

LOVE IN MONTANA SERIES

DARING ENOUGH



KELLY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIOTT

DARING
ENOUGH

Daring Enough

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For more information on Kelly and her books, please visit her website www.kellyelliottauthor.com.

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About the Book

Rose Shaw has no idea what she wants. She put aside passion for practicality, earning her degree in a subject she likes, but doesn't love. Same for her job as an junior architect. And don't even get started on her personal life...been there, done that, got betrayed for her effort. So when sparks fly after meeting a renowned MLB player while on vacation, she takes him for what he is—a homerun in the sack, but nothing more. The next day, she sneaks back to Montana, leaving Bryson behind...but the memories of their night together refuse to disappear so easily.

Bryson Robinson knows exactly what he wants. His parents are a love-at-first-sight success story, so he recognizes what he felt with Rose Shaw during their night together could be the real deal. She has no interest in long-distance dating...so when the league's best pitcher gets devastating news that could be the third strike for his career, he turns it into a win, going all in to get the girl. Starting with a home in Montana—and hiring Rose to design it.

Now he just has to convince her that not all men, including MLB superstars, are players...if she's daring enough to take the risk.

Daring Enough is the fourth book in the Love in Montana series. It can be read as a stand alone, but for a better reading experience the author suggest reading the series in order.

Hey there! Before you dive in to Rose and Bryson's story, have you read Blayze and Georgiana's story in *Fearless Enough*? Each book can be read as a stand alone, but for a better reading experience, I suggest reading each book in order.

Morgan and Ryan's story is book two, *Cherished Enough*.

Hunter and Kipton's story is book three, *Brave Enough*.

Now back to our story!

Other Books by Kelly Elliott

COMING SOON

Love in Montana (Meet Me in Montana Spin Off)

Fearless Enough

Cherished Enough

Brave Enough

Daring Enough

Loved Enough - February 6, 2024

Forever Enough - April 30, 2024

Enchanted Enough - July 23, 2024

Perfect Enough - October 15, 2024

Devoted Enough - January 7, 2025

Holidaze in Salem

A Bit of Hocus Pocus

A Bit of Holly Jolly

A Bit of Wee Luck

A Bit of Razzle Dazzle

The Seaside Chronicles

Returning Home

Part of Me

Lost to You

Someone to Love

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Stand Alones

*The Journey Home**

*Who We Were**

*The Playbook**

*Made for You**

*Available on audiobook

Boggy Creek Valley Series

*The Butterfly Effect**

*Playing with Words**

*She's the One**

*Surrender to Me**

*Hearts in Motion**

*Looking for You**

Surprise Novella TBD

*Available on audiobook

Meet Me in Montana Series

Never Enough

Always Enough

Good Enough

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*Series available on audiobook

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Divided Interests

Lucky in Love
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Take Me Away
Fool for You
Fated Hearts

*Series available on audiobook

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Lost Love
Love Profound
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Love Again
Blind Love
This Love
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*Series available on audiobook

Boston Love Series

Searching for Harmony (New Edition Coming 2023)

Fighting for Love (New Edition Coming 2023)

*Series available on audiobook

Austin Singles Series

Seduce Me
Entice Me
Adore Me

*Series available on audiobook

Wanted Series

*Wanted**

*Saved**

*Faithful**

Believe

*Cherished**

*A Forever Love**

The Wanted Short Stories

All They Wanted

*Available on audiobook

Love Wanted in Texas Series

Spin-off series to the WANTED Series

Without You

Saving You

Holding You

Finding You

Chasing You

Loving You

Entire series available on audiobook

*Please note *Loving You* combines the last book of the Broken and Love Wanted in Texas series.

Broken Series

*Broken**

*Broken Dreams**

*Broken Promises**

Broken Love

*Available on audiobook

The Journey of Love Series

Unconditional Love

Undeniable Love

Unforgettable Love

*Entire series available on audiobook

With Me Series

Stay With Me

Only With Me

*Series available on audiobook

Speed Series

Ignite

Adrenaline

*Series available on audiobook

COLLABORATIONS

Predestined Hearts (co-written with Kristin Mayer)*

Play Me (co-written with Kristin Mayer)*

Dangerous Temptations (co-written with Kristin Mayer)*

*Available on audiobook

DARING ENOUGH

KELLY
ELLIOTT



Shaw Ranch

HAMILTON, MONTANA



Hunters Cabin



Fry Sr & Stella



Brock & Lincoln



Barn



Tanner & Timberlynn



Fry Jr & Kaylee

Chapter One

ROSE

Seattle, Washington

“Come on, please come to this baseball game with me,” Loren begged as she stared me down in the mirror she was using to apply her makeup.

I flopped on the sofa of her fancy condo overlooking downtown Seattle. “I came to Seattle to visit my best friend and celebrate graduating from college, not go to a stupid baseball game.”

“Did I mention how hot the guys look in their uniforms? Besides, there’s an after-party at Nick’s penthouse if they win, and I want you to get to know him more.”

Nick Rossi was Loren’s boyfriend, and he was also a professional baseball player. We had been best friends since kindergarten, and I was devastated when she moved to Washington. We had always planned to go to the University of Montana together. Loren teased me it was a good thing she didn’t go there since I transferred to Montana State to get my degree in environmental design and thought I would be going on to get my master’s. But after getting my degree, I realized my dream wasn’t to design skyscrapers or bridges. Although I had enjoyed the few projects I worked on. Like when I helped my cousin Blayze design his log cabin, as well as helped my uncle design a more environmentally friendly barn for his horses. I liked interior decorating and helped Blayze decorate his entire house. Being able to use colors was something I loved, which gave me an outlet since I hadn’t painted in a few years. Not since I overheard someone tearing apart a painting I placed in an art show. I shivered thinking about that long-buried memory.

My gaze lifted to see Loren. She had moved to Seattle because her dream had always been to live by the ocean. Plus, she had always said she would work for the Seattle Mariners

and she had been so passionate about following those two dreams, and well, she did it. I was proud of her for taking the risk and succeeding.

I had no idea what my passion was. Four years ago, I would have said it was to paint and sell my art to people all over the world. I was especially good at landscape painting. Obviously, there was a lot of inspiration living in Montana. Much like my mother, I had a talent for drawing and painting.

Sighing, I stood. “Fine. Can I at least dress comfortably and not in some slutty dress?”

She shot me a dirty look in the mirror. “I’m not wearing this to the game.”

I raised a brow. “Then why do you have it on?”

“I feel pretty in it.”

Curling my lip, I gave her a look that said she was strange. “Whatever. I’m wearing this.”

Spinning on the stool, she gave me a once-over. “Oh, Rose, no. You’re too damn beautiful, and you’ll ruin it by dressing down.”

“Ruin what? And what do you mean by dressing down?” I asked with my hands on my hips. “I have on jeans, super cute pink sneakers, and a Seattle Mariners long-sleeved shirt? How am I dressed down?”

“That’s cute to wear to the game, not the after-party.”

“Loren, I’m not dressing up for an after-party of a baseball game.”

“Fine,” she stated with a flick of her hand. “But when everyone else at the after-party is dressed cute, you’ll regret it.”

Walking over to her, I put my hands on her shoulders, leaned down, and looked in the mirror. “I highly doubt that.”



Bored. Bored. Bored.

I was bored out of my ever-loving mind. I thought nothing could be more dull than a baseball game, but I was wrong. Okay, so the baseball game wasn't all that boring. I did get into it a few times with fans and screaming at the umpire, I will admit.

But at the after-party, I felt like I was in high school again with how some of the women acted. There were a few players and a plethora of women whom I was starting to wonder if they were paid by the hour. I had walked into one bathroom only to see a guy fucking someone while they stood in the shower. The shower was off, and they were completely clothed. It only took me a nano-second to slowly back out.

The penthouse was amazing, though, so I decided to wander around and take a look at it. The design and construction of the penthouse told me it was done by someone who knew what they were doing and took pride in the aesthetics. The placement of the windows alone was perfection. And I had a hard time believing a guy decorated the penthouse. My fingers itched to touch the fabrics on the sofa and the curtains, but I knew if someone caught me, I'd look weird. So I just smiled as I looked around.

The owner was Bryson Robinson, who was the pitcher for the Mariners, and from what I could tell, he was damn hot. I'd gotten a solid look at him a few times while he was pitching. Loren was right about one thing: the uniforms did look good on the guys. And Mr. Bryson Robinson had a nice ass. At least in the uniform he did. Although, I hadn't laid eyes on him since we arrived, which was strange considering this was his and Nick's place.

If I had to hazard a guess, he was in his room probably with at least two or three women celebrating in his own way. To each his own, I guess. Still didn't help me with my boredom.

From what Loren had told me, Bryson's and Nick's rooms were up on the third floor, but a small sitting area was up there where they would hang out as well. According to her, the third

floor was off-limits to everyone except Nick and Bryson. If that was the case, then that was where I needed to be to get away from everyone. Besides, I was Nick's girlfriend's best friend. Exceptions would be made. At least I hoped they would.

When I walked into the middle of the living area of the third floor, I stopped at the sound of moaning coming from behind one of the closed doors.

"Please don't be Loren," I whispered as I quickly made my way to the large sliding glass door. I opened it and stepped outside, inhaling the fresh air. It felt heavier here than back home in Hamilton, yet it was better than being inside. Even up on the third floor, the smell of booze and fifty-thousand kinds of perfume was too much to take.

The massive balcony overlooked downtown Seattle, as well as the baseball field. I walked up to the rail and took hold of it before I closed my eyes. The sounds of cars honking and sirens in the distance made me wince.

Sighing, I opened my eyes. "God, I hate the city, and in the words of Chandler Bing, could this *be* any more boring."

My obsession with *Friends* was clearly coming out.

A soft chuckle came from behind me to the right. I spun around and put my hand over my heart. "Shit! You scared me."

Tucked away in the corner sat a man. He was so far back one might have thought he was in hiding.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

His deep and masculine voice sent a strange little jolt to my nether regions. "What are you doing out here?" I asked as I leaned against the railing and folded my arms in front of me.

"Hiding."

I laughed. "I don't blame you. I was told not to come up to the third floor, but the moment I heard there was a balcony, and it would be empty, I decided the risk was worth it. You must have thought the same. This is a beautiful spot to hide."

“Who are you hiding from?”

I shrugged. “Not really a who...more like the whole thing. I’m not much of a party person, but my best friend is dating one of the players who lives here and begged me to come.”

“Who is the player?” he asked.

“Um, Nick Rossi.”

He leaned forward, and I could barely make out his face from the light filtering outside. “You’re Rose Shaw?”

I tilted my head and studied him. “How did you know that?”

“I make it my business to know everyone who enters my home.”

My mouth dropped open. “Bryson? Wait, you’re Bryson Robinson?”

“I am. Loren has told me a lot about you.”

Glancing back into the penthouse, I frowned. “Has she now.”

“You’re from Hamilton, Montana?”

“I am,” I said as I turned my head and tried to study him. I couldn’t get a good look at his face since the light from inside was hitting the back of his head.

“Your family owns a pretty big ranch outside of there.”

“They do.”

I could tell one thing about him in the dim lighting, though. He was smiling, and hell, if I didn’t want to see it.

Clearing my throat, I said, “I find it strange you know so much about me, yet I know nothing about you and can hardly even see your face.”

He chuckled, and it made my lower stomach pool with a heat I hadn’t experienced in a very long time.

Bryson stood and walked over to me, coming into the light. He was tall, maybe six foot? I had to lean my head back to look up at him.

He smiled, and my heart tripped over itself. “Can you see me now, Rose?”

“Is it me, or did you try to make my name sound sexier than hell when it left your lips?”

He laughed, and this time, it was a real belly laugh. “I wasn’t trying to do that.”

I nodded, almost disappointed he hadn’t been trying to flirt.

There was a beat of silence before Bryson said, “To make things fair, ask me anything.”

“Really?” I replied, suddenly no longer bored. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Where are you from?”

For a moment, he looked taken aback by my question. “That’s your first question?”

I shrugged. “It’s the one I want to know.”

He stared at me as if he couldn’t figure me out before he finally answered. “Kalispell, Montana.”

“Seriously?”

He used his finger to cross his heart. “Born and raised.”

“Do you miss Montana?”

The way his smile faded was answer enough. “I do. More than I’d like to admit.”

“It’s heaven on Earth, right?”

His eyes bounced around my face, then landed on my mouth as he said, “It is.”

My cheeks heated, and I prayed he couldn’t see the flush I was positive was there. Thank goodness no lights were on out here. I decided to ask another question. “Did you go to college in Montana?”

“I went straight from high school to the minor leagues.”

My brows rose. “Wow. Color me impressed.”

He smiled, and I returned the gesture.

“What else do you want to know about me?”

Tapping my finger on my lip, I drew in a breath, then pointed at him. “How many women in there have you paid to be here?”

His eyes widened in shock. “None. Did you think they were prostitutes?”

I shrugged. “I sure hear a lot of moaning, and I unfortunately walked in on two people getting it on in your second-floor bath. In the shower, actually. With it off, and they were fully clothed, so I’m not really sure why they were in there.”

His brows slammed down. “What? They were having sex in the shower?”

“Yeah, I thought it was strange too. But I say whatever floats your boat.”

“The shower?”

I nodded.

“For fuck’s sake,” he mumbled and turned to look out over the view.

Turning to look at him, I studied him for a moment, much more closely than I could see when he was on the pitcher’s mound. He had a nice profile. Everything was proportioned beautifully. He would be stunning to paint.

Okay, Rose. Stop gawking at the man.

“Why are you out here, really?”

“I don’t enjoy parties.”

Gaping at him, I said, “But this is your house, your party.”

“It’s my house, but not my party. I normally stay at a hotel when we play in Seattle and win.”

I blinked at him a few times. “Then why is the party here?”

“Because Nick lives here too.”

“Do you both co-own it or something?”

He shook his head. “No, just a roommate. He might as well move in with Loren, though, for as much time as he spends there.”

“If it’s not his house and you don’t like parties, why don’t you tell him that? Let them take the party to someone else’s house.”

He shrugged. “The guys enjoy it, so why not let them have a good time after a win.”

I turned and looked at the stadium. “I had you pegged all wrong.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them.

“Excuse me?” he asked, humor in his voice as he turned and faced me. “How did you have me pegged?”

I turned to peek up at him, and couldn’t help but smile at the boyish grin on his face. Oh well, in for a penny and all of that.

“Okay,” I said as I turned my body and leaned against the railing, facing the sliding glass door again. “I figured you were a manwhore, a rich, handsome manwhore, who was most likely in his massive bedroom with at least two or three women celebrating your win.”

He let out a choked laugh. “Wow. That’s stereotyping me, you know.”

I held up my hands in defense. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

“I’ll only accept your apology if you do something.”

My brows lifted. “If you think for one second I’m going to sleep with you, you’re crazy.”

He laughed and shook his head, this time holding his hands up. “I swear I will not ask you to sleep with me.”

“Okay, then what do you want me to do?”

“Do you play rummy?”

I stared at him. “I’m sorry, maybe you’re so pretty to look at, and my mind got confused, but did you ask me if I played rummy?”

Bryson nodded. “I did, and did you say I was *pretty* to look at?”

I winked and smiled at him. “I’m sorry, but isn’t that an old person’s game?”

Tossing his head back, he let out a hearty laugh before he pierced me with his eyes. What color were they? Maybe a light blue? For sure not brown...they were too light.

“There you go stereotyping once again. It’s not an old person’s game, and I like it. I’m bored out of my mind, and so are you, Chandler Bing. Are you afraid to learn something new?”

Smiling at his acknowledgment of my *Friends* comment earlier, I bit down on my lower lip. “Okay, I’ll play rummy with you.”

“I have some cards in here,” he said, motioning to the game room.

“Ahh, just so you know, someone was getting it on in that one room to the left.”

Cursing under his breath, he placed his hand on my lower back and guided me back into the penthouse.

Ignore the way that makes your female parts tingle, Rose.

What was it about a guy and his hand on your lower back to guide you somewhere that was such a turn-on? I’d seen my father do it to my mother a thousand times, and every so often, she would look up at him with a dreamy, lost look in her eyes.

Wait. What was it about Bryson doing it that made me feel that way? I’d never felt this flutter in my stomach before. Now I totally got why my mother looked at my father like she did.

I smiled as I thought about my parents. I wanted what they had. A love like theirs. The way my father adored my mother,

and she adored him. You could feel the love coming off them even after being married for over twenty years.

Bryson's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Stay here. I'm going to make sure no one is in Nick's room," he said as he walked to the door threw it open, then said, "Oh shit, sorry, Nick...sorry, Loren."

He shut the door and turned to look at me. His cheeks were as red as tomatoes. My hands came up to cover my mouth as I attempted not to laugh.

Bryson walked back to me, eyes wide, brows lifted, and his mouth shaped in an O. "That's definitely going to make things weird the next time I see Loren."

At that, I laughed.

I watched as Bryson went to a cabinet and opened a drawer. He pulled out some cards and walked back over to me. "Do you have anything warmer to wear?"

Frowning, I shook my head.

"Come on," he said, taking my hand and leading me to the door opposite Nick's. He opened it, and I followed him into a massive bedroom. I nearly moaned as I took in the room. A king-size bed with a view of the city that was somehow better than the one from the balcony. The room was spotless, and I filed it away to ask him if it was because of him or a housekeeper.

Bryson walked around a corner, then reappeared with two sweatshirts. "Here, it gets chilly on the roof."

"The roof?"

He winked and grabbed a blanket. "It's either there or in here with all the people bumping uglies."

I pressed my lips together tightly to keep from laughing yet again. "Lead the way."

For the next two hours, I played, of all things, rummy. With one of the best pitchers in the MLB. Not to mention, he

was hot as hell and the perfect gentleman. He even dared to go back into the house of sex to get us some food and drinks.

Before I knew it, I lay in a hammock with him as he pointed out the star constellations.

“How do you know all of this?” I asked, twisting my fingers around his. We hadn’t held hands, but he had started to twist his fingers with mine, and I absentmindedly did the same.

“When I was a little boy, my father taught me all about the stars and the planets.”

“Was he an astronomer?”

A soft smile appeared on his face. “He was. He worked for NASA, then met my mother, and she got pregnant. She was from Montana and told him she couldn’t live in Florida. She hated it there. She had finished her master’s degree and wanted to spend a few months visiting her grandparents. Plus, she had a job waiting for her back in Montana. He loved her so much he gave up his job, moved up to Kalispell, and helped her father run his business. All after only knowing her for three months.”

I turned and looked at Bryson. “He gave up everything for her?”

“He did,” Bryson said with a nod. “She was pregnant with me, so that was a big factor as well.”

“Wow,” I said as I slowly shook my head. “It must have been love at first sight.”

Bryson was quiet for a few moments. “It was.”

“That’s so romantic. What was your grandfather’s business?”

The way he smiled as he looked up at the sky made me smile. “He sold farm equipment.”

“Shut up! He left NASA to sell farm equipment?”

Bryson laced his fingers in mine, and I was positive he hadn’t realized he had done it. “He loved my mother and his

unborn baby that much. He never regretted it. He ended up teaching an astronomy course for a local college and said that between his family and teaching, it fulfilled every part of his life. I'm sure he loved working at NASA, but he always said our little family was the one thing in life that made him happy, and he never once regretted the decisions he made in his life."

He laughed softly. "He used to let me sit behind his desk when he taught. Man, I loved watching him talk about the moon and stars."

A strange pull in my chest had me longing for something I couldn't name. It felt like it was right there, but at the same time, so far out of reach. It felt like I was reaching for something in the dark and couldn't touch it, and all I knew was I suddenly felt lost without it.

I needed to ignore the strange feelings I was experiencing, so I asked, "You didn't want to pursue that career?"

"Nah, baseball was my passion. I knew from the first time my mother took me to T-ball that that was what I wanted to do."

Sighing, I nuzzled in closer to him. "You're lucky to have known what your passion was."

He rested his chin on top of my head. "You don't know what your passion is, Rose Shaw?"

"Nope. I mean, I think I do. I'm not sure, though. At one point in my life, I thought I knew for sure what I wanted to study. Then I discovered I had a knack for designing things. Houses, barns, things like that. I enjoy it, but I'm not sure it's my passion."

"What was the other thing you thought you wanted to do?"

I shrugged and stalled for time. I never talked about my love of painting. I decided to see what Bryson would think, so I told him. "I enjoy painting and creating artwork."

"Really?" he said, his thumb rubbing over my skin and sending little bolts of heat into my body.

"Do you have any pictures of your paintings?"

With a soft chuckle, I replied, “No, I haven’t painted in a while.”

Strangely enough, Bryson didn’t press me for some reason. I liked that about him. He must have sensed it was a delicate subject for me and let it go.

We lay there in silence for the longest time before he finally said, “I didn’t know who you were when you first walked in, but hell if I didn’t want to meet you.”

“When I came out on the balcony?” I asked with a soft chuckle.

“No, when you arrived with Loren.” He lifted our hands and held them up toward the sky before he dropped them but kept hold of my hand. “You walked in, and all the light in the room went directly to you.”

I adjusted my body to look at him. “What do you mean?”

He glanced down, and our eyes met. “You’re so different from all the women who come to these parties. Hell, you’re so different from most of the women I meet. Your confidence is evident from the get-go.”

“How so?”

“I’ve never seen a woman so sure of herself and comfortable in her own skin. It’s refreshing. And I might add, you’re the most beautiful woman here tonight.”

I laughed. “Please. Some of those women are wearing thousand-dollar dresses and shoes.”

He shrugged. “That doesn’t make them beautiful. What makes you different is you aren’t afraid to be yourself. You showed up at a party dressed in the cutest fucking pink sneakers I’ve ever seen, your hair pulled back in a ponytail through the back of a Mariners baseball cap, and a goddamn baseball shirt on. Not just any baseball shirt, a Mariners shirt with my number on it.”

Glancing at my shirt, I felt my cheeks heat. “Oh my God! It is your number! I had no idea.”

He winked and went on. “You’re more real than any of those women will ever be. And then, when you found out who I was, it didn’t faze you one bit.”

“Don’t forget I did think you were a rich manwhore.”

He laughed. “That’s right. I almost forgot. So, when are you leaving to go back to Montana?”

My smile faded, and I turned to stare up at the night sky. “Tomorrow afternoon.”

Bryson moved to lay on his side. I looked up and smiled. “What color are your eyes?”

He moved a piece of loose hair from the side of my face. “Green.”

I absentmindedly nodded. “I like the color green.”

“I like the color blue.”

Reaching up, I pulled at the strings of his hoodie. “How can you tell the color of my eyes in the dark?”

“I told you, I notice things.”

“Is this the part where you kiss me and then ask me to sleep with you?”

He lowered until his mouth was inches from mine. “I never asked you to sleep with me, Rose.”

Licking my lips, I reached up and brushed my fingers through his soft hair. “Maybe you should.”

His mouth sealed over mine with a kiss that was so passionate, I felt as if I was falling from the very roof we were on. I moaned when he palmed my breasts through the layers of shirts I had on. How could something like a touch through clothing turn me on so much? Was it because it was Bryson? It had to be. I hadn’t wanted anyone like this in... forever.

“More,” I gasped.

He was off the hammock and had me in his arms so fast I was nearly dizzy.

“I want you, Rose. Right here, right now,” he whispered against my neck as he placed a soft kiss on my skin.

My brain was screaming for me to stop. I liked Bryson, and it had been the first time I’d ever felt such a longing, a need for another person, but there was absolutely no future for us. On the other hand, my body begged for one night with him. One night to see what it would be like to have him buried inside me. One night to be reckless and take something for myself.

He quickly started to undo my jeans while I worked on his.

“Birth control?” I asked.

He drew back, and the look of devastation on his face nearly made me laugh. “I don’t have any condoms.”

I gaped at him. “How could you not have condoms? You grabbed a blanket!”

He blinked at me a few times. “Because it was going to be chilly up here. And I wasn’t exactly planning on having sex up on the rooftop tonight.”

“Should I be offended by that?”

He stared at me like I was insane. I dropped my head to his chest and groaned. Then I looked at him. “Are you a manwhore?”

“I’m sorry. I thought I already cleared that up earlier?”

“We did, sorry. Do you normally use a condom when you have sex?”

“Of course, I do.”

Smiling, I nodded. “Good. Last time you had sex?”

“You first.”

My mouth fell open, and I blinked at him several times. “Are you serious right now?”

“Yes! Why do I have to go first?”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t been with anyone in over a year. Maybe a year and a half.”

He drew back. “How is that possible? You’re insanely beautiful.”

With a shrug, I avoided the answer. He didn’t need to know the last man I was with had destroyed my self-confidence by cheating on me, and that I had boycotted men from that point forward. At least, until I felt the urge to have sex again, and tonight, I was for sure feeling the urge.

“That makes two of us. I haven’t slept with anyone in almost a year.”

I stepped back. “What? How is *that* possible?” I motioned to his body and waved my hands up and down. “You’re a baseball star, I’m assuming rich as hell, and the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. Women must be falling at your feet in every city you play in.”

He looked away sheepishly before he met my eyes. “I was in a long-term relationship, and Kennedy wanted things I didn’t. I haven’t been with anyone since we broke up.”

“How long were you together?”

“Four years.”

“Did she want to get married?”

He let out a humorless laugh before he said, “No, she wanted to fuck around with other baseball players while I paid for all her Jimmy Chows and expensive purses.”

I tried not to laugh as I said, “I think you mean Jimmy Choo.”

Bryson rolled his eyes. “I found out she was cheating when she came on to one of the players who had a conscience, and we parted ways. I also got checked to make sure she hadn’t given me anything, so I am clean.”

“I’m so sorry, Bryson.”

He shrugged. “It’s honestly okay. I wasn’t even upset when I found out. What does that tell you about our relationship.”

I ran my finger over the Mariners symbol on his sweatshirt. “So you’re clean and I’m clean.”

With a nod, he said, “Yes.”

Chewing on my lip, I debated if I would do something stupid. “Well, I’m on the pill.”

Bryson stared at me. Then shook his head. Then stared at me again.

“There are other ways we could do this, you know,” I said with a wicked smile. “My mouth, your mouth.”

I exhaled the breath I hadn’t even realized I had been holding. “Would it make me look like a manwhore myself if I told you that I want to feel you inside me, Bryson? Desperately.”

He pressed his lips to mine, kissing me like he couldn’t get enough of me this time. He cupped my face and broke the kiss. “No man will ever say no to that request, babe. Are you sure? I can pull out as well.”

I nodded.

Dropping his forehead to mine, he said, “Just so you know, I’m not going to last five minutes inside you bare, Rose.”

My hands went to his jeans. “Then you sure as hell better pitch a home run and make sure I come first.”

“I can guarantee that, babe.” Once my jeans were off, Bryson dropped to his knees. I leaned against the wall behind me and gasped when I felt him lick through my folds. A low growl came from him as he looked up at me. “You taste better than I dreamed you would.”

My chest rose and fell with heavy breaths, and the man hadn’t even started yet. My fingers sliced into his hair, and I pushed gently. “Less talking, more licking.”

A wicked smile appeared on his face. “With pleasure.”

“Sure as shit better be.”

I jumped when he laughed, and his hot breath hit my clit. I was going to scream if he didn’t do something soon.

And then he was there. His mouth and tongue quickly got to work, and I had to focus on keeping myself up on just one

leg since my other leg was over his shoulder.

“Does that feel good, baby?”

The pleasure was beyond amazing, and the only word I could get out sounded more like a grunt than anything.

His finger slid inside, and I shamelessly bucked against his face, holding him tight against me with my hand in his hair. I'd never behaved this way before, but I ached for more of him than I had ever desired anyone else.

He concentrated on my clit while his fingers worked me from the inside, and I felt my orgasm coming. I slapped my hand over my mouth to cover my scream, and Bryson reached up and pulled on my arm, drawing my hand away so he could hear every sound I made.

His eyes met mine when I looked down at him, and I fell apart. Screaming out his name as he sucked and licked me to the most amazing orgasm of my life. When I finally came down from the high, I was in his lap as he sat on the patio of the rooftop.

Embarrassed by my wanton ways, I buried my face in his neck and whispered, “I'm sure all of Seattle heard that.”

“I hope they did, and that they know that it was me who made you scream like that,” he softly said, kissing my forehead. I looked up, and our eyes met.

“I want to make love to you, Rose.”

It felt like someone punched me in the chest, but in a good way. Bryson managed to stand, me in his arms, and move us to an outdoor chaise lounge. He laid me down, and I watched as he finished undressing. I sat up, pulled my shirt off, then my bra, and tossed them to the side. I had no idea where my sneakers and jeans were, and I couldn't have cared less.

Picking up my foot, he kissed the inside of my ankle, then behind my knee. My body felt like it was on fire as he moved his way up my body, pressing his mouth softly on my skin as he worked his way to one nipple. When he took it in his mouth, I hissed out in pleasure. His other hand went between my legs, spreading them open for him to touch me. I was

positive I was soaking wet. I'd never had sex without using a condom, but being with Bryson at that moment felt right. In the back of my mind, my conscience was screaming that everything between us would change the moment we made love. That this one-night stand would be much more than that, not only physically but also emotionally. I ignored every warning bell and let my legs fall open more.

"Bryson," I moaned, my fingers digging into his back. "I need you inside me."

He chuckled softly, positioned himself over me, and stared into my eyes.

"Why does this feel like my first time?" he asked.

Was it because he wasn't wearing a condom? Or did he feel the same strange connection? Because if we were both feeling the same thing, that was very, very dangerous.

I pushed my thoughts aside and placed my hand on the side of his face. His eyes softened, and he leaned down to kiss me. The kiss was so soft and tender it nearly brought me to tears. Where had Bryson been all the years I wasted on other guys? And why did he have to come along now...when a relationship would be all but impossible.

"Rose," he whispered as he pushed inside me. He closed his eyes and moaned. "Fuck, you're so tight."

Wrapping my legs around him, I relaxed my body, allowing him to move in easier. When he was fully seated, he locked his gaze with mine. And as if he could read my thoughts, he asked, "Where have you been?"

I forced back the tears that threatened to spill free. What in the world was wrong with me?

Before I could even try to think of something to say, Bryson moved slowly in and out of me. The rhythm felt like waves of pleasure rolling over my body until I couldn't take it any longer. It was torture. I needed to feel more of him.

Digging my heels into his ass, I demanded he do more. "Faster. Harder. Bryson, I want more."

He hadn't disappointed me. More was what I had asked for, so more was what he had given me. It wasn't fucking, though. It was passionate, mind-blowing lovemaking. Unlike anything I had ever experienced before. And if he was even feeling half of what I was, we were both royally screwed...and not in the good way.

He put his hands under my ass and tilted my body up to hit a spot deep inside me. I gasped and held on to the arms of the chair as Bryson drove in harder and deeper.

"Bryson, I'm going to come!" I cried out right before I felt the tingling sensation in the tips of my toes. Before I knew it, my body was trembling with an orgasm so powerful, I thought I left my damn body and ascended to the heavens from this rooftop.

Bryson started to move faster, and I could tell he was there. "Rose, fuck, fuck, fuck."

He pulled out and moved against my belly, his cum hot on my bare skin. A small part of me wished he hadn't pulled out. But even on birth control, I wasn't ready to become a mother to a child whose father I'd only known for a few hours and who was on the road most of the year and lived in Seattle. No. Thank. You.

Bryson rolled off me and laid on the lounge chair that barely fit us both.

"What did you do to me, Rose Shaw?"

Smiling, I ran my fingertips along the top of his thigh. "I could say the same thing, Bryson Robinson."



Bryson and I lay wrapped together in a quilt as I stared up at the sky. At some point, we had moved off the lounge chair, and Bryson had pulled the quilt off the hammock and laid it on the rooftop patio.

The first rays of sunlight were making their way across the sky, and my brain screamed for me to get up and go. Turning, I looked at Bryson. I mean, I really, really looked at him. He looked like a Greek god with his arm over his eyes. I had never experienced sex with another man like I had with Bryson last night. First, we made love, and it was glorious. Then he had me hold the railing that overlooked Seattle as he took me from behind. He was a dirty talker, my first ever, and boy, did I quickly realize that turned me on even more. I closed my eyes and let the memory of it come back to me.

“Do you like my cock inside you like this, Rose?”

Yes. Please.

“I’m going to make sure you feel me for days.”

Okay by me!

It had been mind-blowing, and when he made me come, I had screamed out his name each time. I was positive I woke up some people with the way I cried out when I came while holding the rail. Bryson had made sure I came each time before he did, and three orgasms in one night was a damn record for me. I’d also never come with a man inside me, so that was another plus. I wasn’t sure why I had never experienced an orgasm while having sex. I knew some women did, and some didn’t. Maybe the men I had been with before simply wanted to come fast so the ride was over too soon. I wanted to ignore how amazing it had all felt, but the longer I lay there, the harder it was to pretend it was a one-night stand that meant nothing. It had felt like it meant something, and I saw it in his eyes as well. And that scared the living hell out of me. I wasn’t built to have a long-distance relationship. I was the type of woman who would not be okay that the man she was dating was worshipped by thousands of women. It wasn’t that I wasn’t confident with myself, it was because I was a goddamn realist. Not many men would resist when women threw themselves at them all the time. Okay, and maybe I lacked a little self-confidence, but who wouldn’t! The man was hella gorgeous, rich, and filled out a baseball uniform like he was poured into it.

Leave, Rose. You need to leave.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to carefully slide out from under the quilt. I rushed around the rooftop and found my clothes and sneakers, then quickly got dressed. Then with one last look over my shoulder, I closed my eyes and rubbed at the ache in my chest. Giving one last look at the man who had ruined me for all future men, I whispered, “Goodbye, Bryson,” before I ran for my life.

Chapter Two

BRYSON

I wasn't sure how long I had sat out on the roof as I watched the day wake up. Rose had slipped away at some point, and I was pissed I hadn't felt her move. I had been exhausted from the game, and staying up nearly all night talking and making love to Rose didn't help my exhaustion, so once I fell asleep, I was out. I hadn't slept so soundly in who knows how long. I was positive it wasn't because I was tired, but more that I held Rose in my arms while I slept.

Standing, I walked over to the glass railing and exhaled. The memory of Rose holding on to it as I fucked her from behind made my dick jump. I hadn't even gotten her fucking phone number. Sure, I could get it from Loren, but why hadn't I asked for it or she offered it up? The truth was, I hadn't thought she would run like that. I should have known. There was a connection between us, and I saw it in her eyes that she felt it as well. It was a feeling I hadn't ever experienced before. It was like we had been made for one another. Like she was the missing piece of a puzzle I hadn't finished putting together yet.

Turning, I headed back in and went straight to my room. I didn't want to shower since I could still smell her on my body, but I forced myself to do it. I got dressed and made my way downstairs. As I descended the steps, I could hear that the cleaning crew was already there. Amber and her husband, Drake, were two of the nicest people I had ever met. They owned the cleaning company and had a plethora of people to come in and clean, but they always did my place personally. I wasn't sure if it was because I had been one of their first clients and gave them a shot, or if it was because damn near the entire team used them after I referred them. Either way, they always took care of the place after a celebration party. I never even had to call them; they just knew to show up after a home win.

As I made my way into the living room, I glanced around. They must have gotten here early because the living room looked spotless. Even the wall of windows sparkled. I had a thirteen-million-dollar penthouse designed by one of the best architects in the country, yet I still felt out of place in it. It was supposed to be serene, but it felt cold to me. The two-hundred-and-seventy-degree views from the floor-to-ceiling windows were nice enough. But the view wasn't what I had grown up with. It offered up rich light woods and marble floors. A bar area with a pool table, a home cinema, a large office with a library, and a spa-like bathroom with its own steam shower and hot sauna. Not to mention the state-of-the-art kitchen that would make any chef green with envy, yet it had never felt like home to me. Hell, I never had to leave the damn place. I had a view of the Space Needle and Lake Union, yet it was missing one thing. It wasn't Montana. It wasn't home. During the off season, I always went back to my home state. I had a small house I lived in not far from my parents. It was perfect for a bachelor, and when I was there, I was at my happiest. The people there didn't care if I was a professional athlete, they still treated me like I was just a regular person. Strange since I was living my dream. I loved baseball, but I had to admit that the past few months something had been off. Most likely caused from the pain in my pitching shoulder.

When I stepped into the kitchen, I found Nick and Loren in there already. Loren was at the table, and Nick was making eggs and bacon.

"I was wondering when you would emerge," Nick said, looking up from the meal he was preparing.

"Where did you disappear to?" Loren asked.

I frowned as I poured a cup of coffee. Had she not spoken to Rose yet? When had she left? Would she give me Rose's number?

"I spent some time up on the roof."

Leaning back against the counter, I waited for her to say something, but she took a bite of her bagel and kept reading

something on her phone. Then it buzzed with a text, and she dropped her bagel.

“What in the living hell?”

“What’s wrong?” Nick and I both asked Loren.

She turned around and looked at us. “Rose just texted me from the airport. She’s taking an earlier flight and heading back to Montana.”

“Did she say why?” Nick asked.

Loren slowly shook her head. “I’m the worst friend ever. I left her last night to mingle at the party alone, and I don’t even know what time she went back to my place.”

I wasn’t sure if Rose would want me to tell them what happened between us last night, so I kept my mouth shut.

“You’re not a bad friend, baby,” Nick said, pulling her up and hugging her. He looked at me over her head, a shit-eating grin on his face, and I was pretty sure Nick knew what had happened between us and wasn’t about to tell Loren until Rose did.

“She’ll never want to come back to Seattle ever again. We were supposed to celebrate her graduation before she officially started her new job...the one she’s been dreading.”

A strange twist in my chest had me set my coffee down, realizing I needed to get out of here. “Ummm, I think I’m going to go for a run before we watch films.”

Nick gave me a head nod as he kissed Loren on top of the head while she went on and on about what a terrible friend she was.

I couldn’t get out of the kitchen fast enough because it was obvious my roommate knew everything I wasn’t saying.



I hadn’t heard a damn thing the coach said. My mind drifted back to last night. The moment I first saw Rose standing in the

middle of my kitchen popping an olive into her mouth as she surveyed everything with a sharp eye. Then to us sitting in the hammock talking about the stars. The night would have been one of the best of my life, even if we hadn't slept together. I had never felt so comfortable with any other woman. Not even Kennedy, who didn't care about my life before baseball. She had argued with me for months about going to Montana to see my parents until she finally gave in. While there she had managed to pull her face out of her phone long enough to give them a cursory greeting, and that was about it.

“Dude, what in the hell are you thinking about?” Nick whispered as he leaned in and hit my arm.

Ignoring his question, I grabbed my notebook and stood. Coach had dismissed everyone for practice.

After a few hours of drills, I headed to the batting cages to let off some steam. The sound of the bat cracking eased the built-up frustration I'd had since I woke up and found Rose had slipped away. I was even able to ignore the pain in my right shoulder as I concentrated on hitting the ball.

Why in the hell had she left without saying goodbye? Had she not felt the connection between us? Maybe she had and it spooked her? Hell, five years ago, that feeling would have scared the hell out of me.

“Dave said you were over here. Better not let coach see you in here batting. You risk hurting that arm, and you're fucked.”

I ignored his comment.

“Dude, I haven't seen you act like this in...hell, I don't think I've ever seen you act like this. Want to talk about it?”

“No,” I replied as I hit another ball.

“Does this have anything to do with you hooking up with Rose last night?”

I shot him a quick look, then focused back to where another ball would be coming. The crack of the bat felt like it rippled through the air.

“I saw you come in for food, then head up to the rooftop deck. I followed you and saw Rose. What happened? How did you even meet her? Did you know who she was? Why did she leave? You hooked up with her, didn’t you?”

Walking out of the batting cage, I grabbed a towel and wiped off my sweat. “Are we playing a game of rapid-fire questions?”

He smiled, but I could tell it was somewhat forced.

“It’s Loren’s best friend, Bryson. She is going to lose her shit when she finds out.”

I grabbed my bag, and we headed back toward the facility. “Why would Loren care if Rose and I hooked up?”

“You did sleep with her! I knew it. I could tell the moment you walked into the kitchen. You had a...a look about you. And she cares because she doesn’t want to see her best friend get hurt.”

Stopping, I turned to face him. “What? I had a look about me?”

He gave me a one-shoulder shrug. “Well, I know you haven’t hooked up with anyone since Kennedy. So you just looked different.”

I raised a brow. “How do you know that?”

“Dude, we live together, and my room is always next to yours at hotels, so yeah, I know you haven’t.”

We started walking again, and I let out a frustrated sigh. “She left without even saying goodbye.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“What does that mean?”

Nick frowned, then shook his head. “I don’t know Rose all that well, but from what Loren has told me, and the little I have been around her, she...”

His voice trailed off.

“She what?”

Turning to look at me, he said, “I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s like she has this wall up that keeps her guarded. I’m not sure why, and I haven’t really talked to Loren about it much. The most she ever told me was that Rose had one long-term relationship, and the guy ended up cheating on her big time. She told me once that Rose would have to fall head over heels in love with someone in order for her to trust them again with her heart. From what Loren says, she’s not innocent and has hooked up with a few guys, but she never dates them. It’s always a no-strings-attached kind of thing.”

I rubbed at the back of my neck. “Yeah, I didn’t get the impression from her that she hooks up with guys often.”

“No, I don’t think she does. That’s why I was shocked to see her with you.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “We had a great night, Nick. I mean, she is so different from all these women who throw themselves at us. Hell, she showed up at the party in jeans and pink sneakers.”

He laughed. “That’s Rose. She has a devil-may-care attitude. She’s not careless and thinks things through, from what I can tell. That’s why I’m a bit surprised she slept with you. I don’t see Rose having very many one-night stands.”

I shook my head. “Something was there between us. I felt it, and I know she did too. Which makes her leaving all that more perplexing.”

Smiling, he hit the side of my arm. “Then do something about it if you like her. I will say, I don’t know how keen she’ll be on a long-distance romance, and I have a feeling sending roses and candy won’t win you any points.”

We started walking once again, and by the time we made it through the building and out to Nick’s sports car, I had formulated an idea.

I tossed my bag into the trunk next to Nick’s, and he laughed. “Judging by that look on your face, I’d say you’re officially a man with a plan.”

With a wink, I slipped into the car and pulled out my phone and searched for a real estate agent. “Yeah, I have a plan...let’s hope it works.”



I loved Boston and was thrilled anytime we played against the Sox. Since I was considered the “Ace” pitcher, I would start and be expected to pitch deep into the game. I just wished I could get my mind on said game. Thoughts of Rose and the dull ache in my shoulder were sidetracking me.

“Bryson, how’s it going?”

Turning to see Caleb Monty walk up behind me, I smiled. He was our number-five pitcher in our rotation and a great ball player. Kid was like me, he could pitch and hit. It was rare for a pitcher to be able to also hit well. And most never did anything but pitch. I liked to hit, though, and was lucky enough that the coaches let me.

“Hey, Caleb, how’s the arm?”

He moved his arm in a circular pattern and smiled. “Itching for some pitches.”

I laughed. “All in good time, kid. What do you think about all of this so far?”

“It’s like a dream come true if I’m being honest. All I’ve ever dreamed of doing is playing baseball.”

“Enjoy it,” I said as I slapped him on the back, and we walked into the visitor locker room.

“Bryson, I was, ummm, wondering if I might be able to talk to you later after the game.”

I nodded and wondered what Caleb wanted to talk about. The serious look on his face concerned me.

“Of course, I’m grabbing dinner with Nick at the hotel restaurant, if you don’t mind him being there, we can talk over dinner.”

He smiled. “I don’t mind at all. Was hoping to get some pointers from you. It’s a hell of a lot harder than I thought it was going to be.”

Letting out a lighthearted chuckle, I nodded. “You can pick our brains all you want. I’ll talk to you after the game.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

I watched as he headed toward his locker and couldn’t help but smile. I remember the day I came up from the minors, and how confident I thought I was, only to realize no one gave a shit that I was a star high school pitcher and dominated the minors. The MLB was a whole other beast.

Thankfully, once I walked out to that mound, it didn’t take long to get my head in the game where it needed to be. Although, a certain blonde with blue eyes popped into my mind every so often. I drew in a long breath and exhaled, hoping for at least some reprieve from Rose haunting my every thought.

Chapter Three

ROSE

I set my glass of wine down on the coffee table along with a cheese and fruit plate I had made. I was dressed in sweats, a T-shirt, and Bryson's Mariners sweatshirt I had accidentally taken.

Okay, that was a lie. I knew I had it on, but it smelled like him, and if I was honest, I wanted something to remember that night. Since I couldn't have the man, I'd take his sweatshirt.

Hitting the button on my remote to unmute the TV, I watched as the game between the Boston Red Sox and the Seattle Mariners started. My heart did a flip when the camera went to Bryson. It had been two weeks since we'd been together, and I had dreamed of him every single night.

I held my breath as the first batter walked up to the plate. Then I screamed when Bryson struck him out.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table, and I saw it was Loren. I had been avoiding her as much as I could since I returned home from my trip to Seattle. The few times I did text or answer her calls, I gave excuses as to why I couldn't talk.

With a deep breath, I slid my finger over the phone. "Hey! How's it going?"

"It's going," Loren said. "I just got home from work, and I'm exhausted."

Loren worked for the Seattle Mariners as an executive assistant to some big shot in the office. It was how she and Nick had first met.

"Do you ever get tired of Nick being on the road so much?"

"That's a random question."

Laughing, I replied, "No, it's not. I was curious, that's all."

She paused for a moment. “Well, I mean sometimes it sucks having him gone so much, but when he’s here, he makes up for it, if you know what I mean.”

I laughed. “I can guess.”

“When were you going to tell me that you slept with Bryson?”

My mouth dropped open, and it took me a hot second to find my words. “I’m sorry?”

Loren laughed. “Please, men are worse than women when it comes to gossip. Nick found out from Bryson that you guys spent the night together, and he couldn’t get to my office fast enough to tell me. I’ve been trying to talk to you about it, but you’ve been avoiding me like the black plague.”

“I’ve been busy, that’s all.”

“Yeah, busy avoiding me.”

