

BLAZE VALLEY
RANCH

Curves for the
OLDER
COWBOY

CLARA KING

Curves for the Older Cowboy

Crave County: Blaze Valley Ranch

Clara King

Notices

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About

He's a gruff cowboy who thinks he's better off alone...

Until he finds a curvy young beauty hiding in his barn.

As the oldest Ryder sibling, I'm used to relying on myself. Being free and single is the way I like things, and after watching two of my brothers fall head over heels for their wives, I'm even more certain that marriage isn't for me. I never want to rely on somebody that much. But everything changes when I find a woman hiding in my barn. She's beautiful, curvy, and way too young for me. But she makes my heart pound, and suddenly I'm questioning all my beliefs about love and relationships. After a lifetime alone, is this perfect girl about to change everything?

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Willow

I sit in the back of the car, fiddling nervously with a loose thread hanging from my dress. The driver hasn't said a word since he picked me up from my apartment, and the silence is suffocating me as we edge closer to Fontaine House, the looming mountains of Crave County rising up on either side of us.

Almost there.

My stomach churns as the driver turns left at a fork in the road, following the twisting path up into the mountains. This is my first time visiting Fontaine House. It's the sprawling family home of my sister's new fiancé, Edmund Fontaine, and it's where they're hosting Avery's bridal shower this weekend. I'm trying to stay positive. Avery is my big sister and my best friend in the world, and I know I should be excited for her. She's a romantic at heart and getting married is something she's been dreaming about ever since we were kids. But I've met her fiancé a couple of times now, and there's one word that echoes inside my head every time I see him...

Jerk.

Edmund Fontaine might look like a perfect gentleman, but I've seen his mask slip once or twice already. We were introduced a few months ago when he and Avery invited me to dinner at the kind of restaurant where three tiny main courses cost as much as my second-hand car. Edmund could barely hide his sneer when I told him about my job making candles and jewelry to sell on my Etsy shop, and for the rest of the night, I could see the thinly veiled judgment in his gaze every time he looked at me. Like I was something unpleasant on the sole of his expensive leather shoes. I can already tell that he's nothing like my sweet, open-hearted sister, and I just hope she's not making a mistake.

The driver turns off the path and heads through a pair of wrought-iron gates which automatically open for him. I could have driven here myself, but Edmund insisted on sending his personal chauffeur to pick me up so that I didn't have to make the journey in my "tiny old second-hand car". Even when he's being generous, he manages to sound rude and judgmental. There's nothing wrong with my trusty little Toyota, but Edmund has a whole collection of Lamborghinis and Bugattis; to him, anything worth less than \$100,000 is just a heap of junk metal, not a real car.

"We're here," the driver says woodenly as we head up the gravel driveway toward Fontaine House.

My mouth falls open at the sight of the mansion. It looks like something you'd find in Paris, a gorgeous chateau made of creamy stone with ornate moldings, decorative balconies, and turrets topped with a roof of charcoal-gray slate.

Damn. I knew the Fontaines were rich, but I had no idea they were this rich.

The driveway is packed with expensive-looking cars and people are arriving from every direction as the driver slows down to let me out. My heart is fluttering as I look around at all the beautiful people crossing the lawns toward the chateau. I'm wearing my prettiest dress, pale pink and flowy, but it feels almost shabby now that I'm here in this regal place.

"Thanks for the ride," I say, my voice quivering a little as I tip the driver. He doesn't say a word as I grab my clutch bag and my gift for Avery before getting out of the car.

I wonder if Edmund told him to be as rude as possible to me.

I've barely closed the car door before the driver speeds away, leaving me with no choice but to head for Fontaine House. I follow the crowd toward the entrance doors, silently wondering who the heck all these people are. I don't recognize a single face in this crowd—they must be Edmund's guests, not Avery's.

*I thought this was supposed to be my sister's bridal shower?
Not a party for Edmund.*

The chateau's entrance hall is dazzling in a sleek, cold sort of way. There are chandeliers and shiny marble floors and the kind of sofas that are for delicately perching on rather than sprawling out to watch Netflix. It's beautiful, kind of like a museum or a fancy hotel lobby, but nothing like a home. I'm half expecting to see signs on the walls saying "Don't touch the exhibits".

I spot an obscenely large pile of presents in the corner of the hall, and I wade through the throngs of people to reach it. Gently, I place my gift at the bottom of the heap just as a familiar voice calls out, "Willow!" I turn to see my sister hurrying toward me in a pretty white evening dress, her face glowing with relief. "Thank God you're here!"

She throws her arms around me, and I smile against her shoulder, my nerves quietening as I breathe in her familiar peachy-sweet scent. "Hi, Avery."

My sister pulls back to look at me, her eyes full of warmth. "You look gorgeous."

"So do you. I missed you."

She grins at me and pulls me into another hug. "I'm so happy you're here." Her voice lowers to a murmur. "This place is so intimidating. I don't know how I'm ever going to get used to living in a literal castle."

"Well, you always said you wanted to be a princess when you grew up."

She chuckles, taking my hand and guiding me away from the guests into an empty, old-fashioned drawing room. "Let me show you the view."

She leads me to an enormous window overlooking the mountains and meadows below. Frozen Peak rises to the east, with Snowfall Ridge to the west, forming a grassy valley between the base of each mountain.

"It's gorgeous," I say, feasting my eyes on the vista. Fiery wildflowers sprout up from across the valley—red, orange,

and yellow—and beautiful, old farm buildings stretch on for miles. “What is that place?”

Avery follows my gaze. “That’s Blaze Valley. It’s called that because of all the flowers—kind of makes the whole valley look like it’s on fire, don’t you think? All those farm buildings are part of Blaze Valley Ranch. It’s run by a family of local cowboys.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Cowboys?”

“Yep. The Ryder brothers. I haven’t met them yet. They hosted a charity rodeo up at the ranch a while back, but Edmund didn’t want us to go. He didn’t want to get his clothes dirty.” She laughs, but it sounds hollow and forced, and I turn to her with a frown.

“Avery, look at me.” She does as she’s told, a cheerful smile on her face that doesn’t reach her eyes. I take a deep breath and ask, “Are you happy with Edmund? Truly happy?”

Her mask slips for a moment, and I see a hint of sadness in her eyes before she quickly rearranges her expression. “I’m happy, Willow. Don’t worry about me, okay? I’m a lucky woman. I mean, seriously, just look at this place.”

She gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, but I can’t let it go. “Avery, I really don’t think—”

“Please,” she cuts in quickly, her face crumpling. “Please, Willow, I don’t want to talk about this right now. Not at my bridal shower.”

I sigh, my stomach churning with concern for my sister as I say, “It’s better to talk about it at your bridal shower than on your wedding day.”

“Everything’s fine, Willow. Honestly.”

But now that I’ve started talking, my worries are tumbling out of me like an avalanche. I can’t stop them. “He’s all wrong for you, Avery. All of this is wrong. This is meant to be your bridal shower! It’s meant to be all about you. Only your closest friends are supposed to be here, but instead, there are hundreds of people, hundreds of Edmund’s guests I assume, all

because he can't stand you having anybody in your life other than him—”

“That’s enough.” Avery’s voice is forceful. My sister rarely raises her voice at me, but when she does, it’s enough to shut me up real fast. “I need your support today, Willow. You’re my sister and I love you, but Edmund is *my* choice. I’m not asking you to agree or even to like him. I’m just asking you to respect my decision. Okay?”

I press my lips together and look at my feet, equal parts ashamed and frustrated. “I’m sorry. You’re right, it’s your decision, and this is meant to be your special day. It’s not the time to talk about it.”

“It’s okay, Willow.” Avery’s pretty face softens as she looks at me, taking my hands in her own. “I know you’re only trying to look out for me, and I appreciate it.” I nod and she smiles at me sadly. “Come on, we better get back to the party.”

I let her lead me out of the drawing room and back into the entrance hall, our arms linked as we walk.

“Are Mom and Dad coming?” I ask tentatively.

Avery sighs. “I invited them, but no dice. These days they only talk to me when they want to ask for money.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m so used to our parents being crappy and neglectful that I barely even have the energy to be mad about it anymore.

“We’re better off without them here anyway,” I say, giving my sister’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

“You said it.”

People are milling about all over the place, but nobody seems to notice as Avery and I walk past. Most of them probably don’t even know what Avery looks like, seeing as they’re all Edmund’s guests. The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, and Avery catches my eye, seeming to read my thoughts. She’s always been good at that.

“Don’t look so miserable,” she says teasingly. “At least I’ll get tons of presents.”

I offer her a weak smile which promptly vanishes when I see Edmund striding toward us in his immaculate black suit. He could be handsome if his eyes weren't so cold and his default expression wasn't a disgusted sneer, like everything he sees is beneath him.

Especially me.

A man and woman follow either side of Edmund—presumably his parents. Those ice-cold eyes seem to run in the family, but at least his parents aren't sneering like their son.

“There you are, darling,” Edmund says as we approach, automatically reaching to pull Avery toward him, forcing us to unlink our arms. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“I was just showing Willow the view from the drawing-room,” Avery says with a strained smile. “Willow, these are Edmund’s parents, Hugo and Claudia.”

The Fontaines shake my hand, murmuring polite greetings before they’re distracted by an arriving relative, leaving me alone with Avery and Edmund.

“So...” I begin, trying to think up some casual small talk, but Edmund is already steering Avery away.

“Sorry, Willow,” he says, not sounding remotely sorry. “We have a lot of people to see and I think you’ve hogged your sister for long enough.”

“*Hogged* her?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “We were talking for like five minutes.”

But Edmund isn't listening, he's too busy pulling my sister into the next room. Avery shoots an apologetic look in my direction as they disappear through the open double doors toward the rest of the guests. Once there's a safe distance between Edmund and me, I follow them reluctantly into a wide-open ballroom with a fresco ceiling painted to look like a heavenly blue sky. The champagne is flowing and waiters in bowties flit through the crowd like butterflies holding trays of hors d'oeuvres. Toward the back of the ballroom, I spy a long cloth-covered table laden with snacks, and I head straight for it.

If I have to be near Edmund Fontaine, I want plenty of sugar to get me through it.

I'm in the middle of grabbing as many cookies as I can hold and slipping them discretely into my pockets and my clutch bag when a sharp poke between my shoulder blades makes me whip around.

Edmund is scowling at me, and his frown deepens when he sees all the cookies I'm clasping in my hands.

"What were you and Avery talking about earlier?" he asks, keeping his voice low.

"None of your business." I frown at him, taking a bite of a cookie and trying to look nonchalant, but being this close to Edmund makes me uneasy. He seems pissed, and I've never seen him look so openly confrontational before.

"Of course it's my business," he snarls under his breath. He grabs my arm forcefully, his hand tightening around my skin like a vise. "I'm her fiancé, and ever since you arrived and opened your big mouth, she's been quiet and distant with me. What the fuck did you say to her?"

His face is ugly and twisted, and his grip is tight enough to hurt. I yank my arm away from him, anger welling up in my chest. "Get your hands off me!"

"Keep your fucking voice down."

I'm stunned, my heart pounding furiously as Edmund glares at me with unmasked hatred. He's always been an asshole in a cold, passive-aggressive kind of way, but I've never seen this side of him. It makes me even more certain that Avery is making a huge mistake. She can't marry this monster. No damn way.

"Don't speak to me like that," I tell him forcefully once I've recovered a little from my shock. "And don't you ever put your hands on me again."

Edmund rolls his eyes, sneering with contempt. "I barely touched you. Just stay away from my fiancée. I know you're jealous that your sister is getting all this while you're stuck selling soap and candles from your crappy little apartment, but

you don't get to ruin our lives just because your own is so pathetic."

His voice is a barely audible hiss. Nobody else in the ballroom has noticed a thing, and I feel totally alone as Edmund fixes me with those mean eyes. But I won't let him see how much he's getting to me. I won't let him win.

"Is this how you talk to my sister?" I ask, my voice getting louder. "Is this how you keep her in line?"

