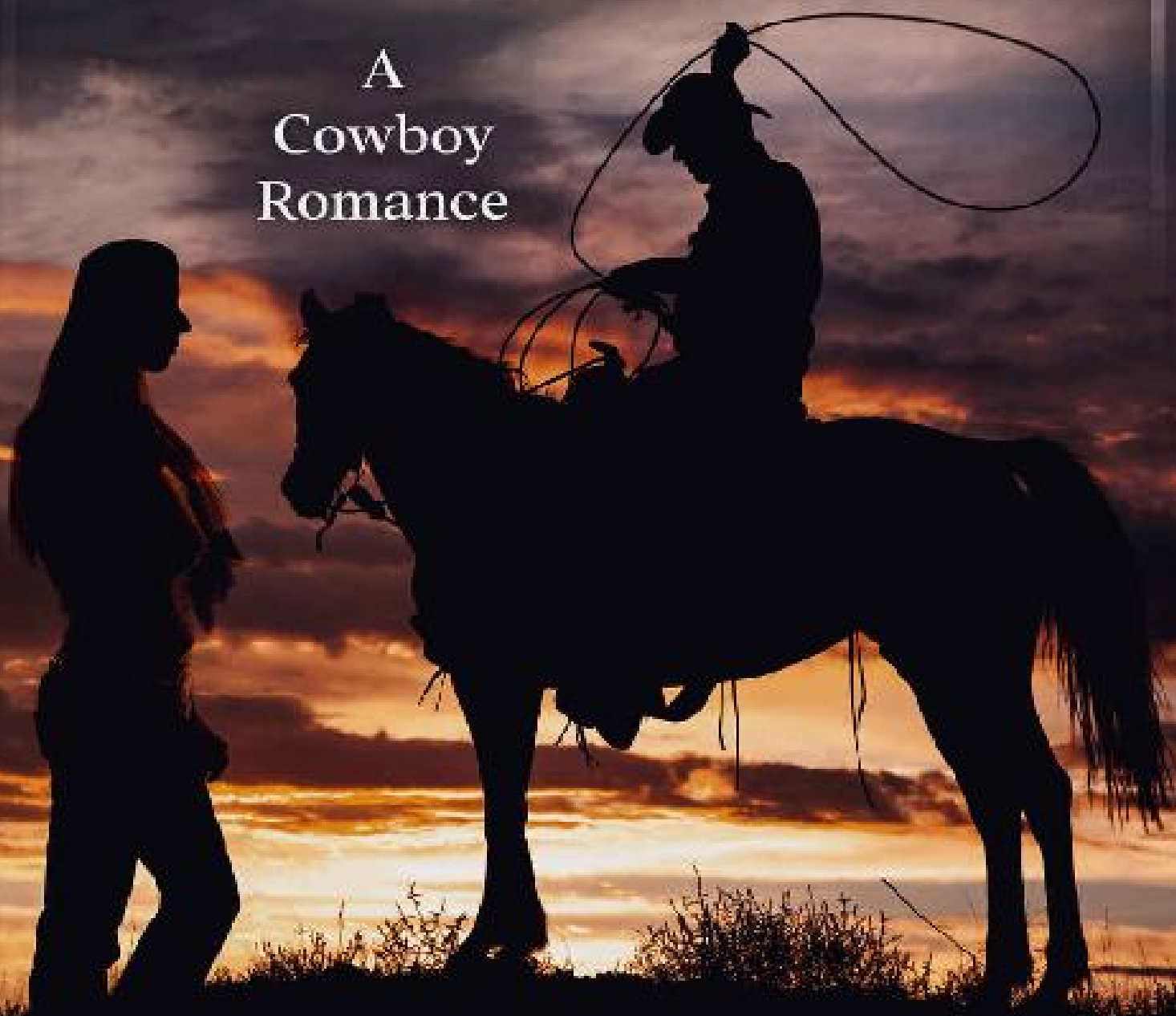


For
HIM

A
Cowboy
Romance



R.L. ATKINSON

For Him

A Cowboy Romance

R. L. Atkinson

Copyright © 2023 Rianna Atkinson

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 9798857191491

Cover design by: GetCovers

Editing by: MH Editorial

*TO GRANDMA BONNIE FOR GIVING ME THE COURAGE TO GO FOR
IT*

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About The Author](#)

Preface

My romance novels range from clean language with only kissing to mature language with closed door sex scenes. All of them will have tension and a desire to swoon for the characters relationships.

No matter what novel you read by me, none will have any explicit sex scenes or cheating.

This novel has no mature language and only kissing.

Trigger Warning: Death is a theme throughout this novel, specifically cancer.

Chapter 1

Cancer.

A word that incited fear and disbelief in me when my mom had first spoken of it over the phone just a few months ago. But the prognosis then hadn't been as bleak as it was now — not for a man that I had once believed to be invincible.

It was something I still struggled to wrap my head around. Stage four cancer in his lungs and spreading elsewhere. He'd never even been a smoker, and I couldn't help but feel it was a cruel joke that this cold world was playing on him, on me and my siblings, and on my mother, who was only a few years into recovery from a stroke.

The chill that was swirling in the Montana air wasn't just due to the icy clouds that were threatening to burst at the seams and unleash the first snowfall of the year. No, it was the devastation that oozed from my skin as the reality of the situation crashed through me. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, leaning forward in a silent scream.

Tears slid down my rosy cheeks, the wet streams catching the ends of my disheveled hair that had slipped from its messy bun, which now flopped sideways on top of my head. Slamming the heel of my palm into the steering wheel over and over again, I yelled curses at the top of my lungs. Why him?! Why me?! The darkening night sky seemed to join in my pain; the moon and stars were hidden by the gloomy clouds mirroring my own anguish.

The road seemed empty and lifeless as I passed by nothing but trees and pastures. The tears caused my vision to become milky, and I quickly wiped them on the back of my dark-blue sweater sleeve. I was overwhelmed already, and I hadn't even made it to my parents' home yet. I was burdened by the looming responsibility of taking care of both my mother and my dying father. I'd accepted the sacrifice willingly, knowing that my two siblings, who each had families of their own, were unable to take on the additional responsibility.

Suddenly, my car jumped, and a loud bang exploded from the rear right side. My dark gray Civic lurched. I corrected the fishtailing the best I could before guiding it off to the edge of the desolate road. There wasn't a streetlight or car in sight. Just me, alone, with the only thing that illuminated the forest area surrounding me being my own vehicle.

Turning the engine off, I hopped out and hesitantly looped around my car. My white Converse crunched softly over the gravel as I found the culprit of the strange sensation: the tire on the back right side of my car had burst. I was left with practically only the rim.

“Great,” I muttered, my lips drifting into a frown as I ran my cold hands over my black leggings. They were all I had left unpacked to wear and were no longer sufficiently providing me the warmth I was craving.

Groaning, I popped open the trunk in desperation, trying to somehow locate the spare tire and jack amongst all of the junk I was hauling home. While my arms were buried between boxes, a flash of light quickly passed me on the road and disappeared. Once I'd found the tire iron, I tugged on the metal yet, it didn't budge. Giving a few more tries with no progress, I finally yanked as hard as I could and flew backwards, crashing onto the pavement.

“Ow,” I whined, rubbing my backside with my free hand.

A low chuckle met my ears.

I whipped my head up, fear coursing through me. “Who's there?” I cried out, waving the tire iron in front of my seated body, hoping that it made my small frame look more threatening than it typically would.

Footsteps paced closer, and I peered around the back of the car. Dim headlights from a truck facing away from me, was parked farther in front of my vehicle joining in the eerie glow from my own lights. It outlined the back of the looming figure standing by my front bumper. Someone tall, with broad shoulders and a wide brimmed cowboy hat that was pulled low over his head. Beneath the shadows, I could make out a strong

jawline, and a thick, dark mustache, but the rest of his facial features were clouded in darkness. He shoved his hands into his pockets, drawing my gaze away from his face. A small amount of light reflected off of the buckle that peeked out beneath the vest-hoodie combo he was wearing.

“I’m not here to hurt you. It just looks like you could use some help,” he spoke, his voice low and rich.

I scooted back a couple of feet, still holding the tire iron high.

“I’m a woman alone on a road, in the middle of the night, with a flat tire. My first instinct towards a stranger doesn’t scream ‘safety’.” My voice cracked.

The figure chuckled once more.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” He walked closer, pulling his large hands from his pockets. The headlights caught his eyes, as the most piercing blue flashed in my direction and then disappeared beneath his black hat.

“My parents live here,” I answered, a little quieter.

“Visiting then?”

“No, moving in with them.” I pushed myself off the ground as he stopped at my back tire and kicked the rim with the tip of his square-toe boot. He wandered farther around toward the trunk and glanced in, chuckling.

“That’s apparent. Let me help you with the flat and then you can be on your way,” he said without looking at me, and immediately began pulling items out of my trunk.

“Excuse me? What do you think—” I started, but he cut me off as he pulled up the floor of the trunk, revealing the spare.

“You weren’t going to be able to reach the spare with all of your stuff piled on top of it.” He gripped the tire with one hand, and before I had any more time to protest, he faced me and extended his hand, fingers wiggling at the iron I was holding.

Trembling, I stood from the ground and walked his way, placing it in his palm as his calloused fingers wrapped around the piece of metal. My gaze wandered up towards his eyes. Blue. Very blue. Though the rest of his features still remained covered in shadows and dark stubble.

Standing beside him accentuated how tall he really was. At least six-foot-two. Silently, I watched him change my tire and replace everything to where it had been, wondering who this helpful stranger enveloped in a darkness really was.

“Thank you,” I said once he shut the trunk.

He barely glanced my way as he tipped his hat, walked back around my car, jumped into his nice diesel, and disappeared as quickly as he’d arrived.

Maybe I should try and focus on these little tender mercies that were mixed in with all of the hurt. Just like my new job. Straight out of vet school, I’d applied for several, and received many offers. One just happened to be in the same town my parents had moved to four years ago after my mom had her stroke. The job and a kind stranger could both count as a tender mercy amongst the sadness and fear.

I took a deep breath, shaking out of the tumultuous thoughts swirling around in my head. Turning off the main road, I cruised down toward my parents’ brick home that sat just past some beautiful pine trees. This was all a learning opportunity, I reassured myself. Many of these experiences seemed to be learning opportunities, albeit ones I’d never asked for.

Chapter 2

“There she is!” My mom’s sweet voice floated into my ears as I stepped into the house.

It smelled of homemade bread, my mother’s specialty. Even before my parents moved to Riverford, Montana, she’d been an amazing baker. This life suited her even more than the one we’d left. Slower. Simplistic. The light wood interior of their ranch home seemed to fit my parents’ vibe in a way that the cold grays of our old home never had. Family pictures of younger, happier days littered the cream walls.

I walked into the entrance way, kicking my shoes off before plodding across the beautiful red and blue rug stretched below me. I emerged into a massive, open great room connected with the kitchen and smiled.

My dad sat on the brown leather recliner directly across from me, watching the television mounted above a beautiful stone fireplace. He clicked the pause button on the remote next to him as my mother pushed herself from her recliner that was beside my father’s. She gripped the handle of her gray walker and found her footing.

“There is our beautiful Tenley,” she said once more, and I rushed towards her, excited to finally see her for the first time since I’d moved away for veterinarian school.

“Hey mom,” I replied, wrapping my arms around her plump form that smelled of home. Her soft, knitted sweater clung to her cozy frame; a pair of soft, dark blue pants matched the pink fabric of the shirt. Her dark brown hair was brushed and hung in thinning strands to her shoulders. I could’ve sworn she hadn’t looked this old four years ago before they’d moved.

I released my mom and stepped back. Her eyes misted with tears as she brushed a wayward strand of my dark-brown hair from my face. Sighing in relief, I turned to my father.

He remained sitting in his recliner, his body thin and frail, and the usual color was drained from his face. A face that

used to look much like my brother, Ben's—rounder, full of life and humor. Now, his face looked gaunt. My dad's bright green eyes were ones I'd also inherited. Yet, his looked so dull now and it took everything in me to keep the tears from flowing past the brims they threatened to burst from.

"Hi Daddy," I whispered, leaning down and pulling him into a hug. A red flannel button-up hung from his body. A frame that felt so skeleton-like beneath my palms. His usually large and thick hands now shook as he patted my back. I broke the embrace, and he coughed heavily for a moment before a faint smile appeared upon his lips.

"How was the drive?" my dad hoarsely asked.

"Long. I ended up getting a flat tire," I replied, walking towards the couch that sat against the wall. I plopped myself down heavily on the couch, which matched the two recliners beside it, wishing that there was some sunlight piercing through the window above me.

"Good thing your father taught you all how to change a tire." My mother gave me a bright smile, one that looked like mine used to before I'd received the latest cancer news.

"Definitely. Although, someone nice stopped and helped me," I replied, and brushed at some remaining dirt on my pants.

"The folks here are so neighborly, you'll love it. And Doc Smith is excited to have a young apprentice to share his knowledge with at the clinic, Doctor Mayn," my mom said, grinning even wider as she called me by my official title for the first time. She had always been so beautiful, even now, aging like fine wine. Her kind, big, bright eyes with thick lashes were like mine. A slightly wider jawline than usual, but her cheekbones and rosy cheeks softened it. It felt like I was looking in a mirror at my future self.

Another coughing fit sounded, and then my dad spoke, "We are so proud of you." He gave me a weak smile.

"Speaking of the doctor, he wants me in tomorrow morning, so I should probably get some shut eye before the

sun rises again,” I replied, and both my parents nodded. “So, I need to know your schedule to start helping.”

My mom gave me a mischievous smile. “Oh, honey. We have a good routine already set up, love. Despite my stroke and your siblings squabbling, I can still manage nearly everything,” my mom answered. I furrowed my brows, wondering if she’d merely used her previous ailments as a ploy to get me home.

She lifted a single brow in response, reading my facial expression, and I took a deep breath. Classic Mom. I stood from the couch, giving both of them a kiss on the forehead. “Downstairs, third door on your left. Do you need anything?” my mom added, guiding me to my new bedroom.

I smiled. “I’ve got everything I need, thanks Mama.” I glanced around what was now also my home. Facing the kitchen, a stairwell ran adjacent to the small entranceway, leading towards the basement where my future room was held.

“Tomorrow for dinner, we need to hear all about your adventures at vet school. Love you!” my mom shouted as I headed outside to my car. I knew that it had been a rather short greeting, but I was exhausted, and needed a good night’s sleep before my first day of work tomorrow.

It was a quick journey to my trunk to gather the one suitcase that held some essential clothes and toiletries before returning to the warmly lit home and plodding down the light brown carpet. I’d unpack the rest of my stuff later. Flicking on the light switch at the bottom of the stairs, I smiled. So similar to the family room at my childhood home. A few lamps provided a dim light around the room, and there were blankets slung over the back of the couches, while a piano sat against the wall beside me.

Walking past the family room and down a hall, I passed two doors, then entered my room. A full sized bed sat to my left in the middle of the room with a nightstand on each side. Across from the foot of the bed was a closet, there was a window on the far wall, and a dresser with mirror on top to my

right. Simple furniture all in a light brown shade with a royal blue bedspread. Just as it had been when I was a child.

I tossed the suitcase to the floor, quickly changed into a pair of shorts and an oversized t-shirt, then crashed into bed.



The alarm went off early—early enough that neither of my parents were awake when I left the house. It was early enough that, as I was driving down the eerily silent road, the sun just barely peeked over the mountains that circled the little town we lived in. Those beautiful, tall mountains, flashing bright greens, as well as the deepest shades of reds and oranges. Crisp fall colors that I knew wouldn't last long enough.

Tugging tighter at the beige turtleneck sweater that warmed my athletic body, I glanced at the white veterinarian coat draped over my passenger seat. Today was my first real day as Dr. Mayn, and my stomach turned with nerves. I reminded myself that I was allowed grace on my first day at anything new, and this job would be no different. It would be like another internship, although with slightly higher stakes and higher pay.

Small, beautiful homes surrounded me as I passed farther into town, took a left at the stop sign onto Main Street, and rolled into the cutest downtown I'd ever seen. It was something right out of the movies. Shops just opening as pink light began to fill the air, people seemingly appearing from nowhere, ready to take on their days. Everyone waved at everyone, knowing exactly who was who.

And there it was. Riverford Veterinarian Clinic just up ahead and to the right. The white sign swung softly in the wind, guiding its visitors and clients towards a large, round dirt front drive that had to encompass almost as much space as the clinic itself. It was an older red building in a rectangular shape, with parking at the long side of the building to the right.

A crisp, green pasture with some holding chutes spanning the opposite side, empty at the moment.

It looked nothing like the clinics I'd had my other internships at. They'd all been newer and dominated by small-animal clientele due to their location in the middle of cities. Only one clinic during my time training had been mixed practice, much like this one was. I'd known that, when I'd accepted this position, my hands-on practice with large animals was lacking, so I'd taken the time to intensely study up on it. I'd done everything I could to memorize every book I'd been able to snag on the subject before today.

A single white truck was in the parking lot, the bed full of boxes that held medicine and equipment. Medicine and equipment that I had maybe only used once before, if ever.

Parking next to the truck, I slipped out of my car, slung the white coat over my arm, and headed towards the cement patio where the front entrance was. It swung open with a soft tinkle when I pulled the silver handle, and I was immediately hit with the smell of sterilizing agents and animals. A familiar scent that set some of my nerves at ease.

Directly in front of me was the reception desk, with two seats behind it that were unoccupied at the moment. The light brown countertop contrasted well with its dark brown base. Filing cabinets and more counter space rose along the wall behind the reception area. My thick hiking boots that I'd broken in while in vet school squeaked across the light cream flooring. I passed two doors to my right and two doors to my left before stopping beside the reception desk that had first drawn my attention upon entering.

Then the door behind the counter I was leaned up against opened, and out walked the shortest, wiriest man I'd ever seen in my life. One thick hand that was unusually large extended towards me as the older gentleman grinned. His tanned skin was wrinkled and looked stiff like leather, contrasting the bright white hair that sat full upon his head.

"Doctor Tenley Mayn!" he said, his voice shaking but commanding in tone. His smile softened in such a kind way as

I reached forward and shook his hand.

“Doctor Jay Smith, I presume?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Call me Doc. Everyone does. You won’t need that white coat much while here. I typically leave mine in my office when one or two of the dogs come in. But overalls and rubber boots, those will be much needed. I ordered ones in your size and they are waiting in your office.” He gestured towards the brown door he’d come through, and I followed him.

The hallway continued past two more doors and a bathroom, opening up into a large area with gray cement flooring covered in black mats and chutes galore. Multiple sizes of stalls for horses and other animals lined one cement wall, kitty-corner to the safe full of medicine and the logbook sitting beside it. Opposite those stalls, were shelves full of different equipment like the centrifuge and microscope; hoses and the like also hung along racks mounted upon the wall. A garage door that could be opened easily sat in the back to the far right. The entire spacious exam area was lit up with bright, fluorescent lights.

Doc gestured to his left, drawing my attention back to the hallway we were standing in. “That’s your new office; mine’s this one to the right. Hurry and drop that off, and grab a pair of overalls and boots. We are headed to our first client of the day.”

I nodded quickly and escaped into the small room. This was mine.

A window sat above a desk across from me, illuminating the newly cleaned dark oak wood. Beside the small computer was the one thing that every graduating veterinarian dreamed of: my name on a plaque. I had done it. Officially a veterinarian. I had ‘DVM’ after my name and everything on a shiny black and gold plaque.

Flinging the white coat across the back of the office chair, I faced my left and found two stacks of boxes containing overalls and two pairs of rubber boots. Grabbing one of each, I

left the office and met Doc at the truck outside. Jumping into the passenger seat, I smiled.

“Where to first?” I cheerily replied.

He chuckled.

“The Kanes’ dairy. And if you knew what we had to do today, I don’t think you’d be grinning as widely as you are.” He smiled to himself, turned on the radio with some old eighties country, and drove us down the road.

Chapter 3

He'd been right.

There had been a lot of checking pregnant cattle today. My arm had never been covered in so much manure in my life. It was still fun, and along the way, I began to pick up the different fetus stages simply by feeling, so that was neat. But I understood the need for overalls and rubber boots.

“Well, how was that for your first farm call?” Doc asked as we hosed off the boots and stripped off the overalls before climbing in the truck.

“Not quite what I expected, but good nonetheless,” I replied, grinning, and he smiled.

“You seem to be a natural, even if your resume didn't have as much large-animal experience as I would've liked,” he answered.

I furrowed my brows. “Why did you hire me then?”

He sighed. “One, it was only you who applied. A small town like this isn't exactly a top pick for veterinarians. But two, your parents are good folks, and when I learned about your father's cancer around the same time that he shared you were graduating, I figured I'd give you a shot.”

I cringed as if I'd just taken a blow to the gut. So I hadn't gotten this job on my own personal merit. No, it had been a favor to my parents. I thought I'd escaped that, choosing a career that they had no experience in, working with people they'd never met. I'd even let myself think that it was mere coincidence that this job became available at the most opportune moment.

“This wasn't a favor though, Tenley,” Doc continued.

“Don't read my mind,” I grumbled in reply, and I stared out the window at the passing scenery. At least that would never get old; it was absolutely gorgeous.

He chuckled to himself. “The only favor was opening a position up to give you the opportunity to apply. I wouldn’t have hired you if I hadn’t believed you to be competent.”

“But you’ve only ever spoken to me over the phone.” I swung my head at him as he pulled us into the lot at the clinic. A massive gray dually was pulled towards the back with a livestock trailer attached. A couple more cars were parked beside mine as well; new additions since we’d left this morning.

“Yes. But your parents showed me videos of your work, and even if I hadn’t seen them, I heard the passion and intelligence in the way you spoke to me,” he replied, shutting off the engine. We hopped out, and he furrowed his brows, running a weathered hand over his chin. “It can’t be...”

“Can’t be what?” I asked, following him back towards the shiny, chrome trailer hitched behind the truck.

Doc let out a slow whistle as a cow bellowed inside and the truck door swung open. Worn boots hit the ground, light-washed wranglers coated with some dirt, held up by a nice belt and buckle. A thick beige Carhartt coat covered wide shoulders, and a grin sat upon the most chiseled and handsome face I’d ever seen.

Dark hair peeked out beneath a gray cowboy hat, hinting at stubble that had been trimmed this morning. “Cassidy Duke!” Doc said, sauntering up to the man and offering a handshake. “Never thought I’d see the day that a Duke would be hauling to the clinic. Y’all got too much going on up at the ranch.”

“Till an emergency arrives, Doc.” Cassidy answered the shake, and then his eyes flashed to mine. A beautiful hazel, pulling together what seemed to be a cowboy right out of fiction. “Ain’t never seen this lass before.”

“That’s Doctor Mayn,” Doc replied, and the cowboy raised his sharp brows subtly before flashing a crooked grin.

“Petite thing, ain’t she.” He chuckled to himself. “Sure you can handle it?”

“My degree and arm that’s been up too many cows’ butts this morning says so.” I snarkily replied, annoyed.

Doc grinned as Cassidy chuckled once more.

“Well, you definitely got spunk, that’s for sure,” he answered, his eyes raking over my body.

I narrowed my gaze at him, only halfway upset that such a handsome man afforded me a look.

“What’s going on then, Cassidy?” Doc asked, pulling his attention away from me.

“Two heifers turned up pretty sick. Poor breathing, seemed to just wander aimlessly, tripping over their own hooves. Don’t seem to be eating much. Problem is, they got out of the pasture a week or so ago, and we couldn’t find them until this morning. It ain’t getting better, Doc,” Cassidy responded. “Figured while I was here, I’d also bring two others for preg checks, since it needs to be done and I already had to haul into town.”

“So, two sick, two pregnant. None of the others that they’ve been around are sick?” Doc asked as he unlocked the back door and we followed him into the clinic. Doc gestured towards the garage door button, so I pressed it. The garage began to rise, the brisk autumn air rushing into the previously warm space.

“Nope. Don’t seem contagious,” Cassidy replied, as Doc began setting up a small run for the cattle to come into and then be confined.

“Alright, back the trailer up and we’ll take a look,” Doc replied, and within a minute, Cassidy had that trailer lined up and ready to go. He opened the trailer door and out stumbled the first two heifers, seemingly unaware of their surroundings. I watched, mesmerized and confused, as they slowly stumbled across the cement floor and towards the end of their designated path.

Even Doc’s face was twisted in confusion. The next two that came out seemed to move normally, with their heads raised, aware of where they were going and completely in tune

with their surroundings. They both seemed larger than the other two heifers, and not just because they were possibly pregnant.

I cautiously approached the two sick heifers as Doc and Cassidy chatted behind me. The closer I came, the more nervous they seemed. Almost as if they were drugged by something. They tried to stumble away, nearly falling over each other, almost oblivious to each other. The two healthy thick black angus cows were wary of me, but not nervous.

Something sat on the tip of my tongue as I watched them move, watched their bleary eyes. Something I'd read once seemed to be tugging at my brain, but I couldn't quite place it.

"If you're ready, we'll send the first one through," Doc said, breaking my thoughts.

Cassidy jumped the railing, walked in, and pushed one of the sick ones forward. Doc caught it in the green chute, confining her neck between the metal bars. She tossed her head about for a moment, and then hung it limply towards the ground.

Cassidy leaned against the railing as Doc ran a hand over the heifer's head and then began checking things. The cloudy eyes were obvious from here, but I wanted a closer look, too. Quietly edging forward, I placed a hand against her neck and felt it. Her coat seemed extremely coarse, gritty compared to other cows I'd touched before. Then she opened her mouth and bellowed weakly. A faint hint of garlic caressed my nostrils, and I whipped up straight.

"It can't be," I muttered.

Doc glanced my way. "Speak up, Tenley," he chastised me.

"I think I might know what it is," I spoke louder, although not quite as confident as I should've sounded.

"Oh?" He crossed his arms and rocked onto his heels.

"Oh is right. I'd like to know what the newbie thinks it is." Cassidy swung himself over the railing, landing with a

loud thud, and walked our way.

Before I had a chance to answer, the clinic door groaned open and one of the assistants poked her head in. Grinning from ear to ear, she smoothed her blonde hair that was pulled tight into a ponytail.

“Hi, Doc,” she said, her eyes drifting from Doc, towards me, and then ending at Cassidy. “Just seeing if you or Doctor Mayn need any help.”

Doc shook his head. “Thank you, Carly, but we’ve got this.”

She nodded, sucking in her bottom lip and still not moving.

Cassidy shook his head subtly and she wiggled her fingers in a small wave. “Hi, Carly,” he politely said, acknowledging her.

She giggled. “Hi,” she replied, her voice sounding dreamy. She continued to stare at him in awe.

“Carly, we are fine out here. Thank you though,” Doc reiterated.

“Oh, right.” She blinked rapidly several times and then gave me a brief wave before disappearing back inside the clinic.

Cassidy cleared his throat and raised a brow towards me, gesturing for me to continue.

“Anyway,” I began. “A blood test and finding out where they’ve been would confirm the diagnosis, but I believe they have locoweed poisoning,” I responded, raising a snarky brow towards a cocky Cassidy.

He snorted and leaned against the chute. “Right. We clear our pastures of it every spring. Riding inch by inch to make sure that it won’t happen.”

“Every inch? Even in places that aren’t pasture? You said they got out and you couldn’t find them.” I raised my chin and stared at those hazel eyes full of wicked schemes.

“Every. Inch,” he spoke lowly, stepping my way and raising a brow. We stood there locked in battle, silently unwilling to back down from our positions. It took every ounce of strength in me to not give into his devilish brow raise, the perfection of his features that were trying to beat over my knowledge and certainty.

And eventually, I won. Saved by Doc himself. “I am inclined to agree with Doctor Mayn, Cassidy.”

I grinned maliciously in triumph as Cassidy’s brow faltered.

“What?” He glanced away, towards Doc with shock.

“Garlic scent on her breath, the way she’s lost coordination and clacking her hooves together; both of them act almost drunk, and are lethargic. Plus, they’re both underweight, and I know your family, your cattle. This is highly unusual right before winter.”

“Yes, but like you said, it is before winter. I thought locoweed was mostly gone by now.” Cassidy ran a hand over the heifer’s neck and furrowed his brow.

“You feel it. The coarseness of her coat,” I added, and he gave a subtle nod.

“Couldn’t it be anything else?” he asked.

Doc sighed. “Let’s rule this out first. Blood test, and either myself or Doc Mayn needs to go with you to see if you can find any locoweed anywhere. I’ll give them some fluids and turn them out to pasture here, but you know what the prognosis is.”

He nodded. “Time will tell. Weston is going to be so pissed,” he muttered, watching the two sick heifers.

“They from Eugene?” Doc asked.

I glanced in confusion between the two men.

Cassidy nodded briefly, then returned his gaze to the two black cows. “Luckily not the first, but they were two of the largest ones yet.”

“Eugene always produces big babies.” Doc chuckled.

“So far.”

Finally, I’d had enough. “Who is Eugene?” I snapped.

Both men laughed as Doc guided the two heifers into a new run. “Probably the best prized bull I’ve seen in years,” Doc answered and then told me I was up.

The conversation ended quickly as I preg checked the two cows and we ran a few more tests before the two healthy ones were loaded back into that nice, silvery trailer.

Doc shook hands with Cassidy and spoke. “I’ll send Tenley here, out tomorrow, and y’all can try and locate the culprit. Try and figure out where they went before then.”

Cassidy’s beautiful face turned towards me and he grinned, tipping his head. “See you tomorrow.” He winked and jumped into the truck, speeding out of the clinic.

Doc had me take every small-animal visit, which was only two of them, and then had me assist on everything else. He told me several times how proud he was of how things were going, and I couldn’t help but smile inwardly. Maybe I wasn’t going to be so bad at this after all.

Chapter 4

Exhaustion crashed through me as I was driving home that night. Never before had I felt so wonderfully tired and proud of myself. Dinner from my parents was delightful—homemade meatloaf from my mother, who really did seem to be doing well. There was a small part of me that wondered if she'd just used my dad's cancer and her stroke as an excuse to get me home. Though I would've come regardless. She shouldn't have to go through this alone, no matter the fact that my siblings lived only one town over.

Dad seemed to be having a better day today than he was yesterday. Even joined in on a round of UNO tonight with my mom before I turned in. They'd asked all about my day and I told them about the diagnosis I'd made on the two heifers.

"You met Cassidy Duke?" my mother screeched when I finished telling her the story.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Mom. I did."

"He's so handsome, isn't he? And he's single. Like you!" she added, that ever-scheming sparkle returning to her eyes.

My dad chuckled, coughed, and then waved a frail hand. "Leave her be, Rosemary. She will date when she wants to."

"Thank you," I mouthed to my dad who gave me a rough wink.

"Oh Charlie. If I leave it up to that girl, she will be single forever. Already twenty-six without a prospect in sight." She placed a card down on the table and I drew one.

"Mom. I have been working hard at school and—"

"Where you should've met a decent fellow and already been snatched up," she cut me off.

My dad placed a card and said a weak, "UNO".

“I did date a few guys, so lay off,” I grumbled as she placed a yellow two.

“And yet, you didn’t come home with any of them. I think I’ll call his mother tomorrow and make sure—”

“Don’t you dare!” I shrieked and slammed a draw four down on the pile, stopping my dad from playing his final card. “I am already going there tomorrow for some work and don’t need you meddling in things like that.”

“If you take too long, your father won’t be able to see you get married. Or walk you down the aisle,” she muttered under her breath.

My father finished drawing his four cards and it was her turn. But I couldn’t take it anymore, not with that comment. It wasn’t like I’d been avoiding dating. I really had tried. Four different times. Two of them cheated, the other two didn’t want me to finish my degree and become a vet.

“I think I’m going to bed,” I whispered, biting back a tear, and pushed myself away from the table. A pleasant evening turned sour in a matter of a comment.

“Tenley,” my father wheezed.

I leaned over, planting a kiss against his forehead, and then faced my mom.

“I think about that nearly every day, Mom. I can’t imagine getting married without both of my parents there, but I won’t force it either. I deserve to be as in love with whomever I marry as you and dad are.” Then I turned and headed towards the stairs, the tears finally falling down my cheeks.

Every little girl dreams about the beautiful white dress she will wear as she walks towards the man that she loves more dearly than anything else. Her hand tucked in her daddy’s elbow as he guides her towards her future. And that was something that I was about to be deprived of. Something I knew all too well could be ripped away at any moment.

The moment I’d heard the news, dating had been pushed towards the furthest point of priority. Being there for

my parents, helping support them in their medical bills, and my mom through the loss of her spouse seemed more important than something as selfish as falling in love.

After a quick shower, I let my wet hair drape around my shoulders and down to my lower back. It was so long it often got in the way, which was why I mostly wore it in buns or ponytails. Another reason that I probably lacked in the boyfriend department.

As the anger and grief escaped my soul, I leaned back against the headboard on my bed. Maybe she hadn't said that out of chastisement, but because of fear. Maybe it was more important to her than I had previously thought. She wanted me to have someone as much as I did, probably because of the love she shared with my father.

All the suppressed desires I'd fought to keep at bay crashed forward in a moment. I'd wanted a love like I'd seen growing up. One that showed me sacrifice and joy. Prioritizing each other and making each other laugh, even on the most sorrowful of days. Teasing each other, complimenting each other, and always telling each other how much they loved one another.

That's what I'd wanted, more than becoming a vet. But when my first boyfriend had cheated, I pushed harder towards my dream career. And it seemed that's what I'd been afforded.

A soft knock sounded on my door. "Tenley, honey?" My mother's soft voice penetrated the dark room.

"Come in, Mom," I answered, and the silver knob twisted before that beautiful woman entered. "I'm sorry," I quickly added as she sat down on the edge of my bed. After I scooted towards her, she slung a warm arm around my shoulders.

"I know it's a sore subject and you don't purposefully stay away from love. But I also know how much you've desired it since you were a little girl. You, out of all three of my children, was the one I thought would be married first. The least likely to end up with a career." She ran her hand up and down my arm.

“You and me both, Mom,” I whispered as the tears slid down my cheeks once more. I hadn’t realized how much this had truly hurt until now.

“I won’t meddle. Even if he is very handsome and his family is extremely wealthy,” she added, and I groaned.

“Mom,” I teased, and she smiled softly in my direction.

“He’s also only twenty-nine.” She bumped me with her shoulder.

“I thought you weren’t going to meddle.” I grinned her way, and she sighed.

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Love you, Mom,” I replied as she wrapped me in a hug before I found the comfort of my pillow.



Because I wasn’t going to the Duke Ranch to perform any medicine, Doc had me travel in my car and leave the clinic truck. But as the road wound higher and higher up the side of the mountain, I began questioning whether I should’ve taken my parents’ truck instead of my Civic.

The last home had disappeared a couple miles back, yet my GPS said I was still twenty minutes from the entrance of the ranch. Pushing a wayward strand of hair that had fallen from my ponytail nervously behind my ear, I continued the journey farther into the mountains. It was beautiful, but the graying clouds in the sky held something ominous.

The minutes trudged by faster than I’d expected as I enjoyed the journey and felt a rush of adrenaline coating the fear that was pumping through my veins. If the ranch was this far out here, I doubted they enjoyed visitors and hoped that Cassidy remembered I was supposed to be coming.

Off to my left a large wooden arch signified the entrance to the ranch. The brand I’d seen on the rump of the

four cattle yesterday was marked beside the words Duke Ranch hanging from the top beam. Passing under, I was swallowed by trees and dark wooden fencing. The graying sky nearly disappeared completely. I would turn this place into a haunted hollow for Halloween if I owned a ranch like this.

Then again, maybe they did. I knew absolutely nothing about this town or these people. I'd been here for only two days now. As the trees continued thick around me and the dirt road twisted to the right, I rolled down my windows and slowed the drive. The thick scent of pine trees and fresh air encompassed me, along with the bristling sting of bitter cold.

There was a possibility my thick green turtleneck sweater and Aztec-patterned coat wouldn't be warm enough, as the cold bit through the fabric of my sleeves. At least I'd brought a knitted hat for my ears as I traversed the insane journey I was about to forage into.

One more turn to the left and suddenly the trees all but disappeared, and I emerged in the most beautiful valley nestled well into the woods. A large cabin rose to my left, smoke swirling from the chimney. Farther down the road, I counted three more homes of similar structure. To my right was a smaller version of a cabin, while behind it all, spread out upon acres and acres of open pasture, roamed cows that bellowed and munched lazily on the sharp needles of grass.

Horses whinnied off to the right, beautiful corrals and round pens were all fenced by the same dark wood that had guided my pathway here. Pristine care was taken to ensure that the grandeur of mother nature was not hindered, but enhanced by the surrounding structures. Down through the trees loped four different cowboys upon the backs of elegant horses, two Razor ATVs blazed down the path to my left as I had stalled my car at the entrance.

Following the four horses came a massive wave of cattle, I could hear the whistling as more hands emerged around and behind the herd. They walked down the hillside towards a large pen where a chute rose, waiting. To the right, behind the small bunkhouse, six more figures emerged from a

looming red barn, horses tacked up and snorting. Their hot breath mixed with the crisp air.

“Didn’t think you’d show this early, Miss. We are just getting our last round up going and bringing all the cattle down before the winter storm.” A voice pierced through the scene that lay before me, the colors of fall imploding with the fictional stampede of cattle and horses.

“Good morning, Cassidy,” I replied and rolled my eyes, turning to find the cowboy leaning up against the door, his arm above his head as he peered down at me with those hazel eyes. His Carhartt was zipped tight around a beautiful paisley-patterned wild rag tied tightly around his neck.

“Park your car over by the house where the trucks are and meet me out by the chute. I hope you brought some gloves, it ain’t warm.” He nodded towards a row of large trucks beside the beautiful home with the smoke curling from the stone chimney that ran up the right side wall. Two chestnut-colored wooden rocking chairs sat upon the exquisite porch that held potted plants hanging off of the railing.

I let my eyes roam the beautiful scene. It was something from a dream that I’d never be able to see enough of.

I crept my car forward, the enormity of it all sweeping my breath away. I was hardly able to catch it as I stepped out into the bitter air once my car was parked. Pulling the hat over my ponytail, it fell at a more normal length, and I zipped my coat up as high as it would go. Shoving my fingers into my gloves, I turned around and watched as four small four-wheelers zipped by, each with two occupants—not one of whom was an adult.

This was a life, and one that the cold would be worth the sacrifice for. I could only imagine what else was hidden through these hills as the road curved around and upwards towards either direction, disappearing into more unknown adventures. There was crude laughter mixed with children screeching and animals of all sounds crashing through the air

as I turned the corner and approached the slowly crowding pen.

Mostly men sat upon horses, ropes strapped to saddles. There were a few women scattered about, huddled in a small group of their own, chatting. The children chased each other with ropes, snakes, and whatever else they could find. I paused for a moment, smiling, and wondering if they truly understood the magnificence of what they enjoyed.

But the beauty was broken by more grating words behind me. “Glad to see you didn’t get lost. Since you’re here this early, I bet Weston wouldn’t mind a vet’s help in our last little round up and deworming before winter.” Cassidy grinned, and I shook my head.