“I’ll have you know I’m busy with my new job. It’s a lot different interning and working there full time...as a real... person.”

I closed my eyes and cursed to myself.

“A real person as opposed to what?”

“It’s just now that I have a degree, they’re giving me more responsibility. That means working long hours and sometimes on the weekend. With the time I took off to come visit, I had a lot to catch up on.”

“Hmm, fine. I’ll give you that excuse. Now spill it, Rose. This is huge!”

I laughed again, but it sounded more like a nervous babble. “Why is it huge?”

Loren sighed. “First of all, this is so unlike either one of you. Believe it or not, Bryson is a really nice guy, and he doesn’t sleep around. He was in a long-term relationship for a while, and Nick said when it ended, Bryson said he was taking a break from dating. Just like when you said you were taking a

break after he who shall not be named did to you what we don't talk about because he's a major asshole."

I chewed on my lower lip; not sure I wanted the answer to my question. I asked anyway.

"Did she break his heart?"

Loren laughed. "God, no. I honestly don't even know how Bryson stayed with her as long as he did. I think he was just too nice of a guy to break things off."

"What was her last name?"

"Kennedy Owens. I never liked her at all. She was only with Bryson for the money and for the attention she got from being on his arm. Nick couldn't stand her."

"What did Bryson see in her, then?"

Loren paused for a few moments. "I'm not sure. They dated a long time; he knew her back from school in Montana, but they had only been friends then. From what I understand, they ran into each other one day and quickly started to date. I think deep down, he knew she was cheating. She was so pissed he broke up with her that she threatened to go to the press with some made-up lie about him. The dumbass put it in a text, though, and Bryson was smart enough to save it. She texted him for months after he broke up with her, begging him to give her another chance."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Wow is right. She's crazy. Even tried to say she was pregnant in a desperate attempt to keep him. I'm glad she's gone."

With my attention back on the television, I watched as one of the batters hit the ball. Bryson ran toward first and caught the ball, getting the Sox player out. I fist pumped and jumped up and down while silently cheering.

"I bet," I said as I settled back on the sofa, reached for my cup of tea, and took a drink.

"Now that we've gotten the crazy ex out of the picture, tell me everything...and do not leave a single thing out! By the

way, are you watching the game?”

I grinned like a schoolgirl. I had been dying to talk about my night with Bryson but had been afraid to. It had been such an incredible evening, and a part of me had wanted to pretend it had been a dream so I could ignore the empty feeling I'd had since I walked away.

After telling Loren all about finding Bryson on the balcony, the stars, the long talks, and the amazing sex, she sighed, then said, “Why in the hell did you sneak out if it was such a great night?”

I groaned. “Loren, you know why I left!”

“No, I don't know why you left. Enlighten me, will you?”

I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. “What good would it have done for me to wake up in his arms and realize that was it.”

“What was it?”

“That nothing else could happen between us. I was leaving to go back to Montana. I live here; he lives.... everywhere!”

“Just during the season.”

My laugh sounded bitter. “Which is long, and they hardly get any time off, and the days they do get off, they're practicing. I hear you complain about Nick being gone all the time. And you live in the same city.”

She exhaled. “Okay, so I admit that maybe a future with you two wasn't in the cards, but why sneak away? If it was that great of a night, why not end it with a goodbye fuck?”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously?”

“Nick said Bryson seemed upset that you just left.”

I brought my thumb up to my mouth and started to bite on the nail. “Mad upset?”

“I don't think so, but Nick said he must have really liked you to have done the deed with you.”

“Please. We were both caught up in the moment.”

“What was it like? The sex?”

My cheeks heated. “Seriously, the best I’ve ever had.”

Loren screamed. “Shut up! Was he a gentleman?”

“He was.”

“And?” she prompted.

“I’m not kissing and telling.”

Loren huffed. “Bitch, please. How many times did you come?”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Let’s just say he made sure to take care of me first, multiple times. Oh, and he’s a dirty talker.”

She fell into a fit of giggles. “No way! Like how dirty? Like get on my face and ride me until you cream all over my —”

“Oh my God! Stop talking! He wasn’t that dirty.”

Loren laughed.

“He was also very sweet and gentle. It was a nice combination of the two.

“I figured he would. Like I said, he’s a nice guy. I think the two of you would be perfect for one another.”

Exhaling, I felt a strange sense of sadness wash over me. “Well, it was only ever going to be the one night since we don’t even live in the same zip code. I will say, I think he’s ruined me for all other men.”

“It makes me sad you won’t even think about opening your heart to someone, Rose. One bad apple...”

“Ruins the whole bushel.”

“Bullshit. You’re just scared to put yourself out there. I get that it can be scary to take that risk with a guy like Bryson, but I think he’d be worth it.”

I shook my head even though I knew she couldn’t see me. “It was one night, Loren. That’s it. One amazing, pleasure-filled night.”

“Rose, you know not all guys are jerks.”

“I know that. And it’s par for the course that I would meet the one guy I could honestly let myself fall for, and he’s totally out of reach.”

“He’s not, though,” Loren softly replied.

“My life is here in Montana, Loren. I’m not like you. I don’t enjoy the parties and the functions and the limelight. I don’t want to see pictures of me on the Internet. I like sitting on my sofa in old sweats with popcorn while I watch a movie I’ve seen a dozen times before. I don’t want to share someone with millions of other people, and maybe that makes me a bitch, but that’s how I feel. I’m already terrified of another guy breaking my heart, and Bryson Robinson could very well break it, if not shatter it.”

“But Bryson—”

“Is a pitcher for a Major League Baseball team. From what I’ve read, he’s one of the best.”

“*The* best.”

Laughing, I replied, “You work for the team, so you’re biased.”

“No, I’m not. He really is. He’s one of the best. His stats speak for themselves. That’s all besides the point. He asked me for your number before they left for Boston, and I said I would ask you if I could pass it along.”

My heart screamed for me to tell her to give it to him. But my head, the part I always listened to, said no. It was one beautiful night to remember, and I was going to leave it at that.

“No,” I whispered.

“What?” Loren replied. Clearly, she had expected me to say yes. “Why in the hell not?”

“It was one night, Loren. A night I’ll remember for the rest of my life. But that’s all. What good would it do for me to talk to him on the phone? All it would lead to is me wishing for a man I couldn’t have.”

“You do know that there are tons of MLB players who are married. They even have kids!”

“I don’t want that type of relationship, Loren. Please respect that I’m asking you to drop it.”

She sucked in a breath. “That’s why you ran. You felt something for him, Rose.”

I wanted to argue with her and tell her she was wrong, but I knew better. I’d known Loren since we were six. She knew about Kyle. The one guy I had fallen hard for who ended up destroying my heart and trust in men. She’d known about the few guys I’d hooked up with, and she knew why I wasn’t willing to give my heart to anyone. Not right now, at least. I was young and starting a career. I had plenty of time. Plus, how can I start a relationship with someone when I’m so lost with what I want in my own life? The last thing I needed was to lose my heart as well.

Closing my eyes, I fought the urge to sigh. But with Bryson, it had all been different. The feelings I had felt with him were nothing I had ever experienced before, not even with Kyle. One could argue I had been too young and naïve, and what I had thought was love at the time was nothing more than a crush. Yes, running from Bryson might have made me a coward, but I knew I wouldn’t have been able to look him in the eyes and say goodbye. Loren was dead-on. I felt something, something very powerful. And that terrified me.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and drew in a long, deep breath. “Please, Loren.”

It was all I needed to say for her to soften her voice. “Okay. But just so you know, I think he felt something, too, and I’m not so sure he’s going to simply walk away.”

I watched as the camera went to Bryson once again. He was saying something to another player, and then he laughed. I could almost hear that laughter and feel it rumble through my body.

“I’m sure Bryson Robinson will forget all about me and our night together soon enough.”

Loren remained quiet for a few seconds before she said, “You didn’t see him, Rose Marie. I highly doubt he’s going to forget about you.”

A part of me hoped that Loren was right, while the other part prayed she wasn’t. The only thing I needed to worry about now was the part of me that wanted Bryson not to forget, and how it outweighed the other part by a whole hell of a lot.



“Why are you asking me all these questions about baseball?” my younger cousin Nathan asked as he worked a horse in one of the round pens on his parents’ part of our family ranch. Uncle Tanner and Aunt Timberlynn, Nathan’s parents, raised horses as well as ran a rescue for wild mustangs on their part of Shaw Ranch. And while his sister Lily was crazy over horses, Nathan’s current love was baseball and bulls. In that order.

“I’m curious what all these numbers mean?” I said with a smile.

He looked at me with a suspicious expression before he walked up to the horse, patted it on the neck, then walked over to where I was sitting on the pen fence. He held up his hand, and I handed him the phone.

After reading it quickly, he smiled. “Bryson Robinson is one of the best pitchers in the league.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “So I’ve heard.”

“Okay, so the ERA basically means how many runs the pitcher is allowed during the nine innings. Most don’t pitch the whole nine, though.”

I nodded. I’d figured that out by how many games I’d watched of the Mariners.

“The lower the number, the better. Then this IP is just innings pitched. The WHIP is walks and hits for innings pitched. SO/w is strikeout to walk. This stat is weird to me.

The ERA-plus tells you how many leagues are better than that pitcher, which not many are in Robinson's case."

His silver eyes lifted to meet my gaze. "Why did you pick Robinson's stats?"

I shrugged. "I met him while I was visiting Loren in Seattle."

Nathan's eyes went wide as saucers. "Wait, you met Bryson Robinson? Like, in person?"

"I did."

I thought Nathan was going to have a fit right there. "Holy shit! Holy fucking shit! Does Josh know?"

"Nathan!" I scolded. "Swearing in front of a lady?"

He waved me off. "You don't count. I can't believe you met Bryson Robinson. Rose Marie, this is freaking huge!"

With my hands on my hips, I replied, "I don't count? What does that mean?"

It was Nathan's turn to roll his eyes. "You're family, you don't count. Where did you meet him? What did you talk about? Was he nice? I heard he's nice. He does a bunch of volunteer work. Did you watch him play while you were there? Why didn't you tell me you met him? Did you tell Josh, and why didn't you ask Josh about the stats?"

I jumped off the fence and walked over to my cousin. Putting my hand over his mouth, I said, "Jesus Christ, you sound like a damn girl with all the rambling."

He pushed my hand away. "You just told me not to swear!"

"I'm older, so I'm allowed to swear."

He stared at me, and it took me a few moments to realize he was waiting for me to answer his questions.

"No, I haven't told Josh because I knew he'd act like a freak. I thought you were more mature, but I see I was wrong."

He snarled his lip at me, then waved for me to go on.

“I went to a game with Loren. She wanted me to go to a party afterward at her boyfriend Nick’s house. It’s Nick Rossi.”

“He’s a good player too.”

I nodded and went on. “Turns out, Nick is roommates with Bryson. I walked out onto a balcony, and he was sitting out there. I didn’t know who he was at first.”

Nathan took a few steps back and covered his heart. “I would have freaked! I would have died right then and there.”

Laughing, I said, “Well, he was hiding. He isn’t much of a party type of guy.”

He nodded. “He used to date this hot girl. They knew each other in college or something. She said in an interview once he hated going to parties and functions.”

I forced myself to smile. So we had that in common. I had yet to Google Bryson’s ex. Whenever I started to type in her name, I stopped myself before hitting Enter.

“Well, anyway, I’ve been watching the games and was curious about what all this meant.”

Nathan smiled. “You thought he was cute, didn’t you?”

“He was rather handsome, yes.”

“Man, too bad you didn’t start dating him. Can you imagine what the guys on my team would say if I told them my cousin was dating Bryson Robinson. Or Josh got to say his sister was dating one of the greatest pitchers ever. Well, maybe not ever.”

If he only knew.

Frowning, I said, “I live in Montana, Nathan. How in the world would that work?”

He shrugged. “I know it would never happen, but how cool would it be if it did?”

I shook my head and took my phone back out of his hands.

“Speaking of, you should come to one of my games.”

Putting my hands on my hips, I gave him an inquisitive look. “Why would I come to one of your games?”

He feigned being hurt. “Because I’m your favorite cousin, and once I tell all the guys, they’re going to want to meet you. Even the coach! Just think how great that could be for me.”

The horse Nathan had been working with walked up and nudged him on the back, knocking him off balance for a moment.

“Looks like he wants to work some more. As far as attending a game, I’ll see.”

Turning, I climbed the fence and started to walk toward my Bronco.

“Come on, Rose Marie! I’ll owe you one!”

I lifted my hand and waved as I laughed and walked away.

Chapter Four

BRYSON

Lewis rotated my arm and lifted it as I winced. He sighed, then rotated it the other way, causing me to flinch.

“Cold baths aren’t going to help this, Bryson,” Lewis stated dryly.

I smiled but knew by the look on his face he wouldn’t pretend not to notice my pain any longer. Lewis Carpenter was the lead physical therapist for the Mariners and worked mainly with the pitchers. My shoulder had started to bother me last year, but I pushed through the pain. With the start of the current season, though, it grew worse after each game I pitched. Not even a few days’ break gave it enough time to recover.

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at me with a hard look. “You need to tell him.”

By him, he meant Trent Hill. The pitching coach. Standing, I rotated my arm. “I’m going to go sit in an ice bath. I’ll talk to Trent today.”

“You need to, Bryson. If you don’t, you know I will. I can’t ignore the look of pain on your face today.”

I hit him on the side of the arm. “I’m meeting with him at four, Lewis. I’ll talk to him.”

He seemed relieved. After gathering his stuff, he turned and headed toward the exit. Caleb walked in, and they exchanged hellos. I watched as Caleb made his way over to the door where the hot and ice tubs were. I slid off the table, grabbed my towel, and headed in the same direction.

When I walked into the room, I saw Caleb already getting into the ice tub, or trying to, at least. He was hovering over it like a fucking crab. I walked over, pulled my shirt off, and slid in. The hot and ice tubs held around two to three guys each.

Caleb looked like he was about to die as he slowly lowered himself. I, on the other hand, sank all the way in.

“Fuck, how do you just get in like that?” he asked.

“Got to bite the bullet and do it.”

He let out a gasp as he finally submerged his entire body.

“Fucking hell,” he said, and I swore I heard his teeth chattering.

“The ice bath is going to be your friend, Caleb. The quicker you get used to it, the better.”

He nodded but didn’t speak.

“After a hot shower, turn it to cold and stand under it for as long as you can stand it. Then keep increasing the time. Before you know it, you’ll be sliding right on into the ice tub.”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “If you say so.”

“You did good out there today.”

He smiled. “Thanks. That means a lot coming from you. I appreciate you letting me do drills with you today. I’ve really been learning a lot by watching you.”

After the game in Boston, Caleb asked for me to pretty much be his mentor. I, of course, agreed to do it. Someday he would most likely be taking over my spot. Sooner rather than later, by the way he pitched the other night.

“Someday, you’ll be the Ace pitcher, so watch all of us as much as you can. The warm-ups, the stretches, all of it. You’ll find your rhythm once you start doing it all, but don’t do it simply because you see me doing it. Find what works best for you and your arm.”

He nodded, and that time, I for sure heard his teeth clattering.

When I stood to get out, I had never seen anyone move so fast. He practically stood and jumped out of the damn tub.

“Christ!” he said as he shivered. “That’s fucking cold.”

I glanced at the clock. I still had some time before I had to meet with Trent. Nick had been in the hot tub and was making his way over to me.

“So?” he asked once Caleb had thanked me again and headed out.

“Not here.”

“Fuck,” he mumbled. “That bad?”

I gave him a look that silently repeated I wasn’t going to talk about it.

Once we had changed, Nick looked in my direction. I nodded, grabbed my bag, and we headed to one of the meeting rooms. Once we found an empty one, we stepped inside, and Nick shut the door.

“Well?”

“Lewis is pressuring me to tell Trent. He thinks I might have torn something, but he’s hoping it’s just inflamed, and maybe a couple of weeks off will help.”

Nick’s eyes went wide. “Shit, they’re not going to like that. Their star pitcher out for a few weeks?”

“What else can I do? Lewis won’t let it go, and when he rotated my arm today, I nearly came off the fucking table.”

“Do you think you have more than one tear?” Nick asked.

I sighed as I pushed my hand through my hair. “I’m not sure. Feels like it.”

He shook his head. “Fuck. I told you weeks ago you needed to do something about your arm, Bryson. You wouldn’t listen to me and kept saying it would be fine. Now you might have done some real damage. Just because you’re only twenty-eight doesn’t mean you can’t get injured. Hell, age doesn’t give a shit at all when you use your arm daily like you do.”

Closing my eyes, I sat down in a chair. “I know. I thought I would work it out.”

“Didn’t work out too well, did it?”

“It might be nothing, Nick. Stop jumping down my throat. You don’t think I know how serious this could be? It’s my fucking career. I know what it means.”

A strange feeling came over me after the words came out of my mouth. Would it be so bad if it meant the end of my career? I had always planned to play as long as I could or until they took me off the roster. I’d be damned if I finished out my career as a washed-up ball player. Maybe I could go out on top. The thought gave me pause.

Nick stopped pacing and faced me. “Even if you need surgery, you can rehab it and come back.”

I nodded and decided not to share my revelation with my best friend. At least, not yet. My mind was all over the place, and I wasn’t sure if my willingness to walk away from baseball was because Loren had told me what Rose had said. She could never be with me because of what I did for a living and how much sacrifice it would take on her part to be together.

“Do you want me to go with you and talk to Trent?”

Narrowing my eyes, I glared at him. “I’m not five fucking years old.”

“I know that. I was only offering. I can’t imagine he’ll take it well that you’ve had an issue with your arm for so long and kept it to yourself.”

“That’s my problem, not yours.”

Nick sighed.

I grabbed my bag. “Might as well not put it off any longer.”

As I headed toward the door, Nick called out to me.

“Good luck, Bryson.”

With one more glance back at him, I gave him a weak smile and replied, “I think I’m going to need it.”



Trent stood and stared out the window for so long I started to wonder if he forgot I was in the room.

“Did you want me to come back later?” I asked as I stood to leave.

“You need to get an MRI as soon as possible. I want to know what is wrong with your arm before we play the Pirates.”

“Wait, you don’t want me pitching against the Athletics?”

He finally turned and faced me. “No. If it’s just inflamed, then the three nights off will do you good. I’ll make the call right now. Head on over, and they’ll be ready to do the MRI.”

A part of me wanted to argue. If I got the MRI, then I’d know for sure what was wrong, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to find out.

Trent cleared his throat, and I looked up at him. He frowned.

“You think it’s torn?”

All I could do was nod.

His hand sliced through his hair as he said, “Fuck.”

Walking over to his phone, he picked it up. “I need to schedule an MRI on Robinson’s right shoulder and arm ASAP. I’m sending him over now.”

That was my cue to leave. I reached down and picked up my bag and headed out of Trent’s office. He didn’t utter another word to me, but before I closed the door, I heard him telling his assistant to get Josh Hart on the line. Josh was the Mariner’s manager. I imagined it wouldn’t be long before the owners were brought up to date and decisions were made.

Three hours later, I stared out over the ball field where game one of three would be played against the Athletics tomorrow night. Lifting the beer I was drinking to my lips, I heard the sliding door behind me open, and Nick stepped out onto the balcony. The same balcony where I had met Rose

almost a month ago. It was near the end of June, and the weather in Seattle was nice for once.

“Anything?” he asked as he leaned against the railing and looked at me.

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“How many of those have you had?” he asked as he took in the small cooler sitting to the left of me.

“Not enough.”

My phone buzzed, and I saw Josh’s name on the screen.

Nick and I both said, “Fuck.”

It wasn’t good news when he was calling you.

Picking up my phone, I swiped to answer it. I flinched when I brought the phone up to my ear. Just lifting my arm had hurt.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Bryson, Josh here.”

“How’s it going?” I asked as I looked up to see Nick watching me. I swore he was holding his breath.

“I’m sure you can guess since it’s me calling you and not Trent, things aren’t going so well. You have a small tear in your rotator cuff. They’re advising you take some time off, and let it heal for a bit.”

“How much time?”

“They want you on the sixty-day injury list.”

“No way am I taking two months off, Josh.”

“If you keep playing, the doctor said you’ll tear it completely, Bryson.”

“I haven’t so far, and I’ve been feeling the pain for the past six months.”

Josh was silent, and Nick scrubbed his hand down his face.

“What do you want me to say, Bryson? You’re the best goddamn pitcher in the MLB, and if you think for one second I

want to see you step away for that long, you're crazy. But I'm not about to put your future in jeopardy because I don't want you to miss a month or two. It's this, or a year—or worse, you never play again.”

I sighed. There went the conflict. I hadn't wanted to just sit on the sidelines and watch everyone else play.

“If you want to travel with the team, you know you can, but Pete has you set up for a PT appointment tomorrow morning at eleven, and I expect you to be there. I'll let Trent know, and he can start making changes to the rotation.”

My eyes closed, and I felt a heaviness wash over me. I had never known anything other than baseball.

“What am I going to do for sixty days, Josh?”

He let out a humorless chuckle. “Hobbies? Any projects you can work on?”

My eyes lifted to Nick, who was still watching the one-sided conversation. I smiled. “Yeah, there is one project I've been meaning to start.”

“Well, you have sixty days to get it done.”

“Challenge accepted.”

Chapter Five

ROSE

I sat in the middle of Aunt Lincoln and Uncle Brock's living room as everyone gushed over the three new grandbabies. I was, of course, one of the ones doing the gushing.

"What is it like having twins, Georgiana?" Lily asked as she rocked Rhett back and forth. Or maybe she had Ryder and I had Rhett?

"It's exhausting but wonderful at the same time," Georgiana said with a wide smile.

My cousin Brock and his wife Georgiana had twin boys two months ago, while my other cousin, Morgan, who happened to be Brock's baby sister, had a baby girl last month at her baby brother's wedding. Well, her water broke at Hunter and Kipton's wedding, and she had little Blakley four hours later.

"How does it feel to be grandparents to three little ones nearly all at once?" my mother asked as everyone laughed.

"It's the best thing in the entire world," Aunt Lincoln stated as she looked down at Blakley in her arms.

"Have you heard from Avery?" my mother asked Aunt Merit, who technically wasn't my aunt, but we all called her Aunt, and her husband Dirk, Uncle Dirk.

Running her finger down the side of Blakley's face as she sat next to Lincoln, she looked up and smiled. "I did. She misses Montana, and I think she will be coming back home soon. At least she is trying to for the summer. She mentioned something about a movie, though."

"A movie. My goodness. Modeling and now movies?" Mom said as she gave a weary-looking Merit a soft smile.

Avery was younger than us, seventeen, and had been living in France the past year or so, going to school and modeling.

She was a beautiful girl with sapphire eyes and light-brown hair. She was discovered by one of Georgiana's friends, a designer from Paris. Avery had been working in Georgiana and Morgan's boutique on Main Street at the time. She really had her entire future ahead of her, and it was endless.

"That would be lovely to have her back here in Hamilton," Lincoln said. "We've missed her so much."

"I know I'd love to have her here," I said as I smiled down at Rhett. Or Ryder. "Who do I have again?"

Georgiana laughed. "Ryder."

"How in the world do you tell them apart?" Aunt Timberlynn asked with a glance between me and her daughter Lily.

"Well, to be honest, we didn't remove the little bracelets until we had to!" Georgiana laughed. "After that, we started putting the diapers with elephants on Ryder and giraffes on Rhett. When we were giving them a bath, Blayze noticed Ryder had a birthmark on his upper left leg shaped like a little heart, so now we have something to identify them. But we use the diaper method when we need to see quickly."

"Thank goodness for birthmarks!" Lily said with a giggle.

"And diapers with designs on them!" I added.

"Rose, how are you enjoying your job at Stiner Architectural Firm?"

I glanced up and smiled at Merit. "It's good. I feel more like an assistant than anything. I thought since I had interned there during the summers, I'd be given more responsibilities after I graduated, but that isn't the case."

"Have you shown them the designs you've worked on?" my mother asked as she walked back into the living room with my grandmother Stella, both carrying pitchers of tea and glasses.

"I have, but I'm the low person on the ladder, so I must earn my way. Some architects give me more to design than others, but it's mostly for the more environmentally conscious

clients. I don't really have the experience to design my own things yet."

"Bullshit," Mom said as she sat down. "Just look at Blayze's house, then say that again."

I chuckled. "I need more experience. That's what it boils down to. Some other architects have the idea I'm not full-fledged because I don't have a master's degree."

"Well, hang in there. If designing is something you're passionate about, it will be worth the wait," Lincoln stated, but something in her expression seemed to be saying something else. Clearly, Lily picked up on that as well.

"Have you painted any? Once upon a time, you wanted to do that more than anything," Lily asked.

Giving her a warning glare, I said no, and then quickly changed the subject. "Morgan, did I hear you when you said your wedding line was featured in *Vogue*?"

Morgan beamed as she looked at Georgiana. "Yes! That was all thanks to the connections Georgiana still has at the magazine. They're going to be flying in next month to do the interview with both of us, but the wedding line will be featured."

"And Georgiana, did you tell me that your custom orders are booked solid through the end of the year?" Lincoln asked.

Georgiana's face broke into a wide grin. "Yes! That is for bridesmaid dresses. I've been dipping my toe more into the design side of things, and I've found I really love designing the bridesmaids' gowns."

"And she is darn good at it!" Morgan added.

I forced myself to smile as the room slowly fell into separate conversations. I was so happy for Morgan and Georgiana. They were following their dreams, and you could see how happy it made them both.

Peeking at Lily, she was talking to her mother, Timberlynn, about helping her develop a marketing plan for a clinic Timberlynn would teach. Lily's degree was in equine business

management, and she had plans to help her parents with their business here on the ranch. She had dreams of growing it even larger, and Timberlynn and Tanner were all for it as they talked more and more about taking a step back and traveling with Brock, Lincoln, and my parents. I had no desire to follow in either of my parents' footsteps. My mother was a freelance book editor with occasional party planning on the side, and my father raised bulls for bull riding in local rodeos and the PBR. The only thing I inherited was my mother's love of painting.

I glanced around the room and took in the women who had shaped me into the woman I am today. Every one of them was formidable in their own way. They all had one thing in common; they knew their passion. Their dreams and desires. I, on the other hand, had never felt more lost. I enjoyed designing houses and was proud that I was among only one other person at the firm with a degree in environmental design. And although I enjoyed my job at Stiner Architectural Firm, something was missing. I didn't have the passion in my eyes like Georgiana and Morgan had when they talked about their store or designs. Or when Lily spoke about horses and her desire to help expand her parents' business. Even Blayze and Hunter seemed to be doing exactly what they wanted.

Resisting the urge to sigh in frustration, I thought back to my time with Bryson. It had been the first time in months I had truly felt at peace. I wasn't sure if it was because I had stopped worrying about my future and finally did something I wanted to do. Or maybe it had been the man I had spent the evening with who made me feel like that.

While I had been lost in my own thoughts, I missed it when Lincoln asked how my trip to Seattle had gone.

"Earth to Rose?" my mother said with a laugh. "Are you even listening to us?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm sorry, I was lost in thought."

"I'd say," Lily mused. "You had a faraway, dreamy look on your face."

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have dreamy faces, Lily. I have thoughtful looks.”

She gave me a look that said she wasn’t going to let it go, and the moment we were alone, she would pounce.

“I asked how your trip to Seattle was,” Lincoln said with a sweet smile.

“Amazing. It was great seeing Loren again.”

“She’s dating a baseball player,” my mother said as she wagged her eyebrows.

Grams leaned forward. “Really? Tell us all about him!”

Everyone giggled. My grandparents had four boys: my father, Ty Jr., was the oldest. Then my Uncle Brock, Uncle Tanner, and Uncle Beck, who had unfortunately died while he was in the Marines. I can only imagine that when Grams started getting daughters-in-law, she was over the moon to talk about more girly things. Like hot baseball players.

“He’s handsome,” I stated with a wide smile. “Totally in love with Loren. Rich, crazy about baseball, and that’s all I really know about him.”

Grams clucked her tongue a few times and said, “All we really want to know is how does he look in the baseball uniform!”

The room erupted in laughter.

“Yes! That’s what we want to know!” my mother stated as she winked at me.

“He fills it out very nicely,” I said, trying not to look at Grams or Lily or I’d burst out laughing.

“Nathan said you were asking him questions about baseball stats.”

My eyes jumped to Aunt Timberlynn. “Um, yeah. I was curious after going to a game and finding I liked it.”

“Or you liked looking at the baseball players!” Lily teased.

“Well,” I said with a wicked smile. “Seeing them in person does make a girl long to know more about the sport.”

Another round of giggles occurred.

Kipton spoke next. “You know, I honestly thought you and Jack Morris would hook up.”

I nearly spit out my tea. Had she really said that in front of everyone?

Kipton’s face turned red. “By hook up, I meant date! Date. I thought you might date him with the way you two bickered and teased one another.”

Laughing, I replied, “Jack! You thought I’d want to date him? He was an asshole.”

“Language, Rose,” my mother warned.

“He was!” I said, fighting the urge to stomp my foot like a child. “He was arrogant, selfish, and cared only about that stupid show, which, by the way, has anyone watched it? The bachelor guy is hawt!”

“He is!” Lily agreed.

“Anyway, you couldn’t have paid me to let his D into my P.”

My mother groaned. “Saying it like that doesn’t make it any better, Rose Marie.”

Lincoln and Timberlynn attempted to hide their smiles as Grams and Morgan giggled.

“Mom, let’s not all pretend I’m a virgin.”

“Oh God,” Mom said, her hands flailing in the air. “For once, can you not just speak your mind, Rose?”

I shrugged as Grams walked over and took the baby from my arms.

“He doesn’t need to hear about Ds and Ps.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Apple didn’t fall far from the tree,” Lincoln sing-songed.

“He was handsome, though,” Lily added.

“Oh, he was hot as hell, but for sure not my type. Not that I don’t think he would have been good in—”

“Okay, I think we need to move on.”

Hiding my smile behind my glass, I looked at Lily and winked. One sure way of moving a conversation on with this group was talking about their kids having sex.

The conversation moved on. My mother sat down beside me, and I prayed she wasn’t about to lecture me about sex again. I was nearly twenty-two, and that conversation was no longer needed.

“Loren’s mom called me yesterday,” my mother said as I sipped my tea.

“Really?” I casually replied, ignoring the instant dread I felt in my heart. It wasn’t uncommon for my mother and Julia to speak. After all, Loren and I had been the best of friends since elementary school, which, in turn, made her mother, Julia, and my mom friends as well.

“She told me that Loren told her you went out with Nick’s roommate. The pitcher for the Seattle Mariners.”

I turned to look at my mother, praying to the heavens above I looked as if this news meant nothing to me at all. I also made a mental note to call Loren and tell her we were no longer friends. I was revoking that friend card quicker than a certain pitcher throws a baseball.

“We didn’t go on a date. I met him at the after-party he and Nick threw when the team won. It was kind of hard not meeting him since I was at his house.”

She smiled, but I saw the twinkle in her eye. “Loren made it seem like you two hit it off.”

I gave a one-shoulder shrug, not wanting to draw attention to my obvious feelings about Bryson. “We were both bored out of our minds, and neither one of us felt like being around a lot of people, so we talked for a while away from the party. I’d hardly call that a date.”

“Was he nice?” she asked, taking a sip of her own drink.

“Who?” I asked, knowing damn well she meant Bryson.

“The pitcher, Rose. Who else are we talking about?”

“I mean, I talked to him for a few hours, so...”

My words drifted off before my mother could pick anything out of my tone with her magical powers.

“Loren seemed to give her mother the impression you hit it off rather *well*.”

Yep, I was going to fly to Seattle, strangle my best friend, and then tell her we were over once she breathed her last breath!

“Mom, I spent a few hours with the guy. Besides, he lives in Seattle, he is a Major League Baseball player, and the last thing I would ever do is date a guy who travels all over the place, and probably has a hook up in every single town.”

She frowned. “Just because he travels doesn’t mean he sleeps around, Rose Marie. Your Uncle Brock used to travel while riding, and he never cheated on Lincoln.”

I stared at my mother. “Mom, we didn’t go on a date. We simply talked. He was a nice guy, and yes, he was insanely attractive, but it was only one time. I mean one night! Of talking! Just talking...that’s all it was. It’s not like we did anything other than talk.”

My mother raised a single brow as I felt someone sit on my other side.

“Abort! Abort! Stop talking,” Lily whispered.

With her words, I tightly pressed my lips and stared at my mom.

Clearing her throat, my mother looked at Lily, then me. “Right. Okay, well, if you say it was nothing.”

“It was...nothing. It was nothing but a night on the terrace —”

Lily pinched under my arm.

“Talking,” I added.

Glancing back and forth between Lily and me, my mother nodded, stood, then walked over to hold one of the twins.

Turning to look at Lily, I said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, but you owe me the entire story.”

“There is no story,” I replied in a hushed tone.

Lily gave me a look that said she didn’t believe a word of my lie. We were like sisters, and she could read right through me. Honestly, all of my cousins felt more like sisters.

“Right, that’s why you told your mom you spent the evening on the...terrace...*talking*. It *was* written all over your face, Rose.”

I huffed. “Nothing was written on my face.”

She sighed, took a drink, then set it on the small table next to her. Turning back to me, she asked, “So how was the air out on the terrace?”

Biting into my lip, I replied, “Hot.”

She sat up some. “Steamy hot or stuffy, humid hot?”

“Steamy.”

Lily glanced around the room. “Dammit. How long do we have to stay here?”

I followed her gaze and noticed everyone was paying attention to the babies, and no one was looking at us.

“If we each get up and casually leave, I don’t think anyone will notice,” I said as I tilted my head and smiled at Morgan and Aunt Lincoln.

The words hadn’t even left my mouth before Lily stood and headed out of the room.

“Real casual,” I whispered as I counted to sixty, stood, walked over toward Georgiana and looked down and smiled as she fed Ryder...or Rhett. One of the two. I hadn’t wanted to make it seem like I was following Lily out.

“Want to feed him?” she asked as she looked up at me.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Sure, let me run to the bathroom really quick. I’ll be right back. In a few minutes. Maybe ten or so. Or fifteen. I really have to go to the bathroom.”

Her eyes went wide.

“No, I mean I have to go, but not poo or anything. I have to make a call first!” I said with a nervous laugh.

“Okay,” Georgiana said with a grin. “I’m sure Lily is waiting on you since she hightailed it out of the room a few moments ago.”

My face heated.

“It’s okay, Rose, go. If anyone asks where you two went, I’ll tell them I asked you to run to the house to get me something for the boys.”

My shoulders sagged in relief. I leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you, Georgiana. You’re my favorite cousin!”

She shook her head as she laughed. “Go. I’m sure Lily is beside herself waiting to hear all the details.”

With another glance around the room, I quietly slipped out and found Lily waiting by the front door. She grabbed my hand and nearly dragged me out of the house. We walked in silence for a minute or two as I followed her to Brock and Lincoln’s barn.

Once inside, I drew in a deep breath. “I wish I was dressed to go riding.”

Lily looked longingly at the tack room and nodded in agreement. When we were little girls, we’d always go riding and talk to each other about boys or whatever was happening in our worlds. Turning to face me, she put her hands on her hips, met her honey-colored eyes with my blue, and said, “Okay, spill it, Rose Marie! I want a play-by-play of every ‘inning’ with that hot pitcher.”

I dropped down onto a bale of hay and glanced around. No one else was in the barn, so I wasn’t worried about us being

overheard.

“Fine. I spent the evening with Bryson Robinson. He’s a pitcher for the Seattle Mariners, and we started off by talking, then playing cards. Then that led to sitting in a hammock together while he showed me the stars. His father was an astronomer who worked for NASA when he fell in love with Bryson’s mom and gave it all up to live in Montana and sell farm equipment.”

Lily blinked at me a few times, then put her hands over her chest. “Oh my gosh, how romantic is that!”

I smiled. “I know. It was love at first sight for them. Plus, she ended up pregnant with Bryson. He said his dad ended up teaching astronomy at a local college and said he never regretted his decision to leave NASA.”

Lily wore a dreamy expression. “Where are those guys at? The ones who love you so soundly?”

I smiled and nodded.

“So you guys talked, played cards, looked at the stars... and then?”

Closing my eyes, I let the memory of that night come rushing back.

“You slept with him!” Lily gasped. “I knew it!”

“Yes, I spent the night with him up on his rooftop terrace, and it was the best sex of my life, and now I’m ruined for all other men. Lily, I don’t know what to do because I can’t stop thinking about him.”

When Lily remained silent, I turned to see her gaping at me. Reaching over, I placed my finger on her chin and shut her mouth.

“Trust me, no one is more surprised by this than I am. I mean, I don’t have time to think about a guy I have zero chance with.”

“I’m sorry, but what makes you think you have zero chance with him? Is he a player, and by that, I mean did he give you the impression he has one-night stands often?”

I shook my head. “No, the opposite. He told me he had been in a long-term relationship with a girl, and she cheated on him, and since they broke up, he hadn’t been with anyone in nearly a year.”

“Wow, so you guys have that in common.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “It wouldn’t work because he is in Seattle, and I’m here. He travels all over the place and hardly has a day off, and when he does, he’s practicing. I have no desire to move to Seattle, and he’s one of the top, if not the top, pitchers in the MLB. It would never work. Besides, I don’t want a relationship. And after the whole Kyle thing, I don’t know if I could trust Bryson knowing that women threw themselves at him constantly.”

“Not all guys cheat, Rose.”

Exhaling, I closed my eyes. “I know that. And I have a feeling Bryson is one of the rare ones. It’s just that I want to figure out...”

I let my words trail off.

“You want to figure out what?”

I dropped back against the wood plank wall and sighed. “My life. What I want to do.”

She turned to face me, taking my hand in hers. “I thought you wanted to design houses and barns and buildings.”

Chewing on my lip, I slowly shook my head.

“You don’t want to do that?”

I screwed up my face and shook my head again.

“Your parents are going to be pissed if you say you want to go back to school for something different!”

Laughing, I took her hand in mine. “I love designing. It was fun when I did Blayze’s house because he was a part of it. I mean, I just drew it out. The real architect did up the plans. I know how to do plans now, but it was different. When I helped design Morgan’s apartment that’s now mine, that was fun. When the Parkers asked me to design them an environmentally

friendly barn and guesthouse, I was all over it. But the things I'm doing at the firm are boring as hell. If I'm even doing design. I get I'm the low person on the ladder and have to work my way up, but it isn't what I thought it would be."

"Do you think it's because you're not controlling what you're designing?"

I gave her a questioning look. "That might be it."

She crossed her legs as she adjusted on the bale of hay. "You love to draw. Everyone knows that. And when you did those other projects, they were on your terms. You got to decide what you were and weren't going to do. At your job, you do what you're told. Maybe that's taking the love of it away from you. Let's use Georgiana as an example."

"Okay."

"Georgiana had an amazing career working for *Vogue*, right? Covering what she loved, fashion. But her true dream was to do her own fashions and have her own store. She thought she was happy with what she was doing, but it took a change for her to see what she truly wanted to do."

"Okay, I get what you're saying, but what are you insinuating I should do? Quit my job? Because I kind of need the money."

She laughed. "No, but maybe you should look at doing something else. Like painting."

"Painting isn't going to pay my bills, Lily."

"Not now, no. But if you started to paint again while still working full time, maybe it would lead to something. When was the last time you sat in a field and painted?"

I shrugged. "I don't have time to do that."

With a tilt of her head, she gave me a stern look. "This Saturday."

"What about it?"

"Do you have any plans?"

"Unless I have to bring home work, I'm free."

“Good! So that means you have plenty of time,” she said with a bright smile. “I’ll pick you up at seven!”

“In the morning?” I nearly yelled out. “Why so early?”

With a wink, she stood and took my hand in hers. “You’ll see!”

And without another word, we headed back into the house and were pleasantly surprised to see no one had even noticed our absence.

Chapter Six

BRYSON

I drew in a deep breath and let the crisp mountain air fill my lungs. I'd missed this more than I had thought.

"The property is just under two-hundred acres and situated at the mouth of Bear Creek Canyon. As you can see, it has the open pasture land that backs up to the mountain and is very secluded like you asked for."

Turning to smile at the real estate agent, I said, "The owners added a nice touch with the bridge over the creek."

She nodded. "Some amazing hiking trails are close by as well. And with your property backing up to the national forest, no one will ever build back there."

"That is a nice selling point. It's beautiful," I said as I looked over the meadow and the slope up to the Bitterroot Mountains. "I'm surprised no one has ever built here."

"They planned to build a house here but ended up staying in Colorado. They did build a six-stall barn and cleared a four-acre meadow, which are ideal for any horse lover."

"And how many other offers are there for it?"

"Right now, you're the only interested party. The market is slowly turning from a seller's market to a buyer's."

Nodding, I took in the view once again. "May I look at the barn?"

"Of course. Let's get back in, and I'll drive us over there."

After looking at the stunning barn that appeared to have never held a single horse, I walked around for a bit longer.

"And you said we're how far from Hamilton?" I asked.

"A short fifteen or twenty minutes."

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

“You’re from Montana if I remember correctly.”

“That’s right. I always forget how much I miss it until I come back.”

She smiled brightly. “Will this be a vacation home?”

“No, I’d like to make this my permanent residence.”

“Well, if you’d like, we can draw up an offer to the owners and see if they accept it.”

The land was beautiful, and for it to be so close to Hamilton was a plus. I knew I was taking a risk, and Rose might think I was insane once she found out, but it was a risk I was willing to gamble. I’d never had a woman take up so much headspace before, and in my heart, I know she felt the connection I felt the night we spent together. And regardless if things worked out or not, I’d be close enough to my parents, and maybe someday I could talk them into building a little cabin here and living closer to me. I knew they would simply be happy to see me put roots down in Montana.

“I’ll go in full price, and I’ll pay with cash. The faster we can close, the better.”

The agent stared at me for a few moments before she snapped her mouth shut and swallowed hard. “Mr. Bryson, the asking price is nearly five million.”

With a smile and a wink, I said, “I know. Full price, cash offer. The faster we can close, the better.”

Pulling out her phone, she dialed a number. “Rick, your property on Bear Creek Trail. I have a full price, cash offer.”

When she looked at me and smiled, my heart jumped in my chest. “We’ll head back to my office right now and get you a written offer.”



“Okay, Bryson, take this elastic band and hold it in your hands like so. Keeping your elbows in close to your body, pull your

hands apart, squeezing your back.”

I did as Kasey, my physical therapist, instructed.

“Good. You shouldn’t feel pain, but you should feel the muscles right behind your shoulder.”

It had been four weeks of PT and rest. I’d gone to games with the team a few times, but it killed me to just sit there and not play.

“Have you noticed any improvements?”

I turned to see Trent leaning against the door of the physical therapy room.

“Maybe some,” I stated.

He nodded and pushed off to walk into the room. “You’re doing the exercises they say to do?”

“Yes, I am...Mom.”

Laughing, he pulled up a seat and watched me as Kasey had me do another exercise.

“In all seriousness, Bryson, how is it feeling?”

I stopped doing the exercise and looked at him. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I needed to be honest with myself and, more importantly, with Trent.

“If I’m honest, I think I’ll need surgery. It feels better, but I’d be in pain if I tried to pitch.”

He looked down at the floor while he rubbed the back of his neck. “Fuck.”

“I echo the sentiment.”

Starting the exercise once again, I felt his eyes on me.

“It’s only been a few weeks. Maybe you should get away, go relax somewhere, and let your arm rest.”

Laughing, I set the resistance band down and turned to face him. “Isn’t that what I’m doing now?”

Kasey had me sit at a machine and instructed me to use it. I did as Trent paced back and forth.

“If you let me work with Caleb, I know he can move up fast in the ranks,” I said as I moved my arms in a circular motion. The machine was like a bike, but you used your arms to pedal.

“Monty? Hell, Bryson, he’s just a baby!”

“A talented baby who, if given the chance, could easily take my place. He’s good, Trent, and you know it.”

“He wouldn’t be on the team if he wasn’t good.”

“Then start to use him. Bring him up in the ranks and give the kid some playing time. He has a wicked fastball.”

Trent scrubbed his hands down his face and released a heavy sigh. “And if we start him too soon, he’ll end up right where you are.”

“Bullshit. You know as well as I do a pitcher can injure themselves at any time in their career. New or old. I’m not saying make him your starter, just give the kid a chance. Let him show you what he has.”

He sat down on a rolling chair and looked at me. “You’ll be out at worse, a year? If anything, you can mentor the kid, help him adjust to the MLB and all of that.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

It wasn’t the time to tell Trent that I had already made up my mind. Regardless if I needed the surgery or not, I wouldn’t be returning to the roster. The last thing I wanted to do was come back and be kept on the team as a last-ditch pitcher. Fuck that.

An image of Rose flashed through my mind. I was a firm believer in destiny and fate. Rose was brought into my life at that exact moment for a reason. I already knew she wasn’t the type of woman who would date a baseball player, and Loren had confirmed it. The sale on the land I had purchased closed three days ago, and I already had an appointment with Stiner Architectural Firm. I wasn’t sure how Rose would feel about me showing up on her work doorstep a few months after our night together, but I was willing to take the risk.

“I might take you up on the suggestion of taking a vacation. I think I’m going to head back to Montana for a bit. I might get a second opinion on my shoulder as well.”

Trent’s face lit up. “That’s a great idea, Bryson. Take the time. You’re not due back in front of the medical board for another month. Head on home, enjoy some family time, and we’ll revisit all of this then.”

I nodded, reached for Trent’s outstretched hand, and shook it. I felt bad keeping him in the dark, but I needed to figure out my future before I did anything else. It was July, and I hadn’t seen Rose since May. Two months had passed by, and I still thought about her constantly. I only hoped she didn’t see my next move as insane as Nick said it was.

“I’ll let you get back to your PT.” With a smile and nod in Kasey’s direction, Trent smiled at me, and I could see some of the worry leave his eyes. Poor bastard. He wasn’t going to be very happy when I announced my retirement.

As Trent left, Nick walked in. “What was that all about?”

I shook my head. “Just Trent worrying.”

Nick glanced at the doorway where Trent had walked through, then back to me. “You about done?”

