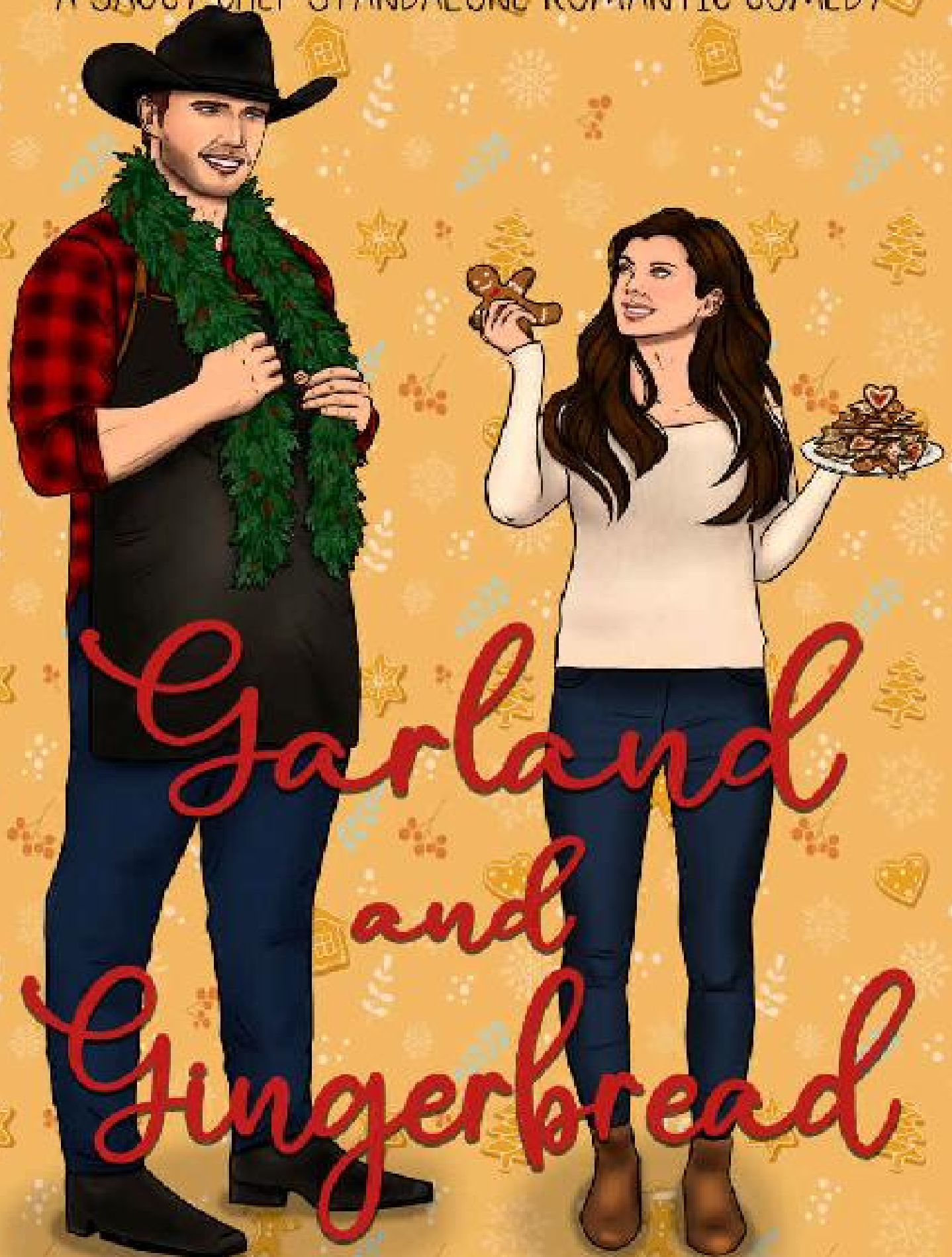


A SAUCY CHEF STANDALONE ROMANTIC COMEDY



Garland
and
Gingerbread

L Y R A B L A K E

Garland and Gingerbread

The Saucy Chef Series Book Two

Lyra Blake

Blake Publishing

This novel's story and characters are fictitious. Certain long-standing institutions and agencies are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly figments of the author's sometimes questionable imagination.

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Contents

Dedication

A Note From Lyra

1. Chapter One

2. Chapter Two

3. Chapter Three

4. Chapter Four

5. Chapter Five

6. Chapter Six

7. Chapter Seven

8. Chapter Eight

9. Chapter Nine

10. Chapter Ten

11. Chapter Eleven

12. Chapter Twelve

13. Chapter Thirteen

14. Chapter Fourteen
15. Chapter Fifteen
16. Chapter Sixteen
17. Chapter Seventeen
18. Chapter Eighteen
19. Chapter Nineteen
20. Chapter Twenty
21. Chapter Twenty-One
22. Chapter Twenty-Two
23. Chapter Twenty-Three
24. Chapter Twenty-Four
25. Chapter Twenty-Five
26. Chapter Twenty-Six
27. Chapter Twenty-Seven
28. Chapter Twenty-Eight
29. Chapter Twenty-Nine
30. Chapter Thirty

Rhett's Barbecue Sauce

Scarlett's Gingerbread Cookies

Acknowledgements

Mistletoe And Mofongo

Julian

The Frayed Edge

Of Grief And Gratitude

Books By Lyra Blake

About The Author

Hey, darlin'.

It's cuffing season.

And I've got a big boy for you.

A Note From Lyra

This book is a spicy holiday rom-com. It's like Hallmark, with the heat it deserves.

Though there are no specific triggers, it contains themes intended for adult audiences, including on-page, descriptive sex. Read accordingly.

Chapter One



FALL AND WINTER WERE my favorite seasons. Oregon regained its lush, green ambiance, and I could finally wear comfy sweaters and curl up with a good book and hot beverage. Crisp leaves in shades of the sunset crunched underneath my brown boots as I trekked up the front walk to my house.

I had half an hour to get everything ready for a day of baking and filming food. Years ago, I'd discovered I was sensitive to gluten, and everything I knew about food fell apart. No more fluffy bread with crackling, rustic crusts. No more eating wherever I wanted without first asking about the restaurant's menu accommodations and prep areas.

It was a dark time for me since I loved food and cooking. After college, I considered attending culinary school, but the risk of cross-contamination was so great that I gave up on that

idea. Instead, I took my business degree and opened a consulting company online so I could make my own schedule and be my own boss.

It was a means to an end because I saved every penny I could to start my food blog adventures. All of my research about food and experiments with gluten-free cooking led to the creation of a course people paid to take in order to learn all about gluten-free living. I directed it toward non-celiacs since that issue differed from mine. Gluten wouldn't lead to chronic health issues for me as it could for others.

I kicked my shoes off at the door, hung my coat in the closet, and then dropped my groceries on the kitchen counter. Knowing we'd need some space for photos both in the kitchen and on the dining table, I carefully organized everything I needed for the recipe.

After finding some instrumental versions of metal songs to play, I got to work measuring and mixing ingredients. I'd created a gluten-free recipe for a twist on blueberry muffins, which was going in the cookbook I'd been working on for over a year. It was surprisingly difficult to create a cookbook, especially since I was going indie and doing it on my own without a major publisher. One had reached out to me in the beginning, but the advance was minimal, and my cut was so paltry I couldn't justify it.

I preheated the oven while I washed dishes, then popped the muffin tin in while I straightened up the kitchen. There was a

knock at the door as I was finishing, and then the sound of it opening and closing.

“I’m here!” my friend Jamie called out. She lugged her camera equipment into my house, heading straight for the dining table and dumping it across the wood surface. “Are you ready to create sexy magical food porn?”

“I don’t know about the porn part,” I laughed, helping her set up. “But the first batch of muffins will be done in like ten minutes.”

“Dibs on the first muffin.”

“You’re here to photograph them, not eat,” I reminded her, waving the drying towel in her direction.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “The muffins won’t go bad in the hour it takes to do my thing. There will be plenty of time to stuff my face after.”

Another knock at the door saved me from having to combat her logic. I hurried over and opened it to let my other friend, Macy, inside.

“I’ve brought alcohol!” she exclaimed, holding up a grocery bag. “And orange juice, because that makes mimosas healthy.”

She kicked her shoes off and joined us in the kitchen, storing the drinks in the refrigerator and washing her hands. “How can I help?”

I glanced over at the oven timer. “Can you pull those out when they’re done and put the next batch in? I need to run up and grab a couple of outfits for photos.”

“Got it.” Her blonde ponytail swayed as she nodded.

I left them to take care of things while I jogged upstairs to my room and looked through my closet for shirts that would photograph well but didn't look like I'd tried too hard. I couldn't go wrong with a crisp white blouse or a soft purple sweater. Blue might work well with blueberry muffins, too. I pulled all three items out and laid them on the bed while I changed out of my black leggings and sweatshirt and into a pair of jeans. I left my white tank top on to wear under the other clothes and ran into my bathroom to fix my dark waves and ensure the loose curls had held through my trip to the store and all the baking.

Satisfied with how my hair looked, I swiped a little gloss on my lips to refresh my makeup and grabbed the clothes, then returned to the dining room. Jamie was already plating food and checking lighting and angles in the kitchen.

“Which one?” I asked her. Though she preferred all-black ensembles, she had an eye for color.

“Start with the white,” she advised. “It'll fade into the background more for the close-ups. We want the muffins to be the star.”

I slipped the shirt over my tank top and buttoned it, leaving the top undone to look a little less stuffy. I held my arms to the side, spinning for Jamie's inspection. She nodded her approval, and I moved to the kitchen.

“I'm going to run to the bathroom real quick.” Macy hitched a thumb over her shoulder and left us to get started on the

photo shoot.

Crystalline sugar glistened in the enhanced lighting, making the fresh blueberry muffins look like something out of a fantasy book. I pressed the button on the remote control I held, and the plate began to rotate on the counter.

“Perfect,” Jamie breathed, leaning close, pushing her short, neon pink hair off her face. The rapid-fire staccato of her camera’s shutter filled the air as she transformed my culinary creation into something worthy of foodie dreams. She lowered the camera and glanced at me with her big brown doe eyes, her long, dark lashes nearly touching perfectly arched brows. “Can you reach for one?”

“Sure.” I hit the stop button on the remote and extended my hand, my fingertips grazing the muffin wrapper. My mouth watered, and I contemplated plucking the treat from the plate and stuffing my face.

Jamie huffed her disapproval. “Not that one. Your right hand.”

I switched hands and licked a bit of sticky blueberry juice from my left thumb while she took more photos. “Can I eat one now?”

“Yeah, look at it like you want to fuck it.” Jamie laughed as I rolled my eyes.

“I’m sure it’s in a book somewhere, but I don’t intend to make food into one of my lovers,” I said drolly, inhaling the

muffin's scent. My eyes closed, and I let out an indecent moan.

“You're a little too good at that,” she murmured.

I took a bite of the muffin and moaned again, catching a wayward crumb with my fingertip and popping it into my mouth. “When you can't have the majority of carbs on the general market, you learn to appreciate a good muffin when you taste it.”

“You know what Leo would say about that.” Macy smirked as she strolled into the kitchen, rewashing her hands out of habit. The curvy blonde sous chef rubbed her palms together greedily. “Can we eat now? I'm starving.”

I looked to Jamie for permission since we were eating her inanimate models. She nodded, and I handed a muffin to Macy.

“Oh, they're good,” she mumbled with a full mouth, letting out a sound much like mine. “I think that cardamom adds the right amount of flavor that makes your palate pause.”

“That's the idea,” I agreed, devouring the rest of my muffin and reaching for the next. I brushed a rogue lock of hair away from my face and held the muffin to my nose, inhaling. “It's just a bit different than you'd expect. I think I want to try adding lemon.”

“Now?” Macy asked, glancing at the clock. “I'm game. Matteo won't be home for a couple hours.”

Macy and I met after she'd gone viral in the kitchen when she first worked for Matteo. Her now husband was a celebrity chef who owned his own Puerto Rican restaurant, and he was off hanging out with his billionaire friends, watching Sunday afternoon football. I much preferred hanging out with the girls and taste-testing my recipes.

I tapped my finger on my chin. "I think I have everything for another batch. Why don't you grab the lemons?"

"Yes, chef," Macy answered with a giggle as she turned and rummaged through the produce drawers in my refrigerator. "I put the orange juice and champagne in here. Mimosas?"

"Oh, hell yes!" Jamie finished packing her camera away and grabbed the juice and bottle of alcohol from Macy, then found champagne glasses in the cupboard. "If you want me to take pictures of you with this next batch, you'll have to make them again because I'm officially done with work for the day, and I intend to spend the rest of it maintaining enough of a buzz to giggle at your bad jokes."

"Hey!" I hip-checked her as I made my way to the pantry to grab the dry ingredients. "My jokes are amazing and even better with a little libation."

"We let you believe that, at least," she shot back with a grin as she untwisted the wire cage on the top of the champagne bottle and aimed it at me. "Go long!"

I backed up and held my hand out as the cork released with a loud *pop!* It sailed across the kitchen, and I reached up on

tiptoe to catch it in my palm, waving it in the air like a trophy.
“First glass is mine!”

Jamie had a mimosa waiting for me when I returned with arms full of flour, sugar, and other items, lining them up on the counter next to my mixer. I took a healthy sip of the citrusy alcoholic goodness and clicked my tongue at the tart aftertaste.

“Have you tried the newish barbeque place downtown?” Macy asked as she zested the lemons over a cutting board.
“Rhett’s. Matteo has been hanging out with the chef.”

“No,” I answered absently as I carefully measured out the flour and sugar. “Can I eat anything there?”

“Rhett told me there’s stuff without gluten on the menu.” Macy squeezed the lemon juice into a separate bowl as I whisked the dry ingredients together. “I think we should do a girls’ night. In fact, I told Eli we should celebrate his magazine feature with dinner there.”

“Actually without gluten?” I asked warily. Even the best chefs in the world sometimes didn’t understand the importance of knowing every last ingredient used. “Does he even know what gluten is?”

“I don’t see how you could have a restaurant in Portland and not know about food sensitivities. We have an entire menu we offer people.”

“He certainly sounds southern enough,” I muttered. I batted my eyelashes and did my best southern belle voice, dragging out the vowel in his name. “*Rhett.*”

“Holy shit,” Jamie breathed, staring down at her phone. “Have you seen this guy? Talk about wanting to ride a cowboy.”

She flipped the phone around, and I gulped. The man in the photo looked like he’d walked straight off the farm. Tall, tight jeans, cowboy boots, a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled to show off forearms too slutty for the internet. And the hat. It shouldn’t have done anything for me, but I’d always had a weakness for the rodeo boys where I’d grown up, no matter how bad they were.

“Is he on the menu?” Jamie asked, downing the rest of her mimosa. “Because I’d put my mouth everywhere.”

Macy rolled her eyes. “Ask him yourself. He makes the rounds to tables every night.”

“I’m in.” Jamie stared at the phone again. “You think he’s into girls who make the first move?”

“I think most men are into you.” I poured the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients already waiting in the mixer and set it to a low speed while I sprinkled a bit of flour over the blueberries and lemon zest. “Flash that smile and those tits, and he’ll probably drool all over himself.”

Jamie poured another drink and tipped it toward me. “I appreciate your faith in my skills of seduction.”

“So we’re on for dinner?” Macy asked. “I can make the reservations and tell Eli.”

My brows rose. “A barbecue place that needs reservations?”

“How do you not know about Rhett’s?” she asked in disbelief. “You’re a food blogger.”

“A gluten-free food blogger,” I clarified. “Not a food critic. I’m not out to review every new restaurant. When I think of barbecue, I envision long tables with benches and meat covered in enough sauce to need those little wet wipes when you’re done.”

“You’re not far off,” Macy admitted. “It’s amazing, and we don’t have nearly enough of it in the area unless you want an overpriced steak.”

“Okay.” I brushed a bit of flour off my black apron. It was one dinner and potentially amazing food. “Let’s do it. I’ll call ahead and see if I can find out what’s safe for me to eat.”

“Perfect!” Macy did a little dance. “You won’t regret it.”

Chapter Two



SWEAT AND DISINFECTANT. SIGNS that I'd made it out of bed and into the world on yet another day. Proof that I could overcome the odds.

My leg muscles strained as I pressed the weights, my face reddening as I forced them to perform past their limit. Shaking, I reached full extension and slammed the safety into place, feeling instant relief from the deep ache in my left leg and glute. My thighs stuck to the leather seat as I slid off the machine, massaging my hip while I reached for the disinfecting spray and towel. It wouldn't remove the lingering pain, but it gave my nerves something else to focus on besides the old injury.

"Amateur," Craig joked, slapping me on the back and adding weight to the leg press. "Sip on your water and watch how it's done."

I rolled my eyes and chuckled, tipping my head back and gulping my water. “Keep talkin’ a big game. Just remember, I can toss you across the room.”

“Fuck off,” he puffed as he completed his first set. He added more plates and smirked. “I’ve never seen you max out the machine.”

I was a bull rider in my previous life, and a good one at that. My growth spurt hit late, and I’d been determined to make a career out of it even when I passed the six-foot mark at the end of high school. It had worked, too, despite all the naysayers. I’d been gathering wins all across the circuit into my mid-twenties.

Until one fall proved everyone who thought a tall man couldn’t ride bulls right. I’d made it to seven seconds when I lost my grip on the rope and went flying nigh ten feet in the air, landing on my left leg and shattering it. My hip and pelvis fractured, and I’d spent months recovering after surgeries and physical therapy.

It ended my career and forced me to find a new path. But the guys didn’t care about my past. They took my injuries in stride and pushed me to hit those personal records.

“I don’t need to max out shit to best you,” I shot back, my Texas drawl thickening. “I’d like to see you last three seconds on a bull.”

Rodrigo racked his weights and stretched his arms, the black tattooed skulls contorting as he moved. “I thought the goal was eight.”

“It is,” I confirmed. “But there’s no way Craig would last three, let alone the full eight.”

“You don’t know that,” Craig forced out, sweat dripping from his blonde hair down his temple. His arm muscles flexed as he gripped the machine, pushing out the final reps. His legs didn’t shake as much as mine, even though he was pressing double the weight.

I shifted my weight to my right leg and shot him a pointed look. “Any time you want to test that out, I’ve got a contact about half an hour out of town. I’ll get you on a bull and see if you’re still runnin’ that mouth after you’ve planted your face in the mud.”

“Hard pass.” Craig shook his head as he finished. “I don’t want a lifelong limp like you.”

“It gives him character,” Rodrigo mused. “Chicks love a good sob story. I bet they line up to help massage the bad leg.”

I laughed his comment off. “If you’ve got women on your mind, you’re not workin’ hard enough. Bench press is open.”

“There’s always room in my head to think about curves and soft skin.” Rodrigo made the outline of a woman in the air and bit his lip. “Did I tell you about the waitress?”

