



**COWBOY OF**  
*convenience*

**JANICE WHITEAKER**



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Cowboy of Convenience, book 1 in the Moss Creek-PD series.

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*For the forgotten ones.*

# Trigger Warnings

This book contains topics some readers might find difficult to read or hear about. These include dementia, and parental death.

# CHAPTER ONE



## EVELYN



*Please scroll back for trigger warnings.*

“SHOTS. SHOTS. SHOTS. Shots.” The women lined around the high-top table at The Creekey pounded their fists against the marred wood surface as they chanted, trying to peer pressure her into getting obliterated with them. Which was pretty hilarious considering they weren’t her peers.

Maybe her grandmother’s peers. Not that her grandmother would ever be caught dead in a place like this.

Evelyn forced on a smile as she lifted the glass of water she’d been nursing all night. “I’m just fine, thank you.”

Gertrude shoved out her lower lip in a pout. “You’ve got to have at least one.” She wiggled her brows. “We’ve got a designated driver tonight.” The old woman leaned across the table. “Might even get him to take advantage of you if you play your cards right.”

“I’m pretty sure Officer Staks has asked you very nicely not to call him your designated driver.” Evelyn cut a longing gaze toward the alcohol that would most certainly take the edge off this night. “And I have less than no interest in him taking advantage of me.”

Cooper was nice enough, and ridiculously good-looking, but she felt nothing for him outside of pity. He’d made the poor decision to offer the girls a ride home anytime they needed one, and the group of retirees were doing their best to make him regret his suggestion.

“That’s fine.” Gertrude leaned back in her seat, giving Evelyn an exaggerated wink behind the lens of her bifocal. “I’m sure he’d be fine with you taking advantage of him instead.”

Evelyn resisted the urge to sigh. These women were worse than the group of friends she used to hang out with in New York. They were mouthier, ballsier, and hell bent on encouraging bad decisions.

And she was done making those. It’s not like they helped anyway.

“No one is taking advantage of anyone tonight or any other night.” She looked from woman to woman, keeping her expression serious. “We’ve talked about this. Consent is important. That’s why we can’t fake a fall and use it as an opportunity to get our hands on a cowboy.”

“No one’s done that since the night Agnes got a black eye because she wasn’t as good at fake falling as she thought.” Betty leaned into Evelyn’s ear like Agnes wouldn’t still be able to hear her across the table. “But I don’t blame her. I’d take two black eyes to get my hands on Officer Grady.”

Evelyn pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. Not only because keeping these women in line was like herding a group of cats in heat, but also because she understood where Betty was coming from.

Officer Grady Haynes was frustratingly appealing. Not only was he a tall, broad, solid wall of stupidly well-toned muscle, he was also calm and collected. Patient and kind. Hard working and polite to a fault.

And he had a voice like melting butter. So smooth and decadent it made her mouth water.

It also affected other, more problematic, parts of her. Parts that would most certainly make her want to break the one-night only rule she’d been following all her life.

Because there was no way a woman could have a man like that in her bed only once.

“And those boys don’t mind driving us home.” Gertrude waved one hand around as she reached for the salt shaker with the other. “What else do they have to do?” She snagged a tiny glass of tequila from the center of the table and knocked it back, licking a line of salt from her hand before sucking on the lime wedge Paige hooked over the rim. She barely winced before continuing on. “And I bet they’d rather make sure we all get into our homes safe and sound than risk having to find one of us sprawled across our front lawn in the morning.”

The rest of her friend group nodded along, agreeing with Gertrude’s assessment.

Betty scooted a lemon drop her way, wiggling her penciled-on brows in not-so-subtle encouragement. “We even ordered your favorite.”

Evelyn sighed. She loved the group of grandmothers. Enjoyed spending time with them. Thought they were some of the most amazing women she’d ever met.

But they would absolutely thrive in high-pressure sales.

“I have to teach an early class in the morning.” Evelyn scooted the lemon drop back toward Betty. “I’m just here to have a good time and hang out.”

Betty huffed out a breath, slumping down a little. “You’re no fun.”

“I’m fun. I’m just trying to be responsible.” It was a new thing for her. And while it was uncomfortable and strange at first, being the voice of reason felt good.

She would never admit it, though. She’d spent too long making people believe the exact opposite.

“Then I guess we’ll have to be irresponsible for you.” Gertrude grabbed the lemon drop and shot it back, one eye twitching a little. “That’s sour. I don’t know how you stand it.”

Evelyn took another sip of her water. “Says the woman who shoots tequila straight.”

Agnes wiggled her way out of her seat. “I’m gonna go get us another round.” She sashayed her way toward the bar,

rocking her skinny jeans and sequin-covered shirt better than most women half her age.

After escaping to Moss Creek a year ago in a last-ditch effort to avoid her fate, Evelyn had been shocked at how easy it was to make friends. How much more genuine everyone seemed. How real they all were. It led to her being more genuine. More real.

Right down to her unwaxed lady basement and self-polished fingernails.

It was amazing.

“Have you been busy at the studio?” Gertrude leaned forward to peer at the assortment of appetizers lined down the center of the table. She chose a stuffed potato skin and took a big bite out of the cheesy, bacony goodness. “I peek in the window every time I pass and it always looks packed.”

Evelyn relaxed a little as the conversation turned to safer waters. “I wasn’t sure how well a yoga studio would do around here, but it’s going pretty well.” She leaned back in her seat, feeling a little bit more comfortable now that the girls seemed to be abandoning their quest to get her as shit faced as they would be. “Even the cowboys have started coming in. I think they realized flexibility can really come in handy.”

Betty wiggled her brows. “It sure can. Did I tell you about how—”

“Shut it, Betty. No one wants to hear about your sexcapades.” Gertrude popped the rest of her potato skin into her mouth. “Speaking of flexibility—” She leaned toward Evelyn with a sly grin. “Is anyone testing your flexibility these days?”

“No.” The answer came out of her mouth a little too quickly and sounded a little too clipped. “I’m not really looking for that right now. I’m just enjoying my life the way it is.” Probably for the first time in her life.

“I bet you’d enjoy it a lot more if you were getting some good—” Gertrude clammed up before dropping what would surely be an indecent word. She leaned to one side, staring at

the spot just over Evelyn's shoulder. "Well, would ya take a look at that." She let out a low whistle, shaking her head. "These men really make me wish I was forty years younger."

Agnes twisted in her chair, craning her neck to look across the bar. "If you were forty years younger you'd still be too old for them."

"Would not." Gertrude tossed a fry at Agnes. "Haven't you heard about cougars?" She peeled her eyes away from whatever group of Wrangler-clad men just walked into the bar and focused on Evelyn. "Are you sure you don't need a good dicking, because lots of opportunity just walked in."

"I'm positive." Sex had never gotten her anywhere in life, no matter how hard she tried. If anything, it only brought her more problems than she already had.

That didn't mean she wasn't curious about exactly what the view on the other side of the bar might be.

Picking up her glass, she sipped at the straw as she angled herself in the seat, glancing at the group of cowboys she'd accurately predicted. Sure, they were nice to look at. Probably said panty-melting things like 'yes, ma'am' and 'would you like it a little harder, ma'am.'

And maybe even an appropriately timed 'good girl' or two.

And while that might have sounded like a perfectly fantastic opportunity to her a year ago, lately she'd been struggling to work up any sort of real interest in the opposite sex.

With one glaring exception.

She turned back to the table and shoved in a chicken strip, chewing through the crispy breaded meat before sucking down some of the water she really wished was wine.

Or vodka.

"I bet those are the boys from the rodeo Maryann Pace brought in to put on a show out at The Inn." Gertrude's eyes went back to the cowboys milling around the bar. "I shoulda got tickets."

“I could probably hook you up.” Muriel sucked down half her mixed drink through a straw. “Maryann wants Amelie to paint her some pictures, so I’ve got leverage.”

“I’m not taking you guys so you’ll have to find another ride.” Evelyn knew exactly how unruly this group could be, and the last place she wanted to be responsible for wrangling them was at an outdoor event with bulls and horses and uneven ground.

All three were equally likely to take one of them out.

“I bet I know who we can hitch a ride with.” Muriel’s thin lips smirked as she pursed them around her straw and sucked down another long gulp. “Seems like Officer Grady’s popular with the buckle bunnies.” She tipped her head to one side thoughtfully. “Or would they be badge bunnies if they’re rubbing themselves all over him while he’s in uniform?”

Evelyn took a slow breath and tried to keep her reaction in check. She didn’t care who rubbed themselves all over Grady. She didn’t.

At all.

Not even a little bit.

It was only curiosity that spun her in her seat and had her eyes narrowing at the pretty blonde trying to wear the man she couldn’t keep out of her head like a second skin.

Muriel leaned close. “Want a shot now?”

Evelyn cranked herself back into place, putting her back to the uniformed man making her escape to Moss Creek way less fruitful than she’d hoped. “Maybe one.”

Muriel cackled, the sound wicked and wild. “That’s my girl.” She shoved a small glass across the table. “I knew you’d get into the swing of things.”

Evelyn grabbed the glass and lifted it. Managed to get it all the way to her lips before stopping.

And setting it back on the table.

Alcohol had served as an escape and an excuse for so long, which was technically what she was hoping for now. But using that crutch was a slippery slope, and she'd already wasted too much of her limited time. She needed to stay the course. To keep plotting. Keep brainstorming.

Keep devising a plan that might save her from spending the rest of her life miserable.

Evelyn pushed the drink away. "I probably shouldn't have come out tonight."

She'd been hoping an evening out with the girls would elevate the foul mood she'd been struggling with lately, but things only seemed to be headed downhill. Not because the girls weren't good company. They were. She was the problem.

To be fair, she'd always been the problem. But before it was by design.

Abandoning her seat and her intentions to stick it out, Evelyn grabbed her purse, swinging it over one shoulder. "I'm going to go get some work done at the studio. You girls have fun and I'll be back in a couple hours to take you home." She leaned over the table, trying to look stern. "Behave."

Gertrude had the balls to look offended. "What do you mean?" She rested one bony hand at the center of her chest. "We're just a bunch of old women. How much trouble can we really get into?"

Evelyn cocked one brow. She already knew the answer to that. All of Moss Creek already knew the answer to that. "Do you want me to bring up the bar brawl you started two months ago?" Shifting her eyes around the table, she made eye contact with each of her friends. "Or what about the street fight right after the spring festival?"

Both situations had gotten very out of hand very quickly, and, while she would never admit this to them, the girls' behavior wasn't entirely unwarranted. They'd grown up in a generation where women were still being suppressed and slotted into the spaces society decided they belonged in, so it

was no surprise they were having one hell of a time helping the younger generations break free.

It would just be great if that good time didn't frequently involve violence.

Only Muriel had the decency to look guilty. "I warned that young man not to raise his voice at his girlfriend."

Gertrude nodded. "You did warn him."

Muriel continued on. "And, to be fair, I did not shove my cane all the way up his ass the way I said I would." She smiled, like she'd done a good thing. "See? We're learning restraint."

"Is that what you're calling it?" Evelyn squeezed her temples, easing the headache she'd been fighting since speaking with her grandmother earlier in the day. "Just do me a favor and please don't end up in the middle of anything tonight, okay?"

"We'll do our best." Muriel sounded sincere, and it was probably the best anyone could hope for.

Evelyn sighed again. "Call me if you want me to come get you sooner."

Gertrude gave her a wink. "What if we want you to come get us later?"

Muriel leaned across the table. "What if one of us hooks up with one of those cowboys and we don't need you to come get us at all?"

Evelyn pointed at Gertrude. "I can't come get you later. I need to get up early tomorrow. I have a class in the morning." She turned to Muriel. "If you convince one of those cowboys to take you home you better be safe because I'm not dealing with an unplanned pregnancy."

Muriel was still cackling behind her as she made her way across the bar, the sound of her friend's laughter bringing a hint of a smile to her lips.

Maybe they'd managed to perk her up a little bit after all.



The night got even better when there was no sign of Grady as she left the bar. Whatever brought him there must not have been too serious.

Or he decided to do a little taking home of his own.

The thought of Grady spending an evening with another woman sat uncomfortably in her gut, and she scanned the bar once more, just in case she'd missed him the first time. But there was no sign of him and that twist in her middle tightened, turning to something she hadn't really grappled with before.

Jealousy was a foreign sensation. One she didn't like and would prefer never to have again.

Maybe it was time to move on. Jump to the west coast and hope to buy a little more freedom before the cold bell of responsibility and familial guilt started to toll.

Evelyn stepped out into the night, breathing in the spring air. It wasn't exactly warm yet, especially at night, but there were no longer feet of snow piled up everywhere, and that was a glorious development. She glanced both ways even though the chances of getting hit by a car in downtown Moss Creek were slim to none. When everything was clear she hurried across the street to the little yoga studio she leased.

Surprisingly, there were a lot of things she liked about Montana, and having her own space to work was one of them. She'd bounced around her whole life. From man to man. From job to job. From apartment to apartment. Staying put for a change felt surprisingly good, even if her nightlife looked drastically different from the one she left behind in New York.

Her client base was no longer shallow socialites and trust fund babies. Now she was really helping people and making genuine connections. She kept retirees on their feet and offered new mothers a break and the opportunity to work on rebuilding their pelvic floors.

What she did mattered. It meant something. And no one gave a shit who she was or how they could use her.

She was almost to the little stoop of her shop when something moved in the shadows. She stopped short, staring at the tall, lean figure peering into the window of her rented space.

No. It couldn't be.

Glancing around, she looked for an escape. Some path to follow without being noticed by a ghost from her past. Of all the people she'd been hoping to get away from by moving across the country, his name was at the top of her list.

She took a slow step back, her Gucci flats silent against the sidewalk. Then another. And another.

But then her feet stopped. Not because she didn't want to go further, but because she couldn't. She was boxed in by a solid wall of muscle.

Evelyn didn't have to turn around to know who was behind her. She would recognize the familiar scent of leather and bergamot and man anywhere. Whether it was a good thing or a bad one remained to be seen.

On one hand, it meant she was completely safe.

On the other hand, it meant she was completely fucked.

# CHAPTER TWO

## GRADY



EVELYN WENT STILL in front of him. Her back was pressed tight to his front, initiating an amount of contact he'd been careful to avoid.

Not because he didn't want it, he did.

He avoided the newest arrival to Moss Creek because it was clear Evelyn didn't feel the same. She did her best to ignore him when their paths crossed, always darting away as fast as she could manage, so there was no denying the woman was as uninterested as it got.

Unfortunately for him, she was also about as interesting as it got. There was something about her that drew him in, and it wasn't only because she was new to town. There was a level of mystery to Evelyn that made him want to dig deeper. To uncover her secrets. Maybe it was the cop in him, or maybe it was a set of dark eyes and full lips that had him showing up whenever she was out on the town.

Like he did tonight.

Unfortunately, his fascination was irrelevant if it wasn't reciprocated, so no matter how much he wanted both to know Evelyn better and enjoy the distraction a relationship would provide, it wasn't meant to be.

Grady took a step back, giving them both a little space.

To his shock, Evelyn followed, taking a step back of her own. He retreated again and, like the time before, Evelyn immediately followed.

He opened his mouth, ready to ask what in the hell was going on, when he noticed she was staring intently at her studio. He followed her line of sight just as the man standing at the door turned to face them. He was positioned in the shadows, making it impossible to tell who he was or what he was up to. It didn't really matter. Lurking was easy to identify and almost always a sign someone was up to no good.

Years of training and a little bit of instinct had him grabbing Evelyn and pulling her body behind his.

He stood tall, focusing on the suspicious individual in front of him. "Can I help you with something?"

Grady discreetly flipped the snap free on his holster, just in case. He hadn't had to pull his weapon much in Moss Creek, but that didn't mean he wouldn't.

Grady kept his eyes glued to the man as the stranger stepped forward, moving out of the darkness and into the pale glow offered by the streetlamp. He could get a better look at him now, but still didn't recognize him. Which was unexpected. He knew just about everyone in Moss Creek.

And this guy was definitely not from Moss Creek.

Nothing about him fit in. Not the tapered cut of his over pressed pants or the tasseled loafers on his sockless feet. And then there was the wild print of his partially unbuttoned silk shirt. The deep slice in the front revealed a scrawny, but tanned, chest devoid of a single hair.

The man looked him over with an amount of disgust the situation didn't warrant, his eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

Grady cocked one brow at the indignant sneer in the man's tone. "I'm Officer Haynes with the Moss Creek PD. Who are you?"

The man ignored the question, his sharp gaze moving to focus on a spot just over Grady's shoulder. "Evelyn?"

Evelyn made a tiny sound of distress, one that was so soft only Grady could hear it, as she grabbed onto his arm, keeping most of her body behind his. "What are you doing here, Sasha?"

The man, Sasha apparently, straightened the line of the jacket layered over that ridiculous shirt, looking bored by the whole interaction. “I came to get you. To bring you home.”

Evelyn snorted, the sound more strangled than amused. “I’m not going back to New York.”

Sasha rolled his eyes to the night sky. “Stop being ridiculous. Of course you’re coming back to New York. You have to.” He refocused on his nails, inspecting them as he continued. “I’ve decided I can forget everything that happened. We can pick right back up where we left off.”

“What?” This time Evelyn’s snort did sound amused. And a little shocked. “No. We can’t.” She shook her head, hands still gripped around Grady’s arm. “That is not happening.”

Sasha chuckled, but there wasn’t a hint of humor in his laugh. “You can’t honestly tell me you’d rather stay here.” He spun in place, arms stretching as he curled his lip at their surroundings. “You don’t belong here. You belong in New York.” His expression hardened. “With me.”

“No. I don’t.” Evelyn sounded a little more confident this time. A little more angry at this guy’s sudden appearance. “I will never be with you, so you just might as well move on. I know I have.”

Sasha’s brows lifted, and for the first time the hard line of his mouth curved into what might be considered a smile. “You don’t honestly expect me to believe you’ve met someone better.” He gestured around the single street of downtown. “Especially here.”

Evelyn’s chin lifted. “Maybe I have.”

Sasha propped his hands on his hips, looking genuinely amused. “I don’t believe that for a second. I know you. I know how difficult you are. I know you demand certain things. You would never be satisfied with someone from a place like,” his nostrils flared, “this.”

“Then you don’t know me as well as you think you do.” Evelyn stepped out from behind him, spine straight and stiff. “Because I *have* met someone from here.” She paused,

hesitating just a second before adding on. “And we’re engaged.”

It took everything Grady had to keep his face neutral. He didn’t miss much in Moss Creek, and Evelyn getting engaged would have hit the gossip mill like a sledgehammer, which meant—

“You’re lying.” All amusement slipped from Sasha’s face as his eyes dropped to Evelyn’s hand. “You’re not wearing a ring.”

He took a step closer, continuing to act as if Grady wasn’t even there. And, even worse, as if Evelyn wasn’t telling him no. “Come on. We’re going to collect your things and then we’re flying out. My plane’s waiting.”

Evelyn stepped back, shrinking away from him. “No. I told you. I’m engaged to someone else. Go back to New York and leave me the hell alone.”

Sasha laughed again. “Right. The infamously single Evelyn Warwick is engaged to a cowboy.” Sasha waved around. “Well, where is he? Shouldn’t he be here with you now?”

“He is.” Grady didn’t realize it was out of his mouth until he heard his own voice. Even then, he didn’t regret it. This prick needed to get the fuck out of Moss Creek and he needed to leave Evelyn the hell alone. Offering up the evidence he was so sure didn’t exist would ensure both of those things happened.

And it would piss him the fuck off, so it was a double win. Triple if you counted the fact that Grady hadn’t thought about all the bullshit he had to deal with for at least five minutes.

Sasha’s chin dropped and his eyes moved from Evelyn to focus on Grady for the first time. “You?” His gaze went back to Evelyn. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it.” Evelyn slipped into Grady’s side, tucking against him like she’d done it a thousand times, wrapping both arms around his waist and resting her head against his chest.

“We’re getting married. The ring’s at the jewelers because they’re making a custom wrap for it.”

He had no clue what the fuck a custom wrap was, but Evelyn seemed to know what she was talking about, so he just let her run with it.

Sasha looked between them, his expression one of disgust and disbelief. “I should’ve known this would happen when you came here.” His lips pressed into a flat line. “You did always prefer spending your time with the simple people, like that artist you followed here.”

“Amelie isn’t simple.” Evelyn tried to pull away, eyes flashing as she zeroed in on Sasha’s face.

Grady pulled her closer, pinning her in place under the guise of affection. “Relax, darlin’.”

The flash of jealousy in Sasha’s eyes only egged him on, and Grady leaned in, resting his lips against her ear. “He’s not worth your time.”

Sasha stared them down, nostrils flared, lip curled in disgust. “Wait until your grandmother hears about this.” He spun away, storming down the sidewalk.

Grady watched him go, looking for any hint of what Evelyn might have seen in the pecker. It sure as hell wasn’t personality, or the way he looked in a pair of jeans.

Once Sasha was out of sight, Evelyn pulled away, turning to face him. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.” Grady glanced down the sidewalk, making sure the asshole was really gone. “I think he’s going to go tell on you.”

“Probably.” Evelyn’s shoulders slumped and she suddenly looked defeated. “I don’t even care.”

“I take it your grandmother isn’t as big of a threat as the women across the street at the bar.” He glanced over, listening for any sign that all hell was breaking loose in The Creekery.

There was a group of out-of-town cowboys milling around inside looking for excitement, and possibly a little tail, and



there was no telling how it would shake out. Especially with Evelyn's friends added into the equation.

Evelyn sighed. "Oh, no. She's terrifying."

Grady chuckled. "So she's exactly like the women across the street in the bar."

Since coming to town, Evelyn had landed herself smack dab in the middle of Moss Creek's geriatric girl gang, securing the much revered position of designated driver and old lady handler. It had almost landed her in the back of his cruiser on more than a few occasions.

Almost, but not quite.

Evelyn's eyes drifted across the street. "Actually, she's nothing like them." Her eyes moved back to him and she gave him a soft smile. "Thanks again for doing that. I'll let you get back to your shift." Evelyn turned away, fishing out the keys to her shop as she headed for the door.

Grady followed behind her. "Maybe I should stick around. Make sure he doesn't come back."

Evelyn's eyes widened as they jumped to his and then darted down the street, searching the area like it hadn't occurred to her that he might linger. "Shit."

Grady gripped the mic clipped to his shoulder, letting dispatch know he was going to be tied up for a while. Dispatch, also known as Linda, wouldn't be surprised considering they all expected him to spend his night dealing with whatever unfolded down here. They just all expected it to be cowboy or old woman based.

This was a much better alternative.

Evelyn's shoulders slumped. "Maybe I should just go home."

"That's fine. I can follow you. Make sure nobody tails you." As far as he knew, Evelyn was alone here. No family. No friends outside of the women across the street and Amelie, the artist friend Sasha mentioned—another New York transplant who lived miles away out at Cross Creek Ranch

with her husband Troy and their baby. That left Evelyn with very few people she could count on to help her with something like this.

Someone like this.

“I have to drive the girls home.” Evelyn reached up to squeeze her forehead with one hand. “And they’re probably shit-faced at this point.”

“I’ll call Cooper. He can come get them.” Grady called Linda in dispatch again, sending Cooper to The Creekey to collect one of Moss Creek’s most entertaining entourages.

Evelyn stared at him, her jaw slack.

Grady lifted a brow. “What?”

Her lips clamped together. “Nothing.” Her eyes swung from one side to the other. “Thank you, I guess?”

Grady froze, realizing he’d overstepped about two minutes too late.

Like usual.

“Lin, hang on.” He released the mic on his shoulder and moved closer to Evelyn. “I’m not trying to take over. I just want to make your life easier.”

Evelyn’s gaze skimmed over his face. “I know.” She glanced back at the bar. “I just feel bad pawning the girls off on someone else. You know how they get when they’ve been drinking.”

“I do.” He’d had to break up more than a few fights thanks to the women sitting in The Creekey. “But I’m pretty sure Cooper can handle them.”

Evelyn didn’t seem convinced. “Muriel can be kind of a puker if she sneaks some of Gertrude’s tequila.” She chewed her lower lip for a second. “And she always sneaks Gertrude’s tequila.”

“Hell.” Grady raked one hand through the short length of hair on the top of his head. “So you’d rather she puke in your car than in Cooper’s?”

Evelyn made a face. “No.” She huffed out a soft laugh. “We have a system.”

“A system?” Grady crossed both arms over his chest. “Now this I gotta hear.”

Evelyn offered up a tiny smile. “Have to deal with a lot of barfers yourself?”

He grinned. “You’d be shocked how many cowboys can’t hold their liquor.”

Evelyn’s head fell back on a genuine laugh. One he’d instigated.

“What about you, fake fiancé?” She looked him over. “You decorate any cars after a night at the bar?”

Grady shook his head, fighting not to let the shadows of his life cloud the moment. “Don’t get the opportunity to drink much anymore.”

Evelyn reached out to adjust the curled mic cord stretched at his shoulder. “I don’t either. I’m usually the DD when I go out with the girls, and other than that, I don’t go out.” She fiddled with the item for a second longer. “And it’s not such a bad thing.” Her eyes came back to his. “I’m not the smartest when I’m inebriated.” Her hand dropped to her side.

“None of us are.” Grady tipped his head toward The Creekery. “Probably a good reason we should get over there and see what’s going on.”

Evelyn groaned. “I can only imagine.” She turned toward the road, stepping right out onto the asphalt without looking.

And right into the path of an oncoming car.

Grady grabbed her as the sporty sedan closed in, pulling her back against him and out of harm’s way. The car slowed, cruising past. Sasha sat behind the wheel, eyes fixed on them as he coasted by.

Evelyn inched closer, lacing her fingers between his and holding on tight as the man who seemed to be her ex continued toward the traffic light. “You were right. He did come back.”

Grady grunted. He didn't want to be right, but it was pretty damn obvious Sasha wasn't the type to give up easily. "I deal with assholes like him every day. They think they're smarter than everyone else." Sasha had 'pain in the ass' written all over him, from the top of his perfectly styled head to the tips of his high-end loafers, the man could be in the dictionary under the word prick.

And Evelyn had dated him. Seriously from the sound of it.

It was hard to wrap his head around the possibility that the sweet, kind, considerate woman still holding onto him would ever be close to a man like that.

"Come on." Grady squeezed her hand, tugging her across the street as she continued to glance in the direction Sasha's car disappeared. "Let's go get your friends and get you all home."

Grady kept Evelyn close, telling himself it was just in case Sasha made a second pass. Just in case they needed to look like what he'd accidentally claimed they were.

When they reached the door to The Creekery, he opened it wide, holding it so Evelyn could pass inside first. She took two steps in and stopped in her tracks.

"Oh shit."

# CHAPTER THREE

## EVELYN



SHE SHOULD HAVE expected this. Should have known it wasn't a good idea to leave the girls alone, especially when they were already a few drinks in.

"Hell." Grady was right behind her, his big body staying close as they rushed toward the center of the bar where Muriel stood face-to-face with one of the rodeo cowboys, staring him down, cane gripped tight in her hand.

Before Evelyn could open her mouth and attempt to defuse the situation, Grady stepped between them, keeping his focus on Muriel. "What's going on?" His tone was patient and calm.

Not the approach she would've taken. Not because she didn't want to, but because right now she was feeling anything but patient and calm. Right now she was feeling a little more like maybe it might not be so bad to whack a few men with a cane.

It was a shame Sasha was already on his way out of town, because she would have loved to have given him a couple good whacks.

"That pecker cut in front of me at the bar and then called me a hag." Muriel waved her cane around, coming close to Grady's head.

But he didn't flinch, just kept the same calm composure as always. "Put the cane down, Muriel."

"I didn't even see her standing there. She's four-foot nothing." The cowboy at Grady's back continued arguing, like he thought it was going to make the situation better.

“I am every bit of five-one. You’d know that if you didn’t lie and tell everyone you’re six feet tall.” Muriel motioned at his cowboy hat. “You probably tell all the girls on the Tinder that you’ve got all your hair too, don’t you?”

Evelyn almost took a step back at the dig. It was a pretty low blow and made it clear it was time for them to get the hell out of Dodge.

Grady must have thought the same thing, because he turned to the cowboy, taking him by the shoulder and directing him away from the group of grandmas. “Why don’t you go sit on the other side of the bar and let me take care of this.”

Evelyn let out a little sigh of relief. She was used to having to handle these situations herself. It was actually pretty nice for someone else to take it on for a change. Too bad it couldn’t happen in the rest of her life. She was fed up with trying to handle that too. Probably because she was doing a shit job at it.

Clearly the cowboy didn’t notice she was a hot mess express because instead of heading to the other side of the bar like Grady requested, he was lingering and focused entirely on her. He gave her a lopsided smile that seemed a little too practiced. “Howdy, ma’am.”

Evelyn fought the urge to roll her eyes to the ceiling. Since coming to Moss Creek she’d been hit on by just about every form of cowboy there was. She learned real quick they tended to lean into certain things when they were trying to get a woman’s attention. Their vocabulary consisted of words like ‘howdy’ and ‘yes, ma’am’ and even an occasional ‘shucks’. Granted, under normal circumstances she would have found it fucking adorable, but her circumstances hadn’t been normal for a long time.

“Can I interest you in a drink?” The cowboy inched closer, reeking of charm and the probability of a one-night stand.

Old her would’ve been tempted. Hell, old her would’ve dragged him back to her place and used him up before throwing him away, digging in another of the notches she once thought would earn her the freedom she desired.

But the shine of her old ways started to wear off about a year ago. Right after it became perfectly clear it didn't matter how many bad decisions she amassed, they would never be enough to get her what she wanted.

And that was when her life really went to shit.

Evelyn forced on a smile. "No, thanks." She glanced away, hoping he would realize she wasn't interested.

"Aw, come on now." The cowboy inched closer as Grady continued attempting to cajole Muriel and the rest of the girls toward the door. "I'm real good company."

This time Evelyn did roll her eyes. And thank God she did because they caught on the sight of a familiar blonde headed straight for Grady.

The same Grady she had been trying like hell to ignore since walking into town looking for time to regroup. Who also turned out to be the same Grady who'd just stepped up and protected her without asking for anything in return.

And, unfortunately, the same Grady she spent a little too much of her time thinking about, putting herself no closer to figuring out how to solve her problems than she was when she ran away from New York and all the responsibilities waiting there.

Evelyn pointed at the blonde, knowing she was being a bitch, but not caring. "She might be interested, though."

It was a dirty move sending the cowboy after the woman who was clearly interested in Grady, but she never claimed to be nice. Actually, she'd built a reputation as the exact opposite. Unfortunately, it was one more plan that had failed epically.

Grady turned toward her, not even noticing the blonde or the cowboy ambling off after her. "I think we need to take them home."

It was odd the way he said *we*. Like somehow they were suddenly a team. Like he was on her side. Which was impossible since no one had ever been on her side. Not really.



Maybe Amelie, but she had her own life now. A sexy cowboy husband and a sweet little baby who understandably ate up every bit of her spare time.

“That’s probably a good idea.” Evelyn moved in at Muriel’s side, linking their arms before dragging the older woman toward the door. “I think it’s time to head out. We’ve all had enough excitement for one evening.”

She sure had. Of all the things she expected to see tonight, Sasha on her doorstep was not one of them. She’d made it pretty clear the last time they talked that he was not someone she wanted in her life, regardless of who else thought they were compatible. So it was bizarre, and a little unsettling, that he came all the way to Moss Creek to find her.

Almost as bizarre as hearing Sasha say he was the one who would be taking *her* back. As if he dumped her after the two dates she’d been forced to accept with him, rather than the other way around.

There was nothing that would ever make her want to spend another second in his presence, let alone form some sort of relationship with him.

That’s why she came to Moss Creek, thinking she could somehow magically disappear and figure out how to build a life of her own. One that wasn’t smothered with responsibility and coercion.

Evelyn glanced over her shoulder to find Grady handling the rest of the group, keeping them together and moving. He flashed her the same, devilish smile that had almost been her undoing more times than she could count. God in heaven, the man was gorgeous. Tall and broad shouldered with a set of hands that were rough enough they’d probably snag half the dresses in her closet.

Or scrape deliciously against her skin.

Hell. She was doing it again.

Evelyn snapped her eyes away from him, forcing them to the door. Staring at Grady—reminding herself how good he looked and smelled and sounded—wouldn’t do her any good.

It wouldn't change anything or cut a single one of the ties binding her.

And it sure as hell wouldn't help her figure out what in the hell to do next.

Evelyn pushed open the door and stepped out into the night, carefully helping Muriel move down the single step leading to The Creekery. She pointed to where her car was parked along the street. "We don't have far to go. How are you feeling? Stomach okay?"

"I'm fine." Muriel sashayed along beside her, displaying entirely too much swagger for a woman who'd had a knee replaced and was probably going to be puking in a bucket sometime in the next fifteen minutes.

She helped Muriel into the front seat, passing off her bucket before turning to find Grady loading everyone else into the back. She offered him a smile. "Thank you."

"Of course." He jerked his chin toward where his cruiser was parked a few spaces down. "Give me just a second. I'll follow you and make sure everyone gets home safe."

She wanted to tell him he didn't have to do that. She would be fine all on her own. It was what she'd been trying to prove her whole life. That she was capable of choosing her own path. Making her own choices. Building a future that might not look the way other people hoped, but could actually bring value into the world.

And every fucking time, she failed.

But no one who mattered was here to watch her fail, and she was tired. Ready to crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head, and forget this night even happened. "That would be great. Thank you."

Grady's gaze was intense as it fixed on hers. "You don't have to thank me, Evelyn. I'm always here. I can help you whenever you need it."

She waited for him to say it was because it was his job, but the words never came out of his mouth.

His full, perfectly proportioned mouth. A mouth she was currently staring at and wondering what exactly it was capable of.

Grady was probably a dirty talker. At least he was in every fantasy she'd had about him.

He didn't use his handcuffs though. Not ever. If he wanted to hold a woman in place, all it would take was one of his wide palms gripping both wrists above her head and she wouldn't move a muscle.

Probably wouldn't want to.

Evelyn's eyes jumped to meet Grady's. "We should go."

She spun away and rushed to get in her car, slamming the door before turning over the engine.

She needed to get the hell away from Grady. Screw needing to forget about the night, she needed to forget about him. Forget about the way he'd so easily claimed she was his without hesitation. Forget about the way she kind of liked it.

Evelyn pulled away from the curb, her belly fluttering a little when a set of headlights filled her rearview mirror.

Proving she was capable of being independent had been her top priority, and rightfully so. But it left her occasionally feeling isolated and a little lonely. A little like there was no one she could really rely on. And tonight, even if it was only for a little bit, it felt good to have someone in her corner.

Not that she would ever admit it. Probably wouldn't even acknowledge it in the morning.

Evelyn dropped Betty off first, making sure she was safely inside before moving onto the next drop off. Agnes also lived in town, so it took less than ten minutes to get her home. That left her with only the terrible twosome.

Gertrude and Muriel frequently stayed together, and tonight they were hanging out at Muriel's place out at Cross Creek Ranch, which was slightly closer than Gertrude's place up on the mountain. But still really freaking far away.

By the time she pulled in, Muriel was snoring in the front seat, barf bucket hugged to her chest, and Gertrude was scrolling her phone, cackling over TikTok videos in the back seat.

Parking in front of Muriel's little cottage and climbing out, she opened Gertrude's door, planning to get the easier of the two on the porch first. But while she helped Gertrude out, Grady appeared at her shoulder and collected Muriel, his voice soothing as he practically carried her up to the porch. She unlocked Muriel's door and helped both women in while Grady lingered, making sure everyone was safe before following her back out into the night.

A tiny bit of her was relieved this was the end of their crazy night together. Another, bigger part of her was disappointed. But that's what her life was all about. Fighting her way through disappointment with a smile on her face. There was no one to complain to anyway.

She turned to Grady, keeping her eyes off the long, tempting line of his frame. "Thanks again for your help."

Grady shook his head. "My helping's not done yet." He tipped his head toward her car. "I've gotta make sure you make it home safe too."

Her belly fluttered again, warming at his concern. No one really worried too much about her—for lots of reasons—and that was fine. Understandable even. Expecting more would be greedy, so she made do. Dealt with shit on her own while everyone else stood at the edges of her life, pretending they were part of it.

And that's what she should do with Grady. Shove him right back to the edge. Clear room so she could figure out what to do next.

"You act like you're thinking about it," Grady shook his head again, "but there's nothing to think on. It's not up for discussion. I'm following you home. That's it."

Her belly flip lurched right into a thigh clench at the commanding tone in his voice.

Oh yeah. Grady was definitely a dirty talker.

Evelyn swallowed hard, trying to stay focused on what she was supposed to be doing instead of wondering what sort of naughty things might come out of his mouth when he came. “Then, thank you again. That’s very nice of you.”

Grady grunted in acknowledgment, but that was the extent of his response. He opened her car door, waiting for her to get in and buckle up before closing her in. He patted on the roof of her SUV before going back to his car and backing up. She did the same, passing him to take the lead as they headed back into town.

By the time she was pulling up to the tiny bungalow she rented from her next-door neighbor Dianna, the warmth of her dirty thoughts was finally starting to cool and her plan to put Grady back in his little policeman shaped box so she could set him on a high shelf was back to sounding brilliant. She didn’t come to Moss Creek to find a man. Quite the opposite actually. She’d tried using men. Over and over. It did her no good, so there was no place for one in whatever plan she concocted next.

But Grady wasn’t making it easy.

Evelyn parked in front of the teeny tiny garage her SUV didn’t even come close to fitting in and climbed out, ready to leave Grady with a handshake and a final goodbye. Or maybe she’d get lucky and he would just cruise past, making at least the last bit of her night easy to deal with.

She watched as he pulled in behind her, refusing to acknowledge the twinge of excitement in her belly when he put his car in park and climbed out. Her breath caught in her lungs as he came closer, each step punctuated by the sharp beat of her heart. She was barely breathing by the time he stopped in front of her, his height forcing her to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. “Thank you again for helping me out tonight.” She wiggled her fingers, working up the motivation to shove her hand between them to offer the friendliest sort of gesture she could think of.

But Grady came closer, his big body thwarting her already somewhat shaky intentions as he leaned into her ear. “I think we might have a little problem.” His words were low and deep in her ear. The warmth of his breath skating over her skin raised goosebumps all the way down to her toes, making them curl inside her shoes.

She’d never been seduced before. Normally she was the seductress. The one propositioning men, inviting them back to her place for a quick, and frequently unfulfilling, evening. An evening that always ended before the sun came up.

She could easily see how a woman could be seduced by a man like Grady. He’d barely even touched her, and if he asked to come inside she’d be hard-pressed to turn him down.

But she would have to figure out a way to do exactly that.

Evelyn swallowed hard. “What’s the problem?”

Grady inched in a little more, one hand coming to rest against the small of her back, staying a little higher than she would have expected given he seemed to be gunning for an invitation into her house.

And possibly her bed.

“What is it?” Her voice was breathy and weak, giving away how affected she was by his nearness. His touch.

It was yet another thing that never happened to her. Men had never been anything more than a tool. A useless one at that. But she didn’t want to use Grady, and it was currently serving as the cherry at the top of her problem sundae.

“It seems like your friend might not have left town after all.” Grady caught her hand, lifting it to loop one arm around his neck. “His car’s parked right across the street. He’s leaning against it watching us.”

Evelyn’s whole body tensed. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I wish I was.” Grady pulled her a little closer as the sound of expensive Italian leather slapping against asphalt sent her

stomach turning. His hand smoothed up and down her spine in slow sweeps. “Just relax.”

Easy for him to say. He didn't know just how bad of a thing Sasha showing up here was. And hopefully he'd never find out. She didn't want Grady to know just how sordid her past was. How dysfunctional of a life she led before coming to Moss Creek.

It was a ridiculous desire but was one, nonetheless.

“Well, well, well.” Sasha's whiny voice made her cringe almost as much as the puff of cigarette smoke he blew out as he stood beside them. “Looks like you're my new neighbor.”

# CHAPTER FOUR



## GRADY



THIS NIGHT WAS either going really wrong or really fucking right.

Maybe a little of both considering the way Evelyn was staring at Sasha, eyes full of panic and fear. Whoever this guy was, she was nowhere near happy to see him.

And while his intentions when he claimed her weren't strictly noble, she seemed relieved by the outcome. He didn't hate it either since it landed her so close.

And it didn't look like that would be ending anytime soon.

"You two always loiter in front of your house like this?" Sasha leveled them with a repulsed gaze. "I'd threaten to file a report with the local PD, but I'm guessing that won't get me very far in a place like this, will it?"

The prick was working hard at picking a fight. Writing checks Grady was confident this underfed, over inflated prick wouldn't be able to cash.

It didn't matter. He was happy to play this game because somehow he'd managed to end up with Evelyn close to him yet again, her sweet scent pressing into his uniform. She moved in a little closer, clinging to him like her life depended on it, holding on as if he could save her from whatever this was.

Lucky for her, he probably could. And he would do it happily. He needed something good in his life right now and he'd always had a thing for saving damsels in distress.

“I wouldn’t waste your breath.” Grady angled Evelyn away from the man watching her a little too closely. “Come on, Sweetheart. We should get to bed.”

It took everything he had to control his body’s visceral reaction to the statement. To the images it invoked. None of them were appropriate for polite company and every single one brought an amount of guilt he wasn’t quite sure what to do with. He’d been alone for a hell of a long time. No woman in her right mind would put up with the life he was forced to lead. And while he understood, it left him facing all the shit coming his way alone.

It also left him strung tight and a little too eager for the opportunity to spend some time with a woman. But not just any woman.

He could have had the blonde back at The Creechery. Could have easily been over her now, rutting out his loneliness and frustrations. But the second he saw Evelyn, the opportunity left so much to be desired that he walked away.

And thank God he had. Evelyn needed him and he could sure use the distraction this whole mess was offering.

She didn’t put up any resistance as he led her up the stairs and onto the porch, waiting as she unlocked the door before following her in. He stayed on the stoop just long enough to stare Sasha down where he still stood in the driveway. Then he smiled. “Have a good night.”

Sasha’s expression was murderous as Grady closed the door, flipping the deadbolt into place before turning to find Evelyn dropped onto the sofa, her head in her hands.

“What in the hell am I going to do?” She asked, probably not expecting him to have an answer.

He did. He always had answers. Always knew how to handle every situation that came his way.

Well, he used to.

“What you’re going to do is go to bed.” Grady tipped his chin toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms. “You’ve had a long night. You need to sleep.” He was careful to soften the

edge of the trait that served him so well, making sure his words were gentle and calm. He was dealing with Evelyn, not a criminal or a bullheaded ranch hand.

But he was still dishing out orders, no matter how candy coated he tried to make them, and he'd learned the hard way that women didn't particularly like taking orders outside of the bedroom.

Evelyn's eyes lifted to his. She looked so different from her normal, confident self. She looked sad. Broken. Defeated. "Yeah. Sleep is probably a good idea." She stood up, her smile weak. "You can go. I guess I'll tell Sasha the truth tomorrow."

Grady snorted. "Why would you tell a fucker like him the truth? He doesn't deserve it and it's sure as hell not his business who you're with." Grady shook his head. "My shift ended while we were driving back from Cross Creek. I'll let Linda know I won't be back at the station tonight." He sat on the couch and went to work untying his shoes. "We can decide what to do next in the morning." Again he was telling her how it was going to be.

And again Evelyn didn't argue. "Okay." She turned and started down the hall, pausing to peek back his way. "If you change your mind, I won't judge you."

He watched her go, surprised that she clearly expected not to find him on her couch in the morning.

He might be prone to telling people what to do and taking shit over, but he wasn't the kind of man who snuck out of a woman's house in the middle of the night. Hell, he did everything he could to get himself an invitation to breakfast the next morning.

Not that he anticipated that's what would happen in this situation. As much as he hated to admit it, he was serving as nothing more than a convenient way to keep a clearly unbalanced ex-boyfriend at bay. And considering he knew how dangerous unbalanced exes could be, he was happy to provide his services.

Especially since they served his own needs.

Grady called Linda, letting her know where he was if she needed him, before ridding himself of everything but his undershirt and pants and stretching out on the couch. He didn't expect sleep to come easily, but he must've drifted off, because before he knew it, he jolted awake.

The first streaks of sunlight were peeking through the windows, signifying another morning in his Groundhog Day of a life, but that wasn't what woke him up. It was the woman staring at him, her lean body clad in a cropped silky robe clinging to every dip and valley.

"You're still here." Evelyn breathed the words out, her voice soft and a little husky from sleep.

Grady shifted on the couch, sitting up as he found his bearings. "Of course I'm still here. I told you I would be."

"I just didn't expect—" Evelyn swept a lock of dark hair behind one ear, shifting a little on her bare feet. "I just didn't really expect you to stay."

Grady stood up, needing to stretch his stiff body. "Are you used to dealing with men who don't do what they say they will?"

Evelyn's lips pressed together. "I'm not really used to dealing with men at all."

Grady tipped his head toward the front window as he moved toward the hall. "Fancy pants across the street begs to differ."

He shouldn't be bothered that Evelyn had a past. Everyone did. But that guy? Her taste in the opposite sex was more questionable than his was back when he had the time and inclination.

Grady shut himself into the bathroom, doing his business and rinsing his mouth out before going back to the living room. Evelyn stood at the front window, lifting one of the wood slats of the blinds and peeking out.

"Anything interesting out there?" Grady collected his keys and went to work reassembling his uniform.

Evelyn shook her head. “It looks quiet.”

“Good.” Grady shoved his feet into his shoes. “Because I’ve got to head out.” He grabbed the door, pulling it open, and was surprised when Evelyn followed him outside, her bare feet silent as they padded across the porch.

He made it down one step before turning to face her, the lower step bringing them eye-to-eye. “You can call me if you need me, you know that, right?”

Evelyn nodded. “I know.” She pinched her lower lip between her teeth, like she wanted to say more but was determined to hold it back. “Have a good day.”

He opened his mouth to offer her the same casual sentiment, but Evelyn’s eyes flicked over his shoulder and she suddenly moved closer. Resting her hands on the sides of his face, she inched in a little more, bringing her body flush against his. Without her hands holding it in place, the front of her rope gaped open to reveal the delicate lines of a silky short set that made it hard as hell to keep his mind in respectable territory.

“Have a good day at work.” Her words were louder this time. Louder, because they weren’t only for him.

Neither was the soft kiss she pressed to his lips. It was quick and fleeting and wouldn’t convince anyone they were together.

Not even a dumbass like Sasha.

“I think you might have to do better than that,” Grady whispered as he reached out to lace his fingers into the hair at the back of her head, cradling her skull in his palm. “Unless you want him to think you kiss me the same way you kiss your grandma.”