“We’re finished.”

I smiled at Kasey. “I’ll be heading out of town, so if you have any printouts you can give me to work on.”

With a knowing look, she turned on her heels and walked to her computer.

“Did you tell him you’re leaving town for a bit?” Nick asked.

“Even better. He suggested I go on a vacation, so I mentioned Montana. Told him I was going to get a second opinion, which I am. I already have an appointment set with a doctor in Missoula. He’s supposed to be one of the best shoulder doctors in Montana. They call him the shoulder guru. If anyone will shoot it to me straight, it will be him.”

Nick drew in a breath and let it out. “Probably for the best to get someone to look at it who doesn’t have an investment in your health.”

I laughed. “Totally.”

“Here you go, Bryson. We’ve done all these before, and the step-by-step instructions are on the handout.”

Taking a quick glance at the exercises, I nodded.

“Here are a few exercise bands you can work with. Start with the yellow, then work up to red, blue, green.”

I took the bands from her and put them in my bag. “Thanks, Kasey. I’ll call the office when I get back into town.”

She grinned, then reached for her stomach and gasped. “Wow, the baby really kicked hard that time.”

My eyes drifted to her swollen belly. She squealed, then grabbed my hand and Nick’s and plastered them on her stomach. Nick’s eyes went wide, but I was positive it wasn’t from the feel of the kick. He went to pull his hand away, but then the baby did some kind of move.

“Can you feel him?” she asked with a wide smile.

“Jesus!” Nick said with a laugh. “Is he fighting with another baby in there? Like an MMA match or something?”

Kasey sighed. “No, just my ribs, kidneys, and Lord knows what else.”

I felt the baby again before I removed my hand. A strange feeling washed over me. Something I had never felt before. I shook my head and let out a disbelieving laugh.

“What is it?” Kasey asked.

I looked at her, then Nick, and said, “Nothing. It’s just, the miracle of babies, I guess.”

Kasey gave me a smile that secretly said she knew exactly what I was feeling because she had once experienced it herself. A longing. A void. A missing piece. Nick wore the same expression. He frowned, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he had thought about asking Loren to take the next step.

When he saw me watching him, he snapped out of his wondering expression.

“Shoot, for a second, I thought you were going to say you wanted one!” Nick said as he hit the side of my arm and turned to walk out.

Kasey winked, then greeted Lewis Hanover, our third baseman, as he walked in for his PT appointment.

Nick and I drove back to our place in silence. Once we got inside, I tossed my bag on the floor and opened the fridge for a water. Nick cleared his throat, and I turned to look at him. He wore a worried look on his face.

“Are you sure about this plan of yours?”

I took a long pull from the cold water, then set it down on the island. “I’m sure. You haven’t said anything to Loren, have you?”

With a shake of his head, he replied, “No. But the little bit I know of Rose, I’m not so sure she’ll see this as a good thing, Bryson.”

“Me building a house?”

“You building a house, using the firm she works for to design the house, and specifically asking for *her* to design it.”

I grinned. “And that’s where we differ, my friend. I think it’s kind of romantic.”

He stared at me. “Romantic would be whisking her away to Italy or taking her on a carriage ride through Central Park. Not showing up at her work and saying you just bought two-hundred acres of land fifteen minutes from where she lives, you plan on building a house, oh, and by the way, you can design it, all because you felt something spectacular the one night you spent together.”

“Okay, so when you put it that way, it does sound a bit creepy.”

“A bit?”

“Bro, she left me no choice.”

Nick laughed. “Dude, you know where she lives. Just go ask her to dinner, for fuck’s sake.”

I shook my head. “I have a plan, and I know it will work. She might be a bit upset with me, but it will work, Nick. I know it will.”

He sighed.

“You should have heard her boss on the phone. Mr. Stiner laughed when I requested to work with Rose Shaw. Then when I didn’t laugh back, he tried his best to sell me on the other architects in the firm.”

“How did you get him to agree to you working with Rose?”

Reaching over for an apple, I chuckled.

“Didn’t give him much of a choice. I told him I’d seen her work, heard good things about her, and I wanted someone who was going to keep with my desire for an environmentally conscious build. He suggested Rose work alongside some guy named Duke. I told him if I didn’t get to work with Rose solo, I wasn’t using their firm.”

Nick whistled. “Damn, played hardball, huh?”

Taking a bite of the apple, I chewed, then answered him. “Only way I know how to play.”

Chapter Seven

ROSE

The knocking on my door had me rolling over and vowing to kill the person who dared to wake me up before nine in the morning. When I opened it and saw Lily and her best friend, Ben, standing there with grins spread across their faces, I went to shut the door. Lily put her foot to block it and gave me a look that dared me to make her leave.

The last time they showed up at my place a few weeks ago, they dragged me to an early morning training session they were doing with kids. Lily sat me down and handed me a sketchbook. I had to admit, it felt good to draw. I drew a few sketches of the kids riding and grooming the horses, then gave them to the mothers of the two kids. I had asked them first, of course, and I could see them glance in my direction from time to time to catch a peek at what I was doing. Both the parents had tears in their eyes when they saw the sketches, and one even asked me if I would do a painting of her daughter on her prized horse. I had politely declined, but a part of me wished I hadn't. I normally liked to do landscapes, but portraits were always my mother's favorite, so it was the first thing she'd taught me.

"If you think I'm going to sit at another damn riding clinic, you are sorely mistaken. It's going to be hot today. It's July, in case you haven't noticed. Like the kind of hot where everyone thinks Satan is sitting on the state of Montana."

Lily rolled her eyes and followed me into my place, Ben right on her heels.

"We're going hiking and thought we might stop, have lunch, then maybe take a swim. Please come with us?"

"And be the third wheel? No, thanks."

Lily's smile faltered for a moment, and if I hadn't been watching her, I would have missed it.

“We’re meeting Abby there, so it’s nothing like that,” Ben stated as he grabbed a banana from my fruit bowl.

“Abby?” I asked, my gaze bouncing from my cousin to her best friend.

Lily cleared her throat and quickly said, “Ben’s girlfriend is joining us.”

My eyes went wide, but with one sharp look from Lily, I turned away from Ben and headed to the sink. “I didn’t know you were dating anyone, Ben.”

“We’ve been dating for a few weeks now. I met her at the gym.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Lily wearing an odd expression. “So you’re going on a hike and picnic with your girlfriend, and you invited Lily?”

He laughed as he shook his head. “No, Abby is joining me and Lily.”

Okay, now I was confused. “Someone needs to explain this to me. I haven’t had coffee yet, and this is weird.”

Lily smiled, but I could tell it was forced. “Ben and I have been doing this same hike for a few years now. We always take the hike up the same trailhead at least once a summer, eat lunch, swim in the freezing cold river, then hike back down. It’s like a tradition, and Ben thinks it’s bad luck to break the tradition. This year, Abby wanted to join us.”

“Okay, well, where do I come in?” I asked.

“I thought maybe you could bring a small sketchbook and…” She shrugged her shoulders. “Draw or something.”

Lily had emphasized the word “I” when she stated she hadn’t wanted to be the third wheel.

“Are you not dating anyone?” I asked Lily. “What about the hell of a hot guy we met at the Blue Moose a few weeks back? He asked for your number.”

“What guy?” Ben asked.

Was that a bit of jealousy I heard in his voice? I glanced back and forth between the two friends. Was there something else besides friendship between Lily and Ben?

Lily grinned. "I forgot all about Hank."

"Hank?" Ben said with a laugh. "What kind of name is Hank?"

Lily and I both looked at Ben and frowned.

"A hot guy name," I stated dryly. "Hell, if he hadn't given you his number, I'd have asked for his. I bet he'd be fun to ride!"

Lily's cheeks turned bright red, but she quickly agreed. "I bet he would."

"Hello, I'm standing right here."

Turning to face him, Lily shrugged. "Please, like you've never heard us talk about guys before."

Ben rolled his eyes. "I don't need the mental image of you riding Hawk."

"Hank," Lily and I both corrected him. Lily put her tongue to her top lip in what I was positive was her way of suppressing a smile.

"Whatever? Did you want to come, Rose? I need to pick up Abby by eight thirty."

Lily faced me. "We'd like to get an early start before the weather gets too hot."

"I think I'm going to pass, but I seriously think you should ask...*Hank*." I winked at Ben when I stressed the dude's name.

Ben's phone sent out a notification, and he glanced down to read the text. When he smiled, I saw Lily stare at him with an annoyed expression before she looked back at me and smiled.

Lily pulled out her phone. "I think I saved his number in my phone."

I couldn't help the smile on my face as I watched Ben's head jerk up in surprise. When he saw me watching him, he focused back on his phone.

"Hank? Hi, this is Lily. We met a few weeks back at the Blue Moose." Lily smiled, and Ben made a face as he pretended to look at his phone. I turned and started my coffee machine.

"I know this is last minute, but I'm going on a hike with another couple, and I thought you might like to join us. We plan on eating lunch and taking a swim."

Ben sighed, pushed his phone into his pocket, and leaned against the counter while he watched Lily.

"Coffee?" I asked him.

"No, thank you."

As I waited for my coffee, I also faced a pacing Lily. "I'm so glad you're able to join us. I'll text you the address to the trailhead and what time we'll be there."

She hung up, and Ben pushed off the counter. "I don't know why you invited some stranger. You're not the third wheel."

Folding her arms over her chest, Lily said, "This hike was our thing, Ben. You let Abby invade it."

Oh. Shit.

"Invade it? She's my girlfriend, Lily, and she's already jealous of our friendship. What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, maybe tell her to trust you!" Lily snapped back.

I nodded. "Ben, she has you on that one."

They both shot me a dirty look. Holding up my hands, I turned and grabbed my mug filled with hot coffee. "Sorry, go on fighting."

"We're not fighting," they both replied.

Ben let out a frustrated breath. “You don’t even know the guy, Lil.”

“What better way to get to know him than on a double date, *Ben*.” The way she said his name caused even me to flinch. The absolute disdain in Lily’s voice was strong.

Ben shrugged. “Fine. I won’t feel torn between the two of you now.”

My mouth fell open as Lily took a step back. Ben’s phone started to ring, and he answered it.

“Hey, Abby. No, we’re about to head that way.”

I focused on Lily, who looked as if someone had kicked her dog. “I hope you brought a two-piece bathing suit for Hank to check out those toned legs of yours.”

Lily had been staring down at the floor and hadn’t seen the thunderous expression on Ben’s face at my comment. What in the hell was going on between the two of them?

Glancing up at Ben, she grinned, then faced me. “Actually, do you have that two-piece G-string you bought last week?”

Oh, my little cousin was going to play dirty. I liked it.

“I do. Follow me.”

Glancing over her shoulder at Ben, Lily said, “Two seconds.”

He nearly growled back at her. “Hurry, we’re going to be late picking up Abby.”

Taking Lily’s hand, I practically pulled her to my bedroom. I dropped her hand when we walked into the room and headed to my dresser. With my voice lowered, I said, “What in the world is going on with you two?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Oh no, there is obviously something there, and we need to talk about the way Ben nearly passed out when you mentioned a G-string!”

“I’m sure it’s only because he doesn’t want his precious Abby to feel awkward or upset.”

“Why would she feel that way?”

An evil look appeared on my sweet cousin’s face. “Because I’m going to be turning not only Hank’s head, but also her boyfriend’s.”

My mouth opened, and I sucked in a breath. “Why, Lily Hope Shaw. You are evil and conniving.”

Holding up the G-string bottoms I handed her, she winked. “Maybe, but I’ll look sexy as hell.”



My mind mentally painted the picture in front of me as I stared out the window to the mountains I could see from my cubicle. I should have been working, but instead, I was trying to imagine what shade of white I’d use for the snow that sat atop the vista in front of me. I blamed Lily for all of this. After she mentioned going hiking with them so I could sketch, I had done exactly that—packed a small backpack, headed to the ranch, and hiked up one of my favorite trails. I settled on a rock that overlooked the pastures dotted with cattle and horses. I sat up there for hours and sketched before I finally made my way back down. I had to admit, it had felt so good to get lost in the art of drawing. I smiled as I closed my eyes and saw the painting take shape in my mind.

“Rose, Mr. Stiner would like to see you in his office,” Melissa, Mr. Stiner’s assistant, said as I jumped in my seat, nearly falling out.

“Jesus, Melissa. You scared me.”

She flashed me a fake smile. “I said your name. But clearly you were daydreaming instead of working.”

I stood, smoothed down my skirt, and shot her a smile just as fake. “At least some of us have an imagination.”

Glaring at me, she said, “As I said, Mr. Stiner would like to see you in his office, that is, if you’re finished imagining things.”

Winking at her, I replied, “Totally finished. I’ll be right there.”

Without another word, she turned and walked away. After grabbing my reMarkable notebook, I stood and followed in the direction she walked.

Mr. Stiner’s office was on the fifth floor, which was the very top floor of the building, so I wasn’t sure why she had come all the way to the third floor when she could have just called me. When she walked by and glanced into the office of Duke Walters, an architect, I had my answer. Duke looked like it took everything he had not to jump up and follow her. So the rumors around the office were true. By the way they were eye fucking one another, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were both out to lunch at the same time today. Not that I cared. Melissa could screw whomever she wanted.

Once we got to the elevator, Melissa stabbed the up button and ignored me. The doors opened, and we both walked in.

“How have you been?” I asked.

She smiled but stared ahead. I wasn’t sure if she was going to answer me or not. Things between us had never been cozy. We had gone to high school together but never really hung out. When I left for college, she had gone straight into working for the firm. She started in the mailroom of Stiner Architectural Firm and made her way up to administrative assistant to the owner. I had always admired how she had moved up in the company, but once I started a few months ago full time, her attitude toward me grew colder, and I wasn’t sure why.

Her reply finally came, and it felt cold.

“Fine. You?”

“Never been better. Say, are you still dating Nolan Smith?”

Her head snapped to look at me or, rather, glare at me.
“No.”

With a nod, I said, "I never did like him."

She sighed heavily, and I bet she regretted her decision to come to the third floor.

When the doors opened, she stepped out, and I followed. I stopped in front of Mr. Stiner's door and waited for Melissa to announce I was there.

"Go on in," she said as she narrowed her eyes at me.

"Always good chatting with you, Melissa."

She huffed, and I swore I heard her mumble something about a little rich girl. I glanced back at her, but she had already turned her back to me.

Mr. Stiner looked up and smiled at me as he motioned for me to sit down. "Rose, thank you so much for coming on up."

I slid into the chair and smiled as I opened my electronic notebook. "Of course, Mr. Stiner."

I'd been working for Stiner Architectural full time since I graduated from college in early May. Two months of feeling like I was in hell. I wasn't surprised when Mr. Stiner brought me on full time. I had worked for him a few summers in a row doing administrative things, mostly for Duke and another architect. Anytime I worked with Duke, Melissa would boss me around and tell me to do things, which drove me crazy. She had clearly forgotten at times I was no longer an intern but an actual employee now. I was positive she either got off on it or was attempting to impress the guy she was most likely sleeping with.

My parents had been happy I was staying local, especially my mother. I think she thought I'd be heading for a larger city to pave my way as someone who was hell-bent on changing the architectural world with environmentally friendly ideas one big skyscraper at a time.

Hard. Pass. Montana was in my blood, and I loved my family too much to ever leave.

Glancing down at my notebook, Mr. Stiner frowned. I had already explained to him at least a dozen times that my little

notebook was like a paper notebook, yet I was saving the trees by not using a paper notebook. He couldn't understand that I only needed a thin piece of "metal" to keep all my notes, thoughts, ideas, and drawings in.

He cleared his throat and spoke. "Now, Rose, you know I think you're one of the most promising employees we have here at the firm."

"I truly appreciate that, Mr. Stiner."

He nodded. "And your ability to help with the designs, as well as interiors, has been beneficial. You have a real eye for interior decorating if you ever want to follow that path. Your attention to details and knack for color is one of the best I've ever seen."

I forced a smile. My boss seemed to push interior design down my throat at least three times a week for some reason. "That's good to know, if I should ever decide to follow that career path."

"And because of that, and the fact that you have earned respect from all of the architects here at the firm, I'm assigning you to a team that'll be building a home right outside of Hamilton for a very important client. You will be taking on more of an...important role."

It seemed like Mr. Stiner had to force himself to say the last two words, and that piqued my interest. Whatever the role was, he obviously wasn't on board with it judging by his tone. That was strange. He's the boss so...I was confused. "What kind of role?"

He reached up and loosened his tie. "Lead design architect."

My mouth fell open, and I quickly shut it. Had I heard him correctly?

I sat up a bit straighter. "I'd be honored, and thank you so much for giving me this opportunity. It means a lot to me that you have that kind of confidence in me, Mr. Stiner."

He cleared his throat. "Well, truth be told, the client asked for you personally. You wouldn't have been my first pick for a

job of this scope.”

Ouch. That felt like a bitch slap if I ever felt one.

“Really?” I asked, instantly intrigued to know who the client was, and annoyed that my boss hadn’t thought I had it in me. I mean, I could hardly expect the man to give me a lead design when I’d only been there for a couple of months. If wishes were fishes and all of that. Something else was up, though, and it clearly irked Mr. Stiner by the way he kept acting as if he had a spoonful of castor oil in his mouth.

“Yes. You’ll be attending the initial meeting today with the client. But I wanted to meet with you privately first since this is a big responsibility, and if you should choose to step back and allow someone like Duke to take over, I would totally understand. It might actually be for the best if you stepped back and let a more experienced person handle this.”

I smiled. “So what you are saying is that you don’t think I can do the job?”

He chuckled. “Rose, you’ve only ever assisted with designs.”

“But I’ve shown you a few things I’ve designed myself without the assistance of someone like Duke.”

He stared at me for a moment, then went on speaking. “Our client *also* requested to speak with you before the meeting. He has some specific concerns about the interior that he wishes to speak to you about in private, no one else. He wants the entire home to be environmentally friendly, of course.”

Nodding as I took notes, I said, “Of course.”

“Rose, you will have to have me or one of the senior architects approve your design. Just because this person is a family friend of the Shaw’s, my name is still on the design.”

I felt my body deflate. “The client knows my family?”

Mr. Stiner shrugged. “I’m not a hundred percent sure, but why else would they ask for a young woman right out of college to design their house?”

Oh, I don't know? Because maybe I have talent, you asshat?

I pressed my mouth together tightly so I wouldn't say those exact words that I'd been thinking.

"You'll be assigned to the team, do your design to please the client, then Duke will take it from there."

My eyes went wide as I stared at him in shock.

Mr. Stiner stood. "Now that we understand that, I'm going to step out and let him step in so the two of you can chat. Since you'll be handling the more intimate area of the home, it's vital you understand the client's needs."

I looked up at my boss in confusion. "You want me to meet with him here in your office and not in a conference room?"

"Yes, he requested it, and he's a very important person, Rose. Do not mess this up."

Okay, who in the hell is this guy? And I'm sorry, what the actual fuck?

My mind raced through people my parents knew. None of them would be so important as to ask for such a crazy request.

I stood. "Thank you for your confidence in me, Mr. Stiner."

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I had a feeling he wanted to fire me right there on the spot for this client putting him the position he was in to give someone with little experience such an important role.

"Wait here, and I'll go get him."

When he shut the door to his office, I exhaled a shaky breath, then started to smooth down my black pencil skirt. Boy, was I glad I decided to dress in my business attire today. I normally wore slacks and a shirt. It was just more comfortable.

Turning away from the door, I picked up my electronic notebook and moved to the window. I had no idea what was happening or who the person was who requested me. They had

to be someone powerful in order to get Mr. Stiner to agree to this even though he had no intention of letting me design the house. Someone political, maybe? My family didn't really get involved in politics, so that couldn't be it. Looking out over the mountains, I started to jot down some immediate ideas for how to make the home more environmentally friendly. Of course, I had no idea what type of home the client would want, where it was located, or how much space I had to work with. Log home? Rock? Were they building up in the mountains or in the valley? Would they be close to Bitterroot River? A million questions raced through my mind. I paused and looked out the window. Why was I even bothering trying to firm these things up if Mr. Stiner had no intentions of listening to me or letting me lead this project completely.

The door to Mr. Stiner's office opened, then shut. I plastered on a smile and turned around, only to stare intently at the man before me who had the ability to crush me not only professionally but intimately.

When I opened my mouth, nothing came out but some weird noise, so I clamped my mouth shut.

He cleared his throat, pulled out the chair that was next to the one I'd been sitting in, and sat. Then, in that sexier-than-hell voice of his, he said, "How have you been, Rose Shaw?"

The only thing I managed to utter was one word.

"Bryson."

Chapter Eight

BRYSON

The moment I saw her, my body came to life. Her back was faced toward the door, and the skirt she wore showed off the ass I knew intimately. My mouth actually watered thinking about it.

When she turned around, her smile faded, and her eyes went wide. A strangled sound came from her mouth before she pressed her lips together tightly.

I pulled out a chair, sat, and smiled at her. “How have you been, Rose Shaw?”

She swallowed hard, then whispered, “Bryson.”

Before I had a chance to say anything, she closed her eyes and shook her head like she thought she might be dreaming. When she finally looked at me, she asked, “What in the hell are you doing here?”

I tried not to flinch at the coldness in her voice. “Okay, not the greeting I expected from you.”

She closed her eyes and exhaled before she set what looked to be an iPad-type device down on the desk.

A look of pure anger moved over her face. She lowered her voice and whisper-yelled at me. “What do you want from me? A kiss? Would you like for me to throw myself into your arms and say, ‘oh, thank you so much for forcing my boss to allow me to design your house’?”

I moved about in the seat. It suddenly felt very hot in the room. “A kiss would be nice, but I didn’t force him to allow you to work on it. He wanted some douche named Drake, and I saw his work. He sucks.”

“And you know I’m good because we slept together?”

Frowning, I leaned forward. “Do not ever talk about yourself like that, Rose.”

She looked surprised and took a step back, her hand coming up to her chest.

“Loren sent me photos of your cousin’s house you designed. I loved it.”

Rose threw her hands up in the air and growled. “Oh my God. I swear I’m going to kill her for real this time, then disown her as my best friend. She knew about this?”

“No. She doesn’t know anything about the property I bought or the house I want built.”

Rose paused for a moment. “Wait. Where did you buy property, Bryson?”

By the look in her eyes, I wasn’t sure I should tell her. I stood, moved around the desk so it was between us, and said, “Victor.”

She stared at me, her eyes blinking rapidly. “You bought land just on the other side of Hamilton? I thought your parents lived in Kalispell?”

“They live on the south side of Flathead Lake.”

“And you thought here would be better? Why?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “It was a beautiful piece of land. I can’t buy that much up by my parents, and it... it was close to you.”

For a moment, I saw something in her eyes. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but it for sure gave me hope.

“Bryson. You bought land to build a house on it because it’s close to me?”

Smiling, I said, “Yes.”

Okay, so maybe she would see all of it as a romantic gesture.

Her eyes turned cold again. Maybe not.

“Jesus Christ, Bryson! We were together for one night! It wasn’t even twenty-four hours! Who goes out and buys land near the woman they had a one-night stand with?”

“It wasn’t a one-night stand, or at least I hoped it wouldn’t be. It wasn’t for me.”

Rose drew in a deep breath, then exhaled. “It was a beautiful night, Bryson. I won’t deny that. But I left without saying goodbye for a reason.”

I raised a brow. “Would you care to explain it to me, then?”

She glared at me. “I think we have a bigger issue here. You just marched in here, threw your weight—and your wallet—around, and asked that a junior-level employee design your house. I don’t even have a full architectural degree.”

“You have a bachelor’s degree in environmental design. I’ve seen the work you’ve done in the past, and that’s good enough for me. I don’t need some asshole with a master’s degree. I know talent when I see it.”

She closed her eyes, then looked at me with a concerned expression. “How is your arm?”

Well, that was interesting.

“It’s okay. How did you know about my arm?”

Her cheeks turned a light pink as she turned away from me to look out the window.

“Have you been keeping up with me?” I asked, trying to hide the happiness in my voice.

“I might have watched a game or two,” she stated as she spun around and leaned against the windowsill. “They mentioned you had a partial tear, and that the team forced you to take a few months off.”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

Chewing on her lip, she asked, “Is it getting better?”

“Not really.”

“Will you be going back out on the road with the team?”

Something moved across her face, but I couldn’t tell what it was. “I’ll get another MRI, and everything will be re-

assessed then.”

“I see. Well, I hope it turns out the way you want it to.”

Grinning, I replied, “So do I.”

Her eyes searched my face before she pushed away and took another defensive stance. “Bryson, this isn’t going to work.”

“Rose, if I wasn’t confident that you couldn’t design the house, I wouldn’t be here.”

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head as she pointed between us. “You’re here because you want something more from me. Yes, the night we shared together was amazing, and I’m pretty sure sex will never be that good again.”

“Really?” I asked, my chest out just a bit too much. “I was that good, huh?”

Rose tried not to smile but lost the battle. “I’d like to think I was pretty good as well since you bought land in my hometown and are standing in my boss’s office right now.”

“Baby, you were better than good.”

Her eyes darkened with desire, and I thought I might have been winning her over before she looked away and the spell was broken.

Her whole body seemed to deflate as she exhaled. “Bryson, I can’t be involved with a guy who lives hours away from me and is never around. I don’t want that. Some women might, but I can’t. It’s just...I can’t...I’m not...”

I walked over to her, put my hands on her shoulders, and leaned down so I could look into her eyes. “I don’t want to walk away from you, Rose. So tell me what I need to do.”

She blinked rapidly as her breathing grew deeper. “I know myself, Bryson. I know that every moment of the day I would sit here wondering what you were doing. Who you were doing? How many women were throwing themselves at you, and I can’t do that.”

“You have that low of an opinion of me that you think I sleep around like that?”

“That’s just it!” she said as she stepped out of my hold. “I hardly know you, Bryson. Yes, we spent a few hours on a rooftop talking and sharing things, but I don’t really know you.”

“Then let’s get to know each other. I don’t have to report back to Seattle for a few weeks. You can learn all about me while you design my house.”

Her head dropped as she slowly shook it. “And when it’s time to go back to Seattle? Then what?”

“We cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“No,” she softly whispered. “I don’t want to fall for a guy who won’t be here in a month.” She put her hands on her hips. “Actually, no, I *won’t* fall for a guy who won’t be here in a month.”

I turned away from her and started to pace. Fuck. It wasn’t playing out like I thought it would. Who in the hell hurt this woman so badly that she wouldn’t even take a chance at something?

When I focused back on her, I nodded. “Okay. Can we at least be friends?”

“Of course, we can!” she quickly said.

“And you’ll still design my house?”

She swallowed hard. “Bryson, if I do this, everyone in this office will hate me. They’ll think we’re sleeping together, and that’s the only reason you asked for me.”

A sickness rolled through my stomach. Nick was right, I hadn’t thought my plan through. “Shit. I guess I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I can totally assist one of the architects with your design.”

“No,” I quickly said. “I want you designing the house. I want us to get to know each other better.”

“As friends?” she asked.

“Yes. And I really think if you give me a chance...maybe more.”

Rose buried her face in her hands and let out a soft scream before dropping them and looking straight at me.

“No! Bryson, I hate that you wasted your time and, more importantly your money, but it isn’t going to work. I don’t want more from you! My heart can’t take the chance.”

The feeling of a knife slicing through my stomach caused me to take a step back. Rose closed her eyes and was about to say something when a knock on the door caused us both to turn and look at it as it slowly opened.

Mr. Stiner walked back in. “Have you had a chance to discuss things? I’ve asked Duke to join us in the meeting room to discuss your design, Mr. Robinson. I really think once you see his past work and hear what he has to say, you’ll see he is the better choice here as lead designer.”

Rose stared at her boss and clenched her hands into fists. She may not think we know each other very well, but I knew that look on a woman. She was pissed.

Mr. Stiner narrowed his eyes at Rose, then looked at me and asked, “How is it you were inclined to ask for Ms. Shaw, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I smiled. “Of course not.”

Rose took a step forward, and I could practically feel the tension dripping from her. “Her best friend Loren is dating my best friend. He’s also a teammate of mine.”

“Yes, I know you play for the Mariners.”

Widening my smile, I nodded. “I do. Loren showed me some work Ms. Shaw had done on her cousin’s house, and it was exactly what I was looking for.”

Mr. Stiner looked at Rose and grinned. “She is talented, and with the right experience, she will make a wonderful designer one day, but for now, I hope you can understand she simply does not have the experience you need for a project of

your size. Plus, if my name is going to be on the design, I must insist you use Duke Walters.”

I cleared my throat. “You’re right, she is talented. But, as Ms. Shaw has pointed out, she is a junior associate in the office, and that it isn’t her place to be a lead designer on my project.”

Stiner’s shoulders relaxed, and I saw him give Rose a slight nod. “Mr. Walters is an excellent designer, and I think you’ll enjoy working with him.”

Motioning for us to head out of his office, I straightened my tie, looked at Rose, then at her boss. “I’m sure he is, Mr. Stiner, but I think I’m going to research firms a bit more. Thank you so much for your time. I hope I haven’t wasted too much of it.”

I turned to Rose, who was now white as a ghost. “Thank you for your time, Rose, and for clearing things up for me.”

Her mouth opened to say something, but Mr. Stiner spoke first.

“Mr. Robinson, if you’ll just give Mr. Walters a moment of your time, you’ll see he is a very accomplished architect.”

“I’m sure he is. Why don’t you send some of his previous work to my email address. I’ll give it a look over and let you know my final decision.”

Without allowing him a chance to speak again, I brushed past him and quickly headed to the elevator. I tried to ignore the way most of the guys gawked at me, most likely because they knew who I was. I hit the down button, and when I stepped into the elevator, I saw Rose making her way to me, and boy did she look even more pissed than she did when I walked into Stiner’s office.

The elevator doors shut before she could get to me, and the last thing I heard was her calling me an asshole.

I flinched, but pulled out my phone and opened my text messages.

Me: Plan A didn’t go so well.

Nick: Do you have a plan B?

Me: I'm not sure there is going to be a plan B.

Closing my eyes, I cursed. "Fuck."

Me: She's pissed and made it clear she isn't interested in me or designing a house for me.

Nick: Don't give up, Bryson.

Me: I'm not going to beg her, Nick.

Nick: Don't. Give. Up.

The doors opened, and I walked out of the building and to the car I had rented. The grand gesture I thought for sure would work had blown up in my face, and now I was positive that not only was my career in jeopardy due to my injury, but that I'd also lost Rose for good.

Chapter Nine

ROSE

The elevator doors shut, and it felt like my heart dropped to the floor. Why had I been so mean to him? He had shown up at my job, though. My job! One part of me was mortified, the other...happy? Feeling more confused than ever, I turned around to see my boss glaring at me.

“Rose, I’d like a word, please.”

Closing my eyes, I counted to five and started to walk back to the office.

Everyone stared at me, including Melissa. She wore a smug smile, and as I passed by her, she said, “Did you really just call Bryson Robinson an asshole?”

I flinched. “Did I say that part out loud?”

She nodded. “And I’m pretty sure he heard you since the elevator doors hadn’t shut yet.”

“Rose!” Mr. Stiner yelled out.

I jumped and headed in the direction of his office as Melissa whispered, “Should I find you some moving boxes for your office?”

Sending her an icy smile, I replied, “Not yet.”

The moment I shut the office door, my boss unleashed on me.

“What were you thinking? We just lost a huge client because you thought you weren’t up to the task of the design?”

I stared at him with my mouth wide open. When I finally recovered, I let out a disbelieving laugh. “I’m sorry, what? I must have missed something because it was you who thought I wasn’t up to the task. You all but pushed Duke onto him.”

He rolled his eyes. The bastard rolled his eyes at me. “You could have just let Duke look at your designs if the man

wanted you to design the house.”

Holding up my hands, I cut him off. “Stop right there. I am one-hundred-percent confident that I could draw up a plan for Mr. Robinson, and he would love it. What I was trying to do was tell him that I’d only been working here for a few months, and that it might not be *appropriate* for me to take on a client as a lead designer.”

Mr. Stiner huffed. “I don’t care if you’re sleeping with the man, Rose. He wanted to use our firm, and for a very lucrative project, and if that meant letting him think an unqualified person was going to design the man’s house, then that’s what we’ll do.”

I took a step back as if the man had struck me. Drawing in a deep breath, I counted to ten, then exhaled.

“First of all, even though it is absolutely none of your business, I’m not sleeping with Mr. Robinson. We have mutual friends. Second, I may not hold a master’s degree like Duke does, and I may not have years of experience with designing, but I have more talent in my pinky finger than Duke Walters will ever have. You don’t think I can design a home for Bryson Robinson? Well, I can.”

He raised a brow and crossed his arms.

“And I will.”

“What do you mean, you will? He isn’t working with our firm because of you.”

I saw what was coming next out of his mouth, and I held my breath.

“Because of you, I lost a huge client. A star. A millionaire who was probably going to build a multimillion-dollar home. He’s gone because of you. How, Ms. Shaw, do you think you’re going to be able to design his home, because as of this moment...”

Knowing the next words would depend on if Bryson ever spoke to me again, I stated, “I’ll design it myself.”

He laughed. “Why does your generation think that you can simply do something because you say it? You need to put in the sweat and tears, and you will not be doing that at this firm.”

Reaching for my notebook, I smiled at my former boss. “You’re right, Mr. Stiner, I won’t because I quit. I don’t need the firm to design. And as far as Mr. Robinson goes, I’ll be sure to send you a picture of his finished home that I designed myself so your ‘more qualified’ associates can use it as a point of reference for what to do to keep clients happy. Oh, and I’ll be pocketing one-hundred percent of the proceeds for this design. I’d say that’s a helluva raise I just gave myself, don’t you?”

Turning on my heels, I walked to the door, threw it open, and marched out of his office with a smile on my face. I needed to show these people I had the confidence to walk out with my head held high. I’d worry about a job, rent, and how I was going to apologize to Bryson, and beg if need be, for him to let me design his house. The rest of it all, the feelings and the insane desire to feel him inside me again, would have to be ignored.

After cleaning out my office, which was basically emptying a few drawers and carrying out the plant my grams had given me, I walked through the third floor and said my goodbyes. The news had reached my floor even before I had stepped off the elevator.

When I passed by Duke’s office, he grinned. “I’ll be expecting your call, Rose.”

“I wouldn’t be holding your breath while you wait on that call, Dick...I mean, Duke,” I smoothly said as I walked to the elevator, stepped inside, and rode it down to the first floor. I handed Jeffery, the security guy at the front desk, my badge and walked out of the building.

Once I was safely in my car, I turned it on, dropped my head back against the headrest, and let out a long sigh.

“My mother and father are going to kill me.”

And besides the obvious anxiety I was inundated with at the moment, I actually let out a laugh because even amid the chaos, I'd just turned a corner in my career...and that sort of excited me.



I swallowed hard as I watched my parents closely as they took in the news that I had quit my job.

“You just quit?” Josh, my younger brother, asked with a wide smile on his face.

“Yes. I didn't want to be fired, so I quit before he had the chance to fire me.”

Laughing, Josh replied, “Yaasss, that is serving cunt!”

“Joshua!” my mother scolded as my father attempted to hide his smile.

“What?” Josh asked, looking oh, so innocent.

Pinching the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger, my mother calmly said, “I don't even know what that means, but do not use that word.”

“I *think*,” my father stated, “it means he thinks his sister is a badass.”

My mother's head snapped in my father's direction, and she glared at him while I attempted to hide my laugh with a cough. Looking at Josh, I winked.

“Moving on,” Mom said, focusing back on me. “Let me see if I have this right. Because you refused to design a house for a very important client and called that client an asshole, you were about to be fired, so you quit instead. Then told your former boss that you'd be designing the house for the asshole anyway and pocketing the entire design fee. Is that right?”

Dad cleared his throat. “Not gonna lie, Rose. I feel like a lot has been left out of the story.”

I nodded. “Oh yeah, a lot. But yes, Mom, you have it right. There is more to why Bryson asked me to design his house, but he asked for me, and I couldn’t do it. I mean, everyone at the office would think I only got the job because I was...”

Turning to look at my brother, I choose my words carefully. “They would think I was dating him. Which I’m not.”

“Who is this important client anyway?” my father asked.

I felt my cheeks burn. “Um, you probably don’t know him.”

Good Lord, was that a lie. My father was a die-hard baseball fan, and I knew for a fact he knew who Bryson was.

I chewed nervously on my lower lip, and prayed he wouldn’t ask who it was.

Giving me a grin and a wink, he replied, “Try me.”

I set my fork down, wiped the corners of my mouth with my napkin, then said, “Bryson Robinson.”

“What!” my father and brother said at the same time as my mother had asked, “Who?”

“You know Bryson Robinson?” Josh asked.

My father slowly shook his head. “I mean, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You must have met him when you went to Seattle.”

I nodded.

“Who is this Bryan Robins?”

“Mom!” Josh said with an exasperated expression on his face. “It’s Bryson *Robinson*, and he’s only the best pitcher in the MLB. Nathan is going to freak!”

Flailing her arms around in front of her, Mom asked, “Wait a minute. How did you meet this boy?”

I smiled as I answered her. “Trust me, Mom, he is not a boy.”

“I’m going to kill him,” my father growled.

“Josh, I think you should finish your dinner in your room,” my mother stated as she motioned for him to leave the table.

“Are you kidding me? This is why I love it when Rose comes over to eat dinner! I want to hear how she and Bryson Robinson hooked—”

“Joshua!” Mom cried out. “Leave the table.”

He grabbed his plate and drink and said, “I am going to call every one of my friends and tell them my sister is hooking up with Bryson Robinson!”

Before anyone could say another word to him, Josh was gone.

My mother let out a long sigh. “I’ll deal with him later, and what the *hell* does serving cunt mean?”

“Dad had it right.”

Smiling like he had won the lottery, my father said, “See, I’m hip.”

“Hip isn’t a cool word, Dad.”

“Rose Marie Shaw, what in the hell is going on?” my mother asked.

Setting my napkin on my plate, I folded my arms over my chest. “Do you want the long or short version?”

“I think we should go with short,” Dad stated. “I’m thinking I might not like the long.”

“Probably not,” I said with an evil smile.

My father narrowed his eyes at me.

“Rose Marie,” my mother warned.

“Okay, short it is. I went to an after-party after the Mariners won a game. Nick, Loren’s boyfriend, lives with Bryson in an amazing penthouse in downtown Seattle. I got bored, wandered up to the private area on the third floor, met Bryson, we played cards out on the rooftop terrace, talked for hours, had amazing sex, and then I snuck away and ran back to Hamilton as fast as I could. Fast-forward a couple of months,

and Bryson shows up in Montana, bought some land in Victor, wants me to design his house, so he told my boss he wanted me and no one else in what I can only assume is some weird way to get me to date him, which I won't because he's drop-dead handsome, plays professional baseball, lives in another city, and I'm not interested in a relationship right now."

"That was one very long sentence," my mother whispered as my father stared at me, his face void of all color.

"I quit my job before they could fire me, and now to prove to my former boss that I really do have talent, I'm going to design Bryson's house. If he'll let me because I told him I didn't want a relationship with him and that he was crazy for buying the land and asking me to design his house. Oh, and when he got upset by my declaration, he told Mr. Stiner he would be looking into other firms, then left. I did what any other woman would do, and followed him to the elevator where the doors promptly shut on me, so I called him an asshole. I'm not even sure he'll talk to me, and I just realized I don't even have his number."

Both of my parents stared at me. I shrugged and patiently waited for one of them to speak.

"We should have gone with the long version," my father whispered.

Clearing her throat, my mother said, "Well, I guess we know why he asked for you and why you quit. I think it clears up why you called him an asshole. I'm still not sure why your brother called you a cunt, but let's tackle one thing at a time." Looking at my father with a tired expression, she asked, "Ty, would you please go get the whiskey?"

Dad stood. "With pleasure."

As he started out of the room, my mother called out, "Make it the good stuff!"

Chapter Ten

ROSE

I leaned against the kitchen counter as I waited for one of my parents to speak. While they downed a few glasses of whiskey in the family room, I cleared the table and cleaned up. My brother texted me once to ask me if I could get an autographed baseball for him because none of his friends believed that his sister was Bryson Robinson's girlfriend. I had quickly texted him back and informed him I wasn't, in fact, his girlfriend, to which my brother replied back with a meme that simply said nooooooooo.

"Are you dating him?" Mom asked with a smile that seemed too hopeful to me.

"No."

"Do you plan on dating him?" My dad piped in.

Turning to my father, I answered him with a simple, "No."

Mom did the pinching of her nose once again as she slowly said, "So, you slept with him, you don't plan on dating him, but you do plan on designing his house."

"If he still wants me to design it."

"May I ask one question?"

"Of course, you can, Dad."

He nodded, went to talk, but then reached for his whiskey and downed it. Setting the glass aside, he said, "I realize you're nearly twenty-three, but no father wants to know that his little girl is having..." He motioned in a circle with his hand. "That."

"Sex?" I asked.

He groaned. "Yes, whatever you want to call it."

I couldn't help but laugh. "It's called sex, Dad, and from what I've read, you had a lot of it with the buckle bunnies."

“Hey!” he said, pointing a finger at me. “This is not about me, this is about you.”

I looked at my mother. “Were you a virgin when you met Dad?”

She nearly choked as she started to cough, and my father gently patted her back. “This is not about me either.”

“I’m starting to think you have more of an issue with me having sex with someone over quitting my job.”

“Rose Marie, I’m not naïve, but it still was something I wasn’t prepared for,” Mom stated dryly.

With a one-shoulder shrug, I softly said, “You asked for the short version.”

“Okay, enough with all of that,” Mom stated, sounding more tired than I had ever heard her. “I can understand why you don’t want to date him, I think.”

My father nearly broke his neck turning to look at my mother. “You can? I mean, I guess the fact that the man is one of the best pitchers in history, is worth millions, clearly wants to have a relationship with our daughter, bought a helluva lot of land right outside of town and wants to build a house on it, a house he wants her to design...yeah...I can see why she doesn’t want to date him.”

“Ty, he lives in Seattle most of the year, and that’s only when he isn’t traveling to games. Rose would never see him during the season. Would he expect her to move to Seattle?”

My father scowled at the realization.

“I’m not moving to Seattle for anyone or anything,” I quickly said, causing my father to place his hand over his heart and sigh in relief.

I exhaled and pushed off the counter and took a seat on the other side of the small breakfast table.

“Rose,” Mom said as she looked at me. “You’ve always been so smart. You skipped kindergarten and went right into first grade. You’ve always made intelligent, thoughtful

choices. Why in the world would you have a one-night stand with a baseball player?"

I lifted my chin. "Because I wanted to do something daring. I wanted to follow my heart for once."

"What does that mean?" Mom asked. "When have you not followed your heart?"

"I can't explain my feelings for Bryson to you. Yes, I don't want to be in a long-distance relationship, that is one reason. Bryson isn't going to give up his career for me. He's trying to impress me with this gesture of buying a place in Montana only minutes from my home, but that doesn't squash my own insecurities. I don't want a repeat of...that happening again."

They both looked at each other and back to me.

"Not all guys are bastards, sweetheart."

"I know, Dad. It's just, I don't even know what I want to do with my life, and starting a relationship with someone right now will complicate things. Plus, I know I would worry about him...straying."

Both of their features softened, and my mother reached for my hand. "Sweetheart, I know that you've had your heart broken by he who will not be named."

I couldn't help it, I giggled.

"But like your father said, not all men are that way."

Turning to my dad, I asked, "When you were out on the road with the PBR, how many guys cheated who were married or dating?"

He looked at my mother, then back at me. "A few. There were more guys who didn't, though. I know it's scary to give your heart to someone, Rose, but you can't push every guy away for fear of getting your heart broken. This guy really seems to like you. I mean, he bought land down the road from here."

"You don't think it's crazy he did that and wants me to design his house? That doesn't give you stalker-type feelings?" I asked them both.

Dad simply shrugged while my mother smiled.

“I think it’s kind of romantic.”

My mouth dropped open as I stared at my mother. “Romantic?” I looked at my father. “Dad, you were ready to rip his head off when I said I slept with him, but I mention he bought land near here, and you think he’s my knight in shining armor.”

“I mean, it’s not what I would have done, but he obviously didn’t consult me.”

Mom laughed.

“What was that for?”

Patting his hand with hers, she said, “You and I hated each other and fought like cats and dogs. But remember the snowstorm?”

Dad smiled and laced his hand with hers. “I could never forget the snowstorm.”

I looked back and forth between them. “Okay, well, I can tell you with complete sincerity that I do not want to hear the long or short version of the snowstorm.”

They both smiled.

“He hurt his arm and that’s why he’s not been playing, didn’t he?” Dad asked.

“Yes, he’s doing physical therapy right now. He has a partial tear. I guess when he goes back, they’ll do another MRI and see whether he can play or needs surgery.”

“His contract is up this year.”

All eyes turned to Josh.

“Nathan told me. He also told me you were asking him about Bryson Robinson’s stats last month.”

My parents both looked from Josh to me, each with their brows raised.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t interested in him. As a ball player,” I quickly added.

“Riiight,” my mother drawled out. “As a ball player.”

“In the meantime, what about a job?”

Leave it to my father to bring that up.

“I already asked Morgan and Georgiana if I can work at the boutique. They both jumped at it. Morgan just came back to work full time and said she is struggling to be away from Blakley, so if I work there, she can take more time off. And I’m going to call Bryson tonight and talk to him about the design. I could make a good amount of money designing his house if he still wants me to. I’ll have to call Loren and see if she’ll give me his number. I’m sure she will. Unless he told her not to.”

A sudden rush of sadness swept over me at that thought.

Mom reached for my hand and squeezed it as she asked, “Do you think you can keep work and your feelings for him separate?”

“Of course, I can,” I said, not sure I believed my own words.

My parents exchanged a look with one another before my father stood. He walked over to me, kissed me on the forehead, and said, “You’re an adult, so I’m going to leave this all up to you.”

He turned to Josh. “Come on, let’s get you to practice.”

“Ty?” my mother called out.

“Yeah?” he asked as he stopped and looked back at us. “Don’t brag to the other dads about Bryson.”

