



Cowboy On-the-Job Boyfriend

for
Christmas



JO GRAFFORD
BESTSELLING CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

**COWBOY ON-THE-JOB
BOYFRIEND FOR CHRISTMAS**

A Very Country Christmas Wish #4

JO GRAFFORD



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CHAPTER 1: THE PONY ENCOUNTER

HOPE

Mid September

I *need to nail this part.*

It was Hope Isaacson's first day on the job at Castellano's, and she had every intention of wowing out her new employers with everything she'd learned in acting school.

I might be performing at a small-town dinner theater, but I'm gonna give my lines some big-city polish.

She had to. It was the only way she was ever going to make it to Broadway.

Where my ex is currently directing my dream musical.

Trying to force that depressing thought from her headspace, she exited her dressing room, feeling a small stab of guilt over how plain and empty the room looked. Not a single holiday decoration brightened the bare walls. Not a single plant or knickknack was displayed on her makeup counter.

In my defense, I wasn't expecting to be assigned my own dressing room.

She'd been recruited during her last semester of theater school and interviewed over a video conference call. Today was only her fourth day in Pinetop, Arizona, a remote mountain town that was turning out to be full of surprises, not the least of which was the amphitheater building she worked in. She'd been expecting a much smaller facility.

She couldn't have been more wrong. Though Pinetop didn't boast a large population on the books, the streets and sidewalks were literally overflowing with people — mostly tourists — who wanted to experience for themselves the festive little town that celebrated Christmas year-round. Clusters of men, women, and children browsed the endless rows of shop windows on Main Street, each one uniquely and

breathtakingly decorated for the holidays. The bakery had a life-sized gingerbread man on display. The front window of the candle shop boasted an entire nativity scene made of wax, and the candy makers performed a fudge show every hour on the hour at the store's display window in full view of the street.

“Focus, sister!” Hope hissed as she bent her head over the script she was holding. She skimmed through the entire first scene as she moved down the long hallway toward the elevator.

It wasn't easy blocking out the hum of activity around her. Castellano's lower level felt like a town in itself. In addition to the dressing rooms lining the hallway on both sides of her, there were storage and props rooms, a spacious employee lounge, and the *pièce de résistance* — an honest-to-gosh stable for horses. Because of her New Employee Orientation last Friday, and the tour of the facility it had included, she knew that the double silver doors at the end of the hallway led to the horse stalls.

The muted nickers and whinnies on the other side of the doors made her want to take a detour to the stable before heading to the main level. Though she'd been born and raised in Phoenix, she'd always considered herself to be a country girl at heart. Horses utterly fascinated her. It had started with the one she'd ridden at a childhood birthday party. It was way too bad she'd had no opportunity to ride one of the beautiful, majestic creatures since.

She'd been raised by a single dad in a small apartment in the back of his art gallery. Other than the dance lessons he'd insisted she take, he hadn't splurged on many other luxuries. He'd barely made ends meet with his Art Nouveau style of painting. Because of his proximity to Arizona State University, mostly college students browsed his downtown gallery. They usually left without making any purchases, making it clear they preferred pop, modern, and abstract art.

With a sigh of nostalgia, Hope glanced at her watch and discovered she had more time than she'd originally thought — roughly twenty minutes before she was expected on stage.

Plenty of time for a quick detour.

Tucking the dog-eared script beneath her arm, she determinedly passed the elevators and kept walking. Excitement gripped her at the thought of paying an unscheduled visit to the stable. The way it was laid out, she could circle the hallway in front of the stalls and end up right back where she was standing in only a minute or two.

She paused before entering the stable, listening to the voices calling to each other on the other side. It made her worry she might be interrupting something.

Then again, voices meant other employees were in the vicinity, people she'd probably be working with in some capacity or another. It wouldn't hurt to make their acquaintance.

Briefly closing her eyes, she quelled a burst of shyness and forced herself to push open the silver doors.

She reopened her eyes as she took a step, then stopped short.

A cowboy was walking backward in faded jeans and scuffed boots. His dark hair curled out from beneath a brown leather Stetson. He was leading a pony in her direction, talking quietly to her.

"You beautiful thing," Hope breathed, eyeing the creature's unusual markings. The little pony's coat was nearly all white, with only a few swirls of black on its chest and hindquarters. Its mane, tail, and the feathering around its ankles were also solid white. Only its ears were a different story. They were a cute and perky shade of charcoal.

The pony tossed its head and nickered at the sight of Hope.

The cowboy glanced over his shoulder at her, slowing his steps. "Hey." He pivoted to face her as he and his young charge reached the stable doors. "May I help you with something?" His dark gaze raked her from beneath the brim of his Stetson.

She had no doubt he was trying to figure out who she was. They'd not been introduced last Friday. It was the first time

they were laying eyes on each other.

“I, um...” She felt a little tongue-tied as she digested the tenor of his Hispanic accent and decided she liked it. A lot. She also liked the way his navy t-shirt was hugging his chest and upper arms. A blue-and-white plaid shirt was tossed on a nearby stall door, a perfect match to his t-shirt. It was probably his.

Though the cowboy wasn't smiling, his expression was far from hostile, so she decided to take the plunge and admit the truth. “I just wanted to see the horses.” She nodded at the young draft horse he was leading. “She's so pretty.”

He treated her to a quick up-down nod. “She's also a bit of an imp.” He gestured at the large ramp to their left. “We're heading up to the ring to run off some of her friskiness. Otherwise, she'll never make it through the first rehearsal.”

It dawned on Hope that he was referring to the same rehearsal she'd be attending shortly.

My very first rehearsal at Castellano's.

Her mouth grew dry at the thought. Though most folks assumed that actors and actresses were naturally chatty and outgoing, it wasn't true in her case. All her life, she'd been painfully shy. It was worse when she was in a new place, surrounded by new people.

Like I will be shortly.

At the moment, the one new face swimming in front of her felt like one too many.

“Are you okay, ma'am?” The cowboy took an abrupt step in her direction, frowning in concern.

It wasn't until his gloved hand settled beneath her elbow that she realized she was swaying on her feet. “Yes, of course! I'm fine.” She drew a deep, soul-bracing breath. “Just having an attack of first-day nerves, I guess,” she added with a nervous chuckle.

“So, you work here.” He gave her elbow a comforting squeeze before dropping his hand. “That answers my other

question.”

Pulling her scattered emotions together, Hope thrust out a hand. The dog-eared script she'd forgotten she had tucked under her arm promptly slid to the floor. The pages scattered in all directions. One page landed near the pony.

She promptly placed a hoof on it to hold it captive and bent her head over it.

The cowboy stopped her from chewing on it by snapping his fingers sharply. “Don’t even think about it, Cream Puff.” He crowded her space, forcing her to back up a few steps.

“What a cute name!” Hope quickly scooped up the pages of her script. “Is she a Clydesdale?” She was far from an expert on horse breeds, but she'd seen plenty of Clydesdales in movies and commercials.

“She’s actually a Gypsy Vanner, one of the smallest draft horses on the market. An evolving breed. There’s a bunch of stuff on the internet about them if you look them up.”

“I certainly will. I’m Hope Isaacson, by the way. An actress.”

And a future Broadway star, I hope.

“Roman Rios.” He held out a hand to help her up. “Head wrangler, though the head part of my job is new. I was recently promoted.”

The humbleness of his admission made her decide on the spot that she liked him. Clearly, there was more to him than his good looks. She placed her hand in his, allowing him to tug her to her feet. “Thanks.” She hastily straightened the hodgepodge of script pages she was holding. “I’m heading upstairs myself if the two of you don’t mind me tagging along.”

Roman made a large, sweeping gesture with his arm, beckoning her to join them. “Which part are you playing?”

“Mary Lynn.” Saying it out loud made her feel shy all over again. The show was a modern rendition of Mary and Joseph’s love story, minus the immaculate conception. The primary

themes were the same, though. It was about faith under fire on a ranch that was struggling to stay afloat. It was also about new beginnings. In the upcoming show at Castellano's, Mary Lynn's new beginning starts to unfold when she and her husband follow their young son's advice to invest the rest of their dwindling savings in a little known breed of horses.

"So, *you're* the one who landed the lead female role, eh?" The sideways glance he gave her held a curious mix of amusement and admiration. "Nice going!"

"That felt like a loaded question." She fell into step beside him as they moved up the ramp together, very glad that she'd chosen to wear a pair of designer jeans to work today. They weren't new, of course. She'd purchased them dirt cheap at a consignment shop in Phoenix, but they still had plenty of wear in them. Her fringed brown shirt wasn't new, either, but she thought it offset her golden tan to perfection. It would quickly fade in this windy little mountain community where folks had to stay bundled up all winter long.

He shrugged. "A lot of people auditioned for that part, including several actresses already on staff."

"Are you warning me that I'll be pulling pitchforks out of my back?" Hope pursed her lips at the recollection of meeting a redhead named Julia on Friday. Something the woman had said led her to believe she'd wanted the part pretty badly herself. However, her belly was swollen like a beach ball with her second child, so her ambitions to land a lead part would have to wait a few months.

"Nah, the owners don't take kindly to stuff like that." Roman gave Hope another sideways glance as they reached the gate leading to the performance ring. "Anyone who tries it will probably get the boot."

"Wow! I just assumed the excessive outpouring of holiday spirit around here was simply a marketing gimmick." She was more accustomed to folks stabbing each other in the back on their climb to the top.

"Nope. It's how Angel and Willa run the place. You'll see." He paused at the gate to get a firmer grip on Cream

Puff's lead rope.

Hope smiled at the pony. She was practically vibrating with energy. "May I?" She waved at Cream Puff.

"Sure." He angled his head at the horse, urging Hope to step closer. "She loves attention."

Hope took a few steps closer with a hand outstretched. It was all the encouragement Cream Puff needed. The pony eagerly pushed her nose against her hand.

"I'm so sorry, but I didn't bring you any snacks." She made a mental note to fix that error on her walk home this evening. There were dozens of stores between the theater and her apartment. Surely, one of them sold apples or carrots.

In the meantime, she tried to make up for her lack of snacks by showering the small draft horse with attention. She rubbed a hand down the front of her wide head, flicking a few wisps of her mane away from her eyes. "You are absolutely adorable!"

Cream Puff tossed her head and whinnied in appreciation. It sounded so much like a response to the compliment that Hope laughed in delight. "I think she understood what I said."

"I think she did, too."

Hope glanced over at Roman and found him watching her with a hooded expression. She hastily lowered her hand and stepped back, knowing she'd taken up more than enough of his time.

Cream Puff, however, wasn't ready to part ways just yet. She followed Hope, pushing her nose against her hand again.

Her heart melted. She impulsively leaned forward to press her cheek against the top of the pony's head. "I think I just made my first friend in town," she declared happily. She was perfectly alright with the fact that her new friend was a horse.

"Your first two friends," Roman corrected in a matter-of-fact voice.

Her gaze flew back to his. "If you mean that, I accept. It hasn't been easy being the new girl in town." She hadn't

meant to tell him that. It just sort of slipped out.

A wrinkle formed in the middle of his forehead. “Has anyone been rude to you?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that,” she said quickly. “It just feels like such a tight-knit town, where most people already know each other, if you know what I mean.” She bit her lower lip, not sure how to explain to an insider how it felt to be her, both a newcomer and an outsider.

“Well, now you know me and Cream Puff.” The hard line of his jaw softened as he watched the two of them together. “I’ve never seen her take to anyone like this before. Did you grow up around horses?”

Not even! Hope’s lips parted in surprise. “I wish,” she sighed. “As much as I hate to admit it, I’m a city girl. Most of the horses I’ve been around were in paintings inside of art galleries.” Her father had one hanging in his collection that she longed to own someday. She’d never told him that, knowing how badly he could use the funds if it ever sold. However, if it didn’t sell in the next few months, she might actually spring for it herself. It would take her a few paychecks to save up for it, but it would be worth it.

“I would’ve never guessed.” Roman shook his head in disbelief at her. “Does that mean you don’t ride?”

She gave him a rueful smile. “Not unless you count a birthday party I attended when I was five-years-old, where they rented a pony for our entertainment.” It was one of her fondest memories. “A super cool teenage girl led each of us around in a circle on the back of the horse when it was our turn.” *We thought we were expert riders when we were finished.*

“Sounds like the experience made quite the impression on you.”

“It did. I’ve loved horses ever since.” Since she was already baring her soul, she didn’t mind adding, “Quite honestly, it’s the biggest reason I accepted this job.” *Sight unseen.* There’d been other offers, plenty of them. One in

particular had been extended by her ex-fiancé, of all people. She hadn't bothered responding to his emails or phone calls about it. After their breakup, she'd promised herself she would never again date on the job, and having an ex-fiancé for a director totally checked that box.

Roman reached for the latch on the gate. "If you ever want riding lessons, I know a guy." The smirk on his face indicated it was him.

A gasp slid out of her. "Are you serious?"

"Yep."

"Oh, my goodness, Roman! Yes!" She followed him and Cream Puff into the riding ring. "Just let me know when." She pressed a hand to her rapidly beating heart, unable to believe her good fortune.

"How about this evening after work?" He affectionately patted Cream Puff's neck. "Can't have the lead actress in an indoor rodeo all rusty on her riding skills."

Hope felt a goofy smile spread across her face. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a warning flag went off about how cozy they were getting, but she chose to ignore it. Being friendly with a coworker wasn't the same thing as dating him. Neither was meeting him for a riding lesson after hours. A riding lesson she desperately needed.

Depending on how you look at it, it even qualifies as a work-related event.

Before she could think of anything else to say, a rich baritone voice rang out across the theater's state-of-the-art speaker system. "Paging Miss Isaacson to center stage. Miss Isaacson to center stage."

She flushed as she recognized Angel Castellano's voice. It was kind of embarrassing to get called out by the owner of the theater for being late. Glancing at her watch, she discovered it was one minute from the rehearsal starting time.

Whew! Not late after all.

But she was certainly cutting it close. “Guess that’s my cue.” She gave a breathy chuckle and backed away from Roman and Cream Puff.

The miniature draft horse lunged against her lead rope in an attempt to follow after her.

Hope blew her a kiss, hating to leave the sweet little pony behind.

Something flared in Roman’s gaze as he watched the exchange, making her wonder if he thought she’d blown the kiss to him.

Surely not!

“Meet me down in the stable after your last rehearsal,” he called after her.

“You’re on, cowboy!” She pointed at him with both forefingers like they were pistols. “I seriously can’t wait!” She could feel his gaze on her as she turned around and jogged toward the stage.

It was a completely portable structure that could quickly be dismantled and reconstructed to form a variety of shapes, depending on the needs of the show. It was currently built in a rounded shape, parked right smack in the center of the riding ring. The backdrop displayed the facade of a ranch home, complete with a wrap-around porch and a wide set of porch steps in front and back.

She hurried up the front porch steps, clutching the pages of her script in one hand. “I’m sorry if I kept you waiting,” she declared breathlessly to no one in particular.

“Actually, you’re right on time.” Willa Castellano glided her way in a long green suede skirt that fell to her ankles. She was the theater owner’s wife, as well as the director — a slender, dark-haired woman with striking blue eyes that seemed to take in the whole room at once. And she had miles of class when it came to her wardrobe. Her white turtleneck sweater was tucked loosely into her skirt, and a jeweled silver belt was cinched over it. She could’ve been a model for a women’s clothing line or something.

Hope smiled her gratitude for not being further called out on her lateness.

“Let’s introduce you to everyone before we get started,” Willa continued breezily.

Hope smiled expectantly at the other cast members milling around the stage. Julia was sitting on the front porch swing, gently pushing it back and forth with one foot. Two guys were leaning on the porch railing. Another cowboy was straddling it.

“Will you do the honors, babe?” Willa spun around to her husband, a tall Hispanic man in black trousers and a white button-up shirt. He was still sound testing his microphone at center stage. “Check one-two-three. Check one-two three.” He gave a thumbs up to the guys manning the sound booth that was tucked in a cubby directly below the stage.

His dark eyes twinkled at his wife as he addressed all those who were present. “In case you haven’t met her yet, this is Hope Isaacson. She graduated at the top of her theater class last spring, and we were fortunate to recruit her for her first full-time acting job.”

His words were met by a smattering of applause.

“Welcome to the family,” someone called.

Family?

Hope gazed curiously toward the woman who’d spoken the words and found several people nodding and smiling her way.

Wow! You’re serious.

She nodded and smiled back, hoping the whole family vibe they were giving off didn’t mean she would get too attached to them. She couldn’t afford to, since she didn’t plan on sticking around town for long after Christmas. This show was simply a resume builder, a stepping stone to bigger things — far bigger things than a town this size could ever offer her.

“Alright, folks,” Willa announced briskly. “We’re going to start from the beginning and work our way through the first

scene. Since it's a brand new script written by yours truly, there will undoubtedly be a few kinks to work out. Just be patient with the process, alright?"

Hope blinked in surprise. Up to this very moment, she hadn't realized that the retired celebrity country western singer was a budding playwright. As far as Hope knew, this was the first script that Willa Castellano had written.

And I'm getting in on the ground floor of it. Holy smokes!

This could be huge. People like Willa had serious connections in the industry. Some of the awe Hope was feeling must have been in her voice during the first scene.

Willa was quick to correct it. "I'd like to hear a little more world-weariness in your lines in this scene, Mary Lynn." The sparkle in her gaze took the bite out of the reprimand. She was just as excited about directing the first show she'd written as Hope was about acting in it.

Hope gave her a thumbs up, inwardly yanking her head back into the game. She closed her eyes for a moment as she dug deep in the effort to taste and feel Mary Lynn's desperation. The woman starring in the show had a lot to lose. The ranch had been in her husband's family for generations. Thanks to a small inheritance from her grandfather, she'd brought a little money into her marriage, but it was dwindling all too quickly. A string of storms had damaged their crops to the point where they had more funds going out than funds coming in. Plus, they had a school-aged son to feed and keep in jeans and sneakers. Oh, and she'd received a not-so-good report from her radiologist about some imaging she'd had done recently. She was waiting to confirm the diagnosis before sharing the bad news with her family.

Hope couldn't imagine having so many things in her life going wrong at the same time.

How do you break the news to the man you love that he's about to lose everything, including you?

Her eyelids were prickling with unshed tears by the time she reopened her eyes. They were still on the phone call

segment of the scene. She lifted the cell phone to her ear. “Hello, Dr. Jones. Since you’re calling me on a Friday afternoon, I can only assume you have bad news for me?”

She allowed her shoulders to slump as she pretended to listen to what he said on the other end of the line. There was nothing but silence in her ear, of course. The phone was simply a prop. It wasn’t even charged.

“What do you mean by an atypical mass?” Her voice trembled a little.

Willa nodded in approval and motioned for her to continue.

Hope was inwardly thrilled at the confirmation that she’d finally gotten the tone and feel of the part right. However, she outwardly continued to play the part of the stressed out rancher’s wife, even managing to squeeze out a real tear. It rolled damply down her cheek.

During their first break, Julia sidled over to Hope, rubbing a hand across her blooming belly.

Uh-oh.

Hope silently prayed that Roman was right about the theater’s zero tolerance policy for personal drama of any sort. She replayed his words inside her head.

The owners don’t take kindly to stuff like that. Anyone who tries it will probably get the boot.

Reaching her side, Julia dipped her head companionably closer to Hope’s. “In case no one has mentioned it yet, I’ve been asked to learn your lines and serve as your backup.” She had plump lips that made it look like they were twisted into a permanent pout.

Hope turned her head to meet the young woman’s gaze. It was the first she’d heard anything about a backup. “Thanks,” she said simply.

Julia’s expression relaxed. “I doubt you’re used to working with a backup who’s six months pregnant.”

“I’m not, but I’m truly grateful to have a backup.” Hope glanced at the woman’s blossoming midsection beneath a tunic-sized blue sweater. The faux leather black leggings beneath it were pretty cute. Julia had them rolled up to expose a patch of fair skin above her black wedge boots.

“In light of full disclosure, I applied to be the female lead.” Julia’s lips twisted into an even bigger pout. “I thought it was only fair that you hear that from me.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” Not sure if that was what Julia had been wanting to hear her say, Hope changed the subject. “Is it difficult being on stage when you’re this far along?”

“Girl, yes!” Julia rolled her eyes. “The baby is constantly kicking my kidneys. Not to mention I started my day off tired.” She stifled a yawn. “I have a toddler at home,” she explained.

“Oh, my goodness!” Hope shook her head in awe. “I can’t imagine how you do everything that you do.”

“Tiredly,” Julia supplied with another yawn. “That said, I *will* memorize your part. Guaranteed.”

“Thank you again.”

“Just do me a favor and don’t get sick or anything,” the young mother added. “It’s one thing to memorize your part. It would be another thing entirely to get called up to actually *do* your part.”

Hope joined in her chuckling. “I’ll try not to.”

Julia abruptly sobered. “Hey, I saw you walking into the arena with Roman Rios. He’s a great guy.”

“I know, right?” It was a statement Hope didn’t have to think twice about. “He offered to give me a riding lesson.”

“You’re kidding!” Julia looked so taken aback that Hope immediately regretted telling her about it.

“Actually, I’m not.” She quickly attempted to downplay the situation. “When he heard how rusty I am at riding, I think he felt sorry for me.”

“Probably.” Julia’s expression was hard to read. “He’s nice to everyone.”

“Very nice,” Hope agreed. Unless she was imagining things, Julia was going out of her way to make it sound like Roman could just as easily have given the riding lesson to anyone.

“He’s widowed, in case you didn’t know.”

Hope slowly shook her head. “I didn’t.” She wasn’t sure why Julia was telling her this.

“He was crazy in love with his wife. May she rest in peace.” Julia made the sign of the cross on her chest, adopting a faraway look. “Still is.”

Yeah, I am totally not imagining things here.

For reasons Hope did not yet understand, Julia was warning her to keep her emotional distance from Roman Rios.

“That’s so sad,” she murmured. “I’m sorry to hear about his loss.”

“No one will ever be able to replace her.” A fierce note entered Julia’s voice.

Hope was fast losing patience with the woman’s thinly veiled warnings.

Fortunately, for all parties involved, I have no designs on the man.

She murmured something about needing to make a pit stop before their rehearsal resumed. Then she made her getaway. As she stepped into the luxurious public restroom at Castellano’s, she stared at herself in the long rectangular mirror over the sink.

You never wanted to be more than friends with him, chickadee.

It was still a little disheartening to find out that the hunky cowboy was emotionally unavailable. It took all the wonderful what-ifs off the table. A wise woman would’ve come up with some excuse to cancel her riding lesson after work.

Instead, Hope found herself foolishly looking forward to it more than ever.



CHAPTER 2: JUST FRIENDS

ROMAN

Roman spent most of his morning training Cream Puff. He ran her around the ring until she burned off some of her frisky pony energy. Only then did she calm down enough to listen to his commands. Angel and Willa Castellano were really hoping to include her in this year's Christmas show, but they would only be able to do so if he got her trained in time.

It was a tall order, and they knew it. However, they seemed to think he could pull it off, and he was doing his level best not to disappoint them.

In the background, he could hear Angel introducing their newest actress to the rest of the crew. Then Willa took over and led the cast members through the first scene of the show.

Roman tried to keep his focus solely on Cream Puff's training. However, he found himself sneaking glances at the stage to see how Hope Isaacson was faring during her first morning on the job.

Early in the rehearsal, Willa stopped the scene several times to tweak things. One of those things was Hope's approach to the female lead role.

"I'd like to hear a little more world-weariness in your lines during this scene, Mary Lynn."

Roman swallowed a smile at Willa's use of Hope's stage name instead of her real name. It was a clever move on her part, designed to keep everyone in their roles.

Hope gave Willa a fervent nod and seemed to be digging deep to embody the spirit of what her director was requesting. When she started to speak again, there was so much angst oozing out of her that Roman stood riveted. Though he forced his gaze back to Cream Puff, he was still very much aware of the lovely actress's performance.

Every word.

Every sigh.

Every snuffle.

Whoa!

He grew still in utter amazement to realize that she was genuinely weeping.

“How’s she doing?”

Roman’s head jerked toward the voice. He found Angel Castellano leaning his elbows on the fence that circled the ring. As usual, the sleeves of his white button-up shirt were rolled nearly to his elbows. Instead of dress shoes, he was wearing black cowboy boots beneath his trousers. One foot was resting on the lowest rung of the fence.

It took Roman a few seconds of mental scrambling to determine that his boss and longtime friend was referring to the Gypsy Vanner standing beside him, not the lovely actress whose voice continued to fill the arena.

“Honestly? Better than expected.” He gave a brief update on his progress with the small draft horse.

“That’s good.” Angel looked immensely satisfied by the report. “Very good.” He studied the horse with a half smile tugging at his mouth. “Any idea how soon we might run her through her paces during an actual rehearsal?”

“Yes and no.” As Roman considered the question, he reached into his pocket for a few carrot stubs. Since Cream Puff had remained by his side during his entire stint of gawking at Hope, she deserved to be rewarded for her obedience. “By normal standards, I’d expect it to be several more days before she’s ready. However, she bonded with Hope Isaacson on our walk to the ring earlier, so that could speed up the process a little.” He held out a handful of carrots and waited.

Cream Puff usually gobbled them up with such fervor that he worried his glove or fingers might be next. However, the pony didn’t so much as acknowledge the snack he was holding out to her.

That’s a first.

Roman stared down at her in surprise.

She appeared utterly mesmerized by something happening on stage. Since Hope was still performing, he could only presume she was watching her new friend's performance. The pony even gave a small huff of distress in response to the angst in Hope's voice. She restlessly pawed at the ground, pulling at her lead rope as if wanting to approach the stage.

Angel snorted in disbelief. "Is it my imagination, or do we have a horse watching our show?"

Roman's upper lip quirked. "Not the show. She's watching Hope. Like I said, they bonded earlier. It could make all the difference in how soon she'll be ready to perform in front of an audience." Though it was rare for a horse to place their loyalty in someone so quickly, he'd seen it happen a few times before. The most surprising element was Hope's complete lack of experience with horses, something that didn't seem to matter to Cream Puff one bit.

"As crazy as your bonding theory sounds, I'd be hard put to deny it since I'm seeing it for myself." Angel's dark gaze narrowed in speculation as he glanced between Cream Puff and Hope a few times. "What do you have in mind, my friend?"

"A short exercise to test the theory." Roman could already picture how it would go. "Treat her like a toddler with a short attention span." That was the best advice he could give. "And limit her interaction to Hope, if at all possible. My gut says you won't get the same results if you pair her with anyone else."

"Consider it done." Angel gave a bark of dry laughter. "Since I know who wrote the script, it won't be too hard to create a custom scene like you just described."

Roman nodded, crinkling his eyes at Angel. "That's really something about Willa branching into script writing."

"Agreed, and you and I aren't the only ones who feel that way. Tickets are selling like you wouldn't believe. This show

might bring in our biggest crowd yet.” Affection thickened Angel’s voice as he returned his attention to the stage.

“I’m glad to hear it.” As Roman followed Angel’s gaze to where Willa was conferring with Hope over another snippet of the scene, there was no doubt in his mind that the guy was wildly and irrevocably in love with his wife.

No one recognizes that emotion better than me.

A wave of melancholy swept over him. Though it had been two long, heart-aching years since he’d lost his wife, not a day went by that he didn’t think about her and the son they’d lost during childbirth. About the family they would’ve raised. About the life they would’ve had together.

His grief was the biggest reason he’d gone job hunting away from Christmas Tree Farm, where he and Angel had been raised on the outskirts of Pinetop. Unlike Angel, Roman still lived there among the other immigrant families. However, he’d desperately needed a fresh start after his wife’s death — some place that didn’t serve up constant reminders of everything he’d lost. He was grateful to Angel for helping him to find his fresh start at Castellano’s.

“You doing alright with your new responsibilities?”

Roman’s gaze flicked back to Angel. “So long as you don’t have any complaints.”

“You’d be the first to hear about it if I did.” Angel gave a snort of amusement. “How do you like being in charge of the other wranglers? Did I put too much on you too soon?”

“Nope. I like it just fine.” Roman was grateful to be working for a man who cared enough to even ask such a question. He was also grateful to be doing something he enjoyed so much. He was no typical wrangler. Not only did he train, exercise, and care for the livestock at Castellano’s, his responsibilities additionally included many elements of show business. He transported the animals to and from the ring during live performances, paraded them in the background as needed, and occasionally assisted with stunts.

“Glad to hear it.” Angel sounded relieved. “We’re fortunate to have you on board. Though Willa and I would never stand in the way if God calls you elsewhere, we don’t want to lose you for any other reason.”

All Roman could do was stare at his friend for a moment. That was heavy stuff. He wondered where it was coming from. “Do you know something about my future that I don’t know?”

“No.” Angel shrugged. “But Castellano’s has grown into something that’s far exceeded our wildest expectations, and you’re a part of it. You’ll be a part of it for as long as you want to be. Just wanted to make that clear.”

“Well, thanks.” Roman felt like Angel was trying to tell him something without saying it outright. “I’d never leave my sister, if that’s what you’re asking. Or our parents.” A dry chuckle escaped him. “Wish they’d lay off my back a little when it comes to their matchmaking schemes, though.” Izzy made a point of introducing him to every single lady who moved into town, and he was lucky if that was all she did. More often than not, she or their mom followed it up by trying to arrange a date between them.

“Sorry, brother. I’m not touching that one.” Angel pushed away from the fence, grinning. “Your family. Your problem.”

“Gee, thanks for all the helpful advice.” Roman didn’t bother hiding his sarcasm.

“You’re welcome.” Angel pointed at him. “And thanks for your guidance about Cream Puff’s debut performance. I’ll get back to you with a game plan. Might be today, but more likely tomorrow.”