Evelyn gripped his shoulders, her lips parting on a sudden intake of breath. “I definitely don’t want him to think that.”

Grady curved one hand against her hip, giving it a little squeeze. “I can take care of it for you, if you want me to.”

Her full, pouty mouth was begging to be kissed, but the lines in this situation were nowhere near being drawn, and he didn't want to take something she wasn't willing to give.

No matter how desperate he was to know how she tasted.

Evelyn's tongue flicked out to skim across her lower lip, barely wetting it. "That would be okay."

It was all he needed to hear.

Grady pulled her closer, one hand still fisted in her hair, the other sliding to her lower back as he claimed her mouth. She immediately opened for him, letting out the tiniest of sighs when his tongue stroked along hers, offering him the taste he was after. The faintest hint of mint lingered, along with a sweetness he could quickly become addicted to.

Every bit of her probably tasted this good.

The sound of Sasha's door slamming made Evelyn jump, her body going tight as she pulled away. One hand lifted to her mouth, fingers teasing across her lips as her eyes held his.

Grady unwound his hand from her hair, gritting his teeth as he eased his body away from hers. "Hopefully he won't bother you today. If he does, you call me." He pulled one of his cards from his front pocket and pressed it into the palm of her hand. "I'll see you later."

He turned and headed for his patrol car, whistling as he pretended to be on his way to work even though today was a day off. From the police department anyway. There were technically no days off for him. Hadn't been in almost three years.

Once in his car, he waited until she was safely inside before pulling away and heading for the station. After checking in and switching to his truck, he headed for his home on Grizzly Peak where he quickly showered and dressed for his other responsibility.

In under an hour, he was back on the road, driving to the ranch his family owned and ran. His mom was waiting for him on the porch when he got there, seated in one of the rockers he'd spent the winter repairing. Her face brightened when he

pulled in, and a little of the load always weighing on his chest lightened.

Climbing out of his pickup and closing the door, he greeted her with a wave. "You look happy this morning."

Her smile was bright and warm. "Well, it's a beautiful day, what's not to be happy about?"

It was the same thing she said to him every morning when he stopped by. Rain or shine. Snow or sleet. For her, every day was a beautiful day. And that was one hell of a gift.

One of only a few.

"It is." Grady climbed the steps and leaned over to kiss her on top of the head. "You have breakfast yet?"

His mother nodded. "There was a nice lady in the house who made me sausage and eggs." Her brows barely pinched together. "She said she makes me breakfast every day."

"That sounds like a good deal. I'd love to have somebody make me breakfast every day." Grady eased down into the chair next to his mother, doing his best to pretend to be unbothered. "She a good cook?"

His mother nodded. "Oh, yes."

"Then maybe I should get here earlier tomorrow. See if she'll make me breakfast too." He glanced up as Charlene, his mother's live-in caretaker, came out onto the porch carrying two cups of coffee. "Well who do we have here this fine morning?"

Grady's mother reached over to pat his knee. "My brother came over to visit me." She took the coffee Charlene offered. "Wasn't that nice of him?"

Charlene's smile faltered a little as she passed Grady the other cup. "That is awfully nice of him." She refocused on his mother. "Can I get you a jacket, Darla? Are you chilly?"

His mother looked down at her favorite embroidered top, reaching to pull it away from her skin, repeating the action over and over again. "Is this my shirt?"

Charlene reached out to adjust the shoulder seam, the movement distracting his mother enough that she stopped picking at the fabric. “Well I don’t see anyone coming to take it away from you, so it must be.”

“That’s okay then, I guess.” His mother turned to him, reaching out to pat his knee once again. “What are you out and about doing today?”

“I thought I’d come by and see what needed done out back. Check in with everybody and make sure things were running smoothly.” He’d been juggling both his job and running the ranch for the past three years. Without his father around, the full weight of keeping the place moving fell on his shoulders.

Along with the full weight of making sure his mother was taken care of.

“Well, that’s awfully nice of you, but Grady will be home from school later and I’m sure he can take care of everything.” His mother’s tone remained calm. Warm and familiar.

So he continued.

“He’ll have homework to do and I have a little free time. I figured I might as well come help you out.” He kept his words light. Easy. Hoping that was how things would remain.

Some days it worked. Some days it didn’t.

His mother’s smile faltered, which wasn’t a good sign. “I said, Grady would handle it when he got home from school.”

“Oh, Darla,” Charlene swooped in, ready to do damage control, “I just noticed what time it is. You’re about to miss your favorite show.”

Charlene reached to take the coffee from his mother’s hand then gently grasped her elbow, intending to help her up, but his mother shook her off.

“I don’t need to watch a show.” Her narrowed gaze swung back to Grady. “You get the hell off my land. This is *my* ranch. I know you’re trying to take it away from me.”



Grady tried to hide his disappointment. It never did any good and frequently made things worse. It'd been a few weeks since his mother had an outburst, so he figured they were due. They seemed to be coming less and less often, which was a good thing and a bad thing at the same time. Good, because her anger was unleashed less frequently, bad because it meant her condition was progressing.

“Okay.” He held up his hands, hoping she would realize he was surrendering. “I’ll go.” He tipped his head to Charlene. “If you need me, call me.”

“We won’t be calling you, thief.” His mother spat the words out as he went down the steps to his truck.

They’d learned a long time ago that Charlene was the best at calming her down when she was like this, so all he could do was leave.

There’d been a few months where he hadn’t been able to visit her at all because his presence confused her to the point she would lash out the second she saw him, but thankfully that passed. Hopefully it wasn’t coming back.

Grady backed out of the driveway, taking one last look at where his mother stood on the porch, glaring at him.

Losing her was a painful process and had been happening for longer than he initially knew. Watching such a warm, caring, loving woman slip farther away would’ve been difficult by itself, but having to do it while still running the ranch that paid for her care was about to kill him.

He followed the lane skirting the edge of the property, turning off on a path he’d hired a friend to cut for just this reason, finally reaching the backside of the barn housing the horses they used to work the cattle. Larry, the head ranch hand, came out of the barn to meet him and they spent the day working their asses off, tagging new calves and moving the herd to a fresh pasture.

By the end of the day he was filthy and tired and more than ready to get the fuck out of there.

And, for the first time in a long time, he had somewhere to go besides home.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## EVELYN



“IS HE STILL there?”

Evelyn lifted the blind slat she’d been peeking out all day, even though there was no need. “Of course he’s still there.” She let it drop back into place, spinning away from the window as she flopped down onto the couch, keeping her cell pressed to one ear. “He’s punishing me for rejecting him.”

Amelie’s baby boy squalled on the other end of the line and her best friend gently shushed him before picking their conversation back up. “Sasha didn’t take your rejection well, did he?”

Evelyn laughed even though there was nothing amusing about the situation. “He didn’t take it at all. He acted like it wasn’t an option. Like we were going to be together no matter what I wanted.”

It’d been the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. The moment that sent her shoving only the necessities into a carry-on and taking the next flight out of New York. She’d gone to great lengths to avoid being controlled. Done everything she could think of to be able to make her own decisions and live her own life. Determined not to allow a man, especially one like Sasha, to take that from her.

Which made it extra bizarre that she didn’t lose her mind last night when Grady ordered her to bed. Any other time, she would have kicked his ass right out of her house, regardless of how great it looked in his department-issued pants.

But Grady's demand didn't seem like control. What else it could be, she didn't know, but whatever it was, it didn't make her bristle the way she normally would.

*"Okay. We'll be here when you get back."* Amelie spoke softly to someone beside her, the tone of her voice sweet and gentle.

Evelyn waited, trying not to be jealous. She was happy for her best friend. Thrilled Amelie found the kind of man neither of them believed existed. Even more delighted they'd procreated and produced the cutest little baby boy she'd ever seen.

But damned if she wouldn't love to have just a little more of her friend's precious time. Especially in moments like this.

*"Okay, I'm back. Sorry. Troy's headed out back with his dad to go work on something I don't care about."* Amelie paused, the line going so quiet it almost seemed dead. *"What were we talking about?"*

Evelyn closed her eyes, breathing deep. *"Sasha showing up at my yoga studio and then renting out the house across the street."*

The twat came over as soon as Grady left, like he thought she would change her mind the second her fake fiancé was out of sight.

She didn't.

Sasha's shock when she slammed the door in his face was enraging. Could the man not take a hint? A small part of him must have expected she wouldn't just fall into his arms since he'd gone so far as to rent the vacant house across the street. He should probably listen to that small part more.

*"That's right."* Amelie groaned. *"What are you going to do? That whiny bastard's going to bug the shit out of you thinking he can wear you down."*

Evelyn chewed her lower lip, debating how she should answer. She hadn't offered the whole story to her friend, specifically the part about Grady pretending to be her fiancé.

Not because she didn't want to share all the details, but because she wasn't quite sure how she felt about those details.

She'd never had a man sweep in and save the day before. Certainly not a man who was willing to sleep on the couch instead of trying to find his way into her bed. At first it almost made her think maybe Grady was just being nice. Maybe he didn't actually have the same kind of interest in her that she had in him.

It would've been some sort of poetic justice.

But then the kiss happened. And, after kissing more than her fair share of men, she could tell the difference when the gesture had more behind it than just keeping up appearances. And there was plenty more behind that one.

It added yet another layer of complication to the problems stacking up on her plate.

"I guess I just have to wait him out. Eventually he'll figure out I'm not going to be with him no matter what anyone else wants, and he'll go back to New York and find some other rich socialite who doesn't care if her husband wears highlighter and tells her what to order at a restaurant." And as long as he was embarrassed enough to keep this whole thing to himself, she might be in the clear.

If not... Sasha might not be the only one back in New York.

Amelie sighed. "God I hope so. I could go the rest of my life without having to see his face again."

"Agreed." Evelyn sat up, leaning to peek out the front blind yet again. "Maybe I should see if I can get my hands on some bedbugs and infest the place he's renting."

"I—" Amelie sputtered. "You know you can't do that, right?"

"I'd be willing to pay to have it fumigated once he left." Evelyn dropped back to the cushions. "I might as well use the Amex at this point."

Amelie's baby started to wail on the other end of the line, like he was just as shocked by her suggestion as his mother obviously was. "I should let you go. Sounds like you've got your hands full." Evelyn worked hard to keep her tone from showing her irritation.

It wasn't the baby she was irritated with. Or her friend.

It was just about everyone else though.

She listened while Amelie promised to call back—knowing full well the chances of it happening were slim to none—before hanging up and gently sliding her phone onto the coffee table.

Then she smashed one of the velvet throw pillows stacked on the sofa into her face and screamed. Even muffled and smothered, the sound made her feel better. Right up until she took a breath to scream again.

The freaking thing smelled like Grady and it only made her want to scream more.

Because she fucking liked it. Because she was tempted to pull another lungful of the Grady-scented fabric into her body.

Instead, she launched the thing across the room, relaxing a little when it bounced off the wall and hit the floor. Then she noticed she was lying in the exact same spot Grady had slept and a tiny thrill tickled her belly.

Her body was off the couch almost as quickly as the pillow sailed across the room. She stared down at the high-end piece, contemplating what to do with it. No way would she be able to stare at it every day, knowing how Grady's big body looked draped across it. She had to stop thinking of him. Stop the flip her belly did every time her brain conjured up his likeness.

Maybe she should burn the damn thing. Leave it on the curb for someone else to snatch up.

Maybe reupholstering it would be enough to keep her mind from reminding her whose well-muscled body once graced its surface.

The possibilities made her head hurt almost as much as Sasha's presence did.

She turned away, one palm pressed across her forehead as she went to the bathroom, popped a couple of anti-inflammatories, and dropped onto her bed, pulling a non-Grady scented pillow over her aching skull. She'd slept like shit the night before, tossing and turning knowing Sasha was right across the street. Lurking. Waiting for an opportunity to force her back into the life she was relegated to at birth.

Everyone thought they wanted what she had, but that was only because they weren't trapped in it. Weren't staring down a lifetime of being forced to do what someone else decided and expected.

And that someone else expected her to marry a man they deemed acceptable, spit out a couple of his children, and smile politely through events and parties. That was it. She was simply supposed to be nothing more than a talking head who went around preserving her family's reputation and maintaining the connections securing their position as one of the most prestigious families of the east coast.

The Kennedys wished they were the Warwicks.

As far as she was concerned, they could have them. What was the point of having all the money you could ever want when you couldn't use it to do the things that would make you happy?

Not that she actually knew what those things were. But, up to this point, doing the exact opposite of what was expected had gotten her pretty damn close.

Evelyn rolled onto her back, flipping the pillow off her face to stare up at the ceiling. Maybe her time had finally run out. Maybe her grandmother was tired of her bullshit and it was game over.

If that was the case, hopefully her grandmother had better sense than to try to force her to marry Sasha again.





“YOU GO TO bed pretty early for a city girl.”

Evelyn sat up straight, horror movie style, as she sucked in a breath.

Grady stood in the doorway of her bedroom, one arm leaned against the frame and a beer in his hand.

Was she hallucinating? Did she accidentally pop the wrong kind of pills before laying down and passing out? “How did you get in here?”

“Key under the mat.” Grady took a sip of his beer. “We should talk about that, by the way. Not a safe place to keep something like that.”

Evelyn continued staring at him, still not convinced she was awake. “*Why* are you in here?”

Grady straightened off the frame, looking completely different than he did last night. His uniform was replaced by a pair of worn jeans and a T-shirt that stretched across his broad chest, revealing a set of pecs that had been all but obscured by the protective vest he wore for work. “Figured it would raise suspicion if I didn’t come home tonight.” He lifted his drink. “You want a beer?”

“Yes.” She absolutely needed one. Desperately if Grady planned to sleep on her couch again.

“Hope you like Modelo.” Grady turned toward the hallway but paused, glancing back at her over one shoulder. “I brought us home some dinner too.”

She stared after him as he disappeared, a little flabbergasted.

He brought home dinner?

Evelyn scooted off the edge of the bed, stretching as her bare feet hit the floor. She’d accidentally fallen asleep in her

yoga wear, so she adjusted the fit of her bralette as she walked down the hall, making sure both her boobs were appropriately contained.

She entered the tiny kitchen at the back of the house to find her small table covered in take-out. The scent of cumin and cilantro hung in the air, making her belly growl. “Did you bring Mexican?”

Grady opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of beer, popping it open with some sort of tool thing hooked to his belt before passing it off. “It sounded good. I haven’t eaten yet today and I was starving.”

Evelyn took the beer but didn’t drink any. “Why haven’t you eaten yet today?”

“I spent the day out at my family’s ranch. Didn’t have time.” He went to the little table and started pulling foam boxes from a plastic bag. The enticing aroma intensified as soon as he popped the lid on the first one. “I got some enchiladas,” he set them down before moving onto the next box, “some soft tacos,” he placed them beside the enchiladas, “and an order of beans and rice.” He added the last of the three large boxes with a sidelong glance, like he was trying to gauge her reaction. “Then we’ve got toppings.” He unpacked a few smaller containers before pulling out one final box. “And tres leches cake.”

If she was ever going to fall in love with a man, showing up with tacos and cake might be what made it happen. Lucky for her, love was never part of the plan. Not her grandmother’s, and not hers.

“Where is there a Mexican restaurant around here?” Evelyn headed straight for the table, dropping down into one of the chairs as Grady took the other.

Grady tore open the bag of complimentary chips before prying the lid from the accompanying salsa. “Technically, it’s not in Moss Creek. There’s a little hole-in-the-wall place right on the edge of the next town over. It’s a little out of the way, but worth it.”

Evelyn shoved the tines of a plastic fork through its wrapper and dug into the enchiladas, eyes rolling back on a soft moan as flavorful ground beef and savory sauce hit her tongue. “Oh my gosh. This is so good.”

When she opened her eyes, Grady was studying her. His gaze dropped to focus on the rice. “I’m glad you like it.”

She rubbed her lips together, trying to convince herself there wasn’t something more than mild interest in his eyes before they left hers. Honestly, it wouldn’t matter if Grady really was interested in her. It definitely didn’t matter that she was interested in him. Her choices in life were limited, even if she wasn’t quite ready to admit it and throw in the towel.

She’d hoped acting out might lead her grandmother to realize she wasn’t going to be falling in line but, based on their conversation the day before, that wasn’t the case.

Not yet anyway.

Evelyn snagged one of the tacos, sprinkling on some lettuce and tomato before taking a bite. It was just as amazing as the enchiladas, but this time she stifled any sort of response she had.

Keeping Grady at arm’s length was no longer an option, not unless she wanted Sasha to discover she was single, but there still had to be lines between them. Very firm ones.

But establishing them could wait. At least until after dinner. No reason to ruin good tacos with depressing conversations, so she opted for something more benign.

“You’ve lived here your whole life, right?” When Grady nodded she continued. “You probably know about all the little places like this then.”

Grady leaned back in his seat, drinking a little more of his beer. “You on the hunt for something specific?”

Evelyn took another bite of enchilada, savoring it before swallowing. “Anything besides diner food and pizza.” She lifted up one hand. “Don’t get me wrong, I love The Wooden Spoon and pizza, but I would kill for something more interesting.”

“Like what?” Grady pressed her for more, looking surprisingly interested in hearing her answer.

The people she dealt with in New York all thought they knew her, the men especially. They were plenty happy taking only what she offered, which was a little fun with no strings attached. It kept things simple. Neat and tidy. And it pissed her grandmother all the way off to watch her build a less than stellar reputation.

But, as angry as she was, her grandmother seemed to remain hellbent on getting Evelyn back under her thumb and forcing her to follow in the family footsteps.

Evelyn shoved down the thoughts of her overbearing grandmother and scooted closer to the table, hoping to avoid ruining her appetite. “Well, I love Mexican.” She filtered through all the amazing food she’d enjoyed while living in New York, fishing for the ones that stood out the most. “Indian might be my second favorite.”

Grady’s brows lifted. “Really? I’ve never had it.”

“It’s amazing.” Evelyn closed her eyes, going back to the little place around the corner from her loft. “The combination of spices is unlike anything else.”

When she opened her eyes, Grady was watching her again, eyes carrying an intensity she felt everywhere.

Everywhere.

Maybe those lines had to be dug into the sand now after all.

“You can’t stay here forever.” The words were harder to push free than she expected.

“Why not?” Grady seemed unbothered by the sudden shift in conversation.

“Well,” a vision of Grady stretched across her couch in his blue jeans threatening to derail her, “because you just can’t. We’re not really together and you have a whole life to live.” She forked in another bite of enchilada, hoping to get it down before her stomach rebelled. “And at some point somebody

from town is going to notice your truck parked in my driveway every night and they'll think..."

Grady leaned closer, resting one elbow against the table. "They'll think, what?"

"They'll think we're really together." Evelyn whispered the last part, like someone might overhear it.

"So?" Grady's commitment to remaining unbothered was really starting to get irritating.

"Everyone you know will think you're dating me. They'll think I'm dating you." Panic started to claw at her insides, forcing her to drop the plastic fork.

Dating had always represented the first stage of hell for her. It was expected to lead to marriage, which revolved around engagement parties and bridal showers and a disgustingly huge wedding, designed to focus on connecting families and displaying wealth.

Because it sure as hell wasn't about love.

Nobody really gave a shit about whether the bride and groom could stand each other. Only how it looked. What it could offer businesses and bank accounts. Somehow the elite remained locked in the past, treating marriage as a business dealing that required strategy and sacrifice.

And she was expected to fall in line. Pretend it wouldn't crush her soul to lead a pointlessly shallow and loveless life.

To marry someone like Sasha.

And then she would be trapped forever. Bound to yet another person who only cared about how she looked. How she acted. What she said and what she did.

"Are you upset because you wish someone else was sitting here at the table with you?" Grady's question didn't sound accusatory, but it did sound curious. And maybe hinted at an edge of jealousy. Like the thought of her wishing there was another man here with her grated.

The question was still amusing. Funny enough to make her laugh. She shook her head. "I promise you there is no one else

I'm interested in having here with me." She wasn't even supposed to be interested in having him there.

Grady leaned closer, gaze holding hers. "Good, because I'd hate to have to break the news to him that you're mine now."

# CHAPTER SIX

## GRADY



HE SHOULDN'T HAVE said that but couldn't find it in him to care.

He probably also shouldn't have come here tonight. Not when he was dangerously close to forgetting that none of this was real. He should have gone back to his house on the mountain, watched a little television, and gone to bed alone. Just like he did every other night.

But today was miserable—exhausting in just about every way—and the last thing he wanted was time to sit and think about the hand he'd been dealt. He needed a distraction. That prick from New York had served one up to him on a silver platter, and he intended to take full advantage.

Grady shot her a wink and a grin, hoping to smooth the moment over without having to take back the words.

Evelyn seemed to relax a little at his smile, offering one of her own. “Luckily, that won't be necessary.” She went back into the box of enchiladas for another bite. “The only men who've hit on me since coming here are old enough to be my grandpas, and I'm pretty sure they were kidding.”

Grady crossed both arms over his chest, continuing to smile. “I'm pretty sure they weren't.”

Evelyn wrinkled her nose as she chewed through her bite. “Now I'm just grossed out.”

“Can't say I blame you there. Muriel grabbed my ass once and I still have nightmares about it.” He drank a little more of



his beer, polishing it off before pointing at Evelyn's. "Drink's getting warm."

Evelyn eyed the bottle. "It sounded really good at first, but I've been trying to limit my alcohol consumption."

"Right. You accidentally quit drinking. Is that why you're always the designated driver?" He'd been wondering how she made it through a night with the girls sober. It only took them five minutes to make him need a drink.

"They might be taking advantage of my current sobriety, but I don't mind." Evelyn eyed the tray of tacos like she was debating having another. "They all got married and had kids super young, so they're just trying to do everything they missed out on."

He nudged the tacos closer, inching it in until she reached over to take one. "And you don't mind missing out because you've had all your fun?"

He wasn't fishing. Technically. It was just a simple conversation. If he happened to learn more about the mysterious woman he'd been hard-pressed to ignore, then it was only a happy accident.

Evelyn picked up her beer and set it in front of him as she dug into her second taco. "Some people would tell you I've had all my fun plus everyone else's."

It was a little bit of a surprise. Evelyn didn't strike him as the typical party girl. She had a certain level of reservation about her. She had a business that started early in the morning. Her rental house was perfectly kept, all the way down to the pristine flower beds and immaculate kitchen.

"Does that surprise you?" Evelyn's eyes moved over his face. "Because you look like you weren't expecting that."

"I've known a few party girls in my day, and I don't see many similarities." While his availability was currently nonexistent, it hadn't always been limited. In his twenties he'd packed as much fun into his free time as possible, which led to a handful of flings, but nothing of any substance.

Or duration.

Evelyn's dark brows lifted. "Really?" Her plush lips twisted into a sly little smile. "Now I'm the one who's surprised. I wouldn't have guessed strait-laced Officer Grady was the type to party."

Grady shook his head. "My time hanging around with party girls was short-lived."

It'd been fun while it lasted, but his career was everything to him and wasn't worth risking, so he'd reined it in, thinking he'd settle down. Find someone to spend his life with.

But then everything came crashing down, dragging him with it.

Evelyn poked at the food. "I can't say the same."

Grady studied her, trying to figure out what she meant. He was skilled at reading between the lines. Hearing what wasn't said instead of only relying only on what was allowed out. But Evelyn held her secrets close. Close enough he was starting to wonder just how off he might have been about her.

"You haven't done much partying in Moss Creek." He wanted to know more about her. Unravel the truth behind what really brought her here and what had Sasha chasing after her. It would be easy to believe it was simply the way she looked, because Evelyn was fucking stunning. But that didn't seem to be what Sasha was interested in.

"Unfortunately, partying didn't get me where I thought it would." Evelyn dropped her fork, abandoning her dinner.

"There's probably a lot of people who say the same thing." He wasn't one of them. He'd give anything to be able to go out. To drink until his problems didn't matter.

But he couldn't. He had a reputation to uphold and responsibilities to see to.

Evelyn gave him a small smile. "That's probably true." She wiped at the corner of one eye, blinking a few times before letting out a sigh. "I really appreciate you coming over here and being willing to help me, but I just don't know if it's a good idea."

“You think telling Sasha the truth is a better idea?” He’d been around Sasha for all of five minutes, and it was clear the guy didn’t know how to take no for an answer. Didn’t intend to get anything less than what he wanted. “Because I think that sounds like a terrible fucking idea.”

Evelyn dropped her head back, slumping into her chair as she let out a little groan. “I’m just so over the bullshit. I’m over the games.”

“I’ve got bad news for you. Life is always bullshit.” He faced it every day. “I wish it wasn’t, but it is.”

She huffed out a bitter sounding laugh. “Yeah, but some bullshit is worse than others.”

She wasn’t wrong there. Everybody had problems, he knew that. And they all thought their problems were the worst problems. Not him. He’d actually seen enough to know his weren’t anywhere close to being at the top of the scale.

They weren’t the best of problems to have either, though. He’d take Sasha’s bullshit any day of the week. Technically, had since somewhere along the way he’d decided Evelyn’s problem was another of his responsibilities.

“He’s not going to stick around long.” Grady waved a hand in the general direction of the house across the street. “He won’t be able to stand living without a Starbucks. I’m willing to bet he’s on a flight home before the weekend.”

Evelyn seemed to perk up a little bit. “You think so?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely I do.” Grady downed a little of the beer she’d passed him. “His kind come here all the time. Spend a few days out at The Inn at Red Cedar Ranch. Pretend like they could be a cowboy. And then they hightail their asses back to their fancy cars and expensive suits.”

Evelyn’s head tilted a little as she considered. “That does sound a lot like Sasha.” One side of her nose scrunched, lifting her lip. “All except the cowboy part. There’s no way he would ever get on the back of a horse.”

“That would be one way to keep him away.” Grady looked Evelyn over, imagining her in the saddle, wind blowing her

dark hair, eyes and smile bright. “I could probably get a horse down here tonight.”

Evelyn stared at him for a few beats. “I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to make you think of me as the more convenient alternative.” He gave her a wink. “Just to sweeten the pot, I can promise I won’t eat your grass or shit on your driveway.”

Evelyn laughed, her head tipping back, the sweet sound solidifying his desire to keep this going. Even if nothing came of it, he needed this. Needed something to look forward to in his life.

And he most definitely looked forward to spending more time with Evelyn. Even more than he looked forward to driving Sasha fucking nuts. It was a win-win and he planned to do whatever it took to make sure it continued.

Whatever it took to get to keep seeing her smile like this.

“I think I’ll pass on the horse then.” Evelyn stood, going to collect a bottle of water from the fridge. “I’m not sure I’d know what to do with one anyway.”

“Are you telling me you’ve been here for almost a year and haven’t gotten your ass up onto a horse yet?” He shook his head. “I’m pretty sure that’s illegal.”

“Well you haven’t cuffed me yet, so—” Evelyn’s eyes suddenly jumped to his, wide and unblinking as a blush bloomed across her cheeks, like she was shocked by what she said.

“You’d have to do way more than that for me to want to put cuffs on you.” He’d had more women than he could count make all sorts of suggestive comments about his cuffs. Enough that the thought of putting them on a woman for any reason besides hauling her into the station held no appeal.

And the last thing he’d ever want was Evelyn unable to use her hands. He was greedy like that.

Evelyn gave him a little smile, her cheeks still flushed. “That’s good to know.”

“Now, some of your friends have gotten real close to landing their asses in the back of my cruiser.” He shook his head. “But I probably wouldn’t have cuffed them either.”

Evelyn’s smile widened. “Gertrude carries a cuff key in her purse just in case.”

The laugh that came out of him was loud and shocking. He hadn’t laughed like that in longer than he could remember. “Why does that not surprise me?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Because you’ve met them?” She leaned back toward the food, grabbing her fork yet again to pick through the enchiladas. “They’re all freaking bonkers. I’m actually surprised I haven’t had to bail any of them out yet.”

So was he. “Well it’s not for lack of trying. Those girls seem to think getting arrested would be a badge of honor.” He stood up and went to work collecting trash. “Luckily things are a little more laid back here than they are in the city. We can be a little more flexible in how we handle things.”

Even if he could have left Moss Creek and gone somewhere else, he wouldn’t have done it. As stifling as it could be at times, there was nowhere else in the world he would rather be. Certainly not somewhere he’d be required to haul in every old woman who acted out after a lifetime of being told what she could and couldn’t be.

“They aren’t that flexible where I’m from.” Evelyn said it like she had first-hand knowledge.

Grady paused, lifting his eyes from where he was stuffing used napkins and silverware wrappers into the paper takeout bag. “Does that mean you’ve been arrested before?”

“No.” Evelyn snorted. “That would never happen.” She chewed her lower lip for a second. “My family is pretty well-known, so even if I had done something wrong, the cops would have just called my grandmother to come get me.”

It hadn't taken him long to figure out Evelyn hadn't come from humble beginnings. Sure her yoga studio was doing well by Moss Creek standards, but there was still no way it would pay for the top-of-the-line SUV in the driveway or the handbags he'd noticed more than one woman in town admiring. They all looked the same to him, but he wasn't so clueless that he didn't know how much one of the damn things could cost.

"So I guess they're flexible for some people." Evelyn's fork dropped yet again. "Everybody else is pretty much fucked, though." She closed the lid on the food and shoved it away.

The change in her mood was quick and drastic, happening almost in the blink of an eye, and it sent her careening right back to a conversation they'd had too many times already.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" She was starting to sound like a broken record. "Because I will understand if you want to go."

Grady shook his head, a little pissed at whoever made this woman think she didn't deserve help. "I'm not fucking going." He took a breath and tried again, gentling his tone as much as he could manage. "We've come too far already. I'm in it to win it now." He smiled, imagining Sasha sitting across the street stewing. "My goal is to have shithead Sasha running back to New York before the weekend."

It'd been forever since something challenged him. Since there was something to look forward to.

There was no way he was giving it up. Even if he only had a few days of fun, it would be more than he'd enjoyed his life in longer than he could remember. "Hell, I'm half considering getting a horse now and parking it on his front lawn. See if I can get him to leave before the sun goes down."

Evelyn's head dropped back on another of those laughs that hit him right in the gut. "Let's put that off until tomorrow. I don't know if I have it in me to deal with whatever temper tantrum he'll throw over that."

“That’s the good thing about having me here.” Grady stood, stretching his sore muscles. “You won’t have to deal with him.” He stacked up the remains of their meal. “Because I can’t wait to deal with his temper tantrums.”

“Ugh.” Evelyn slumped down in her seat. “But you’re not here all the time.”

Grady paused, eyes lifting to hers. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Evelyn scrunched her face up at him. “Is this an interrogation?”

“It can be.” He went back to stacking the containers before carrying them to the fridge. “Or you can just tell me what I want to know.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Sasha came over here the minute you left this morning.”

Of course he did. “I don’t think I want you staying here alone when I’m not here.”

Evelyn blinked at him. “Where else am I supposed to go?”

“You could stay at my place.” The offer was easy to make and even easier to get behind. “You won’t have to worry about him coming to bother you there.”

“I think you underestimate what a man like Sasha can accomplish.” Evelyn wiped both hands over her face before raking her fingers through her hair. “He’ll be able to figure out where you live and then he’ll show up there and I’ll be stuck facing him down without nosy neighbors peeking out their blinds ready to call 911.”

Imagining her out on Grizzly Peak, essentially cornered by that prick, turned his blood cold. “He wouldn’t be that stupid.”

He certainly wouldn’t be that stupid twice.

“Wouldn’t he?” Evelyn’s brows climbed her forehead. “You’ve met him.”

“Fuck.” Grady loaded the leftovers into the refrigerator, working hard to keep from slamming the door. “I really

fucking hate that guy.”

“Same.” Evelyn blew out a breath. “And now I’m stuck dealing with him until his dumb ass accepts I’m not going to New York with him.”

As much as he wanted this to drag out, give himself more time with Evelyn and more time to avoid his own problems, it wasn’t right. He needed to focus on getting Sasha out of Moss Creek and then let the chips fall where they may. “Maybe we should take a walk around the block. Display our love all over the neighborhood.”

Evelyn tapped one finger against her lips. “A walk? To where?”

“Nowhere. Just so we can enjoy the evening.” What kind of life had she been living? “Do people not take walks in New York City?”

Evelyn stood up, looking a little indignant. “Of course we take walks. I walked almost everywhere when I lived there.” She lifted her hands and started counting off her fingers. “I walked to the grocery store. I walked to restaurants. I walked to go shopping. I walked to meet my friends at the bar.”

“So every walk had a purpose?” He couldn’t imagine being that close to so many things. It sounded congested and chaotic.

Evelyn tipped her head from side to side, considering. “Pretty much.”

“Okay then.” Grady took her hand, lacing his fingers between hers. “Then the purpose of our walk is to piss Sasha the fuck off.”



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## EVELYN



WHY HAD SHE not done this before?

Evelyn pulled in a deep breath, letting the crisp spring air soothe her frazzled nerves. It carried a hint of freshly cut grass from the neighbor who'd been mowing his yard since the first hint of green. And the sweetness of the tulips blooming in more than a few of the yards on her block.

This was nothing like walking in the city. There was no noise. No other people jockeying for sidewalk space. No exhaust fumes from the taxis trolling the curbs and no garbage cluttering the gutters.

"You're smiling." Grady squeezed her hand as they slowly made their way down the sidewalk. "Looks like you like walking for no reason."

Evelyn pulled in another deep breath of the cooling evening air. "I guess I do." They'd actually gone pretty far, meandering their way around the little neighborhood she currently called home. And it was turning out to be a pretty nice home.

Lots of people loved the chaos of the city, but she wasn't one of them. The excitement, yes. The loudness, no. It was one of many reasons she'd done her best to earn a one-way ticket out.

And then ended up buying her own.

"I like how quiet it is here." She tipped her head back, facing the rapidly dimming sky. "And I like how well you can see the stars."

Grady chuckled, the sound low and already familiar. “If you like this, you’d love being out on the ranch. It’s quiet as hell out there and you can count every star in the sky.”

She dropped her gaze, meeting his. “Really?”

Grady’s brows lifted. “So now you haven’t been on a horse *and* you haven’t been out on Cross Creek at night?”

“I have, I guess I just didn’t pay attention.” The realization didn’t sit well. She came out here to get away from everything hanging over her head in New York, but had she really accomplished it? Sure, she’d made friends and opened the yoga studio she’d always dreamed of having, but all the bullshit still lingered, hovering like a raincloud ready to open up. Making it impossible to really enjoy the first freedom she’d ever had.

“I get it.” Grady’s steps were slow, keeping pace with hers. “I have a bad habit of forgetting to enjoy life myself.”

“I can imagine. Between working for the police department and working on your family’s ranch, you probably don’t have a lot of spare time.” Guilt tugged at her gut, making her open her mouth again, ready to give him another out. Tell him once more she would confess everything to Sasha and deal with whatever came next.

“If you’re about to tell me I don’t have to keep doing this, you can save your breath.” Grady’s thumb slowly stroked across her skin in a surprisingly intimate touch. “I don’t get to have much fun in life and if you think I’m missing out on driving Sasha over the edge, you’re dead wrong.”

Evelyn worked hard to flatten the smile sneaking across her lips. “It is kind of fun to mess with him, isn’t it?”

“He’s kind of an easy target, but I’m gonna take it anyway.” Grady’s eyes shifted, skimming over her face before going back to the sidewalk ahead of them. “How did you end up with a guy like him anyway?”

Evelyn sighed. “I wasn’t actually ever with him.” She winced internally over explaining her life to Grady. Someone like him probably wouldn’t understand where she was coming

from and would end up judging her harshly. Maybe rightfully so. “My family pushed me to go out with him. My grandmother thought we would be a great match.”

“No offense, but your grandmother sounds like she might be stupid too.” The slow drawl of Grady’s words made his comment sound even more sarcastic.

And even more hilarious.

Evelyn laughed in spite of the gravity of the situation they were discussing, dropping her head against Grady’s shoulder as she wheezed. “I think you might be the first person in the world to ever have enough balls to say something bad about her.”

No one fucked with her grandmother. In fact, everyone did their absolute best to stay on her good side, working hard to wedge their heads as far up her skinny ass as they could get them. Which was a real accomplishment considering the size of the stick already occupying that space.

Everyone except her. She toed the line hard. Walking the edge between outright disobedience and sneaky rebellion, hoping it might eventually make her grandmother decide she wasn’t worth the trouble and write her off.

She should have known better.

“In case you haven’t noticed, old ladies don’t scare me.” Grady gave her a smile that threatened to melt the panties right off her body. “Especially one who would try to hook you up with that fuckin’ guy.”

Evelyn shook her head. “She acted shocked when I didn’t like him.”

Shocked and irritated. Her mother had married the first man her grandmother lined up, marching to the altar without question and saying I do on her twentieth birthday. Then she spent the next thirty-five years miserable, stuck in a marriage that wasn’t just loveless, but filled with hate and contempt.

“That’s surprising considering I knew you and Sasha weren’t a match within two seconds of meeting him.” Grady

huffed out a little laugh. “What the fuck was that shirt he was wearing?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes, the smile lingering on her lips. She didn’t have anyone besides Amelie to talk shit with, and her best friend’s availability for shit-talking was slim to none these days. “He spends more on his clothes than I do.”

“He spends more on his clothes than all of Moss Creek does.” Grady sounded a little disgusted. “That’s probably what your grandma thought made you such a good match. She looked at him and saw dollar signs.”

The contempt in his tone had Evelyn looking at her feet as she struggled with the shame and guilt she’d fought since she was old enough to understand the way people saw her. “That might have been part of it.”

It was absolutely part of it, just not in the way Grady believed. Yes, her grandmother thought Sasha was a good match because of his wealth, but only because she fully expected Evelyn to marry someone of equal value.

But she wasn’t going to tell Grady that. He seemed to be a little disgusted over discovering Sasha came from money. And, while she recognized this thing between them was both fake and fleeting, she didn’t want Grady to be disgusted by her. She carried enough disgust for both of them.

“Money isn’t everything.” Grady’s expression hardened. “I wish I could say it wasn’t something, but I do know it’s not everything.”

She agreed completely. “Money *can* make some things easier.”

It could also make some things harder. Could complicate life in a way no one else understood or honestly cared about. No one had sympathy for the poor rich girl and all her first world problems, and she couldn’t blame them. In the scheme of things, she had it made. She didn’t have to work. Didn’t have to worry about how she would pay her bills.

All she had to do was marry someone her grandmother approved of and carry on her family’s legacy while men in

suits managed their holdings and continued making them exorbitant amounts of money.

It was the most boring, pointless life she could imagine. Spending money just for the sake of displaying wealth. Making connections only to prove how well-connected she was. None of it mattered. Not to anyone besides everyone else who was doing the same exact thing.

Grady's mouth flattened. "But it can't make everything easier. Unfortunately."

Boy was that the fucking truth.

Grady's hand suddenly tightened in hers, stopping her pity party in its tracks. "Looks like we've got company."

"Walking off your cheap take out?" Sasha flipped his hair, slinging the perfectly styled front out of his eyes. "I would guess you'll need a few more laps for that to be the case.

Evelyn tried to look bored. "Stalking is illegal, Sasha. And no one around here cares who you are. If you're not careful, you might just end up visiting everyone else currently sitting at the station."

It was an empty threat. There was no way Sasha's family would ever allow him to wind up in a holding cell. They would throw however much money was required to have him back in the comfort of his own home.

Not that his current living situation was even remotely close to the standard he was accustomed to. If she was lucky, he'd end up horrified by the lack of a catering kitchen in his little rental and decide it wasn't worth the sacrifice.

"Are you threatening to have your supposed boyfriend arrest me?" He almost seemed amused by the possibility.

"First of all, he's my fiancé." Evelyn lifted her chin, fighting the urge to smile. She got why Grady was sticking it out with her. It did feel pretty good to knock Sasha down a few notches. "And second, it's not a threat if you're actually breaking the law."

She knew Sasha was watching her every move. Discovering he was so comfortable admitting it was unnerving, and only reinforced how correct she was in refusing to go out with him again.

“Cut the shit, Evelyn.” He was totally ignoring Grady at this point, focused only on her. “We both know you’re lying. There’s no way you would ever do more than fuck a man like this and then send him on his way.” Sasha’s eyes finally moved to Grady. “I’m sure she’s been open and upfront about her past...” he paused, pretending to fish around for a word, “adventures.”

Grady slowly cocked one eyebrow, looking Sasha up and down. “I take it you’re one of those men who’s intimidated by a woman with experience.” He inched closer, continuing to stare Sasha down. “That because you don’t want them to have high expectations?”

Sasha’s nostrils barely flared, but to his credit he didn’t step back. “My personal life is none of your business.”

“Good. Then you’ll understand why our personal life is none of yours.” Grady’s hand slid from hers to snake around her waist, pulling her body flush against his. “But I’m happy to leave the windows open tonight if you’d like to hear what it sounds like when a woman actually comes.”

Grady’s palm curved around her ass, the heat of his skin sinking through the thin fabric of her yoga pants. The moisture wicking fabric was buttery soft and ridiculously comfortable, but it was terrible as a barrier and she could literally feel the press of each individual finger.

Especially the ones curved close to where her cheek met her thigh. It was a possessive hold designed to make it clear Grady was comfortable touching her everywhere.

And Sasha didn’t miss it. His sharp gaze narrowed, zeroing in on the spot where Grady traced the crease, following it like a path. One leading to a part she’d been neglecting.

“You’re disgusting.” Sasha scowled as he met her gaze. “And all this is pointless anyway.” He turned back to Grady,

looking him up and down. “But I guess if this is what you’d like to spend your last hurrah doing, that’s your choice.” He stepped away, turning to toss one last insult over his shoulder. “But you’ve never been particularly discerning with who you allow in your bed, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

The comment stung even though every partner she’d had was chosen with purpose and intent. It sucked that a man could fuck anything and everything and be celebrated as some sort of playboy. Like bedding women was an achievement to be proud of. But when a woman did the same thing? She was nothing more than a whore. A slut.

Technically, that was what she’d been betting on, so she wouldn’t have minded being saddled with those titles if her plan had worked.

Grady watched Sasha go, clearly unimpressed as he jogged away, finishing the second of his daily runs. “I do feel a little better knowing you kicked his ass to the curb.”

“And I didn’t sleep with him.” She lifted one shoulder. “I guess there’s that.”

“You might’ve slept with him. I’m guessing it wouldn’t have been memorable enough of an experience for you to recall it.” Grady delivered the jab in the same sarcastic drawl as the one he aimed at her grandmother.

And this one was just as hilarious.

Evelyn laughed until her stomach hurt, wiping away the tears edging her eyes as she finally managed to rein herself in. “He has a reputation for being horrible in bed.”

“I believe it.” Grady eased his hand back into hers and tugged her down the sidewalk, moving them toward her little house. “The only men I know who don’t want a woman to be more experienced than they are, are the ones who can’t find the nose on their face.” His eyes slid to hers. “If you catch my drift.”

Evelyn fought the urge to laugh again. “Are you saying they don’t know where the little man in the boat is?”

Grady chuckled. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”



Evelyn laughed along with him—like they shared a joke only they got—and for the first time in forever, she felt a little lighter. A little more able to breathe.

It was how she felt when she first moved here. Far from ridiculous responsibilities and ego-driven expectations.

But then Amelie had her baby and Moss Creek started to feel as lonely as New York.

Yes, she had Muriel and Gertrude and the rest of the girls, but none of them really understood her or the life she was born into. It wasn't the kind of thing that was easy to share. It changed how people saw you. How they treated you.

How they judged you.

And ultimately, that was what would probably happen with Grady. So maybe she needed to look at all of this the same way he was. As an opportunity to have a little fun before her life went back to being shit.

Grady's steps slowed as they rounded the final turn. "Are you expecting someone?"

Evelyn followed his line of sight, perplexed when her gaze landed on the exceptionally full driveway in front of her house. "No."

She didn't get many visitors outside of Amelie and occasionally one of the other women around town. But the car in her driveway was unfamiliar, so all those options were out.

"That's a rental." Grady stopped, all his focus on the unexpected vehicle. "Any idea who might be driving around a rental?"

"I guess it could be somebody visiting Dianna. I still occasionally get some of her mail, so maybe they just picked the wrong house?" She swallowed hard, hoping against hope that was the case.

Even though she knew it wasn't.

She knew exactly who was parked in her driveway and she knew exactly why they were there. Should have actually seen this coming.

Grady turned toward her, pulling her in. “We don’t have to go back. I can make a phone call and have Cooper or Peters come see what they want.”

Once again, Grady was stepping up to take care of her. To handle a situation he seemed to know she didn’t want to face. Unfortunately, there was no escaping this. She was stuck. She knew one day her time would run out and it looked like today was that day.

The driver’s door of the sleek sedan opened and a man got out. He straightened the lines of his suit before opening the back door, holding it wide. He held one hand out, offering assistance to the slim, perfectly poised woman who climbed from the backseat. Her expression was stern and serious as she looked down her nose at the house in front of her.

“Probably could’ve picked her out of a lineup.” Grady shook his head. “You want me to go tell her she’s an idiot now, or should I save that for later?”

Evelyn choked, the sound a cross between unhinged laughter and a panicked giggle. Unfortunately, it was loud enough to draw attention their way.

Her grandmother turned, gaze sharp as it landed on her. She stared at them for a few long seconds before turning to go up the driveway and onto the porch.

“Shit.” All the air rushed from her lungs.

“Seems like our new neighbor might have made a few phone calls.” Grady met her eyes. “What’s she here for?”

The answer was simple and devastating. “To finish ruining my life.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## GRADY



“WE MIGHT AS well get it over with.” Grady kept one arm around Evelyn, keeping her close.

Evelyn’s expression was solemn. “I think all the fun you’re having is about to come to an end. She’s the biggest killjoy I know.”

He knew better than most how debilitating family responsibility and expectations could be. The way they could rule your life and halt your trajectory. Maybe that was why he wanted to tackle this moment head-on. There wasn’t shit he could do about his own issues, but he’d had a lot of practice working other people’s out and was ready to put it to good use. “I bet it won’t be as bad as you think it will be.”

“You’ve clearly never met my grandmother.” Evelyn straightened her shoulders, spine stiff as she walked toward her house. “You should actually probably go.”

“No way.” He tipped his head to where Sasha was practically skipping across the street. “Especially not with him headed over.”

Evelyn let out a little groan. “I really don’t feel like dealing with them right now.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you don’t have to do it alone.” He lifted her hand to his mouth as Sasha glared their way, brushing his lips across her knuckles. “You’ve got your fiancé to help you get through it.”