“Which one?” Craig asked, helping me add plates to the barbell. “I’ve lost count.”

“I grabbed tacos a couple days ago, and I think I met my future wife.” His eyes took on a dreamy quality. “She’s fucking perfect, man. Short, curvy, and that *ass*.”

Sitting on the bench, I laid back and shifted my hips, getting more comfortable. “I think you need a bit more to build a marriage on, Rod.”

I wrapped my hands around the bar, securing my grip and taking a deep breath before lifting the weight and lowering it toward my body. I exhaled as I pressed up, relishing the burn through my pecs.

“It’s a good start.” Rodrigo was practically drooling. “I asked if she was on the take-home menu.”

“You didn’t,” Craig groaned, his hands hovering over the bar as he spotted me. “I don’t know why you say shit like that to girls.”

“You’ve been married so long you probably don’t remember how to be suave.” Rodrigo smacked his arm and downed the rest of his water.

“I’m married because I knew how to be charming,” Craig corrected him. “Women want to be treasured, not treated like meat.”

I grunted my agreement, too focused on breathing to talk.

Rodrigo grinned and looked over his shoulder as he flexed in the mirror. “She gave me her number.”

“Fuckin’ nuts,” I puffed out as I pressed the weight up and racked it so I could add more plates. “I’ll never understand how you land women with a mouth like that.”

“I’m their fantasy.” He had the balls to kiss his bicep. “The Latin lover. Give the ladies some pretty words, then give them

all of this.”

He motioned to his body, and Craig mimicked gagging. Rodrigo looked nice enough, with his coppery skin, dark hair, and eyes. He was shorter than Craig and I, but had bulked up to be nearly as wide as I was. The gold chains he wore around his neck weren't my style, but seemed to work in his favor with the opposite sex.

I laughed and lowered to the bench, planting my feet. “I won't hold my breath waitin' for the weddin' invitation.”

“You'll eat those words.” Rodrigo pointed a finger at me, and I struggled not to laugh as I lifted the bar. “I give it six months before she agrees to marry me.”

“I'll take that bet,” Craig said with a laugh.

Rodrigo shook his head. “Nah, man. I know better than to put a bet down on a woman. Did you watch any angsty teen movies as a kid?”

“What's that have to do with anything?” I forced out on an exhale. My arms burned, but I pushed out another rep.

“Women always find out about that shit,” he explained. “I don't need that coming between me and my little *mami*. I'm going to treat the future mother of my children right.”

“At least you have good intentions?” Craig looked dubious. “Best of luck if she's the one.”

We fell into silence as Rodrigo daydreamed about his girl, and we completed our workout for the morning. I grabbed a quick shower and pulled on my jeans and a plain white t-shirt.

My damp hair was unruly, but I did my best to put it in place by running my fingers through the brown strands. I shoved my feet into my boots and adjusted my belt.

“You know, you’re not in Texas anymore.” Rodrigo loved to give me shit about my belt buckle.

“Jealous, huh?” I gripped the silver star buckle.

He laughed and tossed his clothes into his bag. “I’m not out to draw attention to myself.”

I raised a brow and glanced at his gold chain with the cross. “Just say you don’t have nothin’ to show off, Rod.”

He clicked his tongue and waved me off. “Fuck off with that.”

“I guess I don’t have’ta give you the leftovers.” I pulled the two containers from the plastic sack in my bag.

“Nah, don’t play like that.” Rodrigo snatched one of the white boxes from my hand and popped the lid open, taking a deep breath and sighing. “Brisket. Fuck yeah.”

Craig nodded when I handed him the other container. “Thanks, man. I hope everything goes well with the food critic.”

“Yeah, me, too.” I’d told them about the rumor a local food critic was stopping by my restaurant that evening when I’d found out on Monday, but we hadn’t discussed it since. They probably wouldn’t understand how significant it was.

For me, a transplant to the area, getting local recognition and appreciation were the difference between having a temporary restaurant and becoming one of Portland's staple barbecue recommendations. I wouldn't settle for anything less than the latter.

"If they don't appreciate this shit, they're crazy," Rodrigo said, slapping me on the back and hoisting his bag over the shoulder. "You can tell us all about it tomorrow."

"I will." I lifted my chin and headed out to my black Jeep, tossing my bag in the back and climbing behind the wheel. The Friday morning was sunny, the air still warm from the lingering summer weather we'd been experiencing. I made the fifteen-minute drive to the restaurant and parked out back next to my pit master, Ruben's truck.

He waved to me from where he misted some of the meat in the large smokers behind the building. The air was filled with the smell of beef well on its way to being perfectly tender for the lunch service.

"Mornin' boss," he drawled.

"How's she lookin' today?"

"Pretty as can be." He motioned to the rack of beef ribs that already had a good crust forming.

"Good." I patted his shoulder and made my way inside to my office. I slipped my trademark plaid over my arms and grabbed a black apron inscribed with *Rhett's*, pulling it over my head and tying it behind my waist—time to *get to work*.

The kitchen was quiet when I entered, but it wasn't long before my staff started filtering in for lunch prep. I pulled a tray of baked mac n' cheese from the oven, sprinkled bread crumbs liberally over the surface, and then popped it back in so the top could brown.

“When y'all have a minute, gather 'round,” I called out, wiping my hands on my apron.

Curtis and Dolly finished at their prep stations and washed up while the servers filtered in. Ruben brought up the rear, and I cleared my throat.

“Tonight, we're supposed to have a special guest,” I began, clasping my hands together. “Cora Covington is stopping by to do a critique of our food. I'm sure you all know how important this is for the restaurant.”

Ruben nodded, and Dolly silently clapped her hands, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Her blonde ponytail bobbed with her enthusiasm.

“What do we need to do?” she asked.

“Your jobs.” I ran a hand through my hair. “We treat this like any other night because our consistency and quality is what makes people return time after time. Miss Covington'll get the same treatment as any other guest.”

Curtis glanced over at the warming station. “Should we reserve anything for her?”

“No.” It was our policy to sell food until we ran out. Then we closed for the day. “If she shows up late, that's on her.”

“But—”

I held up a hand, cutting Curtis off. “I’m not changin’ or treatin’ her special. Y’all don’t go out your way, either. She’s like any other payin’ customer, and if we aren’t good enough for her, we’re not good enough for any of them. Understood?”

Murmurs of agreement answered me. “Good. Now y’all get back to work. We’ve got hungry bellies to fill.”

My staff dispersed, and I got caught up in the day, the Friday lunch rush making the hours pass quickly. I didn’t have a break until nearly four, and even then, it was only enough time to run to the bathroom then grab another cup of coffee. I popped some ibuprofen to help ease the ache in my leg and checked to see the status of the meat.

Ruben worked nights, and I took over when I arrived in the morning. DJ and Lex covered the pit a few days a week so Ruben and I could have time off. It was a rotation that worked smoothly, with rare exceptions.

Looking at everything, I figured there would be enough meat for about a hundred plates, give or take a few. I’d talked a good game to my staff, but my stomach was in knots as I waited for Miss Covington to make her probable appearance. What would I do if she didn’t show?

No, not letting thoughts like that into my head. It would be the same as any other night. Too much thought would lead to mistakes, and that would do more damage than disappointing the food critic with the laid-back atmosphere and limited offerings. It had never been an issue before. Just like every

barbecue joint in Texas, I served food until it ran out. Most days, that meant the kitchen closed by six, and the staff spent an hour cleaning before heading home for the night.

“She’s here.” Diedre’s words cut through my thoughts, and I strode to look through the kitchen door. “Over there. Table twelve. Should I offer her something complimentary?”

I shook my head. “No. Like I said, treat her the same as any other customer.”

Movement across the restaurant caught my eye, and I saw a server laughing and leaning close to a customer at another table. I bristled, observing the young man. He tapped one of the women on the shoulder and headed in my direction. I stepped aside, and Jacob wedged his way through the door.

“What was that about?” I asked, tipping my head in the direction he’d come.

“Macy is here with some of her friends,” he answered, blushing. So the kid thought he would get lucky with somebody at that table.

I couldn’t risk him drawing Covington’s attention if he were less than professional, so I made an executive decision. “Jacob, switch with Diedre and take Covington’s table.”

“What?” he blanched.

Diedre fisted her hands on her hips, her blue eyes flashing with anger. “You can’t be serious.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion. I told you what I want done,” I said, leaving no room for arguments. “Jacob, take care with

how you act. Behave, now.”

“Y-yes, sir.” He nodded and straightened his shoulders before darting back to the front of the house.

I turned to Diedre in time to catch the scowl on her face before she smoothed her features. “You’ve got Macy’s table. Do me proud.”

“Right.” She pushed out the doors and returned to the floor to take their order, and I blew out a long breath.

There was no use lingering and staring at a stranger who could mean the difference between failure and success for my business. I turned and stalked back to the kitchen, grabbing a slab of brisket and one of my knives. I lost myself in slicing it and sending it out for service. For the next hour and a half, I ignored everything but the immediate tasks at hand, immersing myself in my job and running my kitchen so I wouldn’t be tempted to look out the window and see whether the food critic had enjoyed her meal.

“Chef.” Dolly stood before me, throwing a towel over her shoulder and eyeing me like she’d tried to get my attention more than once.

“Yeah, I’m listening.”

“She’s gone. You can join us in the real world again,” she giggled and snapped me with the towel playfully. “Macy wants to say hi, but I told Diedre I’d check with you first.”

“I’ll go out there.” I washed my hands and checked my apron to make sure I wasn’t covered in sauce. I’d known

Matteo and Macy since I'd first opened the restaurant, and they brought friends to eat every few weeks.

This time, she had a group of girls filling her table. And two men. They were laughing while sipping water and chatting over their food. The brunette at the end caught my eye, and I did a double take, standing a little taller and pushing my chest out as I plastered a winning smile on my face and approached. I may not be able to shoot my shot in my restaurant, but I could damn well make a good first impression.

Chapter Three



MY THONG RODE A little too far up my ass as I approached Rhett's, where my friends awaited. I tried to subtly adjust but finally accepted my flossed fate for the evening, vowing to pick up more bikini-style underwear the next day. There was no need to suffer for beauty when nobody would be seeing me bare-cheeked.

The low building was paneled in sleek, horizontal wood planks, and the peaked roof stood in contrast, painted red with Rhett's scrawled across it in black and white. It managed to match what you'd expect for a Portland aesthetic while looking a bit country. Smoke rose from behind the building, and I could smell the meat, my stomach grumbling and mouth-watering in response.

I reached for the silver pipe door handle and pulled, using my body weight to wedge the heavy wooden door open.

Warmth encompassed me as I stepped inside and was greeted by a petite blonde behind the hostess podium.

“Howdy, welcome to Rhett’s!” she said, sans an accent. It made the words humorous, and I smiled without trying. “Is it just you dining with us this evening?”

“I’m meeting a group,” I explained.

The girl nodded, her blonde ponytail bobbing. “Oh, you must be with Macy!”

“Yeah, that’s the group.”

“I’ll take you to them,” she offered, grabbing a menu and escorting me across the restaurant and to the back, where I heard my friends before I saw them.

“Scarlett!” Macy jumped up and hugged me. She looked cozy in her worn jeans and powder pink sweater, her blonde hair braided to the side. “I’m so glad you made it!”

“Hey, I came hungry.” I took the menu from the hostess before sitting in the seat Eli pointed to. His husband, Simon, pulled out the chair, and I plopped down on the wood, shrugging out of my jacket and draping it over the back.

They were dressed impeccably as always, likely in something Eli designed. Simon’s broad shoulders filled out the grey suit jacket, but the casual green tee underneath dressed it down for his black jeans, leaving a sliver of rich golden brown skin and bringing out the color of his eyes. His hair was coiffed to the side, and his beard expertly angled to square his

jaw. Eli sat in stark contrast with his white-blond hair and hazel eyes, wearing a cream sweater and black slacks.

“It smells amazing in here.” I glanced at the buttered roll Ella was shoving in her mouth.

She shook her head. “Sorry, not safe for you.”

“I figured.” Gluten-free bread didn’t look as appetizing as Ella’s food.

“But they have so much you can eat,” Macy gushed, pointing to the menu. “All the meat. The greens, creamed corn, and the ice cream.”

It was more than I could have at some restaurants. I perused the menu, looking for the safe items I’d been told about when I called, and my stomach growled loud enough for Simon to hear it.

He looked down at me, his brows raised. “Girl, when did you last eat?”

“I had a salad for lunch.” I shrugged and zeroed in on the sampler plate. Brisket, pork, ribs, chicken, and sausage. All smoked. “I’ve left plenty of room to pig out on everything on this menu. What’s an armadillo egg?”

“Oh, it’s amazing,” Macy said, propping her chin on her fist. “Cream cheese stuffed peppers, wrapped in bacon and smoked. Matteo loves them so much he started making his own version at home.”

“Adding that to my order, then.”

Our server approached, her dark hair pulled tightly back in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her name tag read *Diedre*. She wore a false smile and spoke in a monotone that projected her lack of enthusiasm for working with our table. “Have we decided what we’re having tonight?”

“I think so,” Macy responded when we all nodded.

The server worked around the table, finally looking at me expectantly. “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have the meat sampler and an armadillo egg,” I said, folding the menu. “But I need the gluten-free options and need it prepped away from your bread products. I was told that’s possible when I called.”

“Is it an allergy or diet preference?” she asked.

“Allergy,” I confirmed. People didn’t take food sensitivity seriously, so I always called it an allergy in restaurants because most places had policies on handling food allergies.

“Right.” She rolled her eyes, and I bristled, ready to expand on my needs. “We can do all that. What sides do you want?”

“I’ll do the greens and creamed corn.”

“Great.” The server clicked the top of her pen and tucked the pad into her apron. “I’ll get your orders in and bring your drinks.”

She took a good five minutes to return with our drinks, and we wasted no time toasting Eli’s achievements. I held up my spiked sweet tea. “Eli, we all knew you were destined for great things when you stole all the curtains in our house for your

senior project in design school. And here you are with a wedding dress feature in a magazine! I'm so proud of you!"

"And I expect you to give us all curtains when we get married," Jamie added with a giggle, running her hand through her slicked-back hair. She was all sleek lines in her black leather jacket and matching dress shirt and jeans. I was sure she was wearing her trademark black boots under the table.

Our other friend Lucia slapped her hand on the table, nearly spilling her wine as the flowing batwing sleeves of her red sweater brushed the table. Her brown eyes sparkled with mirth as she grabbed the glass. "Cheers to that. And cheers to you, Eli!"

"Cheers!" we echoed, laughing and sipping on our drinks.

"That dress is still hanging in the downstairs closet," Simon admitted.

Eli grinned. "And you should all watch the words coming out of your mouths, or I'll abscond with more textiles when I visit. I'll make an entire wardrobe out of things from your homes."

Jamie pointed at me, smirking. "Start with Scarlett. Those things you call curtains are an atrocity."

"Hey," I protested, bypassing the straw in my drink for a gulp from the rim of the glass. "Those are all practical for filming when I need to block out light.

"They make stylish blackout curtains, you know." Eli tipped his head to the side. "I could turn them into high fashion, but

they'd be better off in the trash.”

“You should be more worried about finding a man than home décor.” Simon draped his arm around Eli’s shoulders. “You deserve to be as happy as we are.”

“I’ll leave the love story to you two,” I shot back. “I’m happy putting up with myself. I doubt I’d be able to handle some dude’s shit, too.”

Macy moved her hands away from the table as the server approached with our food. “I didn’t want a man, but then I met Matteo.”

“So you’ve got the last good man in Portland.” I looked down at the giant plates in front of me and realized I’d ordered more than I could possibly eat. No wonder the tables were so big. Everything was Texas-style, including the portion sizes.

“I met a nice guy on a dating app last week,” Jamie said as I pulled out my phone and started taking photos of my food. It was a habit to post my meals on social media.

“I hope you hear the red flags in that statement,” I muttered as I edited a close-up of the smoked meat platter. Stabbing a slice of brisket with my fork, I shoved the food into my mouth and moaned embarrassingly loudly. “Oh, *yes*.”

The flavor was dark and smokey, with herbs and a hint of cocoa and coffee. It had a perfectly pink smoke line around the edge, and the outside was slightly crunchy in contrast to the melt-in-your-mouth center.

“Do that in front of the chef, and he’ll cook whatever you want,” Macy laughed. “That’s the best compliment.”

I shook my head and swallowed the bite, taking a moment to pick the restaurant’s location as I posted the photos. Then I took a video for good measure, panning over the spread of meat at side dishes and tagging the place with a few drooling emojis. “Shut up and let me spend time with the new love of my life. Who needs a man when I can order this every week?”

“Rhett is single,” Macy said through a mouthful of macaroni and cheese. “If you play your cards right, you could have a top-of-the-line smoker at your disposal every day of the week.”

“I’m not much for gambling.” I licked the sticky, tangy, sweet sauce from my fingers before attacking a rib.

A shadow fell over the table, but I didn’t think much about it until I heard the smooth southern drawl that accompanied it. “Good to see you think it’s finger-lickin’ good.”

Tight jeans, a white t-shirt covered by a red plaid with rolled sleeves exposing thick forearms, and a chiseled face topped by a cowboy hat. Rhett Roberts, owner of his namesake restaurant. Six-foot-something of padded bulk, light brown hair, and blue eyes I could drown in. Eyes that were causing a flood in my basement.

I choked. Like, full-on, red-faced, sputtering particles of meat back onto my plate—choked. The Stetson-wearing southern god next to me looked concerned until Simon slapped me on the back hard, sending my hair flying into my face.

He gave me one more whack for good measure. “Breathe, Scarlett.”

“Th-thanks,” I managed, shaking my hair like a horse’s mane because my hands were covered in sauce again. I reached for one of the wet wipes and cleaned myself carefully.

“Scarlett, hm? I’m Rhett.” He held his large hand out, and I watched as mine moved of its own accord to rest in his palm. My jaw hung open as his fingers wrapped around mine with the perfect amount of pressure to send zings of electricity straight to my nethers. Then he pumped it slowly, and I could see that hand moving in a very different way on another part of my body.

The restaurant was suddenly hot. Rhett dropped my hand and nodded at Simon. “You must be her... husband?”

The others stifled their laughter, and Simon let out a long belly laugh. “Oh, no, honey. I’m all about pickles, not pussies.”

He leaned over and kissed Eli, threading his fingers through Eli’s hair to drive his point home. Red flags waved in my head when he shot me a conspiratorial look and nodded in my direction. “She’s single as a pringle.”

“And I bet that’s not the only meat that’s finger-lickin’ good. Why don’t you find out, Scarlett?” Eli was shameless in his pursuit of a secondary career as a matchmaker. Rhett chuckled at the off-color joke, and I wanted to sink right through the floor.

I closed my eyes and hoped I could magically forget everything happening. Like a child playing hide-and-seek, I wanted the world to cease to exist when I refused to look at it.