Roman gave him a two-fingered salute, hoping he wasn’t wrong about what he’d witnessed between Hope and Cream Puff.

Unsure of the exact time Willa would conclude today’s rehearsal, he threw himself into the rigor of his daily routine. Without fail, he checked off the duties of the other wranglers. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust them, nor was it his leadership

style to hover. It was just that the livestock at Castellano's was too valuable for even the smallest of mistakes.

For one thing, the world-class trick rider they employed, Christie Hart, kept her show horse, Prancer, stabled there. The local postmaster, who wasn't employed by them, kept his team of six Clydesdales stabled there, too. He hitched them to his sleigh during the winter and his carriage during the summer to give rides to tourists. For a steep reduction in boarding costs, he allowed the staff at Castellano's to use the horses in their shows, as well. It was an arrangement that benefitted everyone involved.

Lunch time rolled around quicker than Roman expected. As he paused working to head to the employee lounge, his phone vibrated with an incoming text message. He quickly scanned it and was unsurprised to see that it was from his sister.

Just checking in. What are you having for lunch?

He smirked and typed an answer he knew she wouldn't like. *Polishing off the leftover donuts from our morning meeting.*

He was right. Her answer came through in all capital letters, accompanied by a flurry of exclamation marks. *YOU BETTER BE JOKING!!!*

Smiling, he shot her a pithy comeback. *What if I'm not?* He strode toward the enormous lounge on the lower level of Castellano's, pretty sure he'd heard they were serving some sort of employee appreciation lunch today. It's something Angel and Willa did every time they hired somebody new.

Izzy abruptly changed the direction of their conversation. *So...have you met the new girl?*

His suspicions were roused, knowing his twin was sniffing for information about Hope Isaacson. Come to think of it, it was probably the only reason she'd started texting him in the first place.

There was no way he was going to make this easy on her. He paused outside the open door of the employee lounge and

started typing again. *Can you be more specific?*

She sent him an eye roll emoji. *New. Lead. Actress.*

After a moment of inner debate, he decided to play along. Maybe it would give her such acute emotional whiplash that she'd have to go take a nap or something. At the very least, it would be quicker than playing guessing games. He'd rather do something besides spend his entire lunch break texting on his cell phone. *She's great. I'm giving her a riding lesson after work.*

Roman!!! More details, please? When he didn't immediately write back, his sister sent yet another text. A bunch of question marks. Nothing else. From years of communicating with his twin, he knew it meant that he hadn't answered her previous text quickly enough for her taste.

Just to be annoying, he kept his answer brief and unhelpful. *I'll let you know how it goes.*

She sent him a frowny face. *So, you're just going to leave me hanging here?*

Yep. He smiled as he typed. *Got to run for now. Bye.*

Her answer was a video meme of a clown with an exploding head.

He chuckled, pocketing his phone as he stepped into the employee lounge.

"What's so funny?" The sweetly familiar voice made him slow his steps.

He glanced up and discovered Hope was standing just inside the door, shifting uncertainly from one foot to the next. Though Castellano's had a buffet line set up in her honor, she'd yet to grab a plate and make her way through it.

The way her honey-gold gaze brightened at the sight of him made him wonder if she'd been hoping he would show up. Then again, it might only be wishful thinking on his part.

"My sister sent me a text that made me laugh. She's always doing that." He allowed his gaze to briefly rove her petite frame. Man, but her slender curves sure fit nicely into

her jeans! The thought was immediately followed by a stab of guilt, since it made him feel disloyal to his late wife's memories. The guilt was followed by a lion-sized dose of irritation with himself. Despite all the blind dates his sister had attempted to set up for him during the past year — including one she'd arranged with Castellano's world-famous trick rider, which had thankfully been disrupted by a scheduling mix-up — this was the first time he could remember noticing a woman *that way* since his wife's death. Unsure if it was a good thing or a bad thing, he tried not to think about it as he tuned back in to what his lovely lunch companion was saying.

“I take it she doesn't work here, since she's texting you?”

“She doesn't. She's actually a stay-at-home mom. Pretty sure she texts me for the adult conversation.” *And to ride my case about getting back into the dating game.*

“Can't blame her for that.” Hope scanned his features curiously. “Sounds like the two of you are pretty close.”

“We weren't given much of a choice in the matter.” He shrugged good-humoredly. “We're twins.”

She gasped in delight. “I take it you look a lot alike?”

“Not really. We look like siblings, but that's about it.”

Hope's expression morphed into one of longing. “I bet it's been so, so, so much fun having a twin!”

“More like one of those love-hate things,” he joked, though it wasn't true. What he and Izzy had between them was hard to describe. When he was happy, she was happy for him and vice versa. When he hurt, she hurt right alongside him. It had always been that way between them.

“And yet you managed to say that with affection,” Hope sighed wistfully. “What's her name, if you don't mind me asking?”

He didn't mind one bit. “It's Izzy, short for Isabel.” Though he'd already given himself one inner reprimand for staring at Hope, he couldn't help noticing that her straight hair was a few shades darker than her fringed shirt. The silky strands hung nearly to her waist. One side was tucked behind

her ear. The other side draped like a curtain against her cheek, making his fingers itch to push it back and tuck it behind her other ear. The thought promptly earned him another inner reprimand.

“It’s a beautiful name. Both of your names are.”

Beautiful? It was the first time Roman could remember anyone calling his name beautiful. He didn’t mind knowing that Hope Isaacson approved of it, though. It wasn’t exactly a common name.

“You’ll meet my sister soon.” It only seemed fair to warn Hope. “She drops by the theater once or twice a week. Pretty much every time she drives into town.” She’d make a point of meeting Hope. Guaranteed.

Hope laughed at his expression. “You don’t look too happy about her impromptu visits.”

“I love Izzy. Don’t get me wrong.” He grunted. “I just get tired of her hounding.”

“About,” Hope prompted.

“About me getting out and dating more.” The moment the truth came out, he wanted to bite off his tongue, pretty sure he’d just painted himself in an unflattering light.

To his relief, Hope didn’t seem to find his statement off-putting. Her sympathetic smile touched his heart like a warm caress. Since she didn’t say anything, he could only assume someone had already filled her in on his status as a widower. If he had to venture a guess, he was betting it was Julia.

To fill the momentary lull in their conversation, he asked, “What about you? Do you have any siblings?”

“Don’t I wish!” She shook her head regretfully at him. “I suffer from Only Child Syndrome. In case you’re wondering, that means people like me are wildly envious of your sibling woes.”

He raised his eyebrows at her as he motioned her toward the food line, which happened to be a build-your-own taco spread. He sniffed the air in appreciation, already able to taste

the made-from-scratch salsa and guacamole. Castellano's served the best food in town, hands down.

"Yeah, I guess it would be tough having no one else to pick a fight with your entire childhood, eh?"

She chuckled as she moved ahead of him. "Except my dad. I've certainly done my fair share of heckling him." She paused at the front of the food line to grab two plates. She handed one of them to him.

"Does he dish it back?" He accepted the plate, liking the unconscious way she'd held it out to him, like she'd done it without thinking. She didn't appear to be flirting with him, either, which he found refreshing. All too many women had an agenda, but not Hope. She was acting like she was genuinely enjoying his company. Nothing else.

"My dad dishes it back with a mile high serving of whipped cream and a cherry on top." She chuckled. "That's where I get my orneriness from." Her smile slipped. "It was like he was determined to keep laughter in our lives after we lost my mom." She added in a quieter voice, "It happened during my fifth-grade year. Congenital heart defect. She went quickly."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Roman took a step closer to her, instinctively wanting to offer comfort. Though he knew a thing or two about heartache, he couldn't imagine what it would've been like to lose his mother at such a young age. He and Izzy were blessed to still have both of their parents around — very much around and always underfoot at Christmas Tree Farm. They doted over their twins and acted like their first grandchild could do no wrong. Though Izzy enormously appreciated their help with babysitting, Roman didn't appreciate the way their mother constantly teamed up with her to interfere in his personal life.

"It's okay. I'm fortunate to have a dad who's more than capable of being two parents wrapped into one." Hope reached for a set of serving tongs and used them to set a flour tortilla on her plate. Passing them to him, she moved on down the line to scoop chicken and rice on top of the tortilla. "Though he

denies it to this day, I'm convinced he was more interested in picking out my prom dress than I was." She smiled at the memory.

"He sounds like an amazing guy." Since Roman was famished, he set two tortillas on his plate and debated adding a third. "Does he live around here?"

She shook her head, making her long dark hair slide against her shoulders. "He owns and operates an art gallery in Phoenix."

"At least it's within driving distance." That was something.

"When the weather is decent." As they carried their plates to the end of one of the long lunch tables, she sighed. "Though he was born and raised there, I can't help thinking..." Her words dwindled. She shook her head as she took a seat. "Sorry! I don't know why I'm babbling so much about my personal life." She fell abruptly silent.

Instead of taking a seat across from her, Roman set his plate down at the end of the table so they could sit closer to each other. "Maybe because you miss your dad?"

"I think you nailed it." She grimaced at him. "We've never lived in different cities before. Not even for college. So, yeah. This is a first for both of us."

He envied the fact that she'd lived in a city that boasted so many college options. Everyone in Pinetop either left town for college or attended online classes.

Like me.

At the age of twenty-four, he was a late-bloomer to the college scene. At Angel's urging, he'd signed up for his first class in August. At first, he hadn't understood why his friend was pushing higher education so hard. Following his recent promotion to head wrangler, however, it was starting to make more sense.

"I'm going to run over to the beverage bar to grab us some drinks. What's your poison?" he inquired in a light voice. "Tea? Lemonade? Water?"

“Tea. Thanks.” She smiled her appreciation at him. “Unsweet, if they have it. Oo, and with a slice of lemon, please.”

“They have both,” he assured, moving across the room to claim two glasses of unsweet teas that were already poured up.

“Lemon?” The woman filling the drinks waved a bowl of fresh-cut wedges at him.

“Yes, please.”

She neatly perched a wedge on the side of each glass.

“Appreciate it.” He returned with them to the table and set Hope’s in front of her with a flourish.

“Thanks! I could totally get used to this kind of service,” she teased.

As he took a seat, he held out a hand to her from sheer habit. Then he waited, unsure if she was accustomed to praying over her food. To his relief, she wordlessly touched her fingers to his.

He closed his hand around hers, hoping to allay some of her homesickness with his prayer. “Lord, bless our food for the nourishment of our bodies. Thank you for the hands that prepared it. Be with my new friend today as she adjusts to the extra miles between her and her father. Amen.”

“Thanks.” Hope squeezed his fingers before letting them go. “That was sweet of you to pray for me.” She gave a self-deprecatory chuckle that sounded a little damp to his ears, like she was closer to tears than she was letting on. “Sorry for sounding like such a cry baby. I’m twenty-three. Time to finally grow up.”

This time, there was no mistaking the sheen of tears over her eyes.

“Hey!” He reached for her hand again. “There’s nothing immature about missing the people we love.” His voice grew rough with emotion. “As one very wise preacher once told me, some people are simply worth crying for.” He’d certainly shed his body weight in tears over the loss of his wife and son.

A lone tear broke free and slid down Hope's cheek. "Oh, my goodness!" Sniffing, she removed her hand from his to brush it away. "You'd better hurry up and tell a joke or something."

"Alright." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "What's a snowman's favorite Mexican food?"

She smiled weakly. "Assuming Frosted Flakes are not considered Mexican food, I have no idea."

"They're not. The answer I was looking for was..." He paused for dramatic effect, rubbing his hands up and down his arms and pretending to shiver, "brrrrr-itos!"

She burst out laughing. "That's so pathetic that it's funny."

He spread his hands. "I think the idea was to make you laugh, which I did," he reminded.

"Guess we'll have to rule it as fair play, then." She was still chuckling as she raised her soft taco to her lips and took her first bite. "Mmm!" She closed her eyes as she chewed and swallowed. When she reopened them, they were filled with wonder. "This is seriously the best taco I've ever eaten."

He huffed out a breath. "Welcome to Castellano's, sweetheart!" The endearment slipped out before he realized what he'd said. He was only kidding, of course, but he tensed for the moment of awkwardness that was sure to follow.

Hope's eyes grew wide as she raised her glass of tea. "You mean it's normal to feel like you died and went to Heaven after eating something prepared at this place?"

"Hoh, yeah!" To his surprise, they were still having a normal conversation. Apparently, his careless comment had gone unnoticed. "Even their PB&Js taste like five-star meals."

She nearly choked on the sip of tea she'd just taken. "They serve PB&Js here?"

"Not that I'm aware of." He grinned. "They would be spectacular, though. Just saying."

"After this meal, I'm a believer." She glanced at her watch and grimaced.

“When do you have to get back?” Though Angel and Willa expected a lot from their employees, they were usually pretty generous with breaks.

“I don’t know. Willa didn’t say.” Hope’s frown deepened. “Sorry if I seem a little distracted. I’ve been receiving texts all morning from...someone I’d rather not be receiving texts from,” she finished in a rush.

He scowled in concern at her words. “Is someone harassing you?”

“Not in a way I can do anything about.” She made a face at her watch, which he suddenly realized was the kind you could receive messages on. “It’s, um...my ex.” She swallowed hard. “Reaching out to me about a potential job offer.”

“Ex-boyfriend? Ex-husband?” He gestured for her to continue, kind of amazed by his own boldness.

“Ex-fiancé, actually.” She sniffed. “Turns out he was already married,” she explained bitterly. “To his job, that is. He accepted a position on Broadway last summer before so much as mentioning the opportunity to me. Then he acted all offended when I didn’t start throwing my belongings into boxes and follow him like a dutiful puppy. Can you believe that joker? I have a life, too, you know!”

Roman nodded slowly. “I can only presume the potential job he’s reaching out to you about would involve moving to the east coast?”

“Yes. New York,” she sighed. “Still thinking about himself and no one else.”

Roman whistled beneath his breath, wondering if she realized it meant that the guy probably still had feelings for her. “New York is a lot farther from Phoenix than Pinetop.”

“Too far.” Her lips tightened. “I thought I made that clear when I handed back his ring. I’m not sure why he even bothered to contact me about yet another job. He’s wasting his time.”

Roman imagined it had everything to do with the fact that her ex was still harboring hopes in her direction, but he kept

his opinions to himself. Instead, he said, “Rumor has it you graduated at the top of your class. I imagine lots of theater companies tried to recruit you.” Some of them were probably still trying.

“I had a few offers,” she admitted.

The way she said it made him think it was more than a few. “Okay, I have to ask.” He polished off the rest of his first taco and washed it down with a swig of tea before continuing. “How in the world did Pinetop win out over all the other places you could’ve gone?”

“One word.” Her smile returned, making him feel like he was being drenched in sunlight. “Horses.”

Her answer made him extra glad that he’d offered to give her a riding lesson after work today. He couldn’t wait to see the joy on her face when she was finally back in the saddle.



CHAPTER 3: BIG, GLOWING PLANS

HOPE

Mid October

Hope slowly moved around the stable's semi-circular hallway, feeding chopped carrots to every horse who bobbed their head over their stall door. She'd washed and diced two entire bags of carrots yesterday evening, then stored them overnight in a gallon-sized plastic bag in the fridge.

"You're spoiling them." Roman shot an amused glance her way as he saddled one of his own horses for her, a mild-mannered palomino named Merry. Though the Castellanos had assured them they considered Hope's riding lessons to be work-related, he usually transported Merry from Christmas Tree Farm for her to ride. He never came right out and said that Merry's temperament was more suitable for a newbie than the more spirited mounts at Castellano's, but Hope was pretty sure that's why he did it.

"That's a complete myth," she protested, popping a stub of carrot into the next horse's mouth. "You can't spoil anybody with too much love." At least, that's what her father had always claimed.

"If you say so." Roman's dark eyes twinkled at her as she finished emptying her bag of carrots and returned to his side.

"I just did, Mr. Rios." She lifted her chin haughtily at him. Over the past month, they'd settled into a habit of exchanging witty banter that, quite simply, worked for her. She was still raw from her recent breakup with her fiancé — far from ready to get anything romantic started again. And she certainly had no intention of getting something started with another co-worker. The fact that Roman seemed content to be her friend and nothing more made her relax around him in ways she'd never been able to relax around other guys.

When she was with him, there was literally no pressure to be anything she wasn't. No pressure to dress a certain way or work extra hard on her makeup. No pressure to be entertaining

or force smiles she didn't feel. He was just as okay with her chatty moods as he was with her quiet moods.

He gently cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. That was when she realized he was stooped down, cupping his gloved hands together.

"Oops! Guess I was, um..." As she replayed where her mind had been, she decided to keep her thoughts to herself. She snickered beneath her breath as she stepped into Roman's hands, accepting his assistance for climbing into the saddle.

"You looked miles away for a few seconds there." His voice was dry as he leaped onto his own mount, Vixen, whom he'd also transported to Castellano's for her lessons. The gelding was a taller, more energetic horse than Merry. He was stamping his hooves on the floor, restless to be on the move.

"Sorry." Another breathy chuckle escaped her. No way was she telling him she'd been daydreaming about him. Not *that* way, of course! She was just really enjoying their friendship. However, she couldn't think of a way to say that without making it sound weird.

"You sure know how to murder a guy's ego." Roman shook his head at her. "Completely checking out on me like that in the middle of our conversation."

"It's not what you think," she protested, lifting Merry's reins and nudging her up the ramp.

"I just told you what I think." He and Vixen quickly caught up to her. "If you want to prove me wrong, you're gonna have to do better than that."

"Oh, my lands! You're in such a crabby mood this evening." She wrinkled her nose at him.

"Partly your fault," he reminded. "I don't like being ignored."

"I wasn't ignoring you. I was..." She bit her lower lip.

"Go on," he taunted. "Put me in a better mood. That's what friends are for."

Friends. His reminder that he only thought of her as a friend put her at ease enough to confess what was really going on inside her head. “Fine! I was thinking about us.”

“Us?” His dark eyebrows rose beneath the brim of his Stetson.

“Yeah. Us,” she retorted. “I’m glad I met you, okay?”

“For the free riding lessons, eh?” His expression grew hooded.

“I’m very grateful to you for that, but it’s not what I meant.” She waved a hand, not sure how to put her feelings into words. “I was referring to our conversations. The way we soundboard stuff off of each other. Shoot! Even the way we annoy each other, kind of like we’re doing right now.”

The hard lines of his face relaxed. “I’m not annoyed.”

“You’re totally annoyed.” She shook her head at him, chuckling. “Sorry about zoning out on you. I’d be happy to pay up in coffee or something after my lesson. My treat.” Going out for dinner or coffee after most of her riding lessons was yet another habit they’d fallen into.

“Can’t today.” His expression grew shuttered again. “I have an appointment.”

“Okay.” She shrugged, a little hurt by his tone. “Maybe some other time.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” His voice was gruff. “My sister makes flower arrangements for nearly every season.” He averted his face from her. “Tonight we’re delivering one to the cemetery.”

Relief flooded her at his words. Mostly relief. It was threaded with sadness, too, as she finally put two and two together. No wonder he didn’t sound like himself this evening! A graveside visit was enough to put anyone in a darker mood, particularly a guy who’d lost as much as he had.

“That’s really kind of your sister.” She wanted to keep the conversation going in case he needed to talk.

“Yeah,” he muttered.

Or not.

She didn't say anything else, not wanting to flood the air between them with a bunch of meaningless words. It wasn't like she truly understood his kind of grief.

Lord willing, I never will.

Her heart ached for him. Losing a spouse sounded bad enough to her. Losing a kid on top of that had to be the absolute worst.

As soon as they reached the riding ring, Roman broke into a canter.

Hope followed him on Merry at a much slower pace. Her instincts told her that he needed to be alone for a few minutes. She considered making an excuse to cut the riding lesson short, not wanting to intrude on his grief any more than necessary. Maybe it would be better to give him his solitude.

He finally slowed Vixen, rode him in a U, and trotted back toward her.

Since he was coming directly at her, she brought Merry to a halt and waited, anxiously searching his face for some clue as to how she should proceed.

He scowled at her. "You're still arching your back a little too much. Remember the three positions we talked about?"

She nodded. "Interior, posterior, and neutral."

"Correct. Try to relax and get back into the neutral position."

"If only there was a button to push to get in the relax mode," she sighed, knowing that part of her problem was that she was tired. It had been a long day of rehearsals. Correction. It had been a long week of rehearsals. Thanksgiving was right around the corner. Two days after that would be the opening night of the Castellano's annual Christmas show.

His scowl grew more pronounced. "I know it's not easy. That's why I said to try."

She practiced arching forward and slumping back a few times the way he'd taught her, in order to locate the middle of those two positions. "Listen, um..." She surveyed him from beneath her lashes. "If it would help your schedule this evening to cut my lesson short, I just wanted you to know I'm cool with that."

His expression hardened even more. "If that's your way of saying I'm too grumpy to be around—"

"You're not!" Her head flew up as she met his gaze. "Gosh, no! Even if you were, which I'm not saying that you are..." She paused, wishing she knew what he was thinking. "I would totally cut you some slack. That's all I'm trying to say. Heaven knows you've put up with more than enough of my griping about my ex. You're practically my shrink." She gave a snort of self-disgust.

At his raised eyebrows, she rushed to explain herself better. "I'm just trying to be respectful of your feelings, okay? If you need to be alone with your memories this evening, I totally get it."

His eyebrows returned to their normal level as he rode a few paces closer to her. "Just fix your posture, alright? You'll be able to absorb the movement of the horse better and be less sore afterwards."

"Working on it." She blew out a frustrated breath, not sure if he was shutting her out or roping her back in. It felt like he was doing a little of both. However, he didn't seem inclined to accept her offer to cut the lesson short, so she tried really, really, really hard to relax and get back in the neutral position in her saddle. She didn't want to add to his current level of stress by performing poorly this evening.

He nodded in approval as she repositioned her spine. "Looks about right. Now hold that position as we ride around the ring again. Back straight. Knees relaxed."

She lifted Merry's reins and nudged her forward. "Let's go, girl." Merry started off at a walk, but eagerly broke into a trot when Hope gave her more rein.

“That’s it,” Roman called after her.

Encouraged by his voice, she settled into a rhythm, enjoying the rippling movements of the horse beneath her. All her life, she’d wanted to ride horses, and now she was getting to check that box off her bucket list. It was one of her biggest dreams come true.

As she circled back to Roman, she impulsively called out to him, “Would you be willing to take a few pictures of me riding? I’d like to send them to my dad.”

Instead of driving home to Phoenix for Thanksgiving next month, she was kind of hoping to talk him into meeting her in Pinetop, instead. She instinctively knew he’d like the small mountain town. Even if she wasn’t going to be here for long, Pinetop would be a better fit for him than Phoenix had ever been. The only way to convince him, though, would be for him to see the place for himself.

For an answer, Roman pulled out his cell phone and started snapping pictures.

“Hey!” She shook her head in admonition at him. “You didn’t give me a chance to pose.”

“You don’t need to pose.” He motioned for her to get moving again. “Just ride.”

Okay, then.

She leaned forward to pat Merry’s neck first. “Are you ready to help me talk Dad into driving to Pinetop?”

The palomino nickered affectionately.

“Thank you.” Hope gave her a quick hug, dimly aware that Roman was still snapping pictures. Then she straightened, deliberately moved back to the neutral position, and circled Merry around the ring again.



SOMETHING SHIFTED IN ROMAN’S CHEST AT THE SIGHT OF Hope hugging his horse. The white-spotted golden palomino

whinnied happily at whatever she said to her. Then they took off together again.

They made a good team, just like he'd known they would. At four years old, Merry was mature enough and calm enough to put a new rider at ease. On the flip side, she was well-trained and could more than handle increasing challenges as Hope's skill level improved. Merry could race around barrels and even perform small to mid-sized jumps. Something told him that Hope would be ready for both of those maneuvers before long. She was so eager to learn that she'd proven to be a quick study. It was why he was being so strict with her posture tonight and every night. Proper posture would play a much bigger role when she moved on to the intermediate-level stuff.

The alarm on his cell phone went off, making Vixen jolt beneath him.

"Sorry, buddy." Roman quickly turned off the alarm. It was his reminder that it was time to head home. Izzy's husband would be back from his farm hand duties by now, which meant he and Izzy would be ready to head to the cemetery soon.

When Hope rode his way again, he motioned for her to head toward the ramp. "I need to get going." He wished he had more time to spend with her. He especially hated the necessity of dodging her offer to grab coffee together. However, he didn't want to let Izzy down. In an odd twist of fate, his wife had been one of his sister's closest friends, making their visits to the cemetery every bit as important to her as it was to him.

Hope gave him a mocking salute and rode ahead of him down the ramp. She slid from her saddle at the bottom of the ramp and walked Merry the rest of the way to the horse stalls. She halted her at the tethering spot and secured her in place for the brushing down they always gave the horses afterward.

Roman glanced at his cell phone again, knowing he should've stopped the lesson a good ten minutes ago. He was going to be cutting it close on time.

Hope watched him. "Go." She stepped forward and reached for Vixen's reins. "I've got this."

He helped her remove the saddles while he deliberated whether to take her up on her offer. “I don’t like the idea of dumping all the clean-up on you.”

“I insist.” She kept her hand out for the reins. “It’ll be good practice for me. Plus, I owe you big time for all the free horse lessons that you won’t let me pay you for.”

He snorted. “I’m not charging a friend, so forget it.”

“Then gimme.” She stepped closer to him to wrap her hands around Vixen’s reins. Their hands brushed in the process.

It felt good. And right. And everything in between. “Fine.” He sent what he hoped was a smirk her way, but wasn’t sure he pulled it off in his current mood. “But don’t think this will make me go any easier on you during the next lesson.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Consider me warned.”

He watched her for a few seconds while she tied Vixen next to Merry, all the while talking to them.

“Don’t worry.” She shot him a teasing look as she bent her head closer to Vixen. “I’m going to give you an extra few minutes of brushing to make up for Roman’s crabbiness.”

He shook his head at her. “You’re a brat.”

She turned her back on him. “Like I said, stinking crabby.”

A smile tugged at his lips as he turned away from her. “Put ‘em in stalls seven and eight,” he called over his shoulder. “Not sure if I’ll come back for them later or leave them here overnight.”

“Roger that, chief wrangler, sir. I’ll feed them, water them, and read them bedtime stories before I take off.”

He chuckled and kept walking. As he rounded the corner, he nearly plowed into Julia.

“Whoa, there!” He reached out to steady her shoulders. “Sorry about that.” He studied her curiously. “What are you still doing here?” She had a baby and a husband to get home to.

“Practicing my lines.” She made a face at him.

“You’re taking that backup role pretty seriously.”

Her frown deepened. “I take my job very seriously, yes.” She waved a white envelope at him as she stepped back. “Never know when I might be needed.”

He eyed the white envelope. “What’s that?”

“Something from a theater company in Philadelphia. It’s addressed to Hope.”

He wasn’t sure why she was telling him that. “So, give it to her.” He glanced impatiently toward the exit, anxious to be on his way home.

“That’s what I’m down here doing,” she snapped. “Can’t help wondering what they’re contacting her about, though.”

“If you really want to know, just ask her.”

Julia tossed back her flaming red ponytail, narrowing her gaze on him. “Did she happen to mention anything about this company during any of her riding lessons?”

“Nope.”

“Wow! You’re in a cranky mood.” She finally stepped aside so he could pass.

“So I’ve already been told. Multiple times.” He glared at her. “Are there any other insults you’d like to throw my way before I take off?”

She smoothed a hand down her plaid maternity top. “Actually, er…”

He’d already started walking, but her words made him pause. “Is there something you need from me?”

“I just wanted you to know that my friend, Martina, will be at our Thanksgiving celebration out at the farm.”

“Good for her.” He wasn’t sure why Julia thought he needed to know who was attending their big annual Thanksgiving celebration, but okay.

“She’s really looking forward to seeing you again.”

“Again?” He gave her a wary look, trying to remember when he’d met anyone by the name of Martina.

“She came to our hotdog and s’more roast, remember?” Julia reminded impatiently. “Short. Quiet.”

That narrows it down. Not.

“Maybe.” Only vaguely, though, and only because the woman’s pixie haircut had reminded him of a fairy. Izzy had been the one to introduce him to her, but they hadn’t spoken again after that. He’d caught her staring at him a few times afterward, but hadn’t thought much about it at the time. Apparently, she had. It was a problem he’d have to deal with later.

“You don’t sound too sure about that.” Julia’s lips twisted into a pout. She sounded more than a little put out.

“Listen,” he glanced impatiently around them, “I’ve got a date with the cemetery that I don’t want to miss, so you’ll have to save my tarring and feathering for later.”

Without warning, Julia stepped closer to throw her arms around his neck. “Oh, Roman! I miss Mia like crazy. Everyone does.”

“Thanks.” He couldn’t remember his wife and Julia being close, but he hugged her back, anyway. “Gotta run now.” He untwined her arms from around his neck and made his escape.

His truck and trailer were parked in the back of the employee parking lot, as far out of the way as possible. With respect to time, he didn’t unhitch the trailer, even though it was empty.

Main Street was jam-packed with tourists this time of evening, so he had to wait at the edge of the parking lot with his blinker flashing for several minutes.

A windstorm had flooded the area with tumbleweeds a couple of days ago, but they’d already been swept up. The mayor made a point of keeping the downtown area as clean as a whistle, since so many people liked to walk up and down the sidewalks to shop, eat holiday sweets, and sip on hot

beverages. The year-round festival feel of the town was part of the charm Pinetop held for its visitors.