Evelyn stared at him, looking unconvinced. “Fair warning, the whole fiancé thing is going to go over like a lead balloon.”

“Don’t care.” He was good at dealing with people who liked to throw their weight around, whether it was money or connections or literal mass. They were nothing more than bullies. And if there was one thing a bully hated, it was someone who didn’t give a shit about them and didn’t play their game.

And that was his forte.

Grady led Evelyn up the driveway, keeping her close as they rounded the corner and Sasha and her grandmother came into view, heads tipped close together as they shared hushed, but sharp, words. They suddenly quieted and her grandmother spun to face them, thin lips pressed flat.

But her focus didn’t go to Evelyn. It came straight to him. Her cold eyes moved down his frame, looking wholly unimpressed. “What have you done now, Evelyn?”

“I believe you mean who.” Sasha dropped his two cents like he was a part of this. The prick was butthurt Evelyn didn’t sleep with him and didn’t miss any opportunity to show his ass about it.

Grady surveyed the situation and the people in it. He could play this one of two ways. He could let Evelyn take the lead. See what she did and fall in line. But he’d never been good at letting someone else be in charge, so he decided to grab the bull—or the grandmother in this case—by the horns.

He walked up the steps, smiling wide as he went straight for the frigid old woman, arms outstretched. “You must be Evelyn’s Gram-Gram.” He grabbed her, squeezing her tight. “I am so excited to finally meet you.”

The old woman stood stiffly, as if she was frozen in shock. Good. Shock gave him the advantage.

Grady leaned back, offering the easy grin he used to disarm the problematic people who crossed his path. “Well, I can see where she gets her good looks from.”

He wasn’t trying to charm her. Based on the expression etched into the small lines around Gram-Gram’s lips it wasn’t

possible anyway. But irritating the shit out of her would be almost as much fun. Maybe more.

“Evelyn,” her grandmother kept her sour face pointed his way for a second longer before shifting it to her granddaughter, “can I have a word with you inside?”

Evelyn glanced at him, looking a little terrified as she shifted on her feet. He left Gram-Gram behind, reaching out to trace Evelyn’s cheek in a gentle touch, hoping it conveyed what he couldn’t directly say: He had her back. However this shook out, he was there for her. Willing to do whatever he could to make sure at least one of them could be free.

Evelyn took a breath, her shoulders lifting on the inhale as she faced down her grandmother. “Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of Grady.” She swallowed hard, the muscles of her neck working. “He’s going to be my husband, after all.”

Sasha laughed, his head falling back. “Come on. We all know this is a fucking lie.” He leaned into Gram-Gram’s ear. “You and I both know she would never date someone like him, let alone agree to marry him.”

Evelyn’s grandmother held up one hand, palm facing Sasha. “One shouldn’t allow their own emotions to color their assumptions.” She flattened her palm against his face, pushing him away. “Obviously, I was surprised to hear you were engaged.” Her cool gaze flicked to Grady before moving back to Evelyn. “So I chartered the next flight available hoping I could learn more about your future husband for myself.”

Grady swallowed down a laugh. Evelyn’s grandmother was as full of it as they were. If she didn’t come to Moss Creek planning to shut shit down, he’d resign. Turn in his badge and admit he wasn’t cut out for the job.

But that wouldn’t happen because he was right. He could see it in her face.

Luckily, something had changed Gram-Gram’s mind. What it was, he wasn’t sure yet, but things like that always had a way of coming out.

And they usually came out quick.

“Oh.” Evelyn was obviously surprised by her grandmother’s declaration. “Where will you be staying? Is your hotel close?” They were smart questions. Designed to outline the limitations they would now be working with, without offering up too much in return.

He was impressed.

“Well I’m staying here, of course.” Her grandmother plastered on the fakest, most uncomfortable looking smile he’d ever seen. “I knew my lovely granddaughter would want me close so we could spend some quality time together.”

Damn. He’d expected Evelyn’s grandmother to be a little shady after the whole Sasha thing, but this woman was a snake in the grass. Luckily he wasn’t scared of snakes.

“We would love to have you.” Grady feigned disappointment. “But we’ve only got one bedroom set up.”

Evelyn nodded along, the movement a little too quick. “The spare is empty since I didn’t need all that space, so I don’t actually have anywhere to put you.”

The stiff smile froze on her grandmother’s face. “Well I’m sure you have a sofa.”

Hell. This woman was not giving it up.

Evelyn’s eyes widened. “Of course I have a sofa, but I didn’t think you would want to—”

Her grandmother’s chin lifted. “I’m perfectly capable of sleeping on a sofa for one night. I’ll simply have everything I need delivered tomorrow so I can be comfortable for the rest of my stay.”

She said it like it wasn’t up for debate. Like she was used to getting her way, no questions asked. It fell in line with everything Evelyn told him, but it also fell in line with his own desire to keep this situation going.

So he was going to let it slide. Let Gram-Gram think she was the one in control. The one calling the shots. It would

make it a hell of a lot easier for Evelyn and him to pull their own strings.

Evelyn shifted on her feet beside him, obviously unaware how well this was going for them. “Of course. That would be fantastic.” Her smile was shaky. “Come in, then.”

She shoved a section of dark hair behind one ear as she opened the front door. He held the screen wide as her grandmother walked in, but the second Sasha stepped forward Grady blocked his path. “Not you.”

Sasha barked out a laugh. “You can’t be ser—”

“As a fucking heart attack. You are not coming in here.” Grady stared the other man down. He might have to let Gram-Gram in, but there was no way in hell this fucker was coming inside Evelyn’s home.

Sasha’s nostrils flared as he leaned to try to peek over Grady’s shoulder, like he thought someone else was going to override his decision.

Wasn’t happening.

Grady backed up, snapping the screen door closed in Sasha’s face. “Enjoy your evening.” He closed the inner door, feeling a little smug as Sasha scoffed.

He turned around to discover Evelyn’s grandmother had a smug expression on her own face. This was a game and she believed she was winning. Based on the slump of Evelyn’s shoulders, she thought the same thing. But almost a decade as a cop and a lifetime of being able to read people’s motivations and intents put him of a different mind.

“Are you hungry?” Grady kept his tone light and leaned hard into the unassuming drawl that served him well in his career. “We finished dinner right before our walk, but there’s plenty left. I could warm you something up.”

Evelyn’s grandmother smoothed down the flowing fabric of her blouse. “I’m fine.”

Good. He really didn’t feel like dealing with feeding her. And there was nothing he wanted more than to get Evelyn



alone so he could let her know this was all going way better than she thought. “Then I suppose we should get you comfortable. Ev and I turn in early since we both get up at the crack of dawn.”

Evelyn’s grandmother made a strange choking sound. It took him a second to realize she was laughing.

“Evelyn? Up at dawn?” She huffed out a breath as she looked Evelyn over from the corner of her eyes. “I’m not sure I believe that.”

“You’ll be believing it at five a.m.” He snagged Evelyn, pulling her close. “But we’ll do our best not to wake you.”

Evelyn was stiff against his side, certainly not selling their story, so he turned her toward the hall. “Let’s go get your Gram-Gram some blankets and a pillow.”

He could practically see the steam rising off the older woman’s head every time he called her Gram-Gram. It was fucking beautiful.

Evelyn walked a little too quickly down the hall, ducking into her bedroom and starting to pace as he closed the door. He caught her as she passed, resting his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to stop. “You need to calm down.”

“*Calm down?*” Her voice started to rise. “How am I supposed to calm down?”

Grady rested one finger across her lips, sealing off whatever was about to come next since chances were good it would be loud enough to carry the short distance to the living room. “Take a deep breath. She’s going to be able to tell you’re wound up and then she’ll know we’re lying.”

Evelyn leaned in, her whisper sharp. “Spoiler alert. She already knows we’re lying. That’s why she wants to stay. She’s trying to call my bluff. She wants to humiliate me. To force me to admit this is all fake.”

Maybe Evelyn understood this situation better than he thought.

“Then don’t admit it.” It was a simple answer and an even easier solution. The only way anyone would know this was fake was if one of them admitted it. And he sure as shit wasn’t going to. This was the only thing keeping his life from being completely miserable. For the first time in forever he wasn’t sitting alone staring at the television until he passed out in his recliner. For the first time in forever he actually had something to look forward to while he faced down the heartbreak of his mother’s decline. Was it a perfect situation? No. But it was something.

And something was good enough for him.

“She’s going to do everything she can to try to force me to admit the truth.” Evelyn met his eyes, her gaze serious. “She will talk to everyone in town. They are all going to know about this by the end of the day tomorrow.”

Grady shrugged. “So?”

“So?” Evelyn’s brows lifted. “What about your friends? Your family? They’re all going to hear we’re engaged and wonder what the fuck is going on. They’re gonna be mad at you for not telling them. They’re going to be—”

She was starting to spin out of control, and he needed to stop it.

“Let me worry about my family.” Evelyn didn’t know there was nothing to worry about. And not having to think about his mother or be questioned about her current state had been a relief he wasn’t quite ready to give up yet. “I think you underestimate the people around here. If you think some strange woman can go around asking questions and they will happily dish out information, then you haven’t been paying attention.” He slid his hands from her shoulders to her face. “Let’s just ride this out. See what we can make happen.”

Someone knocked on the door, but it swung open before either of them had a chance to answer. Acting purely on impulse, Grady lowered his mouth to Evelyn’s, claiming another kiss of circumstance.

This one was just as sweet as the last one. Evelyn's mouth was full and soft, and the little sigh she let out as her hands fisted in his shirt sent a blaze of heat crackling through him. There was plenty fake about this, but their kisses sure as hell didn't fall under that umbrella.

Her grandmother cleared her throat, waiting until Grady broke the kiss and looked her way to speak.

"I came to let you know I won't be needing the blanket and pillow. I sent Bernard out to retrieve some of my things and he will bring back the bedding I need." The disdain she held for him was thinly veiled as she looked them over. "Can I assume there's just one bathroom?"

"There is, but we're happy to let you use it as often as you need." He drawled out the words and pushed on a smile, doing his best to be the clueless cowboy she believed he was.

It wasn't as easy to lean into his charm when Gram-Gram was involved, especially since her face generally looked like she'd been sucking on lemons. The woman was about as sour as it got, making him wonder where in the hell someone as warm and friendly as Evelyn came from.

"How kind of you." Her tone was dry. Gram-Gram gripped the door, pulling it closed. "I'll leave you to your evening."

Grady waited until the door clicked closed before turning back to Evelyn. "Is she always like this?"

Evelyn's forehead dropped to his chest, her words muffled by the fabric of his shirt. "She's usually worse. She's on good behavior because she's still not sure exactly what's going on."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." Grady glanced around the room, letting out a deep breath. This situation had changed a whole hell of a lot more than he thought in the past minute and a half. "So it seems like Gram-Gram doesn't feel too bad about barging in here."

Evelyn's forehead remained against his chest. "It does seem like that, doesn't it?"

Grady glanced at the king-sized bed dressed with layers of blanket and sheet. "I was going to offer to sleep on the floor

but...”

It certainly wouldn't help their cause if Evelyn's grandmother walked in to find him sprawled across the area rug instead of curled up next to his fiancée.

Evelyn sighed, tipping her head back, lips parting as she started to offer him yet another out.

Grady shook his head. “Don't even say it. I'm not leaving you to deal with this on your own.”

Evelyn clamped her lips together, tipping her head to one side. “You can't honestly tell me you don't have better things to do than deal with this.” She squeezed her temples. “This will literally turn your whole life upside down.”

It would, and that was exactly why he wasn't going anywhere. For the past few years every day was the same. He worked. Held his breath to see if his mother would be good or bad. Went home, slept, and then did it all again. He was caught in a repeating cycle, one with no end in sight.

At this point, he didn't care how it changed, just that it did. Something to distract him from the reality that his mother was getting worse and there would come a point when she might need more care than Charlene could give. When that happened, the money would run out quickly, and he'd be faced with a choice he didn't want to make.

Even if all this situation did was distract him from that impending choice, it would be worth it.

Evelyn rolled her eyes like she thought he was being ridiculous. “Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you.”

Grady grinned. “I've been warned.”

Evelyn went to the closet, pulling the silky robe she had on that morning from the hook on the door before going to pull open the top drawer of her dresser. “I should probably also warn you about something else.”

Grady waited, interested to see what other complications she thought would make him change his mind. “What's that?”

Evelyn turned to face him, lips hinting at a smile. “I’m a pretty violent sleeper.”

# CHAPTER NINE

## EVELYN



SHE'D BEEN IN plenty of odd situations in her life, most of them involving men, and every single one of them her own fault.

This one was no different. It was no one's fault but her own, and it was definitely odd, but it was nowhere near as uncomfortable as it should have been.

Maybe it was because she'd known Grady significantly longer than the majority of the men who'd found their way into her bedroom. It could also be because this particular situation did not involve imminent sex.

Whatever it was, by all accounts it should still feel weird as hell considering her grandmother was parked right on the other side of the door and had no problem barging in at any time. But Grady didn't seem bothered by it, so she decided not to be bothered either.

"I'm not scared." Grady kicked off his boots, flashing her a heart-stopping grin. "I've wrestled calves bigger than you. No way you can do more damage than they can."

Evelyn grinned back. "I dunno. My elbows are pretty bony."

Grady's eyes lit up, like he was thrilled with their banter. "Not half as bony as the ones digging into your couch tonight."

Evelyn cackled, laughing louder than she intended at the thought of her rich as fuck grandmother sleeping on a freaking sofa. Never in her life would she have imagined Griselda

Warwick stooping to a level like that and it was hilarious to think about.

Unfortunately, it would probably be the last amusing thing that happened in her life. When all this was over, she would be forced to go back to New York. Married off to some asshole like Sasha and forced to parade herself and the family they created around New York City for the betterment of her family's name.

No more teaching yoga classes. No more hanging out with Muriel and Gertrude. And no more secretly hoping they acted out in a way that would offer her a glimpse of Officer Grady Haynes.

Because, regardless of her best attempts to find another option, she only had two roads to pick from. All or nothing.

She sobered, laugh dying off as the hopelessness she'd been trying to outrun caught up with her yet again.

"Everything's going to be okay, Ev. I promise." Grady's eyes moved over her face. "We will handle this."

She didn't necessarily believe him, but damn it was nice to have someone in the trenches with her for a change. "Okay."

Grady gave her one more long look before slowly turning away. It took her a second to figure out what was happening, but it eventually registered that by putting his back to her, he was offering her as much privacy as he could given the circumstances. Unlike every other man she'd allowed in her bedroom, he wasn't standing there waiting to ogle every inch of her body. Salivating as he waited to get his hands on her.

Not that it had bothered her. Even if she rarely found any sort of sexual pleasure in the encounters, they fed something even more important: Spite.

And, for a while it was enough. She thought her plan of ruining herself in the eye of New York's finest would work and she'd be free.

Obviously not. Her grandmother was here, sleeping on a fucking couch for God's sake, proving there was no escaping her family's expectations.



Not unless she wanted to lose everything else that came with them and end up alone and on her own in a world she still wasn't fully equipped to navigate.

Evelyn quickly peeled her sports bra over her head, letting it drop to the floor before shimmying out of her leggings and panties. She wound the robe around her middle, cinching it at the waist. "I'm going to go take a quick shower." She didn't necessarily want to leave the safety of her room, but she'd taught more than a few classes, and her skin was sticky and her scalp itched from the sweat from those sessions.

"I'll be right here when you get back." Grady's reassurance was oddly comforting. Reminded her that for the first time in her life she wasn't facing her grandmother alone. Unlike her mother, and just about everyone else she knew, Grady wasn't cowering in the old woman's presence, bowing down and ready to blindly do her bidding. And she respected the hell out of him for it.

Evelyn ducked out of the room, quietly tiptoeing into the bathroom next door before taking a quick shower and blowing her hair dry. She pulled on her pajama shorts and tank top before slipping back into her robe and creeping back to the bedroom. She didn't even offer a sideways glance toward the living room to see what her grandmother was doing. Honestly, outside of the fact that she was here to put an end to life as she knew it, she didn't care what the old woman was up to.

Evelyn silently snuck into the bedroom, focusing on the door as she quietly latched it into place. When she turned around to find Grady sprawled across her bed, she stopped in her tracks. After months of hoping to get a little glimpse of him at The Creekey or around town, she was sure as hell getting an eye full now.

Grady was arguably the most attractive member of Moss Creek's Police Department, and that was saying something considering there were quite a few good-looking men on the payroll. But there was something special about the one currently occupying her bed. He was tall and broad in a lean sort of way. Maybe it was the length of his limbs keeping him from looking bulky, but somehow he managed to have more

muscles than she'd ever seen while still seeming graceful in the most masculine sense of the word.

Every one of those thick, almost sculpted muscles was on display as he laid across her sheets in nothing but a pair of navy-blue boxer briefs, eyes fused to the television mounted on her wall as he flipped through the channels. "Feel better?"

Her brain tried to wrap around his question, but it couldn't seem to make sense of the words. Did seeing an almost naked Grady in her bed make her feel better?

Surprisingly, yes. Also dumbstruck, apparently, but admitting that wouldn't be such a good idea. It would push this night into the awkwardness she was so happy to avoid. So she fought her eyes away from where he took up well over his half of the king-sized mattress and flipped off the light, steps slow as she forced herself to the bed.

How many men had she jumped into the sack with in her life? Too many.

And obviously not enough since her grandmother hadn't written her off as a blight to the family name.

But she'd never hesitated like this. Not a single time.

"I don't bite." Grady's eyes slowly came her way. "Promise."

Evelyn waited for him to follow it up with some sort of sexual innuendo. Every other man she'd ever known would have.

But he didn't.

Instead Grady pulled back the sheets, readying her spot. "Have a little bit of a plan."

"You do?" She wasn't surprised. Grady was almost as full of plans as she was and so far they'd been way better than any she'd ever made. Especially the one that resulted in their goodbye kiss on the steps this morning. Or their kiss out on the sidewalk tonight.

Evelyn jumped under the covers a little too fast, revealing an eagerness she didn't normally possess. She glanced down

and noticed she was still wearing her robe. “Hang on.” Her fingers fumbled with the tie at the waist, yanking hard a few times before noticing it was now knotted.

Tightly.

“Here.” Grady passed off the remote as he leaned close, bracing his big body on one elbow as he invaded her space. “You find us something to watch while I take care of this.” His hands went to her waist, long, strong fingers working the tight bind of silky fabric. Every movement brushed against her belly, his touch barely buffered by the thin layers she wore.

Instead of flipping through the channels, she watched his every move, struggling to breathe as her body became more and more aware of his closeness. By the time Grady had the tie loose and brushed the sides of her robe open, her nipples were pulled tight and there was a steady throb pulsing between her thighs.

“There.” Grady’s eyes lifted to her face, barely pausing on the tight press of her nipples against the thin fabric of her tank top. “Do you want to hear about my plan now?”

Evelyn swallowed hard, both frustrated and unsurprised at his reaction to her straining nipples. Grady had never been anything but a complete gentleman, so it would make sense he would continue being respectful, even now. But did that mean she was the only one currently struggling? Maybe she’d misread his behavior. Mistook the intensity in his kisses for interest instead of commitment to their plan.

“If Gram-Gram opens the door, we need to look like a happy couple.” He lifted up her duvet to reveal she was the only one under the sheet. “So I figured this was a close second to a pillow barricade down the middle of the mattress.”

“Oh.” A hint of disappointment accidentally carried through her tone. “If that’s how you’re more comfortable.” She chewed her lower lip, feeling uncertain about a man for the first time. “But I’m fine if you want to be under the sheets too.”

Was *fine* the right word? Probably not, but it was the one she would stick with even though the possibility of being next to such a naked version of Grady was much more than *fine*.

But maybe this really was nothing more than a game to him. A fun way to interject a little excitement into his life.

“Evelyn.” Her grandmother barged right into her room without knocking. “Where in the world are you keeping your gin?”

“Umm.” She licked her lips, trying to find a little more moisture as her brain attempted to make the jump from Grady’s abs to cocktails. “I don’t have any.”

Grady’s hand came to slide through the freshly dried pile of her hair, fingers slowly gliding down the long strands. “We’ve got some beer if you want that.”

“Beer?” Her grandmother choked out the word. “All you have is *beer*?”

Grady continued petting her, smoothing her hair behind one shoulder in an absent-minded fashion. “Ev’s not much of a drinker, so there’s no reason for us to have anything on hand.”

“*Ev*.” Her grandmother slowly repeated the nickname Grady absolutely created solely to irk her. “Isn’t much of a drinker?” Her eyes zeroed in on where Grady’s hand was now sliding across the skin of her shoulder. “Interesting.” She pulled in a deep breath, chin lifting on the inhale. “I suppose I will add that to the shopping list for Bernard.” Her lips pursed. “Should I assume you don’t have tonic either?”

Evelyn swallowed hard as Grady’s touch skimmed down her arm, fighting to stay focused. “I would say that’s a safe assumption.”

“Very well.” Her grandmother’s gaze slid over them one more time before she turned away. “Enjoy your evening.”

When the door was closed and her grandmother’s steps faded to nothing, Grady leaned close, his feather light touch continuing. “How many more times do you think she’ll come in here tonight?”

Evelyn's head fell back against the headboard. "I don't even want to guess."

"I bet I can make it zero." Grady's eyes sparkled as his free hand gripped the carved wood of the headboard she'd convinced an acquaintance to smuggle out of her loft and ship to Moss Creek. His bicep flexed as he pushed against it, bouncing the edge against the drywall behind their heads in a slow, rhythmic beat.

A beat that she quickly started to feel in troubling places.

Between the familiar way he'd just touched her and now imagining the rate at which he fucked, she was practically squirming in the sheets when his pace started to get faster. She couldn't look away from him. Couldn't take her eyes off the wickedly sexy smirk on Grady's face as he fake fucked her into the wall. It was confusingly erotic and frustratingly unsatisfying. By the time he ended, punctuating the torturous interlude with four, spaced out hits, she was heavily considering a trip back to the bathroom.

But she was the only one struggling to maintain their composure. Grady was grinning from ear to ear, looking pleased as hell with himself, like he was having every bit of the fun he claimed to want. "It's a shame we're on the backside of the house so Sasha couldn't hear that." He pulled his hand from the headboard, dragging the blanket over his body. "Maybe tomorrow we can torture him a little longer during our walk."

Torturing Sasha did sound like fun. Almost as fun as whatever the actual torture would involve.

Hopefully it would be more kissing.

She almost laughed at the ridiculousness of the thought. She was thirty-two freaking years old. Way too old to be getting worked up over a few kisses and a fake fuck.

Grady gave her a conspiratorial wink. "Or we could kick this up a notch."

Evelyn slumped down on the mattress, resisting the urge to rub her legs together in an effort to find relief. "What do you

have in mind?”

Grady tucked one hand behind his head, the angle flexing the thick bulge of his bicep. “We could open the windows and you could put on a little bit of a vocal performance for him.”

Was he suggesting— “You want me to fake an orgasm to make Sasha jealous?”

Grady’s eyes were shadowed in the dim light coming from the television, making it impossible to read his expression. “I guess that’s up to you.”

She might not be able to see his face, but there was an unmissable hint of suggestion in his words.

And she was turned on enough to take the bait. “What are my other options?”

Grady rolled to his side, facing her. “Your options are whatever you want them to be.”

That sounded like an offer. An opportunity.

But different from all the opportunities she’d taken before and it left her uncertain.

Unsure.

That was why the thought of walking away from the life she’d always known was so fucking terrifying. It wasn’t just losing the money or her family. She had practically no real-life experience outside of her time here in Moss Creek. She didn’t have a credit card. Didn’t have any money outside the nest egg she’d managed to stash by selling handbags and other luxury items to her friends in New York. And most of that was gone, spent on her car and groceries and rent. If she walked away from her family she would essentially be destitute.

It was terrifying. Left her caught between wanting to walk away and be free and just accepting her fate and being taken care of.

Evelyn sighed, letting her head fall back. “I don’t really know what I want them to be.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to figure it out.” Grady’s hand left her skin and he rolled away, putting his back to her. “Good night, Ev.”

# CHAPTER TEN



## GRADY



“I THOUGHT YOU two woke up at five.”

Grady squinted one eye open to find Gram-Gram glaring at him in the dark room.

“I think you forgot to reset your clock, Gram-Gram.” Grady blew out a sharp breath, using his tongue to rid his mouth of the strands of hair stuck to his lips. “We’re two hours behind New York.”

Gram-Gram’s already thin lips flattened even more and she continued staring at him.

Grady reached up to fish the rest of Evelyn’s dark hair out of his mouth. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Gram-Gram shifted on her feet, looking surprisingly uncertain. “I don’t know how to work the coffee maker.”

Grady almost snorted in amusement but caught himself. He was supposed to be making this woman think he was happy to have her here. Thrilled a sour-ass old woman was waking him up at three in the morning to make her coffee. “Okay.” He went to work unwinding himself from the body sprawled across his.

Evelyn wasn’t quite the violent sleeper she claimed to be, but she was sure as hell a clingy one. The woman stayed on her own side for all of an hour before migrating to his section of the mattress, worming her limbs into any nook and cranny she could fit them. By the time he finally fell asleep, she was all but attached to him.

Not that he was complaining. It wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to him.

Torturous, yes. Terrible, not by a long shot.

Gram-Gram was huffing by the time his feet finally hit the floor, so he dragged the whole thing out a little longer, taking the time to carefully tuck the covers back around Evelyn's snoring form before leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head.

"Should I come back later?" Gram-Gram's indignant tone made him smile.

"I'm coming." He wiped one hand down his face, scrubbing away the last of the sleep blurring his vision. "Remind me to set the coffee to start automatically tomorrow."

Gram-Gram stayed hot on his heels as he walked down the hall. "I don't know what that means."

Grady bit back a sarcastic retort, struggling to fall into the amiable temperament he carried while on the clock. "I can set the maker like an alarm clock, only instead of going off it makes coffee." He padded into the kitchen and flipped on the lights, wincing a little at the change in brightness.

"Holy mother of God." Gram-Gram stumbled back, clutching the pearls looped around her neck with one hand. Her eyes fused to the morning erection tenting the front of his boxer briefs as she leaned against the fridge, scandalized.

"Don't have a heart attack on me, Gram-Gram." He smothered a smirk as he went to work scooping coffee into a filter. Luckily Evelyn had a whole coffee station set up on the counter, saving him from being forced to guess at the location of the items he needed, so the process was smooth and their secret remained safe. Once the reservoir was filled he switched the base grade machine on and turned back toward the bedrooms. "Cups are in the cabinet. Milk's in the fridge. I'll see you in a couple hours."

He made a stop in the bathroom before falling back into the bed and closing his eyes, ready to sneak in a little more sleep before five actually hit.

He made it all of ten minutes.

“Do I put milk in this?”

Grady sighed. “I don’t know, Gram-Gram. How do you take your coffee?”

The room was silent for long enough he thought she’d left.

“I don’t know.” Gram-Gram sounded pissed. Like she thought it was his fault she didn’t fucking know how to make coffee.

It was getting harder and harder to keep his shit together with this woman. “If you don’t know then how am I supposed to know?” He forced in a breath, scrubbing one hand over his burning eyes. “Who *does* know how you take your coffee?”

“Bernard.” There was something off in her tone. Something he couldn’t quite read.

And that was unusual.

Grady sat up, trying to get a better look at the woman still standing at the bedroom door. “Then ask him.”

A flicker of emotion seemed to pinch Gram-Gram’s shadowed face. “I can’t. He’s on his way back to New York.”

That was an unfortunate development. “Then I guess you’ll have to figure it out.”

“I’ll just wait.” Gram-Gram finally left, abandoning both him and her quest to obtain whatever mysterious concoction she drank in the mornings.

Fucking finally.

Grady settled back onto the mattress, barely managing to relax before Evelyn was wiggling his way again, pressing nearly every inch of her body into the side of his and releasing a soft sigh.

Any hope he had of falling back into peaceful slumber went out the window the second her skin hit his. It was a good thing Gram-Gram was gone. If she was shocked by his half-mast morning salute, she’d be absolutely scandalized by the complete hard-on he was currently sporting.

It was almost as bad as the one he'd struggled to ignore the night before. For a second there it seemed like Evelyn might want a little more out of their arrangement, and he'd been more than ready to accommodate her demands. But the second she started to waver, that option was off the table. If he touched her, it would only be because she wanted it.

Without question. Without hesitation.

"I don't know how to turn on the television."

"Christ." Grady tossed back the covers for the second time before detangling himself from Evelyn yet again. "You're killing me, Gram-Gram." He snagged his jeans from the dresser and tugged them on, stuffing his still fully hard dick in before zipping them up.

He stalked into the living room, grabbed the remote from the coffee table and switched on the television balanced on the antique stand across the room. "What do you want to watch?"

Gram-Gram held one hand out. "Just show me how to change the channel and I'll do it myself."

Grady ignored her, pulling up the guide. "I'd really like to get some fucking sleep before I have to go to work, so just tell me what you want to watch."

How could anyone be this clueless? Being rich enough to have a butler—or whatever the fuck she called Bernard—was one thing, but allowing yourself to be helpless without him was another.

He paused, glancing back toward the bedroom, hit hard by a possibility he hadn't considered before.

Was this how Evelyn was when she first moved to Moss Creek? Did she not know how to make coffee or turn on a television? Was she just as incapable of existing in the real world as Gram-Gram was?

"Give me that." Gram-Gram snatched away the remote, looking down her nose at him. "You can go back to bed. I promise not to bother you again."

Somehow he didn't believe her.

“Fine.” He wasn’t in the mood to argue. “Goodnight.”

Gram-Gram focused on the television, slowly scrolling through the catalog of programming displayed on the screen. “It’s technically morning, but I suppose I knew what you meant.”

This fucking woman. She didn’t miss any opportunity to dig at him, even after he’d dragged his ass out of bed to help her.

Twice.

Grady peeled off his jeans, tossing them onto the dresser before falling back onto the mattress. A second later, the sound of women bickering carried in from the living room.

Was Gram-Gram watching trash TV? It sure as hell sounded like it.

He grinned in spite of the early hour and the loss of sleep he’d never manage to reclaim. Evelyn’s grandmother might be worried about how the world saw her, but it seemed like she had at least one shamefully guilty pleasure.

And where there was one, there were probably more.

Figuring out a little more of what made Gram-Gram tick soothed his irritation at missing something so significant about Evelyn. He wanted to believe it was a simple case of being too far removed from the situation, but that wasn’t it. He’d always been able to dissect other people based on how they acted and what they said, using the knowledge to tease out honesty and, frequently, confessions. It was why he was the one sent to every domestic call that came in while he was on the clock.

But he never put the pieces of Evelyn’s behavior together. Didn’t see her inability to parallel park or her preference for the older generation as anything significant. But maybe they were. Maybe she stuck with Muriel and Gertrude and the rest of the gang because they were also a little behind on the technology and recent innovations her own peers had mastered.

He tipped his head, looking down at where Evelyn’s face was pressed against his chest, her dark hair scattered across the

skin of her cheek as she soundly slept. Was it possible she came here practically as incapable as Gram-Gram was and still managed to rent a house, buy a car, and start a business all on her own?

And was it possible he'd missed every one of the signs?

He always found a level of pride in his abilities as a cop. Being able to read the room and diffuse a situation based on what he saw.

But what if he wasn't as fucking good at it as he thought he was?

"Is there a place I could call to bring me coffee?"

Gram-Gram's interruption was almost welcome this time, because at least he was able to see it coming, so he wasn't completely inept.

"How are you gonna order coffee if you don't know what you like?" He wasn't trying to piss her off. Technically. But if she felt comfortable annoying the shit out of him, then he was going to feel comfortable annoying the shit out of her.

"I'll just order one of everything." She'd obviously thought it through and came up with the most reasonable solution she could find. If you could call ordering every coffee item from a menu reasonable.

He wouldn't.

Grady climbed out of bed for the third, and final, time, checking his phone to find it was actually almost five. Close enough. "Come on." He yanked on a shirt. "I'll take you into town to get some fucking coffee."



"GOOD?" GRADY GLANCED across the cab of his pickup to where Gram-Gram sipped from her insulated cup.

“It’s not what I usually drink, but it’s fine.” Her answer was clipped, but the way she was sucking down the mocha told him Gram-Gram was a fan.

And thank God, because he almost lost his mind as she questioned the owner of blue moon coffee about every single item. Luckily, the woman was way more patient than he was, and didn’t seem to mind Gram Gram’s confusion over her own personal preferences. After fifteen full minutes, Gram-Gram had finally narrowed it down to the mocha or some sort of caramel and vanilla concoction. The shop owner easily talked her into the chocolate option before brewing it up and sending them on their way with two coffees and two chocolate croissants.

“I assume you purchased a ring for my granddaughter.” Gram-Gram took another sip from her cup, but if she was making an attempt to appear casual, it wasn’t working.

He should have expected a line of questioning, especially once she got a little caffeine in her. “I did. It’s at the jewelers.” He fished around his brain for the word Evelyn used when rattling off the excuse for why there was no rock currently on her finger. “They’re making a wrap.” It sounded right when he said it. Still didn’t make a lick of sense, but at least it had a familiar ring.

“Hmph.” Gram-Gram didn’t hide her displeasure. Or maybe it was judgment. Didn’t matter.

Grady gripped the wheel, trying to keep his cool. “Something wrong?”

Gram-Gram peered into the open end of the sleeve containing her croissant. “I would’ve expected you to have that handled before you proposed.”

“Why’s that?” He was genuinely interested to see what she had to say. Not only because it might give him some insight into what a wrap was, but because he was pretty confident Gram-Gram had some fucked-up ideas about how marriage should be.

Gram-Gram lifted her brows, gaze heavy as it came his way. “Would you start a business without ensuring everything you needed was in place?”

Her answer was what he expected, which was good. It meant he wasn’t entirely blind. But it was still fucked up.

“I suppose not, but I don’t reckon I look at marriage and a business as being the same thing.”

“That’s the problem with young people these days. They go into a marriage thinking love will be enough, and it’s simply not true.” Gram-Gram sat stiffly in the seat next to him. “Marriage is a partnership. It’s destined to fail if the people involved don’t agree on how it will be run.” Her eyes narrowed, looking him over. “Or, if they enter into it unprepared.”

“Sounds like you had a happy marriage.” He somehow managed to keep the sarcasm out of his tone.

“I had a *successful* marriage.” There was an edge to the qualifying part of her statement.

Gram-Gram, unsurprisingly, found a successful marriage to be more desirable than a happy one. It made it slightly more understandable that she would consider Evelyn and Sasha a good pair. Especially if that decision was based on Evelyn the way he now suspected she was before coming to Moss Creek.

It was still wrong as hell.

Even if Evelyn didn’t know how to make coffee or drive or balance a checking account, she was still nowhere near as helpless as Sasha or even Gram-Gram. She’d proven that.

And Sasha was a fucking ass. There was no way in hell someone as sweet and kind and gentle as Evelyn should ever have been set up with him. It was bullshit, which was why he accidentally opened his mouth.

“And you thought Sasha and Evelyn would have a *successful* marriage?” This time he couldn’t temper his words. Every bit of disbelief and anger he felt over Gram-Gram’s shitty matchmaking attempt bled into his tone.



Gram-Gram's already tight posture went even more rigid, the paper bag crinkling as her hand fisted. "Sasha is the son of an old friend. I was advised he was extremely successful and well spoken."

"He's an ass." Yet again, Grady couldn't temper his words. Couldn't keep himself in the normal, easy-going place he normally resided.

Gram Gram's lips flattened. "So I've been told."

Grady stared out the windshield, trying to pick apart the bits and pieces of their conversation, hoping he could reassemble them in a way that made sense. A way that would answer all the new questions he had. Questions about Gram-Gram. Questions about Evelyn.

Questions about himself.

But the answers weren't fucking there no matter how hard he looked.

Gram-Gram stayed quiet the rest of the short drive, downing what was left of her coffee and nibbling on the croissant. When he turned onto the little road leading to Evelyn's bungalow, there was a large box truck parked on the curb across the street. "Well I hope you plan to see a lot more of him because it looks like Sasha's officially moving in."

Gram-Gram's chin lifted. "Sasha's gone. He flew back to New York last night." She collected her cup and bag as Grady pulled into the driveway. "Those are my things being delivered."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## EVELYN



EVELYN STOOD ON the porch of her tiny bungalow, watching as two movers carried in the truckload of items her grandmother seemed to pull out of thin air. “She can’t be serious.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve only spent half a day with your Gram-Gram, and I can tell you she is always serious.” Grady stood beside her, one arm draped around her shoulders as her grandmother barked orders, sending the movers into the spare bedroom taking up one front corner of the house.

Evelyn rubbed at the ache forming in one temple. “I just don’t get why she’s going to all this trouble.”

Getting all the furniture and bedding, not to mention the movers carrying it, overnight must have cost a fortune. It seemed like a ridiculous amount of money and effort to spend simply to prove a point.

Grady’s grip tightened, pulling her out of the way as the movers came past with a king-sized mattress that would dominate the majority of the space in the spare bedroom her grandmother clearly planned to claim as her own.

Grady leaned into her ear. “I’ve got some good news. It might make you feel a little better.”

Evelyn frowned as the items continued coming. “I doubt that.”

Grady’s eyes fixed on hers, like he wanted to witness this mood-altering moment. “Sasha’s gone.”

Evelyn's eyes widened, jaw going slack in surprise. "You're kidding."

Grady shook his head. "Nope. Sounds like Gram-Gram might've shipped his ass back to New York City last night."

What? "I thought she and Sasha were in this together."

Grady shrugged. "That's what I thought too, but it's lookin' like maybe I don't know as much as I thought I did."

Evelyn glanced at the house across the street. Sure enough, the rental car was gone from the driveway and no one was peeking out the windows, trying to get a look at what was happening. "I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing."

She'd spent her whole life tiptoeing around her grandmother, learning from her mother's mistakes, hoping to fly under the radar and avoid being married off before she could buy alcohol. It was the first of the plans she'd concocted, and when it worked, she just kept making them. Kept coming up with ways to drag her freedom out longer until eventually she decided to do everything she could to ensure it permanently. She went to work ruining her name. Tarnishing the shiny image her grandmother valued so much.

That was when her grandmother started to zero in. She began dragging Evelyn to everything from fundraisers to cocktail parties. Doing damage control and attempting to force her into the role she didn't want.

And Evelyn had to comply. Her grandmother held the proverbial purse strings with an iron fist, making it impossible for Evelyn to really and truly escape with anything more than the clothes on her back.

Which was when she concocted her plan of selling anything and everything she had, stashing the cash in a safety deposit box while she lived on borrowed time.

Thank God she had. That money allowed her to escape to Moss Creek instead of finding herself at the end of an aisle in a white dress.

“I’m gonna consider not having to look at his face a win. Especially since it was only gonna be a matter of time before I put my fist through it.”

“Understandable.” Evelyn sighed. “I guess it does make me feel better knowing he’s not over there waiting to accost me the second you leave.”

“Speaking of.” Grady slid his palm down her spine, letting it rest on her lower back before leaning into her ear. “As much as I want to stay here today and run interference between you and Gram-Gram, I have to work.”

Evelyn stared as one of the movers carried past a pile of bags from the closest department store. “That’s okay. It looks like she’s going to have more than enough to keep her busy today.”

Grady grinned. “You think Gram-Gram’s ever set up her own bedroom before?”

Evelyn’s lips lifted, working into a little smile of her own. “No fucking way.”

“That’s what I figured.” Grady chucked her on the chin. “You better not help her either. Make her do it all by herself. If she wants to be a pain in the ass, she’s gotta earn it.”

“I can’t help her. I’ll be gone. I have to teach classes all day.” Evelyn paused, trying to gauge his reaction. “Did that sound convincing?”

Grady’s smile slipped the tiniest bit. “I believed it.”

“Good because that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.” It didn’t matter that she only had two morning classes scheduled. She’d rather sit by herself at the studio all day long, bored to tears, than risk being here with her grandmother. She had no desire to be lectured about her responsibility to her family or fend off whatever plot her grandmother was concocting.

“I’ve got to head out in a few minutes. Grady tipped his head toward the house. “I’m going to go get changed.”

“I’ll come with you.” Evelyn stuck close to the man working as the most attractive buffer she’d ever seen. She

would simply get dressed too and leave when he left to ensure there was no way her grandmother could corner her.

She might have also had an ulterior motive for following Grady into her bedroom. Even after the best night's sleep she'd had in a long time, her body was still running way hotter than normal. That same annoying throb was teasing between her thighs, reminding her there would be an almost naked Grady in her bed again tonight.

Close enough to smell. Close enough to touch. Close enough to taste.

*"Stop it."* She chastised herself under her breath as she closed the door, hoping it might work if she said it out loud. It definitely hadn't worked the five hundred times she'd said it in her mind.

"What's that?" Grady met her gaze as he peeled his T-shirt over his head to reveal the wide plane of his chest and the rippled muscles of his abs. His pecs were scattered with sandy brown hair tapering off as it reached his stomach. Since most of the men she'd dabbled with in New York were hopeful models and fledgling actors, she didn't have much experience with chest hair.

And it was a travesty.

Not only did it look rugged and masculine, it felt fantastic. The springy strands had been surprisingly soft when she woke up to find them under her palm and pressing into her cheek.

Grady's brows lifted as she continued staring at his bare chest. "Everything okay?"

Shit. She forgot to answer him. "I'm fine. I just remembered I need to pick something up at the store."

"What is it? I can grab it on my way home when I get off tonight." Grady gripped the front of his jeans, flipping the button loose before dragging down the zipper and skimming them toward the floor.

Evelyn closed her eyes in a long blink, attempting to reset her short-circuiting brain, but all it wanted was another

glimpse of his skin. “I’ll probably just go tomorrow. I’m sure I need more than just a few things.”

Probably. Nothing she could begin to identify now, but eventually she might remember.

“We can go together. I’m off work again tomorrow. I can check in at the ranch and then we can go do whatever you need to do.” Grady strode to the closet where his bag was stashed and pulled his pants free. By the time he had them all the way on, blocking her view of his lower half, Evelyn finally managed to process what he’d said.

“You don’t get two days off together?” She didn’t know much about how real jobs worked, but sort of assumed everyone worked five days and then had two off, even if they didn’t fall on the standard weekdays and weekends.

“Since I don’t have kids or a wife, my schedule’s more flexible. A lot of times I work a different set of days every week.” Grady retrieved his undershirt and worked it over his head. “Then I work on the ranch on my days off.”

“So you work every day?” She shouldn’t be shocked. If she could fill her studio up, she’d work every day. Whatever would help earn the money she desperately needed. Hell, she’d even considered trying to find a second source of income, but finding gainful employment when you were thirty-two and had no job history was nearly impossible.

“Yup.” Grady blew out a breath, like the reminder made him tired. “Been that way for the past few years.”

Now that she was looking more closely, she could see the fatigue lining his eyes. “Why—”

The door to the bedroom bumped open. Her grandmother looked Grady up and down, one brow angling as he buttoned his shirt. “I need someone to help me.”

“Not gonna be us.” Grady pulled on a vest, layering it over his shirt. “We’ve both got to work today.”

Her grandmother scoffed. “You’re both going to be gone? I’m here to spend quality time with you. Get to know my

future grandson-in-law. How can that happen if you're not here?"

"If you wanted to spend quality time with us, you should have let us know you were coming so we could adjust our schedules." Grady chastised her grandmother in a way she'd never heard anyone do.

And it might have been even sexier than the chest hair.

And her grandmother appeared just as shocked by it. She gestured toward the room across the hall. "I can't take care of this all by myself."

Grady dropped to the bed and went to work lacing his boots, unbothered by her grandmother's reaction. "You're a smart woman. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Her grandmother straightened her shoulders. "Fine."

"Where's Bernard?" Evelyn suddenly noticed her grandmother's constant companion hadn't been around since the night before. "Why can't he help you?"

"Bernard is in New York." Her grandmother's words were clipped and short, probably because she was not enjoying the thought of fending for herself.

Welcome to the real world.

Grady finished tying off his boots before standing and straightening his uniform. "Whatever you don't get done we will help with when we get home."

Her grandmother shifted on her feet. "What if I decide I want another coffee while you're gone?"

"Call an Uber." Somehow Grady managed to say it with a straight face. Like the thought of her grandmother in the back of a stranger's Camry wasn't absolutely hilarious.

Her grandmother's brows lifted. "What in God's name is an Uber?"

"Kind of like a taxi." Grady ambled her grandmother's way, looping an arm around her shoulders and leading her



from the door. “Or, you can call me and I’ll see if one of my buddies on the force has time to come get you.”

Her grandmother’s head reared back. “You want me to ride in a police car?”

“They’ll let you sit in the front.” Grady sounded so sincere and innocent she almost believed he was genuinely trying to be helpful.

Right up until he shot her a grin and a wink over one shoulder, sending her heart skipping along to the beat of its own drum.

She was fucked. There was no way she would survive having that man in her bed again. Not without spontaneously combusting or melting into a pile of mewling goo.

“Finish getting ready, Ev.” Grady tipped his head her way. “We’ve got to get a move on.”

“Right.” She almost forgot she wanted to escape when Grady did. “Give me just a sec.” Evelyn quickly changed into her yoga pants and tank, pulling her favorite Moss Creek Football sweatshirt over the ensemble before putting on her sneakers and heading out of her bedroom, eyes dragging to the open doorway across the hall. The movers were unloaded and gone, leaving stacks of belongings in the bedroom she didn’t have the money to furnish.

She attempted to only buy the essentials when she first came to town, only realizing later that she could have been a whole lot smarter about the process. She spent too much on her furniture and too much on her SUV, but what was done was done, and she managed to get it under control before she ran herself into the ground.

Or tapped into the family credit card she was determined not to need.

Grady was in the living room when she came out, giving her grandmother the rundown on the remote. “If you want the screen with the list of programs you push this button here.”

Her grandmother seemed to actually be listening to him, her sharp eyes focused on his every move. Once Grady was

finished, she snatched the remote away. “I’m sure it can’t be that hard.”

Grady turned away, shaking his head as her grandmother went to work finding what she wanted to watch. “You ready to go, Sweetheart?”

“Yup.” Evelyn grabbed her bag and keys, escaping out the front door with Grady right behind her.

He closed the house up, using the key he’d collected from under her mat to lock the deadbolt before leading her down the stairs. “I give her an hour before she has the whole system screwed up and starts calling for help.”

“She doesn’t have anyone to call. Bernard’s not here and I’m busy. She’s on her own.” She shouldn’t be so smug about it, but her grandmother was primarily responsible for her own helplessness when she left New York. The reason electric bills and car insurance were foreign concepts. It was kind of nice to see her get a little taste of what it felt like to be the most inept person in the whole world.