“You do realize that I have only done stuff like that in a school setting. None of this cowboy way,” I replied and glanced at him. His eyes once more raked up and down my body.

“That’s pretty obvious. You sure your toes won’t get too cold?” He winked as I shook my head.

“You really just assume your looks allow you to get away with saying anything you want, don’t you?” I said in response.

He threw his head back and laughed. “They’ve not failed me yet. Except when it comes to Weston.”

“Who’s Weston?” I asked.

He shook his head, leaning up against the railing we’d stopped at. “My older brother.”

“You don’t seem to like him.” I watched him as he tipped his hat up and stared off at the group of men joking around.

“You’d be surprised with how wrong you are.”

“Then what do you mean?”

He pushed himself backwards off the railing and kicked some dirt with the toe of his worn boot. “That I don’t get away with stuff with him like I do with everyone else. But

he's that way with everyone. I got the sense of humor. He got the brains."

"Well, at least together you two are the complete package," I quipped back, and he clicked his tongue.

"I am that alone."

"Who told you that?" I swiveled to face him.

He gave me a flirtatious grin. "Every girl in this entire town." He puffed his chest out.

"I wouldn't say that with pride. You obviously couldn't keep one."

I heard a low chuckle behind me. Cassidy's eyes glanced over my shoulder and a scowl crossed his face.

"Nice to hear someone else put him in his place," a voice spoke—one I could've sworn I'd heard before but couldn't quite place. I swung around as the figure who spoke turned to face the railing, his back facing in my direction, and hopped the fence.

"Well, time to get to work," Cassidy muttered as the figure sauntered towards the crowd that had formed. A tall figure with broad shoulders and a powerful gait. Someone who knew who he was.

"Weston?" I questioned, and Cassidy sighed, answering my question without a word.

As I watched Cassidy jump the fence after his brother, I couldn't help but see the resemblance in their walk. Both of them had grown up in this world, hardened by physical labor and practically born in a saddle. Weston had a slightly thicker back, but both had the same dark hair that curled at the ends. Similar style wide-brimmed cowboy hats, just one was black and the other was gray.

Cassidy caught up with Weston, said something as he gestured in my direction, and then grinned. Weston gave a stiff nod and grabbed the reins to a lone Buckskin that had been ponied into the pen from a man who looked eerily like Cassidy. Older than Cassidy, but not old. Not like the

gentleman sitting upon a bay back in the corner. That cowboy was beside a woman with bright hazel eyes who was standing on the ground.

Hooves stampeded closer, and suddenly a few horses and cattle emerged over the edge of the hill, headed straight towards the pen that housed so many people. Brushing my hands over my cargo joggers, I hopped the fence and walked into the cage.

Cassidy was now sitting atop a Chestnut and trotted my way. “Well, Doctor. Head on over towards the chute. You get to preg check today, since you so willingly admitted that you have experience with that.”

I rolled my eyes at the jab and walked towards the chute for another round of checking pregnant cattle. Heads swung my way and brows furrowed in confusion until Cassidy rode into the group and announced who I was. There were several greetings after that as I stopped myself beside the chute, and the first wave of cattle burst through the open gates.

“HERE WE GO!” Weston shouted above the crowd, his voice so familiar. I scanned the group trying to find him, but didn’t have time as the first cow shot into the chute.

“You’re up, Doc!” one of the hands with a thick beard said and I got to work.

Chapter 5

Cassidy hadn't been wrong. I was cold and practically numb by the time the last cow made her way through the run. It was a miracle I could feel anything at all to give them an accurate assessment by the end. I slumped against the chute and closed my eyes as hooves and voices faded, all headed towards the main house where Cassidy and Weston's parents lived.

The silence was welcoming, and I could hear the whistle of the wind brushing against the leaves that were quickly making their escape to the ground. It smelled fresh once more, and I couldn't help but smile. All had been worth it for this simple relief afterwards.

Another wave of fresh fall air tickled my nose. I cracked my eyes open, ready to climb the railing and gaze at my surroundings. Cassidy and I still needed to go find locoweed, so staying wouldn't be considered an intrusion.

"I'll be going with you instead of Cassidy," Weston's voice spoke behind me as I hoisted myself up a couple rungs of the railing. "He informed me of your suspicions, and I want to see the evidence myself."

"Hmmm," I breathlessly acknowledged as I stared at the serene surroundings. Brightly colored crimsons and ambers, mixed with flashing hues of peach and greens bounced across the light that sang upon the breeze.

"This is perfection," I whispered. Despite the numbing cold, I had fallen in love with someplace that shouldn't exist.

"It never grows old," Weston spoke close to me, and I felt the railing rattle and glanced his way.

My eyes met his.

The most piercing of blues. A blue I'd never forget set beneath the strongest brows.

"YOU!" I said, and a small smile briefly caressed his face.

“Hey there,” he replied, studying me.

I remained silent for a moment, simply staring at the swirling ocean cobalt irises surrounding his pupils.

He brushed his hand over the sleeve of his gray Carhartt coat and then spoke, “I wondered if you’d recognize me or not. You seemed a bit frenzied that night.”

“I think the lack of light should’ve been the reason you’d wonder that. I barely saw anything but your eyes and surprisingly decent mustache.” My gaze caressed his features, wanting to soak it all in. Every trimmed facial hair that coated his wide set jaw, a large scar that ran beneath his left eye, down across his cheek towards the lower corner of his face.

The moment my eyes rested upon the thick scar, he swung his face away and pulled the hat lower on his head.

“It’s nice to officially meet you, Mr. Duke,” I softly said, oddly drawn to this quiet man.

“And you, Doctor Mayn,” he answered and glanced my way just momentarily before returning his gaze towards the hills in front of us. His thick hands, covered in worn leather gloves, adjusted the deep green wild rag tucked around his neck. He propped one foot up on the bottom rail, his spur ringing out.

“So, where are we headed?” I asked, and his turquoise eyes came towards me once more.

“The valley that I assume the heifers drifted towards is over yonder. It’s warmer there this time of year,” he answered, pushing off of the rail.

“Then why didn’t anyone find them until a couple weeks later?” I asked, following him through the pen and towards a Razor that was parked along the dirt road.

“Are you accusing us of being negligent?” he snarled in my direction, ripping open the passenger door for me and crossing around the front of the vehicle.

“No.”

“Then why’s it matter?” He pulled himself into the driver’s seat as I buckled myself in and shut the door.

“Because I’m trying to understand how they got poisoned,” I replied as he turned the key over and the engine roared to life.

“You are accusing us.”

“Am not!” I shouted. That got hot fast.

“Then it don’t matter!” he snarled back, whipping the side-by-side around and slamming it into drive. We were tearing up the side of the mountain before I had time to reply, and I quickly latched onto the handles as he ripped in and out of the trees, higher and higher up. We were no longer following any sort of pathway as we dropped down a hill and emerged into a very small valley.

Weston rammed the Razor into park and killed the engine as I stared at the open space around me. I hesitated, afraid to ask another question, but one was bubbling up beneath the surface.

“This isn’t a usual pasture area?” I quietly questioned.

“No. Not enough space for the whole herd. Plus, it’s quite far out from where we can keep an eye on the cattle. But the biggest reason we don’t use it for grazing land is the wildlife that frequent here. Quite a few cows have been killed in this meadow within an hour of them escaping because of that.” He paused and pulled himself out of the Razor. “Most of the usual spots the cattle run to were empty when we went looking after the two heifers first disappeared,” he shortly replied.

“And you didn’t look here since they were more than likely already dead,” I mumbled, climbing out of the vehicle.

“Obviously,” he snapped and didn’t even glance my way as we began wandering the open meadow. It was a beautiful, small glen with a brook that softly bubbled along the edge. I could feel the temperature difference here, like he’d said; it was warmer, despite the snowflake I watched flutter to the ground.

One single, thick white frozen flake of water settled onto the ground next to the very plant I was looking for.

I tilted my head, suspicion rising within my stomach. This locoweed was all but dried up, as if it had been cut and placed here deliberately, not growing from the ground.

“Mr. Duke?” I called out, crouching down and picking up a stick. Hoof prints were thick in the mud around this small pile oddly, like the two heifers had nowhere else to go and been forced to eat it.

“You found it,” Weston breathed out beside me, squatting down to join me.

“It’s odd though. It doesn’t look like it was growing here. See this?” I pushed the stems around with the stick and they easily moved, not ripping from the ground or disturbing any soil.

“As Cassidy probably said, we don’t let locoweed grow here,” he sharply said and stood up, placing some in a plastic bag from his pocket.

“I never said you did,” I snapped in reply and whipped around to face him. “You are acting like I have just come in and accused you of being incapable of taking care of cattle.”

“Have you not?” He shoved the bag into his pocket and glared at me. Cyan eyes of frustration.

“No, I have not.”

He shook his head and scoffed. “The first day you arrive, you tell my brother, the foreman of this ranch, that the two sick heifers brought in have locoweed poisoning. Something we take seriously. He said you didn’t believe him when he said we ride looking for it before we ever turn out the cattle. Then you asked me why no one found them for over a week.”

Turning on his heels, he strutted away from me. The snow was now falling rapidly and the warmth in this little glen was no longer present. I ran after him.

“Mr. Duke!” I shouted.

He turned his head just as the toe to my boot caught a branch, and I crashed face first into the now wet ground. Mud and bitter frozen leaves shot into my mouth then up my nose as a bellowing laugh ricocheted around the small valley. Pushing myself up from the ground, I glanced up at Weston, groaning in embarrassment.

My cheeks flushed red-hot while he grinned in breathless laughter. Snow fell against his felt cap, the white speckles contrasted strongly against the blackened cowboy hat. Watching his amused grin, I couldn't help but chuckle as well. Brushing the dirt and leaves from my face, my giggle dissipated, as Weston crossed his arms in front of his chest in amusement.

"You better not tell a soul about that," I demanded, pointing a finger in his direction.

He smiled, his blue eyes brightening despite the stiffness in his cheek that hindered the left side of his lips from raising any higher. "I am telling absolutely everyone that the new vet face planted her first day on the ranch."

"That's rude!"

He snorted and shook his head.

"I'll tell everyone that you were the one to trip me then," I added, and his laugh was cut short. His jaw fell open in shock.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?"

"But I didn't do that!" He walked my way and offered me a hand. I placed my palm in his extended gloved hand and stood up. My fingers lingered in his grip and both of us stared at it, not ready to release the comfort that I was suddenly finding being this close to a grump of a man.

"No one else was here, it would be my word against yours," I mindlessly whispered, staring at the touch.

Slowly my gaze left the hands and drifted towards Weston's face. Not the typical kind of handsome, but in his

own way more rugged, a little wilder, a little less refined. I couldn't help but softly smile.

“Then it's our secret,” he replied, his voice quieter as the warmth from his breath caressed my cheeks. I could practically hear his heartbeat through the silence that had befallen us with the gathering snow. As my eyes left him to glance around the meadow that had quickly become white, he dropped his hand. Yet, remained close to me, wrapped up in the peaceful stillness of the changing season that had arrived.

“Our secret...” I mumbled under my breath and lifted my palm to the sky. A small flake fell upon my glove that matched the blue knitted cap my mom had made. It clung to its shape for a small moment before melting away. A frozen beauty that could cause so much destruction.

“We should get back before we get snowed in up here. The weather can change on a dime in these parts,” Weston said, still standing beside me.

My eyes lingered on the untouched snow coating the earth around my feet, until I slowly slid my head to face Weston. Once I finally met his gaze, I found a softness in him that hadn't been there before. Only for a moment before it too melted away as that snowflake had done upon my mitt, and we were back in the Razor, heading towards safety.

Chapter 6

“Let me know if you notice anything else, and I will keep you up to date on the two heifers’ progress,” I said to Weston as he held my car door open.

He tipped his head in my direction, snow flaking off of the brim and dusting towards the thickly covered ground that was becoming slicker by the minute.

“Better get going before the storm gets any worse,” he replied as I slid into my car and he shut the door.

Turning the car engine over, I pulled off the beanie and tossed it into the passenger seat before rolling my window down. “Why aren’t you the foreman instead of Cassidy?”

A wide, crooked grin spread across Weston’s face, the skin around his scar wrinkling slightly. “Because my job is much better. Now go.” He nodded towards the exit as snow blew into the car causing my hair to slap me across the face. Another chuckle came from him as my cheeks burned red and I pulled the strands from my mouth.

Quickly rolling up the window, I threw the car in reverse and skidded my way backwards and then began slowly sliding down the road. It was a painfully labored trek, the tires slipping across the icy embankment as I traversed away from the log home that quickly faded from view, clouded behind the torrential snowfall that was blanketing the sky thick with white.

Barely making it around the first turn, the back side of my car groaned and then slid out of control towards the left. It pulled me off of the main road and bumped into a frozen embankment. I jammed my foot onto the accelerator, urging it forward, but all the tires did were squeal across the icy ground without launching me forward.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mumbled, ramming the gas pedal once more, praying the tires would catch on something, really anything, and lurch me onward. Over and

over again I attempted to make some ground, but all it did was dig a deeper and slicker hole for each tire.

“Ugh,” I pouted and leaned forward, my head bumping against the steering column and blasting the horn for a short moment. A tapping sounded against my window. Pulling my head off of the wheel, I glanced to my left to find Weston standing there with a sly, subtle grin across his face.

Pressing the button, the window cracked open, steadily widening with a soft plunk. “I’m assuming you saw most of that.” I glared at him as he chuckled.

“I may or may not have watched for a good few minutes.” His eyes sparkled with amusement.

I rolled mine in annoyance.

“What do you want?” I grumpily replied.

He threw his hands up in the air, the stiffness quickly returning to his frame in response to my cold words.

“I came to offer a tow,” he sharply replied as the amusement fell from his face, back to the cold shoulder he had been giving me during our first Razor ride.

“That would be appreciated.” My eyes slid away from his intense gaze, ashamed I’d snapped, but frustrated all the same. What was up with me struggling to control my emotions lately? Snapping at my mom, snapping at a stranger, crying at random times, and getting upset in situations that weren’t really in my control. None of that was like me.

Cancer.

The single word came to my head as Weston quietly walked to the front of my car to attach a tow strap. I was exhausted, knowing that in a sense I was completely helpless in stopping the loss of my father. My dad would soon be gone, leaving my mom alone. Leaving me even more alone in this world.

Her concern this entire time, my mom’s pressure from last night was because she was afraid too. Afraid that I would always be alone as she was about to be. My company would

never be as my father's has been to her. A child was not the same as a spouse and never should be. They had taught me that, and shown me what a healthy relationship was supposed to be like. At least two out of their three kids had successfully achieved that kind of love as well.

Not me, though. And the longer I was alone, the more I feared that it would be something I'd experience forever.

The car lurched forward, so I pressed the gas pedal softly. Smoke blasted from Weston's truck and then we were off, the strap dragging me forward behind his matte black, older generation Dodge.

He was lucky. He had family and a lot of it as it seemed today. His parents, Cassidy, at least one other brother, plus kids running around. Even the cowhands seemed to listen to him give orders despite the fact that he wasn't the foreman.

He wasn't alone.

I was finding myself oddly jealous of a stranger I barely knew as we slowly made our way down the road. His life seemed beautiful; where he lived was absolutely stunning. Even as the deathly snow fell in silence amongst the whine of his engine, I couldn't help but marvel at the wonder around me.

Sheer, clean white coated the branches of pine trees and almost every inch of exposed ground around us. Any scrap of light reflecting off of the newly delicate surface seemed to signify the beginning of a new stage in life. Animals would go into hibernation while others would begin to explore the frosty wonderland that was slowly filling the mountains.

My life was doing the same thing, moving into a new stage, and one I wasn't accepting. Dread and fear had seemed to encapsulate every bare parcel left exposed instead of excitement and acceptance. I took a deep breath, vowing to do better, to start fresh, and enjoy what little time may be left with my father.

This wasn't the time to mourn; no, this was a time for celebration while both of my parents would still be here for

Thanksgiving and hopefully Christmas. Maybe even New Year's. However long or short, I would take this time to enjoy every moment with them and work hard at my career. Progressing in life the best way I could.

Weston slowed to a stop at the edge of the drive, as the snow was thinner here and cars had already cleared some sort of pathway along the main road. I pressed the brakes as he exited his vehicle, his boots imprinting into the snow as he walked in my direction.

I opened my door as he squatted down in front of my car. "Thank you!" I shouted.

He stood up, the end of the tow strap in hand.

"You know it's not safe to drive on that donut. Why haven't you gotten it changed yet?" he asked, leaning against the hood, keeping his face emotionless.

"Haven't had time," I replied, crossing my arms on top of the door.

"Well get it fixed or you ain't gonna make it far into winter driving that thing here." He turned around without so much as a smile and began rolling up the strap. I couldn't figure him out. He was hot and cold, flipping between the two moods so quickly it was giving me whiplash. Without another word, he tossed it into the backseat and then climbed into his truck, leaving me alone in snowy silence.

My shoulders sagged and I slid back into my car, annoyed. Inching forward, I crept past his truck, turned onto the road, and began the slow trek back to the clinic.



I placed a chart onto the receptionist's desk beside the sweet, curly brown-haired, twenty-year-old girl I'd met upon returning from the Duke Ranch several days ago, having just finished my last report from the day.

“Make sure Ms. Vanderbilt comes and gets the prescription today,” I said, smiling as Elena happily slid the chart from my hand. Today felt like another step towards growth. Doc had me take all of the small-animal appointments solo for today, and even one horse appointment.

“We heard you went out to the Duke Ranch the other morning,” Carly spoke beside her companion, not glancing up from her computer screen. She stopped typing for one second, pushing a strand of blonde hair from her face and then continued clacking on the keyboard. “You should’ve let me know, and I could’ve come and assisted you!”

“I did go out, but it was an easy job to handle by myself,” I replied, half wondering why it was such a hot topic.

“And you met Cassidy your first day.” She sighed with a dreamy look playing in her gray eyes. There it was. The same look I’d seen the day I’d met him.

“Stop swooning. You went on one disastrous date.” Elena clicked her tongue, rolling her dark brown eyes that matched the freckles splattered across her skin.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Carly snarled in response. “You had two, and they went just as well as everyone else’s.”

“Everyone else’s?” I asked, leaning against the counter and picking at a thread from my white coat that was tugged over another burnt orange turtleneck sweater. I liked these thick, knitted sweaters. They kept me warm and were pretty bulky, hiding all of my insecurities about my body that lacked most womanly curves.

“Cassidy is the most eligible bachelor in the entire town. He’s been on at least one date with every woman over the age of twenty, yet not a single one seems to have piqued his interest,” Carly said, smiling her thin lips in my direction. “That is until now.”

“Until now?” I furrowed my brows.

“You.” Elena threw a thumb in my direction, and I shook my head.

“I’ll see you girls tomorrow,” I replied, stopping the conversation, and turned around.

“Lunch since it’s Wednesday?” Carly asked, and I paused in my tracks. “Come on, a midweek pick me up!” I blinked a few times, realizing it had been *more* than just several days since I’d been to the Duke Ranch. It had been almost a week. Which meant I’d been here longer than a week and finally felt like I’d settled in nicely. Even considered these two girls semi-friends. My parents and I had spent every evening together, even during my dad’s bad days. I wasn’t missing out on a moment with him again.

And I hadn’t seen or heard from Weston or Cassidy since. Their heifers were slowly improving, and I had to go pick up some feed for them tomorrow morning now that they were eating again.

“Alright, lunch tomorrow. My treat,” I replied, and both girls clapped their hands in glee, matching purple scrubs billowing in effect. Carly was athletically built, while Elena was a thicker girl. She must’ve stolen all of the curves that I was supposed to have received, and I was a little jealous. They were both beautiful, extravagant, and turned heads wherever they went. Which meant they heard all of the gossip around town and always came with exciting news.

Much of which I’d been the main topic of lately.

As I left the waiting area, I heard Carly demand that any Duke appointments be handled by her from now on. I chuckled, still not quite sure what all the fuss was concerning Cassidy.

It was a quick trip to drop off my white coat in my office, and then I headed home, the donut still holding steady along the plowed streets. We hadn’t had another snowstorm, and it hadn’t been quite as thick in the valley. I knew I needed to get it changed and soon, but the clinic had been busy, and I was doing everything I could to learn as much as possible so Doc would trust me with more solo appointments.

Especially for large-animal farm calls. Those were challenging and the most exciting for me. I’d found myself

drawn more and more to each client that had an interesting case at their small ranch or farm, more so than the routine dog and cat visits. Maybe all along I'd been meant to be here, be a part of this lifestyle.

Another evening passed by with my family, my mom pressing about going on a date with someone while here—aka Cassidy. I politely said no, but didn't become as frustrated as I had previously been about her constant pushing towards having some sort of love life. I couldn't blame her either, but I couldn't, not with him. I'd heard enough of his player-like stories to have written him off before even a single date, no matter how attractive he was.

He was almost too perfect. Which sent all sorts of red flags up in my head. No, he wasn't the one for me, and I didn't need a date to know that.

Chapter 7

My hands wrapped around the third burlap feed sack. I grunted as I slammed it down on the flat shopping cart. Doc wanted four bags, so I reached for the last, spinning around as a small bead of sweat dripped from my forehead. Standing up straight as my stack wobbled slightly, I leaned against the cart handle and steadied my heart rate. Despite my small frame, I was tough, but four fifty-pound feed bags definitely got the blood pumping.

Smoothing out my black long-sleeve T-shirt I'd picked to wear under a gray vest, my eyes locked onto a man I hadn't seen in a while.

Weston.

He was squatted down, dragging a chicken feed bag out from a pile. Wearing those usual square toe boots mated with a pair of wranglers that a thick, blue-checked flannel was tucked neatly into. He also had a plain brown vest resting over his shirt and that black cowboy hat sat atop his curly hair. I found him intriguing to look at.

He ran a hand over his mustache, slung the bag over his shoulder, and stood, his gaze swiveling to meet mine. No smile, no emotion.

We just stared for a moment.

Swallowing my pride, I offered the first soft smile. "Hi," I said.

His face remained fixed on me, emotionless for a moment, and then he suddenly walked my way.

"Doc says the heifers are slowly improving," he finally said and paused in front of me. Those piercing midnight eyes scanned the contents of my cart and then quickly over my body.

"Yep. We're going to add in some of this grain to help fatten them up and see how much permanent damage was done," I answered and then cocked my head. "You know that's

chicken feed right?" I pointed to the bag laying over his shoulder.

He clenched his jaw. "Yes. I obviously know it's chicken feed. I can read."

"I never said you couldn't." The smile fell from my face.

"Well, all you do is assume I don't know things," he coldly replied, his face still emotionless.

"No I don't!" I snapped. "I have never once assumed that, and I'm sick of you thinking that I do." Gripping the handles to my cart, I pulled back on it to put some distance between us, and began to wheel it away from him. But I paused, annoyed, and whipped around to face Weston.

He hadn't moved a muscle.

"I don't know what I did to offend you, Mr. Duke, but I apologize, and don't worry—I'll make sure it's only Doc that takes care of your animals from now on," I snapped at him and spun away in frustration. I shoved my cart forward and continued as quickly as I could away from that man.

"You didn't offend me," his voice said, startling me with how close it was. My toe caught the lip of the cart, causing me to stumble forward. My head rammed into the metal handle with a massive thunk.

I closed my eyes, embarrassed, and frustrated even more. "Can you just leave me alone?" I snarled, turning around and rubbing at the bump. I was shocked, he looked hurt by my statement, a sadness in his eyes.

"Are you alright?" he softly asked.

"I'm fine."

"I'm not good at this small talk stuff," Weston said, running a hand across the back of his neck and looking oddly sheepish. The frustration left quickly as I realized that this man who looked powerful and strong might not be as confident as I had first chalked him up to be. "You're the first woman to talk

to me like a normal person in a long time, and I don't know how to react," he added.

"Why would a woman not talk to you like a normal person? You're not an ugly guy."

The right side of his lips twitched briefly. "But not handsome like my brother, and it becomes painfully obvious when we're together." He chuckled quietly, and I stepped towards him.

"Why would you want to be like your brother? From what I hear, he can't keep a girl to save his life despite having the option of every single one of them."

"Even you?" His brows twitched, and I studied those intense cobalt eyes. He was shy, something you wouldn't recognize while watching him work.

I scoffed. "No thank you. He may be conventionally attractive, but I don't want to be with someone who settled for me because no one else was left."

The intensity in his eyes brightened. "Did a lady just reject Cassidy Duke?"

"Absolutely right this lady rejected Cassidy Duke." I giggled, grinning as a subtle smile cracked his lips. "Really though, why do you have chicken feed?"

His crooked smile widened. I couldn't help but study his full lips hidden beneath that mustache of his. The way the right side of his mouth raised higher than the left was something I found myself wanting to memorize. I liked the imperfection.

"I have chickens at my house, Miss Mayn," he answered, his gaze softening.

"It's Tenley, and I didn't see any chickens."

"You didn't see my house." He winked and walked towards me. I backed away, bumping into the cart as his hand wrapped around part of the exposed handle. "Excuse me, Miss Tenley."

I hesitantly slid over, and he tossed his chicken feed on top of my stack. Slowly, he began pushing the buggy forward. Walking beside him in silence, we wandered the beige and white aisles, heading towards the cash registers that sat at the entrance.

“Do you not live on the ranch?” I asked, breaking the stillness between the two of us.

“I do. Just not down near the entrance. I built my home up higher, wanting to be away from the crowd. The view from my window is breathtaking.” He turned to the left and slowed his approach.

“It’s not been too long since I’ve moved here, but honestly, that sounds like a dream. Although it’s hard to imagine something more beautiful than what I saw driving in that first day.”

He inched the cart forward, glancing away from me. The sharpness of his jawline that was speckled with dark stubble caused me to stare for a moment—up until he spoke. “You haven’t seen nothing yet.”

“Show me?” I asked without thinking, and then quickly stared forward as the cart screeched to a halt. Scarlet-hot embarrassment crashed through my body, flaming not just my cheeks but every inch of skin.

“I mean, you know, just like, uh—” I stuttered. “Like when the heifers come back... Or something...”

I felt warm all over, sweating despite the winter chill in the air. There was no way I’d just spoken that. Two words that had crossed the line.

“Actually,” he started, and I blinked rapidly but still refused to look at him. “There’s a small herd of cows that we didn’t breed this year since they’re a little older that I’ve kept up near my house. Haven’t moved them like I would’ve normally done by now since I usually bring Eugene to that pasture in the winter. Then they integrate with the younger, pregnant cows.”

I finally chanced a glance towards Weston. His cheeks were a little red as he continued to ramble. “That herd is in need of a good deworming and just a once over before winter hits really hard.”

I remained still beside him, my heart racing in my throat as I realized that he was attempting to find an excuse to invite me over.

“Sure could use a vet visit if you’re available to help out sometime in the next few days. Storm warning came in, so I gotta get it done before things get rough. Except I just now remember your saying that Doc would come out to service our herd and not you...” he finished, and his voice trailed off. Curious blue eyes roamed my face before he realized I was watching him, and then he turned away.

“I think I could pencil you in on Friday?” I responded quietly, hoping he would recognize my unspoken apology for my outburst.

Weston gently pushed the cart forward, a faint smile visible against his lips. “Friday it is.”

We checked out in silence and then parted ways without another word. A few odd glances from the cashiers were afforded in our direction, but they said nothing. As I drove the vet truck back to the clinic, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of excitement; though, I wasn’t sure if it was because I was going to be seeing an incredible view or someone. Someone who I couldn’t figure out, who I might potentially be able to call a friend.



I slid into the booth across from Elena and Carly. The bright red plastic was cracking from years and years of use, the menus at this hometown Center Street Diner were flaxen and fading. But the food here was to die for. I’d already eaten here more times than I cared to admit in the short time I’d lived in this small town.

Taking a sip of my water while we waited for the server to bring our food, I gazed out the window beside me. People bustled quietly up and down the sidewalk, pausing to talk to neighbors and kinfolk, making me wonder how many had ever made it out of here, even for just a vacation.

Carly and Elena were gossiping about something I hadn't been paying attention to. Not until Elena addressed me by name, pushing her curly hair behind one ear. She'd left it down today, framing her beautiful, soft face while Carly had pulled her blonde, straight hair into a sleek high ponytail. It lacked the baby hairs that stood up straight like mine was currently doing.

"Martha told me you rejected Cassidy Duke." Elena grinned wickedly as Carly's mouth fell open.

"What?" I questioned, turning my green eyes towards the two girls who sat across from me. "Martha who?"

"Martha from the feed store," Elena replied.

I sighed heavily—a private conversation that was of course overheard by someone else. Meaning that most likely the entire town knew that I'd told his brother that I would never date Cassidy.

"So it's true!" She stared at me in shock.

"Why would you do that? What'd he say?" Carly asked, rocking forward in the booth. I turned my gaze back towards the winter wonderland that had befallen us.

"She didn't say it to Cassidy directly," Elena filled in before I had a moment to speak.

"Does everyone know?" I asked, but Carly ignored my question.

"Who'd she say it to?" She addressed Elena who swung towards her, practically leaving me out of the gossip about myself.

"That drifter who comes through town now and then," Elena answered and clapped her hands in glee.

“The really tall, quiet one? Keeps to himself but seems super intense with that gnarly scar I can’t seem to stop staring at?” Carly asked, scooching a little closer to Elena. And for a moment, I was reminded of our age difference, despite it being small.

“That one,” Elena replied and I furrowed my brows.

Weston wasn’t a drifter at all so why were these girls talking about him like he was one? As if he never spoke to anyone and hardly ever came into town. Although, I’d have to admit that was the first time I’d seen him in town since moving here, and most people whispered rumors about Cassidy in passing and nothing about Weston. Or the other sibling I knew they both had.

“What do you guys know about the Dukes?” I suddenly asked, interjecting myself into the conversation that was about me.

“So much!” Elena squealed.

“Everyone does! Especially because of Cassidy.....” Carly added with a hungry smile, and I tilted my head in curiosity.

“Carly,” Elena scolded, rolling her eyes before returning to me. “Right, I forgot you didn’t grow up here. The Dukes practically founded this little town. Coming out west before anyone else was here. They own at least something of everything here except for the mayor’s office. They stay out of politics all together, or pretend to.” Elena’s brown eyes widened in admiration.

Carly continued for her. “The ranch has been passed down for generations, typically the oldest son inherits it once he’s left town and done something ‘successful’ outside of the family ranch.”

“Successful?” I questioned, quite intrigued.

“That’s a super broad term, because it could mean anything from a college degree, starting a small business, making a chunk of money, or even something simple like

learning a new skill or trade. Then upon return, by invitation from their dad, he offers them the ranch,” Carly finished.

“Rumor has it that the oldest son, however, rejected the offer this generation, so the second son inherited it when he returned,” Elena said as the sweet, gray-haired server carried over three plates of burgers.

“Here you ladies go. Anythin’ else y’all need?” she asked, her voice sweet like honey.

“We’re good for now, thank you!” I replied as she set down the three plates of food on the gray tabletop and then twirled away. Her red diner outfit made a swoosh as she left.

“He’s supposedly scary though. At least that’s what everyone in town says. They say he’s pretty mean, can shoot deadlier than a Texas Ranger, and is super terrifying to look at,” Elena said between bites of her burger.

“Terrifying to look at?” I asked as some juice ran down my hand from the hamburger. A telltale sign of how delicious the food was here.

“Yeah. Someone said he’s all gashed up across his entire face and down his torso from some animal fight he got into as a teenager,” Elena continued, her eyes not moving an inch from her food.

“Apparently he won though, and they ate the animal that year,” Carly muttered through a full mouth and shrugged her shoulders. “Anyway, he made Cassidy foreman, since other than offering his younger brother the ranch, which he didn’t want to give up, that was the next best thing available. Besides, everyone knows that Cassidy isn’t exactly fit for being a boss despite how amazing he is.”

“Why does it seem like much of this is speculation? What happened to the oldest brother?” I asked, shoving some hamburger into my mouth.

“Because most of it *does* come from rumors that we’ve heard from those in town. Their parents homeschooled Cassidy and his three siblings, so we didn’t really get to know them growing up like we did others in town. They don’t invite

a lot of people up to the ranch anymore either, not after the time that Cassidy nearly burned down the entire place with a bonfire he threw as a young teen. Though I've seen the ranch a few times making runs there with Doc," Carly answered as I swirled a french fry in ketchup. So much was making sense, yet so much was also confusing.

"Wait." I blinked, my hand frozen halfway to my mouth as ketchup plopped onto the plate. "You said he has three siblings?"

"Yeah. The eldest brother became an accountant when he met his wife while at college. They live at the ranch and have a couple kids. He works as the accountant for the family but rejected inheriting it because of his wife. Well, that is if the rumors are true. I think his name is like Remington or something. Then there's the next sibling, the boy who inherited the ranch. He left and somehow made a massive amount of money and came back. What was his name? Wesley? Winston?" Carly's voice trailed off as pieces fell together.

"Weston," I muttered under my breath. But that was impossible. There was no way what they were saying was true. I would have to find some appropriate time to ask about the rumors and get an answer as to why everyone thought he was so rude. If people only gave him a chance, they'd come to learn he was helpful and sweet in his own way.

Shaking my head in shock, I shoved another fry in my mouth. Sweet? Not me calling someone sweet whom I'd only had a few interactions with. But I couldn't deny I was drawn to him.

"What'd you say?" Elena asked, and I blinked, pulling myself back to the present.

"Nothing. Sorry. Go on."

Elena took a swig of water and continued. "Then came the third child. A sister named Pearl. She left and came back with a husband, and she has zero desire to be anything but a housewife at the ranch. Her husband works for the Dukes, which is rumored to have been his dream job, and some say

that was the only reason he married her. But who cares as long as they're happy." She chuckled as I placed the last fry into my mouth.

"Then there's Cassidy," I urged them to continue.

"Exactly. The *gorgeous* baby of the family and he was treated like that for much of their childhood. Rumor has it that he and Wesley, or whatever his name is, are quite close despite the age gap. Hence, another reason he was made foreman without hesitation," Carly finished and slurped the last droplet of water from her cup.

"Age difference? How much of an age difference?" I asked, curious as to how old Weston actually was and wanting some sort of weapon to use in my defense if I were to embarrass myself in front of him once more.

"Uh, six or seven years, I think," Carly answered, and my jaw nearly hit the floor. There was a potential for ten years of an age difference between Weston and me? Ten full years would put him around thirty-six years old, if Carly was right.

"You okay?" Carly asked, as I continued to sit in disbelief at the shock holding my entire frame frozen.

"Tenley?" Elena pressed.

"Hello?" Carly said once more, and I finally snapped out of my stupor.

"Yeah, sorry. That's just a lot of information to digest," I responded and glanced at my watch. "We need to get going, Doc needs his lunch, and we've got an appointment in fifteen."

"Don't know how much of it is true, though," Carly added as I plopped some cash onto the table, and we slid from the booth, leaving empty plates.

"Probably more than you think," I mumbled, following the two girls from the diner. We waved at our server upon exit and said quick greetings to a few of the townsfolk I'd met through work or my parents since being here.

Neither girl heard my comment, and I was grateful that the conversation had ended. Yet, I was still curious as to how much was factual. Especially if Weston really fought off an animal.

That had to be a cool story, but one I feared he would hardly speak about.

Chapter 8

Pulling into my parents, drive that evening felt exhausting. I was ready to crash in my bed, not because today was bad, but because I ended up covering every patient that afternoon for Doc and was physically wiped now. Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself that I had to put on a happy face for my parents and glanced at the unfamiliar truck sitting in the drive.

A red diesel that did not belong to my parents. Maybe one of my siblings bought a new vehicle and was here visiting? Feeling a rush of rejuvenation from anticipation, I hustled up the front steps and swung the door open. The smell of the most delicious home cooked meal crashed against my nostrils and excitement coursed through my veins.

Only for my heart to drop in an instant.

Seated on the couch beside my parents in their recliners, was Cassidy and who I assumed to be his parents. My mouth fell open as all five pairs of eyes swung towards me. What was going on? I quickly kicked my shoes off and unzipped my coat, my eyes flickering between each person in front of me.

“Uh, hi?” I said, hesitantly stepping into the great room. “What’s going on here?”

My mom smiled widely, her hair was curled and she had makeup on her face. My father even wore a nice button up and seemed to be a little more lively than usual. Cassidy had on a nice gray button down paired with clean slacks, and his felt cowboy hat looked pristinely dusted.

“We have guests for dinner!” my mother quickly replied with a grin and pushed herself forward in her seat, reaching for her walker. Cassidy promptly rose from his spot on the couch and helped my mom to her feet. “Well, let’s eat now that Tenley is here!”

I remained frozen in bewilderment as Cassidy’s parents both came in my direction, pausing directly in front of me. Shifting from staring in shock at Cassidy, who was now

helping my father rise from his chair, my gaze eventually settled on the two people in front of me. Both of them were taller than I was; his father stood as tall as Weston and wore a cleanly starched pair of wranglers with a dark green flannel. He'd combed his hair neatly and clutched a beige cowboy hat in his fingers.

But, as my gaze rested on his eyes, I couldn't tear away from it. So blue. His eyes were so very bright blue. Just as Weston's were. His hair was light brown, nearly blond but that was about the only thing different between father and son. He even had a mustache so similar to Weston's, albeit a little thinner and with graying tips. His strong face shape, thick neck, powerful build, it was like I was staring at a reflection of what I imagined Weston would look like as he grew older.

Wrinkled and weathered, tanned skin hardened by years in the sun, but handsome. Imperfectly handsome. The perfection that caressed Cassidy's features came from his mother, whom I did quickly glance towards. Yes, Cassidy and his mother looked very similar. She wore a nice long-sleeved blue blouse and jeans. The more I studied everyone, the more it seemed almost like I'd been set up on a date.

My gaze returned to Weston's father, unable to focus much on that fleeting thought. As I studied the intensity in his eyes, I think he suddenly knew. The way his brows twitched and his head slightly tilted. I think he knew, and oddly enough a small, crooked smile filled his face, hidden mostly by the mustache.

"It's a pleasure to finally properly meet you, Tenley. We saw you at the ranch the other day, fitting right in. Anyway, Cassidy filled us in on what is going on with the locoweed." Weston's mother extended her hand as I blinked, tearing my eyes from those blue eyes. "I'm Nancy, and this is my husband, Jeb."

I grasped her hand and shook, plastering a small smile on my face. "Sorry I didn't introduce myself then. It was a bit of a hectic day."

Footsteps sounded beside me, and I stole a glance over Jeb's shoulder. Cassidy was strutting our way, a haughty grin clear upon his face. "Not to be rude, but what's going on?" I quickly asked before he reached us.

It surprised me when Jeb answered. "Your parents invited us and Cassidy to a wonderful dinner."

"Ain't this great?" Cassidy's voice reached my ear as he came to stand beside his father. Those blue eyes made it so difficult to tear away from. However, the longer I stared, the more I realized all I wanted was for them to be on Weston, and not his father.