He slapped his hand to his heart. “You think I’d gossip about my own daughter?”

“Do I need to remind you about the time Garth Brooks had her come on stage at his concert?”

My father looked at my mother like she was crazy. “It was Garth Brooks, Kaylee!”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Josh stated with a wide smile. “I already told everyone on the team so you can save your breath.”

Giving him a pat on the back, my father said, “I’m raising you right, kid.”



Pacing back and forth in my living room, I chewed nervously on my thumbnail while I waited for Bryson. I wasn’t even sure he would come after what happened earlier this morning. After calling Loren and getting his phone number, I had sent him a text right before I left my parents’ house and asked if he would come to my place so we could talk. I wouldn’t blame him if he never even spoke to me again. After all, I had told him I wasn’t interested in a relationship and called him an asshole in front of a number of people. I wasn’t even sure if he had heard me.

I jumped when I heard the knock on my door and nearly let out a scream. Drawing in a deep breath, I slowly let it out before I made my way to the door. When I opened it and saw Bryson, my knees nearly buckled out from beneath me. He looked even more handsome than ever. He wore a cautious expression on his face, and I couldn’t blame him.

Blinking a few times, I let my eyes take in the man who stood before me. It wasn’t Bryson in the baseball cap and uniform that made my mouth drool. It wasn’t the Bryson in business slacks and button-down shirt with a tie from this morning. It was Bryson in black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a freaking black cowboy hat that made his green eyes pop even in the dim porch light.

Fighting to gain control over myself, I smiled. “Did you dress all in black in hopes no one would see you coming here?”

A devastating smile broke out over his face, and he let out a soft chuckle. “I was out when you texted.”

My heart felt like it tumbled out of my chest and to the floor at the thought of him being on a date.

“At a place called the Blue Moose.”

I forced a smile. “Local bar in town. I know it very well.”

Bryson raised his brows and gave me a look that silently asked if I was going to make him stand on the porch or invite him in.

“Please, come on in. I didn’t mean to interrupt a date.”

As he walked by me, I closed my eyes and drew in the smell of him. Woodsy with a touch of bergamot and citrus. Same as the night we spent together. I needed to find out what cologne or aftershave he used and douse my pillow in it every night. So I could revel in my own self-inflicted misery.

I watched as Bryson took in my apartment. It wasn’t anything grand like his penthouse, but I liked it. The living space was one giant open room, with the living room being right when you walked in from the door that led to the back alley. Off to the left was a small eating table, and the open kitchen farther in. A large wall of windows looked out over Main Street. I had two bedrooms as well. The main bedroom had a balcony facing Main Street, and one of my favorite things to do each morning was drink my coffee out there. The other room faced the alleyway.

“I like your place,” he said before he turned and faced me. My heart hammered in my chest at the sight of him. I had been more shocked than anything that morning when I saw him, then angry. Now, well now, I was fighting to ignore the instant pulse between my legs at the cowboy standing in front of me. Baseball Bryson was hot as well, but cowboy Bryson was making my panties wet.

“I like the cowboy look,” I stated as I walked past him to the refrigerator. “Beer?”

“No, thanks, I’m driving. I will take a water, though.”

Reaching in for the pitcher of filtered water, I poured him a glass and one for myself. It hadn’t escaped me that he didn’t deny he had been on a date, which made my stomach feel

slightly ill at ease. How could I blame him. What were my words again? Oh yes, I don't want more from you.

“Thank you for coming over. I wanted to apologize for earlier today.”

He grinned and took the glass from my outstretched hand, and I prayed he hadn't heard the intake of breath when his fingers touched mine.

“There's no need to apologize. You were right. I had no right to come into your place of employment and put you in that situation or expect anything more from you.”

No, no, no! I didn't mean that when I said it.

I motioned for him to sit down. He took a seat in the chair that faced opposite the sofa. I sank down onto the sofa and slid my hands under my legs to keep them from shaking, or from chewing on my thumbnail because I was so nervous.

What is it you freaking want, Rose? You don't want a relationship, yet you hate the idea of him being with another woman. You don't want to design his house, but you want to prove something to who? Your old boss who never believed in you?

I was about to apologize for calling him an asshole when he spoke. “I wasn't on a date, in case you were wondering. I met up with an old friend of mine who lives in Hamilton now.” He grinned. “We were best friends growing up. We both went to the minors, and Howie decided he wanted to be back home with his girlfriend, Ruth. Baseball wasn't in his heart like Ruth was. They moved to Hamilton, and he works for a large ranching equipment dealer.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Had he bought close to Hamilton because his best friend lived here? How fucking arrogant was I to assume he did it because of me. I felt my cheeks heat, and I looked down at the waters on the coffee table.

With a deep breath in, I looked up at him and word vomited. “First of all, I'm very sorry I called you an asshole in front of all those people...it was uncalled for. Second, I feel

like a complete idiot for accusing you of buying property near Hamilton because of me. I don't normally think so highly of myself, and the idea that you would do that now that I think about it is crazy. I know you have family and friends here in Montana, so forgive me for that blunder. And third, thank you for having enough faith in me to design your house. If you're still interested, I would very much love to design the house, especially since I also quit my job, then told my old boss I was going to design your house and then shove it down his throat after it was built."

I pressed my lips together tightly to keep from saying anything else while Bryson let everything sink in.

He nodded. "Okay."

Drawing my head back in surprise, I asked, "Okay to what? The apologies? Me designing your house?"

"All of it. I accept your apology, and I would be honored to have you design my house. I'd also like to make some updates to a barn that the previous owners had built."

My mouth opened to say something, but nothing came out. That was it? Why was he being so nonchalant about all of this?

Somehow drawing upon the will to act just as casual, I forced a smile. "Great. Well, I hope you pay well because I'm working at the boutique downstairs that my cousins own, and it doesn't pay nearly as well as my old job did."

Bryson laughed. "I'm sure we can come up with a number we both agree on."

He stood, and I did the same.

"I better get going, I left Howie and Ruth at the bar when you called me, and I'm staying at their house, and I'm their ride."

"Oh, okay, sure. Um, I appreciate you coming over to see me tonight."

It suddenly bothered me that he hadn't corrected me on why he had bought the land in Victor.

Oh my God, what in the hell is wrong with you, Rose Shaw? One second, you think it's crazy. The next, you think it would have been a romantic gesture.

He reached down, finished off the water, and set it back on the table. "Thanks for the water. I'll give you a call tomorrow, and maybe we can meet and talk about contracts, money, etc. I'll see if Howie can recommend a lawyer in town to handle it all for us."

Oh shit. I was so in over my head, and Bryson was treating me like an...employee.

Okay, Rose Marie. This was what you wanted, wasn't it?

Nodding, I replied, "Sure. I work in the morning at the boutique downstairs, but I'll be off at two."

Bryson made his way to the front door, and I followed him, wiping my sweat-covered hands on my sweatpants.

Reaching for the door, Bryson opened it and stopped. I nearly ran into him and let out a small squeak of surprise. Slowly turning, he looked down at me, and my breath caught in my throat.

"First, it was an asshole move to call your place of employment and demand that you design the house. I'm sorry you quit your job over me."

I shook my head, but no words came from my mouth. I was too busy looking at the intense look in his eyes.

"Second, Howie had no part in why I purchased the land in Victor. And third, I know you'll do an amazing job on the house."

My heartbeat intensified as I swallowed hard. A strange relief washed over me knowing he had bought the land to be near me. It was clear to me now that I was losing my damn mind.

"Thank you." That was all I could manage to get out, and boy, did it sound breathless.

Bryson's eyes darted down to my mouth, and for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. I even felt myself

lift slightly onto my toes.

He suddenly cleared his throat and took a step back. “Good night, Rose. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

With a calm I didn’t feel, I smiled and replied, “Night, Bryson. See you tomorrow.”

I watched as he headed down the steps and to a car that looked like it was a rental. He slipped inside, and I stood on my small porch and watched as he backed up and then drove down the narrow alley.

Slowly shaking my head, I whispered to myself, “You really are a coward, Rose.”

Chapter Eleven

BRYSON

Howie opened the front door of his modest three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath house and gawked at me. “You look like shit. What in the hell happened between the bar and here?”

I had lied to Rose about needing to go back to the bar and pick up Howie and Ruth, but I couldn’t stand to be in her house any longer. The urge to pull her into my arms and kiss her had been too powerful. Her message had been loud and clear that morning. She didn’t want anything from me.

“How did it go?” Ruth asked, popping up on the sofa and tucking her legs under her with a hopeful look.

My hand sliced through my hair, and I groaned. “I almost kissed her when I was leaving.”

Ruth gasped. “You didn’t, though, did you?”

Howie laughed. “Poor bastard. Let me fix you a drink.”

“Make it a double,” I said as I slouched down into the oversized chair opposite where Ruth sat.

I had told Howie and Ruth everything. From the night I spent with Rose. How I couldn’t stop thinking about her. How I ran off and bought land minutes from her hometown, and how I had marched into her office like a hotshot and demanded she work for me. After Howie got over his initial shock that I was strung up over a woman, he looked at his wife and said, “He needs your help.”

“Tell me exactly what happened,” Ruth said as she took a glass of whiskey from Howie.

When he handed me mine, I downed it.

“Alrighty, then,” he said as I handed it back to him. “Let me make you another one.”

Scrubbing my hands down my face, I took the cowboy hat off and set it on the floor, then looked at Ruth.

“She quit her job.”

Ruth gasped. “No!”

“Yes,” I said with a disbelieving laugh. “Told her boss she was going to design my house and shove it in his face once it was built.”

Smiling, Ruth said, “I like her already. What else?”

“She thought I was on a date tonight, and I was a dick and let her believe it for a few minutes.”

Nodding in approval, Ruth stated, “Good. This is good.”

“How is her thinking he was on a date good?” Howie asked.

“The one thing about women, gentlemen, is that when they aren’t ready to give you themselves, they certainly aren’t willing to let anyone else have you.”

I rolled my eyes at the same time Howie did. “Why do women play games?”

“She’s not playing a game. I don’t know her yet, but from the little you’ve told me, I think she likes you more than she wants to admit. Maybe she’s just scared.”

“How do you get that out of what I’ve told you?” I asked.

Ruth shrugged. “She ran, so that tells me the feelings she had for you scared her.”

Howie pointed at me. “Yes! She ran, and that’s why!” Turning to Ruth, he asked, “Wait, huh?”

Sighing, Ruth said, “If I spent an evening with a guy, that from all accounts sounds like she enjoyed herself...by the way, don’t tell her you told us about that night.”

I nodded and waited for her to go on.

“Then decided I was going to get up, sneak out, and leave without so much as a ‘thanks for a good time,’ it’s because I was afraid to say goodbye.”

“Why would she have been afraid to say goodbye?” I asked.

“You mentioned that her best friend, Loren, stated she had been cheated on before, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, maybe that caused her to put up a wall around her heart. I mean, it would be scary falling for a guy who was a professional baseball player, lived in a different city, and traveled for months out of the year. Not to mention, you’re good looking.” Looking at Howie, she added, “But not as good looking as you, sweetheart.”

“Thank you, my love.”

I pretended to gag, then motioned for Ruth to go on.

“It might be hard for her to let you in, especially if she hasn’t had the best experience with relationships.”

Howie stared at Ruth with nothing but pure pride on his face. He looked at me and pointed at her. “This is why I love her. She’s smart as hell.”

Ruth laughed. “I’m a therapist. It’s kind of what I do.”

Leaning back in the chair, I let her words replay in my head. “That’s why you wanted me to play it cool with her.”

“One reason I wanted you to play it cool with her is you probably spooked her with the whole land and house thing. I mean, there is a romantic gesture, and then there is...you,” she said as she waved her hands at me. “If you really like her, Bryson, you need to go slow.”

“I think she wanted me to kiss her tonight. She lifted up some when she thought I was going to kiss her. When I told her about Howie, she said she felt stupid for thinking I bought the property because of her. So when I left, I told her Howie had nothing to do with why I bought it.”

Ruth smiled, and Howie frowned.

“That’s perfect, Bryson. You don’t want her to think you’re putting her into the friend zone. You don’t want to play with

her emotions either. You simply want to take things slower than the initial pace you set.”

“You’re telling me that I didn’t have anything to do with why you bought it?” Howie asked.

Ruth stood, reached for his hand, and said, “Come on, I’m exhausted. I forgot what it was like to go out for drinks.”

Howie stood and looked down at me. “Make yourself at home, Bryson. If I don’t see you before I leave for work in the morning, good luck.”

“Thanks, Howie. And thanks for letting me crash here.”

Ruth leaned down and kissed my cheek. “You’re always welcome here.”

I spent the next few hours staring up at the ceiling thinking about Rose. My mind drifted back to the night we shared together, and how I had felt the first time I kissed her. Made love to her. If there was one thing I believed in, it was destiny. Everything happened for a reason, and Rose Shaw stepped out onto the balcony for a reason. I’d do whatever it took to prove to her I was worthy of her taking a chance on us.



The bell above the door of The Coffee Cup Café rang as I stepped inside and glanced around. Sitting at a booth in the back right corner was the man I was meeting. When he looked up and our eyes met, he slid out and stood.

I made my way to him and reached out my hand. “Mr. Shaw, I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me this morning.”

Ty Shaw gave my hand a firm shake, did a quick once-over, then motioned for me to sit down. Sliding into the booth, I attempted to slow my beating heart.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” I said as I looked up at the server who stood with a pot of coffee.

“Would you like some coffee?”

I turned the cup over and placed it on the saucer. “Yes, thank you.”

We both watched as she poured the coffee, then she said she’d give us a few minutes to decide on breakfast.

“Thanks, Sue,” Ty said as he gave her a smile.

When he focused back on me, he said, “The sunrise breakfast is what I recommend.”

I glanced down at the menu and scanned it. I was so fucking nervous I wasn’t even sure I could eat. After reading what the sunrise breakfast was—two eggs, bacon, sausage, and two slices of toast—my stomach growled.

“That sounds good,” I replied, then looked up at Rose’s father. He looked to be in his late forties, maybe? His brown hair had streaks of gray in it, but his blue eyes were identical to Rose’s. The man was built and looked like he could beat the hell out of someone if they looked at him—or his daughter—the wrong way. Rose was also the spitting image of her father. He was good-looking, and I could only imagine what he looked like in his younger days. A cowboy hat sat to the side of him. He looked cool as a cucumber, and I quickly searched my memory to see if Rose had mentioned her father being a Mariners fan. Nothing came to mind.

Damn it.

“Mr. Shaw—”

“Ty, you can call me Ty.”

I nodded. “Ty, you’re probably wondering why I asked to speak with you.”

He leaned back, folded his arms over his impressively built chest, and narrowed his eyes at me.

I closed my eyes. *Jesus Christ, did I really just think that he had an impressively built chest?*

When I opened my eyes and focused on him, he raised a brow. “Son, why don’t you just come out with it before you

give yourself a damn stroke.”

Clearing my throat, I replied, “Of course. Mr...um...Ty, I met your daughter Rose a few months back in Seattle.”

“Yes, she mentioned you.”

My eyes widened, and I couldn't help but smile. “She has?”

He nodded. “She said it was a one-night thing, and I have to say I'm not too happy about it.”

I suddenly had the urge to flee. Rose told her father we slept together? Kill. Me. Now.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to beat your ass. That is, unless you hurt my daughter. Then me, and three other men who love Rose will hunt you down and break both of your arms.” He stopped talking and looked as if he was thinking of something. “It's more like me, five other grown men, and three young adult men who ride bulls for fun. One for a living now. I'm sure that would hurt you more than punching that pretty face of yours. Would probably end that baseball career you have as well.”

My mouth fell open, and I glanced around the café to see if anyone else had heard the threat. If they had, they did one hell of a job pretending they hadn't.

Sue appeared out of nowhere. “Ready to order?”

When it appeared I hadn't gained my ability to speak yet, Ty ordered the sunrise breakfast for both of us.

“Something other than coffee?” he asked.

Glancing up at Sue, I replied, “Wa...water...please.”

Her brows drew in, and she shot a look at Ty, who simply shrugged.

“I'll get this in and bring you a water.”

I nodded, then looked back at Ty. “She told you we spent the night together?”

“She did. Now if you’re here to tell me she’s pregnant because she was too scared to ’fess up, then you better be ready to run out that door. I’ll give you a twenty-second head start, but just know that I may be older than you, but I’m fast as hell.”

“What? No! I mean, I don’t think she is. She hasn’t said anything to me about it.”

Ty instantly relaxed, dropped his arms, and flashed me a bright-ass smile. “Thank God.” He laughed. “I really didn’t want to kick the ass of one of my favorite baseball players. I don’t think my son and nephew would have forgiven me.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

Ty laughed. “You can relax now, son. You’re safe.” He pointed at me. “For now.”

When he winked, I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or cry.

“Now, I don’t think you came here to talk to me about bulls, unless you’re interested in either breeding them or riding them.”

“Riding them?” I asked, a little bit of excitement slipping through.

Ty leaned forward, and his smile was bigger, if that was possible. “Do you want to ride a bull?”

For the first time since I’d set foot in the café, I felt relief. Excitement. “Does the fact that I have a tear in my rotator cuff change how I should answer that question? Because I really want to say yes.”

Ty’s smile faded some. “Shit. Yeah, you can’t ride one if you’re injured.”

I sat back in the booth. “Well, fuck.”

He laughed. “I like you. Don’t hurt my daughter, or I’ll strap you on my meanest bull and see how long the rope will hold.”

I laughed, and when he didn’t, I immediately stopped. “The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt your daughter. I

know this sounds crazy, and it probably is, but something happened that night between us. Something I've never felt before. I know Rose is not interested in a relationship, and I understand her reasons. Well, I think I do. I would never pretend to understand what any woman thinks."

"That's smart of you. As for the reason you think she doesn't want a relationship. Your job? Where you live? Simply buying some land and building a house on it isn't going to change her mind, you know."

"I know that, sir. You're the only person outside of my team and best friend who I'm telling this to, and I would very much appreciate it if it stayed between us."

Ty drew his brows down, and I could see the curiosity on his face. "I give you my word. Whatever you say to me, I'll keep in your confidence."

I drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "I injured my arm, obviously, and was told I needed to take a sixty-day medical leave. It's not getting any better, though, and I'm pretty sure I'll have to have surgery."

"Shit," Ty whispered. "I'm sorry, Bryson. That really sucks. You're at the top of your game. I hate this for you."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that more than you know. But because I am at the top of my game, I'd rather go out that way than sit for a year on the sidelines of each game and hope that I'll get playing time when I recover. Younger guys, talented, younger pitchers, are waiting for the opportunity to prove themselves."

"What are you saying?"

I moved about in my seat some and then looked directly at him. This was the first time I was saying this part out loud to someone who wasn't in my circle of trust. I was telling someone, and I was fucking terrified. "I'm going to retire from baseball. I haven't told anyone yet besides Nick."

"Not even the team?"

With a shake of my head, Ty whistled. "If you're trying to get on my good side, you just did a hell of a job doing it, son."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I bought the property because I believe in fate, sir. Destiny. I can't stop thinking about Rose. When I saw her yesterday, I had a hard time catching my breath and righting myself, if that makes sense."

He grinned, and I knew he knew exactly what I was talking about.

"I knew the crazy-ass decision to buy property and build a house so close to her was worth it. I've been in a long-term relationship before, and the way your daughter makes me feel...I've never felt this way about anyone. I don't know if you believe in love at first sight, and I'm not saying I love Rose, but I truly believe it wouldn't be hard to fall in love with her. I'm going to be here full time. In Montana. I've already found a shoulder doctor in Missoula, and my parents aren't far away, and...God...saying it all out loud makes me sound insane."

Ty shook his head and smiled. "My wife would say it sounds romantic. My daughter would, too, if she wasn't so damn stubborn. She gets that from her mother, just putting that out there as a warning."

I chuckled again and went to speak, but stopped when Sue brought our breakfast out and set it down in front of us. She also placed a glass of ice water in front of me and a glass of orange juice in front of Ty. He must come here a lot and order the same thing because I was pretty positive I hadn't heard him order juice.

We started to eat and enjoyed a comfortable silence before Ty asked, "Why did you want to meet with me?"

I set my fork and knife down and wiped my mouth. "I thought it was the right thing to do. Introduce myself to you, let you know I have feelings for your daughter, and..."

My voice trailed off, and he tilted his head. "And?"

"I have no idea how much to pay her for the design of the house, and don't ask me why I thought you were the person to go to."

Ty tossed his head back and laughed. It was infectious, and I soon found myself laughing as well.

“Damn, kid, you really aren’t good at any of this, are you?”

I shrugged. “I want to be fair, and I honestly want your blessing.”

Ty’s smile slowly faded, and he put his fork down and cleared his throat. “First, it means a hell of a lot to me that you met with me. It tells me a lot about your character. Now, my brother Brock would say you’re a kiss ass, and you’re simply trying to get into my good graces.”

I nearly choked on my tongue. “Not at all, I was—”

Holding up his hand, Ty went on. “I like to think I’m a good judge of character, and I think it took balls to come here. Now, if you had known I knew you and Rose had...” He glanced around the café and then back at me. He gave me a look, and I nodded. “Been together, I’d like to think you still would have come.”

“Probably would have reached out to you the moment I stepped foot in Hamilton.”

Ty grinned. “I see why Rose likes you.”

His words made my chest feel tight as a bubble of hope swelled. “You think she likes me?”

Nodding, he replied, “I do. She won’t admit it. She’ll fight you every step of the way because she’s stubborn like her mother.” He smiled as if remembering something. “Her mother and I used to go back and forth with one another. I was positive she hated me, and hell if that didn’t make me want her more.”

I jerked my head back in surprise. “Really? The way Rose described you two, she made it seem like it was love at first sight.”

Glancing down at his plate, he let out a soft laugh. “It was for me. I think it might have been for Kaylee, as well, but we both came with a lot of baggage that we needed to work

through. The attraction was there, no doubt about that. I'm pretty sure I loved that woman the moment I saw her. And then when she opened her mouth and it was nothing but sass, I fell even more."

I smiled. "It sounds like Rose takes after her mother. Do you know that the first time I saw your daughter she was in the middle of my kitchen, surrounded by women in designer clothes trying their best to make an impression. Not Rose. She was dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved Seattle Mariners shirt, bright-pink sneakers, and her hair was in a pony and pulled through a Mariners baseball cap. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was by far the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Then when she figured out who I was, she didn't treat me any differently. That's rare in my world. My last girlfriend loved my money more than she loved me, and when I found out she had been cheating on me, it was almost a relief."

"I imagine you have women throwing themselves at you often."

Shrugging, I replied, "It depends. If I put myself in a situation like a party, then yes. I don't like the attention, never have. I'm not saying I'm an innocent. When I first moved up to the big leagues, I wasn't an angel by any means."

Ty let out a single laugh and nodded.

"I guess what I want you to know is I respect your daughter. I am head over heels for her, and the last thing I would ever want to do is hurt her."

Pushing his plate back, Ty regarded me for a moment before he said, "If Rose decides she isn't interested in a relationship, will you respect that?"

The thought of Rose not wanting to be together nearly had me throwing up the food I ate. "Of course, I will."

"By the way you just looked like you wanted to toss up your breakfast, I'm going to guess you're hoping that isn't the outcome."

"No, sir," I said with a humorless laugh. "That is not the outcome I'm hoping for."

Ty exhaled. “As much as it pains me to say this, and it is not because of who you are, I genuinely like you.”

“Um, thank you?”

He chuckled once again. “My wife is going to love you. My son is going to shit his pants, and my nephew Nathan, he just might kiss you. My daughter has most likely already fallen for you, and my mother might ask you to show up in a baseball uniform simply so she can check out your ass.”

My mouth opened, but I had no words.

He nodded. “I know. I’m giving you fair warning.”

“Wow, okay. I was good until the uniform thing.”

Ty shrugged. “I believe in laying it all out there, kid. Now, I would never speak for my daughter or her feelings, but when she spoke about you, I saw something in her eyes I’ve never seen before. I see it in yours as well. I’m going to give you one piece of advice.”

Leaning in closer, I said, “I’d be honored.”

With a twinkle in his eyes, Ty said, “Buckle up, Bryson. You’re in for one hell of a bumpy ride. Hold on tight, and do not give up no matter how much she pushes you away.”

“Oh shit,” I whispered.

“Oh shit, is right. Now, I’m going to go home and tell my wife I met you, I like you, she’ll love you, and we’re going to invite you to dinner.”

“Um, will Rose know about this dinner?”

A wicked smile grew across his face. “Oh, Bryson. What fun would that be? By the way, invite your parents down to spend a few days. They can join us for dinner too.”

“Wait. You want me to invite my parents to have dinner with you and your wife...and Rose, but don’t tell her?”

He winked. “I sure do.”

I dropped back into the seat. Rose was either going to hate me or...no...she was going to hate me.

“Now, about what she should charge you for designing your house.”

Chapter Twelve

ROSE

I'd gotten a text from Bryson to meet him at Weston and Weston Law Firm at two thirty. I wasn't sure if it was a strange coincidence we were meeting at the same law firm my family used, or if he had somehow found out my family used that firm. Maybe his friend Howie used them. Yes, that had to be it. But...how weird.

I laughed and brushed away my crazy thoughts. How in the hell would Bryson know my family used that law firm? It was the best in Hamilton, so of course, he'd be using them.

My hands were sweating again as I pulled into the parking lot and parked next to a brand-new black Ford F-250. I stared at it for a moment.

"There is no way," I said as I looked at the truck and then to the building. When would Bryson have time to buy a truck? Or was it even his truck? And why in the hell was I even going on about a stupid truck?

"What is wrong with you, Rose Shaw?" I whispered as I glanced around the parking lot looking for the rental I had seen Bryson in last night.

Shaking away my insane thoughts, I closed my eyes and counted to ten, then looked down at my outfit. Dressed in the light-blue dress I had on from working at the boutique, I quickly looked at myself in the little mirror on my visor. My hair was pulled back in a low pony, and I had a little bit of makeup on. The pearl drop earrings had been a gift from Morgan for being in her wedding, and I wore them any chance I got. Since I knew we were meeting at a law firm, I decided to stay in the clothes I worked in. I loved the dress. It was very 1950s style.

Slipping out of my Bronco, I shut the door and started toward the entrance. I took the elevator to the second floor and soon found myself at the receptionist's desk.

“Hi, Rose!”

“Hi, Lee, how are you doing?”

“Wonderful! I’ve been instructed to bring you back to a meeting room once you arrived.”

I nodded and gave her a warm smile. Lee had been working here for as long as I can remember. When I was a little girl, she used to give us kids suckers and a coloring book and crayons. We hadn’t come often, but when we did, Lee always made it worth the trip, and we were never bored.

“You can step on in here. They’re waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Lee.”

When I opened the door, I came to an abrupt halt. The first person I saw was Bryson. He sat in a chair looking far different from the cowboy in my living room last night, or the baseball player who had stolen my heart months ago.

Wait. What?

My eyes took in the way his skin looked tan in the white button-down dress shirt he had on. My gaze took in the muscles of his forearms on display since he had rolled up his sleeves. Why was that so damn hot?

His hair looked like he had run his fingers through it at least a dozen times, and that smile of his...it was innocent, but I knew the wicked things that mouth could do, and it made my insides tremble with desire.

I ignored the way my body heated at the memories staring at his mouth brought me. When I glanced to my right, my smile quickly faded.

“Dad?”

Glancing to the left of where Bryson sat...there was no way I was seeing right. I squeezed my eyes shut and looked again.

“Holy shit. What are you all doing here?”

My Uncle Brock, Uncle Tanner, and Uncle Dirk were all sitting around the table wearing amused expressions on their

face.

Mr. Weston, seated directly across from Bryson with his back to me, cleared his throat and stood. He motioned for me to take the empty seat next to Bryson.

I moved slowly into the room, glaring at all six men.

When I made it to the chair, Bryson stood and pulled it out for me. He winked and flashed me that smile that made me want to pull his mouth to mine. I somehow ignored the feeling and took a seat, glanced around the table, and hoped it looked like I was shooting daggers at all of the men seated at the table.

“I don’t even want to know how it is you’re all here.”

My father cleared his throat and said Bryson’s name under his breath. Bryson tensed next to me and pretended to be looking through some papers.

“Uncle Brock?”

“I have experience in building.”

I huffed. “How?”

“I’ve had numerous things designed and built for the foundation.”

Crap. He had me there.

“Uncle Tanner?”

“I’ve worked closely with a friend of mine who designed one of the ranch’s barns. You remember him? You followed him all over the place when you were little.”

Smiling at the memory, I said, “Mr. Hatter. He’s the reason I love to draw.”

Tanner returned my smile with a nod. “He was a great man. I miss him.”

“We all do,” Mr. Weston stated.

“But why are you here?” I asked.

Tanner grinned. “I’ve paid him to design numerous things for me. I’m a consultant.”

I rolled my eyes.

Looking at Uncle Dirk, I asked, “And you?”

“I’m here to make sure they don’t beat up the famous baseball player and get sued.”

Pressing my lips together to keep from laughing, I turned and stared at my father. “Dad?”

He pointed at Bryson. “He asked me for my help. I offered it. He had no idea what architects made, and I highly doubt you paid any attention to that at your old job. So we’re all here to make sure you get paid what you deserve to be paid, and that everything is legal. At the request of Bryson.”

My brow rose. “You’re on a first-name basis, huh?”

Bryson squirmed in his seat, and my father wore a shit-eating grin.

“Oh yeah,” he said, hitting Bryson on the back. “We had breakfast this morning.”

Bryson’s face turned bright red.

I shot Bryson a dirty look. “Did you know?”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Bryson didn’t reply and looked at Mr. Weston. “Should we start now?”

“I think that would be best.”

The next hour and a half was filled with talk about contracts, deadlines, budgets, and design plans. My anger quickly faded as I paid attention to all of it. My three uncles pretty much stayed quiet for the most part, except for a few times when they offered suggestions. Uncle Tanner said Mr. Hatter would charge between five percent and twenty percent of the build cost, depending on the job. Bryson and I agreed to fifteen percent even though I thought it was way too high and Bryson thought it was too low. Uncle Dirk had leaned over and whispered to me, “Let the boy pay you top dollar. He can afford it. He’s one of the highest-paid baseball players in the league.”

I stood firm and said I wouldn't go higher than fifteen, to which Bryson finally agreed to.

"I think you should form an LLC, Rose," Mr. Weston had stated.

Looking at the lawyer with a confused expression, I asked, "Why?"

"What if you want to start your own design company?" Bryson asked.

Staring at him, I said, "You think I could start my own business?"

"Of course. Why not?"

I glanced around the table and suddenly felt like I couldn't breathe. Standing up so fast I nearly knocked the chair over, I quickly headed toward the door.

"Excuse me, I need a minute."

The moment I pushed through the door of the balcony that was off the private lobby, I drew in a deep breath as I clung to the rail.

"Rose?"

His voice sent a rush of warmth through my entire body.

"I'm sorry, Bryson," I gasped. "I needed a minute."

Coming to stand next to me, he leaned against the rail, and I could feel his eyes on me.

"Talk to me."

My head dropped, and I closed my eyes. "I don't know what I want to do."

"Rose, if you don't want to design the house, I can find another person to do it. I would, however, love to have your opinion on it."

A strange pressure in my throat started as I fought back tears. Why in the hell was I about to cry?

I drew in a deep breath and counted to ten before I looked at Bryson. My God if he wasn't the most handsome man I'd

ever laid eyes on.

“Why do you want me to be a part of this so bad?” I asked.

His eyes softened when he smiled, and something cracked open in my heart. “Because I want you to be a part of my life.”

“Why?” I asked again, this time narrowing my eyes at him in confusion.

He shrugged. “I felt something with you that I’ve never felt with any other woman. Call it crazy, but I feel like destiny brought us together.”

I couldn’t help but smile up at him. “It was a wonderful evening, but Bryson, I—”

Pressing his finger to my lips, he shook his head. “Stop talking for one second. I know what you’re going to say. It would never work because I live in another state, and I travel. My job. I get it. But I need to tell you something, Rose.”

My heartbeat doubled as I softly said, “Tell me.”

He turned and looked out toward the mountains. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to find the words to say what he needed to say or if he was simply taking in the moment. If it was the latter, I was going to punch him in the stomach for leaving me hanging.

Finally looking back at me, he said, “I’m most likely going to need shoulder surgery.”

I gasped.

“That means at least a year away from the game. I’d already been tossing around the idea of not renewing my contract that ends this season.”

Reaching for the railing, I attempted to keep myself upright. “What? I thought you loved baseball.”

“I do,” he said, his mouth turning up at the corners. “It’s been my life for as long as I can remember. A dream I had since I was a little boy, and I’ve gotten to live it. I’ve been blessed more than I could ever hope for or desire. And...I’m tired.”

He stopped speaking as he rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. He exhaled before he continued. "I've been thinking it was time to walk away before you even showed up and rocked my entire world."

"But you're the best pitcher in the league. My brother said you'd probably make millions on a contract renewal."

"I have more money than I know what to do with, Rose. I donate a lot, I've paid off my parents' house, put money away for them so they can retire early if they want, put my own retirement money away. I don't need any more money. I need...I need something more."

His eyes felt like they were searching deep into my soul. I was both excited and scared at the same time. What was the more he was going to say?

"What do you mean...more?"

"I want a normal life. I want to date someone like how regular people date. I want to get married and have kids one day. I want to coach Little League baseball or hell, even T-ball."

My hand came up to my mouth to keep my laughter in. "Do you know how many fathers would shit their pants if they saw you coaching T-ball?"

He chuckled. "I want a normal life, Rose."

Looking away from him, all I could do was nod.

"I'm going to announce my retirement from baseball next month."

My entire body swung around and faced him. "What?"

"I was going to wait until the end of the season, but my shoulder decided to speed it up."

"You're not going to play baseball anymore?"

He slowly shook his head, and I could see the sadness in his eyes, but at the same time, something like relief was there.

"How does that make you feel?"

“Honestly?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “Always honesty.”

“Scared. Excited. Worried.”

I chewed on my lower lip as I took him in. “Would you have bought land in Victor if you hadn’t met me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I planned on moving back to Montana, so I’m not sure where I would have ended up.”

“What if I’m not interested in anything other than friendship?”

Bryson reached for my hand, and the heat from his touch caused me to inhale sharply. “Are you not interested in even trying?”

“If I say I don’t want any part of designing your house, what would you say?”

“Okay. But will you still go out to dinner with me tomorrow night?”

Blinking rapidly, I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“I like you, Rose. A lot. I don’t want to walk away from something that is pulling me so goddamn hard I can’t think straight.”

Closing my eyes, I whispered, “I feel it, too, and that scares me, Bryson.”

“Why does it scare you?”

“I felt this strange emotion that night with you, and that’s why I left. I tried to convince myself it was because of who you were, your job, different states, and that was part of it, but I’m also so confused about where I’m going in my life. I don’t have a job or know what I want to do, but I do know I don’t want to start a design business. I’m so confused about everything in my life right now.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders. “Let’s start there. Let me at least be a friend to you, Rose. And if you don’t want a design business, don’t do one. If you don’t want to design

the house, we'll go inside and tear up the contracts right now. All I really care about is this."

He motioned back and forth between us.

"I want to get to know you better. I want to see where things go, but if you tell me to turn and walk away right now, I'll do it. I'll hate it, and I'll regret it for the rest of my life, but I'll do it."

I swallowed hard, glanced at the door that led back into the law firm, and closed my eyes.

"Please talk to me."

Focusing back on Bryson, I fought to hold back my tears. "I don't want you to walk away."

He smiled, and his shoulders relaxed. "Then what is going on in that beautiful head of yours?"

I drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out as I prepared to bare myself to Bryson. "Everyone knows what they want to do, but I have no clue. I thought it was designing, and I do love it, but I don't know if I want to do that for a living. I don't want my parents upset with me, but I feel so damn lost. All of my cousins have goals. They have dreams. Morgan's was to design clothes. She's kicking ass at her dream. Blayze's was to work on the ranch, and he's never been happier. Lily's is to work with horses. Bradley is bull riding. Avery is modeling. My brother Josh wants to help my father raise bulls. Nathan loves bull riding and anything to do with the ranch. And me...I'm good at drawing houses. I like doing it as a side hobby. I have no idea what I want to do for a living. Even you seem to have a purpose, and you're walking away from a career that you love, and you seem at peace with it." Tears pooled in my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to hold them back. "How can I give myself to you when I don't even know who I am?"

Bryson pulled me to him, and I wrapped my arms around him tightly. I melted into his body and breathed in his scent. It instantly put me at ease, and I remembered how I felt so relaxed with him before.

"You don't have to have it all figured out right now, Rose."

I sniffled and buried my face in his shirt. His hand moved slowly up and down my back as he pressed a kiss on top of my head.

“Maybe you want something simpler.”

Drawing back, I stared up at him confused. “What do you mean?”

“Not everyone wants a career, Rose. Who is the one person in your life you admire more than anyone?”

Without even thinking, I said, “My mother.”

“What does your mother do for a living?”

Smiling, I said, “She reads books for a living and edits them. She throws one hell of a good party, and she loves to...”

My mind drifted to a memory, and I stopped talking.

“Where did you just go?” Bryson asked.

Stepping out of his embrace, I wrapped my arms around my chest and said, “I was about ten or eleven, maybe, and I went with my mother to sit out in a field. I don’t remember where on the ranch we were, but my mother had decided to paint. She had set up a small easel for me, gave me paints, and we sat in silence as we both painted. She painted the mountain range, and I painted these two horses that were off in the distance. My mother said I was a natural and that I had inherited her talent for painting. She showed me how to add my parents, Josh, and myself into my painting. I remember being so happy that day. The two of us were alone in the middle of a pasture painting. I’d never felt so close to my mother as I did that day. I loved that she said I had gotten my talent for painting from her. It made me feel like she was part of me, and I was part of her. But I remember her telling me how before she met my father she had felt so lost and confused. And that Daddy had helped her find her way.”

My eyes lifted to meet his gaze. He smiled and whispered, “Destiny, Rose Marie.”

“Fate,” I replied.

Bryson softly brushed a loose hair from my face. “Do you still paint?”

My eyes drifted away. “No. I mean, I haven’t really sat down and painted anything in a few years. I doodle. My cousin Lily has been bugging me to paint more.”

“Why don’t you?”

My teeth dug into my lip, and I looked away, not wanting to admit the reason.

“When I was in high school,” Bryson said, turning and facing out toward the mountains once again. “There was a scout from one of the major league teams. It was the state championship, and I had never been so nervous in my life because I was told he was there to watch me. I really wanted the win. When my coach told me someone from the Red Sox was there, and they were interested in me, I nearly shit my pants. You don’t go from high school directly into the MLB. It’s very rare. I remember walking into the dugout, dumping everything out of my bag, and I threw up in it.”

“Oh my gosh!” I said, slapping my hand over my mouth.

Laughing, he said, “I was so freaked out. Scared out of my mind. What if I fucked up? What if we lost? What if I got hurt? A million things ran through my eighteen-year-old brain. My coach didn’t bother to tell me there were a lot of other scouts out in the crowd that night watching me, and it was a good thing or I might have passed out.”

“How did you play? Did you win the state championship?”

He grinned down at me. “We did win, and I played like shit the first few innings. Then my father came down and sat next to me. He asked me what was wrong, and I told him. He turned to me and said that life was always going to be filled with moments of clarity, but also moments when we would feel lost and confused. The key was for me to decide whether I was going to let the stress of something I couldn’t control dictate the outcome, or if I was going to take a deep breath, do the best I could do, and whatever happened happened. That’s how my father is. He believes everything happens for a reason.

Then he reminded me I hated the Red Sox and wouldn't want to play for them anyway, so we both had a good laugh. The rest of the innings there were no runs made by the other team. We won, I got multiple offers for college scholarships, and a number of minor league teams were interested in me. The point of that story is sometimes you have to let go, Rose, and trust that your heart will help you find the right path."

"And if I don't know what path I'm even looking for?"

"Close your eyes right now."

I sighed in frustration and closed my eyes. Bryson came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to him. It felt so good to be in his arms, and at that instant, I knew there was no walking away from us. From at least seeing where things took us.

"Put yourself in a place where you feel the happiest."

Groaning, I said, "Oh God, Bryson, this mind shit doesn't work on me."

He squeezed me. "Rose, please?"

"Fine." I closed my eyes and tried to think of where I would be happiest. Images started to float through my mind. Being in Bryson's arms. Riding my favorite horse. Game night with my family. Looking up at the stars with Bryson. Painting Bryson. Painting at sunset. Painting a little girl running in an open field filled with wildflowers. Painting Bryson holding the hand of a little boy as they walked toward the setting sun.

My eyes snapped open, and my entire body went tense.

"What the fuck?" I whispered.

"Um, that wasn't the response I was hoping to get. You couldn't find a happy place?" His voice had a bit of teasing to it.

Turning in his arms, I stared up at him. "I don't want the LLC."

"Okay," he replied. "What do you want?"

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

I opened my mouth and was about to give him a one-word reply. But I was so strong in the knowledge that I was about to follow my heart *and* my head. There was no fear, no worry, just pure happiness in knowing I was certain of something in my life.

You. I want you.

The doors opened, and my father stepped out. “Is everything okay?”

My head suddenly spun, and I forced myself to remain calm. Could you fall in love with someone this quickly? No! No, of course you couldn’t.

“Rose?” Dad asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

“Everything is fine, Dad. I don’t want the LLC. I don’t want to do this for a living.”

I could feel Bryson next to me. He took my hand in his and gave it a soft squeeze, a show of him being there for me if I needed him.

Dad looked confused. “Ooookay.”

“I’m going to design Bryson’s house. I’m going to work at the boutique and I’m going to...”

Looking between them both, a sense of calm washed over me. “I’m going to go see if Mom wants to paint with me.”

“Paint?” my father asked, his gaze shifting to Bryson who nodded. He looked back at me, and I could tell he was asking himself if I’d lost my damn mind.

Standing up straighter, I squared my shoulders. “Let’s get this finished. I have somewhere I need to be.”

I started to head back into the building when I stopped, glanced over my shoulder at Bryson, and said, “Yes, I’ll go to dinner with you tomorrow night.”

As I turned around and headed in, I heard my father say, “What happened out here?”

Bryson replied, “She’s finding her happy place.”

Reality hit me right in the gut, and I hadn't been prepared in the least bit. But I was ready for it all. At least, I hoped I was ready for it.

“Holy shit. I'm about to take the leap.”

Chapter Thirteen

BRYSON

Pulling into the small parking lot behind La Chic Boutique, the store that Rose's cousin's owned and where she was now currently employed, I parked next to Rose's Bronco. I turned off the truck, slipped out, and shut the door. I wasn't sure why in the hell I was so nervous, though. Maybe because it was our first official date? Or it was because it was Rose. Maybe it was because I let Ty talk me into thinking it was for the best we didn't tell Rose that both of our parents would be joining us for dinner. And all I really wanted to do was skip dinner and take her to bed.

I walked up the steps, taking them two by two, and found myself standing on the little porch. There wasn't anything on the porch except for a couple of hanging plants and a rug that was imprinted with *I like it dirty*. My mind instantly went to an image of Rose's mouth around my cock. I shook that thought away as I chuckled thinking '*yeah, I like it dirty, too*' and knocked on the door.

A few moments later it opened, and my breath was knocked right out of my lungs.

"Wow," I whispered as I took in the beauty standing before me.

Rose grinned and motioned me inside. Once she shut the door, she did a little spin. "You like?"

My eyes dropped to her chest, where her breasts were on display, but only enough to make me want to see more.

"You look fucking amazing."

She chuckled. "Georgiana designed it. Apparently, boho chic is in. I asked Georgiana if having my tits on display was also in. Is it too much? I wasn't sure where you planned on going for dinner."

My eyes took all the dress in. It was long and almost fell to the floor, but I could see the black heels Rose had on. There was a slit on the side of the dress that came up to about mid-thigh and my mouth salivated to see more skin. It was cinched around her waist, showing off her curves. Rose wasn't super thin like most of the women I had come in contact with, and I loved that about her. She was comfortable in her own skin, and fuck if that wasn't a turn-on.

"It is not too much. I mean, I want to peel it off you and lick every inch of your creamy skin, but..."

My words trailed off when her eyes met mine.

"That doesn't sound so awful."

I slowly shook my head. "No, it doesn't. Except we have reservations, and I'd hate not to show up."

Rose reached down and picked up a small clutch bag, slipped her phone inside, and winked at me. "We better get going then. And where are we going in Hamilton where you needed reservations?"

I held the door open while she stepped outside. One push on her keyless entry and the door locked.

"Your father told me about a new steak restaurant."

"Oh yeah! There used to be a French restaurant there, but...well...I'll tell you all about that story someday."

We walked up to my truck, and I opened the passenger door for her. "How interesting can a French restaurant be?"

Rose took my hand, and I helped her up. I couldn't help but notice how her body trembled slightly from my touch, and I had to force my body to settle the hell down.

Once she was in, I shut the door and made my way to the driver's side. Once in, Rose went on.

"It's not about the restaurant. It's about the guy who was the chef there. He kidnapped Morgan."

My head snapped, and I stared at Rose. "Come again?"

She nodded. “Yep. He was a stalker. It’s a crazy long story. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

That was a good sign she was saving stories for later. Stories she’d tell to me over dinner—or breakfast if I had my way with where we were going.

“No wonder me buying land and asking you to design my house freaked you out.”

She laughed.

“We could walk there if you want. It’s only two blocks up. That way, you don’t have to fight with finding a parking spot. The tourists have started to flock in now that it’s summer, and parking can sometimes be hard to find.”

“You don’t mind walking?”

“Not at all!”

She went to open her door, and I told her to hold on while I ran back around the truck and helped her out. Once she was out of the truck, we walked down the alley and turned on a street up toward Main.

I reached down for Rose’s hand and was pleasantly surprised she allowed me to hold it.

“What was it like growing up here?” I asked as we walked down Main Street.