Jamie slid a napkin and pen toward me when I finally opened my eyes. “Here, you can give him your digits.”

“The man did not ask for my number.” I looked to Rhett for backup, but he stood there with those perfectly white teeth showing in a grin.

He rubbed the shadow of stubble on his chin and looked me over. “I’d never turn down a number from a lady who blushes such a pretty shade of rose.”

A chorus of swooning breaths surrounded me as my friends fell under the spell of that Texas drawl. All eyes turned to me, waiting for my answer. Traitors, the lot of them.

“You look like you give good hugs.” Why couldn’t the earth open up and swallow me whole when I said stupid shit?

“I could be enticed to offer one if you let me take you for coffee sometime,” Rhett answered. Was it just me, or had his shoulders gotten even broader?

I nodded and reached for the pen like I was possessed, jotting down my number and folding the napkin in half before handing it over. “I drink coffee.”

“Well, that’s a start,” he chuckled. He tucked the napkin into his back pocket, then tipped his hat and turned away from me. “Macy, darlin’. I’ve got to get back to the kitchen, but I

wanted to stop by and see you real quick. Thanks for bringin' your friends by.”

She beamed at him and patted his arm. “Always good to see you, Rhett.”

Once he'd walked away, Jamie and Lucia squealed, clapping like excited children. I shot them a quelling glare, but that didn't stop Jamie. “Girl, you just landed a southern mountain man!”

I tried to minimize the situation. “I gave him my number. Nothing more.”

“If you don't want to ride that bull, I'll volunteer as tribute,” Lucia added. “I'll bet the ride lasts longer than a couple minutes. He's built for stamina.”

“He's not cattle,” I murmured, finishing my drink and letting the conversation divert to other topics.

I was half-dazed by my audacity for the rest of the evening and spent the entire drive home overthinking everything I'd done. When I parked in my driveway, I didn't remember the turns I'd taken to reach my destination.

Kicking off my shoes at the door and dropping my purse on the small entry table, I headed upstairs to strip out of my clothes and take a quick shower to rinse off the lingering smell of smoked meat. It triggered feelings of regret, and there was no use worrying about things that hadn't even happened yet. Like coffee dates with handsome Texan chefs.

I pulled a baggy t-shirt over my head and slipped beneath my covers, finally finding rest.

Rest that was short-lived because a few hours later, I awoke with familiar stomach pains. I tried to roll over and ignore it, then curled into a ball as the discomfort increased. It was a classic sign of gluten consumption, and though I knew there was no fighting it, I still resisted the nausea and cramping.

“No, no, no,” I lamented into my pillow. “It was supposed to be *safe*, damnit.”

Finally, I rushed to the bathroom, falling ill and dropping to my knees in front of the toilet. Dinner was far less enjoyable the second time around. That was just the beginning. Between bouts of vomiting, I rushed to the kitchen to find a metal bowl because I knew the worst was yet to come.

Cold sweats, stabbing, cramping pain in my lower stomach, and finally, the rush to the toilet as I held the bowl in my lap so my body could purge every contaminate I'd eaten. I groaned and finally gave in to tears when I didn't have the will to stay strong any longer. There was nobody to witness my downfall over the next few hours.

When I was an empty vessel, and the cramping no longer drove me to the bathroom, I found a bottle of water in the kitchen and carefully sipped it in bed. My vision blurred as I reached for my phone and opened the familiar app. I swiped and tapped the video button, not giving a fuck about how my mussed hair or pale skin.

I stared into the camera. “I wish I could say I’m used to this, but getting glutened never gets easier. This is the sucky side of food sensitivities. Even when I’m careful, and even when I’m clear about my needs, one mistake by somebody who either doesn’t understand or doesn’t care lands me in this position for hours—sometimes days or weeks. Please listen to people when they tell you about their food limitations. It matters so much.”

I held my fist to my mouth as bile rose in the back of my throat again. My voice wavered as I signed off. “Send me all your positive thoughts and maybe some anti-nausea meds. I’m going to need them.”

I hit post and flung my phone down onto the white comforter as I rushed back to the bathroom, gripping the corner of the counter as I bent over the toilet and lost what little water I’d tried to keep down. I flushed the toilet and rinsed my mouth, brushing my teeth for good measure.

Slowly, I sank to the rug on the floor, pulling the metal bowl into my lap and hugging it as I leaned my head against the vanity and let exhaustion pull me into a fitful, often interrupted sleep.

Chapter Four



SATURDAY MORNING GREETED ME with cooler temperatures and lingering dampness from the rain overnight. I was ready to get to the gym and decompress after last night's events at the restaurant. The napkin with Scarlett's letter burned a hole through my back pocket for the rest of the evening and now sat safely on my nightstand, waiting for me to pick it up and make the call.

I'd decided to wait until at least ten to call in case she was a late sleeper. My phone remained silenced in my bag to aid in my self-control. Lifting until my arms threatened to give up would take my mind off things for a little while.

I pulled into the gym lot and found a place to park my Jeep, then grabbed my bag and went inside. Saturday mornings weren't as busy as the weekdays. I was the first of my workout group to arrive, so I grabbed a treadmill and set off at a slow

pace to warm up all the tight muscles in my legs and lower back.

The physical therapists had been right when they told me that the key to recovering from my injuries was movement, but sometimes it was damn hard to get going when everything protested. In moments like that, I reminded myself how lucky I was to be walking at all. The mirror on the wall reflected my image, and I studied it critically.

In the last six years, I'd changed. When I was on the Rodeo circuit, I'd taken pride in my toned arm and leg muscles, the six-pack abs I worked hard to maintain. The years of recovery meant learning a new way to care for myself, and long runs and heavy lifting were out. Now, I was broad, but didn't have that same definition. I was strong, but not ripped. My new body taught me that fitness couldn't be judged by how a person looked.

It opened my eyes to what it felt like to be judged on your appearance, but in a negative way. When my then-fiancé came to my place for dinner and watched me eat with disdain, I realized I wasn't the man she'd begun dating. Then she told me that I'd changed too much and no longer took care of myself. She'd wanted to marry a bull rider, not a man who would have a lifelong limp and a dad bod before he had kids. I still remembered the sound of her gold solitaire engagement ring dropping to the surface of my wooden dining table.

Another body joined me, and I nodded at Craig, who silently acknowledged me and started jogging. I pushed the pace on

the treadmill as sweat beaded on my brow. Grace hadn't wanted me, and I didn't expect other women to feel differently. I wish I could say I hadn't given her another thought, but those words still plagued me occasionally.

At first, I'd thought I could win her back if I got in shape again. I hired a trainer who quickly showed me my new limitations. Then, I had to watch Grace make the rounds at the rodeo, flirting and throwing herself at the winners like a buckle bunny. I knew then that I could never live up to her expectations. I would never take home first place again.

The reminder still stung after so many years.

"Hey, pussies!" Rodrigo pulled me from my melancholy thoughts. "Stop walking like old ladies, and let's lift shit."

I chuckled at his form of motivation. Gym culture was like the circuit in some ways, mainly that it was brash, and nobody filtered their words. I could appreciate it.

Turning the treadmill off, I pointed at his arms. "So you're finally ready to put some muscle on those chicken wings?"

Rodrigo clucked and flapped his arms. "I'm aiming for turkey, at least."

"We can work with that." I dropped my water bottle by the row of benches and grabbed the thirty-pound dumbbells.

"How did last night go?" Craig ventured as he selected his weights.

"Fine, I think," I answered, finding my grip. "I cooked the food. It's up to the critic to decide whether she liked it."

Craig lifted his chin. “Fair enough. I hope it was the best barbecue she’s eaten.” You deserve it.

“Fingers crossed.” I focused on keeping my hips still as I pushed the weights above my head.

“I called her,” Rodrigo said from the bench beside me where he was lifting.

Craig glanced over. “Who are you calling?”

“The girl from the restaurant,” Rodrigo supplied on an exhale. His gold chains shifted against his black sleeveless tee as he pushed the weights up again. “Talked for a fucking hour, man. I’ve never wanted to talk to a chick that long. It wasn’t like she was coming over for a booty call, either.”

“Congrats.” Craig’s voice was anything but congratulatory as he shook his head. “You’ve made it to the next level of life, where you see women as more than objects for your pleasure.”

I held back my laugh and finished out my set before exchanging my weights for forty-fives and repeating the reps. “Did you ask her out?”

Rodrigo’s smile wavered. “Yeah, but she told me no.”

“Sorry, man. That’s tough.” I didn’t think I’d ever seen him look less than his cocky self. It was never fun to be rejected.

“Don’t be.” He shrugged it off, and his sly smirk returned. “She told me I could call again tonight. She wants to know me better before we go out.”

“I remember those days,” Craig said with a wistful smile. “I used to read poetry to my wife over the phone until she fell asleep.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Rodrigo stood and stretched. “What kinds of things did you read to her? Shakespeare and shit?”

“Name one play by Shakespeare,” I challenged my friend.

“Summer something,” he said, picking up his water bottle and spraying it into his mouth.

“*A Midsomer Night’s Dream*,” Craig offered.

Rodrigo inclined his head. “Yeah, that one. I had to watch it in school. I remember laughing.”

“I’ve never read her Shakespeare.” Craig’s cheeks flushed. “She likes to read romance books. I bought some I knew she wanted to read and surprised her with them.”

I faltered but saved myself from taking a weight to the face. “The sex books?”

“They have whole plots.” Craig’s voice was defensive. “But the sex was pretty hot. I won’t say it didn’t help me in other ways than winning her heart and mind.”

“I’ll ask her if she reads,” Rodrigo concluded. “If she doesn’t, maybe I’ll get her into those books.”

“Maybe take her on a few dates first,” I suggested. “You start reading her sex scenes on the phone, and she’ll think you’re only after one thing.”

“Do you still think she’s the one?” Craig questioned, finishing his set.

“Yeah, she’s smart.” Rodrigo grinned. “She works at the restaurant in the evenings. Goes to nursing school during the day.”

“And she doesn’t care that you’re a bouncer?” I knew Rodrigo rarely dated seriously, but it wasn’t solely on him. A lot of women didn’t like that he worked at a local strip club as a bouncer. They assumed he was fucking all the dancers, but he saw them more as sisters. He treated them well and made sure customers stayed respectful.

“Nah, she’s cool. I’ve been waiting for her to message me.” He picked up his phone and grinned as he read his texts. “There it is. Yeah, she’s a goner for me.”

“Right,” Craig laughed.

Rodrigo’s smile turned to a frown as he concentrated on the screen. “What the fuck did you do, Rhett?”

“Me?” I dropped the weights back to the rack and shook out my arms. “Nothin’, why?”

He spared me a glance and continued swiping his finger over the phone screen. “I think you broke the internet. Some chick named Scarlett.”

What would she have to do with anything? “Yeah, she came to the restaurant with one of my friends last night. I got her number.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work out for you,” Rodrigo murmured. “They’re hashtagging *justice for Scarlett*.”

“What happened to her? She was fine when I met her.”

“Haven’t you checked your phone today?” Craig asked, looking over Rodrigo’s shoulder. “Fuck, man. They’re trying to cancel you.”

“The hell?” My phone was in the locker room, but the guys followed me until I dug through my bag and pulled it out. I opened one of my social media apps and found hundreds of notifications—too many messages and comments to count. I didn’t understand what was happening.

“Fuck, that sucks, man,” Craig said from beside me, his phone in hand. “She got sick at your restaurant.”

“Shit,” I whispered, opening the angry messages, expecting something like food poisoning. No, it was something about gluten. “She had an allergic reaction or something. I didn’t know she had food restrictions.”

I followed one of the tagged links to her page and found photos from my restaurant the night before. She’d raved about the food. Then I saw how ill she appeared in her story videos and heard her broken voice. My heart sank that I’d caused somebody distress.

“Your place has a two-star rating this morning,” Craig murmured gravely.

My eyes shot up to see he wasn’t kidding. “What? It was at five stars yesterday.”

“Those foodies work fast.” Rodrigo slipped his phone back in his pocket. “Man, you’d better get that under control before you’re fucked over.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, tossing my phone back in my bag. “I need to cut the workout short and figure out how I’m gonna fix this.”

“You got this.” Craig’s palm landed reassuringly on my shoulder. “Text us later.”

“Nobody ever really gets canceled!” Rodrigo called out as I spun and purposely strode out of the locker room.

Easy for him to say. People usually weren’t trying to cancel bouncers. I tossed my bag in the back of the Jeep and fished my phone out. As my vehicle roared to life, I connected the phone to my speakers and glanced at the time. It was after eight.

“Call Matteo,” I barked out. He should know something, since Macy had brought Scarlett to my restaurant.

“It’s Saturday morning, Rhett.” My friend sounded half asleep. “Why are you calling this early?”

“I figured you wouldn’t want me callin’ your wife,” I answered. “Seein’s how it was her guest that rallied a mob of keyboard warriors to cancel my restaurant.”

“What?” Matteo sounded more alert. “What happened?”

“I’m still trying to figure it out myself,” I explained. “The Scarlett chick can’t have gluten and said she got sick at my place.”

Matteo's voice was muffled as he no doubt spoke to his wife. I heard Macy's quiet exclamation before he returned. "We had no idea."

"That doesn't sound like Scarlett," Macy pitched in. "She's never been anything but sweet, even when she has an issue with her food sensitivity. She asked people to shit on your reputation?"

"Not exactly," I admitted, recalling Scarlett's words. "She didn't mention my restaurant directly."

As if I'd summoned it, I heard her voice faintly in the background. They must have been watching what she posted.

"Oh, poor Scarlett," Macy whispered. "Rhett, I don't think she knows what's happening. She's not answering when I call."

Alarm bells went off in my head. "How bad is this allergy? Severe enough she needs to be hospitalized?"

I pictured Scarlett's pretty face swelling, her fingers wrapped around her throat as she gasped for air.

"No, nothing like that," Macy answered. "She'll probably be sick for a few days, but she usually bounces back within a week. It doesn't happen very often. Scarlett's careful about where she eats to avoid this. I feel so guilty because I was the one that suggested Rhett's."

Matteo spoke low to his wife. "No, it's not your fault. Mistakes happen."

I wracked my brain, trying to remember anything on the orders that would have indicated a customer with allergies. We'd had one ticket with a dairy allergy, but I couldn't remember anything about gluten or wheat.

"I don't know what happened, but I intend to find out," I vowed. The gentleman inside me needed to make amends. "Matteo, I want her address."

"I don't know." He hesitated, and I held my breath as I heard him moving through his place. His voice was quiet when he spoke again. "I think this is a situation where I'll ask forgiveness later. Macy told me you got Scarlett's number last night. I'm only doing this because I trust you'll treat her with kindness."

"Always." He rattled off an address, and I pulled to the side of the road, ignoring the honks of the car behind me. I slammed the Jeep into park and grabbed an empty envelope and a pen, jotting the directions down. "Thanks, man."

"I've got a number you can call about the fallout," he added, giving it to me. "That's for Julian Rivera. There's nobody better in marketing, and he has people that work on PR crises. I'll text and let him know to expect your call."

"Appreciate it." I stared at that number like it was my lifeline.

"Don't thank me yet," Matteo chuckled. "You're going to owe him a lot of food on top of whatever the company charges."

“I’ll take any help I can get if it saves my business.” Thoughts raced through my head as I ended the call and headed home to shower.

I pulled into the underground parking for my condo building and took the elevator to my floor, dropping my gym bag by the door and stripping as I crossed the living room. I shucked my black shorts and boxer briefs to the floor in the bathroom and jumped in the shower, bracing myself against the cold water until it warmed.

It didn’t take long to wash my body and devise a plan of attack. When I’d finished and ran a little gel through my hair to keep it in place, I pulled on jeans and a black polo, shoving my feet into my cowboy boots. I grabbed my leather jacket and Stetson on the way out the door and had an awkward first conversation with Portland’s marketing guru on the way to the closest mega store.

Julian seemed completely confident in his team’s ability to help me and said he’d have something for me by the end of the day. It was more than I could do alone, so I thanked him profusely before ending the call. I pulled into the store’s parking lot and practically jumped out of the Jeep as I strode inside. I grabbed a cart and headed to the med section, looking for anything for digestive issues and tossing it in. Then I searched out some lemon-lime soda and gluten-free crackers. They didn’t look like the typical saltines, but there weren’t many safe options.

Scarlett's pale face was imprinted on my brain, fueling my purpose as I walked the aisles and bought an oversized fuzzy purple blanket and a cow plush that matched. I hoped Scarlett was one of those girls who liked stuffed animals. Finally, I grabbed a couple of hot/cold packs and tossed them in the basket. As I returned to the front of the store, I snagged a large wicker basket and added it to the pile I'd accumulated.

The lady at the checkout raised a brow at the assortment I placed on the belt, but I didn't offer an explanation in response to her silent question. She sighed and gave me my total, and I tapped my credit card on the machine, taking the now full basket back to my vehicle. I plugged Scarlett's address into my phone and navigated to a pleasant neighborhood of row houses, happy to find she wasn't in an apartment with nosey neighbors.

I pulled into the driveway and hopped out, opening the back door to arrange the items in the basket. Donning my Stetson, I grabbed the basket's handles and pulled it out, shouldering the door closed and approaching the front door.

It wasn't until I rang the doorbell that I realized it might have been better to call first. But that would have given Scarlett the opportunity to tell me to go fuck myself. I needed to apologize and make sure she was okay.

When she didn't answer, I rang the doorbell again and tapped my knuckles lightly on the wood next to a fall wreath. She had a miniature hay bale with a smiling scarecrow

perched on top and pumpkins surrounding it. It reminded me of how my family's home looked in autumn.

Finally, the lock turned, and the door opened to reveal Scarlett. She looked nothing like the night before when I'd met her. Those greenish-gold eyes looked flat, and her skin was pale. Her hair was thrown into a haphazard bun, with strands that had escaped hanging around her face and neck. She wore a stained grey sweatshirt and matching sweatpants that dwarfed her frame.

Her eyes widened when she registered who was standing at her door, and she swiped a fist across her mouth. "Rhett."

"Scarlett." I shifted the basket to my left arm and tipped my hat at her. "Sorry to show up unannounced, but I heard what happened and needed to make sure you're okay."

Her fingers flew to her mouth, and she gulped, blinking as she breathed, "This has to be a nightmare."

She wavered, and I realized what was happening a second before her eyes fluttered closed. I dropped the basket onto the hay bale and caught the unconscious woman as she collapsed against me, wrapping my arms around her.

I froze, looking down at the top of Scarlett's head and wondering what in the hell I was going to do next.

Chapter Five



A DEEP VOICE MURMURED something from far away. That wasn't right. I needed to wake up, because I'd had the worst nightmare about Rhett showing up on my doorstep. Forcing my eyes open, I was met with a broad chest clad in black. It belonged to a familiar cowboy chef, and my heart raced as I realized he was inside my home.