I faked a smile in Cassidy's direction, catching his apologetic stare. "Will you excuse me for one moment?" I quickly said. Turning towards the kitchen that had an ornate large island in the middle, I power walked past that and into the dining room. It was set in a beautiful little nook surrounded by a large arched window that let in beautiful sunrises. My parents were watching the encounter from their seats beside each other on the finely set table.

Leaning forward between the two, I whispered, "Explain."

My mom gave me her mischievous smile. "I knew you would never take the initiative, so we decided to help."

"Is this a date?" I said through gritted teeth.

"You would've absolutely objected to one, so that's why we invited his parents too," she replied as my father subtly rolled his eyes.

"Of course I would object! How is this any different? It's still pairs!" I felt ready to explode in frustration until my gaze flickered towards my father. He gave me a pained smile.

Closing my eyes, I took a calming breath. It was only a single dinner that was not a date, to appease my mother. One which would hopefully get her off of my back for a while.

"Everything alright?" Nancy's voice entered the dining room, and I stood upright, my hands resting upon my parents' shoulders as the three of them approached, patiently waiting.

“Of course! Let’s eat!” my mom said as I sucked my lips between my teeth for a moment.

And it came as no surprise that I ended up seated next to Cassidy. Dinner began, small talk passing mostly between my parents and his. Even Cassidy seemed unusually quiet, which came as an odd relief for me.

I leaned towards Cassidy. “You could’ve said something.”

“I didn’t know until my parents pulled up into your driveway,” he replied, taking a sip of his water and glancing at me.

I shook my head. “I need to focus on my dad and work right now, not date.”

“Technically this isn’t a date.”

I shoved a bite of mashed potatoes in my mouth. “All the same...”

“Am I that repulsive to you?” he asked, his perfect brows rising in my direction. No, he wasn’t repulsive, I was just exhausted, and if I was being completely honest with myself, I felt no chemistry with him.

Another wave of fatigue crashed through me, and my eyes slid towards my father. He was looking so frail. The color had drained from his face, and he was staring blankly at the wall across from him instead of being involved in the conversation that my mother was so intensely invested in.

It killed me to see him so small. I was the petite one in the family, though that had never stopped me from learning everything I could from my dad.

But this wasn’t the man I’d grown up with. The man I cherished and so dearly missed. Thanksgiving was mere weeks away, and I needed him around for that. I needed him around for Christmas, and for everything in my life to come.

I needed my father, and seeing him that poorly shoved out any remaining morsel of energy I had left for this day.

Scooting back from my place at the table, I rose to my feet. My mom gasped as silence fell upon the table.

“I apologize for my abruptness, but I’m quite exhausted. I mean no disrespect, but if you’ll please excuse me, it’s been a long day of work.” Walking away from my half eaten plate, I felt every pair of eyes drill holes into my back except for my father who remained still and blank.

Kneeling down beside him, I rested a hand on his forearm. He flinched, finally being pulled from his stupor. “Come on daddy, let’s get you to bed.” I whispered, and he nodded once, his eyes misting over as I helped him to his feet. Taking a few steps back from the table, he stumbled towards me before catching his balance.

“Tenley, dear. Please sit back down. I’ll take care of your father while you finish dinner with our guests.” My mom smiled at me, but I shook my head.

“No, Mom. I’m sorry, but on top of being exhausted, I have a busy day at work tomorrow.” I guided my father forward a few more steps before hooking his elbow and turning away from the table.

“Is this because you think this is a date?” she squealed, jumping up from her seat. I remained silent, ignoring her question as I led my weary father from the room. The whispered voices faded as I disappeared down towards my parents’ master bedroom.

Once we were in the hallway, my father stood up straight and shook the weariness from his figure. He winked at me as my jaw fell open in shock. He’d known. Somehow he’d known. A grin filled his frail lips as we chuckled silently with each other.

“I promise I’m not trying to avoid dating, Daddy.” I whispered, and he gave me a quick nod.

“You just don’t want to date this Cassidy fellow,” he replied, and I nodded. He placed a weathered hand against my shoulder. “I love you, my sweet daughter.” He coughed.

I shuddered, a solemn air falling upon us. This was the first time I truly acknowledged the deadline that hung stiffly in front of me. My father's life was expiring soon. What's more was he was acutely aware of it, which made things all the more real. More pressing.

His hand slid from my arm and flopped loosely to his side before he disappeared around the corner to his room. I snuck off as quietly as I could, hiding away in my own place of desolation, eventually falling asleep.

Chapter 9

It was a cold morning, the air stiff with threatening storm clouds as I pulled my car into the clinic parking lot. I had back-to-back appointments for the first three hours of the morning, and then some farm calls to do with Doc. But it was difficult for me to focus as last night's tumultuous events crashed through my mind like a DVD stuck on repeat.

I could only imagine how pissed Cassidy was, seeing as how I'd up and just left him sitting at the dinner table. A twinge of guilt flooded through me. Neither of my parents were awake this morning when I left for work, so the scolding from my mother would come tonight. A scolding I was not looking forward to. Then there was the matter of Nancy and Jeb. I owed all three dinner guests a solid apology, but wasn't sure where to begin.

The bell tinkled as I walked in and found both receptionists sitting at the front desk, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. My look this morning was disheveled and messy. Not only had I forgotten my usual mascara that I typically slapped on, but my hair had not been cooperative, so it was pulled into some frizzy bun on the top of my head. On top of all of that, while eating toast for breakfast, some of the red jam had slid off and plopped onto the front of my cream hoodie. A stain I hadn't noticed until halfway here, meaning there was no chance of changing.

Luckily, I could just take it off and wear the tight, navy blue long-sleeved T-shirt under my white coat today. But it didn't mean I felt any more put together, in fact, that would reveal the lack of womanly curves that I hated so much. One of the excuses an ex had used to justify his cheating.

"Woah. Someone's had a rough morning," Carly said, her hair neatly curled in perfect beach waves.

"That's the understatement of a lifetime," I muttered and pushed my way through the door towards my office. It wasn't like me to give the girls such a cold greeting, but today was a day.

Luckily, my first two appointments went smoothly, routine vaccinations for the two sweetest puppies. I was seated in my office with a pen between my teeth, filling out charts on the computer waiting for my next patient, when a knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” I said, attempting to not spew the pen from my teeth.

Carly’s young face popped around the corner as she hesitantly entered my office, which looked much cozier now that it had become swamped with pictures and client sheets. Plus, many of my textbooks and articles that I consistently referred to filled the empty corners.

“Hey, Doc Mayn,” she said, a cautious smile caressing her face.

“Hey Carly. Sorry about earlier!” I quickly replied with a grin, and pulled the pen from my mouth. “What’s up?”

She sighed, stepping in like normal as the tension slithered away. “You have a phone call on line two. It was disappointing to see Duke on the caller ID and it not be Cassidy,” she grumbled.

“What do you mean?” I raised a brow

The ID says Weston Duke, but—”

“Thank you!” I interrupted her without thought, wondering what this was about.

She blinked, startled, and then raised a brow as I reached towards the phone.

“Anything else?” I added, silently encouraging her to leave.

“Nope.” She grinned suspiciously, and then shut the door behind her.

I picked up the phone and stared at the blinking light. Weston had called. Why would he be calling? I’d updated him on the heifers yesterday, so it couldn’t be about that...

Clicking the flashing button I waited a second and then spoke, “Hi, Mr. Duke. How can I help you?”

“Hey. I got a situation.” Weston’s powerful voice came through the line with an urgency behind it that wasn’t normal.

“Is everything alright?”

“Nah. Found Eugene munching on some locoweed. Some fencing was down and he’d escaped, only to run right towards a pile of that poisonous—” he muttered a few curse words under his breath, thinking I couldn’t hear, and then returned to a normal volume. “That poisonous plant.”

“How much and for how long?” I asked, ignoring commenting on his language.

“Don’t know how much, but not for more than a few hours,” he answered.

Relief rushed through me, knowing that not much damage could be done in a couple hours of eating locoweed. I assumed Weston knew this too, and an odd feeling bubbled up in my gut.

“I can come out and get some blood to test his levels while you watch for any symptoms. Though, I doubt he ate enough for it to become toxic if it wasn’t for too long,” I replied, trying to reassure him.

“How soon can you get here?” he quickly asked, the urgency and shortness still present.

“I’ve got three more patients to see, and then was supposed to go with Doc on some farm calls, but he can handle those alone. I’ll be out in an hour and a half,” I answered.

“Okay, thanks.” Then the line went dead.

I hung up the phone, curiosity filling me, along with a sense of dread. Once was just a random event, twice is a coincidence that had me thinking there was something more going on. Unless Eugene ended up in a similar area to where the last batch of locoweed was found. The only problem was the fact that Weston and I had cleared that area of the weeds

leftover from the two heifers that had originally been poisoned, so that couldn't be possible.

Something was amiss. Truly wrong. Picking up the pen that I'd set upon the desk, I began spinning it around my fingers. Two separate incidents of locoweed consumption in the middle of November in Montana on the same ranch; locoweed was common in Montana, it enjoyed the mountain environment.

My fingers stopped moving immediately, and I sat up straight in my chair.

While locoweed was common and liked cooler temperatures, there was snow on the ground now. Plus the weeds that we'd found looked to have been placed there, not ripped from frozen ground as if it had been growing in the wild.

I stood from my spinning chair and shoved out of my office, crossing the hallway towards Doc's closed door. Rapping my knuckles quickly on the frame, I danced between my feet, waiting for Doc's weathered face to appear.

The doorknob finally spun and it swung open, revealing a similar layout to my office except with different pictures, different books. It was also crowded with more stuff than mine. Doc ran a wrinkled hand over his hair and smiled at me.

And then it quickly fell from his face as his eyes met mine. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I have a crazy theory," I started, wringing my hands together as his silver brows pulled together.

"Go on." He was curious as to what I had to say.

"You know the two heifers with locoweed poisoning from the Duke Ranch?"

He waved his hand in the air impatiently. "Spit it out."

"It's the middle of November, Doc, with snow covering the ground. The weeds we found looked like they had been pulled from soft soil, not wet frozen dirt. Plus, Weston

just called and said he found Eugene eating some after escaping his pasture, so I'm headed out there in a bit to draw some blood to check his levels. Doc, once is random. But twice?" I paused and watched his face, letting him have some time to come to his own conclusion.

The moment his face fell in shock, I knew he was thinking the same thing as I was. "When you go out, you check every single pasture for more locoweed. Collect what you can and advise Weston to call the livestock agent in town."

I nodded, his reply confirming the crazy theory that was running through my mind.

"Knowing Weston though, he's probably already thought of the very thing you and I are suspicious of. My money has it that the livestock agent already knows, and he's begun moving his cattle into pastures that have been confirmed cleared," Doc continued, leaning against the frame as I tilted my head.

"Doc?" What I wanted to ask was a side note, not entirely related to the cattle issue, and he somehow knew.

"Yes?"

"You've met Weston."

"Of course I've met Weston. I've been the only vet here for twenty years."

I furrowed my brows. "Then why is it that, from what I gather, no one knows who he actually is? Plus there's all these rumors about him being scary?"

Doc chuckled, and then his belly rolled as the chuckle became a full laugh. "Oh the rumors. I've heard so many different things over the years. The Dukes have always kept more to themselves, but the stories they tell about this generation makes me chuckle. Apparently, some believe his face is so mangled that he has to wear a prosthetic to function normally. Others say he's missing limbs. There's even a rumor that he's blind since both eyes were damaged beyond repair."

"Blind?!" I snorted.

“And mute,” he added.

I sighed as the laughter ebbed away. “Why doesn’t he come to town and stop the rumors. Show them that he’s a normal guy?”

Doc sighed. “I think that’s something you’ll have to ask him. Although if I’m being honest, I think he finds some humor in them.”

The door to my right swung open, and Elena popped her head in from the main entrance. “Doc Mayn, your next patient is here!” She smiled as I straightened the white coat around my shoulders.

“I’ll be right there,” I happily replied and she disappeared once more.

“Before you go to the ranch, you should brush your hair,” Doc muttered as I turned away.

I whipped my head back in his direction and scowled. “I’m putting a hat on over it, so it’s fine.”

He laughed, his eyes sparkling, and disappeared back into his office as I ran a hand over my frizzy bun. As long as I didn’t see Cassidy, it shouldn’t matter if my bun was frizzy or not. Honestly, even if I did see him, it wouldn’t matter. I wasn’t trying to impress any of them. Was I?

Chapter 10

The sky was looking even more dismal as I turned off of the main road and onto the crudely plowed Duke Ranch driveway. Yet, despite the darkening gray overcast, I found a peaceful beauty in the snow-covered trees glistening around me. Surrounding the drive, enclosing me in tendrils of frozen charm as I climbed farther towards a realm of hidden perfection.

As I rounded the last corner and emerged upon the pristine landscape of smooth, untouched snow spotted amongst herds of cattle and the row of buildings, I noticed an immense amount of activity. Several throngs of cattle were being slowly driven down towards the homes, pocketing into what I imagined was a safer and warmer section of the ranch to buckle down for winter.

My little car, with the donut tire, still carrying me to my destinations, slid into a spot next to the same dually that had been sitting in my parents' driveway just last night. I put the vehicle into park and took a steady breath, reminding myself that I owed them an apology, but couldn't seek it out. Not right now. The priority would be Eugene and making sure that Weston was taking precautions.

Grabbing the medical bag that I'd stuffed with any necessary equipment I might possibly need from my passenger seat, I stepped out into the bitter cold. The chill bit through my stained sweatshirt that I tugged tighter to my body. Setting the bag on the roof of my car, I dove into the back seat and grabbed the thick, black coat and matching beanie I'd tossed in there earlier this week. As I had told Doc, I just snuggled the hat over my crazy bun, slammed the door closed, grabbed my bag from the roof of the car, and turned around.

And screamed.

Throwing the only weapon I had in my hands forward, the medical bag slammed into the chest of the figure who had silently approached me from behind. Weston caught it with a grunt, and a subtle, crooked smile crossed his face. There was

speckled frost at the tips of his mustache, his large hands covered in those worn yellow gloves. He was sporting a brown Carhartt coat with a hoodie and several layers underneath.

I rolled my eyes and held out a hand. “Can I please have that back?” I asked.

He chuckled. “No.”

“Excuse me?” I shoved my palms against my hips, feeling the cold from the wet ground already seeping through the worn soles of my hiking boots. At least I’d put on some wool tights beneath my cargo pants today.

“You heard me,” he replied and lowered the bag to one side.

“That’s not yours.”

“Then why’d you throw it at me?”

“Why’d you sneak up on me?” I snapped back, staring at his intense turquoise eyes.

“I didn’t.” His smile widened slightly.

“Well, maybe stomp louder next time.”

He grinned and chuckled a little deeper than before. “Razor’s parked over there. Let’s head to Eugene.” Without handing me the bag, he adjusted his usual cowboy hat on his head and walked around me towards the bunkhouse. The same side-by-side we’d journeyed in before was parked just past the entrance to the gate that led to the chutes we’d worked in last time.

I pursed my lips in annoyance, but followed behind Weston. No spurs adorned his boots today, and I couldn’t help but be a little surprised with how quietly such a large man could walk. And the view wasn’t half bad either. He had powerful legs and a wide back with even broader shoulders. He was built like a force to be reckoned with, and I really wondered if he’d taken on an animal once.

But now was not the time for that question as we arrived at the red and black Razor. I pulled open the cold door and climbed in before he set my bag onto my lap and turned

the key over. Gripping the handlebar so I didn't fly around too terribly, we sped off towards wherever it was he was keeping this prized bull.

The engine seemed muffled as we barreled along this sparkling white road. Traversed often by not just tires, but horses as well. I once again felt enchanted by the world around me.

"You don't see this every day," I quietly muttered to myself.

"I do," Weston snarkily replied beside me, and I clicked my tongue.

"Well, I don't. You seem to forget I grew up in L.A.," I casually stated, staring out at the passing wonder.

The Razor slowed as we turned off the beaten path to one that had more hoof prints than tire tracks. "I didn't know you grew up in L.A.," he said and ran a hand over his mustache. "How does a city girl end up becoming a vet, as well as her parents moving to one of the smallest towns in Montana?" he asked, and I glanced his way. It was a good question. One I didn't really have the most satisfying answer to.

"I'm assuming growing up in this world, you've seen the movie *Spirit*? The old DreamWorks animated film?" I asked.

He nodded once. "Obviously. Who hasn't?"

"You'd be surprised." I turned away and watched the trees begin to thin. "Anyway, one day I was home sick from school, and my mom let me pick out one of the new DVDs she'd bought from the clearance bin at the store. I put them all into a bucket and picked one blind. It was *Spirit*. From that moment on, I became obsessed with animals. My parents adopted a dog from the shelter for us when I was in middle school, and I spent my entire free time training her. One day I came home to find her vomiting and seizing on the floor. Turned out she had cancer. It was on the day she passed that I

told everyone I would become a veterinarian so no other animal had to suffer the way Belle did.”

The trees fell back and a large empty field with a few groupings of pines scattered throughout emerged in front of me. Off to the right side was a beautiful, natural looking stone wall that shone with untouched snow. Untouched except for in the middle, there were carefully placed boulders that created a makeshift staircase.

Rising above the retaining wall, extending in the distance at the end of the trodden footpath, stood a delicate but magnificent cabin home. Quaint, but impeccable.

“That’s your house, isn’t it?” I gasped, pointing at the log cabin with a porch stretching in front. Snow dripped from the green, metal roof, freezing into pointed icicles.

“Yep. I had the older cows here this morning, but I’ve shifted them into a lower pasture where I’ll push the first time pregnant heifers to join them. So, I brought Eugene to his winter home,” Weston replied, the Razor rocking as he stepped out.

I pushed open the door and hopped into the snowy embankment that rose above my boot. “Where is he?” I trudged around the front of the vehicle, the moisture soaking into the hem of my pants. My ankles were already beginning to turn numb.

Weston nodded towards the corner on our right. “I got him behind some panels happily munching on fresh hay over yonder.” He immediately began taking massive strides through the snow towards the metal gate. For every one step of his, it took me at least four shuffling pushes to cover the same amount of ground. I tried to hop between his footprints, but kept sliding and nearly crashed to the ground. So I went back to making my own path.

Within two minutes, he’d walked through the gate and was putting more distance between me and him as I was panting and fighting the snow that was rising higher and higher. Finally, I arrived at the entrance with the wet, dense

frozen water up to my calves. Leaning against the cold, copper railing, I paused to catch my breath.

“Mr. Duke!” I wheezed, not loud enough.

“Mr. Duke!” I shouted once more, this time my voice carried to his ears, causing him to pause.

His head swiveled to both sides before he turned his whole body around.

“Will you slow down? My short legs can’t keep up!” If it wasn’t embarrassing enough already having thrown my bag at him earlier, he smiled so widely at the sight before him, I could see teeth.

“Stop it,” I grumbled, feeling myself unable to stop the smile that was twitching at the corner of my lips.

And he actually laughed. An oddly beautiful sound, though it was brief, as he started walking my way.

When he finally reached where I was standing, I spoke again. “Why can’t we drive all the way in?”

“Snow’s too deep, and I don’t want ruts in my pasture. It’ll kill all the good grass that comes back in the spring,” he answered, making me groan.

“I barely made it all the way over here without dying and you’re telling me—”

Before I was able to finish my sentence, Weston reached forward and scooped me up, throwing me over his shoulder. I was too stunned to scream, too shocked to fight him as he began trudging back through the pathway that he’d previously made. Hanging upside down, I stared at his back as he walked forward, the snow barely seemed to hinder him.

Even with the layers of clothing he had on, I could feel his body ripple with every effortless step. His entire life had been spent etching out muscles and power, built for a life to deal with animals of a large caliber. They were bred for size and mass. Yet, Weston was carved to match them. I weighed nothing to him as he covered ground without so much as his heart rate increasing.

Large fingers were latched onto my thigh from his right hand, holding me gently but tightly to his body as my stomach draped over his thick shoulder. The entirety of his well-muscled arm wrapped around both of my legs and suddenly, while his heartbeat was remaining steady, mine began racing.

The warmth from his body was also calming which began to balance out the shock that had sent my pulse into a frenzy. This felt comfortable. Being this close to him wasn't scary, but peaceful and exciting all at once. It didn't come as a surprise that he smelled much like the forest as well.

Finally, as the shock wore off, I relaxed farther into his hold and felt all of the blood rushing to my head.

"Mr. Duke?" my voice cracked as I said his name.

"Weston," he firmly replied as my vision began to spin. I paused, despite how uncomfortable things were becoming as we passed around a thick grouping of pine trees.

"Weston," I began, my voice a little softer, and I felt him shudder beneath my body. "All of the blood is going to my head. Do you think you could carry me not upside down?"

He chuckled quietly as we emerged from around the pine trees, and he paused. My feet suddenly touched the ground, the snow not quite as deep here with the dense branches sheltering the ground. Weston stepped in front of me and squatted down, reaching behind him.

"Climb on." He wiggled his fingers, though I hesitated.

Something felt a little different this time, or maybe it had felt a little different the entire time. Being that close to him, being able to feel the way his body moved had set my heart racing, even if the comfort of his frame had also eventually calmed it down.

"Miss Tenley. Eugene is waiting for us," Weston spoke again.

I shook my head. Just two friends, walking out to check on a bull because one of those friends was a vet and the other owned the animal. That's all this was.

I slung my arms around his brawny neck, the medical bag tapping against his chest before he stood up with ease. Slipping my legs around his waist, he tucked his hands around my thighs while I settled in against his back as he began walking again. My eyes involuntarily closed as I pressed my cheek tighter against his coat with a deep inhale. He smelled so wonderful, like right after a big Thanksgiving meal where everyone was breaking out their Christmas trees.

It made me wonder if my parents used real Christmas trees instead of the fake ones now that they lived somewhere that had access to beautiful pines. I'd always dreamt of going and cutting down a real tree, and the amazing smell the house would be filled with. Oh how lovely that would be mixed with that leftover turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie from the best meal. Then the nap that always came after while the men watched some football.

This would be my first Thanksgiving with my family in four years. I'd never been able to go home during vet school, and I felt a small twinge of gratitude that I would at least have one last Thanksgiving with my dad around, in a place that was quickly growing on me.

I was so lost in thought that I hadn't noticed that Weston had stopped walking. My cheek so deeply pressed into his back that the lack of movement had gone unnoticed. It wasn't until I felt the vibrations from his voice did I realize what was happening.

"Miss Tenley, look up," Weston softly said.

I blinked, prying my face away from his warmth and glanced over his shoulder. An audible gasp left my thick lips as I stared at the beast in front of me. Probably the most beautiful angus bull I'd ever seen munched lazily on some hay. The thickest neck with a large hump, and the sleekest, shiniest black coat lay upon a chiseled specimen. Plus quite a sizable pair of gonads that bull had on him as well.

Slithering down from Weston's back, I felt an odd chill brush upon my skin the moment his touch left my legs despite the layers of clothing between us. Walking to the side of the

man that had toted me across half the pasture, I stopped and stared at the bull, completely unaware that I'd mindlessly pressed my side directly up against his body.

He stiffened for a moment, the thudding of both our hearts echoing across the empty pasture. I was no longer alone in the racing of my pulse. My eyes slipped away from the bull who'd raised his head to watch us and shifted towards the towering man beside me. He was already gazing at me, strong brows set above those intense eyes. That scar that ran deeply across his cheek was paler than usual from the cold and pulled tight.

Everything fell still. Not a soul dared to move, not a single crispy, cherry leaf left clinging to a branch dared to flutter across the breeze that had become silent. The world that was spinning so quickly, jumping forward, paused in its very movement, holding its very breath. My chest rose in silent whispers, delicate wings brushing against my stomach.

Slowly, he blinked. Thick, dark lashes flickering from my eyes then across my body. I immediately wished I'd taken Doc up on his reminder to brush my hair. Yet he didn't look away when they rested upon my emerald eyes once more.

His subtle, crooked smile caressed his lips.

And that moment was seared upon my memory forever.

Eugene suddenly brayed, snapping Weston and I out of whatever stupor there had been. We both quickly inhaled and looked towards the bull as the world resumed. The wind began to howl, the leaves rustled, pine trees danced as the snow swirled into the air once more.

Weston cleared his throat and climbed around the side of the pen. Eugene didn't spare him half a glance as he moved the green panel closer and closer, creating a small chute without needing an actual one.

I furrowed my brows. "And if that massive bull decides he wants out, what do you think you and that panel are going to do? Stop him?"

Weston chuckled. “Just come draw some blood. Eugene doesn’t care,” he answered and waved a hand towards the bull.

I hesitantly pulled out my necessary equipment and shuffled slowly through the snow. I was doing my best not to trip while purposefully not looking at Weston’s face, knowing full well the grin he was holding back.

But he was right. Drawing blood on this massive bull was easier than drawing it on most of the dogs and cats I’d done it on. Honestly, it was easier than practically every animal I’d ever drawn blood on. Once I had what I needed and it was properly stowed away, Weston moved the panel from Eugene’s side and set it up against the fence.

“I’ll come get that later. I’ve already got all of the locoweed I found where Eugene was in a big bag down at the barn,” Weston said, walking back my way as I picked up my bag from the snowy ground.

“Weston, I need to talk to you about a thought I had.” I slung my arms around his shoulders once more as he crouched down in front of me.

“Go on,” he said, standing up and beginning to journey back towards the Razor. A fresh snowflake settled against his hat, glistening thick and brightly upon the black background. This time I settled my chin on top of his shoulder so I could speak to him easier. It felt so comfortable, and he smelled so nice as he walked forward.

“I don’t think this locoweed stuff is an accident,” I started, and he inhaled deeply.

“I agree. Called the livestock agent after calling you, he’s gonna come up tomorrow. Got everyone moved around except, like I already said, I’ll move the heifers in with the older cows after you come out for the deworming. Later than normal, but won’t be a biggie, I just haven’t had time like normal so your help is appreciated. I also rode along all the fences today and they all look intact so hopefully no other cows will escape,” he answered as I placed my left cheek

against his shoulder so I could look at his face better, or I guess it was his neck.

“I’ve never ridden a horse before,” I replied having latched onto his comment about riding the fence line.

The right side of his face lifted in a soft smile. “I figured, which is why we brought the Razor.”

Snow was now quickly falling, adding a thin layer to the path we were following back. “When did you first learn to ride?” I asked, watching the snowflakes settle against his mustache and then quickly melt a second later.

“I was practically born in a saddle. My mom barely rides anymore now that she’s had two hip replacements, and my parents are technically retired, but yeah. I’m pretty sure I learned to ride before I walked. They would strap us kids in the saddle on our own horses, pretty much saying don’t die, and off we’d go.” He chuckled, the corners of his eyes crinkling with the joy from the memory.

“Do you ride every day?”

“Of course. My mare needs her exercise.”

“You have a mare? Aren’t they supposed to be moody and sassy and all of that.”

He tipped his head down towards the ground. “Exactly why I like ‘em.” A mischievous smile played across his lips, and I felt those same wings dance within my stomach.

Tucking my chin tighter into his shoulder as the wind picked up, I watched him wade carefully through the frozen tundra for a moment. Comfortable silence settled between us as the sky darkened, and the snowfall rapidly increased in intensity. It wasn’t just that the snowflakes were beginning to briskly crash against the ground that truly worried me, but the fact that the wind was also becoming incredibly forceful. Squalls rose out of the blue, and I could feel Weston fighting against it to stay upright.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew across the pasture. He stumbled to the right, barely catching himself with his hand and arm against a group of pine trees we’d been carefully

traversing. A couple curse words escaped his mouth as he glanced at the hand that had caught us. I almost laughed at his reaction until I saw what he was staring at.

A thick chunk of wood was embedded into the side of his forearm. Stabbed through the sleeve of his coat and into his skin. How deep the wound went, I had no idea, but it looked painful. He dropped the other hand from around my leg, gripping the edge of the slab.

“Don’t!” I shouted as he went to pull it out. He paused as I clung to his neck with my arms and gripped his waist tightly with my legs.

“Why not?”

“So you don’t possibly bleed out, dummy. I know it’s just your arm, but that’s a thick chunk of wood and you don’t know if it cut something important or how deep it is.” I replied as he dropped his hand from around the chunk.

“Well, it hurts like some bad words I won’t say,” he grumbled.

“Well, let me take a look at it,” I quickly said and attempted to scramble off of his back. “Maybe I can tie something around it to stop the bleeding and—” I paused as he quickly tucked his good arm beneath my body again and pressed me tighter against his back.

“If we stop now, we will get caught in this storm,” he sharply stated as the wind howled even harder and snow crashed around us. I scanned the vicinity and realized I could no longer see the Razor, nor Weston’s house. Eugene was nowhere in sight either.

Within a matter of minutes, our casual excursion had turned deadly.

“Weston.” Fear laced my voice, and I knew he heard it.

We were already caught in the storm.

“First, Eugene has probably already made his way back to the run-in shelter farther down the pasture. It’s in a pocket of warm air and has all the feed and water he could dream of

with a heater in the water so it doesn't ice over, okay?" he began, taking a step forward after retucking his injured arm under my leg with a slight wince.

"Okay," I whispered, shoving my face fully against his neck. He knew this area better than I did, so despite my worry for his wound, I had to trust him.

"Second, remember, I was born and raised here so I know this place like the back of my hand. I know where we are. I'm going to turn and head towards my house, okay? We will hunker down inside until the storm passes." He shifted the direction we were moving while I nodded against his neck. The wind howled in my ears as he ducked his head and shoved forward.

This was going to be okay. Everything was going to be okay. We were right next to his home. It had just been up a short walkway near where we'd gone to find Eugene. I took another deep breath, settling in against the warmth of his neck, his skin, not caring how intimate of a spot this might be. He didn't say a word either as the snow began to seep through my thick coat.

A coat that I'd brought with me from Colorado where I'd been for vet school. While it had been too warm there, it was no longer doing the job here. I shivered, trying to shove myself closer into Weston as I felt him take a slight step upwards. And again. And again.

He was climbing stairs. Several more shaky steps, the incline decreased to a gradual slope as the wind beat even harder against where we were going. I didn't even chance opening my eyes or moving myself away from him. My back was becoming numb as the moisture combined with the bitter wind bit through my layers. The feeling had nearly left my legs as my pants were practically soaked with the snow and icy blow.

"Just a little farther, Miss Tenley," Weston shouted above the gust that crashed against us. My senseless fingers gripped the medical bag as tightly as I could as he trudged

forward. I nodded against him, hoping that we would make it to his home without any further mishaps.

Just a little farther.

Chapter 11

The door crashed open as we literally fell into his home. Still clinging to his back, he shoved the door closed with his foot, and I rolled off, splaying my limbs wide. I sighed in relief as my eyes met the simple ceiling and trailed along the log wall to my right in this small entrance way then rested upon a beautiful oil painting of a cowboy and his bay horse. The pair seemed to be wandering up a stunning hillside, the sun just breaking the horizon and casting a soft yellow and orange hue.

Below the painting was a row of cowboy hats, both felt and straw, hung on repurposed horseshoes. Lastly, resting upon the floor was a simple bench, boots tucked beneath it in a neat row. Rolling my head to the left, Weston had already pushed himself off of the floor and was removing his boots with his one uninjured arm. Beyond him was a simple rustic kitchen with black appliances that were spotless. The island was placed between the front wall and dining table at the far end of the room, a door splitting the two that let out onto what had to be some kind of porch.

Sturdy and unlike anything I'd seen before, four chairs surrounded a table with a large arched window on both the opposite wall from the front door and the adjacent wall to the kitchen. I could imagine that such a view was absolutely incredible normally, while right now all I saw was white.

Standing up, I glanced towards the very wall that held that beautiful painting. At the end of the bench, a door was ajar, revealing a simple half bathroom and beyond that was a staircase leading to the basement. Surrounding a stone fireplace were two coffee colored leather recliners and matching couches on either side. Not a television in sight in the sitting room. An intricate rug spread beneath the furniture bringing color into a neutrally dominated space. More paintings were hung upon the walls, and on the mantle of the fireplace were framed pictures that I desired to get a closer look at.

Despite the simplistic beauty of it all, that wasn't what shocked me. Despite the fact that no matter what I could imagine, this would've never been what I'd pictured in my head for Weston's home. None of that was the top surprising factor.

"Woah," I breathed out as Weston's feet padded across the floor towards his kitchen.

His hat was already nicely hung up, gloves slung over the tops of his boots that were placed in their precise location.

"Not what you were expecting?" he asked, and I plopped down on the bench to undo my frozen laces that were slowly defrosting.

"Uh, no. Not really." I chuckled, pulling off the first soaked shoe with a slurping sound.

"Why not?" Weston raised his brows at me, his black hair wet with a ring from the hat and was sticking slightly to his forehead.

I shrugged my shoulders, pulling the next shoe off and trying to find a place for them that wouldn't cause a mess. "You live alone, in the middle of the woods. I expected something..." My voice trailed off.

"Messier?" His blue eyes shifted towards me as he stopped at the kitchen island. My medical bag was in one hand, and he plopped it onto the countertop.

I grimaced, admitting that I agreed.

"I'm not some savage, you know." He unzipped his coat and began to slowly shrug it off.

"I know that. But you don't get out very often, so much so that people think you're a drifter who comes into town to the feed store from time to time. I guess I just expected something a little rougher around the edges."

He chuckled, finally wriggling his one arm free as I let my coat slip off and laid it over the bench; my stained hoodie was also wet from our excursion. I paused, watching his careful movement to avoid the wood still stuck in his arm. My

shock from his organized home stopped me from rushing over towards him to help; I didn't want to leave a mess in a place that he kept so clean.

“Ah, so that's what they think of me right now,” he remarked lightheartedly, snapping me from my thoughts.

“At least the people at the feed store do,” I replied, pulling the hoodie off over my head and my beanie along with it, revealing the frizzy, now quite damp mess that I called hair. “Wait, you don't seem surprised.”

Weston leaned against the counter and watched me gently lay both the hoodie and beanie on top of the wet coat, his eyes quickly raking over my body. “There's a new story all the time.”

“You could set it straight once and for all you know.”

“Why?” he asked as I shoved my hands in my pockets and walked towards him, grimacing at the wet trail I was leaving. “It's always entertaining to hear people talk about the newest update I didn't even know about myself.”

“They don't bother you?” I placed both my elbows upon the light brown granite countertop.

“Not anymore.” He offered me a soft smile, and I tilted my head, my bun flopping to the side and causing my neck to twitch. A low chuckle escaped his lips. I stared at his intense ocean eyes, watching them flash with an acceptance of sorrow.

“But they used to,” I whispered, gently sliding my fingers together and offering him an opening of sympathy.

He nodded. “I used to go to town all the time, especially after I got my driver's license. Despite being homeschooled, I had a large group of friends, and we would all hang out at the diner or do stupid teenage stuff together. Honestly, I was a lot like Cassidy before...” He paused, his eyes shifting towards the blanket white window beside the dining table. “Before *it* happened.”

Weston looked back at me, waiting to see if I understood. And I did. He was talking about whatever caused the scar that ran thick down his left cheek.

“Anyway, after that, the first time I went to town everything was different. Rumors had already started to spread about me being deformed and scary looking.” His voice trailed off once more. I watched as his eyes shifted to the piece of wood embedded in his arm, having pierced through thick layers. Despite what I assumed was probably some intense pain, he seemed pretty numb to it. But then again, maybe whatever had caused that scar was a pain so extreme, not much phased him anymore.

“I don’t think you’re scary looking,” I replied, and a half smile spread across his lips as his fingers wrapped around the piece of wood.

“Eh, it’s really no big deal what they say anyway.” Suddenly he tightened his grip, and I knew what he was about to do.

“STOP!” I shrieked and he paused. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m home, and I want it out,” he nonchalantly replied.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, reprimanding him, and he chuckled again. “And who’s going to stitch it up? It’s not like you’re a doctor so let’s bind it with—”

“No, but you are,” he cut me off and jerked on the wood, ripping it clean from his arm. Immediately, I slammed a hand over the wound as he dropped the chunk on top of the table. A large, calloused hand draped upon mine, adding more pressure to the wound that was slowly seeping blood.

His hand.

Weston’s palm practically swallowed mine, and I stared at it. Veins ran thick through his wrists and towards his fingers. Wings brushed against my stomach wall as my heart raced in my chest. It had been a long time since I’d touched a man’s hand. Since I’d had a man touch my own. Even if this man was simply a friend.

Time resumed as the palm of my hand became damp from the blood. “Weston, I am a doctor of animals, not people.

I don't think I can sew it up all nice and pretty. It will leave a nasty scar."

"Wouldn't be the first one." He winked at me as he softened his voice. "You've got this."

He gazed at me with those intense blue eyes, as if he was saying he trusted me. My shoulders sagged as I closed my eyes. It was either let it bleed out and become infected, or sew it up. There were no other options. Weston slowly lifted his hand from mine, the warmth of his touch leaving a cold emptiness in its wake. We shuffled towards the bar stools. I sat down, opening my medical bag as he pulled off his last layers of warm clothes, leaving him in nothing but a dark blue, long-sleeved T-shirt like me.

"You can ask me anything you want, you know. It won't bother me," he said, laying his right arm onto the kitchen island and sliding up the sleeve. I swung to face him, shaking my head at how unsterile this environment was.

Stitches. On his kitchen counter.

Drumming his fingers against the countertop, the muscles danced across his thick forearm while I pulled my legs under my bum to make myself taller. Humor sparkled in his eyes as he bent his elbow to expose the outside of his arm where the wound was in my direction.

Blood dripped onto the counter as I searched through my bag for some gauze and disinfectant. "Why don't you tell people who you are when you hear them talking about you? You could have a social life again," I asked, beginning to clean up around the wound so I could start stitching him up.

"That's really what you want to ask? Not how it happened? Or find out if the stories are true?" He didn't even flinch as the needle made its first pass through his skin. I wished I had something to numb him with.

"I mean, I am curious if you want to share, but you don't have to." Obviously, I wanted to know what happened, but I was more confused why he didn't care about being so alone.

Loneliness was terrifying to me. Something that I dreaded, knowing it was coming sooner rather than later. Once my father was gone, it would only be a matter of time before my mom also eventually died. She and him were like yin and yang, so close that the moment this cancer takes him, she will die of a broken heart within a matter of months. Leaving me absolutely alone.

I could feel his gaze burning into me as I tied off another stitch.

And another.

“I don’t get you,” he finally muttered.

“Why not?” I replied and continued to slowly stitch up the wound. Luckily, all of his clothing had made it so the wood hadn’t been able to pierce too deeply into his arm. Just the first few layers of skin were all, despite the amount of blood that I had cleaned up.

“When people have figured out who I am, that’s always the first thing they want to know. But not you.”

I tied off the last suture and taped a bandage on top. “Now, do I also need to give the patient a cone, or will he remember to not lick at it?”

A mischievous smile erupted on his face as I looked up from his arm. Weston tugged his sleeve back down to his wrist and shook his head. “This wound is not something on my list of things I’d like to lick.”