“Should be an interesting day for her then.” Grady’s hand settled at the small of her back as he led her to the door of the SUV she was considering trading in for something cheaper. He opened the door, waiting while she climbed in. Once she was set he leaned into the open door. “Should we have a goodbye kiss?”

Her stomach fluttered, reigniting that damn throb. “I would imagine she’s peeking out the window.”

“That’s what I figured.” Grady didn’t hesitate. He grasped her chin and pressed his mouth to hers in a sweet and disappointingly chaste kiss. He leaned away, tapping her on the nose. “Have a good day, Ev.”

“Yup.” She pressed her tingling lips together. “You too.”

Grady closed her in and then went to his truck, sliding into place before starting the engine and backing out, continuing farther than needed before flashing his lights.

The damn flutter roared to life as she backed out in front of him and headed for her studio with Grady following behind

her, making sure she got where she needed to go.

He lingered while she parked in front of the studio and let herself into the space, offering a honk and a wave as he drove away, leaving her feeling cared for and protected in a way she'd never been before.

Sure, there had always been people around to do things for her in New York, but all of them were paid to be there. None of them genuinely cared about her or her well-being. And not a single one of them would have ever stood up next to her against her grandmother.

Evelyn watched Grady's truck disappear down the street as the butterfly occupying her insides started to breed, amping up both the tickle in her belly and the heat collecting just below it.

She pressed one hand to her belly, trying to ease one of the problems she had where Grady was concerned. She liked him. Genuinely. Honestly.

Had for longer than she'd been willing to admit.

But liking him was one thing.

Wanting him was another.

And it might be her undoing because there was no way she would survive another night in bed next to that man.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## GRADY



“LOOKS LIKE SHE survived.” Grady peeled off his vest, hanging it in the small closet before working down the buttons of his shirt. “I have to say I’m a little surprised.”

“Me too.” Evelyn sat on the bed, fresh from her shower, dark hair full and soft as it fell over her shoulders and against the silky robe wrapped over her pajamas. “I kind of expected the house to burn down while we were gone.”

“Me too.” Grady grinned. “That’s why I made sure someone came past every hour.”

“That was really nice of you.” Evelyn’s dark eyes hadn’t left him since they came into her room.

Hell, they hadn’t left him since they pulled into the driveway, timing their arrival perfectly.

“Did you have a good day?” Evelyn’s gaze locked onto his hands as he peeled away his shirt.

“Decent enough.” He gripped the front of his undershirt and dragged it up, moving a little slower than he normally would have. “What about you?”

Evelyn’s lips pressed together as her eyes followed the hem of his rising shirt, unblinking as he peeled it away from his body. She swallowed, the delicate line of her throat working as he tossed it into the laundry hamper.

“Ev?”

Her eyes snapped to his face. “What?”

He already knew Evelyn found him attractive—there was no missing the way she drank him in the night before—but finding him attractive and wanting more from him were two different things.

Two very different things.

Grady made quick work of his pants, unfastening them before adding them to the basket. “Your day? How was it?”

“Oh.” Evelyn cleared her throat, eyes drifting back down his mostly naked form. “It was good. I taught a couple classes and then spent the rest of the day cleaning and working on the books.”

“Sounds productive.” Grady pulled his eyes from the bed, going to his bag in the closet to grab a fresh pair of briefs. “I’m going to go take a quick shower.”

He needed out of this room for a minute. Needed some time alone and a cold shower to reset his mind.

“Okay.” Evelyn peeled away the robe to reveal the low neckline of a short set so transparent he could easily describe her small, dark nipples in perfect detail. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

That was part of the problem.

He should have known being in bed with Evelyn would be a slippery slope. And maybe he did.

Part of him wanted to think he was strong enough to navigate the terrain. To let things stay simple and uncomplicated. But he knew damn well how quickly things could become complicated. It happened all the time, whether it was while he patrolled the streets of Moss Creek or navigated the rocky terrain of his mother’s illness.

Nothing ever stayed simple.

Grady ducked out of the bedroom, letting out a little sigh of relief when the door across the hall was closed. The last person he wanted to face right now was Gram-Gram. Although, she would be great at shriveling the aching hard-on growing in his drawers.

He locked himself into the bathroom and turned the cold water on at full blast before stepping under the spray, sucking in a breath as it hit his skin. He grabbed whatever body wash Evelyn used and scrubbed down, working quickly since the familiar scent undid whatever the cold water accomplished. And jacking off to thoughts of the woman you were supposed to be helping, using her soap and her shower while she was in the next room, didn't seem right.

Especially since Evelyn had been uncertain about what she wanted the night before.

He finished up, rinsing away the suds before shutting down the water and drying off. He pulled on his fresh underwear and brushed his teeth then took a deep breath and went back to the bedroom.

Evelyn was propped against the headboard, the already low line of her top seeming like it dropped more while he was gone. "Feel better?"

Not at all. "Yup."

He went to his side of the bed, sliding under the covers before attempting to relax. But his whole body was strung tight, focused on every breath Evelyn took beside him.

Every move she made.

The glow from the television cast shadows over her as she shifted around, rolling onto her side to face him, the lacy neckline of her damned top slipping low enough to give him an unobstructed peek at one puckered nipple. It was so close he could almost feel it under his tongue and it sent him rolling away, needing to hide his reaction. "Goodnight, Ev."

"That's it?" She sounded almost indignant. "You're just going to go to sleep now?"

Grady glanced at her over one shoulder, doing his best to keep his eyes off the torturously perfect nipple still peeking out at him. "Did you want to talk about something?"

Evelyn stared at him, mouth slightly agape. "I thought maybe..." She shifted around and the dark point of her other nipple slipped free.

There was no way it was an accident. One, maybe.

Not both.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Ev?” He gave up the fight and let his gaze drop to her fully exposed tits. “Because if you’re not, you might want to readjust your pajamas.”

Evelyn rubbed her lips together, the same uncertainty from last night leaking into her gaze. “Maybe.”

“Maybe’s not good enough.” Grady managed to roll away, putting his back to her for a second time.

Evelyn scoffed, the sound a little whiny. A little needy. “Grady, please.”

He rolled back to face her, unable to stop himself. “Please, what?”

Evelyn licked her lips, the action making his fully hard cock jerk in anticipation. “Please touch me.”

“Is that what you really want?” His fingers itched with the need to caress her soft skin. To feel it under his hands because she wanted it, instead of because someone else was watching. “For me to touch you?”

Evelyn stared at him, lips parted, eyelids heavy. “I—” She hesitated, her eyes shifting to focus on where his hand rested against the covers. “Shit.”

She suddenly turned away, flipping back the covers and sliding off the bed, her steps light as she raced from the room, leaving the door ajar before disappearing into the bathroom next door.

That was not the reaction he’d been hoping for.

Somewhere something had gone wrong. Some wires got crossed, and it led to a misunderstanding he couldn’t leave between them. Not only because her grandmother was mere feet away and just waiting for them the fuck up, but also because he didn’t want Evelyn thinking this was all a ploy to get his hands on her. It wasn’t.



Grady kicked his feet over the edge of the bed and onto the floor. He was almost to the door when he glanced down to discover the hard line of his fully erect dick was unmissable, and he didn't have the energy to deal with a scandalized Gram-Gram if their paths crossed. Grabbing Evelyn's discarded robe, he wrapped the silky floral fabric around his body and tied it before ducking out into the hallway. He paused just outside the bathroom door, unsure of what exactly to do. He'd never technically been part of a cohabitating couple before.

He decided to split the puppy and tapped against the door as he opened it, pausing when there was an inch gap. "Ev? I'm coming in." He slid in, closing the door behind him, eyes meeting Evelyn's in the mirror over the sink. She was leaning against the counter, looking upset enough it was clear he'd fucked up.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to think—"

Evelyn's eyes closed. "It's fine. I misunderstood and assumed last night you were offering to—"

He waited for her to finish, needing to hear her next words. When they didn't come, he prompted, "Assumed I was offering to, what?"

Evelyn opened her eyes, lifting them to the ceiling. "Don't make me say it."

"I think you should say it because if we don't start saying exactly what we mean, this kind of shit is going to keep happening." He moved closer, dropping his voice even lower to ensure her grandmother wouldn't hear their conversation. "You thought I was offering to, what?"

She pressed her lips together, flattening them as her eyes came back to his, meeting in the reflection. "I thought you were offering to get me off."

Maybe this wasn't the misunderstanding he thought it was. "That's exactly what I was offering."

All the air rushed from her lungs. "But you were acting like—"

“I was acting like I’ll only take it further if you really want me to. And that’s something I need to hear in clear and complete terms, Evelyn.” He shook his head. “I might’ve touched you for the sake of all this,” he motioned around them, swinging his hand in the general direction of the bedroom her grandmother occupied. “But I’m only going to really touch you if I know you want it.”

He shouldn’t really touch her at all. Should have never made that fucking offer, vague as it was. But he wasn’t taking it back either.

Especially not now that they were standing in the light of the bathroom and he could see the flush of her skin. The tight press of her nipples as they strained against the thin fabric of her tank. “If I touched you now would you be wet for me?”

Evelyn sucked in a breath, as if his words shocked her. “Yes.”

He leaned closer, letting his front brush across her back. “If I touched you now could you be a good girl and stay quiet for me?”

Evelyn’s hands gripped the counter tighter. “Yes.”

The word was sweet and soft and rushed out along with what he hoped was a sigh of relief.

Grady palmed her hip, testing the waters. “Does that mean you want me to touch you now? To make you feel good?”

Evelyn’s dark eyes held his in the mirror as she rubbed her lips together like she was fighting with herself. Struggling to offer the answer it was pretty clear she wanted to give. “Yes.”

Grady moved in more, pinning her in place with the weight of his body against her back as his palm flattened against her belly, fingers teasing at the elastic band of her sleep shorts. “Promise me you can be quiet?”

Evelyn nodded, the motion jerky. “I promise.”

“I don’t know if I believe you.” Grady eased his hand into her shorts, sliding over the plane of her belly before cupping her pussy in his palm.

Evelyn whimpered, her legs spreading wider. Offering him better access and nearly making him release a groan Gram-Gram would most certainly hear.

He traced the line of her slit, barely pressing between the swollen softness of her folds. He sucked in a breath at the silky smoothness of her skin. “Christ, Ev. You’re fucking soaked.”

Evelyn bit her lower lip, pinching it hard as he traced a line up to find the hardened nub of her clit. He started to circle, teasing along the sides of it in a steady rhythm. “Why are you so wet?”

Evelyn whimpered again, the sound turning to a scoff when his hand went still. She tried to work herself against him, attempting to take what she wanted.

And while it was sexy as fuck, he needed to find out what led them to this point. He flattened his fingers. “No coming until you tell me why you’re this wet.”

Evelyn scoffed again, eyes narrowing in the mirror. “All this time I thought you were a nice guy.”

He leaned into her ear, holding her gaze. “Sweetheart, if I was a nice guy I would’ve gone to sleep.”

Evelyn’s nostrils flared as she continued staring him down.

Grady nosed along the shell of her ear, breathing in the scent of her skin. “Now I’m gonna give you one more chance to answer me before I do exactly that.” He teased along her clit, just to remind her of what was on the line. “Tell me why you’re so wet.”

Evelyn’s breathing was shallow and sharp as her reflection stared at his. Finally she confessed, “When you were banging the headboard against the wall last night, I was imagining what it would be like if you were really fucking me. And I haven’t stopped thinking about it since.”

Grady groaned softly at the admission, grinding the hard line of his dick against her soft backside. “I was hoping it was something like that.”

He rewarded her immediately, picking right back up where he left off. Only this time, his free hand curved along the swell of her tit, tracing the fullness of it before yanking down the deeply scooped neckline of her tank top, fully revealing what he'd only gotten a glimpse of earlier. Evelyn's tits were perfectly sized, just big enough to fill the palm of his hand, with dark, plush nipples standing at attention, practically begging to be touched and tongued.

Grady palmed one, rolling the perfectly puckered tip between his thumb and finger as he continued teasing her clit, fingers gliding along her soaked skin as she trembled against him.

“Oh my God.” Her words were louder than a whisper, forcing him to remind them both of the promise she made.

“You said you'd be quiet, Ev.”

“I'm trying.” She bucked against his gliding fingers, reaching back to grip his thigh for stability as she let out a soft moan that shot straight to his dick.

And most definitely carried through the door.

As much as he hated to do it, Grady pulled his hand from her breast, sliding it up the column of her neck to clamp over her mouth. He pulled her back against his chest, bracing his forearm over her shoulder to keep Evelyn pinned in place as his other hand continued working between her thighs. “Is this how it's always going to be? You promise to be quiet even though we both know you won't do it?”

There was no hiding the smug satisfaction he felt. Watching Evelyn come undone in the mirror—seeing how impossible it was for her to stay quiet because of what he was doing to her—was fucking amazing. It took this little game they were playing to a whole new level. One that made it infinitely more interesting.

And made him even more determined to keep it going for as long as possible.

Her whole body buckled as she came, limbs twitching, middle tensing, legs trembling. He gentled his touch but

continued teasing her, dragging the moment out until she sucked in a sharp breath and jerked away, letting him know she'd crossed the line from pleasure to sensitivity.

Grady gently pulled his hand from her shorts, but the other stayed across her mouth as he lifted his fingers to his lips. Evelyn watched with wide eyes as he sucked her wetness from his skin, relishing the taste of her.

“Do you think you’ll be able to stay quiet when I have my head between your thighs tomorrow night?” His cock flexed in anticipation. “Because I don’t think I can keep my hand over your mouth while I’m down there.” He dragged his quieting fingers free of her lips, tracing the lower one as he went.

Evelyn didn’t look away as she said, “I guess you’ll have to find something else to put in my mouth to keep me quiet.”

Holy hell. Did he think this was a game? Because if that’s what it really was, she might have just called checkmate.

Grady straightened, backing away from her. If he didn’t get a little space, he was going to end up begging her to put her mouth on him now. “Go to bed, Ev.”

Evelyn turned to face him but made no move for the door. “Are you coming to bed too?”

He shook his head. “I’m staying here for a minute.”

Her eyes dropped, fixing on where his cock sat, hard and straining beneath the silky fabric of her robe. “Are you going to jack off?”

“Absolutely I am.” There was no sense lying about it. He felt no shame in the admission either, not now that he knew where things stood between them. “Go to your room. I’ll be there in a second.”

Evelyn’s brows lifted. “A second?” The tip of her tongue came out to skim across her lower lip as she continued staring at his crotch. “I think I can wait a second.”

Grady sucked in a breath. “Are you saying you want to watch me?”

Did he think this was a game? He was wrong.

It was fucking warfare. And she just dropped a goddamn bomb.

Evelyn's eyes finally lifted to his. "You just watched me get off. It's only fair I get to do the same."

She barely finished speaking before he was reaching into the elastic of his boxers and pulling out his cock. Every inch of him was throbbing with need and aching for release. Wetness leaked from the tip, soaking the front of his underwear and adding the tiniest bit of lubrication as he took himself in hand and squeezed.

Evelyn rubbed her lips together, focused on where he fisted his dick, pumping down the length before sliding back up and gliding his thumb across the new bead of moisture collected at the head.

Her eyes came back to his. "Why are you so wet, Grady?"

He knew what she was doing and he was going to give her exactly what she wanted right out of the gate. No questions asked. "Because I was imagining what it would be like to fuck the hell out of you in front of that mirror."

He was no stranger to taking matters into his own hand, but this was the first time he'd done it with an audience. He'd never be able to look at jacking off the same way again.

Evelyn watched as he fucked his fist, the flush on her cheeks deepening with each pump of his hand.

Grady leaned forward, bracing himself against the counter as he leaned in to trail his lips along her neck. "Do you like this, Ev? Seeing what you do to me?"

"Yes." The admission rushed out on a breath.

"You're going to have to return the favor then." He worked himself faster, flicking his wrist at the end of each stroke. "Because I want to see how pretty you look when you play with your pussy."

Now that he'd started, there was no limit to the fantasies he could conjure up. Fucking Evelyn from behind while they stared at each other in the mirror. Kneeling between her parted

legs as he watched her finger herself. Planting his face between her thighs while she smothered those sweet sounds she made with the pillow he slept on at night. Fucking her into the mattress until they were both breathless and slick with sweat.

He yanked the hand towel from the loop, barely managing to get it in place as his balls pulled tight, sending him spilling into the terrycloth while Evelyn watched, pupils dilated, lips parted, skin flushed.

It was fucking intense.

And made it impossible to pretend that this little distraction wasn't turning into something way more complicated.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



## EVELYN



“EVELYN.”

Evelyn jerked awake at the sharp sound of her grandmother’s voice, head snapping up from where it rested against something much firmer than her pillow.

“What?” She flailed around, struggling to detangle herself from the mass of blankets and cowboy tangled around her. “What’s wrong?”

Her grandmother stood at the open bedroom door, looking slightly less polished than normal. She was already fully dressed in her standard slacks and a gauzy blouse left open at the neck to display a necklace that probably cost more than the house they were currently staying in, but her hair seemed a little flatter. Her pants had the tiniest bit of wrinkling in the fabric and the lines around her eyes were a little more pronounced. “Why hasn’t your alarm clock gone off?”

“Because it’s only four fifty-eight, Gram-Gram.” Grady’s deep voice was gravelly with sleep. He grabbed Evelyn around the waist and pulled her down against him. “We’ve got two more minutes.”

Her grandmother huffed loudly before her footsteps carried down the hall.

“I think she’s mad.” Evelyn tried to ignore the hard press of his skin against hers, but it was impossible and left her wishing they had more than two minutes.

“I think I don’t care.” Grady’s hand curved around her ass, palming the fullness of her cheek. “And she’s not mad. She

just doesn't know how to make coffee.”

Evelyn groaned as her grandmother started banging around in the kitchen, as if she had any clue what to do with the items found there. “Why is she up so early?”

“To be fair, she slept in compared to yesterday.” Grady's fingers teased along the hem of her shorts as her grandmother's banging got louder. “She's not used to being alone, is she?”

“I don't know that she's ever been alone.” As long as she could remember, her grandmother had Bernard at her side. Even back when her grandfather was still alive, Griselda spent most of her time with the man who handled nearly every aspect of her life. “Bernard's always been with her.”

“And now he's not and we're the ones being punished.” Grady yawned, scrubbing one hand down his face. “I might be willing to pay to fly him back here if it will keep her from waking me up every morning.”

“You stay here.” Evelyn peeled her body away from Grady's, sliding out of bed. “I'll go make her coffee. Maybe she'll quiet down.”

“Too late. I'm already awake.” Grady tossed back the covers and strode around her bed, looking ridiculously sexy, all ruffled and sleepy and hard.

Evelyn looked him over. There was no way she could avoid it. “If you go out like that she'll have a heart attack.”

“I know. I thought I was going to have to call the squad yesterday.” One hand went to the front of his briefs, adjusting the rigid line of his morning erection as he flashed her a devilish grin. “Might be worth it. We could have a little peace.”

“Tempting, but you still can't go out there like that.” Not only for her grandmother's benefit, but also for hers. She needed to think straight and be on top of her game to deal with the woman getting louder by the second, and Grady was proving too capable of stealing every bit of focus she could scrounge up.

“Fine.” He snagged the floral robe he’d worn into the bathroom last night, slipping the drapey garment onto his broad shoulders before tying it around his waist. It looked ridiculous on him. The sleeves hit his forearms and the hem barely cleared the weight of his balls. And somehow she still felt a little like drooling.

“A man should be able to be comfortable in his own home,” Grady grumbled as he padded out into the hall, headed straight for the kitchen.

Evelyn stuck close behind him, a little unsure of how this morning would play out. She’d had plenty of time to think about the situation while working at her studio yesterday and could only come up with one possible conclusion: Her grandmother was calling her bluff.

In her grandmother’s mind, if she could prove they were lying, it would provide the opportunity to show Evelyn how incapable she was on her own. Humiliating her before attempting to force her back to New York.

And if she refused, her whole life would change.

She’d listened for years as her mother lamented about having no choice but to marry her father, going on and on about how it was simply a sacrifice she had to make because of the connections it would provide the family. Clearly her grandmother was gunning to use her in the same way. She might have gotten out of being paired up with Sasha, but it would only be a matter of time before it was someone else.

Someone who might be even worse.

Her only other option was to give everything up and try to survive on her own here in Moss Creek. Unfortunately, even after nearly a year, her little yoga studio could barely cover her expenses. It did okay, but it wasn’t like Moss Creek was a thriving metropolis with an unlimited customer base. She might be able to stretch the money she had left by getting a cheaper car and only buying what she absolutely needed, but there was still a chance she would end up broke and homeless, sleeping on Amelie’s sofa.

She was never expected to be anything outside of an ornament. A representative of her family who was tasked with maintaining their image and the connections her grandparents had cultivated.

A socialite.

And that wasn't going to get her very far for very long anywhere outside of New York and her family's influence, let alone a place like Moss Creek.

"How did you sleep, Gram-Gram?" Grady sauntered into the kitchen, looking unbothered by her grandmother's presence and completely at home in her home. "Was your new bed comfortable?"

"I slept fine." Her grandmother was going through the cabinets, clearly not looking for anything in particular. "Do you two have plans for today?"

"Actually, we do." Grady reached for her, taking her by the hand before tucking her against his front, wrapping both arms around her as he cradled her close. "Ev has a class to teach this morning and then we're heading over to my family's ranch to do a little riding."

Her grandmother's brows inched up the tiniest bit, moving as much as her Botox allowed. "Your family owns a ranch?"

Grady grinned. "Sure do. It's been passed down through the generations for over a hundred years."

Evelyn schooled her features, hoping it wasn't evident this was all new information to her. She knew Grady's family had a ranch but didn't realize it was so well-established or that, from the sound of it, he would one day be the owner.

It was surprising, considering he seemed to really enjoy being a police officer and she couldn't imagine he planned to keep juggling both things for the rest of his life. It was obviously already wearing on him.

"Interesting." The flatness of her grandmother's voice made it seem like she thought the information was anything but. "I suppose I'll join you for the class this morning, but then I have some business matters to attend to."

Evelyn swallowed hard at her grandmother's mention of business matters. Hopefully it wasn't finding her an acceptable husband to take Grady's place. The thought had her wanting to be as far from the woman she'd feared her whole life as possible. "I'm not sure this class is anything you would be interested in."

"You clearly think I'm incapable of participating in normal activities such as sleeping on a couch or taking a simple yoga class, but I can assure you I am more than able to handle those things and quite a bit more." Her grandmother's lips pursed as she yanked open the next cupboard and pulled out the first coffee cup in line. "Now show me how to make a cup of coffee."

It took everything she had to keep a straight face. "Sure thing."

Evelyn took the cup and turned away from her grandmother, widening her eyes at Grady as she passed.

He gave her a wink and a smile, reminding her she wasn't alone in this. That he was in it with her. He had her back.

After last night, she was hoping he would have more than her back soon.

Evelyn walked her grandmother through the simple steps of putting cream and sweetened syrup into coffee before passing the cup off and making one of her own. She'd just taken her first sip when Grady started rifling through the fridge, pulling out the basics for a simple breakfast.

He paused at the stove because he had no clue where anything else was. She moved in beside him, pulling out the pan she used to cook eggs and a bowl to scramble them in, as if they did this together all the time. He worked on cracking half a dozen into the bowl while she lined a few servings of turkey bacon onto paper towels, popping them in the microwave to cook before going back to collect the empty shells and dropping them in the garbage. Between the two of them it only took a handful of minutes to fix bacon, eggs, and toast. Her grandmother watched them with a shrewd gaze as they set the table and sat down.

“Better eat up, Gram-Gram.” Grady motioned to the food “If you’re coming to class this morning you’ll have to change.”

Her grandmother looked down at the slacks and cream-colored blouse she wore, lips pinching. “I’m sure I can manage in this.”

Grady’s eyes fixed on Evelyn as her grandmother stiffly sat down beside her. He took a big bite of his toast and she could almost see the gears working inside his head as he chewed through it.

He was coming up with something to say and she was willing to bet it was going to be good. Good enough she ignored her coffee because having it come out her nose didn’t sound like a great way to start the day.

Luckily she’d prepared herself. Without his unintentional warning, she would have lost it when he said, “It’s going to be real hard to put your feet behind your head in that outfit.”

Even knowing it was coming she still had to fake a coughing fit to hide her laughter. Her grandmother gave her a sidelong glance before looking down her nose at Grady. “And what would you suggest I wear?”

Grady’s expression was innocent as he offered up an alternative. “Ev has a whole drawer full of yoga clothes. You aren’t much bigger than she is. I’m sure she’ll let you borrow something.”

Evelyn nearly swallowed her tongue. Good God she was going to die if he kept this up.

Her grandmother’s spine straightened, lips curving downward as she scowled. “Evelyn and I are the exact same size. I have been the same weight since I was eighteen years old.”

“In that case, you might not want to spend too much time downtown because our next-door neighbor, Dianna, makes some of the best cinnamon rolls you’ve ever tasted.” Grady lifted up a forkful of eggs between them. “They’re sure as hell better than anything I can make.”

Her grandmother stared at him for a second, like she was still shocked to find him there. Finally she turned to Evelyn. “Would that be the same Dianna who owns this house?”

Her question wasn’t actually a question. She was making a statement. Letting Evelyn know she’d done her homework and knew exactly what her situation was.

“That’s right.” Grady answered for her without missing a beat. “Ev and I decided to stay here until the lease is up since it’s close to town and only a five-minute drive from her studio. Then we’ll move to my place up on Grizzly Peak.”

Her grandmother studied Grady. “You don’t live on your family’s ranch?”

Grady shook his head. “No, ma’am. I’m a big boy with a place all my own.”

Her grandmother poked at the eggs on her plate, shifting them around before finally lifting a small bite into her mouth. She chewed slowly before swallowing. “Your eggs are acceptable.” She lifted the coffee to her lips and took a sip. “But this isn’t nearly as good as the one I had yesterday.”

Evelyn’s head bobbed back in surprise. That was the closest thing to a compliment she’d ever heard come out of her grandmother’s mouth.

“I’m glad to hear you don’t hate them.” Grady shoveled in another mouthful. “I’d be happy for any pointers you have.”

The line of her grandmother’s mouth hardened, and once again Evelyn was caught on the edge of laughing. Her grandmother had never cooked a thing in her life and wouldn’t have the first clue about how to scramble an egg.

But she would never admit it.

“The famed chef Herbert Fleming put heavy cream in his eggs.” Her grandmother said it with a level of authority only someone of her social stature could muster up.

Grady lifted his brows, nodding as he turned to Evelyn. “We’ll have to add heavy cream to our shopping list. Try out Herbert Fleming’s famous scrambled egg recipe.” Grady

turned back to her grandmother. “Thanks for the pointer, Gram-Gram.”

Evelyn slowly pulled in a breath through her nose, trying to keep her mind blank and her expression neutral as she exhaled. Every freaking time Grady said Gram-Gram she almost lost it.

Initially, she didn’t really see how any of this could be fun for him. It certainly wasn’t for her. But maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe this was every bit as entertaining as Grady believed.

Her grandmother nibbled on a little of her toast, eating half a piece of bacon and a quarter of her eggs before standing. “I suppose I should get ready.” She smoothed over her blouse. “Change my clothes, as Grady has so helpfully suggested.” She turned to Evelyn. “Would you please get me something to wear?”

Grady pushed back from the table and stood up, looking sexily ridiculous in her robe. “I can get something for you, Gram-Gram.” He turned. “Follow me. I’ll get you all set up.”

The second they were out of sight, Evelyn bent at the waist, putting her head between her knees and sucking in air, trying to get it together. Something told her whatever Grady pulled from her drawer was going to test her ability to maintain her composure.

She quickly cleared the table, scraping plates and loading them into the dishwasher before setting it to run and peeking her head out into the living room. There was no sight of Grady or her grandmother, so she crept down the hallway. The bathroom door was closed as she passed. Grady was in her bedroom, a pair of athletic pants slung low on his hips as he tugged his T-shirt over his head.

“You’re really coming to this class?” Evelyn kept her voice quiet, closing the door behind her.

Grady grinned. “Sweetheart, you couldn’t keep me out of that class.”



She heard the bathroom door open and a second later her grandmother came barging in. "I'm ready."

Evelyn took a steadying breath before turning around. She focused on her breathing, forcing her lungs to work as she took in the sight in front of her. Her grandmother might not have gained any weight since she was eighteen, but she also hadn't gained any muscle mass. After years of seeing her in nothing but flowing pants and blouses, the sight of her scraggly form in a pair of hot pink cotton leggings and a matching racer back tank was startling to say the least.

Grady let out a whistle. "You look good in pink, Gram-Gram." He propped his hands on his hips, looking her over. "It really shows off your gray hair."

Her grandmother's posture was stiff and awkward. She was clearly uncomfortable but was much too proud to admit it.

And much too committed to whatever game she was playing. "I'll wait for you two in the living room." She spun away, bare feet just as wild to see as the rest of the ensemble.

Evelyn closed the door behind her, leaning against it as she turned to Grady. "You are going to fucking kill me. I am going to get a hernia from trying not to laugh."

Grady stalked her way, looking just as sexy in athletic pants and a T-shirt as he did in jeans and cowboy boots or his uniform.

And just as predatory.

He stopped in front of her, reaching up to run the tip of his finger along the underside of her jaw. "I told you I was here to have fun." He leaned in and for a second she thought he might kiss her, but his lips only hovered over hers as he said, "and I'm just getting started."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## GRADY



THIS CLASS WAS every bit as amazing as he hoped it would be.

Grady lifted his head from where it hung between his shoulders as he attempted to execute the simple, but shockingly challenging, downward facing dog pose Evelyn directed them into. He scanned the room full of retirees, a little irked when they all seemed to be handling the stretch significantly better than he was.

Gram-Gram was at the front of the class, proving to be just as skilled at physical activity as she claimed. She kept her jaw tight with focus as she maneuvered her skinny body into every pose with perfect precision.

He'd done his best not to make an ass out of himself and was more than grateful to be in the back most portion of the room where no one could see how tight every muscle of his body was.

No one but Evelyn, anyway. She frequently passed by, adjusting his limbs with gentle movements, her touch almost clinical as she helped him the same as she would any other student. It was still more than enough to have his cock paying attention and threatening to test the constraints of his loose-fitting pants.

“Now we’re going to lower our bodies to the mat, curling in as we press our forehead to the floor, grounding ourselves in the child’s pose.” Evelyn’s voice was soothing and almost melodic as she guided them into the next position.

Grady's movements were anything but smooth and coordinated as he managed to get down on his knees and stretch his arms over his head, breathing through the stretch in his lower back as his muscles threatened to revolt.

Someone else was suffering from a revolt of a different kind and, thanks to the quiet of the room, their fart practically echoed through the space. A cluster of giggles followed, along with another fart.

"Can you quit doing that?" Muriel reached out to swat one hand in Gertrude's direction.

Gertrude swung back at her, forehead still pressed to the mat as she flailed. "I can't help it. Last night was taco night and I think I ate too many beans."

Gram-Gram's head turned and she glowered toward the cluster of women next to her. Muriel noticed her watching them and leaned toward Evelyn's grandmother, stage whispering, "Ignore her. She's got IBS." Gram-Gram continued staring without saying a word, but Muriel was undaunted and continued explaining. "They don't really smell, they're just loud." Muriel winced, her nose wrinkling up. "Maybe they smell a little bit, but not a lot."

"We should be focusing on our mind and not our words." Evelyn walked between Muriel and her grandmother, gently redirecting the class back to what they were supposed to be doing. As she had so many times before, she came Grady's way, pausing to urge him deeper into the stretch. But this time she got a little more touchy, sliding her hands along his ass. She followed the curve far enough her fingers brushed over the spot where his balls pressed against his pants.

He tipped his head and found her smirking at him. Evelyn pointed at his mat. "Focus on the stretch."

"Yes, ma'am." He pressed his forehead back to the rubber, grinning. This game between them kept expanding, and continued to get a hell of a lot more fun every time it did.

Fun enough he was going to be in as many of Evelyn's early-morning classes as he could fit in. Embarrassing himself

right here in the back row every single time, hoping she might put her hands on him again.

“Take a deep breath and slowly release it, letting go of all your stress and worries before gently bringing your body up.” Evelyn guided them through a few more deep breaths before thanking everyone for coming to class and sending them out to enjoy their day.

Grady hung back, watching with no small amount of amusement, as Muriel, Gertrude, and Helen accosted Gram-Gram, chattering as they circled around her, mistakenly believing she was a new member they could pull into their fold.

Evelyn stepped in beside him, watching the same thing. “Looks like they’re having as much fun with this as you are.”

Grady kept his voice low so only she would hear it. “No one’s having as much fun as I am.” He leaned into her ear, dropping his tone even more. “And if you’re going to tickle my balls during class, you might want to make a permanent spot for me.”

Evelyn laughed, her head tipping back as the light sound drew the attention of the remaining people in her studio.

“Ladies.” Grady tipped his head at the troublesome group watching them a little too closely. “I see you’ve met Evelyn’s Gram-Gram.”

Muriel dropped one arm around Gram-Gram’s shoulders. “We have. We were just telling her she simply has to come have lunch with us tomorrow at The Wooden Spoon. Mae’s making tuna casserole and she’s going to love it.”

Evelyn made a little noise, her posture going stiff as she took a slow breath and blew it back out. “Mae does make very good tuna casserole.”

Grady nodded along. “The best I’ve ever had.” He slung one arm around Evelyn’s shoulders. If Gram-Gram was going to be spending time with the girls, he needed to make sure everybody was on the same page. And now was as good a time as any to accomplish that.

To their credit, not a single one of Evelyn's friends said a word, but every set of eyeballs rested where his arm touched their young cohort. "Ev and I are going to go horseback riding today, so you all will have to be on your best behavior since we won't be around to bail you out."

Gertrude's lips lifted in a wicked smile. "That sounds like a challenge to me, Officer Haynes."

"Whatever you get into is all Cooper's problem. I'm off the clock." He slowly dragged his thumb across the soft skin of Evelyn's shoulder. "So do your worst."

Muriel pursed her lips. "I think my worst is going to involve stopping off at The Baking Rack to grab some cookies and going back home."

Gertrude sighed dramatically. "My day's going to be pretty boring too. I have a doctor's appointment."

Helen offered up a similar excuse before the ladies turned to Gram-Gram, gushing over how wonderful it was to meet her and how they couldn't wait to see her tomorrow at lunch. Gram-Gram, surprisingly, readily agreed to join them at The Wooden Spoon for tuna casserole.

They made plans to meet up at eleven the following morning before the girls collected their purses and headed outside. Gram-Gram did the same, pulling on the light jacket she borrowed from Evelyn before pausing at the door. "Can I assume I will see you at dinner?"

"You can." Grady pulled Evelyn in a little more, giving Gram-Gram his most disarming smile. "Make sure you're hungry. Ev and I were planning to stop and grab take-out on our way home."

"Of course you are." Gram-Gram stretched her features out in an odd expression that almost made it seem like she was attempting to smile. "I'll see you then." She walked out just as the same rental car she'd arrived in two days ago pulled up. The driver jumped out and rounded the front, opening the back door right as she reached it, holding it wide and closing it after her.

“Looks like Bernard’s back.” Grady watched as they drove off.

Evelyn shrugged. “I’m not surprised. He’s worked for my grandmother forever. He’s been around as long as I can remember.”

“And he just follows her wherever she goes?” It was hard to grasp. The thought of someone driving him wherever he wanted to go was completely foreign.

“Pretty much.” Evelyn shook her head. “She must pay him really well for all the shit he puts up with.”

“Maybe she doesn’t pay him in money.” Grady wiggled his brows. “Maybe they’ve got a little something going on.”

Evelyn’s nose wrinkled. “No way.” She shook her head. “I’m pretty sure my grandmother hasn’t had sex since she got pregnant with my mother.”

Grady stared at her pointedly.

“I’m serious.” Evelyn dug in her heels. “My grandfather was a lot older than she was and I’m pretty sure she hated him as much as my mom hates my dad.”

Grady continued staring and Evelyn kept rambling, clearly convinced Gram-Gram had been living as a nun for the majority of her life.

“Yes, I recognize she could have fornicated with someone besides my grandfather, but you’ve met her.” Evelyn continued pleading her case. “Can you imagine her having sex?”

“No, and I’d rather not.” Grady grabbed Evelyn by the shoulders and turned her toward the room at the back of her small space. “Go get your bag so we can go. We have too much shit to get done to stand here and debate Gram-Gram’s sex life all day.”

Evelyn crossed her arms. “Yeah. I heard that.” She lifted her brows. “Horseback riding?”

He didn’t figure she’d missed that. “You can’t be engaged to a cowboy without knowing your way around a saddle.” He

pointed at the back. “Go.”

“You’re so bossy.” Evelyn shot him a cute as fuck pout as she collected her stuff. “It’s almost like you’re used to telling people what to do, Officer Haynes.”

He chuckled, his mood much lighter than it would normally be on a day he had to go to the ranch. “Believe it or not, I was bossy way before I became a cop.”

“Oh, I believe it.” Evelyn grabbed her bag and came his way. “You probably came out of the womb that way.”

“Probably.” Grady laced his fingers with hers, taking her bag and carrying it out to where her SUV was parked. Evelyn drove them back to her thankfully Gram-Gram free house where they quickly changed into more practical clothing for the day he intended to show her.

They were pulling up to the ranch in his pickup truck just after eight. Normally he would stop at the house to check on his mother, but today he skipped it, this time going straight to the barns.

Grady parked his truck and climbed out, going around to help Evelyn out. She stood beside him, eyes bright as she looked around the property his family had owned for generations. “I didn’t even know this place was out here.”

“There’s probably a lot around Moss Creek you don’t know about.” Grady slipped his hand in hers, taking full advantage of the ruse they were establishing as he led her into the barn. It was one of his favorite places to be growing up, even if running the ranch was never high on his list of future plans.

Funny how that worked out.

Larry came striding out of the tack room, smiling wide as his eyes landed on them. “I wondered where in the hell you were this morning.” He came their way, continuing to smile. “I was starting to think you were finally takin’ a day off.”

Grady shook his head. “Not me. There’s no time for days off.”



Larry slapped him on the arm, crinkled eyes focusing on Evelyn. “This one here wouldn’t know a day off if it hit him with a stick.”

Grady rested one palm on Evelyn’s back. “Evelyn this is, Larry.”

Larry offered one hand up, giving Evelyn’s a gentle shake. “Nice to meet you. I’ve known Grady since before he was born.”

“Larry and my parents have been friends since they were kids.” The older man had been a fixture in his life. As a kid he called his father’s best friend Uncle Larry, fully believing they were actually related.

Evelyn smiled back, leaning toward the ranch hand. “Has Grady always been so bossy?”

Larry laughed, long and hard. “Used to be worse.” He tapped Grady in the center of his chest. “The force mellowed him out a little.”

Evelyn’s brows lifted as she looked him over. “This is you mellow?”

Grady gave her a single nod. “You’re welcome.”

Evelyn laughed, the sound light and airy as it echoed through the barn. It was a sound the space hadn’t heard in a long fucking time, and it sure as hell needed it.

“You bring her to work?” Larry looked Evelyn over, taking in her T-shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers. “Because if you did, I’ve got a few stalls that need mucked out.” He gave Evelyn a wink like she didn’t already know he was teasing her.

“Maybe next time.” Grady slid one hand into the back pocket of her jeans even though there was no reason to put on a show for Larry. He’d never introduced the man to a woman in his life, so her presence was enough for the man to draw conclusions. “Today I thought I’d take her for a ride. Show her around a little bit.” He’d spent so long feeling resentful about the property that was now his responsibility, and it felt good to be proud of it. To want to show it off.

“I think that sounds like a great idea.” Larry thumbed over one shoulder. “Might want to head on over to the east pasture. We’ve got a new addition out there.”

Grady picked up his meaning right away. “Good idea.” Everyone loved baby animals, and he couldn’t imagine Evelyn was any exception. “I figured we’d take Lula Bell and Scout.”

Evelyn’s eyes widened. “You have a horse named Lula Bell?”

Larry tipped his head. “Sure do.”

She beamed. “I love it.”

“You’ll love her. She’s a sweetheart. Real easy-going.” Larry shot her another wink. “I bet you two will be fast friends.”

Evelyn nodded, pressing her lips together as she shifted around on her feet, showing the first hint of nervousness. “Sounds good.”

Grady and Larry spent the next few minutes getting the horses out and saddling them up. Evelyn watched quietly, taking it all in with a hesitant stare. When they were done he turned to her. “You ready?”

Evelyn took a deep breath, shoulders squaring. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Grady led her over to where the mare his mother used to ride stood, calmly waiting. He walked her through the basics of mounting and offered a little bit of a boost as she swung herself up and into the saddle, grinning from ear to ear when she was settled. “I did it.”

Grady rested his hand on her thigh. “I knew you would.”

He passed her the reins, giving Evelyn a quick rundown of how to handle them.

“I think I’ve got it.” Evelyn still looked a little hesitant, but her smile was gaining confidence with each passing second.

Grady checked everything over one final time, making sure she was as safe as possible. “I know you do, but honestly

Lula Bell will just follow whatever Scout does, so you can just sit back and relax and enjoy the ride.”

Grady grabbed Scout’s reins and led the bigger horse out of the barn. Lula Bell proved herself the right pick by falling in beside him, staying close as they went out into the yard. Grady was just about to mount up when he heard a door slam. He turned as his mother came running toward them, both arms up in the air. Lula Bell’s tail flicked, swishing from side to side as the woman who used to ride her every day closed in.

“Who are you?” His mother started screaming, shaking her fists as she approached Evelyn and Lula Bell. “Get off my horse!”

Lula Bell took a step back, clearly flustered by this different version of the woman she used to know.

“Mom.” Grady abandoned Scout, going to where his mother continued rushing Lula Bell. “Calm down.”

“I know what you two are doing. You’re trying to steal my ranch.” She continued yelling, flailing around as she tried to grab at Lula Bell’s reins.

Evelyn, not knowing what to do or how to react, gripped them tighter, yanking as she desperately tried to figure out how to get Lula Bell away from his raging mother.

“Get off my property.” His mother shifted tactics and lunged at Evelyn, trying to drag her down as all hell broke loose.

Evelyn jerked in the saddle, trying to slide off the other side to escape his mother’s attack. Lula Bell panicked, dancing around before lifting her front feet off the dirt in a rear that was just enough to send Evelyn sliding straight to the ground.

“*Evelyn.*” Grady raced toward her, heart in his throat as Lula Bell continued dancing around, her hooves coming dangerously close to Evelyn’s crumpled body. He bumped the horse on her butt, giving her a slap as he ducked down to scoop Evelyn up from the dirt.

“Calm down, Darla.” Larry rushed into the mix, going straight for his mother.

“They’re trying to steal my land. They want to take the ranch from me.” She shoved at Larry, still trying to get at Evelyn.

Larry jerked his chin toward where Grady’s truck was parked behind the barn. “You go. I’ve got this.”

He didn’t argue. Staying here now would only make the situation worse. He carried Evelyn to his truck, depositing her in the front seat before reaching out to push her hair from her face, looking her over for any injuries. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes were wide as they locked onto his face. “I’m fine.”

Grady ran his palms down her arms, over her hands, along her legs. “Did Lula Bell step on you?”

“Grady.” She caught his hands, holding them tight as she leaned down to meet his eyes. “I’m *fine*.” She released her hold, lifting her fingers to trace along his face. “But what about you?”

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## EVELYN



HER ASS WAS sore and she'd probably never try to get on a horse again, but any discomfort she was feeling was nothing compared to the pain etched in Grady's face.

"I'm okay." He tried to reassure her, but his words didn't sound truthful, only resigned.

Evelyn studied his face, trying to figure out what to say next. "Do we need to go back? Make sure everyone else is okay too?"

Grady shook his head, hands still gripping her thighs like he needed to hang onto something just as much as she did. "It'll only make things worse if I go back."

Not if *they* want back, but if *he* went back. It was a tiny clue about the situation she wasn't confident she fully understood, but also didn't really have the right to ask about. So she just nodded, stroking the slightly stubbly skin of Grady's jawline in a way she hoped was soothing. "Okay."

His forehead dropped down to rest against hers and his eyes closed as she continued petting him. "My mom's had vascular dementia for the past few years. For a while it wasn't too bad, but lately it's been getting worse. Some days she's fine, but other days—" His voice broke, shattering her heart a little at the same time.

What in the world did you say in a situation like this? She didn't have a clue, but she had to say *something*.

"Is there anything I can do?" It was a stupid question. She didn't know how to help someone with dementia. The only

skill she really had was helping people build up strength through yoga, and that certainly wasn't useful in this situation.

Grady's lids lifted and he gave her a slow smile. "You're actually doing a whole hell of a lot." He lifted his head from hers, thumbs stroking over her blue jeans. "Usually I'm on my own after something like this happens, and it's nice having you here with me." His smile slipped. "But I still wish you hadn't had to witness that."

Evelyn tried to give him a reassuring smile. "It's okay. That's what fiancées are for, right?"

Grady seemed to relax a little, chuckling at their inside joke. "That's a good point." He looked over the top of his truck door, scanning the ranch. "I could probably call Larry and see if he could bring the horses back here so you could still get the ride I promised you."

Evelyn shook her head, shifting a little on her sore rear end. "I think I might take a rain check on horseback riding. At least until the bruise on my ass goes away."

Grady's lips flattened, his jaw going tight. "I never in a million years thought you would get hurt. If I did, I wouldn't have brought you here."

Evelyn smoothed down the front of his T-shirt. "I know, and I promise I'm fine." She continued petting him, pretending it was simply to offer comfort when actually she just wanted to touch him. Feel his body under her hands.

Last night Grady had touched her in all sorts of ways and she hadn't done any touching of her own. They'd sneaked back into her bed and she'd promptly passed out, drained from both the chaos of the two days before and what was arguably the most mind blowing and sexy orgasm of her life.

But now she was wide awake and feeling a little needy. A little like she wanted to comfort him. And it was making it a little hard to keep her hands to herself.

Luckily, Grady didn't seem to mind. He leaned into her touch, his wide hand moving over her thigh as he did some touching of his own.

“What now?” Evelyn traced the hard line of a pec through the soft cotton of his T-shirt. “Do you have anything else you need to do today?”

Outside of teaching classes at the studio, her life had become the exact opposite of the one she’d lived in New York. Here, there were no events to attend. No social gatherings to pop into. Hell, she’d even started forgoing her bikini waxes and facials, falling into what could best be called a DIY beauty routine.

And she didn’t hate it.