Folks couldn't get enough of their homemade fudge, hand-twisted pretzels, and steaming cider. Every year, the shop owners of Pinetop put their heads together to design a new annual mug to commemorate the Christmas season, which pretty much lasted year round. Then each of them invested in a stockpile of them. They sold like crazy, too. Tourists could often be found scouring the antique and resale shops on the edge of town in the hopes of finding mugs from previous years to "complete their set." It was a pretty clever sales gimmick, if you asked him.

He drove slowly down Main Street, stopping occasionally to allow tourists to cross in front of him. They weren't supposed to jaywalk between intersections like that, but the bigger the crowd got, the more people did it. It wasn't worth the risk of hitting a pedestrian, so most drivers crawled through the busiest stretch of shops and kept a foot hovering over their brake pedals. Local law enforcement officials claimed they were trying to crack down on all the jaywalking, but Roman hadn't seen much evidence of it, probably because Pinetop depended so much on the money tourists spent in town.

As he exited the downtown area, the crowd thinned and the train of vehicles grew sparse. He always found it easier to breathe when he reached the wide open stretch of highway between Pinetop and Christmas Tree Farm.

The mountainside rose on one side of the road, while the craggy landscape dropped steeply downward on the other side. Approximately five miles later, he neared the tall pine log entrance of Christmas Tree Farm. The logs were sunk into brand new brick columns, compliments of Jorge Ortega.

Though the guy could be a bit of a punk, he'd finally secured his green card and was trying to make an honest living working construction. His specialty was masonry, and the new brick columns certainly spruced up the entrance to the farm.

The wide gate was propped open. Though it was only October, twinkling Christmas lights were already wrapped around the columns. Ever since the farm had been under new management, they'd been borrowing the biggest play from the town's playbook — keeping the place decorated for the holidays year-round. As far as Roman was concerned, it was smart marketing for a company called Christmas Tree Farm. Life-sized candy canes illuminated both sides of the entrance, lighting the way for visitors to the tree lot.

Roman bypassed the lot and hung a left in front of the big farmhouse where Emilio Navarro and his wife, Tess, lived. They'd been working hard to fix up the old place that Farmer Tom had given them after moving with his wife to a retirement home in town. Tess had gone all out on the Christmas lights this year. There were flickering candles in the upstairs windows and a Christmas tree twinkling from nearly every downstairs window.

More lights lined the eaves and wrapped the porch columns. To the delight of the immigrant kids living on the farm, Tess had also filled the front yard with blow-up Christmas toys — life-sized gingerbread men, Frosty the Snowman, a whole clan of elves, and one gigantic Santa.

As he made his way to the cabins where most of the employees lived, he found a sense of comfort in having a place like this to come home to. Most of his neighbors were poor, but they had each other, and there was no price tag you could put on something like that.

Roman wasn't sure he would've survived the past couple of years without the support of such a close-knit family and community. As he reached his two-story cabin at the end of the street, he tried not to think about how dark the windows were. Two years ago, a Christmas tree had glowed in the front window of the living room. His wife had claimed it needed to go up as early in the year as possible so they could enjoy it longer. He hadn't had the heart to put one up since her passing. The tub of ornaments they'd purchased together was sitting in the attic. Maybe someday he'd put up another tree, but not this year. It was still too soon.

As his truck lights swung across the yard of the cabin next to his, the front door flew open.

Izzy stepped outside to the porch. Her thick, quilted coat was already on. So were her hat and gloves. She wrapped her arms around her middle, bouncing in place while she waited for him to circle the gravel cul-de-sac and park in front of his cabin.

The moment he leaped to the ground and slammed the truck door shut, she called out, “Cutting it a little close on time, are we?”

“Wasn’t aware there was a deadline,” he shot back.

“There’s not, but it gets colder every second this time of the evening.” She shivered and bounced some more. “We’ll turn into icicles if we stay out too long in this wind.”

He jogged up the sidewalk and met her at the top of the porch steps to enclose her in a hug. “Thanks for making the flower arrangement. I’m not any good at stuff like that.”

“You know I don’t mind.” She hugged him back. “Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah.” He was as okay as he could be before a visit to the cemetery.

She pulled back a little to scan his face. “How’d the riding lesson go today?” Wisps of dark hair poked out here and there from her white sock hat. She looked like she’d put it on over her braids in a hurry.

He shrugged. “Hope still needs to work on her posture, but she’s coming along.”

A smile curved his sister’s lips. “I’m sure she appreciates the lessons.”

He nodded. “Seems like.”

“So, is this a new side hustle of yours?” she pressed.

Roman had no idea what she was talking about. “What do you mean?”

“Giving riding lessons.”

“Nope. Just helping out a friend.”

“A very pretty, very single friend.” A sly look crept into Izzy’s eyes.

“Just a friend,” he repeated firmly, dropping his arms and stepping back. “Are Eduardo and Little Ed ready to go?”

Her expression changed to one of motherly concern. “Actually, Little Ed is running a low-grade fever this evening.”

“I’m sorry.” He cocked his head at her. “Would you rather do this another night?”

“No. We’re pretty sure it’s only because he’s cutting teeth. Eduardo offered to stay home with him as a precaution, so it’s just me and you this evening, cowboy.”

He reached out to flick the white pompom on her hat. “How about you sit this one out, too? Like you said, it’s pretty cold tonight. Go be a mom. I’m sure the Eds would appreciate that.”

Her expression brightened. “Are you sure you don’t mind going alone?”

“Nah. I’ve got this.” Her quick agreement to stay home surprised him. He’d been under the mistaken impression that she needed the visit to the cemetery as much as he did. Apparently, he’d been wrong.

She backed toward the door. “If you’re sure you’re sure, I’ll run grab the flowers.”

He nodded firmly. “I’m sure.”

She was back in two snaps with the thick cluster of fall foliage. A bright orange ribbon was tied around them, securing the stems with a bow.

“Thanks.” As Roman accepted the flowers, he leaned closer to kiss his sister’s forehead.

“They’re not out there anymore, Roman,” she whispered. “Only our memories of them.”

“I know.” He drew a jagged breath. “I’m glad.” He was thankful that their parents had raised them to believe in

Heaven — that they had the hope of being reunited again with loved ones who reached the other side ahead of them.

“Me, too.” Izzy blinked back tears. “I’ll make you some more flowers for Christmas, if you want, but that might be the last time I do it. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course.” He searched her features, trying to figure out what she was really trying to tell him. “If you’re ready to say goodbye, I understand.”

“It’s time, Roman,” she said gently. “For all of us. Please don’t take that the wrong way. I’m not trying to be insensitive.”

“I know you’re not. It’s okay if you’re ready to say goodbye.” He kissed her forehead again, not sure if he was ready to do the same. Maybe he’d get there, eventually. Maybe he wouldn’t.

“I love you, Roman.” She reached up with both hands to squeeze his shoulders.

“Yeah, yeah.” He winked at her, trying to keep his voice light so he didn’t break down in front of her.



A FEW MINUTES LATER, HE TOOK A KNEE BEFORE THE PAIR OF tombstones at the mountain’s edge. Because a church had stood there many years ago, Christmas Tree Farm had its own cemetery just beyond the cul-de-sac.

“Izzy is right. You’re not in the ground, Mia,” he said quietly. “I don’t know if you can even hear what I’m saying. Not a hundred percent sure how that stuff works in the afterlife.” He shook his head, knowing what he had to say was more for his benefit than for hers. “I just wanted to say again how sorry I am that our time together was cut short.” It still didn’t feel right.

“I love you,” he continued hoarsely. “I’ll always love you and our son.” He pulled the old wilted flowers from the urn that Izzy had anchored to the ground. Otherwise, it would’ve

long since blown away in the brisk mountain wind. He set the fresh autumn foliage in the urn and stood, feeling like part of his heart remained in the ground at his feet.

Yeah, he wasn't ready to say goodbye yet. He was glad Izzy was, though. He started to turn away from the grave. Then he stopped and half-turned back. "I met a new friend. You'd like her. Her name is Hope."

Hope was certainly something he could use an extra dose of right now. Christmas had been Mia's favorite time of year, so the holidays were extra hard for him. His goal was simply to get through them like he'd done the past two years.

As he walked back up the rocky incline, he found himself looking forward to his makeup coffee session with Hope after work the next day. Glancing back at the grave stones, he wondered if he should feel guilty for looking forward to spending more time with her.

She's just a friend, he reminded himself. A friend that might be job hunting out of town, according to Julia. Though it was none of his business, he decided he might make it his business over coffee tomorrow. As a friend, he had a right to know stuff like that.

I think.

A dull feeling settled in the pit of his stomach at the thought of her leaving town. Maybe he'd tell her that. He imagined the holidays were going to be tough on her this year, too, following her breakup. Maybe hearing that he liked having her around would bring her a little comfort.



CHAPTER 4: PLUS ONE INVITATION

ROMAN

An hour-ish earlier

“**H**ey, girlfriend!”

Hope jolted at the sound of Julia’s voice. She was surprised to discover that her pregnant backup was still in the building. She stopped brushing Merry to glance up as the redhead glided into view.

“Hey, Julia!” she called back. “What are you still doing here?”

“Roman just asked the same thing.” Julia’s gaze turned speculative as she walked Hope’s way. “He seemed unusually cranky this evening. He’s not usually like that.”

Silence settled between them, during which Julia seemed to be waiting for Hope to say something back. Hope kept her expression carefully schooled, refusing to take the bait. She had no interest in discussing Roman behind his back.

She continued brushing Merry, figuring Julia would get to her point all the sooner if she kept quiet.

“He’s on his way to the cemetery to pay his respects to his wife and son,” Julia continued in a slightly testy voice.

Hope nodded and kept brushing. “Yes. He told me.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” Julia sidled closer.

Hope spared a glance at her, swallowing a rush of irritation. “Losing his family? Absolutely! My heart goes out to him.”

“Everybody loved Mia.”

Mia. Hope mentally latched on to the name. It was the first time she’d heard anyone mention Roman’s dead wife by name. It sounded cute and sweet.

“Everybody loves Roman, too.” Julia’s voice grew softer. “It broke all of our hearts to watch him grieve the way he’s

done.”

“I can only imagine,” Hope murmured, without looking up. She was anxious for Julia to get to her point.

“My friend, Martina, has been praying for him every day since the double tragedy.”

Hope nodded, though the name Martina meant nothing to her.

“She’s really been there for him, if you know what I mean.”

It sounded like a warning to Hope. “That’s nice,” she said vaguely. “I’m sure he appreciates that.”

“Technically, his sister was the one who introduced them, but she’s my friend, too.”

Yeah, Julia was definitely hinting at Hope to back off from Roman, though she wasn’t sure why.

We’re just friends.

“I know you two are friends,” Julia continued in the same silky voice. “He’s made it very clear it’s nothing more than that.”

Oh? Hope flicked another glance the woman’s way, kind of surprised that Roman had said anything to her at all about their friendship. Julia didn’t strike her as someone he’d confide in. She was way too shallow.

Before Hope returned her gaze to the horses, she caught sight of a white envelope in Julia’s hand.

Julia must have noticed, because she raised the envelope and waved it at her. “It’s for you. I saw it on Angel’s desk and offered to bring it down to you.”

Hope wordlessly held out a hand for it, making a mental note to send an immediate address change to whoever had sent her something at work. Her heart raced at the return address on the front of the envelope. It was from a large theater company in Philadelphia.

Julia watched her closely as she opened it. “Did you apply for a job with them?”

The hopefulness in her voice made Hope’s irritation ratchet up another few degrees. “No.” *But if I had, it would be none of your business.* She wished Julia would skedaddle back upstairs to pester someone else.

“You know what? It’s probably junk mail, which means I’m only wasting my time.” Though she was dying of curiosity to know what was in the envelope, she stuffed it in the back pocket of her jeans and returned to brushing Merry.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Julia coaxed. “You know you want to.”

“Oh, all right!” Hope’s willpower snapped. She reached for the envelope and pulled out the piece of paper inside. Hastily scanning its contents, she grew still. It was a job offer, one she most definitely hadn’t applied for. Her hands started to shake.

“Well?” Julia sounded impatient.

“Like I said. Junk mail.” Hope stuffed the paper back into the envelope and returned it to her pocket. It wasn’t a complete lie. Though it wasn’t a form letter, it was junk nonetheless.

“You seem upset.” Suspicion clouded the young actress’s voice.

“Nope. Just really tired.” Hope bit out the words. “It’s been a long day. I’m heading home right after I finish tending to the horses.”

Julia frowned. “I didn’t realize working in the stable was part of your job.”

“It’s not.” Julia knew it wasn’t. “I only offered to help tonight so Roman could get to the cemetery sooner.”

Julia was silent for a moment. “You’re a good friend.”

Friend. Friend. Friend. Just a friend. Hope was growing tired of hearing the word, especially since Julia seemed to have an ulterior motive for constantly repeating it.

“I try,” she sighed, wondering what it was going to take to get the woman to leave her in peace. Then an idea struck her. “Listen.” She angled her head at the spare brush on the bench behind her. “If you want to help me brush down the horses, we’ll both get out of here sooner.”

Julia’s expression transitioned from a pout to a grimace in nothing flat. She arched her back and placed a hand on it, as if experiencing a twinge of pain. “I’d love to,” she gushed in a falsely sweet voice, “but I’d better not, because of the pregnancy and all. I’m sure you understand.” She took a step back. “I mainly came down here to deliver the mail.”

No, you came down here to try to find out what was in it.

“I totally understand.” *More than you realize.* Hope made no effort to infuse any extra warmth into her voice.

Julia turned toward the elevators. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Lucky me! “Goodnight, Julia.”

“Night, Hope.” The redhead lickety-split through the stable doors.

Hope stared after her, trying not to laugh. *Holy smokes!* Her backup actress was turning out to be a real piece of work — one who clearly had a problem with her growing friendship with Roman. There was no telling why.

She hurried through the rest of the brushing and feeding, gave both horses a quick hug, and headed outside.

The moment she made it back to her apartment, she reached for the envelope again. What it contained was earth-shattering. She read it a second time beneath the glow of the lamp in her living room.

Dear Miss Isaacson:

We are pleased to offer you a lead role in our upcoming spring production of PHANTOM IN THE GARDEN. This is a short-suspense opportunity, due to a last-minute vacancy. We plan to re-cast the role

before Christmas, so please read the terms of our offer carefully...

Though Hope read the offer a third time and a fourth time, she still didn't understand why the company was extending the offer to her. It was a job she hadn't applied for. Though she scanned job openings online nearly every evening, she'd yet to officially circulate her resume and didn't intend to do so until after Christmas. She felt like she owed Castellano's her undivided attention until then.

It wasn't until she read the fine writing at the bottom of the letter that she finally understood how she'd even gotten on the company's radar. Pete Jasper was the director. The same Pete Jasper she'd almost married.

Her heart thudded sickly at the sight of her ex-fiancé's name. What on earth was he doing directing a show in Philly? The last she'd heard, he'd moved to New York City, which was a good two hours away from the theater company who'd sent her the letter.

Her hands started to shake again so badly that she allowed the letter to drop to her lap. Apparently, Pete had changed jobs.

And still wants to recruit me to his cast.

But why? After all this time, she'd figured she'd finally heard the last of him. It made zero sense to her. It did, however, manage to make her angry all over again.

How dare he contact her out of the blue like this! Right when she was finally starting to heal and move on. She didn't need him making her second-guess her decision to break up with him all over again. And she certainly didn't need for him to make her feel like resuming communication with him could make or break her chances to land a job on Broadway.

Even though the letter in my lap very much makes it sound that way.

She let out a moan of frustration, wishing she could pick up the phone and call Roman. However, there was no way she

was disturbing his cemetery visit. She would simply have to wait until tomorrow to soundboard the unexpected job offer off his very capable shoulders.



ROMAN HAD JUST ROLLED INTO BED WHEN HIS CELL PHONE pinged with an incoming text message.

Guess I forgot to turn the sound off.

He retrieved it from the charger on his nightstand and held it up to scan the screen.

The text was from Julia. He tasted disappointment, wishing it was from anyone besides her. Her message made him sit up in bed.

Hope said it was junk mail, but whatever was in the envelope made her hands shake. Just thought you should know.

Concern shot through him. He gripped the phone, longing to call Hope to make sure she was alright. However, it was past ten o'clock. She was probably in bed by now, possibly already asleep.

With a groan of irritation, he texted Julia a thumbs up.

She shot back a response. *I don't think it was junk mail.*

He didn't bother answering. His gut told him that Julia had an issue with Hope, probably for no other reason than Hope had landed the role she wanted in the Christmas show.

He plugged his cell phone into the charger once again and lay back down, staring at the ceiling.

Thinking.

Worrying.

Soul-searching.

Though he'd only met Hope Isaacson a little over a month ago, her friendship had quickly become important to him. It

wasn't something he was in any hurry to give up, which made Julia's texts all the more concerning.

Was someone in Philadelphia truly attempting to recruit Hope away from Pinetop? Even worse, had she applied for a job there without telling him? She'd been honest with him about feeling like her job in Pinetop was merely a stepping stone to something bigger. However, he really had expected her to keep him in the loop about these kinds of decisions. Was there a reason she was shutting him out?

Unfortunately, he was going to have to wait until tomorrow to find out the answers to his questions. He wished tomorrow didn't feel so far away.

It was a long time before he fell asleep. And for the first time in years, he didn't wake until his alarm went off. It was a strange feeling not already being dressed and walking out the door by then.

He stretched and yawned, reluctant to roll out of bed until he remembered the envelope Julia had delivered to Hope the evening before.

His drowsiness fled. Anxious to find out more about what the envelope contained, he quickly shaved and dressed for the day.

By the time he headed to his truck, snow flurries were falling. It was still dark, so he felt them before he saw them. Only when he turned his headlights on could he see the tiny bits of frost floating downward. They bounced and slid off the glass without sticking.

He started the motor and turned on the windshield wipers, knowing the snowflakes would start to stick as soon as the truck warmed up. He reached the highway, but continued to keep his speed down. After enough flurries fell, the road would become slick.

Despite waking up later than usual, his vehicle was still one of the first ones to arrive in the employee parking lot behind Castellano's. The only other vehicles present belonged

to the kitchen staff. One or two of them showed up early every morning to start the baking.

As he parked his horse trailer in the furthest row from the building, another vehicle caught his eye — one that normally wasn't there this time of day. The sight of the red Mustang parked up by the rear entrance door made his heart pound with anticipation. For reasons that didn't yet make any sense, Hope was already at work even though she wasn't due to start for another two hours.

He quickly leaped down from the truck cab and headed indoors, making a beeline for Hope's dressing room. When he arrived, her door was cracked open, and a light was on inside.

He paused outside the door to lightly rap his knuckles against it. "Hope? Are you in there?"

The door swung open, and her tear-stained face appeared.

Worry leaped into his chest. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, shaking a few fresh tears loose. As they slid down her cheeks, his arms automatically came out.

She stepped into them.

It was the first time he'd ever held her, so it was an entirely new feeling, one that filled him with wonder.

She whimpered from the effort to hold in a sob, drawing a few shuddery breaths.

"Are you hurt?" He cuddled her closer.

"Not on the outside," she choked.

"I can tell you're upset." He gently tucked the top of her head beneath his chin.

She gulped against his neck. "I received a job offer in the mail last night."

Ah. The envelope. He rubbed his palms in gentle circles across her back, liking the fact that she was confiding in him about it. "A job offer isn't usually the cause of tears."

“It’s one I didn’t apply for.” She drew another shaky breath.

“You did graduate at the top of your class,” he reminded. “Maybe that’s how they found out about you.”

“Not they,” she corrected. “Him!”

A single pronoun spoken in such a bitter voice could only mean one person. Her ex.

“I’m gonna need a little more information,” he said carefully.

“Pete Jasper is trying to recruit me to the cast of Phantom in the Garden.”

His eyebrows rose. “That’s a big show.”

“Yes. We’re talking Broadway. Philadelphia, to be more precise.”

His heart sank. “That’s an awfully long way from Pinetop.”

And from me.

“I know, but it’s where I’ve always dreamed of ending up someday. Broadway, that is. Not necessarily Philadelphia.”

“Someday,” he repeated, trying to figure out where she was going with the conversation.

“Yes. Someday. Not this soon, though. Not before Christmas!” She sounded indignant.

He raised his head to peer incredulously down at her. “You’re telling me he expects you to make a major career decision before the end of the year?”

“Yes!” Her voice crescendoed. “And as badly as I don’t want to work alongside my ex again, I feel like I should at least consider the merits of the offer. It’s Broadway, for crying out loud!”

“Right.” His arms tightened around her, trying to come at the issue from an objective angle. It was hard, though, since he

had such strong feelings on the topic. “Besides the fact that it’s Broadway, what’s the biggest upside to accepting the offer?”

“Not one thing,” Hope declared with energy. “The fact that it’s Broadway is the *only* upside.”

“Okay, then.” He liked the sound of that more than he should have. As her friend, he was supposed to be supportive of her career, not trying to talk her out of what might prove to be the biggest opportunity of her life. “What are the cons?”

“Literally *everything* else,” she declared breathlessly. “It’s ridiculously far from home. My ex-fiancé works there. No, it’s worse than that. My ex is directing the show.”

Whoa! If she accepted the job, that meant her ex would be her boss.

“I can’t do it,” she exploded without warning. “I won’t. Not before Christmas, anyway. I couldn’t possibly do that to Angel and Willa. They’ve been too good to me.”

Relief surged through Roman at the reprieve she didn’t realize she was granting him. “Then that’s your answer.” He wished his voice hadn’t come out so hoarse. He didn’t want his personal feelings to affect her decision. “Tell him that reporting to Philly before Christmas is out of the question, and see if the offer still stands at a later date.”

She nodded against his shoulder. “I like the sound of that. It’ll give me time to inform Angel and Willa about what’s going on and talk it over with them, too, before making a final decision.”

It already felt final to Roman. His chest ached at the thought of losing her so soon after meeting her. However, it wouldn’t be right to stand in her way. If Broadway was ultimately where she wanted to end up, then he’d just have to find a way to deal with it.

“Man,” he muttered, not sure what else to say.

“You don’t sound too happy about it.” She tipped her face up to his, still leaning against his shoulder.

Though he didn't think it was her intention, it brought their mouths closer. Much, much closer.

He dragged in a breath, all too aware that if he dipped his head a few inches, his lips would touch hers.

For a moment, all rational thought left his brain. Longing tore through him to know what it would feel like to kiss her. Fortunately, his sense of reason kicked back in before he did anything stupid.

Kissing her was probably the quickest way to ruin their friendship, and that was something he couldn't bear the thought of. It was a sobering thought, but it gave him the strength to tear his gaze away from her, not caring where he looked so long as it was anywhere besides her very kissable lips.

She remained in his embrace a few minutes longer before slowly unwinding her arms from around his middle. "I wanted to call you so badly last night," she admitted in a shaky voice.

His lips twitched at how badly he'd wanted to do the same thing. "You should have."

"No way!" She looked aghast. "I didn't want to intrude on your time at the cemetery."

He shrugged. "I wasn't there for long."

His answer made her grow still. "Did everything go okay?"

"More or less." He shrugged again. "My nephew was running a bit of a fever, so Izzy and Ed hung back with him."

Hope gasped. "You mean you went there alone?"

"Yep." He chuckled at her expression. "I'm a big boy, Hope. I go places by myself all the time."

She drew in a sharp breath, looking like she wanted to slap him. "I can't believe you just said that!"

"It's true," he pointed out.

"I want to believe you." She scanned his face anxiously. "Are you sure you're okay?"

“Do I look okay to you?” The way she was looking at him made him long to take her in his arms again. It was an emotion he had no right to be feeling for a woman who was only a friend.

“Other than tired? Yes.” She continued to eye him worriedly. “Did you get any sleep last night?”

“A little.” Being tired this morning felt like the least of his worries. The possibility of having to say goodbye to Hope when she moved to the east coast filled him with far more dread than anything else at the moment.

His phone vibrated with an incoming text. He considered ignoring it. However, it might be his sister, and he was hoping for an update on his nephew’s condition.

He dug his phone from his pocket and discovered that it was, indeed, Izzy. He eagerly read her message, then immediately wished he hadn’t.

Forgot to ask you last night...have you invited anyone to our Thanksgiving celebration? It’s only a month away.

His shoulders tensed, since there was only one reason she’d be asking a question like that. There must be a single lady she was hoping to introduce him to.

“What’s going on?” Hope asked quickly.

“My sister,” he growled.

“Uh-oh! Is your nephew worse?”

“I have no idea.” He gestured irritably at his phone. “Izzy’s trying to figure out if I’m bringing anyone to our big annual Thanksgiving feast at Christmas Tree Farm,” which, of course, he wasn’t, “and I can think of only one reason she’d be asking that.”

“Oh, really? What’s that?”

“She’s up to her matchmaking tricks again.”

A gurgle of laughter escaped Hope.

He rounded on her. “I’m not sure what you find so amusing about her interference in my life.”

“I wouldn’t call it that!” Hope sent a playful punch in the direction of his upper arm.

If it was anyone else, he would’ve ducked. Instead, he let her fist connect with his biceps. “What else would you call it?”

“She cares about you, Roman, and there are a lot worse things in the world than having people in your life who care about you.” Her expression clearly indicated that she thought he was overacting, which irritated him more than it should have. He’d just finished going way out of his way to comfort her. It would’ve been nice if she’d taken his side in return.

“She has a funny way of showing it.” He scanned Hope’s face, looking for any sign of sympathy. There was none. She was truly convinced that his sister had the right of it.

After a pause, she ventured in a softer voice, “Maybe she’s just tired of seeing you sad and alone.”

“Who says I’m sad?” Most days, he thought he did a pretty good job of hiding it. He couldn’t believe Hope was calling him out on it to drive her point home. It felt like a cheap shot.

“Uh, I just did, silly!”

Yep, she was totally calling him out on his grief. He couldn’t believe it. “Fortunately, I have a good friend to beat me up about it. I mean, cheer me up,” he corrected sarcastically. “Unless she decides to leave town and abandon me altogether,” he added, half-turning away from her.

“I heard that.”

“You were supposed to.” He moved toward the door.

“You know what? You’re awfully crabby for a guy who has both a good family and good friends who care about him very, very much.”

Very, very, huh? She was going to have to do better than that if she wanted to smooth his ruffled feathers. An idea struck him, making him swing back in her direction. “If you care so much, how about you prove it by coming to the Thanksgiving feast as my plus one? That way, my sister —

and anyone else with any bright ideas in my direction — will be forced to stand down.”

He meant it as a joke, albeit a tired one. However, the wrinkle that settled in the middle of Hope’s forehead told him she was actually giving his question some serious consideration.

“The evening before Thanksgiving,” she mused slowly, “Dad and I usually meet at a little hole-in-the-wall on the outskirts of Phoenix. Inside an old city bus, no less. It was converted into a diner years ago.”

“So, I’m losing out to your dad.” He spread his hands. “I’ve had worse rejections than that.”

“Don’t get your cart before your horse, cowboy.” She held up a finger. “I was about to say that I was planning on breaking tradition by asking him to come here instead of me going there.” She bit her lower lip. “Something tells me he might enjoy the change of pace.”

Roman still wasn’t hearing a commitment one way or the other. “I’m a simple guy, Hope. When you make up your mind, just give me a yes or a no.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I was trying to put you in a better mood. Guess it’s not working.”

He turned again to leave. “The only thing that’ll improve my mood at this point is a firm yes. Otherwise, I’ve gotta brace myself to face a bunch of stuff I’d rather not face.” He wasn’t sure why her answer bothered him so much, but it did. Once he’d realized she was seriously considering his invitation, he’d made the mistake of getting his hopes up.

Dumb idea.

Hope might be his friend, but she was still a woman, which meant she was very capable of keeping the men in her life in emotional knots.

“It’s most likely a yes,” she called after him, sounding like she was trying not to laugh. “So long as your offer doesn’t expire before I have a chance to call my dad.”

He paused in the doorway, though he didn't turn around. "Yeah, that's not happening. Having you as my plus one was sort of the whole point." He disappeared around the corner before he said something he might regret.

He had a nagging feeling that he was being unreasonable, but he kept walking anyway.



CHAPTER 5: CLEARING THE AIR

HOPE

Hope stared after Roman, belatedly realizing how close they'd come to having their first argument. It kind of hurt her feelings, since she had no idea what she'd done wrong. She really had been trying to cheer him up.

As she replayed their conversation in her head, it slowly dawned on her that maybe he hadn't been kidding about wanting her at his side over Thanksgiving.

And all I did was joke about it.

Blowing out a breath, she moved toward the door.

I need to make this right.

Though they hadn't known each other for long, he was seriously the nicest guy she'd ever met. She didn't want to lose their growing friendship over something so stupid.

Her steps slowed as she neared the doors of the stable. What if he was still angry with her? What if he wasn't ready to smooth things over?

What if I've truly blown things between us?

As a month of memories raced through her head, she was forced to acknowledge that Roman had done nearly all the giving in their friendship. He'd shown her the ropes around Castellano's and helped her over her newbie status much quicker than she could've done on her own. He'd given her free riding lessons and comforted her on more than one occasion when she'd been upset.

Like this morning.

He'd been her soundboard about career decisions and patiently listened to all of her griping about her ex.

What have I done for him in return?

The fact that she couldn't think of anything right off the bat filled her with self-disgust.

I guess I've bought him coffee a few times.

But that hardly compared to the crazy number of the things he'd done for her.

Big things.

Small things.

Sweet things.

Meaningful things.

I'm such a horrible friend! Always acting like a spoiled diva while he rushes around, trying to make everything in my world right again.

Remorse gripped her as she reached for the stable door on the right.