“That’s what she said,” I snorted out, while cleaning up my equipment and then froze halfway zipping up the bag. It was deathly silent between him and I, and embarrassment didn’t come close to describing what I was feeling. Unable to look at Weston beside me, unable to move. That immature joke that dated me hung stiff into the air.

Weston suddenly sucked in his bottom lip and a chuckle escaped his chest. That same, deep laughter that sounded so delightful danced through the air. Slowly, I finally allowed myself to breathe, though my cheeks flamed red-hot with embarrassment. The laughter that rumbled deep in his

chest washed a little of that embarrassment away as I finally finished putting everything back in its rightful place.

I swung my head to face Weston as he immediately went quiet and cleared his throat, pretending that he hadn't just laughed at my immature joke.

"I'm so sorry." I grimaced and he grinned widely, the edges of his eyes crinkling.

"Why—" He cleared his throat again.

"Why are you—" He closed his mouth, stopping the second wave of laughter that was rising again.

"Don't apologize." He inhaled deeply and regained his composure. "Though I did not expect you to ever say something like that."

I cracked a less embarrassed smile and opened my mouth to speak, just as a pounding sounded on the front door.

Seriousness swooped into the room, blanketing over any lightheartedness that was left.

Another round of knocking set a thick silence upon us. Weston slowly stood up, his hand slinking to his waistband where I noticed for the first time ever a handgun was holstered. Something I assumed he carried with him almost all the time, as there was a faded impression where it sat.

Knocking sounded once more as Weston arrived at the front door, and his fingers tightened around the knob. Who in their right mind would be all the way up here in this storm? One last glance towards me, he threw open the door, ripping the weapon from its holster.

And then it was immediately returned as both Weston and I stared in shock at the figure standing in the doorway.

Chapter 12

A small, freckled boy with bright, rosy-crimson cheeks and nose stood shaking and wet in the doorway. His cowboy hat gripped between his fingers with a hood pulled over his curly, dark red hair. Big blue eyes stared up at Weston, fright covering his soft, boyish features.

Suddenly, Weston's hands wrapped around the boy's shoulders, and he ripped the kid around into the house, kicking the door closed.

"What are you doing?!" Weston yelled as the boy stomped off the snow from his clothing in the entranceway. A wet pair of jeans over boots that were soaked so badly you could hear an audible squish of moisture with every step.

"Your mother is going to kill me when she finds out you're here. Does she even *know* you're here?" he snarled again, helping the boy pull off his wet coat and boots.

The boy shook his head. "I heard you talking earlier to Uncle Cassidy about the vet coming out to check on Eugene after you found that poison stuff. So when she arrived, I followed along wanting to watch." His teeth clacked as he spoke, frozen stiff.

"Keaton, did you walk this entire way?" Weston asked, crouching down in front of the boy who now wore only his wet jeans and a less wet sweatshirt. The boy nodded. "Does maybe your dad know you're here?"

"No. I didn't think it would be necessary to tell him or Mom." he mumbled, knowing he did something wrong.

"Well, go call your mom. I may be her big brother, but she will kick the living tar out of me if she thinks I got you in some sort of trouble." Weston placed a hand on the back of Keaton's head, pushing him towards the sitting room. That's when I saw a landline phone with an actual cord hung against the wall near the fireplace.

Glancing towards Weston who clenched his jaw and crossed his arms in front of his chest, I blinked in surprise. “Does that thing still work?” I asked, and Weston’s blue eyes shifted to me as Keaton pulled the white phone down from the wall.

“Only thing that will up here. Cell phones don’t work this far up the mountain, even without a storm,” Weston replied and walked my way, once again joining me on a stool at the island. Keaton began speaking into the phone, twisting the cord around his fingers.

“So, his mom is your sister?”

Weston nodded. “The red hair comes from his dad.”

“I heard that the only reason he married your sister was to be able to work here,” I replied, and Weston shook his head with a crooked smile.

“Pearl married my best friend, Cash. He’d already been working for me when Pearl came home from college and she realized that he wasn’t that bad of a looker,” Weston replied as Keaton hung up the phone and turned to face the two of us.

“Mom’s mad, but grateful I’m safe,” he muttered, shuffling this way.

“Could I borrow the phone to call my parents?” I asked Weston, who nodded yes and pushed himself off of the stool.

“How ‘bout we cook something for dinner?” he asked Keaton, who grinned as they headed towards the fridge while I made my way to the phone. Realizing that I was stuck here until the storm passed, I felt I should let my parents know so they wouldn’t worry.

The dial tone was loud as I stuck it against my ear and typed my mom’s number into the phone. It only rang twice before a frantic “hello” came through the line.

“Hey, Mama.” I said and a gasp came from her.

“Charlie! It’s Tenley,” my mom shouted away from the receiver before returning to me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I was at the Duke ranch checking a bull when the storm hit. I’ll be here until it clears, but I’m safe. Inside,” I replied. “How are you and Daddy?”

“You’re at the Duke Ranch? I thought after the disaster dinner date you wouldn’t want to see Cassidy again.”

“So, it was a date!” I hissed in annoyance, and she sighed.

“Tenley, I can’t have you end up alone.”

I gripped the cord tighter and took a deep breath. Now was not the time to be upset at her, she loved me and cared about me. The conversation about all of that could come later. So, I ignored her comment and changed the subject.

“Are you and Dad alright? How’s Dad doing?”

“Today is a better day for him. We are safe and all hunkered down. It’s not that bad down here at all, and the plows will have the roads cleared easily once the storm ends,” she answered, her voice light and calm.

“Love you, and give Daddy my love, too. I’ll be home as soon as possible,” I said.

“Love you, too, sweetie. Be safe!”

We said our goodbyes, and I hung up the phone. Turning around, I found Weston and Keaton cooking up what looked like a delicious cowboy stew and chatting comfortably. It was endearing watching someone who came off a little hard to be so soft with his nephew. As I neared the two of them, I paused, shocked with what I overheard.

“Why is Doctor Mayn here with you and not Cassidy?” Keaton asked.

“Why would she be with Cassidy?” Weston stirred the pot that steam escaped from, allowing the most delicious aroma to fill the air.

“Because of the date I heard him and Grandma talking about.” Keaton dropped some onions into the stew.

“Date?”

“Yeah. Grandma and Grandpa went to Doc Mayn’s parents’ house with Cassidy last night for dinner. I’d wondered why Cassidy had dressed up all fancy,” Keaton answered.

Weston gripped the ladle a little tighter, but he didn’t answer. Silence fell between the two for a moment, and I stepped into the kitchen.

My offer to help was denied, not by Weston, but by Keaton. Weston refused to look at me, but I was confused as to why he was so upset. Being friends didn’t mean he had any right to me, if we could even call each other friends. It hadn’t ever really been discussed, he’d just ended up one of those people I felt comfortable around and wanted to be around. One of the few people I’d been able to meet, despite my insane schedule and everything happening with my father, that made me feel less alone.

It was Keaton and Weston who spoke during dinner. I thanked them both for the delicious meal and complimented them, but Weston barely looked at me. The blanket white snow falling outside didn’t let up as the evening wore on, and the two boys began cleaning up the dishes from dinner. I felt so out of place and slunk away to the living room, plopping myself and my now dry but stiff clothes into the recliner to stare at the pictures on the mantle.

Not a single one had Weston in them. I found a few of Keaton, his parents, tons of Cassidy and another man who looked like a mix of the two brothers I’d met. Even some of a girl I assumed to be Pearl since she looked a lot like Nancy. But not one had Weston.

There was a large family portrait hung upon the rock above the mantle. Standing up, I crept closer, trying to sort through the people in the frame to find him. It took me a minute, but there he was, hidden slightly in the back. He stood a hair taller than everyone else, but not by much, and he had his typical cowboy hat on.

You could see the piercing blue eyes, but a soft shadow fell over the left side of his face. It masked the scar, though it was still slightly discernible. I wished you could see it better;

it gave Weston a rugged look of power and strength. In this picture though, his beard was as thick as his mustache, which covered the end of the scar that ran along his jawline. When I leaned in even closer however, I could see that there was still a thinner patch of hair where the scar was.

It was the only picture of him, and yet it wasn't the man that stood by the sink, laughing with his nephew. The man in this portrait was hidden away, barely smiling with a dark sweater tucked up around his neck. The man in the picture didn't want to be seen, much like the man that seemed to still want to remain invisible in town.

So different from the man who had so clearly laughed at a joke I made that wasn't really that funny. Not the man that had literally carried me through a blizzard and hadn't winced as I sewed up a nasty wound without any anesthetic.

The sink turned off, and the two boys dried their hands. "Go take a shower or something and find some warm, dry clothes in the dresser downstairs," Weston said to Keaton.

Keaton nodded. "Then could we play a game before bed?"

"Bring one up with you," Weston answered, and Keaton grinned before racing down the stairs. Cold, midnight eyes turned towards me, but he didn't walk my way. Instead, he took a deep breath and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Are you going to tell me why you suddenly won't talk to me?" I snapped at him.

He shook his head, clearly frustrated. "You lied." His face had gone blank.

"About what?" I threw my hands into the air.

"It doesn't matter, what does is the fact that you lied."

"I haven't lied about anything!" I stepped away from the mantel.

He threateningly stalked towards me, though remained collected in his cold demeanor. "I remember you saying you don't fancy Cassidy."

“I don’t!”

Weston stopped in front of me, looking down at me with his intense gaze. “But you went on a date with him last night.”

“First off, I didn’t know it was going to happen. Second, why do you care so much?” I jabbed a finger into his chest as he blinked, confused. The anger began to slowly slip away.

“Didn’t know?” he asked, tilting his head.

I sighed. “No. I got home from work exhausted, and your parents were already there with Cassidy.”

“You were set up.” He took a step back as I nodded in agreement.

“Weston, why do you care so much if I went on a date with Cassidy or not?” I asked again.

“I care that you lied to me. Well, didn’t lie, but that... Yeah,” he muttered, running a hand over the back of his neck.

“Weston, I haven’t had a chance to meet a lot of people since moving here. It’s been work from day one. Plus, with my dad, it’s just not in my cards. So the people I have met, the friendships I have made, I value to the extreme. You are my friend. Or at least I’d like to think we are friends, so I wouldn’t lie to you,” I replied, and he closed his eyes briefly, relief filling his features.

“So you really don’t have feelings for Cassidy?” he asked, and I shook my head. “Well, if they do change, just tell me. As your friend, I’d like to know what’s going on in your life, Miss Tenley.”

Weston stepped towards me as the tension left the air. I smiled at him. That confirmation that he valued me in his life the same way I valued him was so reassuring. It made me happy to know that I had a friend, that I had him. He returned my smile, soft and crooked, and his eyes sparkled. Part of me thought how nice it would be to have him as more than a friend.

The phone on the wall began to ring, its shrill screech breaking the soft cocoon we were in. He furrowed his dark brows and walked towards the phone, pulling it from the hook as I plopped down on the couch.

“What?” he said, grumpily.

He paused, and then spoke again. “You checked everywhere else?”

Another pause.

“Alright. When the storm breaks, let’s check again.”

A third pause, and then he thanked whoever it was and hung up the phone.

“So.” He turned to me and sat down on the same couch, throwing his arm over the back and spreading his legs for comfort. I tucked mine under me and faced him as he raised an amused brow at the way I was sitting. “That was Cassidy.”

“Everything okay?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“Cassidy went to check on the cattle before the storm hit too hard. He found a fresh pile of locoweed in with the older cows. The ones that you’re gonna help check tomorrow.”

“Didn’t you just move them there today?”

“Yeah, and normally I’d already have added in the younger, newly-pregnant heifers but we are a bit behind schedule.” He ran a hand over his mustache and frowned. “I have an odd thought that I’m not liking, Tenley.”

“Which would be?”

His eyes flew to the mantle, the wheels turning in his head for a moment before he spoke again. The chill upon his words iced me to my very core and held a threat that made even me a little frightened of him.

“Someone close to me is trying to kill my cattle. Trying to ruin me.”

Chapter 13

I watched Weston, his face pulled tight in determination. He wasn't frustrated or angry because he wanted to hurt someone, but because someone was trying to hurt him and the things he cared for. This would ruin not just him, but his entire family too, if they were successful.

"How else do you explain how they seem to know my routine, where my cattle are going to be and when? Or how to make it seem like an accident that those two heifers walked into some locoweed?" he muttered, and I placed a hand upon his arm.

He flinched from my unexpected contact. I quickly withdrew my hand as his eyes stared at the vacant spot on his arm. He clearly wasn't used to human touch from someone who wasn't family, much less a woman.

"So change up your routine. And only tell your most trusted confidants about the plan," I replied, and he nodded, still staring at the spot on his arm. Gingerly, I returned my hand, and he closed his eyes, almost like he'd forgotten what it felt like to have someone else initiate the touch. To realize only now what he'd been missing.

"I'll have Cassidy and myself check fences and pastures every day. We will rotate who's keeping an eye on things and keep the livestock agent up to date. Tenley, if I'm right, someone at that bunkhouse, or even a family member, could be behind this." He shook his head. "It can't be a family member."

"It's probably not family, Weston. They love this place as much as you do," I answered, running a thumb back and forth over his arm.

He clenched his jaw and nodded, but didn't answer. His eyes drifted over my shoulder once more towards that mantle of pictures and remained there. I let him live in his thoughts, as mine tumbled around my head as well.

Despite my reassurance, I wondered if it was someone from his family, upset that he'd inherited the ranch and not them. Remington actively passed on it, so that practically ruled him out. But Pearl and Cassidy were never offered the ranch since Weston had been next in line—although Cassidy was now foreman, second only to the owner. Rumor had it that Pearl wanted nothing more than to be a housewife, and if that was so, then she couldn't care less about not inheriting the ranch. She lived here with her husband who was also Weston's best friend.

No, it couldn't be family. They eliminated themselves as suspects. So it had to be someone at the bunkhouse. I didn't know who they were, only having worked with them once, but I assumed they were also pretty close to Weston since he let them into his life. They knew who he was outside of the town's rumors, and I could only imagine how hard this was eating at him. Obviously, he valued trust, considering the way he'd exploded at me for a misunderstanding of what he thought was a lie.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs, and Keaton popped his head over the top of the banister, holding UNO. He grinned widely, his hair damp from a shower, and emerged on the main floor wearing pajamas that fit him. I furrowed my brows and glanced at Weston, quickly removing my hand.

"I keep extra clothes in the guest room downstairs for my nieces and nephews." He smiled as Keaton plopped down on the floor, in front of the wooden coffee table.

"The best sleepovers happen at Uncle Weston's house!" Keaton added and pulled the cards from the box.



I had lost horribly, practically every round. They had homemade rules that took me forever to figure out, but it was fun regardless. Weston had the largest smile on his face the entire time, and Keaton never once seemed perturbed by the

unevenness of his grin. They joked like the best of friends, and I found myself watching the way Weston genuinely cared for Keaton to be so endearing and sweet.

Following the two of them down the carpeted stairs that twisted at the bottom, Weston flicked a light switch and the room was illuminated. To the left was another bathroom, a used towel had been plopped on the light beige tile clearly from Keaton. Simple, small, but functional.

The room that had been lit up was a small family room with a sectional that faced the wall that supported the stairs. A TV was placed on top of a dark brown stand, DVDs and an old PlayStation lined the bottom of the exquisite construction. Two doors across from the TV broke up the rectangular shaped room with more beautiful paintings along the walls. At the far side of the room, two large windows let in some light alongside the sliding glass door that emerged onto what I assumed was a snow-covered patio.

“Night, bud,” Weston said, wrapping his arms around Keaton and giving him a big hug.

Keaton spun to me and grinned. “Goodnight, Doc Tenley.” I smiled back before the boy disappeared into the room closest to the bathroom.

Weston faced me and nodded towards the other door. “That’s my room. You can take the bed for the night.” He shoved his hands in his pocket and headed towards the couch.

“Uh, no. This is your home. I can sleep on the couch,” I replied, racing towards the sectional and shoving past him.

“You’re my guest, so you get the bed.” He pulled his hands from his pockets as I plopped onto the couch, and he glared down at me.

“Your house, your bed.” I laid onto my back and stared up at him, grinning like I’d won. But his face told me something different.

His eyes bore into me, deep, piercing to my soul. A stern look on his face, not willing to back down, but not upset

that I was arguing with him. No, he was definitely not upset, but what he was, I didn't know.

“Sit up,” he growled, and I immediately did.

“Good girl,” Weston added and crossed his arms in front of his chest as my heart skipped a beat, and I stared in hungry shock. I was unable to say anything. Unable to do anything, no matter how much I willed my body to. “Now, you'll sleep in the bed, and I won't have any more arguments.”

I watched him for a moment, waiting for my stubbornness to kick in as a look of triumph caressed his features, which snapped my body back into gear. I leaned forward onto my arms and gazed up through my lashes, slowly. “How about we find a compromise? Because you won't be sleeping on the couch either.”

He furrowed his brows. “Woman!” his word seeped in frustration combined with a hint of humor.

“So that's a yes?” I grinned.

“Fine. Ideas?” He plopped himself down on the couch and watched me from the side.

“You could share a bed with Keaton?”

“It's a twin size. You think I'd fit on that by myself?” he replied, raising his brows.

I grimaced. “Yeah, that won't work.” We both sat there in silence for a moment, and then I snapped my fingers. “I got it!”

“Okay?” He turned his head towards me.

“We build a pillow wall between us on your bed. That way it's like we made two separate beds.” I grinned, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

“Alright,” he finally said, his long lashes fluttering back open. Slapping both hands on his knees, he stood, and I followed him into his bedroom. The light illuminated a room that I wasn't entirely unsurprised by. Straight across from me was a large, king-sized bed with a dark caramel quilt spread

over it. Elk decor pillows mixed in with sleeping pillows lined up against the antler-designed headboard.

Two matching nightstands on either side, with simple lamps sitting atop them, were clean and straight. Above the bed was the window, the blinds drawn closed. To the left was a closet, and set up against the wall directly next to me was a dark wooden dresser that pulled the entire room's decor together. On top of the dresser were more pictures and I wandered towards them, hoping to catch a glimpse of Weston in some of them.

Here they all were. He had pictures of him and an older gentleman, posed behind different animals they'd hunted. There were some of him and his father. Him and Cassidy, much younger, holding fish. Or covered in mud beside a four-wheeler. Even pictures of who I assumed was Weston on horseback at a rodeo roping something, or just on a ride.

All of the pictures were of him much younger, without the scar. Not a single one after. It was as if once whatever it was had happened, Weston had stopped existing. Stopped living.

I ran a hand across the top of the dresser and my eyes continued along the walls. On the far side was a door, opened to a nice bathroom. A separate shower on the left side with glass doors that were completely clear. To the right was the tub. Past that was a separate small room for just the toilet, and then the single vanity to the left. Same brown cabinets and beige countertops as the other bathroom.

Simple, effective, and just enough for one person.

I continued past the bathroom and slid my hand along a picture frame. A whole bunch of men and women in military uniforms. Just one picture and so many blurry faces with helmets and sunglasses, I couldn't make any of them out. Then there were a few more beautiful oil paintings as I reached the bed.

The bed where Weston had already constructed a large pillow wall, at least three high and extending the majority of

the length of the mattress. “How’s this?” He extended his arms and grinned in success.

I smiled. “That works.”

“Perfect. I know you don’t have any other clothes, so if you want, you could borrow a shirt and shorts of mine?” he offered.

“That would be nice. Thanks!” I responded.

He quietly made his way towards the dresser. Pulling open the second drawer, he snagged a T-shirt and shorts for me then shut the drawer. I quickly disappeared into the bathroom.

It wasn’t hard to figure out how to use the shower, and I let the hot water run down my naked body. Although I didn’t have my regular shampoo and conditioner, I let the water slip through my hair anyway and borrowed Weston’s. I was about to smell like a man as I emerged from the shower, feeling refreshed. He’d placed a clean towel on the rung beside the shower before I’d undressed, and I began to dry myself off.

This wasn’t the time to linger, so I dried as quickly as I could. Dressing was a slight problem, however. The shirt was more like a nightgown that went way past mid-thigh, but the shorts, on the other hand, no matter how tight I tried to tie them, they wouldn’t stay up.

Eventually I gave up and emerged from the bathroom with my damp hair dangling down to my lower back. Weston glanced up from the book he was reading on the bed, and his eyes widened for a moment before he quickly blinked the shock away.

“Uh. Your shorts are way too big,” I said, feeling my cheeks burn crimson-hot. Though I doubted that’s why he’d been shocked.

He chuckled and placed the book on the end table. He’d chosen the side closest to the door, farthest from the bathroom. Standing from the bed, he walked around the foot of it and stopped in front of me. Sliding the shorts from my grip, he turned to the dresser and pulled open the top drawer, grabbing a pair of boxers.

I shuffled towards the bed and pulled back the quilt and sheets, finding crisp white silk sheets waiting for me to slip into. Closing my eyes, I sunk down into what was probably the most comfortable bed I'd ever laid in. The cool sheets tickled my bare legs and felt like butter against my skin.

Tucking the sheets against my chin, I heard the door click and within a second the shower was running. A wave of exhaustion crashed over me, despite the fact I realized I'd just left my dirty clothes and bra in the bathroom. Normally, I would've been embarrassed, but I was too tired to care. Plus he had a sister, it wouldn't be like he'd never seen a bra before.

Rolling onto my side, I faced the wall and kept my eyes closed.

The shower turned off fairly quickly, and within a few minutes, I heard the knob click again. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I looked up at the bathroom door as it cracked open, but Weston didn't emerge.

"Soooo. Out of habit, I only grabbed some skivvies. The shorts I gave you were my smallest pair and they don't fit me anymore," he began, and I pulled my lips into my teeth, stifling a laugh.

"And?" I teased.

"*And*," he emphasized, "Close your eyes so I can come grab a shirt and shorts without you seeing anything."

"Embarrassed?" I taunted once more.

"I am proportionate in all areas of my body, darling. Embarrassed is not the word I would use," he quickly replied, and my heart stopped for a moment.

I'd heard what he'd said, but I almost couldn't understand what he meant. It seemed too unreal, too 'more than friend' like. No, he was just finding the line of where our friendship was and joking like that didn't hurt.

"Such a shame I have to close my eyes, then," I said, and squeezed them shut.

Nothing. I heard nothing.

“They’re closed, dummy,” I added.

There was another second of silence before I heard the familiar scrape of a wood drawer being pulled open. Fabric shuffled around for a moment, another drawer closed and then opened, more fabric, and then the drawer closed. He was walking back to the bathroom; even if he was so quiet I could barely hear his footsteps, I just knew he was.

And I couldn’t help myself.

My eyes cracked open just as his back disappeared into the bathroom. Thick muscles cascaded every inch of his body, dancing with every slight movement of his frame. Something I’d felt and imagined in my head. It was a quick glimpse, but it left me wanting more. Wanting to see what it was along the left side of his body that had so briefly flashed before my eyes before he’d disappeared.

Sighing, I felt a twinge of guilt for peeking and frustration. It had left me even more intrigued and curious.

Weston emerged just a few moments later, his mustache neatly brushed through and his curly hair was damp, longer on the top, but only by a little bit. He looked clean and classy, and the curls were tighter, more defined from the shower. It was strange seeing him in shorts and a t-shirt though. His legs were definitely much less tanned than his arms and face, but still thickly muscled.

The sleeves of his shirt fell just above his biceps, scrunching slightly and accentuating his hardened body of muscles. Muscles. Not gym muscles, but hard-labor-built strength that I couldn’t help studying. He was not someone I would’ve ever thought would pay me much attention. I was from a completely different world than him, only thrown into his life because my parents moved to Montana four years ago for fresher air and a slower life. Yet here we were.

I also hadn’t known the whirlwind ride it would take me on in the first few weeks of me moving here.

A friendship with someone so powerful, intelligent, and mysterious. Someone who I couldn't figure out, who didn't seem real, yet the imperfections of him made him more real than anyone else.

He walked around the bed, flicked the light switch off, and then climbed in, leaving us in pitch black. My eyes slowly began adjusting as we lay in silence, the pillow wall between us.

“Are you worried?” I whispered into the air, wondering if he was still awake.

Silence.

He must have already fallen asleep, and I shifted towards the stack of pillows, wondering what he looked like while he slept. If maybe his face finally fell into some sort of comfort and relief. Maybe while sleeping, he realized how strong he really was. Maybe while sleeping, he had a life outside of this ranch. Although, I wondered if he truly didn't care about that, if this life was enough for him.

“Yes.” His deep voice pierced through the thick stillness. “I'm worried that if whoever is doing this succeeds in their end goal, it's not just me that will be destroyed by the loss of the cattle, but my entire family. Everyone I love will be ruined by this.”

A true confession, and not one he would willingly admit to. That was a deep secret that rested in his soul, something I wondered how painful it had been to express. I wished I could console him, give him the confidence I had in him, but I didn't know how. There were no words that would quench that flame.

So I drifted to sleep without saying anything more as he did the same.



It was still dark when I woke next. The sun had not risen, yet I was roused from my sleep for some reason. Blinking a few times, I let the room fall into focus. I was facing the pillow wall that had tumbled down. There was only a single pillow between us, no longer stacked three high, and I pushed myself up slightly to get a better view of him.

He looked peaceful. Sprawled on his back, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. The blanket was shoved down towards his waist, bunched above his shorts, and the T-shirt clung tightly to his body. How did he not realize he was such a specimen to behold?

But it wasn't his figure that I studied—it was that scar. Reaching over the pillow that separated us, I extended a finger towards his face. Hesitating for just a moment in the shadow filled room, I hovered above his skin. Another violation if I were to do this, just like peeking earlier.

Yet, my self-control was out the window in another second as I brushed his face, tracing the bumpy scar. His eyes twitched, those dark brows flickered, so I paused my movement but left my finger against his cheek. Waiting for another moment before I resumed tracing, and it was as if he leaned into the touch.

As I continued to draw my finger across his skin, he shifted closer with a soft groan. I reached the end of the scar and withdrew my finger but continued to study him. To have him in my life was truly a blessing.

Then I laid back down on my pillow and fell asleep once more.



It was so warm and soft when I awoke with sunlight blaring through my eyelids that I kept them closed. Reveling in the comfort that I felt wrapped around my body, I snuggled in tighter and inhaled deeply. It smelled so much like that

musky tree scent I'd experienced earlier when Weston had carried me through the snow.

So calming, so consoling. Another deep breath filled my lungs, and then I finally cracked open my eyelids. There he was. Weston's chin was tucked against the top of my head, his arms encircling my body. I smiled softly and wiggled into his chest a little tighter. This was very nice. I couldn't remember the last time I'd awoken so refreshed.

Tucking one leg between his, I scooted as close as I could, feeling him tighten his arms around my body. A soft sigh left his lips. His chest rose higher, and he lifted his chin from my hair. I tilted my head back and met his intense gaze with my green eyes. A lazy smile was upon his face as he blinked a couple times.

"Good morning," he said, his voice deeper and raspier than usual.

"Good morning," I whispered in reply. This I could do again, get so used—

My eyes widened at the exact same time as his.

And we both freaked out.

I ripped my leg from between his as he pulled his arms back and attempted to roll away at the same time as I did. We got caught in the blankets, snapping us back towards each other, and I smacked against his side.

"Ow," I grunted.

"Sorry," he quickly replied as we tried to untangle ourselves from the sheets.

"I think this goes this way," I said, moving part of the sheet up.

"Pull this," he grunted.

"Now slide this towards you." I tugged at the edge of the sheet.

"No, that made it worse," he mumbled as I was pulled on top of him. "Ow, your hips are digging into my thigh."

“Stop being a baby, and turn this way.” I pushed at him as the door swung open.

“GOOD MORNING!” Keaton shouted. “Can we have —”

He froze as Weston stopped trying to pick me up off of him. I swung my head towards the door at the same time as Weston, his hands still around my waist, and the sheets tangled around one leg of mine and his entire torso. My palms were placed onto the bed in front of me, my chest facing Weston’s torso with one leg stretched across his body. He was sitting up, holding me, and staring at the door.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Both Weston and I said at the same time.

Keaton remained in a stupor with his mouth open.

“Keaton, buddy,” Weston said, and Keaton finally blinked. “I’ll make waffles for breakfast.”

Keaton slowly nodded and then fumbled for the doorknob.

“Keaton.” Weston said again as the boy’s small fingers wrapped around the handle. “We had pillows stacked between us and the sheets somehow became tangled in the middle of the night. All we did was sleep, buddy.”

Weston let go of my waist, and I managed to roll over and sat down on the bed, my leg still draped over his torso. He gestured towards the pillows that were thrown all over the bed and floor and then lifted my foot to reveal the sheet wound tightly around it.

“I had that happen once. Though I wasn’t sharing a bed, and it really freaked me out.” Keaton finally said, breaking the silence, though I wasn’t sure if he really believed us.

“My leg is slowly becoming numb, so it’s kind of freaking me out,” I muttered, and Weston shook his head, silencing me.

“Doc Tenley is my friend, buddy, so I’m just trying to help keep her from getting really scared,” Weston addressed the eight-or-nine-year-old kid again.

“Like Dad did when I saw him and mom was caught in their sheets,” he replied, and Weston inhaled sharply.

Blinking a few times in shock, he shook his head and then said, “Yes. Probably like that.”

“Cool. Well, waffles sound good, but I was actually going to ask if you could hook the sleds to the back of the four-wheeler this morning! It’s done snowing and you always do that when we get a big snowfall like this!”

Weston grinned. “Of course! We will be right out!”

Keaton smiled innocently, and then left the room, the door swinging shut behind him. Weston leaned back in relief against the headboard, and I flopped down completely on the bed. That had not just happened. If that kid told anyone what he saw, people could get the wrong idea. Especially depending on the words that he chose to use when describing what he’d seen.

“What was that?” I mumbled, closing my eyes in embarrassment.

Weston chuckled, his fingers tugging at the sheet that was still wound around my leg. “That was the final nail in my coffin from my sister is what that was.” Slowly the pressure began to dissipate from my ankle.

Chapter 14

Wrapping the hair tie around the base of my braid, I tugged at the stiff clothes from yesterday. Weston had already dressed and headed upstairs for breakfast, leaving me to get ready for the morning—morning that was going by so quickly. I didn't look nearly as haggled as yesterday, even the bags under my eyes were non-existent. I wished for my own toiletries, but Weston at least had a decent hairbrush.

Pausing at the base of the stairs, I stared out the large window beside the sliding door. Snow piled halfway up the glass, obstructing my view of the pink sunrise just peeking out upon the mountainside. Something threatened in the air, taunting me with the idea of an adventure. Finally, I climbed the carpeted stairs, laughter reaching my ears as I emerged at the top.

Weston and Keaton were in the kitchen, the young boy sitting on the kitchen island beside a plate that was already stacked high with waffles. "Hey, Doc Tenley!" Keaton said, his smile bright as he dipped a waffle into a bowl of syrup and stuffed the sticky mess in his face.

"Hey," I responded with a smile as Weston plated another waffle.

"You're going to join us sledding right?" Keaton asked, stuffing another bite into his mouth.

"To be honest, I've never been sledding before." I slipped onto a barstool as both Weston and Keaton whipped around to stare at me.

"Like, ever?" Keaton asked, syrup dripping from the waffle he was holding.

"Never," I answered as Weston placed a plate down in front of me.

"She can come right?" Keaton asked, returning his focus to Weston.

“We have cows to check this morning, gotta make sure everyone handled the storm kiddo. Once morning chores are done, of course she can come,” he replied, placing a glass of orange juice on the counter in front of me. Grabbing the syrup bottle from beside Keaton, I drizzled some over the waffles that steamed upon my own plate.

It melted in my mouth, and I moaned lightly, closing my eyes. One of the best waffles I’d ever tasted came the morning after a crazy snowstorm. Cutting another piece with my fork, I quickly stuffed a massive bite into my mouth, suddenly understanding Keaton’s actions earlier.

“I’ll take that as approval, and a silent thanks to the chef,” Weston teased and I nodded, humming an agreement while stuffing another bite in my mouth. He chuckled. “So, you’ll stay for sledding? We could just check the cows this morning while you’re here instead of this afternoon like we’d planned.”

My fork paused halfway up to my mouth in shocking realization. “It’s Friday,” I said, stunned. I’d completely forgotten what day of the week it was.

“Yes?” Weston questioned.

“I have patients today,” I muttered, and the last bite of waffle plopped to my plate. “I am supposed to be at work!” Shoving the seat back from the counter, I stuffed the waffle in my mouth and drained the orange juice all in one gulp.

“Give me a minute, and we will head down the mountain so you can take off,” Weston said, scrambling to clean up. He, too, stuffed an entire waffle into his mouth, while sticking the rest in his fridge and wiping down the countertops.

Keaton hopped down, and we made our way towards the door where I slowly layered myself in now mostly dry clothing.

“Disgusting,” I muttered, brushing at the sticky red jam stain that surely wouldn’t come out ever now.

A chuckle sounded behind me and I spun around while stuffing an arm in my coat. Weston was pulling a vest over his black hoodie and then tucking his arms into his Carhartt. He looked put together as usual, pulling his boots on and tucking them under his crisp wranglers. He tugged on his hat, causing me to tilt my head sideways.

“You kind of look like Doc Holliday, did you know that?” I said as I slid the beanie tighter over my ears.

Weston simply winked and then pulled open the door. Crisp white snow coated the entire world in front of me. Sparkling crisp and clean, bending with the waves of everything around us and thigh deep. Weston snagged a shovel from beside the front door and began pushing snow off of the porch.

Eventually, he dug a pathway down towards the Razor that we could wade through and began brushing the snow off of our transportation that would take us down the mountainside. It took some finessing because of the snow, but eventually I was buckled into the passenger seat, with Keaton jumping in the back, and we were slowly making our way down the hillside.

The snow wasn't quite as deep as we emerged at the bottom of the pastures and sped over towards the main lodge where my car was covered in snow. Though it looked like the cowhands had already taken a plow to the drive, so at least my vehicle wouldn't stay stuck. Things were already lively with cattle braying, and cowboys out riding. Cassidy came sauntering up as Weston put the Razor into park and began updating him on the rounds they'd already made as I walked over to my car.

Slowly, I began pushing snow off of the roof and windshield, attempting to prepare to leave. Keaton made his way towards me, leaning up against the vehicle.

“You make him smile,” Keaton said.

“Sorry?” I replied, shoving the last bit of snow out of the way so I could see while driving.

“Uncle Weston. He’s happy around you and smiles more. He even laughs with you,” Keaton continued.

“He’s a really fun friend, and I’m pretty sure he was like that ‘cause you were there,” I answered, tugging at my frozen door. It crackled and took a couple more nudges before it broke loose and opened.

“He always laughs with me, yeah, but never when strangers are around. Mom says that people see him as some monster, and he doesn’t like scaring people so he keeps to himself. That’s why he refuses to come to parties and things. But not around you.” Keaton pushed himself off of my car.

“Anyway, see you this afternoon!” He waved and suddenly was gone. Just like that, throwing a curveball towards me without a second thought before disappearing.

Tossing my bag into the passenger seat, I leaned against the car. I didn’t understand, couldn’t understand why anyone would have made Weston out to be a monster because of a scar on his face. No matter how it happened, it just didn’t seem to be like him. But there were things in both of us so broken, that maybe together we were helping each other feel whole.

Taking one last longing look at the glistening canvas around me, I smiled. It was so beautiful, like something from the movies, that I let myself soak it all in before I climbed into my car.

A shadow fell over the frame as I went to pull the door closed, and Weston rested one arm along the top, leaning forward.

“No locoweed this morning.” His eyes sparkled.

“That’s good to hear. You should put my number in your phone so if I’m not at the clinic and you find some, you can call me,” I replied, shocked with how easily I had offered something personal, and slyly pleased that I’d made it seem so nonchalant.

He nodded, pulling out his cell and handing it to me. I quickly entered my information and passed him back his

phone.

“Let me know when you’ll be headed this way and I’ll make sure the cattle are ready.” He smiled, bright and crooked. Just like it should be.

“Then we will go sledding?” I added, turning the key over.

He chuckled and winked. “Well, a form of sledding. Be safe.”

Weston pushed away from the car and shut the door for me, stepping back from the vehicle. I slowly made my way from the ranch, sliding more of the way than actually driving.



I called Doc the moment I pulled onto the main road from the Duke ranch to inform him of my situation. Luckily, I made it back to the clinic just in time for my first patient of the day, and being as late as I was saved me from Elena and Carly pestering me as to why my clothes were exactly the same as yesterday’s.

Something shone in Doc’s eyes when I told him I was heading back again this afternoon and why. “You should change into something different before heading back up to the Ranch, Doctor Mayn,” Doc said, pushing open the door to my office as I filled out the last patient form.

“Do I look that bad?” I asked, glancing up from the computer, and Doc shook his head.

“No, just a fresh change of clothes never hurts.” He winked.

I narrowed my gaze, suspicious of what was floating through his head, but ultimately decided to let it go.

“I do want to see my dad as well, so a change of clothes is a good idea.” I sighed, pressing submit on my last form. “Doc?”

“Hm?” He leaned his small frame up against the door. We made an odd pair, him and I. Both of us smaller, yet able to handle ourselves. At least when it came to animal medicine, I was competent. In my personal life, I felt all too lost.

“Thank you by the way. I’ve learned a lot in the past few weeks.” I smiled graciously at him, slinging my white coat over the back of the chair.

“You are way more capable than you give yourself credit for,” he answered and then left me alone.

I slipped out of my office and exited through the back door, not ready to be caught by the two nosy receptionists. I needed as much time with my father as I could get and, maybe more so, time to think.

I could feel the donut on my car wobbling by the time I pulled into my parents’ driveway and my phone buzzed in my pocket. Sliding it out, I saw a message from a number I didn’t have saved. Once I opened it, I knew who it was.

Weston.

Done with everything, so whenever you’re ready Miss Tenley, let me know!

I shot a quick reply letting him know I was stopping at my home for some food, to say hello, and for a change of clothes, then I’d be on my way. The bubbles appeared but no reply came as I entered my home. The smell of freshly baked bread crashed against my nostrils just as the first day I’d moved back. My father sat in his recliner, watching a little bit of television, and his eyes slid my way.

“Hi, sweetheart.” He coughed a few times as I walked towards him.

Pressing my lips against his forehead, I gave him a quick kiss as my mom spoke from the kitchen.

“You’re home early!” She glanced up from the cutting board, clad in an apron with flour speckled across it.

“Just stopping by for a quick change before I have to head back up to the Duke Ranch,” I replied, standing up

straight and unzipping my coat.

“If you leave those up here, I’ll run them through the wash,” my mom said, returning to the cutting board in front of her with a mischievous sparkle in her eye. “I am also glad to see that the disaster dinner hasn’t turned you off from the Duke’s.”

I chuckled and stripped down to my pants and shirt. “It’s work, mom.”

“Why can’t it be more too? Cassidy is a very handsome fellow and an eligible bachelor. His mom and I are great friends, and she thinks you would be perfect together.” She winked, mischievously telling me that she wasn’t as serious about setting me up as she’d previously been.