"Oh, thank goodness." Rhett breathed a sigh of relief, but my breath caught at the sight of him kneeling at my side. "You had me worried for a minute, darlin'."

"What's happening?" I asked, confused. When I tried to move, Rhett placed a large hand on my shoulder, guiding me back down. I was in my house, lying on the sofa.

"You swooned," he explained in that smooth drawl. "So I caught you and carried you inside."

I felt my jaw drop. My mouth was dry, and my thoughts were slow. I grabbed on to the only words I could think of. “I don’t swoon.”

“Nothin’ to be embarrassed about.” Rhett rubbed my shoulder, but pulled his hand back when I looked down. “It happens. I’m happy I could offer my arms.”

I pushed myself to sitting, and he didn’t stop me. “It doesn’t happen to *me*. I don’t swoon over men.”

“As flatterin’ as that’d be, I think it had more to do with your current state of health than my rugged good looks.” His tone held an air of lightness that made me bristle more. I couldn’t help it if I noticed how good he looked. I was human. “How are you feelin’ now?”

I paused to think about that. “Fine, I guess. Why are you here?”

“I heard about what happened, and I had to see for myself you were okay.” He pressed his lips together as I stood, only to falter on my weakened legs. Those brawny arms wrapped around my waist, pinning me to his chest. His cologne was woody, and I caught a whiff of coffee underneath. I inhaled again, then realized how it might look with my nose firmly pressed against his pec.

He was frowning when my eyes raised to meet his. “Which you’re clearly not. Why don’t you sit down and let me help you?”

“And if I want you to go?” So help me, I didn’t actually want him to leave, but my pride and mortification drove me to push him away. “Maybe that’s what would help the most.”

“Frankly, Scarlett, I don’t give a damn what you want,” he drawled. My shoulders dropped as I sighed in relief. “I care more about what you need, and right now, you need my help.”

My stomach chose that moment to sabotage what might have been an endearing moment by rumbling ominously. My eyes widened in alarm, and I slapped a palm over my mouth as I felt bile rise to the back of my throat, muffling my words. “Right now, I need to make it to the bathroom.”

“Here.” That was the only warning Rhett gave me as he swept me up into his arms and lumbered forward. He paused, looking down at me with furrowed brows. “Where’s the bathroom?”

I let out a choked laugh that quickly became a groan when pain shot through my stomach. “There’s one under the stairs.”

He followed where I pointed my finger and opened the door to the half bath, setting me down without a moment to spare. I fell to my knees in front of the toilet and flung the lid up, huddling over it as I dry heaved. There was nothing left to come up. When I’d finally stopped vomiting a few hours prior, I’d been too nervous to drink anything for fear it would start the cycle again.

Rhett’s long fingers brushed over my head, and I realized my hair tie had come loose in my rush. He pulled the dark strands back, holding them firmly in his fist as I heaved again. I could

see his feet to the side, bright white socks covering them. He'd taken his shoes off when he came inside. I groaned, realizing what I must look like to him.

"I'm so sorry." My voice echoed in the toilet bowl. "You shouldn't see me like this."

"Shh," he hushed me. "You're fine, darlin'. It's the least I can do after my food caused your predicament."

That was something I didn't understand. I lifted my head and looked at those blue eyes of his. "How did you find out?"

"You posted it on social media." His mouth tightened. "It would be difficult to ignore the messages filling my inbox."

"I didn't—" My words cut off, and my brow furrowed as I thought back to last night. I'd been so ill. I didn't know where my phone was at that moment, but I had it at one point because I vaguely remembered picking it up and talking. "Oh, shit. Did I really do that?"

"'Fraid so, darlin'."

"Oh, no." I stared down at the bottom of the toilet bowl, regretting my life decisions. "I can't believe I did that. I swear, I didn't mention your restaurant."

"You didn't have to," he said quietly. "You'd tagged Rhett's in your earlier posts."

"Fuck me," I whispered.

"I don't think you're in a state to make that offer, Scarlett." His eyes sparkled with mirth when I lifted my head. "Ask me

again when you don't look like a half-dead mouse the cat dragged in."

"Of course you *would* think that," I said with an edge to my words. "That's such a guy thing to do."

"To find humor in an otherwise entirely unhumorous situation?" Rhett's head tipped to the side, and his hat shadowed half his face. "Guilty."

I tried to stand, but stopped. As much as it pained me to ask for his help again, I held a hand up. "My feet fell asleep. A little help, please?"

"Sure thing." His large hand enveloped mine, and I was on my feet again with one swift tug.

This time, I stopped myself from falling into him by bracing on the bathroom counter. My head spun, and I focused on the gleaming silver faucet, trying to center myself. Pins and needles shot through my feet, and I grimaced. Finally, the feeling passed, and I felt more stable.

"Ok, I'm good now." I took a few small steps, but Rhett stayed at my side, his hand on my lower back like he thought I would pass out again.

"Do you want to head back to the couch or up to your bed?" he asked when we stood by the stairs.

"Depends." I paused and leaned against the wall, looking up at Rhett. "Are you going to insist on staying, or will you leave?"

Rhett crossed his arms over his chest, making the sleeves of his black polo pull tight over his massive biceps. “We already talked about this. I’m stayin’ to look after you, Scarlett.”

“The couch it is,” I decided, shuffling into the living room with the cowboy chef on my heels. I settled down on the tan suede microfiber and noticed a large basket on the coffee table. “What’s that?”

“I brought it for you,” he said, pulling it closer as he took the cushion beside mine. The whole couch dipped under his weight, and I tipped toward him, bumping into his side before scooting away. His chuckle rumbled low. “Steady now, darlin’.”

That voice did something to me, but I couldn’t be sure the shivers weren’t from my weakened state. I ignored him and took in his gift. “How did you know I like purple?”

“I didn’t,” Rhett offered, pulling the blanket out and untying the bow holding it in a perfectly folded rectangle. He shook it out and laid it over my legs. “Soft, isn’t it?”

My fingers brushed over the plush fibers. Damnit, he was right. “Mhmm.”

“I got you this, too,” he said tentatively, handing me a white cow plush with purple spots. “I didn’t know whether you liked stuffed animals.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, squeezing the soft plush. I wasn’t about to tell him the only other stuffed animal I owned was nearly thirty and had been to the stuffy hospital more times

than I could count over the years. Maple was my little secret, and I loved him, even though his left leg sported countless repair stitches, and he was a little light on the stuffing in the lower extremities.

I peered into the basket and saw the rest of the peace offerings he'd brought. "How sick did you think I was?"

"I didn't know, so I tried to cover all my bases," Rhett supplied as I held up the anti-diarrheal and anti-nausea meds. "I'm not familiar with your allergy."

"Sensitivity," I corrected him, scratching absently at the rash that had developed on my chest. "It's a gluten sensitivity. Not severe enough to be celiac, but enough that consuming gluten will make me feel pretty miserable for a few days."

"Are you having an anaphylactic reaction?" he asked, focused on the rash. How embarrassing.

"No. It's just itchy." I dropped my hand and reached for the lemon-lime soda in the basket. "I think I'll try a few sips of this to start. Then maybe a cracker or two."

"Let me get you a glass." Rhett practically jumped up from the couch and headed to the kitchen. He didn't bother asking where I kept my glasses; he just opened the cabinets until he found one, then grabbed a small plate and brought both back to the coffee table.

"You know, I'm capable of pouring soda into a glass," I said as he plucked the bottle from my hand. He filled it halfway

and tried to hand it back to me. “No need to be stingy now. I’m a big girl and can drink a full glass.”

Rhett rolled his eyes and filled the glass before placing it in my waiting palm. “Sip on that for a minute, and I’ll get some crackers ready for you.”

I took small sips, my nose wrinkling at the carbonation tickling my mouth. My stomach didn’t rebel. In fact, it seemed to settle a bit more as I drank. “I’ll take those crackers.”

He opened the box and placed a few on the plate, setting it on my lap. Eating was awkward as he watched me intently, but I nibbled on the bland crackers and smiled at him. The conversation stalled, only the sound of my munching filling the surrounding air. It gave me time to think about everything that had happened over the last day, and my cheeks heated with embarrassment.

“You’ve got some color comin’ back,” Rhett observed, his thumb brushing over my cheek. I blushed harder.

“Uh, yeah.” I cleared my throat and took another drink. “I think I’m feeling a bit better. I guess what I needed was a little something in my stomach.”

“I can cook for you,” he blurted, looking down at his feet as soon as the words were out of his mouth. “I mean, it’s kind of what I do.”

The hopeful look on his face made it difficult to reject his offer. “Okay.”

“I make a mean egg scramble,” he said with a relieved grin.
“Or biscuits and gravy?”

“Biscuits and gravy usually have flour,” I pointed out.

Rhett’s face fell. “Oh, right. Just eggs, then.”

I watched as he shuffled around my kitchen, finding what he needed. “Do you want anything in the eggs?”

“I think I’ll play it safe and stick with plain eggs.”

“Sure thing.” He cracked the eggs into a bowl and beat them with a fork while the pan heated. When a drop of water in the skillet sizzled, he added butter and poured the eggs in, shaking the pan as it cooked. “You like them a bit runny or fully cooked?”

The thought of runny eggs made my stomach turn. “Cooked all the way, please.”

Rhett nodded and continued, flipping the eggs in the pan and cooking them on the other side before sliding them onto a plate and sprinkling a little salt and pepper over the top. He brought me the plate and sat next to me to watch again. “It’s not fancy, but it’ll fill your belly.”

“Thanks.” I stabbed at the eggs with a fork, blowing on the bite before tasting it. “Mm, good.”

“Glad you like it, darlin’.”

I nodded and made quick work of the plate before setting it on the coffee table. The eggs sat heavily in my stomach, but

my body didn't reject them. I didn't know what I'd do if I had to vomit in front of a near stranger again.

"Tell me what happened with my post," I said, leaning back against the couch and pulling the blanket up, my fingers stroking the soft material.

"Your fans are a dedicated bunch." Rhett laughed humorlessly. "They came to your defense immediately. I haven't made my way through all their angry messages and comments yet. There are hundreds. My restaurant's rating dropped to two stars. Maybe one by now."

I held the blanket to my face. It was worse than I'd imagined, and I felt horrible. "I'm so sorry, Rhett. I never meant to cause problems for you."

"Macy said it was out of character for you."

"You talked to Macy?" I buried my face in the blanket, futilely trying to hide from the terrible reality I'd created for the man next to me. "Is she mad?"

"Not mad," he said. "Concerned. She couldn't get you on the phone."

"Shit, it's probably dead by now." I'd have to find it and let her know I was okay. Relatively, at least. I reluctantly faced Rhett. "Are you angry with me?"

"No, darlin'." He patted my knee reassuringly, his lips parting in a sad smile. "I'm not angry. I feel awful for what happened to you, and I want to get to the bottom of it so it never happens again."

“I told the server about my gluten sensitivity,” I explained, thinking back. “I even called ahead to ask what menu items were safe.”

“There must have been a miscommunication somewhere,” Rhett said thoughtfully, draping his arm across the back of the couch. If he moved his fingers, he’d be toying with my hair. I’d never wanted fingers to flex so badly. “Rest assured, I’ll be talkin’ to my staff today.”

“I appreciate that.” He was doing everything I could ask somebody to do when they made a mistake. “I’ll do what I can about my followers. They should know I would never want to send an angry mob to somebody’s doorstep.”

“Thanks, darlin’.” Rhett stood, and I resisted the urge to tell him to stay longer. “I think I’ll leave before I overstay my welcome. I’m glad you’re feelin’ a bit better.”

He bent and picked up a tablet and pen I kept on my coffee table for blog ideas, jotting down a number. “I want you to call me if you need anything, ya hear?”

“Yeah.” I nodded absently, then realized he was showing himself to the door. Shoving myself to my feet, I wrapped the blanket around my body and hurried to catch up with him as he opened the front door. “I appreciate you stopping by and taking care of me. I’m sorry I’m a mess. Sorry for everything, really.”

Rhett turned back, offering me a smile that showed his perfectly white teeth and the dimple in his cheek. I wanted to poke it with my finger, but I wisely kept my hands to myself.

He tipped his hat at me like a cowboy from old Western movies. My body's reaction made me wonder if I was, in fact, capable of swooning because I felt a little floaty.

“Stop blamin’ yourself. It’ll all work out in the end.” That smile turned into a smirk. “Besides, now you’ll have to go out for coffee with me.”

“I would have gone out for coffee with you, anyway,” I murmured, hugging my purple makeshift robe to my body. “I promise I’ll be showered and dressed appropriately when you take me out. And I’ll smell better.”

“Take care of yourself, darlin’. You’ll be hearin’ from me soon.” Rhett’s fingers brushed across my cheek, then he turned and headed out the door. Admittedly, I watched as he walked away, the jeans just tight enough to outline a spectacular ass and muscular thighs. I was pretty sure he was the definition of a tall drink of water. A big and tall glass I’d gladly drink down.

Pressing my lips together to stifle a girlish giggle, I closed the door and leaned against the wall. It could have been worse. Rhett could have seen me in a baggy t-shirt that should have been tossed five years ago and that black floss I’d worn to dinner.

Sighing, I dragged myself upstairs to my bedroom, pawing through my bedding until I found my very dead phone. I plugged it into the charger while I showered the sick from my body and gave myself a silent pep talk. First, I’d text my friends to let them know I was okay. Then I’d get to work

trying to undo the damage I'd done to Rhetts's reputation.
Hopefully, he'd still want to go out with me after.

Chapter Six



TRUE TO HER WORD, Scarlett had tried to initiate damage control among her followers, and it had helped a little. Combined with whatever magic Julian's team worked at Atabey Industries, that saved my reviews from staying low. I'd made a carefully crafted apology on social media and the restaurant's website, where I promised to learn and do better.

A vow I intended to keep. After returning from the gym, I carried the box of books I'd ordered upstairs and set it on the couch while I showered and grabbed clean sweats and an obnoxious red t-shirt with a beaver logo. It had been a gift from my mother, who loved to send me things that reminded me of home.

One quick punch of my knuckles broke through the tape on the box, and I pulled out several books on eating a gluten-free diet. I lost myself in them for the next couple of hours, but

they only made me more confused. I didn't even know some of the specialty flours recommended within the pages existed, much less where to find them or how to use them. The people writing the books all had their own opinions about what flours made the best custom gluten-free blends.

It was like every pit master having their own rub and sauce recipes, but sans gluten. What I found out from the books was that every damn thing in the world seemed to contain gluten. I didn't know how Scarlett ever managed to find food she could eat if she didn't prepare it herself.

At the restaurant, it had the potential to contaminate everything. There was no way I could make things celiac-friendly like some restaurants, but I could ensure items on my menu were safe for those with sensitivities. My rubs didn't contain any wheat products, but there was some soy sauce in my barbecue sauce.

It was overwhelming. So I did the only thing I could think of. I called Scarlett.

“Hello?” she answered slowly.

“You sound better, darlin’.” Admittedly, hearing her voice caused a reaction that made my pants feel tighter. “How ya feelin’?”

“Good morning, Rhett,” Scarlett said pointedly. “I’m feeling much better, thanks.”

I grinned and let my drawl thicken for her. The way her name rolled off my tongue was satisfying. “Mornin’, Scarlett.

I'm glad to hear that."

"You sound like you're in a good mood," she said slowly. "I'm guessing you haven't heard."

My body tensed. "Heard what?"

"Cora Covington made a statement about Rhett's." Her words were like ice water poured over my head. "She decided not to post her review of your restaurant until she sees an effort on your part to improve your menu labeling and service."

It irked me, but in the end, it was deserved. Scarlett was told she'd be safe eating my food, but I didn't ensure it. "There's not much I can do about that."

"I have a proposition for you," she offered, tapping something on her end of the line.

"I'm listening." Forcing myself to relax, I pulled my laptop over to me and opened it. I had to know what was said about my restaurant—about me.

"You know I feel responsible for what happened," she began. I opened my mouth to protest, but she powered on. "Don't bother telling me it's not my fault. If I hadn't gone on socials, nobody would have known, and you would have a restaurant review posted today. So let me try to do something to make things right."

"Go on."

Scarlett took a deep breath. "I'm willing to teach you about gluten sensitivity in a culinary setting. How to look out for

problematic ingredients, preparation cautions, and maybe a few recipes or modifications you could make to be more inclusive to those with food sensitivities. Your food is amazing, and I'd recommend it to my followers in a heartbeat if I were confident they could safely enjoy it."

"Works for me." I found the food critic's website, and my lips flattened as I read her diplomatic response to the snafu at my restaurant. "I was callin' to ask you to help me, anyway. This stuff is more than I ever learned growin' up."

"Even chefs who attend culinary school often get little to no training on food sensitivities," she explained.

That did make me feel a bit better. Sometimes, I felt like an outsider in the food industry, since all my food skills came from my mother and grandfather. I could make award-winning barbecue, but my food wasn't pretty like some of the chefs out there. It was messy and delicious and needed wet wipes—sometimes a shower—to clean up after.

It worked well back home, where the first Rhett's opened a few years ago. Then I got the harebrained idea to expand and picked the northwest as my first location outside the south. Rhett's had been successful as far as startups go, but I needed it to stay that way.

"When can we start?" I asked a little too eagerly. Hopefully, she wasn't looking to be impressed by me. "I'll free up my schedule for you. Maybe we could grab some coffee?"

"Yeah, that'd be good." Scarlett's voice was quiet, and I tried to decipher if there was a hidden meaning behind her answer.

I'd grown up learning the unspoken language my mother and sisters spoke, but no matter how many years passed, it was impossible to master.

“Does tomorrow work for you?” I needed to meet with my staff before I talked things out with Scarlett. I'd chosen to wait until after the weekend so my regular staff was in, and I'd have everybody who touched Scarlett's food present.

She paused, and I found myself holding my breath, awaiting her answer. “Yeah, I can do it tomorrow. You want to meet for coffee?”

“You could come to my place,” I suggested on a whim. The regret was immediate. Though I had the desire to see Scarlett in my home, that wasn't a first date kind of thing. And was it even a first date? I so rarely ventured into the dating pool that I was rusty.

“I think a coffee shop would work,” she countered.

It wasn't rejection, but my stomach clenched anyway. “Yeah, I'll text you the time and location?”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow, Rhett.”

“Have a good day, darlin'.” I hung up the phone and immediately sent Scarlett the name of the shop and picked nine as a meeting time because it gave me enough time to get back from the gym. She'd have enough time to get up and get ready, too.

Not that I expected her to ready herself to meet me. I'd seen her at damn near her worst and still felt that pull of attraction

between us. I'd never hung on every simple word a woman said to me like I did with Scarlett. It didn't make sense after the short amount of time I'd spent with her, but I wasn't one to ignore a good thing when I saw it.