Before her hand settled on the doorknob, both doors were yanked open. Roman stood on the other side with a ravaged expression twisting his bronze features. He took one look at her and started apologizing.

“Don't,” she pleaded, stepping across the threshold.

He backed up to let her into the stable, but stopped when she reached out to place a hand on his arm. “I'm the one who should be apologizing.”

“Nah, you were right.” He glanced down at the hand she had resting on his arm. “I was just being a royal crab.”

The way he was looking at her hand made her pull it back and drop it to her side.

Just friends, she reminded herself, scrambling for something to say to restore the peace between them. “Listen. If your offer is still open, I'd like to be your plus one at that Thanksgiving get-together. For reals.”

To her dismay, his expression didn't change. “What about your dad?”

“I'll figure it out. I'll, uh...try to get him a bus ticket or something.” He didn't have a driver's license. He didn't even own a vehicle. “If his schedule won't allow him to make it to Pinetop before Thanksgiving, I'll get him here as soon as possible afterward.”

“Or I can stick to my original plan and muscle through my family drama like I always do.” He shook his head at her. “I don’t like the idea of taking you away from your dad during the holidays. Family is too important.”

Though she agreed with him wholeheartedly on that point, it felt like he was pushing her away. Disappointment flooded her. “So, I blew it, huh?” He must be even angrier than she thought. “Guess there was an expiration on your offer, after all.”

“Of course not!” He scowled at her. “If you’re in town for the party, I want you there. But I meant what I said about figuring out your dad’s situation first.”

“And I will. I just wanted to give you a firm yes.” *Like you said you wanted, right?* “It was wrong of me to joke about your invitation and keep you dangling like that.”

His gaze narrowed on her. “I’m not looking for pity points, Hope. Either you want to come with me or you don’t.”

Gosh, but you’re making me work for it! She folded her arms and scowled back at him. “This is not my pitiful look. In case you haven’t noticed, I genuinely enjoy hanging out with you, cowboy.”

They engaged in a staring match, neither of them budging for a painfully long stretch.

“Oh, come on, Roman,” she finally exploded. “You said a firm yes was the only thing that would put you in a better mood. Yet here we are, facing off like two angry bulls.”

His lips twitched as he considered her words. “Clearly, you’ve never witnessed two angry bulls going at it.”

“Then enlighten me,” she snapped.

He raised his eyebrow at her. “To be honest, I hope it’s something you never have to see. It’s brutal and bloody.”

“Fighting with you feels pretty brutal and bloody,” she grumbled.

The remorse that leaped into his gaze made her wish she could call the words back.

Before he could apologize again, she rushed to add, “Just RSVP to that shindig for two. We have plenty of time to figure out the details, okay?”

His gaze burned into hers for a moment. “Okay.”

She couldn’t tell if he was in a better mood, but her own mood had certainly improved. “Just for the record, even if I end up leaving town for another job, it doesn’t have to end our friendship.”

His scowl returned. “It wouldn’t be the same, though.”

Her chin came up. “Who says it can’t be better?”

“Me.” He juttled his chin right back at her. “We can’t exactly do your riding lessons over text. Or our coffee breaks afterward.”

“It’s not like I want to leave here, Roman.” She waved a hand to take in their surroundings.

“Good to know.” He didn’t sound overly excited about her admission.

“If you don’t want me to go, just say so.” She wasn’t sure what gave her the boldness to come at him like that. All she was sure about at the moment was one thing. If they wanted their friendship to last, it would have to be built on honesty.

“If I stood in the way of your professional dreams, what kind of friend would that make me?” He looked exasperated. “You just do what you’ve gotta do, and I’ll find a way to deal with it.”

Though his answer was less than thrilling, she was relieved that he was no longer acting like their friendship would hinge on her next job decision.

She backed toward the door. “You’ll be the second to know when I make my decision.”

He gave her a questioning look.

“Second only to my dad, and it won’t happen until after Christmas. Promise.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “Now *that’s* how you put a guy in a better mood.”

She reached behind her to push open the door. “On that note...” She paused in mid-sentence. “Ooo, before I go, I should probably ask if we’re having a riding lesson this evening.”

He pretended to glower at her. “Unless you have something better to do, Miss Isaacson.”

“See what I mean?” She pointed at him, fighting to keep a straight face. “Locking horns with you is bloody and brutal.”

Something glinted in his gaze. Something that made her insides warm like hot butter being poured over a bowl of popcorn as she made her exit.



A month and a half later

THE DAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING DAWNED COLD AND WHITE. Three to four inches of snow had fallen during the night. Roman had a sinking feeling in his chest as he drove to town. Though the snow tires on his truck had no trouble tracking through the fresh layer of slush, there was no denying that road conditions were poor.

Normally, it wouldn’t have been any cause for alarm. His entire family lived in Pinetop, and they were accustomed to dealing with the fast-changing, persnickety mountain weather. However, Hope’s father did not live here and was not accustomed to the sketchy road conditions he’d be driving into today. Or riding into, since Hope had mentioned the possibility of buying him a bus ticket.

As soon as Roman arrived in the dinner theater’s parking lot, he shot a quick text to Hope. He didn’t want to call her, since a lot of folks were still sleeping at this time of day.

Roads are bad. What does your dad drive?

She responded so quickly that she must've already been awake.

Nada. He doesn't drive.

Frowning at her answer, he tapped the speed dial button to call her. The situation sounded a little too complicated for texting.

“Hey, Roman.” Her voice was still husky from sleep, telling him she must have just woken up. She might not even be out of bed yet.

“Morning, beautiful.” His greeting was met with awkward silence, which made him realize what he'd said. *Oh, snap!* His face turned red with embarrassment. After a moment of deliberation, he decided to keep talking as if he hadn't said something monumentally stupid.

“What did you mean when you said your father didn't drive?” He was going to have to be more careful with her. Stupid things seemed to be slipping out of his mouth right and left these days when he was around her.

“He doesn't.” Her voice was wry. “Dean Isaacson either walks, bikes, or uses public transportation. He doesn't own a vehicle. Or a driver's license, for that matter.” She didn't say why, and he didn't ask.

“So that's the reason for the bus ticket.” He'd been wondering about that.

“Yes. It's also why I'm up at such a horrific hour,” she groaned. “I know you country boys are bright eyed and bushy tailed this time of day, but it's not like that for city gals.”

He grinned at her dramatic reference to the *horrific hour*. It was five o'clock in the morning, not the middle of the night, like she was making it sound.

“I thought you said you were a country girl at heart,” he teased.

“I'm getting there,” she sighed. “Baby steps, my friend.”

“Alright.” His brain snapped back to the deteriorating weather conditions. “Back to your dad's trip.”

“It’s not going so well.” Her voice was glum. “He called a few minutes ago to inform me that the bus company has cancelled it.”

“Outright cancelled it?” That surprised him. “Or just delayed it?”

“We’re hoping for option two. It sounds like they’re trying to reissue his bus ticket for tomorrow.”

Tomorrow was Thanksgiving. No wonder she sounded so worried. “What time?”

“They have one spot available on a bus that would leave mid morning. From what he described, it would start off on a more southerly route, but still get him to Pinetop before nightfall. That’s the plan, anyway.” She blew out a frustrated breath. “I checked the weather forecast, and we might actually get more snow by then.”

Bummer! Even if they didn’t get more snow, Hope was still essentially going to miss spending Thanksgiving with her father.

He mulled over the possibilities and could only come up with one that made any real sense. “Would you mind texting me his address? There might be another work around.”

“What sort of work around?” The wistfulness in her voice tugged at his heart. *Shoot!* It was more than that. The thought of her missing Thanksgiving with her father felt like a fist closing around every heartstring at once and giving them one powerful yank.

“My truck tires track just fine in the snow.” He was very confident in his ability to deliver what he was offering. “I’ll need a thumbs up from Angel, but I could take today off and make the run down to Phoenix myself. We’ve got enough coverage with the horses.”

“Oh, Roman,” she breathed. “Are you sure?”

“Yep. It’s not that big of a deal. I’ve got plenty of vacation days stored up.” The only reason he was working the day before Thanksgiving was to give as many of the wranglers off as he could. Several of them were married with kids. However,

he knew for a fact that one of them would jump at the chance to earn some time-and-a-half holiday pay instead of twiddling his thumbs at home.

“Not that big of a deal?” Hope’s voice rose to an incredulous squeak. “*Au contraire!* This is huge, Roman! So huge that I don’t know how to even begin thanking you.”

He shared the first suggestion that popped into his head. “Wanna come with me?” He certainly wouldn’t mind the company.

“Absolutely!” Her answer was followed by some rustling and scraping sounds. “Good gracious! My dad is going to be over the moon when I tell him we’re on our way.” There was a breathless quality to her voice that told him she finally was up and moving around.

“Think you can be ready to take off in about an hour?” The sooner they got on the road, the better. Depending on traffic, it was an eight to ten-hour round-trip in good weather. The current road conditions were going to make it even longer.

“Ha! I’ll be ready in ten minutes, cowboy. Want me to make us some coffee?”

“You have to ask?”

“Two tall, steaming cups coming right up,” she returned cheerfully.

If she’d been within hugging distance, he might’ve hooked her in for a quick one right then and there. Sometimes she fretted to him about feeling like she was doing most of the taking in their friendship, but she was forever doing thoughtful stuff like that for him. She just did it so effortlessly that she didn’t see how much it added up — a loaf of homemade banana nut bread here and a mended button there. After being a widower for over two years, he appreciated the personal touch she put into everything more than she’d ever know.

“Whelp, I’d better head to my office to make a few calls.” Roman knew he was about to make the day of the wrangler who needed the extra money. He would be kiss-the-ground grateful to get called back in to work. “I’ll be on my way to

your place as soon as I can.” He hated ending their call, but he needed to touch base with Angel right away and let him know what was going on.

“You’re the best!” Hope sang out the words before disconnecting the line.

He cradled his cell phone in his hand for a moment. Though her comment had been intended as playful, he wished she understood how good it made him feel when she said stuff like that to him.



THOUGH ANGEL PICKED UP RIGHT AWAY, HE DIDN’T SAY anything for a few seconds. When he finally started talking, it was in a hushed voice. “Is everything okay?”

“Yep. I’m really sorry to bother you over the holidays.” It sounded like he’d woken Angel up. “Just need to fill you in on something and make sure you’re okay with how I’m handling it.”

“Fire away!” Angel was starting to sound more awake.

Roman gave him the short version of Mr. Isaacson’s cancelled bus ticket. “I called Elmer Beachham to see if he minded helping out with the horses. He’s on his way.”

“There’s no one I’d rather have keeping an eye on things in your absence.” The approval in Angel’s voice was exactly what Roman had been hoping to hear.

“You and me both.”

“He probably acted like you were doing him a favor. Man!” Angel whistled beneath his breath. “Five kids, one a newborn, and all girls.”

“Yeah, you’d have thought Christmas came early,” Roman agreed. “Sorry about springing this on you at the last minute.” He hated the necessity of doing it.

“Sounds like you’re needed more in Phoenix than here.” Angel’s voice was mild. “Go be with your girl and enjoy the

holiday.”

My girl? Roman tensed at the realization that his boss had entirely misread the situation. “Uh, Hope isn’t my...that is, she and I are just friends.”

“Ah.” Angel didn’t sound one hundred percent convinced, though he was quick to apologize. “Sorry to imply otherwise.” He abruptly changed the subject. “I’m not sure how it came about, but I really appreciate the riding lessons you’ve been giving her. Until she arrived in town, I don’t think she understood she’d be working for a rodeo as much as a dinner theater.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure the opportunity to work with horses was what drew her to Pinetop.” Roman didn’t want to ruin Angel’s holiday by breaking the news to him that horses alone wouldn’t be enough to keep her in town. Not that it was his news to tell. Angel would find out soon enough from her that she was already scouting around for other job opportunities.

“A city gal who’d never ridden a horse.” Angel sniffed. “No, a single turn on a pony with a lead rope at a child’s birthday party doesn’t count.”

“And now look at her.” Roman was every bit as pleased with Hope’s progress as Angel was. She showed potential for some other things, too — barrel racing, jumping, possibly even a little trick riding. He hadn’t told anyone yet, least of all her. If she was simply going to leave town, there was no point. If she chose to stay, though...well, the sky was the limit as to how far she could develop her horsemanship.

“Safe travels, my friend.” Angel sounded like he was trying to muffle a yawn as he ended their call.

As soon as Elmer arrived to take over, Roman was back in his truck and on his way to Hope’s. Once he was alone again with his thoughts, Angel’s words echoed through his mind.

Go be with your girl.

It bothered him that Angel had jumped to the conclusion that he and Hope were dating. Even more troubling was the

realization that others might be jumping to the exact same conclusion.

He wracked his brain, trying to remember anything he'd done that might've given folks that impression. Sure, he and Hope spent time together, but not in any romantic settings. He was giving her riding lessons, for Pete's sake, not dragging her off to some remote storage room to neck.

He wasn't sure where that thought had come from, but it brought a wave of heat up the back of his neck. As another thought struck him, the wave of heat intensified.

Had he inadvertently given Hope the impression he wanted to be more than friends? On at least two occasions, he'd called her stuff like babe and beautiful. Had he done it at other times without even being aware of it? At the next stoplight, he removed his Stetson and tossed it on the seat cushion beside him. Running a hand through his hair, he debated what to do to make things right with her.

We need to clear the air between us.

It was the only answer that made sense. Even if it made them uncomfortable, talking things out was the only way to keep their friendship strong. Not to mention it was probably only a matter of time before someone asked them point-blank if they were a couple. And when it happened, they needed to be ready with an answer — preferably an answer they'd both agreed on. The long drive ahead certainly would provide enough time and opportunity to hash through a few things together.

When he reached her building, he had no trouble snagging one of the front parking spots. A few hours from now, that wouldn't be the case. She was renting the apartment over Snow Village Antiques & More, which gave her a perfect view of Main Street. Though he'd never been in her apartment after dark, he imagined the Christmas lights below were spectacular from her second-story windows.

As he was reaching for his phone to let her know he'd arrived, he caught sight of a bundled up figure hurrying his

way across the snowy sidewalk. Since the figure was making a beeline for his truck, he could only assume it was her.

Pushing open his door, he leaped down, intending to walk around the truck to open the passenger door for her.

However, she continued to plod doggedly in the direction of the driver's door, so he remained where he was.

"It's so c-cold." She reached his side and held out one of the two insulated cups she was holding. Hers was white. His was red.

"Thanks." His nose picked up a whiff of caramel and spice, the scents of holidays and home. Those weren't the only things reminding him of the holidays right now. He eyed her white beanie and matching quilted coat, thinking they made her look like a less round version of Frosty the Snowman.

"Gotta take c-care of my chauffeur." She rested a hand on his shoulder and used it for leverage to step onto the running board. With his assistance, she climbed into the cab one-handed and shimmied to the middle of the long truck seat, still clutching her insulated coffee cup.

She sighed in appreciation, holding her hands out to the heat blasting from the vents. "Like I predicted, my dad was beside himself when I told him we were coming to get him. He seriously can't wait to meet you."

Roman leaped into the truck and slammed the door shut. Without asking, he reached for her coffee, and she wordlessly handed it over. He proceeded to set both of their cups in the center holders below the dashboard. That way, their hands were free to clasp their seatbelts. As he buckled his, he decided now was as good a time as any to tackle the topic of their friendship.

"Hey, I've gotta ask you a question."

"Sure. What's up?" She smiled expectantly at him.

"Angel said something to me over the phone a few minutes ago that has me wondering."

"About?" she prodded, chuckling.

“You and me.”

“Oh?” Her voice sounded odd.

“He called you my girl,” he explained.

Her eyes widened. “I wonder what gave him that impression.”

“No idea. I set him straight, of course. That said, if he thinks we’re together, there’s a chance others might think that, too.”

Her cheeks turned pink. “No one has said anything to me about it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I’m more interested in knowing if you think I’ve given you anything other than the friend vibe,” he confessed gruffly.

“What?” She practically shouted the word.

“Do you think I flirt with you?” He wished she wasn’t making him spell it out so clearly.

“Gosh, no!” She looked taken aback by his question.

“Good, because the last thing I ever wanted to do is give you the wrong idea about...” he gestured awkwardly between them, “where this is headed.”

“Where what is headed?” Her voice took on a squeaky quality.

“Our relationship,” he supplied hastily, not sure if that was the right word.

She stared at him, looking perplexed. “With all due respect, I don’t consider us to be in a relationship.”

“Me either.” *Man!* Having this conversation with her was turning out to be even harder than he’d imagined it would. “The thing is, I loved my wife very much,” he confessed, feeling like he was baring the most vulnerable parts of his soul. “Part of me always will.”

“Of course you’ll never stop loving her,” Hope gasped. “Your lives were indelibly intertwined.”

Her words were more eloquent than any he could've come up with. They were also thoughtful and kind, which answered his most burning question. She respected the sanctity of his marriage. He wasn't sure why he'd ever doubted it and felt bad that he had.

"That's why I don't date," he continued quietly. "It wouldn't be fair to the other person." He gripped his steering wheel with both hands. "No matter how many times my sister attempts to set me up on blind dates, it won't change the fact that I loved my wife."

"I find it to be both honorable and wildly romantic." Hope reached for her cup of coffee. Cradling it between her white-gloved hands, she bent her head over it to breathe in the swirl of steam rising from it. "It's the kind of love you read about in storybooks and want to believe is real."

He stared at her in awe. "Really?" He would've never considered the marriage between two poor immigrant kids as anything book-worthy, but okay.

Her head abruptly swiveled in his direction. "Omigosh! Please, please, ple-e-e-ase assure me we're not having this conversation because you think *I've* been flirting with *you*?"

"No! Not at all!" He couldn't believe she was so worried about it. "You've always respected my status as a widower. It's probably why we hit it off so well from the get go. There's no pressure when I'm with you. No agenda. No expectations."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far, Mr. Rios." Hope's voice turned playful. "I have very high expectations of my friends. You're a member of a very elite crowd, mister." She chuckled. "Minus the crowd part."

Her words made him grin. "Since you're so selective about who you hang around, I'm flattered I made the cut." If she was so selective, though, how did her ex-fiancé fit into things? It was a sobering thought.

She shot him a merry look as she took a sip of coffee. "Depending on how you think about it, we kind of owe our friendship to Cream Puff."

“You’re not wrong.” He recalled the way she’d instantly bonded with the spirited little Gypsy Vanner. It was how he’d instinctively known Hope was a good person. It was funny how he found the reactions of animals more trustworthy than the reactions of people sometimes.

“So, are we ready to bring this somewhat cringy topic to a close, Mr. Rios?” The look she gave him was brimming with humor.

He nodded in relief. “More than ready, Miss Isaacson.” He’d been ready to end the conversation the moment he’d brought it up. “I’m sorry for making us talk through something that made us both cringe. I just...” He paused to search for the right way to put it. “I just don’t want you to end up hurt because of me, unintentionally or otherwise.” He honestly couldn’t think of a quicker way to hurt a woman than by giving her false expectations of their relationship. Was that what her ex had done?

Hope adopted a solemn expression as she raised the coffee cup she was holding in her right hand. “If anyone asks, we are friends and nothing more than friends, so help me, God.”

Trying not to laugh, he cast a sideways look at her as he put his truck in gear and backed it from its parking spot. He had one more serious point to make. “All cringe-worthy topics aside, our friendship is important to me. Just wanted you to know that, too.”

She waved her mug at him. “Right back atcha.”

“That’s why I’m not in a hurry to give it up.” He pulled onto the snowy Main Street and took off at a crawl.

Her smile vanished. “Who says you ever have to give it up?”

“Maybe I should’ve said it a different way.” He flicked another glance at her. “I’m not in a hurry to see you leave town.” If it was selfish of him to say that out loud, then so be it. It was the truth.

She glanced out the window to her right. “I haven’t exactly started packing, Roman.”

“Maybe not, but you’ve got a big decision ahead of you. One that could easily have you pulling out your suitcases.”

She blew out a gusty breath. “I’m praying about it. Hard.” She bent her head over her coffee again, as if drawing comfort from the scent. “I’m torn. I truly am. Even though the job in Philly doesn’t check all the boxes on my wish list, what if another opportunity like it never comes along? Would I regret my unwillingness to tolerate a few drawbacks? Or is settling always the wrong answer? In which case, I should probably do the unthinkable and turn down the biggest opportunity that has ever come my way or is likely to ever come my way again,” she concluded with the drama he’d come to expect from his favorite actress. By now, he understood that she wasn’t putting on an act. She just felt things more deeply than a lot of folks did.

“You don’t know that,” he pointed out mildly.

She shrugged. “It’s simple logic, cowboy.”

“I’ll take faith over logic any day,” he countered.

“Wow! That was pretty profound.” The look she gave him was so admiring that it made him feel a foot taller. She was truly an incredible friend, more than she’d ever given herself credit for.

But a friend was all she would ever be.

He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to keep reminding himself of that.



CHAPTER 6: HEART-TO-HEART

HOPE

Thanksgiving

Hope awoke when the first splash of sunlight hit her face. She sat up in bed and stretched her arms wide, feeling more rested than she had in weeks. Leaning toward her nightstand, she removed her cell phone from its charger and shot a quick text message to Roman. He'd be up for sure since it was daylight.

Did you sleep alright?

He'd driven the entire way to Phoenix and back, which amounted to nearly ten hours straight behind the wheel — all so that her father would get to spend Thanksgiving with her. She was overwhelmed with gratitude and already wracking her brain for a way to properly thank him. The fact that she was attending the big Thanksgiving celebration with him at Christmas Tree Farm today didn't feel like enough.

He sent her a one-word response. *Yep.*

She wrinkled her nose at his answer. The girl in her wanted more details. She tried again.

Are you sore from all your driving yesterday?

His answer was longer this time. *Stiff shoulder. Not from driving. Old rodeo injury.*

She frowned in concern, knowing that over ten hours of driving certainly hadn't helped. *Which shoulder?* She quickly typed the question and pushed send, wondering why he'd never mentioned his rodeo days to her before now. She sensed a story there, one she planned to drag out of him if she had to.

Left. He was back to one-word answers.

She wished she could do a little palpating around the area to see if he was simply dealing with a tight muscle or something worse. After a moment, she started typing again. *Do you have a heating pad?*

Nope.

I do, she retorted. *If you come early to pick me up, I'll have your shoulder feeling like new again.* Okay, maybe that was a slight exaggeration, but she'd learned a lot about taking care of sore muscles during her many years of running track.

How early?

His answer escalated her worry on his behalf. The guy was seriously no good at asking for favors. The fact that he was taking her up on her offer this quickly probably meant his shoulder was killing him.

Though it was a long shot, she decided to see how much pampering he'd accept from her. Their friends-only conversation yesterday had her psycho-analyzing everything she did to make sure it wasn't something that could be construed as flirtatious.

She decided to appeal to his tastebuds first. *Have you eaten breakfast yet?*

Nope.

She smiled. *I'm making omelettes if you want one.* Surely, he could eat with one hand while she wrapped his shoulder in a heating pad.

His answer told her everything else she needed to know. *I'm on my way.*

Yeah, he was hurting alright. And hungry. Fortunately, she could help out with both of those things.

It was way too early to dress for the Thanksgiving hoopla at the farm, which wasn't starting until two o'clock this afternoon. She didn't want to even think about putting makeup on this early.

She padded in her sock feet to the adjoining bathroom and decided that the pink hoodie and gray sweats she'd slept in were more than adequate for breakfast.

Besides, we're just friends.

Gosh, but Roman was quick to remind her of that fact every chance he got! Since no laws of social etiquette called for friends dressing up for friends, this could be her big chance

to prove to him that she was capable of being friends and nothing more.

She made a face at herself in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. Shoot! If it was just her father present for breakfast, she probably wouldn't even brush or style her hair.

All I would do is this.

She finger-combed her hair back into a ponytail and twisted a plain black stretchy tie around it. Right before she left the bathroom, she made one small concession — lip gloss. It was a sparkly, spice-scented flavor that she'd purchased on a holiday special at one of the shops down the street. She'd been waiting for the perfect occasion to pull it out and give it a try.

Thanksgiving morning certainly fit the bill. It was her favorite holiday besides Christmas. Her dad was in town. Plus, her best friend in the world was on his way over.

Your best friend, huh?

She inwardly chided herself for calling him that, not sure where that thought had come from. It was true, of course, at least on her part. She wasn't sure if he saw her that way, though. He was super close to his sister and parents, too. Plus, he'd grown up with all kinds of friends at Christmas Tree Farm. He probably didn't need or want another bestie any more than he wanted another romantic entanglement in his life.

Feeling a little sorry for herself over how one-sided her feelings for him probably were, she exited the bathroom and made her way to her bed. She yanked the patchwork quilt into place and plumped up her pillows and shams with a few well-placed punches. Guilt stabbed her at the knowledge that she was taking out her frustration on a pile of innocent pillows. She gentled her movements as she leaned the pillows against the headboard of her sleigh bed. Though no one was around to see it, she preferred to climb into a made-up bed every evening. She was naturally tidy.

As she passed through the living room, she straightened the felt pumpkin she'd purchased online during college, liking

how it looked on one end of her creamy linen sofa. Then she hurried to the mantle to light the trio of apple pie scented pillar candles displayed there. The fireplace below was one of those faux inserts. There was a switch on the wall beside the painted white brick facade that allowed her to turn on a set of flickering bulbs. She would've much preferred the smoke and flames of a real fire.

Someday, she silently promised herself as she parted the curtain to look out the second-story window of her living room. There was still no sign of Roman's black pickup.

"Looking for someone?" The sound of her father's voice made her jump.

She whirled around in delight. "Happy Thanksgiving, Dad!" She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't heard him enter the room. Flying his way, she threw her arms around him.

He hugged her back. "Sorry about scaring you." He was wearing an olive green sweater over an untucked button-up shirt. The threads were super soft against her cheek. Like her, he hadn't finished getting dressed. His feet were still bare beneath the frayed hem of his jeans.

She closed her eyes for a moment, reveling in the piney scent of his aftershave. She'd always loved it.

Opening her eyes and taking a step back, she pointed at his hair. "What's up with the longer locks?" She smiled slyly at him before turning around and heading for the coffee maker in the kitchen. "Did you meet somebody that you're trying to impress?" Giving his rangy frame another once-over, she decided that wearing his dark hair a little longer suited him. It made him look more like the artist that he was.

"I asked you a question first." He reached up to shove his glasses higher with one finger. She had no doubt he'd been up early reading. He always started his morning with prayer and a few chapters from the Bible. Afterward, he usually turned the television on low and caught up on the weather and stats about his favorite teams. Not sports. He probably couldn't name

three pro football players. However, he could spout off the last decade's worth of world champion chess players.

"What question? All I can remember is hearing your voice and jumping." She pulled three white mugs from her overhead cabinet. Shoving the first one beneath the coffee dispenser, she pressed the brew button.

"You were looking out the window like you were expecting someone." He followed her into the kitchen and leaned over her shoulder to give the trickling coffee an appreciative sniff.

"I was looking for Roman," she supplied. *As if you didn't already know that.* "He's joining us for breakfast."

Her father leaned closer to kiss her cheek. "Nice guy. I like him much better than the last one."

Her shoulders tensed. "Oh, we're not, um...dating." Why was everyone and their cousin jumping to that conclusion all of a sudden?

"Yeah, right."

"We're not," she repeated in a firm voice. "He's a widower, Dad. Still recovering from losing his wife and baby."

"Ouch! That's rough." He gave a grunt of sympathy.

"Yeah, it's the saddest thing. Something went wrong during her labor, not sure what. Anyhow, he lost 'em both at the same time."

"I'm really sorry to hear it, hon." Taking a few steps back, he leaned against the granite island and folded his arms. "So you're not dating anyone, huh?"

"I asked you a question first," she reminded.

"No, I'm not dating anyone, either."

"Technically, I asked if you'd met someone special."

His smile was benign. "I meet people all the time, hon. You're going to have to be more specific."

She made a face at him before opening the door of the fridge to start pulling out supplies — coffee creamer, eggs, bacon, and cheese. “Is there anyone in your life you’d consider giving up your own widower status for?” She’d never thought of asking before, but she suddenly very much wanted to know. Was it even possible for a man who’d once been happily married to love again?

“No. Your mother was the only woman for me.” Her father didn’t sound regretful or sad about it. Just accepting.

Her heart sank at the very real possibility that neither he nor Roman would ever seek out that kind of companionship again. “We said goodbye to Mom ten years ago,” she reminded softly. “It’s perfectly okay if you meet someone else who makes you happy, you know.”

“I haven’t, but thanks for your permission.” He winked at her to take the sting out of his sarcasm. Shifting his weight against the cabinet to get more comfortable, he asked, “Now where were we? Oh, yeah. We were talking about the guy who’s giving you riding lessons, meets you for dinner every other night of the week,” he ticked the list off on his long fingers, “drives all day to fetch your dad for Thanksgiving, and has you talked in to attending some party this afternoon as his plus one. I have no earthly idea why I jumped to the conclusion that my daughter was dating such an attentive young man.”

“Attentive friend,” she corrected with a chuckle. “That’s what we are, Dad. Friends. Really good ones.”

He cocked his head at her, looking like he was holding in a laugh. “How long did you say this fellow has been widowed?”

“I didn’t say, but it’s been over two years now that you ask.”

His eyes — the same honey-gold as hers — twinkled warmly into hers. “He’s not going to grieve forever, you know.”

She handed him the first mug of coffee. “Look who’s talking,” she grumbled. The moment the words left her mouth,

she was stricken with remorse. “I’m so sorry,” she murmured. “That wasn’t called for.”

“I’m sorry, too.” He lifted his cup and blew on it. “Didn’t realize I was hitting such a sensitive chord. I’ll back off.” He took a sip. “I do like Roman Rios, though.”