My soggy socks plopped on top of the pile I’d left for my mom as I placed my hands against my hips with a chuckle. “Mom, we talked about this.”

It was my father sitting beside me who interjected for my mother. “Then why do you smell like a man?” he wheezed out.

My mom dropped the knife, shocked. Her eyes shot up as she squealed. “You do?”

“I was snowed in at the Duke Ranch without my toiletries. Obviously, I am going to smell like a man when I had to use his soap.” I purposefully left out the detail that it was Weston’s. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure why I was avoiding that specific detail, but part of me wondered if it was because I didn’t want them getting the wrong idea about him too. Having them pressure me about Cassidy was more than enough already.

“And now you’re going back.” She clapped her hands in glee while I rolled my eyes and headed towards the stairs.

I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to it. “I know, I know. Just for work,” she teased me, and I smiled. “Well, at least have fun while working!”

“Thanks, Mom,” I replied and quickly disappeared into my bedroom.

Leaning my back against the door as it clicked shut behind me, I inhaled deeply. I really did smell like Weston, and there was a part of me that didn't want to shower and lose that scent. It was calming and comforting, it was familiar. But I did want to give myself a fresh wash after wearing the same musty clothes from yesterday, so I grabbed another pair of thick cargo joggers, and then stared at my shirt options.

Normally, I opted for a baggy sweatshirt that hid my body. The joggers fit like a glove and allowed for flexibility, so they worked with my job. The sweatshirt hid my insecurities and fulfilled the need for something warm. But this time, as I stared at the clothes on the hangers, I hesitated. Weston hadn't looked away when he'd seen me without my sweatshirt yesterday. In fact, he seemed to have even lingered on me for a moment.

Shaking my head, I chuckled to myself. Weston had nothing to do with this odd twinge of confidence that I was beginning to feel. I felt a little more confident and freer simply because I was finally settling into a new place. That was it. That had to be it.

Pushing a few hangers aside, I pulled out a thick, dark green sweater that hugged my frame a little tighter. Not a super nice outfit because I knew it would get dirty due to the nature of my job, but something a little more flattering and feminine.

A quick shower later, my hair was braided back once more, and I had a light layer of mascara across my lashes. Shoving my phone into my back pocket, I snagged another black, winter coat from the hanger, checked the pockets for gloves and a beanie with a pom-pom on top, and headed back up the stairs.

Sitting on the couch, I chatted with my parents for a little bit, listening once more to them pestering me about my love life. I let them and never got angry with them, slowly having understood why they cared so much the more I paid attention to what they were truly saying. Taking into account the loneliness that my mom would soon be experiencing, I couldn't blame them for any of this.

A vibration came from my back pocket, and I slipped my phone out to find a text on my screen from Weston.

I'll be at the clinic in about fifteen minutes. Since you have still neglected to get that tire changed on your car, I can't let you drive it out to the ranch again. Too dangerous.

That was it. No room for discussion or argument. "I need to get going. Love you guys." I said, giving both of them a quick kiss on their cheeks then quickly heading out the door. Tying my still damp hiking boots, I slid into the driver's seat and found Weston's contact. He wasn't allowed to tell me what to do. It was ringing before I turned the engine over.

He answered by the fourth ring. "What?"

"Rude," I replied, and he chuckled.

"Not rude, because I know you're calling to argue with me about me picking you up." His response came with a crackle.

"Obviously. I am perfectly capable of—"

"No. This ain't happening. You've been lucky so far to not be driving when the storms have hit. You keep pushing that, and next time you might find yourself in a ditch. I'll see you in a minute," he sharply replied, and the line went dead.

"Butt-face," I muttered, but wasn't really that upset about it. He wasn't wrong. The spare tire really was a hazard on these roads, and I should be more proactive about getting it changed. A problem though was time—something I didn't have much of outside of work.

Turning off of the road, I pulled into my usual parking spot and killed the engine. The bright blue canvas stretching above me held not a cloud in sight. It had been such a beautiful drive through town, everyone bundled up and wandering through the snowy escape. Winters here were not mild like back in Colorado during vet school or California growing up, and I found myself realizing more and more that I was falling quickly in love with this deadly wonderland.

The door tinkled as I stepped inside the clinic and pushed some hair behind my ear. Carly and Elena stared at me

with large grins on their faces, the lull between appointments giving them ample time to gossip.

Both were wearing bright pink scrubs today and had ponytails, although the styles looked different on each girl because of the stark differences in hair type. Carly was the first one to speak as I leaned against the counter, waiting for Weston.

“So, your schedule says you’re headed back to the Duke Ranch. Can I come with you?” She leaned back in her chair and stars filled her gaze.

I chuckled. “Yes, I’m headed back, but it’s once again, something that I can handle on my own,” I answered, sliding a couple paperclips into a pile.

“Cassidy’s growing on you, isn’t he?” Elena added, spinning in her chair to face me.

“It’s work guys. You know about the locoweed poisoning the same as I do.” I glanced towards the front door, hoping Weston showed up soon. There was only so long I could skirt around what they were fishing for.

“Exactly, Elena. Cassidy is still available.” Carly shot a sideways glance to Elena before returning to me. “Speaking of, when are the heifers headed back?” she asked.

“Next week, hopefully,” I answered.

“Another excuse for you to visit Mr. Sexy,” Elena said with stars in her eyes, and I shook my head.

“Let it go, girls. Cassidy is not for me.”

“Is that why you’re procrastinating heading to the ranch by chatting with us?” Carly asked, and both girls tilted their heads.

“No. I’m getting picked up, so I’m waiting,” I answered, looking at the two girls whose mouths dropped open.

“He’s coming to pick you up?!” Carly squealed and then spun towards Elena. “How’s my hair?” She ran a hand over her head, smoothing down the fly aways.

“It was one date, Carly,” Elena replied with annoyance as the whistle of a diesel truck hummed into the clinic lot. Carly stuck out her tongue at Elena, then slid her gaze to the front door. A matte black, first gen truck that was not Cassidy’s but Weston’s. Elena let out a low whistle as he looped around and came to an idle with the passenger side facing the front door.

“I haven’t seen that truck before,” Elena muttered, and Carly nodded in agreement.

“Later girls,” I quickly said, grabbing my medical bag, and walked towards the door as the driver’s side opened. Weston had his black felt hat pulled low over his eyes as usual, his features clouded in shadows that made him look rather imposing.

“Who’s that?” Carly breathed out behind me in disappointment.

“I don’t know, some hand probably,” Elena said as I pushed open the door.

Weston made it around the front of his truck as the door clicked shut behind me. His lips twitched upwards into a crooked smile. I tugged open the passenger door before Weston could reach it, tossed my bag inside, and hopped in. He shrugged his shoulders and returned to the other side as I buckled myself in.

We were roaring along the road in comfortable silence, as I admired the exquisite dark leather of the interior of his truck. It smelled fresh and clean, with just a hint of the usual farm scent that I’d grown accustomed to. Organized, just like his home. At least to the outside world, Weston was a very put together man. To me, he was more than that.

“Shouldn’t take us too long, these cows are typically really well-behaved,” Weston said, breaking the silence, and I smiled. Part of me knew he and a couple of the other hands could’ve done this by themselves, yet he’d still wanted me to come.

“Keaton’s becoming impatient?” I asked.

He smiled to himself, turning the radio on for quiet background music I'd never heard before. Old country, grunge style.

“Of course he is. And he told all the others I'd agreed to pull them behind the wheel, so I've been getting pressured all day.” He replied, tipping his hat up with his right hand, leaving his left on the top of the wheel.

“So, it's going to be an entire family affair. I can just go after we finish with the—”

“Stop that.” He cut me off. “Obviously, this is for you too, Tenley. Everyone has to go sledding at least once in their life.”

I clicked my tongue at him but smiled to myself. He was becoming more bossy, more assertive, and I was finding myself actually happy with it. My phone began vibrating once more in my pocket, repetitively, and I tugged it from my pants to see a name on the screen I hadn't heard from in over a month.

“Trixie!” I shouted after answering the video call. There she was, bright hazel eyes with the most gorgeous cheekbones and super tan skin staring back at me. She had the largest grin on her face, squealing in glee. “Are you back from your trip?”

“I am! Which means I finally get to talk to my best friend after having no access to my phone for a month, and it was soooo weird!” she answered, pushing her bleached blonde hair behind her ear. This girl and I had grown up together, and despite going to separate colleges, we'd always stayed in touch and spent every summer together that we possibly could.

“I need all the details! Dish!” I squealed back as she furrowed her brows.

“First off, where are you? That does not look like the inside of your little Civic that you need to upgrade, like, yesterday!” She leaned closer to the screen.

“I'm in a truck, headed to a ranch to deworm and check some cattle.”

“That looks like extra fancy, custom colored leather for a simple work truck, Tenley,” she muttered trying to get a better look at my surroundings.

“This ain’t no work truck,” Weston muttered beside me.

She gasped, slapping a hand over her mouth. “I heard a man’s voice!”

“It’s just my friend, Weston.” I flashed the phone towards the driver and then back to my face as she blinked in shock. “It’s his cows I’m headed to check, ‘cause you know, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine here.” I pointed to my chest, and she clicked her tongue.

“Fine, be all boring like usual.” She leaned back against her couch, and I glared at her. “I do have some news,” she continued and paused, looking a little awkward.

“What?” I asked, in anticipation.

“I don’t want to be insensitive though. You know, with your dad and all. How is he?” she hesitantly said.

“He’s doing,” I muttered, and she sighed.

“No improvements.”

I shook my head as she smiled softly. I didn’t have to say much, and she knew. She’d always known how I felt better than I knew for myself. “It’s not insensitive, you shouldn’t have to pause living your life simply for me because of my dad.”

“You sure?” she quietly asked, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Weston raise a sympathetic smile. As if he understood from personal experience.

“Of course,” I answered.

She flashed her hand in front of the screen, and I saw it. A massive, shiny diamond ring. I squealed in delight for her. “It’s gorgeous! Simon finally asked! Congratulations! Oh, my goodness, I can’t believe it!” I cried out in glee, and she shrieked in happiness.

“Right? This entire trip, he’d apparently planned it simply to propose.” She wiggled her fingers once more and then slid away from the camera.

“Have you told my parents yet?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I didn’t want to be rude.”

“It’s not rude! You know they will want to know! They love you maybe more than they love me since you’re actually getting married,” I replied with a small laugh, and she giggled too.

“Okay, well I’ll call them right after we hang up this facetime. Also, the next piece of news. I want to have an engagement party with all of our old friends and new friends and family obviously! And I need you there, with your parents. I know that your dad can’t travel too far, so I’ve been looking and there’s this ranch in Billings that you can stay at and stuff. Do you think your dad could make it there?” she asked with a hopeful smile.

“You don’t have to sacrifice things simply to accommodate my dad,” I quietly replied, feeling that dread enter my body once more. I think the thing I hated the most about this cancer stuff was the sympathies—the hesitations that people had about enjoying life and sharing the things that made them happiest. Plus giving up dreams for me because of this cancer.

“I’m not. It would be more of a sacrifice to not have your dad and mom there. To not have my best friend since childhood there,” she replied with a pout.

“Alright, alright. Billings would work!” I answered with a smile.

“See you in a month! I’ll send exact details later. Love you, girl!”

“Love you, too,” I quietly said, and her face disappeared from my screen. I stared at it. The reality of how dire my dad’s condition was, was continually hounding me. The gravity of this cancer came and went like a wave, but this was becoming too much. Others outside of my family were

now changing plans because he was dying. I was once again reminded that I really was losing my dad.

My daddy was going to be gone. He might not even make it a month, and I hadn't had the heart to tell her. A tear slid down my cheek, unable to be stopped. This was all too much.

A calloused thumb swiped across my skin, brushing away the stain upon my face. "You know it's okay to be happy, too. To keep living your life too, Tenley," Weston softly said.

I shook my head, letting my hands fall to my lap. "I hate it. All the sympathies and hesitations that everyone has when trying to tell me happy news. It's not okay for me to keep living right now, not while my dad no longer has that capability. But others... others should."

"Why is it wrong for you but not for others? You're not the one dying, Tenley. Do you think your dad would want you to waste this little time he has left here with you being sad?" Weston glanced my way, his intense blue eyes radiating empathy. I stared back, unsure how to answer.

"Losing a loved one is strange, Tenley. And how we react and handle it as humans is even more strange. Some people ignore it, others fall so deeply into it that it consumes them. The secret is learning how to acknowledge it while still thriving. Your dad wants to see you thrive, love life. That's what makes him the proudest," he continued.

"And how would you know? You still have both of your parents," I snapped, feeling defensive because I knew he was right.

"Because I lost my grandpa when I was nine, and I was closer to him than my dad until he passed. My Papaw taught me how to hunt, fish, and fix an engine up by the time I was seven. He'd bought me my first car at eight, and we began rebuilding it to look like the General Lee from that old TV show The Dukes of Hazzard. It was our favorite show to watch together and my last name is Duke, so you know." His eyes misted over as he got lost in memories from his

childhood. The pictures upon his mantle flashed through my mind and I hung my head.

“He taught me to rope and ride and passed on his love of ranching in nine short years of me living. I aspire to be like him every day. When he was diagnosed with bone cancer, I thought his life was over which meant mine was, too, and I struggled to understand what was going on. But he kept pushing me to continue doing the things I loved even if he couldn’t join me. I would spend hours retelling my grand adventures while I watched this man wither away. And then, just like that, he was gone.” Weston sighed, pulling the hat from his head and setting it gently on his dash.

“My grandma followed a year later, but she kept telling me that my Papaw had never been happier than during those last few months,” he finished, and silence settled between us. Vulnerability to share such a treasured experience couldn’t have been easy for him, yet he’d willingly expressed it.

I decided to share something with him about my dad. Something happy. “Growing up, my family was oddly close. I didn’t realize how strange it was to not fight with your siblings until I was a teenager and one friend mentioned how weird it was that my older sister and I didn’t argue. That my little brother didn’t try to bite me all the time. My parents created a home of love by showing us how to properly treat each other. And they spent every moment they could giving us everything we desired.”

I sighed. “But it was my dad that gave me the opportunity to experience things I loved. I was sporty growing up, preferred putting together things and cars over makeup and cheerleading. One year, my brother was building a go-kart for some school project. When he finished, I stole it so often my dad took the time to build one for me. With me.” Another tear slid down my face as I choked back the honest truth. The truth was that I was terrified. So afraid of having to do this life without him.

“How am I supposed to live without him, Weston?” I whispered, the flood gates opening. Tears poured down my face, crashing against my legs as I let everything I’d been

holding at bay flow through me. He placed a hand on my thigh and began brushing his thumb back and forth, letting me cry. Letting me feel.

“By simply living. And living for him,” he softly replied.

Chapter 15

We arrived in quiet solace; he'd allowed me to sit in my thoughts. He never removed his hand from my leg, which I was grateful he hadn't. Maybe I really should try and continue having a life instead of simply waiting for my dad to pass away. Having a little fun would be alright, a little adventure wasn't illegal, and my parents had been asking for me to get out there. Not to date Cassidy, but finding something to enjoy would be alright.

Weston led me over to that trusty steed of a side-by-side, and we took a short ride to a smaller pasture where there were about ten cows munching on some hay. They barely picked their heads up when we arrived, docile and older. Which made the process go smoothly and quite quickly. We did preg checks on all of them on top of deworming, and wellness exams to make sure that they really weren't pregnant.

"Weston," I said as he released the last cow from the chute.

He leaned against the green metal and raised a brow towards me. "Yeah?"

"You really didn't need my help doing this, did you?" I asked, crossing my arms and giving him an annoyed expression. He winked and pushed himself off of the chute, heading my way with a sly grin.

"I mean, it made it so I didn't need to get one of the hands to help," he responded as a thundering vibration began to rumble through the hillside. I turned away from Weston's intense gaze and chiseled features, and waited. Waited for the scene that I knew was coming as the whistling intensified.

Then there it was. Rising over the hillside across some beautiful snow was a herd of cattle surrounded by Cassidy and a couple hands on horses. I watched as they rose over the hill and walked towards the gate at the far side of the pasture. Growing up I'd only heard of cowboys, but I'd never had a

chance to make it out of L.A. They'd been a myth until college and vet school.

At least I knew they were real then, but I'd never been able to meet one in person until moving here. Within a few weeks, my life had changed so abruptly, and in such a strange way. I found myself intrigued and falling in love with this life.

Sighing loudly, I watched the procession with eyes of infatuation. A deep chuckle sounded beside me, and I whipped my head towards Weston. He'd shoved his hands into his pocket and was watching me with a smirk.

"Don't look at me like that," I snarled at him.

"Like what?" he asked.

I gestured at him up and down. "Like that. Like it's so amusing to see someone find this lifestyle awe inspiring."

"But you do," he stated as a matter of fact as the cattle began pouring through the gate. I watched them slip through towards the hay that was scattered throughout the pasture and begin to hungrily munch upon the feed, bellies filled with babies and hay already.

Weston was right. I did find this lifestyle absolutely incredible. Hard. Intense. But incredible. Definitely glorified outside of the actual western world, but all the same, I knew why it was so easily made out that way. Why so many girls wanted to find themselves a part of this world, because I was desperately and deeply falling into that same trap. Even with the everyday hardships and blunders I was beginning to catch a glimpse of, this made me feel more at peace than anything else I'd ever witnessed before.

"Come on, darling," Weston whispered into my ear as the gate was closed, and I turned around, following him towards our side-by-side. Even he was a view unlike anything I'd seen before. Men didn't grow quite like him back where I was raised. Men didn't grow quite like my father either. Maybe that's why I hadn't dated much growing up. Hadn't cared too much for any of the boys that had shown up in my life previously.

Weston pulled the Razor into its typical parking spot and a wave of kids came running, led by Keaton despite the fact that at least two boys and a girl following him were taller and older. They gathered in a circle around Weston and I, eager faces pleading with the cowboy sitting in the driver's seat.

"Is it time?" the oldest boy said, a beige felt cowboy hat upon his head. He also had curly hair, although it was light brown, and big blue eyes that were framed with a scattered pattern of freckles lit up on his face. A mixture of Cassidy and Weston. He most certainly had no problem with gaining friends at school with that smile he just flashed.

"It's time, Butch," Weston said, stepping out of the Razor. He pointed at me as I popped around the backside. "That's Doc Tenley, and she's never even been regular sledding before. So let's be nice today."

A warning that the kids all grimaced at, and Weston shook his head as if knowing it was fruitless.

"Hey, Uncle Weston?" A small girl with rosy cheeks and bright red, curly hair peeked out from behind Keaton. She looked like a mini version of him.

"What's up, Millie?" Weston bent down, and she ran towards him, her puffy mittens matching nicely with her bubble coat and beanie on her head. She jumped into Weston's arms, and he adjusted her zipper so it was tighter under her chin.

"Can we do the horses first?" she asked, causing me to furrow my brows.

"Yo! I could break out them old skis Dad was telling me y'all used to use," Butch replied with a sly, mischievous grin.

And when I looked at Weston, I knew I was in trouble. He had that same glint in his eye. "No. Whatever you guys are thinking, no. I'm a beginner, remember?" I quickly said as Weston's mischievous crooked grin grew even wider.

“They should be in the barn laid up against the side somewhere,” Weston said, and Butch grinned before scurrying off.

“What are you getting me into?” I asked as Millie clapped her hands and squealed.

“You’ll see,” Weston addressed me and then turned to Keaton. “You think you can tack up Kip?” Keaton nodded and rushed off as Weston faced the rest of the group. “Well, go get your sleds!”

The cheers and grins that filled the kids’ faces as they ran off poured dread into my soul. Agreeing to this insane idea was now coming back to bite me in the butt. Weston set down Millie who, being no more than four years old, toddled after the group of kids heading towards the row of houses where I could only assume their sleds were.

“Weston, you tell me what is going on right now or so help me,” I demanded.

He dipped a hand in his pocket and pulled out his phone. “You ever heard of Skijoring?” I shook my head no as he scrolled through something. “Well, that’s kind of what we will be doing except with sleds. Unless Butch does find the skis but I wouldn’t recommend you try them if you’ve never skied before.” He scrolled a little longer and then handed me his phone.

I watched the video play with my jaw nearly on the floor. Horses had ropes tied to their saddles, pulling someone on skis behind them at full speed going over jumps and doing flips and grabbing rings off of posts and what not. Intense, terrifying, dangerous, and not to mention absolutely insane.

“I’m going to die,” I muttered while watching this.

Weston gently laughed. “I’ll go slow,” he said, and I turned to look at him, dazed and in shock.

Behind Weston came Keaton and Butch, who were carrying a pair of skis. Keaton was leading a beautiful bay horse with a thick black mane and rippling muscles that flexed with every step the horse took.

“Well, I guess this wouldn’t be the worst way to go out,” I muttered as Keaton and Butch reached Weston and I. Weston took his horse from Keaton and then began wandering towards the houses. We followed, the rest of the five kids joining with sleds tucked under their arms except for Millie. She dragged a small sled behind her, grabbing my hand the moment she joined us. I glanced down at the tiny mitten wrapped around my fingers, and my heart swelled up.

The kids talked and joked, the twangs from their accents thick in the air. We rounded the trail and continued up into the trees to the left. Passing through a dense patch of pines, snow not able to reach every part of the forest floor, we emerged onto a flat and wide open valley. Not a single track broke the freshly fallen snow in this glen, not a bump was in sight. This was the intended destination, and I knew it by each kid that set down their sleds along with Weston as he easily hoisted himself into the saddle.

He sat down with the softest bump; Kip barely even twitched as Weston settled onto the back of his horse. Butch clicked his feet into the skis and grabbed the end of a rope that was already attached to the seat. Suddenly, Weston spurred his horse forward, and they were off.

The kids around me squealed in glee as powder flew behind Butch on the skis, snow whipping off of the bottom of the horse that was galloping as fast as possible in the field. Weston turned his horse sharply, Butch whipped around on the skis, rapidly swinging back and forth. Suddenly, Kip dove sideways and Butch flew off, unable to hold on any longer.

The kids laughed and cheered as Weston slowed his horse to a trot and made his way back to the group. I shook my head. No way was I getting on a sled behind that death trap. Nope, nope. That was an absolute hard pass for me. What had I been thinking when I’d agreed to this? My brain had obviously gone towards a simple slide down a hillside, not intentional turns at full speed with the goal to fling the cargo across the ground.

“Who’s next?” Weston asked once he arrived back at the group. His horse pranced in place and snorted, steam rising

from her nostrils.

All the kids raised their hands as Weston's sparkling blue eyes rested upon mine. I shook my head, no way.

"Annie?" Weston asked, still not looking away and the oldest girl grinned, picking up her plastic sled from the ground. She had on a cowboy hat as well, but took it off, unlike Butch, and handed it to Keaton. Weston tied the sled string to the end of the rope that was attached to his saddle and then dropped it beside his horse.

Annie laid down flat on her belly, tucked her chin down, gripped the sides of the sled and nodded once like she was signaling to release a calf from a chute at a rodeo. Weston nudged Kip on who dug into the ground and shot forward. The sled jerked and then began flying behind horse and rider.

Same thing, sharp turns at high speed with Annie covered in a layer of snow before the sled dumped on its side and she was ripped from the plastic sheet. It tumbled and bumped along behind Weston and his horse as they slowed to a trot and headed back in the group's direction. This was not seriously what they had in mind, was it? And just leaving their passengers behind once they fell off seemed cruel. Butch was just barely returning to the group by the time Weston had arrived back at us.

"Who agrees that Doc Tenley needs a turn?" Weston asked, staring at me. The kids shouted in agreement around me, Millie squealing in glee. I shook my head, feeling my heart begin to race. It wasn't death that was coming, it was cold and possibly a broken bone or two.

"Come on! You agreed to this," Keaton said to my left and I glanced down at his freckled face, his cheeks red like Millie's. The bright blue plastic sled was upside down and coated in snow, laying on the ground behind Weston. I closed my eyes. I wasn't a chicken and had agreed, so just one time and that would suffice.

Opening my eyes, I hesitantly stepped through the group towards the sled and flipped it over. Making sure the

strings weren't twisted, I stared at my ride that sat waiting in front of me.

"You better not kill me," I warned Weston who chuckled.

Laying down upon the cold and wet sled, my hands trembled as I gripped the edges. Squeezing as tightly as I could with my gloved fingers, I prayed that this wasn't how I went out. Copying Annie, I tucked my chin, not wanting snow to go down my shirt, and nodded fervently.

"Hold on, darling," Weston said, and he kissed at his horse. Closing my eyes tightly, I heard the hooves move and the string slide across the snow, and then suddenly I was jerked forward. It nearly tossed me at that moment.

And then I was flying.

The sled slithered across the snow, hoofbeats moving faster and faster as the wind crashed against my cheeks sharply stinging. But it was so freeing. Snow flecks splattered against my face as I felt the sled dip slightly and then swing around, turning. I laughed, truly and freely laughed, and cracked my eyes open.

"FASTER!" I shouted.

Weston glanced my way before pushing his horse from the leisure lope and into the gallop like he'd done with Annie and Butch. The kids were right, this was the most fun I'd had since I could remember.

Tightly gripping the edges of the sled, I ducked and turned with each movement, finding the rhythm of how the sled moved. Until Weston decided to cheat and jerked his horse in a tight spin. The sled suddenly went flying into the air. The moment it smashed into the snow, I was thrown.

White flakes poofed around me as I slammed into the powder, laughing. I laid there for a moment, with my eyes closed trying to catch my breath and ignoring the snow that had found its way down my coat. It was cold, but I didn't care. Finally, I brushed the flakes left on my face away and stared up at the bright blue sky above me.

The crunch of snow sounded closer and closer before the muzzle of a horse was above me. Kip leaned down and sniffed my face, her soft nose tickling my skin, and I giggled again. Then Weston's face appeared beside his horse.

"That was amazing," I said, letting my arms flop to my side.

Weston grinned, and I studied his face. I'd previously admitted to myself that he was an attractive man, but there was something more now. Something free about him.

"Round two?" he asked, and I nodded vigorously.

Each kid got a turn before I went again, but didn't last as long. Weston had learned from my first ride and improved his ability to throw me off. However, after a second round for everyone, the kids asked for the four-wheeler. Apparently, unbeknownst to me until we passed through the flat field we'd just been at and continued farther on to a new patch of snow, most of them barely held on for more than a couple seconds when Weston broke out the four-wheeler.

After moving higher into the mountains, we emerged at a new spot. There were some slopes here, but nothing hard, nothing but the trees that thickly surrounded this hidden sanctuary. Fresh, untouched powder glistened across the meadow. Perfect for throwing kids from a sled behind a four-wheeler without hurting anyone.

This time, two sleds were tied to the back of the vehicle. Keaton laid down upon one while Butch hopped on the other. I stared at the two boys that had the same wicked grins spread across their lips. Weston sat upon the idling wheeler, a devilish look in his eyes, which also held a look of wonder and childlike joy.

"Whoever falls off first has to do the other's morning chores tomorrow," Keaton bet Butch who pulled his hat on a little tighter.

"Deal," he replied, and they looked at Weston.

Weston's ocean eyes raised to mine. "Get on," he said, patting the spot behind him and moving the shotgun that was

hooked across the back of the wheeler out of the way. I blushed. My cheeks burned red-hot, and I wasn't even sure why. Maybe it was because Annie beside me sighed audibly like it was something cute, or the fact that I hadn't been that close to Weston since waking up wrapped in his arms. Either way, I hesitated for a moment before sheepishly climbing on behind him.

"Hold on, darling." He whispered, and I threw my arms tightly around his waist. My heart slammed in my chest, holding myself this close to him made my stomach swim with butterflies.

He gunned the four-wheeler, and it jumped, ripping through the snow. Within two turns, Keaton and Butch went flying in opposite directions at the exact same time. They weren't kidding when they said Weston was crazy with the wheeler. The horse had just been a warmup for him.

I rode behind Weston, clinging tightly to his solid body for quite some time as the kids each bet one another who'd stay on the longest. The smiles that were permanently etched onto their faces were unmatched in time. Eventually, most of them became tired and cold and wandered down the mountainside to go warm up before dinner began. Keaton and Butch remained with Weston and me.

Putting the four-wheeler into park, Weston tapped my hands that were around his waist. "Your turn."

I grinned. Despite my earlier reservations, this was the most fun I could recall in such a long time. And even if I could only hold on for two or three seconds, that was enough. But I was a little competitive and glanced at Butch and Keaton, who eagerly waited to take my place on the back of the four-wheeler.

"Ten bucks says I can last longer than either of you two did." My feet hit the snowy ground, tingling with contact.

"Bring it on!" they said at the same time and hopped on the back of the wheeler, dangling their legs off either side and clutching tightly to the bars while pushing the shotgun back towards Weston. I waded through the snow, untied one of

the sleds and plopped myself down on the other. Tucking my chin once more and gripping tightly to the edge of the plastic, I bobbed a few times to settle in tighter before nodding that I was ready.

The speed with which Weston took off had the sled in the air from the first bump. I think I was in the air more than I was actually touching the snow. It was intense as I crashed back and forth between snow and icy patches, spinning to the side. And I barely lasted for more than just a few turns before the sled went one way, and I was flying through the air in the other direction.

Crashing into the snow, my sleeve rode up and my arm made contact with the crispy cold as it slid up under my coat. But I didn't care. That was amazing, and I wanted another round. Sitting up, I pulled my sleeve back down and began dusting off the snow. The tree line was practically sitting against my back; my body had narrowly missed ramming into a trunk.

The engine roared closer to me and then stopped some yards away, the three boys looking quite smug. Weston killed the engine as Keaton and Butch swung around in my direction. I shrugged and tilted my head, placing my hands against the ground to stand up when all three boys froze.

Fear laced Keaton and Butch's faces, while Weston's tightened and became intense. Almost aggressive. The wheels started spinning in his head as I froze in shocked response. It was deathly silent out here. Every noise that normally chirped from the forest, every creak of a branch from the breeze whistling through the leaves was vacant, and I knew there was something wrong.

"Tenley. Do not move. Do not turn around," Weston quietly commanded between gritted teeth, his body stiff, and slowly rising from his seated position. He inched upwards, barely making a sound with his movement.

I swallowed the lump that was forming thick in my throat. Sweat pooled against my skin despite the cold as dread

filled my soul. Any sense of excitement had rushed out, leaving nothing but terror in its place.

“Weston,” I whispered, blinking in fright without knowing why I was afraid. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as if someone or something was behind me.

Slowly, Weston reached around behind him and carefully began to slip the shotgun from the scabbard. A shotgun I hadn't given more than two thoughts about. I stared at that man's face, pleading with him to take this panic away. But his eyes weren't looking at me. He was staring over my shoulder at something. The thing that was causing the stench of fear to hang stiffly in the air.

“Weston,” I whispered in terror again.

His eyes flickered to mine as he swung the shotgun around and began to pull one leg over the seat. “I'm going to count to three, and then you need to slowly, very slowly and as quietly as possible, stand up and come my way,” he quietly said, his voice barely reaching my ears. I gave him a subtle, quick nod. My entire body was trembling as his eyes returned to whatever was past me.

“One,” he whispered, his legs now on the same side of the four-wheeler.

“Two.” He slowly stepped down from the wheeler as Keaton and Butch remained frozen in place. His eyes reached mine and the intensity in them had me nearly backing away. My heart was racing in my throat, the pounding of blood rushed through my ears. It was becoming warm.

“Three.”

I slowly rose from my spot and heard a twig snap behind me.

“RUN!” Weston suddenly shouted and shot into the air. I took off as quickly as my feet could carry me, the sound of the gun echoing through the forest. The pounding that was in my ears rang around me as Weston began running in my direction. He started to shout and yell random sounds, swinging his arms and looking quite terrifying. Staring at

whatever was crashing behind me. The ferocity in his face looked primal, animalistic.

“Faster. You have to go faster!” he bellowed at me. Fear ripped through me, propelling me farther forward as he fired into the air again with the shotgun. His feet moved quicker and he roared into the air like a hungry lion ready to tear its prey to pieces as the gap between us was closing.

I took a chance and glanced over my shoulder to see what was so terrifying.

Mistake. The biggest mistake I could've made was looking behind me.

Chapter 16

A massive black bear was barreling directly towards me. The pounding that I'd thought had been blood in my ears was him chasing me. And this bear, sights locked onto me, was so close, too close. I wasn't going to make it.

"WESTON!" I screamed, sheer panic racing through my blood. He was also an arm's length away in front of me.

"Keep going!" he shouted and kept running as I passed beside him. Another shot rang out into the air as he bellowed again. This time the black bear roared back. A few more steps, and I crashed into the four-wheeler, barely able to breathe. Keaton and Butch watched behind me, and I slowly turned around to find Weston and the black bear in a stare down. Neither one was moving. Both chests were rising and falling quickly, steam coming from both figures.

The black bear was on all fours, a crazed look in its eyes. Another lull, silence expanding the meadow. My heart raced and my lungs burned as I watched Weston stare down a bear, his back towards me. I couldn't lose him. Not yet.

"Weston," I whispered, my entire frame trembling and suddenly Weston lunged towards the bear, waving his arms wide. The black bear stumbled a few steps backwards, actually intimidated. Weston stopped moving once more as the bear took a few more staggering steps away and then turned around and disappeared into the tree line.

Weston remained facing away, tightly gripping the shotgun as the three of us at the four-wheeler breathed out in relief. Relief that he was okay, that I was okay. We waited for a moment longer before I saw his shoulders sag, and he turned around, slowly beginning to head our way.

His eyes remained trained on the ground before him, tucked under the hat and gripping the shotgun tightly. My body heated up with odd desire as I watched him stalk back in our direction. Powerful. Strong. I couldn't quite form a

coherent thought as he returned, edging away with a deliberate motion from the forest line.

And then I screamed.

Out from the trees, off to Weston's right, came the bear. Barreling straight toward the person that had just saved my life. He whipped his entire body towards the black beast that was crashing through the forest. And pointed the shotgun directly at the bear.

A shot rang out, echoing through the mountainside and silencing the world around us as the bear collapsed.

"Weston," I whispered, immediately leaving the four-wheeler and sprinting towards him. The bear grunted, his chest rising once more, and then he was still. Just in front of Weston. Just before his claws could have reached the man who'd not hesitated to run directly at a bear to protect me.

I reached Weston who still had the shotgun pointed at the now dead bear with a shell between his teeth. He was breathing steadily, intensely staring at the animal.

"I don't get it," he muttered as I stopped beside him. My eyes raked over where I'd run from, the bear's tracks on top of most of mine. Then I swung them back to the black fur that bristled in the wind.

"I don't get it," he mumbled again, and I placed a hand on his forearm. His head twitched my way, dangerous eyes meeting mine and then softening. His entire body softened as he lowered the gun, pulling the shotgun shell from his teeth and shoving it back into his pocket.

"What don't you get?" I asked.

"Why didn't he just continue on his way? He'd already turned around and left. Why'd he come back? He wouldn't be dead if he hadn't come back." Weston swallowed, ran a hand over his mustache, and then looked sharply past me.

His demeanor changed as he took charge. "Butch, I have to stay here. Go call Fish and Wildlife and tell them what happened, then lead him back here. Keaton, you need to go home."

“Yes, sir,” Butch replied and scooted forward on the wheeler, turning the engine on.

“You go too, Tenley,” Weston softly said to me.

I shook my head. “No. I’m not leaving.” I let my hand fall from his forearm, and his eyes flickered to where my touch had last been.

“Go. I’ll be fine.”

I literally plopped myself down in the snow and crossed my arms over my chest. “No.”

He closed his eyes and a half smile lifted at the edge of his lips. “Yes, ma’am.” Weston nodded towards Butch and the wheeler’s engine slowly faded away. Weston rested the butt of the shotgun into the snow and sat down beside me, our bums were going to go numb quickly, but I didn’t care. Yet.

We sat in silence. I could see the wheels spinning in his head and scooted a little closer to him. My leg brushed his, pulling him from whatever thoughts were crashing through his head. The adrenaline that had been coursing through me from fear was ebbing away, and I was becoming tired.

“Thank you,” I whispered, looking down at the snow.

“I told you I wouldn’t let you die,” he answered with a hint of teasing, and I bumped him with my shoulder.

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” I said, and he chuckled. “Today’s been a lot of firsts.”

“I’m assuming you’ve never seen a bear before now?” he asked, and I shook my head no. “They’re pretty common here, I see at least one, if not two, every year. Hence why we carry guns just in case.”

“When’s the first time you ever saw one?”

“I was four and out fishing with my Papaw. We didn’t catch anything that day, that’s for sure.” He chuckled and looked down at his pants, brushing some snow off.

“I don’t blame you; I would’ve left the fish for the bear too.” I picked at the fraying shoelace on my hiking boots.

“The first time Cassidy saw one I had taken him fishing, too.” He chuckled to himself, leaning back against the palms of his hand after laying the shotgun across his lap.

“Everyone in town says you’re really close with Cassidy, even after...” I paused. “*It* happened.”

He glanced my way. “Always have been. He may be seven years younger than me, but it’s been a long time since I felt so far apart in age.”

“Which makes you thirty-six,” I muttered under my breath. There was the confirmation that he was ten years older than me. Ten entire years. There wasn’t that much of an age difference between either of my siblings and myself.

“Yes, Miss Tenley. I am thirty-six.” He furrowed his brows. “You seem a little shocked.”

I watched him for a moment, pulling my lips between my teeth before sighing. “Just trying to come to terms with the fact that you are ten whole years older than I am.”

It was his turn to be stunned. “What?” His cyan eyes widened.

“I’ll be twenty-seven in January if that makes things better,” I replied.

He chuckled. “I turn thirty-seven in March, so not much,” he responded with a soft smile.

“I like when you smile,” I blurted out, and his brows twitched before I slapped a hand over my mouth. “Maddie always warned me to think before speaking.” I lightly bumped my lips in reprimand.

Except Weston gripped my fingers, stopping me from hitting my lips, and pulled them away from my mouth. “It’s easy to smile around you,” he whispered. His hand stayed wrapped around mine while we gazed at each other, soaking in the simplicity of each other’s company. I’d known him for less time than almost anyone else in my life and yet, I was comfortable with him. He was a better friend than most.

Weston let go of my hand and then spoke. “Who’s Maddie?”

“Oh, my older sister.” I looked down at my fingers that had been in his hand wishing for a moment that neither of us had gloves on.

“You mentioned you have a brother and sister that you were close to growing up,” he prompted, and I nodded.

“We were practically inseparable. Doing everything together. I had a soccer game, they were both there with my parents. Luke had his football game, we were there. Maddie was at a dance competition, we were there.” I sighed, smiling to myself as beautiful memories flashed through my head. Bittersweet memories.

“Are you still close with them?” he asked, and I looked up, meeting his eyes. His fingers were mindlessly tracing the shotgun.