Rose smiled. “We spent most of our time on the ranch. As you know from our conversation the first night we met, the Shaw Ranch is big. All my uncles live on it, except for Dirk, but I explained everything about him and Merit. Their two kids, Bradley and Avery, are like brother and sister to me. We all grew up together, and they spent more time on our ranch than at their own. Merit’s family has a farm that she and her brother now run. They grow everything and anything. I’ll take you to the farmers’ market in town. It’s the only place I buy my fruits and veggies.”

“I’d like that.”

“Anyway, we didn’t come into town a lot when we were little. As we got older, we came into town more. Especially

once we started high school. My Uncle Brock has a community center that he started in memory of his first wife and his late brother, Beck. It's pretty neat, and they're hoping to build a new water area for the kids. I know he's excited about it. They also have a mental health office for those who are seeking help with really anything. His first wife suffered from depression."

"Did they get divorced?" I asked.

"No. Sadly, she died while giving birth to Blayze, our oldest cousin."

"Damn, that's terrible."

Rose squeezed my hand. "It was, but Uncle Brock met Aunt Lincoln, and he always says she saved him. My father says that about my mother as well. I think it's sweet."

"That is. Your father is a great guy. Scares the shit out of me, and I can't tell when he's joking and when he's serious."

She laughed. "He's a pussycat."

I let out a huff. "I don't think so. At least, not when it comes to you."

Rose looked up at me and smiled. "That's what daddies are for, right? Protect their little girls."

"I guess so. All I know is if I ever have a little girl, I will have a baseball bat in my hand every time a boy shows up to take her out."

A beautiful laugh slipped from Rose's mouth. I stopped walking, and we turned to face one another.

"Before we get there, may I kiss you, Rose Marie Shaw?"

Her eyes lit up at my request, and a soft shade of pink filled her cheeks. "Right here? On Main Street? Don't you remember what living in a small town is like? The gossip!"

I slipped my arm around her waist and drew her body against mine. "Fuck the gossip."

Her nostrils flared, and her eyes turned dark. "I like the way you think, Mr. Robinson. Kiss me."

Dipping my head, I lightly brushed my lips across hers, then said, “I’ve been waiting to taste this mouth since I walked into that office the other day.”

She smiled. “What are you waiting for?”

Rose bridged the distance between us, and we both moaned when the kiss deepened. I would have stood there all night kissing her if I thought I could. Instead, I slowly drew back and rested my forehead on hers.

“I’ve missed you, Rose.”

Her hand came up to my chest, and she exhaled. “I’ve missed you, too, Bryson. More than you know. Can we skip dinner and go back to my place?”

I closed my eyes and let out a groan. “You have no idea how much I would love to do that, but we can’t.”

“Screw the reservations. I’m sure it won’t hurt them any.”

Taking a step back, I gave her a sheepish look. “We sort of have to go to dinner.”

She raised a brow. “Why?”

My eyes drifted down the road to the steak house that was on the corner before they rested back on her lovely face.

“We’re meeting some people there.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Please tell me it’s your best friend and his girlfriend.”

“It is not.”

Rose took a few steps back. “Bryson, what did you do?”

I held up my hands in defense. “Nothing. Your dad suggested dinner with him and your mom and brother.”

She seemed to relax. That wasn’t going to last long.

“And he told me to ask my parents to join us.”

Rose’s mouth fell open. She snapped it shut, then it slowly fell back open. “Your parents are going to be at dinner? With my parents?”

“Um, yes. That would be right.”

She slapped me on the chest, and I stumbled back.

“You didn’t think it was important to alert me to this?”

Shrugging, I replied, “Your dad told me not to, and well, I figured he had a reason.”

Anger filled her eyes, and I instinctively took a step back. “My dad told you not to? Oh my God! Oh. My. God. I can’t believe this!”

She turned and started marching toward the corner.

“Call me crazy,” I said as I jogged up and started walking next to her. “But maybe we shouldn’t go into the restaurant mad.”

She shot me a dirty look.

“I mean, you’re not mad at me, right?”

She glared at me. “You could have given me a warning.”

“I just did!”

Stopping, she put her hand on her hip. “Is that why you kissed me? To butter me up? Prepare me for the meeting of the parents on our *first date*?”

I screwed up my face. “When you word it like that, it sounds like a terrible idea. But when your dad mentioned it, I think I was so scared I simply went along with it.”

She folded her arms over her chest, and it did amazing things to her breasts. My eyes dropped down to them, and Rose cleared her throat. “Like what you see?”

I licked my lips. “I do.”

With a smile, she tilted her head. “Too bad. You’re not touching them. And to think, I was going to let you rub your ___”

Her words were cut off by the sound of someone calling out her name.

She spun around and stiffened. To my surprise, she stepped closer to me, and I could practically feel the tension coming

off her.

“What’s wrong?” I softly asked. “And what were you going to let me rub and where?”

Rose cast me a warning look, then faced the person who had called out her name.

An older woman started up the sidewalk toward us, a wide grin on her face. I couldn’t help but smile in return.

“You’re about to be the focus of some small-town gossip.”

My smile faded. “Oh shit.”

“Oh shit, is right...Mrs. Pratter!”

Leaning in closer to Rose, I whispered, “Fitting name.”

She elbowed me, then took a step away, then came back to my side, then stepped away again. It was like she couldn’t make up her mind if we were a couple or not. I made the decision easier by wrapping my arm around her waist and drawing her body next to mine.

As the older woman stopped in front of us, she gave me a once-over, and if I wasn’t mistaken, spent a little too long on my midsection. With her brows raised, she focused on Rose.

“And who is this handsome young man, Rose Marie?”

At the same time I said my name, Rose practically shouted, “No one! Just a friend!”

Mrs. Pratter raised her brows higher, and a knowing smile appeared. “Just a friend named Bryson Robinson. Aren’t you a handsome thing.”

Jesus, I felt my cheeks blush.

“I was showing him around town. That’s all. Nothing more.”

Giving her a slight pinch on the side, Rose yelped, turned, and glared at me.

“If you’ll excuse us, ma’am,” I said with a flirty smile and a kiss to the back of her hand. “We are running a bit late for ___”

“An appointment!” Rose cried out. Stepping out of my arm, Rose wished the woman a lovely evening, turned on her heels, and walked away as fast as she could.

Mrs. Pratter stared after her.

“If you’ll excuse me. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

The older woman nodded in confusion. “You as well.”

I calmly walked toward the bookstore where Rose had nearly thrown herself inside, a smile on my face and my feet a little lighter than normal.

“I’m going to love this little town.”

Chapter Fourteen

ROSE

Mrs. Pratter! Of all the people to run into, why did it have to be Mrs. Lucy Pratter? She most likely saw us kissing, and it would be around the gossip group within hours. Minutes even!

After racing to the back of the store and telling the young girl at the counter I was just looking, I made my way to the back corner and paced.

“If you were trying to give the woman any reason to think something was off with you, you were successful. She stared after you like you’d lost your damn mind.”

I stared at Bryson as he walked down the aisle of books, and for some reason, I had the crazy urge to lift my dress and tell him to take me right there. In the section of the bookstore that shelved all the self-help books. Maybe what I needed to do was buy some of them instead.

“Stop doing that!”

Bryson stopped in front of me. “Doing what?”

Lowering my voice, I whispered, “Looking all handsome and fuckable!”

He raised a brow. “A bookstore does it for you, huh? Remind me to put a library in the house you are designing.”

I nearly growled. “No, Bryson, you do! Dressed in dress slacks and a shirt that shows off your broad chest. By the way, your ass looks great in those pants.”

He turned slightly and looked at said ass. “Does it? Better than the baseball uniform?”

My mind flashed back to him standing on the pitcher’s mound. Biting down on my lower lip, I shook my head. “When you retire, will you be able to keep the uniform?”

With a soft laugh, Bryson reached for my hand and tugged me to him. “Why are you hiding in a bookstore from an old woman?”

“That old woman is the town’s biggest gossip. The first thing she’ll do is call the hotline and tell everyone Rose Marie Shaw was making out with a Greek god on Main Street.”

A wicked smile appeared on his face. “Greek god? And wait, is there really a hotline?”

I reached up and ran my finger along his strong jawline as I nodded. I wanted to skip dinner, skip meeting his parents, and fall into bed and forget anything and everyone existed.

“I’m scared, Bryson. Your parents?”

He kissed my forehead. “I know. Let’s blame your dad for bullying me.”

Dropping my head to his chest, I laughed.

Warm arms engulfed me, and I felt so safe. Why had I never felt like that way with any other man?

Destiny. Fate.

With a long, drawn-out sigh, I patted his chest. “We better go, or they’re going to think we’ve skipped out on them.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I exhaled as I looked up at him. My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt a jolt of desire hit me as he smiled down at me. “I’ve got you.”

With a nod, I took a step back. “Let’s go have dinner with our parents on our first official date.”

I could tell he attempted not to laugh as he held his arm out for me. When we walked by the front checkout area, the young girl asked, “Didn’t find what you were looking for?”

Glancing up at Bryson, I winked. “I believe I did.”

Not even five minutes later, we stepped into the Bitterroot Steak House. It hadn’t changed much since the last time I had been here, which was easily eight or so months ago, but there was a more masculine feel. Leathers and woods were

prominent, and the white tablecloths contrasted starkly with all the dark colors.

Bryson told the hostess we had reservations under Robinson, and she grinned. “Yes! The rest of your party is here. They’re already seated.”

My heart leaped to my throat. Who in the hell meets the parents on the first date? I had no sooner wrapped my head around dating Bryson when he throws this at me. I should have been mad, but instead, I found myself more intrigued to meet the people who raised such a kindhearted person. In the months since we’d spent the night together, I had done my fair share of googling Bryson. He wasn’t only known for being one of the best pitchers in the MLB but also for all of the charity work he did. He’d granted more Make-A-Wish wishes than any other player in the league. He’d even donated his time and money to organizations like Habitat for Humanity, breast cancer awareness, youth programs for underprivileged kids, and so much more. I was pretty sure I had fallen for him more each time I read something about him giving back.

Wait. Fallen in love with him...more?

The server snapped me out of my thoughts as she said, “Follow me, please.”

Bryson put his hand on my lower back, and I attempted to ignore the way it sent my stomach flipping.

We walked through the restaurant, and I couldn’t help but scan the faces. Hamilton was small, but it was still big enough that it wasn’t the kind of town where everyone knew everyone. Especially with all the tourists that came through. I still saw a few people I knew. No one seemed to notice who Bryson was, and I wasn’t sure why that made me sigh inwardly in relief. That was a lie. I did know. In my research of Bryson, there had been tons of pictures of him with his then girlfriend, Kennedy Owens. Most of them were formal pictures of them attending functions. Some of them were pictures of them out and about in Seattle, like going and grabbing Starbucks. Bryson always looked away from the camera, where Kennedy had seemed to love the attention. She was beautiful as well. Short blonde hair

that had been cut into a bob just at her chin. Not a single picture showed the woman without makeup on. The one thing I noticed in the pictures was they never seemed to hold hands. Interestingly enough, Bryson had reached for my hand often in the past few days. Was it an agreement between them not to show public affection in front of potential cameras? It was something I was curious to ask Bryson about, but not sure how he'd feel about me asking about his longtime girlfriend. Maybe he was more relaxed out in public because he was about to retire? I stole a peek at him, and he looked nervous. I smiled. He wasn't nervous about anyone taking his photo or recognizing him. He was nervous about meeting the parents tonight.

Looking at me, he smiled. "What?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

I saw my parents first. My mother wore a black-and-white dress. Her hair was down and flowed around her shoulders, and she had a smile on her beautiful face. Next to her, my father gazed at her with so much love as she spoke, I felt myself smile. I wanted someone to look at me like that. With love so obvious, everyone saw it.

When my gaze followed my mother, I nearly stumbled. Bryson's mother and father looked at my mother with interested eyes as they listened closely to what she was saying. His father was an older version of Bryson with streaks of gray in his brown hair. He looked to be in his late forties. He clearly worked out and cared for himself, evident by his physically fit upper body. Bryson's mom sat to his father's right and was stunning. Her light-brown hair was curly and fell just above her shoulders. The front was pulled back into a twist giving me a clear view of her beautiful face. I couldn't tell what color her eyes were, but the moment she turned and looked directly at me, I knew they were the same eyes as Bryson's.

Dropping his hand from my back, Bryson walked up to his mother, leaned down, and kissed her softly on the cheek before he whispered something into her ear that made her eyes sparkle. When she looked at me, I could see the vibrant green.

They were so stunning it took me a moment to return her smile.

Bryson's father stood, hugged his son, gave him a firm slap on the back, then turned to face me. When I didn't make a move, my father laughed.

"I see we surprised you," my mother said as she motioned for Bryson to walk back over to me. Gently taking me by the elbow, Bryson guided me to the table.

"Rose, this is my mother and father, Greg and Anna Robinson."

Snapping out of whatever trance I was in, I attempted to ignore the little voice in my head that screamed everything was moving entirely too fast.

Bryson placed his hand gently on my lower back once again, and the warmth of his touch managed to break me out of the panicked state I was about to tumble into.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson."

Anna stood. "Please call me Anna, and my husband Greg."

Greg nodded as he gave me a brilliant smile, just as he took my hand and kissed the back of it.

Well, the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

"Greg and Anna, it is," I stated as Anna drew me into an embrace. My eyes caught my mother's from across the table, and it was clear she was attempting to hold back a smile. What kind of sick and twisted parents did I have?

Bryson gently pulled his mother away from me as he said. "Mom, don't squeeze the life out of her, please."

Anna let out a chuckle and took her seat along with Greg.

"I cannot even begin to tell you how happy we were when Bryson invited us to dinner this evening. We had no idea he was even dating anyone," Anna stated.

"Anna," Greg warned as Bryson shot a look of warning at his mother.

“We’re not.”

All eyes turned to me, and I instantly felt sick to my stomach. Had I said that out loud?

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I could see the look of sadness in Bryson’s eyes when our gazes met. Feeling like a total bitch, I glanced across the table to my parents. They both gave me a look that said I was on my own.

Bryson cleared his throat. “Mom, I told you already, Rose is a friend of mine, and she’s drawing the designs for my house.”

Looking back and forth between me and her son, Anna nodded. “Of course. I’m sorry. I’m putting the cart in front of the horse.”

Was I the cart or the horse in that scenario?

Everyone fell back into an easy conversation around the table after that little mishap, except for me and Bryson. I sat there still in a stupor. How in the hell had this turned into a meet-the-parent night? And why had I said we weren’t dating? Hadn’t we agreed it was our first date? What was wrong with me?

“Are you really mad?” Bryson whispered into my ear.

“I’m not sure what I am, to be honest. Everything changed when I saw your parents. It made it all...real.”

“Blame your dad. He thought it would be a good idea for us all to have dinner together.”

My eyes immediately darted across the table to my father, who was laughing at something Greg had said.

I mentally planned out my father’s demise. When my mother caught me shooting daggers at my father across the table, she reached for my hand.

“I was a little upset with your father, as well, but don’t be too hard on him. He thought he was doing a good thing. That it

would break the ice and...whatever reason he did it, his heart was in the right place.”

Turning to look at her, I lowered my voice. “On what planet did the man think this was a good idea?”

“Do not whisper-shout at me, Rose Marie!”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. “Mom, do you know what it means to get spooked?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Good. Because if you thought I was spooked before, I’m really spooked. Like this is me Spooked 2.0. I’m ready to run. Bolt. Scram. And all the other words for flee that I can’t think of right now.”

She took my hand and gave it a light squeeze. “At least the meet the parents thing will be over and done with.”

I closed my eyes and cursed silently. Thank God my brother wasn’t here. That’s all I would need was him calling Anna or Greg a cunt.

The server arrived to take Bryson’s drink order and then mine. When I asked for a whiskey, three fingers, my mother kicked me under the table. I corrected my order and asked for a glass of red wine instead. Bryson had gone with water. Clearly, he hadn’t needed the liquid courage like I had.

After getting our drinks, everyone ordered. I wasn’t even sure how in the hell I would be able to eat, my stomach was in knots. When I was in Bryson’s arms at the bookstore, it all seemed okay. Not a big deal. The second I saw his parents, though, it all became so real. We had spent one night together, and a few hours here and there, and here I was sitting across the table from his parents.

“How long have you been designing homes, Rose?” Anna asked.

The panicked stupor was back and in full force. When I opened my mouth to speak, nothing emerged. Anna stared at me with a smile that was quickly fading the longer I remained silent.

When I felt Bryson take my hand in his, that comforting feeling swept over me once again.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I found my voice. “Not very long, and I haven’t designed very many projects. Bryson’s will be the largest.”

Mom cleared her throat and launched into her proud mother mode. “Rose designed our nephew’s house, and not only did she design the outside, but she helped him with a lot of the interior design as well. She has an eye for color.”

“Is that so?” Anna said with an arched brow. “I’m terrible at interior design. Just ask the boys.”

“Nonsense,” Greg stated. “Our home is beautiful inside and out. You should see the gardens.”

Anna blushed. “Fine. I do have a green thumb, and my favorite place to be is digging in the dirt.”

“Oh, I love to garden as well!” my mother said.

Greg and my dad quickly launched back into their conversation about bulls and bull riding. It was clear Greg was interested in the subject, or maybe simply curious. It wasn’t every day you met someone who raised bulls for bull riding.

“Do you have any idea what you’d like the house to look like, sweetheart?” Anna asked Bryson.

“We haven’t gotten that far.”

“I assumed we would be talking about that tonight at dinner,” I added as I looked at my father, who caught me glaring at him. He gave me an innocent smile and then winked.

“And do you work for a local firm?” Anna asked.

Bryson cleared his throat and moved around in his seat, as if suddenly not so sure this whole dinner was a good idea. At least that was what I had assumed he was thinking judging by the expression of regret on his face.

“I did until your son nearly got me fired.”

Anna's eyes went wide, and Greg turned to look at me with a disbelieving expression on his handsome face. Goodness, he really did look like an older version of his son.

"What?" they both asked at the same time.

I waved off my hand and let out a humorless laugh. "Not to worry, I quit before I could get fired. So, I negotiated hard when it came time to design Bryson's house."

They both swung their gaze over to their son as his mother asked, "What did you do, Bryson David Robinson?"

Bryson at least looked regretful for his actions. He shyly looked at me before he addressed his mom and dad.

"I might have asked—"

Clearing my throat, I stated, "Demanded."

Nodding, he went on. "I sort of demanded to her boss that they let Rose do the designs for the house."

All eyes were back on me, and I decided I was not a fan of attention. At least not from two sets of parents.

When no one spoke, I did. "I worked at the architectural firm for a number of years in the summer and interned there last summer. I assisted with a few designs over the years, but not actually designing them. I believe my old boss enjoyed my eye for design when it came to the interior and would often ask my thoughts on that. I don't think he thought I was old enough to design a full house. Let alone one for a professional baseball player."

Anna frowned. "So what if you're young? Age has nothing to do with it. It's all about talent. You might have more talent in your pinky finger than all those architects do combined."

I heard my mother say, "I like this woman. A lot."

"I don't have the proper degree, nor do I have the experience. I've designed my cousin's house and a few barns. I'm nowhere near qualified, so Bryson will still have to end up hiring an architect to do the actual building plans."

“I disagree,” Bryson stated. “And once everyone sees the designs for the house, they’ll all see exactly how talented you are.”

“What is your degree in, Rose?” Greg asked.

“Environmental design. The degree is versatile with jobs in architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, and interior design. The focus of my studies is on designs with environmentally sustainable spaces.”

My father decided to join the conversation at that point. “My brother, Brock Shaw, has a foundation here in town where he has built a community center as well as a health center that focuses on mental health care. Rose has been working alongside Brock with designs for a new water area for the kids and an outdoor arena for charity rodeos.”

“This is the house she designed for Brock’s oldest son, Blayze.”

Man, the cheerleading section for Rose Shaw was strong tonight.

Mom handed her phone over to Greg, and he and Anna flipped through photos. Anna looked up at me, her eyes sparkled with delight.

Greg was still looking at the photos when he said, “Rose, I do believe you’re being modest. This home is stunning. You have to know a lot about the engineering structure of a home to design something like this.”

“And you had a hand in the interior as well?”

Being under a microscope was never one of my favorite things. And for some reason, I wasn’t sure if my parents were attempting to sell my ability to design or make a case for what a wonderful woman I would make for their son.

“I did,” I replied. Looking at Greg, I said, “I learned a lot from an architect who worked with my uncle Tanner on the ranch. He let me ask a lot of questions and was the reason I was interested in designing buildings and barns while keeping our environment the number one priority. He was an amazing teacher.”

My mother and father both smiled at me.

“Blayze has Rose come in each season to decorate his house. And the girls all love to bounce from house to house decorating for Christmas.”

Anna beamed at me. “How amazing! Rose, you must certainly have an eye for color.”

I forced a smile and stared down at my glass of wine. Bryson must have seen how uncomfortable I was because he asked his father, “Anything new in the skies, Dad?”

Greg quickly caught on and launched into some asteroid that had been picked up with some powerful telescope. The conversation soon fell to how Greg used to work for NASA, how he and Anna met, and how Greg found himself in Montana. It was a relief to have the conversation directed away from me.

The rest of dinner was easy conversation between everyone. I had relaxed since the conversation was off me and found that I truly liked Greg and Anna. It was clear all the parents got along, and when my mother insisted they stay the night at the ranch at their house instead of at the hotel they were staying at, Greg and Anna agreed.

“Where are you staying, Bryson?” Anna asked.

“With Howie and Ruth.”

“How is Howie?” Greg asked. “I haven’t seen him in years.”

As Bryson spoke to his mom and dad, I looked at my father and gave him what I hoped was a look that said he was dead to me. His smile faded, and he looked at my mother, who shrugged and said, “This one is all you.”

Dad picked up the bill, and everyone thanked him for dinner. As they all made their way out of the restaurant, I hung back and waited for my dad.

“Did you enjoy dinner?” he asked as he placed his hand on my back to guide me out.

Stopping, I faced him. “Dad, how could you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Suggest that Bryson ask his mother and father to drive down to Hamilton to meet everyone? I agreed to design his house, not marry him and push out a couple of kids.”

Dad laughed. “I like him, Rose. He’s a good guy, and I really believe he has feelings for you.”

“But to invite his parents and give me no heads-up, Dad!”

I raised my voice, causing a few people around us to look up.

“Not here, Rose Marie.”

Growling under my breath, I stormed out of the restaurant and found the rest of our group in a circle discussing a local rodeo event held at the family ranch. I wasn’t sure where my anger was coming from, which bothered me more than anything.

“Oh, Greg, how fun would it be to watch the little ones at a rodeo? We should plan on coming back down for it.”

Greg nodded but caught sight of me. We exchanged a smile, and he made his way over to me. “I’m sorry if we caught you off guard, Rose.”

I felt like a child for the way I had acted all through dinner and was regretting it. Why had I thrown up a wall around myself? I smiled. “I don’t think I was ready for that surprise, but it was lovely meeting you both.”

“You clearly were not expecting to meet us this evening,” Anna said as she looked at Bryson, who pointed at my father.

Everyone laughed.

“I’m going to walk Rose back to her place. I’ll call you in the morning?” Bryson said as he leaned down to kiss his mother on the cheek, then shook his father and my father’s hand. He kissed the back of my mother’s hand and told her how honored he was to meet her. When she blushed, I nearly laughed. My mother actually blushed. What in the hell.

Anna beamed up at her son. “That sounds good. Maybe we can meet for breakfast before we head back home.”

“Sounds great,” Bryson stated.

Realizing everyone was standing there awkwardly waiting on me, I remembered my manners. Turning to Greg and Anna, I reached my hand out to Greg first. “It was such a pleasure meeting you both.”

“It was our pleasure,” Greg stated with a smile that I was sure was still making the ladies’ heads turn.

When I faced Anna and held out my hand, she drew me in for a hug. “I adored getting to know you, Rose. I can’t wait to see your design plans and what you do to the house.”

My stomach lurched. What if I let Bryson down? His parents. My parents. What had I gotten myself into?

“I hope we’ll see you soon.”

Smiling back at Anna, a strange sensation in my chest had me fighting back tears. What in the hell was wrong with me? I managed to keep the waterworks at bay and my voice strong and steady. “I hope so, too, Anna. I enjoyed this evening.”

She squeezed my hand. “I did too. Again, I’m sorry we surprised you like we did.”

Smiling, I gave her a hug goodbye.

After our parents walked out, following Greg and Anna back to their hotel, then they would all drive to the ranch. Bryson and I said our goodbyes and watched them all walk toward their vehicles.

Once they were gone, I started to walk—no, march—toward my place.

“Rose.”

Spinning on my heels, I pointed at him. “I don’t know who I am madder at. My father or you for going along with his stupid idea of springing your parents on me. You do not meet the parents on the first date, Bryson!”

“You’re right, I should have warned you, but if I told you my parents would be joining us for dinner, would you have come?”

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know!” I stated as I spun back around and started down Main Street. Bryson caught up and walked next to me.

“I should have been given the choice, Bryson.”

He pushed his hand through his hair and sighed. “I know. I’m sorry, Rose. It’s just...”

His voice trailed off, and I turned to look at him. “It’s just what?”

When he looked at me, he had an expression on his face that I couldn’t read. “I know I’m going about this all wrong, and the last thing I want to do is fuck it up. I guess I thought if my parents met you, and you all got along, and you liked them, you’d like me as well.”

It felt like someone punched me in the stomach. “Bryson, I do like you. I like you a lot, and I won’t deny that. But you can’t force this.” I motioned back and forth between us with my hand. “This isn’t something you can get because you simply want it. No matter how much you suck up to my father or sweet-talk my mother. You can’t win me over by asking me to design your house or by introducing me to your mom and dad. It doesn’t work that way.”

He nodded. “I know that, and I wasn’t sucking up to your father.”

“Really? Breakfast this morning? Letting him tell you to invite your parents.”

A look of hurt crossed his handsome face. “I met him for breakfast because I wanted to let him know how I felt about you, and I needed his help with the contracts. I wasn’t kissing anyone’s ass, Rose. And yes, I messed up by not telling you, but I didn’t want you to get spooked.”

“Really?” I asked with my arms folded over my chest. “Because I’m spooked, Bryson.”

“Rose,” he said, taking my hand in his. “What in the hell happened between the bookstore and the restaurant? I thought things were going good until you saw my parents, and then something shifted.”

How did I tell him I was scared? Why was I scared? What was wrong with me?

I pulled my hand back. “I need to be alone right now, Bryson.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow. We can drive out to the land and figure out where you’re thinking of building. We’ll start from there, but right now...right now, I really need to be alone.”

Turning away from him before I lost the strength to walk away, I quickly made my way down Main Street. The urge to look over my shoulder at Bryson was so strong, but I kept my eyes straight ahead of me.

Once I got into my apartment, I waited in the dark until I saw Bryson slip into his truck and drive away.

My heart hammered in my chest as I kicked off my shoes and headed toward my bedroom. Once inside, I softly shut the door, leaned back against it, and brought my hand up to my mouth. I did the one thing I swore I would never do over a guy again.

I cried. But it wasn’t because he had hurt me.

It was because I had hurt him.

Chapter Fifteen

BRYSON

Walking up to me, Howie handed me a glass of orange juice and two ibuprofen. “You look like shit, Bryson.”

I let out a gruff laugh and took what was offered to me. “Thank you. And I feel like shit. I was up half the night drinking.”

Howie sat down in the chair across from me. “Things not going as planned?”

I sighed. “I think I might have fucked up with Rose. Again.”

Ruth sat down on the edge of the chair and slid her arm around Howie’s shoulders. “I don’t think you did. If you had, she wouldn’t still be designing your house.”

“She signed a contract, so she’s obligated to do it.”

Ruth slowly shook her head. “Nothing has started, and I’m pretty sure if she wanted to, she could get out of it. You spooked her with the parental move.”

“Her father told me to invite my parents down and to go to dinner. You told me to take her out to dinner.”

“Yes, take her to dinner,” Ruth stated with a shocked expression on her face. “Not her and your parents. I don’t blame the poor girl for running. I can’t even imagine what that must have been like for her.”

Howie shook his head. “Bryson, I’ve never seen you so in knots about a woman before. Not even Kennedy.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Let’s move on from that conversation.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Ruth had never liked Kennedy and had told me on more than one occasion I needed to open my eyes. I’m sure I knew deep down inside things would

never work out with her, but I was too stubborn to admit it. I knew she wasn't the one, probably from the very beginning. Total opposite with Rose. Something about the first time I laid eyes on her, everything in my world seemed to shift into place.

Exhaling, I scrubbed my hand down my face and dropped back into the chair. "She walked away from me last night like she never intended to see me again."

Ruth reached over and patted my knee. "Don't give up just yet, Bryson. Plus, she does intend on seeing you again. She said she'd see you today."

"Wish I had your faith, Ruth. You didn't see how angry she was last night."

"I think she was most likely more angry with her father."

My phone buzzed with a text message alert, and I reached for it.

"It's from Rose," I said, my heart pounding in my chest.

"What does it say?" Ruth and Howie both asked in unison.

Rose: I'd like to get an early start this morning and head to your property. Should I meet you there?

"She's asking if I want her to meet me at the property today," I stated as I lifted my gaze to them both. Howie fist pumped as Ruth gave me a gentle smile. I looked at her with pleading eyes.

Ruth calmly stated, "Give her the option."

Me: Good morning. Whatever is easiest for you. I can swing by and pick you up or meet you there.

"Good! Good!" Ruth said.

"Why is it so good?" Howie asked.

"Because last night Rose was upset, she had no voice. No control. No one likes that in any circumstance. By giving her the option, Bryson is giving her back control."

I nodded. "No wonder you're a shrink."

Ruth chuckled.

The three dots on the screen moved, then stopped. I stared at the phone; my heart felt like it was about to jump into my throat. The dots appeared again, then were gone.

Standing abruptly, I started to pace. The fucking dots came and went. It was a good thing she still wanted to go out to the property, but it was clear from her text she was putting me in the friend zone—or worse, the professional zone. My eyes widened as I stared, waiting for her text.

Fuck. Why had I listened to Ty about inviting my parents to town and dinner? I knew it was a bad idea. I knew it was!

Her text finally came through, and I stared at it. It was five words. Five beautiful words.

Rose: You can pick me up.

It felt like she had been writing a book.

Ruth stood. “Chin up, Robinson. The girl likes you. All you need to do is slow down, but don’t slow it down too much, or she’ll think you lost interest. Then again, maybe she wouldn’t since you’ve already introduced her to the parents.”

My head started to pound again. “I’m never going to live that down.”

“Never,” Ruth whispered.

Howie stood next and frowned as he looked at me. “I am so glad I found Ruth.”

With that, he turned and followed her into the kitchen.

Staring at the phone, I went to hit Rose’s number when Ruth called out, “Don’t call her! Text back what time you’ll be there.”

“How does she do that?” I whispered as I quickly texted Rose back that I would pick her up in thirty minutes.



Rose sat in the passenger seat of my truck as we drove the short twenty-minute distance to the land I had purchased. When we approached the main gate, Rose smiled at the covered bridge over a running stream.

“That’s cute.”

“My mom said the same thing when I showed her the pictures.”

“Have your parents seen the land yet?” Rose asked.

With a shake of my head, I replied, “Later today before they head back home.”

She nodded. “I wonder how our parents are getting along.”

I drew in a breath and slowly exhaled. “I’m sorry about last night, Rose.”

“It’s over and done with. Do you have a build site in mind?”

My hands gripped the steering wheel harder. I wasn’t sure what I had been hoping for. I got that she was pissed about dinner and how many times could I apologize for not telling her about our parents joining us. Yet I thought once she saw the land, her heart would melt just a bit. I was clearly wrong.

“There are a couple of spots I was thinking of. The property goes back a good ways and backs up against forest land, so no one will ever build back there.”

She nodded, took out the same electric notepad she had the day I had surprised her, yet again, in her boss’s office. Shit. I really needed to stop with that. It was clear Rose was not the type of woman who liked to be surprised.

We drove up the drive, and on both sides were large open meadows of green grass. The land started to roll the closer we got to the Bitterroot Mountains. The barn was off to the right, and I caught Rose smiling as she looked around. I’d have given my right arm to know what she was thinking.

“This is beautiful, Bryson.”

“I know. The moment I saw it, I knew this was the place. It has the best of both worlds. The meadows down here and the mountains.”

Turning to look at me, she asked, “Why don’t you want to live somewhere like Lake Tahoe?”

I gave her a questioning look. “Why would I want to live there?”

Rose shrugged. “I don’t know.”

That was random, and I wanted to know why she had asked.

“Why would you ask me that? I told you before that Montana is, and will always be, home.”

Rose looked out the window, then sighed. “I read it somewhere in an interview you did.”

My mind raced through the thousands of interviews I had done over the years, and I was pretty damn sure I never mentioned I wanted to live up at Lake Tahoe.

“That is one beautiful barn. Look at this meadow. I see why they built it here. Any horse would be in their glory to make this their home.”

“First thing I plan on doing when I move out here is get some horses.”

“You should talk to Tanner and Timberlynn. They have raised some of the best horses in all of Montana. Especially if you want them for trail rides if you plan on taking advantage of the mountains.”

“Good to know. I’ll make a note to get in touch with them.”

Rose nodded, then asked, “Can we take a look at the barn?”

“Sure,” I replied, pulling up to it and parking. Rose slipped out and started for the two-story wooden barn.

Glancing back over her shoulder, she asked, “Is there living space here?”

“Yeah, there’s a little one-bedroom, one-bath apartment in the barn. I figured I would live there while the house was being built.”

She looked surprised by that but quickly covered it up and said, “That’s a good idea.”

We walked into the barn, and Rose took in everything. Six stalls lined one side, six on the other. A tack room, a bathroom, and a small office space.

“It looks like it was recently built.”

“I believe it was. The owners thought they would have more time to come out and enjoy the property with their horses. Their long-term plan was to build a guest lodge with about sixteen bedrooms in total. They wanted to offer things like horseback riding, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and hiking.”

“Wow. This would have been the perfect place for all of that.”

I smiled. “I know. A little farther back is a small stream coming from the mountains. It’s still flowing pretty good.”

“I bet the creeks were flowing this spring with all the snow we got this past winter.”

When I felt her gaze on me, I turned to look at her. She stared at me with a questioning look on her face. “What?”

“Is this something you do all the time?”

“What do you mean?”

“Follow your first reaction to something? Like with the land.”

I winked. “When I know I want something, I go for it.”

“And if you don’t get it?” she asked, her arms folded over her chest.

“I fight for it.”

Something in her eyes changed, but before I could fully read it, she looked away. For one moment, though, she looked

surprised. Did she have no idea she was worth fighting for? If not, I'd try showing her until my dying day.

"Look over there," Rose said as she pointed at a spot north of the barn. "Let's walk over there."

As we walked side by side, I debated if I should take her hand. In the end, I decided not to. We walked through the pines until we came to another open meadow. Rose turned in a circle and looked at the mountain range behind us.

"Do you feel it?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Feel what?"

Closing her eyes, she let the sunshine hit her face, and I found I couldn't breathe as I watched her. She was so damn beautiful. To see her in her element made my heart race.

"This is the spot, Bryson."

Glancing around, I took in the stunning vista in front of me. The Rocky Mountains were literally my backyard. I looked up the ridge at the Douglas firs, pines, spruce, and aspens. The creek's rushing water flowing in the distance had me closing my eyes and taking in all the sounds.

The wind through the trees. Running water. Birds singing. A feeling of pure peace swept over me. For the past few years, I had been moving nonstop, and I was more than ready to slow down. I nodded. "This is the spot."

When I opened my eyes, I caught Rose's gaze. She wore a huge smile on her face. She opened her electronic notebook and sat down on the ground. She looked around, then focused on the blank notebook and started to draw.

"How big of a house are you thinking?"

I sat down next to her, kicking my legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "I know for sure I want a log home. I don't need anything large."

She glanced up and faked a surprised look. "What? But you have the big condo in Seattle?"

Laughing, I shook my head. “That big condo in Seattle just sold.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You sold it? Who bought it?”

“A couple from California. Nick had already decided to move in with Loren, so it worked out perfectly.”

“Wow.” She looked shocked at my mention of selling the condo in Seattle. With a quick shake of her head, she went on. “Okay, back to the house. You don’t want a big house. Tell me what you want.”

“I want a home. Something that feels cozy yet will be comfortable enough to raise a family. I think five bedrooms, so my mother and father will have a place for when they come and stay.”

Rose nodded. “Bathrooms?”

I stopped and thought for a few moments. “When I was younger, I remember I always wanted a bathroom connected to my room that was only for me.”

“Me too!” Rose stated with a laugh. “We lived in the old ranch house, and although my mom and dad added on to it, I had to share a bathroom with Josh, and I hated every second of it. I was always so jealous of Morgan, Lily, and Avery because their bathrooms were attached to their rooms.”

“That’s what I want. Each bedroom to have its own bathroom. And maybe a good-sized half bath for guests.”

“If you do that, your small cozy house will be a bit bigger.”

“I guess maybe I don’t want it as small as I thought. I really just want it to feel like a home.”

Rose smiled at me, and for a moment, I thought for sure she was going to say something, but she shook her head and looked back down at the drawing.

“I love being outside, so I’d really love a big porch.”

“Wraparound?”

“Not a fan of wraparounds.”

“What else do you want?”

I thought about it for a few moments. “Large windows so it feels like the outside is inside. A big kitchen.”

Rose looked up and grinned. “I forgot you said you liked to cook.”

“I don’t get to do it often, so a big kitchen is a must. And I want one of those eat-in kitchens where I can be cooking, and people are in there with me.”

“What do you like to cook?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “I like coming up with new things to eat, and my grandmother had me in the kitchen from the time I could stand on a stool helping her bake. If you need a good cake or pie, I’m your guy.”

Laughing, Rose started back on the drawing and made notes on another page. She stopped and stared up at the mountains.

“What would you want in your house? Something just for you?” I asked.

She closed her eyes and smiled. “I’d want a room for painting. It would have to have large windows to let in the light and lots of room to put paintings all around.”

I watched her closely. “Why don’t you paint more, Rose?”

She exhaled and slowly shook her head. “It’s a long story. Let’s get back to the house. What else would you like?”

“Game room would be nice. An office, maybe. Since I’m retiring from baseball, I need to figure out what in the hell I’m going to do.”

Rose kept working on her drawing. It wasn’t lost on me she was purposely keeping it from me.

“Maybe I’ll go to school and get a degree.”

Rose stopped drawing and looked at me. “Are you being serious?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“What would you get your degree in?”

“I have no idea.”

Laughing, Rose got back to work. After a few minutes, she stood. “I’m going to walk back over to the barn for a second.”

I stood and followed.

Stopping right in front of the barn, Rose turned and looked at me. “Why did you really ask me to design your house?”

Her question caught me off guard. “What?”

“Why did you ask me to design your house? Was it because you wanted to see me again?”

“That was part of it. You snuck out after we spent the night together.”

She sighed. “Because I couldn’t...”

Her voice trailed off.

“You couldn’t what, Rose? There was something between us that night, and even if you’re afraid to pursue it, I’m not. Could I have gone about getting in touch with you another way? Yes. But if I had called you, would you have answered?”

She swallowed hard. “No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t...I don’t want to have my heart broken, Bryson. I was afraid I’d lose you, I guess.”

“I’m here right now, Rose. Standing in front of you. Building a house to stay here. I’m not going anywhere. I want to see where this leads, and I don’t understand why you keep pushing me away.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

Walking up, I took her hands in mine. “Rose, talk to me.”

“Why did you ask me to do this? Design your home.”

I looked directly into her eyes and softly said, “Because I believe in you.”

Rose took a few steps back as she opened her mouth to say something, then shut it. Tears filled her eyes, and she spun on her heels and started toward the barn.

She might not want to show me her emotions, but I was tired of her running, and it was going to stop right now.

Chapter Sixteen

ROSE

My heart hammered in my head as Bryson's words replayed over and over in my head. "I believe in you."

It wasn't like I never had anyone believe in me. Hell, my parents did. My mother and father always told me how talented I was with a paint and brush and my drawings. Blayze did when he asked me to help him design his house. I had talent. I knew I did. But the idea of putting it out there for the world to see scared me. It was the talent show in high school where I had overheard some girls in the bathroom talk about how terrible my painting was. It had been one I had worked on with my mother. Hearing them say it was terrible had broken me to the core. Then the painting in the gallery where someone else had torn apart my work. And the guy I thought I had been in love with tossed me to the side as if I was nothing. All those insecurities in my life where someone said I wasn't good enough. The scars from that ran deep.

Closing my eyes, I thought back to earlier that morning when Jax Harper had bumped into me at River Rising Bakery. He asked me again about putting a painting in their gallery, and I had declined...*again*. I had done it once while in high school and overheard someone going on and on about how terrible it was and how an art gallery like Cassens Fine Art shouldn't have such garbage displayed. I had nearly run past them and ripped it off the wall. Jax had tried to tell me to ignore the harsh words, but from that day on, I hadn't painted. At least, I hadn't finished a painting.

"Rose."

I jumped at the sound of Bryson as he stormed into the barn. When I turned around to tell him I needed a few minutes, I pressed my mouth into a tight line. He looked angry, and I had never seen him angry before.

“Fine. I admit it. I fucked this all up. I was stupid, I did everything wrong that I possibly could, but there is one thing I know for a fucking fact.”

I wanted to respond with a snarky comment, but nothing would come out.

“The first time I laid eyes on you, something inside me changed. You may not believe in love at first sight, Rose Marie Shaw, and I never did before you. You consume my thoughts. You make my body ache simply thinking about touching you. You drive me so goddamn crazy I do stupid shit like buy land and barns, and ask you to design my house, and it’s all because I fell in love with you the moment I saw those damn pink sneakers. If you don’t want this, if you won’t fight for us, then yeah, maybe we should just end all of this here and now because as much as I think I have enough fight in me for both of us, I’m not so sure anymore.”

My hand went to my mouth to keep the sob back that was threatening to spill out.

Bryson pushed his hands through his hair and let out a frustrated groan. He turned to me, and I could see it in his eyes. The beautiful bright light I loved about those green eyes was slowly fading, and I was the cause.

He shook his head and raised his hand, then dropped it to his side. “You found your way up to me, and I had the best night of my life with you. Yes, I’m impulsive when it comes to you, but I know in the very depth of my soul that I want to be with you, Rose. I’d fall on my knees and beg you if I thought it would make a difference. I can’t make you want this, but I can fight until I know for a fact that you don’t want this.”

I felt a single tear roll down my cheek as Bryson took a few steps toward me. When he stopped right in front of me, I looked up into his hauntingly beautiful green eyes.

“I’m scared,” I whispered as I closed my eyes.

The feel of his hands on my face caused me to look at him once again. “Baby, tell me what you’re scared of because I would never hurt you.”

“I don’t honestly know. Of falling in love with you?”

Bryson bent down to look into my eyes, a confused look on his face. “And that’s a bad thing because?”

I let out a soft laugh. “It’s not a bad thing. I just feel so lost that I guess I’m afraid to lose myself even more. I’ve always had this wall up around myself, and I know it’s stupid. I’m stronger than the things that have happened to me in the past, but I’m terrified I’ll mess this up between us because I do want you so much. And the fear of failing is there, and I can’t get rid of it.”

He smiled. “So far, I seem to be the one messing up.”

I shook my head. “No, you haven’t.”

“Tell me what you’re afraid of failing at.”

“Everything. I told everyone I was interested in architecture when really all I’ve ever wanted to do was paint. I didn’t get a degree in architecture because I was worried I wouldn’t be good enough even though I know I am. How messed up is that? I haven’t finished a painting since high school when I overheard a few different people say the painting was bad. I know not everyone will like my art, so that just pisses me off even more, so much so that I’m afraid to take a leap. The first guy I gave my heart to broke it. I’m terrified to give you my heart because from the moment you first smiled at me, you made me feel something I’ve never felt before, and if you broke my heart, I’m not sure I would ever recover.”

“Rose,” Bryson softly whispered as he placed his finger on my chin and lifted my gaze to him. “No one is perfect. Not me, not you, no one. I completely understand your fear with your paintings, but if you don’t even try, you’ll always second-guess yourself. And if we don’t try to see where this goes...”

His voice trailed off. “I want to see where this goes between us.”

Bryson smiled. “Good, because you already know I do.”

I chuckled, then looked up at him with a serious expression. “Have you never worried about failing?”

“I still do.”

“But you’re the best pitcher in the league,” I pointed out.

“I worked my ass off to get to where I am, Rose. Do you know my first high school baseball coach told me I would never make it to the major leagues? He said I didn’t have what it took. I could have listened to him and stopped playing. Instead, I listened to my heart and gut. They both told me that I was good. Damn good. My dream was to be a major league pitcher, and I would do whatever it took to be one. My mother and father played a huge role in my success. I’m positive if your mom and dad knew your true desire, they would support you one hundred percent.”

“I know they would, but I don’t want to disappoint them after I went to school for something other than art.”

“Who cares what your degree is in. All that matters is you do something that makes you happy, Rose.”

Chewing on my lower lip, I exhaled. “I know I can design you a beautiful home.”

Smiling, Bryson tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, leaned down, and brought his lips just short of mine. “I never doubted your ability, Rose. And I know what I feel here.” He took my hand in his and placed it over his heart. “Is real. It’s worth fighting for.”

A sob slipped free, and I felt the last bit of wall around my heart break and collapse. I was finally ready to admit what I knew the moment I saw Bryson Robinson step out of the shadows. “I feel it too. I’ve felt it from the first moment I saw you.”

His mouth captured mine and silenced any lingering anxiety in an instant. I still held the notebook in my hands and felt Bryson take it from me. I was so lost in the kiss I had no idea what he had done with it and could not have cared less at that moment. All I knew was he was kissing me, and it felt like heaven.

His arms wrapped around my body and drew me closer. I could feel his desire for me press into my stomach and caused

my own to double with intensity. I wanted him and was tired of fighting it.

My fingers sliced through his hair, drawing him closer so I could deepen the kiss. Bryson moaned into my mouth, and a bolt of lust shot straight to my core.