With only an hour or so until I needed to be at the restaurant, I closed my laptop and changed into my jeans and a plain black t-shirt, grabbing a green and black plaid flannel to wear over it. The weather was starting to cool off, but didn't require a coat yet. I gathered my things and set off, reluctant to have the requisite meeting with my staff.

Ruben was placing ribs on the smoker for the evening crowd when I pulled into my reserved spot behind Rhett's. He wasn't much of a talker unless the subject was meat or the smokers he loved to work with. I tipped my hat at him on the way in and headed to my office to drop my things at my desk. The staff was still filtering in, so I waited a few minutes before venturing into the kitchen.

"Hey, y'all," I greeted them, leaning against the counter. "I need all y'all in here for a minute."

The front staff joined the kitchen workers, and I took a deep breath before beginning. "There was an incident Friday night. Some of you may have heard about it already."

The staff's downcast eyes told me they'd all heard about what happened.

"One of our customers with food restrictions was given somethin' that she couldn't eat." I elaborated, trying to keep my voice even. "And that information, along with her havin'

been at this restaurant, was put online. It caused significant backlash and a PR nightmare I'm still trying to deal with."

I let that sink in for a minute, wanting to watch how they reacted. Toes scuffed against the floor, and some people looked concerned. One person didn't show any concern at all.

"Diedre." She looked up at me, her jaw set stubbornly. "You had the table. Do you remember discussin' food restrictions?"

"No." Her voice was guarded, arms crossed in front of her. "If a customer had asked for food accommodations, I would have written it on the ticket."

"You're sure?" I gave her another chance.

"One hundred percent, chef."

I nodded, realizing I couldn't trust my server. I might not be able to prove she messed up, but I believed Scarlett was careful about what she ate. Nobody who ended up as sick as I'd seen would forget to ask for what she needed. "Either way, mistakes like this can't happen in my kitchen. We run on reviews and word-of-mouth. If those things are negative, nobody will show up to let us prove them wrong. Do all y'all understand?"

"Yes, chef," echoed through the employees gathered before me.

"Good. I'll be implementin' some new protocols and investin' in trainin' for everyone. The trainin's will be mandatory, like staff meetin's. Anybody who doesn't want to participate can hand in their two weeks' notice." That got their

attention. “Oh, and in case you were wonderin’, the customer will be okay. But she was fuckin’ sick for days. I won’t allow it to happen a second time. You don’t belong in my restaurant if you don’t respect the customers and their needs. Get back to work.”

The front staff left the kitchen, and I turned to the others. “I want every accommodation called out when a ticket comes in. You yell ‘special prep,’ and whatever it’s for, so everyone in the kitchen knows. Got it?”

Dolly and Curtis nodded. She offered me a little salute. “Done.”

“Great. Let’s serve some meat.”

Contrary to what people who wanted to cancel a business probably believed, the bad press brought more people into the restaurant. And gave us triple the number of food accommodations as usual. Every time one of the staff called out for a special prep, I thought of Scarlett. She was fast becoming entwined in my mind, and I was impatient to see her again.



The coffee shop was bustling Wednesday morning, and I waited in line for nearly ten minutes to place an order. Scarlett hadn’t arrived yet, so I took the liberty of ordering for her.

They even had gluten-free muffins, so I grabbed one of those for her, too. It looked less appetizing than the sticky bun I selected for myself.

Shouldering my way through the coffee-deprived line of customers awaiting their morning pick-me-ups, I found a table for two toward the back of the shop. I smoothed the front of my black and grey plaid shirt and ran my hand through my hair, needing an outlet for my nerves. I didn't know whether it was a date or a work meeting, but I hoped for the former.

The chair at the small table creaked concerningly when I leaned back, so I rested my elbows on the table instead. It was fun to watch people react to seeing a man wearing a cowboy hat in the middle of Portland, an endless social experiment that helped me pass the time until I saw Scarlett walk through the front door. I lifted a hand and waved her over, rapt as she approached.

She was effortlessly beautiful in dark-wash jeans and an emerald peacoat, making her eyes look greener than gold. Her hair flowed down around her shoulders in loose curls, and I had the sudden desire to reach out and feel if it was as soft as it looked.

“Hey, Rhett,” she greeted me breathlessly. Her smile lit up my entire day. “Sorry, I’m a bit late. I was trying to find parking.”

I stood and pulled out her chair, motioning for her to sit. “I didn’t notice. Thanks for comin’.”

“Of course.” Scarlett lowered to the chair, setting her bag on the floor next to her as I pushed her up to the table. “How are things?”

“Could be worse.” I returned to my seat and picked up my coffee, scalding my lips as I took a sip. I held the wince back and pointed to her cup. “I didn’t know how you took your coffee, so I left it black.”

“Usually, I like it sweet, with a shot of vanilla and caramel.” She wisely blew on the brew before tasting it. “But this works fine.”

“I should have asked. I’ll get you another.” The coffee threatened to slosh over the cups as I stood abruptly, but Scarlett stopped me with a hand on my forearm.

We both looked down at where her fingers brushed my bare skin, tickling the dark hairs on my arm. “Sit down, Rhett. I want to drink it black.”

I could get lost in her eyes. Reluctantly, I looked away and sat, resting my forearms on the table. Or at least I thought I was setting my hands gently on the table. Instead, the wood top tilted, sending coffee sloshing over the rims of the mugs.

“Oh!” Scarlett cried out as the coffee poured over the edge of the table and into her lap

I swore under my breath and reached for napkins, then realized I hadn’t gotten any. Fuck. I used my arm to hold the coffee back. It worked, but I couldn’t move. Damn inconvenient.

“I’ll grab something to clean this up with,” Scarlett offered, hurrying to the counter to speak with the barista. She returned with a towel and a damp rag, and I was stuck watching her clean up after my mistake. That ate at me, but what other choice did I have?

When she knelt before me, my mind wandered straight to a future where she’d be on her knees for a very different reason. The little man down south was eager to make that happen, but it was neither the time nor the place for shit like that. I brought up a mental image of Scarlett sick over her toilet while I held her hair back. That helped.

“There,” she declared. “All fixed.”

“Thanks.” It sounded paltry. “Here, let me return those.”

I whisked the wet towel off the table, but Scarlett stood at the same time, and my eyes widened as the sopping fabric smacked her full-on across the face. She gasped and sputtered, falling back. I rushed forward, dropping to my knees and ignoring the pain that shot through my left leg to catch her before she hit her head on the hard floor. Wrapping an arm around her back, I pulled her to my chest.

Her mouth opened as she processed what had just happened. I wet my lips, trying to come up with anything suave to say. “Sorry, I’m an ass.”

That wasn’t it.

Scarlett broke into a smile, a giggle escaping her lips. She slapped a hand over her mouth but couldn’t stop the laughter. I

found myself following, my chest rumbling with mirth.

She motioned at our position. “This is ridiculous!”

“You okay?” I asked, smoothing my free hand over her damp cheek.

Scarlett sobered, her eyes locking on mine. Our connection was undeniable at that moment. I brushed my thumb down her jaw and across her soft, rosy bottom lip. It was the color of cherry juice stains, and I longed to bend my head and find out if she tasted the same.

“Rhett,” she whispered, drawing me back to reality. The people around us were starting to stare, so I carefully pushed myself off the floor, grimacing as I lifted Scarlett with me. She frowned. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“No.” I gathered the towel and rag that had been forgotten and handed them to the barista, who had wandered over to check on us.

Scarlett reached up and straightened my Stetson, then dropped into her seat. I carefully sat across from her, extending my leg to give it a rest.

“Are you sure you aren’t hurt?” she asked again.

“It’s an old injury from my rodeo days,” I explained with a wave of my hand. I didn’t want her pity or for her to think I was weak. “Sometimes sudden movements give me a twinge of discomfort.”

Scarlett looked like she didn’t know what to say about it. “Oh. Well, I’m glad it’s not a new injury, then.”

“Me, too,” I mumbled.

She pressed her hands on her jeans, and I saw the dark stains on the blue fabric. “I know we were supposed to have a meeting, but I’m covered in coffee, and it’s cold. Do you mind if I take a rain check for another day?”

My heart sank into my stomach, but I couldn’t blame her for not wanting to be around me. “No, of course not.”

She stood, pulling her bag over her shoulder. “Maybe next week? I’ve got filming and stuff for the next couple days.”

“Yeah, I’ll make it work.”

“Great.” Her smile was unwavering, covering whatever she was feeling underneath. “Text me with what works for you.”

“I’ll do that.” I deposited our empty cups in the return bin for dishes and grabbed the wrapped treats, blotting the coffee off the bottom and handing the muffin to Scarlett. “It’s gluten-free.”

“Thanks, that was thoughtful.” She unwrapped it as we walked out of the coffee shop. “I’m parked down here.”

“I’ll walk you.” I didn’t want her to go, so I’d take every minute I could next to her.

Scarlett took a big bite of the muffin and coughed, covering her mouth as her eyes squinted and watered, cheeks turning red.

“That bad?” Of course, I’d get her the wrong food, too. It was becoming an unfortunate pattern.

“It’s a little dry,” she admitted, swallowing hard. “Probably best eaten with coffee to wash it down.”

She stopped next to a silver sedan. “This is me. I appreciate you inviting me out. Next time, we’ll make it less of a disaster.”

I forced out a laugh. “Yeah. Have a good week.”

Then Scarlett’s arms wrapped around me, her cheek pressed against my shirt over my heart. I barely had time to pat her back before she pulled away, offering me a half smile. “You, too, Rhett.”

I watched, stunned, as she climbed into her car and pulled away from the curb. Shaking my head, I turned to find my Jeep, sure I’d never see the woman again after everything that happened. I’d miss that smile.

Chapter Seven



I STARED DOWN AT the text message I'd sent an hour ago, regretting every damn word.

Why don't you come to my place?

Rhett made me wait almost fifteen minutes before he replied. In that quarter hour, I'd contemplated unsending the text half a dozen times and wondered how fast I could book a flight to Hawaii twice.

Then came his reply. *Sure. See you at ten.*

Rhett had Monday off, so there was no rush to get to the restaurant. I'd offered to review his recipes so he was more aware of possible allergens in his food. Now it was just after nine, and I needed to move my ass if I wanted to look presentable by the time he arrived.

I'd frantically cleaned the clutter in my house and ran the vacuum over the floors. The bathroom got cleaned twice because I couldn't seem to get the memory of me yakking with him holding my hair out of my face. I even lit the pumpkin spice candle Jamie left after a photo shoot so the place wouldn't smell like he remembered.

Jogging upstairs, I stripped out of my purple plaid pajama pants and white tank top, tossing them in the laundry bin before I turned the shower on to warm up. The elastic fought me momentarily before I pulled it from my long, dark hair. I hopped under the hot stream of water and took a moment to try some deep breathing. My nerves wouldn't let me relax fully.

It wasn't that I was afraid to have Rhett over. I had an overwhelming need to make a good impression on him after the last two disasters. He probably thought I was a klutz after the coffee shop, but I didn't want to think about that. I massaged shampoo into my scalp and breathed in the minty scent, letting it center me.

My skin was pink when I finished scrubbing with soap and my loofa. I left conditioner in my hair while I did my face care and shaved my legs and bikini area, rinsing my entire body when I finished. Not that I thought Rhett was going to see any of it. Did a small part of me hold out hope? Maybe.

I meant no, of course not.

Who would want a hot, burly cowboy with a panty-melting drawl to slowly peel their jeans and lace underwear down their

legs and bury his face between their thighs?

Me, that's who.

I could practically see it, though Rhett might be a little tall. The image of me standing was quickly replaced by one where he knelt and pulled my legs over his shoulders while pinning me to the wall.

I leaned against the shower wall and let my hand slide down my body, following where the water trailed between my legs. My fingers slid through my slickness, finding my clit and stroking lightly.

I tried to imagine how Rhett's tongue would feel flicking against my most sensitive bits, what his thick fingers would feel like as he slipped them inside. I pressed my fingers into my channel, curling and finding my g-spot while my other hand took over the outer stimulation. It wasn't long before I was gasping and coming all over my hand as I imagined clenching around Rhett.

It was hot.

Until I lost track of where I stood and ended up under the shower spray, inhaling water and nearly aspirating in my own bathroom. That broke the magic of the moment with me and imaginary Rhett. The images faded from my mind, replaced with blue and white tiles and water that had turned tepid.

I rinsed again and climbed out, toweling off and wrapping the towel around my head while I did my makeup. It was nothing fancy, just enough to make me look like my leveled-

up self. I contemplated lipstick but decided it was a little much and swiped on a tinted gloss instead. Couldn't hurt to have kissable lips, right?

I set the makeup with a spray and squeezed the excess water out of my hair before using my hair dryer and round brush to imitate a blowout at the salon. Satisfied, I did a little nude voguing in the bathroom mirror. My phone alarm chimed, and I panicked momentarily, realizing I only had fifteen minutes until Rhett arrived if he was the kind of guy who showed up on time. He seemed like it, given he'd made it to coffee before me the week prior.

I selected a black thong and bra, then pulled on a well-worn pair of jeans and a tank top that hugged my curves, topped with an oversized plum cardigan. The purple set my eyes off nicely, and I'd take all the help I could get. Anything to get barf girl and the coffee mess out of his head.

I was a barefoot-at-home kind of girl, but I didn't know how Rhett felt about seeing naked toes, so I slipped my feet into a pair of suede sherpa-lined slippers and trotted back downstairs. The cloying smell of imitation pumpkin made my nose wrinkle, and I took the candle to the bathroom, extinguishing it where the fan would pull the smell out of the room.

After setting it back on the coffee table where it could look pretty and give off a much more muted scent, I went to the kitchen and looked through the cabinets for something I could whip up in only a few minutes. Having memorized the recipe, I settled for a simple version of blueberry muffins. In less than

five minutes, I was portioning the batter out into muffin tins, and the oven was well on its way to being preheated.

At ten on the dot, the doorbell rang, and my heart jumped up into my throat. I shook my hands and skipped to the door, trying to get that extra energy out. Rhett would turn and run if he could see me. I giggled quietly to myself and smoothed my hair, then unlocked the front door and opened it, my eyes moving up, up, up to Rhett's smiling face.

"Mornin', Scarlett," he drawled easily. His blue and black plaid over a plain white tee made his eyes even more vibrant in the morning light.

I stood back, giving him enough space to get inside and maybe checking out his butt a little as he walked past me. "Good morning, Rhett."

"Are we havin' a dance party?" He lifted a brow.

I frowned. "What?"

"You were dancin' or somethin'. I saw through the window." He tapped the window that sat six feet up, and I realized he was tall enough to see through the semicircle of glass. Was nothing sacred in this world?

Desperate to cover my embarrassment, I pulled a move worthy of an early nineties dance fad, snapping to the beat as my feet moved across the floor. "Yep. On Mondays, we make *mooves*."

I could blame my beet-red face on the dancing, right? Fuck, I hoped so.

Without warning, Rhett grabbed my hand and pulled some fancy move that made me spin into his chest. He smelled like smoked meat and leather, with whatever woodsy cologne he wore. Before I could take a second lingering breath, I was twirling away from him again, struggling to catch myself as he did what looked like line dance moves.

“Like that?” he asked with a chuckle.

I planted my hands on my hips. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

Motioning for him to follow me to the kitchen, I turned, but heard the change in his voice as he answered. “I can’t ride bulls anymore.”

There was a deep undercurrent of pain under his words, and part of me was afraid to ask. The nosy part of me needed to know, though. I put the muffins in the preheated oven and faced him. “What happened?”

“I got thrown, and gravity won the fight,” he hissed, his gaze far off. “It took a year to walk again and three years for me to get back on a horse. I never got on a bull again.”

“I’m s—”

“Don’t,” Rhett interrupted, holding a hand up. “It’s in the past and led to me openin’ the restaurant. The flagship location is back in Texas.”

“Sounds like you made the most of a less-than-ideal situation.”

“Yeah.” He set a notebook on the counter and tapped it with his fingers. “I brought the recipes.”

“Right. Awesome. May I?” I tentatively reached for the well-worn notebook.

Rhett slid it over to me. “Yeah. I need to grab somethin’ from my car, anyway.”

I flipped through page after page of recipes with notes written in the margins. I heard the front door when Rhett went out, then again a minute later when he returned. My head rose to find him striding toward me with two to-go coffee cups.

“Caramel latte for the lil’ lady.” His proud smile was contagious, and I returned it with my own.

“You remembered.”

He tapped his temple. “It’s a vault up here.”

“Well, then.” I smiled mischievously. “While you’re tucking information away, add that I love your smoked chicken thighs and those ribs. And chocolate.”

“Noted.” Rhett’s chuckle made me want to lay my head against his chest to feel it rumble. “Next time, I’ll bring you meat and chocolate.”

Fuck, yes, bring me your meat, cowboy. I can eat the chocolate after.

It took me a moment to ensure I hadn’t blurted those thoughts out loud. I covered it with a flippant giggle that sounded ridiculous. “Good. You do that.”

The timer on my oven beeped, and I busied myself pulling the perfectly golden muffins out, playing a quick version of hot potato as I removed them from the pan and set them on a cooling rack.

“Those smell incredible,” Rhett said, inhaling deeply. “Blueberry?”

“Yeah, my favorite.” I found a couple small plates in the cupboard and placed two muffins on each, then set them on the counter while I got the butter and a knife. Rhett watched me slice my muffin down the middle and add butter to each steaming side. I glanced up at him as I blew on it. “It’s the only way to eat them.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He mimicked my actions and took a bite, moaning in a way that had my nipples tightening and my pussy acting like a thirsty bitch. “Yep, you can cook for me whenever you want. I’ll let you make me fat and happy.”

I snorted and caught a blueberry before it became a projectile aimed at Rhett’s face. He’d seen enough of my digestive pyrotechnics. I covered my near-mishap and scarfed down the rest of my muffin, then washed and dried my hands before reopening the recipe book.

“There’s so much in here,” I observed, noting two distinct forms of handwriting. “How long have you had this?”

“It was my granddaddy’s before mine,” he explained. “He’s the one who taught me all I know about barbecue. There’s nobody better in Texas.”

I could admire that kind of dedication to family. Nobody else in my family could cook, and I'd only learned out of necessity.

“Does he help with the restaurant in Texas?”

“No, he's a bit long in years to be runnin' a kitchen.” Rhett finished his first muffin and started on the second, licking a bit of blueberry juice that lingered on his lower lip. I'd never wanted to be a blueberry so badly. “He likes to come by a couple times a week to boss people around.”

“Sounds like a character,” I laughed.

“He is. You'd probably love him.” Rhett seemed to understand the implication of what he'd just said, and he cleared his throat. “Everybody loves him.”

“I'm sure.” I tapped on a recipe. “You see here in this sauce recipe where you've got soy sauce? It's a wheat derivative and contains gluten. Is this what you use here?”

“Yeah,” he answered, polishing off the second muffin.

I bit my lip. “Is it the same signature sauce I used four containers of when I was at the restaurant?”