Edmund looks alarmed at my rising volume. He's obviously determined not to make a scene—determined not to let any of his rich friends see what's happening. He takes a step back from me like I'm some kind of rabid animal and says, "You better learn how to keep your mouth shut, Willow. I won't let anybody ruin my relationship with Avery. Especially not you."

With one last contemptuous glare at me, he turns on his heel and heads back toward my sister who is looking at us from across the room with a frown of concern.

I'm shaken. I feel like somebody just dumped a bucket of ice water over my head, leaving me shivery and on edge. With a steadying breath, I shove the handful of cookies I'm holding into my clutch bag and head away from the ballroom, back toward the empty drawing room with the view of Blaze Valley Ranch. I set my bag down on a side table before heading for a rickety chair in front of the window with a view of the valley below. I stare out at the green pastures, thinking hard.

I was already wary of my future brother-in-law, but after our heated exchange, I'm determined to stop Avery from marrying him. My sister is the sweetest person I know, and she deserves so much more than a man like Edmund Fontaine. He might be richer than Croesus, but no amount of money is worth having to spend a lifetime with a man like that. I just wish I could make Avery see sense. The minutes tick by, but I'm totally absorbed in my thoughts, still contemplating what to do when a voice calls out loudly from somewhere nearby.

"Attention please, everyone!"

I quickly stand up and grab my clutch bag off the table, heading back to the ballroom where a crowd of people circle Edmund's parents. Everybody watches them expectantly, no doubt waiting for a speech of some kind. But the Fontaines look grave and serious.

I thought this was supposed to be a bridal shower, not a funeral.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," Claudia Fontaine says, looking flushed. "Especially as today is my son's big day."

I clench my teeth.

Her son's big day? This is supposed to be my sister's bridal shower!

"It's been brought to my attention," she continues, "that the Fontaine Pendant has been taken from my room. It was there an hour ago and now it's gone."

A frantic mutter echoes around the room, and I catch Avery's eye. She looks sad and exhausted, and I desperately want to bring her home with me. I want us to leave now and never look back.

"Now, please understand," Edmund's father, Hugo, cuts in, "that we are not accusing anybody. Every person here tonight is a trusted and beloved friend of the family. But we must ask if anybody saw anything that might be relevant. The necklace has been passed down the Fontaine family for generations. It holds great sentimental value, but it's also worth millions of dollars."

"It was worn by Marie Antoinette on her twenty-first birthday," Claudia adds, seemingly unable to help herself.

There's an awkward silence while everybody eyes each other suspiciously. Suddenly, Edmund steps forward from the crowd. His eyes are glinting triumphantly, and unease swells in my gut at the barely suppressed grin on his face.

"I know exactly who took the pendant," he says sharply. My heart stutters as he points his finger right at me. "Willow. I saw her coming down the stairs a little while ago hiding something in her bag."

There's a sharp intake of breath from all around as everybody turns to look at me.

"Edmund!" Avery snaps. She looks horrified as she turns to her fiancé. "How dare you? Of course it wasn't Willow!"

"Sorry, Avery," he says, "but I know what I saw. Your sister took the necklace."

I ball my fists, my skin burning as hundreds of eyes land on me. "That's not true! I haven't even been upstairs. Not once."

Edmund shakes his head like it pains him to have to do this, and in that moment, I hate him more than I've ever hated anything.

"I know what I saw, Willow," he says. "I saw you coming down the stairs hiding something in your bag. You disappeared from the ballroom for a long time. Don't think I didn't notice."

"I didn't touch any necklace," I snap, an edge of panic in my voice. "I went to the drawing room for some peace and quiet. That's it!"

Edmund sighs. "I wish I could believe that, Willow. But I know what I saw."

His parents are glowering at me, and before I know it, I'm surrounded by Fontaines.

"I need to check your bag, young lady," Hugo says gravely.

"Fine!" I snap, thrusting it toward him. "I have nothing to hide."

Everyone waits with bated breath as Hugo opens my bag. A few cookies fall to the floor as Hugo roots through it, before finally pulling out...

A diamond necklace.

My stomach sinks to the floor as he holds it up, looking at me with contempt. "How dare you? We invite you into our home—"

"Willow didn't take it!" Avery cries, cutting him off as she looks helplessly toward me. "She wouldn't do that. I know my sister."

The Fontaines ignore her. People are pressing in from all sides, their accusing eyes fixed on me. I watch as Claudia makes a show of pulling out her cell phone.

“This is a very serious crime,” she says sharply. “I think it’s a matter for the police.”

My breath is coming fast and shallow as I watch her punch in the numbers 9 1 1. I’m like a cornered animal, my stomach churning with anxiety.

What the heck is happening?

“Please, stop this,” Avery begs. “She didn’t do it!”

Edmund wraps a protective arm around her waist, not letting her shake it off no matter how hard she tries. I catch his eye, and his gloating expression is too much to bear.

“You did this!” I cry, fighting back tears. “You put it in my bag!”

Edmund feigns shock. “Willow, don’t you think you should drop the act and take some responsibility?”

I’m too upset to speak.

He did this. He planted the necklace there. I know he did.

Claudia is talking to the operator, asking for the police. From all around, people are staring at me with undisguised disgust, muttering to themselves. I catch a few words.

Thief. Bitch.

I can’t take it anymore. Every instinct is telling me to get out of here. I push past the Fontaines and start to run, barging through the crowd until I’m back in the entrance hall. People cry out after me, and I can hear the pounding of footsteps on my tail—no doubt Edmund’s. But I don’t stop. I fly through the double doors and into the warm summer evening, my heart hammering as I go. Adrenaline keeps my legs pumping, and I cut through the immaculate French gardens, squeezing through a crumbling gap in the wall that surrounds Fontaine House and racing toward the only thing I can see for miles.

Blaze Valley Ranch.

Grayson

It's a typically busy night at Silver Saddle Saloon, and I've dragged all four of my brothers here with me for a celebratory drink: Holt, Luke, Hunter, and Jackson. We just found out this morning that my brother Luke is going to be a dad. His wife, Delilah, is six weeks pregnant, and he hasn't stopped smiling since he told us about it. The whole family was invited to celebrate, but Delilah and Holt's wife, Penelope, chose to stay home for one of their girls' nights, so it's just me and my brothers shooting the shit.

"Have you thought of any names yet?" Hunter asks in between sips of whiskey.

Luke shakes his head. "I'll probably let Delilah decide. She's the one having the baby."

Just saying his wife's name out loud makes my brother's eyes glaze over with joy. He's been crazy about Delilah for a long time, and I know marrying her was a dream come true for him. It's been crazy to watch my daredevil little brother give up his bull-riding career and become a devoted family man, but he looks happier than ever. And so does my other brother, Holt. He never used to be much of a talker, but now he loves to gush about his wife Penelope, and their little daughter, Ellie.

I'm happy as hell for my brothers. Their wives are great, and being an uncle to little Ellie is awesome, but seeing them fall so hard for their women makes me even more sure that family life isn't for me. I never want to rely on somebody that much. It's a huge risk, and not one I'm willing to take. I'm a loner and have been for all of my forty-three years on this planet; that's the way I like things, and it's the safest way to be.

"Being a dad is the most amazing thing," Holt says, grinning at Luke. "It's exhausting, but man, it's so worth it."

Luke nods, his grin even wider than Holt's, and they clink their glasses together while I catch Jackson's eye with a smirk. Like me, my brothers Jackson and Hunter have never fallen in love. All this happy family stuff is pretty alien to us, and even if it's great to see Luke and Holt so happy, we still like to tease them. Sometimes we'll catch them staring off into the distance with a longing smile on their dumbass faces, obviously thinking about their wives like they can't wait to get home to them. Holt is doing it right now, his eyes focused on nothing, that yearning look on his face. I take my chance.

"Holt's a fucking asshole," I say matter-of-factly. "Don't you think?"

Jackson catches on immediately. "Yeah. He smells like one too."

Hunter nods solemnly, joining in. "I can smell him from here. Does this guy ever wash?"

"Nope. He's a real dumbass," I add. "I've seen cow turds with higher IQs than this guy."

"Absolutely," Jackson says. "Stupidest guy I know."

"Total shit-for-brains."

Holt is still staring into the distance, oblivious, and it's Luke who finally takes pity on him, giving his shoulder a shake. "Earth to Holt Ryder."

Holt snaps out of it, frowning at our grinning faces. "What are you assholes looking at?"

"We were just talking about how great you smell," Hunter says.

"And how you're definitely smarter than a cow turd," I add.

Holt rolls his eyes, his lips twitching. "Fuck you."

I laugh, shaking my head and toasting my brother before taking a sip of my rum and coke. We talk and drink for a while longer before Luke starts getting restless.

"Well guys, I better get home to Delilah," he says, standing up to leave.

We congratulate him one more time, giving him a few friendly slaps on the back before he heads out of the saloon closely followed by Holt, who's ready to get back to his own wife.

"I'm getting out of here too," I say, downing the rest of my rum and coke and grabbing my hat. "It's been a long day. I'll see you guys later."

Jackson and Hunter wave me off, staying behind to talk while I head out of the saloon and toward my pickup truck, relieved that I only had one glass and can drive myself back.

The sky is darkening to a cloudy shade of indigo as I head back to Blaze Valley Ranch with George Strait crooning through my speakers. I pass Luke's farmhouse, catching a glimpse of him and Delilah kissing in the kitchen as I follow the winding dirt track toward my own home.

Jesus. Those two really can't keep their hands off each other.

I park my truck and get out, wishing I could head straight to bed. But I need to check a few things before I can turn in for the night. Blaze Valley Ranch is divided five ways, with each of the Ryder brothers taking charge of a section of land. We pool our resources and share our profits, but even watching over just a fifth of this land is a lot of work. The ranch stretches for miles in the valley between Frozen Peak and Snowfall Ridge, and overseeing the whole operation means waking up in the early hours and working hard until dinner. Then I have to check everything over again before bed. It's grueling manual labor, but I wouldn't have it any other way—the Ryders are cowboys through and through, just like our dad before us, and I love taking care of our cattle on these gorgeous green pastures.

I wouldn't say no to a little more sleep, though.

With a tired sigh, I head for the outbuildings, making sure everything is secure and ready for the morning. After the stables, the barn is the last thing to check, and I poke my head inside, scanning the timber-frame interior which is full of hay bales ready for winter. Everything is quiet. Satisfied, I turn

back toward the farmhouse when a noise makes me stop in my tracks.

Achoo.

I freeze, frowning as I strain my ears.

A-a-achoo.

Shit.

There's someone in my barn.

I whip around and throw open the barn doors again, reaching for a heavy-duty flashlight hanging from the wall. The beam illuminates the dim barn, and I stride through the rows of hay bales, peering behind each one.

“Who's there?” I snap, listening out for another sneeze. But nothing happens.

I reach the back of the barn, and I'm starting to think I must have imagined the noise as I step out behind the final row of hay bales, shining my flashlight toward a darkened corner.

I almost drop it.

In the corner of my barn, concealed behind a bale of hay, a young woman is sitting on the floor with her legs crossed, squinting against the beam of my flashlight. She's wearing a flowy pink evening dress and shielding her eyes with one hand while the other holds a handful of...are those cookies?

Jesus, how much fucking rum did I drink?

“Please don't hurt me,” the stranger says, sounding panicked.

My stomach drops at the fear in her voice, and now that I'm convinced she's real, I take a tentative step forward. “It's okay. I'm not gonna hurt you.”

“Can you shine that light somewhere else?”

“Sorry.” I do as she asks, pointing the flashlight toward the opposite wall. The girl heaves a sigh of relief and removes her hand from her eyes, revealing her face.

Holy fuck.

She's the prettiest little thing I've ever seen. Those liquid brown eyes stare up at me nervously, and her full, pouty lips make me stifle a groan as I take them in. There's a smudge of chocolate beneath her bottom lip, probably from the cookies, and it makes her look even more adorable.

What the fuck is happening? Why is this angel sitting in my barn eating cookies in a beautiful dress at eleven o'clock in the evening?