“Not as much. They live outside of town, both of them married. It was like the moment they had families of their own, I was less than them. Like I wasn’t good enough because I was single and working towards a career. It’s not like I chose to not get married. My intention was to get an education to be able to support myself until I got married. Never thought I’d make it all the way to twenty-six single.” I started to draw shapes in the snow.

“I wanted to be a husband and father more than I wanted to inherit this ranch. Remington had the right idea when he gave it up for his wife,” Weston mindlessly said, and I blinked in shock.

“So it’s true. You own this entire place.”

He nodded yes.

“But you don’t want it?” I continued.

“Oh, I want it. Wanted it. I never thought about doing anything else. If Remington had accepted it instead of becoming an accountant, I would’ve begged him to let me work here for the rest of my life. What I am saying is, if I’d met someone while away who asked me to do something

different like his wife had asked, I would've passed on inheriting this place in a heartbeat. My Papaw always said that this life isn't worth anything if you have to live it alone. That all the things in the world would never be as valuable as a family." He stared at the bear that lay still in the snow in front of him. He chuckled to himself. "And yet, here I am."

"You and I both," I muttered in reply. "At least you have your siblings and parents."

He snorted once. "Not the same thing and you know it."

"True..." I mumbled, my voice fading away. "By the way, I have to ask something."

"What's that?" he replied, looking at me as the solemn air faded away.

"I was told that you guys are forced to move away and not allowed to return until you're successful. Is that true?"

A crooked grin spread across his face. "Sort of. It's a tradition in our family to move away when we turn eighteen and graduate high school to experience something else the world has to offer than just the lifestyle we were raised by. It doesn't matter what else it is, but we have to accomplish something. Once we do, then we have the option to return back to the ranch and continue to work and live here, or not. My dad was the only one of his siblings to even return to the ranch. Remington found he enjoyed a little more of the indoors. I joined the Army to pay for my degree in Agriculture Business. Pearl left and learned to be a hairdresser before coming home and marrying Cash. Cassidy learned to be a welder professionally, not just the crude stuff we were taught growing up."

"How long were you gone for?" I asked. The bravery that came from joining the military did not surprise me after watching him run straight toward a bear.

"Three years."

"You finished your degree in three years?"

He nodded. "I took some college online before turning eighteen and finishing school."

"And you were homeschooled right?"

"Yep. All of us were, and all of the kids now are, too. It allows us to stay on the ranch and help while still receiving an education." He shifted the shotgun across his body.

I turned towards him, crossing my legs that were becoming numb. "I also heard you somehow made a butt load of money while gone."

He chuckled. "Smart and lucky investments that paid off and continue to do so."

"Man, my life sounds way less interesting than yours does," I mumbled under my breath, and then laid back against the frozen ground, slowly making a snow angel. When I sat up, he smiled at me and went to reply but was cut off by the roar of several engines. Emerging from the trees across the meadow were two Razors and a four-wheeler.

Cassidy and Butch were sitting in the first Razor, followed by Jeb and the sheriff. Sitting on the four-wheeler was someone from Fish and Wildlife because there were legal things to deal with when killing a bear like this. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but it hadn't been this.

Either way, we proceeded to give statements and explain what had happened with both the sheriff and the game officer, traced steps and checked weird things, making sure it was all in self-defense. I was utterly exhausted by the time I'd found a moment to myself. Weston was speaking with Jeb and the two professionals over by the bear's carcass while I leaned against the Razor.

Cassidy wandered my way, his hat casting an eerie shadow across every carved feature of his face. Strong line, the perfect set of dimples with proportionate features.

"How you holding up?" he asked, coming to stand beside me.

"I'm alright. Not sure if it's settled in quite yet that I was chased and nearly attacked by a bear, but it's fine." I

chuckled to myself.

“We could talk about it over dinner or something?” he replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Like a date?”

“Of course a date. We have to fix the disaster of the last one that our parents sprang upon us.” Cassidy grinned, his lips pulling wide and thin. An attractive smile that had won him every girl he’d ever desired. Except for me. It was nice to look at, but that was it.

“I really need to just focus on my dad and work, Cassidy.”

“Then why are you out here with Weston riding in a sled?” The smile fell quickly from his face.

“It’s not like that. I was here for some work and Keaton invited me to stay for a bit. I didn’t have any more appointments, so I thought why not.” I pushed off of the Razor and kicked some snow.

“I get it,” he said sharply, and I looked up at his face, confused.

“Get what?”

“You like Weston, that’s why you refuse me.”

“We are just friends,” I answered sternly, annoyed he couldn’t take a simple no for an answer.

“Does my brother know that?” Cassidy raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. It’s been explicitly stated by both of us,” I said, and he clicked his tongue in denial but didn’t say anything else concerning the matter. “Can I ask something about Weston though?”

He stepped in front of me and leaned against the Razor, curiosity etched across his face. “Something you won’t repeat to him?” I added.

“What is it?” he said, not directly giving me an affirmative to my request.

I sighed, but knew it wasn't worth pushing for. "Why doesn't Weston go to town? Have a social life? You clearly have one, and you two are close, so why doesn't he come with you? He says he finds the rumors entertaining, but I don't believe it's just that."

The haughty expression fell from Cassidy's face and he glanced towards his brother. I studied the very man who was chatting with the sheriff, looking very much in charge. No matter how self-conceited Cassidy was, he dearly cared for his brother, you could tell. And I knew that Weston loved Cassidy. Which is why I also knew that Cassidy knew the truth, it was just a matter of whether he would divulge it or not.

"Weston was almost eighteen when, you know, "it" happened. His girlfriend at the time came to the hospital while he was there in a coma and visited frequently, nearly every day while he was wrapped up like a mummy in all these bandages and the gnarliest looking cast I've ever seen. When he was finally released to go home, the doctor taught our mom how to properly change his bandages and dress them to hopefully prevent worse scarring. His girl came before he had his skin graft to finish closing the wound on his face that looked nasty. Like real nasty."

He paused while I studied the large figure who had become someone important in my life. "Well, she showed up one day while the bandage was being changed, and she saw his face. You could see some of his muscles and bones along his jawline where they would add the skin later, and she freaked out. She didn't come back again. Once in a while she would send a text, asking how he was doing and whatnot, but that was it. Eventually, Weston's left leg healed enough that he was given permission to drive again. So he packed up his crutches, I convinced him to let me tag along like usual, and drove to town to the Center Street Diner."

I had a strange feeling where this was going. One that had my heart breaking for Weston before I'd even heard the entire tale.

Cassidy looked away from me and back at his brother. "I was eleven and still understood what happened. It would've

destroyed me, and sometimes I look at Weston, surprised and grateful he's still around. Still alive." He paused once more and then looked back at me before continuing. "His friends always hung out at the diner, and Weston went hobbling in, excited to be with them. Before it happened, everyone wanted to be his friend, be around him. But after this, Cash was the only one who stuck it out."

"What happened at that diner, Cassidy?" I pressed.

"Weston walked into the diner to find one of his friends with his arm around his girl making out. He obviously stopped moving in shock, and then one of the guys sitting in the booth saw him. It took him a minute to recognize Weston, and so he stared, and it drew nearly everyone else's attention in that diner, including his girlfriend's. She screamed, called him a monster and all these other names I'll never repeat in my life. Pointing at Weston, she yelled at him to get out, that he was scaring her, and kept saying how horrible he was, that he wasn't human anymore. I managed to convince Weston to just leave, and he's never set foot back in that diner. Finished homeschooling and took off as fast as he could. His ex started all of the crazy rumors about him from that one interaction at the diner. Before he'd even healed enough to go to town, she'd already begun turning his friends against him."

"I'd like to punch her in the face," I muttered, and Cassidy chuckled.

"Last I heard, karma caught up, and she's been divorced twice by cheating on her husbands and doesn't have custody of her three kids." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Still..." Anger bubbled up inside me. I couldn't understand how someone could be so cruel. We are always told not to listen to what others say about us, but I couldn't imagine how horrible that had been for Weston. And embarrassing. How demeaning that had been for him and destructive towards any confidence he had as a teenager. All because of something that I assumed was out of his control, he'd lost all of his friends and girlfriend in one fell swoop. Plus the rumors, although I figured that the scar gave him some credibility in the military.

A buzzing began in my pocket as I remained lost in thought. Somehow amongst the spotty reception on this mountain, I was standing in a pocket that calls could come through. I slipped it from my pocket and stared at the name on the screen, confused.

“Hello?” I said upon answering.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe I reached you,” Maddie gasped through the speaker.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Dad coughed up blood and then passed out.” She sounded not just upset and worried, but legitimately terrified.

“Wait, what?” I asked, dread filling my body once more.

“Mom had to call me because you’re working. An ambulance is taking Dad to the hospital. Can you get to the hospital so Mom isn’t alone? I’ve got four kids to pack into a vehicle, plus driving to town, so it’ll take me a little while,” she cried out, overwhelmed with the news. Dread left my body as shame filled its place. If I’d only been home...

“I’ll head there right now. Thanks for calling me,” I quietly replied. Maddie shakily inhaled before hanging up the phone. I stared ahead waiting for the numbness to push out the shame. The bubble had just burst. There was no time for me to enjoy life, that wasn’t possible. I was here, goofing off, when my parents needed me the most.

“Cassidy?” I muttered, and he peeled his eyes up from his phone.

“What’s up?”

“Weston came and got me from the clinic so I didn’t have to drive my car with the donut up here. My dad is being taken to the hospital, and I need—”

“Say no more,” he cut me off and nodded towards the passenger seat while walking around the front of the Razor. Everything in me went blank as he started the engine and I mindlessly sat, waiting to be taken to my dying father.

Chapter 17

Cassidy followed me through the sliding glass doors into the white hospital that smelled of sterile cleansers. I rushed to the front desk and asked for my father, Charlie Mayn. The receptionist told me to go to the third floor and gave me the room number. Cassidy quietly led me to the left towards the elevator.

I stared at my reflection in the distorted steel doors. The beanie was beginning to dry, my braid that lay stiffly down my back hung at a strange angle, but I didn't care. My father was in the hospital, and I hadn't been there to help because I'd decided having fun was more important.

A ding sounded and then the doors spread apart, the tile clicked beneath my hiking boots and Cassidy's square-toed pair. We found the brown door down the hallway on the right, and I knocked before pushing it open.

My mother's eyes lifted from the bed to the right, just past the small bathroom door. White sheets, a white tile floor with pale beige wallpaper that matched the seat she sat in on the opposite side of the bed. The steady beeping from the monitor was the only sound in the room, since the TV that was mounted against the wall across from the bed was off. A small couch was underneath the TV, a strange hospital couch that I knew was stiff.

"Mom," I said as she gave me a tender smile.

"Do you need anything before I go?" Cassidy asked behind me, and I shook my head. "If you do, don't be afraid to call." And then he headed back down the hallway we'd just run through. Maybe he wasn't as cliché of a playboy as the town chalked him up to be.

The door clicked shut behind me, and I walked forward in shame. "I should've been there. I'm so sorry, Mom," I said, sliding another chair forward from beside the couch and sitting down on the other side of Dad so I could see her. I placed his frail hand in my own.

“You were at the Dukes. I didn’t call you, so how do you know?” she replied with an odd sparkle in her eyes.

“Maddie called.”

She clicked her tongue in disappointment. “Your dad is fine. Just a side effect of the cancer is what the doctor said. He’ll stay overnight, and then we will head back home.”

“Still. I should’ve been there. I can’t let you go through this alone,” I replied, brushing my thumb over my dad’s hand.

“Tenley, I’m not alone. I have you and your siblings. I have my grandbabies, and I still have your father. It is you I am worried about being alone, which is why I didn’t call you. I wanted you to spend as much time at the Duke Ranch as you could.”

“Mom, I went—”

“For work. I know. Did you at least have a little fun?” my mom asked.

A smile slid across my face, giving her a silent answer as my dad stirred in the bed. His eyelids fluttered, and then he blinked them open. His gaze glanced at my mom and then rested at me.

“Hey, sweetheart,” my dad said, and I smiled. “Is your mom giving you a hard time?”

“Nothing new,” I quipped and he chuckled.

“Rosemary dear, can I have a minute alone with our daughter?” he addressed my mother.

She nodded. “I’ll go grab the doctor.” And she silently left the room.

I waited with my father’s hand in mine, not sure what to say or what he wanted to discuss. The steady beep was the only sound that passed between the two of us, and my mind began to wander to every insane event of the day. My father being in the hospital had to be a result of me stepping out of line and spending extra time with someone who wasn’t him.

“Tenley, sweets,” my dad finally said, and I looked at his face. The tubes running from his nose matched how pale his skin was. The checkered hospital gown was tucked up to his chin. “Are you reconsidering your feelings for Cassidy?” There was an edge to his voice as he spoke. One that I couldn’t quite place.

“No. Weston had picked me up at the clinic so I didn’t have to drive my car with the bad tire up to the ranch and—”

“Did you say Weston?” my father cut me off, causing a cough to rumble from his chest.

“Yes?” I questioned.

“No, Tenley. I don’t need you to be interested in Cassidy, but I won’t have you interested in someone who has hurt a woman before.” His weak voice sounded so stern.

“Wait, what? Hurt someone?” I was shocked and confused.

“Yes, Tenley. Weston may have his family fooled enough to have inherited the ranch, but the fact that he tried to hit his ex-girlfriend won’t receive a blind eye from me.” My father pushed himself up on the bed.

“What are you talking about?” my voice cracked.

“When he was almost an adult, he got upset about something and went to hit his girlfriend. He was stopped by two young men who used to be his friends, and they got into a brawl. That’s why he doesn’t come to town anymore. He’s embarrassed and now deformed, but that’s what he deserves.”

“Dad,” I began, and he shook his head, silencing me.

“I have been fine with you going to the ranch because Cassidy is there, and from what I hear from your mother, so are many others. But please, stay away from Weston,” he finished. But that edge in his voice had returned, almost as if he spoke a small, white lie.

“Weston has never and would never hit a woman, Dad,” I firmly stated, and my dad ripped his hand from my grip as the door opened and in walked the doctor and my

mom. That was the end of that discussion, which left me unable to defend Weston or myself.

Whoever told my father that rumor must have something against Weston. But more upsetting was the fact that that specific rumor existed and no one had shut it down. Or maybe it was talked about in such hushed tones that none of the Dukes knew it existed. I needed to learn who was spreading it to help shut it down, or inform Cassidy about it so he could stop it.

Either way, that rumor needed to go, and needed to go now.



Today was Thanksgiving. My father had come home from the hospital the day after being admitted, and I spent as much time at home with them as possible. Cassidy had come and picked up the two heifers from the clinic a week ago, and I told him the rumor that my dad had heard. Carly poked herself into that conversation, listening while he quietly explained to me that it was apparently an old one that circulated every so often, started by the ex-girlfriend herself. It would typically die quickly, as it seemed no one was quite willing to believe it entirely.

Weston had texted me a few times to let me know that there were no new locoweed cases that had popped up. All I replied with was a simple “thanks for the update” text, unsure of how to traverse this new, rocky road I was walking with the disapproval from my father. Plus, my mind was reeling with the constant thought about how ineffective locoweed poisoning seemed to be. As long as the plant was found quickly and the cattle couldn’t graze on it for long periods, they’d be fine. But how relevant that thought was, I wasn’t sure.

A few days ago, Doc had come and snagged my car keys, returning them later that evening, and I’d left work no

longer driving on a donut. Doc refused to tell me who'd done it and refused any money I tried to offer him.

But I was numb most of the time, feeling guilt and shame over not being there when my father had passed out. Now, both him and my mom had continually pressured me to get out of the house and go see Cassidy again, even though he wasn't the friend I wanted to visit, and to head to the Duke Ranch, but I refused. There was no way I would risk not being around for my father again.

I flopped down on the couch, ready for the holiday weekend. I had the next three days off; Doc volunteered to be on call since his wife's sisters were coming to town. He'd informed me that he needed an escape just in case.

"When are Maddie and Luke getting here?" I asked while my mom finished putting away the last dish I'd washed after breakfast this morning.

"Within the hour, sweetheart," she replied.

"So, when are we starting the turkey for dinner tonight?" I twisted my hair between my fingers. With today being a holiday, I'd decided to leave it down and curl it in gentle waves. I'd even applied a full, but simple face of makeup and was wearing a nice, dark rust orange long-sleeved dress. The skirt was ruffled and came to about mid-thigh, simple but sweet, and the color looked so nice against my skin. It also paired nicely with the thigh-high black heeled boots that Trixie had shipped me as a gift she'd brought back from her trip.

Despite everything that had happened, the newfound confidence I'd felt growing had remained.

My mom finished drying her hands and walked around the kitchen island while untying the apron from her floor-length checkered dress. "We aren't," she stated.

My eyes widened and I blinked, taken aback.

"Why not? We always have turkey for Thanksgiving!" I sat up on the couch as my dad grunted from his recliner.

Today was a rough day for him already, and we were only nearing noon.

“Because we have been invited to join another family for Thanksgiving dinner. They asked us to provide a few green bean casseroles and some desserts,” she answered by pulling the four pumpkin pies from the fridge that I’d been told to make last night and placed them on the counter.

“What family, Mom?” I questioned.

She began to stack four dishes of casseroles beside the pie. “The Dukes.”

I looked between my father and my mom. He coughed, his eyes full of sympathy and warning at the same time. “Why?”

“Because Nancy and I were talking the other day, and she mentioned she misses seeing you at the ranch. So we chatted and she invited all of us there for Thanksgiving dinner, including your siblings and their families.”

I sighed and grabbed a pillow beside me, tucking it against my stomach as she grabbed two pies. “Now, help me carry all of this to the truck so we can be on our way the moment Luke and Maddie arrive,” she commanded, and I glared at her. “I really don’t understand why you stopped going there, Tenley. Your father and I want you to be happy, and you seemed to be enjoying your time spent there.”

Grunting, I aggressively tossed the pillow to the edge of the couch and stood up. Stomping towards the kitchen in my black boots, I grabbed two casseroles and followed her out to the truck.

“Because I haven’t had any work there, Mom. That’s why,” I said as she pulled open the back door and placed her pies on the seat. Pushing past her, I placed my casserole dishes beside the pies.

She shoved her hands on her hips and pursed her lips. “Why can’t you be like every other kid in the world and rebel a little? Or at least have a life outside of work?”

I spun back around to stare at my mom in shock “What?” I asked.

“You heard me. In high school you never snuck out, always telling me where you, and Trixie, and your girls were going. You didn’t sneak around with any boy and even in college you never once went to a party. Now, you’re here and all you do is work and come home to take care of your father and I.” She shook her head. “Seriously. I don’t actually need you to take care of me. The doctor said I’ve healed just fine, and you know it was simply an excuse to get you to move home. Go do something that isn’t work for once! Do something adventurous! I’d rather have to call your sister because you’re off making out with some guy when your dad collapses than to have you already there. Live a little!”

“Live a little? I tried that!” I snapped at her, and she blinked, stunned. “I was at the Duke Ranch when dad ended up in the hospital, remember?”

“Working! You were working Tenley!” she shouted at me, raising her voice.

“I was being thrown off a sled from the back of a four-wheeler and then was chased after by a bear!” I yelled back, throwing my hands in the air as a tear slid down my cheek. I was exploding. Everything I’d shoved down a couple weeks ago when it happened came flooding back.

My mom’s gaze widened, shocked. Everything from happiness to terror flashed across her beautiful face. “You were what?” she whispered, and I sighed, my shoulders sagging.

“I tried to live a little. And now all I feel is guilt and shame for doing something fun when you and Dad had to call an ambulance to go to the hospital,” I quietly answered as two SUVs turned down my parents’ road. “I tried.”

My mom’s gaze slid to the two approaching vehicles that contained my siblings and their families. “Oh, Tenley. You don’t need to feel guilty. Honestly, that makes me happy to hear. Not that you were chased by a bear, but that you were having a little adventure.” She softly said as the black SUV

slowed and pulled off to the side of the road, the tan one parking behind the first.

Maddie popped her head out of the passenger window and waved while Luke rolled down the driver's side of his SUV and shouted a hello. My mom grinned and blew kisses their way, letting them know we will go get Dad and be on our way. Within ten minutes, the rest of the pies and casseroles were in the truck, my dad seated up front with a small oxygen tank, and I was stuffed into the back, driver's side.

There were no words exchanged as the procession began, my siblings following behind us, towards the Duke Ranch. A place that I had been avoiding. I didn't even know what I was going to say to Weston when I saw him, and I'd never had a chance to apologize to Nancy and Jeb from the first failed dinner date. Although it seemed they didn't care at all. Cassidy was a wild card, as well, plus I was starting to regret my outfit choice.

A shorter dress with thigh-high, chunky-heeled boots were not exactly ranch material. It was more L.A. girl style. I needed to have Carly and Elena take me shopping soon to update my wardrobe, but I really liked this dress. The cut gave me the illusion of curves and helped me feel sexy. Although, I was now worrying that it would give Cassidy false hope.

Chapter 18

The familiar drive to the ranch was shorter than I would've preferred, and we emerged at the base of the houses once more. Trucks lined the open space as usual, Razors and four-wheelers without drivers, and no cowboys were riding down the side of the mountain. But throngs of cattle grazed on flakes of hay scattered about, most of the herd being down near the majority of the houses. I assumed Eugene was the only one higher up the mountain close to Weston's house.

Lights were on in the main home, and smoke curled from the chimney. Cute fall decor littered the porch, and I took a deep breath as my mom put the truck into park and killed the engine. The front door swung open and Nancy emerged with Jeb. They waved excitedly at my mom who grinned and returned the gesture, climbing down from the truck.

I hesitantly pushed open the truck door, watching for Weston or Cassidy. Nancy's eyes met mine, and she gave me a soft and joyous smile. Mine was not quite as relaxed.

"Can we help with anything?" Nancy asked, once she'd given my mom a hug.

"We have some pies and casseroles, but other than that, I think we are okay," my mom answered, and Nancy followed her around to the other side of the truck. Jeb hung back with me, walking slower beside me to gather dishes too. My mom was helping my dad out of the truck when Jeb's hand wrapped around my arm and stopped me.

"Did the bear incident scare you off or something?" he asked, staring at me with those blue eyes that were too much like his son's. I glanced towards the door, hoping by a slim chance that Weston was there. He wasn't.

"Oh," I muttered, watching for a little longer, and then turned back to Jeb. "No, just my dad is doing worse and work was busy."

Of course, I made up an excuse, and he didn't believe me. But he didn't push it any further. "Well, we're glad you're

back,” he said with a smile, also so much like Weston’s, and then walked forward. He took my dad from my mom and headed towards the house. My siblings came around the side of the truck to help carry pies and casseroles while their spouses ushered the kids towards the front doors.

“I can’t believe we are standing on the Duke Ranch,” Maddie said as Nancy passed by carrying two pies. My sister leaned forward and whispered between Mom and me, “Thank you, Mom for being Nancy’s friend.”

“Thank your sister for this one. She’s apparently made an impression on them,” my mom replied, grabbing two more pies. Her balance was much better lately, and she’d been able to ditch the walker.

“What?” Maddie said and I shook my head, silently refusing to explain.

“Now hurry up, Cassidy is waiting for you, Tenley,” my mom added and shuffled away from the truck.

I groaned, though at least this was the first time in a while she’d pestered me about Cassidy. Part of me knew that it wasn’t his attention I was vying for. A part of me that I was continually denying.

“Double what?” Maddie stared at me in shock, while my two siblings and I grabbed the last of the casseroles.

“Man, I thought we’d made it past this whole ‘arrange dates with Cassidy’ thing,” I muttered.

“As in Cassidy Duke?” Luke asked beside me. He and Maddie shared my mom’s eyes, but had the same dark hair I did. However, they both resembled my dad when it came to face shape and bone structure. Not as petite as I was and with thinner lips.

Luke was wearing nice slacks with a simple, deep green button up, his leaner frame suited nicely to the look. Maddie had pulled her short hair back into a half up, half down style and wore a plaid, blue skirt with a black turtleneck sweater.

“Yes, Cassidy Duke,” I replied.

“*The Cassidy Duke* is interested in you, yet you aren’t into him? Are you ever interested in any guys?” Maddie asked beside me as we took the couple steps up towards the front door. Yes, I was. Just not that guy. Honestly, it had been a while since I’d recognized that feeling of intrigue, that desire to pursue someone.

I didn’t have to answer as we pushed open the door and entered the liveliest, warmest home I’d seen almost ever.

Kids were giggling, running across the bright brown wooden flooring to the right. A massive great room, with a stone fireplace centered upon the wall, was encircled by large leather couches. A rug splayed between them, covered with children and toys.

The warm orange and scarlet hues accentuated by the fire light danced across the hearth, illuminating across the grand open space before us. A staircase ran upwards directly to my left, a loft with bright wooden knotted railing exposed to us.

Hats hung along hooks galore against the wall adjacent to the door and faint country music played behind the chatter of people. Straight across from the entrance was the massive kitchen. Deep cinnamon colored granite countertops ran the length of the room, creating a large island piled high with food already. Behind the island was an expansive kitchen with modern appliances and beautiful deep red cabinets. To the left was a piano and guitar pushed back into the corner to make room for two extravagant and large dining tables lit with candles and utensils already set.

I slowly stepped forward behind my siblings, scanning the room for a pair of blue eyes that I desired to see. There were faces I recognized, and many I felt I’d seen at least once before, but no Weston. Not yet.

Cassidy was in the kitchen, already talking to my mom. But no Weston.

Searching once more, I finally spotted him. He was standing against the far wall covered in shadows beside the piano, talking to someone who had their back to me. No hat

this time, his curls neatly gelled, and even his mustache had been trimmed nicely with the tips turning out and up.

The sleeves to his crisp, navy button-up were rolled halfway up his forearms, and he'd paired it with his usual large buckle and a nicely starched pair of dark wranglers. He looked very handsome, even more so than I remembered.

Weston hadn't noticed me yet, his eyes still fixed on his red-headed companion as a beautiful woman approached the two of them. She looked much like Weston and Cassidy, and I assumed it was his sister Pearl, which meant that the man with his back to me had to be Cash.

I desperately wanted Weston to see me, while still not knowing what I would say to him. It confused me as to why I cared so much about him interacting with me, but I did miss my friend.

I made it to the kitchen counter, and added my dish to the rest of the stash before slipping silently over to the edge. Weston was to my right, the rest of the kitchen appliances to my left, and I watched my siblings approach Nancy and my mom; Cassidy was no longer with her. Any restraint I had was gone as I consistently kept looking over at Weston, who was deeply enthralled in conversation.

Glass sliding across the counter pulled my attention in front of me. "Long time no see," Cassidy said, pushing some wine in my direction.

"Hey," I replied, mildly amused and running my finger around the base of the glass.

"Your siblings are nice." He leaned forward on the counter as I glanced back at Weston.

"Mmm," I mumbled in reply.

"My parents are happy you're here for Thanksgiving. I'm happy you're here," Cassidy said, and I glanced back at his perfectly proportioned face. His hazel eyes watched me, simple and kind, yet I felt nothing else. He had on a very nice red and black checkered flannel, black jeans held up by a

buckle, as well. Cassidy's hair was styled nicely, but lacked the refinement that Weston's had.

"We appreciate the invitation," I replied, my gaze sliding back to Weston as he leaned up against the wall and took a sip of his beer.

"I was thinking after dinner we could disappear somewhere together," Cassidy pressed, while I studied the features of the man who'd saved my life.

"After dinner, I'll be taking a nap," I lightheartedly replied, tearing my gaze from Weston and gave a small smile to the man beside me.

"We can nap together then," Cassidy teased with a wink, and I shook my head as my eyes returned to Weston. "Or maybe you'd rather disappear with someone else."

I sucked in my cheek as Weston's eyes finally slid over the shoulder of his friend, locking onto mine. The bluest of blues, just as they had been the first night he'd stopped and helped me change my tire. Maybe Cassidy wasn't wrong. Maybe it was Weston that I wanted to disappear with, just for a moment. Without anyone else knowing. If no one else knew, then my dad couldn't get mad. I wasn't doing anything wrong seeing my friend. Right?

"You haven't been playing hard to get, have you?" Cassidy stated beside me as Weston raised one side of his lips in a crooked grin. I peeled my gaze from the man in the corner to meet Cassidy's eyes.

"Is that what you've been thinking this entire time?"

He nodded.

"Cassidy, you are a very handsome man, and I've been grateful to know you, but I have no romantic feelings for you," I explicitly stated. "You could have any girl in town that you want."

He sighed. "Except you."

I didn't say anything, which was an answer on its own, as my eyes slid to the corner once more. Weston's gaze flashed

to mine, and he raised both brows at me. I couldn't stop the smile and blush from settling upon my cheeks.

"But Weston could," Cassidy stated, and I whipped my head towards him.

"What?" I asked, furrowing my brows and standing up straight as he took a sip from his beer bottle.

"Weston could have you if he wanted."

I rolled my eyes. "Cassidy, I've also told you before that we are just friends."

"Just friends don't look at each other the way you two do." He gave me a mischievous smile.

"That's because you don't think two people of the opposite gender can be friends." I took a sip of my wine and glanced back towards the corner.

"No, I do not," Cassidy said, as Weston pushed himself off of the wall and began wading through the sea of people in our direction.

"Well, you are being proven wrong," I replied with a foolish, winning grin, and he shook his head.

"He is the only worthy opponent for me to lose to." Cassidy winked at me, and I gave him an annoyed sigh. He chuckled, raised his beer towards Weston, and then slipped away from the counter as the very man we'd been talking about stopped beside me.

"Hi!" I cheerily said, happy to see him, but worried he was going to be mad at me.

"Why have you been practically ignoring me?" He got straight to the point, and I blinked in shock. Although he'd once told me he was terrible at small talk, so I shouldn't have been that surprised.

"Glad to see you too," I grumbled, and he tilted his head towards me, his eyes telling me he wasn't playing this game. "Work was crazy. Everyone insisted they had to get their animals in before the holiday."

He shook his head. “Try again.” His intense eyes stared directly into my soul. He wasn’t going to back down until he had a satisfied answer.

“Weston...” I began, and his gaze softened.

“I’m not mad, just making sure you’re okay.” He leaned a little closer towards me, and I inhaled deeply. It was only now that I realized I missed not just him, but his smell as well. His simple presence beside me, I’d missed it all.

“Is this because of the bear thing?” I quietly asked, and he gave me a single nod. “Yeah, I’m okay. Only because of you.”

There was something new in his eyes as he studied me tenderly. Something I hadn’t seen before, and it made my heart slow down. The room swirled into the distance, and there was nothing but him and I.

Frozen and bound.

A single moment threading between only him and I despite the multitude of people surrounding us.

Then a soft tinkling against glass pulled me from my stupor, my eyes remaining locked with his for one more second as the room rippled back into focus and became silent. His heart beat with mine, settling into rhythmical sync as Nancy tapped her glass with a spoon once more.

And then the spell was broken, and we both looked towards his beautiful mom. “Jeb and I are feeling so blessed to have our family here with us, as well as friends, old and new, gathered in celebration of gratitude. Dinner won’t be ready for another three hours, so until then, don’t be afraid to grab snacks from the trays on the counter and mingle. Happy Thanksgiving!”

She raised her glass in a toast, and we saluted her, taking a swig before I returned to the man towering beside me. My eyes caught Maddie’s questioning gaze before coming in contact with Weston’s once more. She had this inquisitive grin on her face, that same look Cassidy had given me right before scurrying off.

“We have three hours to kill,” Weston said, tilting his head.

“What ever shall we do?” I replied and smiled.

“Well, there is this pond over on the other side of the ranch that’s perfect for ice skating.” He leaned forward onto the counter and spun the bottle between his hands.

“I’ve never been ice skating before!”

“What size shoes are you?” he asked, his eyes sliding down my body, and he leaned over to the side to get a better view of my feet. As his gaze slowly ascended my frame, his eyes bled with hunger for half a second. A hunger that food would not satisfy, and then it was gone.

“Seven,” I timidly said, and then felt the excitement quickly rush away. My voice became quiet. “No, we shouldn’t go.”

His smile fell immediately from his face, and he clenched his jaw. “Why not?”

My eyes shifted to my father who was sitting on the couch, holding the oxygen tank to his chest, and inhaling deeply. I wouldn’t be gone again if something happened, not this time. Not ever. Weston traced my gaze to find what I was looking at, and the tension fell from his face.

“You can’t stop living, Tenley. We talked about that,” he gently said.

I shook my head vigorously. “I won’t be gone again if something happens. Not like last time.”

“Again? Last time? What are you talking about?” Weston asked, and I turned my shameful gaze to meet his.

“My father was rushed to the hospital by ambulance because I was here, sledding. ‘Having fun’ instead of taking care of my parents like I’d moved here to do.” I blinked back the tears of fright that were swirling within me. He inched closer to death every day, and I was terrified I would be somewhere else when he left this world.

“That’s why you’ve been ignoring me,” he stated, and I sucked my cheek back between my teeth. Weston’s face softened into a tender smile. “We are staying on the ranch, where your father is. For only three hours, and if something happens, you’ll be right there.”

He wasn’t wrong. I wouldn’t be that far from my dad, and my mom had gotten mad at me earlier for not adventuring out more. Whiplash, back and forth, tugged at me. A war within my soul as I battled to decide if this would bring me more guilt. I glanced at my father one more time. There were so many people around, he would be taken care of, and I wasn’t going that far.

“Ice skating,” Weston prompted, a smirk filling his face as I looked back at him once more. Feet padded across the floor, and a red-haired boy popped up between the two of us.

“Did you say ice skating?” Keaton asked with a grin, and Weston glanced at him, slightly perturbed. I chuckled, surprised by his annoyed reaction, although I realized I was also slightly peeved that it wouldn’t be *just* Weston and me.

“Yes. I said ice skating,” he answered through gritted teeth.

“Sweet! I’ll go tell the others!” Keaton replied and scurried off. I couldn’t help but laugh lightly as my eyes fell on Weston who looked especially frustrated.

“Give me a minute to find you some skates in your size. I think we’ve got a pair around here somewhere,” Weston said, his eyes drilling holes after Keaton, causing me to laugh again.

“Weston, I’m wearing a dress.”

“You look very pretty in it,” he stated nonchalantly, and then whipped his head towards me, confusion caressing his features. “Why do you mention that?”

“I don’t have a jacket and it’s cold.”

He shook his head. “Duh, idiot,” he muttered to himself, and then grinned. “Wait here. I’ll steal some tights or pantyhose or whatever they’re called from Pearl, and we will

head out.” And Weston took off, leaving me waiting for another adventure.

Chapter 19

Weston turned around a corner and we emerged from the small pathway that had obviously been driven on many times before this trip. In front of me was a small pond, completely frozen over with scratches already across the surface. Keaton and Annie shouted in delight and Millie clapped her hands in glee as he put the Razor into park. They jumped out of the back.

I sat still, admiring the last bit of frozen green foliage whose tips peeked out from beneath the snow. Weston came around to my side as I tugged at the black, wool tights that clung uncomfortably to my legs, though I was grateful for them since it seemed especially cold today. He pulled open the door and knelt down in front of me. I furrowed my brows as he gently grabbed my foot and brought it towards him, resting it upon his leg.

His fingers slid the battered but functional figure skate upon my foot and then began lacing it tightly up. I watched his thick, veiny hands work something so delicately without a word, without hesitation. His cowboy hat was once again upon his head, hiding those beautiful blue eyes and that face that I so desperately loved to see.

Once the skates were on both of my feet, he stood and quickly changed his boots out for a pair of black hockey ones before extending his palms to me. I tenderly placed my hands in his, and he helped my shaky legs out of the Razor. Balancing against him, we made our way to the pond that the other three kids had already zoomed across.

Graceful and quick, Millie's pockets bulged with rocks that she was gathering around the edge of the pond. Then she chased after Keaton and threw the small pebbles at him before gathering them up quickly and returning to her game that they all laughed at.

Weston's skates hit the ice and he easily slid backwards, making room for my wobbly feet. I stared at the slick, frozen surface, nerves bouncing through my veins. The

sledding was one thing, but this was something else. It always looked so romantic and fun in the movies but right now, as I stared at the ice in front of me, it looked like anything but fun.

“Trust me,” Weston whispered, and I looked up from the frozen surface at the man in a Carhartt in front of me. “I’ve always got you.”

Nodding quickly, I placed one skate on the surface and leaned into his hands. Balancing against him, I placed the other blade upon the ice, and he slowly tugged me forward. He skated backwards across the pond, gently pulling me along and allowing me to feel the freedom of the movement.

I was anything but graceful, but I slowly felt excitement slither back into my veins. After a minute of him pulling me along, he began to instruct me on how to push myself forward on the skates. He didn’t let go of my hands, but gave me time to struggle with the movement.

Giggling while he smiled wide, I eventually found a rhythm to the movement, and he loosened his hold on my hands. I grinned even bigger as I remained steady, skirting around the pond after Weston.

Suddenly, Keaton bumped into my backside, making me tumble forward. Directly into Weston’s outstretched arms.

“Sorry!” Keaton called, scooting on by. Weston wrapped his arms tighter around me as we slid slowly across the surface and then came to a gentle halt. I was laughing, he was chuckling and grinning. My cheek pressed against his chest, and I could feel his heartbeat steady beneath his ribs, holding me snug to his frame.

Instead of moving away, I sunk into his embrace. Closing my eyes and leaving my hands pressed against his abdomen that I’d braced upon. Pine trees and leather enveloped me along with a little musk that I didn’t have a word to describe. I liked this.

Gradually, I opened my eyelids and lifted my gaze to meet his eyes. He was already studying me, looking down at my face with the most tender contemplation. His thick, dark

lashes fluttered as a crooked smile spread softly across his face, pulling his scar tight.

Oh, Weston. I thought adoringly. Finding myself seeing a side of this powerful man that I knew he never shared with anyone else.

His hand slowly drifted from my waist, and his fingers brushed against some hair that had fallen into my face. Fingers trailed along the edge of the strands, his eyes following steadily behind. There was no pressure to drift apart yet, and I watched his movements as my heart whispered in my chest like a soft breeze on a summer day.

“I like your hair like this,” he whispered, his eyes still with his fingers that slowly threaded through the end of the curls. I liked the way he was touching my hair. I liked the way he was speaking to me. I liked the way he’d looked at me earlier, even if we were just friends.

Millie skated by behind us, the crunch of rocks crashing against the ice muffled by the trance we were standing in. She paused to pick them up as Keaton roared up behind her and teased her before they skirted off, chasing one another.

Despite the distraction, I couldn’t peel my gaze away from Weston’s eyes that had drifted to mine. Intense and full of wonder.

And longing.

“Weston...” I whispered, and his body shuddered.

Suddenly, he slammed forward against me, unintentionally shoving me away. My eyes met Millie’s directly behind Weston, as she grimaced. Swinging my arms, I tried to maintain my balance, but failed and crashed onto the icy surface.

A crack sounded below me.

Glancing down between my legs, I gasped before plummeting into the icy darkness. Frigid water pierced into my throat and wrapped around my entire body, as I became completely submerged in the frozen liquid.