“Shit.” Rhett ran his hand over the stubble on his chin. “Yeah, that's the stuff. You had four of them?”

“I would have taken shots of it had it been an option,” I mused. “That stuff was like crack. Sweet, tangy, with a touch of lingering heat.”

He shook his head. “I'm glad you enjoyed drinkin' your poison, at least.”

“This would be easy to adapt,” I explained. “There’s no dairy. The only thing you’d need to sub out is the soy sauce for tamari.”

“I can do that.” Rhett motioned to the notebook, and I passed it to him. He tore a page from the back and returned it to me, jotting down what I’d advised. “Tell me what else I can do.”

“Is there any wheat in your spice rubs?” I asked.

“No, that’s why we tell people they can have the meat dry. It doesn’t touch anythin’ with wheat since the cuttin’ surface is separate.”

“Great. Some of the sides would be more difficult to switch up.” I thumbed through until I found the macaroni recipe. “You’ve got wheat noodles and wheat in your sauce. I probably wouldn’t make an alternative unless you’ve got a high demand for it, simply because of the cost.”

“Salads are safe, right? There’s a vinaigrette dressin’ without gluten. We make it in-house.”

“As long as you don’t add something like soy sauce.” It couldn’t hurt to check. Most people needed more than one lesson about food sensitivities to remember things.

“No, nothin’ like that.” Rhett showed me the recipe. “Oil, vinegar, a bit of honey, salt, pepper, herbs.”

“Do you mind if I make my own notes on another piece of paper?” I asked. When he nodded, I tore a sheet from the back and grabbed a pen from my kitchen counter, writing down the recipes and what modifications would be necessary to make

them gluten or dairy-free. Most of the food didn't contain nuts. I didn't know about every allergen, but I could help him with those.

"That's a lot." I jumped when I realized Rhett's words were close enough to my ear to feel his breath on my neck. His left hand braced on the edge of the counter, and I could have sworn the fingers of the opposite hand skirted across my back briefly.

"You don't have to take all of my suggestions." My voice came out raspy, and I cleared my throat and turned away from him, reaching for my coffee and taking a big gulp. "It's just things you could change. Though, I'd suggest having a couple sides and at least one dessert option for those needing a more specific diet."

"You have a pretty way of sayin' that," Rhett observed. "It sounds better than sayin' they can't eat any of the good stuff."

"Anything can taste amazing if you make it right," I told him. "The Scarlett Letter is all about making delicious gluten-free recipes accessible to the general public. It's like a foodie paradise for those who can't have wheat and gluten."

"That's cool, really." He flipped further through the notebook. "Talk to me about desserts."

"Well, cake can usually be made with an alternate flour and stay pretty close to the original." I pointed to the chocolate fudge ring recipe. "The mouthfeel might be slightly different, but most people with food restrictions are used to that."

“I can’t tell much of a difference with these.” Rhett plucked another muffin from the cooling rack and unwrapped it, decimating half of the baked good in one bite.

I shot him a sly smile. I had no false modesty. “That’s because I’m very good at what I do.”

“I bet,” he murmured between bites. The way he looked at me suggested he’d rather be sampling me than a blueberry muffin.

I looked away, afraid he would see his desire reciprocated in my gaze. For the next thirty minutes, I made notes, and Rhett asked questions here and there until we’d made it through the entire recipe notebook.

Rhett stretched, looking even broader as his arms reached up, then out. I wanted to slide against him and wrap my arms around his torso like I had in front of the coffee shop. I’d bet myself he gave the best hugs, and it only took a brief moment to confirm my suspicions. Hugging him now seemed out of place, so I reached for my coffee cup, only to find it empty.

“If you want, I could help you come up with recipes,” I suggested, reluctant to end our time together. It was already nearly noon, but still too short for me.

“I’m sure I’ll need a bit of help,” he agreed, adjusting his hat and retrieving his notebook. He swiped another muffin from the cooling rack and grinned sheepishly. “One for the road.”

I laughed and walked him to the door. “Thanks for coming today. I appreciate your willingness to listen. It’s a skill many

don't possess.”

“I'm all ears whenever you want to talk,” Rhett said, the words holding deeper meaning. He stepped outside and turned back to me. “Much obliged for your help, Scarlett.”

“You do *not* talk like that normally, do you?” He'd laid it on thick with that drawl and all the southern charm.

“Maybe I'll let you find out one day, darlin'.” He tipped his hat at me and swaggered down the walk. If I didn't know better, I'd think he wanted me to look at his perfect ass in those jeans that hugged all his muscles in just the right way.

I lingered in the doorway until he climbed into his Jeep, then waved and returned inside, where my house felt strangely empty without Rhett's larger-than-life presence.

Chapter Eight



I'D MADE A HABIT out of dropping by Scarlett's house after the gym in the mornings. I didn't ring the bell or go inside, but I did leave her favorite coffee on the doorstep, shooting her a text when I got back in my Jeep. At first, she seemed confused, but after several days, she started popping her head out of the door as I backed out of the driveway, waving her thanks.

It was a gamble whether she'd think I was a stalker or a man interested in her as a woman, but things had been going well so far. This morning, there was another car in her driveway. Unsure what to do, I donned my black Stetson and grabbed her coffee and the second coffee I'd bought myself. I hadn't told Scarlett that she'd influenced me in my order of choice, and it was an identical caramel latte.

A light mist drifted down from the sky and coated everything in a sheen of moisture, including my jacket, on the way to the door. It was the kind of rain that looked paltry but could chill you to the bone in minutes if you didn't get inside quickly.

I stepped onto the front porch, but before I could set the coffee cups down, the door swung open, and a pink-haired woman I vaguely remembered from the restaurant greeted me with a broad smile.

“Scarlett, he looks straight out of that TV show!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly. A camera hung around her neck, and she lifted it, the shutter clicking as she took my picture. “Stand just like that, but tip your head forward a bit for me, okay, cowboy?”

“Jamie!” Scarlett came running behind her friend, carefully lowering the camera and edging her out of the way. She leaned on the doorframe, and I couldn't stop grinning as I took in her dark braided hair and oversized black sweater that made her look adorable. She wore matching leggings, but her feet were bare, toes painted a deep purple.

“Mornin', darlin',” I greeted her, handing her one of the coffees.

“Thanks, Rhett.” Her lips lifted into a shy smile as she breathed in the caffeinated aroma. “This is my friend, Jamie.”

I turned to the pink-haired woman and made a show of tipping my hat at her before handing her the second coffee. It

never hurt to win over a woman's friends. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"Fuck, that's so hot." Jamie fanned herself and feigned a swoon. "Say something else."

"Don't." Scarlett waved a hand. "You don't have to do anything she says."

"I don't mind obligin' the lady, Scarlett."

She rolled her eyes as I laid the accent on thick. "Fine, if you're going to play into it, at least come in out of the rain."

I followed the women inside, sliding my boots off and silently grateful I'd picked a pair of socks without holes for the day. I couldn't say the same about my boxer briefs, but I could remedy that later with a quick online order. Funny how a girl could make a man think about the smallest things.

"So, Rhatt," Jamie mimicked my drawl. "Scarlett says you grew up in Texas."

"Born and raised in Roberts, ma'am," I answered, leaning against the kitchen counter. "My great, great granddaddy founded the town, and the rest of my family still lives there."

"That's so cool." She pushed a strand of neon pink from her face and took a drink of her coffee. "Oh, this is Scarlett's favorite! I think I like you, cowboy."

"That's what I'm aimin' for," I joked. "Put in a good word for me, would ya?"

“Oh, I’ll do more than that.” Jamie quirked her lips like she was plotting something. “Hey, Scarlett, have you invited this man to murder movie Sunday nights?”

“Murder movies?” I repeated, running my hand over my jaw, wondering if they were into all that true crime shit.

“Horror movies,” Scarlett corrected, popping a pod in her coffee maker and setting a mug underneath. The machine burred in the background. “We watch cheesy, scary movies on Sundays during the fall.”

“Sounds... interestin’.” I’d never been much for horror movies, but I’d damn sure show up if she invited me. Maybe I could hold her if she got scared.

“Would you want to come?” she asked tentatively, handing me the cup of black coffee.

I tipped it at her in thanks and slurped a sip, trying not to burn my tongue to hell. My tastebuds were important. “If you’ll have me.”

“Of course she will!” Jamie answered for her friend. Her face turned somber. “There’s one catch, though.”

“What’s that?” I couldn’t fathom what would be so serious about a movie night.

When Jamie giggled, I knew she was messing with me. “Everybody brings food and alcohol to contribute to cocktails. That means we’ll expect some of your meat, cowboy.”

I ignored how she waggled her brows and looked me up and down. “I think I can manage somethin’.”

“Perfect!” Jamie set the coffee cup down and picked up her camera. “Now, I need to borrow you for a minute. Come on.”

I glanced at Scarlett, but she shrugged and covered her laugh with another drink. That left me with no choice but to be polite and follow Jamie to the living room. She pointed to the fireplace, and I rolled my eyes but rested my elbow on the mantle, touching my fingertips to my hat.

“You’re a natural,” she said behind the lens, firing away. “Do that smile of yours.”

“Pardon?”

“You know, the one you do when you’re talking to Scarlett.” Jamie pointed to said woman who had followed us. “Scarlett, say something to make him smile.”

“I’m not sure it works that way,” she said hesitantly. “Um. I like your barbecue.”

Jamie scoffed. “Come on, you’re not even trying. Rhett, what would you do if Scarlett stripped naked and line danced across the living room?”

The sheer improbability of the notion had my lips parting as Scarlett buried her face in her hands, and Jamie took full advantage of the moment. She giggled triumphantly, and the rapid whir of her shutter drowned out whatever Scarlett muttered under her breath.

“Okay, Scarlett, get over there.” Jamie playfully shoved her friend toward me, and I instinctively reached out to catch her. More clicks of the shutter.

I gave up on trying to resist and played into it for the woman, pulling Scarlett to my side. She made a little sound, and I loosened my hold. “Sorry, sometimes I don’t know my own strength.”

“I’m fine,” she reassured me, relaxing into my hold.

Jamie paused long enough to rearrange us so Scarlett was standing facing me. She had no qualms about tipping Scarlett’s chin up, so our eyes met. “Good. Now, Rhett, I want you to place your fingers under her chin like you need to see her eyes.”

Scarlett’s laughter cut off when my fingers met the delicate skin of her neck and trailed up until I used the barest amount of pressure to hold her chin in place so she couldn’t look away. Her lips parted on an exhale, and I felt my lips tugging upward.

“Breathe, darlin’,” I whispered, mere inches from her mouth. Her chest rose in a shuddering breath. The world faded away as I examined the green and gold flecks in her eyes. How the right held just a touch more gold than the left. If I lowered my head slightly, our lips would touch.

Closer, closer.

“All done!” Jamie’s exclamation broke the spell, and I could have stomped my foot in frustration.

My cock strained against my jeans, and I pulled my hand from Scarlett’s jaw, turning away so they couldn’t see the state I was in. I took slow, deep breaths and tried to think of

anything that would reduce my blood flow. Rodrigo's bare, hairy ass when he mooned us after he showered did the trick.

Two sets of assessing female eyes stared at me when I spun around, and I panicked. I wasn't ready to talk about feelings one-on-one with Scarlett, let alone with the crazy camera lady present. The faster I could get out of there, the better. "I need to head to the restaurant."

"Yeah, of course." Scarlett moved forward, escorting me to the door.

I shoved my feet back into my boots and stopped in front of her. I didn't want to leave, but I couldn't stay, or I'd start blathering and embarrass myself more than I already had. "Thanks for the coffee."

"Ditto. I'll see you Sunday?" she asked, her look hopeful.

I nodded and mustered a carefree grin. "Of course. I'll bring meat for everyone."

"Don't tell Eli and Simon that," Jamie called out. "They'll take you up on that offer in a way you aren't prepared to serve up."

My mouth snapped shut, and Scarlett shook her head. "She's just teasing. They're totally chill. And married. Your... meat... is safe. I can't wait to have more."

I looked toward the ceiling, keeping my damn mouth shut so I didn't blurt out that I'd gladly let her taste my meat whenever she liked. Instead, I cleared my throat and nodded. "See you Sunday, darlin'. Jamie."

“Bye, cowboy!” Jamie waved, and I tipped my hat at her as I left, making her burst into a fit of giggles that followed me to my car, along with Scarlett’s whispered admonishments.

As I drove away, I had the distinct impression I was getting in over my head with Scarlett, but nothing was going to stop me from dipping my toes in. Not even my own insecurities.



DJ greeted me in the back of the kitchen when I stopped by the restaurant late Sunday afternoon to pick up the meat I’d had him add to the smokers.

“I just pulled it off,” he said, motioning with the tongs to the meat before him. “Didn’t know if you wanted to cut it up, so I left it alone.”

“Thanks, that’s great.” I lined a service pan with foil and slid the ribs in, saucing them again and wrapping them tightly so they’d keep their heat on the drive. “Can you grab a container of sauce for me?”

“I got you.” He wiped his hands on his black apron and lumbered to get me the sauce. DJ was a prime example of why you shouldn’t judge somebody by their looks. The man was built like a brick, short and slightly rotund, but he could stay on his feet longer than everybody else on my staff without getting winded. “This enough?”

I nestled the full container of my new sauce into the pan.
“Yeah, thanks.”

Since Scarlett liked the chicken thighs, I had plenty to share. I sealed them up in another pan and stacked the two containers, balancing them as I bid the rest of the weekend staff a good evening. Carefully, I secured the food on the passenger seat of my Jeep so I could catch them if they slid. Thankfully, they didn't move much on the ride to Scarlett's. Cars filled her driveway and lined the surrounding sidewalk, so I parked a few houses down.

The light was fast fading as I looped the bag of liquor over my wrist and secured my Stetson on my head, taking one last look at the black pearl snap dress shirt I wore under my jacket. It didn't look so fancy paired with my jeans and boots, but I wanted to make a good impression on Scarlett's friends. Plus, it wouldn't show stains.

I could hear laughter as I made it to Scarlett's door and pressed the doorbell with my elbow, since my hands were too full to knock. There was no way I'd risk dropping all the food. I could see Scarlett laughing as she hurried to the door, stopping on the other side and glancing in her entry mirror. She was adorable, smoothing her dark waves and pulling her jeans up, then checking out her ass before tucking in the oversized shirt she wore, decorated with cartoon horror characters.

“Hey!” she greeted as she pulled the door open and motioned me inside, rising on tiptoe to sniff the pans. “Oh,

that smells so good. Is it what I think it is?”

“Good evenin’, darlin’.” She didn’t notice me breathing in her hair while I removed my boots. Scarlett wore slippers, hiding those dainty little toes of hers. “Depends on what you’re hopin’ to eat.”

She pressed her lips together, and her tongue darted out to wet them as her gaze wandered south for the briefest moment. I would have missed it if I hadn’t been so focused on her face. “I hope you brought my favorites.”

“Well, then, you’re in luck.” I set the trays on the kitchen counter by the stove, in the only open spot left. Plate after plate of food filled the space. Since there were no labels, I assumed it was all safe for Scarlett to eat. “I’ve brought ribs and thighs.”

“Yes!” Scarlett pumped her fist and watched as I unwrapped the food. I handed her the container of sauce. “You can decide whether to share or hoard that for yourself. It’s the new recipe.”

She hugged it to her chest, and I envied a plastic container. “Thank you. Really.”

“Anything for you, darlin’.” It was as good a time as any to ask the question I’d been mulling over in my head. “I think I’ve come up with a way to impress the food critic, but I’ll need your help to pull it off if you’re willin’.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Scarlett agreed without even hearing my proposal.

“Thanksgivin’ dinner, but with alternate options for those who need them.”

Her smile was almost worth all the shit I’d been through. “I love that idea. Maybe we can chat about it later this week?”

“Sure. I’ll bring the coffee and some ideas.”

“Cowboy!” Reluctantly, I turned to greet Jamie and the others behind her. “You might remember Eli and Simon. That’s Eli’s twin sister, Ella.”

I held my hand out, shaking everybody’s hand. “Good to see you again.”

She bore little resemblance to her brother. Her hair was red to his blonde, with a slight upturn to her nose, while Eli’s was more angular. You could see genetics at play in their eyes and lips.

“Scarlett made us wait to eat until you arrived,” Simon said, handing plates out to everybody. He and his husband made me look almost underdressed compared to their expertly styled outfits.

I chuckled and took my plate from him. “Well, I’m sorry to cause a delay.”

“I’ve got the movie set up.” A dark-haired girl I vaguely remembered from the restaurant meandered into the kitchen, leaving little elbow room. She wore sweats and a cropped long-sleeved shirt with a local university logo on the front. “Hi, Rhett. I don’t think we met at the restaurant. I’m Lucia.”

I nodded to her. “Nice to officially meet you.”

Everybody filled their plates and moved to the living room, where there was more seating than I remembered. Aside from the tan couches and chairs, there were what looked like giant grown-up beanbags covered in faux fur. Eli and Simon plopped into the center of one, and Ella took the other. Jamie and Lucia sprawled out on the couch, leaving the loveseat for Scarlett and me. I got the feeling it was intentional.

“Do you care if people talk during movies?” Scarlett asked, attacking a rib in a way that would make my mama proud.

“I’ve never given it much thought. I guess not.”

“Good, because we’re going to make fun of the whole thing,” Jamie added.

She wasn’t kidding. They immediately started razzing the main female character for her ignorance. I recalled watching the movie when I was younger, but it had probably been once. Everybody in the room could quote the entire thing.

“Scarlett, here comes your man!” Jamie was giddy, kicking her feet under the blanket as she focused on the screen.

I turned to find Scarlett blushing as red as her name. “What does she mean?”

“Nothing,” she rushed.

“A woman doesn’t blush like that unless...” My words trailed off as I watched the ghost-faced villain reveal himself. Scarlett blushed harder, if possible. “You’ve got a thing for masks?”

“Maybe,” she whispered, letting her hair fall into her face.

“Definitely!” Eli laughed. “She’s got a fantasy that a masked man will corner her.”

Scarlett chucked a throw pillow at him. “Should I tell everybody about your shrine for the OG My Little Ponies?”

Eli’s eyes widened, but he closed his mouth, feigning zipping his lips and tossing the key away. I wanted to tease Scarlett, but she was focused on her plate of food, refusing to look at me. So I settled in for the movie.

We stacked our plates on the coffee table after the meal, and Ella took them to the kitchen and returned with buckets of buttered popcorn and boxes of movie theater candy. Scarlett reclined on the couch, trying to keep an appropriate distance between us, though she kept looking at me from the corner of her eye. When she kicked off her slippers and tried to tuck her feet under her, I reached out and grabbed her ankles, making her squeak as I planted her feet in my lap.

“Just relax, darlin’. I’ve got you.” I tossed a blanket over her legs and handed her the bucket of popcorn while I worked my thumb and fingers over the soles of her feet. She let out a breathy moan, but I kept my eyes straight ahead to avoid embarrassing her in front of her friends.