“Me, too.” She shoved another mug under the dispenser and hit the brew button again. While she waited for it to finish, she pulled out a mixing bowl and a pair of non-stick skillet. Setting the skillet on the stovetop, she turned the heat on low beneath them. Then she started cracking eggs into the bowl.

“For what it’s worth, I’m no longer grieving. Guess I just haven’t met anyone who makes me feel even half as special as your *friend* makes you feel.” He wagged his eyebrows playfully at her as he stressed the word *friend*. “How am I doing?”

“Better.” She rolled her eyes at him.

The doorbell rang, making her glance anxiously over her shoulder toward it.

“I’ll get it.” Her father straightened and swiveled around to set his coffee mug on a cork coaster. “You keep doing whatever you’re doing.”

“I’m making omelettes. How do you want yours?”

“Surprise me.” He strode across the room while she continued to crack and stir eggs.

She heard the hubbub of male voices behind her as her father welcomed Roman into the apartment. Cold air swirled into the kitchen from the balcony outside.

“Oh, my lands! Shut the door,” she pleaded, shivering.

“Oops! Sorry about that.” Her father hurriedly complied.

She glanced across the living room, seeking out Roman with her gaze. His gaze locked with hers for a heart-racing moment — long enough for her to note the shadows beneath his eyes that told her he’d lied about last night. He hadn’t slept well at all.

“Hey, Roman!” She eyed the small package he was carrying. It was wrapped in brown parchment paper and tied with green twine.

“Hey, Hope!” He removed his Stetson and set it on the back of the sofa as he strode her way. “My sister caught me on the way to my truck and insisted I wait for her to finish wrapping this for you.” He held out the package to her.

“Do you mind, Dad?” She gestured with her spatula for him to take over making omelettes.

“Not at all, hon.” He was at her side in two snaps, playfully nudging her out of his way. He was the one who’d taught her how to cook, and he could do it better than she could. “Go open your gift from your friend.” Since Roman was behind his back, she was the only one who saw him smirk over the word *friend*.

“Behave,” she hissed as she handed him the spatula.

Pasting on her most cheerful smile, she moved Roman’s way to accept the gift. She tried not to notice how amazing he looked in his half untucked plaid shirt, faded jeans, and scuffed cowboy boots. Like her and her dad, he hadn’t gotten too dressed up, which made him look all the more huggable.

Untying the green twine on the package, she tore into the parchment paper. Beneath it was a blue gift box with white snowmen hand-stamped all over it. She lifted the lid and gave a murmur of appreciation. Laying on a bed of red silky fabric was this year’s annual Pinetop commemorative mug.

“My first Pinetop mug,” she announced joyfully. “Thank you so much, Roman!” Without thinking, she stepped closer to throw her arms around him — mug, box, and all.

Grinning, he lightly swung one arm around her shoulders. “I’ll let Izzy know you liked her gift.”

“Oh, I don’t just like it, cowboy. I love it!” As she drew back from him, the mug in her hand bumped his left shoulder.

His reaction was so slight that she almost missed it. However, she was pretty sure he winced.

“Alright, mister. Time to tend to that stiff shoulder.” She pointed him toward the living room. “Into the recliner you go. I’ll be back with the heating pad and coffee.”

He shot her a grateful look and did as she instructed, settling into the leather recliner by the fireplace with an oomph of appreciation. It had been passed down to her by another college student. Though the brown leather was worn in a few places, it was way too comfortable to get rid of.

She moved back to the kitchen to pull her heating pad from a lower drawer. As she popped it into the microwave, her father leaned her way. “Playing nurse, are we?”

“Just stop,” she whispered, feeling her cheeks heat.

“How does he want his omelette?” he shot back.

“Ham and cheese. No salt.” She made a face at him.

“What a good friend you are, knowing that stuff,” he teased, turning to doctor the omelette to her exact specifications.

Rolling her eyes, she removed the heating pad from the microwave and kneaded it for a few seconds to make sure the heat was evenly distributed across the synthetic beans inside the bag. She then returned to Roman’s side.

For a moment, she assumed he’d fallen asleep.

His eyes were closed, leaving his black eyelashes resting against his bronze cheeks.

“Do I have a spider on my nose or something?” he inquired dryly.

Smiling, she bent over him. “I was trying to decide if it made sense to wake you.”

“I’m not asleep.”

“You’re closer than you realize, cowboy.”

“Nah, I’m just relaxed.” He cracked one eye open.

She handed over the mug of coffee she’d brewed for him. He liked it the way her father did — black.

“Thanks.” He took a sip, then set it on the extra coaster she kept on the coffee table beside the recliner. “It’s good.”

She studied him for a moment. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to try something before applying the heating pad.”

He gestured for her to continue.

“It might hurt,” she warned, “so don’t slug me, cowboy.”

He snorted. “I can handle whatever you dish out, city girl.”

She reached for his stiff shoulder with both hands, gently pressing the pads of her fingers into the muscles there. As she suspected, they were coiled tightly.

He grimaced as she started to palpate.

“Are you okay?”

“Yep.” His voice sounded a little strained.

She reached down to pull the lever on the recliner, tipping him back a few inches. “Better?” She temporarily laid the heating pad against his other shoulder.

“Most definitely.” He shifted a little to settle deeper against the seat cushion.

“So, what exactly did you do to your shoulder?” She dug her thumbs a little deeper into the tightness, liking how his eyelids drifted closed again.

“Got thrown off a bull.”

She gasped. “When?”

“Too many times to remember between the ages of seventeen and...I don’t know. Twenty-two, maybe?”

Her eyebrows came together in consternation. “They let seventeen-year-olds get on bulls?”

“I lied about my age. You’re supposed to be eighteen.”

She swallowed her horror and kept kneading. “I would’ve never pegged you for a thrill seeker.” He was so quiet and steady. So level-headed and dependable.

“I needed the money.” He muffled a yawn. Or tried to. He finally gave up trying and yawned in her face.

“Am I putting you to sleep?” she teased.

“Yep.” He opened his eyes. “Don’t take that the wrong way. I meant it as a compliment.”

“If you say so.” She gently transferred the heating pad from his good shoulder to his injured one.

His breath eased out slowly. “Feels good.” He reached up to touch the back of her hand, pressing it against his shoulder for a breathless moment.

“Thanks.” His eyes closed again.

She watched as his hand grew limp against hers and slid down his chest. Catching it, she gently laid it on the arm of the chair. She fiddled with the controls on the recliner again to prop his legs out in front of him. After a moment of deliberation, which involved a half-guilty look across the room at her father, she slowly eased off his boots and set them beside the chair. Then she draped an afghan over his knees.

She stood there, longing to run a hand through his hair to get rid of the hat line left by his Stetson. Instead, she turned around and tiptoed back to the kitchen.

Her father was waiting with two omelettes laid out perfectly on two white plates. He pulled back one of the bar stools for her.

“Just friends, eh?” He whispered the words as he glanced toward Roman’s sleeping figure.

She carefully schooled her expression. “Just friends,” she affirmed softly, reaching for her fork. “Thanks for making breakfast.”

He winked at her. “I enjoy cooking for my favorite daughter.” Bowing his head, he said a quick prayer over their meal.

“Your only daughter,” she corrected before taking her first bite.

He studied her in a way that made her squirm on her stool.
“What?”

“You look happy. Pinetop suits you.” He glanced toward Roman again.

“Whatever you’re thinking, please don’t say it,” she pleaded.

“Fine, but you’re thinking it, too.” He sobered. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy. And you are. I just don’t understand why—”

“He only wants to be friends,” she interrupted in a hushed voice.

Her father frowned thoughtfully. “Did he say that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” The wrinkle in the middle of his forehead deepened.

She changed the subject, hoping to distract him. “I got another job offer.”

“Oh?” His eyebrows rose. “Where?”

“From a big theater company in Philly. They’re offering me the lead role in a new Broadway show called Phantom in the Garden.”

He nodded in approval. “That sounds promising.”

“I thought so, too. Right up to the point where I read who will be directing it.”

He watched her closely. “Don’t tell me it’s your ex.”

“It’s him.”

“Noooo!” He drew out the word in a way that made Roman shift restlessly in the recliner.

“Shh!” She glanced worriedly his way.

“So, what did you tell your big shot ex?”

“I sent his company a certified letter that notified them I wouldn’t be making a final decision until after Christmas. I’m

not going to leave my current employers hanging like that.”

“Nice stall. What did he say?”

“He hasn’t responded yet,” she admitted. “It’s possible he already scratched my name off the list of his dream cast and moved on to the next victim.”

Her father gave her an odd look. “That’s an interesting choice of words. What do you mean by victim?”

“I didn’t apply for the job.”

“Oh.” He propped his forearms on the bar. “You mean to tell me that bozo tracked you all the way to Pinetop?”

She shrugged. “Looks like.”

“That’s a little creepy.” He didn’t look too happy about it.

“What about you?” She leaned closer to him. “How are things at the art gallery these days?” Though she longed for an update, she sort of dreaded it at the same time.

To her surprise, his expression relaxed. “Better than it’s been in a long time, actually.”

“Because of the holidays?” She leaned closer, eager to hear more.

“No. It’s because I took a class about how to offer direct sales from my website.”

“You’re kidding!” Her lips parted in surprise. Her father was one of the least tech savvy people she knew.

“I wish I was.” He shook his head ruefully at her. “You know me. I’d much rather press hands and give live tours of my gallery. Turns out there are more buyers online. Business is booming for the first time ever.”

“Dad!” Hope’s voice rose, making Roman stir again.

“Shh!” Her father took great delight in shushing her back.

She quickly lowered her voice. “This is amazing news! I’m so happy for you.” He deserved every ounce of success that came his way. He was the kindest, most talented painter she’d ever met.

His smile grew wider. “Now that I’ve gone digital, I’m thinking of selling the gallery and hitting the road.”

She studied him in fascination. “Where would you go?”

“Wherever you end up.” He pointed at her with both hands. “Going virtual makes me footloose and fancy free. I can go anywhere I want, and where I want to be is with you.”

“Oh, wow!” she breathed. “I’m so...wow, Dad!” She blinked back tears. “I guess I’ve always wondered why you didn’t go bigger with your art.” She searched for the right way to say it. “You passed up so many shows and tours.”

The look he gave her was brimming with love. “That wouldn’t have been fair to you, dragging you from one city to the next, one school to another... Not the kind of life I wanted for my little girl, that’s for sure. You needed more stability. You’d already lost so much.”

“I had no idea,” she whispered in a choked voice, “but thank you.” She reached up with her napkin to dab at the corners of her eyes. “Thank you for giving me the best childhood a girl could possibly have.” As answering emotion glinted in his eyes, she sought for a way to lighten the air between them. “The only thing that would’ve made it better is more horses,” she joked.

He angled his head in Roman’s direction. “Seems to me that fellow over there is handling that just fine for you.”

“Yes.” Her smile slipped. “He’s very quickly becoming very important to me, Dad.”

“I can tell.”

“I’m finding it harder and harder to picture myself moving away from here,” she added. *And him.* This time, the tears prickling her eyes were from self-pity.

“You have a beautiful friendship,” her father agreed quietly, looking like he wanted to say more. However, he kept silent.

“It can’t ever be more than that, though. In his heart, he’s still married to her.” She held his gaze steadily.

An acute mix of concern and understanding infused his gaze. “Do you want it to be more, sweetie?”

She bit her lower lip. “Did you hear what I said about us being just friends?”

“I heard you.”

“That means it can’t be more, Dad.” She silently pleaded with him to let it go. “And I’ve decided I’d rather have what we have than not have him in my life at all.” She didn’t mention that she’d decided it on the spot. Just now.

“You should tell him.” Her father’s expression didn’t invite debate. It was more of an order than a suggestion.

“I will. Eventually. He’s not ready to hear it yet.”

Her father nodded. “Guess it might not hurt for me to nose around the real estate market here in Pinetop.” He waved his fork at her. “Just to see what’s available.”

She gaped at him. “You would seriously consider moving to Pinetop?”

“Thought I made myself clear on that topic.” He spread his hands. “I plan on moving wherever my favorite actress lands.”

“I thought you were joking,” she spluttered.

“You thought wrong, kiddo.”



CHAPTER 7: NOT A DATE

ROMAN

Roman woke with a smile tugging at his mouth. He stretched his good arm and arched his back in appreciation. Man, but he was comfortable! All warm and hazy from the best dream of his life.

Mia had been there, tugging off his boots and tucking a blanket around him. Then she'd ever-so-gently climbed into his lap to snuggle against his chest.

He wiggled his toes at the memory, then blinked at the realization that his boots had actually been removed — not just in his dream, but for real. His eyelids popped open, and he sat up. Or attempted to, only to discover he was fully reclined.

Glancing around him, he realized he wasn't at home, after all. He reached over the side of the chair to fumble with its unfamiliar controls.

"I've got it," Hope's voice rang out softly in his ear.

He caught a shiver of movement from the corner of his eye as she hurried his way. Quickly assessing his surroundings, he noted that the coffee mug on the table beside him was no longer steaming.

"How long have I been out?" He stretched again.

"You really don't want to know." She chuckled as she helped adjust the chair to an upright position.

"Just tell me how soon we need to leave." Guilt flooded him at the realization that he'd been asleep long enough for her to change her clothes for the Thanksgiving celebration. Her adorably rumpled pink and gray sweats were gone. So was her messy ponytail that he'd been dying to tug on. She was now in a long beige dress that hung nearly to her ankles. It was covered in puffy Swiss dots and cinched in with a brown leather belt that matched her boots. The only reason he even knew what Swiss dots were was because of his marriage to Mia. She'd done her best to educate him on the finer nuances of the female wardrobe. Because of her, he even knew that the acronym LBD stood for a little black dress.

Hope's smile was cautious. "To be perfectly honest, we should've already left."

"Whoa! What time is it?" He abruptly sat forward, making the no-longer-hot pad slip from his shoulder.

"About ten 'til two, give or take a few minutes." She caught the heating pad and laid it on the table beside his mug of cold coffee.

"Why did you let me sleep so long?" he growled, though he knew it wasn't her fault.

"Because you were exhausted, cowboy." She handed him his boots.

As he pushed aside the blanket covering his knees, he realized that she was the one who had removed his boots and tucked the blanket around him.

Not Mia.

And after she'd made him coffee, he'd taken no more than a single sip. It was no wonder women often complained about men being so much trouble.

Because we are.

As he fought to hold on to his perfect dream, the images faded. For a moment, he couldn't so much as conjure up Mia's face, probably because of the one hovering beside his chair. The same one that was constantly filling his thoughts these days.

He hastened to apologize for how long he'd been crashed in her living room. "Hope, I—"

"It's okay." She cut him off with an unconcerned wave. "That's what friends are for, right? You drove all day to fetch my dad from the city. It only seemed fair that I let you snatch some much-needed sleep in return."

He was consumed with embarrassment as he tugged on his boots. "I can't believe I've been sawing logs for nearly six hours straight." He couldn't imagine what her father had read into the situation.

“You needed it.” She stood and held out a hand to him.

The manly thing to do would be to ignore it and pull himself to his feet. However, her pink-tipped fingernails proved too enticing to ignore. Maybe it was because he’d been dreaming about his wife for the past several hours. Regardless of the reason, he felt starved for the softness of a woman’s touch. *Correction.* Not just any woman’s touch. Hope’s.

It made no sense, so he didn’t even try to analyze his feelings. He simply reached back and allowed his dearest friend in the world to help pull his sorry self to his sorry feet.

She gave his hand a restless squeeze before letting it go. “Well?” She arched her eyebrows at him. “How’s the shoulder?”

He rolled his shoulders a few times. Then he swung his left arm in a wide arc. “Incredible!” He swung it in another circle. “I haven’t had this range of motion in a long time.”

She nodded in satisfaction. “All we did was massage away the tightness. Then we followed it up with a little heat therapy. We could try stretching the muscles first next time, and see if that helps even more.”

“Show me after the party,” he begged. Physical therapy was something he hadn’t been able to afford at the time he’d incurred the injury. It had happened at a time in his life when he didn’t have health insurance. All that had changed when he’d started working at Castellano’s. It simply hadn’t occurred to him to get his shoulder looked at since then, though he was more than happy to let Hope do the honors. It would provide yet another excuse to spend time with her.

Something I enjoy more than I should.

“You’re on, cowboy!” Hope sounded so happy about the prospect of doctoring his shoulder some more that he could’ve hugged her. “Finally a way I can repay you for my riding lessons.”

“Consider the debt paid.” He reached around her to tug a strand of her long hair. “You’re always doing stuff for me.” The kind of stuff money couldn’t buy, like reclining his chair,

tucking a blanket around him, and removing his boots. He couldn't believe she'd done that last item and kind of hated the fact that he had no memory of it.

Except in my dream.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized he couldn't recall seeing his late wife's face in his dream. It was possible he'd just assumed it was her. All he could really remember was that he'd been with a woman. One who sweetly and tenderly removed his boots. One who'd stirred things in him he hadn't felt in a very long time.

He stared down at Hope in consternation, wondering if she was the woman he'd actually been dreaming about.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She scanned his face, pretending to be worried. "Is there a piece of popcorn stuck in my hair or something?"

He barked out a laugh. "Why? Were you eating popcorn while I was sleeping?"

"She was. It's a Thanksgiving tradition of ours. More of a joke, actually." Her father sauntered into the living room with his hands resting casually in the pockets of his jeans. Though he'd answered the door barefoot earlier, he was now wearing loafers and a gray wool jacket.

When Roman looked at Hope for an explanation, she rolled her eyes. "Sorry. Dad is very good at leaving people hanging with his stories."

Dean Isaacson shrugged. "Thought you could take it from there. You tell it so much better than I do."

"Let's circle back to the fact that I was four-years-old," she protested. "Young. Impressionable. You could've sold me on literally anything else you wanted. You could've elevated my tastebuds to macaroons, petit fours, or cheese cake. Who doesn't love cheese cake?"

Her father smiled indulgently at her before turning his laughing gaze to Roman. "My baby girl asked for a room full of popcorn for dessert that year, so I went out and bought the biggest bag I could find. It was bigger than she was at the

time.” He held up a hand to measure the approximate height of the bag. “Not sure why any grocery store would stock life-sized bags of popcorn and, quite frankly, I haven’t seen another one since. It impressed the socks off of her.” He chuckled at the memory. “I got the biggest, sloppiest kisses for my efforts.”

“Dad,” Hope groaned, bumping her forehead against Roman’s shoulder that was no longer sore.

Roman was all too aware of the silky strands of dark hair that swung forward and brushed against the front of his shirt. He adored everything about her, from her fun personality to her flowery scent.

He ached to take her in his arms, but he knew it wouldn’t be right, especially following the just-friends conversation they’d had in the truck yesterday.

A lull in the conversation ensued, during which he glanced over the top of Hope’s head at her father. He found the guy studying him with an inscrutable expression.

Feeling like he needed to do something before the quietness in the room got awkward, Roman heard himself saying, “Any interest in joining us for the biggest Thanksgiving celebration in town, sir?”

Mr. Isaacson’s eyebrows rose. “I will *not* say no to that.” The glance he gave his daughter held a questioning note.

Hope glanced between the two men. Then she gripped Roman’s arm excitedly. “That would be amazing! Are you sure it’s okay, though? It’s not like we RSVP’d for him or anything.”

He snorted. “Wait until you see the mountain of food they’ll be serving. Trust me, they’re prepared to feed one more mouth or fifty. We have leftovers for days afterward.” His mouth watered at the memory. “If my mom and sister can think of a dish to throw turkey in, they do it. I’m talking turkey and dumplings, turkey ravioli, turkey chili, turkey tacos, turkey enchiladas, turkey and vegetable soup, grilled turkey over a Cobb salad...”

Hope gave a whimpery little sigh. “If you’re trying to make us drool, it’s working. Don’t forget you’re talking to two people who normally have popcorn for dessert on Thanksgiving.”

“Ha!” He ran a hand through his hair, very much enjoying the opportunity to brag a little about life at Christmas Tree Farm. “Dessert is another mile long adventure for your tastebuds. I probably should’ve warned you days ago that you’re gonna roll away from the table this afternoon feeling ready to pop.”

He retrieved his Stetson from the back of the sofa as he walked Hope to the door. He clapped it on and reached for the coat he’d left hanging on the hall tree.

She lifted a white faux fur jacket from one of the hooks, and he held it up for her so she could shrug into it. Then he helped her untuck her hair from the back of it. Their hands brushed a few times.

Her touch inevitably stirred the memory of his dream from earlier, making his eyelids grow heavy with longing again.

“Thanks.” Her voice was breathless as she reached inside her pockets to withdraw a pair of insulated white gloves. “Okay. I’m as ready as I’m going to be. Let’s go freeze our way to your truck.”

Though she was kidding, her words weren’t too far from the truth. A light layer of snow had fallen while Roman was sleeping, coating the windshield of his truck. He assisted her into the truck and turned on the motor so it could start warming up. Then he leaped back to the ground with an ice scraper in hand.

To his surprise, her father had chosen to remain standing outside the truck with him. “You get that side. Then throw the scraper to me, and I’ll get this side,” he offered.

Roman nodded, appreciating the offer. “Just get the big stuff. The defroster and windshield wipers can do the rest.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Dean Isaacson watched him work for a moment. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. My

daughter can't stop singing your praises.”

Roman was a little embarrassed by that. “I had some help making friends with Hope. Has she gotten around to telling you about a little pony named Cream Puff?”

Her father guffawed. “As a matter of fact, yes! She’s full of stories about that horse. She sounds like a real character.”

“And then some,” Roman agreed. “If you pay a visit to the stable, I’d be glad to introduce you to her. Assuming you plan on being in town a few more days.” He made sure Mr. Isaacson was looking when he tossed the ice scraper across the hood to him.

He caught it with one hand. “Haven’t made up my mind yet, but I should be around long enough for that.” He started scraping. “While you were snoring up a storm in the living room earlier...” He paused to smirk at Roman.

Roman felt his ears turn red. “Listen, I’m really sorry about—”

“I was just kidding about the snoring,” her father interrupted. “I’m the reason you’re tired, so no apologies are necessary. I’m mighty grateful to you for coming to pick me up.” His voice thickened with emotion. “This would’ve been the first Thanksgiving that I missed spending with Hope.” He paused to clear his throat. “A bunch of folks on the bus might’ve been forced to witness a grown man cry.”

“My pleasure, sir.” A warm and wonderful feeling settled in Roman’s chest. He was more grateful than ever that he’d been in the position to call off from work and make the trip.

“I know you did it for her,” the man continued, “which brings me to something else I’d like to thank you for — your friendship. Hope has never been this far from home, and you’ve made the transition a lot easier for her.”

“Her friendship means the world to me, too, sir.” Roman couldn’t have been more earnest. Hope had managed to fill a void in his life that he hadn’t believed would ever be filled again. Right before their paths had crossed, he was beginning to wonder if there’d ever be an end to the clawing loneliness in

his chest. From the moment they'd met, it had felt like he was holding a personal miracle in his hands.

"She's happy here in Pinetop." Mr. Isaacson finished scraping his side of the windshield and met Roman's gaze squarely. "You're a big part of the reason. Thanks for looking after her in my absence."

"You're welcome, sir." Roman's chest swelled beneath the man's kind words.

Exchanging another nod, they moved in unison to their respective doors and hopped inside the truck.

"There you are!" Hope glanced curiously between the two of them. "I could hear your voices outside. It sounded like you were having a great bro talk. I was starting to feel left out."

"When else was I going to tell the juiciest stories about your childhood?" Her father bumped shoulders with her as he buckled his seatbelt.

"Please assure me you didn't," she returned in a faint voice.

"Eh, well, maybe not the juiciest ones. Gotta save something for later in the visit." He winked broadly at Roman from the other side of the truck.

Roman grinned as he fiddled with his windshield wipers. It took a couple of minutes for the rest of the snow to melt from the glass. And during every second of those minutes, he was acutely aware of Hope sitting beside him, laughing and horsing around with her father. Every time her elbow brushed his arm or their knees bumped, his heart pounded a little harder.

He tried to shake off the feeling that something was subtly changing between them. Maybe he was still tired, or maybe the opposite was true. Maybe he'd gotten too much sleep. Or maybe the dream had gotten to him more than he'd realized.

The drive to the farm didn't take long. A couple of teen boys were manning the front gate. It was one of the few days of the year that Christmas Tree Farm wasn't open for business.

The teens were there to hand out flyers and answer the questions of any would-be customers who drove up.

Seeing Roman behind the wheel, one of them stuck out a gloved hand. “That’ll be five bucks for parking, sir.” He was struggling not to laugh.

Roman took one look at his threadbare glove and reached for his wallet.

“I was just kidding!” The kid quickly pulled his hand back. Then both boys started laughing uproariously.

When Roman opened his wallet anyway, the kid shook his head vehemently. “My dad would tear off my backside if he found out I took any money from you. We ain’t charity.”

Roman pocketed his wallet and tugged off his black leather gloves instead. “Think he’d go any easier on you if he saw you in a pair of new gloves?”

The kid eyed them wistfully. “I might be willing to find out.”

Roman slapped the gloves into his palm. “If he notices, tell him some guy passing through the gate lent them to you.” He hated the idea of the teen losing a finger or two to frost bite.

“Just on loan, eh?” The kid was already whipping off his threadbare gloves and tugging on the newer insulated ones.

“Yeah, I’ll probably come looking for ‘em after the spring thaw.” Roman winked at him to let him know he had no intention of coming back to collect them. Then he drove past the gate.

“Sugar daddy,” Hope announced in a stage whisper. “You act all tough in the riding ring, but now I know your deepest, darkest secret. Your heart is made of marshmallows.”

“Whatever.” He curled his upper lip at her, very glad she didn’t know just how soft his heart was for a certain new actress who’d blown into town only two months earlier. He didn’t dare meet her father’s gaze, but he could feel it on him.

In the past, vehicles would’ve been parked haphazardly all over the front lawn of the big farmhouse, but not this year. The

new owners, Emilio and Tess Navarro, were a stickler for appearances. They'd built a big gravel parking lot beside the house for events like these.

"I'll drop you off at the front door, then go park," Roman offered.

"No way," Hope protested, touching his arm. "We came together, cowboy, remember?"

Her words both warmed his heart and filled him with pride as he pulled into the parking lot and found what had to be the last spot available. He certainly wasn't going to mind walking into the holiday celebration with such an amazing woman at his side. She was beautiful on both the inside and outside.

He led Hope up the porch steps, with Mr. Isaacson following behind them. The front door of the farmhouse flew open before he could knock.

Izzy stood there, arms folded over a filmy red sweater. The toe of her black cowgirl boot tapped out a warning. "You didn't tell me you were bringing anyone."

"Roman!" Hope lightly punched his upper arm. "You said —"

"I'm just kidding," his twin interrupted, holding out her arms. "He told me."

When Roman attempted to embrace her, she danced around him and enclosed Hope in a bear hug. "I'm so glad you came!" She drew back when she caught sight of Dean Isaacson. "And who's this handsome fellow?"

"My Dad. It's kind of a long story," Hope explained breathlessly. "The short version is we've never missed a Thanksgiving together, but—"

"You don't need a reason for being here." Izzy held out a hand to him. "The more, the merrier. Come on in before you turn into icicles."

Mr. Isaacson shook her hand and looped a gift bag over her wrist before pulling back.

"What's this?" She eyed it curiously.

“Homemade blueberry jam,” he explained. “We didn’t want to come empty-handed.”

“It sounds delicious.” She peeked inside the bag. “Who made it?”

“I did.”

“You?” She glanced in surprise at Hope.

He shook his head at his daughter. “Hope is too busy to cook these days. She mainly orders takeout.”

Izzy looked impressed. “You’re a man of many talents.”

As she finished herding them through the front door, a blast of aromas slammed into Roman.

“I can practically taste the pumpkin pie already!” Roman filled his lungs with air, knowing this was exactly how a home was supposed to smell during the holidays. His nose picked up a delectable medley of roasted turkey, fresh-baked bread, and pumpkin pie.

“It’ll be ready soon,” Izzy promised. “Tess and everyone she recruited for duty are dividing and conquering in the kitchen. She estimated they’ll have everything set out between three-thirty and four. If you’re hungry before then, feel free to camp out at the hors-d’oeuvre table.”

“I can wait,” Hope said quickly, though she shot him a worried look. “Not sure you’ll be able to, though.”

He shrugged, knowing she was referring to the fact that he hadn’t eaten all day. “It’s not like I was working up much of an appetite.” He scanned the room, looking for his parents, and found them elbowing their way in his direction.

“Roman!” His mother reached him first and threw herself into his arms.

“Mamá!” He swung her around in a circle, making her red and green ruffled skirt swirl around them. Like she did on most holidays, she was wearing one of the long, traditional gowns she’d brought with her from Venezuela. And at the age of fifty, she could still very much hold her own on the dance floor in her lovely dress.

He caught Hope's eye as he set his mother back on her feet. When he began the introductions, he spoke in Spanish for his mother's benefit. "Mamá y papá, este es mi amigo, Hope Isaacson, y su papá, Dean Isaacson." He switched back to English to finish the introductions. "My parents, David and Leah Rios." He was proud of his beautiful mother and handsome father. Proud of how hard they worked. Proud of the new culture and language they'd embraced in the States when they'd immigrated from their homeland a decade earlier. He was especially proud of how hard they were still working to learn the language and acclimate to the culture.

Mr. Isaacson hurried forward to shake the Rios's hands. "It's great to meet you."

"My pleasure." David Rios beamed at him. "I grow Christmas trees." His command of the English language was much better than his wife's. "What do you do?"