“I should probably grab a few things from my house and bring them to yours while Gram-Gram is out on the town.” His eyes came to hers. “That is, if you’re still enjoying our little ruse.”

“I’m enjoying it.” The words came out too fast, giving her away.

And Grady didn’t miss it. His lips pulled into a wicked smile. “That’s good to hear, because I’ve got plenty more ideas up my sleeve.”

Warmth bloomed low in her belly, rushing to pool lower. “What kind of ideas?”

Grady moved in closer, his big body blocking out the morning sun. “I think I’ll let them be a surprise.”

She swallowed hard as anticipation and excitement swirled in her belly, nearly making her forget the events of the past few minutes. She started to feel guilty about it, but maybe Grady was trying to forget too. He said having her here made it easier, and maybe that was because she provided a distraction.

And if that’s what he wanted, she was happy to give him all sorts of other things to think about.

Evelyn leaned closer, knees spreading wider as she inched toward him, thighs braced around Grady’s hips. “Maybe I should come up with a few ideas of my own.” She traced one finger down the center of his chest before hooking it into the



waistline of his jeans. “That way I’m not the only one who has something to look forward to.”

“I think I like plotting with you, Ev.” Grady reached out to tip her chin up. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with.”

His lips hovered over hers. For a second she thought he was going to kiss her, but, like this morning, his mouth didn’t so much as brush hers before he backed up. “We should get going.”

He grabbed her behind the knees and swung her around in the seat before closing her inside the truck. It was a little abrupt. And a lot disappointing.

But maybe it was better if they didn’t interact too much while there was a chance his mother could see it. She was clearly suffering and something like that might only make her more confused.

Grady got behind the wheel and slowly eased them back out onto the road. He turned away from town and headed for Grizzly Peak, the mountain both he and Gertrude called home. As much as she hated what just happened, she wasn’t upset about finally getting to see the place Grady called home. She might have taken a minute or two to imagine the place when she picked Gertrude up. Or dropped her off. Or looked in the general direction of the mountain.

“How long have you lived on Grizzly Peak?” Over the months, she’d sort of developed her own little backstory for Grady, but it was becoming more and more clear it wasn’t even remotely close to what his real life was like. Not only was Grady not quite as easy-going as he seemed, but his day-to-day experience seemed to be quite a bit more complex than she guessed. Between working for the police department, dealing with his sick mother, and running the ranch, it was no wonder he had a slightly bossy edge to his personality. He had a lot to get done and not nearly enough time to accomplish it.

“I think I bought my place six or seven years ago.” Grady stared out the windshield, looking significantly less relaxed than he was this morning when they woke up. “Part of me

planned to stay on the ranch forever, but this place came up for sale and I decided to live there. At least for a little while.”

“Does that mean you expect to move back to the ranch?” Obviously he couldn’t move back there now, not with the way his mother seemed to struggle to understand who he was. But there would come a point where it wouldn’t be an issue any longer.

It was probably one of those blessing and a curse sort of things. Watching someone you love suffer was miserable and you didn’t want them to suffer anymore, but the end of their suffering would be...

The end.

“I guess I’ll just have to wait and see how things shake out.” Grady shrugged. “There’s not much I can do but take life as it comes right now.” He blew out a loud breath. “And lately it’s been coming at me like a fucking freight train.”

She understood that. It was how she’d felt the past year, taking on a whole different sort of life than what she’d had in New York. At the time she thought it was awful to face something so different it left her feeling stupid and incapable.

But today put it into perspective.

What Grady was dealing with was awful. The most terrible, miserable thing she could imagine. And he’d been handling it alone.

Evelyn reached across the console, sliding her hand onto his thigh, wanting to offer him a little of the support he’d been lacking for so long.

And maybe a little more.

By the time they pulled into Grady’s driveway, she had all sorts of ideas milling around her brain and that now familiar throb pulsating between her thighs. If Grady wanted a distraction, she planned to make sure he got it.

She offered him a smile as he opened her door to reveal one of the absolute cutest log cabins she’d ever seen. “This is kind of the quintessential mountain getaway, isn’t it?” Evelyn

leaned back to take in the full scope of the A-frame structure. The front was flanked by a quaint covered porch complete with rocking chairs. It was the kind of place she could imagine spending an evening with a cocktail and a good book.

“That’s part of why I bought it. I figured if nothing else I could eventually rent it out as a vacation home.” Grady unlocked the door and opened it wide, letting her pass inside first.

Evelyn walked in, looking around the bright, open space. “Holy shit.”

She loved her little house downtown. It was quaint and cute and cozy.

But this—

This place felt more like a home.

“Is that a good holy shit, or a bad holy shit?” Grady closed the door and followed her in, setting his keys on the island centered along the bank of cabinets occupying the front corner.

“It was a fantastic holy shit.” Evelyn ran one finger along the cool surface of the stainless-steel countertop as she walked toward the triangular wall of windows taking up the whole back wall of the cabin and overlooking the mountain. “This is breathtaking.” It was one of the few things she missed about New York. Her loft had an amazing view of the city and while this wasn’t the city, it was equally stunning. “I can’t believe you get to wake up and look out at this every day.”

Crossing the rustic hardwood, her steps softened a little when she reached the cowhide rug situated in the living room portion of the open space. “It’s beautiful.” She stood at the glass, looking over the large, double-layer deck stretching off the back of the house. “I don’t blame you for buying this. I would have bought it too.”

Her eyes refocused, catching Grady’s reflection in the glass. He had an odd expression on his face that sent her turning to face him. “Sorry. I sort of just made myself at home, didn’t I?”

Grady's eyes moved over her. "Until you start wearing my robe around, you haven't come close to how comfortable I've made myself at your house."

"You did kinda just take it over." She smiled, walking toward him. "What's the funny look on your face for, then?"

Grady's shoulders jerked in a shrug. "I guess I just didn't expect you to be so impressed by my little house."

Evelyn snorted out a laugh. "Are you kidding?" She swung her arms around, gesturing at the modern but also rustic and cozy space. "This place is phenomenal."

Grady's chin tucked, his eyes dropping to the floor. For a second she almost expected him to scuff one boot against the floor and say, 'aw, shucks'. Instead, his eyes came back to hers, carrying a level of intensity she felt all the way to her toes. "I'm glad you like it."

She more than liked it. She loved it. Loved it so much she was already trying to come up with a way to stay here for a night.

Without her grandmother.

Ugh. Her grandmother. If they were going to get more of Grady's stuff into her place without risking running into her they needed to get moving. Evelyn pointed toward the lofted second floor that had to contain his bedroom. "You need to go get your stuff."

Grady lifted one brow at her. "You can't be the bossy one, Ev. I'm the bossy one."

"Not today." She grabbed him by the shoulders, turning him toward the wrought iron staircase. "We need to get back to my house before my grandmother gets there, remember?"

She was hoping to get there with time to spare. Time to take Grady's mind off all he was facing.

"I don't know if it's possible to forget Gram-Gram." Grady's boot hit the first step. "She leaves quite an impression."

Evelyn kept pushing him, urging him up the stairs as she followed behind. Her steps stalled out as they reached the top. “Holy shit.”

Grady went to his closet, shooting her a grin over one shoulder. “That another good holy shit?”

“You know it is.” Evelyn wandered around his bedroom as Grady collected another uniform and a few changes of clothes.

The loft only took up about a third of the cabin’s available footprint. But one end was open, overlooking the first floor and the wall of windows, making it feel spacious and open, a lot like her place in the city. A king-sized bed sat in the center of the space, headboard against one of the walls built to flatten out the sharp angle of the roofline. The headboard had a nightstand incorporated onto each end and sconces glowed from the walls above each surface.

“This place is amazing.” She dropped down onto his bed. “We should abandon my grandmother at my house and stay here instead.” The idea seemed even better when she leaned back, relaxing into the softness of Grady’s mattress.

She’d been able to get her headboard shipped from New York, but not much else, so her mattress was whatever was the cheapest at the discount store one town over. It was fine, but nowhere near as comfortable as Grady’s.

“As much as I like the thought,” Grady climbed onto the mattress, “I think Gram-Gram would find us and insist on sleeping in my recliner.” He crawled over her, nuzzling along her neck. “And I’m positive you can’t stay quiet enough for a place like this.”

Her eyes slipped shut as his lips traced along her skin. “Whose fault would that be?”

“I’m happy to take full responsibility.” Grady nipped at the spot just below her ear. “But maybe we should test it out. Just in case.” His hand teased along the skin of her belly, dipping under the hem of her T-shirt, the roughness of his skin dragging decadently across her sensitive flesh. “What do you think?”

“I think that would be smart.” Evelyn sucked in a breath as his fingers found the peak of her nipple and started to tease it through the thin fabric of her bralette. “Just so we’ll know.”

“If we know then we’ll know.” Grady plucked at the tip, shooting a sensation of pure pleasure right to her core. “And knowing’s half the battle.”

“Yup.” She wasn’t even listening to what he was saying anymore, just blindly agreeing. The man was skilled at distraction—

Distraction. Shit.

“Wait.” Evelyn shoved at his chest.

Grady went still. “What’s wrong?”

Why did she lose her mind the second he touched her? Never once had a man been able to make her lose focus for a second, much less lose her entire train of thought.

“I had a plan.” Evelyn managed to hook her leg around his, locking tight before shoving against him again. Their entwined bodies rolled across the mattress, coming to a stop with her on top, knees straddling his thighs.

Grady lifted a brow. “What’s your plan?”

That was a good question. She hadn’t really gotten past the ‘distract Grady with something sexy’ stage. But while the list of options was long and diverse, one particular act would always be at the top.

Evelyn dropped her eyes to the waistband of his jeans. “Take off your pants and I’ll show you.”

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## GRADY



GRADY STUDIED EVELYN'S face, trying to figure out where in the hell this came from. "I don't think that's a good idea, Ev."

Touching her was one thing, but letting her touch him was different. As it was now, he had a shot at being able to walk away from all this when it was over, but the window on that was closing fast.

And would slam shut if she put her hands on him.

Evelyn was already working her way into his life in ways he didn't expect. She was slowly permeating every inch of space he took up in the world, leaving an imprint that would never wash away. If she decided to walk away from him when this was all over, he'd never be the same. But he would survive.

Probably.

Evelyn's eyes jumped to his. "What?" She straightened, hurt flooding into her gaze. "Why not?"

Grady hesitated. How in the hell was he supposed to tell her that once she touched him he'd never be able to let her go?

Apparently, the answer was: quickly. Because a split second later Evelyn was climbing off him, sliding over the edge of the bed and racing down the stairs.

She was running. Just like she did the night before.

"Ev." Grady followed behind her, taking the steps as fast as he could before catching her as she rushed across the hide



rug toward the front door. He snagged her by the arm. “Stop.”

Evelyn’s eyes wouldn’t meet his as he spun her to face him.

“You can’t keep running away like this, Sweetheart.” He kept his tone gentle. “I want you to talk to me.”

Evelyn sniffed, her eyes still everywhere but his. “There’s nothing to talk about. I just thought—”

“Everything you think is right, Ev.” He decided to lay it all out. He didn’t want to look back and have regrets, and not telling her how he felt would be one hell of a regret. “I want you.”

Her gaze jumped to his, wide with surprise. “You do?” she whispered.

Did she really not know? “I’ve wanted you for longer than I can remember.” He huffed out a little laugh at the memory of the first time they met. “Ever since that night I caught you giving Gertrude a piggyback out of The Creekery.”

Even though she was by far the youngest of the group, it was clear she was the mother hen. The one who made sure everyone was safe and happy. She genuinely loved those women and she did it with her whole heart.

“She forgot her cane and I was worried she’d fall and break her other hip.” Evelyn’s lips started to curve, but quickly flattened. “She’s way heavier than she looks.”

Grady laughed, moving closer. “I saw how you took care of them. The way you defended them whenever they got themselves into trouble.” He brought one hand to her face, skimming a section of dark hair behind one ear. “I saw how you helped Amelie with her shop when she was too pregnant to keep up with everything.” He skimmed along her cheek. “I saw how you were always the one giving and no one was ever there to take care of you.”

Evelyn’s eyes moved over his face as she barely shook her head. “I shouldn’t need anyone to take care of me.”

“Why?” Grady lifted his brows. “Because you’re rich?”

Evelyn's face fell, like she didn't realize he'd figured that out. "Kinda."

The admission made him sad, but it explained a lot. "Because you have money you're not allowed to have problems or need help?"

Evelyn gave him a little nod. "It never seemed fair to complain. So many people would love to have my life."

"We talked about this, Ev. Money can't fix everything. It can only make some things easier." He added on what he left off the last time. "Money won't make my mom better. Doesn't matter how much you give her, she still won't know who I am." He continued tracing along her skin, following the line of her jaw. "And sometimes money creates problems. Look at your Gram-Gram. She can't even make a cup of fucking coffee."

Evelyn huffed out a laugh, her eyes rolling to the ceiling. "I shouldn't laugh. I didn't know how to turn on a stove."

"But you do now." Grady inched in a little more, drawn to her the same way he had been from the start. "And I bet you figured it out all on your own."

Evelyn's head bobbed from side to side. "Sort of." She offered a small smile. "I googled it." Her smile faltered and she took a breath so deep it lifted her shoulders. "If you want me why did you say it wasn't a good idea for me to..." Her voice trailed off.

He wanted to ask exactly what she was planning to do, but he needed to focus on the conversation they were having. And there was no way that would happen if he knew exactly what he'd rejected. "Because if you want me to walk away from you when this is all over, I need to keep some space between us."

And there wasn't much left to work with. He'd already fucked up by touching her. Already made it that much more impossible to consider letting her be.

"Oh." Evelyn chewed her lower lip, gaze falling to his chest. She was quiet for a minute. When she spoke again her

words were so soft he almost didn't hear them. "Maybe I don't want you to walk away from me."

"Maybe's not good enough, Ev." He wanted to believe it might be true. That Evelyn was feeling just like he was. "You need to be sure."

Evelyn pressed her lips together, eyes searching his. She opened her mouth—

And his cell started to ring in his pocket, the ascending chime one he couldn't ignore.

"Shit." Grady dragged the phone free before connecting the call and pressing it to his ear. "Is everything okay?"

His mother's wails answered before Charlene did. "Your momma fell trying to get down the front steps. I can't get her up."

"Did you call the squad?" The question was barely out of his mouth when Evelyn moved in, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head on his chest.

She was comforting him. Letting him know she was there for him just as much as he was there for her. That he wasn't alone. And making a liar out of him.

Because there was already no way in hell he could walk away from this woman.



EVELYN'S HAND SLID across the console to find his, offering a squeeze. "You doing okay?"

"I don't fuckin' know." Grady blew out a long breath. His plans for the day had been derailed. "I hate the hospital."

Evelyn's thumb slowly skated across his skin in a gentle stroke. "Does your mom have to go there a lot?"

"No. Thank God." He gripped the steering wheel, trying to fight the sadness creeping in. "It just reminds me of when my

dad got sick a few years ago.”

Evelyn stayed quiet, her silence leaving too much room for things he’d been holding in to spill out.

“He had a heart attack and my mom was already too confused to call 911 so he laid on the floor for almost an hour before I came in and found him.” At the time it had qualified as the worst day of his life. “His heart was damaged but they expected him to recover. Then pneumonia set it and—” He couldn’t finish.

And Evelyn didn’t force him to. Her free hand came to slide down his arm in a soft touch that somehow made it all easier.

Grady cleared his throat, turning her way as they stopped at a light. “Thank you for staying with me today.”

He’d offered to drive her home more than a few times. Evelyn refused every one of them, choosing to sit in an uncomfortable chair at his side as they waited to hear from doctors and made plans.

“You don’t have to thank me.” Evelyn barely smiled. “You deal with my grandmother and I’m positive that’s way worse than spending an afternoon in the hospital.”

“At least Gram-Gram is entertaining.” He latched onto the new topic, leaning into it and the break it would offer his overwhelmed brain. “Even if she’s a pain in the ass who likes to get her way.”

Evelyn’s lips flattened, rolling inward for a second before she let out a long sigh. “She has very definite ideas about the way my life should go. That’s why she’s here. I’m not doing what she wants.”

“Do you think she wants you to move back to New York?” The thought bothered him. A hell of a lot.

She didn’t belong in New York. She belonged in Moss Creek.

“Probably.” Evelyn scratched at a spot on her jeans, rubbing back and forth over the fabric. “There’ve always been

expectations for me. That I'll take on certain responsibilities in my family.”

He understood that. Completely and totally. “I take it you're an only child too?”

Evelyn gave him a sad smile. “I'm the only child of an only child.” Her head tipped back and she stared up at the roof. “There's no one else for her to push it all on. For a long time, I still thought I could get out of it. That if I just acted bad enough my grandmother would give up on me. But that doesn't seem to be happening.”

“I don't know if you've noticed this, but Gram-Gram doesn't seem like the kind to give up on anything.” He faced Evelyn as they came to a stop light. “The woman can do a handstand, for God's sake.”

“Right?” Evelyn huffed out a laugh as she shook her head. “Where did that even come from? I've never seen her do any sort of physical activity, let alone something that requires so much strength *and* balance.”

“That's a little terrifying then.” Grady turned into the lot of the best Chinese restaurant around. “Who knows what else she's capable of.”

Evelyn groaned. “I don't even want to know.”

Grady parked and shut off the engine. “I say we stuff her so full of rice and egg rolls that she can't move. Then we won't have to worry about it.”

Evelyn gave him a wide grin, clearing a little more of the sadness clouding his mood. “I agree.”

Twenty minutes later, they were back on the road and his truck was filled with the scents of General Tso's chicken and sweet and sour sauce. When they pulled in at Evelyn's house, Gram-Gram's rental car was parked in the driveway next to Evelyn's SUV. He parked his truck right behind it, blocking her in just for fun, then helped Evelyn out, taking on both heavy paper bags of food.

There was no sign of her grandmother when they went in, so Evelyn sent him to the kitchen to unpack while she went in

search of her. The old bitty was probably rifling through the whole house, looking for something to prove they were full of shit so she could get on with whatever plan brought her here.

A plan Evelyn thought involved dragging her back to New York.

The possibility had him dropping the bags on the kitchen table before following Evelyn down the hall, catching up with her right as she reached Gram-Gram's door.

Evelyn lifted her brows. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"I'm making sure Gram-Gram knows soup's on." Grady knocked on the door of the spare bedroom before grabbing the handle. It was time for Gram-Gram to get a taste of her own medicine.

He shoved the door wide. "Gram-Gram. Dinner's—" The words died off in his throat.

Evelyn gasped, one hand coming to clamp over her mouth as she stared at the scene in front of them.

Her grandmother stood in some sort of open-ended tent-like contraption, wearing nothing but a paper bikini. Bernard stood in front of her, an airbrush in his gloved hand.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Evelyn continued to stare, jaw dropped, brows pinched together in horror. "And why are you doing it here?"

"I get a spray tan every six days. Without it I look old." Gram-Gram shifted on her feet, assuming a pose similar to one Evelyn coached them through that morning. "You're more than welcome to stay and watch, but the color I use is specially formulated for my skin tone, so don't expect to get one of your own."

Grady rubbed one hand over his mouth, trying to disguise the smile working across his lips. He was sure as hell getting a lot of bang for his buck with this whole thing. If a mostly naked Gram-Gram wearing elastic napkins and a hairnet didn't make him forget all the shit happening in his life, nothing would.

Grady looped one arm around Evelyn's shoulders. "Take your time. Don't want anyone to think you're a day over seventy."

Gram-Gram worked her jaw from side to side as Bernard airbrushed the inside of one thigh. "I've been told I don't look a day over sixty."

Grady opened his mouth, ready to ask Gram-Gram how long ago that was, but Evelyn planted both her hands in the center of his chest, shoving him down the hallway. "We just came to tell you we brought back dinner. Enjoy getting your tan." She slammed the door and continued pushing him toward the kitchen. "Go."

Grady leaned closer, lowering his voice since Evelyn obviously didn't want him to continue poking the beast for now. "Who told Gram-Gram she didn't look a day over sixty?"

Sure, Evelyn's grandmother clearly worked hard to keep herself up. And sure, she wore expensive clothes and jewelry. But the woman didn't look under sixty. Not by any stretch of anyone's imagination.

"Everyone tells her that because they don't want her to ruin their lives." Evelyn gave him one final push, bumping him into the small kitchen.

"Sweetheart, I'm not scared of Gram-Gram. She can't ruin my life." There was nothing to ruin at this point. Everything was going down the shitter all on its own.

"You'd be surprised what she's capable of." Evelyn went to the kitchen table, tearing open the stapled bags a little more aggressively than the situation warranted.

"Is that what you're worried about? Her ruining your life?" Evelyn was scared of the scrawny woman down the hall. He'd seen it from the beginning, but he was having a hard time figuring out exactly what power she held. "She can't make you marry someone like Sasha, Ev. That shit ended centuries ago." Grady decided to try to lighten the mood. "And if she does, I'll pop the stick out of his ass and beat him with it."

Evelyn's expression shifted, a hint of a smile teasing across her lips. "That's probably why my grandmother thought he was such a good catch. They have matching sticks."

"Then maybe they should get together." Grady reached out, pulling her close even though no one was there to witness it. "They can have sword fights with them."

Evelyn laughed again. "Gross."

He stayed close, unable to pull himself away from her. "Not as gross as the sight of Gram-Gram in that paper bikini."

"Ew." Evelyn's voice lowered to a whisper, eyes widening. "It looked like she has a Brazilian wax."

"Didn't notice that, but thanks for pointing it out." Grady slid his hands down to palm her ass. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to have nightmares now."

"Are we eating or not?" Gram-Gram breezed into the kitchen, reeking of chemicals and audacity as she stopped to scan the food spread across the table. "I have to dry for ten minutes so I might as well eat while I wait."

Evelyn sidestepped out of her grandmother's way and out of his grip. "You're going to eat like that?"

Gram-Gram leaned over the table to open the container of mixed vegetables, the G-string cut of her bikini bottom cutting up the flat crack of her ass. "I assumed you would want me to make myself comfortable." She straightened, challenging glare focused on Grady. "So I am."

Damn. This woman was good. Whatever game she was playing, Gram-Gram was fully committed to it.

Which made him think this was about more than just wanting Evelyn to move back to New York.

"Of course we want you to make yourself at home, Gram-Gram." Grady went to the cabinet and pulled out a plate, bringing it over and passing it off to Evelyn's grandmother. "Our home is your home."

"Of course it is." Gram-Gram scooped a small amount of vegetables onto her plate, turning her nose up at the rice before



spinning to face them. “How was your day?” She turned to Evelyn. “I assume you enjoyed riding around aimlessly on the back of an animal?”

“Of course.” Evelyn hooked her arm through his, resting her head against his shoulder as she lied through her teeth about their day. “It’s so peaceful out there.” She straightened, expression brightening. “You should come with us next time.”

Grady almost snorted. There was no way that woman was getting on the back of a—

“I think I might.” Gram-Gram stabbed her fork into a chunk of carrot, taking a bite off one corner of the large piece. “I’ve heard fresh air can be invigorating for the circulatory system.”

Grady stared at the scrawny woman standing in the center of the kitchen wearing nothing but a paper bikini and a heightened sense of self-importance. “Are you sure? It’s a pretty physical activity.”

Gram-Gram leveled her gaze at him. “If you can do it, I certainly can.” She took another bite of carrot. “Given how much you struggled through this morning’s class, I can’t imagine it requires that much physical ability.”

He had to give it to her. Gram-Gram was a worthy opponent. The woman was doing everything in her power to make him fold. Or at least make him lash out at her in a way she could use as leverage when arguing Evelyn would be better off in New York. And he sure as hell wasn’t giving her any leverage. Especially since he was pretty sure she had millions of things to use against Evelyn as it was.

“That’s why I’ve been taking Evelyn’s classes. Baling hay and roping cattle might build strength, but they sure don’t help with flexibility. And I don’t get up after I hit the ground nearly as fast as I used to.”

Gram-Gram snorted. “Talk to me about that in fifty years.” She tipped her head to one side. “Bernard? How long has it been?”

Bernard came into the kitchen holding his cell phone, watching as the timer counted down. “You’ve got thirty more seconds.”

“Perfect.” Gram-Gram went to work piling more food onto her plate, passing it off to Bernard before striding past him. “I’m ready to get out of this ridiculous bikini.”

Bernard followed her from the room, carrying the plate she most definitely was not going to finish, leaving Grady and Evelyn alone again.

He shook his head. “She’s something else, isn’t she?”

Gram-Gram reappeared in the doorway. “I’ve been thinking. I would like a tour of the area.” Her eyes landed on him. “I assume you’re familiar with it since you’ve lived here your whole life.”

Damn. It sounded like Gram-Gram might’ve been checking into him. “I’d be happy to show you around my little town, Gram-Gram.”

“Of course you would.” Gram-Gram squared her shoulders. “We can do it tomorrow after Evelyn’s morning yoga class. I’d like to go to my lunch with those women at least somewhat educated about this part of the country.”

“Can’t do it tomorrow.” Grady shrugged, trying to look like he wasn’t enjoying the opportunity to tell Gram-Gram no. “I’ve gotta work, but I’ll check my schedule and let you know when I’m available.”

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## EVELYN



“EIGHT IN THE morning. Got it. I’ll be there.” Grady disconnected his call but continued pacing around the bedroom.

Evelyn watched for a few seconds, uncertainty keeping her lips sealed. She still struggled to know what to say to him. What questions to ask. What questions not to ask. How to let Grady know she was there for him. Hopefully she wasn’t failing miserably because life in the real world wasn’t the only thing her upbringing left her ill-equipped to handle.

She also wasn’t too great at dealing with the emotional aspects of human interaction.

Her mother had never been particularly warm or emotionally available, and her father was about as absent as it got. The deepest relationship she’d ever had was with Amelie. That’s probably why she chose Moss Creek of all the places in the world she could have escaped to.

And watching Grady rake one hand through his hair as he continued pacing made her glad for it. Happy she could be here for him at a time like this.

Evelyn slipped off the bed, padding across the floor to stand directly in his path. When he paused, she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against the center of his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Grady seemed to relax, his arms encircling her, one hand cradling her head as he let out a long breath. “Charlene said

she's resting. They gave her some pain medication that seemed to help."

Evelyn slowly stroked up and down the warm skin of his bare back, trying to soothe Grady the only way she could think to. She couldn't tell him everything would be fine. It would never be fine. Not in any capacity. All she could do was let him know he wasn't alone. Just like he'd done for her so many times before.

"They're going to do the surgery in the morning. She'll be in the hospital for a couple more days before being moved to a rehab facility."

Grady seemed to tense up again, prompting her to tip her head up so she could see his face. "Which part are you most worried about?"

There was so much on his plate it would be impossible to relax while staring down all the problems he was facing, but maybe she could help him focus on one. Reduce the weight resting on his shoulders one load at a time.

Grady's fingers worked through her hair and against her scalp, gently massaging as he considered her question. "Charlene's able to stay with her at the hospital tonight, so I don't have to worry about that. Larry's got the ranch under control for the most part." His eyes pinched. "I guess I'm worried I won't be able to find a place willing to take her because of her history of aggression."

It was an understandable concern. One she was clueless about where to even start trying to solve. "Could the hospital help find options?"

Grady's hand continued working through her hair as his eyes moved over her face. "Maybe. It's worth a try." He nodded, like the idea made sense. "I'll ask while I'm there tomorrow."

A little of the helplessness she'd been struggling with eased. "What time are we leaving in the morning?"

Grady's brows pinched together. "You don't have to go with me. You have better things to do than sit in the hospital."

“Actually, I don’t.” Yes, she had a couple classes she would have to cancel. And yes, she normally went out to Amelie’s for lunch on Thursdays. But being with Grady was more important than any of that. He needed her.

And she needed to be there for him.

Grady’s hand moved along her face, touch achingly gentle. “Ev, I—”

Evelyn reached up to press her fingers against his lips. “If you’re about to tell me I don’t have to go with you, then you can save your breath.”

Grady’s mouth slowly curved as he spoke behind her pressing digits. “You enjoyed turning that back on me, didn’t you?”

Evelyn smiled. “I did.” She backed up, taking his hand to pull him along. “Now come lay down. You need to get some sleep. You’ve had a really long, fucked-up day.”

Grady came easily, looking every bit as delectable as he had the night before in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs, his hair still damp from the shower. While that would have normally distracted her, tonight she needed to stay focused. Needed to be there for him.

Grady slid under the covers, shifting down against the mattress, holding the blankets up as she curled against him. There was no point in pretending like that wasn’t where she would end up anyway. The second she fell asleep, she would wedge her body as close to his as possible, so might as well get comfy now.

Once she was settled, he tucked the blankets around her, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Comfortable?”

Evelyn nodded, her cheek resting against the tickly press of his chest hair. “Very.” She trailed her fingers through the textured strands. “What about you?”

“Honestly?”

Evelyn tipped her head back and studied his face. “Of course, honestly.”

Grady flashed her a boyish grin. “If you want the truth, my bed’s more comfortable than yours.”

She snorted out a laugh. “That’s because your bed’s probably nicer than mine. I bought the cheapest one I could find.”

Grady’s brows lifted. “Yeah? Why’d you do that?”

Evelyn continued toying with his chest hair, sliding her fingers through the strands before smoothing them back down. “When I first moved here I didn’t have a great concept of how much things cost, and I started to go through my money pretty quickly. Once I noticed how fast it was going, I cut way back.”

As a result, the furnishings of her home were an odd hodgepodge of high-end and store brand. For a while, she’d kicked herself for not figuring things out sooner, but maybe she should be relieved she’d figured them out eventually. When you jumped in with both feet you were bound to get wet no matter how quickly you learned to swim.

And at least she didn’t drown.

“I’m really proud of you, Ev. Most people wouldn’t have done what you’ve done. And they sure as hell wouldn’t have worked as hard as you have to figure shit out.” He stroked down her arm before linking his fingers with hers. “You’re really fucking brave.”

Was she? It didn’t seem like it. “I didn’t come here because I was brave. I came here because I was scared.” She never wanted to live the way her mother had—miserable and resentful. “I just wanted to be able to live my own life and I was afraid that wasn’t going to be possible if I stayed in New York.”

She was still a little afraid that wouldn’t be possible, but those concerns were diminishing quickly. Because Grady was right. She *had* figured things out. Maybe not right away, but eventually. Even if her grandmother flew back to New York tomorrow, withdrawing any hope of financial support or family connection, she would be okay.

Would she be rich? No.

And the thought was almost a relief.

“You know you don’t have to go along with what Gram-Gram says.” Grady’s voice was low as his touch continued moving over her skin. “You have options.”

Evelyn smiled against his skin. “I know.” She hesitated but only for a second. “I decided I’m not going back to New York. I’m staying in Moss Creek. No matter what my grandmother threatens.”

The minute the confession was out of her mouth it was like the clouds parted and the sun finally peeked through. She’d been so scared of what would happen if she chose to go against her grandmother, so worried about everything she would lose.

Now she was focused on what she would gain.

“I just feel like I should probably stick around. The girls need me. If I leave, they won’t have anyone to drive them around when they go out.” She could only imagine who they would try to con into being their new babysitter. Probably poor Cooper. “And I want to see Amelie’s baby grow up.”

Grady was quiet for a minute. “That the only reasons you want to stay?”

Evelyn’s smile grew. “There is this man I’m interested in.” She continued teasing her fingers through Grady’s chest hair, a little fascinated by the feel of it. “But he’s kind of bossy, so—”

She squealed as the mattress and the room shifted, her body seeming to move all on its own. Grady was suddenly over her, his weight heavy and grounding. “Bossy?” He pushed up to his knees. “You haven’t seen anything yet, Ev.”

How had she thought she’d be able to keep her head tonight? To resist the urge to ogle Grady in his underwear. Because she was wrong. So very wrong.

Grady jerked his chin toward her sleep shorts. “Take those off.”

Never had she moved so quickly to do what someone else wanted. But, after spending her whole life doing exactly the



opposite, she was starting to see it might not have actually gotten her anywhere.

And that wasn't going to happen tonight.

Evelyn shucked her shorts and tossed them over the edge of the mattress, breaths shallow as Grady's dark gaze raked over her bare legs and pussy.

His eyes lifted to the silky tank she still wore. "Take that off too."

He didn't have to ask twice. The satiny fabric was sailing through the air as fast as she could wiggle it off.

Her heart raced in her chest as she waited to see what he would ask next. Or maybe, what he would do next. The possibility of him touching her again had a sense of urgency building in her belly.

But Grady made no move to reach for her. The only thing touching her body was the weight of his gaze as it made a slow, leisurely pass over her.

Grady rocked back onto his heels, adding distance between them. It was disappointing, but her disappointment flared to something much warmer when he said, "Spread your legs for me, Ev. I want to see all of you."

Just like she did before, Evelyn immediately did what she was told, parting her thighs as lust flared in his dark gaze.

But then Grady went silent, body tense and unmoving as the seconds ticked by.

Was he waiting for her to do something? Was she supposed to repay him by touching herself the way he'd done in the bathroom?

She inched her hand downward, arousal flaring as her fingers moved over her belly and brushed the short crop of hair on her pubic bone. She'd barely reached her clit when Grady shoved her hand away with a growl that made every part of her clench.

"That's mine." He rocked forward, giving her no time to prepare before his mouth was on her, hot and hungry. He

licked and sucked at her like he was ravenous. Desperate to take everything she had to give.

It was shockingly abrupt and sent her back bowing off the mattress as her nails dug into the sheets, seeking purchase.

Grady's mouth didn't leave her flesh as he warned, "Pillow."

Somehow she managed to drag one over her face as he continued offering up the sort of contact she'd never expected was possible. Sure, this was an act she'd participated in before, but not once was it like this.

This was intense. Powerful. Consuming. Just like the man offering it.

When Grady slid a thick, long finger into her body, dragging it across a spot that curled her toes and tested the muffling capacity of the fiberfill between her teeth, she was gone. Coming harder than she ever had as his sinfully skilled tongue dragged the climax out, making her body jolt with each decadent pass.

Then it was too much. She rolled away, flinging the pillow aside, as pulses of warmth and sensation continued racing through her lower half like a heartbeat of Grady's making.

"Are you tired already?" Grady caught her around the middle and dragged her back, a smug grin splitting his handsome face. "I figured you'd have more stamina with all that yoga you do."

"I'm not tired." She wanted more. Wanted him to get the release he needed. "I just need a minute."

Grady lifted a brow. "Then what?"

"Then..." She licked her dry lips, struggling to put it into words.

Getting men into her bed had always been easy. They came quickly and willingly. Grady did not. He wanted so much more than she'd ever had to give, and while she was more than ready to offer it up, this was one more interaction she was woefully inexperienced at.

“Then...” She swallowed, forcing the next word out.  
“Sex.”

Knowing Grady would be over her—inside her—was exhilarating. Intoxicating.

Terrifying.

Because this was more than sex. More than an act intended to earn freedom. This was different. Different in a way she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Grady's hand slowly made a path down her middle, tracing a line between her breasts and along her navel before skimming across her sensitized clit. The sensation was overpowering, and it hit her like lightning, making her whole body curl in response.

“I don't know, Ev.” Grady teased across her again, causing the same reaction a second time. “I think we're gonna be waiting.”

Her eyes flew open, locking onto his face. “What? Why?”

Grady's smile was devilish and not even the smallest bit disappointed as he crawled over her, the heavy line of his cock resting against her belly through the fabric of his underwear. “Because I'll be damned if I won't feel you come around me the first time I'm inside you.”

She opened her mouth, ready to argue, but Grady was already off the bed and collecting her pajamas.

“Sit up.” His demand left no room for argument.

She complied, limbs heavy and weak as he carefully dressed her before climbing in beside her and pulling her useless body close. “Goodnight, Ev.”

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## GRADY



“I BROUGHT YOU some terrible coffee from a machine I found beside the bathroom.” Evelyn lowered into the chair beside him, voice quiet as she passed off the paper cup. “Has the doctor come out yet?”

Grady shook his head before taking a sip from the drink that was just as bad as Evelyn claimed it to be. “A nurse came out a few minutes ago and said it was taking longer than expected, but that the surgeon should be out soon.”

Evelyn inched a little closer to him, her expression filled with worry. “Are you holding up okay?”

“I guess I’m a little numb.” He hadn’t unloaded on anyone in years—hadn’t opened up about how fucking hard all of this was. There really wasn’t anyone he could open up to. Not until now. “It’s been one thing after another for so long I think I’m just used to it at this point.”

Evelyn’s hand came to his shoulder, smoothing out the fabric of his shirt, adjusting the neckline, picking something he couldn’t even see free before flicking it away. “I hate that you had to get used to it.” Her busy hand finally stopped fluttering around then moved to slide into his. “I wish there was something I could do to help.”

He could see that helplessness on her face. In her actions. Evelyn obviously didn’t understand how significant her presence was.

But he didn’t mind telling her. “You are helping. If you weren’t here, I would be facing this alone.”

Evelyn's gaze drifted to the chairs across from them where Larry and Charlene sat not so long ago. "That's not true."

He got what she was trying to say, but it was still wrong. "It is. Having other people here isn't the same as having someone like you with me."

Evelyn's mouth hinted at a smile before flattening. "Someone like me?"

She was new to this, he got that. If Evelyn had been in a relationship before, he'd eat his hat. Because while he might have missed some things lately, there was no way he couldn't have noticed how uncertain she was when it came to their connection.

And they had a connection. One that went far beyond their plans and their scheming. One that had nothing to do with Gram-Gram or Sasha or his own need for distraction and her desire to live a life of her own choosing.

And he wasn't afraid to admit it. "I think we both know this has turned into more than we initially expected, Ev."

Last night Evelyn said she was staying in Moss Creek. It was a decision he knew could change her whole life. Gram-Gram didn't seem like the kind of person who enjoyed not getting her way, and there was a large chance she would cut Evelyn off completely. That meant Evelyn could be giving up everything to stay. Money. Her family. The whole life she had before.

It was a huge decision. One she admitted was partly because of him.

Evelyn rubbed her lips together, that uncertainty he'd seen so many times pinching her brows. "I don't know how to be part of a *more*, Grady."

"Yes, you do." He slid his thumb across the back of her hand, wanting to reassure her. "You're here with me now even though you don't have to be."

Evelyn's eyes went wide. "Yes I do. I would never make you sit here alone—"

Grady chuckled. “That’s why I’m saying you know how to be part of a *more*.” Her obvious desire to support him eased a little of the tightness that had been fisting in his chest since they took his mother back. “After you got hurt yesterday falling off Lula Bell, you weren’t worried about yourself. You were worried about me.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes like he was making the worst argument ever. “Of course I was worried about you. I only had a little bruise on my ass. You’d just witnessed your mother acting very...” She paused before offering the gentlest explanation for the incident he could imagine. “Not herself.”

It was almost cute that she didn’t see how very significant all she did was. Almost.

He chuckled. “Sweetheart, that is exactly how a relationship works. You put each other first. You worry about the other person and want to take care of them. Want to make sure they’re happy and supported.”

Evelyn stared at him, throat working as she swallowed. “That’s how you make me feel.”

He reached up to tuck her hair behind one ear, needing to touch her a little more. “I hope so.”

Evelyn blinked a few times, her chin barely quivering as she pressed her lips together and inhaled sharply. “No one has ever made me feel like that.”

He wasn’t surprised. Gram-Gram certainly lacked any warmth. And considering Evelyn’s mother hadn’t tried to intervene in any of Gram-Gram’s bullshit, she couldn’t be too concerned about Evelyn’s happiness.

“That’s a fucking shame.” He leaned in, pressing his lips to her forehead. “But you know I’m not the only person who would be there for you if you gave them the chance.”

He’d love to be the one Evelyn always counted on, but that wouldn’t be right. No matter how much he wanted to be selfish with her, he couldn’t be. She deserved to be surrounded by as many people who loved her as possible. “If the girls knew what Gram-Gram was trying to do, I can promise you

they would hogtie her, pack her into a box, and ship her skinny ass back to New York.”

Evelyn snorted out an unladylike laugh.

“Same for Amelie. I’m sure she knows more about this than anyone. If she thought you were ready to make a move, you can bet your ass she would throw down with that little baby of hers strapped to her chest.” He could almost imagine the whole lot of them, ready to raise hell in Evelyn’s defense.

Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that. Moss Creek didn’t have enough holding cells to deal with the fallout.

Evelyn lifted her eyes to his. “I never really told Amelie about everything.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I felt bad complaining when her life was such a mess too.”

“You’re allowed to complain, Ev.” He wanted her to know she was allowed to be unhappy. She was allowed to wish her life was different. And she was allowed to share it with the people she cared about. The people who cared about her. “Life is hard no matter how unlimited the funding is.”

Evelyn sighed. “Believe it or not, the funding was never unlimited.” She went back to smoothing down his shirt. “I have a credit card with a monthly limit and that’s all I could spend. Granted it’s a decent amount, but it made it impossible to buy anything without my grandmother knowing.”

“I think Gram-Gram has control issues.”

Evelyn choked out a laugh. “No shit.”

Grady glanced up as Larry and Charlene came back from their trip to the cafeteria. “They have anything good to eat?”

“Definitely nothing as good as Charlene’s cookin’.” Larry sat down. “Has anyone come out?”

“Just a nurse who said it would be a little while longer.” They’d explained yesterday that sedating his mother was a risk and might result in further loss of her already diminished mental capacity, but there was no alternative unless he wanted to leave her bedridden for the rest of her life. Her broken hip had to be repaired.



“Hopefully they’re just being extra careful.” Charlene smoothed down her hair. “I’ll feel just terrible if she’s having complications. I should have stayed right with her.”

Grady had told Charlene it wasn’t her fault a million times, but he understood the weight of guilt, so he offered it up again. “It’s not your fault. You can’t physically be at her side every second.”

“But I’m always so careful.” Charlene continued to fidget, smoothing down the front of her pants as she tried to claim a responsibility that wasn’t hers. “I thought the worst of it was over and she’d tired herself out. I stepped outside real quick to take a phone call and the next thing I knew she was sprawled down the back steps.”

Larry patted Charlene on the shoulder. “She’ll be okay. Darla’s always been a strong woman. She’ll come out of this.”

Finally the door leading back to the recovery area opened and the same nurse from before waved him in. Grady took Evelyn’s hand, bringing her along as he followed the nurse into a small room on the other side of the door.

Evelyn’s feet slowed as she glanced back toward Larry and Charlene. “Will they be upset that I’m coming back here and they’re not?”

“No.” He was sure his father’s best friend and his mother’s caregiver wanted to hear how she was doing, but right now he needed a little privacy.

And he needed Evelyn.

Grady moved one of the chairs toward her, waiting until Evelyn was seated before sliding into the one beside her. The surgeon was still in scrubs when he came into the room, looking serious.

“I was able to get your mother’s hip replacement done, but she really struggled during the surgery. There were a few times we had to stop and wait for her vitals to even out, but she got through it.” He focused on Grady, voice a well-practiced combination of pointed but also sympathetic. “As I told you before, there’s no way to know how she’ll be when she wakes

up. Some people come out of sedation with no lingering effects, but some people don't ever quite regain what they had."

"We understand." Grady's hand slid into hers. "Will we be able to go back and see her soon?"

The surgeon nodded. "Of course. She's in recovery now. They'll call you back two at a time as soon as she is awake and stable." The surgeon shook his hand and Evelyn's before directing them back into the waiting area.

Larry and Charlene were sitting a little closer when Grady opened the door. His mother's caretaker quickly shifted and crossed her legs, putting some space between them. Was this another thing he'd missed? Larry and Charlene? Was it possible they'd developed more than a friendship during their time working on the ranch?

Yes. It probably was.

"How is she doing?" Charlene eased a little more to the side, resting one elbow against the arm of her chair. "Are we going to be able to go see her soon?"

Grady nodded, shoving aside the frustration he felt at discovering he wasn't as skilled at reading people as he thought. "The surgeon said I should be able to go back soon."

And he was right. In under five minutes the nurse was back, leading him and Evelyn to where his mother was waiting. He hesitated before stepping in, bracing himself for whatever was waiting for him.

The surgeon obviously believed he wanted his mother to be exactly as she was before when she woke up, but as much as he hated to admit it, that wasn't true. The way his mother was before the surgery left him unable to see her on a regular basis. He spent limited time with her, worried his presence would leave her confused, agitated, and irate.

Like it had the day before.

But once he saw her in the hospital bed, he realized maybe the way she was would have been better.

The nurse went to her side, grasping one limp hand. “Darla? Your son and his wife are here to see you.”

Grady didn’t correct her. All he could do was stare at the blank look on his mother’s face. Her eyes were hollow and empty, mouth hanging open as she stared at a point on the wall across from her hospital bed.

Evelyn’s hand squeezed his, holding tight. “Why don’t we sit down.” She gently directed him to the set of chairs at his mother’s bedside, urging him into the one closest before scooting in beside him.

“Sometimes it takes a while for the anesthesia to really wear off.” The nurse adjusted his mother’s blankets before checking her IV and slipping out of the room, letting them know she would be close by if they needed her.

Grady couldn’t take his eyes off his mother. Seeing a woman who was once so full of life reduced to a shell of her former self lodged a heavy pain in his gut.

“Could you tell me something about your mom?” Evelyn rested her hand on his back, rubbing slow circles. “Did she cook?”

Grady nodded, swallowing hard. “All the time. She made the best hush puppies and dumplings I’ve ever had.”

“I don’t know what a hush puppy is, but I’ll take your word for it.” Evelyn’s head gently rested on his shoulder. “Was she born in Moss Creek?”

“No.” He rested one hand against the bed. “Her family owned a ranch a few hours from here. She and my dad met when he went to pick up some cattle.” He smiled. “She always said he came home with one more heifer than he planned to.”

Evelyn made a choked sound. “You’re kidding.”

Grady shook his head. “Not even a little bit. She was funny like that.”

“That is fantastic.” Evelyn smiled. “Was your dad funny too?”

“No. Not at all.” His hand slid across the blanket, slowly moving to cover his mother’s. “He was always fine letting her run the show and be the center of attention.”

“I wish I could have seen them together.” Evelyn’s soft voice continued easing the squeeze in his chest. “I’ve never seen a couple who can stand each other, let alone a pair who would be okay letting the other person shine like that.”

“Sure you have. You’ve seen Amelie and Troy. Griffin and Dianna. Those men are happy to take a backseat and let their wives get all the glory.”

“That’s true.” Evelyn sighed. “Maybe I just never paid that much attention because I assumed it was irrelevant.”

Grady peeked down at her. “And now it’s not?”

Evelyn gave him a soft smile. “Now I’m wishing I had a better example when I was younger so I wouldn’t feel so clueless about how to—” she paused, pressing her lips together “—how to be with someone.”