When the movie hit the halfway point, they paused for a bathroom break and cocktails. Scarlett let me make her a Manhattan with the whiskey I’d brought.

“So, do you celebrate Halloween?” she asked, taking a drink.

“I guess?” I wasn’t one to do much decorating. My mother was the one who decked the house out for the seasons.

Scarlett tipped her head to the side. “There’s a haunted house we’re going to on Halloween. Want to come?”

“Do I have to wear a costume?”

“Of course, that’s half the fun,” she teased, moving back to the couch.

This time, she let me pull her against my side and cover us both with the blanket. “Send me a time and place, and I’ll be there.”

I didn’t care about the movie, but having Scarlett next to me, touching her, was the highlight of my year. While she watched and chatted, an idea formed in my head. She liked masks, and we’d be at a haunted house. I smiled to myself. Halloween couldn’t come soon enough.

Chapter Nine



THE NEON PURPLE TEMPORARY hair color choked me as I sprayed it on the front strands of my hair. My friends and I went all out for Halloween. We decorated the entire house and hosted a killer party when we lived together. Now that we'd moved into adulthood, we enjoyed going through the haunted houses together for a good jump scare. There were plenty to choose from in and around the Portland area.

“What do you think?” Jamie asked, coming into my bathroom in her costume.

I checked out her black corset and the sleek leather skirt that went with it. “I think you look more like a madame than a vampire.”

“Is there much difference?” She quipped, leaning forward to apply a deep red lipstick. “Besides, I've got the fangs.”

She tapped the faux fangs that covered her incisors. Her pink hair was at odds with all the dark, but it was uniquely Jamie.

“You look hot as a vampire,” I told her, finding my hair dryer to speed up the drying process. “I’d let you bite me.”

“If you weren’t into the cowboy, I’d take you up on that offer.” She curled her tongue and removed a smudge of red from one of her fangs. “Did he tell you what his costume is going to be?”

I shook my head. “No. Said not to worry about it, that he’d find me.”

“Do you think he’ll be in the house of mirrors?” Jamie asked eagerly. “He could pull you to the side and take you against one. You’d see your reflection a thousand times over.”

“Yeah, and then we’d be arrested for public indecency,” I pointed out as she mimed the actions. “For all I know, he’ll dress up as a cowboy.”

Jamie brought her hand to her chest with a gasp, her breasts threatening to spill over her corset. “He wouldn’t cheat like that.”

“I know we’ve hung out, but I don’t know him all that well.” I cut off anything she would say by turning the hair dryer on and blasting the colored strands of hair.

She was waiting with hands on her hips when I finished. “Whose fault is that? You can ask questions, same as him.”

“Look, I wasn’t looking for any kind of relationship.” I nearly poked my eye out with the black liquid liner and had to

remove some of it with a cotton swab. “We obviously like each other but haven’t discussed our status. He hasn’t even tried to kiss me.”

“Have you tried to kiss him, Scarlett?”

“Of course not.” I finished the other eye and applied the over-the-top false lashes to complete the creepy doll look. “A man like Rhett wouldn’t want the woman to make the first move.”

“Wow.” Jamie shook her head. “I didn’t think you were so judgmental.”

I glared at her in the mirror. “I’m not. He grew up in some small town in Texas. I think it’s a good assumption that he was raised with traditional values that didn’t include women throwing themselves at him.”

“Well, you fucked that one up already when you literally fell into his arms,” she said with a raised brow. “Is this a new rule of yours? Because I remember you taking the initiative with me back in college.”

Of course, she would dredge up the past. “That was one time. I was nearly blackout drunk, and it wasn’t serious. You were my best friend, and I wanted to know if I liked girls like that.”

“And what a tragedy that there wasn’t a spark,” she giggled. “Are you saying you think this is something serious with Rhett?”

“How should I know?” I knew defensiveness was creeping into my words, and I could feel my shoulders tense. “He’s nice. I’m pretty sure he feels the same attraction as me. Obviously, he’s driven and relatively successful.”

Jamie leaned against the door frame, examining her pointed black acrylics. “It sounds like he checks quite a few boxes for you, then.”

“Yeah.” There was no use denying it.

“Then kiss him and find out how far that attraction goes,” she suggested with a shrug. “Would you even want a man who couldn’t handle a woman taking charge?”

“No, that’s a red flag.”

“He was a professional bull rider, right?”

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with anything?” I stepped back and took in the finished look. Dark pigtails with neon purple money pieces in front, pink cheeks, wide eyes, red lips, and flecks of fake blood on my face and neck. A white, off-the-shoulder puff sleeve shirt under a black-and-white striped jumper, neon purple tights, and black combat boots. I would have taken a bat with nails, but weapons—real or fake—weren’t allowed at the place we were going.

“I think he’s probably used to hopping on and sticking it out for the ride.”

Jamie escaped the bathroom before I could whip her with the hand towel, cackling as she headed down the stairs. I sighed and followed, grabbing a leftover slice of pizza from the box

on the table and hoping my lipstick was really long-wear and smudge-proof.

My friend leaned against the counter, twirling her keys around her finger. “You ready to go freeze your ass off?”

I laughed and nodded. “Crank the heat in the car. We’ll absorb all the warmth we can beforehand.”

“Deal.” I grabbed my coat and purse, following Jamie out the door. It took almost an hour to get to the location, which was plenty of time to sweat before we parked in the field outside the venue. Haunted houses popped up all over the area every fall, but the one we were attending had an actual house structure with multiple floors of rooms in addition to a mirror maze and the less-scary section for kids that included a pumpkin patch, hay maze, and hayride.

“Good call on coming later,” Jamie said when we found a spot two rows back from the entrance. “Most of the families should be gone, which means fewer screaming kids.”

“I don’t know how you tell the difference in there.” I left my coat in the car in the name of fashion. “Everybody is screaming.”

“Oh, what a scary vampire!” An old crone cackled in front of us. It took me a second to recognize Ella.

“That’s incredible makeup.” I inched closer to examine the prosthetic nose she’d attached seamlessly.

Ella turned her head back and forth to show it off. “Thanks! It took some work, but I think I got it down.”

A priest and nun stood behind her. Only Eli and Simon were the most flamboyant religious figures I'd ever seen with the glittering black fabric they wore. Simon held up a rainbow holy water aspergillum. "I absolve you of your sins."

"And I encourage you to go commit more," Eli added, crossing himself.

We laughed, and I made Eli twirl so I could take in his corset under his habit and cloak. Simon was already pulling on his Roman collar, and I wondered how long it would be before he discarded it altogether.

"The baddest bitch has arrived!"

I turned to see Lucia dressed as the devil. Eli made her costume, too, so it matched. She didn't need the stereotypical pitchfork; her intricately designed horns were magnificent enough. Her thigh-high, blood-red boots covered what the short, corseted dress didn't, and she wore a red velvet cape that hung to her knees.

"Are we waiting for your man, Scarlett?" Eli asked, looking behind me.

I turned to see if he'd spotted him, only to feel a twinge of disappointment when there wasn't a tall cowboy in the parking lot. "No, he said he'd find us when he arrives."

"Then let's get in there!" Lucia and Ella skipped ahead. We paid the entry fee and got our hands stamped for the eighteen and over sections of the exhibit, then meandered through the waiting crowd.

We went through the mirror maze first, and I only ran into the glass a few times. One year, I'd gone face-first into one of the mirrors, so I was happy to avoid getting another bloody nose. The first haunted section was mild, with scary exhibits where the actors didn't touch the patrons. I still got creeped out with the lifelike dolls, their makeup imitating cracked porcelain with blood seeping out of the damaged areas.

It reminded me of my great-grandmother on my dad's side of the family. She had a guest room, but it was more of a shrine for her porcelain doll collection. My parents used to put me and my brother in that room until I woke them up screaming at two in the morning a few times because I was convinced they were alive and about to steal my soul.

That's why I'd dressed as a doll. It was the only thing I was really afraid of.

Give me masked men with chainsaws and axes. Actually, just give me masked men. Spooky season meant plenty of masked eye candy all over the internet, fueling some of my most sordid dreams and solo sessions.

We got in the longer line of older patrons, and I flashed my hand at the entrance to the adult-only section. We'd come just after nine and hit a lull in the cycle.

"Halls are narrow. Follow the arrows. Your safeword is red rum," the worker repeated in a monotone. "If you use it, the actors won't touch or scare you, and you may move through the rest of the house to the nearest exit."

Jamie practically vibrated with excitement, surging ahead of us, and Ella clutched my arm as we moved into the darkness. Screams and music echoed through the space, and it was impossible to tell where anything was except for the faintly glowing arrows on the floor. Ella screamed as something growled next to her, and a half-werewolf, half-man, jumped out, its claws dragging along Ella's costume. We both shrieked and ran forward, only to run into a deranged clown who laughed maniacally in our faces.

At some point, we left the others behind, and the stairs were narrow enough that we had to ascend to the second level single-file. I hadn't anticipated getting split up from the others when the hallway teed off, and an actor with a grotesque, twisted mask chased me in the opposite direction from Ella.

It didn't take long to become disoriented, and the silence was unnerving. I didn't see any other patrons, and the next room I entered seemed empty. I reached out, trying to feel my way, knowing I might touch something that would scare the hell out of me at any moment. My heart raced, and I swore to buy nightlights for my house after.

Heavy breathing came from my left, and I gasped, whirling away and moving faster. I could see the shadow of a doorway ahead, but before I made it through, a large hand wrapped around my waist, lifting me off my feet entirely and dragging me through heavy curtains.

I screamed with all the breath I had. The actors weren't supposed to do that.

My back slammed against a wall next to a window with milky glass, and a hand covered my mouth. The faint light filtering through the glass illuminated the massive figure with a ghost mask in front of me. I thrashed and tried to scream again, but my cries were muffled, the person pressing their body against mine until I could barely breathe.

All I could see was that white mask; their black clothing melted into the surrounding darkness. It lowered toward me, still breathing heavily, until the cool material touched my cheek.

“Tell me, do you like scary movies, darlin’?” the masked figure growled in a familiar drawl.

My next scream died on my lips, and the fear became something very different. Rhett had me alone, pinned against a wall, at his mercy. Jamie’s advice ran through my head, and I reached up, lifting his mask and pulling his face down to mine. He dropped his hand from my mouth, and our lips crashed together desperately.

“Fuck,” I breathed against his lips, sucking in another breath.

Then he was on me again, taking control of the kiss, slipping his tongue past my lips and exploring me. His hand wound around the back of my neck, the other wrapping around my waist, drawing me closer, keeping my breasts pressed against him. My nipples hardened and ached, and I wriggled, trying to get more friction against them.

Rhett seemed to know what I needed, his lips never leaving mine as his hand moved to cup one breast, finding the

hardened nipple through my clothes and brushing it with his thumb before gently pinching it. He gave the same attention to the other. I rode the thick thigh he'd pressed between my legs to support me. I cried out in his mouth when his hand found me wet through my underwear and applied pressure.

"More?" Rhett grunted, pulling away and denying me his caramel-flavored tongue.

"Don't stop," I panted, covering his hand with mine and moving it beneath my purple lace panties. "Touch me, Rhett."

He circled my clit, finding my opening and working a finger inside. He groaned his approval. "You're so wet for me, darlin'."

"Lips."

He obliged, returning his mouth to mine and letting me nip and lick at him while he worked another finger inside and stroked as the heel of his palm applied pressure to my clit. It was hot, knowing we could be discovered at any moment. My orgasm came crashing over me, and Rhett swallowed my scream, sucking on my tongue as he worked me through it.

Fingers curled comfortingly against my scalp as he pressed his forehead to mine, the mask lost on the floor somewhere. Rhett's lips touched my temple as he withdrew his fingers and sucked them into his mouth, tasting me.

"Sweet," he moaned. "So fuckin' good."

I reached out and cupped his stiff length through his black pants, wordlessly offering him the same. It stung a bit when he

stopped me, gripping my wrist and shaking his head slightly.

“I wasn’t plannin’ that. You owe me nothin’.” His thumb brushed over my knuckles; then his touch was gone completely. “When we go further, I want the comfort of a bed, Scarlett.”

I giggled breathlessly and nodded. “Deal.”

Rhett looked down, retrieving the mask, and I couldn’t stop another laugh from passing my lips. “Did you really wear a ghost face costume with cowboy boots?”

He shrugged. “They’re comfortable.”

“Only you, Rhett Roberts.” I shook my head. “Only you.”

“Wha’dya say we find our way out of here,” he suggested, taking my hand and pulling me back through the curtains to the room he’d accosted me in.

I let him lead, figuring he knew what he was doing. My confidence waned as he ran into a wall, grunting at the impact.

“Sorry,” Rhett murmured. “It’s this way.”

He was right, and we merged back with the other patrons. I was so high on what we’d just done that I barely noticed the other actors, laughing outright at a couple of scare attempts. Rhett didn’t even flinch when they came at us, and most tried to intimidate me, not him.

Finally, we exited into the chilly night air, our hot breaths puffing white between us. He didn’t let go of my hand as we wandered through the crowd. I’d let him know where we could

meet up if he didn't want to go through the haunted house, and we found the others already drinking cider and eating the apple and pumpkin spice donuts.

Jamie was the first to spot us, waving her hand to get my attention. "Scarlett! There you are!"

The others turned as we approached. Ella covered her mouth with her fingers, and Eli and Simon snickered.

"I see you found your cowboy," Lucia said pointedly.

"Yeah, why?" I asked, suspicious of the way my friends were acting.

"Must have been tough in there," Jamie observed, not even trying to hide the glib tone in her words. "It looks like you ran face-first into each other. Your lipstick is smudged, Scarlett. Rhett seems to be wearing half of it."

I could feel my face heating, and Rhett's cheeks turned rosy. He rubbed at the back of his neck, seemingly at a loss for words.

Unwilling to let my friends scare off the man who'd just made me scream with his fingers, I stepped in. "Come on, we're all adults."

"Clearly," Simon quipped.

"Can I get you cider and donuts, darlin'?" Rhett asked. He looked ready to bolt, so I gave him a chance to take a breather.

"Yeah, that'd be great. Make sure it's their gluten-free batch." I pulled my hand from his and watched him walk

away, his head standing out above most of the other patrons. As soon as he was out of earshot, I spun to face the others. “You’d better be nice to him. I’ll never forgive you if you scare him off!”

“So you like him like him?” Eli asked, tapping his chin.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I admitted.

They let out a little cheer, and I covered my face with my hands, hoping Rhett hadn’t heard. I waved off the myriad questions they had.

“Look, we’re not even officially anything,” I mumbled. “Please, just let us figure it out on our own, okay?”

“Absolutely,” Jamie said, crossing her finger over her heart. “Can I still threaten him with dismemberment if he dares break your heart?”

“Who are we geldin’?” We fell silent as Rhett rejoined our group. He handed me a paper cup of cider and a bag of still-warm donuts. “I got an extra bag in case you want more.”

“Thanks.” I offered him a brief smile, then thrust my hand into the paper bag, pulling out one of the fresh sugar-coated confections and stuffing it in my mouth. It was a little dense compared to what the others were eating, but still delicious.

The others quickly changed the subject, asking Rhett about his restaurant and Texas—a topic he could talk about nearly endlessly. After half an hour, I couldn’t stop yawning, and Rhett immediately picked up on it.

“Ready for bed, darlin’?”

I couldn't help but think about all the ways I was ready to be in bed with him. Shoving those thoughts down, I nodded. "Yeah. I think so."

"I have clients to meet with early, anyway," Eli said, looking at his phone. "We should probably head home."

The others murmured their agreement, and we walked out together. Jamie left me alone with Rhett as she continued to the car, and I looked up at the man who had donned a movie mask to make one of my fantasies come true.

"I'm glad you came tonight." Well, that sounded ridiculous.

"And I'm glad you invited me," he said.

Then, in front of anyone who watched, he pulled me to him and kissed me breathless. He tasted of apple and cinnamon, sweet and powerful. His body warmed me as his arms held me steady. I wasn't ready for the night to end, but it couldn't last forever.

Rhett licked his lips and grinned at me, tipping his hat. "Goodnight, darlin'."

"Goodnight," I murmured, touching my fingers to my swollen lips. I found Jamie's car and slipped into the passenger seat. She already had the heat on full blast, and I sunk into the warm seat, pulling my jacket on.

"So," Jamie started with a smirk as I buckled my seatbelt.

"Don't." I blurted, pressing a finger to her lips to silence whatever teasing words were about to exit her mouth. "Let me ride the high."

She laughed and turned the music on. “Point taken. You keep thinking about the cowboy. I’ll get you home safe.”

Chapter Ten



RODRIGO WALKED INTO THE gym on Monday with a smug ass look on his face, and I knew we were in for it. I ignored it, but Craig fell right into his trap.

He paused between sets and nodded. “I know that look.”

“I’m in love with an angel,” Rodrigo effused, clutching his hands over his heart. “I’m going to marry her.”

I looked up from my curls. “You’ve been saying that for weeks.”

“I’m ready to go ring shopping, man.” He pointed to his ring finger and danced, waving his hand. “Gotta put a ring on it.”

I couldn’t understand the sudden change from player to romantic. Next thing we knew, he’d be coming in spouting off sonnets. “Don’t you think you should date a little longer?”

“Why waste time when I know she’s the one? Life is short. Love hard.”

“What the fuck?” Craig made a face. “Are you writing inspirational cards now? What kind of shit is that?”

“The truth.” Rodrigo punched Craig in the stomach while he was lifting, and I hurried to catch the bar, but he recovered in time. “You telling me you don’t want to spend every minute possible with your wife?”

Craig paused. “I do, but that’s not reality. And we dated for years before getting married. I made sure I knew she was the right one.”

“So you doubted your love for years?” Rodrigo poked back. “If you’re in love, you’re in love.”

“Love doesn’t always pan out,” I pitched in, thinking of my past. “Sometimes you think you’re head over heels, only to have your heart crushed. There’s no harm in taking a little time to make sure you can weather life’s storms together.”

Rodrigo’s expression was sympathetic. “I’m sorry you got your heart broken, Rhett.”

“I didn’t say that,” I snapped, letting the weights drop too loudly.

“Yeah, sure you didn’t,” he said doubtfully. “You know, you can’t spend your life projecting one woman onto every other woman you meet.”

“You’re not my therapist.” I increased the weight and pushed myself. “You’re just blinded by puppy love.”

“And you’re jaded by your past.”

That was an understatement. Still, I didn’t appreciate being called out by a guy who’d fucked a different woman nearly every weekend for the year I’d known him. “I leave the past where it belongs.”

Rodrigo smirked and threw me a curveball. “How’s it working out with the chick you poisoned?”

“Nah, man.” I blew out a breath, my arms trembling. “We’re not doing that. And I didn’t poison her. It was a kitchen mix-up.”