"I'm sorry," she says quietly, setting the cookies down on her lap. "I know I shouldn't be here. I just needed to get away from...well, anyway, I'm sorry for sneaking into your barn. I don't usually sneak into people's barns. I don't usually sneak into places in general, not just barns. I don't sneak into houses either. I'm not usually a...a breaker-inner...is that a word? Probably not, but you know what I mean—"

She's rambling, talking at a hundred miles an hour as if someone has a gun to her head, and I raise a hand to cut her off gently.

"Do you want to talk about this inside?" I ask. "Instead of on the floor of my barn?"

The girl goes quiet for a moment, and then eventually, she nods.

I close the space between us and lean down to give her a hand up off the floor. Her skin is baby-soft against mine, and a shiver of something unfamiliar and electric shoots up my arm at the contact. Those pretty brown eyes widen a little, catching my gaze, and my heart starts to thump. Now that she's standing up, I can see every inch of her curvy figure: the heavy swell of her breasts, the creamy skin of her cleavage, and those perfect hips, wide and thick, plump as a ripe little peach...

Fuck. Get it together, Grayson. Stop the creepy old man act. She looks young enough to be your daughter.

With a sharp breath, I beckon the girl to follow me as I turn away from her, leading her out of the barn and toward my farmhouse. My heart batters against my ribcage the whole way there, filling me with unease. I've never felt like this before,

and I sure as hell don't want to start feeling like this now. Especially not over a girl who looks like she's barely old enough to drink.

Why the hell am I reacting like this to a woman I only just met, dammit?

And more importantly, how the hell do I make it stop?

Willow

It took me a long time to reach the ranch, but it was the only place for miles, and I couldn't bear to stay another second at Fontaine House with Edmund and his guests pointing at me accusingly. So I fled across the pastures and the meadows before I finally stumbled across this haybarn. I didn't have a plan. I still don't. All I wanted to do was get away from the Fontaines as fast as possible. Somewhere safe. Far away from those horrible judging faces. But I didn't count on being found by an intimidatingly hot cowboy with a fierce scowl and eyes like emeralds.

When I heard him stomping through the barn asking "Who's there?" in his deep, growly voice, I almost had a heart attack. I was eating the last of my provisions—the cookies I smuggled in my pockets from the snack table—and despite the craziness of my situation, I still wish this sexy cowboy hadn't found me sitting on the floor stuffing cookies into my mouth. It's not the first impression I would have chosen to make.

My legs are stiff after so long sitting on the hard floor of the barn, and I force them one in front of the other as my growly savior leads me toward a cute wooden farmhouse with a wrap-around porch. There's a garden full of lavender and herbs out front, and the sweet summery scent calms my nerves slightly as I follow him up the porch steps and into his home.

The farmhouse is adorable—all timber beams and open fireplaces with a cozy leather couch and thick Persian rugs covering the wooden floors. I watch as the cowboy shrugs off his jacket and sets down his hat, turning to me. Those green eyes are piercing, and my mouth is dry as I take in the sheer size of him. He towers at least a foot above my five-two frame, and he looks as strong as a bull with his broad shoulders and thick arms. Everything about him screams of raw, masculine power, and it sends a shiver through my body.

“You hungry?” he asks in that deep, gravelly voice.

“No, I’m good,” I say automatically. In truth, I’m starving. All I’ve eaten today is those cookies, and I’m dying for a proper meal. But I don’t want to inconvenience him any more than I already have.

“You sure?”

I nod emphatically, but my stomach chooses that exact moment to gurgle loudly in protest. The cowboy’s lips twitch.

“Well, I guess I’m a little hungry,” I say sheepishly.

“Come on. We’ll talk in here.”

I follow him into a rustic-style kitchen and sit down at the table, my heart fluttering with nerves.

“So,” he says, his back turned to me as he reaches for a pan from the cupboard. “What’s your name, anyway? I’d rather not call you barn girl.”

“I’m Willow. You?”

“Grayson. Grayson Ryder.”

I run the name through my mind, mouthing it silently before I say, “Well, thank you, Grayson. For not cussing me out when you found me out there.”

His broad shoulders shrug as he busies himself heating butter in a pan. “I don’t cuss out women. I’d like to know what you were doing sitting in my barn though.” He looks over his shoulder at me, an eyebrow raised questioningly.

I open my mouth to tell him everything that happened back at Fontaine House. Something about those eyes makes me want to open up and trust Grayson. But if I explain to him that I was hiding in his barn to escape being called a thief, why should he believe me? Nobody else did. The necklace was in my bag, after all. He’ll probably think that running away and hiding in his barn is proof that I *am* a thief. I was so determined to get as far away from that house as possible that I didn’t even stop to think about how guilty I was making myself look by fleeing the scene.

But I'm not guilty.

Screw the Fontaines for accusing me of something I didn't do. Especially Edmund. He knew the necklace was in my bag because he's the one who put it there. He must have sneaked into the drawing room while I was looking out of the window and hidden the pendant, then he lied about seeing me on the stairs and accused me in front of everyone. I know it, but I can't prove it. The whole thing is such a mess, and I just can't bring myself to tell Grayson about it. He seems trustworthy, but he's also a stranger, and who's to say he doesn't know the Fontaines personally? Their house is close to his ranch, so it's plausible for them to know each other. He might even call them up and tell them where to find me if I admit what happened.

"It's complicated," I say eventually, running a hand through my hair. "But I know I shouldn't have been there, and I'm sorry."

Grayson frowns but he doesn't push the subject. Instead, he just grunts, flipping something over in the pan and grabbing a plate from the cupboard. I smile as he sets an omelet down in front of me, looking almost apologetic.

"I haven't been grocery shopping yet so there's not much choice. Hope you like ham and cheese omelets."

"I love them," I say, smiling warmly. "Thank you. It looks amazing."

I cut into the buttery omelet, savoring every bite while Grayson sits at the table opposite me, looking troubled. No doubt he's wondering how the hell to get rid of the stranger who broke into his barn and is now eating all his food.

"Thank you for all this," I say. "You've been so kind. I promise I'll get out of your hair as soon as I'm done eating."

My stomach drops even as I say the words. I have nowhere else to go except back up to Fontaine House, and the thought of facing all those people—and possibly the police too—makes me feel sick to my stomach. I don't have any money

with me, and my phone is still sitting in the clutch bag that Hugo took from me.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” Grayson asks, looking unconvinced.

I start to say yes, but then I think of all those angry, accusing faces and the answer dies in my throat. “Well...not exactly. I live in the city, but I came here by taxi and my bag is...uh, well, I don’t have access to it right now. But I’m sure I can figure something out—”

“I have a guest room down the hall,” Grayson cuts in. “Nothing fancy, but if you need a place to sleep, it’s yours.”

Even though Grayson is a stranger, I have to fight the urge to throw my arms around him. He might be intimidating on the outside, but he’s being so generous. I broke into his barn and yet he’s treating me like I’m a guest rather than an intruder. He seems genuinely concerned about me, and I see those green eyes flicker in my direction every time he thinks I’m not looking, like he’s worried I’m about to vanish into the night.

“Thank you so much, Grayson.” Instinctively, I reach out to grab his hand, squeezing his calloused palm between my fingers. The contact is enough to make me shudder, but I try not to let it show as Grayson looks down at our joined hands. He swallows hard, then nods before gently pulling his hand away and standing up from the table.

“It’s this way,” he says.

Suddenly he seems on edge, and I cringe at myself for grabbing his hand like that. I need to remember that this guy is a stranger. Sure, he’s an insanely *hot* stranger, but judging by where he lives—out here in the middle of nowhere on this giant ranch—he probably prefers his own company. Not to mention he looks about twice my age. A silly young girl in a party dress is probably the last thing he wants to deal with right now.

Feeling chastened, I follow Grayson to the guest bedroom. He opens the door to reveal a small room with large windows and a comfy-looking double bed. There’s something intimate

about the two of us standing so close, staring at a bed together, and my pulse quickens as Grayson ushers me inside.

“There are a few of my t-shirts in here if you want to sleep in something more comfortable,” he says, avoiding my gaze as he gestures toward the closet.

“Thank you. This will be perfect.”

I sound like a broken record with the number of times I’ve said thank you, but Grayson has been a lifesaver tonight. I wish I knew how to repay him.

“Well, I’ll leave you to get some sleep,” he says, hurrying toward the door like he can’t get out of here quick enough. It hurts more than it should.

“Goodnight, Grayson,” I say, waving awkwardly.

“Goodnight.”

As he shuts the door, our eyes meet for a second, and my heart leaps into my throat. It’s a look charged with something raw and exciting, and I’m suddenly desperate for Grayson to stay here with me. But a second later, the door closes between us, and I’m left staring at the solid brown wood.

With a sigh, I shrug out of my dress and grab the biggest t-shirt I can find from the closet, letting it drape over me like a dress. I’m thick and curvy, always have been, but Grayson’s shirts drown my short frame. The fabric smells like him—raw and woody—and I can’t get enough. I curl up in bed, inhaling deeply, surrounding myself with that heavenly scent. Eventually, I hear the door next to mine close as Grayson heads to bed, and knowing there’s nothing but a wall separating us is enough to keep me wide awake with excitement.

But Grayson Ryder isn’t the only thing keeping me awake. Every time I close my eyes, I’m back at Fontaine House, being stared down by Edmund’s guests as he tells everyone I’m a thief. It makes my throat close up just thinking about it. I know I can’t hide out in Grayson’s guestroom forever; soon enough, I’ll have to go back to Fontaine House and face the music. I need to be there for Avery, and I especially need to

stop her from marrying Edmund Fontaine. But even though I know I can't avoid him forever, I'm relieved that for one night at least, I'm safe and sound with a huge, rugged cowboy to take care of me. And when I finally drift off into a light sleep, Grayson is the only face I see.

Grayson

I stare at the ceiling, working my jaw as I try not to think about the curvy beauty in my guestroom. But shit, how can I think of anything else? From the second I laid eyes on Willow, my body has been going haywire. It's freaking me out. I've never felt this way before: heart pounding, stomach churning, pulse racing, cock swelling, all from simply *looking* at this girl.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Not ever.

I'm a loner. A lone fucking wolf. I don't want that to change. It's terrifying...this all-encompassing need surging through me...the need to hold her, claim her, taste her, kiss her.

Fuck.

I slam a fist against my pillow, stifling a groan. I've kept my heart safely closed off for all these years, and suddenly, a total stranger has woken up my whole body. And not just any stranger, but a girl half my age. Sweet, curvy, and totally irresistible.

Stop it, asshole, I tell myself firmly. Stop these crazy thoughts.

But I might as well be telling the stars not to shine. There's no way I can take my mind off Willow. Especially not when that pretty little face and those gorgeous curves are curled up on the other side of that wall right now. I keep playing back the minute I saw her on the floor of the barn in that pink dress, those brown doe eyes looking up at me. It's driving me crazy.

It's not just her curves I'm interested in, though. I want to know everything about this girl. I wish she would trust me with her story. She told me she lives in Denver and arrived in

Winterdale by taxi, but that doesn't explain how she ended up in my barn eating cookies out of her lap with no money and no phone.

Knock knock.

The sound of a fist against wood yanks me from my thoughts, and for a second, I think it's Willow knocking on my bedroom door. My pulse thrums as I scramble out of bed, but then the sound comes again, and I realize it's coming from the front door instead.

Who the fuck is knocking at this time of night?

I head out of my room and toward the front door, opening it with a scowl. Two strangers are standing on my doorstep, a man and a woman. The woman looks frantic with worry, wringing her hands, while the man looks irritated, his nose wrinkled like there's a bad smell hanging around him.

"Hi," the woman says, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I'm sorry to bother you so late, but I'm looking for my sister, Willow. She's twenty-two, five-foot-two, brown hair, brown eyes, wearing a pink dress."

"Uh..."

I'm not sure what to say. Does Willow *want* to be found? Would she really have been hiding out in my barn if she wanted her sister to know where she was?

Before I can continue, the sneering guy cuts in. "Look, have you seen her or not? We have places to be, and I've wasted enough of my day looking for this fucking woman."

Willow's sister turns on him, her eyes blazing. "For once in your life, Edmund, could you stop being an asshole? Just for two seconds!"