I pulled my mouth away long enough to say, “Bryson, I need you.”

He clearly needed no other invitation. His hands were everywhere, pulling off my shirt, squeezing my breasts before he lifted my body. I wrapped my legs around his waist and ground into his erection.

“Fuck,” he whispered before he pulled my bra down and released a breast. The feel of the cool morning air caused my already-hard nipple to harden more. It was an unusually cool July morning, but that wasn’t the reason my entire body shivered. It was knowing I was about to be with the one man who had made my heart feel something I’d never felt before.

Bryson backed us up against one of the stalls and moaned when he placed his mouth over the sensitive peak of my breast.

“God, yes. Bryson, I...I...”

He lifted his head and looked into my eyes. “I know, baby. I feel it too.”

Moving to the other breast, he pulled it out, and my bra was lifting them both up as if offering Bryson a meal to devour. And did he ever. With my body pressed against the door of the stall, Bryson worked on sucking each nipple, back and forth, giving them equal pleasure. I was positive I was going to come simply from that alone. Is that even possible? With Bryson, yes, it sure as hell was.

“Please!” I whimpered as he pressed his hard dick into me, causing me to buck against him. The friction was heavenly, but I wanted him inside me.

“I want to fuck you, Rose. Right here in this barn.”

I bit down on my lip as a tingling sensation swept over my body. No way was I going to come simply from Bryson saying he wanted to fuck me.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I asked with a smile.

Bryson set me down and started to unbutton my jeans. “I want to lick your pussy until you scream out my name, and I hear it echoing in this stable.”

My knees felt weak while my hands trembled to undo Bryson’s jeans. He dropped down and pulled my sneakers off, then slid my panties and jeans off. Everything felt fast and clumsy, like we were two high school kids trying to get in a quick fuck before we got caught.

Before I knew it, Bryson had me sitting on the edge of the stall door. I gasped as the cool metal hit my bare ass cheeks, and I had to focus on staying on the thin rail. My breasts lifted by my bra still pulled down and under them, and Bryson’s pants were undone. I wanted to push my hand down inside them to feel his hot, hard erection, but if I let go of the sides of the stall I would fall.

“Hold on tight, Rose.”

I did as he asked and held my breath, knowing what was about to come. My body trembled with anticipation, and the first swipe of his tongue through my folds had me sucking in a short breath. My body was wound up so tight, not only from what Bryson was doing, but also with focusing on staying on the door of the stall. Somehow it heightened the experience tenfold.

“Oh God, Bryson. I can’t do this!”

He looked up and smiled.

“No, I mean, I can, but I’m going to fall on my ass perched up here like this!”

Standing, Bryson lifted me and set me down. “Don’t move.”

He retreated and came back with a couple of blankets and laid them down on the floor of the barn.

I quickly finished undressing as Bryson did the same.

“I’ve been dreaming of being inside you again, Rose.”

“Me too,” I panted as I laid down on the blanket, and he quickly positioned himself between my legs.

“I’ve been dreaming of eating this pussy of yours.”

I closed my eyes and moaned out his name. Bryson’s mouth was back to devouring me, and I could feel my orgasm building. It was going to hit me like a speeding train. I screamed out his name when he pushed his fingers inside me and sucked on my clit.

When I floated back down to my body, Bryson was positioned over me, his cock sliding over the slickness of my cum.

“Please,” I whispered while I wrapped my legs around him and pulled him closer to me.

“I don’t think I’m going to last long.”

Smiling, I reached between us and positioned him at my entrance. “Do what you said you wanted to do.”

“Fuck you?”

My heart jumped in my chest, and I felt my breathing pick up. The high from my orgasm only moments ago faded, and my core pulsed for more.

“Yes.”

Bryson pushed inside me, causing me to let out a little yelp.

He stilled. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t stop!” I demanded, digging my nails into his shoulders.

Bryson moved slowly at first. Pulling out, then slowly pushing back in. His mouth had captured mine, and it was a sweet torture to be kissed while he slowly made love to me. He had promised me more, and I wanted it.

“Bryson, harder.”

He chuckled, bit my lower lip, then did exactly what I wanted. What I needed. He fucked me fast and hard, both of us moaning in pleasure. When he reached under my ass and lifted me, he went deeper, hitting the spot that caused me to spiral out of control with an intense orgasm. I cried out his name as my body squeezed around him. “Bryson! Oh God, Bryson!” I screamed with pleasure.

“Rose, I’m going to come,” Bryson cried out, burying his face in my neck and pushing in as he moaned my name once more and came inside me. God, how I had missed being with him. I knew one night wasn’t going to be enough. Hell, I wasn’t so sure a lifetime would be enough. The idea of never being with him was no longer an option. I wanted him again, even now with him still inside me.

When he lifted his body to look down at me, I smiled. “That was amazing.”

“It was beyond amazing. When I’m inside you, it’s like a whole new experience. I can’t get enough of you, Rose.”

Reaching up, I placed my hand on the side of his face. “I feel the same way, and this deep feeling I have for you no longer scares me.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “I’m glad. Because now I know for a fact I can never let you go.”

I giggled but then gasped when he pulled out of me. The warmth of him instantly caused my body to mourn the loss.

Dropping down next to me, Bryson pulled the cover, which I only then noticed was scratchy as hell, over us. Pulling me closer to him, we focused on calming our breathing down.

“I’m pretty sure this is a new blanket. Or maybe it’s a horse blanket?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I was in Bryson’s arms and felt at peace for the first time in months. It was the same feeling I felt when we were up on that rooftop terrace staring up at the stars. A contentment I’d never known before, and it felt nice.

With a kiss on top of my head, Bryson softly said, “A penny for those thoughts of yours.”

“I was thinking about how peaceful this is, and how the last time I felt like this was when I was in your arms on your roof.”

“That was the best night of my life, and it wasn’t the amazing sex.”

Looking up at him, I asked, “What was it, then?”

“It was the night you came into my life and changed everything. I changed that night.”

Smiling, I snuggled deeper into his side. “It was for me as well. I have thought about you nearly every single day after that.”

His finger traced a lazy circle on my arm. “I did as well. It about killed me to wake up with you gone.”

Sighing, I kissed his chest. “I’m sorry I ran, but I’m so glad you came after me, even if a phone call would have worked as well.”

Bryson laughed, and I loved how it moved through my body. “I don’t think a simple phone call would have won you over. But I’m glad we’re here together, Rose.”

“You know,” I said as I rested my chin on the back of my hand, “you really didn’t have to buy a few hundred acres of land to win me over.”

“I’ve missed Montana more than I can say. Knowing you were here so close to my parents only made me realize what I really wanted.”

“Bryson, I know I said I couldn’t do a relationship with you if you were playing baseball, but even having you here for a few days, the thought of letting you go forever isn’t something I could even comprehend. I won’t be the reason you give up your dreams.”

Sitting up, he gathered me onto his lap as he leaned against the stall. “First of all, I don’t ever want you to think I’m giving anything up for you, and I would never ask you to give anything up for me. My shoulder is shot, Rose. Right now, if I give it a rest, I might be able to get away with not having

surgery on it for a while if I'm careful how I use it. If I go back to playing, I will for sure be in surgery within the next few months. I've been playing baseball for over fifteen years, and I'm ready for the next phase of my life."

"And what exactly is the next phase?"

He flashed me a wickedly sexy grin. "Not to spook you, but I'm hoping it means spending my days and nights with you. Making this place into a home, starting a family, and enjoying moments like this."

"This is rather nice, and believe it or not, I'm not spooked. And just so you know, I never believed in love at first sight until you came out of the shadows on your balcony. I took one look at you, not having a clue as to who you were, and I felt my heart come to life. That is the only way I know how to explain it. It was powerful, and I'm not honestly sure how I didn't profess myself to you right then and there."

"I loved that you had no idea who in the hell I was. And I loved it even more that even after you found out who I was, that didn't faze you one bit."

I giggled. "As much as I would love to stay wrapped in this scratchy-ass blanket with you—famous or not—I think we should get dressed."

The sound of a car driving up had us both freezing our movements.

"Um, are you expecting anyone?" I asked, jumping up to my feet and wrapping the blanket around me.

The sound of doors shutting had both of us scrambling for our clothes.

"Bryson?"

"Rose?"

We stopped and stared at one another. "Oh my God, it's my mother!" we both said at the same time.

When I heard my father's voice next, I saw myself standing at Bryson's funeral!

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” I whispered as I attempted to pull my jeans back on. When I looked at Bryson, he was already dressed and slipping on his boots.

“What the hell? How do men dress so fast?” I said, spinning as I looked for my bra that had gotten thrown somewhere.

He suddenly pushed me into the stall. My sneakers were thrown at me, and Bryson whispered, “Your bra is in the corner.”

I turned to see it there and chuckled. How had it gotten thrown in here? I reached for it, then heard Anna’s voice and dropped like a rock.

“There you are!” said Anna as she walked into the barn. I crawled over and tucked myself into a corner as I slowly got dressed.

“Hey, what are you guys doing here?” Bryson asked, his voice sounding a bit too panicked.

“We came to see the land. You told us you and Rose would be here.”

“Where’s Rose?” my mother asked.

My father chuckled. “If I know her, she’s walking around the property.”

“She had to go to the bathroom,” Bryson quickly said.

I closed my eyes and internally cursed.

“Rose? My daughter is using the bathroom in the outdoors?” my father asked, clearly sounding confused.

“Yep. She drank a large coffee on our way here.”

“Why didn’t she use this bathroom?” Dad asked.

I closed my eyes and held my breath.

“We hadn’t walked into the barn yet, and I totally forgot there was one in here.”

“Okay, well, um...do you want to show us around the barn?” Anna asked.

“What’s going on?”

Greg joined the party, and I heard my father telling him I was out in the woods going to the bathroom. At that moment, I prayed a hole would open and swallow me. It could not possibly get worse.

“Just pee!” Bryson said. “She drank a lot of coffee.”

My mother laughed. “So you said.”

I was wrong. It could get worse.

“Let me show you guys around the barn. Dad, there’s an office in here.”

“An office, huh?” Greg asked as the voices started to move away from the stall. When I could no longer hear anyone, I quickly finished getting dressed. Thank God the stalls were empty, and I hadn’t had to worry about hay in my hair. Once I was dressed, I stood and nearly let out a scream as I saw my mother leaning against the wall opposite the stall I was in.

“Mom!” I gasped. “What in the hell are you doing? You scared the shit out of me!”

“Watch your language, Rose Marie.”

I felt my cheeks heat. “Why are you standing there?”

She pushed off the wall and walked over to the stall, opening it and motioning for me to come out. “You’re my daughter, and I know you. The day you go to the bathroom in the woods is the day hell freezes over. I took one look at Bryson, and I knew. Hanky-panky in the barn isn’t new to me, Rose.”

I stared at her. “Hanky-panky?”

“I’ve had my fair share of it with your father.”

My hand came up to my mouth to keep my laugh from slipping free. “Are you saying you and Dad fooled around in a barn?”

With a wink, she wrapped her arm around me and said, “A barn and a lot more, sweetheart.”

Rolling my eyes, I groaned. “Really, Mom?”

She stopped and picked up my electronic notebook and handed it to me. “Have you had a chance to even draw any designs?”

“I have. It’s just a quick sketch, really. Once I get back home, I’ll draw it out on paper and see what Bryson thinks.”

She nodded. “Have you painted any?”

My head turned to look at her. “I’ve done a little bit of drawing, but I pulled out all of my supplies last night.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.”

I could hear the voices of Bryson and his parents, along with my father. I stopped and turned to face my mother. “Why didn’t you ever pursue anything with your painting?”

Mom looked at me confused. “What do you mean?”

“You’re so good. And the painting you did of Dad and his brothers is one of my favorites. You taught me how to paint, but you never did anything with any of the paintings. Why not?”

“First of all, painting has always been a hobby of mine. As far as teaching you how to paint, I really didn’t. You saw me painting and wanted to try it. When you were little, it was just lines, circles, and stick figures, but it didn’t take long for your talent to show up. You’re a much better painter than I am, Rose.”

“I am?”

She smiled. “Of course, you are. I was so happy when you put one of your paintings in the Cassens gallery. I never understood why you stopped painting after that.”

“It wasn’t such a great experience. Back to you, though. You never wanted to do it as a profession or anything?”

Laughing, she said, “No. I love what I do. Books are my thing, and throwing parties. Painting, for me, is a stress reliever. It relaxes me. It’s never even crossed my mind to sell

one of my paintings. But you, on the other hand, your father and I thought for sure you would follow that path.”

The door to the office opened, and my father walked out. “I thought I heard your voices. We thought you might have gotten lost in the woods or eaten by a bear!”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Nope, I ran into Mom, and we got to talking.”

Bryson looked back and forth between me and my mother before his gaze landed back on me. I nodded and smiled to silently reassure him all was well.

“I was about to show everyone the spot we picked for the building site.”

With a little bit more excitement in my voice than was needed, I replied, “Wonderful! Lead the way!”

Bryson tilted his head and studied me before Anna reached for his arm. “You heard her, lead the way!”

Bryson started to walk out of the barn, his mother on one side of him, his father the other, when my dad turned to look at me and my mother and raised a single brow.

“I’m trying really hard not to kill him in front of his parents, Rose.”

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “Dad, don’t act like you and Mom never had sex in a barn.”

His mouth dropped open in shock, and he looked at Mom. She simply shrugged and let out a little laugh.

“We should probably catch up,” I said, starting to head in the direction Bryson had gone. Taking me by the arm, my mother pulled me to a stop.

“Rose, we’re not finished with this conversation.”

Nodding, I replied, “Understood.”

As we started to walk, my father asked, “What conversation? What did I miss?”

“We were talking about Rose’s paintings and why she never followed that dream of hers.”

My father sighed. “Damn it, why do I always miss the good stuff!”

Chapter Seventeen

BRYSON

I glanced at my watch to see Josh Hart was ten minutes late for our meeting. My sixty days for mandated rest and PT was over. I'd been back in Seattle for a day, and I already missed Montana. Correction...I missed Rose *and* Montana. I thought I would have been nervous but felt a crazy calm as I waited for him. He wouldn't be happy when I told him I wasn't going to play.

My phone pinged with an email alert, and I pulled it out. It was from Rose, and the subject title was: Digital Drawings Enclosed.

Feeling my heart quicken, I opened the attachment and looked at the designs for the house. After that first day at the land, when Rose finally opened to let me in, she returned home and spent the next few days doing nothing but drawing. She had thrown so many initial sketches out that I was sure she was never going to show me what she had envisioned. When she finally did, I was blown away. It was like she had an open view into my mind and had drawn the home I had dreamed of the moment I saw the land.

She had also sketched out some of the interior, like the kitchen and living room. After we made a few changes together, she got to work with the structural engineer I had hired to finalize the building plans. When I had to leave to come back to Seattle, I thought she might get spooked again, but she had been so buried in the process of designing the house and meeting with the structural engineer, she hadn't really had time to think about it. At least that was what she had told me.

The door opened, and Josh walked in. He smiled when he saw me and reached his hand out to shake mine.

"Sorry about making you wait, Bryson. It's been crazy around here."

“Not a problem,” I stated as I took a seat at his desk.

He cleared his throat and reached for a report from what I was guessing was the orthopedic doctor I had seen in Missoula. He read it, nodded, then looked up at me as he set the papers down on his desk.

“Looks like the physical therapy did some good. You ready to get back out on the mound?” Josh asked.

A part of me wasn't the least bit surprised that they would be ready to toss me back into the game, caring less that my shoulder wasn't a hundred percent.

“No, I'm not.”

His eyes went wide. “What do you mean? It looks like things have healed a good amount. Your pain level is down, so what's the problem?”

“The problem is it isn't healed. I still have a partial tear, and yes, PT has helped, but the moment I start pitching, I'm going to be in pain again.”

“We can give you shots to help with that,” Josh stated as he sat back in his chair. His expression said he was confused by where the conversation was going.

With a shake of my head, I said, “I'm done, Josh.”

“You're done with what?”

Jesus, he wasn't going to make it easy on me, was he? “Baseball. I'm done. I'm going to step down and retire. If I even tried to play, the tear will rip, and I'll need surgery, and I'll be out the rest of the season and probably some of next season as well. That's not how I want to go out. My contract is up, and you and I both know you might get two, maybe four more games out of me before I'm back on the injury roster. I'd rather go out on my own terms.”

He let out a disbelieving laugh. “Wait, you're telling me you want to quit? Give up baseball? Have you lost your goddamn mind? You're the number one pitcher in the league, Bryson! This team needs you. Your contract is about to be

renewed, and you'll stand to make millions." He glanced at my shoulder. "Even with the injured shoulder."

I might have stood to make some serious cash, but the moment the owners found out about how bad my shoulder was, the offer would go down.

I crossed my ankle over my leg and smiled. "You seem to be doing pretty well without me. You've only lost three games in the seven weeks I've been out."

Josh scrubbed his hand down his face. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. You're willing to walk away from this because you're worried about a little surgery on your shoulder. You'll be as good as new, Bryson."

With a shake of my head, I said, "Josh, I'm done. And as far as what I'm going to do? I don't know yet, but I'm thinking of investing in some bulls."

His eyes went wide in confusion. "Bulls?"

Grinning, I replied, "Bulls."

"Is that a code word for something?"

"Nope, it is exactly how it sounds. Bulls. Maybe learn a bit about cattle ranching and start my own."

Josh stared at me like I'd lost my mind.

I stood. "What do you need me to do to start the process of me leaving?"

Looking up at me, I could tell Josh wanted to argue, but in the end, he let out a long exhale. "Let me let the owners know, and I'll get back to you on the next steps."

"Sounds good."

Reaching across his desk, I extended my hand to him. "I'll never be able to thank you for giving me a chance, Josh. You changed my life for the better."

He got up, shook my hand, and smiled. "I should have known this was going to happen when you sold the penthouse."

All I could do was laugh.



Stopping at the top of the landing at Rose's place, I lifted my hand to knock. The door opened before I could make contact, and Rose appeared on the other side of the door. A wide smile on her face.

"You're back!" she cried out, throwing herself into my arms. "I missed you so much!"

Holding her tightly, I whispered, "I missed you too."

Breaking apart, Rose took my hands in hers and pulled me inside. "I was about to leave for family game night! I'm so glad I didn't leave earlier. How did everything go?"

I drew in a breath and exhaled. "It went okay. I pissed several people off, went back and forth with my agent and the club about me retiring early and what they would pay out. In the end, things worked out. The Mariners let me out of the rest of my contract for this year since I'd most likely not be getting in much play time with my shoulder. I got a hefty paycheck to walk away, so I'm here to stay."

Her eyes lit up, and I couldn't help but notice how that made me feel as if I was floating on cloud nine.

"Bryson," she whispered, lifting up onto her toes to kiss me. "I feel guilty for being so happy."

"Don't," I said as I tucked her hair behind her ear. "This is what I want, Rose."

She smiled the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. "I want it too."

The words were there, three little words that were my truth, and I really wanted to say them. But I didn't want to scare the shit out of her when things were going so well between us.

"Do you want to go with me to family game night?"

I had yet to meet Rose's brother Joshua, but not for lack of trying. He was young, in high school, and always on the go.

"Will I get to meet Josh finally?"

"Yes!" she replied. "But if you're tired from traveling, I totally get it."

"Family game night sounds great to me."

"I'll drive!" she said, taking my hand in hers and pulling me back out the door. What I really wanted to do was spend the evening alone with her, but we could celebrate my return to Montana after game night.

The drive to the Shaw Ranch from downtown Hamilton was about twenty minutes or so. The Bitterroot River went through part of the ranch, and it was nestled in the Bitterroot Valley tucked between the Sapphire Mountains to the east and the Bitterroot Mountains to the west.

"What was it like growing up on such a large ranch?" I asked as Rose drove up to the massive gate entrance that simply read, Shaw Ranch.

"It was like growing up on a few different ranches, to be honest. The ranch is mainly a cattle ranch, but with my dad and Uncle Tanner having their own part of the ranch, and each doing something different other than cattle ranching, it felt like a few ranches rolled into one. Anytime we wanted to do something fun, we went to Uncle Tanner and Aunt Timberlynn's part of the ranch. We got to see foals being born, which was fun for any kid. Different types of horses and wild mustangs. My grandparents live in the second oldest house on the ranch, with my mother and father living in the oldest. It was always fun going there because they spoiled us. Then you had my father's part of the ranch. Since he raises the bulls, it was always crazy. Especially when my older cousins and my brother started riding bulls. It was fun watching Blayze ride. He's amazing on a bull. My father said he was better than Dirk, Brock, and him combined."

"But he doesn't ride professionally?"

She shook her head as we drove down the long driveway. Every now and then the road would go off in another direction, and I assumed it was to the different houses on the ranch. Rolling meadows were on both sides of the drive, and cattle, as well as horses, dotted the landscape.

“He is a rancher through and through. Though he will ride for charity events. Brock no longer rides and hasn’t for a few years. Neither has Dirk.”

“Does Josh want to ride bulls professionally?”

Rose turned and looked at me. “He loves riding them, but I think he enjoys the training part. I’m not so sure he wants to do it professionally. I know he likes working for Blayze and Hunter on the ranch.”

“Hunter is...?”

“Blayze’s younger brother.”

“Right! Brock and Lincoln’s youngest.”

“Should I make you a family tree?”

I chuckled. “I think I got it. But Bradly and Avery aren’t really blood related, but you still call each other cousins.”

“Yep. And don’t be surprised if I call them simply by their names. Every now and then, I throw in aunt or uncle. But their ranch isn’t far from ours. Aunt Merit grew up living next door to Uncle Dirk. Her family has a farm where you can go and pick things like strawberries, blueberries, huckleberries, tomatoes, you name it. I think I told you this already.”

Nodding, I said, “You did.”

“They have a farmers’ market at the farm, as well, each weekend.”

“So is Dirk a farmer now?”

“He is, but he also raises cattle on his family’s ranch. His mother passed away a few years ago, and it was a pretty tough time for him. He lost his father before Avery and Bradly were born.”

“I can’t imagine. That’s one of the reasons I decided it was time to settle down. I want to spend time with my parents, and I want them to be involved in my kids’ lives. If I kept playing baseball, that meant I’d most likely be living in Seattle a majority of the time. I didn’t want that. And I didn’t want to be away from my own family once I started one.”

Rose gave me a quick look and smiled.

“I know this is new and all, but you do want kids, right?” I asked, holding my breath as I waited for her answer.

“I do want kids. Every time I see Ryder and Rhett and little Blakley, something happens here.”

She placed her hand on her chest.

“It’s like a dull ache, and I feel like I’m missing out on something. It’s crazy.” She turned and looked at me. “I never thought about it before, but you and I have a five-year age difference. How soon are you wanting kids?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Whenever the time feels right. And I’m glad you’re planning that little adventure with me.”

She smiled.

Reaching for her hand, I squeezed it. “So will it be your parents, us, and Joshua at game night?”

Rose pressed her mouth into a tight line. “No, family game night is much bigger. We usually have it at Brock and Lincoln’s house because they have the biggest house.”

My heart dropped. “Who all is going to be there?”

“Well, not Avery, ’cause she’s still in France!” Rose stated with a nervous laugh.

“So not Avery, but everyone else?”

She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Probably not Bradley since he’s out on the circuit. But it’s summer, and everyone is home.”

“Everyone?”

Stopping her SUV, she put it in park and turned in her seat.
“Maybe we should go over that family tree really quick.”

Chapter Eighteen

BRYSON

By the time we pulled up to Brock and Lincoln's house, Rose had quickly gone over the Shaw family tree. It was kind of easy to remember. Each Shaw brother, plus Dirk, had two kids each. Crazily enough, one boy and one girl. Except for Brock and Lincoln. They had two boys and one girl. There were three great-grandbabies. Ryder and Rhett were twin boys, and Blayze and Georgiana were the parents. Blayze was Brock and Lincoln's oldest son. Blakley was a little girl, and was Morgan and Ryan's baby. The twins were almost four months old, and Blakley was almost three months old.

I could keep this all together. No problem. Josh was Rose's brother. Bradley was...he was...Tanner and Timberlynn's son? No, Dirk and Merit's son. Maybe. Shit.

"Ready?" Rose asked as she put her Bronco in park.

"I think so. I'm starting to get them confused already."

Rose took my hand in hers. "It will be fine. I should warn you, though, my dad and uncles played it cool meeting you, but I think my cousins, especially Joshua and Nathan, are going to freak the fuck out when they meet you. My grandmother might as well."

I stopped walking at that. Rose took my hand and pulled me along. "Your grandmother?"

"She might ask to see your ass."

I raised a brow.

"I'm only warning you."

"Funny, your father gave me the same warning."

Rose laughed.

"Shit, I should have brought them something, like a signed ball or some other type of merch."

She laughed. “The fact that they can tell their friends that I’m dating you is enough. Come on, we’re late.”

“Did you at least give them a heads-up I was coming.”

She wore a wicked smile. “If my father can drop a bombshell on me with the whole meet the parents at dinner, I’m going to do the same thing. It will serve them all right.”

“Are you sure, Rose?”

Stopping before we got to the front door, Rose faced me. “Talk to me.”

Shrugging, I replied, “I just want to be Bryson, the guy Rose is dating. Not Bryson, the MLB pitcher.”

Taking my hands in hers, she reached up and kissed me. “You’re just Bryson to me. You’re not Bryson, the best pitcher in the MLB.”

“Was the best pitcher.”

She rolled her eyes. “Was the best pitcher. After the initial shock that you’re here, my family will treat you like one of them. If we act like it’s not a big deal, they will too. It will only be this first initial meeting. Like me with Anna and Greg! Hopefully, you handle it better, though.”

I pulled her to me and leaned down, kissing her deeply before I rested my forehead to hers.

We stood there for a few moments staring at one another, neither of us saying a word. Something passed between us, though. Something strong and beautiful, and I wanted to tell her we should leave and go back to her place. Or better yet, our barn.

Finally, Rose stepped back. “You ready for the circus that is my family?”

With a wink, I replied, “Bring it on.”

Taking my hand in hers, she opened the large wooden door and called out, “Sorry I’m late!”

“It’s about time you showed up! Mom and Dad were about to—”

A young teenage boy who had to be Joshua stopped in the hallway and stared at us. His eyes bounced from me to Rose, then back to me. He was a younger image of Ty, his father. I could see a bit of Kaylee in him as well. You certainly could tell they were related. Where Rose had blue eyes, Joshua had gray. Rose had blonde, curly hair, and Joshua had brown.

He slowly lifted his hand and pointed at me. “Holy shit. It’s really true.”

“Joshua Ty Shaw,” Rose reprimanded.

“You’re...it’s...you’re...I think I need to sit down.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Walking up to him, I extended my hand. “It’s nice to meet you finally, Joshua.”

He looked down at my hand, slowly lifted his, and shook my hand. “It’s Josh. You can call me Josh.”

“Josh, it is.”

When I dropped my hand, he stared at his.

“Okay, so it might take a *bit* longer for everyone to treat you normally,” Rose stated as she gave her brother a confused look.

When it was clear Josh wasn’t going to move, Rose took my hand again. “They’re in the family room.”

I drew in a deep breath and exhaled as we walked around a still-frozen Josh and into a large open family room. There had to be at least twenty-five people in the room, and multiple conversations were going on. Most of the women were around the three women who each held a baby. I was going to assume one was Georgiana and one was Morgan.

Brock, Ty, and Tanner were attempting to help an older man, whom I assumed was Ty Sr., figure out a remote.

Dirk stood with an older woman who seemed to be accusing him of eating something while she held a pie in her hands.

A woman around the same age as Rose, with dark brown hair, was arguing with a younger kid around the same age as

Josh about what game they were going to play first.

Rose and I both looked around the room. No one had noticed us. Josh finally came and stood next to me.

“Dude, my cousin Nathan is most likely going to faint when he sees you. He idolizes you. Just a warning, he may fan boy, unlike me.”

Rose and I both turned to look at Josh, who was still holding his hand out like it was covered in gold.

Rose leaned over and stared at her brother. “Because you didn’t just fan...boy?”

Josh rolled his eyes.

Clearing her throat, Rose said, “I’m here.”

No one looked our way.

“Hello! I’ve arrived, and I brought my boyfriend!”

Nothing.

Josh put his hand up to his mouth and whistled. The entire room fell silent, and all heads turned to the three of us.

“Sorry I’m late. Bryson showed up at my place when I was leaving.”

The sound of a female scream came from the left side of the room. When I turned to see who had screamed, I noticed it was the younger kid. Nathan, I was guessing.

“Okay, I wasn’t prepared for him to scream like a girl.” Josh laughed.

The kid stumbled back, and the girl caught him.

“Dude!” Josh said with a laugh. “Were you about to faint!”

Kaylee quickly crossed the room and pulled me into a hug. “Bryson! I’m so glad you made it! This is the perfect place to meet the entire family! Well, with the exception of Avery and Bradley.”

I nodded. “Rose didn’t tell me it was the entire family until we pulled up.”

Looking at her daughter, she frowned. “Like father, like daughter.”

Rose waved off her mother, then spoke.

“I think the easiest way to do this is to go around the room, and I’ll introduce everyone.”

All heads in the room nodded.

“We’ll start with the boy who can scream like a girl,” Rose said as she motioned in the direction of Nathan.

“Bryson, I’d like you to meet my younger cousin Nathan Shaw. Son to Tanner and Timberlynn.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nathan.”

Nathan attempted to say something, but the only words that came out sounded like babble.

The girl who had caught Nathan said, “Maybe you should sit down, Nathan.”

“And that is Lily, who is playing nursemaid to Nathan.” Rose chuckled.

Lily waved. “Hi, it’s nice to meet you, Bryson.”

“Pleasure is all mine, Lily.”

She blushed, then looked at Nathan, who was still staring at me, his mouth gaping open.

Moving along, Rose pointed at her uncles standing with the older man who was staring at me much like Nathan was.

“You already met my Uncle Brock and Uncle Tanner. You know my dad, but this is my grandfather, Ty Sr. Grandpa, this is Bryson Robinson.”

Ty Sr. dropped the remote and started to make his way across the room and over to me.

“Jesus holy Christ above, I can’t believe it!”

“Ty Shaw!” someone said from somewhere in the room. “What is wrong with you?”

Ty Sr. stopped in front of me and slowly shook his head. “You’re the baseball player. The pitcher. The Mariners. Holy shit. You’re standing in my living room.”

“Um, it’s actually my living room, Dad,” Brock stated as he held up his hands and gestured around the room.

Ty Sr. waved off Brock’s comment. “Who cares! He is in here, on the ranch. With Rose. Are you dating my granddaughter?” Spinning to look at Kaylee, then his son Ty, he demanded, “Why did no one tell me Rose was dating the best pitcher in baseball? Do you people know who this is?”

I had to duck to miss Ty Sr.’s arms, which were currently flailing about.

“Dad, maybe you should step away from Bryson,” Kaylee said as she took his elbow and tried to lead him away from us.

“Kaylee, it’s Bryson Robinson. This kid once hit a grand slam. He’s a pitcher, and he hit a grand slam. Do you remember that?” Ty Sr. asked me as he looked back at me.

I nodded. “I do, indeed, sir.”

A wide smile erupted on the older man’s face. “Did you hear that? He called me sir. You can call me Ty. Better yet, you can call me Granddad!”

Rose groaned, and Josh laughed.

“Okay, then,” Kaylee said as she guided Ty Sr. away.

“Moving on,” Rose stated in a deadpan voice. “This lovely woman is my Aunt Timberlynn, who is Nathan’s mother and Uncle Tanner’s wife.”

I nodded and smiled as Timberlynn said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Bryson.”

“Pleasure is all mine.”

“Then you have my Aunt Lincoln.”

Another beautiful woman in her mid-forties smiled and waved. “Nice to meet you, Bryson.”

“Mrs. Shaw.”

“Oh no, please call me Lincoln.”

“Will do,” I said as I tipped my head in her direction.

Rose pointed at one woman who held a baby in her arms. “That is Georgiana, and she is holding...”

Georgiana looked down at the baby. “Um, Rhett.”

“No, you’ve got Ryder. I’ve got Rhett,” a guy around my age said as he looked down at the baby he held.

“No. I have Rhett. You have Ryder, Blayze.”

“Georgie, I have Rhett.”

“Okay,” Rose interrupted them and pointed at Blayze. “Obviously, that is Blayze.”

Blayze stood and made his way over to me. He reached his hand out, and I shook it. “It’s a real honor to meet you, Bryson. Do you like babies?”

“I...um...” I looked down at the baby in his arms and smiled. He wore a Seattle Mariners outfit. “I for sure like this one.”

Everyone in the room laughed. Then Blayze held the baby out for me to hold.

“Blayze!” Rose and Georgiana said at the same time.

“What?” he said, glancing back at his wife. “I want to take a picture of Rhett being held by Bryson Robinson in his little baseball shirt.”

“You have Ryder!” Georgiana exclaimed.

My head spun, and the next thing I knew, I was holding a baby and getting my picture taken.

“Oh my God. That is so cute. I think my ovaries exploded,” Rose said as she snapped a photo with her phone.

“Same,” said three other women in the room.

“Good Lord. Did I not raise you all better than this,” the older woman, whom I was guessing was Stella, Rose’s grandmother, said as she walked up to us. “Get that baby right now, Blayze Shaw.”

Blayze expertly took the child from me. “Yes, ma’am.”

Stella stopped in front of me and gave me a once-over. She lifted her hand and pointed at me.

“Oh dear,” Rose whispered.

“Now you listen here, young man.”

“Oh my God! Mom! Grammy is about to yell at Bryson Robinson! Make her stop!” Josh cried out.

“Grammy,” Rose started to say before her grandmother cut her off.

“This is my precious Rose. She is mighty and fierce, but her heart is fragile.”

“Huh?” Rose stated from beside me.

“Rose? Fragile?” Josh added in a totally confused voice.

“If you so much as make her shed one tear, I will hunt you down, and you’ll never play baseball again.”

Josh and Nathan, and I’m pretty sure a few other people in the room, gasped.

I let out a nervous chuckle. “Good thing I just retired.”

Rose turned and faced me, using her hand and waving it in front of her. “Oh no, don’t kid with her.”

“Wait, you retired?” Nathan shouted from across the room, then bellowed out, “Nooooo!”

“Sweet. This means you can give me private lessons, right?” Josh said as he elbowed me in the side.

“What? Oh my God, shut up, Josh! Mom, make Josh shut up!” Rose said, reminding me of a young girl fighting with her sibling.

“Josh, hush. Stella, maybe you can threaten the handsome baseball player another time,” Kaylee said as she guided Stella across the room.

I leaned into Rose and whispered, “Your mom thinks I’m handsome, huh?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Please, every woman in the room thinks you are.”

Clearing her throat once again, Rose went on with the introductions. “Over there in the corner tucked away is Hunter and his wife, Kipton. They’re newlyweds, so they’re always hanging on one another.”

I laughed as Hunter walked up and shook his hand. “It’s a real honor to meet you. Big fan of yours.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

Kipton shook my hand. “We met once. You probably don’t remember.”

Staring at Kipton for a few moments, I recognized her. “Kipton Howse! Wow, it’s great seeing you. I guess you’re Kipton Shaw now?”

She chuckled. “Yep!”

Rose looked back and forth between us a few times, then smiled. Had that been a hint of jealousy in her eyes?

“How did you guys meet?” Hunter asked.

“I was doing some charity work in Helena when I was Miss Montana, and Mr. Robinson...”

“Please, call me Bryson.”

Kipton smiled. “Bryson was also there. We sat next to each other that night at a charity dinner. If I remember right, we hardly got to say two words because the mayor’s wife talked your ear off.”

I laughed. “That’s right. It’s good to see you again, Kipton, and congratulations to you both on the wedding.”

Hunter looked at Kipton with so much love on his face, I couldn’t help but smile. Rose had told me how they’d met. Kipton had hosted a bachelor-type show that starred Hunter as the bachelor. I’d seen commercials for it but never had a chance to watch it.

Rose went on with the introductions. “And sitting over there with the other baby in her arms is Morgan, and next to

her is her husband, Ryan.”

Ryan walked over and shook my hand. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Bryson. I love watching you pitch. Sad to see you’re ending your career, but happy to see the smile on Rose’s face.”

I shook his hand. “I instantly like you.”

Ryan and Rose both chuckled.

“It’s nice to meet you, Bryson. Don’t worry, I won’t make you hold Blakley for a picture.”

Ryan smiled at his wife, then turned his attention to me. “Unless you want to.”

“Hey, wait, if he takes a picture of Blakley, Ryder gets one too.”

“Oh my God. He took a picture with Ryder because you were holding him! I have Rhett!” Georgiana stated as she stood and pulled down the pants of the baby she was holding. The diaper appeared to have animals on it.

“Oh shit. I did have Ryder. Okay, then Rhett is after Blakley.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rose said in a lowered voice. “If you want to leave, I totally understand.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “I’d love to take a picture with both babies and anyone else, for that matter. I say we get all the pictures out of the way!”

And before I knew it, the entire Shaw family lined up to wait their turn for photos. Even Stella and Ty Sr.

Chapter Nineteen

ROSE

I sat on one of the sofas and glared at my family as they all took turns getting their pictures taken with Bryson. What had I been thinking, that they would all treat him like a normal person?

Sighing, I dropped my head against the back of the sofa. I felt it move, and opened one eye to see Lily smiling at me as she sat down.

“Okay, I’m only going to say this once to get it out of my system, and then I promise to be normal again.”

“Not you too!” I groaned.

“Oh my God, Rose. He is so freaking hot, and a baseball player?”

Lifting my head, I waggled my brows and whispered, “I know. And he’s so good in bed.”

Lily giggled. “I mean, you know how you think a guy is hot because he plays a sport? Well, he is hot in person. I can’t imagine him in a uniform.”

“Girl, I know. Wait until Avery sees him. She’s going to go nuts.”

“She will!” Lily giggled.

“Is she coming home at all this summer?” I asked as I searched the room for Merit. She had to be missing her daughter and Bradley.

“Dirk and Merit are going to Paris to visit her. Since Bradley is out on the circuit, they thought it would be a good time to go.”

“Bradley is going to be pissed he’s the last to meet Bryson.”

“He won’t be the last. Avery will be.”

I nodded. “That’s true. Don’t worry, all of this will be over and done with, and everyone will treat him like family soon enough.”

Looking over at Nathan standing next to Bryson with a wide smile, I exhaled. “I sure hope so. I want him to be comfortable with the family.”

“Rose, you literally brought one of the best professional players in baseball through the front door, and you didn’t think the family would go a little crazy? Not to mention all of them are Seattle fans.”

I gave a one-shoulder shrug. “I know. Did you hear Nathan scream?”

Lily laughed. “You seem to forget I was standing next to him. I thought my eardrum busted. I’m pretty sure he almost fainted. It’s kind of cute.”

Smiling, I looked at Bryson signing the back of Nathan’s shirt. “It is cute.” I sat forward and blinked several times. “Oh gosh, now Blayze and Ryan are asking him to sign their shirts. This is enough.”

“What are you going to do?” Lily asked, standing up and following me to where my family practically assaulted the man I loved.

Stopping, Lily bumped into me.

“Oof. Why did you stop?”

Lowering my voice, I said, “I love him.”

“Who?”

“Bryson, you idiot!”

Lily looked past me and tried to hide a smile before saying, “Then you better go save the man you love from our grandmother, who appears to be trying to get him to pick her up!”

“What?” I shouted as I turned in time to see my grandmother motioning for Bryson to pick her up.

“Make sure you get us in the full picture!” Grammy said as my father was laughing his ass off while my mother attempted to get my grandfather to stop taking pictures.

“That is enough!” I shouted, causing the entire room to go quiet.

“Grammy, that is the man I love you’re trying to climb up. And maybe we can calm down just a bit with all the photos and signing of things. Oh, we can do like the last ten minutes or so where he can sign and do photos.”

Everyone stared at me with their mouths gaped open.

I put my hands on my hips. “Okay, so maybe suggesting the last ten minutes was a bit too much, but please, let’s just...”

My voice trailed off as everyone stared at me, and I looked at Bryson. He had a look on his face that made my entire body instantly warm.

“I love you too,” he said, crossing the room and stopping in front of me. Cupping my face in his hands, he leaned down and stopped right before his mouth met mine. “I love you, too, Rose.”

It was only then I realized I had said I loved Bryson in front of my entire family. Well, with the exception of Bradley and Avery.

Looping my arms around his neck, I lifted onto my toes and deepened the kiss.

“Ahh, you two might want to break it up,” Josh said as he pulled at my arm. “Dad’s got that weird look on his face, the one where his eyebrows pull down and he kind of resembles Butch, that one bull he had. I can’t risk Bryson getting hurt. I still need him to sign my baseball hat and a few things for my friends.”



After my declaration of love to Bryson and his to me, and after my mother reassured my father that Bryson wasn't stealing me from him, family game night finally started. Since Bryson was new, he got to pick from the hat to see what game we were playing. When he pulled out Twister, my father yelled no and made Bryson pull another game out while everyone burst out laughing.

Bryson frowned as he looked up and said, "Speak Out?"

"Oh no," I groaned as everyone else laughed.

"What's Speak Out?"

My father practically skipped over to Bryson and handed him the plastic piece to put into his mouth. Bryson took it and stared at it.

"Are we playing dentist?"

Lily giggled next to me. "Oh my God, I see why you love him."

My mother explained the rules. "We break up into teams. You have to put those in, and then you read a phrase. Whichever team gets the most phrases correct wins."

Bryson lifted the plastic mouthpiece. "How long do I have to wear this?"

"We have a timer, so it will ding, and then the next person will wear them," Lincoln said as she passed around the bucket, and everyone drew a number. "The person who draws the game always goes first."

I openly sighed in relief. I was number nineteen. There was no way we'd play long enough to get to my number.

"Okay. Got it," Bryson said with a firm head nod.

After we got into our groups, Bryson went to put the mouthpiece in and then stopped. He looked directly at my father and asked, "No videos will be posted on the Internet, right?"

Dad shot him an evil smile.

"Dad," I warned.

Lifting his hands in a gesture of surrender, he said, “Fine. No videos allowed.”

Bryson nodded, slipped the plastic piece into his mouth, and looked around as everyone laughed. When he looked at me, he winked.

“He has nice teeth. That’s a good sign,” Grammy said from the other side of the room.

Bryson read his sentence out loud, and all I could hear was, “Car fucking a hoenut fuck so cocks will hurt you.” I cringed as everyone laughed.

“Son, I really hope you aren’t saying what it sounds like you’re saying,” Brock said as he attempted not to laugh.

Bryson repeated it.

“Car!” Morgan shouted, and Bryson pointed at her and attempted to say yes.

He repeated it.

“Fucking!” Hunter yelled out as Kipton smacked him on the arm.

“Hunter! I highly doubt it says that.”

Looking at his wife, Hunter shrugged. “Sure sounds like it.”

Bryson rolled his eyes, then said the sentence slower.

It was Granddad’s turn to try. “Carjacking a hoenut truck...”

Bryson shook his head and repeated the word that sounded like hoenut.

“Donut!” I yelled out as Josh stood.

“I got it! Carjacking a donut truck so cops will chase you!”

Bryson looked relieved as he attempted to say yes! He pulled the plastic piece out and moved his mouth around a bit.

“Hang on to that, Bryson,” Lincoln said. “I clean them all at the end.”

“Got it.”

He walked over to me and sat down. We had been lucky enough to get on the same team.

“That was harder than I thought it would be.”

Laughing, I kissed him on the cheek. “You did great.”

“Next up is number two!” Lincoln called out.

Nathan jumped up and slipped the plastic into his mouth.

I pointed at my cousin. “Nathan kills these. Watch.”

When Nathan said his sentence, everyone stared at him.

“What?” Lily asked as she slowly shook her head.

Nathan sighed. “Ound anana uffins.”

“Brown banana muffins!” Bryson cried out.

Nathan jumped up and down and pulled his mouthpiece out. “Dude, you got it!”

Bryson smiled, then quickly dropped his smile when my father shot him a dirty look.

As the game went on, Bryson guessed more than anyone else, and my father declared Bryson wasn’t allowed to play anymore.

“That is our cue to leave,” I said as I stood and reached for Bryson’s hand.

“No! Don’t go,” my mother said as she walked over to us.

“We need to get home, as well, and put the twins to bed,” Georgiana said as she and the baby she held both yawned.

Morgan stood. “Same with us. I’m not sure how they slept through all the yelling.”

Hunter laughed. “They’re used to it.”

Bryson made his way over to Brock and Lincoln. “Thank you so much. I had a great time.”

Giving Bryson a friendly pat on the arm, Brock said, “You officially made it through your first Shaw family game night.

Welcome to the club!”

“Thanks so much!” Bryson said as he shook Brock’s hand, then Lincoln’s. We made our way around the room saying goodbye. Bryson offered to play a bit of ball with Nathan and Josh, and I thought for sure my brother was going to cry. When we finally got to my mother and father, Dad gave Bryson a megawatt smile.

“You did good.”

Bryson returned the smile and shook his hand. “It was fun.”

Dad gave him a friendly slap on the back. “All teasing aside, Bryson, I’m glad you joined us. And I’m very happy to see that smile on my daughter’s face.”

Looking down at me, Bryson squeezed my hand. “So am I.”

When we both looked back at my father, he added, “Just a reminder, if you hurt her, I will kill you and bury you up in the mountains, and no one will ever find your body.”

“Dad!” I exclaimed.

“Ty Shaw!” my mother said as she glared at him.

Bryson took a step away and replied, “Duly noted.”

And with that, Bryson nearly dislocated my arm as we retreated.

Chapter Twenty

BRYSON

Two months later - October

“Wow, I can’t believe it,” Rose said as she slipped out of my truck and stared at the log home that was in the middle of being constructed. “How are they moving so fast?”

Walking up next to her, I took her hand in mine. “I won’t lie and say when I searched for a builder, I didn’t do a little digging. Tim Hassle Builders is out of Idaho, but he is a huge Mariners fan. Once he found out who wanted a house built, and I offered up a few perks, he got me on their schedule and has been personally overseeing the building.”