Kicking my legs, I reached for the blurry surface, strong fingers wrapped around my numb wrist, pulling my head into fresh, icy air. I coughed, spitting out water that had burned my lungs from swallowing and tried to entangle my own hand around Weston's arm.

"Don't let go!" Weston commanded, his belly flat against the ice. A small crack began to splinter beneath his chest as my weight and the current pulled at my ankles.

Fear washed through my veins, prickling like needles at my body that was rapidly becoming bitter cold. I gripped tighter with my fingers, desperately splashing against the water as it lapped across the hole that was beginning to form a new, thin layer of ice.

"How did the ice—" I spluttered out, and then swallowed another mouthful. My teeth stopped chattering, too cold to exert any energy as Weston was attempting to drag me out of the pond. My fingers and body were excruciatingly painful. But his effort was becoming fruitless. I felt trapped in a paralyzed state, unable to move. His endeavor only increased the depth of the crack beneath his stomach as he continually slid across the ice, nearly falling in after me himself. The current tugging at my legs was increasingly growing as my weight became denser and denser.

"An air bubble must have been caught beneath—" Weston began, and then my head slipped under the surface of the water. All feeling escaped my body, the soaked clothing dragging me deeper into the water. My fingers loosened from around him. The only thing I could still sense against my skin was Weston's hand still desperately clinging to my wrist.

My mind wanted my body to try and force my way back to the surface. My muscles convulsed, desperate for warmth and fresh air, but my limbs refused to move. I felt my lungs tighten from the lack of oxygen, and I watched as his face began fading into a blur. The icy surface above me was drifting away, and his touch was now waning as the numbing bitter cold of water engulfed me. Weston's mouth was moving, the muscles in his entire body straining as I was being sucked farther and farther away.

This was the end for me. It was nearing as Weston began pounding against the thin layer of ice that had solidified around my arm. Red stained the surface that splintered and cracked, but it was of no use. My arm began to slide through his hand.

Black clouded the edges of my vision, my body and lungs falling into a blissful state of nothingness. Water pierced into my burning lungs as my body involuntarily attempted to fill them with oxygen.

The shadows that were surrounding Weston's blurry figure above me were darkening as he ferociously tried once more to raise me from the water, refusing to let go of my wrist. But his fingers were as numb as my entire body was, and instead I slipped another centimeter away, edging closer to the bottom of the icy pond.

A muffled roar vibrated through the ice and rippled the water that had become my tomb. Weston, fighting to keep me with him, crying out for me. Begging that I stay with him, but there was something dragging me down and away from the light that was dimming above me.

The last thing I saw before succumbing to this blistering cold darkness, was Weston's intense blue eyes.

Those beautiful blue eyes.

And then my wrist slipped entirely from his hand.

Chapter 20

****WESTON****

No.

I slammed my fist into the ice once more as Tenley slipped from my grasp. One moment she was in my arms, gazing at me with the most adoring emerald eyes. Her sweet face flushed with rosy cheeks. The next, she was plunging into the cold abyss below.

It had nearly pulled me in as well, but I'd managed to dig the toes of my skates in and collapse onto my belly, stopping her from becoming lost in the water. Millie was sobbing, terrified, and Keaton had dived onto my ankles, holding me tightly with Annie.

Yet, I still lost her. The water had been too cold and my fingers lost their strength.

Her body drifted deeper into the water below the ice that I hit once more with desperation. My knuckles turning red with the blood that oozed out of every cut from the layer of frozen death that had entombed Tenley.

"No," I hoarsely cried out, angry. Then a small hand tapped me on my shoulder, and I shook my head, unable to look away from her fading figure. So petite, so feisty.

"Uncle Weston." Millie's voice trembled beside me, and I bit back the rage that was roaring through me. I knew I shouldn't blame myself; it had been an accident. No one could have guessed that there was an air pocket in the exact spot Tenley would fall onto. No one could have known that the single area that needed to be thick was compromised and caused Tenley's weight to break through entirely. But I was angry.

She'd looked at me differently today. A way no one had done. And the woman that I had quickly fallen for was fading fast beneath a wall that seemed impenetrable despite my desperate attempts.

I was also angry about losing my grip on her. The current that had tugged at her legs combined with the ice-cold temperature turning my own hand numb had ripped Tenley away. Someone who was becoming more than just a friend was disappearing from my life. I'd never felt the pain that was shooting through my heart at this moment before.

"Uncle Weston," Millie said again.

"What?" I snapped, swinging my head towards her, and she blinked in fright. Her big eyes swallowed her face. I was filled with immediate regret and opened my mouth to apologize when she lifted one little mitten and pointed to the hole.

"You're going to save her, right?" she whispered.

Something zapped into place. Everything I'd ever learned sent a fiery fuel racing through my veins. Yes, I was going to save her.

"Oh, you sweet girl," I said and then slammed my fist once more into the thin layer of ice freshly blanketing the hole. I increased my speed and strength, and the hole widened. Large enough for me to fit through.

"Annie," I stated as I stood up and pulled my coat from my body. "The moment I dive in, you get Millie into that Razor and then come and wait for me at the hole."

Annie nodded, reaching out for Millie and grabbing her arm tightly.

"Keaton, you are in charge of my clothes," I said, and Keaton stiffly nodded, my shirt falling on top of the coat that I'd piled off to the side. The air bit at my exposed torso as I removed my skates, socks, hat and added them to the pile. My fingers were already becoming numb as I undid the buckle and looked directly at Keaton.

"If I'm not back up within three minutes, you *all* leave and go get Grandpa," I commanded, my jeans joining the pile of clothes.

"Yes, sir," Keaton said, and I turned around to face the hole that had already formed a thin layer of ice. Ramming my

fist against it, I split the ice; I took some quick breaths, bracing for the needle-like sensation that was about to swallow me whole.

And I jumped into the water.

It burned and ice shards ripped at my skin, already having begun to form a frozen layer on the hole I'd created. I allowed myself to sink further into the water.

The current pulled me away from the small light that pierced the frozen surface, but I allowed it to do so, hoping it would drag me towards Tenley. And it did. Within thirty seconds I found her, floating aimlessly a few feet away.

My lungs were beginning to deflate, the oxygen depleting from my cells as I wrapped an arm around her body and began swimming back to the surface. She wasn't moving in my arms as I pushed higher and higher, shoving her in front of me through the hole that was both mine and Tenley's relief.

With the combined help of Annie pulling and myself pushing, I burst through the water, gasping for air, to see Tenley's frozen body laying against the bank of the icy lake. Her skin was gray, her lips blue as Annie pressed against her chest, trying to get water out of her lungs.

I pulled myself out of the water, my entire body shaking with cold as Keaton clenched my clothes tighter to his chest. My teeth chattered as the water frosted against my skin; Tenley was still not moving.

"Sta-Sta-Start the Razor," I stuttered, and Keaton glanced my way, confused for a moment before understanding and rushing to the side-by-side. He scrambled for the keys, fumbling a few times before finally managing to turn the engine over.

"Weston, it's not working," Annie cried out, and I stumbled their way. Collapsing into the snow at the bank of the pond, I pulled Tenley's stiff body into my arms, rolling her sideways into my chest.

"Tenley," I whispered into her frozen hair. "Please, darling."

Squeezing her tightly, I pounded against her back, trying to get her to spit up anything that she might've swallowed. She hadn't been under the water for more than a couple minutes even though it had felt like a lifetime. It had to have been the cold that took her first.

It had to be.

My palm worked faster against her, and then suddenly water dribbled from her lips.

She convulsed, spewed out more liquid, and gasped for air. But her eyes didn't open as her body began to shake violently. It matched my trembling self that was starting to ache from the cold.

Forcing another wave of adrenaline to rush through my veins, I picked her up and stumbled towards the Razor that Keaton had started. I had to get us back to the house. Back to warmth.

At least the adrenaline was pushing a small amount of blood to my extremities, and they burned. "Kea-Keaton," I stuttered. "My clothes."

Tenley wasn't moving, and her breathing was so shallow, so faint as her body stopped shivering. She was fading quickly, her clothes crisp from the frozen water. I closed my eyes, knowing that she was probably going to hate me for the rest of her life with what I needed to do, but at least she'd live, and I rolled her away from my chest.

Peeling the dress from her body was tricky as it clung to her, wet and frozen. Once I'd gotten it over her head, I tossed it to the side and ripped the wool tights in two, prying them from her legs after managing to tug the ice skates from her feet.

Nothing but her bra and underwear were left and I pressed her against my torso. Skin on skin contact was the fastest way to warm someone up, and the most efficient. I closed my eyes, wrapping her as tightly as I could against my own frozen self as a coat draped around my shoulders. She felt

so small, so cold within my arms, and I knew there wasn't much time left.

I was weak, exhausted, but had to get her home. Standing upon my cramping legs, I climbed into the passenger side of the Razor and pulled her tighter against me. The Razor shook as Keaton and Annie joined us, with Annie taking the initiative to speed off towards the house.

Tenley's crisp lashes that were coated with frost flickered for a moment as I glanced down at her face that I had buried against my chest. "Please. Please," I whispered. "Stay."

I'd never felt so hopeless. Not even when the bear had tried to attack her, or when Cassidy had been attacked and everything in my life had changed from that accident.

But now? Now this precious woman lay cradled in my arms, her heartbeat so faint against my bare skin. Her own body was frigid, icy to the touch. Annie drove as fast as she could, Keaton keeping the coat around my shoulders while Millie held onto my boots and the rest of my clothes in her lap.

We whipped around the corner, screaming straight for the home that was lit up and warm as Tenley shuddered in my arms. She didn't wake, so I tucked her as close as I could and pulled the coat from around my own shoulders, cocooning her in between the fabric and my own body.

Annie screeched in front of my parents' home and threw it into park. "Put pants on first, Weston," she said and I glanced at her, having completely forgotten I was in nothing but my underwear.

Keaton came around the side and handed me my jeans that I jumped into while running up to the house. I didn't bother buttoning them as I burst through the front door, holding a now trembling Tenley. Her body had begun to convulse as I searched frantically for anyone really.

My mom's face popped from around the dining table as the room became completely silent. "Help her," I begged, clutching tightly to Tenley.

“To the fireplace,” My mom instructed, ushering me over to the roaring flames, and I crashed in front of the mantle. “Don’t let her go. You’re the warmest thing.” She faced the room as whispers floated to my ears. “Everyone upstairs. Now!”

Keaton quickly explained what had happened, loudly, as they slowly filtered out of the main room. Several gasps and murmured questions disappeared with the crowd before silence filled the emptiness around me. I couldn’t stop staring at Tenley who was still shaking violently in my arms.

She had to be okay. She had to be.

“My baby,” Rosemary cried out, falling beside me, and reached for Tenley. She wrapped her arms around Tenley and tried to pull her from my grasp. But I held on tighter.

“Give her to me,” she barked at me. I remained still, holding Tenley close as her shivering began to slow and her heart started to race. It was pushing blood through her body, trying to warm her up.

“Give me my daughter!” she shrieked, but I refused to.

Cassidy’s voice sounded softly near Rosemary, off to my side. “She’s the warmest in his arms. Now, come on. Let him—”

“He took her clothes off. He doesn’t have clothes on. That’s so—”

“Warm. Skin to skin contact is the quickest and best way to warm someone up,” Cassidy said, attempting to reassure her again.

“I don’t care,” Rosemary said as a blanket fell over my shoulders and Tenley, cocooning her in.

“I do,” I snarled, finally breaking my silence and Rosemary immediately hushed. “If you want her to live, you’ll back off.” She hesitated for a moment, and then slowly stepped away with Cassidy.

And that is where I stayed. In front of that fireplace, holding Tenley and praying that she would wake up soon, as

the frost gently began to melt from the most beautiful eyelashes I'd ever seen. Her cheeks slowly becoming that rosy pink I so adored.

Chapter 21

TENLEY

My skin burned. Something blistering hot had encircled me as I blinked, trying to shift in the tomb that was so warm. Scorching hot, but oddly comforting. Painful, but consoling. I was beginning to feel my toes again, even my fingertips were coming back into feeling with excruciating needle pricks.

I fluttered my eyelids, trying to remember what had happened. Trying to figure out where I was. Aching, I cracked them open to find myself staring at a bare chest with dark hair upon it. Strong muscles embraced me tightly, holding me close against a warm body that was familiar. Smelled soothing, like the forest.

Weston. It had to be.

Agonizingly slowly, I turned my head so I could see the face of whomever was holding me tightly. And I found those blue eyes watching me, the very image that had been the last thing I'd seen before being swallowed whole. His shoulders sagged in relief as he moved a hand towards my face and brushed back some hair that was damp.

Neither of us had to speak as I knew he'd been the one to save me again. He was the reason I was still alive.

"Ice skating was fun," I hoarsely choked out, finally breaking the silence that was bouncing around us.

He chuckled, a tender crooked grin spreading across his lips. I tucked my face against his bare chest once more as he sat back a little farther. Tension and worry fled from his body as he brushed a thumb back and forth across my cheek.

"People told me that muscles are uncomfortable to cuddle with." I coughed, rocking my head to meet Weston's curious gaze again. "They were wrong."

He shook his head and winked. "What do they think? That we are going to flex the entire time?"

It was my turn to giggle. “I guess.”

Our small, hushed, private conversation was interrupted by my mom’s face who appeared above Weston’s shoulders. The blankets that cocooned around both of us were beginning to cause me to sweat, which came as a welcome new sensation.

“Tenley!” she cried out.

“I’m okay, Mom.” I replied and glanced at the man who was tenderly holding me. “Thanks to Weston.”

“And he will put you down.” My father’s voice rose from across the room, causing Weston to stiffen. “Immediately.”

Weston furrowed his brows, confused. It mirrored my own befuddlement. Slowly, he released me from his arms, carefully keeping the blankets wrapped modestly around my shoulders so I could at least spin and face my dad who was in a recliner. He was watching Weston and I with pain in his eyes. There was no one else with me in this room besides my parents, Nancy, and the man who had saved my life.

I stayed close to Weston, leaning against his body for support, and he kept one arm around my waist. My dad shakily pushed himself up from the chair, placing the oxygen container beside him.

“Do not touch her again. She is my daughter. It is my responsibility to protect her, not someone like you.” He coldly stared at Weston, who clenched his jaw beside me.

I gasped, blinking rapidly between my dad and Weston.

“Daddy...” I cautioned. “He is the reason I’m alive.”

“He’s also the reason you nearly died. I thought I made this clear when I told you—”

“He’s never hurt anyone!” I cried out, attempting to stand, but collapsed back to the ground. I couldn’t believe that my father was still hanging onto the rumor.

Sorrow slashed across my father’s face before he took a deep breath. “Tenley. You already know my feelings, now I

am asking you to respect them.” My father’s eyes shot towards Weston. “I thought I could get past the fact you’ve hit a woman before, so Tenley could be with Cassidy. But I can’t. It’s absolutely disgusting to watch you...” He paused, stepped closer, and his voice cracked as he spoke, “you *monster* put your hands on my daughter.”

Weston remained emotionless beside me.

“How dare you!” Nancy cried out, upset at my father, but Weston simply shook his head once, asking her to stop.

“Well, at least you have enough honor to admit what you’ve done,” my father said sharply as Weston sighed.

“I’ve never even thought about hitting a woman, sir. I would never hurt your daughter either,” Weston calmly stated beside me, still holding me with one arm.

My father stepped coldly forward. “Back away or I will call the police if you touch her again. I am still capable of taking care of my own daughter.” I stared at my dad in utter shock.

He glared sharply at Weston, his face pulled tight, battling something internally as he fought with the man beside me externally.

This wasn’t coming from him; it couldn’t be coming from him. Everything was exploding around me as I stared at the frail figure before me that stood as tall as he could now.

“But he’s never hurt me. The police won’t be able to do anything,” I stammered.

“Yet, who will they believe? That monster and his family that hid him away, or a man dying of cancer trying to take care of his daughter. Better than anyone else can.” My father wasn’t budging, his cold and calm demeanor crushing my soul, and I felt my heart shatter inside me. This wasn’t like him at all. This wasn’t like the man who had raised me.

Weston slowly slipped his arm away from me, his intense eyes clouding over as he shoved the walls back up around him. Walls that I’d managed to once break through.

“Weston?” I quietly cried out, and he turned towards me, sorrow filling those blue eyes. Yet, he didn’t say anything as he pushed himself off of the floor. He shook from exhaustion but lifted his chin, holding it proudly high as he looked at my father.

“That’s right. Run away again like the coward you are,” my father calmly said, his eyes full of frustration.

“I’m not running, sir. I am doing as I’ve always done—protecting your daughter,” Weston simply stated, and then he grabbed his coat that was draped over the railing and disappeared into the outdoors with his boots in hand.

An emptiness swirled within my heart, in a place that I hadn’t realized had once been so full. He’d made the choice for me so I didn’t have to. My father had literally said it was either him or Weston, and Weston had taken that burden from me without hesitation.

And I wasn’t sure what hurt more.

I stared at the door long after Weston had faded from view. My father was being looked over by my mom as he had collapsed back against the chair. Nancy ran upstairs and then returned with Cassidy on her tail. But he merely gave me a sympathetic glance and then headed towards the door to go after Weston. It should’ve been me who went after him, but I feared what would happen if I did.

I feared the guilt that was already consuming me, torn between Weston and my dad.

My father wasn’t wrong. The police had to know about the rumors too, and they would most certainly side with a dying man over Weston, even though it was a lie. Even if I tried to fight it or Weston’s family tried, the police would just say that we were blinded by our care for him. Because I did care for him.

More than as a friend, and I had been too stubborn to realize it until I’d lost him. Until he’d walked out to make sure that I didn’t lose my father. But I wasn’t sure if that was any

better. Why couldn't I have both? Why did it have to be one or the other?

A small morsel of guilt bubbled up in my throat as my mom helped me to my feet so we could leave. Guilt that a part of me knew if I had to, I would've chosen Weston.



I stared out the window at the passing trees. We were on our way to Billings for Trixie's engagement party. There was only one week until Christmas now, and yet I still felt nothing but the same emptiness that had stolen my soul on Thanksgiving. Doc had taken over dealing with things at the Duke Ranch, knowing something was amiss. For whatever reason though, he would give me small updates every once in a while. Which I was silently grateful for.

Two more piles of locoweed had been found, luckily the cattle hadn't made it to them yet, since Weston was on top of things. One had been in Eugene's pasture, and the other had been in with a small group of second year mothers who were pregnant. I told Doc I had a suspicion they were targeting the cattle that were going to provide the next generation, to which he agreed. But there were still no leads on who was doing it or why they were doing it.

I'd barely spoken to my father more than had been necessary, burying myself in my work and taking care of my parents' home to avoid both guilt and sorrow. My mother never mentioned Cassidy or Weston, even during a lunch date we went on. She merely wanted to make sure I was okay. Which I wasn't, but there was nothing left to do. I was too tired of fighting.

Even Elena and Carly noticed something was off, but I didn't know where to begin or how to explain it to them. So we went shopping instead. There was no point in saying anything. It wasn't worth risking Weston being arrested simply because my father had some false idea about him. I asked Doc

about him several times though, wondering why so many people thought that about Weston. He said it was because of fear—fear was such a powerful manipulator.

Weston's family obviously had tried to keep the rumors at bay, but until Weston was willing to confront them himself, there would always be suspicions that aroused. Yet, I couldn't blame Weston for keeping to himself. Even my father had called him a monster to his face. I couldn't imagine how it would feel to be treated like that constantly. And yet, the man had still held his head high when he'd left. Everything Weston had done up to that point hadn't earned the amount of respect from me that his calm composure had then.

And no matter how hard I tried to bury it, I missed him.

"Tenley, dear," my mom said from the front seat. "You remember Tommy from high school?"

I glanced at her. "Yes?" My voice was short.

"He will be there, and he's single. Your father and I both contacted him to invite him to enjoy your company while here." She grinned widely in the mirror.

All I did was stare blankly at her, and then turn away. What a horrible way to spend what could be the last little bit of my father's life, but I was so angry. They had pushed me to date, to find someone, yet ripped away the one man that I'd developed my own organic relationship with.

And for what reason? Why was Weston off limits but every other guy was okay? What was it about him that my dad hated so much? Because it was not like my father to believe so strongly in something that he had no proof for.

"Tenley, you can't stay mad forever, it's not healthy," she added, glancing at my father in the passenger seat.

"I'm not mad. I'm disappointed with how you treated Weston. And hurt," I replied, staring out the window once more.

"It was only to protect you, Tenley." My father's faint voice brushed against my ears.

“Weston is not someone I need protecting from.”

He sighed and returned to staring out his window, ending the conversation. It was going to be a long weekend. Tommy and I had already been on a date once in high school. He was everything I didn't want in a man: loud, obnoxious, and stuck up. Yeah, he was funny once in a while, but that was about it. I liked how powerful Weston was without needing to be the center of attention.

My heart broke again, my mind fighting with memories of him, and I closed my eyes. Hoping that sleep would rescue me from the rest of the two hour drive.

Chapter 22

We pulled off of the road and entered the dude ranch that Trixie and her fiancé had booked for the weekend party. It wasn't that this place was ugly, but after seeing the Duke Ranch so many times tucked away in the mountainside, this didn't quite do it anymore. A massive lodge loomed into view as we drove along between perfectly spaced pine trees that were dusted in a hint of snow.

Beyond the trees were pastures, the wooden fencing dark and perfectly stained. Horses meandered about to the right, and some cattle bellowed to the left. Nothing extreme, no cowboys riding down a mountainside or a tall, dark, and handsome mysterious figure scaring me as I got out of my vehicle.

What there was though, was a nice parking lot to the right side of the large lodge, already filled with several vehicles. A small road continued past the lot, and then two other smaller buildings that looked like miniature cabins were placed in front of a large red barn. More pastures spanned behind the lodge, sparkling with untouched snow from the most recent storm.

My mom slowed the truck and then pulled into an empty parking stall before killing the engine. I silently climbed out from the back and yanked my suitcase from the bed of the truck. The wheels scraped against the pavement as I wandered towards the front door of the lodge. Before I managed to tug on the golden handle, it burst open wide and there she was.

A loud, high pitched shriek rang in my ears as Trixie wrapped me in a massive hug. We jumped around for a moment, I fawned over her ring, and then she slung an arm around my shoulders, dragging me inside. It was warm in here, a fire lit to my right in the dark brown sitting room. A lady sat behind the front desk on my left, also in the dark brown wooden coloring. Deep reds and oranges mixed in along the

rug that sat between the fireplace and two couches that faced each other.

A long similar rug spanned the hallway that stretched forward in front of me, passing beside stairs that wound upwards and a door at the end of the hallway. “We are staying upstairs! Your parents have their own room, but you’ll be with me and the girls!” Trixie squealed in glee, guiding me towards the stairs. “There’s a big kitchen and sitting room with pool tables and fancy couches through that door. We will probably go on a horse ride tomorrow or something and just enjoy our time!”

“Sounds wonderful,” I replied halfheartedly, and began climbing the stairs after Trixie. She had on black leggings and a thick, cream sweater that still looked marvelous on her even though the shirt drowned her. Carly and Elena had helped me update my wardrobe a little. I currently wore the new pair of square-toed boots I’d been working in the past week, with my own high-waisted wranglers and a nice beige, long-sleeved T-shirt that I’d tucked into my pants.

“You look super cute by the way. I’m loving the western look and the fact that your hair is down!” she added as we emerged at the landing. A wide sitting area stretched before me, with a hallway going to the left and right. Trixie turned left and twisted the handle to the second door before pushing it open.

Squeals met my ears and three more girls crashed around me. Girls I hadn’t seen since high school. They all looked so similar. Leggings, a baggy sweatshirt, and hair pulled into a tight ponytail.

Marsha was the first to greet me, her bright brown eyes raking over my body. “So, Simon has a cute brother that has like two cute friends, who are *all* single.” Of course, that was her greeting as Trixie pointed to the far twin-sized bed on the left. There were five beds in here, one beneath the window at the opposite end of the room, two on the left, and two on the right. A large, square wooden room with the stereotypical handmade quilts. Absolutely gorgeous and gave a home feeling to the room.

There was no television, no bathroom in here. Only a large closet that was open and already stuffed full of clothes on the right side of the entrance. I shook my head and then wandered towards the last empty bed.

“What are you saying, Marsha?” I asked, setting the suitcase down beside the bed and shrugging off my Aztec-print coat.

“That because none of us are single like you are, we want to help you get a date.” She grinned, plopping down on her bed that was on my side of the room.

“Tommy’s been telling us about how your parents called him because you are single and refuse to date any of the men they’ve set you up with,” Dakota added, her blonde, short hair draping over the white pillow as she leaned back on her bed across from me.

“Of course he has,” I muttered. He most likely over exaggerated what my parents had said. That was what he did.

“Well, we figured having more options should at least help,” Marsha said as my eyes found Tori’s at the far side of the room. She was quiet and gave me a sympathetic smile. I said nothing as the girls began gossiping about how exciting the party would be tonight as we all would get to mingle with Trixie and Simon’s families.

I hated that I was acting so sour, but not only had my parents set me up, but now these girls had added even more guys to the list. It wasn’t even that I was angry, no, I was in pain. Because no matter how hard anyone tried, how much they offered men around me, none of them would be Weston.

It had been weeks of no contact with him, and the longer it went, the more confused I became. We had been just friends. Only friends explicitly stated. Yet, I couldn’t stop thinking about him and the way he’d looked at me on Thanksgiving. And I couldn’t stop thinking about the feelings that had burned deep within my soul as I had finally recognized what I’d been denying for so long.

Only for it to all come crashing down.

Swallowing the ache that was in my heart, I plastered a fake smile on my face and joined in the gossip. I needed to be happy for Trixie, excited for her. This was her time and the time to be here for her. Not me. I wasn't going to be selfish.



It was proving harder than I had expected to remain joyful as I watched the girls around me find the utmost happiness in their partners. Especially Trixie and Simon who couldn't take their eyes off of each other. He absolutely adored her, his gaze intense and strong whenever he spared a moment for her. Thin face, high brows, light brown hair that was straight and perfectly gelled into place. Exactly the kind of guy that fit Trixie.

Each of these girls had a partner who seemed to absolutely adore their significant other. And I was becoming irritated by the four boys that were flirting with me constantly. Or around me, as if it had become a competition between them of who would win me over first. I sat on a recliner watching Trixie and Simon challenge Marsha and her husband in a round of pool while Tommy and who I think was Carson teased each other from either side of me.

Surface level stuff I didn't care about. I'd tried, truly tried, but every word out of my mouth had been forced when I'd talked to these men. Now we were sitting in a brightly lit room where people mingled supporting either Trixie or Simon. My parents were talking with Trixie's parents, catching up on four years of missed experiences, over to the right beside a snack and juice bar.

There were beautiful white tablecloths draped across the tops of the table, white chairs pushed against them, some filled with people. The sparkling marble below my feet shone despite the abundance of people that shuffled about. The walls were a nice, pale gray, and I felt like we'd walked from one

world into another despite the site across from me. Large floor-to-ceiling windows exposed us to a beautiful sunset.

Oranges, yellows, and crimsons painted across a canvas that caused the ache to deepen within me. I wasn't hungry or thirsty. I wasn't bored either, despite the fact that I was staring out the windows. I was simply tired, praying that I wouldn't wake up tomorrow.

It would be so much easier than dealing with the guilt that would come when my father passed, and I was still upset with him. So much easier than knowing that every day that passed, I was falling deeper into sorrow as Weston slipped further from my grasp.

I could apologize to my dad, but I didn't feel like I'd done anything wrong. But I needed something to change. Once more I was drowning, and this time I didn't have Weston to save me. My parents weren't listening to me either, they weren't hearing what I'd been trying to say since moving home.

My phone spun between my fingers as I got lost in my thoughts, wishing that I could fix something. One thing. Anything. These two guys needed to stop talking as I was struggling to drown them out. Annoyed, frustrated, tired, and alone. I'd never felt so alone in my life, yet I'd been single the entire time.

I wasn't even sure what Tommy said, but whatever it was sent me over the edge, and a tear slid from my eye. There was no way I could continue doing this. I wasn't me. Not anymore. The only person who could pull me up from this tomb I was fading into was Weston, and I'd finally had enough.

Unlocking my phone, I tapped on his contact. The last message from before Thanksgiving sitting there in blue from me. Short and rude. How petty I had been at that moment thinking that it had been worth pushing him away because I'd not been the one to drive my dad to the hospital.

So I typed a message. A single, simple sentence.

I need you, Weston.

That was it. And I pressed send.

Then I stared at the screen, waiting and hoping for a response as the nerves bubbled in my stomach. I couldn't believe I'd actually sent it. It had been too long since we'd talked and been left on rocky terms. How could I tell him that I needed him when that would possibly mean jail time for him?

No. No. That had been a horrible decision. But one I couldn't take back as the message changed from delivered to read. Then those three little bubbles appeared, and I waited. Hoping that maybe I hadn't overstepped my boundaries.

Except they disappeared like we had from each other's lives, and I knew I'd made a terrible mistake. Locking my phone, I leaned my head back against the recliner and closed my eyes. Tears silently slid down my cheeks. Embarrassing, I knew that, but I couldn't stop them.

It was truly over and we'd never even had a chance. I just wanted one chance to see what could come of this, if there was even something there. Maybe I'd read into it, or because it was forcefully taken from me, I was now thinking it meant more. But I dared to hope that wasn't true. It couldn't be. It just couldn't.

This pain in my heart was all too real. It burned worse than my lungs had when I'd been drowning. Something that hurt this terribly had to be real. I clutched my chest and leaned forward, the agony spreading like a fire through my body. Cassidy had asked several times if I was interested in Weston. Even Maddie had given me a knowing look, his father had known at that failed dinner when I'd kept staring at his eyes.

Why hadn't I seen it all then?

"Tenley?" A soft voice sounded in front of me, and I quickly wiped the stains from my cheeks, blinking open my eyes. Tori was standing in front of me, holding out a drink. I pulled it from her hands and took a sip.

“It’s from uh, that guy,” she said, pointing to one of the four men that had been vying for my attention. I raised the glass in thanks, not one to turn down a free drink, but that was it. “Are you okay?” she added, sitting down on the couch beside me. I hadn’t even realized that the two men were gone until now.

“Yeah. How come you ask?” I replied, sipping on the drink.

“You were crying, and you haven’t exactly been the most upbeat. It’s because of your dad, isn’t it?” she asked, sipping on her own drink. She had on a simple dress and heels now, while I still wore the same outfit as earlier.

“Partly,” I mumbled.

“And the guys.”

My eyes shot up to meet hers. “You were always quite perceptive.”

“I can tell them to leave you alone if you want?” She smiled, and I shook my head.

“No, I need to suck it up for Trixie. We are here for her, and she thrives on boy stuff,” I replied, causing her to raise her brows in agreement.

“How’s the new job? I couldn’t imagine living out here. It’s so cold; although, I wouldn’t mind seeing a real cowboy before we leave.” She giggled, and I couldn’t help the small grin from forming on my face.

“It keeps me busy, and honestly, it’s beautiful here so I don’t mind it.”

“Don’t mind it? Or don’t mind the views?” She winked, and I shook my head.

“If you’re referring to cowboys, I have met a couple of lookers.” I couldn’t lie, even if there were no feelings between Cassidy and I, he was incredibly handsome. The entire Duke family seemed to be. One in particular sat above all the rest.

“Well, where are they?” She grinned mischievously.

“And what would Michael say if he heard you talking like this?” I clicked my tongue teasingly at her.

“The same thing! I think he wants to see one even more than I do!” She giggled again.

I felt the joy slip away once more. I remembered that feeling when I’d seen the first real cowboy driving through Montana. It was a fantasy that had become reality, and now here I was missing a cowboy that I’d grown quite fond of. One that I’d become so close to. A man who’d given me experiences of a lifetime and lived something out of fiction.

A life that I was slowly desiring. The love and passion his family held for each other reminded me of my childhood, of better times with my family that seemed to be crumbling apart. He was the one who’d given me a chance to live again, and now I was falling to pieces on my own as well.

“Tenley?” she said again, and I snapped out of the sorrow that was consuming me once more. “I’m really sorry about your dad.”

I glanced towards him to find his eyes on me, a pained expression of guilt and grief across his own features.

“Me too, Tori,” I whispered. “Me too.” For more than what she was implying.

Chapter 23

The night wore on, and everything was becoming too much. No matter how hard I pretended to block it out and ignore the four men that followed me around, I couldn't take it. The sun had set about an hour ago, the party only becoming livelier as a DJ was here now, playing music while everyone danced.

The girls tried to shove me out onto the dance floor, my mom pushed me towards Tommy, but I'd fought them the entire way. I was standing on the edge of the dancing group, watching Trixie with a soft smile upon my face, feeling a small glimmer of happiness for her when my mom approached again.

"You need to forget him. There's a reason the town whispers about how much of a monster he is," she said in my ear, though it sounded halfhearted.

"They also whispered about how deformed he was, yet you know that to be untrue. You've met him," I snapped back, and she crossed her arms, tightening the deep purple cardigan around her body.

"There's some truth to every rumor, Tenley. I heard the same thing your father did, and I won't lose you to that... to that savage," she added with hesitancy, and my soul shattered. It wasn't worth the argument anymore. It wasn't worth the anger. No, I felt sorry for my mom, for she would never give him the chance to show her who he truly was.

That last sentence was all I could handle, and I took a shaky breath then turned around. Disappearing out of the room and into the hallway, I pressed my back against the wall.

Someday I'll make it out of this. Someday I'll be saved, but it seemed a million years away from this life I was becoming trapped in. My lip trembled as I closed my eyes, tears once again silently slipping down my cheeks. Luckily, the mascara that I'd applied earlier was waterproof, but I could feel it beginning to flake from my lashes.

I needed a place to hide from this pain, but no matter where I'd tried to escape to, I'd been unable to find a way out. Clutching my chest, I leaned forward and soundlessly screamed. Death wracked my soul as I crumbled forward. This was the end.

Rough fingers suddenly brushed against my cheek, swiping away the tears, and I shot my head up. Blinking away the blur in fright, I stared at the face before me. Fright quickly became disbelief. This wasn't possible, it wasn't real.

I never thought I'd see that shade of blue again.

My heart raced in my chest as I stared at every line etched upon his face, searching for something that confirmed this wasn't all in my head. But the more that I stared, the more real he became. My chin trembled as his other hand cupped my opposite cheek. The tears vanished from my skin by a single swipe of his thumb.

I couldn't believe it. Weston.

He towered above me, close. His intense eyes staring deeply into mine.

"You're here," I was barely able to whisper. "How are you here?" My trembling hand reached forward and rested against his chest. My fingers found the quarter zipper on his thick, gray fleece sweater and fumbled with it. I could feel his heartbeat through the fabric and his button up he had on beneath.

"You asked," he replied, his voice soft and tender. "I will always come when you ask."

I trembled against his touch as he brushed some hair from my skin once more. I slid my hand towards his face, hovering above his left cheek. He didn't move as I stared for a moment longer, needing to know if it was really him.

Then I swept my fingers gently across the thick scar starting beneath his eye and traced it along his jawline. He leaned into the touch and even closed his eyes briefly.

“I have a confession,” I whispered, and he furrowed his brows as I continued to glide back and forth across the scar.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve touched your face,” I said, my eyes tracking my fingers.

He kept his brows creased, dropping his hands from my face as I finally stopped tracing his scar. “I don’t remember you ever touching me like this before.”

“You wouldn’t,” I grimaced. “You were asleep.”

He gasped, overexaggerating his shock. “You crossed the pillow wall! How dare you!”

“I also peaked when you were walking back into the bathroom when you’d forgotten your clothes,” I added, and he grinned widely, softly laughing his incredible laugh.

“Like what you saw?” He raised an inquisitive brow, and I clicked my tongue at him.

“You wish.” But I had liked it. I’d also liked waking up wrapped in his arms. I liked every moment he’d touched me. “Weston?”

His grin softened, his eyes tender. “Yes, darling?”

I opened my mouth ready to confess that I cared for him, that I liked him, when the door opened and out stumbled Trixie and Simon. Clamping my hands around Weston’s waist, I jerked him towards me to block my body from view as the two giggled and continued to make out. Weston placed his palms against the wall on either side of my head, watching the couple from his peripherals.

“Should we say something?” he mumbled to me.

“Like what?” I mouthed back, and he shrugged his shoulders as they crashed against the wall closer towards us.

“They think they’re alone,” he whispered.

“I know that.” I shrunk closer against Weston’s body.

“Then say something.”

“And how do we explain this?” I breathed out, and he glanced down at me as I stared up at his handsome face.

“We weren’t doing anything,” he muttered.

“It doesn’t look like that,” I replied as Trixie and her fiancé crashed even closer our way. “We could try and slip out to the sitting area?” I suggested, and he nodded once quickly.

Dropping his hands from around my head, he grabbed my right fingers and went to drag me down the hallway when Trixie and Simon smashed directly against Weston.

He was rammed up against the wall, slamming me between his body and the wood once more. “Ow,” I sharply wheezed, as the wind rushed from my lungs.

“What the—” Trixie said, breaking apart from Simon as I desperately tried to disappear behind Weston.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” Weston said, tipping his hat slightly. “Sir,” He added towards Simon.

“Oh, no worries!” Trixie smiled brightly at Weston as I shrunk even farther behind him. “We didn’t know this hallway was already occupied.”

Weston kept his head facing me, his eyes tucked underneath shadows as he nodded once more and then brought his gaze back between his arms.

I kept my mouth closed, waiting for Trixie and Simon to leave. They didn’t need to be involved in this yet. Not until Weston and I had a chance to talk privately. I couldn’t risk him being arrested simply because he and I were caught together.

A couple footsteps sounded behind Weston, Trixie and Simon passing, and I almost breathed out in relief except they stopped. Weston raised his brows at me in uncertainty.

“Hold on,” Trixie stated, her heels clicking closer to us. “Do I know you?”

“I don’t believe so,” Weston stiffly replied.

“Do you know Simon?”

“No ma’am,” he answered with his eyes staying locked on mine.

“Then you must be a worker here cause we booked this entire place for the weekend,” Trixie calmly replied, and then took one step closer. “You seem so familiar.”

I closed my eyes and tucked my face into Weston’s chest, praying that she would just leave.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever met; I apologize for any inconvenience,” Weston politely said.

“Okay.” Trixie finally spun around and took a couple steps away before her heels stopped moving again. “Wait a minute.” Suddenly her thin fingers were wrapped around my forearm, and I was jerked out from Weston’s cocoon.

His hand latched around my free wrist, and he caught me, tugging me back against his frame as Trixie released her hold and her jaw fell open in shock.

“No way!” She squealed. “You picked one!”

I furrowed my brows. “Picked one?”

“Yeah. I just didn’t recognize him because he is now dressed like—“ Trixie stopped speaking as her eyes met Weston’s, and then they slid across his face. Even I knew she was staring at the scar.

“Trixie,” I stated, and she shook her head.

“Woah,” She muttered. “His eyes.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” I pleaded with her, and she blinked a few times, studying him closer.