For a moment, Edmund looks at her like she's slapped him, but he quickly recovers, rolling his eyes and looking at me with a sardonic smirk as he says, "Women, right? So fucking dramatic. Can't say anything without them whining at you."

He's obviously expecting me to nod along with a knowing smile, like I agree with what he's saying.

Fuck that.

“Get off my property,” I snap, taking a menacing step forward. “This is a cattle ranch; we don’t have room for sexist pigs here.”

That wipes the smirk off his face. He raises his hands in mock surrender. “Dude, I was *joking*.”

“You heard me, asshole, get out of here.”

With a childish huff, the man turns on his heel and stalks off like a wounded puppy. The woman takes a tentative step back, and I shake my head.

“I wasn’t talking to you, ma’am. Just the dumbass you’re with. Listen, if I see your sister, I’ll let you know, okay? Have you got a number I can call or something?”

Gratefully, Willow’s sister presses a piece of paper with her number on into my hands, and I feel guilty as hell as I look into her anxious face. But at least I can give Willow the number. That way she can choose whether she wants to call or not. Her sister seems sweet, but that guy she’s with convinces me I’m doing the right thing by keeping Willow a secret. I don’t want him anywhere near her.

Fuck, I hope they’re not dating

The thought of Willow being with a man like that is enough to make my fists clench.

“Thank you so much,” the woman says with a weak smile once she’s handed over her number. “I really appreciate it. Sorry again to wake you so late.”

“No problem.”

I wave off Willow’s sister, watching as she rejoins the man from before and gets into his flashy Lamborghini before they drive back up the dirt track toward Winterdale. There’s something uneasy rising in my gut as I watch them go, and I close the front door with a sigh, turning back toward my bedroom.

I stop in my tracks.

The door to the guestroom is open, and Willow is peering out, looking straight at me. She takes a step out into the hallway, and my heart thumps when I see she's wearing one of my shirts. It hangs like a dress on her, and she looks so fucking adorable.

"Thanks for not telling," she says, biting her lip. "And for getting my sister's number for me. I feel awful. She sounded so worried."

"More worried than the guy she was with." My voice comes out harsh and angry, and Willow sighs.

"That's Edmund. My sister, Avery's, fiancé."

"Is he the reason you were hiding in my barn?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Kind of. It's all just a misunderstanding." She runs an agitated hand across her forehead, her shoulders drooping slightly. "Could I borrow your phone? I want to text my sister to tell her I'm okay."

"Of course."

I grab it from my bedroom and hand it over. "You can keep it with you. I'll take it back in the morning."

She smiles at me. "Thank you, Grayson. I'm so sorry about all this—I'm attracting nothing but chaos at the moment. Don't worry, though, I promise I'll leave you in peace first thing tomorrow."

With a small wave, she disappears back inside the guestroom, leaving me with only one thought.

I don't want her to leave tomorrow. I don't want to be left in peace.

For a man like me, it's a scary fucking thought.

Willow

I wake up to the sound of birdsong. Sun streams through the window as I open my eyes, taking in the unfamiliar room. In my half-asleep daze, it takes me a while to remember where I am, but eventually, the events of yesterday trickle through into my consciousness. Grayson, the stolen necklace, hiding in his barn, Avery and Edmund.

With a sleepy groan, I push myself up onto my elbows and spy Grayson's phone on the nightstand. I grab it, tapping the message icon to see if Avery has said anything else since we spoke last night. I texted her shortly after she left here with Edmund, praying that he wouldn't see the message. He's often peering at her phone, looking over her shoulder like he doesn't trust her. But there are no new messages from Avery, only our exchange from last night, and I hope that means Edmund is none the wiser. I scroll back through our messages, reading them over again.

11:31 pm Avery, it's Willow. I'm sorry for not texting before, but I left my phone at Fontaine House. I'm safe and have a place to sleep tonight. Don't tell Edmund I messaged you. Love Willow. P.S. I didn't steal that necklace.

11:33 pm OMG, Willow I was so worried!!! Are you sure you're safe? Can I come over and pick you up?? I need to see you! Of course you didn't steal the necklace! I know you would never do that. I'm so sorry that everybody is accusing you. I'm trying to make them see sense but Edmund is so stubborn and he just won't listen to me. Where are you?? Did that guy from the ranch give you my number??

11:36 pm I promise I'm safe. I'm sorry for worrying you, but I had to get away from that house. You don't need to pick me up, especially not with Edmund there. I don't want him to

know where I am. I'll text you tomorrow, okay? We'll figure something out. Just don't tell Edmund.

11:38 pm I won't tell him anything. I'll delete our conversation so he can't see it. Don't worry, I'll find a way to fix this Willow. There must be an explanation. I won't let them pin this on you.

11:39 pm Thanks Avery. I love you. Goodnight.

11:39 pm Love you too, and I'm so sorry again for everything. Goodnight Willow <3

I put the phone down and stretch out with a yawn, feeling the sun warm my face as it beams through the window. It's so peaceful here. Everything is silent except for the twittering of birds and the gentle breeze through the trees, so different from the cacophony of barking dogs and car horns that I usually hear from my apartment in the city.

I push myself out of bed, and as I move, I catch the manly scent of the t-shirt I'm wearing—Grayson's smell. I drink it in, suddenly desperate to see him again. I was already spellbound by Grayson with his rugged good looks and growly voice, but ever since he told Edmund to beat it last night, I'm feeling even more drawn to him. I've never met anybody like him before: so gruff and serious on the outside but generous and thoughtful on the inside. It's enough to make my knees weak.

I'm about to leave the guestroom when something outside catches my eye. A dark blur of motion in the distance. Curiously, I peer out of the window, and my mouth drops open. Grayson is galloping across the meadow on a shiny brown horse. He's wearing a flannel shirt and blue Wranglers, a cowboy hat perched on his head, like something out of an old western, and I'm practically drooling as I watch him ride. He makes it look as easy as breathing. It takes me a second too long to realize that he's riding my way, and before I can pretend like I wasn't just staring at him, he spots me in the window. I wave awkwardly, throwing open the window as he slows the horse to a trot until he's just a few feet away from me.

“Good morning,” he says, those sexy green eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “You sleep okay?”

I nod, struggling to regain the power of speech. “Y-yeah, uh, yeah, great thanks. It’s so quiet out here.” He hums with agreement, absent-mindedly patting his horse’s sleek neck as I ask, “Your horse is so beautiful. Is it a boy or a girl?”

“This is Misty,” he says, smiling slightly. “She’s my best mare. Got a temperament sweeter than honey.” He pauses for a moment, looking between me and Misty. “Do you want to ride her?”

My eyebrows shoot up. I’ve never ridden a horse before, but Misty looks so sweet and pretty, and the thought of being close to Grayson is too tempting to resist.

“Sure.” I grin at him. “When in Rome, right? Just let me get dressed.”

Grayson nods and turns Misty around, making her trot away from the window. I pull on my dress from yesterday—the only piece of my own clothing I have with me—and head into the kitchen. There’s a cake box on the table with a note on top saying “Willow’s breakfast”, and I open it to reveal a buttery croissant and a slice of red velvet cake.

Damn. Did Grayson go to the bakery just for me?

I’m grinning to myself as I take a bite of flaky croissant, setting the red velvet cake aside for later. Then I head outside into the bright summer morning, polishing off the croissant as Grayson spots me and comes over.

“Thank you for breakfast. It was delicious.”

Grayson nods sheepishly. “No problem. I usually just have eggs but I figured you might like something sweet.”

“I can see why you thought that. I mean, I *was* chowing down on a pile of cookies when you found me.”

His lips twitch into a smile. “Exactly. Anyway, you ready to ride?”

I feel my cheeks heat up at his perfectly innocent question, but I manage to nod. “Sure. I’ve never done this before,

though.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk you through it.” Grayson swings his leg over Misty’s back and dismounts with ease, beckoning me toward the horse. “Come closer. Don’t worry, she won’t hurt you.”

I do as he says, tentatively lifting a hand to stroke Misty’s sleek brown coat.

“Now I’m gonna lift you up, and you’re gonna put your left foot in the stirrup,” Grayson says. “You see it?”

“Yeah.” My heart flutters as I feel Grayson’s strong arms wrap around me, lifting me with ease until my foot is resting in the stirrup.

“Good. Now grab the reins with your left hand.” I do as he says. “Grab this part of the saddle with your right hand and then swing your leg over onto her back.”

With a deep breath, and with Grayson’s strong arms still holding my hips steady, I swing my leg over, careful not to kick Misty as I settle into the saddle. It feels strange and a little scary to be this high up sitting on the back of an animal, but I try to relax, reaching forward to give Misty’s neck a gentle pat.

“Good job,” Grayson says before mounting Misty in one fluid, experienced motion and settling into the saddle behind me. His warm, solid chest presses into my back, and I shiver at the contact, resisting the urge to completely melt against him. “Don’t worry, we won’t take her far. She’s not used to carrying two people.”

At this moment, I’d be happy to go to the moon with Grayson sitting so close to me, but I make a noise of agreement, and his arms reach forward, pressing either side of my waist as he grabs the reins. Misty starts to walk, and we gently rock back and forth as she makes her way slowly through the open fields, the clip-clop of her hooves muffled by the soft grass. There’s something freeing about giving over control to Misty and trusting her to keep us upright. I give myself over to the feeling, relaxing slightly against Grayson’s

chest as I breathe in the sweet scent of wildflowers, listening to the birds and the mooing of cattle from across the ranch.

“This is so different from being in the city,” I say with a sigh of contentment. “I’m cooped up in an office most days back home. It’s nothing like this.”

“You don’t like your job?” Grayson asks, his voice so close to my ear that I feel goosebumps spring up on my arms.

“No. I have an Etsy shop that I love, but it doesn’t earn enough for me to quit the office.”

“What’s an Etsy shop?”

“It’s an online store where you sell your own handmade stuff. I sell all kinds of things on there: candles, soaps, jewelry. I love making beautiful things.”

“That sounds pretty awesome.”

“Thanks.” I grin like a schoolgirl, glad that Grayson can’t see my face. “What you do is pretty awesome too. It must be amazing to spend so much time out in nature.”

“It’s all I know,” he says. With a click of his tongue, Misty starts to speed up a little, her hooves beating a steady rhythm as she carries us further away from the farmhouse. “I’ve never done anything else,” Grayson continues. “You have to be okay with being by yourself a lot when you live out here. Your only company is cattle a lot of the time.”

“You like being on your own, then?”

Grayson is quiet for a moment, like he’s thinking hard about his answer. “I guess it depends on who I’m with.” He doesn’t elaborate, and we lapse into silence for a little while before he suddenly asks, “What else do you like? Apart from your Etsy shop?”

“Cookies.”

He chuckles, and the sound is like magic. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“Turns out I like riding horses, too,” I say. “Misty is awesome.”

“You can feed her some sugar cubes when we get back. She’ll love you forever.”

In the distance, a figure on horseback appears on the crest of a nearby hill, galloping toward us like a bird in flight. I hear Grayson curse under his breath.

“That’s my brother, Hunter,” he says reluctantly, “and something tells me he’s gonna have a few questions.”

Hunter slows his horse to a gentle trot as he nears us, his face slack with shock. He looks almost comical as he stares at us.

“Grayson?” he asks, eyes wide.

I hear Grayson sigh from behind me. “Hey, Hunter.”

Hunter tips his hat to me, looking at me like he can’t believe I’m real. “Morning, ma’am.”

“Morning,” I say, smiling at him weakly, trying to figure out why he’s looking at me like I’ve got three heads.

“This is Willow,” Grayson says. “She’s...I’m helping her out.”

Hunter raises an eyebrow. “Helping her out?”

“Yes.”

Hunter’s eyes travel over both of us, no doubt noticing how close we’re sitting to each other. My back is practically glued to Grayson’s chest.

“Hunter, shut up,” Grayson says.

“I didn’t say anything!”

“You didn’t have to.”

Hunter’s face splits into a smirk, and he nods to us. “Well, I’ll leave you two alone. Enjoy your ride. It was nice to meet you, Willow.”

A knowing look flashes in Hunter’s eyes as he winks at Grayson before turning around and riding back the way he came.