Evelyn seemed to be caught in a spot of self-awareness that threatened to leave her uncertain and afraid. Worried she would fail at something she’d only just finally allowed herself to believe could be hers. And it frustrated the hell out of him. Especially since she was offering him exactly what he needed.

Grady rested his forehead against hers. “You’re doing a pretty damn good job for someone who claims to be clueless.”

Evelyn smiled up at him. “Good.”

The nurse peeked into the room, stealing the quiet moment. “How’s it going?”

Grady turned to look over his mother’s expressionless face one more time. “I suppose we should let everybody else have a chance to see her. I’m sure they’re chomping at the bit out there.” He stood. “Will she be in a room soon?”

The nurse nodded. “It usually takes around an hour.”

“We’ll be back around then.” He walked with Evelyn back down the hallway, freeing up space for Charlene and Larry to go back and visit with his mom.

If that's what you could call it.

"You feel up to lunch?" He lifted their joined hands, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "I think I need to get out of here for a minute."

Evelyn stood up a little straighter, shoulders squaring. "Then let's get the hell out of here." Her steps moved a little faster, like she was determined to get him out of the hospital as fast as humanly possible. They were almost to the large entrance when she came to a sudden stop.

Gram-Gram stood at the information desk, the biggest vase of flowers he'd ever seen clutched in her hands. Her gaze snapped to them and she stepped away, calling over one shoulder to the woman helping her, "Never mind."

Grady squeezed Evelyn's hand, trying to offer her the same reassurance she'd been giving him all morning as Gram-Gram came to a stop in front of them, looking Evelyn over first before turning to him.

"I thought you had to work today."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## EVELYN



EVELYN SAT STIFFLY in the same horribly uncomfortable chair she'd occupied all morning. Larry and Charlene were back from their visit with Grady's mom, their mood obviously somber as they all sat in silence. She opened her mouth, but then clamped it shut again, unsure what to say.

Their plans for a lunchtime escape had been foiled by her grandmother's unexpected appearance, so now they were right back where they started. Grady wasn't getting the escape he needed and she was back to feeling helpless. Frustrated once more by the woman she'd been sidestepping her whole life.

Her grandmother sat next to Grady, posture perfect, giant flower arrangement on the ground at her feet. She watched Larry and Charlene with a steady gaze until they finally sensed the tension and excused themselves.

At least someone got a break.

Once they were gone, her grandmother seemed to relax the tiniest bit. She blew out a long breath, eyes straight ahead as she said, "I hate hospitals."

Grady chuckled. "Me too, Gram-Gram."

After a few more moments of uncomfortable silence, her grandmother offered a surprising amount of unexpected information. "My husband was ill for quite a while before he passed. So I've spent a lot of time in waiting rooms like this."

Grady turned to look her over. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Her grandmother took a deep breath, chin lifting with the action. “Thank you. I’m sorry you’re dealing with your mother’s illness.” Her eyes slid Grady’s way. “I’m also sorry I had to hear about it from one of the women I had lunch with.”

Evelyn blinked in shock. Was her grandmother offended? “We didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think my granddaughter’s future mother-in-law’s surgery would interest me because you had no reason to believe it would.” Her lips pursed. “I understand I haven’t exactly been a large part of your life, Evelyn, and I regret that.”

Was she caught in some sort of weird parallel universe? Maybe someone had opened up a tank of laughing gas somewhere and the fumes were causing her to hallucinate. It seemed like her grandmother was apologizing. And her grandmother never apologized.

Evelyn leaned back, just in case the air was fresher back there. “It’s okay.”

Her grandmother’s eyes went straight ahead again, her hands linked together so tightly in her lap her knuckles turned white. “It’s not okay. I was simply trying to abide by your mother’s request, and I wish I hadn’t.”

Evelyn blinked as the information processed. Her mother asked her grandmother to stay away?

Her mother never missed an opportunity to go on and on about how her life had been ruined. How she’d been forced into a marriage she didn’t want. Yet never once had she stepped in to make sure the same thing didn’t happen to Evelyn. So hearing her grandmother hadn’t been involved in her life at her mother’s request was shocking. “I think she didn’t want me to end up like her.”

Her grandmother huffed out a bitter laugh. “You will never end up like her.” Her eyes finally came Evelyn’s way. “You are nothing like your mother. She’s always been happiest when she’s miserable. When you were born, I was so scared you would be the same. But you were such a joy-filled child. I



adored you. And I think she found great delight in resenting that. Almost as much as she found in making sure I never got to build a relationship with you.”

Grady suddenly stood up, stretching his arms over his head. “I’m going to go grab a coffee from the cafeteria. Anybody want one?”

Evelyn sat up straight. *He was leaving her?*

“I would love a mocha.” Her grandmother didn’t hesitate to make a request. “With whipped cream.”

Grady tipped his head. “You got it, Gram-Gram.” He turned to Evelyn, leaning close. “What about you, Ev?” Evelyn widened her eyes at him, trying to convey her complete disbelief that he would abandon her in a time like this. They were supposed to be a team. He was supposed to be there for her.

Grady leaned into her ear, his voice low. “You girls need to talk without me between you. It sounds like there’s too much there already.” He pressed a lingering kiss to her lips before straightening, offering her a wink. “I’ll be back.”

Evelyn stared after him. He wasn’t wrong, but facing this alone was no less terrifying.

“I’m glad you found someone who genuinely loves you.” Her grandmother smoothed the line of her slacks. “When I discovered you left and your mother hadn’t so much as checked to make sure you were okay, I was appalled. That’s why I called and tried to get you to come home. I was hoping that maybe—” She stopped, pausing for a few long seconds. “I was hoping that maybe she was finally losing her influence and I would be able to spend time with you before there’s no time left to spend.”

Some of what she was saying was starting to make sense. Her mother did focus heavily on her misery and did frequently wallow in it. But that misery was her grandmother’s fault, wasn’t it? There was one way to find out.

“Did you really force my mother to marry my father?”

Her grandmother's eyes snapped to hers, narrowing sharply. "Is that what she told you?" Her grandmother huffed out a laugh. "No wonder you wanted nothing to do with me once you got older."

She was speechless. Dumbfounded. "If you didn't force her to marry my father, who did?"

It was a story she'd heard for as long as she could remember. Her mother *had* to marry her father. She didn't have a choice. It was the only option.

But was that all she said?

Evelyn wracked her brain, trying to remember if her mother had ever outright said it was her grandmother who made it happen, but she couldn't pinpoint that ever happening. She'd always just assumed, based on other things her mother said about her grandmother. About how selfish she was. How she only cared about herself and what was best for her. How all that mattered was keeping the family financially secure.

And maybe that was the issue.

"Can I ask you something?" It was odd to converse with the same woman she'd avoided and villainized her whole life. But Grady was right. This conversation needed to happen.

Her grandmother barely nodded, looking just as uncomfortable as she was. "I'm happy to answer any questions you have."

"Did my mother get an allowance too?" Her mother's spending habits were part of the reason she was so clueless about how much things cost. She'd somewhat assumed that as her grandmother's agreeable daughter, her mother had more access to funds than she did.

But maybe that wasn't the case.

"Everyone in the family has an allowance. You, your mother." Her grandmother sat a little straighter. "Even me. It was something your grandfather felt very strongly about. That we ensure our family's legacy can continue on. That we maintain enough to continue supporting ourselves and the charities that are important to us."

“Your mother found it disappointing that we would have what we do and not allow her to use it in any way she deemed fit.” Her grandmother’s lips thinned and she tilted her head to one side, waving one hand. “That’s why she married your father. He has more money than sense and allows her to spend as much as she wants.”

Evelyn leaned forward, elbows on her knees as she caught her face in her hands. “I can’t believe this.” She let all the information marinate a second before changing her mind. “Yes I can.”

“Your mother isn’t a bad person. She’s simply selfish.”

Evelyn rocked her head to one side, tipping it her grandmother’s way. That qualification simply didn’t make sense. “And you don’t think that makes her a bad person?”

Her grandmother offered a dismissive shrug. “She’s never killed anyone.”

Evelyn laughed. “Your standards are way lower than I thought.”

A little of the hard mask her grandmother wore softened as she contemplated her next words. “I love your mother, Evelyn, but only because she’s my child. I tried for many years to find a way to have a relationship with her, but it simply isn’t possible. So then I tried to have a relationship with you.” Her eyes drifted away. “I invited you to join me at events and parties hoping maybe we would have an easier time getting to know each other now that you’re older, but...” Her words died off.

“But I believed you married my mother off and planned to do the same thing to me.” She wanted to believe what her grandmother was saying was true, and so much of it seemed right, but there was still one sticking point. “Why did you try to set me up with Sasha?”

Her grandmother rolled her eyes, leaning back in her chair as the fingers of one hand pressed to her forehead. “Sasha. That child is a mess.” Her hand dropped. “He’s the son of a

dear friend of mine and it would appear they greatly embellished his accolades.”

“*Greatly* embellished,” Evelyn agreed.

Her grandmother’s expression warmed in a way she’d never seen. “But none of that matters now because you found yourself a nice man.” Her brows lifted. “And he must genuinely love you considering you haven’t used a single dollar of your allowance since coming here.”

“I didn’t want you to know where I was. I thought you would come find me and make me choose between our family and my freedom.” The admission felt much guiltier than she would have ever expected thanks to what she’d just learned.

All these years she believed she knew who the villain was, but she was merely caught up in a game that didn’t actually exist.

Her grandmother’s eyes met hers, carrying a sadness she’d never noticed before. “I deeply regret not having this conversation sooner, but I worried you would cut me off the same way your mother has.”

Had her mother done that? It didn’t seem like it. “But she still goes to every event. She represents the family at every function.” Her brain was still struggling to come to terms with this new truth. “You two talk.”

“She’s always enjoyed the perks of being a Warwick and wouldn’t give them up for anything.” Her grandmother’s jaw set. “And I suppose I didn’t want the world to see how horribly I failed as a mother, so we are cordial when we’re in public.” Her steely eyes hinted at sadness. “But outside of that, I haven’t spoken to her in years.”

“I—” Evelyn let out a small scoff. “I don’t know what to say.”

The nurse from earlier appeared through the door, smile faltering a little as her eyes drifted across a waiting room way less populated than it was before. “I was coming to let you know your mother-in-law is in her room.”

Her grandmother leaned close. “Have you already married the cowboy police officer and just didn’t want to tell me?”

She could come clean now. Admit she and Grady were never engaged. That technically, they weren’t even together when all this started. But her relationship with her grandmother was still on fragile ground, and it seemed like a lot to unload onto an already complicated and convoluted situation.

Evelyn shook her head, relaxing a little at still being fictitiously tied to Grady. “No. We’re not married yet.”

The foreign expression that spread over her grandmother’s face, her smile, looked surprisingly genuine. “I’m glad to hear that. I would hate to have missed out on yet another important event in your life.”

“If you ladies are ready to go, I can take you up to the room now.” The nurse’s tone was brisk and got Evelyn moving.

“Yes. Okay.” She pulled out her cell phone and dialed Grady’s number as her grandmother hefted the vase of flowers from the floor. They followed behind the nurse as the call connected.

“Hey, Sweetheart. Are you okay?”

His immediate concern warmed every part of her. “I’m fine. The nurse is taking us up to your mother’s room.”

“You and Gram-Gram?” Grady’s tone was cautious.

“Yes. Is that okay, or would you like for us to wait?”

She was caught in a weird predicament. Technically, Grady’s mom was nothing more than the confused parent of a guy she was just beginning to find her footing with, so it felt a little invasive to be the first one into her room. Except Gram-Gram didn’t know any of that. She believed she was meeting a future in-law.

One Evelyn knew wouldn’t recognize her own son, let alone her.

“I’ll meet you there. Go ahead and go in without me if you feel comfortable with it.” Even in this moment, he was thinking of her. Making sure she was comfortable.

Evelyn got the room number from the nurse and gave it to Grady before disconnecting the call.

“Does he not tell you he loves you before he hangs up the phone?” Gram-Gram frowned, seeming a tad judgmental.

And it got Evelyn’s feathers up. “His mother just broke her hip and had to have surgery. He’s got a lot going on, so you’ll have to forgive him if he forgets some things.”

Her grandmother tilted her head to one side. “I apologize. I forget that not all relationships are like the one I had with my child. I should have considered that he wouldn’t be his normal self right now.” Her grandmother pressed her lips together. “I take it Grady loves his mother.”

Evelyn’s defensive reflex calmed a little at her apology. “He loves her very much.”

The differences between Grady’s relationship with his mother and her mother’s relationship with her grandmother were drastic and stark. Almost as glaring as the differences between her relationship with her own mother. It was never particularly close or warm, but until today she didn’t see just how distant and detached it really was. Because, like the completely out of touch lifestyle she was raised in, it was all she’d ever experienced. All she knew.

She didn’t have fond memories about hush puppies or dumplings. She didn’t have funny stories about things her mother had said or the relationship her parents had. All she had was a false narrative that led her down a path of self-imposed self-destruction.

“I’m glad you have found a man from a normal family, Evelyn. You deserve that.” Her grandmother reached out, giving Evelyn’s hand a squeeze in the first show of affection she’d ever experienced from the woman. It was gone as quickly as it started, but the impact of it lingered.

And it wasn’t the only hard truth she was facing.

“Unfortunately, his mother’s fall isn’t the worst of what she’s dealing with.” Evelyn swallowed a lump in her throat, beginning to understand just how much Grady had lost. “His mother has vascular dementia and there’s a chance the sedation from the surgery exacerbated her condition.”

Her grandmother’s eyes jumped her way as they reached the doorway of the room. “I see.”

The nurse motioned into the space before taking off, leaving them standing in the hall.

“That’s what your grandfather suffered from.”

Gram-Gram’s knowledge bomb hit her right as Grady appeared at the end of the hall. He was immediately at her side, palm on her back, eyes fixed on her face. “Ev?”

She blinked, trying to clear away as much of her own emotion as possible before facing Grady. But it was a losing battle. There was too much there to be contained.

“Hey.” She grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him down until his lips met hers, warm and firm as they righted everything that was upside down in a kiss that she would never be able to forget.

It was nothing like the kisses they’d shared before. There was no heat. No passion. None of the intense sexual chemistry they’d both been skirting. This kiss was tender. Touched by a level of intimacy that didn’t come from lust. It came from something else. Something deeper.

It came from understanding. It came from connection. It came from a place of raw realness.

Maybe even a place of love.

Evelyn pulled away, managing a shaky breath and an even shakier smile. “Let’s go see your mom.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY



## GRADY



THE BRAKE LIGHTS of Evelyn's SUV lit up as she parked in front of her house's tiny garage. Grady pulled in right behind her, lining his truck beside Gram-Gram's rented sedan before hustling up the gravel driveway to grab Evelyn's door.

Her eyes widened in surprise before she offered him the sweetest smile and a soft, "Thank you."

"If I don't have to thank you for spending an entire day at the hospital with me, then you sure as hell don't have to thank me for opening a car door for you, Sweetheart." He rested one palm on the small of her back as she got out, keeping Evelyn close as they made their way to the front porch. "You think Gram-Gram has had dinner yet?"

"I would hope so. It's almost nine o'clock." Evelyn's steps were slow as she climbed the steps and crossed the porch. "I'm sure Bernard took her to get something after he picked her up from the hospital earlier."

"After seeing him give her that spray tan, I think she should be the one taking Bernard out to dinner." Grady waited, holding the storm door as Evelyn unlocked the deadbolt. "She owes him."

Evelyn laughed softly. "Is that your way of letting me know you won't be giving me any spray tans?"

Grady leaned into her ear, nuzzling against her hair, the soft scent already relaxing a little of the stress he'd collected at the hospital. "I'll give you as many spray tans as you want, Ev,

but our situation is a hell of a lot different from Gram-Gram and Bernard's. You don't pay me—”

Evelyn pushed the door open to reveal a scene that made discovering Gram-Gram wearing a paper bikini in the spray tan tent seem appealing.

Evelyn gasped as she tried to take a step back. Her foot caught on the threshold and sent her toppling back against Grady's chest as he took a step back of his own. He still somehow managed to catch her in spite of his current state of shock.

He'd give anything to see Gram-Gram wearing that paper bikini now, because witnessing her naked and bent over the back of Evelyn's living room chair was going to be burned into his memory until the day he died.

Along with Bernard's rutting form.

Evelyn grabbed the door, slamming it shut like it would undo what they'd just witnessed. Her eyes were wide as they jumped to his, holding a second before she spun away and raced down the steps.

Grady chased behind her. “Ev, slow down.”

She shook her head almost violently. “Nope. Not gonna slow down.” She grabbed the handle of his truck door, yanking it open and launching herself into the passenger's seat. “I need a little distance from whatever that was.”

He understood. The last thing he wanted to do was attempt to interact with Gram-Gram as if he didn't just see her having the hell fucked out of her by her butler. Grady dug his keys from his pocket, climbed in, and started the engine. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere I can bleach my eyeballs.” Evelyn raked one hand through her messy hair. “I think I'll probably need to do it a few times.”

“I wish I could say it would help, but I'm pretty sure we're going to be left with that visual for a long time.” He backed out of the driveway and headed down the street. “We could go to my place. Spend the night there.”

“I think I might want to spend the rest of my life there. I don’t know if I can ever look her in the eye again.” Evelyn pressed both hands to her face, the tips of her fingers digging into her eye sockets. “I think I’m gonna have to throw that chair away.”

“How about we just ship it to Gram-Gram when she goes back to New York since she seems to like it so much?” Grady reached across the console, pulling Evelyn’s hands from her face. “Hopefully they were using protection, otherwise you’ll have a new auntie to take care of.”

Evelyn sputtered, the sound quickly changing to a laugh. “What in the hell even *was* that?” She pressed one palm to her forehead. “*Bernard?*”

“I guess now we know why doesn’t mind givin’ her a spray tan.” He linked his fingers with Evelyn’s, chuckling as he shook his head. “I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.”

It should have frustrated him, but there didn’t seem to be enough emotional bandwidth left in him to muster it up.

Somehow he’d missed Evelyn’s struggles when she first arrived in Moss Creek, missing how out of her element she was in the real world. Then the possibility Charlene and Larry were carrying on some sort of relationship had flown entirely over his head. Now Gram-Gram and Bernard’s torrid affair had escaped his notice.

He was losing his fucking touch and he’d be pissed as hell about it tomorrow. But tonight he was going to focus on Evelyn. Her mess was easier to deal with than his.

“Now we probably know who told Gram-Gram she needed to figure out how to take care of herself a little.” He and Evelyn had plenty of time to discuss her conversation with her grandmother as they sat at his mother’s bedside, and she’d filled him in on all the wild details about her mother and grandmother’s dysfunction and how it had spilled onto hers. But that was still raw, so the most glaring of her issues might be the easiest to face. Grady wiggled his brows at her. “Bernard must be tired of fulfilling all her needs.”

Evelyn made a gagging sound. “Too soon. You need to wait at least a few days to make sex jokes about my grandma and Bernard.”

Grady laughed, because as traumatizing as the situation was for Evelyn, it was exactly what he needed. Gram-Gram might be a pain in the ass, but she was one hell of an amazing distraction. And considering his mother’s current state, he needed one. Desperately.

“How long do you think she’s going to hang around?” Grady shifted the conversation to something that might make both of them a little more comfortable. He couldn’t stand talking about his mom or her situation anymore, and Evelyn obviously wasn’t ready to fully dig into the hilarity of Gram-Gram’s current relationship status, so maybe he could find a spot in the middle. “From what you said earlier, it sounds like she wants to be a part of your life.”

“It does sound like that. I just hope she spends more of it clothed.” Evelyn cringed. “Ugh. No matter how hard I try, all I can see is her naked ass.”

“Could be worse. All I can see is Bernard’s naked ass.” Grady gave her hand a squeeze as she made another choked sound. “But I do think Gram-Gram is going to stick around for a while so we might need to come up with a better living arrangement.”

Evelyn’s eyes slid his way. “Does that mean you want to keep this whole thing up?”

He watched Evelyn for any sign of what she was thinking. Trying to pick up on the cues he used to so easily read. But, like he was starting to realize, reading her wasn’t easy for him. “Are you saying you want to tell Gram-Gram we lied?”

“Do *you* think we should tell her?” The question almost sounded apprehensive. Like she was worried he would say yes.

But maybe he was seeing what he wanted to see. Was just as blind in this moment as he had been in so many others. That

left him with no choice but to hope for the best. Pray she was feeling the same way he was and offer the truth.

Grady shook his head. “No. I don’t think we should tell her.” He could give her reasons. Explain Evelyn’s relationship with her grandmother was still so new that confessing a lie like that might be enough to topple it. He could claim they were already in too deep since everyone in town likely already knew of their supposed engagement and told everyone they knew.

But he didn’t. He left it as it was, because his real reasons had nothing to do with anyone else.

Evelyn nodded. “That’s what I was thinking too.” She chewed her lower lip. “But I am a little worried about what’s going to happen the next time I see the girls.”

“It is a little weird they didn’t call you right after their lunch with Gram-Gram since I’m pretty sure she spilled every worm in the can while they were together.” He’d been expecting both of them to get phone calls from an entire group of angry old women, ripping them a new one for keeping their relationship a secret.

But not a single call came. It was odd.

And a little unnerving.

“You think they’re mad?” Evelyn seemed worried. “Maybe we should have told them what was going on.”

Grady lifted a brow as they started the ascent to his home on Grizzly Peak. “Do you really want them to be trying to keep a secret like this?”

Evelyn’s lips pressed together. “Good point. I don’t think they could do it.”

“I know for a fact they couldn’t do it.” He’d seen them in action enough times to know that while the girls might have the best intentions, the minute they got wound up, their mouths started to run. “We’d be fine as long as nobody got into the tequila.”

Evelyn laughed. “I would say the chances of that happening are slim to none.” She rolled her lips inward, rubbing them together as her eyes came his way. “So what’s our plan now?”

“My plan is to go home and forget most of this day happened.” He needed a break from everything. And as much as he would love to have no idea what Gram-Gram looked like when she fucked, he wasn’t mad about the opportunity to sleep in his own bed.

With Evelyn.

He pulled down the lane leading to his house, already feeling better as the thick line of trees flanking the drive opened up, revealing clear, star-lit skies. He parked, pulling in a lungful of air as he helped Evelyn out. This place was exactly where he needed to be.

And this woman was exactly who needed to be here with him. Because, while he wasn’t quite ready to admit it, he did have a new plan. One that stretched much farther than just tonight.

He let Evelyn into his home, trailing behind her, watching her move through the space the same way she had last time they were there. She went straight for the windows at the back of the house, looking out over the mountain, form shadowy in the moonlight.

“It’s even prettier at night.” Evelyn sighed, the height of her shoulders easing down just a little.

“It’s prettiest in the morning.” Grady moved in behind her, wrapping one arm around her middle, holding her close. “Just wait.”

Evelyn’s head dropped back to his shoulder. “I can’t believe you were okay with staying at my house when you could have been staying here.”

“Your house had something mine didn’t.” He eased away from the windows pulling her with him. “But my house does have one thing yours doesn’t.”

Evelyn lifted her brows as he led her up the stairs to the loft. “You mean besides a view?”

He continued across his room. “Besides that.”

Her lips hinted at a smile. “And besides a good mattress?”

“So maybe my house has a few things yours doesn’t.” He flipped on the light in the attached bathroom, pulling Evelyn in behind him.

“Well it doesn’t currently have my grandmother and Bernard fucking in it, which is good enough for me.” Evelyn’s eyes landed on the item he thought might catch her attention. “But I won’t complain about that bathtub.” She crossed to the large whirlpool tub situated under a skylight offering an unobstructed view of the night sky. “Holy shit, Grady. How did you get that thing in here?”

“It wasn’t easy.” He’d almost talked himself out of installing the thing, but decided it was worth the effort and the money. Soaking his tired body every night might have been the only thing that got him through the past few years of non-stop work and stress. “But since I had to replace the roof anyway, we just pulled off some of the sheeting and used a crane to drop it right in.”

Evelyn’s eyes lifted and she gasped. “There’s a skylight.” She pointed, like he didn’t already know it was there. “Is that where you brought it in?”

“Pretty much.” Grady bent down to plug the tub before switching on the water. “Once I got it in, I saw how nice it would be if the hole stayed.”

Renovating the dilapidated A-frame was the last bit of fun he’d had before his father died and the weight of responsibility and illness tried to grind him to dust.

“It’s amazing.” Evelyn sat down on the edge and stared up through the glass. “You might have a hard time getting me to leave after seeing this.”

“Maybe that’s the plan.” Grady opened up the cabinet beside the tub and pulled out one of the plastic-wrapped

spheres he kept on hand for particularly rough days. “Maybe I want you to stick around.”

Evelyn’s dark eyes followed him as he peeled away the wrapping and dropped the ball into the tub. The scent of sandalwood and vanilla drifted through the air as it melted into the water. “Was that a bath bomb?”

Grady snagged the hem of his T-shirt. “I’m a country boy, but I’m not completely uncivilized.” He tipped his head toward the warm water. “Now get your sexy ass in the tub.”

Evelyn’s laugh was everything he needed tonight. *She* was everything he needed.

But not just tonight.

He’d need her tomorrow too. And the next day.

And there was a really good chance he’d need her the day after that one too.

She almost acted shy, her eyes avoiding his as she worked off her shoes and wiggled out of her jeans, revealing long legs and smooth skin.

“Somethin’ wrong?” Grady tossed his shirt into the hamper, a little worried she might be enjoying his tub alone. Just because he was ready to go full steam ahead, didn’t mean she was. And if he needed to back off, he would.

He could be patient. He could wait until she saw how good this was between them. He could—

“I’m just trying to be respectful.” Evelyn’s eyes still didn’t come his way as she dragged away her shirt, leaving her standing in just a lacy, pale pink pair of panties and matching bra. “I get a little distracted when I look at you,” one hand waved in his general direction as she shimmed out of her panties, “like that. And you’ve had a rough day.”

Grady’s lips barely lifted at the edges, teasing their way into a hint of a smirk as he worked the fly of his jeans open and shoved them down, underwear and all, cock already fully hard and standing at the ready. “Sweetheart, I think we should get something straight.” He chucked the rest of his clothes into



the hamper before moving closer, hoping to force her eyes his way. “You can disrespect me anytime you want.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## EVELYN



SHE WASN'T AWARE of how tense she was until her whole body was submerged in warm, Grady-scented water.

“This is amazing.” Evelyn sighed, sinking a little deeper into the relaxing heat. “I gave up a lot when I moved here and I think I miss baths the most.”

Her loft in the city had a great soaking tub, but the tiny version in her Moss Creek rental was barely big enough to sit in, let alone stretch out for any sort of an enjoyable experience. She hadn't minded so much before—it was better to be relegated to only showers than married off to an ass like Sasha—but with that fear off the table, she was ready for a pile of bubbles big enough to hide her whole body.

And a bikini wax.

Maybe a pedicure.

“Hmm.” Grady was propped up against the opposite end of the bath, his long legs flanking each side of her body. His hand wrapped around one of her feet, lifting it against his chest before gently rubbing the sole with the pads of his thumbs. “What else did you give up?”

She wiggled her toes with a grin. “Pedicures, for starters.”

He inspected her self-polish job. “They do seem a little raggedy.”

She yanked her foot away with a scoff.

Grady's laugh was loud as it echoed through the high-ceilinged space. “I'm just giving you a hard time.” He caught

her foot under the water, gripping it tight as he lifted it to the surface. “Your toes are perfect.” He went back to working the sole with a firm, but careful touch. “Prettiest piggies I’ve ever seen.”

Evelyn snorted, the sound wholly unattractive. “Did you just call my toes piggies?”

“That’s what they are. There’s a whole nursery rhyme about it.” He pinched her big toe between his thumb and pointer. “This little piggy—” He lifted his brows, eyes coming her way like she didn’t already know exactly what he was talking about.

He was teasing her again. It was sweet and adorable, but also a little depressing.

“That’s not really something we did in my family.” She knew her upbringing wasn’t normal, but always believed that was primarily because of the wealth that permeated it. Maybe money wasn’t what made it so different.

Grady’s mouth hardened. “Imagine that.” He pulled her foot closer, pressing a kiss to the tip of her big toe. “This little piggy went to market.” He moved to her next toe, kissing the tip of it. “This little piggy stayed home.” He kept working his way down the line, in the sweetest, weirdest rendition of the rhyme she could imagine. It was achingly cute. Right up until the last little piggy found his way home and Grady’s strong hands gripped her calves, dragging her body along his until she was straddling his lap.

She wobbled a little as her knees scooted against the bottom of the tub, skin too slippery to get much traction. “I don’t remember this being how that ends.”

“You’ll just have to trust me then.” Grady’s hands moved up her thighs before sliding back to palm her ass, bringing her closer to the straining line of his cock.

The same cock she was doing her best to ignore.

Yes, Grady said she could take advantage of him whenever she wanted, but it still didn’t seem okay to objectify and lust after him considering the day he’d had. Although maybe that

was what he needed. It was the whole reason he'd wanted to be a part of this fake fiancé thing in the first place, wasn't it?

"You look like you're thinkin' about something awful hard, Ev." Grady smoothed his hands up her back.

She rested both palms on his chest, spreading her fingers wide as her knees continued to resist the position she had them in. "Did you really just tell Sasha you were my fiancé because you needed something to take your mind off everything?"

Grady's fingertips traced down the length of her arms, his touch warm and gentle. "You sure you're ready for the answer to that?"

Evelyn clenched her thighs, fighting to hold her position. "Yes."

"Then no." Grady's eyes held hers. "That's not the only reason."

She swallowed hard. "What was the other reason?"

Grady's hand traced down her front, following the slight swell of each breast in a touch that wasn't even close to satisfying. "You were the other reason." He continued drawing slow circles that seemed to get smaller and smaller but still never reached the spots she wanted contact most. "I talked myself out of you more times than I can count." His finger traced dangerously close to her straining nipple, anticipation making the skin pull tight. "I knew I didn't have the kind of time you deserved."

Evelyn struggled to breathe as his teasing finger moved closer and closer. "But you had the time to pretend to be engaged to me?"

"Yes." Grady's eyes followed the path of his wandering finger. "I couldn't take you to dinner and movies, but I could sure as hell camp my ass on your couch at night and make sure that pecker didn't bother you." His gaze came to hers. "Especially since your couch is more comfortable than your bed."

Evelyn slapped at his shoulder, intending for the move to be as playful as his tone, but the motion stole what remained

of her precarious balance, sending her body sliding right against Grady's—nipples dragging along the textured hair of his wet chest, pussy pressing against the hard line of his cock. She couldn't help the tiny moan that slipped free.

Grady caught her, holding her tight, nostrils flaring as she rolled her hips, seeking out more of what she needed.

He groaned, thrusting up against her. "And I'm real fuckin' glad we'll be in my bed tonight." He suddenly stood, the move smooth and coordinated as he hauled them both up and out of the cooling water.

Evelyn held on for dear life as he swung her over the edge, planting her feet on the mat on the other side before joining her. Grady grabbed one of the large towels he'd laid out and wrapped it around her body, carefully drying her off before slinging the used towel over his shoulder and bundling her in the fresh, dry one. He tipped his head toward the door. "Go get in bed."

She lifted one brow. "Are you telling me what to do?"

Grady didn't seem deterred. "I am." He stepped closer. "But only because I'm planning to make it in your best interest to listen to me."

She actually didn't mind listening to Grady. He did have the tendency to be a little bossy, but it was never for his own benefit. That didn't mean she wouldn't give him a little bit of a hard time about it.

"I guess I'll listen then." She released her hold on the towel around her body, letting it slip to the floor at her feet. "Goodnight." Evelyn turned, letting her hips sway a little more than normal as she made her way to the bed. Once she reached the edge of the mattress, she climbed on, crawling on her hands and knees toward the pillows, giving anyone behind her a full view of her pussy.

She only made it halfway up before a pair of strong hands gripped her ankles, stopping her and pinning her in place. Before she could blink, his mouth was on her, hot and demanding. The sensation was unexpected and overwhelming

and sent her head dropping to the blankets. Grady's grip moved to her thighs, spreading them wider as his tongue flicked against her clit with maddening accuracy.

"Grady." She clawed at the blankets, fisting her fingers in the fabric as fire licked through her body, flaming to an inferno within seconds. Her thighs started to shake and suddenly Grady's mouth was gone, leaving her hanging and frustrated. The sound that came out of her was half scoff, half sob.

Grady chuckled, his strong hands coming to her hips. "Sounds like you forgot the way this was going to work." He flipped her over, the smug line of his mouth dropping to her breast, drawing the puckered nipple deep.

She hooked one leg around his, trying to fight to get him closer so she could use his body to ease the need ruling her thoughts. But Grady held firm, his wicked mouth continuing to make her suffering worse with every passing second. Each draw of his mouth at her breast echoed between her thighs. Each drag of his tongue made her body clench, pulling tighter and tighter until she was ready to snap.

"What's wrong, Ev?" He offered her nipple one last pull before moving to the other one, her nails digging into his skin when he lightly dragged his teeth across the neglected tip. "You seem frustrated."

She gritted her teeth, managing to find enough focus to answer, "I'm trying to figure out how I ever thought you were a nice man."

Grady chuckled, his deep voice reverberating between them as he nosed his way up her neck. "Seems like you might be as bad of a judge of character as I've been lately." His lips trailed along the line of her jaw. "Is this your way of tellin' me you don't like being teased?"

His question was sobering and took a little of the edge off the intense desire to climax. "I don't know what I like."

What she liked hadn't really mattered before, outside of the fact that she liked her freedom. Sex was just a tool she

hoped would procure it long term.

But it turned out that it was all for nothing. Her freedom had never been on the line. She'd based her life on false assumptions and misbeliefs.

And she didn't want to do that anymore.

Grady nipped at the lobe of her ear. "That sounds like an opportunity if I've ever heard one." His voice was warm and deep as his lips moved against her skin. "Because I'd be more than happy to help you figure it out."

Evelyn arched under him, trying to get the feeling from earlier to come back. "Maybe you're a nice guy after all."

Grady rose up, stealing the weight of his body as he went to his knees. "I guess we'll find out, won't we?" He reached for one of the small, built-in nightstands as his eyes moved down her splayed body. "But I'm guessing the number of times I've imagined you just like this makes it unlikely anyone would call me nice."

She rubbed her lips together as her belly twisted tight. "You've imagined me like this?" It was flattering and fed the part of her that was desperate for connection. Hopeful that one day she'd be able to have something real with someone who wanted her. Someone she wanted back. It had been a pipe dream for so long. But now that she was facing it down, the reality of it was a little overwhelming. A little scary.

"More times than I can count." He tore open the packet in his hand, tossing it to one side before rolling the condom down his length. "And after seeing how fucking perfect you look in my bed, I can promise you I'll be imagining it twice as much." He leaned forward, bracing one hand against the mattress beside her head. "Unless you don't like me thinkin' of you this way."

She swallowed hard as the twist in her belly tightened, the feeling foreign and a little frightening.

Grady was so many things. He was bossy. Hard-working and smart. Funny and ridiculously gorgeous. And whether he wanted to admit it or not, he was also nice. Nice enough that



he would offer to quit fantasizing about her if she wasn't okay with it.

It made her eyes burn and her chest ache and it made it difficult as hell to focus on the need that was clawing at her just minutes ago. She wanted that back. Needed it to soften the edge of everything else happening inside her.

“I guess I can let it slide.” Evelyn looped one leg around his waist, flexing hard enough to bring his body to hers. “As long as you don't mind me thinking about you like this.”

Grady brushed his nose against hers in a tender touch. “I would prefer it, actually.”

She sucked in a breath as the wide head of his cock pressed against her core. “I guess you'll just have to make sure you do a good enough job that I'll want to keep thinking about it.”

Grady eased down onto one elbow, the warm width of his chest pressing into her. “I don't think that'll be a problem.” His knees widened, bracing his big body as he pressed forward, stretching her inch by glorious inch.

And she was struggling to enjoy it the way she planned, caught in a whirlwind of emotions that had her both on the verge of tears and desperate to have him as close as possible. Pleasure no longer mattered like it did before.

This was about something else. Something she both wanted to claim and run from as fast as she could.

Grady's forehead fell to hers, his eyes closing as his jaw clenched. “Christ, you're tight.” He worked one hand between their bodies, his fingers finding her clit. “You've gotta relax, Sweetheart, or this isn't gonna be fun for either of us.”

Evelyn shifted around, fighting against an odd feeling of too much. Too much fullness. Too much sensation. Too much —

Emotion. Vulnerability.

Sex had always been so easy. So simple. A means to an end.

This was none of those things.

Grady's eyes moved over her face. "Talk to me, Ev. Tell me what's going on in that pretty head of yours."

"Nothing." She squirmed, not sure if she was trying to get closer or trying to get away. "I'm fine."

Grady shook his head. "This is not the way a woman who's fine and enjoying herself acts." He slowly eased away, freeing his body from hers.

"Wait. Where are you going?" Evelyn grabbed at him as he moved toward the edge of the bed. "I thought we were going to—"

"You thought I was just going to shove my dick in you until I got off?" Grady peeled the condom free. "Because you keep tryin' to get me to do that, but I'm gonna tell you it's not ever gonna happen." He ducked into the bathroom and came back, fully focused on her. "I can get myself off, Sweetheart. I don't need you to do that."

Her jaw went slack. "But—"

"No buts." Grady reached the bed, one hand fisting the blankets and dragging them down, sliding the sheet and comforter under her body. He climbed in, pulling her close before burying his nose in the pile of her hair. "We do it right or we don't do it at all."

"That's a little all or nothing." She wasn't mad. She was... something else.

Something that was a little difficult to identify.

"Not true. That wasn't nothing." Grady nuzzled closer. "We played This Little Piggy."

Evelyn snorted, one hand coming up to press against her eyes, trying to stop the bite of tears trying to leak free. "I hope you're not considering that foreplay."

Grady's lips moved close to ear. "Sweetheart, I consider everything with you foreplay." He tucked her close. "Now go to sleep."

That was easier said than done considering what just happened. And what didn't.

It changed everything. Changed her.

Changed them.

Because there was no longer any way to avoid admitting it. Somehow, she'd gone and accidentally fallen in love with Grady Haynes.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## GRADY



“YOU READY FOR this?” Grady glanced at Evelyn as they pulled into the driveway of her house.

“No, but I don’t have any clothes and I can’t really teach a class and go to the hospital in this, so I guess I’m going to have to suck it up.” She slumped down in her seat with a little pout that made her look cute as hell.

Or maybe it was that she was wearing a pair of his sweatpants and one of his favorite T-shirts that made her look cute as hell. Regardless of the reason, Evelyn had been adorably grumpy since they woke up, and he was enjoying it a little too much. He’d never seen a woman so put out over a man making her wait to have sex.

But to be fair, he’d never made a woman wait to have sex.

Grady parked and they walked up to the porch hand-in-hand. Evelyn’s steps slowed more and more as they got closer to the door until he was practically dragging her across the porch. He used the key he’d taken from under the mat to unlock the deadbolt then took a deep breath before opening the door.

And once again Gram-Gram left them stunned.

“Uhh.” Evelyn’s mouth hung open. “What is all this?”

Gram-Gram stood from where she sat in the chair she’d victimized the night before, a clipboard in her hands. “This is for your wedding.” She motioned to where Bernard sat with Dick Church, the mayor of Moss Creek. “I’m sure you know Mayor Church.”

Grady tipped his head at the mayor before refocusing on Gram-Gram. “What wedding?”

The hard lines of Gram-Gram’s face softened. She passed her clipboard off to Bernard before coming to stand in front of them. “When I saw your mother yesterday—” She paused, clearing her throat before continuing. “I knew she would want to be able to see her only son get married.” Her tone gentled. “And I thought I could help make that happen.” Her eyes went to Evelyn. “Of course you can still have a big, beautiful ceremony at a later date, but I thought...” She met Grady’s gaze. “I thought you might want to do something for her today. Just in case...” Her lips pressed together, sealing off a truth he couldn’t escape.

Grady stared at the mess of decorations stacked on every available surface. “You really went all in with the blue, didn’t you?”

Gram-Gram’s mouth almost seemed to curve. “I assumed someone as rugged as yourself wouldn’t be interested in anything that looked too feminine.” She waved one hand around Evelyn’s house. “And my granddaughter seemed to be partial to the color, so I made an executive decision.”

Evelyn was silent at his side, her skin pale. “Grandma, I need to tell you something.” She pressed one hand to her stomach. “We aren’t—”

Grady pulled her close, stopping her confession in its tracks. “We aren’t going to be able to help you with any of this. Evelyn has a class to teach and then we need to go to the hospital.”

Gram-Gram’s head dipped. “Of course. That’s why I thought I could help.” She backed up. “I can arrange for everything.” She took her clipboard from Bernard. “I assumed you could provide the horses?”

Evelyn’s dark brows lifted. “The horses?” Her voice was weak and a little squeaky.

“It only makes sense that you arrive on horseback since your family owns a ranch.” Gram-Gram had a pen poised

above the paper. “What color will they be?”

Evelyn made a strangled sound that had him pulling her toward the hall.

“Whatever color you want, Gram-Gram, just let me know.” He pushed Evelyn into the bedroom before offering Dick a wave. “Mayor.” He closed them into the room before taking a deep breath.

He should have shut this down. Told Gram-Gram it was probably already too late for his mother to attend his wedding in any meaningful way. But he didn’t.

And he wasn’t going to.

Because even if she wasn’t in her right mind, his mom was still here. And that meant there was still a chance she was in there. A chance she could see that he was happy. That she wouldn’t be leaving him here alone.

Evelyn pressed both hands to her head as she dropped to sit on the edge of her terrible mattress. “What are we going to do?”

For him it was a simple answer. One he was surprisingly certain of. And not just because of his mother. “We could get married.”

Evelyn’s dark eyes lifted, slowly coming to meet his. “I’m pretty sure she’s not just planning on having a symbolic ceremony.” She pointed toward the living room. “The actual mayor is out there.”

“I know.” He was unsure about a lot of things right now, but this wasn’t one of them.

Evelyn blinked. “But we haven’t even had sex yet.”

It was a weak argument and it gave him hope. “Technically we have.”

She continued staring at him. “Grady, we would actually be married.”

“I know.” And the more he thought about it, the better it sounded. The righter it felt. “So I guess you need to decide if

you're in the market for a husband."

"I—" She sat up a little straighter, her eyes moving from side to side before coming back to his. "Are you in the market for a wife?"

He slowly smiled. "Depends." This was the same game they'd been playing for longer than he even realized. Each of them pretending they didn't know exactly what they wanted. Acting like they didn't see what was right in front of them. "She'd have to be willing to sign a prenup that says we only sleep in my bed, because hers sucks."

Evelyn's hand pressed against her mouth. "That would be crazy." She laughed behind the press of her palm. "Right?"

Grady shrugged. "I guess it's only as crazy as we think it is." And making Evelyn his wife didn't seem crazy at all. Imagining her in his life permanently was about as uncrazy of a thing as he could imagine.

"I don't have a dress." Evelyn's hands moved to her cheeks, pushing at the flush of pink blooming on her skin. "We don't have rings." She fanned her face. "I don't even know your middle name."

"You don't need a dress unless you want one." He stroked along the inside of his third finger with the tip of his thumb. "And they sell rings at the jewelry store in town." He paused, trying to remember her other concern as his mind started to race. "Albert."

Evelyn stopped flapping her hands. "Your initials are GAH?"

"Guess so." He itched to move closer to her but didn't trust himself to get her to work on time if he touched her the way he wanted to. Especially since it was sounding like maybe Evelyn might be considering becoming his wife. "What's your middle name?"

She rolled her lips together, pressing them into a frown. "Elizabeth. It's my mother's name."

That explained why she jumped to his initials so fast. "EEW." He grinned. "Sounds like you might not mind



changin' your last name.”

“It *would* be nice to be able to have monogrammed towels.” She took a deep breath, shoulders lifting and dropping. “For the record, I think seeing my grandma and Bernard last night might have diminished our mental capacity.”

“That mean we’re taking a trip to the jewelers after our class this morning?” He held his breath, caught on the edge of something bigger than he even considered hoping for.

Since his dad died, he’d just been trying to keep his head above water. Doing his best to work the job he loved and maintain the ranch that paid for his mother’s care. Burning the candle at both ends so he wouldn’t lose what his family worked so hard to build.

The most he ever hoped for was a day off. Maybe a morning to sleep in. But neither of those held a candle to having Evelyn in his corner for the rest of his life.

She rocked onto her feet, hands gripped together as she pursed her lips. Finally, she nodded. “Yeah. We’re going to the jewelry store.”



“WELL LOOK WHAT the cat dragged in.” Gertrude crossed her arms. “If it isn’t the happy couple.”

The girls were waiting for them outside Evelyn’s studio, decked out in the brightest collection of spandex he’d ever seen.

And not a single one of them was smiling.

“Hey.” Evelyn’s voice was soft and hesitant. Like she thought she had something to feel bad about.

But she didn’t. She didn’t have a single fucking thing to apologize to anybody for, and if they thought they were going

to make her feel guilty—

Muriel slapped at Gertrude. “Stop giving her a hard time.” Her eyes came their way, studying them for a second. “Are you two really engaged or are you just fucking with Griselda?”

Grady draped one arm over Evelyn’s shoulders, pulling her closer. “A little from column A. A little from column B.”

Helen held her hand out. “Pay up, bitches.”

“Goddammit.” Gertrude huffed out a dramatic breath as she dug into her purse. “I knew I shouldn’t let you talk me out of my guess, Muriel.”

Muriel shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a romantic at heart.” She gave Evelyn a wink. “And what’s sexier than a man in uniform?”

Helen shoved her hand closer to Muriel, wiggling her fingers. “A man in cowboy boots. Give me my money.”

Muriel’s brows lifted as her eyes moved to Gertrude. “She’s got a point, but that would’ve only convinced me I was righter.” She slapped a twenty-dollar bill into Helen’s hand before coming at Evelyn, squeezing her in a tight hug as she rocked them from side to side. “It’s about damn time you found a nice young man to get you off.”

Evelyn’s eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

Muriel’s focus came his way, looking him over. “That didn’t sound too promising. Do you need some pointers? Maybe a diagram?”

Evelyn groaned. “Please don’t give him any pointers. I have thought about old ladies having sex way too much already.”

Gertrude looked from Muriel to Helen to Agnes. “Wait a minute. Who’s having sex?”

Helen leaned toward Gertrude. “Griselda’s fucking her butler.”