"I'm a painter." Dean Isaacson drew a large rectangle in the air, then pretended to swab a paintbrush back and forth across it.

"Pintor," Mr. Rios explained in Spanish to his wife.

"Ah. Pintor." She nodded in understanding. "Hola!" There was no mistaking the welcoming note in her smile.

The next thing Roman knew, his mother's head was bent toward Dean Isaacson's as they conversed in Spanish. Roman met Hope's sparkling gaze.

She shrugged. "Like your sister said, he's a man of many talents."

"I'll say! Do you speak Spanish, too?" For the life of him, it had never occurred to him to ask her before now.

"Un poco," she answered cheekily. Translated in English, her words meant *a little*.

He stared at her in amazement. "How did I not know this?"

She shook her head. "It never came up before now."

He was so excited by the discovery that she could speak Spanish that his brain was already swimming with a few

choice phrases he wouldn't mind using on her. *Preciosa. Chica bella. Perfecta.* To him, she was the loveliest, most incredible woman on the planet — one who'd been full of surprises all day. Eh, who was he trying to kid? She'd been full of surprises since the day they'd met.

He caught sight of Julia and her husband, Diego, on the other side of the room. Though he nodded at them, Diego was the only one who waved back. All Julia did was glower at him and Hope. She ducked her head to say something to the dark-haired woman at her side. He could only presume it was the friend who'd been anxious to visit with him again. Montana, Melanie, or something along those lines. He felt a little bad that he didn't recognize her from last time, much less recall her name.

His mother's laughter reclaimed his attention, and he found himself staring open-mouthed at Hope again. Leah Rios was teaching her the steps of a traditional Venezuelan dance. Hope was having no trouble picking it up.

Roman caught Dean Isaacson's knowing gaze. "Something tells me you gave your daughter dance lessons."

"Ballet," her father supplied proudly. "It was her mother's dream to raise a little ballet dancer. Though she didn't live to see it, I made sure that particular wish came true."

"Roman!" His mother gestured with both hands for him to approach her, jabbering in Spanish that his lovely friend needed a partner. Before any other guy could edge him out of the honors, he hurried to Hope's side.

They were soon chuckling their way through his mother's version of the world-famous Joropo dance.

"*Ella me gusta,*" his mother shouted to him. It meant *I like her*. Something told him he'd be hearing a lot more of her opinions about Hope later on. She'd become almost as bad as Izzy when it came to trying to pair him off with one pretty girl or another. For once, it didn't bother him, though. He trusted Hope implicitly.

Even with my heart.

When the music slowed to a waltzing lilt, he found he had no desire to leave the dance floor. Having Hope in his arms was the happiest he'd been in a long time. Guys were constantly trying to cut in on him, but he glared and snarled them away. The only one he conceded to was her father.

Dean Isaacson pretended to duck when Roman leaned closer to inform Hope that he was being paged to the den by his sister. Izzy had been making frantic motions to him for the past ten minutes, the kind that told him she was dying to talk. And since they'd spent so many years at the farm, he knew the den was her favorite go-to spot in the house.

He suspected he knew what she wanted to talk about, and he wasn't wrong. No sooner had he stepped into the den did she pull him into the curtained alcove against the back wall.

She slapped her hands down on her hips and fixed him with an accusing look. "You care for her," she hissed. Though they were currently the only ones in the room, she was careful to keep her voice down, since someone could walk in on them at any time.

"You mean Hope?" He wasn't in the mood to play guessing games.

"No. The other woman you've been setting the dance floor on fire with for the past hour."

"Of course, I care for her! She's my—"

"Don't you dare try to friend zone her to me, Roman Axel Rios," she spat. "I know you better than that, and I certainly know what I saw happening out there." She pointed toward the living room.

"She's more like a best friend," he qualified, in no mood to try to hash out his complicated feelings for Hope. Certainly not in the middle of a holiday party.

"No kidding! The extra special kind of friend you eventually put a ring on."

He fisted his hands at his sides and glared back. "We're coworkers, for Pete's sake! Not—"

“That doesn’t change what I saw.”

“Fine.” Clearly, he wasn’t going to talk his twin out of what she’d seen, so he tried another tactic. “She’s sworn to me on more than one occasion that she will never again date on the job. She tried that before, and it ended badly.”

“Then you need to make sure your relationship with her ends differently.”

He threw his hands into the air. “Maybe I don’t want it to end. Have you considered that?”

“Of course, I have. I’m already browsing bridesmaid dresses, bro.”

His glare deepened. “What part of we’re just friends don’t you understand?” When she didn’t answer, he added, “It’s what we both want.”

“Is it?” Her voice rose.

“That’s what I just said,” he growled.

“What about all of your riding lessons and dinner dates? And don’t even get me started on that stunt you pulled yesterday, driving all the way to Phoenix and back in such lousy weather!”

He wasn’t sure how she’d heard about that, since he’d been careful not to mention it to her. “Friends do stuff like that for each other all the time, Izzy.”

“Oh, come on, Roman!” His twin gave a weary sigh. “How many more not-a-dates do you plan to go on with your just-a-friend before you face what’s really happening here?”

They stood nose to nose, scowling at each other for another long, tension-charged moment.

He finally relented. “Okay.” He groaned out the word, not sure how to put into words what he’d been feeling lately. “I care for her more than a friend should.” Sadly, admitting it didn’t make him feel any better.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” his sister muttered.

“I don’t want to ruin our friendship by pressuring her into a relationship she doesn’t want.” *With a grieving widower who has more nicks and dings on his heart than you can shake a stick at.*

“And you know this for a fact, huh?” Izzy didn’t sound the least bit empathetic. “Because you’ve confessed that you love her, and she informed you outright that she doesn’t feel the same way.”

“What? No!” He lifted his hat to run a hand through his hair. “I’ve barely had the chance to talk to God about it, much less to her.”

“Then you’d better get busy.” Her forehead furrowed menacingly. “According to Julia, Hope received a job offer out of state. So, if you don’t give her a reason to stay in town...”

He didn’t bother telling her he already knew about the job. He doubted it would change her stance on the issue.

“Maybe it’s not that easy.” He chose his words carefully, not wanting to say anything he couldn’t take back — like how she didn’t know all there was to know about love, just because she was happily married herself. Every couple and every situation was different.

“Or maybe you’re making it harder than it has to be.” She reached out to give his shoulders a gentle shake.

“It’s hard for me, Izzy, whether you see it that way or not.” His voice grew rough.

“I do see it! That’s the problem.” Her face crumpled. “I’m the girl who’s spent the last couple of years watching her twin nearly grieve himself into the ground. And the worst part about it was knowing there was nothing I could do except wait and pray. Now that there’s finally a glimmer of hope on the horizon, though, I can’t just sit on my hands while you run from it. You need to be running *toward* it, Roman.”

“Believe me. I intend to talk to the Lord about it before bed tonight.” His voice grew rough, sensing he had a long session ahead on his knees.

“We’ve already been doing that, Roman,” she cried. “Mom, Dad, and I for two years straight. So you’ll just have to pardon me for saying that your lovely *friend* feels like the answer to a few thousand of those prayers.”

He nodded mutely. The fact that his sister was probably right didn’t make it any easier to admit. It was a battle he’d been fighting for too long inside his own head. After his wife’s and son’s deaths, he’d had to look pretty hard to find a reason to keep getting out of bed each morning. He would’ve done anything to trade places with them — to give his life for theirs so they could’ve kept living. But the Lord had willed otherwise.

Was Hope Isaacson the reason?

“It’s time,” Izzy declared softly as she watched his expression. She stepped closer to wrap her arms around his middle and rest her head against his shoulder. “Time to say goodbye to what could have been, so you can finally embrace what’s right in front of you.”

It took a while before he could speak past the emotion clogging his throat. “I’m trying to.”



CHAPTER 8: NON-COMPETE CLAUSE

HOPE

As the dance drew to a close, Hope threw her arms around her father. “I’m so glad we got to spend Thanksgiving together!”

“Me, too, hon.” Her father kept a protective arm around her shoulders as he maneuvered her through the press of bodies in the room. “Lord willing, it’s a tradition we won’t ever have to break.”

They had Roman to thank for helping keep their tradition alive this year. She glanced around the crowded living room in search of him. To her disappointment, he still hadn’t returned from his chat with his sister. She hoped everything was okay between them.

“Are you looking for Roman?” Her father nudged her knowingly with his elbow.

“Maybe.” There was little point in lying to him about it. The guy knew her so well he could practically read her mind.

“Eventually, I’m going to get used to no longer being the number one guy in your life,” he sighed.

“Don’t worry.” She elbowed him back. “You’ll always be my favorite dad.”

“Gee, thanks.”

As she continued to scan the room for Roman, it dawned on her that she missed him. He’d only been gone a few minutes, but it felt like a piece of her heart was missing. She gave herself an inward shake, knowing it wasn’t a feeling typically experienced by someone who was just a friend. It did no good. She continued to feel starved for the sight of him, a feeling that was becoming all too familiar.

No matter how much time they spent together, it never seemed to be enough. She was always left wanting more — more time, more conversation, more togetherness, more of him.

Because I'm falling in love.

The realization stole her breath as she and her father left the living room and entered the long hallway leading to the back of the house. She stopped and stared. The ceiling above them was literally drenched with Christmas lights. Framed photographs were artfully arranged on the walls. Here and there, a tiny Santa hat was perched on a corner of the frames. A scattering of palm-sized white snowflake lights completed the mix.

“Wow!” Hope gazed around them in awe. “Somebody went to a serious amount of trouble to decorate this house. I’m taking mental notes.”

“We all are.” Izzy’s musical voice wafted to them from the far end of the hallway. “Emilio and Tess really outdid themselves this year.”

“I couldn’t agree more. It’s truly spectacular.” Hope wasn’t kidding about taking mental notes, either. There was just something about Pinetop that made a person want to put up a Christmas tree and start stringing lights the moment they arrived in town. The holiday spirit brimming on Main Street alone was downright contagious.

“Speaking of spectacular things,” Izzy’s creamy bronze features took on a sly cast, “I believe there’s something Roman would like to show you in the den.”

“Where’s that?” Hope’s heartbeat sped in anticipation of seeing him again.

“Around the corner to my right, your left. He’s already there, waiting for you.” Izzy pointed toward the den before gliding in their direction. When she reached them, she neatly inserted herself between Hope and her father. Looping an arm through his, she informed him, “Your presence, on the other hand, is being requested in the dining room. Word travels fast when there’s a famous person in the house.”

“Famous? Ha!” Though his voice was scoffing, Hope could tell he was flattered by Izzy’s description of him.

“More famous than all the rest of us put together,” Izzy assured, laying it on thick. “Anyhow, this woman is a collector, and she’s hoping you’ll weigh in on the value of a print she’s hoping to acquire.”

Hope met her father’s gaze and chuckled. “In case anyone wonders what he’s thinking right now, I’ll tell you. It sounds something like this. *Oh, please! Throw me in that briar patch.*”

He grinned at her reference to the classic story of *Peter Rabbit*.

“Only because you have the advantage of insider information.” He waved an admonishing finger at her. “Whoever is asking for my input has no idea who they’re really dealing with.”

“Uh-oh.” Izzy glanced laughingly between them. “Dare I ask what you’re talking about?”

“And spoil the surprise?” Hope mocked.

“How about a teensy little hint?” Izzy coaxed.

“If you insist.” Hope tried to keep a straight face but wasn’t sure she succeeded. “My artistic father once debated the reason for a missing button on a shirt in a portrait for four hours straight!”

“Oh, please!” Izzy sniffed as if four hours was nothing. “Long-winded conversations are the norm in Pinetop. He’ll fit right in.” She used their joined arms to tow Hope’s father down the hallway toward the dining room.

Whatever he said in response to her pithy comment about the locals drew another infectious peal of laughter from her.

It was as if they’d already forgotten that Hope was lingering in the hallway behind them.

Guess it’s time for me to go find Roman.

As she moved down the hallway and rounded the corner, her steps slowed. The door to the den stood open, and Roman was on the other side of it. She could see his rangy frame

hunched over the mantle. One hand gripped the edge of it as he stared into the fire. His back was to her.

She paused in the doorway. “Roman?” She called his name softly, not wanting to startle him.

His shoulders tensed. Then he slowly straightened and pivoted to face her. “Hope.” The tortured note in his voice made her draw a sharp breath.

“Is everything okay?” She hurried across the room to stand in front of him.

“Not exactly.”

“Why? What’s going on?” She took another step, instinctively wanting to offer comfort. She ached to slide her arms around his middle and just hold him, but he wasn’t hers to hold. He’d made that very clear yesterday, so she kept her arms at her sides.

“I haven’t been perfectly honest with you about something.” His voice grew ragged. “It’s not that I purposely lied to you...” He stopped and shook his head. “I honestly never meant for this to happen.”

“What are you talking about?” She tipped her face up to his. “You’re one of the most decent and honest people I’ve ever met.” She couldn’t think of a single instance in which he’d been anything less.

“I care for you,” he declared bluntly.

Her heart thudded at his words. “I care for you, too.” Her voice reverberated with an emotion she could no longer hide. “We’re friends, remember?”

“We’re more than friends, Hope.”

His words stunned her. It took a moment for her to find her voice again. “Wh-what did you say?”

“You must think I’m a complete idiot for telling you this after everything I said to you yesterday, but my sister just spent the last half hour setting me straight on a few things.” He looked like he was still trying to come to grips with what he was saying. “And she’s right. I’m falling for you.” He looked a

little dazed by the admission. “I’ve probably been falling for you since the day we met. I was just too blind to see it.”

“Roman,” Hope whispered, pressing a hand to her heart. His gaze was burning into hers, making it impossible to look away, impossible not to feel the swarm of feelings he was stirring in her — the same feelings he’d been stirring the entire time they’d known each other.

“Say something,” he begged. “Punch me, if you have to.”

An airy chuckle whooshed out of her. “I don’t feel like punching you.”

He ducked his head a little in order to gaze more deeply into her eyes. “I need some reassurance that I haven’t just ruined everything between us.”

“No, it’s not that.” Far from it, since she felt the same way he did. “I just...” She raised her other hand to her heart. “This is really unexpected after yesterday.” She hadn’t anticipated any such declarations from him. Like...ever!

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Her lips curved ruefully. “I hope your apology is for what you said yesterday.” Her voice grew softer. “Not today.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry for yesterday.” He closed the final distance between them, reaching for her hands. Lowering them to her sides, he loosely laced his fingers through them. “For not seeing what was right in front of me today and every day.”

She stood there for a moment, just absorbing everything he was saying and everything she was feeling. It was like she needed to breathe through it first.

“Tell me about her,” she whispered.

His eyebrows rose, not yet comprehending what she was asking.

“Tell me about Mia.” She sensed that this was a hurdle they needed to cross before they could move forward.

He looked away. It was a while before he responded. “We met here on the farm. My sister and I immigrated with an older

cousin while we were in our mid teens, but our parents stayed behind for another year to tie up some loose ends with Dad's job."

"What did he do?"

"Construction. Mostly for the government. That's why his green card application was a little more involved." He returned his gaze to her. "Our cousin took a job in Texas, so Izzy and I continued on to Christmas Tree Farm without him. Mia's family took us under their wing until our parents could join us — inviting us for dinner, that sort of thing. Mia and I became friends. One thing led to another, and we got married a few days after my nineteenth birthday."

"Wow!" Hope couldn't imagine being married that young.

His hands tightened on hers. "Was that a good wow or a bad wow?"

"It was a that's-really-young-to-be-married wow. I was only in my second year of college at the time," she mused. "Still growing up. Still figuring out what I wanted to do with my life."

"I get that." His lips twisted. "It's different for immigrant kids, though. Most seasonal workers don't go to college. They work hard, grow up fast, and that's about it. Little did I know when I first arrived in Arizona that Christmas Tree Farm would be different, mostly because of Angel Castellano. He was the first one to break the mold by leaving for college. He came back, though, and now he's working like crazy to take as many of us as he can to the next level with him."

"I'll say!" Hope had heard nothing but good things about the guy. "I hear he employs half the town!" *Immigrants, locals, and out-of-towners like me.*

"Not quite half." Roman's mouth quirked. "I know it feels that way, though."

They stood there, smiling goofily at each other as silence settled between them. She was the first to break it. "I'm fine with dating my best friend, so long as it doesn't cost us our friendship. It's too important to me."

He drew her closer. “I wasn’t planning on giving anything up. I’m asking you for more, not less.”

She bit her lower lip, still needing a little more reassurance. “Let’s take it slow, though. I don’t want to rush into anything, okay?” She was still dealing with her breakup. He was still processing his grief. Not to mention she had a big career decision ahead.

“Okay.” Caution crept into his gaze. “Exactly how slow are we talking?”

“What do you mean?” Her voice grew thready as his gaze dropped to her mouth.

“I want to kiss you. Is that allowed?”

“Here?” She caught her breath. “You do realize there’s a massive holiday celebration taking place—”

Her words were silenced as he dipped his head and seamed their mouths together. “There’s a celebration taking place right here.” His voice was husky against her lips.

“Roman,” she sighed.

“I’m a little rusty at this stuff.” His mouth caressed hers in all the right ways. “You’ll have to tell me if I’m doing anything wrong.”

She was pretty sure he was doing everything right. “Cocky,” she hissed.

He took advantage of her parted lips to deepen their kiss. It was only for a few seconds, but it was long enough to make her heart race and her breathing grow irregular.

When he raised his head, his male-satisfied smirk was almost too much for her.

She gave his fingers a not-so-gentle yank. “If you’ve got something to say to me, cowboy, just say it.”

His grin widened. “Has it occurred to you just how badly you’re violating your cardinal rule?”

As the meaning of his words sank home, she burst out laughing. “You mean my Absolutely No More Dating on the

Job Rule?”

“That’s the one.”

She batted her lashes at him. “I think it locked horns with the All’s Fair in Love and War Rule. Like you once told me, bull fights are brutal and messy.”

“Listen to you.” There was a world of pride in his voice. “Already sounding like you’re dating a wrangler.”

My on-the-job boyfriend.

The thought both made her smile and filled her with angst. “Do you think Angel or Willa will mind that we’re, um... together?” *While working at their dinner theater?*

“Nah, they started dating on the job, too.” His dark eyes glinted with humor. “I think they’ll be okay with it, so long as all the kisses you steal from me are in private.”

“Just the ones I steal from you, huh?”

“Oh, I intend to do my fair share of the stealing.” His gaze dropped to her mouth again. “Later, though. We have a Thanksgiving feast to get back to before they send out a search party for us.”

As if on cue, a pack of kids came running and laughing down the hallway. They careened into the den and stopped short at the sight of Hope and Roman standing hand-in-hand by the fireplace.

One of the boys made a face of comical dismay, followed by a gagging sound. “Just like my mom and dad,” he muttered, spinning around to leave. “Let’s go play hide-n-seek somewhere else.”

Roman dropped her hands so he could twirl her shoulders toward the door. “Are you getting hungry yet?”

“A little.” She loved the way he kept a hand splayed on the small of her back as they started walking. He didn’t drop his hand, even when they reached the doorway. She paused to glance over her shoulder at him. “Are you sure you’re ready to go public with us?” She was already dreading the curious

looks and questions that were sure to follow. Up until now, all the speculating had been behind their backs.

“Are you?” He studied her soberly.

She had mixed feelings about the topic. “I asked you first.”

“I’m handing my vote back to you. Just tell me what you want.”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I thought I did, but my priorities have been shifting ever since we met.”

He abruptly tugged her back into the room. “Talk to me, Hope.” He cocooned her against the wall with one arm propped over her head.

“Now? Aren’t you starving?” she protested.

“I can eat anytime.” His dark gaze narrowed on her. “I’m more concerned about what’s bothering you right now.”

She’d been hoping not to bring up any personal drama over Thanksgiving, but it was getting harder to hide things from him as he got better at reading her emotions.

“My ex texted me,” she admitted. “Again.”

His jaw tightened. “When?”

“While you were sleeping earlier.”

He gave a rigid nod. “And?”

“He’s pressuring me for an answer about the job in Philly.”

“I thought you told him you weren’t making any final decisions until after Christmas.”

“I did, and I doubled down on it in the text I sent back a few hours ago.” She quelled a shiver. “I don’t like the fact that he’s sending personal texts instead of going through official channels like he would with any other perspective employee.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Just to be clear, my final answer to him is going to be no.”

He looked relieved. “You know that won’t break my heart, but are you sure?”

“I’m very sure that I can’t work with him again. There will be other opportunities. If not, I already have a good job.” One she was suddenly no longer in a hurry to leave.

He reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Wherever we end up, I just want to be together.”

“Me, too.” She greatly appreciated the fact that he wasn’t pressuring her to remain in Pinetop, despite having his family and most of his friends there. The fact that he would leave the door open to other opportunities underscored how serious he was about being with her.

“To be honest, I’m in no hurry to leave Pinetop,” she confessed. “I know that’s not what I’ve spent the last couple of months saying, but you’ve given me a very big reason to stay.” The time it had taken her to realize it didn’t make it any less true.

“You aren’t the only one who’s changed your mind on something important lately.” He tipped his forehead against hers. At the same moment, his stomach growled, making them both laugh.

“Come on.” She straightened, reaching for his hand. “Gotta go feed my favorite cowboy.”

He eyed their joined hands. “If we head out there like this, our secret will be out.”

She rolled her eyes at him, backing toward the door and towing him after her. “You know what? Something tells me the only people we’ve been fooling lately are ourselves.”



One week later

A LOUD THUMPING SOUND JOLTED HOPE AWAKE. SHE SAT straight up in bed, wondering if something had fallen off a shelf in the living room. Shoving the quilt from her legs, she

swung her feet to the floor and blindly felt for her fuzzy cat slippers. She accidentally kicked one of them, sending it careening beneath her bed.

Oh, well! House slippers are over-rated, anyway.

Since she was living in a second-floor apartment, the floors were already warm.

The pounding happened again.

Wrapping her arms around her middle, she stumbled into the hallway. “Dad? Are you up already?”

The door to the guest room flew open, and he stepped out, nearly plowing into her.

“Hey, sugar!” He clasped her shoulders to steady her. “Thought I heard someone knocking on the door. I was getting up to see who it was.”

She rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?” It was still dark out.

He grunted. “Too early for visitors, that’s for sure.”

The pounding sounded a third time.

“Oh, my lands! This had better be important.” Hope stomped across the living room to the front door, knowing it couldn’t be Roman. He was probably already at work. Not to mention he’d call first, not just show up unannounced.

Squinting through the peep hole, she made out the figure of a man on the other side of the door. He was wearing a dark suit with a dress shirt that glowed white in the moonlight.

The pieces of the puzzle clicked into place, making her heart race sickeningly. “It’s Pete Jasper,” she declared faintly.

Her father didn’t look too happy about it. “What in the world is your ex doing in Pinetop?” He kept his voice low. “I thought he was in New York or Philly or thereabouts...”

“So did I.” Despair crept into her voice. “What should I do?”

“Nothing. I’ll handle it.” Her father jerked the ties of his robe a little tighter.

“Yes, please.” Hope threw her hands into the air, backing away. “He has no right to show up o’dark early on my doorstep. I’m not even dressed.” His audacity was beyond infuriating.

While her father briskly undid the deadbolt, she moved around the corner to the hallway. Though she didn’t have any interest in meeting with her ex face-to-face in her PJs, she had every intention of eavesdropping.

A swirl of cold air pushed into the room, indicating that her father had opened the door. She shivered and tightly folded her arms to hold in as much body heat as possible.

“Mr. Isaacson?” She heard the surprise in Pete’s voice.

“To what do we owe such an early morning visit?” Her father’s voice was dry, clearly implying that he was anything but okay with Pete just showing up out of the blue.

“I’m really sorry about that, sir.” There was a pause, during which she imagined Pete looking over her father’s shoulder in search of her. “Is Hope home? I need to speak with her about something urgent.”

“Is everything okay?” Her father was careful to avoid a direct answer. “I can deliver a message to her, if you want.”

Pete huffed out a breath, not sounding the least bit happy about her lack of availability. “I’m only in town for a few hours. Just make sure she gets this.”

“I can do that.” Paper crinkled as her father accepted whatever Pete handed him. It was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering. The front door must still be open, because the temperature in the apartment was fast plummeting.

“Tell her I need an answer right away. I don’t know how long I can hold off the dogs, so to speak.”

Dogs? Hope’s insides quaked. It almost sounded like a threat.

“I’ll let her know.” Her father’s voice remained coldly polite. “Is there anything else?”

“Will she be at work today?”

Dean Isaacson cleared his throat. “Believe it or not, I’m only visiting for the holidays. My daughter doesn’t check in or out with me.”

“Fine,” Pete growled. “Just give her the papers.”

Without any further conversation, the door was abruptly slammed shut, and the deadbolt was thrown back in place.

Hope came out from behind the wall. “Well?” She was shivering violently.

Her father held out a gold manilla envelope to her. “He wanted me to give you this.”

She moved across the room, snatching an afghan from the couch to wrap around her shoulders before accepting the envelope. Ripping it open, she removed two stapled packets of paper.

“It’s an employment contract,” she exclaimed as she examined the top page. For the lead female role in *Phantom in the Garden*, no less — the show she’d already decided to turn down.

“Not sure why he couldn’t have mailed it or emailed it to you,” her father grumbled.

“I know, right?” She thumbed through the pages and froze as she reached the last one. It was a printed notification of Pete Jasper’s company’s intent to pursue legal damages against her if she failed to sign the contract before Christmas. Their reason made her insides turn even colder.

Apparently, she’d been bound by some non-compete clause at her last job — the one in Phoenix where she’d first started working for Pete at a summer theater. The terms were clear. She was not allowed to work at any competing company for a period of one year after leaving her last company.

It took a few seconds for her to find her voice. “He’s suing me,” she gasped.

“What?” Her father reached for the papers.

She blindly handed them over. “The weirdest part is that I have no memory of signing anything like this.”

“Don’t have my glasses on.” Her father scowled at the forms. “What exactly is he claiming that you signed?”

“Some sort of non-compete clause,” she sighed. “If I understand correctly, it means I can’t work at any theater in the country for the next several months.”

“Which is exactly what you’re doing,” he pointed out.

“I know.” Her heart thudded with alarm. “It sounds like he’s going to sue me for it, too, unless...” She stopped and swallowed hard.

“Let me guess.” Her father’s voice was dry. “This will all go away if you just sign his blasted contract.”

“Yes.” Her insides felt numb. Everything had been going so well up to this point. She was finally settling in to her new job and new town. She had a new boyfriend. She was finally happy.

And now it’s all falling apart.



CHAPTER 9: LOVE AND WAR

HOPE

Hope and her father exchanged a long, weary look.

“I’ll get you an attorney,” he promised in a tight voice. “We’ll fight this.”

“How?” She clasped her hands to keep them from shaking. “This is so much bigger than us, and you know it.” Pete Jasper came from old family money and was now a partner at one of the biggest theater companies in the nation. Sure, she and her father could put up a fight, but her gut told her it was a battle they wouldn’t win.

“I don’t know how, but we will.” Dean Isaacson’s voice was firm.

“I need to tell Roman.” Her mind raced over all that needed to happen today. “I also need to tell Willa and Angel.” *As soon as possible.* She briefly closed her eyes. “Forcing me to drop out of the Castellanos’s Christmas show is so unfair to them.” *On today of all days!* Tonight was the opening night of their show. It was the only reason her father had lingered in town for so long.

“Agreed. Maybe they’ll be able to give you some direction for how to handle this.”

“I can tell you exactly how they’re going to handle it,” she informed him dully. “It’s called a backup for my part. She’s been training with me the whole time.” Unfortunately, she was a very pregnant backup, who hated Hope’s guts and would be glad to see her go.

She glanced around the cozy little apartment, hating the thought of leaving it behind almost as much as she hated the thought of leaving Castellano’s. However, there was no way she could afford to continue paying the rent without a job. It was hard to believe her life had come to this.

“I’ll make some coffee while you get dressed,” her father offered kindly.

She nodded, knowing neither of them would be able to go back to sleep. “Do you mind making an extra one for Roman?” Since it was so early in the day, it only made sense to share her bad news with him first.

“Consider it done.” Her father started pulling mugs out of the cabinet.

Feeling dazed, Hope wandered back to her bedroom and shut the door. Leaning against it, she allowed the first tears to fall.

“Why, God?” She choked out the words, then gave a shaky laugh. At one point in her many years of attending church, she seemed to remember some pastor say that *why* was the one question God never chose to answer.

The same pastor had gone on to say that God did what He did because He knew what was best for them. Always and forever.

It's just so hard to believe that right now.

Yesterday, it had felt like the whole world was in her hands. Today, it was coming completely unraveled. She could lose everything!

She pushed away from the door and moved to her closet to dress. She was only dimly aware of pulling on a pair of black jeans and boots. She tugged a soft gray sweater over her head, finding an odd sort of comfort in dressing in such somber colors.

Not in the mood to style her hair, she finger-combed it into a high ponytail. Then she applied a layer of lip gloss and decided she was ready to face her day.

Or as ready as I'm going to be.

She straightened the quilt over her bed without actually making it and retrieved her cell phone from the nightstand. Stuffing it in her back pocket, she reached for the strap of her crossbody purse and pulled it over her head. It was made of camel colored leather that didn't match the rest of her outfit, but she didn't care. Today wasn't about making a fashion statement. It was about containing a fire before it burned out

of control. It was about minimizing the damage that was already taking place.

When she returned to the kitchen, her father wordlessly handed her a tall, insulated cup of coffee. “I’m going to run get dressed. I can be ready to take off in about five minutes.”