“Sorry about him,” Grayson says once Hunter has vanished back over the hill.

“Why was he looking at us like we’re space aliens?”

Grayson chuckles, urging Misty to turn back toward the farmhouse. “Because he’s an idiot. And also because he’s probably never seen me within ten feet of a woman before.”

He says it so matter-of-factly, and I know it shouldn’t matter to me, but I can’t help the thrill of pleasure that rushes through my body. I like the thought of being the only woman Grayson has ridden with or opened up to—it excites me more than it should.

“This was really fun,” I say as the farmhouse gets closer. “Thanks for taking me out.”

“No problem.”

I feel my heart sink a little as Grayson slows Misty to a stop. When I get off her back, it will be time for me to leave. I don’t have any more excuses to stay here with Grayson.

“Hey,” he says once he’s dismounted, landing on his feet with an easy bounce. “I know you probably have to get back to the city, but do you want to stay for lunch?”

I have to stop myself from screaming “yes” a thousand times. Instead, I settle with a smile and a nod. “I’d love to.”

Grayson’s eyes twinkle as he reaches up to help me off Misty’s back, and I fall clumsily into his arms. His hold on me tightens for a moment, and I look up at him, my chest pressed against his. I swear I can feel something hard pushing into my stomach, and it sends warm desire rushing between my legs.

With a sharp intake of breath, Grayson pulls back, making sure I’m steady on my feet before he turns away from me.

“I’ll go grab those sugar cubes for Misty,” he says, his voice sounding strained. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch him go, grimacing at the growing ache between my legs. I can’t figure this guy out. One second he’s asking me to stay here longer, and the next it’s like he can’t bear to look at me.

But I want him to do so much more than just look at me.

I want him to touch me, hold me, claim me...

I want Grayson Ryder so badly it hurts.

Even the craziness of everything that happened at Fontaine House seems unimportant by comparison, and as he comes back outside holding a small handful of sugar cubes, I'm desperate to leap into those strong arms. I know it's wrong. He's so much older than me and we're practically strangers. I should simply thank him for everything and leave him alone. But as I watch Grayson untack his mare, his flannel sleeves rolled up to reveal his tanned forearms while those Wranglers hug his perfect ass, leaving him alone seems easier said than done.

Grayson

I wasn't supposed to invite her to stay for lunch. I wasn't supposed to take her riding. I wasn't supposed to get too close. I was supposed to keep my distance. But I couldn't resist that sweet face looking out at me from the bedroom window. And the way she smiled at me when I asked her to stay for lunch, well shit, I couldn't resist that either. I don't seem able to resist anything about Willow. I shouldn't want her. She's too young, too pretty, too adorable...whereas I'm a gruff cowboy in his forties who's barely even looked at a woman before.

But dammit, how am I supposed to resist her?

I watch as she feeds Misty the sugar cubes I just handed over, her pretty face beaming with delight as my horse gratefully devours the treats.

"You're such a good girl," Willow says softly.

Misty snorts approvingly, and when the sugar is all gone, we leave her to graze as we head back inside the farmhouse.

"She likes you," I tell Willow once we're in the kitchen.

"I like her too. I've never fed a horse before." She looks so pleased with herself, and it warms my heart. "Do you mind if I take a quick shower before we eat?"

My mind stutters over the word "shower", filling my head with thoughts of Willow, her gorgeous curves wet and glistening, the swell of her breasts dripping with water...

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Sure, go ahead. It's the door opposite the guestroom."

She slinks away into the bathroom, and even though I try to focus on cooking our lunch, the sound of the rushing water distracts me.

This woman is making a fucking teenager out of me.

I nearly lost my mind when she pressed her curvy little body back against me while we were riding Misty. My cock was painfully hard the whole time, and even now I'm throbbing with need as I listen to Willow's sweet singing voice echoing out of the bathroom.

I manage to concentrate enough to whip up a couple of cheeseburgers and some fried potatoes, plating it up just as Willow walks in wearing another one of my t-shirts, looking fresh-faced and pretty as hell. She smells like my soap along with a hint of her own sweet scent, and it's enough to make my hands tremble as I set the plates of food down on the table.

"Wow, this looks amazing!" Willow sits down opposite me with a smile. "Sorry I didn't stick around to help."

"Don't worry," I say, setting down a jug of sweet tea. "I like cooking."

"That makes one of us," she says with a chuckle. "I can make candles and jewelry no problem, but give me a recipe to follow and I'll end up burning the house down."

"My mom was the same," I say, smiling slightly. "She started a fire in the kitchen once. She was only meant to be making toast."

Willow giggles. "She sounds like my kind of woman."

"Yeah. She was pretty great."

Willow's smile fades a little. "Oh, I'm sorry Grayson. I didn't realize—"

I wave off her apology. "It's okay. She passed away a long time ago when I was about the same age as you. Car accident."

I don't make a habit of talking about my mom. It's still painful, even after all this time. But something about Willow makes me want to open up. I want to know everything about her, and I want her to know everything about me. It's not a feeling I'm used to, but as I look into Willow's wide brown eyes, I want to show her the real me. The man nobody ever gets to see.

“I’m so sorry. That’s awful.” She reaches across the table and rests her hand on mine, just like she did last night. Only this time I don’t pull away. I let my thumb rub circles on her soft skin, giving in to my desperate need to touch her.

“It was tough. I’m the oldest sibling, and I was definitely the one trying to hold the family together. It hit my dad the hardest, though. She was the love of his life.”

Willow shakes her head sadly. “It must have been so difficult for him. And for you too. I can’t even imagine...”

I nod, clenching my jaw tight. Unfortunately, I don’t have to imagine because I was there. I saw the way my mom’s death broke my dad’s heart. I saw the way he became a shell of himself, and I saw the way it took him years to put himself back together. But there was always a piece missing, right up to the end of his life. He never remarried. Never even got close. Watching my dad go through that convinced me that love isn’t worth the risk. I never wanted to rely on anybody the way he relied on my mom. And when my dad died a few years back of a heart attack, a bittersweet part of me was glad that he was finally where he’d want to be: with my mom. Reunited.

“Anyway, you don’t need my sob story,” I grunt, giving Willow’s hand a gentle squeeze. “What about you? What are your parents like?”

She lets out a long breath. “Honestly? They’re not great. They never took much of an interest in me and Avery when we were growing up. Then suddenly, when they found out Avery was engaged to a rich guy, they were all over her. At first, they pretended they were genuinely interested in her life, but then after a little while, they showed their true colors and started asking for cash.” She shakes her head bitterly. “My sister is a sweetheart. She’s generous to a fault, and she can’t bring herself to say no to them. And they know that. They use that against her, and it pisses me off.” Her voice gets a little more forceful toward the end, and once she’s finished, she looks up at me sheepishly. “I’m sorry. You just told me your parents have passed away and now I’m complaining about mine, even though they’re alive and well. I should be thankful.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just because my parents aren’t around doesn’t mean you can’t complain about yours. And anyway, I like hearing about you, Willow.”

Her eyes sparkle a little when I say her name. “I like hearing about you too, Grayson.” Her pretty pink lips curve into a smile that makes my heart thud as she asks, “Have you always lived here on the ranch?”

“Yep. Me and my brothers grew up here. We all built our own farmhouses and outbuildings, and now we each have a fifth of the land. We share ownership of all our equipment and our cattle, and then split the profit.”

“That’s awesome! You must be pretty close if you all work together like that.”

I nod. “We are. I don’t see as much of Holt and Luke nowadays though. They’re both married with their own families.”

Willow suddenly seems shy, looking down at her lap as she asks, “Not you, though?”

“No. Not me.”

“Not into relationships, huh?”

The air thickens as her question hangs between us. If somebody had asked me two days ago, the answer would have been simple. I’m a loner. I don’t want anybody else. I don’t need anybody else. But ever since I found Willow in my barn, things seem a whole lot more complicated. If I don’t want anybody else, then why does my mouth go dry every time I look at Willow? If I don’t need anybody else, then why am I desperate for her to stay here with me? If I’m such a loner, then why does my heart pound whenever she’s near me? Why have I thought of nothing else but her since the minute we met?

“It’s complicated,” I say eventually, my voice low. “It’s a big risk, opening your heart up like that to somebody.”

“But isn’t it worth it?” she asks tentatively. “For the right person, I mean?”

“If you’d asked me a week ago, I’d have said there’s no such thing as the right person. Not for me.”

Willow’s eyebrows raise, her plump lips parting slightly. Her hand quivers a little in mine as she asks, “And what if I asked you now?”

I don’t respond. Instead, I get up from the table, circling it until I’m standing in front of Willow. She looks up at me with those big doe eyes, the same sweet way she looked at me when I found her in my barn, and I reach down to grab her waist, pulling her up off the chair so that she’s standing, her chest against mine.

“If you asked me now,” I murmur, lowering my face toward hers, “I’d tell you this.”

Willow gasps as I capture her plump bottom lip between my own, sucking it into my mouth with a groan. She tastes like lavender and sweet tea, and I can’t get enough. My skin buzzes with electricity as Willow melts against me, her curvy body surrendering to my touch as I slide my tongue between her pretty pink lips, savoring her sweet taste. My cock strains against my jeans as Willow moans softly, her hands reaching up around my neck, pulling me closer.

I cup her ass and lift her up into my arms, her legs wrapping around my torso as I claim her honeyed little mouth. She’s like a little firecracker in my arms, grinding herself against me desperately, whimpering into my mouth until I’m fucking light-headed.

“Fuck, I’ve wanted to do this since the minute I saw you,” I mutter, kissing my way down the creamy skin of her neck.

“Me too,” Willow gasps, wriggling with anticipation as I carry her out of the kitchen and toward my bedroom. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice tells me to stop this.

She’s too young. Too perfect. You could get hurt. She could break your heart.

But right now, I don’t give a shit. I’m too focused on the gorgeous girl in my arms to dwell on all the reasons I

shouldn't be doing this. She's all that matters. I'm going to claim her in every possible way. I'm going to make her come so hard she cries my name. And I'm going to love every fucking second of it.

Willow

It's official: I'm in heaven. The sexy cowboy of my dreams is carrying me to his bedroom, holding me like I'm weightless as he shoulders open the door and lays me down on his bed. His emerald eyes are full of desire as he reaches for my breasts, massaging them through the fabric of the t-shirt I'm wearing. My nipples harden as his fingers brush against them, making me shudder with pleasure at the sensitivity. Beneath Grayson's shirt, I'm braless, and his hands eagerly snake beneath the fabric until he's squeezing my bare tits with those big palms.

My wet core throbs with need as Grayson pulls the shirt up over my head, tossing it aside until I'm lying beneath him in nothing but my sodden panties.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," Grayson murmurs reverentially, his eyes roaming across my plump, curvy hips and the softness of my belly. "These curves have been driving me insane."

I shiver with pleasure at his words. I've always been confident about my curves, especially since Avery has the same body type as me and I think she's gorgeous, but it's still exciting to hear Grayson call me beautiful as he devours my body with his gaze.

He sinks his mouth down to my nipple, sucking it hard, teasing the sensitive pink bud with his eager tongue. His hand slides down my stomach and I moan as he presses two fingers against the sodden fabric between my legs.

"You're all wet for me, sugar," he groans, pulling away from my nipple with a gentle pop.

"I've been horny since I woke up," I whisper, my cheeks warming slightly. I've never spoken like this to anybody before, but Grayson seems satisfied with my response. His

hand dips beneath the waistband of my panties until his fingers brush against my slit.

“Oh!”

I gasp at the sensation as his fingers explore my most intimate spot, touching and teasing as he kisses me hard on the mouth, swallowing my moans. Without warning, he pulls away from my lips, pressing feathery kisses down my body until he reaches my panties and yanks them down urgently. I kick them off, leaving them strewn on the floor beside the t-shirt.

I'm completely naked.

My heart flutters anxiously, and I have to stop myself from instinctively covering my body with my hands. I feel like a raw nerve, exposed and vulnerable. But Grayson looks spellbound as he runs his hands down my hips, gently prizing apart my thick thighs until my pussy is exposed, wet and aching.