Rose stared at me in disbelief. “Bryson Robinson. Did you bribe him?”

“No. Not really.”

She laughed and turned back to the house. “I still can’t believe I designed that.”

I smiled and pulled her to me. “I can. Did you ever show the plans to your old boss?”

“No, and I don’t intend to. I was being silly. So, now that the house is dried in and the inside is safe from the outside elements, the fun really begins.”

Laughing, I replied, “If you say so.”

Rose had designed a two-story log home with five bedrooms, five-and-a-half baths with a total square footage of fifty-three hundred. The outside of the cabin we went with square logs rather than round. The roof was metal, and a ton of windows allowed the outdoors inside.

The first floor had a three-car garage. When you walked into the house from the garage, the mud room was to your left

and the laundry to your right. Down the hall, the kitchen sat on the left side, the back side of the house, and had a beautiful view of the Bitterroot Mountains. Opposite the kitchen was a large formal dining room. The kitchen had a clear shot into the large family room. On the advice of Kaylee and my mother, they both said when you're in the kitchen, you need to be able to see what was going on in the living room. Not simply for entertaining but someday when kids came along.

The front of the house, opposite the family room, was the staircase, a half bath, and a large, two-story open foyer. Rose designed a large front porch and a huge outdoor patio that would be in the backyard.

The northern side of the house held the owners' suite. Rose knocked it out of the park with her design. She included a fireplace, a coffee bar, a bathroom that would end up looking like it belonged in a spa, two walk-in closets, and access to the outdoor patio. At the front of the house and across from the bedroom was a media room, and next to that, a library, which had been a private joke between me and Rose. Nathan and Joshua already asked if we could watch baseball games in the media room.

The upstairs had a catwalk that led to four private bedroom suites, two of them with private balconies. At the south end of the house upstairs over the garage was one room that was full of windows. It was an art room for Rose. She hadn't designed it, but I had asked the structural architect and builder if there was a way to incorporate it without Rose knowing. At some point she would find out, but until then, it was a secret I was keeping from her.

"It's going to be amazing, Rose. You did a wonderful job designing it."

She smiled up at me. "Thank you for pushing me into it."

I tossed my head back and laughed. "Never one to mince words, are you?"

"Nope," she said as she turned back to the truck. She opened the back door and took out two bags.

“Let me take one,” I offered as Rose handed me one. “Where do you want to go today?”

Rose looked around, then back at me. “Remember when we went on that hike with Hunter and Kipton, and we found that spot that overlooked the creek?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Maybe that spot.”

“Sounds perfect,” I stated with a smile. “Do you have a jacket in case it gets colder?”

She shook her head. “I have a sweatshirt in the bag. Are you able to carry this bag along with the cooler?”

“Sure thing,” I said. “Let me grab the cooler with our lunch in it.”

Rose and I quickly left behind the noise of the house being built and headed up one of the trails that we had discovered not long after we started exploring the property. Since Rose and Kipton had grown so close, Hunter and I had as well. We had quickly become good friends, and I had introduced Hunter to Howie, and Kipton and Rose to Ruth. We often went out on couple dates, and the girls would go riding together at least once a week.

It warmed my heart to see Rose painting more and more the last two months. You could see it on her face how happy she was when she painted. And she was so damn good. I wanted to see her sell her paintings, but I wasn't going to pressure her. She'd do it when she felt comfortable doing it. So for now, she worked at the boutique and spent her spare time painting.

“This is the spot!” Rose declared as we stopped at a small opening overlooking the creek below us. It wasn't flowing as much as it had been when I first bought the property last spring, and with it being October, the flow had slowed to a trickle, but the sound of the water was still peaceful.

I watched as Rose took out the easel and set it up. It hadn't been hard to find one that folded up and fit into a backpack. Next came a small canvas that she set on the easel. After she

had it where she wanted it, she reached into the other bag and took out a travel-size paint set of twelve colors. When Rose was painting at home or on the Shaw Ranch, she used tubes of paint, but when we hiked somewhere to paint, she brought the watercolor paints in pans, and all she had to do was wet her brush.

As she got set up to paint, I put out a blanket and got my book ready. While Rose worked, I read. It was the perfect combination, and I found I truly loved that time we spent together like that. We didn't have to speak to enjoy one another's company. After years of constantly being on the go, I enjoyed moments of doing nothing but reading and watching Rose paint.

I watched as Rose quickly got lost in her painting. Something was so beautiful about it. The way she would crinkle her nose when she was deep in thought, or frown when something wasn't turning out the way she wanted it to. But it was when she smiled at something she put down on the canvas, that was my favorite thing of all.

Focusing on my book, I soon got lost in my own little world. It felt like it had only been a few minutes when I heard Rose say my name. I looked up at her standing over me. She wore a beautiful smile, and I fell a little bit more in love with her. Would I ever get used to the way she made me feel? I doubted it.

"Want to take a break?" I asked, putting my bookmark in the book and setting it down next to me.

Rose dropped down to her knees on the blanket and stared at me. "Do you realize how much my life has changed in the five months since we first met?"

"I hope for the better."

She reached for my hands. "You made me believe in myself again. You were a little pushy with the relationship thing, but I'm so glad you were. Last May I watched Hunter and Kipton get married, and I felt this emptiness inside me that I couldn't pinpoint. When I went to Seattle to visit Loren, I wanted to get away from all the happy couples in my life. It

wasn't like I was jealous, but I wasn't sure where my life was supposed to go. Everyone else seemed to have it figured out, and I felt so lost. That day you showed up at Stiner Architectural Firm and said you wanted me to design your house, I thought you had lost your mind. But you gave me the courage to realize I wasn't happy sitting in an office. You and Lily both opened my eyes and made me realize that painting is truly something I love, and it's what I want to do."

"Does this mean you'll sell your paintings?" I asked.

She scrunched up her face in the most adorable way while she said, "Maaaaybe. Last week when we went to that elementary school in Missoula, when your dad was talking to the kids about the stars, I spoke to the art teacher."

My heart started to beat faster as I watched the excitement in Rose's eyes. "Go on."

Chewing on her lip, she said, "I asked her about teaching art in elementary school, and what I would need in order to do it."

"What did she say?" I asked.

Rose smiled. "A bachelor's degree, which I already have, and I'd need to complete a course in teacher education. When we got back to Hamilton, I asked a friend of mine who teaches at Daly Elementary about it. She was over the moon because their art teacher who currently works there is retiring after this year, and they'll be needing a new art teacher. This may be crazy, but I thought I'd take the course and apply. Is that insane of me? Do you think I should do it?"

"It doesn't matter what I think you should do. What is your heart telling you, Rose?"

She drew in a long deep breath, then let it all out in an excited whoosh. "It feels right, Bryson. For the first time in my life, something feels right."

Smiling, I cupped her face in my hands. "The light in your eyes is saying enough for me. I say go for it, sweetheart. If it feels right, then take the leap."

Throwing herself into my arms, I held on to her tightly. From the moment Rose had shown up to that party in those pink sneakers, my life had done a complete one-eighty. She wasn't the only one who felt like her life finally felt right. Mine not only felt right, it felt complete in so many ways.

When she pulled back to look at me, she had tears in her eyes. I felt a punch right to my heart.

“Please tell me those are happy tears, Rose.”

Nodding, she replied, “They are. Very happy tears. If you hadn't showed up that morning at my job with your crazy idea of me designing your house, none of this would be happening. I've never been so happy in my entire life, Bryson. Thank you.”

“Aw, baby, I had nothing to do with it.”

“You did,” she said, kissing me on the tip of my nose. “I used to think I was so strong, but deep down I was terrified of so many things. You gave me the courage to follow my heart, and I will forever be grateful to you for that.”

My eyes caught sight of a large pine behind us. When I caught Rose's gaze, she wore a sexy smile. “I've seen that look on your face before, Mr. Robinson. You're thinking of doing something naughty.”

Glancing around to make sure no one would be able to see us, I turned back to her. “I'm thinking of doing something very naughty to you.”

Rose licked her lips and stepped away from me. “Keep your shirt on, it's cold, but take off your sweats and panties.”

Going so slow it nearly drove me insane, Rose slid her pants down, stepped out of them, then motioned for me to come closer to her as she backed up and leaned against the large pine.

I dropped to my knees and lifted her leg. Sliding my finger inside her, we both moaned.

“You're so wet.”

“Always for you.”

Not wanting to waste another second, I buried my face between her legs and worked her over with my tongue, mouth, and fingers to bring her to orgasm. Rose slapped her hand over her mouth as her body shook with pleasure. Not wasting any time, I pulled my cock out and slipped it inside her. Being inside her always felt like heaven, and I knew it wouldn't take long to come.

“Rose, I'm so close,” I gasped, slipping my hand between our bodies and finding her clit. It only took a few rubs with my thumb, and her insides were squeezing out my own orgasm.

Pressing my mouth to hers, we moaned into each other. My orgasm left me barely able to stand. Rose sagged against my body, her breathing hard and fast.

“One of these days we're going to get caught.”

I laughed. “Let's just hope it's not by your father. I'm not sure he'd believe another peeing in the woods story from me.”

With a giggle, Rose kissed me. “We should get dressed and eat lunch.”

Pretending to pout, I pulled out of her and found something to clean us both up. As I helped Rose slip back into her panties and sweats, we simply smiled at one another. I had honestly never dreamed I could be so damn happy.

We sat down and ate lunch and talked about everything from the house and how quickly things were moving, to her telling her parents about her new plans. I knew Kaylee and Ty would support Rose no matter what she decided. And seeing the glow of excitement in her eyes when she told them, I knew they'd be so happy that she'd decided on a career she would be passionate about.

As I watched Rose get back to work on her painting, I couldn't help but picture her in a classroom with a bunch of little kids. She was so good with her little second cousins, Blakley, Ryder, and Rhett. So I knew she'd be fantastic as an educator.

I got back to my book and was lost in the story when Rose declared, “It's done.”

When I glanced up, my breath caught in my throat. The painting was one of the best ones I'd seen Rose do. Not that she had painted a whole lot, but she had let me see some of the paintings she'd completed when she was younger.

The painting before me had me transfixed. If I hadn't been standing in the spot she had painted, I would feel like I was there. I was by no means an expert at paintings, but the way Rose used light and shadow as depth was amazing. My eyes went to the river, then back to the painting. The way the creek meandered through the hills and over the large boulders in the painting matched the view in front of me. Rose had added a bit more water since the creek only had a small amount. Her imagination and use of the colors were beyond beautiful.

"Rose," I whispered as I stood. "That is...it's...it's beautiful."

Chewing on her thumbnail, she studied the painting. I could see she was giving it a critical eye, most likely about to make changes or say she'd start another one next time. When I looked at it, it was perfect. Then she said the one thing I hadn't expected her to say.

"This is the one. I think this is the one."

It was like the world had stopped moving. I stopped breathing and waited for her to keep talking. When she didn't, I asked, "The one for what?"

Glancing over, she said, "Jax has been asking me to display something in the art gallery down on Main Street. I think this is the one."

I wanted to jump around like a little kid and scream out in joy. "You're going to put it in the art gallery? Rose, I think that's a great idea."

Smiling, she put her hands up to her mouth and let out a bubble of nervous laughter. "Am I really going to do this?"

Reaching for her hand, I pulled her to me. "I'm fighting the urge to tell you to keep it for the house."

"My house?"

I had just told Rose to take a leap, so I was going to follow my own advice and do the same. “I was sort of hoping you’d move into my house with me. After all, you will have your own art room above the garage.”

Her brows drew down in confusion. “There isn’t a room above the garage.”

“There will be.”

Rose narrowed her eyes at me and smiled. “What did you do, Bryson?”

“I only want to make you as happy as you’ve made me, sweetheart. You don’t have to decide now, but think about it, okay?”

She nodded and gifted me with a stunning smile.

“Now, back to the painting. Are you going to tell anyone you’re going to sell it?”

Putting her attention back on the painting, Rose nodded. “Lily for sure. She’s been trying to get me to paint for a while now, and I do owe her credit for at least getting me to start sketching again. Kipton for certain. We tell each other everything. I’ll tell my parents as well, but other than that”—she looked back at me—“I’d like to keep it between us.”

I nodded and looked at the painting. “Now how do we hike back down without damaging it?”

Rose laughed. “That’s a good question.”

We eventually got everything packed up, and Rose decided she would carry the painting down. We weren’t that high up on the trail, so as long as she didn’t slip, all would be good.

When we returned to the open meadow, we could see the house beyond where the barn was. Banging and sounds of nail guns could be heard echoing off the sides of the mountains, and it was strange to think we hadn’t heard any of the noise tucked up against the mountain. The only sounds I’d heard were the water running, the wind blowing through the trees, and the sounds of birds.

“Let’s drop this off at my truck, check in one more time, and then head back,” I said as I motioned to the truck.

Rose came to a stop and stared over at the house.

“What’s wrong?”

When she didn’t answer, I followed her gaze. Instant dread filled my entire body, and my first instinct was to stand between her and Rose.

“What in the hell is she doing here?” Rose asked.

Chapter Twenty-One

ROSE

I had been flying high since I told Bryson about my plans to get a teaching certificate and teach art. After our hotter-than-hell lovemaking session, everything felt so clear to me. I could see every little thing in greater detail. The color of the rocks in the water, the patterns on the bark of the trees that lined the creek. The yellow leaves of the aspen trees. It was all crystal clear. My brush flew over the canvas in a way it hadn't in years. It felt like...home. And the fact that we were on Bryson's property made it even more special. I'd never felt so happy in my entire life, and nothing would ruin it.

That was until I saw Kennedy Owens standing in front of the house I had designed with her hands on her hips and a frown on her face. She was clearly sizing it up, and that made my entire body feel itchy.

The moment I saw her, I felt like I had hit a brick wall. I stopped walking and couldn't pull my eyes off her. She was dressed to the nines in an all-white pantsuit that made her stick out like a sore thumb here. Her hair was pulled up in some fancy twist. Earrings dangled down from her ears, and the necklace she had on kept catching the sunlight and casting out shards of light rays.

She hadn't been at all what I had expected. Sure, she was beautiful, but only looking at her from afar, I wasn't sure what Bryson had seen in her.

Right, they went to school together, you idiot. He'd known her before he made it big.

Bryson's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "Wait right here, Rose."

I watched as Bryson put the bags into his truck before he stalked over toward Kennedy. Not even thinking, I followed him.

Kennedy turned, and when she saw Bryson, she lit up like a Christmas tree. “Hey, Bub!”

Bub?

“Kennedy, what are you doing here?”

She smiled, but when she caught a glimpse of me walking up, her smile faltered. Only for a split second, though, and if I hadn’t been watching her closely, I would have missed it.

“I ran into Loren and Nick the other day. I have to admit, I was so surprised when you announced your early retirement. I thought for sure you’d have called me.”

Bryson folded his arms over his chest. “Why exactly would I call you, Kennedy?”

She gave a little shrug while she kept her gaze focused only on Bryson. Not even when I walked up and stood next to him did she look away.

“Because even after everything, we’ve always been best friends, Bryson.”

That statement felt like a gut punch.

“No, we haven’t, Kennedy. Not even close.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. She had probably said that to take a strike at me. But how would she even know who I was? Nothing had been printed about Bryson since he had announced his retirement. No one outside of our family and friends knew we were dating.

My eyes went wide, and I looked down at the ground. Loren. I was going to kill her.

“How did you find me?” Bryson asked.

“Nick told me.”

“Did he?” Bryson said with a note of agitation in his voice. “I’ll be sure to let him know not to share my address with random people.”

Kennedy smiled and took a step closer to Bryson. “I think we both know I’m not simply people, Bub. After all, we were

together for a long time.”

Watching her place her hands on Bryson’s chest made my skin crawl. Every ounce of me wanted to step between them and push her down to the ground. Bryson pushed her hand away and took a step back. I had to hide the smile when she looked so rejected by the gesture.

“Why are you here, Kennedy?”

She gave another little shrug, then started to finger the diamond necklace on her neck. It was clear she was nervous, especially when she darted her gaze to me. “Would you mind giving us some privacy, please?”

Before I even had a chance to say anything, Bryson spoke. “Anything you have to say, you can say in front of Rose.”

Kennedy glared at me, then sighed. “Fine. Have it your way.” Focusing back on Bryson, she said, “I want you back.”

I nearly choked on my tongue. Bryson let out a humorless laugh as he shook his head and stared at Kennedy. “You want me back? Have you lost your mind?”

“No. My mind is clear for the first time in months. I know what I lost, and I want it back.”

My mouth fell open, and I took a step forward. “I’m sorry, but you can’t have him back.”

Kennedy looked at me like I was beneath her. A bug she wanted to stomp on and crush into the ground. The way her judgmental eyes traveled over me should have made me shrink away. Instead, it did the opposite. I lifted my chin and smiled at her. This was who I was, and I wasn’t ashamed of it. Besides, sweatpants were easy to shed when Bryson and I lost control of ourselves like we had earlier. A pantsuit wouldn’t have been.

“And who might you be?”

“Me?” I asked as I pointed at myself with my free hand. The other hand was holding the painting, and for a hot second I wanted to hit her over the head with it.

“Bryson! Bryson, over here!”

All three of us turned to see a reporter with a cameraman following him. Bryson shot a look at Kennedy. “You brought a reporter?”

“I did. I thought it would be good publicity for you.”

Scrubbing his hand down his face, Bryson growled under his breath. “Jesus Christ, Kennedy. I don’t want publicity. I’m retired for a reason. I don’t need any good publicity because I don’t want any publicity. I want to live a quiet life here in Montana with Rose.”

Kennedy stepped back and put her hand to her cheek as if Bryson had just struck her. She looked at me, and for a hot second, I swore she was going to spit on me. Instead, she squeaked out one word. “What?”

The reporter walked up, and Bryson put up a hand. “You’re on private property, and you need to leave, Zane.”

My eyes bounced around from the reporter, who apparently was named Zane, to Kennedy to Bryson and back to the reporter.

“Wait, Ms. Owens granted us the interview. She said you had a big announcement.”

Glaring at Kennedy, Bryson shook his head. “No big announcement. The last one I made was big enough.”

Zane looked at Kennedy, who seemed to be pleading with Bryson. “There isn’t a big announcement? Tell me we didn’t waste our time flying out here for nothing, Kennedy.”

Kennedy opened her mouth, then shut it as she looked down at the ground.

Poor Zane looked like he was about to be sick.

“I’m going to be fired for this. I talked the bigwigs into letting me fly out here to interview Bryson and promised them an exclusive. You told me it would be an exclusive.”

The last sentence had been directed at Kennedy.

Stepping up in the middle of everyone, I extended my hand. “Hi, I’m Rose Shaw.”

Zane shook my hand. “Hey there.”

“I think I can help you with that exclusive.”

Perking up, Zane asked, “You can?” at the same time Bryson said it.

I nodded and smiled at him. “I do believe Ms. Owens was about to leave, though, were you not?”

Bryson covered his laugh with a cough.

“No. I wasn’t. Bryson, we had a good thing, and I don’t know why you’re throwing it away.”

Zane looked confused and leaned into me and asked, “I thought they broke up like a year ago.”

“They did,” I replied with a roll of my eyes.

Looking confused, Zane asked, “Then what is she doing?”

I exhaled as I watched Kennedy and Bryson argue back and forth. “Unfortunately, Zane, she is making a fool of herself, and Bryson is giving her too much of his time. Will you please hold on to this—for dear life—do you hear me?”

Handing his mic to the cameraman, Zane took the painting. I spun around and stepped between Kennedy and Bryson.

“That’s enough!” I yelled out. I put my hand on Bryson’s chest and said, “Why are you doing this? Stop arguing with her. It’s all she wants.”

“Hey!” Kennedy said with her hands going to her hips.

“And you, go home, Kennedy. You’re only making yourself look desperate. You had your chance with Bryson, and you blew it. Now it’s my turn, and honestly, it’s starting to piss me off that you’re trying to win back the man I love. He’s mine, sweetheart, so back the fuck off.”

“I really wish the camera was rolling,” Zane whispered. “Is the camera rolling?”

The cameraman shook his head, and Zane cursed under his breath.

Pointing her perfectly manicured finger at me, Kennedy practically growled, “Who do you think you are?”

Standing straight, I lifted my chin, stared directly at Kennedy, and said, “I’m the woman who is going to marry him and, God willing, raise a family with him in this house you see right here. You, Ms. Kennedy Owens, are not welcome here, so please turn around, get into your fancy-ass car with your fancy-ass clothes, and please leave before I call someone to remove you.”

Kennedy’s mouth dropped open, and she looked at Bryson. “Are you going to let her talk to me that way? Bryson, we were going to get married, have babies.”

That caused me to suck in a breath as I turned and looked at Bryson with a surprised expression on my face.

Bryson looked at me. “I never asked her to marry me, Rose. That wasn’t what I wanted.”

A wave of relief swept over me as Zane let out a breath. “Thank God! I don’t know what I was going to do if that was the case.”

Everyone turned and looked at him. He shrugged. “I’m invested now.”

Kennedy stomped her stiletto-clad foot, causing dirt to fly everywhere. When she saw mud on her white pants, she let out a scream, spun on her heels, and tried like hell to stomp away. The effect was lost as she stumbled along the dirt road. She slipped into her little sports car and peeled out before she drove down the driveway and out of sight.

Zane handed me the painting. “That is beautiful. Did you do it?”

“I did,” I said as Bryson still seemed angry with Kennedy showing up here, and with a reporter to boot.

“Zane, how would you like the first sneak peek into Bryson Robinson’s new home he is having built? You could do a piece on Bryson about what happens after retirement. A one-time look into his new private life.”

With eyes as big as silver dollars, Zane looked like he was about to jump into my arms and kiss me.

“Bryson?” I asked, causing him to snap out of whatever mood he had been in.

“Yeah, of course. As long as none of this with Kennedy gets included.”

Zane grinned wide. “Kennedy who?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

ROSE

“Stop wringing your hands like that, Rose.”

I drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled as Lily grabbed one hand and Kipton took the other.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea after all,” I whispered as I watched Jax hang up the painting I had created a few weeks ago at Bryson’s place.

“It’s a great idea because it is an amazing painting. Do you honestly think they’d hang up a piece of shit in the gallery?” Lily stated as Kipton chuckled.

“I really do like how you’ve embraced the whole speak your mind thing, Lily,” Kipton stated as she leaned forward and looked at Lily.

“Thank you,” Lily stated with a wide smile.

“Are you two done? Because I honestly think I’m going to throw up.”

Kipton dropped my hand and started to rub my back. “Rose, the painting is beautiful. As a matter of fact, I think it’s the best painting in here.”

Jax looked back at us, a single brow raised.

Clearing her throat, Kipton said, “Landscape-wise.”

His brows rose.

“Besides your paintings, of course,” Kipton added with a nervous burst of laughter. When Jax looked away, Kipton asked, “Does he paint landscapes?”

I nodded.

Jax climbed down the ladder, folded it, and headed toward the back of the gallery to put it away. When the phone rang, Jax excused himself and answered it in the back. Lily and Kipton started wandering around the gallery as I sat on the

stool behind the counter. Jax and I hadn't yet discussed what we should price the painting.

The bell on the gallery door rang, and an older woman walked in. She looked so familiar to me, but I couldn't place her.

She glanced around the gallery, and when she spied me, she said, "Good afternoon."

Oh, she must have thought I worked there. I smiled. "How are you today?"

"Wonderful," she said as she moved farther into the gallery. Kipton and Lily were looking at a sculpture, both talking in lowered voices, but clearly debating something. I stood and went to join them when the woman who had come in gasped.

We all turned to look at her. My stomach felt like it had just caught my heart.

No. No, no, no! Don't let this happen to me again!

I wasn't supposed to be here when anyone saw the painting. I hadn't wanted to know what people thought.

"Who is the artist of this painting?" she asked without looking away from it.

I saw Lily look at me and grin. She was about to call me out as the artist, and my entire body stiffened.

Kipton must have known I was panicked because she said, "She's a local artist here in the Hamilton area."

All eyes went to Kipton. She quickly fell into the role of Jax since he was still missing. Thank goodness we had all dressed appropriately.

The older woman let her gaze fall back on the painting. "I've never seen such beautiful work. The depth of her painting is unbelievable. Look here, the way she used the light and shadow together. It almost makes it look like the water is moving in real time."

I blinked a few times and stared at the woman.

Kipton stopped and looked at the painting. “I agree. The fall colors are just beautiful.”

“She is very talented and has been painting since she was a little girl.”

That compliment came from Lily.

“Do you know her?” the older woman asked, looking at Lily.

Nodding, Lily replied, “She’s my cousin.”

“Well,” the woman stated, bringing her focus back to the painting, “I’m working down south a bit and needed to get out and explore. I’m so glad I parked and got out to walk around. Charming little town, by the way.”

“Thank you,” the three of us all said in unison.

Kipton turned to look at her. I could tell she was also trying to place the woman. “So you’re not from the area?”

The woman laughed. “No, Los Angeles is where I call home.”

It must have dawned on all of us at the same time that she was an actress.

“Wait, you’re Kylee Heart! The actress!” Lily practically shouted.

Kylee laughed softly. “I am.”

Kipton smiled. “I thought you looked familiar.”

Pointing at the painting, Kylee asked, “How do I buy this?”

“I just hung that up!” Jax said as he walked into the room. I quickly looked around to see if I could either slip out the front door or hide in the back office.

“You did? Well, then it was meant to be. I was telling your coworker here how lovely the painting is. The use of the light and shadow adds to the movement, don’t you think?”

Jax shot Kipton a quizzical look, and she shrugged her shoulders. I prayed he would go along with the ruse.

He made his way over to the painting, and I slowly crept toward the back office, only to have Lily walk up and lace her arm in mine.

“Let me go, Lily,” I softly whispered while attempting to pull my arm away.

“No way. You’re going to witness the first sale of your painting, and she will be none the wiser. Walk around, and let’s pretend we’re looking at things.”

Knowing I could never get away from Lily without causing a scene, I let her drag me over to the sculpture she and Kipton had been looking at.

“Okay, what is this thing? Kipton said it was an abstract piece, but I swear it looks like someone bending around to scratch their a—”

I poked her in the ribs to get her to stop talking so I could listen to what Kylee was saying.

Jax had just finished giving his interpretation of the painting, and Kipton nodded as if she knew exactly what they were talking about.

“Does she have any other pieces here?”

“No,” Jax said with a sad expression. “We’re hoping she will add a few more pieces to our collection.”

“Does the gallery up the road have any of her work?” Kylee asked.

“No, she’s exclusive to us,” Jax stated.

Kipton covered a laugh with a cough, and I was pretty sure my mouth hit the floor.

“Sneaky little bastard,” I muttered under my breath.

The bell above the door rang again, and Jonathon Wiser walked in. He owned a bed-and-breakfast in town and would often come in and find pieces to decorate with. When he looked at where Jax, Kipton, and Kylee Heart were standing, his eyes went up to the painting.

“That is the most stunning river painting I’ve ever seen. And just in time for fall decorating.”

He made his way over and leaned in to see who the artist was. “Is that...?”

Lily and I turned around and faced the sculpture. I held my breath and prayed he didn’t know who Kipton was.

“Rose Marie Shaw,” Kipton stated, her voice spilling over with pride. I couldn’t help but smile. I was so glad she was part of our family now.

“She has talent, like her mother. I need this for a new bed-and-breakfast I’m opening.”

Lily and I shot a quick look of surprise at one another.

“I’m afraid you’re too late,” Kylee stated. “I’m buying this piece.”

“Does she have any other pieces in the gallery, Jax?” Jonathon asked.

Jax cleared his throat. “Not at this time, but—”

Kylee cut Jax off when she said, “I’ve already commissioned another painting by the artist, so you’ll have to get in line.”

My head snapped up, and I turned to Lily and mouthed, “*What the hell?*”

Her hand came up to her mouth to keep from laughing.

“Jax, I need a painting like this in my new rental. It’s up in the mountains, and a creek flows right behind the cabin. It would be perfect.”

“Since you know Rose Marie Shaw,” Kylee stated, “maybe you should contact her to paint your cabin and creek.”

I heard fingers snap. “That’s a great idea! It will add more of a personal touch to have the cabin and creek painted and hung in the cabin.”

“Exactly,” Kylee stated. “Now, how do I go about contacting the artist? Does she specialize in landscapes?”

“She, um, she does a number of landscapes, yes,” Jax stated.

“And the price?” Kylee asked.

Without missing a beat, Jax replied, “Three thousand.”

“That’s a steal for this!” Jonathon stated.

I turned around and gaped at the three of them. Kipton walked over, took me by the arm, and led me into the back room. Lily followed.

We slipped inside the office that was in the back and shut the door. The three of us grabbed hands, jumped, and silently screamed. I had sold my first painting. And I had sold it to a Hollywood actress!

Chapter Twenty-Three

BRYSON

“Don’t be afraid to walk up to him,” Ty said as we both stood in a pasture on his portion of the Shaw Ranch.

Glancing back at him, I frowned. “You want me to walk up to a bull? In an open field? Not to mention, the bull is mean.”

“He’s not mean,” Ty replied with a smirk. “I take that back. He is mean when he’s in the pen. He’s not mean right now.”

I shook my head and took a few steps back. Suddenly, Josh walked by me and straight to the bull. Then he jumped up on the bull and sat on it. My heart nearly leaped from my chest.

When he laid back on the beast and folded his arms behind his head, I glared at Ty.

“They are gentle giants. We raise them from the time they’re born, and when they’re out here in these fields, they’re babies.”

I turned and looked at the fifteen-hundred-pound *baby*.

With a laugh, I said, “Are they all this...gentle?”

“Hell no!” Blayze said as he walked up next to us.

“Don’t let him fool you, Bryson. Most of these bulls will let you pet them, give them a treat, and some even let you sit on them, like Josh there. A few will try to buck you and finish you with their horns.”

I faced Ty. “You wouldn’t let me try to sit on one of those, would you?”

He shrugged and walked toward his son and the bull. Looking at Blayze, I let out a nervous laugh. “He wouldn’t... would he?”

Blayze leaned in and replied in a low voice, “You’re dating his daughter. Practically living with her in her apartment, so...

you tell me.”

I rubbed at the base of my neck. “Good point.”

“Bryson, you ready to go?” Josh asked as he walked up to me. He had replaced his cowboy hat with a baseball cap.

Motioning for him to lead the way, I replied, “I’m ready if you are.”

Turning to follow Josh, Ty walked up on the other side of me, sandwiching me between him and Blayze.

Clearing his throat, Ty said, “I really don’t know how to thank you for doing this, Bryson. It means a lot to Joshua and Nathan.”

I stole a quick look at Ty. “It’s not a problem at all. I’m kind of excited, if I’m being honest.”

“Do you mind if I tag along?” Blayze asked. “Mom and Dad are with Georgie and the kids, so I’m free this afternoon.”

“The more, the merrier.”

Ty slapped me on the back. “Let’s go cause some baseball coaches and parents to shit their pants, shall we?”

The few months I’d been in the area, I had kept a low profile—mainly because I hadn’t wanted it to get out where I was and have people attempting to get a picture of me and sell it. After the whole episode with Kennedy and the interview Rose had talked me into doing, the steam had been taken out of the sails of some attempting to find out where I was and what I was up to. Giving ESPN the exclusive interview, showing them the house, and announcing my relationship with Rose had been the perfect thing to do. Now that I wasn’t playing, there really hadn’t been much interest in me. Nathan and Josh had begged me to come to their practices numerous times, which I’d declined, but now it finally felt like it would be okay. Most people in town knew I was living here, and I had to say, no one treated me any differently besides a request for a photo or signed ball or hat. It had been nice.

An hour later, and after the shock somewhat wore off that I was at their baseball practice, I was giving an impromptu

pitching clinic. I'd never had so much fun in my life, besides actually playing. Something about working with the kids brought me pure joy. After the practice was over, I met and shook hands with some parents, signed a few things, and found myself talking to Ty, Blayze, and Larry about baseball, ranching, and raising cattle. I wanted to do something with my land, and I'd always been interested in cattle.

Larry cleared his throat and looked around nervously before he said, "I'm probably overreaching here, and I'm not sure what you plan on doing now besides maybe ranching, but if you're ever interested in coaching, we would love to have you on our coaching staff."

Ty and Blayze turned and looked at me, eager to hear my answer.

"Coach?"

"It's stupid, I know. You could be coaching in the major leagues, and I'm here asking you to think about coaching club baseball teams."

I honestly hadn't even thought much about what in the hell I was going to do after retiring. Most of my thoughts were about Rose, the house, and the ranch. I had already been helping Blayze and Hunter out on the ranch whenever I could, simply because I wasn't used to sitting around with nothing to do. The thought of coaching baseball hadn't even entered my mind.

"I bet you'd probably get a lot of parents interested in private pitching lessons," Blayze said before turning his gaze to Ty and asking, "Don't Nathan and Josh do private lessons sometimes?"

Ty nodded. "Yeah, for sure."

"You'd have them lining up for private lessons," Larry stated with a grin.

"Of course," Ty said with a cough, "I'd expect priority."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I mean, I've tossed around the idea of coaching once I had kids, but I do miss it, and being here today was a rush."

Larry's eyes grew hopeful, as did Ty's.

"You'll think about it?" Larry asked.

"Did you say kids?" Ty said at the same time Larry had spoken.

It only took me a moment to decide I already had my answer. "No need to think about it. I'll do it."

Larry jumped like a teenage girl and let out a whoop. Then he looked around, rubbed the back of his neck, and lowered his voice a few octaves. "This is great. Amazing. The way you were with the kids today, I know we'll all benefit from having you here."

I smiled and couldn't deny I felt a little giddy, as well, and if I had been alone, I might have done a little spin jump myself.

Larry reached out to shake my hand. "I'll be in touch with you later this week with all the details. We won't make any sort of announcement until it's all official."

"Sounds like a plan to me," I replied, giving his hand a firm shake and then giving him my cell phone number.

Smiling like he'd won the lottery, Larry shook his head. "Bryson Robinson, coaching with us. Holy shit. I have to go tell my wife."

Larry turned to Ty. "Good seeing you, Ty. Give Ty Sr. and Stella all my best." Facing Blayze, he said, "Great seeing you, Blayze. I hope to see Ryder and Rhett in T-ball in the upcoming years."

Blayze laughed. "Let me get through the first year before we start talking about sports."

Lifting his hands in surrender, Larry said, "Fair enough."

We said our goodbyes to Larry and headed toward the parking lot. Nathan and Josh were already standing by my truck, waiting for us.

I pulled out my phone and saw Rose had tried calling six times. A moment of fear hit me so hard I stumbled.

Rose: Where are you?

Rose: OMG, Bryson! I need to talk to you! I have the best news!

Rose: Okay, why aren't you answering your phone!

Rose: BRYSON!

That text about good news allowed my lungs to open once again, and I drew in a deep breath.

Rose: Mom said you went with Dad to Josh and Nathan's baseball practice!

Rose: I'm heading there!

"Rose texted me like five times," Ty stated as he stopped walking.

"She did me as well. Said she had something to tell me."

Ty nodded as the three of us came to a stop. "Kaylee said she told her we were at the ballpark. I guess she's on her way."

The sound of Rose calling out my name caused the three of us to snap our heads in the direction of the parking lot.

"What is she doing?" Blaze asked.

"She's lost her mind, that's what she is doing! Did she really jump out before Lily had the car stopped!" Ty shouted as he marched toward Rose, who currently ran toward us.

"Rose Marie Shaw, what in the hell are you doing jumping out of a moving car!"

Rose ran right by her father and launched herself at me. I caught her and laughed as she wrapped her legs around me and buried her face in my neck.

Holding her tightly, I looked at Blayze and Ty and asked, "Is she laughing or crying?"

Blayze walked up and bent down to look at Rose. "I think both?"

"She just scared the hell out of me," Lily stated, walking up with Kipton, Nathan, and Josh.

"That was awesome, Rose!" Josh laughed. "Totally serving cu—"

“Josh!” Ty warned as he held up his hand. “Stop saying cunt!”

“What?” Blayze and I asked at the same time. Lily and Kipton laughed.

Rose pulled back and had a wide grin on her face. Tears streamed down her face as she attempted to talk.

“She...she...bought...wants...more...fighting over... painting!”

Her face returned to my neck, and the five guys all turned to Lily and Kipton.

“Can you decode that, please?” Blayze asked.

“Jax hung up her landscape painting today.”

Rose said something, but it was muffled.

“Not even five minutes after he hung it, Kylee Heart walked in.”

“Who is that?” Ty asked.

“Uncle Ty, she’s only the hottest actress around right now. She’s filming that western show south of Hamilton,” Nathan said with a look like he couldn’t believe his uncle had no idea who the actress was.

Lily went on. “Kylee loved it, said she wanted to commission the artist for more paintings!”

“Meanwhile,” Kipton added. “Jonathon Wiser came in and saw it. He wanted it for his new bed-and-breakfast. Kylee told him she had just bought it, and Jonathon then asked Jax if Rose had any more. Then Kylee said, ‘oh no, get in line, buddy, she’s painting another one for me.’ Then she suggested he commission Rose to paint the creek on his property where his bed-and-breakfast was, and he thought it was a great idea!”

Lily nodded. “And Rose had been standing there the whole time!”

Kipton jumped up and said, “And Jax sold it for three-thousand dollars!”

“What!” Josh said as he stumbled back and bumped into Nathan.

I held Rose tighter as I said, “I told you, sweetheart. I knew it would sell fast because it was so beautiful.”

“Rose, I’m so damn proud of you.”

When Rose heard her father’s voice, she drew back, and I set her down. She wiped at her tears and looked directly at her father. “Daddy, I think I could do this. I think I could sell my paintings.”

He smiled at her, cupped her face in his hands, and brushed his thumbs across her cheeks. “Baby, I always knew you could. Don’t tell your mother this, but you’re a better painter than she is!”

We all laughed.

Rose turned to look at me, then back to her father. “I’m also going to be taking a teacher certification class, and I applied to be the art teacher at the elementary school next year.”

Ty’s eyes went wide with shock. “An art teacher?”

“I know it’s not what I thought I wanted to do, and I had a ton of fun designing Bryson’s house, but I don’t want to do that for a living. Maybe I’ll also do some consulting if a firm needs it for environmental input on their project.”

“Sweetheart,” Ty said as he took her hands in his. “Why didn’t you tell us you wanted to pursue art? Your mother and I would have stood behind you a hundred percent.”

Rose looked at me and smiled. I leaned in closer and whispered, “I told you.”

When Rose turned back to her father, he had tears in his eyes. “Rose, we would never be upset that you followed your heart. We simply want you to be happy.”

Ty drew his daughter into his arms and held her.

“I’ve never been so proud of you, Rose.”

When they broke apart, Rose wiped her tears away. “Thank you so much, Dad. I was confused about what I wanted to do.” She smiled at me. “But everything seems to be falling into place now.”

“I’ve got my own news!” Josh stated, causing everyone to turn and look at him.

“Bryson is going to be our new coach!”

Rose spun around, her mouth gaping open as Nathan added. “And he’s going to give us private pitching lessons!”

“For free!” Ty added with a wide smile as Bryson just groaned.

Chapter Twenty-Four

ROSE

I stood in front of the large, two-story home and stared at it. It was finished. I wasn't sure how Bryson and the contractor had managed to get it built as fast as they did, but here it was, one week before Thanksgiving, and it was finished. It was empty, but finished.

Arms wrapped around me, and I felt Bryson's chin rest on the top of my head. "It's beautiful, Rose."

"How in the world did you manage to get them to build it so fast?"

"Easy. I offered bonuses if they got it finished before Christmas. It was *my* bonus they got it finished before Thanksgiving."

Turning, I looked up into his green eyes. "So your bribes worked?"

He shrugged. "They did, and I won't feel bad about it. They still have some items to finish up inside. The punch list is long, but I told them all to take a week off for the holiday. Since everything is inside now, if it snows, we're good."

I placed my hands on his chest, wishing we didn't have coats on. I missed feeling the heat of his body against mine.

"It really is a beautiful house. No one believes me when I tell them my girlfriend designed it. They keep asking what firm you own!"

Laughing, I dropped my head to his chest while he wrapped me in his arms once again.

"Do you want to go in and look at it?"

I peeked up at him. "You know the best part is coming, right?"

“You mean the part where we make love in every single room?”

“No, but that will be a lot of fun too. The best part is decorating it! I have so many ideas!”

Bryson tossed his head back and laughed. “I am leaving that up to you. The only room I want to have a say in is the theater room, and my man cave slash library.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn't wipe the smile from my face. “What are you doing here? I thought you had private lessons today.”

Bryson had been officially working with the Big Sky Baseball Club for the past few weeks or so and had been in heaven. And Josh and Nathan had both improved so much simply from having Bryson not only for private lessons, but being able to head outside after a family dinner or game night and toss the ball back and forth with him. It hadn't taken Bryson long to fit in with the family. Everyone adored him and treated him no differently than they would any other guy I would have been dating. Of course, Brock had him help with delivering a calf, and that encounter made Bryson think twice about whether he wanted to raise cattle. And my father was hell-bent on getting the man I loved up on a bull. Bryson's only saving grace was that his shoulder wasn't completely healed. I wasn't sure how long that excuse would last, though.

“I finished up early and saw Josh with his hitting coach. He told me you were driving up to take a peek at the house... without me!”

Feeling my cheeks heat, I looked away for a second before focusing back on Bryson. “I was nervous about it. I mean, I know we've seen it being built, but I honestly still can't wrap my head around the fact that I helped this come to life.”

Bryson looked past me and at the house. “Come on, let's go inside. The cleaning crew left about two hours ago. They texted me when they finished.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I nodded and took Bryson's outstretched hand. We walked up to the steps that led to the

front porch. Large river rocks formed the columns that outlined the steps. The logs were not the typical round logs you saw on log homes but instead had been cut into squares. I loved the look it gave the house and made it appear older instead of a brand-new build. The dark tan metal roof was another one of my favorite things about the house.

“What do you want to do with the front porch?” Bryson asked as we stopped and looked at the large area.

“Well, it has a beautiful view of the open pastures. I can picture us sitting out here in the morning drinking coffee. Or watching a storm over the Sapphire Mountains, maybe.”

His eyes looked out over the open pastures to the mountain range in the distance. “I like that idea. What about a porch swing? I could see one on the end over there.”

Turning to look where Bryson was pointing, I nodded. “I love that idea!”

The double black iron doors opened, and we stepped into the large foyer, took off our coats, and hung them up. A closet was on either side, with one containing a design my mother created for shoes and boots. To the left after the closets was a half bath. My mother had picked out the wallpaper, and Anna had picked out the flooring. I had loved watching my mother and Bryson’s mother work together on little projects for the house. When Bryson had asked me if I minded if our mothers designed the half bath, I almost cried. It was so sweet and kind of funny he didn’t trust them with a full bathroom design.

Beyond two large wooden doors to the left was the theater room. Bryson was already making plans for baseball watch parties. The staircase was opposite that room, and the large family room was beyond that. The back wall was floor-to-ceiling windows with a stunning view of the Bitterroot Mountains. The large eat-in kitchen was to the left, and the main bedroom was to the right. One of my favorite rooms was the large mudroom, and opposite that, the large laundry room.

“Let’s head to our bedroom.”

Smiling, I let Bryson take my hand and lead us to the large owners' suite. There was a fireplace against the family room shared wall. Bryson had pushed that wall out and added a sunroom sitting area with floor-to-ceiling windows that gave you the same view as the family room. It was beautiful, and I could see a large reading chair tucked into one of the corners.

"I like that we ended up doing wood planks on all the walls. I also like that you did a stain on the ones in our room," he added.

Our room. It still felt so surreal. The man was amazing. I had never been so happy or so in love in my entire life.

It felt like a million emotions hit me all at once. Happiness about everything happening in our lives. Excitement for the future. Fear that the bottom would fall out from beneath me. Love so strong it left me breathless. Except I hadn't wanted to run. The old me would have panicked and had the urge to flee. The new me? Oh, the new me wanted to close her eyes and leap with Bryson right by my side.

"The room is huge," I said as I spun around in the middle and came to a stop in front of Bryson. "You keep calling it our house."

He smiled and held his hand out to me. "Because it is."

"Is it because I designed it? Because last I checked, I didn't have the money to help you pay for this thing. I'd have to sell a heckuva lot more paintings to even make a mortgage payment on this place."

Bryson laughed as he took my hand and drew me to him. "It is our house because I love you and want you to help me make this a home."

"I want that too," I stated as I cupped his face with my hands. "I want to make this our home. I want to build beautiful memories here with you. I close my eyes and can see our future, which isn't something I've ever been able to do before you. I love you so much, Bryson. With you by my side, I feel like I can do anything, and I've never felt that way before."

He placed his hands over mine and smiled down at me. His eyes sparkled, and my heart raced in my chest from the smoldering look he gave me. “Marry me.”

I felt myself blink a few times, then shake my head. “What?” I asked with a confused laugh.

“It isn’t the way I wanted to ask you, but nothing I’ve done so far in our relationship has been normal or expected.”

I stepped back, and my mouth hung open while I tried to say something. Had Bryson just asked me to marry him? Out of the blue?

Of course, the man did! I shouldn’t be surprised at all considering how we’ve done things so far.

Bryson chewed on his lower lip. “Did I go too far? I went too far, didn’t I? Shit. Rose, don’t freak out on me or run.”

The look of fear on his face pulled me from my shocked state. “Run? I’m not running anywhere but into your arms. It’s just that you caught me off guard. I figured you were going to ask me to make love to you in here, not ask me to marry you.”

He closed his eyes, and I could feel the worry coming off him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and waited for him to meet my gaze.

“Yes. I’ll marry you.”

When his eyes went as wide as saucers, I nearly laughed. “But on one condition.”

“Anything,” he whispered.

“Make love to me here. In *our* room.”

Bryson lifted me, and I let out a little scream.

“I think I have a better idea.”

“Really?” I giggled. “Do tell.”

“How about in that big bathroom? You bent over the sink?”

My lower body instantly ached for him to be inside me. “Yes, please.”