“Thanks, Dad.” She was glad he wasn’t leaving her to face the music alone. After he left the room, she whispered a prayer. “Be with us today, Lord. Give us the wisdom to say the things that need to be said and do the things that need to be done.” She felt a little better after praying, though it still didn’t change one sentence on the contract from Philadelphia that she’d folded and stuffed inside her purse.

Poor Roman! She hated the thought of breaking her horrible news to him even more than breaking it to her bosses. He was going to be devastated to find out that she would be moving back to Phoenix with her father — just until she could figure things out and decide what came next.

It was a silent walk to the theater. Since Hope lived a few doors down, she pretty much only drove when it was raining or snowing. Roman’s black truck was already in the parking lot, along with a few other vehicles.

She led her father to the rear entrance, where the red-painted door never failed to make her smile.

Until today.

Feeling like there were no smiles left in her, Hope twisted the door handle and found it was unlocked. Her insides knotted at the realization that it meant either Angel or Willa was there.

Pushing open the door, she stepped into the welcoming heat. Shivering and rubbing her gloved hands together, she glanced toward Angel’s office. The door was open, and the light was on.

“Looks like my boss is here,” she announced shakily. “Guess we’ll be getting this over sooner than I expected.”

Her father didn’t say anything. He simply followed her down the hallway with the other two coffee cups in hand.

Hope paused outside Angel's door to knock lightly on it. "Is anyone home?"

"Oh, hi, Hope!" He sounded surprised to see her. "Come in."

He wasn't alone.

Roman, who'd been standing in front of Angel's desk with his arms folded, spun in her direction. He lowered his arms and took a step her way, glancing between her father and her. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," she rasped, fumbling with the clasp on her purse. It took her a moment to realize why she was having so much trouble opening it.

Roman took pity on her, moving her way to help her remove her gloves. When he realized her hands were shaking, he took a moment to rub them briskly between his.

"I, um..." She pulled the folded contract from her purse. "Pete Jasper showed up on my doorstep this morning to deliver this." She handed it to Roman, then impulsively faced her employer.

"I'm so sorry, Angel. I don't remember signing a non-compete clause with the last company I worked for. It was just a part-time summer job at an outdoor theater. No doubt they had me sign something, but I had no idea there were these kinds of strings attached to the deal. I certainly didn't intentionally misrepresent things with you and Willa during my interview." She was so close to weeping that she had to stop and clear her throat.

"Please. Take a seat." He beckoned her and her father toward the upholstered chairs in front of his desk. The concerned look in his dark gaze nearly proved to be her breaking point as she hastily took a seat. She'd always liked and respected him. He was a good man and a great boss. Plus, he was every shade of smoking hot in his signature dark suit and white dress shirt. She had no trouble picturing why her director, Willa, had fallen so hard or so fast for him.

He came out from behind his desk and reached for the papers Roman was frowning his way through. “May I?”

“It’s a job contract, as far as I can tell.” Roman handed over the whole wad, looking anxious to be rid of it. “And a threat to sue Hope if she doesn’t sign it.”

“That’s hardly orthodox.” Angel’s voice was dry as he returned to his desk with the papers and took a seat. He riffled through them. “You’re right. It’s a job offer, accompanied by a demand letter.”

Dean Isaacson unzipped his coat and leaned forward. “What exactly is a demand letter?”

“No idea.” Roman crouched between the two chairs, and her father handed him the cup of coffee he’d brewed for him.

Roman took it and lifted it in the air to thank him.

Angel flicked a hard-to-read glance between Hope and her father. “In this case, it’s nothing more than saber rattling.”

“Meaning this joker hasn’t officially sued my daughter yet?” Mr. Isaacson sounded hopeful.

“That is correct.” Angel’s gaze moved back to Hope and settled on her and Roman’s joined hands. “If you don’t mind me asking, what sort of relationship did you have with your last boss, Hope?”

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, shooting a nervous glance at Roman.

He nodded at her. “Tell him everything.”

She drew a deep, bracing breath. “We had one of those whirlwind relationships. We dated. He proposed shortly afterward. Then he left town to take another job without telling me. I ended our engagement when he pitched a fit over my failure to immediately drop out of college and follow him.”

“Ouch!” Angel’s expression remained impassive. “So, this is personal.” He scanned the paperwork some more. “I was wondering.”

“Yes.” *And vengeful.* It felt like Pete was single-handedly trying to destroy both her career and her happiness.

“It’s a little personal for me, too.” Angel’s jaw tightened. “Since you’re my lead actress for the biggest show of the year at Castellano’s. Might not hurt for us to do a little saber rattling in return.”

Hope gaped at him, unable to believe she still had a job. *For a few more hours or days, at least.* “What do you mean?” Her voice came out sounding a little strangled.

Angel shrugged. “Since your ex enjoys writing letters, maybe we should write him one in return.”

She dabbed at the dampness forming at the edges of her eyes. “What would we say?”

“That you’re not in breach of any non-compete clause, since you’re technically employed at a small-town restaurant, not a theater. One that provides a variety of live entertainment options — everything from dancing to dinner mysteries to rodeos.”

Dean Isaacson frowned. “I’m no attorney, but it’s starting to sound like we’re splitting hairs over a legally gray matter.”

Angel nodded. “I reckon that about sums it up.”

“So, what’s the bottom line?”

Her boss spread his hands. “The show that Hope is currently performing in has been advertised to the public as a Christmas rodeo. The burden of proof would be on Mr. Pete Jasper to prove otherwise, if he really wants to take things that far. I’m not sure it would be in his best interest to generate that sort of negative press for his company as they head into the production of...” He peered closer at the paperwork in his hands. “Phantom in the Garden.” He snorted. “Doesn’t sound like a knock-off version of Phantom of the Opera at all, does it?”

“All I’m hearing is that I’m not fired yet.” Hope squeezed Roman’s hand, and he squeezed back.

“Fired!” Angel gave her an incredulous look. “I can assure you that’s not happening.” He met Roman’s gaze. “The more I think about it, the more I like the rodeo angle. Thanks to all the riding lessons you’ve given Hope lately, that might be our best defense against this mess.” He flicked his thumb and forefinger in disgust against Pete Jasper’s contract.

“What do you mean?” Hope’s gaze danced hopefully between the two men.

Angel smiled at her. “You enjoy working with horses, right?”

“I absolutely love working with them!”

“Good. How do you feel about the idea of becoming an understudy of Christie Hart?”

She stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“I am, and she certainly is.” He gave her an assessing look. “She puts in long hours during our summer and fall rodeos and could really use a break now and then. If you’d be willing to train with her—”

“Yes,” Hope declared so quickly that the four of them burst out laughing.

The tension in the room dissipated.

Hope found herself blinking back more tears, happy ones this time. “Just show me where to sign.”

“We’ll get to that as soon as I have a chance to square it away with Christie.” Angel winked at her. “In the meantime,” he swiveled his chair to face Dean Isaacson, “rumor has it you’re in the market for some real estate.”

Her father blinked in surprise. “Word travels fast around here.”

“It’s a small town. You’ll get used to it.” Angel shrugged. “In a good fifty to a hundred years, give or take.”

They chuckled again.

Roman stood and tugged Hope to her feet. “While they discuss real estate, how about we go finish our coffee

somewhere else? There's something I wanted to show you."

He and Angel nodded at each other and seemed to be exchanging a silent message.

Hope didn't care what it was. All that mattered to her was that these two men were on her side.

As she and Roman strolled hand-in-hand down the still empty hallway, she tipped her head against his shoulder. "What were you wanting to show me?"

"This." Without warning, he pulled her into the nearest storage room and shut the door behind them. He leaned her back against the door, not an easy task since they were both still holding coffee cups.

"You wanted to show me the storage room?" she teased.

"Yep." The laughter died on her lips as he swooped in for a soul-searing kiss. "How do you like it?" he inquired huskily.

"I, um...might need to see a little more of the place to make up my mind."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He reached for her coffee cup to set it beside his on a nearby cabinet.

She slid her arms around his neck, and he kissed her again, slower this time. He drew out the sweetness of the moment, stirring her emotions and dragging a sound from her that was half-sigh and half-sob.

"Hope, it's going to be okay," he promised. "Angel knows what he's doing, legally and otherwise. There's nothing he wouldn't do to protect those he cares for, and you're part of the family now."

Family. His words made her throat tighten with emotion. "I haven't had a family in a very long time," she choked. "It's been just me and my dad."

He nuzzled the edge of her mouth. "You've got me now, too, along with everyone else at Castellano's. Even the horses."

She smiled at that.

“Plus everyone at Christmas Tree Farm.”

She smiled mistily at him. “I adore them right back. Every single one of them. That’s why Pete’s latest shenanigans are so unsettling. I can’t bear the thought of giving any of this up.” She waved a hand vaguely around the dimly lit room. “Or you.” She settled her arms back around his neck.

“You’re not going to lose me, babe,” he assured. “I’m too much in love with you.”

She went still in his arms. “You love me?”

“If you doubt it, I haven’t kissed you nearly enough.” He smiled against the side of her neck where he was currently nipping a warm trail of kisses.

She giggled when he reached a ticklish spot. “I thought we agreed to take things slow.”

“Compared to how fast I want to go,” he kissed his way across her cheek to her lips, “we’re taking things at a snail’s pace.”

“I see.” She gave a breathy chuckle. “How much faster would you prefer to go?”

He swooped in for a very tender, very thorough kiss before answering. “I’m not sure you’re ready to hear it. I don’t want to scare you away before you have the chance to admit you love me back.”

“I do.” She smiled against his lips. “So much.”

“I know.”

“So cocky!”

“I prefer the word confident, but that works, too. Man, Hope! I can’t believe you just told me you love me.” Wonder infused his voice.

“Why’s it so hard to believe? You said you already knew it.”

“Because you have so many distractions in your life right now. Big, serious ones.”

“You’re more important than all of that, Roman.” Her voice hitched. The fear of being forced out of town had really helped her see just how important he’d become to her.



IT WAS DIFFICULT TO ROLL UP HER SLEEVES AND GET TO WORK two hours later. However, years of training had taught Hope how to focus during even the most stressful circumstances.

“Cut!”

It seemed to her that Willa had called for more breaks this morning than she’d ever done before. This was the third one in the past hour.

“Take ten, folks.” Willa made a circular motion in the air to disband their huddle. “I want everyone drinking water. Hope, I need to see you for a sec.”

Hope nodded, wondering if Willa had an update on her legal situation. *I can handle whatever she has to tell me.* It felt like she’d been balancing on a razor-sharp edge all morning, though she was pretty sure her performance didn’t justify replacing her with Julia.

I can do this. I can do this.

“Yes, you can.” Willa’s striking blue gaze scanned the frayed jeans and faded plaid shirt that comprised Hope’s costume during the first act. In comparison, she looked like she was ready to go on a concert tour in a classy cream jumpsuit and red heeled boots. They were lower heels than usual, probably because she would be in them most of the day. Her dark hair was piled high on her head, cascading down her cheeks in perfect ringlets. She was absolutely stunning.

“Sorry. You weren’t supposed to hear that.” Hope rolled her eyes. “I’ve been giving myself little pep talks all morning.”

“We all do it.” Willa didn’t bat an eyelash over her explanation. “Listen, I’d like to change something in the first scene that’ll put you in the riding ring even sooner.” She

ducked her head closer to Hope's, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Considering everything that's going on, it seemed wise to emphasize the rodeo elements of our show."

"I appreciate it." Hope blew out a breath, trying not to let the threat of a lawsuit from Pete rock her confidence before tonight's performance.

"Also, I want you to know that I understand today is difficult for you. Then again, I've never seen a day that doesn't come with its own set of troubles." Willa waved a hand, making her silver bracelets jingle. "Nobody gets off scot-free this side of Glory. We all have stuff to deal with."

Hope chuckled wryly. "So chin up and muscle through it, huh?" She'd always liked Willa's honesty, along with the kindness in which she delivered it.

"On the contrary, I was going to advise you to use it to your advantage." Willa spread her hands. "Just hear me out. I know you've been dealt a tough hand, but it fits the part you're playing, if you know what I mean."

Hope stared at her for a moment. "So, instead of rubbing onions under my eyes to make me cry, let my personal issues be the onions today?"

"Exactly." Willa's smile was full of empathy. "To up the ante even more, don't be surprised if your ex shows up for our opening night. Angel and I aren't buying his only-in-town-for-a-few-hours line. This is show business, and he's trying to steal our female lead. Mark my words. He'll be scouting you from somewhere in the audience. We have tight security, so don't be afraid. Just be aware."

"The show must go on." Hope nodded. "I get it."

Willa gave her a high five, then handed her a bottle of water.

Hope uncapped it and took a healthy swig. "Thank you. For everything." There were no words to express how grateful she was to have Willa on her side. It further strengthened her loyalty to Castellano's.

“You’re part of the family,” Willa said simply. She gestured for Hope to head to the riding ring next.

Roman was waiting for her there. “I’m sure you’ve heard we’re making a change to the first scene, and here she is.” He gestured grandly toward Cream Puff, who was all but wagging her tail as Hope walked up to them. “A few days ago, I bragged to Angel about how you and Cream Puff sometimes look like you’re dancing while you’re training together. I showed him a quick video, and he—”

“Wait! Back up.” She slapped her hands down on her hips. “When did you record this video?” She was dying to know.

“Babe, you’re always asking me to take pictures of you to send your dad. The other day I accidentally hit the record button. I’m not sure what made me show it to Angel. Guess I’m just so proud of my super hot, super talented girlfriend.” His gaze burned into hers as powerfully as a kiss.

“Nice save, cowboy.”

“I thought so. Anyhow...” He gestured at Cream Puff.

“You want us to dance?”

“Think you can do it for an audience?”

“I do.” Because of the look in her eyes, he took a step back.

“Quit looking at me like that.” He removed his Stetson to wave it at his face a few times. “There are consequences for stuff like that, you know.”

“Later, gator,” she teased. “Assuming you want an IOU on what I’m imagining doing to you right now.”

“Yes, please,” he groaned and gave Cream Puff the signal to take off.

Hope pretended to chase her around the ring. Then she pretended to run away while Cream Puff chased her back. She had to admit that Cream Puff’s happy frolicking did look a little like dancing. She was such a happy pony. The audience was going to love her antics, especially the kids.

Willa ended the rehearsal early and sent the cast members to their dressing rooms to rest and air out, as she put it. “Keep sipping on water,” she instructed. “I cannot stress enough how important it is to stay hydrated on a day like this. And no eating anything whatsoever that wasn’t prepared in our own kitchen. They know the drill.”

Hope knew she was referring to the dietary restrictions on performance days. Her last break passed in a blur. Then it was time to report backstage for final preparations for tonight’s show.



Opening Night

THE CURTAINS OPENED, AND HOPE STEPPED INTO THE spotlight to bemoan the ranch she and her fictitious husband were fearful of losing. After the first scene came a poignant duet that brought a wave of clapping across the amphitheater.

They were packed to the gills with both tourists and local citizens alike. She’d yet to spot Pete Jasper in the audience, though. Maybe he hadn’t bothered showing up after all.

As both Angel and Roman had predicted, Hope and Cream Puff brought the house down with their dance. Kids squealed and teens whistled. The conclusion of their performance earned them a standing ovation.

Hope felt like she was walking in a happy glow back to her dressing room. To her surprise, the door was standing ajar.

One of the security guards shrugged. “Gotta fan in there who claims to be a long-time friend wanting to congratulate you on tonight’s performance.”

“Name?” she asked quickly.

“Pete Jasper.”

She nodded, knowing she couldn’t avoid their confrontation forever. “Stay close,” she instructed, “and let Roman know I’d like for him to join me as soon as possible.”

“Roger that.” The security guard lifted his cell phone to call Roman.

“And keep the door open.” She stepped inside her dressing room, heart pounding and palms sweating.

And there he was. The man whom she’d once pictured wearing a wedding dress for. The same man who was now threatening to sue her.

“Hello, Hope.” It was impossible to read his expression as he strode in her direction. He was wearing a business suit. No tie. Real diamond cuff links. Expensive leather shoes. His blonde hair was carefully tousled and sprayed into place. Everything about his appearance was so carefully staged that she wasn’t sure what she’d ever seen in him.

She greatly preferred the wind-blow hair and callused hands of a certain small-town wrangler.

As Pete approached her, she held up a hand to keep plenty of space between them. “What do you want?” She tried to squash the twang of nerves reverberating through her.

“You,” he said simply.



CHAPTER 10: FINAL APPEAL

ROMAN

Because of the special notification system set up on Roman's cell phone, the call from Security flashed across his screen with a red-flag alert status.

He accepted the call on the first ring. "Roman Rios speaking."

"This is Castellano's Security with a message from Hope Isaacson. She's requesting your presence in her dressing room pronto."

He gripped the phone tighter, already springing into motion. "Is she okay?" He tossed the saddle he was holding onto the top of the nearest empty stall door.

"She seems a little shaken up. There's a rodeo guest with her. She instructed us to stay close."

"I'm on my way." Roman broke into a run. Since he was already on the lower level, it didn't take long to reach Hope's dressing room.

A security guard was standing outside the door, which was propped open.

Roman skidded to a halt as he reached the guy. "Is she—?"

"Inside." The guard jammed a thumb at the door.

As Roman leaned closer, he could hear the hubbub of voices on the other side. What he heard made him pause and listen.

"Feel free to call off your attorney." Pete Jasper's voice was smooth — too smooth. It was laced with the underlying impatience of a man accustomed to getting his way, except this time he wasn't. "This was never going to court. We both know that."

"Did I truly sign a non-compete clause with you?" Hope sounded suspicious. "Strange how I have no memory of it."

"Does it matter?" her ex drawled.

"It does to me," she spluttered. "The truth always matters."

“I wasn’t aware that anything I said or did mattered to you anymore.” His voice grew bitter. “You weren’t responding to most of my calls, emails, or texts. How else was I supposed to get your attention?”

“You weren’t.” Her voice was flat. “That’s how breakups work, Pete.”

“It was a foolish misunderstanding!” The frustration in his voice mounted. “I can’t believe you threw away everything we had over it. Two years of being together. Two years of sharing our hopes, dreams, birthdays, and holidays.”

“Some of them,” she corrected coolly. “You missed my first birthday and our second Christmas. Oh, and you didn’t bother informing me about the job opening in New York until after you’d accepted it.”

“Only because I knew how upsetting the whole idea of relocating from Phoenix would be to you. Your father was there. Your friends were there. Your college was there.” He spoke slowly, as if he was explaining something to a small child.

“And you somehow came to the conclusion that leaving me out of the decision altogether would be less upsetting?” Her voice rose incredulously.

“As a matter of fact, yes! I ripped off the bandage, so to speak. Believe me, it wasn’t any easier on me.” He blew out a breath. “Especially when you returned my ring over it. I was devastated!”

“I only returned your ring after you lost your religion over my refusal to follow you to New York. I would’ve never graduated from college if I had.”

He made a scoffing sound. “You could’ve transferred to any one of the most elite theater schools in the nation. How is that a hardship?”

“You were asking me to start over. No, you were demanding it,” she seethed. “Which gave no consideration to *my* hopes and *my* dreams. Never in my life have I felt so irrelevant. Like what I wanted didn’t even matter.”

“Of course, you matter to me, darling! I was a fool not to confide everything to you from the start. I was even more of a fool to step foot on that flight to New York without telling you. If it makes you feel any better, I’ve regretted it ever since.”

She was silent for a moment. “To be perfectly honest, it makes me feel nothing at all.”

“Ouch! I guess I deserved that.” He blew out a breath. “Just give me another chance, and I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“That’s not possible.” Her voice brooked no further discussion on the topic. “I’ve moved on. You need to do the same.”

“Hey, I know you have every right to be angry with me.” His voice turned cajoling. “Punish me all you want for my mistakes. But whatever you do, don’t punish yourself for them. You deserve this job opportunity. It’s what you’ve always wanted. It’s your big break.”

“I did want it,” she agreed, “but I’m no longer so sure. People change, Pete. I’ve changed.”

“Of course, it’s what you still want.” He sounded aghast. “Nobody changes that much.”

“I have,” she retorted. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have another appointment to keep.”

Roman didn’t hear any sounds or movements for the next few seconds.

“So, that’s it?” The sudden sneer in her ex-fiancé’s voice made Roman take a step closer, ready to storm into the dressing room and intervene if necessary. “You’re just going to pretend like I’m not standing here, offering to write your ticket to Broadway?”

“I’m not pretending anything.” Her voice was devoid of emotion. “I’ve carefully considered your offer. I’ve soul-searched it, sound boarded it off my closest friend, and I’m respectfully declining it. I ask that you give my answer the

same respect I gave your question. Accept it and move on as I have done.”

“I’m fighting for our relationship, Hope. I’m fighting for us! Doesn’t that count for anything?” His voice rose in supreme frustration.

“Once upon a time, it did. Not anymore. I’m sorry, Pete, but this is goodbye.”

“You’ll regret this,” he snarled.

Roman quickly stepped into the room and moved to Hope’s side. Half shielding her with his shoulders, he dipped his head closer to hers. “Are you ready for your next appointment, babe?” It was past ten o’clock and dark outside, so he couldn’t imagine what else could be on her calendar. However, if she had somewhere she needed to be, he intended to be the one to escort her there.

“Really, Hope?” Pete Jasper stalked past them in disgust. “If I’d known you’d taken up with some dime-a-dozen cowboy, I never would’ve wasted my time coming to this backwoods town.”

Hope’s fingers bit into Roman’s arm as her ex finally exited the dressing room. Without turning around to see it for herself, she whispered, “Is he gone?”

“Yep, and I’m pretty sure he’s not coming back.”

“Good.” She shuddered. “I still can’t believe he showed up here in the first place. I would’ve thought a town as small as Pinetop would be beneath his notice.”

“But you aren’t.” Roman had no doubt whatsoever that the lovely woman at his side was the magnet that had drawn the stuffy city slicker into town.

“I am now.” She shook her head. “Did you see the look he gave me on his way out?”

Yeah, he’d seen it alright. It was the look of a man who’d realized he’d lost. He’d been a fool to gamble with the affections of someone as lovely as Hope. Roman suspected it was something the guy would regret for a long time to come.

His problem. Not mine.

Roman had no intention of blowing his own second chance at happiness that the good Lord had seen fit to give him. He was done holding on to the past and done grieving. He was finally ready to step into the next adventure that was awaiting him.

With Hope.

He grinned down at his beautiful girlfriend. “Bet you had no idea you were dating a dime-a-dozen cowboy,” he teased.

She spluttered with laughter. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“It was worth it to hear you laugh.”

She slid her arms around his middle. “He couldn’t have been more wrong about your worth. You mean everything to me, Roman.”

He pressed his cheek to the top of her head. “About that appointment you mentioned...”

“I was referring to you.” She hugged him tighter. “I just wanted Pete to leave so we could get started on the rest of our evening together.”

He very much liked the sound of that. “What do you have in mind?”

“Maybe a drive around town to look at the Christmas lights?” She tipped her face eagerly up to his. “It’s my first Christmas in Pinetop, and I don’t want to miss a thing.”

More importantly, it was their first Christmas together, and Roman had no intention of missing a moment of that either.

“What about your dad?” The last he’d seen of the guy was when he was sitting in the VIP section of the audience with Willa and Angel Castellano. “Want me to drive him back to your place first?”

She shook her head happily. “He said something about going out with friends. I didn’t ask who or where. I’m just thrilled that he’s in no hurry to leave Pinetop.”

Roman was glad, too — very glad — for an entirely different reason. As his mouth brushed her cheek, he searched for the right words to explain his reason.



ARMY RANGER SHANE JACKSON WAITED UNTIL MOST OF THE other guests had left the dinner theater before exiting his row. Ever since the rocket propelled grenade (RPG) blast that had taken out half his squad, it took him longer to get places. It was a miracle he could walk at all. At least that's what his team of surgeons had claimed. They'd wanted to remove his leg below the knee, but he'd refused to let them. That was another story entirely.

He pushed his cane out in front of him and used it for leverage to drag his right leg forward. Because of the nerve damage, he didn't have much feeling in his toes, so he was extra stinking proud of the fact that he'd managed to pull on a pair of cowboy boots tonight. He was sick and tired of wearing those stupid therapeutic shoes they'd sent him home from the hospital with.

A childish shout was followed by a flurry of movement on the tiered amphitheater benches below him. A redheaded, freckle-faced kid started hopping up the benches in his direction.

"No, Timmy," a woman called frantically. "Please use the stairs so you don't break a leg!"

It's her.

Every cell in Shane's body tensed as he recognized her voice. He hadn't been expecting to see her on his first night back in town. He'd been hoping to, of course, and fantasizing non-stop about it. He just hadn't expected it to, well, actually happen.

"I left my T-Rex over here somewhere." The kid continued hopping like a jack rabbit up the benches. "I hafta find him!"

Shane watched his movements with envy, remembering a time when he could move with such agility.

Not anymore.

It sort of killed him that Carol Gilman was about to lay eyes on this broken-down version of him. As badly as he wanted to see her again, he hated the fact that she'd be seeing him like this. He glanced down at his bum leg in disgust. There was definitely no stadium bench hopping in his future.

His gaze flicked back toward the woman he'd been secretly crushing on since high school, as she continued to plead with the kid to use the stairs. He drank in her spill of blonde hair over her shoulders that he remembered so well. Her jeans covered the same slender curves. Her brown jacket and matching hat were new, though, and made her look like a winter elf.

One who might be married with a kid now.

The thought poured icily over his ardor. Then his Ranger training kicked in, allowing him to swiftly assess the problem and determine she wasn't, in fact, the kid's parent. Number one, they looked nothing alike. Number two, she was wearing a name badge on a festive red-and-white braided lanyard. And number three, he'd not once in his life heard any sane parent try to stop a kid from killing himself by using the word please. Nope. That was the work of an amateur.

Relief crashed through him as his hope was restored that Carol might actually still be single. He resumed his study of her as she caught up to the freckle-faced punk.

"Timmy Jones!" This time, her voice was fierce as she straddled one of the benches to address his behavior. "Since you did so much running inside the building this evening, you're going to spend the first five minutes of your recess with me tomorrow."

Timmy promptly stuck out his tongue at her.

"Ten minutes," she corrected in an even firmer voice. "You can help me pick up trash around the room, wipe down the whiteboard, and set out the snacks for everyone."

The kid clenched and unclenched his fists at his side. For a few seconds, Shane wasn't entirely sure he wasn't going to draw back and strike her.

Though their altercation was none of his business, the soldier in him wouldn't allow him to stand by idly while a hostile situation brewed beneath his nose. Since he'd already evaluated the most immediate factors involved, he decided it was time to intervene and diffuse the conflict.

He moved his cane down the next step, where it promptly landed on something soft and squishy. Glancing down with a scowl, he perceived that he had a small stuffed dinosaur pinned to the step with the leg of his cane. A T-Rex, to be exact. He'd found the missing toy.

Even better.

He cleared his throat loudly to get the attention of the angry boy and frustrated woman. Both heads swiveled in his direction.

"There's a very sad T-Rex over here looking for its owner," he informed them, watching Carol closely for any sign of recognition. To his disappointment, her expression didn't change.

The kids' eyes, however, grew glassy with relief. "It's mine, sir."

Since he looked ready to bolt around the woman to continue his haphazard ascent across the benches, Shane held up his cane to stop him. "Whoa there, cowboy! Your T-Rex is injured, which means no loud or sudden movements. You're going to have to use the stairs to get to us. And tiptoe," he added in a hushed voice, just to see how much he could press his luck.

When the kid tearfully did exactly what Shane had instructed him to do, it was all he could do not to laugh, especially when Carol's amazed blue gaze met his. She followed Timmy, still showing no sign of recognizing the kid's dinosaur savior.

When they reached him, he pointed at the step with his cane. “Down there.” It was probably as filthy as all get out, but most kids couldn’t have cared less about stuff like that.

Timmy certainly didn’t care. He wasted no time snatching up his beloved toy. He tucked it under his arm, leaving only the head of the T-Rex sticking out. “Thank you, Mr. er...” He glanced up solemnly.

“Shane,” he supplied.

Timmy nodded respectfully as he eyed the knee brace Shane was wearing over his jeans. “What’s that for, Mr. Shane?” He pointed at the brace.

“Oh, Timmy!” Carol reached for his shoulder, presumably to turn him around. “It’s not polite to ask questions like that.”

“I don’t mind,” Shane assured, knowing that most kids were insatiably curious. He used his cane to lightly tap his knee brace. “It’s to help keep my leg from bending when I don’t want it to.” Otherwise, he’d be on the floor every time the fool thing decided to buckle. The doctors were still tinkering with it, trying to get the muscles to come back to life and do what they were supposed to do. They weren’t giving him much hope, though.

“Oh.” With a worried frown, Timmy squatted down beside Shane’s leg to give it a closer look. “Does it hurt?”

All the time. “Not too much.” Shane shrugged, glancing over at Carol. “At least I was one of the lucky ones who got to come home.”

“Home?” She studied him in puzzlement. Then she gasped. “Oh, my goodness! You’re Shane Jackson!”

Yeah. That Shane.

He’d told her his first name earlier, but she’d not connected the dots until this very moment. He tensed for the questions that were sure to follow.

“So, you’re home.” She sounded a little dazed. “For good this time?” The corners of her eyes crinkled with sadness as the reason behind his presence finally dawned on her.

The grandfather who'd raised him had passed away a couple of months ago, and Shane had inherited his old cabin in the mountains.

"I, um...didn't see you at the funeral." She frowned a little as she scanned his features.

"I was in the hospital." Though Shane would've done anything to be there, he'd been mostly unconscious at the time, going through one surgery right after another in the fight to keep his leg.