“Why not? He’s got the rugged handsomeness about him.” She tilted her head and stepped closer; Simon waited patiently down the hallway. He knew how much she loved being in the middle of drama that wasn’t her own, and he let her do her thing.

“Please, Trixie. I need you to trust me just this once.” I wasn’t ashamed to be seen with Weston, I was afraid of what my dad might do.

“Oh. My. Gosh. I *have* seen you before!” she blurted out, pointing at Weston. Her eyes slid to me, and she placed both of her hands on her hips. “And you said he was just a work friend.”

“He is a friend. Or was. Or still is, I think. It’s complicated, okay?” I stuttered out, trying to sort through what was bouncing around in my head.

“What’s your name?” Trixie asked, studying Weston.

“Weston Duke.” He politely tipped his head her way.

She squealed and bit her bottom lip, returning her attention to me. “He’s so cute!” She shrieked softly. “I won’t tell anyone, for now.” And she skipped off with Simon leaving the two of us alone in the hallway.

“We need to talk. Somewhere privately,” I said to Weston, still staring at where Trixie and Simon had disappeared.

“It’s a nice night out, we could go for a walk around the ranch?” he asked, and I glanced over my shoulder at the man who stood protective at my back.

“How’d you know I was here, anyway?” I suddenly asked, spinning around to face him after realizing I’d never told him where I was.

“Your friend called when you were in the truck with me, so I knew this party was happening in Billings. I went to your house first, and when nobody answered the door, I called the owners here to see if they had a reservation for an engagement party for a Trixie this weekend.” He shrugged his shoulders like it was no big deal.

“How did you know to call here?” I asked, stepping away from him. It was a hugely romantic gesture what he’d done, but also slightly suspicious.

“This is the highest-rated dude ranch in Billings. Plus, my family supplies the cattle they raise here.”

I sighed in relief and immediately stepped back into his body. Wrapping my arms around his waist, he stiffened for a

moment, surprised, and then held me back.

“Let me go get my coat,” I said against his torso, not quite ready to let go. He buried his face into my hair and just held me. Not as friends, but as something more, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t deny it. I couldn’t deny how much I found comfort in his embrace, in his smell, and in his warmth.

Chapter 24

****WESTON****

She came bounding down the steps two at a time, a smile wide on her face that broke my heart. I pressed end on the phone call with Cassidy, knowing that the conversation she and I needed to have, was once again going to have to wait.

“Tenley,” I said and her grin immediately fell from her face.

“What’s wrong?” she quietly asked, seeing the distress in me. “I saw you hang up the phone, did you get some news?”

I clenched my jaw, frustrated that this was happening now and torn between the worry for my home and for Tenley and me. She’d said we were only friends so many times before, but the way she’d hugged me had felt different. Like she’d realized how much I cared for her and shared those feelings in return, yet now would not be the time I’d get an answer.

“Eugene was found down, his grain coated in something he shouldn’t have eaten. Cassidy called Doc who’s on his way out to try and get Eugene to the clinic, but they don’t know if he will make it,” I stated, masking my emotions because I didn’t want her to worry more than she needed.

Her jaw fell open, her eyes wide in shock. “Poisoned?” I nodded stiffly. “You should go,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “You need to find out what it was they put on the grain, who did it, and make sure your other—”

“Tenley. Darling,” I cut her off, placing my palm against her cheek and brushing some hair away from her fallen gaze. “Cassidy can—”

“Cassidy doesn’t own the ranch. Go.” She suddenly lifted her head to meet my eyes. “I can come and help.”

As much as that was something I wanted, I didn’t feel like she should leave her best friend’s party for this. Not for

something that I could handle on my own with Doc's help, no matter how badly I wanted it to be Tenley.

"You need to stay for Trixie," I tenderly replied.

She leaned against my palm and nodded her head, but I could see the disappointment and sadness. We shared one more private moment, one that hurt me more than I thought it would, before the doors down the hallway opened and out stumbled a few party goers that giggled and waved at Tenley. She sighed and gave them a tight smile as I let my hand fall from her face and slipped out into the cold and lonely night without another word.

I drove like a madman, angry that I had to leave Tenley, angry that whoever had been targeting my ranch escalated to actual poison that might have just killed my prized breeding bull. I didn't care about the possible insurance payout; I wanted Eugene to stay alive. It seemed like I couldn't catch a break. Just as I thought that maybe Tenley felt the same as I did, just as I was hopefully going to get confirmation that she cared for me as much as I cared for her, it was ripped away.

But I had to focus on the one thing that was in my control—taking care of my cattle. Specifically Eugene and any of the others that might have come in contact with the tainted grain. What had been used, I wasn't sure, but it didn't make me any less upset as I swerved off the main road and sped up the driveway.

Doc's vet truck was parked by my parents' home, Cassidy's truck and trailer were waiting, while everything else seemed eerily silent. No cattle were bawling, no horses were neighing, there was nothing. The tension in the air was palpable.

I cut the engine and the diesel whine dissipated upon the wind. The moment my boots hit the snowy ground, one of my hands came running my way.

"Give me an update," I gruffly stated, tucking the collar around my ears while heading straight for a Razor.

“Only Eugene got into the grain. It seems that we caught the others soon enough,” he replied, attempting to keep up with my quick pace.

“Where else was this grain?” I didn’t understand how this was possible. Before I left, everything had been fine. Two hours, that’s all it had taken for this perpetrator to deal some damage. But how did he know I was gone?

“With the first-time pregnant heifers and the second year cows,” he answered as I pulled myself into the driver’s seat of the Razor.

I grumbled a few curses under my breath, a habit I wished to break, and nodded to the hand. “I want permanent watch over every herd. Figure out some rotation,” I commanded, and he tipped his head in acknowledgment before scurrying off.

Revvng the engine, I roared off down the road and up the side of the mountain towards Eugene’s pasture to see how things were going.

His pasture came into view underneath the star-filled sky. The evening moon cast a silvery glow across the typically bright scenery. A small livestock trailer was hitched to one of my old farm trucks, pulled far into the field, parked in front of a crowd surrounding the prone figure of Eugene.

Jogging through the field, I stopped at the edge of the crowd as they stumbled up the trailer gate and inside. Every hand was attempting to carry and push this massive beast into the trailer as Doc ran lines of fluids and everything possible to him.

Cassidy approached me as the trailer swayed. “I don’t get it, Weston. Everything was fine when you left.”

I nodded, clenching my jaw for a moment as Eugene was finally laid down inside the trailer. Then I turned to Cassidy and gave him some instruction. “I’ll take him down to the clinic with Doc and see what we can sort out. Give me some of the grain, and I’ll get tests going with Doc down there. You work on making sure watch rounds are running

efficiently, as well as finding any other possible evidence. Call the livestock agent and have him and the sheriff meet me at the clinic.”

Cassidy furrowed his brows. “You’re going down?”

I nodded stiffly.

“As in, you’re going to town for something other than chicken feed,” he said again in befuddlement.

I once more confirmed his statement with a nod. Then a slow, mischievous grin spread across his face as everyone slowly began making their way out of the trailer. “So, something good happened when you went to meet Tenley?”

I sighed and chuckled. “Not sure.”

Doc joined Cassidy and I before Cassidy was able to pry and weasel for more information. “I’ll call Carly on the way to the clinic, see if she’s still up to give us an extra hand. She closed the clinic today, so I’m hoping that she hasn’t gone to bed yet, despite it being late in the evening,” he said and gave me a tight smile.

I grunted an agreement. “Hop in, I’ll drop you at your truck and follow you down.”

Doc looked surprised, raising his brows between Cassidy and me. “You’re coming?” Doc asked, pointing at me.

“Seriously, why is that so surprising?” I demanded, exasperated.

“Because you’re going to town!” they both exclaimed at the same time. I tipped my head down and stared at the ground. Their surprise shouldn’t have been such a shock; I never offered to go to town for nearly anything that wasn’t by myself, once a month, to the feed store. Plus, no one knew that I’d been down to pick up Tenley once before besides Tenley herself.

Honestly, it had become a habit. I didn’t avoid going to town because of my insecurities as I’d once done. No, I couldn’t care less what others thought about me. Those rumors I truly found funny. But it had been so long since I’d gone into

town under any circumstance, I couldn't blame them for being so shocked.

“Look, the longer you two stand here, acting shocked, the more likely Eugene is to die,” I stated, ignoring the stares from not just Doc and Cassidy now, but the few other hands that had paused around us.

They continued to remain frozen solid.

“Seriously, you two!” I snapped again, finding it slightly funny that my offer had truly surprised them this much.

“He offered....” Cassidy mumbled at Doc, his eyes never leaving my face. Doc slowly nodded, his gaze as wide and apparent as ever. I chuckled to myself and then turned away, heading towards the front of the truck.

Jumping into the driver's seat, I turned the engine over as Doc hoisted himself in. It was a short drive to his truck where he exited without a word, leaving me with just my thoughts.

Thoughts that tumbled through my mind, jumbled and distorted. So many of Tenley and what might have come from the much needed conversation, while the rest were of what was happening now. Who was doing this? How did they know I was gone? What did they try to poison my cattle with? And why the sudden escalation from locoweed to whatever this was?

It was a lot yet, no matter how intense this cattle situation was, everything with Tenley seemed to tug harder and harder. Gaining more of my attention than it should. I prayed that having to leave hadn't ruined the possibility of sharing something with her.

I prayed even harder that somehow, her father would come around.

Chapter 25

TENLEY

I stared across the room at my parents, feeling anything but okay. It wasn't regret I was feeling from texting Weston and the fact that he had shown up, it was sadness that I had to do so behind my parents' backs. I may not have rebelled much growing up, but I was now, except it didn't feel exciting or good. Weston had held me in his arms, unplanned, in a way that had been long overdue. Even though he'd left tonight and I was desperately wishing I could've gone with him, I understood why.

Not just because I wasn't necessarily needed as Doc could handle the situation, but also because of my parents. If I'd disappeared they would've become suspicious. Plus there was Trixie, and I was doing everything in my power to not be that horribly selfish friend that was just a drag at this party.

The bounding figure of a very happy girl came my way, her curls flowing down her shoulders like the majestic queen she was. "Where'd your tall, dark, delicious, and mysterious cowboy go?" Trixie asked with a wink.

"Back home for an emergency," I replied with a shake of my head. Although, I was secretly happy that she thought the same thing about Weston as I did. He was just that, and I'd been a fool to take so long to recognize how much I truly desired him.

"So, go after him," she replied and brushed some hair over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry?"

Trixie rolled her eyes. "I may not know why you don't want to show him off to the world, but I can recognize the look he gave you."

"I'm not hiding him, it's just complicated," I answered a little sharper than intended, and my eyes drifted once more towards my parents. Trixie followed my gaze and sighed.

“So, it’s a parents thing. Why do they not approve?” she asked. Of course she knew without me having to say anything at all. She always knew.

“They believe a rumor about him that isn’t true,” I muttered and felt another wave of heartbreak consume me. How could I continue like this?

Trixie wrapped me into a massive hug and for a moment I let myself feel everything that was eating me alive. There was no right answer in this situation—someone would get hurt no matter what. Someone was already getting hurt whether I continued to distance myself from Weston, or told him that I needed him, that I wanted him. And that person was me. I would hurt myself whether I listened to my father or went after Weston.

“You should go to him,” she whispered again in my ear.

“I can’t. It’s your engagement party.”

She pushed away from me with her hands around my shoulders. “Oh, screw that. You have love waiting for you, who also seems to be in some sort of emergency. I’d want Simon with me if I ever ended up in an emergency. You also love your parents, it’s plain to see. But you shouldn’t have to sacrifice where your heart is taking you because circumstances with your dad are on a time limit.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Hearing her speak those words, so similar to ones I once heard from the man in question, gave me the confirmation that I needed to allow myself to finally completely fall for Weston. A soft smile spread across my face as I felt a weight lift from my heart.

“One problem. I rode here with my parents,” I replied with a chuckle, and she huffed in frustration.

Then she shoved her hand around my wrist and dragged me halfway across the room towards Simon who was chatting with his parents.

“I need the car keys.” She extended her free palm and wiggled her fingers at him. Barely aware of what he was

doing, he dug through his pockets and placed them in her hand without breaking conversation.

Trixie turned towards me and dangled them in front of me. “Go. I’ll have my parents or his drive us to your house to grab them on Monday when we leave.” I hesitated, refusing to take her car, but she shook her head once more and raised my hand that was still gripped in her fingers before shoving the keys against my palm. “Go!”

Wrapping my fingers around the keys, I smiled at her as my eyes misted over. “Thank you,” I whispered, and she grinned the widest grin I’d ever seen from her. After one last glance her way, I hurried out of the gathering room and leapt up the stairs.

Everything was packed back in my suitcase within five minutes, and my coat was around my shoulders as I closed the door behind me. My heart was racing in excitement. I couldn’t believe I was doing this.

I couldn’t believe I was doing this.

The excitement dropped to nerves the moment that my feet landed against the main floor, pausing me in my tracks. Here I was, going against my father’s wishes with little hesitation. Against wishes that still confused me.

Closing my eyes, I took a reassuring breath and turned towards the front exit when a voice stopped me.

“Tenley.” A door clicked closed behind two figures that slowly limped my way. It was my mother who spoke, helping my father down the hall towards me. I studied them as they came closer and closer. Of course I would get caught, I would never be allowed to make a decision entirely for myself. Everything I’d ever done had been at the consideration of others, those around me, yet this one time I’d chosen something solely for me, and it was thwarted.

“You’re leaving,” my father coughed out when they stopped in front of me. He slumped against my mom; it was not a good night for him. I remained still, watching the two of

them, unsure how to answer. “Where are you going?” he added.

I still didn’t answer as he fell into a coughing fit. A tear slid down my cheek. We had barely spoken since Thanksgiving, and I could see the major decline in just a few short weeks. My silence was a response that gave my mother an answer.

“You’re going to see *him*, aren’t you?” she declared, more as a statement than a question. This time I nodded once, and she sighed.

“He has been respectful of my decision to not see him. Until I asked for him. He only came because I asked, but now I need to go. For him, I need to do this,” I softly replied.

Her face tightened and her chest rose with a heavy breath. She didn’t necessarily begin to scold me, but she did begin to ramble on about why going was against my father’s wishes. Her chaotic glances to my dad drew my attention as a small crowd began to fill the hallway. All of the girls in our group with their spouses along with Trixie and her fiancé.

But I barely paid the onlookers attention. Or even my mother. No, I watched my father who seemed oddly at peace. A simplistic sigh left his lips as he took a shaky step my way and gave a short nod.

“I never meant to break your heart, sweetie,” he hoarsely whispered beneath my mother’s continuing rambling. “I wasn’t ready to let you go. As your father, it’s been my job to protect you and take care of you your entire life. But I see now.”

She silenced as his last sentence cut through the whispers like a knife through hot butter. “What?” I breathed out, confused.

“I was wrong. Oh so very wrong,” he continued, and I furrowed my brows. “I simply couldn’t believe that anyone else could take care of my Tenley as well as I do. No one could feel the need to protect her as much as I do, to act on that desire, and to love her the way she deserves. It should’ve

been me, as your father, to save you Thanksgiving Day. But when Weston came rushing inside, holding you, I felt so much pain and frustration because in that moment, I realized I *couldn't* have been the one to protect you. But Tenley, even if I wasn't dying, the next step in life is for me to pass that mantle on, and I realized how lucky I am to still be alive to see it. You're a grown woman, and it's time I let that responsibility go."

He smiled tenderly. "I was in denial for far too long that I was truly dying, and I'm sorry I was so harsh on Weston. It's high time I give the reins to someone else, and it took me too long to recognize that. And when I did, I reacted horribly. Saying some horrible things that clearly are not true."

My dad stumbled towards me, placing a frail hand against my arm and giving me a pale smile. "I clung to one rumor that made me feel less guilty for being unable to take care of you anymore. I wasn't ready to accept that."

"But you were fine with Cassidy, or Tommy," I replied, shocked and trying to process what he was confessing.

"Because I knew they were never your type. And I knew you were stubborn enough to handle them on your own. But when Cassidy's father came to dinner, I saw the way you stared at him. Like you'd seen a ghost, or someone else you recognized. Then at Thanksgiving, when I saw Weston for the first time, I knew. Even then, I knew. I simply did everything I could to deny it, because that meant life really was moving forward, and worse, I wouldn't always be here to see it."

Everything suddenly made sense. This mountain of a man was afraid. My budding relationship with Weston had forced him to face reality and truly process it, which was scary. Not just for him, but for me as well. This entire time he'd been concerned about losing me because we were running out of time in this world in general, and he hadn't been ready to accept that. If he did so, it would solidify his ending minute on the clock.

I gathered my daddy in my arms, holding him tightly as his body shuddered against my own. Unspoken

communication that no matter what, he wouldn't lose me. And more importantly, that I was going to be okay.

He patted my back a couple times, and I broke away. "Go to him. And when we get home, I believe I owe that man and his family an apology."

"I love you, Daddy," I whispered once more, kissed my mom quickly on the cheek, gathered my suitcase, and ran out into the cold night's air.

Chapter 26

Cutting the engine to Trixie's black Tucson, I jumped out of the vehicle in the parking lot back at the clinic. I could see one of Weston's farm trucks and trailer down at the end of the building. Doc's truck was also sitting beside the trailer that was open with lines running from the clinic to inside the back. I wondered if Eugene was still inside the trailer, too sick to have left.

Wandering into the front of the clinic, I was met with silence, except for Carly who was sitting at the front desk looking pale. Her eyes shot up and met mine with a fright that quickly left when she saw it was me.

"I thought you were in Billings." She smiled tiredly at me.

"I was," I simply replied, not sure how to explain that I was here more for Weston than for what was going on. "Do we have any updates? What are you doing here?" I asked, coming to stand next to the disheveled looking young lady.

She shrugged her shoulders. "They're running tests on the grain and trying to keep Eugene stable." She leaned back in the chair, worry etching her beautiful face. "I'm here because Doc called since I closed the clinic after he left, and he thought I might still be awake. They wanted an extra pair of hands to assist, but I was not needed after all."

"Why not?"

"Well, I met the shockingly handsome Weston Duke. He is definitely not deformed and very capable on his own. I can't believe I thought he was just a drifter. You know, the one from the feed store?" she replied, pinching the skin between her brows. Then she lifted a brow and grinned wickedly. "But he's got nothing on Cassidy."

I smiled to myself, ignoring her last sentence. Weston had come to the clinic, not Cassidy. I'd expected to confront him and then head to the ranch, after doing what I could to help here to deliver any news to Weston. It was supposed to

have been my excuse to see him. But instead, Weston came to town.

Shock filled my face as I blinked, the information settling in.

“Wait, Weston’s here?” I asked, my eyes sliding towards the door behind her desk.

“Yeah. I thought it was Cassidy when they pulled in,” she grumbled, and I bit my bottom lip lightly.

Weston was here.

Rushing behind the desk, I pushed open the door and let it swing closed behind me. I was met by several muffled voices behind Doc’s office door and nothing else. Knowing I wasn’t invited to whatever meeting they were having, I let my curiosity swallow me and slowly wandered towards the back.

Pushing further into the clinic, towards the large-animal room where all of the lab testing equipment was, I was met with a mess. Eugene was still inside the trailer that was parked halfway into the building. There he lay, breathing heavy but alive, hooked to all different things. Along the back wall sat a pile of soggy grain that I recognized as the same feed I’d seen at the Duke Ranch before.

I walked towards the grain and ran my hands across the small mess. A kernel was underneath a microscope, a couple tubes were running in the centrifuge, containing different swabs of the grain. But no results yet. I leaned up against the counter and bumped my head lightly against the shelf above me in frustration, feeling a little useless.

A logbook crashed onto the floor.

Bending down, I picked it up and looked at the black binder. It was our drug book that kept track of the medication that was in our safe, how much was taken out, plus who was last to check some out. The last date on it was from Doc from yesterday. He most likely hadn’t had time to enter the drugs he was using for Eugene today.

I flipped through the pages, wanting to double check that nothing had been messed up when falling, but it looked

fine. Everything was as it should be. Then it hit me, the logbook had been tossed carelessly on the shelf above me, not near the safe as it should've been. Taking one last look at the log, I tilted my head in suspicion.

Doc had apparently withdrawn a large quantity of Phenobarbital. The injection medication for euthanasia procedures as well as seizure management. I rushed back to my office with the logbook and turned on my computer. Tapping my fingers against my desk in impatience, I waited for the screen to load the appointment records from yesterday.

Scrolling quickly through the charts, I found not a single euthanasia appointment as well as not a single refill of the medication for any of the patients who were on Phenobarbital regularly. That had to be what was poured in the grain, but that also meant someone at the clinic that had access to the safe was the person at fault. And there was absolutely no way it could be Doc.

Double checking the log, I shook my head. It definitely wasn't Doc. That wasn't his handwriting, but it did look familiar.

My heart sank. That narrowed the pool down very quickly and I had a suspicion of who it was. Someone I would've never expected.

Leaning back against my chair, I closed my eyes wondering how to proceed. I wanted concrete proof, which meant making sure that the liquid in the grain was actually Phenobarbital before I took my accusation to Doc or Weston.

Running back to the lab, I waited impatiently as the centrifuge slowed down and prepared another vial with a small dose of the drug that I properly logged out of the safe. Praying that it wouldn't come out with the same composition as the vial I held in my hands, I watched it slowly begin to spin faster and faster as the door crashed open behind me.

I flung around to see Carly standing in the doorway, staring at me with malice in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her lips pulled tight because she already knew. And I didn’t need to wait for the centrifuge to finish to know that I was also right.

She pushed the door closed behind her and glanced to my left at the spinning vials. “There’s Phenobarbital in there, isn’t there?”

I nodded, but didn’t speak.

“So, are you going to report me?”

I sighed and stared at her as she pushed off of the door and wrapped her hands behind her back. “You know I have to. You tried to kill someone’s cattle and stole a lot of drugs.”

“BUT I HAD TO!” she cried out, ripping her hands out from behind her back. In her grasp was a small pistol, which she pointed directly at me. I stepped back into the counter behind me, glancing at the still spinning centrifuge and completely bewildered. My heart was racing as she continued towards me, brandishing her weapon.

“H-h-had to?” I stuttered, attempting to mask the fear that was surging through me.

“He wouldn’t pay attention to me. This was the only way to get him to notice me, to see me again,” she stated, her eyes narrowing in on me as she continued slowly my way. One could smell the threat that loomed in the air, as she closed the distance between us.

“Who wouldn’t, Carly?” I asked, hearing the machine beside me beep lightly indicating the cycle was done. I blinked back the fear as her eyes shifted to the centrifuge. Reaching a trembling hand out towards the machine, she clicked her tongue, stopping me.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she angrily stated. “You know, when you first came here I thought you would be a hindrance to my plans, but instead you helped me know when the best times to hit them were. Feeding me information in ways you didn’t realize, that’s how come I never was caught. I can’t believe no one ever found the locoweed I’d been growing in my greenhouse at home. Not even my parents. Somehow,

you'd attracted the attention of the entire town, and it was simple to find out where you were or *he* was."

Carly stopped directly in front of me, just an arm's length away. Her once perfect hair was frizzy and mangled, dark bags underneath her eyes matched the dark gray sweatpants that were wrinkled about her slender frame.

"Who was, Carly?" I asked once more as the centrifuge whirred to a complete stop, and she shifted the barrel of the gun to the vials now that were still inside.

"CASSIDY! Haven't you figured it out yet?" she screeched at me, and I lunged for the centrifuge as she squeezed the trigger. A searing pain slipped through my side as I crashed to the floor, cradling the machine. The cord ripped out of the wall as I took a painful, shaking breath. "HOW DARE YOU!"

I clutched the machine tighter as the gun shook in her grip. "DROP IT!" she screamed, and I shook my head, refusing to give up the evidence that would prove what I'd previously thought, and now had confirmed.

"This whole thing, you did all of this because Cassidy didn't take you on a second date?" I asked, trembling. She shook with rage, bumping the heel of her hand against her head.

"He was supposed to love me back. I knew he was the one for me after the first date, but he practically avoided me after. So I had to make sure that he came around and noticed me. But you messed it up! He was interested in you instead!" she screamed again, and the door across the room crashed open. In stumbled the livestock agent and sheriff, along with Doc and Weston, who shoved himself in last.

"Put your gun down," the sheriff commanded, everyone but Doc brandishing a handgun of their own. Even Weston had a deadly look on his face, honing in on the girl who was holding me hostage.

"Drop it," the sheriff repeated.

Carly blinked, anger caressing her features and then defeat. She knew she'd lost, and while she may be willing to kill cattle, I doubted she was willing to kill a human.

Her shoulders sagged, and the pistol fell to the floor. She lifted her hands in the air as the livestock agent and sheriff came rushing at Carly. My eyes locked onto Weston who shoved his 9mm into his waistband and crashed directly towards me.

I shook, still unable to let go of the centrifuge as he fell to his knees and reached forward. Strong hands gently pulled the machine away from me and he handed it to Doc, who grabbed it and returned to the sheriff.

Weston's intense blue eyes were filled with concern and relief. As well as a little bit of surprise.

"Are you okay? How are you here?" he asked over and over as I stared at him, trembling. And then I lunged forward into his body. He wrapped me tightly against his chest, pulling me against the warm steel of his frame.

I could hear the handcuffs click around Carly's wrist. I could hear Doc speaking with the two officers, and occasional mumbling coming from Carly, but all I did was lean tighter against Weston. The very man I'd come back for.

Until I realized I had something I needed to know. "Wait!" I exclaimed, pulling slightly away from Weston to be able to see Carly. She was fuming as Weston brushed some hair away from my face. "Why the change? Why did you suddenly decide to escalate from locoweed to Phenobarbital?"

"Because it was taking too long! If just making them sick wasn't working, then I'd ruin the entire business so he would have to find a job in town. He'd have to come to me!" She lunged against the handcuffs and the sheriff who was holding her wrists.

Poor girl, I thought with a small amount of disbelief, that she would think this was the reasonable way to go about things. However, I lifted my chin in response, not afraid of her as Weston gently offered his hands to lift me to my feet. The

adrenaline was slowly drifting away, as I settled against his grip and gave him a soft smile.

“You were never into Cassidy, were you?” she cried out in disbelief, hanging against the restraints as the agents and Doc dragged her out of the room. I didn’t pull my gaze from Weston’s as he placed his palms against my cheeks, and the door clicked shut behind them.

I stepped closer to him, fisting his coat around the waist.

And I shook my head. “No, I never was,” I whispered, and Weston crashed his lips against mine.

It was the most tender kiss I’d ever experienced. He tasted sweet, delicate, and gentle. At first.

One hand slid to the nape of my neck, and he threaded his fingers into my hair, slightly tilting my head back before diving in deeper and more passionately.

Stronger, harder, like a craving that neither of us could satisfy. I tugged against his coat, pulling him closer into my figure as his hand slid down from my cheek, and he shoved his tongue into my mouth. His thumb brushed across my neck and then collarbone, sending shivers running down my spine as my body began to heat up.

It was perfect.

Chapter 27

We broke apart panting and I was already wanting more. More from this man that had waited entirely too long to kiss me for the first time. But there were things to still settle and matters to still handle, which I was reminded of as his hand slipped down my side and brushed against the bullet wound.

I winced, and Weston's hungry gaze narrowed, shifting into concern. "You're hurt," he growled and moved me away enough that he could see the slice in my coat.

"It just grazed me," I said, slipping my arms through the sleeves and shrugging off the warm fabric. Laying it upon the messy counter behind me, I lifted my shirt enough to inspect the wound. "Nothing a few stitches won't fix."

He chuckled, and I raised my gaze to meet his handsomely imperfect face. "Don't ask me to sew it up." He winked, causing me to roll my eyes.

"You're not even a doctor of animals, so of course not," I sarcastically replied, and he placed a palm over his heart as I pulled the hem back down.

"Ouch." He grinned that crooked grin, and I tilted my head. Lifting my hand without hesitation, I brushed my fingers across his scar, and he leaned into the touch. Completely unabashed to be enjoying the contact.

"Tell me the story," I whispered as he closed his eyes.

"Took you long enough to ask," he muttered, relief coating his figure. "Cassidy and I were out riding four-wheelers late September. Being young and dumb, going as fast as we could and hitting some sick jumps. You know, like boys do."

Weston opened his beautiful blue eyes and studied my green ones. In one fell swoop, he gently lifted me up and sat me down on the counter, pushing aside my coat. Weston raised my shirt to expose the wound that was dripping some blood

and then glanced around him. I pointed to my right at some drawers where gauze and tape were.

He headed that way and continued speaking. “Cassidy took this massive jump and completely wiped out. His wheeler went one way, he went the other. Lucky he went the way he did instead of with that thing cause it smashed against a couple trees and then tumbled down a cliffside.” Weston pulled out the white gauze patches and some tape before walking back my way.

“I’d bet ya money that thing is still there.” He chuckled and pulled open the first pad and dumped some alcohol on it to clean up the wound first. “This will hurt, sorry darling.”

I gritted my teeth and braced against the edge of the counter as the searing burn shot through me upon contact. Leaning my forehead against his chest, I bit back a scream. “Just a second more,” he whispered and placed a kiss against my hair.

Closing my eyes, I waited for the painful sensation to leave as Weston continued his story. “Anyway, suddenly out of the trees came this massive bull moose. I have hunted some large moose before, but this guy had antlers like you’d never believe. It was during peak rutting season too, and unbeknownst to us, we’d driven right into his territory. The moose was charging Cassidy who was unconscious on the ground.”

He placed a fresh gauze pad over the wound and began taping it down. I knew what Weston had done without needing to hear it. But I didn’t interrupt him as he sighed and his eyes glazed over. “I did the only thing I could think of and gunned my four-wheeler. I rammed into that moose as fast as I could, hitting near his shoulder to keep him from killing my brother. Honestly though, I don’t know how it didn’t kill me instead.”

Weston stepped away from me and slowly began unzipping his coat. “Obviously you can see where part of his antler ripped through my face.” He traced the scar upon his cheek as his vest fell to the floor, leaving nothing but his button up. His fingers began working the pearl snaps. “I

shattered my femur and pelvis, broke my collarbone plus several ribs on the left side of my body.”

Weston finished unbuttoning his shirt and let it fall from his body. Although I’d seen a glimpse of his chest when he’d saved me from the frozen ice, I hadn’t looked hard enough or been coherent enough to see anything else.

There was a massive scar, four of them running in crooked lines starting underneath his pec and sliding in a similar angle to the one upon his face towards his side. That’s what I’d caught a glimpse of the night he’d forgotten his clothes.

“It punctured my lung and barely missed my heart,” he finished as I slid myself down from the counter. I studied the raised skin, a haunting memory of death that he narrowly evaded. Without thinking, I raised my hand and gently brushed my fingertips across the jagged edges. Starting beneath his pec and sliding down each line that should’ve taken him from this world. Each remaining signifier of an alteration in the course he’d previously been on.

His body shuddered beneath my touch as I stepped closer to him again and let my hand fall from his skin. “What happened to the moose?” I asked, studying the rivets upon his torso.

“My parents say he was killed upon impact. But honestly, they probably had to go put him out of his misery a different way. I never pressed for anything more, and I don’t think I want to know.”

“So you protecting your little brother and nearly dying was the excuse your lowlife ex needed to cheat. I could say a few choice words about her,” I grumbled, resisting the urge to allow my hand to wander across more of his torso. It was shameful I knew it, but I couldn’t help staring at his hardened body of steel.

Weston chuckled and shoved his hands in his pockets. “So. Cassidy told you then. I wondered why you never asked nor seemed to believe all the crazy rumors I know go around.”

I leaned back against the counter while he bent down and slowly began working the buttons on his shirt. The muscles in his forearms danced as each finger snapped them together.

“But why do you still stay away?” I asked as he shrugged his jacket on. Weston adjusted his felt hat then ran a hand across the back of his neck.

“Habit.”

I clicked my tongue and then gently stepped into his body, wrapping my arms around his waist. He was my home.

“So what now?” I buried my face into his chest as the door pushed open behind him. The sheriff was back to ask questions and get my story.

“Now?” He buried his face against the top of my head. “Now I need to sit down with your father. Then I’d like to come a courtin’ you if that’s something you’d agree to,” he whispered against the top of my head.

While that wasn’t something people did anymore, I loved the idea of it, especially coming from him.

Because for him, I’d do anything.

Epilogue

The sun shone brightly through the curtains, nothing else was awake. I sat upon the edge of my bed waiting for the day to begin. Waiting for something that my father should've been here for.

He would've gone to Weston's bachelor party yesterday. Cash, his brothers, his dad, even my own brother had gone hunting with him. The only person that had been missing was my dad, someone that Weston had become very close to in the last couple months of his life. How ironic it was that someone my father once thought was horrible, became one of his closest confidants.

My eyes wandered to the dresser where a picture of my daddy sat next to the one of Weston and I when he'd proposed. At least he'd been there for that, knowing that his daughter would be taken care of for the rest of her life.

Things had surely changed in the past ten months. Everyone knew who Weston was now, his new best friend being the older lady at the diner. She always gave him a discount, and we ate there often. Doc had semi-retired and I was running the majority of the clinic, with consultation from Doc of course. We were even discussing hiring another vet.

My life seemed picture perfect to the outside world, yet those who truly knew me knew there was a piece that was missing on this big day.

My brother would be walking me down the aisle in place of my father, which was beautiful in thought, yet I couldn't help but feel a small tinge of sorrow. I missed him something fierce. He was supposed to be here on my wedding day. I'd imagined this moment so many times growing up that I wasn't sure I could do it without him.

A soft knock sounded on my bedroom door before light cracked through the open space. My sweet mom peaked around the edge, her hair pulled up in rollers that matched my crazy morning look.

“Good morning, bride-to-be,” she softly said, and I gave her a small smile. “Missing your dad?”

I nodded, and bit back the tears that were misting upon the edges of my eyes. “He was supposed to be here. He was supposed to be the one to walk me down the aisle.” My lip trembled as my mom sat down upon the edge of the bed.

“And who says he isn’t?” she calmly replied. I stared at her as a tear slid down my cheek. My mom rubbed my shoulders as I leaned against her. I could do this. Because I had so many people to remind me of how much my father loved me and how proud he was of everything I’d become.

And because of Weston.

He’d been my rock during the grief I’d felt following my father’s death. Not once did he press me to heal faster or give more than I could. Honestly, I saw much of my father in him. Those two had been more alike than I think either of them would’ve ever admitted. It was such a comforting and joyous thing.

“Are you going to be okay all by yourself here?” I asked, breaking the silence. It was only now that I realized that my mother would be living completely alone after tonight. We had slowly been moving most of my stuff into Weston’s home, leaving a few things behind that I would need up until today.

“Of course, sweetie. It’s not like you are going that far. Besides, Maddie and her husband have been chatting, and they are going to move in with me. They need some help babysitting the kiddos while they’re at work with Maddie’s new job,” she answered and stood up from the bed.

I glared at her in shock. “Why wouldn’t you tell me any of that?”

She chuckled and glanced at the gold watch around her wrist. “Because you had enough to worry about. Now hurry up and get your things, we have a wedding to get ready for.”



Trixie was pinning the veil into the back of my curls. Simple waves that left my hair long down my back. Weston always mentioned how beautiful he found my hair when it was left down. I had more makeup on than I'd probably ever worn before, applied perfectly by Weston's sister, Pearl. His mom stood in the corner with my mom, observing the final touches and waiting for the time to help me pull my dress on.

Simple off the shoulder satin dress. Not a single sparkly bead in sight with a detachable train that gave some definition to my figure while still adding some beautiful timeless elegance. It was everything I could have dreamt of. Even the day was perfect. One of the few days of the year that Montana actually had a fall. Bright oranges, yellows, and reds painted the leaves. The clear blue sky added warmth to the dark emerald and garnet color scheme we'd picked.

The dress was pulled down from the hanger and brought my way. I stepped into it with a heavy, beating heart. The wedding planner had just announced that it was time. The beautiful cream room off to the side of our small town's church glowed in anticipation as my mom began doing up the pearl buttons in the back of the dress.

I lifted my feet to step into the heels, wondering what Weston looked like and feeling nothing but excitement. A warm blanket seemed to wrap around my shoulders as Nancy handed me my bouquet. For a moment, I could've sworn that my daddy was here to escort me down to the man waiting for me.

"You look absolutely stunning," Nancy whispered, a comforting smile upon her face. I grinned back as the wedding planner popped her head back into the room.

"Let's go! We are waiting on the bridesmaids." She ushered my sister, Weston's sister, Trixie, and Elena out of the room. I trailed slowly behind Nancy while my mom walked beside me. We stepped out into the hallway, the soft music from the rustic chapel pouring out of the door that my bridesmaids were slowly walking through.

There was my brother, waiting beside the door looking so much like my dad. I sniffed back some tears realizing that he truly was here. Although it was Luke who was physically here, my father would be right beside me, too. My mom and Nancy both gave me soft kisses upon my cheeks and then disappeared into the chapel.

I stared at the doors that were now shut. Large, dark brown, oak doors that were thick and arched along the top. Weston was waiting in there for me, the beginning of the rest of my life was waiting. My heart raced in my chest, pounding so heavily I could hear it echo throughout the now still hallway.

Then my eyes slid to Luke. He had a sad smile on his face. “Weston is a very lucky guy,” Luke said as I approached, and then he stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled something out. A small picture. “Thought you’d like it if he joined us.”

I stared at the man smiling back in the photo. My daddy. Our father.

“I’m honored to be escorting you in his place, Tenley.” Luke smiled, wiping the tears from his cheeks, and I couldn’t keep back a few of mine.

“You’re going to ruin my makeup,” I teased and he pulled me into a hug as the music began once more inside the chapel.

“You ready?” he whispered, and I nodded.

Luke placed the picture in his suit chest pocket, placing Dad near his heart, and then extended his left elbow to me. I slipped my slender hand into his elbow crease and smiled as the doors swung open.

There he stood.

A new felt cowboy hat sat upon his head, a dark gray that blended so nicely with his suit and emerald green tie. His black, curly hair and his thick mustache were neatly styled, and he had the most imperfectly perfect grin on his face.

Those intense blue eyes that I would never get tired of seeing watched me, glistening with the utmost joy. He was

absolutely the most handsome and incredible man I could ever ask for. He was everything for me.

****WESTON****

There she was, walking down the aisle towards me. To become mine to love and protect for the rest of my life.

And I'd never seen anything more beautiful.

THE END

About The Author

R.L. Atkinson

Born and raised in Utah, R.L. Atkinson enjoys a busy life as a mom and wife taking care of all kinds of animals. She uses her personal life experience to help bring reality to all her novels. Writing has always been a passion of hers, and publishing is a dream come true.

Follow her on Social Media:

TikTok: @romanceauthormom

Instagram: @romanceauthormom

Continue following Weston and Tenley in the next book: Imperfectly Ours: A Duke Ranch Christmas-Available for Preorder now.

Discover More of Her Novels:
<https://www.amazon.com/author/r.l.atkinson>