“Fuck, Willow, you're so pretty,” he says, his voice hoarse. “I need a taste.”

Holding my legs firmly apart, Grayson sinks his head between my legs, sucking my clit into his mouth. My hips buck with pleasure, and my whole body tingles as Grayson teases the sensitive bundle of nerves with his hungry mouth, holding me down and forcing me to take every delicious sensation. I throw my head back with a sob, clawing at the sheets as Grayson slips a thick finger deep inside me, then another, stretching me around his digits until I'm trembling.

“Oh, God!” I cry as he starts to sink his fingers in and out of me, still relentlessly sucking on my clit like he can't get enough. I feel my orgasm bloom between my legs, making me clench and tighten with anticipation, like a coiled spring stretching out, ready to snap. “Oh, Grayson, I'm gonna come! Oh yes...oh...OH GOD, YES!”

My orgasm rips through me, leaving me breathless and quivering, my legs shaking with each throb of pleasure. But

I'm still aching. I need more. I need Grayson inside me, filling me up, making me his in every way.

"You're gorgeous when you come," he says breathlessly as he pulls away from my clit, sliding his fingers out of me. "I'm gonna make you do it again."

I melt at his words, watching as he gets off the bed and starts to strip. He unbuttons his flannel shirt as fast as possible, tossing it aside before he unbuckles his belt and yanks down his jeans and boxers, kicking them aside until he's standing naked in front of me.

Holy crap.

Grayson's got the kind of body that only comes from a lifetime of hard, manual labor. He's strong and brawny, with tight, taut muscles and sun-bronzed skin. My eyes glide down, past his stomach, until my gaze is resting on his thick cock. It stands to attention, long and girthy and glistening with precum. My mouth waters as I take him in.

He looks so big.

So powerful.

I shiver as he reaches for me and pushes my legs completely apart, opening me up to him. He kneels on the bed and leans over me, positioning his cock at my entrance, the hardness poking against my core, making me squirm with anticipation. I'm aching for him, gushing with desire as he asks, "You ready for me, sugar?"

I press my lips together and nod eagerly, taking a deep breath as Grayson pushes his cock into me, his thick girth stretching me open, like something far too large squeezing into a space far too small. Grayson groans as he bottoms out inside me, closing his eyes for a moment and taking a deep, shuddering breath before he looks at me.

"You okay?"

I nod, wriggling as I try to ease the discomfort. "It feels a little strange. Maybe because I've never done this before..."

Grayson presses a kiss on my lips, hard and searing, before he pulls back to look at me. “I’ve never done this before either. But we’re gonna figure it out together, okay? I’ll be gentle with you, Willow.”

It’s easy to trust Grayson. Every movement is so careful, like he’s worried he might break me. I can feel the way he’s holding back, every muscle taut and tense as he starts to move in an agonizingly slow rhythm, his eyes fixed on me. Gradually, my body starts to relax, adjusting to the feel of Grayson’s cock inside me. Discomfort starts to melt into pleasure, and I give into the sensations with a moan of surprise.

It feels so good. So so good.

“More,” I gasp, shuddering as Grayson hits a delicious spot deep inside me. “Please, more!”

My words spur him on, and I wrap my legs around his back as he starts to thrust a little faster, letting his hesitance fall away slightly.

“You sure you’re ready for this?” he asks, breathing hard.

“Yes.” The word comes out like a plea. “Stop holding back, Grayson. I want you.”

My cowboy doesn’t need telling twice. He pins me to the bed with his hands, driving into me again and again, fucking me into the mattress until I can hardly breathe. I savor the slick, slapping sounds of Grayson’s cock sinking into my wet core, and I reach up to tease my nipples, sobbing at how good it feels.

“Please don’t stop,” I beg, moving my hips back and forth so that I’m meeting Grayson thrust for thrust. I sit up slightly, wanting to see the place where our bodies are joined, and I watch greedily as Grayson’s thick, meaty dick disappears inside me, covered in my cream, driving into my pussy in a punishing rhythm.

The pleasure blooming between my legs is almost unbearable, and every deep, urgent thrust pushes me closer to

the edge. Grayson's rhythm is turning sloppy and frantic, his groans more desperate.

"Shit, Willow, I'm gonna come," he grunts, his teeth clenched. "I can't hold back anymore."

We grab at each other, pulling each other closer, clawing and groaning and fucking until everything explodes, turning my vision white. My body pulses with pleasure, the sensations overwhelming me until I'm a sobbing wreck, panting hard as I collapse into Grayson's arms.

We stay like that for a while as our breathing slows, our bodies relaxing. Grayson's hand absent-mindedly strokes my hair, and I nuzzle against his body with a hum of contentment.

"You okay?" he asks eventually, his voice hoarse.

I lift my head to look at him. His green eyes are twinkling, and there's a lazy smile playing on his lips as I say, "More than okay."

"Me too, sugar."

It fills me with warmth when he calls me that, and I beam at him as he leans in to kiss me, his taste raw and musky on my tongue. It's blissful. I lose myself in our closeness, melting against Grayson's mouth as his stubbled jaw grazes my chin.

"I could kiss you all day," he mutters against my lips, sucking on them, teasing them, parting them with his tongue.

There's nothing I want more than to stay here in Grayson's bed, but somewhere in the back of my mind, a guilty word is growing too loud to ignore.

Avery.

She must be worried about me. I've left her to deal with the Fontaines all by herself, and while she's fiercely defending me against their accusations, I'm rolling around in bed with a sexy cowboy.

Reluctantly, I pull away from the kiss and ease myself up off Grayson's chest. "I'm sorry. I wish I could stay here with you, but I can't stop thinking about my sister."

Grayson frowns, reaching out to cup my cheek as he asks, “What about your sister?”

“She’ll be worrying about me. I told her I’d text her, but I... well, I got distracted. And she’s all alone with them, alone with *him*, and I’ve just left her to deal with it all by herself.”

I’m starting to ramble, but Grayson cuts me off. “Willow, tell me what’s going on. You’ve been secretive as hell since you got here, and I get that, but I want to help.”

I’ve avoided telling Grayson about what happened at Fontaine House. I didn’t want him to think badly of me, or doubt whether I was telling the truth. But ever since I arrived at the ranch, Grayson Ryder has been like a dream come true, and I have to trust that he’ll believe me. I can’t keep hiding from what happened. And more importantly, I can’t leave my sister to deal with it alone. She should be here with me, not stuck at Fontaine House with her horrible fiancé.

“It happened at my sister’s bridal shower yesterday,” I say with a sigh.

I tell Grayson everything. From arriving at a bridal shower full of Edmund’s guests, to our angry confrontation at the snack table, his accusation in front of everybody, and the horrible moment when Hugo Fontaine pulled the necklace from my bag.

“I promise I didn’t steal it,” I say finally, biting nervously at my bottom lip. “Obviously none of them believe me. I mean, the necklace was in my bag, so it doesn’t look good. And then I fled the scene, which looks almost as bad. But it was Edmund who put the necklace there. I just know it was.”

Grayson is quiet for a moment, his eyes burning with anger, and for a moment I’m scared it’s directed at me. But then he says, “Fuck Edmund. And fuck his parents too. I’ve met Hugo Fontaine. He’s a self-important bastard. I’m not surprised his son’s the same.”

“So you believe me?”

Grayson frowns at my question. “Of course I believe you, Willow.” His hand reaches for mine, squeezing it hard. “I’m

sorry they put you through that. It must have been horrible for you. But we'll fix this. I won't let Edmund get away with treating you like that."

Relief surges through me at his words. He believes me. Unquestioningly. There's not even the slightest hesitation on his face, and my throat clogs with emotion.

"Thank you for believing me," I say, leaning in to press a kiss against his lips.

He shakes his head, looking a little bemused. "You don't need to thank me, Willow."

"I want to. You're a good man, Grayson Ryder."

Before he can say anything, I kiss him again, a long lingering kiss full of affection and gratitude and all the things I want to say to him but don't know how. His hands snake around my waist, and without warning he pulls me up into his arms, carrying me bridal-style out of the bedroom.

"Where are we going?"

"To take a shower. Then we're heading for Fontaine House."

My eyebrows shoot up. "But...what am I going to say to them?"

"Don't worry, sugar," he says, setting me down in the shower and getting in after me, turning on the warm water. "We'll figure it out together."

He lathers soap in his hands before running his fingers up and down my body, gently washing every inch of my skin. And as we stand together beneath the rushing water, all glistening skin and desperate hands, I feel like maybe everything will be okay.

Grayson

I don't have a plan as I start my pickup truck, driving away from the ranch with Willow riding shotgun beside me. All I know is I need to protect my girl. Something has shifted between us today—whatever is between me and Willow goes far beyond just lust or sexual attraction. I feel a desperate need to keep her safe. To make her happy. And if confronting the Fontaines is what it takes to protect her, then that's what I'm going to do.

My blood is fucking boiling after what Willow told me about Edmund Fontaine. I knew that guy was an asshole the second I saw him, but knowing he's trying to frame Willow for something she would never do makes me want to punch him in his sneering face.

"I'm not sure about this," Willow says nervously from beside me. "I don't know if I can face them again."

I give her hand a quick squeeze as I turn onto the winding path that leads to Fontaine House. "Of course you can. I'll be there with you, and I won't let them treat you like shit again. We're going to sort this once and for all, and then you'll never have to go back to that house again. I promise."

"I will if my sister marries Edmund," Willow says darkly.

"When she hears about what he did, maybe she'll reconsider."

"God, I hope so," she mutters as we drive through the wrought-iron gates, which are thankfully wide open. "She deserves so much better."

I park my truck in the driveway in front of the mansion, looking over at Willow. She's chewing anxiously on her bottom lip, looking at the house like it's about to bite her.

“It will be okay, sugar. All the guests from yesterday will be gone by now, and I won’t let the Fontaines disrespect you.”

Willow takes a deep breath and nods, smiling at me weakly. “I know you won’t. I’m sorry, I just can’t stop thinking about how it felt when all those people turned on me.”

“They don’t matter, princess. None of them matter. You never have to see them again.”

She nods slowly. “You’re right. They don’t matter. I guess I just need to be brave and face the music.”

With a deep breath, she unclips her seatbelt and gets out of the truck. I copy her, taking her hand in mine as we walk up the drive toward Fontaine House. I raise a fist to the large double doors and knock loudly, feeling Willow’s hand trembling slightly in mine.

“It will be okay,” I say, pressing a kiss on her head. She smells like lavender and sweet shampoo, and I already can’t wait to get her back home with me when this is all over.

The double doors open and Avery peers out at us, her eyes widening with relief.

“Willow!” she gasps, throwing her arms around her sister. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re back. I’m so glad you’re okay. I was so worried, even after your texts...”

“I’m sorry, Avery. I’m sorry for running away in the first place.”

Avery squeezes Willow tight, and I smile to myself. I’m glad Avery’s got her sister’s back, even if nobody else in this house does. She doesn’t even seem mad that I lied when she came to the ranch last night. She’s too busy hugging Willow to even notice me.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she says firmly. “I’m the one who’s sorry. The way everybody turned on you like that. It was horrible. I don’t know how that necklace ended up in your bag, but I know you didn’t put it there.”

“She didn’t,” I say with a nod, “but Edmund did.”

Avery frowns at me over Willow's shoulder. "Edmund? What do you mean?"

Before I can reply, there's a noise from somewhere behind Avery as a voice calls out, "Who's at the door? Is your sister back?"

I recognize the voice. Edmund. Willow's eyes widen and she looks at me anxiously. But my girl has nothing to hide from now that I'm here.

"Can we come inside?" I ask.

Avery nods slowly, grabbing Willow's hand as we head through the double doors and into a grand entrance hall. Edmund is standing in the center of the hall, his arms crossed. As soon as he sees Willow, he bristles, something dark and mean contorting his features.

"Come to apologize?" he snaps at her.

Big mistake, asshole.

I stride toward him, looking down at his pathetic sneering face. "She has nothing to be sorry for. She didn't take the fucking necklace. You put it in her bag."