Her frown deepened. "I didn't know. Are you okay?" Her anxious gaze dropped to his knee brace.

He wouldn't go that far. "I'm here." It was the safest answer. "It's good to see you." She was even more beautiful than he remembered. He knew he was probably staring, drinking her in like a man dying of thirst.

"Is everything alright up there, Carol?" A man's booming voice wafted up to them from the base of the theater stands.

"Yes! We're coming, Dad!" Her frown disappeared as she reached for Timmy's hand.

However, Timmy had already placed his small paw in Shane's much larger one. "We should help him down the stairs." He pointed worriedly at Shane's knee brace.

"It's okay, kid. I'm used to hobbling around on this thing." He tapped his cane on the step for emphasis.

"No, Timmy's right," Carol said quickly. She shot Shane a pleading, work-with-me look. "You helped him find his toy, so he's going to repay you by helping you down the stairs."

Timmy's face brightened. He squeezed Shane's hand excitedly. "If I do a good job, does it mean I no longer hafta miss my recess?"

A smile tugged at Carol's lips. "Maybe we could reduce it to five minutes again." At his look of disappointment, she quickly added, "It might not take even that long to set out the snacks. The faster you work, the quicker you can head to recess."

“Two minutes,” Timmy declared in a lofty voice. His green eyes twinkled up at Shane. “Bet I could do it in one minute if I was a soldier like you.”

“Maybe you will be someday.” Shane winked at him. “But you’re gonna have to listen to your teacher and learn everything you can from her between now and then, you hear?”

Carol stepped closer to Shane, touching his arm. “Thanks for adding that last part in,” she whispered.

It was a good thing she was standing so close, because Timmy chose that moment to dance a little jig. He caught Shane off guard, pulling on his hand hard enough that he nearly lost his balance on the stairs.

Carol immediately wrapped her hands around Shane’s upper arm to steady him. “Maybe having him help you wasn’t the brightest idea after all.”

“I’ve got no complaints.” He grinned as Timmy continued to horse around while Carol did most of the actual helping.

Reverend Jonah Gilman was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. “Hi, Shane.” Though his voice was polite, his expression was grim as it settled on his daughter’s hands that were still wrapped around Shane’s arm.

Carol immediately dropped her hands to her sides. “You recognized him?” Her head swiveled between the two of them. “I sure didn’t. It’s been so long since the last time we saw each other.”

“Eight years,” her father intoned quietly. His gaze raked over Shane’s knee and cane and returned to his face. “I’m sorry for what happened to your squad.”

Though Shane carefully schooled his expression, the mention of his squad felt like a kick in the chest, directly at his heart. “Yeah. Me, too.” He was barely able to choke out the words.

“I need to speak with you about something, son,” the reverend continued in the same somber voice. “Any chance you can make it by my office at church in the morning?”

Shane nodded, not yet trusting his voice. He cleared his throat. “What time?”

“Is eight o’clock too early?”

“I’ll be there, sir.”

“That’s the same time I get dropped off,” Timmy announced in excitement. “Are you coming to visit me, Mr. Shane?”

At Shane’s surprised look, Carol quickly jumped back into the conversation. “Timmy is in our preschool program.” She reached around Shane to ruffle the kid’s hair. “And our Christmas pageant at the church.”

“My daughter is our children’s pastor.” There was no small amount of pride in Reverend Gilman’s voice and an equal amount of warning in his eyes.

Shane nodded, wondering if the whole reason for their appointment in the morning was so that the man could warn him away from his daughter. Back in Shane’s high school days, he hadn’t exactly been the kind of guy that girls would bring home to meet their parents.

Reverend Gilman had nothing to worry about, though. The moment he’d announced that Carol was involved in children’s ministries, Shane had been reminded just how far out of his league she was. He hadn’t been good enough for her in high school, and he certainly wasn’t good enough for her now.

She’s safe from me.

As he said his goodbyes to them, Shane’s gaze lingered on Carol again. Unfortunately, he couldn’t make the same promise about his dreams. She probably wasn’t safe from those.

Not tonight, anyway.



ROMAN STROLLED WITH HOPE DOWN MAIN STREET WITH HIS arm around her shoulders. She snuggled against his side,

pointing out her favorite shops.

“Fudge?” Roman was surprised to learn she had such a sweet tooth. “What flavor?” It was a difficult question to answer since the candy depot was always coming up with new and limited time flavors, usually to commemorate one holiday or another.

“All of them,” she sighed. “I’ve sampled at least a dozen already, and each one is more delicious than the last.”

A man and a woman passed them with a kid between them. The kid’s hands were clasped in theirs. Every few seconds, he shouted, “Again!” They counted to three and lifted him a foot or two in the air.

Roman immediately recognized the man. “Oh, hey, Reverend Gilman!”

The minister smiled broadly, slowing his steps to toss out a greeting. “Good evening, Roman.”

“This is my girlfriend, Hope Isaacson.” *Soon to be more, Lord willing.* Roman’s chest swelled with pride as he made the introductions.

“Oh, my goodness!” The blonde woman on the other side of the kid stared in amazement at Hope. “She’s the actress, Dad. The one who starred in tonight’s show!”

Her announcement called for another round of introductions, during which Carol produced her program and begged Hope to sign it.

“Would you like to sign my T-Rex?” The kid between them waved a stuffed dinosaur in the air.

Amidst the ensuing chuckles, the reverend and his daughter said goodbye and continued on their way.

“It’s so amazing here in Pinetop,” Hope breathed, watching them leave. “Like we’re part of something bigger than ourselves.”

“It’s a very special town,” Roman agreed, caressing her with his gaze as they lingered beneath a streetlight. It had never been more special to him than now. He caught sight of

the church steeple in the distance, overcome by the joy and wonder of the holiday season.

“I love you, Roman.” Hope pressed a gloved hand to his heart.

Instead of immediately answering, he dropped to a knee in front of her and reached for her hands, taking them in his.

“I love you, too. More than you’ll ever know, though I’d be happy to spend the rest of our lives showing you just how much.”

She caught her breath. “Roman?” Her awed whisper wrapped around his heart like a gentle caress.

“Will you let me do that, Hope? Will you marry me and let me spend the rest of our lives loving and cherishing you?”

“Yes!” The word was part sob, part laughter, and part sheer happiness as she urged him back to his feet. “Oh, my goodness, Roman! We’re engaged!”

She threw her arms around his neck, and he lifted her off her feet, twirling her around and around on the frosty sidewalk. To Roman, it truly felt like the most wonderful time of the year. Never before had he believed the age-old words about Christmas more than he did tonight.

More like the most wonderful time of my life!

He couldn’t wait to share their incredible news with both of their families.



EPILOGUE

Christmas Eve

“Please tell me this is real,” Izzy pleaded as she smoothed a hand down her red velvet sheath dress. “I keep pinching myself to make sure I’m awake, but I’m afraid all I’m going to do is have a mass of bruises on my leg when I wake up in the morning.”

Hope chuckled at her future sister-in-law in the dressing mirror they were standing in front of. “Quit stealing my lines. I’m the one who can’t believe this is really happening.”

It had taken no small amount of maneuvering to pull off a wedding on such short notice. She and Roman had Izzy and his parents to thank for most of it, since the two of them had been so tied up with the demands of performing in Castellano’s Christmas show.

Dean Isaacson had been a tremendous help, too. He’d returned to Phoenix only long enough to meet with a realtor and a moving company. His art gallery was now for sale, and he was currently crashing in the guest room at Hope’s apartment. He was taking over the rent as soon as she moved out.

“You and Roman make the most amazing couple.” Izzy’s dark eyes grew damp. “I’ve never seen him this happy before.”

At Hope’s questioning look, she repeated in a fierce voice, “Never!” She reached over to adjust Hope’s veil. “My brother will probably never admit it, so I’m just going to say it. He was very young at the time of his first marriage. We all were, and Mia was so determined to be the first of our friends to get married.” She shook her head regretfully. “Don’t get me wrong. She was a nice girl, who adored my brother to pieces, but you’re much more suited to him than she was. You’re his every dream come true. His perfect match.”

“Thank you,” Hope whispered, blinking past the mist in her eyes. “There’s no better gift you could’ve given me than that.” In the days leading up to her wedding, she’d been

wondering if she'd have to spend the rest of her life competing with a ghost for her husband's heart.

And now I don't have to wonder any longer.

"Now go be happy together," Izzy urged, leaning closer to kiss Hope's cheek. She disappeared out the door only seconds later.

Then Hope's father appeared. He wordlessly held his arms out to her.

She lifted the long folds of her lacy white dress and glided into his embrace. "I'm so happy, Dad!"

"Me, too." He beamed down at her, his eyes glinting with pride and adoration. "If only your mother could've lived to see this day! Something tells me she knows it's happening, though."

As he produced a clean white tissue and gently dabbed the edges of Hope's eyes for her, he caught sight of the gold locket nestled against her throat. "Ah. I see you brought your mother with you." He'd given her the locket for her tenth birthday. It had her baby photo on one side and his wedding photo with her mother on the other side.

"I had to." She could tell it gave him as much comfort as it gave her. "Oh, and I want to thank you." Before she got caught up in the flurry of the coming ceremony, she wanted to mention it. "I saw the shape of the wedding gift you wrapped for us, and I know it's a painting." She was pretty sure she knew which one.

"Not just any painting." He tapped her nose affectionately. "It's the one you've always wanted. I promised it would be yours someday."

"My horses," she sighed happily. Not only would she have the beautiful painting hanging on the wall of her and Roman's home, she would have her father's workmanship on display, which would make it all the more special.

"Are you ready?" He tipped her chin up to give her a final fatherly once-over.

“So ready.” She didn’t think she was ever going to quit smiling. “I love him so much, Dad!”

“I know you do.” He brushed his thumb across her chin. “You got one of the good ones, kid. They don’t make ‘em any finer than Roman Rios.” He angled his head at the door. “Let’s get you to the altar before he has to come fetch you there himself.”

He led her to the entrance of the sanctuary. Then the music changed. Everyone in the audience stood as he led her down the aisle between the wooden pews.

Roman was waiting for her at the end of it, with Izzy beaming on one side of him and Izzy’s husband nodding cheerfully on the other side. Roman was still in his jeans and cowboy boots. Hope had insisted on it, knowing her favorite wrangler wouldn’t be comfortable wearing anything else — not even on their wedding day.

He was wearing a suit jacket over them. That was something *he’d* insisted on. He’d specially purchased the beige wool jacket, brown leather vest, and white button-up shirt for today. She’d pinned the rose boutonniere on the jacket herself, then hung it back on the doorknob to his dressing room before making her way across the vestibule to her dressing room.

Roman’s gaze burned into hers as her father transferred her hand to his arm. “Thank you, sir.”

“I love you both.” Dean Isaacson squeezed both their shoulders, then backed up to take his place in the front row. Leah Rios reached over to tug him closer to where she and Roman’s dad were standing.

Hope shot them a smile full of gratitude for including her father like that. Then she gazed joyfully up at Roman.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

“You look pretty amazing yourself.” After what Izzy had confided in her a few minutes ago, Hope felt like she was seeing him for the first time all over again. She replayed her soon-to-be sister-in-law’s words in her head.

You’re his every dream come true. His perfect match.

Only the four of them were standing in front of the altar. There hadn't been time to put together a larger wedding party, and Hope wasn't sure she would've wanted more people in it, anyway. Most of her friends from college had moved to bigger cities.

This is my new life. My new town. My new husband.

She faced the minister with Roman and listened as he quoted the beautiful, timeless verses about love.

“Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast.”

It was her favorite passage in the Bible. She could quote it by heart. She especially loved the end of it.

“It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

She and Roman glanced at each other, silently mouthing the words, *Love never fails*. Though their formal vows came next, they'd already pledged themselves to each other in their hearts.

“What the Lord has joined together, let no man separate,” Reverend Gilman concluded. “By the powers vested in me by God and the State of Arizona, I pronounce you married. You may kiss the bride.”

Roman wasted no time dipping his head over hers. “I love you, Mrs. Rios.” He claimed her lips the same way he'd claimed her heart — completely and forever.

She reached up to touch his cheek, lost in the wonder of being his. Of all the dreams she had for their future, she was very sure that none of them would ever top this.

This day.

This moment.

This miracle.



*Ready to read more about reformed cowboy Shane's helpless
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Guess what? I have some Bonus Content for you. Read more about the swoony cowboy heroes in my books (more first kisses, more weddings, more babies...) by signing up for my [mailing list](#).

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SNEAK PREVIEW: OPPOSITES
ATTRACT HERO

A *big-city police detective butts heads with a small-town realtor over the best way to catch a criminal in this sweet, opposites-attract romance.*

Detective Zayden Wolfe is tall. Award-winning realtor Alice Underwood is short. He's serious; she's hilarious, especially when she's nervous or on edge — which is where he's been keeping her since the moment they met.

Oh, and she's totally not buying his claim about transferring from the Dallas Police Department to the country, simply to enjoy the farm-fresh air. He's up to something, and she'd happily expose whatever it is if she wasn't so busy trying to stop a ruthless band of criminal land developers.

Turns out he's after the same thugs, which are now after her, forcing the two of them to work together and finally deal with the spark of attraction they've been fighting.



Hope you enjoyed this excerpt from

[Opposites Attract Hero.](#)

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I - Instantly Her Hero

J - Jilted Hero

K - Kissable Hero

L - Long Distance Hero

M - Mistaken Hero

N - Not Good Enough Hero

O - Opposites Attract Hero

Much love,

Jo

SNEAK PREVIEW: HEART LAKE BOX SET #1



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Grab your copy!

Heart Lake Box Set #1

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Heart Lake Box Set #2 (books 4-6)

Heart Lake Box Set #3 (books 7-9)

Much love,

Jo

SNEAK PREVIEW: THE BILLIONAIRE'S BIRTHDAY DATE

TEXAS BILLIONAIRES #1

“So far it’s been a good day for Cantona Enterprises.” Roman Cantona tapped his earpiece to set it more snugly in place as he paced the wall of tinted windows in his penthouse office suite. “I’m not sure I understand your beef.” His Uncle Stan was turning out to be a real dooms-dayer to work with on the board of directors.

“My concerns can be summed up in two words,” Stan Cantona retorted. “Negative. News. Our stock price took a beating last month on the day of your father’s funeral. We need to do something, and fast, to inject some new life into it.”

“We enjoyed a smooth transition of leadership,” Roman pointed out in a low, steady voice, though he was seething on the inside. He’d been groomed for the position of CEO for the past five years. *Correction.* He’d been groomed for it his entire life. Though he hated the circumstances that had forced his rapid rise to the helm of their company, he knew he was ready. Only a fool would deny it. “Our stock price has been recovering and stabilizing ever since.” He was a familiar name and face to his investors and employees alike, not to mention a trusted one.

Furthermore, he was perfectly fine with the fact that his father’s passing had been noted and mourned by their investors. A life so well lived should have caused more than a tiny blip on his flashing television monitors. It didn’t bother him in the least that their company’s stock price had

temporarily dropped. It was like the market, itself, was paying proper homage.

“Recovering?” His uncle’s voice rose to a high-pitched protest. “Stabilizing! Might I remind you we’re not a snoozing start-up that’s teetering on the brink of bankruptcy here. We’re an innovative, cutting-edge hotel and resort chain. We set the bar, the trends, the expectations, and the price tags in this industry! We—”

“What do you have in mind, Uncle Stan?” It was difficult, but Roman kept the snarl out of his voice. Clearly, the man was working his way up to some sort of agenda, and Roman preferred to cut to the chase. There were at least a dozen items on his desk needing his more immediate attention. The fretting of his father’s only brother was going to have to wait on the back burner for at least the remainder of the afternoon, and Roman was about to set him straight on that fact. Out of respect to his Uncle Stan’s position in the family, however, he’d spare the man another five minutes. Any hope of breaking for a super late lunch before his next meeting was out of the question, anyway. His uncle had already burned up way too much of the afternoon with his endless fussing and fuming.

“For one thing, we need to start pushing the holiday honeymooner packages.” His uncle sounded disgruntled for no particular reason.

“We have banners on every major travel agency website, an ad slick going out next week to a highly curated mailing list, and a televised celebrity endorsement running as we speak.” It was July, for crying out loud! Cantona Enterprises was rolling out its marketing campaigns right on time, in Roman’s opinion, the same as when his father was alive.

“Then we might need to switch up our game, son.” Uncle Stan’s voice was dry. “Our winter reservations are a solid six percent below what they were last year around this time.”

Around this time? Well, that’s a rather vague statistic for you! One that didn’t sound quite right to Roman. He had a feeling there were some apples-to-oranges comparisons rolling

around inside his uncle's frivolous, playboy head; but he didn't have the time to argue the point.

"Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention." It was time to close down his uncle's rant. Roman's next meeting, which was only twenty minutes away, stood a much better chance at raising the company's bottom line than listening to a family member complain. "I'll be sure to look into it."

"When, son?"

There was the sound of water splashing, followed by a peal of female laughter on the other end of the line, making Roman suddenly wonder what sort of business trip his uncle was actually on. Stan Cantona was supposed to be on a quality control inspection of their new line of luxury villas in Colorado Springs.

"After my next meeting." It took superhuman effort for Roman to keep the impatience from his voice. He made a mental note to have his executive assistant provide him with a full report of his uncle's travel schedule. It was beginning to sound as if he and Uncle Stan might have more to discuss on their next call than his unfounded concerns about their winter honeymoon reservations.

"I look forward to hearing what you come up with, son." Uncle Stan's voice relaxed.

"I'll call you back at five-thirty." Roman had no intention of doing such a thing. He'd be lucky if his next meeting would be over by then, but he didn't mind the thought of his uncle waiting by the phone for his nephew to make contact.

"It's Friday evening, son. What's the rush?"

Roman resisted the urge to gnash his teeth at his uncle's mild put-down. Apparently, it was urgent for Roman to pander to Uncle Stan's concerns but not urgent for him to act on them. *Duly noted.* If this was some sort of developing power struggle between the two men, Roman intended to establish his authority in short order.

“I have a few other things to discuss with you that we should probably get out of the way before the weekend starts.” Roman didn’t bother hiding his smirk, since his uncle couldn’t see it. *Shoot!* Maybe he’d call the fellow after all, just to be annoying. Two could play the game of burning the other’s valuable time when it was least convenient.

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. “I appreciate your commitment to your new position,” his uncle drawled in a tone laced with superiority, “but the hotel business is a marathon, not a sprint.”

“So I’ve heard.” *Unless it’s something you want done. Then it needs to happen yesterday.* It was beginning to sound as if Uncle Stan had Friday night plans he didn’t want interrupted.

Must be nice. Roman wrinkled his nose, hardly able to remember what it was like to have a social life. He’d showered and slept way too many times in recent days in the rooftop crash pad above his office.

“All the same,” he intoned in a deadpan voice, “I think it’s best that you and I have another pow-wow this evening. I’d like to get your input on a few things.” It was the first time since their senseless conversation had begun that he was actually enjoying himself.

There was the sound of female laughter again in the background.

“Hey there, kiddo, can you hold on a sec?” Without waiting for Roman’s response, Uncle Stan had the audacity to put him on hold.

Roman promptly disconnected the line. *Son. Kiddo. New position.* Yeah, his uncle was clearly having issues with the idea of a nephew for a boss — another problem that would have to be dealt with soon.

His executive assistant’s voice trilled across his earpiece. “It’s ten minutes early, but your four o’clock has already dialed in for your video chat and sounds anxious to get an early start. What would you like me to tell him, sir?”

There was no way Roman would be prepared to negotiate a real estate deal for a piece of bayside property before reviewing the latest research that his Acquisitions Department had dug up. He strode across the Brazilian walnut hardwood floor to his chrome desk in the center of the room. “Let him know I’ll be with him shortly and patch him in on time, please — not a second sooner.”

“You betcha, sir. I dropped two files on your desk earlier from Acquisitions.” The cheerful understanding in Marla Greenhaven’s tone buoyed Roman’s spirits. She’d faithfully served as his late father’s executive assistant for more than a decade. He was truly blessed that she had agreed to continue working alongside her new CEO.

“I have them. You’re the best.” He’d already removed the ornate crystal paperweight she’d planted atop them and was flipping through the pages to scan their contents.

“That’s why you pay me the big bucks,” she teased.

Her extraordinary professionalism was exactly why he’d offered her a raise to continue in her current role. He smiled, only half-listening as he absorbed the facts and figures on the sheets of paper in front of him. “Rumor has it your grandchildren are visiting.”

“It’s more than a rumor, sir.”

“Figured that. As soon as you patch through the president of Moore & Sons, I want you to forward our phones to voicemail and start your weekend an hour early.”

“But, sir—”

“I insist, Mrs. Greenhaven.”

“You’re the boss,” she joked, but he could hear the gratitude in her tone. “I hope you intend to get out of here soon, as well?” A tad of motherly concern crept into her voice.

“I’m going to try.” *Maybe in a year or two, I’ll be able to get myself back on a more humane schedule.*

“Then I wish you a wonderful weekend and will leave you to study your notes in peace.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Greenhaven. Now go spoil the snot out of those grand-kiddos.”

“Oh, I fully intend to.” She chuckled and disconnected the line.

He hurriedly finished reviewing his notes and straightened. Hands on his hips, he rolled his shoulders to loosen the knots in his neck and glanced up at the flashing numbers on the series of wall monitors to the left of his desk. He typically kept three different television stations on mute to track stock prices and scrolling headlines throughout the day. After his eye-roll-type conversation with his uncle, he was happy to note that Cantona Enterprises was closing up a full two dollars per share. It proved his company’s new CEO must be doing something right.

He straightened his navy silk tie and reached for his mug of coffee. It had long since grown cold, but he could use a shot of caffeine before heading into his next meeting. Taking a quick gulp, he closed the folders on his desk and moved back to the wall of windows, choosing to spend the last thirty seconds before his video chat absorbing the spectacular view. He didn’t like to fiddle with notes during a meeting. Call recording would allow him to go back later to review anything they discussed.

He considered the view outside his office windows to be the best in the world. His company’s ivory high-rise headquarters overlooked the bay of Corpus Christi. Dozens of yachts were moored in the sparkling blue waters beneath his windows, and the Harbor Bridge arched its way against the sky in the distance. Someday soon he was going to fire up the engines of his newest yacht and take it out for a spin, even if he had to host a blasted business meeting below deck to make it happen.

All too soon, his moment of soaking up the view ended. The large screen directly across from his desk, which had been swirling with a boca design of champagne colored bubbles, flashed to life.

The face of Moore & Sons' silver-haired president appeared. "Welcome to the big leagues, Roman!" It was meant as jovial congratulations on his recent promotion, but Harley Moore's blue-gray eyes were sad. He and Roman's father had been long-time friends.

"Thanks, I think." Roman spared the guy a wry smile. Harley was well aware of how lonely it was at the top. His wife of thirty-something years was battling Alzheimer's at an exclusive medical facility, which Roman suspected was the only reason a happily married man like Harley had ever agreed to start an appointment this late on a Friday evening. Plus, his oldest son had recently been involved in a serious skiing accident, leaving the man desperately short-handed.

"Long hours, huh?" Harley's kind gaze sharpened with interest.

"You can say that again, but I have big shoes to fill." It was an honor and a privilege to be walking in his father's footsteps and carrying on his legacy. Nothing else would have made Roman feel better during such a difficult time. He supposed it was part of his grieving process. Plus, his mother and sisters were counting on him now, as well as his uncle, two cousins, and thousands of employees across the nation.

"Speaking of big shoes," Harley's voice grew hushed, "I made a promise to your father that I intend to keep, no matter how much it ruffles that expensive gel you use to keep your Ken doll hair so perfectly spiked."

Roman snorted and ran a hand through his hair to prove it was free of said gel. His hair had always been naturally tousled. "You were saying?" he inquired with his blonde brows raised.

"I'm working my way up to it, my friend." Harley Moore was seated behind an enormous executive desk in his Seattle office. He leaned forward to peer more closely at his computer screen and clicked a few buttons. "According to my calendar, you have a birthday coming up in a couple of weeks."

"Yep. It rolls around the same time every year." *So?* Roman shrugged. He couldn't see how his upcoming twenty-

eighth birthday had anything to do with the real estate contract they were supposed to be negotiating. Plus, he'd never felt less like celebrating. He wasn't near finished grieving for his father.

"Well, this year you're going to enjoy a well-deserved, one-of-a-kind birthday celebration. I just sent the reservation link to your email."

The laptop on Roman's desk pinged with an incoming message. He huffed out a chuckle of disbelief, pretty sure he wasn't going to have time to break away from work long enough to enjoy anything that required a reservation this far in advance. He was still getting his CEO sea legs underneath him, still trying to carve out some version of a new schedule that made sense. "Listen, I appreciate the thought, but—"

"It wasn't my thought, Roman, though I wish I could take credit for it. This is a final gift from your father. I'm just the delivery boy."

What? Roman went still. "What are you talking about, sir?"

Harley Moore's smile was infused with nostalgia. "He knew what he was asking of you when he bequeathed the crown of CEO to you, but he didn't want the weight of it to crush you in the first month. As a precaution, he made me promise to deliver his final gift to you after he was gone, and he made me promise to impress upon you how important it was to him that you take a few days off from work to celebrate your birthday this year — no matter what."

"A few days?" Roman's jaw dropped. That was impossible! He didn't have hours to spare, much less *days*.

"Yes. For a well-deserved weekend getaway to an exclusive resort in Fiji."

"You're kidding!" Roman was enormously moved that his father had done something so kind and generous during his final hours — while he was suffering from cancer, no less. There was no way Roman could use the gift, of course. Maybe he'd see if one of his sister's would like to travel in his stead.

“This is no joke. His exact words were this: *Remind Roman that nearly everything seems impossible until it’s done, and that includes getting his arms around his new responsibilities long enough to breathe normally again.*”

That sounded one hundred percent like his father. Roman tried to smile but ended up grimacing, since his emotions were so strongly stirred.

“He wanted you to take this trip, Roman. He wanted it more than anything.”

“Why?” Roman shook his head, not understanding why it mattered if he blew out the candles on a birthday cake or not this year.

“He was convinced this weekend getaway was crucial to giving you the rest you were going to need to stay on top of your game. Said your whole family was depending on you to take this break so you could come back and hit the ground running again.”

Or I could just keep running. No breaks.

“He felt so strongly about it that he said he wished there was some way to make this type of immersion experience mandatory for every new CEO.”

“Immersion experience?” Roman frowned and strode across the room to his desk. By now, he was burning with curiosity. Whatever weekend getaway his father had planned for him was starting to sound more like business than pleasure. He wondered if it was some high-end team-building seminar.

Opening the email that Harley Moore had sent him, he was surprised to see a gold invitation with the words Birthday Island sparkling on it. Out of sheer curiosity, he clicked on the flashing words and was redirected to a secure web page, which bore this message:

Welcome to Birthday Island! Your specially curated celebration begins here with a brief questionnaire. We’ll take care of the rest. See you soon in Fiji!

Roman shook his head at the computer screen. An island where birthday wishes came true, eh? His first assumption was

wrong, because this was sounding less and less like a business trip. It was also sounding too good to be true. *Sorry, but I'm a realist.* What could some party planner on the other end of a computer survey do to make his deepest, most heartfelt wishes come true? What he wanted the most didn't have a price tag on it.

"Just fill out the questionnaire, alright?" Harley Moore pleaded.

Roman glanced up at the large screen, almost surprised to see the president of Moore & Sons still present. Their video chat had strayed much farther from the topic of real estate acquisitions than he imagined was possible.

"If for no other reason, do it to honor your father's final wishes."

Roman couldn't believe how serious the man looked and sounded. "You don't leave me much choice when you put it that way." He clicked the link on the website, and the pixels on the screen faded out and faded back in to form a list of survey questions.

Harley Moore smiled. "Mrs. Greenhaven has already been so kind as to reschedule our meeting for Monday. Meaning your last task for today is to fill out a simple survey, then click the submit button." He gave Roman a two-fingered salute. "I'm going to leave you to it and sign off, since I happen to have a date with my wife." His face flashed off the wide screen in front of Roman. Moments later, the screensaver popped back on.

A simple survey, huh? By now, Roman was too curious to do anything but read the first question.

Sum up your week in one word.

It wasn't even a question. He kept reading, quickly skimming his way to the bottom. None of them were worded as questions, more like demands. One of them jumped out at him more than the others.

Describe what you could smell, hear, and taste the last time you were happy.

Fine. If his father's final wish was for his only son to spin castles in the clouds, Roman supposed he could humor him one last time.

Here goes nothing.

He highly doubted there was a party planner on the face of the earth who could deliver the kind of birthday experience he truly wanted. The loss of his father was proof enough that he wasn't living in a fairytale. Genies in bottles didn't exist. Some wishes simply weren't meant to come true.

But he'd given his word to Harley Moore, so he typed honest answers to every single request. The most ridiculous one required him to state his celebrity crush. *Interesting.* The most interesting thing about it was that he actually had one. *Nothing like telling a perfect stranger something I've never admitted aloud to a single family member, but okay.* He wrote about his childhood sweetheart — a rising pop star, who he'd just discovered was living in New York. Maybe she wasn't a celebrity yet, but she would be someday. He was sure of it.

Just for kicks, he went on to describe his biggest wish — inviting her on a date. Not that he was convinced a mere birthday party consultant was going to be able to deliver anything quite that extraordinary. Things like true love and happily-ever-afters happened all the time in Disney movies — not so much to CEOs who were too busy to date.

Why was this so important to you, Dad? As mystified as ever, Roman pushed the button at the bottom of his computer screen to submit his answers.



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[The Billionaire's Birthday Date](#)

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