Grady lifted his hands in the air with a scoff of disbelief. “How did you know? Did she tell you?”

Helen looked at him like he was an idiot. “How could you *not* know? It was obvious as hell.”

Grady raked one hand through his hair. “Shit.” Maybe he was going to have to start taking Helen around with him. Make her some sort of civilian liaison and give her a badge.

But not a stun gun and definitely no pepper spray.

Gertrude clapped her hands together, expression warm as she looked between them. “So when’s the wedding? I need to find something to wear.”

Evelyn’s eyes came his way, uncertainty pinching her beautiful features. “About that.”

“It’s this afternoon.” Grady dropped the bomb, grinning as it exploded.

“What?”

“Today?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Are you pregnant?”

All four women spoke at the same time, expressions a cross between shock and panic.

“Grady’s mom is sick and we’re having a little ceremony at the hospital so she can see him get married just in case...” Evelyn’s voice drifted off.

No one wanted to say it, but he was going to have to face it one way or another. Because it didn’t seem like the mother he once knew would be coming back in any way. Not the one from his childhood. And not the one from last week.

Muriel’s hand pressed against her chest, resting over her heart. “Say no more.” She reached out to grab one of Evelyn’s hands. “Tell us what we can do.”

Evelyn’s face softened. “You guys want to come?”

Muriel scoffed. “Of course we want to come. You wouldn’t be able to keep us out of that place.” She took one of Grady’s hands, giving it a squeeze. “And we understand why

you might not have felt comfortable letting us know you're fucking."

Evelyn made a sound like she was about to choke.

"We're very fond of both of you, and it would've put us in an uncomfortable situation if you split up and we had to pick sides." Muriel leaned toward Grady. "Just so you know, we would have picked Evelyn."

He tucked his chin in a nod. "Understandable."

Muriel pursed her lips, one eye squinting behind her glasses. "What about a cake?"

Gertrude bumped in at her side. "That's a good idea. I might not be as good of a baker as Dianna, but I can sure as hell make a decent buttercream."

Helen sidled up at Muriel's other side. "I took a Wilton cake decorating course twenty years ago. I'm sure it's like riding a bike."

Everyone turned to Agnes.

She widened her eyes. "Don't look at me. I don't cook." She raised her brows. "And I'm sure as hell not doing the dishes."

"Sounds perfect." Grady tipped his head toward the door they were still standing outside of, needing to get things moving. "Let's let our girl get her class done so we can all divide and conquer."

The girls happily hurried in, grabbing mats and getting into place. They continued whispering to each other enough that Evelyn had to get on them a few times during their stretches. When class was over, they were the first people out the door, promising to meet up at the hospital wedding ready, with cake, at five o'clock sharp.

Grady helped Evelyn close up shop before loading into his truck and heading out of town.

"Where are we going?" Evelyn glanced back, dark brows pinched together in confusion. "I thought we were going to get rings."

Grady shot her a smile across the cab. “We are. But first we’re going to get you a wedding dress.”

She brought it up which meant she was worried about it. And he knew Evelyn well enough to know she wouldn’t make a big deal about it. She would simply do without because, deep down, she still felt like she didn’t have the right to complain or want for things. That she should be happy with what she got because of the family she was born into.

So he was going to make sure she got it all.

“Do we have time for that?” Evelyn pulled out her cell phone, lighting up the screen. “Your mom—”

Grady reached across the truck to take her hand as an ache of sadness settled into his chest. “My mom doesn’t even know I’m not there, Ev. There’s a good chance she won’t even know what’s happening tonight.” His eyes rested on her. “But you’re gonna remember this forever.” He put his eyes back onto the road in front of them, dragging his thumb across her soft skin. “That’s why you’re getting a dress and you’re getting those cute little piggies of yours professionally polished.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## EVELYN



SHE WAS DEFINITELY out of her mind.

But as it turned out, out of her mind was a pretty great place to be. Aside from it being on the back of a horse.

“You comfortable up there?” Larry stood beside her, sticking close like he was worried she might land on her ass again. She appreciated it, because she was also a little worried she might end up on her ass again. Luckily, Lula Bell seemed to have calmed down after their little run-in a few days ago, and the mare was leisurely picking at the vegetation lining the emergency room curb.

“I’m good.” She looked over each side, making sure the cowboy boots Grady bought her were still securely hooked into the stirrups. “Are you sure she’ll do what I say?”

Larry offered a smile, the strain of the past few days showing in his eyes. “She’ll listen to you a hell of a lot better than Grady will, so I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Evelyn laughed, the sound loud and a little unhinged. “Maybe I should marry Lula Bell instead.”

Larry met her gaze. “There’s still time to change your mind. I’m happy to go tell everybody you came to your senses.” Lifting a brow, he flashed her quick smile. “Course, a runaway bride on horseback is a pretty dramatic event, so you should be prepared to make the local news.”

It was nice of him to offer her an out, but she didn’t need one. Yes, she recognized this decision was bordering on

impulsive, but so was her decision to leave New York. And her decision to start a yoga studio.

So far, her impulsive decisions had worked out way better than the well-laid plans she'd concocted over the years.

Evelyn took a deep breath, sitting up straighter in the saddle. "You don't have to worry about seeing me on television tonight." She gave him one more smile before gently tapping Lula Bell with her heels, ready to go find Grady.

But the horse didn't budge. She just continued munching on the grass and clover like they didn't have somewhere to be.

"Lula Bell." Evelyn nudged her again. "We need to go."

Lula Bell obviously didn't care one bit about their schedule because she took one half-assed step forward before nosing through a fresh patch of roughage.

"Here. I'll help you out." Larry swatted Lula Bell right on the rump, the smack surprisingly loud and hard enough to get Lula Bell moving.

Fast.

Evelyn held on for dear life as the horse took off, teeth and brains rattling around inside her head, struggling to remember the pointers Larry had given her less than five minutes ago. Unfortunately, every single one of them was gone. Probably knocked loose by the jarring slam of her ass into the saddle as Lula Bell hauled ass up the side of the hospital.

It probably looked beautiful from a spectator's point of view. Her hair and the lacey fabric of her dress were both flying in the wind, creating an image of a princess majestically riding toward her Prince Charming.

Unless you got too close. Then you could hear her cussing Lula Bell up one side and down the other as her poor vagina took the worst pounding it had ever faced. And that was the worst part of the whole thing because she'd planned on using the hell out of it tonight.



When they reached the bend in the parking lot, Lula Bell turned, thankfully heading in the correct direction. Evelyn gripped the reins but didn't dare yank out of fear she would spook Lula Bell the same way Grady's mother had. And she had no intention of being unceremoniously dumped on her ass for a second time, this one covered in white lace and with a full audience.

A piercing whistle cut through the air and a second later Lula Bell danced to one side, halting her forward trajectory as she sidestepped. The clap of hooves against blacktop preceded Grady's appearance by seconds. He reached her side, grabbing Lula Bell's reins as his horse blocked her path.

"Oh thank God." She shoved one hand under her dress, wedging it between her lady basement and the saddle, cupping the bruised and battered area. "I don't think my vagina could have handled much more."

Grady leaned to look Lula Bell in the eye, brows tight together. "What in the hell happened? I've never seen Lula Bell move that fast."

Evelyn shifted around, unsuccessfully trying to get comfortable. "I couldn't get her to move so Larry smacked her on the ass." She gave up looking for a less irritating position and decided to try sitting very still instead. "To be fair, I'd run if somebody spanked me like that too."

Grady's mouth pressed into a thin line as he glanced toward the corner of the hospital. "I don't know what in the hell he was thinking." Reaching for her, he whispered, "Come here," as he wrapped one arm around her waist, hauling her up and off Lula Bell and onto his lap. His hands smoothed down the curls of her hair before sliding over her bare arms. "You okay?"

She latched one hand into the front of his button up shirt, a little concerned she might slip over the edge. "Yes, but I think I would like to get wherever we're supposed to be so I can get the heck off the back of this horse."

Grady smiled, looking ridiculously handsome in blue jeans, a powder blue button up, and a suit jacket, eyes shaded

by the brim of his perfectly pristine cowboy hat. “I think I like having an eager bride, Ev.”

She yelped a little as he nudged his horse into action, leading Lula Bell along as they rode to the hospital entrance where the girls were waiting with Amelie, Troy, Gram-Gram, and Charlene. Everyone clapped as they arrived and snapped pictures with their phones since there was no time to hire an actual photographer. It was nothing like the formal, extravagant, self-indulgent wedding she always thought she’d have to suffer through. This was nothing more than a handful of the people they were closest to, a homemade cake, an off-the-rack dress, and a last-minute booking with the mayor.

It was perfect. Especially since she got to choose the man beside her.

Grady dismounted, strong hands coming up to help her down. He passed the horses off to Larry, who tipped his head before leading them to the trailer. It was a lot of work for such a small bit of time, but her grandmother was right—Having the horses was a perfect touch.

Even if her nethers might never recover.

Grady’s eyes fixed on her face. “You ready?”

This is what Larry didn’t understand. There was no reason for her to run away. Even if she had doubts, even if she changed her mind, the man in front of her would never hold that against her. He would never get upset. He would never expect her to do anything she wasn’t ready for or positive she wanted to do.

He’d proven it last night. If he thought she wasn’t one hundred percent on board, he wouldn’t hesitate to stop this wedding or anything else they faced.

Evelyn nodded without hesitation. “Are *you* ready?”

Grady grinned. “I’m ready for you to uphold my end of the prenup.”

Evelyn laughed, her head falling back. She’d been a little upset when her grandmother showed up at the eleventh hour with a prenup that would have given war and peace a run for

its money, but Grady hadn't batted an eye. He signed it willingly without reading a single line.

Right as soon as they put an addendum on the bottom that said he would never have to sleep on her mattress again.

Evelyn reached out to adjust the flower pinned to his jacket. "That means we won't be staying at my place anymore."

Grady winked. "Guess Gram-Gram and Bernard will have to entertain themselves."

She wrinkled her nose. "Eew."

Grady grabbed her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. "Not for long. Soon you're gonna be Evelyn Elizabeth Haynes."

She tipped her head to one side, lifting her shoulder to meet it. "Eeh."

Grady's laugh was loud and long as he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. He turned to face the group still snapping pictures, giving them a few seconds before motioning to the automatic doors. "Shall we?"

Evelyn smiled. "We shall."

The next fifteen minutes were bittersweet. Grady teared up when they walked into his mother's room. Gram-Gram had filled it with flowers and a balloon arch that stood at one side of the bed. Darla had a pretty blouse that looked really familiar layered over her hospital gown and her hair was brushed out and fluffed up. It was impossible to know how much of what was going on Darla understood, but hopefully a little part of her recognized what was happening.

Grady nearly broke her heart when he reached to hold one of his mother's hands partway through the short ceremony, keeping it in his as they said their vows.

Once it was all over, they shared cake and champagne. Darla was included every step of the way. At any given time, someone was standing next to her, having a one-sided conversation about everything from the flavor of the cake to

how many times Gertrude farted during yoga class that morning.

When it was all over and everyone had cleared out, they were left in the quiet of the hospital room. Grady excused himself to make a call, leaving her alone with her new mother-in-law.

Evelyn sat in the silence for a minute, feeling a little awkward. Darla hadn't said a word since waking up from surgery, and she didn't appear to have much awareness of what was going on, but it still didn't feel right not to say something.

"I know you don't really know me." She smiled, but the expression quickly slipped away. "I just want you to know how much I appreciate what a good mom you were." Squeezing her eyes shut, she cringed a little inside. "Are." A few guilty-heavy seconds passed before she continued. "Grady is such a good man and I'm sure a big part of that is because of you." She pressed her lips together, hit by a sudden wave of grief. "I'm really sad I didn't get to know you before..." She swallowed at the lump tightening her throat. "Before."

"She would have loved you." Grady's voice sent her eyes snapping to the doorway where he stood looking like everything she never knew she wanted.

And more.

"I hope so." Evelyn managed a smile. "I'm sure I would have loved her back."

Was it possible to miss something you never actually had? To grieve what might have been? Because that's what this felt like.

Her relationship with her own mother was fractured long before her grandmother's arrival. Actually, fractured wasn't the right word—something had to exist to be broken. Losing out on a second chance to have someone like a mother was a stab to the heart she hadn't anticipated.

"I'm sure you would have too." Grady moved into the room, his steps unhurried as he came her way. "She loved to play practical jokes." He smiled, the expression sad and

wistful. “Once, when I was seven or eight, she took all the underwear out of my drawer and replaced it with my dad’s. Tried to convince me I’d shrunk.” He stopped at the end of the bed. “Another time she put plastic wrap between the toilet seat and the bowl.”

Evelyn snorted. “That’s a little vicious.”

Grady tipped his head. “She was expecting it to just feel funny when I sat down.” His grin widened. “What she didn’t expect was my dad to be havin’ a bad reaction to an extra spicy jalapeno and come running into the house in the middle of the day.”

She laughed so hard she started to wheeze and her stomach muscles ached. “I’m sure I would have loved her.” She pressed one hand to the side of her head as another thought occurred to her. “Can you imagine if she hung out with the girls?”

“No, and I don’t want to.” Grady’s warm gaze rested on Darla. “I would have hated havin’ to arrest my own mother.” Sadness slowly crept into his eyes. “She would have loved today.”

Evelyn stood up, moving to his side. “She did love today.”

Grady’s head dropped on a half nod. “I hope so.” He turned to her, one hand coming to her face. “You ready to go home, Mrs. Haynes?”

Holy shit. She was married.

Not for money. Not for connections. Not for status or prestige.

Just for love. Love she fully planned to consummate tonight.

She leaned into his touch. “I am.”



“I THINK I came out on the good end of that prenup.” Grady sat across from her in the tub, playing with her toes just like he had the night before. “This is way better than staring at Gram-Gram and Bernard over the dinner table, pretending we don’t know—”

Evelyn splashed him with the sandalwood-scented water. “Shut it.” She wiggled her toes, looking over the perfect shine of the deep red polish. “I’m still not ready to talk about that.”

Grady tweaked her baby toe. “You’re no fun.” He went back to massaging her foot, his expression turning serious. “I should probably go to the ranch tomorrow. Make sure things are going okay.” His eyes came to hers. “Want to join me?”

“That depends.” She adjusted where her head rested against the side of the tub. “Do I have to hang out with Lula Bell?”

He laughed softly. “No. I think we might need to find you someone else to hang out with.” He worked his fingers between her toes, offering a stretch that felt divine. “Or maybe you can just ride with me until you’re a little more used to being on the back of a horse.”

Evelyn frowned. “Won’t that be too much weight?” She felt guilty enough when it was only her. Thinking of both her and Grady on Scout’s back had her imagining the poor horse’s middle dragging the ground.

“Nah. Not for short rides.” Grady gave each toe a gentle twist, working his way down the line. “And I don’t want to wait to show you around the ranch. It’ll be half yours someday.”

“Umm, no it won’t.” She wiggled her feet free of his hold before shifting around. “We have a prenup, remember?”

While her grandmother had been worried about Evelyn’s best interests, she’d been worried about Grady’s. The documents clearly stated that his family’s ranch would always stay exactly that. “What’s yours stays yours.”

Grady’s eyes narrowed as his lips tipped into a frown. “I don’t think I like that.”

“Too bad.” She crawled over him, sliding a little as she fought against the slippery bottom. “My grandmother is very focused on preserving generational wealth. She would never have let you sign something that said I got half of what was yours.”

“That’s pretty nice of her, but what about our kids?” He lifted his brows. “They’ll get all of what’s yours and mine so it will all be combined eventually anyway.”

Evelyn pinched her lower lip between her teeth as that same familiar flutter she used to fight so hard to ignore flapped its way through her belly. “Kids?”

Grady studied her for a second, like he was trying to see what she was thinking. “You don’t want kids?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I’ve always assumed I would have them, I just never really thought about it happening.” But now that she was, all sorts of images were fighting for footing in her mind.

Grady as a dad, walking hand in hand with a mini version of himself as he showed them the ranch that would one day be theirs.

Gram-Gram pretending she didn’t care if dirty fingers ruined her silk blouse.

Little piggies going to market and playing practical jokes.

“Maybe kids wouldn’t be so bad.” Evelyn leaned closer, planting her hands on his chest as she teased her only slightly sore pussy against the very solid line of his cock. “But you’ll have to fuck me to make them happen.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



## GRADY



“NOW, EV,” HE gripped her hips, planning to work her body away from his, “we don’t have to rush.” His fingers slid against her skin as he struggled to ease her away. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“So, we decided to get married and had a wedding in less than twelve hours, but you think I should wait to have sex with you?” Evelyn pursed her lips as she shifted her hands to the tub edge behind his head, using the hold as leverage to work her body closer. “Isn’t there a saying about buying the cow?” She rubbed her tits against his chest. “Because I’m pretty sure my purchase of the cow is complete.”

Grady started to chuckle but the drag of her pussy against his cock turned it to a groan. “That’s not what that saying is about.” He fought a little harder to get the movement of her hips under control. “And I’m not sure I like you comparing me to a cow.”

“Why not? Your mom was a proud heifer.” She leaned in a little closer. “At least that’s what I heard.”

“Funny.” Grady couldn’t help the drop of his eyes as they moved over her slick, glistening skin. “Did you wake up this morning and decide to be a pain in the ass or did it happen later on?”

Evelyn’s lips slowly tipped into a mischievous smile, the action sending his blood pumping. “I woke up this morning upset that you didn’t finish what you started last night.”

Last night was... Complicated. Everything had been fine, better than fine actually, right up until they were in the thick of it. Then something changed. There was a shift in Evelyn. One he couldn't pinpoint the reason for, which was frustrating as hell. So he hit the brakes. It was the only option he had since his ability to read his new wife left a lot to be desired.

Which was why he wasn't sure what was different between then and now, but something sure as hell was. She'd gone from almost hesitant to downright dangerous.

"I'm not in the habit of fucking women who aren't as into it as I am, Ev." Grady put the only thing he was sure of between them, hoping she might offer some much-needed clarity.

Evelyn's eyes moved over his face. "That's not what happened."

"Okay. Then tell me what did happen." He'd tried to figure out what she was thinking—what she was feeling—more than a few times today, and every single one of them came up blank. That left him with no alternative. All he could do was ask and hope Evelyn was willing to open up to him.

She traced a line across his skin, following a drip of water as it ran down his arm. "I've never had sex that was more than sex, and it was a little overwhelming."

Grady studied her face, not because he was trying to see what she wasn't saying—he'd given up hope of that—but because he couldn't look away. "Why not?"

His new wife offered a half-shrug. "I was just trying to ruin my grandma's ability to easily marry me off. There was really nothing else in it for me." She sighed. "I should probably feel bad about it, but I always made it clear that I wasn't looking for anything more."

"But you wanted more with me?" He couldn't stop himself from asking. He needed to hear it. Needed to know they were both in the same place.

Evelyn tipped her head to one side, laughing. "I think it's a little late for you to ask me that."

Grady gave her ass a little smack, the movement splashing the now lukewarm water around. “I meant last night. You wanted more with me last night. Before Gram-Gram showed up with a full wedding plan.”

Evelyn smoothed down the lines of his chest hair. “Wanting more with you just kind of came out of nowhere.” Her lips curved in a teasing line. “Kinda like that last little piggie does.”

He understood that, but... “You’re not really answering my question, Ev.”

The teasing line of her lips slipped, working into something more serious. “I did answer your question.” She smoothed her hands over his skin, each sweeping touch sliding a little lower than the one before it. “I didn’t have to marry you, Grady.” Evelyn traced the lines of his pecs. “My grandmother was never going to make me marry anyone. I could have stayed single without worrying what might happen.” Her hands dipped under the water as they moved over his stomach. “I could have even stayed in Moss Creek. I could have told her the truth and she would have understood.” Her hand tickled against the curve of his obliques. “But I didn’t.” Her tickle of a touch suddenly became firm and solid as it gripped the line of his dick. “I married you. Promised to love you until the day I died in front of God and your sick mother.” She fisted him tight. “If that doesn’t say I want more from you, I don’t know what would.”

He groaned as she pumped his cock, water easing the glide of her skin against his. “I want it all from you, Ev.” The honesty in her words pulled a confession from his lips. “I want everything.”

“Yeah?” Her lips brushed against his. “What’s everything?”

“If you can think of it, I want it.” He gripped her ass, fingers digging into her flesh as she worked his cock. “Marriage. Babies. Rocking chairs on the porch. All of it.”

“You’re already a third of the way there.” She moved in closer. “And it wouldn’t take much for you to have two out of

three.”

She was killing him. “Don’t fucking tempt me with that, Ev.”

He’d been so alone for so long and the thought of having not only Evelyn, but someone he could love the way his parents loved him was—

“But you said you wanted everything.” She rocked against him, the angle of her hand changing. “Maybe I want everything too.” The heat of her body teased against his, taunting him.

And as much as he wanted to give in, it couldn’t happen.

“You’ve faced a lot of changes lately, Sweetheart.” Grady hooked his arm around her waist, lifting Evelyn up and out of the water the same way he had the night before. “I think we need to wait a while before we pile any more on.” He set her down on the bathmat, drying her off before wrapping her in a fresh towel. “We have a lot to figure out before we start adding to our plate.”

“Like what?” Evelyn peeled the towel from her body and stepped close, reaching out to carefully dry his skin.

“We need to decide where we’re going to live. Do we want to take over the house at the ranch or stay here?” He watched as she tenderly took care of him, gently blotting away the water from their bath. “We need to decide where we’re going to stick Gram-Gram and her full-service butler when they come to visit.” He lost his train of thought as she dropped to her knees, working the towel over his legs, her full mouth dangerously close to the jutting line of his cock.

Evelyn’s eyes lifted to meet his. “Anything else on that list?”

“Probably.” He’d already forgotten the first two items, so coming up with the rest was not happening. Hell, he’d be lucky if he kept breathing looking at how fucking sexy she was on her knees.

Evelyn dabbed the towel against his shins and feet before setting it on the edge of the tub. “Maybe it’s not a bad idea to

wait for babies.” The tips of her fingers dragged from his ankles to his thighs. “I like the idea of not having to share you for a little while.” She leaned in, lips sliding over him without warning, hot mouth hungrily swallowing him down.

Gripping her hair, his fingers twisted into the thick strands as her lips sank over him. The wet warmth of her mouth was almost as consuming as the sight of her full lips stretched around him. Her dark eyes lifted to meet his as she pulled back and took him in again.

He needed to look away from her, had to find some way to preserve what little control he had left, but there was no severing the tie locking his gaze on hers. Like every other time he’d tried to put distance between them, he failed.

“Fuck, you look good on your knees for me, Ev.” He clenched his jaw, fighting against the urge to come. “Show me how much you can take.”

The suction of her mouth was perfect as she took him into her throat and when she pulled back and flicked her tongue against the underside of his head he nearly spilled down against her tongue.

Which wasn’t a promising sign.

Grady used his hold on her hair to drag Evelyn free. The wicked smile she gave him tempted him to fill her mouth again. Take just a little more of what she was so willing to give. But that would be a slippery slope. One he was almost guaranteed to slide right down.

So he jerked his chin toward the bedroom. “Go.”

Evelyn stood, one finger coming to wipe along the side of her mouth. “Bossy, bossy.”

He nodded. “That’s right, now get your ass in my bed, wife.”

Evelyn moved closer, one hand reaching out to cup his balls in a gentle squeeze. “Don’t keep me waiting, husband.”

Fucking hell. Last night she’d been so hesitant. Almost seeming scared. Tonight’s Evelyn was a whole different

woman. One who was testing the hell out of his limits.

Grady took a deep breath, raking one hand through his hair before following behind her, relieved when she didn't crawl across the mattress to tease him with a full view of her flushed pussy. Because he wouldn't be able to resist the temptation.

And tonight needed to be perfect. A night worth remembering. And it would be hard as hell to recollect ten point three seconds.

He watched as she pulled back the cover and laid down, her long body stretched out across his sheets.

Evelyn cocked a brow at him. "Are you coming?"

"Yup." Hopefully not too quickly.

Grady crawled over her, dragging his nose and lips up her body as he went. He reached her thighs, planning to make a little detour, but Evelyn slipped her hand over the object of his interest. When he lifted his eyes to hers, she shook her head and gave him another of those wicked smiles. "Come up here."

Shit. His intention of warming her up to the point she'd only need a little bit to send her over was cut off at the knees.

"Seems like you might have another plan, Sweetheart." He shifted higher, lining his body with hers. "Mind filling me in on what it is?"

Evelyn twisted her lips to the side, one eye squinting like she was thinking it over. She shook her head. "No. I don't think so."

"Well, that's no—"

Suddenly, she hooked a leg around his, locking tight as she pushed, rolling them across the mattress and reversing their positions. Her long hair draped across his face, tickling against his skin as she cackled victoriously. "Keeping the element of surprise was a smart choice." Evelyn pressed her hands to the center of his chest, using them to raise her upper body away from his. "I don't want you hitting the brakes on me again."

He was screwed now. Being the one in control, he might've had a chance. But lying here, watching Evelyn fuck him, would be one hell of a test. And chances were good he was going to fail it.

Evelyn didn't seem to care. His new wife looked happy as a clam as she reached for the nightstand, digging through his upper drawer before coming back with a condom. She tore it open, tossing the wrapper away before leaning back to carefully slide it into place. "If we're not planning on making any little Gradys soon, maybe I should get on the pill." Her eyes lifted to his. "Because I think I want to feel what it's like when you come inside me."

Grady gritted his teeth. "Sweetheart, you can either talk or you can be on top, but you can't do both." Watching her move over him was going to be hell, but if Evelyn thought she was gonna bring that dirty mouth into things, then she would have to think again.

Evelyn leaned forward, planting her palms in the center of his chest again. "What's the matter, husband? It seemed like you liked dirty talk." She rocked forward, rolling her hips before arching her back in a move that lined the head of his cock into place. "Does that mean you don't want me to tell you how good you feel inside me?" She bore down, working herself onto him as her eyes rolled closed. "Because you fill me up so fucking well."

Grady pressed his palm over her mouth, sealing off any more words she might try to say. "Wife, I need you to shut up." He couldn't see it, but still felt Evelyn's smile against his skin, and that was almost as bad.

The woman was a problem. Thank fucking God she was all his.

She snagged his wrist, dragging the hand from her lips down to press against the swell of one tit. "I like when you call me your wife."

"I like you being my wife." Grady thumbed across her nipple before giving it a teasing roll. "Almost as much as I like watching you take my cock."

Evelyn sucked in a breath, clenching around him. “So you get to talk dirty, but I can’t?”

Grady’s free hand gripped her hip as he braced his feet against the mattress. “Seems like.”

Evelyn moaned as he thrust up into her, meeting her movement. “That seems like a double standard.”

“Don’t care.” He was having a hard time stringing words together. Every bit of his focus went to making sure this lasted more than thirty seconds, and the odds of that happening dropped more with each whimper that came through her lips.

Evelyn’s head fell forward as she continued rocking over him, her movements speeding up. “You feel so good.”

“I can tell.” He thrust again. “You’re fucking soaked for me.”

Evelyn whimpered, the sound a little desperate and filled with need. “Grady, I—”

“I’ve got you, Sweetheart.” He slid the hand on her hip to where their bodies were joined, settling his thumb against her clit. “Now show me what it looks like when my pretty little wife comes on my cock.”

Evelyn’s hands clenched where they gripped his chest, nails digging into his pecs as her movements became more erratic. It took everything he had to maintain what he’d started, timing his thrusts as well as he could as he continued working that tiny bit of flesh for all he was worth, praying he could hold out.

When her thighs jerked against his hips, he let out the breath he’d been holding, balls immediately pulling tight. Her pussy fisted, gripping him as she bucked against him, her cries filling his empty house the same way she’d filled his empty life.

Perfectly. Suddenly. Completely.

“Holy shit.” Evelyn’s spine curved as she fell forward, collapsing against his chest, fingers still twisted in what



remained of the hair there. A few of them now belonged to her, and he was more than happy to make the sacrifice.

He'd make it again later if she let him.

"That was—" She panted out a breath.

So he finished for her. "Fucking amazing."

Evelyn's head rocked so her grinning face came into view. "I was going to say mediocre, but I guess amazing works too.

Grady gave her ass a little slap. "Mediocre?" He reached between them, slicking his fingers through the wetness that belonged only to her. "That doesn't feel like mediocre to me, wife."

Evelyn laughed, the sound a little husky as she eased her body from his and rolled off to her side. "Fine. I guess I can give you amazing."

Grady rolled to face her, propping one hand against the side of his head. "You don't sound convinced. I might have to give it another go. See if I can get you to level me up."

Evelyn laughed, the sound light and sweet. "You might have to wait until tomorrow." She gingerly reached to touch her inner thighs. "Between you and Lula Bell, my parts might need a break."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## EVELYN



“WHAT IN THE world are you doing?” Evelyn padded across the living room, wiping the sleep from her eyes as Grady banged around the kitchen.

“Making breakfast.” He grabbed a coffee cup from one of the open shelves above the sink and poured it full before adding a splash of her favorite creamer and passing it off. He held up the carton with a grin. “I stole this from your fridge, so hopefully Gram-Gram’s not too pissed when she wakes up and discovers it’s gone.” He watched as she took the first sip. “Good?”

Evelyn closed her eyes, breathing in the delicious scent of vanilla and roasted beans. “It’s perfect.” She slipped onto one of the swiveling stools lining the large island and relaxed against the cushioned back. “What else did you steal from my fridge?”

“There wasn’t much else to steal, Sweetheart.” He went to work cracking eggs into a bowl. “I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this, but you’re a shitty grocery shopper.”

Evelyn scoffed, feigning offense. “How much did you want me to buy? I’m only one person and I don’t know how to cook.” She took another sip of coffee, unable to miss how much better it was than what she brewed up herself. “Why does your coffee taste so much better than mine?”

“Don’t know.” He whisked the eggs around, mixing them together before seasoning them with salt-and-pepper. “I just use the cheap shit in a can.”

Evelyn pushed her lower lip out. “Me too, but mine never tastes this good. Yours is so much richer.” She took another sip before peering at the liquid. “It’s a little darker too.”

“How much do you use when you make it?” Grady added a splash of milk to the eggs before pouring them into a skillet.

Evelyn shrugged. “I just followed the directions on the back.”

Grady chuckled. “That’s your problem. The instructions on the back are for beginners.” He mixed around the eggs with a spatula. “I use twice as many grounds as they say you’re supposed to.”

Evelyn snuck another peek at her coffee. “So does that mean it has more caffeine in it?”

“I sure as hell hope so. We’re gonna need the extra boost.” He lifted the lid on another pan to reveal a handful of sausage links sizzling. “We’ve got a lot to do today.”

Evelyn set her coffee down on the counter and raked both hands through her hair, trying to smooth out the sexed-in snarls. “Are you still wanting to go to the ranch?”

Grady went back to the eggs, stirring them around as they started to form curds. “It’s not about wanting to, I *have* to go to the ranch today. I haven’t been there in too long already.”

“But Larry’s been there. He’s the one who runs it, right?” She was trying to fit together all the moving parts of Grady’s life so she could figure out how she could be most helpful to him. Most of her classes at the studio were early in the morning or in the evening since nearly everyone in Moss Creek worked a more traditional schedule. That left most of her day available to help him tackle whatever needed tackling.

As long as it didn’t involve riding a horse.

“Larry’s the head ranch hand and has been since I was a kid, but my dad was always the one who managed everything. Grady shifted around the sausages. “I took over when he died, so I try to be there as much as I can.”

She had a hard enough time keeping up with the demands of her little business. She couldn't imagine trying to juggle the strange schedule he worked as a police officer *and* running a ranch. "So we definitely need to go to the ranch today." She took another gulp of coffee, feeding more caffeine into her system. "And I have a couple classes to teach this morning."

Grady collected two plates from the same open shelving that held the coffee cups, stacking them down the counter before dropping on eggs and sausage. "I'll need to go to the hospital too. Spend some time there." He snagged a sausage that jumped ship and dropped it into place. "And we could sure use a trip to the grocery store since it's a lot farther of a drive to pick something up."

Evelyn lifted her cup to hide the smile on her lips. "I could go to the grocery store for you."

Grady's eyes jumped to hers and the look of fear in them was hilarious. Funny enough that she immediately started laughing.

"I'm just kidding. You already said you were unimpressed by my pantry stocking abilities." She slid off her stool, rounding the island to where the toaster was sitting on the counter. She unwrapped the loaf of bread beside it and dropped a couple pieces in.

Grady turned her way, coming close and bracing his hands at each side of the counter around her. "You don't have to do that, Ev."

She peeked at him over one shoulder. "Are you worried I'll ruin toast?"

He nipped at the line of her neck. "A little."

She brought one elbow back to gently jab him in the gut. "Jerk."

Grady moved closer, the front of his body pressing into the back of hers. "But I'm your jerk, Mrs. Haynes."

She turned to face him as the slices toasted. "I guess it's too late to return you now, husband." Her eyes moved down his front, following the long line of his body. "Not that I'm

considering it. After last night, I'm relatively satisfied with my purchase."

Grady moved in a little closer, bringing his body flush against hers. "I like hearing that, but I remember wanting a do over." He gripped her around the waist and lifted her onto the counter, pushing up the hem of the T-shirt she'd slept in to reveal it was the only thing she had on.

"No panties, Ev?" Grady leaned in to catch her mouth with his in a lingering kiss that sent all her nerve endings firing. "This can't be a panty-free zone, Sweetheart. I won't be able to get anything done if I know you're walking around here with nothing to stop me from taking you whenever I want."

Evelyn leaned into him, looping her arms around his neck. "You act like panties are some sort of Grady-proof barricade." She wrapped both legs around his waist, pulling him in until the fabric of his pajama pants pressed against her. "And maybe I want you to be able to take me whenever you feel like it."

After a good night's sleep, the tenderness caused by her unexpectedly aggressive horseback ride the day before was all but gone, and she fully intended to make the most of it. Especially now that she knew how much fun it was to press Grady's buttons. "Maybe one day I want to be minding my own business, washing the dishes, and suddenly feel your mouth on me."

Grady groaned, his hands gripping her ass as he pulled her closer. "Careful, Ev. You're playing with fire."

"Then just call me a pyromaniac." She snaked her hand down the front of his pajama pants, wrapping her fingers around the rigid line of his cock.

Grady hissed, his jaw clenching tight as she pumped him with her palm. "If you're not careful, I might never let you leave this cabin, wife."

She couldn't help but smile. "Have I told you how much I like when you call me your wife?"

Grady shoved one hand into the pocket of his pants, pulling out a condom and slapping it on the counter. "You

might've said something to that effect, yes." He gripped the front of his pajamas and yanked them down to expose his hard length.

Evelyn watched as he rolled the condom into place. "You're awfully prepared for someone who just complained about me not wearing panties."

"It wasn't a complaint, Sweetheart." Grady dragged his fingers along her pussy, sucking in a breath as they slipped through the wetness already there. "I swear to God, Ev." His hand went to his cock, lining it up. "You make me want to get nothing done today." He flexed forward, spearing into her, sinking deep in one smooth motion that sent her head tipping back to rest against the open shelf behind it.

She braced one hand against the counter, trying to keep her body stable. "Are you saying that this is nothing?"

"You're not nothing, wife." Grady's arm banded around her waist, pulling her close as his free hand came to the back of her head, lifting it from the edge of the shelf. "You're everything."

His mouth claimed hers, tasting of coffee and promise. His tongue teased against hers as he rocked into her, each stroke deeper than the one before it. It was the hottest way she'd ever been fucked, but something about the angles wasn't quite lining up, and while it felt good, it also felt unproductive.

Grady's arm flexed at her back and he hefted her up. "Seems like kitchen counter sex isn't going to be your favorite thing." He carried her over to the barstool she'd just vacated, dropping her into place before pulling her ass to the edge, sending her upper half against the leather back. He hooked her legs over his shoulders, leaning forward to brace himself against the back of the chair.

The next slide of his body into hers hit differently. It dragged against a toe-curling spot inside her while also providing friction against her clit. The combination pulled an absolutely sinful sound from her lips.

Grady's dark eyes met hers. "Better?"

She nodded, barely managing to agree. “Better.”

Gripping her hips, he rolled them upward a little more as he leaned even closer. His next thrust had her moaning as the sensation of those perfect points of contact intensified.

“That is it.” Grady gripped the back of the chair, holding it tight as he began to fuck her in steady, strong strokes that hit more spots than she knew she had.

Evelyn gripped the seat under her ass as her vision started to narrow and her ears started to ring. Every move of his body carried her higher until there was nowhere to go but down.

And she fell. Fast and willingly. His name on her lips as she shattered into a thousand pieces.

It was so much more than she ever knew sex could be. It was connected. It was consuming. It was engulfing—

The smell of something burning cut through the haze of afterglow. She opened her eyes, trying to straighten as she looked around. “I think something’s on fire.”

Grady’s face was buried in her hair. “Very funny.”

Evelyn pushed at his chest as the scent grew stronger. “I’m serious, Grady. I smell smoke.”

Grady leaned up, eyes going wide as they landed on the stove. “Shit.” He pulled out of her, yanking the front of his pajama pants up to cover his dick and the used condom still wrapped over it as he raced around the island to grab the empty sausage pan from the burner. He looked from side to side like he was unsure where to take the smoking skillet.

Evelyn pointed at the front door. “Outside.”

“Good call.” He jogged to the front door and chucked the pan into the yard before turning to face her. “Next time, remind me to turn off the stove before I have my way with you.”

“No promises.” She slid off the stool, wiggling her T-shirt back down as she picked up one of the plates of now cool food and carried it to the microwave. “You’re very distracting.”



There's a good chance I'd let the whole house burn down around me."

Grady ducked into the half-bath on the main floor, coming out a second later waving one hand in front of his face. "I think we need some fresh air." He went to the wall of windows at the back of the house and unlatched the lock before sliding two large sections apart.

Evelyn's jaw dropped. "Holy shit. Those are doors?"

"They are." He pulled a screen from each side, joining them in the middle. "There's three sets, so I can get a pretty good cross-breeze going when the weather's nice." He came back to her side, pulling her close and pressing a kiss to her lips. "You want to have breakfast on the deck, Mrs. Haynes?"

"I would love to have breakfast wherever you would like, Mr. Haynes." The microwave beeped and she pulled the first plate out, passing it off to Grady before loading in the second one. Two minutes later it was hot and ready and both their coffees were topped off.

They were headed to the deck as Grady's phone started to ring. He turned, hustling back to the kitchen to get it from the counter, connecting the call as he walked back toward her. "Hello?" He paused, pulling the phone out to look at the screen before pressing it back against his ear. "This is." Grady's eyes met hers. "What?" He shook his head. "That's not possible. She was doing okay last night. She—"

The look on his face sent her stomach dropping. Setting her plate on the closest surface, she went straight for him, stealing Grady's plate before he dropped it and sliding it onto the counter. Evelyn wrapped both arms around his middle and held tight, hoping it was enough to keep him together as his heart broke right in front of her.

"Okay. I understand." He pressed one hand against the back of her head, closing his eyes as he held her close. "I'll be right there." Grady ended the call and dropped the phone to the sofa. He wrapped both arms around her and buried his face in her hair, pulling in slow, deep breaths. "She's gone."

Evelyn nodded, blinking hard as she tried to keep the tears burning her eyes at bay. She smoothed her hands up and down his back, trying to comfort him the only way she knew how. Nothing she could say would make this better. Nothing she could do would bring back the mother he once knew. There wasn't a plan in the world that could fix this.

So she just held him quietly, waiting until Grady leaned back to meet her eyes. The pain she saw there was consuming. The kind they could both easily get lost in.

And he didn't need her lost. He needed her to do what she'd been doing for the past year.

He needed her to figure it out. To be as brave as he thought she was.

Evelyn reached up to smooth out his sleep messed hair and offered up the first logical step to making it through this. "Let's go see your mom."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## GRADY



“IT FEELS STRANGE to be here without her.” Grady scrubbed one hand over his face, trying to rub away the exhaustion burning the edges of his eyes. They’d been going nonstop since leaving the hospital, trying to get everything organized and in line.

“I can imagine.” Evelyn stuck close as he moved up the stairs of his parents’ house, looking at it through different eyes.

It was no longer their home. No longer the family haven it once was. It felt empty even though there was only one thing missing. Every other item was exactly where it had been a week ago, but the crush of emptiness was oppressive. Smothering.

“How long did you live here?” Evelyn’s question was soft, like she wanted to give the space, and the grief inside it, the respect they deserved.

Grady led her into the first door on the right. “Right up until I moved into the A-frame on the mountain, so almost thirty years.”

Evelyn gave him a little bit of a smile as she followed him in. “Kind of a late bloomer, weren’t you?”

“I think I felt guilty.” Grady moved to sit down in the chair behind the same desk his father used to work at. “I knew they were disappointed I didn’t love the ranch as much as they did, so I thought maybe they’d feel better if I stayed until I had a reason to go.” He leaned over to open the filing cabinet, sifting

through the papers in search of the documents he needed. “Honestly, I figured I’d get married by the time I was twenty-five and have an excuse to leave. But that didn’t happen.” He pulled out a manila envelope stamped with the name of the funeral home that handled his dad’s final services and would now be caring for his mother. “But then my dad sat me down and told me I needed to live my life the way I wanted to, and if that didn’t include the ranch, it would be okay.” He opened the unsealed flap and sifted through the papers inside, making sure everything was there. “But then he died and my mom went downhill, and all I could do was try to keep all the balls in the air.” He added the folder and papers to the pile he’d already collected.

“Is that everything?” Evelyn didn’t sound nearly as exhausted as he was.

She’d been a trooper. Not only had she gone with him to see his mother before the funeral home came to pick her up, but she’d been at his side while he made phone calls and ran errands, doing his best to get as much handled as possible. Which included collecting all the paperwork about the funeral his parents had the forethought to prearrange.

But he was still missing two sets of documents. “I’m surprised everything wasn’t in the same place.”

His father had been a meticulous bookkeeper, and he’d done his best to keep up with it, but his own methods weren’t perfect. He had a habit of moving things. Deciding it made more sense to put it somewhere else.

Except he didn’t remember touching the will or investment records at all.

“Is there someplace else you might have put them?” Evelyn looked around the office. “Maybe a safe or lock box of some sort.”

Grady huffed out a little laugh. “What would I do without you?” He stood up, grabbing Evelyn and pulling her in for a quick kiss before going to the painting concealing the wall safe his father installed twenty years ago. “You’re right. I think I put them in here right after my dad died.” A faint recollection

wiggled around the back of his brain, but that was all that remained of the long past moment. He quickly entered the combination and opened the door. Sure enough, everything from his parents' attorney was stacked inside, safe and sound, along with the cash they kept on hand.

"Holy shit, Grady." Evelyn looked from the contents of the safe to him. "Please tell me that's not paper money in an ancient wall safe."

"I'm pretty sure this is fireproof." Grady looked around the edges for some sort of stamp that might prove his claim, but there was nothing. "Probably."

"Not to be bossy, but you might want to consider putting that stuff into a safety deposit box." She reached out to scrape her fingernail over the flaking finish of the safe. "At least until you invest in something a little more durable looking."

He took a closer look at the safe he'd never paid much attention to and laughed in spite of the day. "Have I ever told you my dad loved trying to build the weirdest shit?" He leaned close enough to notice the jagged welding and hammered edges. "I bet he built this himself." The realization stabbed a pain deep into his chest. "There's probably things like this all through this house."

Evelyn reached out to gently inspect the door of the safe. "It's not terrible, but I don't think I would trust it to protect my most precious items in a natural disaster." Her lips quirked. "Or a sausage pan fire."

Grady reached in to collect everything inside. "Agreed." He stacked the items on the desk before settling the picture back into place.

Evelyn looked over the framed piece of art, her fingers going to the initials at the bottom. "HEH." She lifted a brow. "That wouldn't happen to be your father, would it?"

Grady barked out a laugh. "Yup. Harold Edward Haynes." He shook his head. "He didn't just make the safe. He had to make the art to hide it too."

Evelyn's eyes sparkled, her smile widening. "Sounds like your dad was just as cool as your mom." She pressed her lips together. "What else do you think he made in this house?"

Grady collected the stack of documents and bundled cash. "There's no telling."

"Sounds like we might have to start an investigation." Evelyn almost sounded excited at the possibility. "See what sneaky Harold left as his legacy."

Her words lodged a lump in his throat.

This ranch was his father's legacy. His whole family's really. There was no way he'd ever be able to give it up. "I think I might want to move here, Ev."

Evelyn chewed her lower lip, tilting her head to one side. "It's a pretty big house, husband." She backed out into the hall, looking back-and-forth between the doorways of the second floor. "Did I count five bedrooms up here?"

Grady gave her a grin. "And there's one on the main floor." They'd converted what used to be the office into a master bedroom when his parents hit their mid-fifties, thinking they'd eventually reach an age where they couldn't easily go up and down the stairs. Sadly, neither one of them had the opportunity to reach that stage of life.

Evelyn's brows lifted. "There's *six* bedrooms?" Her expression turned sad. "Why are you an only child?"

He'd asked his mother that same question, so he offered up the answer she gave him. "My mom said I was already everything she wanted."

Evelyn's face fell a little more. "My mom told me I was more than she could handle."

Of course she did.

"I don't think I should ever meet your mother, Ev." Something told him they'd barely scratched the surface of the bullshit Evelyn's mother had put her through. And the chances of him being able to stay civil staring that woman down were already slim.

“I don’t think that’s anything you’ll ever have to worry about. She’ll never come here, and I don’t have any reason to go back to New York.” Evelyn pressed her lips together, sliding one hand down the casing of the door in a tender touch. “When would you want to move?”

He knew Evelyn would be okay with living at the ranch, but he didn’t expect her to look so excited about it. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Evelyn gently stroked the wood, like she was already becoming attached. “I’m ready whenever you are.” She paused, a hint of uncertainty pinching her features. “I do have a question though.” Her lips twisted into a devious little smile. “Have you ever heard of something called goat yoga?”



GRAM-GRAM SLID A stack of papers across their table at The Wooden Spoon. “I think I have everything organized.”

Evelyn’s grandmother was turning out to be one hell of an asset. From what Evelyn said, the woman had planned every kind of event in existence, and she wasn’t afraid to throw around money or connections to make shit happen.

She did both while organizing the gathering that would take place after his mother’s services. In less than twenty-four hours, she’d pulled together a venue, a caterer, decorations, and sent every picture he and Evelyn collected from the house the night before to a videographer who was putting together some sort of slideshow.

“I really appreciate you doing this.” Grady flipped through photographs of the banquet hall and the chosen menu.