Edmund scoffs. "How the hell would you know? You weren't even there! This is none of your business."

"You're accusing my girl of something she didn't do," I snarl, my fists clenching. "That's my fucking business, believe me."

A door opens nearby, and Hugo Fontaine steps into the hall, closely followed by his wife.

"What's all this noise?" he demands, scowling. His icy-blue eyes find Willow, and he visibly stiffens. "Well, well. The thief returns."

Anger surges through me, red-hot and fierce as I snap, "The only thief here is your son."

Hugo looks at me, raising a contemptuous eyebrow. "And why would my son steal his own mother's necklace? I'll thank you to keep your wild conclusions to yourself, Mr. Ryder." He

turns to his wife. “Claudia, call the police and tell them we’ve located our thief.”

Edmund smirks at me while his dad talks, and he takes a step toward me, lowering his voice to a mutter so only I can hear. “Not so tough now, are you, big guy? I hope the cops lock that bitch up. Teach her a fucking lesson.”

I see red. With a growl of rage, I slam my fist into Edmund Fontaine’s smug face. My hand connects with his nose, and he stumbles backward, looking astonished. A trickle of blood starts to leak from his left nostril as he makes a show of running at me. But after a lifetime of rearing cattle, a guy like Edmund is no match for me. I tackle him to the ground, and he lands hard on his back. People are calling out around us, but I can barely hear them as Edmund aims a wild, desperate punch at me. I grab his fist in my hand and slam it back to the ground. He yelps and crawls away, bloodied and defeated, clutching his nose and glaring at me.

“Nobody speaks about Willow like that,” I mutter darkly. “Especially not you.”

He’s too busy stemming the flow of blood from his nose to answer me. I can hear Claudia and Hugo shouting something, but I ignore them, pushing myself up off the floor and turning to Willow. She’s looking from me to Edmund, her eyes wide, and Avery takes a step toward me, sounding bewildered as she asks, “What did you hit him for?!”

“He called your sister a bitch. I’m not letting that shit slide.”

Willow’s gaze softens, and I close the distance between us, pulling her into a tight hug.

“Assault!” Claudia is shouting as she fusses over her son’s bloody nose.

“You’ll pay for that, Ryder,” Hugo snaps, striding toward me. “We’ve got you, now. The whole thing is on camera.”

I turn to him, frowning. “What do you mean on camera?”

“Security cameras,” Claudia says triumphantly.

There’s a moment of silence as her words hang in the air.

“Security cameras?” Avery echoes. “You mean there are security cameras in this house?” Edmund’s ears glow pink as she turns on him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why does it matter?” he asks, his voice thick and muffled like he has a cold.

Avery looks like she might explode with rage. “Because the cameras will prove that Willow didn’t steal the necklace! Why the hell didn’t you tell me there were cameras before?”

“Because he knows what the cameras will show,” Willow says. “They’ll show him stealing the necklace and hiding it in my bag.”

Claudia scoffs, still dabbing at her son’s nose. “Preposterous!”

“We didn’t bother to check the cameras because the necklace was found in her bag,” Hugo says, rolling his eyes. “The culprit was pretty obvious.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Avery says, her voice full of determination. “We’ll watch the footage and see what happened.”

Edmund escapes his mother’s fussing, his nose swollen and dried with blood. He looks shifty and anxious as he reaches out to grab Avery’s hand. “We don’t need to watch it, darling. The necklace was in your sister’s bag. She took it. Case closed.”

“If that’s true, then why don’t you want us to see the footage?” Willow asks.

Edmund doesn’t answer, and Avery pulls her hands out of his, stepping back from him. “You’re going to show us that footage, Edmund Fontaine, or I swear to God I will walk out of this house right now and never come back.”

“Fine,” Claudia says imperiously. “Edmund has nothing to hide. We’ll review the footage and then call the police. Assault and theft.”

“We’ll see about that,” Willow says, catching my eye. She can barely hold back her grin of anticipation, and as I watch

Edmund squirm uncomfortably, looking from his mom to his fiancée, neither can I.

Willow

Grayson's hand grips mine as we follow Claudia Fontaine through the house and into a backroom full of camera monitors. My pulse thrums with anticipation as we all crowd around the monitors while Hugo sits in front of them, fiddling with the screen. Edmund is standing in the corner looking sheepish, not meeting anybody's gaze. His nose is crusty with dried blood.

I was shocked when Grayson punched him, but grateful that he was sticking up for me. Edmund should never have spoken about me like that, but I hope the fight won't get Grayson into any trouble. He looked so fierce, so protective, and when he called me "his girl" like it was the most natural thing in the world, I felt like my heart might burst. Now, thanks to him and Avery, I finally get to see the footage from the bridal shower. And so do the Fontaines.

"Here we are," Hugo says. "The footage from yesterday."

He looks smugly confident as he presses play, and we all bend our heads toward the monitor, watching the black-and-white footage. I look between the monitors, keeping my eyes fixed on my past self. I watch as I walk out of the ballroom after my confrontation with Edmund, heading into the drawing room and setting my bag down on the side table by the door. Then I look back toward the monitor showing the entrance hall, keeping my eyes on the stairs when suddenly, a lone figure leaves the ballroom and heads up them.

Edmund.

My heart pounds as we watch him. He opens the door to what I presume is his parent's room, before reappearing a few moments later with something hidden beneath his suit. He heads back down the stairs and with a quick look around, he sneaks into the drawing room. My past self is too busy looking

out of the window, lost in thought. I don't notice when Edmund creeps through the door and opens my clutch bag, sliding something into it. Avery gasps from beside me, her face leaning closer and closer to the monitor. We watch as Edmund leaves as quickly as he came, vanishing from the drawing room, and heading back into the ballroom.

"Well," Grayson says, squeezing my hand, "that looks pretty damn conclusive to me."

We all turn to look at Edmund who is cowering in the corner, looking at his feet, and I can't help the satisfaction I feel at his unease.

What goes around comes around.

"Edmund," Avery says with a sharp exhale. Her mouth opens and closes as she searches for the words, but eventually she just asks, "Why?"

She looks blindsided. I know she wanted to believe there was some kind of innocent explanation for all this, and it pains me to see the betrayal on her face.

Edmund finally looks up, meeting her gaze. He doesn't look so meek now—his eyes are blazing with rage.

"I did it for you, Avery," he says, pointing at me furiously. "She's a bad influence! She doesn't want me to marry you, and she was trying to break us apart all because she's jealous of what we have. I thought if I could just get her away from us, away from our home, things would be okay." He sounds like a whiny kid trying to justify why he ate all the candy.

"I can't believe you would do something like that!" Avery cries, taking a step away from Edmund.

"It was for your own good. Your sister's a bad influence. You don't need her! You only need me." Even his parents look embarrassed by his outburst. But Edmund isn't looking at them. He's looking at Avery, reaching out for her. "I know what's best for you, darling. And Willow isn't it. Just because she isn't a thief doesn't mean she's not a poisonous little—"

"Say another word about Willow and you'll have two black eyes tomorrow instead of just one," Grayson growls.

My protective cowboy. With him beside me, I feel completely safe. Not even Edmund's icy blue scowl can intimidate me now.

"Avery, please," he continues with a sigh, "I know sometimes you can be overemotional, but try to think logically."

"Here's some logic for you," my sister says bitterly, reaching for her finger. She pulls off her engagement ring and throws it at Edmund's feet. "The wedding's off."

With one last disgusted look at her ex-fiancé, my sister links her arm with mine, and together we stalk out of the backroom, leaving Edmund spluttering behind us.

"Please get me out of here, Willow," my sister whispers, her voice thick with emotion.

I lead her out through the entrance hall and into the late afternoon sunshine, guiding her toward Grayson's pickup truck.

"Oh, God," Avery mumbles, "I've been such an idiot."

She bursts into tears, crying on my shoulder as I wrap my arms around her, stroking her back as it shakes with sobs.

"It's okay," I say, my voice gentle as I try to soothe her. "Everything will be okay."

Avery pulls back to wipe her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Willow. I can't believe he did that to you. What a...what a..."

"Dick?" I supply.

My sister shakes her head furiously. "That's way too polite."

I can't help feeling guilty as I watch my sister cry. Even though Edmund is to blame, it hurts to see her so miserable.

"I'm sorry, Avery," I tell her, reaching up to wipe a tear from her cheek. "You don't deserve this."

She sniffs hard. "I do. It's my own fault. I've never loved Edmund. I didn't want to marry him, and he knew that, but he promised me the world, and I just kept thinking that it would all be worth it in the end. I wanted you to be able to quit your

office job. I wanted us to have all the things we never got to have as kids. I was so caught up in it that I didn't even realize I was agreeing to marry a total asshole." She buries her face in her hands, shaking her head. "I'm such an idiot, Willow."

"You're not an idiot," I say forcefully, prizing her hands away from her face. "You're smart and strong and beautiful and you deserve so much better than Edmund Fontaine. You deserve somebody who makes you feel loved and cherished. Somebody who makes you feel like the queen that you are."

Avery smiles weakly, a glimmer of something warm in her sad eyes. "You mean somebody who makes me feel like Grayson makes you feel?"

I don't even try to deny it. I nod, smiling a little. "Yes. Just like that."

"As soon as I'm done crying, I'm going to need all the details. Immediately." I chuckle, and Avery takes my hand in hers with a sigh of emotion. "Thank you, Willow. For saving me from the worst mistake of my life."

I shake my head. "You saved yourself, honey. Now you're free."

Avery smiles, her tears drying on her face as she says, "Free. I like the sound of that."

Finally, Grayson strides out of Fontaine House, heading toward us. He's holding my clutch bag in his hands, and I thank him as he gives it to me. It's still full of yesterday's cookies.

"Ready to get out of here?" he asks, pulling his keys from his pocket.

"I guess the police aren't coming, then?" I say hopefully.

"I don't think so. After seeing that footage, I don't think the Fontaines are feeling quite so sympathetic toward their son. They were saying something about family honor and reputations just as I was leaving." We get in the truck, me and Avery in the back, and Grayson continues, "Also, after everybody left the backroom, my finger slipped and I accidentally deleted all the footage from today."

I snort, and even Avery smiles a little as Grayson starts the truck and drives us away from Fontaine House, leaving Edmund and his family far behind us.

* * *

I spend the ride back to the ranch answering Avery's whispered questions about me and Grayson. We mutter to each other about every detail, giggling to ourselves as he looks back at us questioningly in the rear-view mirror. Despite everything, Avery seems more and more cheerful the further we get from Fontaine House, and by the time we reach Grayson's farmhouse, she looks like a mountain of weight has been lifted off her shoulders.

"You can stay in the guestroom for as long as you need," Grayson tells my sister once the truck has stopped.

"Thank you," Avery says with a smile. "But don't worry. I'll be okay. I'll find a hotel or something." I frown at her questioningly, and she whispers, "I don't think you two lovebirds need me ruining your fun."

"Don't be silly! I want you here, Avery."

She shakes her head stubbornly as Grayson says, "My brother, Hunter, lives nearby. His farmhouse is bigger than mine, and he's got plenty of spare rooms."

Avery hesitates. "Are you sure he won't mind?"

"Positive."

She smiles. "That would be perfect. It's just for a couple of days."

Grayson starts the truck up again and we follow the dirt track up past his farmhouse, twisting through the fields until we reach Hunter's enormous home.

"I'll call somebody to have your stuff delivered from Fontaine House," Grayson says. "Hunter has plenty of space to store it all until you're ready to leave."

Avery bites her bottom lip nervously. “And you’re absolutely positive that he won’t mind?”

“I promise he won’t mind. He’ll be happy to help you out.”

With a nod in Grayson’s direction, Avery wraps her arms around me, hugging me fiercely. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Text me, okay?”

Avery nods and turns to Grayson. “Thank you for everything. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. And hey, don’t worry, okay? Hunter won’t bite.”