Bryson quickly walked us through the little hallway and into the massive bathroom we would share. The shower was straight ahead and jutted out from the rest of the room, with windows letting in more light. The long counter to our right held two sinks and a plethora of storage.

Setting me on the counter, Bryson pushed up the dress I had on. I had almost changed into sweatpants before heading over, but I'd come straight from work. He dropped down to his knees and pulled my panties to the side. I gripped the counter and held my breath while Bryson placed kisses up one thigh, then the other. He ran his thumb through my wet slit, and I sucked in a breath. Ripples of excitement danced along every nerve, feeding the fire of desire.

Pinching my clit softly, he whispered, "Do you want my mouth here?"

"Yes!" I gasped out. "Please, Bryson."

Parting my legs so he could get better access, he pressed his mouth to me, and I buckled against him.

"Oh God, Bryson."

He pushed my legs open wider, and I shamelessly rocked against his tongue, my fingers digging into his hair and drawing him closer. I needed him closer. I needed him inside me. When he slipped his fingers inside, I knew I was on the verge of losing all sanity. It felt so good, and something about doing this with our clothes still on and the passion raw and real was so erotic.

"I'm going to come!" I cried out, my head falling back as a million tiny stars exploded behind my lids.

Then he was gone, and my body instantly missed him. When I opened my eyes, Bryson had his pants open and his dick in his hand. He slowly pumped while he licked his lips before giving me a dazzling smile.

"Bend over the sink, Rose. I want to fuck you."

I'd never moved so fast in my life.

“Hang onto the counter, baby. I’ll try to control myself, but I’m not promising you anything.”

Glancing over my shoulder at him, I felt my breath dragging in and out. “Don’t. Lose. Control. Bryson.”

He grabbed my hips, positioned himself, and pushed in hard and fast. So hard that I lifted onto my toes and nearly lost my grip on the counter.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Closing my eyes at the sensation of him filling me so deeply, I pushed back against him. “Fuck. Me. Now.”

My bluntness must have been all Bryson needed because he moved fast and hard. The feeling of him pounding into me was so good, and every time he went in, he stroked a part of me that felt so damn good, I was positive I would come again.

“Yes! Oh God, yes!” I cried out, gripping the counter and pushing back against him when he moved back in. The sounds of our bodies slapping together, knowing we were joined so intimately, was so intoxicating I threw my head back and moaned in pleasure.

“It feels...so...good,” Bryson said as he moved faster. That was it. He was hitting that spot over and over. My entire body felt like it caught fire, and I screamed out his name as my orgasm hit me.

“I’m coming, Rose. Fuuuck, I’m coming.”

We came together, and I swore it was the best orgasm of my life. When Bryson finally slowed and came to a stop, he leaned over and kissed my back. I wished we would have taken the time to get undressed because my only regret was that I wanted to feel that kiss on my hot skin.

“Stay there. Let me get some toilet paper to clean you up.”

“Is there any in here?” I asked with a chuckle.

I could hear Bryson in the water closet where the toilet was. He held up a roll and smiled. “They put some in!”

Bryson dropped down and started to clean me up, then himself. I slid down to the floor and sat there, thoroughly fucked and feeling like I was on cloud nine. I had an amazing man who built us a beautiful house and had asked me to marry him.

“Rose?”

Sighing in pure happiness, I turned to look at him only to gasp as I looked at the diamond ring in the little blue box.

“Shall we make it official?”

I nearly launched myself at him as I yelled out, “Yes!”

Life had never been so beautiful.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ROSE

Bryson held on to my hand tighter than normal as we walked up the steps to Uncle Brock and Aunt Lincoln's house. It was family game night, and Bryson and I were about to tell everyone in my family we were engaged. We were heading up to see his parents this weekend and would tell them then.

"Maybe we should wait on telling them," Bryson said, pulling me to a stop.

"No way. I want to shout it from the rooftops. Why don't you want to tell them?"

He rubbed the back of his neck while a worried expression took hold of his face.

"Bryson, talk to me."

"It's not that I don't want to tell your family. It's that I don't want to tell your dad."

Smiling, I wrapped my arms around his neck and lifted on my toes to kiss him. "Don't be nervous. I'm pretty sure my parents will see it coming. We did, after all, build a house together. And my parents are going up to Missoula with us to furniture shop. It's kind of a done deal."

He sighed. "Moving in isn't a big deal. We've been practically living together for a few months. I'm always at your place."

I ran the tip of my finger along the side of his face and jawline. "If you want to wait to tell them, we can wait."

Bryson looked past me to the front door. He drew in a long, deep breath and exhaled. "No, you're right. I want everyone to know we're engaged. Plus, your dad already paid for private pitching lessons for Josh through the end of the year. I highly doubt he'd want to disappoint him like that if he killed me."

I rolled my eyes. “Great way to think about it.” Taking his hand in mine once again, I tugged him toward the door. When I opened it, I called out, “We’re here!”

Gone were the days of everyone fawning over Bryson. He was now part of the family, and he loved the normalcy of it all. Every now and then, someone would recognize him and ask for a picture or autograph, but for the most part, he was simply Bryson. The man I was head over heels in love with.

Once we stepped into the large family room, I let out a scream. Avery stood there with a wide smile on her face. Bradley stood next to her, equally happy. Every time he had been home, he had missed the chance to meet Bryson. Finally, tonight was the night.

“Oh my God! Avery!” I cried out as she made her way to me, throwing her body into mine. I caught her and laughed. When she pulled back, I was once again captivated by those sapphire eyes of hers. Her golden-brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and I could not believe she was only seventeen years old. She looked older.

“Look at you,” I said as I pushed her out at arm’s length and gave her a once-over. “You look beautiful.”

She smiled, and her cheeks blushed. “I’m here until after the first of the year! I’m so excited to be home for a month!”

Avery hadn’t been able to come home at all this past summer like normal due to a small role in a movie that was being shot in France. Acting wasn’t at all what Avery wanted to do, but she couldn’t pass up the chance to do it, and Uncle Dirk and Aunt Merit agreed.

“I bet your mom and dad are over the moon to have you and Bradley both home!” I said, hugging her once again.

Bryson cleared his throat, and I clapped my hand over my mouth. “Shit! I’m so sorry. Avery, this is Bryson Robinson.”

Looking at Bryson with a dreamy expression, Avery said, “I’m so excited to meet you. You’re one of my favorite pitchers.”

“You watch baseball?” he asked, his brows raised in suspicion.

With a shy shrug, Avery replied, “Only for the uniforms, if I’m being truthful.”

Bryson and I both laughed.

Bradly waited patiently for his sister to step aside. When I looked past her at him, Avery jumped out of the way. “Sorry, Bradly!”

He grinned and waved it off like it was no big deal.

Stepping up, Bradly reached his hand out to shake Bryson’s. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Mr. Robinson.”

Bryson chuckled. “It’s just Bryson. The pleasure is all mine. I was watching some of your rides with your father and Brock the other day. Impressive. They both stated you ride better than either one of them ever did.”

A deep red filled Bradly’s cheeks, and he looked down at the floor, kicked at something invisible, then met Bryson’s gaze again. “I appreciate them saying that. I love what I do, so I think that helps.”

“Amen to that,” Bryson said, holding out his hand and slapping it with Bradly’s.

“Josh and Nathan mentioned something about a family baseball game tomorrow.”

Bryson nodded. “Yes, I hope I can count on you to be on my team.”

I laughed. “They broke up the family into two teams. Bryson is coaching one team, and my dad, because he thinks he knows more than Bryson, is coaching the other.”

Bradly grinned. “I’ll make sure I’m on your team.”

Giving him a hit on the side of the arm, Bryson replied, “Great.”

As Bradly and Bryson started talking about bull riding and what life was like out on the road, I searched the house for my father and mother. I finally caught them both walking into the

room carrying boxes of pizza. My stomach growled the moment I smelled the food.

With Bradley and Bryson deep in conversation, I made my way across the room and started to help them spread out the pizzas on the table Lincoln had set up.

“Mom, Dad, is there any way Bryson and I can speak to you in private real quick?”

My father looked down at the pizza, and I swore he was about to cry.

I looked at my dad. “It will only take a minute.”

“Of course, darling. I’m sure Brock won’t mind us using his office. Ty?”

With my dad licking his lips and staring at the opened box of pepperoni pizza, my mother hit him in the side with her elbow. “Ty?”

“Right. Yes, Brock’s office.”

Smiling, I reached up and kissed his cheek, then my mother’s. “I’ll go grab Bryson and meet you both there.”

Mom took hold of my father’s arm and practically dragged him away from the pizza. As everyone started to make their way to the table, Dad called out, “Do not eat all the pepperoni, or I’ll have to hurt someone!”

Bryson was walking toward me when I motioned for him to follow. “They’re waiting in Brock’s office.”

“Now? We’re doing this now?” he asked in a panicked voice.

“Yes, we’re doing this now,” I said, taking his hand and dragging him from the room almost exactly like my mother had with my dad.

We stopped shy of the office, which had the door open. I could hear my father complain to my mother that it better be good, and if he missed pizza, he was making me and Bryson go get more.

I motioned for Bryson to draw in a deep breath and exhale. When he blew out all his breath, I patted him on the chest and whispered, “Good luck.”

“What?” he whisper-shouted and grabbed my hand. “You are not making me do this alone!”

“I am. I don’t know how my father will feel that you asked me before you asked him.”

Bryson’s eyes went wide. “Holy shit. Does he expect that? I mean, I told him months ago what my intentions were for you.”

I shrugged. “Don’t know if he really expects it.”

He stumbled back a few steps. “You don’t know!” he whisper-shouted. “You. Don’t. Know?”

“Don’t know what?” my father asked, causing us both to jump and let out a scream. Bryson’s scream must have been a little too girly for Dad because he frowned at him.

“Get in here, both of you. The longer you stand out here and argue, the longer I’m being kept from my pizza.”

We stepped into the room, where my mother leaned against the desk, her arms folded across her chest and a wide smile on her face.

Bryson and I stood there, neither one of us uttering a word.

Dad tilted his head, glared at us, then exhaled. “For God’s sake, just tell us already so we can get back to the food!”

“Ty Shaw. Stop acting like you haven’t had pizza in ten years. You ate three pieces on the way here.”

My head snapped to look at my father. He simply shrugged and said, “I’m still hungry.”

“Well?” my mother asked, tilting her head and looking from me to Bryson, then back to me. “What was it you wanted to talk to us about?”

Placing my hand on Bryson’s back, I gave him a gentle but firm push. He shot me a dirty look, then plastered on a smile when he turned back to my parents.

“Kaylee, Ty, I wanted to see if I might ask for your permission to marry your daughter.”

My mother pushed off the desk and started clapping her hands. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Wow, are you that eager to marry me off, Mom?”

“Now hold on a second. Don’t I have a say in this?”

Turning to my father, I gave him a fake smile. “Not really, Dad. This is just an obligatory thing that Bryson must do since you’re old school.”

“Old school!” my parents both stated at the same time.

“Excuse me?” Mom asked, back to folding her arms over her chest. This time, she looked pissed. “Are you saying we’re old?”

“No, that isn’t what she was saying at all. I think she meant old-fashioned. Since I’ve already asked her and she said yes, I realized I should have asked you both first because...”

Bryson’s voice trailed off as my mother and father went from looking at him to looking at me. Then something strange happened. My father’s eyes got teary, and he looked at my mother.

“The boy has manners. I told you I liked him from the very beginning.”

My mother nodded and held her arms out to Bryson. “That is so sweet of you to think of us that way, Bryson!”

Wait, what?

Dad reached for Bryson’s hand to shake it, then pulled him in for a hug. Giving him a couple of hearty slaps on the back, he said, “I knew you were a good one from the moment I met you.”

“Really?” Bryson and I asked at the same time.

“You’ve got a yes from me as well. That’s three for yes! It’s your lucky night, son. You’re on my team tonight.”

Putting his arm around Bryson, they started to walk out of the room. I stood there with my mouth hung open in stunned silence.

Mom walked up to me and laughed. “We already knew what you two wanted to talk to us about.”

Turning to look at her, I asked, “How?”

She faced me and winked. “Dorothy Rickers?”

“Who?” I asked, confused.

“She works at Mikesell’s Fine Jewelry. Georgiana saw you and Bryson leaving, walked across the street, and casually asked what you two were doing in there. Dorothy, never one for missing out on gossip, told her Bryson had bought you an engagement ring.”

We both looked down at my left ring finger, where there was no ring. “It’s being sized,” I softly said. Glancing back up at my mother, I slowly shook my head. “So the two of you knew this whole time and played like you didn’t?”

She chuckled. “Yes. And if Bryson really believes those were tears in your father’s eyes, he better watch out.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “You both knew and acted like you didn’t! How could you do that?”

With a shrug, she replied, “It was fun watching you both freak out for a moment. I don’t know why you thought you had to ask us first, but it was a very sweet gesture. I’m not surprised, though. The two of you have been barreling through this relationship like two bats out of hell. If I didn’t see the way that man looks at you with so much love, I’d be worried.”

“He does? Like how Dad looks at you? Or Brock looks at Lincoln? Tanner looks at—”

Laughing, she put her hand over my mouth. “Yes! The boy looks at you like you’re the very air he breathes, sweetheart.”

I felt the tears, and my mother shook her head. “No, don’t cry, or I will.”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted, Mom. Was a man to look at me like Daddy looks at you.”

Mom blinked rapidly. “Damn it, Rose Marie!”

We both laughed as I wrapped my arm around her waist and started back to the family room, where I could already hear Bradley and Avery fighting over who got to pick game night from the hat.

“You can never go wrong when you follow your heart, Rose Marie. I’ve always taught you that, and I’m so happy to see you doing just that.”

I leaned my head on her shoulder as we walked. “I love you, Mom.”

We both stopped and turned to face one another. “I love you, too, darling.”

“Come on, let’s join the family, and you and Bryson can tell them the good news.”

The moment Mom and I stepped into the family room, my father whistled and got everyone’s attention. He pointed at Bryson and said, “Bryson and Rose Marie have something they want to announce!”

All eyes swung to Bryson, then to me, where I stood just behind him. He reached his hand back for me, and I took it, stepping up next to him.

We looked at each other, nodded, then faced my family and shouted, “We’re engaged!”

Screams and woo-hoos filled the room as everyone came up to congratulate us. Lily had been the last to make her way to Bryson, then to me. My smile instantly faded when I looked into her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She forced a smile. “Nothing is wrong.”

“Bullshit, I can tell you’ve been crying, and that is not from happy tears, Lily Shaw. What is wrong?”

She glared at me and said, “Keep your voice down. Nothing is wrong. This is your night, so please don’t draw attention to me.”

Narrowing my eyes at her, I lowered my voice. “Who has you so upset?”

“What’s going on?” Kipton asked as she made her way over to us.

Lily forced a smile. “Nothing. I’m so happy for you, Rose.”

When she pulled me in for a hug, she whispered, “Please not here, Rose.”

Drawing back, I smiled and nodded. I wasn’t about to let it go, but Lily was right. Now wasn’t the time.

After three rounds of rock, paper, scissors, Avery got to pick from the hat. She laughed as she called out, “Pictionary!”

Bryson had made his way over to me, leaned down, and whispered, “I hate Pictionary.”

“Me too,” I replied.

Our eyes met, and I grinned as I said, “There is always the barn?”

“Our barn?”

Chewing on my lower lip, I glanced around. “The original ranch barn.”

His eyes lit up. “I don’t believe I’ve seen that yet.”

“Well,” I said with a wicked smile. “We can’t have that.”

Slipping my hand in Bryson’s, we slowly made our way toward the kitchen to escape. Once we got there, we turned and started to giggle as we headed to the back door in the kitchen.

“And where do you two think you’re going?” my father asked, sitting on the counter eating a piece of pizza.

We both froze, and I turned to face my dad. “Pictionary isn’t for us, so I thought I’d show Bryson the original ranch

barn.”

Dad set the pizza crust down, wiped his hands, then jumped off the counter. With a shit-eating smile, he walked up to us and put a hand on Bryson’s shoulder and one on mine.

“What do you know, I hate Pictionary too. Come on, I’ll drive us over.”

As my father pushed past us, he called, “Don’t forget your coats!”

I sighed and looked at Bryson, who attempted to hold back a laugh.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as I took my coat Bryson had reached for and handed to me.

“It’s okay. Next time.”

“Yes!” I said with a nod. “For sure.”

“Bryson! Rose Marie! Let’s go before people notice we’re gone.”

Looking at my father walking toward Bryson’s truck and heading to the driver’s side, Bryson laughed as we made our way out of the house and in his direction. “I honestly love your father.”

Watching the two men I loved more than life itself, I brushed away a single tear. “So do I.”

Epilogue

LILY

“What is it about weddings that make me feel so depressed?”

I glanced up to see Renee Sanders, one of my friends from high school, frowning out at the dance floor. My eyes followed her gaze, and I couldn't help but smile. My cousin Rose was dancing with her new husband, Bryson. I'd never seen her look so happy, or so beautiful. They met in Seattle a year ago at a party Bryson had at his place. He retired from the Seattle Mariners after injuring his pitching arm and now lived right outside of Hamilton in a house that Rose herself designed. They honestly were the cutest couple.

“Rose looks beautiful,” I stated, my eyes sweeping over the rose-colored wedding gown our other cousin, Morgan, designed. Morgan co-owned a boutique in downtown Hamilton with our cousin Blayze's wife Georgiana. They were known for their custom-designed wedding dresses and bridesmaids' gowns.

In a twist that only Rose would do, she wore a colored wedding dress, and her attendants wore white and cream. Morgan had been all over that idea and had designed the gown in record time.

“She does, indeed,” Renee stated as she sat down next to me. “I especially love her hair.”

Laughing, I looked at her. “Is that because you did her hair?”

She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “You have to admit, her hair looks stunning with those small roses in it.”

“You could make anyone's hair look stunning, Renee.”

With a smile, she winked at me. “Hey, do you think Bryson could introduce me to a few of his former friends? Particularly that blonde over there who keeps eye-fucking me.”

I followed her gaze and saw one of the guys who used to play with Bryson on the Mariners looking our way.

I let out a huff. “Excuse me, but how do you know he’s not eye-fucking me?”

Renee laughed. “Do you want him to be looking at you?”

I shrugged. “I might want him to be looking at me.”

“Who?” Ben, my other best friend and the guy I’ve had a crush on for as long as I could remember, asked as he sat down between me and Renee.

“The hot baseball player in the corner over there currently looking at either me or Lily, or possibly both of us. That might be kind of fun.”

I screwed up my face. “I didn’t need that visual, Renee.”

Ben laughed.

“You never did tell me why Abby didn’t come with you?” I asked as Ben slid a glass of wine in front of me, then gave Renee her drink.

He shrugged. “She said she didn’t feel like coming.”

Renee lifted a brow as she took a sip of her wine.

I let out a humorless laugh as I asked, “She didn’t give you a reason why?”

Looking frustrated, Ben said, “No, Lily, she didn’t.”

I drew back. “Wow, okay. Don’t bite my head off. I was simply asking about her, that’s all.”

He sighed and pushed his hand through his hair. “She thinks I’m spending too much time with you now that you’re out of school. She accused me of not being able to let you go, and I told her she was talking crazy. I’ve explained time and time again you’re like a sister to me, and I’ve never had those kinds of feelings toward you.”

Ouch. Well, that was a dose of reality I probably needed.

Nodding, I took a sip of my wine.

“I mean, I can see where she’s coming from,” Renee stated as I shot daggers at her. She wasn’t catching on, though, since she was still staring at the baseball player while she talked. “It’s not every day a guy has a woman for a best friend. And a hot one, at that, with amazing breasts.”

Ben looked down at my exposed cleavage, then quickly averted his eyes as if he had just burned them. I frowned and looked down.

“I’m trying to be understanding, but she told me today that she should be my best friend.”

I nearly choked on my own spit. “I’m sorry, but first she says we can’t hang out, and now she wants to completely take you away from me?”

Ben looked at me with an apologetic expression. “I know, Lily, but I think maybe we need to step back from seeing each other so much. I think that would make Abby feel better.”

“Ben, we’ve been best friends since we were old enough to talk. Don’t you care about my feelings?”

“Of course, I do, but she’s my girlfriend, and I need to show her that she means more to me.”

“Wow,” Renee stated. “I didn’t realize Abby was that insecure in her relationship with you, Ben. Is she that threatened by Lily?”

Ben shot her a dirty look. “She’s not insecure and she does not feel threatened by her. Put yourself in her shoes. If you were dating a guy who had a female best friend, wouldn’t you feel the same way?”

I wanted to say that I thought I would feel more secure in my relationship, but I kept my mouth shut. As much as I hadn’t liked Abby, I wasn’t in her shoes, no matter how much I had wanted to be.

“Clearly she is if you’re just tossing Lily to the side. Girls come and go, Ben, you know that. But Lily has been by your side for everything. It’s just strange to me that you can’t find a middle ground. And Abby has been jealous of Lily since day one, and you know it.”

“Renee,” I softly said. “It’s okay. You have to do what you have to do, Ben. After all, you love her, right?”

“Of course, I love her. I love you, too, Lily.”

I felt my cheeks heat.

“Not in the same way, you know that. I love you more like a sister.”

Forcing myself to smile, I said, “Then we simply cut back on the time we spend together doing things.”

Ben sat back in his seat. “I still want to help with the riding camp this summer. I committed to one day a week and I won’t back out.”

“My mother and father will appreciate that.”

He smiled, then looked past my shoulder and frowned. “What is Maverick doing here?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I smiled. “Granddad wasn’t feeling good, so my mother asked him if he would be Grams’s date.”

“That is so hot,” Renee said. “I would fall over right here on this table for him if he asked me to. I mean, look at him. Tall, brown hair that looks soft enough to run your fingers through, and eyes that look so light blue I could swim in them for days.”

Ben gagged.

Laughing, I looked back at Renee. “His eyes are gray.”

“How do you know?” Ben asked.

I focused back on Maverick, and a strange sensation swept over my body. “I see him every day on the ranch, Ben. It’s hard not to notice. And,” I said as I directed my attention to Renee. “He’s not only handsome, but one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met. My father thinks of him like he’s part of the family.”

“Yeah, he eats dinner with you guys more than I ever did.”

I looked at Ben and frowned. “What? Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?”

He scoffed. “Over that guy? Don’t be ridiculous. I see the way he looks at you, though. I don’t like you being alone in the barn with him. Who knows where he even came from.”

My mouth fell open. “You don’t even know him, Ben. Have you even spoken two words to him?”

He snarled up his lip. “I’ve met guys like that. He’s a nobody, and your dad better be careful, or that guy could try to take over things.”

I stared at him in disbelief. When had he become such a snob? Had he always been and I had never noticed it before?”

Renee hit Ben on the arm. “Shut up! He’s coming this way!”

I felt a strange sensation in my chest as Maverick walked up and stopped at the table. “Renee, Ben,” turning to me he smiled bigger. “Lily.”

“Hey, Maverick,” Renee replied with a megawatt smile. Was she batting her eyelashes or was there something in her eye?

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” Ben asked.

Renee’s smile faltered for a second before she looked at Maverick once again.

Laughing, I glanced back up at him and couldn’t help but notice how incredibly good he looked. I had never seen him in a suit, and my, oh my. His gray eyes almost seemed like a light baby blue, after all, against the blue tie he wore. Renee had certainly been right about his light brown hair. It wasn’t covered by a cowboy hat or baseball cap, and it looked so soft and silky that my hands itched to run my fingers through it and see if it was as soft as it looked. He wasn’t too terribly tall, maybe around five foot eleven, but he was built. Even in the suit you could see how broad his shoulders were, and I knew if I touched his arm, I’d feel the muscles there as well.

I swallowed and looked down at my wine glass for a moment. Why was I thinking about touching the guy who worked for my father? Peeking back up at him, I smiled bigger. He wasn't just a guy who worked on the ranch. It was Maverick. And since I'd graduated from college and been home full time, we had gotten to know each other better, and he really was a nice guy. And really nice to look at it.

"Would you like to join us?" Renee asked.

Ben shot her a confused look before he looked at me. Before I could second Renee's request, Maverick spoke.

"I came over to ask Lily for the next dance."

"Why?" Ben asked with a snarky laugh.

My head snapped to my left to look at him. "What do you mean *why*?"

Moving nervously in his seat, Ben looked from me to Maverick, then said, "It's just, you *work* for her."

"He doesn't work for me, Ben. He works for my father."

"Wow, snob much, Ben?" Renee said under her breath.

Maverick cleared his throat. "It's okay, I'll just go..."

His voice trailed off and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. With a smile in my direction, he turned to walk off in the direction of where Avery and Morgan were standing. Avery was my younger cousin, and I knew she wouldn't turn down a dance from Maverick if that was where he had been heading. For some reason, I wasn't okay with him dancing with her. Avery was a lot younger than Maverick. Eighteen to his twenty-six.

Standing, I reached for his arm to stop him.

Yep, just as I had thought. Hard as rock muscle laid underneath that suit. I'd, of course, seen him in T-shirts and I could only imagine what the rest of him looked like.

"Wait. I'd love to dance with you, Maverick."

His eyes lit up and I couldn't help but grin wide to see the look of happiness on his face.

The song ended and he extended his arm for me to take it. I wrapped my hand around it and started toward the dance floor. When I glanced over my shoulder, Renee gave me a thumbs up as Ben scowled and shook his head.

What is his problem?

The next song started and it was a slow song, one I hadn't ever heard before. Maverick placed his hand on my lower back and kept a respectable distance between us.

"Be honest," I said with a grin. "Did Grams tell you to come over and ask me to dance?"

He laughed. "Truthfully?"

"Yes, please."

"No, she didn't. I wanted to dance with you."

My stomach did a little flip. "Oh. Well, you're a very good dancer if no one has ever told you before."

"I took dancing lessons when I was seven."

"Really?" I asked, instantly intrigued. "You never talk much about your childhood. Why is that?"

He did a slow spin of our bodies and then moved us across the dance floor with seamless motion. He hadn't answered my question, and I thought for sure he wasn't going to.

"I lived in foster homes growing up. When I was seven this younger couple took me in. They had been trying to have a baby and couldn't get pregnant. They decided to do foster care. I was their first child they took in." he smiled as if remembering something. "They were dancers, both of them. I lived with them for over a year. It was the longest I'd ever spent in a foster home."

My chest tightened as his words settled in. "What happened?" I asked.

He tried to smile but it didn't reach his eyes. "They decided to adopt me. The day they told me I was so happy. I don't honestly ever remember being that happy."

I swallowed hard as I tried to hold back the tears that wanted to build up in my eyes.

“Up until then, all the places I had stayed were pretty much hell. The people only wanted me because they got money for fostering me. I was never treated like one of the family until Mindy and Justin. They treated me like I was their son. Made me feel deserving of their love. It had been a new experience for me.”

“If they adopted you, why did you only live with them for a year or so?” I asked as he turned us once more.

“The day the adoption was to take place, there was a car accident. Mindy and Justin both died, and I was in the hospital for a few weeks.”

I gasped and lost the battle to hold back the tears. One slipped free. I quickly reached up and wiped it away. “How terrible. Oh, Maverick, that must have been so devastating for you.”

He gave me a weak smile. “I was almost nine by that point. After I got out of the hospital I went to an orphanage for a bit before I was tossed back into the foster care system.”

“And you didn’t find another forever family?”

With a shake of his head, he looked past me. “This is a beautiful wedding.”

And that was the sign he was finished telling that story. I wonder if my parents had known that about Maverick? I made a mental note to ask my mother.

“What made you start working with horses?” I asked.

When he looked back down at me, his eyes were full of life again. “I ran away from the foster home I was at when I was sixteen. Got a job at a horse ranch and started out mucking the stalls. Then moved on to grooming the horses. I followed the ranch owner around as much as I could so I could learn everything it took to raise and train horses. He was a great guy. Never asked me why I showed up on his doorstep, practically skin and bones from not eating very much and no proof of who in the hell I was. The only thing I really knew

was my name. It was the only thing my birth mother ever gave me, besides my life,” he said with a nonchalant, one-shoulder shrug.

“Maverick Prescott,” I whispered.

He winked and oh my, did it send a jolt through my body. I clearly needed a visit with BOB and soon. I wasn't even sure when I had last had sex. Not that I had a very active sex life. I dated a few different guys. I had been stupidly waiting for one particular guy to come to his senses and see that we were made for one another. He was currently dating Abby, though, and showing a side of him I wasn't a fan of.

“Why are you frowning?” Maverick asked, one brow arched.

“Was I?”

“You don't like my name?”

“I do! I love your name. Keep telling me about the horses.”

The song changed and it was another slow song, so we kept dancing.

“Well, it took me a few years to move my way up the ranks on the ranch, but Dustin finally let me start training the horses. He said I had a way with them, especially the cranky ones and the ones who had emotional issues.”

“You do,” I said with a smile. “Have a way with the horses. My father calls you a horse whisperer. Said you can take any horse and make them trust you.”

His cheeks turned pink, and it was the sexiest thing ever to see the blush on his cheeks. Not many rough and tough cowboys blushed, but when they did, it made a girl's insides warm. Or maybe it was just this cowboy who had that effect on me.

I chewed on my lower lip and jumped when he spoke again.

“I love horses more than people, so that's probably why they like me.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s more than that. I’ve seen you with them. You have a way about you that makes them feel at ease. I think it’s the way you touch them.”

His fingers dug into my waist for a moment before they loosened. I found myself drawing in a quick intake of air.

Looking away, Maverick scanned the room.

“Will you be coming over for my dad’s birthday dinner?”

“Your mom asked me to join the family, but I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Maverick, my father thinks of you as a son.”

Something passed over his face before he cleared his throat and stepped away right as the song ended. “Thank you, for both dances, Lily.”

I had the strangest sensation of missing his touch. I brushed it off and smiled at him. He was, after all, incredibly handsome. What woman wouldn’t want to be in his arms? “It was nice dancing with a man who doesn’t step on my toes. Ben is terrible at dancing.”

He chuckled. “Well, I better let you get back to your friends. I’ll walk you over to your table.”

Grinning up at him, I said, “A horse whisperer *and* a gentleman.”

He lowered his voice and whispered, “I’m not a gentleman all the time, Lily.”

The way his eyes turned dark when he said that made me bite down on my lip. Had he meant for that to sound so sexual? Or had I just imagined it? My mind instantly went to an image of Maverick’s mouth on my body and I shivered.

“Are you cold?” he asked, a slight smirk on his face.

I shook my head, but hadn’t been able to muster up any words.

Before I could think on it another second, he stopped walking. “Thank you again for the dance.”

Feeling out of sorts suddenly, I nodded. “Um, yes, thank you.”

Maverick turned to Renee and Ben, wished them a good night and started to walk across the room and toward my mother and father.

“Now *that* is eye-fucking.”

I hadn’t realized I had been staring at him retreating until Renee’s words pulled me away and I looked at her. “What?”

“You, eye-fucking the hot cowboy who cleans up real nice. How did it feel dancing with him?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Renee. They danced, it wasn’t like they were dry humping on the dance floor. He works for her dad.”

I slipped into my seat and picked up my water. My mouth had gone dry. When I finished drinking, I glared at Ben. “How could you make him feel like he was less than me?”

Ben’s eyes went wide. “What do you mean?”

“The comment you made about him working for my father. So what? He’s more than just a ranch employee, Ben.”

“Oh, really? You sneaking into the barn with him, are you?” Ben asked, a smirk on his face.

Every part of me wanted to say yes. I wanted to see what his reaction would be. So when the words that came out of my mouth next tumbled out, I wasn’t the least bit surprised.

“Maybe I am. And maybe he’s the best I’ve ever had.”

Renee nearly spat her wine across the table. “What? Are you sleeping with him?”

Ben’s mouth hung open in utter shock.

My only reply was a one-shoulder shrug.

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Here is a sneak peek at Willow and Aiden's story in *The Butterfly Effect*

Chapter One

WILLA

Senior Year

"Promise you won't say anything, Willa," Lacy begged.

I rolled my eyes and glared at her. "Lace, you're going to the same party as Hunter and you want me to stay home. How is that fair?"

She folded her arms over her chest and sighed. "Willa, you cannot go to a party that's going to be all college kids. Hunter would *kill* me if he knew I brought you, not to mention Mom and Dad if they ever found out."

"How will they know? Hunter even said he might not be going."

"That's because something better came up. Or someone better," Lacy stated.

I snarled my lip. "Gross. Didn't need that visual."

Lacy smiled. "Less than a year, Willa. After this May, you'll be college bound and heading to plenty of parties!"

I dropped my head back against the sofa. "This isn't fair! I'm eighteen, I should be able to go."

She glanced away before she focused back on me. "Yes, and also still in high school. There will be no high school people there. None. Plus, you may not have noticed, but you're beautiful. You've grown into one of those pinup girls

that guys used to hang up in the garages back in granddad's day. You have a curvy figure and the innocence that make all guys go mad. If those college guys get one look at you, it's all over. We'll be beating them off with sticks."

I laughed and motioned toward my equally stunning sister. "Hello? We come from the same genes."

"I know. But I'm in college; you're still in high school. I'm not bringing you, and that's the end of it."

I shot off the sofa and huffed as I walked past her. "Fine. Go to your stupid party. I don't really want to go anyway."

"Willa, don't be like that. Our brother will murder me if he knows I took you to a college party."

I reached for my jacket and quickly put it on as I headed to the front door.

She sighed. "Where are you going?"

"To the barn!"

"It's dark out! You can't ride right now. Daddy will—"

When I spun back around, she stopped talking. "I'm eighteen years old, Lacy. I think I'm okay to go to the damn barn, and I wasn't planning on riding. I just want to be around the horses, if that's okay with you."

She threw up her hands in defeat. "Fine, I'm out of here."

I didn't wait for her to say anything else. I opened the front door and walked out into the frigid night, slamming it before heading down the path that led to the barn, where we kept the horses and a few goats. My father usually kept most of the horses in the east pasture, but there were a few he stalled up on colder nights.

I'd take spending time with a horse over a stupid college party any day. It wasn't like I was interested in any guys anyway. My heart belonged to one man and one man only. Aiden.

I smiled as I thought about him and the last letter he'd sent to me. I loved that he handwrote me letters; it felt more

special. Most of his letters were just about nothing really. He asked me more about me than he said anything about him.

A few strands of blonde hair had fallen out of my ponytail, and a sudden gust of wind caused them to whip against my face. I wrapped my scarf around my neck tighter and marched forward as I whispered, “I wish you were home, Aiden.”

As I walked into the barn, I removed the scarf and shrugged off my coat, tossing both to the side. The heated barn felt good after the brief walk from the house. I noticed a light coming from the tack room and shook my head. My father would be pissed if he knew the light had been left on. He was a stickler for not wasting money. It was the farmer in him.

With a sigh, I headed toward the room and mumbled, “Hunter, you left the light on again.”

A whinny came from my right, and I turned to see Firelight bobbing his head. “I know, buddy, but it’s going to snow and we all know you’re actually a pansy ass when it comes to snow. Plus, it’s dark out. You don’t like the dark. You don’t want to go ride in the snow *and* the dark, do you?”

I walked over and gently rubbed the side of his neck...and frowned.

Sweat.

I looked into the stall and asked, “Did someone ride you?”

“Someone did.”

I froze. I’d know that voice anywhere.

Slowly, I turned—and saw Aiden leaning against the tack room doorframe.

I was positive my mouth hit the floor and my insides nearly burst on the spot. If I had thought eighteen-year-old Aiden was handsome, I was not ready for twenty-one-year-old Aiden. He stood before me in jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt that hugged his upper body in the most delicious of ways. It was almost sinful how hot he looked. A backwards baseball cap sat on his head, a SEAL trident stitched on the back. His jaw was covered with the slightest bit of stubble. His body

looked like one of those chiseled statues you'd find in Rome somewhere of a handsome Roman fighter. He had a smoking-hot body.

Oh. Holy. Hell.

“Aiden,” I whispered as a smile grew across my face. “Oh my gosh, Aiden!”

Without even thinking, I ran to him and threw myself into his outstretched arms. I hadn't seen him since he had graduated more than three years ago.

Three years.

He had come home once since then, but I had been on a school trip to Italy at the time and had just missed him.

“You're home! You're really here!” I said as my body instantly heated from Aiden's arms wrapped tightly around me.

“I'm not home long,” he said, his arms slowly letting go of their grip on me. “I'm between deployments, I have to head back to Virginia Beach in a few days. I'm sorry I missed you the last time I was on leave.”

“It's okay! I hated that I was on that stupid school trip.”

He finally stepped back and gave me a once-over. “Wow, Willa, you've certainly grown up.”

“You've changed too,” I said with a slight chuckle. I ran my finger along his stubble and tried not to let him notice how my hand trembled. “I didn't think you could possibly get any more handsome.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You never were afraid to say what you thought.”

I grinned. “Does Hunter know you're here?”

“Yeah, we were together a couple of hours ago. I wasn't in the mood for a college party, so I asked him if I could come ride for a bit and come see you.”

My heart felt like it skipped a beat. “You wanted to come see me?”

He nodded and gave me a look that said a million and one different things, but none that I could read.

“I wish you told me you were here, I would have gone riding with you.”

His smile faltered for the briefest of moments. “I needed the alone time.”

With a quick nod, I replied, “I get that. By the way, congratulations, Frogman. I know I’ve written and told you, but I couldn’t wait to tell you in person.”

His dimples came out as he graced me with a wide smile. “Thanks.”

“How is it? Being a SEAL?”

“Good. Hard. A mind fuck most of the time, but I love it. My goal is to be on one of the best SEAL teams.”

“One of the best?”

“Yeah, the best of the best.”

I took his hand and led him over to the hay bales. “That doesn’t surprise me. You always did have the drive to be the best. You haven’t gotten hurt, have you?”

He shook his head. “Nah, not really.”

“Liar,” I said with a sharp look. If he thought he could hide the truth from me, he was wrong.

He raised his hands in defeat. “Never could lie to you, Willa.”

We both sat down, and I turned to face him, crossing my legs as I tried not to ogle him. The way he looked was enough to set my panties on fire. “Hunter has been keeping me up to date with how things are going when I don’t hear from you as often as I’d like.”

He frowned and looked away.

“It’s okay, I know you’re busy, and you talk to him on the phone more often than you write. Will you stay stationed in Virginia Beach?”

He nodded. “Yeah, if I stay on the same SEAL team.”

“And you’re going out on deployment again?”

He nodded.

“Where to?”

He drew in a breath and then sighed. “Can’t really share a whole lot of what I do.”

“I get that. No social media?”

He shook his head. “No. But I can email you if you want to keep in touch more often.”

“I’d like that,” I said with a grin.

“Not sure how often it will be though.”

“Is there, um... anyone, you know...” My voice trailed off.

A sexy grin moved across his face. “No, I don’t know.”

I rolled my eyes because I knew he knew what I meant. “Are you dating anyone?”

He laughed. “No. I haven’t had time for any of that, and honestly, I don’t think it’s a good idea to be involved with anyone. I need to keep my head on, and thinking about some girl and what she’s doing while I’m deployed would not allow me to think straight. I see some of the guys on my team get messed up when it comes to girls.”

“That makes sense,” I said, trying not to show how happy I was that he wasn’t seeing anyone—while still hating that he said he wasn’t interested in getting involved.

“You?” he asked as he stared into my eyes.

I shook my head. “No. I mean, I’ve dated a few guys, but not for long. I’m not really interested in getting involved with anyone.”

Aiden reached out and ran one of my loose strands of hair between his fingers. “A woman as beautiful as you should have guys beating down your door.”

A rush of flutters hit my stomach. “You finally don’t see me as a little girl anymore, huh?”

His eyes darkened. “I haven’t seen you as a little girl in a number of years, Willa.”

That caused me to lift my brows. “Are you stalking me?”

He laughed. “I do have ways to keep tabs on you, if I really wanted to.”

I laughed. “I bet you do. Have you been deployed to very dangerous places?”

His brows went up. “Um...why?”

With a shrug, I replied, “I don’t know, I just worry about you.”

He nodded and finally let my hair slip from his fingers as he dropped his hand. Whatever spell he had been under, it was now broken. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and he looked away from me. “I don’t know what in the hell I’m doing.”

I drew my brows together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Aiden let out a small chuckle and shook his head. “Nothing, I don’t mean anything. I’m tired.”

My heart hammered in my chest so loudly I was positive he heard it. “Did you want to come into the house? My folks are at a Christmas Eve party and, well, you know where Hunter is. Lacy’s at the same party.”

Aiden looked back at me, a strange expression on his face. “I think about you a lot, Willa. Your smile...it always did make me feel happier. When things are tough, that’s what I think about.”

“My smile?” I asked as I reached for his hand and held it. I was so relieved when he didn’t pull away.

He nodded. “Yeah, your smile.”

We stared at each other for a few moments before he cleared his throat and went on. “So, Boston University, huh?”

I let out a soft chuckle. “Yep. Getting a business degree. The plan is to come back home and take over the orchard once

my folks retire. Now that Hunter is a police officer, he doesn't have a lot of time to help my dad."

"I'm glad Jack beat the cancer."

My eyes stung with the threat of tears. Anytime I thought about the battle my father went through to beat his cancer, it nearly made me fall into a puddle on the floor, weeping. "Me too."

"Glad you're getting a business degree. That's good. You always said you were gonna run the orchard someday."

Glancing down at our joined hands, I shrugged. "Hunter and Lacy aren't interested in it, but I've always loved the apple trees. The land. It makes me feel at peace."

A pained expression moved over his face before it vanished as fast as it appeared. He smiled and softly said, "I know."

My mouth and lips suddenly went dry. I ran my tongue along them, and Aiden quickly stood and turned away from me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes. No. I don't know, Willa. I really don't know," he replied with a laugh that sounded more confused than humorous.

With a frown, I stared at his back. Was he shaking?

I stood and reached out to touch his shoulder.

Aiden spun around, grabbed my hand, and before I knew it, I was back against the wall of the barn, his mouth inches from mine.

"You're confusing me," he said, his voice hoarse, as if he had been screaming for hours.

"I'm...I'm what?" I stammered as I frantically searched his face with my eyes. Aiden's throat bobbed, and I snapped my gaze up to meet his.

"I can't, Willa. I can't do this."

My head spun, and I let out a confused chuckle. “What are you talking about, Aiden? Now you’re confusing *me*.”

Then he did the one thing I never dreamed he would do. He kissed me.

Our lips pressed together in what started off as a sweet kiss, an innocent kiss, before Aiden prompted me with his tongue to give him more. And I gave him more. I’d give this man anything he asked of me. I brought my arms up and wrapped them around his neck while I pressed my body into his. He was solid muscle, and I groaned at the feel of him. A low growl came from the back of his throat, and I swore it vibrated through every inch of my body.

Aiden was kissing me.

And like that, it was over. He stepped back, scrubbed his hands over his face, and then bent over with his hands on his thighs and took deep breaths in and out.

I was frozen. Unable to move, and honestly as confused as all get out. What had just happened?

“Um, I, ah, I didn’t mean to kiss you,” he said.

“You didn’t?” I asked, a touch of anger mixed with disappointment in my voice.

He looked at me, and I watched his chest rise and fall with each breath. “I shouldn’t have kissed you is what I meant.”

“Why not? I wanted you to kiss me, Aiden. I’ve dreamed of you kissing me.”

He straightened and took a step back, shaking his head. “No, you don’t want that, Willa.”

A humorless laugh escaped my mouth, but it sounded colder than anything. “I’m pretty sure I’ve wanted you to kiss me since I was like eleven, Aiden.”

His confused expression turned to one of panic. “I can’t. I cannot give you what you want, Willa. I’m not interested in a relationship and I...I wasn’t thinking. I took one look at you, and you’re hot as fucking hell, and I was thinking with my cock and not my head.”

I flinched and took a step back.

Aiden closed his eyes for a second and then turned away from me. “It was good seeing you, Willa.”

“That’s it? You’re going to treat me like that and then just leave? I’m not asking you to be my boyfriend, Aiden. But don’t you dare walk away from me and pretend we’re not friends. If you never kiss me again, I’ll be okay with that, but I don’t want you to walk away from me like this.”

Aiden slowly turned and faced me once again. “Friends?”

I nodded. “Yes. Always.”

His hand came up to his mouth, and he honestly seemed to be struggling with something.

“Talk to me, Aiden. What’s wrong?”

With another shake of his head he walked back up to me. He cupped my face in his hands and stared into my eyes. “I’m sorry, Willa. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“You wish you could what? Aiden, you’re making no sense right now.”

He drew in a deep breath and then slowly let it out as he rested his forehead against mine. “You’re so beautiful, and one day some lucky bastard is going to marry you, you’ll have babies, and you’ll teach them all about apples.”

I searched his face before placing my hands on his arms.

“I’m sorry that person can’t be me.” He closed his eyes and whispered, “I want it to be me so fucking badly.”

I drew in a breath, but before I could say anything, he pressed his mouth to mine once more. The kiss was so sweet, yet full of an emotion I couldn’t pinpoint. I tried to get closer. If I could have crawled into his body, I would have.

He jerked his mouth from mine, and I fought for air.

“You’ll always have my heart, Aiden. I swear to you, it will always belong to you.”

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut before he looked down at me. “Don’t wait for me, Willa.”

I lifted my chin, about to tell him I’d wait for eternity, when he kissed me once more and then whispered against my lips, “Friends, always.”

He drew back, wiped the tears away from my cheeks, and then took a step away.

With a shaky voice that didn’t even sound like my own, I replied, “Friends, always.”

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Kelly Elliott is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling contemporary romance author. Since finishing her bestselling *Wanted* series, Kelly has continued to spread her wings while remaining true to her roots with stories of hot men, strong women, and beautiful surroundings. Her bestselling works included *Wanted*, *Broken*, *Without You*, and *Lost Love*. Elliott has been passionate about writing since she was fifteen. After years of filling journals with stories, she finally followed her dream and published her first novel, *Wanted*, in November 2012.

Elliott lives in Central Texas with her husband, daughter, and two pups. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading and spending time with her family. She is down to earth and very in touch with her readers, both on social media and at signings. To learn more about Kelly and her books, you can find her through her website, www.kellyelliottauthor.com.