Gram-Gram reached across the table, taking his hand in hers. “I wish I’d had more support when my husband died. It was a very difficult time and I—” She took a sharp breath before offering a tight smile. “I’m just glad I came here when I did so I could be of assistance.”



It was shocking to think that just a week ago he'd looked at this woman as his enemy. As someone planning to take Evelyn away and dictate her life. The same life she'd worked so hard to escape.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

"I'm sorry no one was there to help you when he died." Evelyn's face fell. "If I'd known—"

"It wasn't your responsibility to know, Evelyn." Gram-Gram shut her down abruptly. "I'm just glad we're here now." Her eyes dropped to the menu in front of her as she flipped it open. "Now what should I order?" Her lips flattened. "Because I don't believe I'm as big of a fan of tuna casserole as your friends."

They spent the next hour chatting about everything except his mother's death, which he was almost as grateful for as he was Gram-Gram's attention to detail and willingness to take on the load.

By the time their late lunch was over, he was feeling a little more relaxed and less overwhelmed by everything that had to be done. Grady walked Evelyn and Gram-Gram out to her SUV, pulling Evelyn in for a quick kiss before packing her into the front seat and closing the door.

Evelyn rolled down her window before pulling away. "We'll see you at the ranch?"

He nodded. "I'm gonna go check in at the station and touch base with a few people about next week." He leaned to look across the console at where Gram-Gram sat in the front seat. "Thanks for coming to help me pick out something for my mom to wear. I'm sure she'd be much happier with what you two come up with than whatever I'd put together."

Gram-Gram gave him a little smile. "Of course. And if we don't find anything we can agree on in her wardrobe, I'm happy to purchase something we know she would love."

He considered telling Gram-Gram he was more than capable of buying his mother something new, but he knew her offer wasn't really about the money. Gram-Gram seemed to

struggle with knowing how to act in a situation like this almost as much as Evelyn did. It made him think she might have developed a fondness for him. He was positive that woman knew how to handle every casual social interaction in existence—It was the more emotional situations she struggled with.

Grady tipped his head in a nod. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

Evelyn leaned in, offering him another kiss. “Go get all your stuff done and we’ll see you in a little bit.”

She leaned back in her seat, eyes holding his. “I love you, husband.”

She said it like she’d offered those words to him hundreds of times before instead of just once. They sounded easy and honest. Just like they did when he returned them. “I love you, wife.”

Evelyn beamed at him, smile bright enough to chase away the shadows hanging over his head. He tapped the roof of her car and backed up, watching as she pulled out of the lot behind The Wooden Spoon, on her way to finalize the plans her Gram-Gram made.

And it gave him time to finalize some plans of his own.

It wasn’t right that this was how Evelyn’s wedding went. She deserved so much more. And while he might not be able to go back in time and change all that had happened, he could sure as hell make up for it.

He drove over to the station, just like he said he was going to. Only he wasn’t there to check in. He parked and headed in through the back, more than ready to plan something he would actually look forward to attending.

“Grady.” Peters jogged up to his side, gear rattling around as he hustled. “Good to see you, man.” He grabbed Grady in a back slapping hug. “You hanging in there?”

“I’m doing okay.” Grady gave his friend a pat on the shoulder. “How about you? Those girls keeping you on your toes?”

Peters grinned. “They’re all three hell on wheels.” His smile slipped the tiniest bit. “Just like their momma was.”

Peters had been the first of his work buddies to call him up after his mother died to offer his condolences. Probably because he understood grief better than most people.

“Glad to hear it.” Grady returned Peters’ smile. “Means they’ll hold their own.”

Peters chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t think I need to worry about them not holding their own.” He gripped the front of his vest. “They’re like a ready-made gang and I pity anyone who crosses them.”

“Good thing you’ve got connections to keep them out of trouble.” He liked Peters. He was a good guy and under normal circumstances he’d stay and chat a little longer.

But right now he had a travel agent to meet. “Have you seen Flynn’s wife come in?”

“She’s up in the main office.” Peters smirked. “You planning something for that new wife of yours?”

Grady couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. “I am.” He turned toward the main office. “I owe her a honeymoon.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## EVELYN



“THIS PLACE IS unbelievable.” Evelyn did a slow spin in the center of the venue her grandmother found to hold Darla’s wake. “How did you find it?”

The property was a private country club located less than a half hour from Moss Creek and only fifteen minutes from the funeral home where the visitation would be held. It was a beautiful combination of rustic and classy, with exposed beams, creamy walls, and glittering chandeliers. It was an odd combination, but it worked.

And it fit what she knew of Darla. Granted that wasn’t much, but from all the stories Grady had told her over the past few days, his mom seemed to be both warm and fun. Outgoing and kind. Hard working but still enjoyed getting to dress up.

This place seemed like something a woman like that would have liked.

Hopefully.

“I made a few calls. I have some friends who have connections out west and they were able to put me in touch with the owner of the property.” Her grandmother motioned toward the front of the room, moving on as if making something like this happen was no big deal. “All the photographs will be displayed here. Alister has promised me he will have the prints to me in plenty of time.” She turned, frowning at the far wall. “I tried to schedule a plated dinner, but apparently that’s not an option they could accommodate,

so we will be having a buffet. I've been told they're," she made air quotes with her fingers, "big here."

Her grandmother struggled to spit out the last words, her obvious distaste for the self-serve dining method making Evelyn smile. "Buffets are big everywhere."

"That's possible." Her grandmother took a breath, smoothing down the front of her shirt as she let it out. "Bernard says I'm out of touch." Her eyes came Evelyn's way. "That I don't understand the way the world really works."

"Bernard's probably right." Evelyn moved toward one of the circular tables they'd set up as an example of how things would look at the actual event. She sat down in the closest chair, taking a break while she could get it. "I didn't know what I didn't know until I came here, and it was a rude awakening."

Rude and embarrassing.

And if she felt that way at thirty, she could only imagine how her grandmother felt realizing how clueless she was at nearly eighty.

Evelyn stretched her tired body, hoping to work up a last bit of energy to finish out the day. "But you can always learn."

Her grandmother came to sit beside her, gracefully lowering to the seat. "It would appear I have to if I wish to keep Bernard in my life."

Evelyn didn't hide her surprise. "Bernard gave you an ultimatum?"

Her grandmother's lips flattened. "He says now that our relationship has," she paused, "*transitioned*, he's no longer comfortable with me paying him to do things for me." She tipped her head, expression stern. "And I don't understand why. If I'm happy to keep paying him, he should be happy to continue taking it."

"It sounds to me like Bernard wants more of a partnership." Evelyn glanced around, making sure the woman who was helping them earlier wasn't within earshot. "And he might feel a little dirty taking your money considering you're

sleeping together. Like you're paying him to have sex with you."

Her grandmother's spine stiffened as she sat taller in the chair. "I most certainly do not pay him to have sex with me." Her chin lifted. "He does it quite willingly."

"That's good to hear, but you need to understand how the lines there are getting really thin." Never in a million years would she have expected to be giving her grandmother relationship advice. Never would she have expected to give her grandmother any sort of advice, but here they were. "And you could always hire someone else—"

Her grandmother shook her head, the movement sharp and abrupt. "No. I don't trust anyone but Bernard."

Well. That was kind of sweet.

Evelyn offered her grandmother what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Then I think it's a great idea to consider what he's asking. It sounds like Bernard wants you to be a real couple." Evelyn paused before adding on the trickier part of Bernard's request. "He just wants you to carry a little of your own weight in that partnership."

"He wants me to make my own coffee." Her grandmother said it like it was a huge request.

"Is that all?" It did explain why she'd been so focused on learning how to make coffee, but if that was all Bernard was asking her to do—

"He also wants me to learn to cook." Her grandmother's eyes drifted to one side. "And he said something about *laundry*." She seemed to choke a little on the last word.

And Evelyn understood where she was coming from. Having to Google 'how to use a washing machine' as a full-grown adult was a little humiliating.

But Bernard's request still sounded pretty reasonable.

"Those all seem like pretty normal expectations to have of someone who's sharing your space." She leaned a little closer. "Are you two living together?"

“We lived together even before we—” Her grandmother’s eyes came back Evelyn’s way. “Before.”

“So it sounds like Bernard is still okay with doing most of what he’s always done, he just wants you to pitch in so he feels like he’s not just another paid employee.” She was kind of proud of Bernard for standing his ground and pushing her grandmother to broaden her horizons.

It was a surprisingly empowering thing to do. Not that she felt that way at first. Initially she considered burning all her clothes and just walking around naked.

Her grandmother’s head turned her way. “Of course he’s not just another employee.” Her lips tipped down. “He’s not an employee at all.”

“Do you see now why he felt a little strange about you still paying him?” The situation would be funny if Evelyn didn’t understand her grandmother’s confusion. Navigating through the life she had before and the life she had now were two very different things.

Her grandmother sighed, shoulders slumping the tiniest bit. “I suppose I do see where he’s coming from.”

“If it’s any consolation, it’s very convenient to be able to make your own coffee.” Evelyn smiled. “But you should probably have Grady show you how to do it, because he does a way better job than I do.”

Her grandmother’s sharp expression softened. “You know he took me to get coffee my first morning here.” She pursed her lips. “I was fully prepared to tell him he was not good enough for you and then send him on his way.” Her eyes jumped to Evelyn’s. “Not because I was planning to find someone better for you. I just felt very strongly that you deserved so much more than your mother or I had.”

Evelyn cringed a little. “I take it you were as happy in your marriage as my mother is in hers?”

“Not exactly.” Her grandmother sighed. “I had a fondness for your grandfather, but it never became more than that. We worked well together, and I struggled after he passed, but I



never had the same sort of warmth for him that I have for Bernard.” Her grandmother smoothed down the front of her slacks. “When I spoke with Grady that morning, I could see so many similarities between him and my Bernard. It made me hopeful that it wasn’t money that brought him to your side.” She tipped her head. “I was pleased to see how readily he signed the prenuptial agreement. He loves you for you.”

“Then I would say the fact that Bernard doesn’t want to be on your payroll anymore means the same kind of thing.” Evelyn hesitated before making a confession. “And Grady was a little pissed when he found out the prenup protected all his assets too.”

Her grandmother’s eyes widened. “Why would that upset him?”

“Apparently, what’s mine is mine and what’s his is mine.” She didn’t bother trying to hide the smile working onto her lips. “He said it will all go to our kids anyway. I might as well get my half now.”

Her grandmother shook her head. “Absolutely not.” She almost looked a little panicked at the possibility. “Does he need a good attorney? I am happy to connect you two with someone—”

Evelyn held one hand up, cutting her grandmother off before she ended up in a full-on rant about preserving wealth and protecting assets. “I will probably take you up on that.” Her eyes moved around the space. “Once we get through all of this.”

Her grandmother reached out to take her hand. “I’m so sorry you two are going through this, but I’m so grateful we were able to have his mother at your wedding.” Her expression dropped as her eyes fell away. “When I saw her, I just knew...” She took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. “And thankfully we will be able to provide her with the beautiful sendoff she deserves.”

“Thank you so much for helping with it. I don’t know that Grady could have taken this on too.” Even after being in his

life for such a short time, it was evident that her poor husband was overworked in every sense of the word.

“I am here whenever you need me, Evelyn.” Her grandmother amended, “You and Grady both.” She paused, rubbing her lips together before continuing. “I would like the opportunity to continue building a relationship with the two of you. Hopefully becoming a part of your lives.”

“We would really like that.” Evelyn added on a piece that couldn’t be overlooked. “You know I won’t be coming back to New York, right?”

Her grandmother gave a little laugh. “There’s nothing for you there, dear. Everything you want is right here.” Her eyes lifted to the vaulted ceiling. “Maybe not right here, but you know what I mean.”

Did her grandmother just sort of make a joke? It was even a little funny.

Evelyn laughed just in case. “To be fair, this place does meet my immediate need, which is to help my husband show everyone how much he loved his mother.” That wouldn’t be something she would ever have the opportunity to do, so making sure Grady could was important.

Her grandmother looked her over. “Does he know you’re the one paying for this?”

Evelyn tipped her head from side to side. “Not yet. I’ll probably wait to spring that on him.”

It was the first thing she’d done with the Amex when she pulled it out of isolation. Grady would never spend this kind of money, but she understood how important something like this could be. Probably better than many. “I really thought I wanted to leave everything about who I was behind, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe I’m still a little more hung up on appearances than I wanted to admit.”

Only it wasn’t her appearance she was worried about. She wanted everyone to see how wonderful Darla was. How much her son loved her. She wanted Moss Creek to talk about it for

years. She wanted everyone to remember what a wonderful final gift Grady gave his mother.

“Appearances are like money, my dear girl.” Her grandmother softly smiled. “They are something, but they aren’t everything.” She gave her a pat on the knee before standing up. “Now, I believe we need to meet your husband at the ranch so we can choose something lovely for his mother to wear.”

A wave of emotion hit Evelyn out of nowhere, tightening her throat and pinching her chest. “I’m really glad you’re here with me.”

She’d been so focused on Grady—on making sure he had what he needed—not once had she considered that she might need something too. Didn’t really believe she even had the right to need anything at a time like this.

That was something she might have to work on for a while—believing it was okay to occasionally be less than perfectly happy in spite of the life she was born into. Hopefully it would get easier, because guilt and gratefulness were surprisingly heavy to carry around all the time.

“I’m glad I have the opportunity to be here when you need me.” Her grandmother straightened, the woman she was so familiar with but was also so unknown, standing tall as she collected her purse and folder. “Let’s go help that handsome husband of yours.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## GRADY



“I’M NOT MAD.” Grady kept his expression firm. “I’m just disappointed.”

Lula Bell blinked at him with big brown eyes, looking unbothered by the lecture he was dishing out.

“I just expected more from you is all I’m saying.” He held out a treat, watching as his mother’s favorite mare chomped through it. “I’m not putting all the blame on you, though.”

After finishing up at the station, he’d come straight out to the ranch, parking in the back out of habit before making his way into the barn, looking for something to occupy his time until Evelyn got there. He already felt a little lost without her at his side. It sort of made what Gram-Gram had said to him that first morning make sense.

Maybe marriage *was* more like a business partnership than he’d initially wanted to admit. Having someone to share the load and tackle the problems coming his way had certainly made the past few days easier to bear. Of course there was plenty more than that to his partnership with Evelyn, but now he understood a little better what she was trying to tell him.

Because he couldn’t fucking wait to see his partner again.

Which was why he was having a talk with Lula Bell. He spent a good amount of his time on the back of a horse, out in the fields helping out, and he wanted Evelyn to be able to be with him sometimes. That meant either Lula Bell had to get her shit together, or he would have to find his wife a new

horse. And the thought of Evelyn riding the same mare his mother rode was a little too sentimental to give up on easily.

“I know you weren’t the only one to blame for what happened at the hospital, and I plan to have a talk with Larry too.” He leaned back as Lula Bell swung her head his direction, nostrils flaring as she sniffed around for any evidence of additional treats. “That one was a peace offering. You don’t get any more until you show me you’re willing to hold up your end of our bargain.”

Lula Bell nudged him, this time looking for attention instead of food. He stroked down her neck, feeling a little regretful he hadn’t taken her out more since his mom stopped riding. “I’m sorry too. I bet you’ve been bored. I can fix that for you, but you’ve gotta be sweet to my wife.”

He probably sounded like a broken record at this point, but calling Evelyn his wife felt too damn good to care. The circumstances of their marriage were certainly unusual, but he wouldn’t change a thing.

Except maybe putting childproof locks on the house to keep his mother from getting outside that day. It was something he would probably never truly forgive himself for, but not for a second had he ever expected her to lash out like that. He’d been shocked enough at the way she would get so upset with him, because up until the last little bit, his mom was as sweet as they came.

And that was how he was going to remember her. That was the woman he was going to tell Evelyn about when she asked. That was the woman he would tell his kids about, so they grew up knowing what a great woman their grandmother had been.

He gave Lula Bell another pat on the neck, reassuring her, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” before he checked in on Scout and the rest of the horses and headed out of the barn.

Surprised to see Larry’s truck haphazardly parked up by the house as he stepped out, he doubled back through the barn, thinking maybe they’d missed each other somehow. But as there was no sign of the ranch hand anywhere, Grady headed

up the way, looking around the yard and the outbuildings as he went.

Still no sign of Larry. But there were plenty of signs of something else: Deferred maintenance was everywhere—glaringly obvious now that he had a minute to breathe. After three years of not enough time to go around, the house was looking a little rough around the edges.

He went up the steps to the back porch, taking stock of all the things that needed to be done. The planks needed a good sanding and staining. The railing was in need of replacement, and the windows were filthy. It was one more thing to feel bad about, and yet another item to pile onto his still overflowing plate.

Because he wouldn't ask Evelyn to live in a house that wasn't everything she deserved it to be.

A little surprised to find the back door already unlocked, Grady entered the house more cautiously than normal. There was an odd, but familiar, feeling crawling over his skin as he stepped inside, and a strange, almost sour scent teasing through the air. He moved through the large kitchen, following the main hall that cut up the center of the house, pausing when the hair at the back of his neck stood up.

Something was wrong. He'd been in enough bad situations that he'd learned to trust that sixth sense. And while it might have been a little bit of a pain in the ass lately, he wasn't quite ready to give up on it yet.

Grady went still, listening for any sign of what was going on. A shuffling sound carried down the stairs, leading him to the foyer. That odd smell he caught a whiff of earlier was a little stronger here, telling him he was heading the right direction.

Or the wrong direction, depending on what was at the top of the stairs.

Habit had his hand moving to his waistband, intending to flip the snap on his holster free, but there was no holster or

pistol at his side. All he had at his disposal was experience and the instincts he'd been struggling to get in line.

The rustling continued on the second floor and was now accompanied by mumbling. Someone was in his office, and it didn't take a genius to figure out who it was.

The realization was a punch to his gut. A reminder that while his innate ability might have decided to come back online the past few minutes, it had let him down on more than a few recent occasions.

And he might be adding one more instance to that list.

Grady crept up the steps, years of coming home late after work making it easy to find a silent path that avoided any creaky spots in the wood. When he reached the office door, Larry was still tearing through the desk, oblivious to his presence.

Grady propped a shoulder against the door jam. "Can I help you find something?"

The ranch hand—the man who'd been his father's best friend for so many years—leveled his bleary-eyed gaze on Grady. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm going to have to ask you the same question." He crossed his arms, posing his body in a position that conveyed a casualness he didn't currently feel. Like so much else, shifting into work mode was so much easier when he wasn't close to the situation or the people inside it.

And maybe that's why he struggled so much when it came to reading Evelyn. With recognizing Gram-Gram's true intentions. He was too attached. Too invested to see clearly.

Just like now.

"Don't fucking look at me like that." Larry's words were slurred. "

"How am I looking at you, Larry?" Grady kept his words as calm and measured as possible.

It could be easy to let the situation get to him—and later it would—but right now he had to get through it. So he leaned



into his years' worth of practice dealing with liars and thieves.

“Like the fucking pig you are.” Spittle flew out of Larry’s mouth on the word *pig*, making it clear he didn’t look at piggies quite as fondly as Grady did. “I should have seen all this coming. You always thought you were too good to run the ranch.” He shoved one hand Grady’s direction. “You should have been fucking grateful. Happy your family had something to pass down to you. But instead, you walked away like it didn’t mean shit.”

It was an interesting assessment. It was also incorrect. “I didn’t walk away from the ranch, Larry.”

“Like hell you didn’t.” He stood up from the chair he didn’t belong in. “And now you and your stuck-up bitch of a wife are going to sell it off and go on your merry little way.” He rounded the desk. “Throwing away all your father’s hard work over a piece of ass.”

“Which is it, Larry?” Grady held his ground, fighting to keep his composure as Larry continued across the office. “Am I abandoning the ranch to be a cop or because of a woman? You’re talking out both sides of your mouth.” He took a steeling breath. “And both of them are wrong. I’m not selling the ranch. I’m actually moving here.”

Never once had Grady considered selling the ranch. Hell, he worked his ass off for three years trying to keep that from happening, knowing he was only an extended stay in a dementia unit away from losing it all. That was what his ability to keep the ranch came down to.

The care his mother needed was expensive. Between paying Charlene and shelling out for the home health care service that covered the hours she couldn’t, he was already plowing through his parents’ savings at an unsustainable pace. If he’d had to put her in a facility, it would’ve all been gone in under a year.

And then he would have had to sell the ranch. There wouldn’t have been another choice. So he’d worked every second of every hour of every day, trying to make sure that never happened.

“Bullshit.” Larry stumbled a little, reaching out to steady himself on the wall. “Your fucking wife can’t even ride a goddamned horse. There’s no way she’s gonna live on a ranch.”

“What my wife will and won’t be doing is none of your business.” He didn’t mind Larry slinging insults at him, but Evelyn had been his saving grace these past few days, and he’d be damned if he let anybody say a bad word about her.

Even a drunk, stupid old man.

“My business is getting what I’m due.” Larry shoved one finger into the center of his chest. “This ranch should come to me. I’m the one who worked it. I’m the one who appreciated it. I’m the one who deserves it.”

“I’m not sure about what you deserve, but I know what you need is some coffee and a little time to sober up.” Grady worked the conversation toward the only resolution he could come up with, hoping he could still diffuse the situation. That was always the number one priority in any confrontation, and usually he was good at it. “Why don’t we get you downstairs, get a pot of coffee going, and give you a little time to get your thoughts right.”

“My thoughts are the rightest they’ve ever been.” Larry kept coming his way, undaunted and undeterred. “What I deserve is what me and Charlene are owed since you stole this ranch right out from under us.”

Grady’s blood went cold. The way he said it sounded so familiar. It was etched into him over the years, cut deeper every time his mother flung the accusation his way.

And it was hard to deny where that suspicion might have come from. “I didn’t steal anything from you, Larry. This ranch was never going to be yours.” He wanted to be the kind of cop he worked so hard to become—level-headed and detached—but it was impossible. “You *don’t* deserve it. You *didn’t* earn it. And you sure as hell *didn’t* appreciate it.”

He pulled his phone out to call for backup since his ability to handle this himself was diminishing rapidly. But before he

could call the station, Larry lunged, batting the phone out of his hand and across the hall as he sneered, “Don’t tell me what I deserve.”

Grady took a step back, because if he didn’t he was gonna punch Larry in the face. And he didn’t have time to go through all the repercussions something like that would entail. He had a wife he wanted to be home for every night. A honeymoon he intended to take.

And he had a fucking ranch to run.

“I’m gonna pretend like you didn’t just swing at me, Larry.” Grady took another step back as the older man kept coming, backing him down the hall. “But you need to get the fuck out of *my* house.”

Larry laughed, the sound wheezy and wet. “This isn’t your house, boy. This is your *father’s* house.”

Grady nodded, agreeing with Larry for the first time. “You’re right. This is my father’s house.” He backed up again, inching his way toward the spot his cell phone landed. “Just like it was his father’s before him.” He closed the gap, managing to get the phone right beside his boot, bracing himself for Larry’s reaction when he grabbed it. “Just like it’ll be my son’s after me.”

He bent, reaching down to grab the cell, but Larry was surprisingly quick. He rushed forward, grabbing Grady by the shirt and slamming him into the wall. His eyes were bloodshot and red, that sour smell tainting the space leaking out of his pores and his mouth as he leaned into Grady. “Where’s the fuckin’ money? I know you hid it from me.”

Grady gripped Larry’s shirt, fisting it tight, intending to shove him off and let the chips fall where they may. But before he could push, something heavy and solid swung from one side, catching Larry in the temple, sending his head twisting hard and his body dropping.

Grady stared in disbelief at the woman in front of him. “Gram-Gram?”

She stared down at Larry's motionless body, looking just as shocked as he was. "I've never hit anyone before." Her eyes went to the object still clutched in her hands. "Oh no." Her focus came to his face. "I'm so sorry. I simply grabbed the heaviest thing I could find. I didn't realize—"

"Nothing to apologize for." Grady gently took the urn from Gram-Gram, tucking it under one arm. "I think my dad would love knowing he helped knock Larry out."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## EVELYN



“IT’S PROBABLY BETTER I’m not the one who hit him. I would have been swinging to kill.” Evelyn crossed both arms over her chest, scowling from her spot on the sofa in Grady’s parents’ house.

Technically, now it was their house, which made Larry’s invasion that much worse. Not only had he violated both Grady and his parents’ trust, but he’d also tainted her new home with this memory.

And she had every right to be pissed about that, regardless of who she was or where she came from.

The police officer in front of her chuckled, surprisingly amused by her threat of violence. “And I am very glad you didn’t, because the paperwork on that would have been a nightmare.” He scribbled across the pad in his hand. “Is there anything else you can think of? Anything else you might have forgotten?”

There was one thing she sure as heck *wouldn’t* be forgetting. “What about Charlene? Is she going to get in trouble for her part in this?”

Unfortunately, her grandmother only managed to stun Larry and the hit to the head must have rattled the sense right out of his brain. He hadn’t stopped running his mouth since he staggered back to his feet. He’d called her every name in the book and spewed all sorts of admissions he’d regret making.

Like the one where he said he and Charlene had been looking through the house for weeks trying to find the money

she helped Grady move to a safety deposit box.

Or the one where he said he should have hit Lula Bell harder because maybe then the horse would have run straight into traffic.

Or the one where he said he was only telling Darla the truth when he fed her the bullshit about Grady stealing the ranch.

That was when she grabbed the closest thing, thankfully not Grady's father, and tried to lob it at his head. For some reason, Grady stopped her, his frustratingly soothing voice working to calm her down as he wrestled away the cast iron statue of a horse and put it out of reach before parking her on the sofa.

The whole thing was unbelievable. How in the world could two people who pretended to care so much be so fucking awful to a man who was nothing but good to them?

The police officer gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'm not sure what's going to happen with Charlene just yet."

Knowing Charlene had been searching the house and helping Larry feed Grady's sick mother lies made her out of her mind with anger. It also made her consider taking Grady's dad out for a little road trip. He probably wouldn't mind the opportunity to get another lick in.

Grady rested his arm on her shoulders, pulling her close to press a kiss against her temple then continuing to hold tight. Like he wanted to hold onto her just in case she decided to try to assault someone with a horse again. "It's okay, Ev. Everything's going to be fine."

"Fine?" Was he out of his mind? Did Gram-Gram accidentally clip him with the urn too? She faced him, incredulous. "The man you thought of as an uncle broke in here and tried to find the cash he knew your parents kept on hand because he was a greedy asshole with an inflated sense of entitlement." It was about the nicest way she could put it, and part of her was proud she was being as tactful as she was.

“What’s done is done, Sweetheart. There’s no reason to keep being upset about it.” His words were calm and even.

Which only infuriated her more. “Why aren’t you mad?”

Grady gave her a grin. “Because you’re mad enough for both of us.” He palmed the back of her head, pulling her lips to his in a kiss that probably wasn’t fit for decent company and took a little of the edge off her rage.

But only a little.

She didn’t expect to ever have someone like him. And the thought of someone hurting him the way Larry and Charlene just did brought out a whole different side of her. One she was having a tough time reeling back in.

The officer cleared his throat, giving her a smile when she looked over. “Just a few more questions.”

Evelyn went through the same story she’d already told Cooper and the other cop who’d been tasked with this mess. Explaining how she and her grandmother pulled up at the house and noticed a strange pickup truck instead of Grady’s. She assumed it was a friend of the family who’d come over to offer their condolences, so they quietly went in the back door, not wanting to interrupt. Once they were in, she went to the bathroom because it had taken way too much coffee to get her through the past two days. When she came out, her grandmother was gone and all hell was breaking loose upstairs.

“So you didn’t actually see anything that happened?” The police officer summed up her statement.

“No. And that’s probably a good thing, because I would have lost my shit.” Grady’s parents were so good. *He* was so good. They had what she never would and for some reason she felt wildly protective of them.

Grady leaned into her ear. “To be fair, Ev, you’re kind of losing your shit a little bit.”

Evelyn faced him again. “That’s the expected reaction a person should have to a situation like this. To be angry. To be outraged, and frankly I’m a little concerned you’re not.”



Normally she loved his calm demeanor, but at this moment it was sort of getting to her. Making her want to protect him even more.

“I could choose to be upset, and there may come a time that I will,” Grady reached up to run his fingers through her hair, “but right now, I’m just thinking about what a great mama bear you’re gonna be.”

All the rage racing through her veins bled away almost instantly. “Really?”

Ever since Grady had mentioned kids, she’d struggled not to think about what that might be like. How it would feel to be a mother. How great Grady would be as a dad.

And how unprepared she was for motherhood.

Her only example left a lot to be desired. Part of her worried it was genetic. That no matter how hard she tried, she would be the exact same way her own mother was. Disconnected and self-centered. Unable to form any sort of emotional connection or provide the love and care a child needed.

But hearing that Grady believed differently culled a little of the fear.

“Sweetheart, you are the most caring, warm, kind and selfless person I know.” Grady continued sliding his fingers down her hair. “And you are protective as hell. Ready to stand up and fight for the people you love and willing to put in the work it takes to be better.” His thumb came to trace along her lower lip. “There is no one else in this world I would want as the mother of my children.”

The police officer cleared his throat again.

Evelyn took a deep breath, letting it back out as she forced herself back into her comfort zone. Making plans. She’d always had one, and making one now might help her feel better. Less ragey. “What do we do now?”

“You don’t have to do anything.” The cop closed his notepad and tapped it with his pen. “I’m the one who gets to do all the work now.”

Evelyn managed a small smile. "I'm sorry you have to deal with all this. And I'm sorry I was a little," she fished around for a decent sounding word, "reactive earlier."

Grady leaned closer, but his voice was loud enough the cop would hear. "Don't feel too bad for him. Peters loves his job." He grinned at the cop who must also be his friend. "And he's used to dealing with wild women."

Peters chuckled. "You leave my daughters out of this, Haynes."

Grady's grin turned devilish. "I'm not talking about your daughters."

Peters' smile disappeared immediately and one hand came up to scrub over his face. "I don't even want to talk about that one."

Evelyn lifted a brow. She had no clue what was going on or who they might be referring to. Luckily, word traveled fast in a small town and she would find out soon enough.

And that made her feel a little better about a lot of things. Word of what happened tonight would travel like wildfire. And even if Charlene didn't get into legal trouble for her part in the attempted theft and the mental manipulation of Grady's mother, she would still be faced with the judging eyes of Moss Creek.

And that might have to be enough.

There was still a good chance she might punch Charlene in the face if she ever saw her again, though.

It took a couple more hours to finish giving statements and clear the house out. Once the police were gone and Bernard had taken her grandmother back home, Grady pulled Evelyn close, resting his forehead against hers as they stood in the kitchen where she would be making coffee someday soon. "You're fucking amazing."

Evelyn smiled a little. "I don't know that I would go that far, but I do seem more prone to violence than I realized."

Grady smiled back at her. “That’s because for the first time in your life you have something you want to protect.”

The truth in his words was sobering.

For so many years, she’d been fighting for the chance to have this. Something real. Something she chose. Something she wanted. It only made sense she would fight just as hard to protect it. “I just don’t like knowing someone you cared about hurt you.”

“That’s because you love me.” His smile widened, like her angry sort of love pleased him. “I think Gram-Gram might love me a little too.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes up toward the ceiling as she laughed at all the new revelations concerning her grandmother. “I don’t know that there are many people she would assault a strange man with an urn for.” She looped her arms around Grady’s waist, moving in closer. “And she’s already making plans to bring her attorney in to ensure your assets are as safe and protected as they can be.”

Grady lifted a brow. “Did she not see you try to murder Larry with an iron horse?” He chuckled. “I’d say everything I own is about as safe as it gets. No one will want to cross my wife to try to get it.”

Obviously that wasn’t true.

She frowned up at him. “Larry did.”

Grady groaned, shaking his head. “Fucking Larry.” He raked one hand through his hair before scrubbing it down his face. “I always wondered why my dad didn’t pass more responsibilities off to him. Toward the end, he was tired a lot. I kept trying to get him to back off, but he wouldn’t do it.” He clicked his tongue. “I guess now I know why.”

Evelyn studied Grady for a second. “Why didn’t you pass more onto Larry when you took over then? You had a whole second job and a house to take care of. Do you think deep down you knew something was off about him?”

Grady’s eyes dropped. “I wish I could say I did, but it’s starting to seem like I might have a few blind spots when it

comes to the people close to me.” His gaze came to hers. “And I didn’t pass anything off because I wanted to keep doing things the way my dad did. It was easier to keep doing it than teach someone else. And it made me feel like part of him was still around.”

Evelyn smiled. She loved hearing Grady talk about his parents. About the way he loved them and the way they loved him back. It helped provide insight she wouldn’t have any other way. Insight she would need if she planned to be a mom.

And it was seeming like she did.

“Part of him is definitely still around.” Evelyn lifted her eyes to the second floor. “And speaking of, I don’t think we should take out the safe in the office. Maybe we can just install a second one somewhere else.”

She wanted to keep as many memories of Grady’s parents around as she could, especially since their future children would never know them in any real capacity. And because the chances of her parents ever meeting them were slim to none, which was probably better anyway.

Grady rested his hand against the side of her face, thumb stroking over her cheek. “I love the fuck out of you, wife.”

She looked over his face, taking in the warmth and honesty there. “That’s good. Because I was serious about goat yoga.”

# EPILOGUE

**GRADY**



## Grady

“FEEL THE STRETCH in your back as you sink deeper into the pose.” Evelyn’s soft, soothing voice carried him through the discomfort this particular position always brought. Apparently after years of riding horses and wrestling criminals, his back left a lot to be desired.

But he was still out there every morning he could be, in his spot in the back row, fighting his way through the beginner level class Evelyn held just for the girls and Gram-Gram.

Because the rest of the classes were starting to get pretty damn crowded.

It turned out Evelyn wasn’t only a great partner for him, she was also one hell of a businesswoman. And once she fully had her footing, there had been no stopping her.

After moving to the ranch, the first thing they’d done was build a new studio that attached to the back of the house through the now enclosed porch. But instead of closing the original location, she’d hired a second instructor to take it over. The downtown spot was more convenient for most people, so her customers were happy, and Evelyn was able to integrate the goat yoga she wanted, so his wife was happy too.

The sound of someone breaking wind was followed by a snicker.

“I heard that Gertrude.” Muriel’s voice had him lifting his head, hoping to get a glimpse of whatever unfolded next.

“It wasn’t me. It was Pepper.” Gertrude collapsed from her downward facing dog, waving one hand in front of her face as she shoved at the black coated pygmy goat beside her. “I don’t know what she ate, but it stinks.”

“Do I need to put the goats away?” Evelyn’s voice carried a hint of scolding. Keeping her friends in line was just as

difficult when you added in livestock as it was when you added tequila, so she kept them on a tight chain.

“You two need to shut up.” Betty was sprawled across her mat, no longer even attempting to follow the class. “Me and Parsley are having a good time.”

Parsley—named after a near-death experience where she got into Evelyn’s herb garden and ate almost everything inside it—stood on Betty’s back, looking around like she was the king of the mountain.

A very small, very feisty mountain.

“I told you if you couldn’t keep it together with the goats in here we would have to get rid of the goats.” Evelyn moved to Betty’s side, shooing Parsley away. “It’s important that you guys stay flexible and strong.” Evelyn stared at Betty until the older woman rolled her eyes and bent her body into the same folded over shape as the rest of the class. She smiled, nodding in approval. “Breathe in through your nose before releasing it through your mouth.”

His wife moved along the edge of their small group, passing where her grandmother and Bernard were holding perfect positions, before stopping beside him to run one hand down his back and over his ass.

“Don’t get fresh with me, wife. I’m not supposed to get distracted.”

Evelyn moved behind him, urging his heels closer to the floor. “No one’s trying to distract anyone.” She moved away, but not before running a teasing touch against the spot where his balls pressed into his knit pants, offering a wicked little laugh as she moved back to the front of the room to pick up where she’d left off.

The rest of the class went just like every other class with the girls. There were plenty of interruptions, lots of laughing, and frustrated sighs from Gram-Gram.

It was a great way to start the day.

Once they were done, the girls continued playing with the goats, giving them all the pets they could handle. It turned out



the animals were complete attention whores and loved being in the yoga classes almost as much as the people taking them. And there were plenty of people taking them.

Right after the new studio was finished, Evelyn connected with Maryann Pace, the owner of The Inn at Red Cedar Ranch, and helped plan a package deal that involved a stay at the ranch and a goat yoga excursion, complete with a private luncheon hosted by Maryann's daughter-in-law, and owner of The Wooden Spoon, Mae.

Inspired by Maryann, Evelyn then came up with a plan to build a venue on their ranch where people could hold weddings, parties, and graduations. They'd broken ground on the structure as soon as his house on the mountain sold. If all went according to plan, the place would be finished in the next couple of months.

Just in time for them to host the first event.

Evelyn gave him a smile as the girls rolled up their mats. "Did you enjoy your class, husband?"

"I always enjoy taking your classes, wife." He pulled her close, one hand gripping her hip as the other splayed across the swell of her belly. "What about this guy? Did he enjoy class?"

Evelyn blew out a breath so hard it ended with a trill. "He slept through it but only because he was up all night dancing around like he was at a rave."

"You leave that baby alone." Gertrude sidled up next to Evelyn, gazing lovingly at her belly. "He's just stir crazy. Imagine how you would feel being cooped up in a small place like that all the time."

Grady couldn't help but chuckle. Not just because of Gertrude's immediate defense of his son, but because at one point he'd been worried their little boy was getting the short end of the stick.

His mom and dad would've been great grandparents, but that simply wasn't in the cards. Evelyn's mom and dad were even less interested in this little boy than they'd been in their

own daughter. So that left only Gram-Gram to spoil and adore him the way only a grandparent could.

At least that's what he thought initially. He'd been wrong as hell.

"Is he kicking again?" Muriel shuffled their way, eyes bright with hope. "I want to feel."

Evelyn wrinkled her nose. "No kicking. He got it all out of his system last night."

Muriel's face dropped in sympathy. "Poor baby's probably exhausted."

Evelyn sighed again. "I am."

Muriel's eyes lifted from where they were fixed on her belly, widening the tiniest bit.

"Ahh." Evelyn shook her head with a little laugh. "You weren't talking about me."

"All right ladies." Gram-Gram strode over, waving her hands to disperse the group. "My granddaughter is growing a little human and she looks exhausted." She looped one arm through Evelyn's, stealing her away. "She needs to go rest before the group from The Inn comes for their afternoon class." Gram-Gram led Evelyn from the building, taking her through the enclosed porch connecting it to their new home.

In the year they'd been in the house, they'd done a lot to update the space and make it into something that was both like the house in his memories and also one where they could raise their children in the future. Reminders of his parents were everywhere, from the safe in the office, to his mother's potted plants that Evelyn faithfully tended, to the cast iron horse that had been on the living room shelf for as long as he could remember.

But plenty was different too. The hardwood had been refinished, walls had been painted, furniture had been replaced. Wood blinds now covered all the windows and the kitchen had new cabinets and marble countertops.

It was the perfect combination of the past, present, and future.

Grady trailed behind as Gram-Gram led Evelyn straight into the living room. “Go sit down, dear. I’ll make us some coffee.” She sat Evelyn on the couch before going to the kitchen, using the maker like an expert. She set the coffee to run and turned to face where he stood at the fridge. “She’s working herself too hard.”

Gram-Gram had come a long way to becoming a warmer version of herself, but she was still no-nonsense and straight to the point. It was part of her charm.

“Are you going to tell her that?” Grady shook his head. “Because I think that’s gonna go over like a lead balloon.” Since they’d gotten married, he’d discovered his wife didn’t mind being bossed around in certain situations, but Evelyn had her limits.

He could put her to bed when she was tired. He could calm her down when she was wound up. He could even get her back on track when she was fired up over someone she loved being hurt.

But you couldn’t tell Evelyn shit when it came to her business. She was as protective of that thing as she was of him, and there was no way she was going to back off those classes.

“I’m not saying she needs to stop teaching.” Gram-Gram’s eyes widened. “Lord knows I would never try to tell her how to handle her business.” She rested her palms on the top of the island between them. “But I think there are areas where we could arrange for someone to come in and be helpful.” She waved one hand around the kitchen. “You could hire a housekeeper, for instance.”

“She’ll never go for that, Gram-Gram.” Grady cracked open the bottle of water he’d pulled from the refrigerator. “She’s still not over Larry breaking in. She doesn’t trust anybody coming into her house. That’s why there’s two dead-bolted doors between the studio and the kitchen.”

“I understand she wouldn’t want just anyone coming in, but what if we were able to find someone we could absolutely trust?” Gram-Gram tapped her fingers against the marble counter, eyes shifting to one side. “Bernard and I have been discussing our options recently, and we are considering making a more permanent move to the area.”

Grady tried to follow her train of thought. “I don’t think Bernard can handle cleaning this house.” The guy was in good shape, but he was still almost seventy.

Gram-Gram’s head tipped back, her brows pinching together. “I’m not speaking of Bernard.” She lifted her chin. “He is quite retired and has no interest in anything like that.” Her eyes moved to his. “But he has a granddaughter who needs a change. And I thought it might be beneficial for you and Evelyn to have someone around to cook and clean and eventually help care for the baby.”

Grady’s brows lifted. “You mean like a nanny?” He wasn’t a fan of someone else raising his child. “I don’t—”

Gram-Gram lifted her hand. “Hear me out.” She stood tall, ready to plead her case. “You are a very busy man, Grady. Regardless of how wonderful you may be, there are still only so many hours in the day and many of those hours Evelyn will be here by herself.” She motioned toward the barn. “It’s not as if you can take the baby with you when you go out to work the cattle, and you certainly can’t take him with you when you go for your shifts at the department.”

Grady scrubbed one hand down the back of his neck, hating that Gram-Gram had a point. He’d hired a new head ranch hand and brought in a manager, but he still liked having his hand on the pulse. “I don’t know. She might go for it, she might not.”

Gram-Gram’s eyes held his. “I know Evelyn can be very protective of the people she cares about, which is why I was hoping you would help me make her see how useful it could be to have someone to assist her.”

Grady tipped his head to one side. “She might be willing to consider someone who worked as a personal assistant, but you

will never get Evelyn to agree to having a nanny.”

Gram-Gram tucked her chin. “Fair enough. Even if she simply has someone to vacuum the carpets and load the dishwasher, that will be helpful.”

“You know I don’t appreciate other people making plans for my life.” Evelyn walked into the kitchen, one eyebrow lifted in a way that some people would think meant she was upset.

Not him.

Because he’d learned a lot about his wife over the past year and a half. And while it hadn’t been quite as effortless as it was with strangers, he’d finally started to be able to read her.

“I wasn’t planning anything. I was simply asking Grady if he thought it would be useful for you to have a personal assistant.” Gram-Gram jumped right into the personal assistant angle. “I just don’t want you to be overwhelmed and overworked. I want you to be able to focus on your baby and your business.”

Evelyn’s eyes came his way before moving back to her grandmother. “Do you have someone in mind for this position?”

Gram-Gram’s eyes widened, like she was surprised Evelyn was even considering it. “I do. Bernard’s granddaughter. She’s a lovely girl.”

Evelyn took a deep breath, dragging the moment out. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to talk to her.”

Gram-Gram’s face brightened and she clapped her hands in front of her. “Excellent. I will arrange for a meeting as soon as possible.” She gave Grady a smile before turning to the hall. “If you excuse me. I need to make a trip to the bathroom.”

When Gram-Gram disappeared down the hall, Evelyn turned to face him, her mouth pulling into a smirk.

Grady snagged her around the waist, pulling her as close as her growing belly would allow. “How much did you hear?”

Evelyn snorted. “The whole damn thing. I knew she was up to something. She kept pointing out all the tasks she had people for in New York and telling me how great it was to not have to vacuum her own carpets.”

Grady tipped his head. “I mean, I don’t think she’s wrong.”

Evelyn’s shoulders dropped. “I just worry.”

Grady leaned in to press a kiss against her forehead. “I know you do, but I can always move the iron horse down where you can reach him.”

Evelyn laughed, leaning into his touch, the sound quickly turning to a long, loud yawn. “I think I need a nap.”

Grady smoothed over her hair. “I think our son might need to get his shit together because I plan on trying to convince you to do this at least four more times.”

Evelyn’s head dropped back, eyes meeting his as a look of horror widened her eyes. “I’m not having five babies, Grady.”

“Okay.” He nodded his head, like he was willing to negotiate. “Maybe just three then.”

Evelyn’s eyes narrowed, proving he wasn’t the only one that had learned a few things about their spouse. “I feel like this is a trick. Ask for five so three will sound reasonable.”

Grady grinned. “Three *is* pretty reasonable. Brody Pace has—”

His argument was cut off by a screech from the half-bath down the hall.

Gram-Gram came hustling down the hall, yoga pants askew, looking outraged and embarrassed at the same time. She pointed back the way she’d come. “Why is there plastic wrap on the toilet?”

“Oh shit.” Evelyn’s hand went to her mouth as her eyes jumped his way. “I forgot I did that yesterday.” She poked at his chest. “You didn’t go in there like you always do when you came in from the barn.”

“So this is my fault?” Grady couldn’t stop laughing and he couldn’t love the woman in front of him any more.

Today.

Tomorrow was probably another story.



I hope you enjoyed Grady and Evelyn’s story. It was a tough one to write, for many reasons, but I’m so happy with how it turned out. Like Grady, I had to watch someone close to me struggle through the difficulties of Vascular Dementia. It was a terrible and isolating experience and I hope this story helps anyone currently dealing with a similar situation to feel less alone.

If you aren’t quite ready to leave the world of Moss Creek, then I have good news for you-

Janie and Devin (aka. Ofc. Peters) are up next.

Their story will also tackle some serious subjects, but, like Cowboy of Convenience, it will do it with humor and heart.

[Preorder your copy of Cowboy and the Convict here!](#)



# About the Author



Janice Whiteaker writes romance as herself, her romantic suspense pen name Jemma Westbrook, and her brand new romcom pen name Josie Watts.

Her stories are low-angst and filled with girl power.

Janice lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband, three savage children, and a few too many chickens.

[Join her readers group to keep up with the latest cover reveals, and read teasers you won't find anywhere else.](#)





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Out Bad



**Sinners and Saints**

[Take Me to Church](#)

[Tell Me No Lies](#)



**Secrets of Mountain Men**

[Mountain Calling](#)

[Mountain Yearning](#)

[Mountain Claiming](#)

[Mountain Reckoning](#)

[Mountain Holiday](#)

[Mountain Homecoming](#)



**BIG Northwest**

[Danny](#)

[Alex](#)

[Charlie](#)



**Never Waste a Second Chance**

[Run](#)

[Regret](#)

[Redeem](#)