Avery laughs weakly, sounding nervous as she gets out of the truck and heads for Hunter’s front door. She waves to us just as the door opens to reveal Hunter Ryder. Even from here, I can see his eyes widening as he looks at my sister like he’s just seen an angel float down onto his doorstep. But before I can see any more of their exchange, Grayson drives us away from Hunter’s and back toward his own familiar farmhouse. My heart swells as we reach it. Something about this place feels like home. I’ve felt more joy here on Blaze Valley Ranch than I ever have in my city apartment, and now I know Edmund Fontaine is out of my sister’s life—and mine—I feel happier than ever.

“Home sweet home,” Grayson says as he stops the truck and gets out, opening my door for me. I leap straight into his arms, melting against his solid chest.

My strong, protective cowboy.

“I’m so glad to be back here with you,” I murmur against his ear.

“Me too, princess.”

He carries me into the house, pressing feathery kisses on my cheeks as we head for the living room, making my heart flutter with delight. He sits down on the brown leather couch and pulls me onto his lap, cupping my cheek with his calloused hand as he looks into my eyes.

“I want you to stay here, Willow.”

My breath catches in my throat. “What do you mean?”

“I want you to stay on the ranch with me. I don’t want to lose you, sugar.”

My head is spinning as I try to take in what he’s saying. “You mean...stay with you here forever?”

“That’s exactly what I mean, Willow.”

The longing in his eyes takes my breath away as he looks at me, stroking my cheek with the pad of his thumb as he waits for an answer.

“You really mean it?” I ask.

“You know I do.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard and says, “I know it’s crazy. Believe me, I know. I’ve spent my whole life believing I’m better off alone, and part of me is terrified of how much I care about you. But the second I saw you sitting in the barn, something shifted in me. You’ve turned my world upside down, and I can’t imagine going back to life without you, sugar.”

My eyes prick with tears at his words, and it takes me a moment to remember how to breathe. “I feel the same way, Grayson. I don’t want to leave you either. Being here with you makes me happier than I’ve ever been in my life, and I never want that to end.”

Grayson’s face splits into a grin. “So you’re saying you’ll stay?”

“Yes!” I say with a sob of emotion, beaming widely. “Of course I’ll stay. There’s nothing I want more.”

Grayson kisses me hard, holding me tightly like he never wants to let go. He pulls away with a twinkle in his eye and says, “I love you, Willow. And I know it’s too soon to tell you that, but dammit, I don’t care. I know how I feel. I know how much I love you. And I’m going to do everything I can to make you happy.”

My face aches from smiling so much as I wrap my arms around my sexy cowboy, his words making me tingle with pure joy. “I love you too, Grayson. I love you so much.”

And it's true. I've been crazy about this gorgeous older cowboy since the moment I saw him. He's protective and kind and sexy as hell, and I know that my feelings for him are only going to get stronger with time. I never used to believe in love at first sight, but Grayson Ryder stole my heart the moment I saw him.

And he's never giving it back.

Epilogue
Grayson

“I think he’s finally asleep,” Willow whispers from beside me, her eyes full of affection.

Our three-month-old son, Oliver, is sprawled on his back like a starfish, his chubby arms and legs spread wide. My heart aches as he makes a sweet little noise in his sleep, his tiny rosebud mouth opening slightly.

Our perfect boy.

Nothing could ever have prepared me for becoming a husband and father. It’s like a whole section of my heart has been unlocked, filling me with so much love that sometimes it’s hard to breathe. I loop my arm around my wife’s waist and press a kiss against her soft cheek as we watch our son sleep for a while longer before eventually tip-toeing out into the hallway and closing the door silently behind us.

“I swear he’s starting to fall asleep easier,” Willow says once we’re back in the kitchen. “Somebody up there must love us.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not complaining.”

Willow grins at me, her whole face glowing. She’s always smiling, especially since Oliver was born, and now that she’s reopened her Etsy shop again after taking some maternity leave, she’s happier than ever. I converted one of the guestrooms into a workshop for my wife, and she loves to spend her free time creating beautiful things to sell. With our combined income, she was able to finally quit her office job in the city, and now she gets to do what she loves full time. Her scented candles and soaps fill our farmhouse, and she’s always wearing pretty handmade jewelry. She even made our wedding rings.

“I’m going to bake some cookies for Avery,” Willow says, starting to grab ingredients from every cupboard. “Her pregnancy cravings are crazy right now. I swear all she wants is cookies and horseradish.”

“What a combination.”

Willow laughs as I wrap my arms around her, pulling her back against my chest. “I don’t think she eats them together. But who knows? I was obsessed with pickles dipped in peanut butter for like two months when I was pregnant.”

“How could I forget? You kept asking me to try it.”

“It was good!” With a laugh, she pulls away from my embrace and starts to cream together some butter and sugar in a bowl, smiling thoughtfully to herself. “Avery will be such an amazing mom. I don’t know who’s more excited—her or Hunter.”

“I’d like to add a third candidate to that list,” I say with a smirk. “You, Mrs. Ryder. I thought you were never going to stop screaming when she told you.”

Willow laughs. “Well, hey, it’s not every day you’re only sister says she’s having a baby.”

I hum in agreement, smiling to myself. “Do you realize I can now take credit for two couples in this family? Luke and Delilah, and now Hunter and Avery.” Willow raises an eyebrow at me as I continue, “I convinced Luke to make the first move with Delilah. And I told Avery she could stay at Hunter’s house, which is how they first met.”

“Do *you* realize that you mention this at least twice a week, Mr. Cupid?”

I laugh, giving her ass a light spank. “Alright, smart mouth.”

She giggles, pressing her ass back against me, making my cock swell at the contact. My wife is curvier than ever since we became parents, and it’s impossible to keep my hands off her thick ass and wide hips. I still don’t know how the hell I got so lucky. Willow is so damn gorgeous, and somehow, she manages to get more beautiful every single day.

“You have no idea what you do to me, sugar,” I mutter as I reach up to cup her tits from behind, squeezing the plump mounds and brushing my fingers against her nipples which are hardening through the fabric of her dress.

“So show me,” she says slyly, still grinding her ass against my crotch. My cock throbs with need as I scoop my wife into my arms, leaving the half-finished cookie dough behind as I carry her into the living room. I settle back onto the couch, Willow straddling my lap, grinding against me desperately.

My insatiable girl.

I reach beneath her dress, expecting my fingers to brush up against her panties. But there’s no barrier. Her wet little hole is totally bare, and she gives me a naughty smile as I run my finger along her slit, making her shiver.

“Fuck, you’re such a bad girl,” I groan as I tease her soft, honeyed pussy with my fingers. “You better be ready for me.”

She kisses me, sucking hard on my bottom lip, nipping it gently before she says, “Always.”

I scramble to undo my belt, yanking down my jeans and boxers just far enough to leave room for my cock to spring free, thick and aching. I cup Willow’s ass, guiding her onto my length and groaning as she sinks down onto it with a gasp of sweet relief.

“Oh, yes,” she groans. “I need it.”

“So take it, baby.”

She throws her head back and starts to bounce up and down on my hard length, whimpering with pleasure. Her warm, tight hole fucks my cock, and I see stars as my wife rides me like a wild thing, her chocolate-brown eyes glazed with lust.

“You’re so fucking pretty when you ride me,” I groan, squeezing her plump ass cheeks as I help her move up and down.

“It feels so good,” she sobs, her hands gripping my shoulders for balance, clutching tight as she takes my cock. “Oh, Grayson!”

Her muscles are tightening around me, quivering and fluttering, and her movements turn frantic as she inches closer to release.

“Fuck yes, that’s it princess. Come for me.”

“OH, GRAYSON, YES!”

With a strangled cry, Willow comes on my cock, her pussy throbbing. She milks me dry as I give into my own orgasm, spurting my release deep inside her, panting with relief until I’m spent.

Willow hums with contentment, resting her forehead against mine as her breathing slows. I can feel her heartbeat against my chest like horse hooves hitting the ground, and I wrap my arms around her back, inhaling her lavender-sweet scent.

“I love you so much,” I mutter, pressing a kiss against her neck.

“I love you too, Grayson.” She pulls back to look at me, her eyes sparkling. “My perfect cowboy.”

I smile at her, my chest filling with pure emotion as I look into her pretty face. Never in a million years did I expect to become a husband or a father. I closed my heart off for so long, too scared of getting hurt to give love a chance. But as I lean in to kiss my wife, I know that no matter what happens, loving her is worth it. She’s made a family man out of me, and now that she’s mine, I’m never letting her go.

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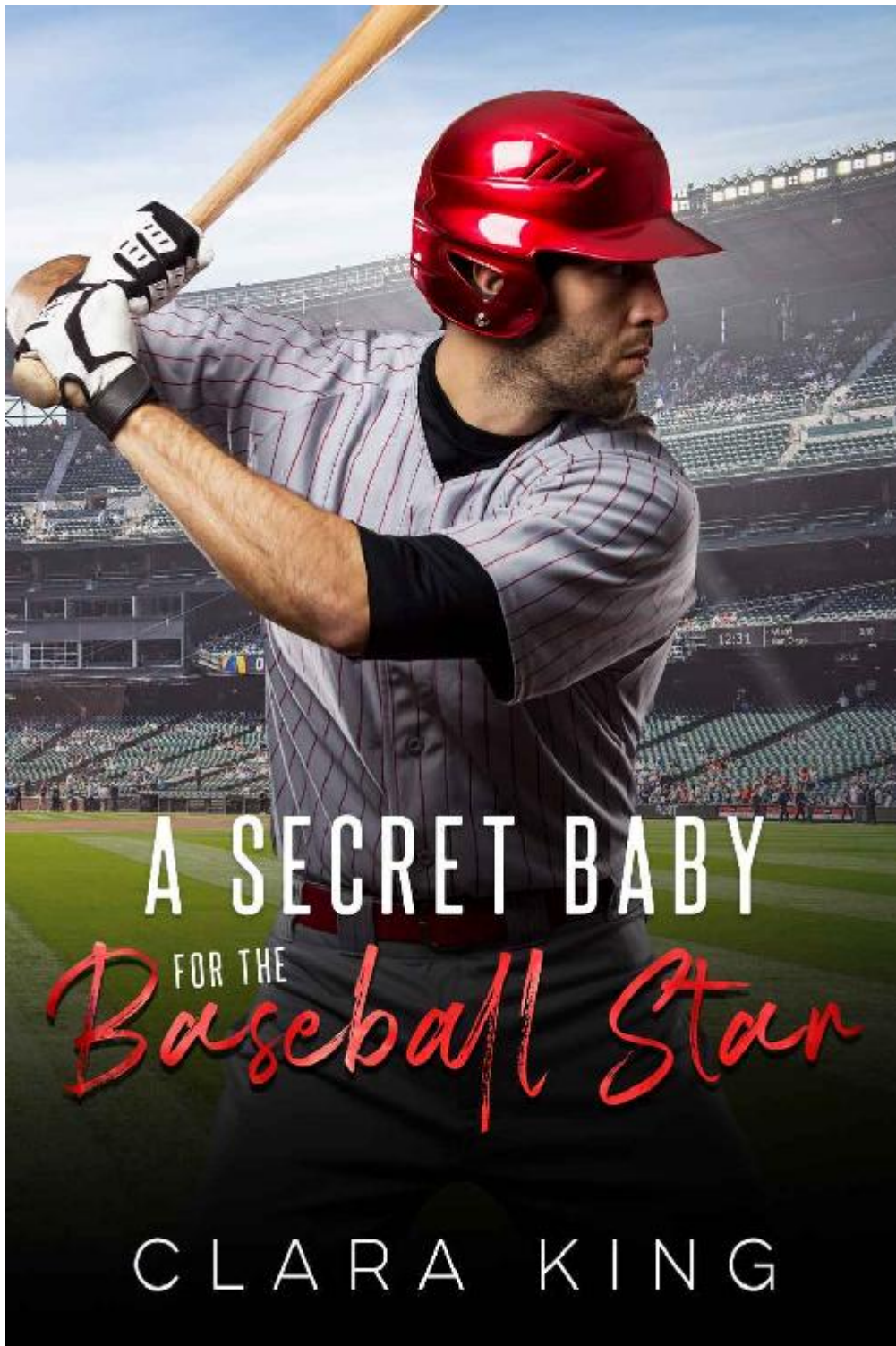
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