“I don’t know many men who start dating women they’ve poisoned,” Craig added to the stupidity.

I rolled my eyes at them. “Again, not poisoned. And we’re not dating... exactly.”

“You’ve been out a bunch. Are you going to see her again?” Craig asked.

Finishing my set, I moved the pin to the top of the stack and went for the leg press. It was a form of punishment at this point. “We’re working together on a project, so I’m sure I’ll see her plenty.”

My relationship with Scarlett wasn’t something I wanted to share with everyone else. Maybe it was lingering insecurities that admitting I was more than interested in her would be the beginning of the end. I hated admitting that Rodrigo, of all people, might be right about me letting my past influence my future.

“How much you want?” Craig asked, adding plates to the opposite side I was working on.

I glanced at the plates. “One more.”

I sat and got my feet in position, pressing my back against the seat. A slight miscalculation would lead to days of discomfort in my hip. Taking a breath, I released the safety and focused on extending my legs. It always ached, no matter how often I tried building strength on my left side.

I counted down from twelve, careful not to lock my knees even though it was tempting to relieve some of the strain on my muscles. The last thing I needed was another injury. The guys let the subject of romance drop for the rest of the workout. Instead, Craig talked about taking his kids out on Halloween. His wife went all-out, buying matching family costumes.

One day, I wanted a family like that—a good, faithful woman who wouldn’t be scared off by life’s challenges. My mind wandered, and I found myself picturing Scarlett in that role. She’d probably throw a big party and make all the food herself. Judging by her costume, she’d be into the whole family dressing up. No doubt she’d have movie marathons planned for the kids, too.

I saw a little boy with my smile and eyes, dressed as a superhero, snatching candy from a bowl as he ran past, cape waving behind him. Scarlett would put makeup on a girl with dark hair, turning her into a fairy princess with glittering wings. And me, I’d have a costume with a mask. After the kids

were in bed, I'd shut off all the lights and stalk her through our sprawling house until I'd cornered her.

My fantasy melded with recent reality, and I could practically hear Scarlett's moans of pleasure and taste her on my tongue. Fear would mix with pure lust, and we'd come together again and again until we were soaked in sweat and too tired to do anything but curl up in bed together.

I almost missed what Rodrigo was saying on the way out the door. "Huh?"

"I said I hope you and the food lady work out," he repeated. "You seem happier with her around."

"Thanks," I mumbled, continuing to my Jeep.

I wasn't good with the feeling stuff. It wasn't how I was raised on the ranch. Boys learned resilience and became tough men. The women were emotional enough for everybody and could hold a grudge, whereas men were supposed to let things go and move on.

How often had my dad told me to forget Grace and move on with my life? When I first had the idea for a barbecue place, he thought it was a distraction from heartbreak. He still held out hope that I'd take over the ranch one day, but there was no way my body could withstand the physical exertion required to do farm work. It wasn't until I opened Rhett's that he acknowledged it was my new dream. The ranch would pass down to my brother Vaughn, who was made to run the place. He had the heart and the business head for it.

My dad's support for the restaurant lifted a weight off my shoulders and gave me the freedom to pursue success in a way nobody else in my family had. Scarlett made me feel the same way. She could have set her mind on destroying Rhett's, but she wanted to see me succeed instead.

I'd tried to give her a little space after Halloween, but I wanted to call her. I settled for shooting her a text message I knew she wouldn't be able to resist.

Want to grab coffee and go for a walk at the waterfront tomorrow?

I had a response by the time I arrived home. *You started with coffee. I'm in.*

I chuckled to myself. *Good. I'll pick you up at nine.*

It's a date.

I stared at her response as I kicked my shoes off. A date. That was the first time we'd put a label on anything we'd done. It felt right.



There was a chill in the November air as I walked to Scarlett's doorstep at nine on the dot the following morning. I'd been a few minutes early, so I'd waited in the car. My mama taught

me it was never okay to show up early to pick up a woman. They needed every minute to prepare.

She used to remind my dad about that rule on Sunday mornings when he'd asked if she was ready for church. The memory of their playful banter brought a smile to my face as I rang Scarlett's doorbell.

I shouldn't have peered through that window, but she had that habit of dancing down the hall, and I didn't want to miss that carefree moment. Sure enough, she slid on her socks and did a few steps before sliding her feet into her shoes and pulling her coat on. I didn't mind waiting a minute if I got to take in her beauty.

Scarlett made jeans and a simple, long-sleeved green shirt more beautiful than it had a right to be. Her hair was pulled back low, with a few strands framing her face—a practical choice for walking outside with the wind blowing. Maybe I should have thought about the weather.

Finally, the lock turned, and Scarlett's brilliant smile appeared, happy lines forming around her eyes. "Hey!"

"Mornin', darlin'." It was a habit to tip my hat at her, and she always rewarded my effort with a pretty blush. "You ready for some caffeine?"

"Full disclosure—this will be my second cup." She closed the door behind her, and I rested my hand on her lower back as she walked to my car.

“Mine, too.” I opened the door for her, holding her hand as she climbed up. “Buckle up. We’ve got some ground to cover today.”

She laughed as I got behind the wheel. “It’s a walk, Rhett.”

“Mostly,” I agreed.

“Does your car always smell like the restaurant?” Scarlett asked, inhaling deeply. “I swear, it’s like you hung a smoked meat air freshener.”

“No, I’ve got a few bags of stuff in the back seat.”

She turned to peer into the vehicle’s rear, where I had two duffel bags full of to-go containers. “That’s a little much for a picnic. And it’s a little early for lunch.”

“We won’t be keeping it,” I said as I pulled up to a drive-thru coffee shop. “Caramel latte?”

“Please.” Scarlett waited until the barista handed us our coffee to ask, “Then what are you doing with it?”

“We’re going to make a difference.” I probably should have asked her if she was okay with what I had planned, but Scarlett cared about people. She’d be down for it. “I walk the waterfront and find people who need meals.”

“You feed the homeless?”

“Yeah, every week.” I worked my way down to our destination and found a spot to park nearby. She didn’t wait for me before opening her door and hopping out. I grabbed the bags from the back and slung them over my shoulders.

“This is really thoughtful, Rhett.” Scarlett held our coffee cups, and we started toward the bridge area. There were usually people trying to keep dry underneath.

The wind bit at my face, and Scarlett pulled the hood of her coat over her head. “You good?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “As long as the rain holds off until we’re finished.”

I adjusted the bags and removed my Stetson, placing it atop her head to help block some of the wind. It covered her eyes, and all I could see was her grin beneath.

“Do I look like a cowgirl now?”

I chuckled and patted the top of the hat to make sure it wouldn’t blow off. “I don’t know about that, but you look damn cute.”

“I guess that’ll have to do for now.” Scarlett offered me the coffee she wasn’t drinking, and I took a long drink.

It didn’t take long to find the people we were looking for. Some of them were used to me showing up, and they eagerly approached.

“Hey, it’s John Wayne!” An older guy named Johnny made finger guns like an old Western movie duel. “And you brought Maureen O’Hara!”

Scarlett shot me a questioning look, and I suspected we’d need to brush up on her classic Western movies.

“The lil’ lady obliged me by taggin’ along today,” I told him, unzipping one of the insulated bags and handing him a food container.

“Here.” Scarlett took my coffee and set it with hers on the sidewalk’s edge, then began helping distribute boxes. Her gaze shot to mine. “They’re hot.”

“Yeah.”

Her lips curled up in an understanding smile, and we spent the next ten minutes making sure everybody around us had a hot meal for at least one day. Some opened the boxes immediately, ignoring the enclosed utensils and using their hands. Others walked away, saving it for later.

After I handed the last meal over, I folded one bag and put it inside the other, and Scarlett retrieved the cooled coffee. I took my cup and finished the last of the tepid brew, tossing it in a trash can as we passed.

“So you’re The Duke to them, huh?” Scarlett broke the solitude of our slow stroll.

I reached out and took her stiff hand in mine, trying to lend her a little of my heat. “Johnny loved watchin’ movies like that. He’s got a lot of stories from his younger years. His time in the military gets a little blurry, and after that, it’s all tragedy. We’d never treat a veteran like that back home.”

“There aren’t enough mental health services available to the general public,” she agreed.

I hadn't intended to bring the mood down, but life wasn't always pretty. We fell into a companionable silence for the rest of the walk, rushing to the Jeep when the threatened rain began falling from the grey skies.

"Here." I opened the door and lifted Scarlett into her seat, buckling her before I thought better of it. Her mouth hung open as I closed the door and jogged to my side, tossing the empty bags in the back before getting us back on the road.

"Rhett." Scarlett's voice was quiet, and I turned down the country music on the radio to hear her. "The food was hot."

"What of it?"

Her finger absently traced over the back of my hand, where it sat on the armrest. "You said it was leftovers. Your restaurant doesn't have leftovers."

"You're very observant today," I joked, shooting her a grin.

"And even if you did, I doubt you'd have twenty smoked chicken thighs left over," she added. "You made that all just to give it away."

"I did," I admitted, keeping my eyes on the road.

Scarlett sighed and twined her fingers with mine. "You're a good man, Rhett."

My heart beat faster at her words of approval, but she was giving me too much credit. I squeezed her hand, and her whole body leaned close as I brought it to my lips, kissing her knuckles.

“Bein’ decent isn’t the only thing that makes a man.”

Her breathy laugh had me hard immediately. “And the fact that you believe it proves what I already said. What may be obvious to you is a blind spot for many.”

“I can’t take credit for that.” When I put her hand on my thigh, she didn’t remove it. “My parents raised me to be a decent human. Everyone on earth deserves basic human decency. Any less is an atrocity.”

“You have to stop saying things like that,” Scarlett said. I watched her bite her bottom lip at the red light. “My panties may just combust.”

I choked on my saliva, and she giggled at me while I recovered. “Any time you want to let me get you hot, you let me know, darlin’. I’m still cravin’ another taste of you.”

“Will you let me sample you next time?” she flirted.

I shifted in my seat, my jeans far too tight for the size of my erection. It was pinching and probably leaking as I thought of Scarlett’s lips wrapped around the base. “I’m half tempted to pull over and let you have your fill right now.”

“*Mm*,” she moaned. Her hand reached between her legs, and it took all my concentration to stay in my lane on the road.

“You’re tryin’ to kill me, woman.”

“I can save it for another time.” Scarlett moved her hand back to her thigh and looked out the window innocently.

My frustrated groan drew a muffled laugh from her. I couldn't leave it like that. "Let's do dinner and a movie Sunday."

She wagged her brows suggestively. "Are you going to bring your ghost mask?"

"My place," I clarified. I'd never had a single woman in my condo. "And we're gonna brush up on your Western movies. It's a cryin' shame you didn't know who Maureen O'Hara was."

"Keep talking all southern to me, and I'll agree to anything," she purred, her lashes lowered.

"I'll remember that," I vowed, turning onto her street and pulling into the drive in front of her house. I parked and turned off the ignition, then tapped her leg. "Stay put."

Scarlett remained in her seat while I opened the door and held her hand as she jumped down. I walked her to the door and tipped her chin up so I could look into her green-gold eyes, much like when Jamie posed us in front of the fireplace. Her breath caught as I leaned down, turning my head to the side to get under the brim of my hat and find her lips with mine.

There was nothing desperate about that kiss. I took my time feeling our mouths together, slipping my tongue past her lips to play with hers briefly and pulling away too soon. My lips curled into a smile when Scarlett protested and leaned toward me.

“A little somethin’ to think of until Sunday,” I whispered, reclaiming my hat and putting it back on my head. I opened Scarlett’s door and ushered her inside, unable to resist kissing the top of her head and breathing in her scent. “See you soon, darlin’.”

Chapter Eleven



I PEELED THE BLACK dress off my body and tossed it onto my bed with a frustrated shriek. “Nothing works!”

“Girl, calm down,” Eli soothed. Simon made a clicking sound behind him, barely fitting into the rectangle on the video chat displayed on my laptop.

“What about the acid wash jeans?” Jamie suggested from her rectangle as she twirled her fork in a bowl of spaghetti and shoved it in her mouth, slurping up a wayward sauced noodle.

I looked at the jeans she was talking about, remembering how tight they were on my waist. “They’re standing-only pants.”

“I swear, I’m going to come organize your closet one of these days,” Eli muttered, threading his fingers through Simon’s as his husband sat beside him.

I huffed out a breath. “I don’t need organization right now. I need something that’s right for a date!”

“The man has seen you half dead and covered in vomit,” Simon pointed out. “And then he kept coming around. I don’t think you’re in danger of disappointing him.”

“Yeah, but she’s planning to have sex tonight.” Jamie waved her fork in the air. “You want something that isn’t too difficult to remove. Unless you want to buy yourself some time to come to your senses. Then you should wear layers.”

“I don’t need to come to my senses,” I growled at her. “I need to get railed hard enough to lose all sense of time and space.”

Eli applauded me. “That’s right. Get yours. Those pelvic floor muscles have to be worked out often if you don’t want to pee when you sneeze in ten years.”

“That’s what vibrators are for,” Jamie quipped with a grin. “Personally, I’m a fan of daily double workouts.”

“Hi!” I waved and pointed at myself, spinning in my bra and panties. “Focus on me! The woman having a wardrobe crisis twenty minutes before her date is arriving to pick her up!”

Eli sighed at me. “You’d look good in a paper sack. In fact, you’ve worn one before. Remember when I made that paper dress for school?”

“Oh, I forgot about that.” Jamie leaned forward. “Do you still have it? It’d make tearing her clothes off easier for the cowboy.”

“Not helping,” I singsonged, turning back to my closet.

“You’re going to sweat your makeup off if you don’t calm down.”

I slowly spun to look at him, my eyes widening at his audacity. “Eli, I don’t care if you’re gay—you *never* tell a woman to *calm down*. You can still be castrated.”

Simon patted his husband’s lap. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you. The crazy lady won’t get close enough.”

“Thanks, bebe.” They started making out right on camera, and I turned to Jamie, my last hope.

“I don’t think Rhett is going to dress up for movie night,” Jamie concluded. She looked down at her phone and grinned. “Macy says Matteo asked, and Rhett is wearing jeans and a t-shirt.”

I nearly expired on the spot. “You had her ask him?”

“I mean, it was the fastest way to find out what you should expect,” she said with a shrug. “Though he thought it was a little strange when Matteo called to find out about his date, then asked what he was wearing.”

“He’s going to know it was for me.” I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands, seeing bright bursts behind my closed lids.

“How would he know?” Jamie asked flippantly. “Unless you tell him. Don’t do that. Then it would get awkward.”

“I have the worst poker face ever,” I reminded my friends. “He’ll be able to read it all on my face.”

“You’re too much.” Jamie rolled her eyes at me. “Go for nice black leggings and that white boyfriend button-up. Throw that deep-vee vest over it. Combat boots. Voila.”

“I agree with the magenta maven,” Eli said, finally coming up for air. Simon nodded. “He votes with me. That’s three-to-one. Get your ass dressed, Scarlett.”

“Should I change into a different bra?” I asked, looking at the black lace number that was made to be viewed.

“Hell no,” Simon admonished. “Let him catch a glimpse of it and make his mouth water.”

“Okay.” I pulled my leggings on and slipped into the white dress shirt, buttoning it up and adding the black vest over.

“You’re not a nun, Scarlett.” Jamie shook her cleavage at me. “Unbutton at least two buttons—maybe three. Let those ladies shine.”

“Right.” I unbuttoned the top two buttons on the white shirt and fished my combat boots out of the closet, grabbing a pair of black socks and completing the ensemble. “How do I look?”

I twirled, and my friends applauded and cheered. They were the best hype people I could ask for. I ran a brush through my hair to break up the curls I’d added earlier and checked my makeup. I’d gone for natural, with a red lip stain that would last through whatever happened tonight.

“You’re all amazing,” I gushed at the camera. “Thanks for keeping me sane.”

“We lost that fight long ago.” Eli waved it off. “Now we’ll enable you toward the right kind of crazy.”

“Deal.” I checked the time and swore. “Shit. I’ve got to go. Thanks again. Love you lots!”

Eli and Simon caught the kisses I blew and returned the affectionate gesture.

“Have fun!” Jamie waved. “Remember to take condoms!”

I laughed and ended the private video chat, closing my laptop and setting it on my nightstand. After a quick trip to the bathroom—because who wanted to pee as soon as they got to a guy’s house—I ran downstairs. Though Rhett told me I didn’t have to bring anything, I made my flourless chocolate cake and bought a bottle of wine to be a polite guest. What were you supposed to show up with to sleep with a person for the first time?

When I thought about it, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had sex. My rechargeable boyfriends did a good enough job, and I didn’t have to deal with shit from them.

Fuck. Condoms.

I hurried back up the stairs to grab a few from the nightstand, plugging one of said silicone boyfriends in for good measure—in case the evening didn’t go as I hoped. The doorbell rang as I set the toy down, signaling Rhett’s arrival. My stomach

flip-flopped. I'd missed that excitement, where everything about a person was new.

My footsteps pounded down the stairs, and I could see Rhett's hat in the window as I twirled when I reached the bottom. I gathered the cake and wine, then slipped my purse over my wrist before opening the door. Rhett's chest was always the first thing I saw, and I breathed a sigh of relief because he wore a plain black t-shirt. And that black cowboy hat.

"Darlin', you look hungry," he drawled, and those words went straight down to make my panties wet.

"Starving," I replied breathlessly.

"You'll have to step out of your house if you want to come over for dinner."

I shook my head. "Right."

Rhett took the bottle of wine, and I locked the door behind me. He had a habit of touching me as I walked, but electricity radiated from where he touched every time I felt his fingers against my back.

"I can hold that for you while you get in," he offered, carefully balancing the cake and wine.

"Thanks." I buckled in, and he put the cake in my lap, setting the wine on the floor.

Country music blared through the speakers when Rhett started the car, and he quickly turned it down. "Sorry. Didn't realize it was that loud."

“What are you making for dinner?” I asked as he backed out of the driveway and pulled onto the main road.

“I’ve got everythin’ ready for burgers and fries,” he answered.

That was surprising. “Really?”

“You didn’t think I only ate restaurant food, did you?” he teased. Without a coat, I could see his thick muscles flexing as he handled the steering wheel.

I tried to come up with something to say, but he’d gotten it right. “I guess I assumed you just ate the food you cook.”

“That would get old eatin’ the same thing day after day.” Rhett’s head moved to the music, and he hummed some of the tune. I didn’t realize my mouth was hanging open until his brows furrowed, and he asked, “Are you okay?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah. I didn’t realize you could sing.”

“I can carry a tune passably well,” he acknowledged. “Do you sing?”

“Not like you.” He thought that beautiful baritone was just passable? “I mostly sing in the shower or when the music is up to drown out my voice.”

“I’m sure you’ve got a beautiful voice.”

“I promise, I’m not being modest.” I grimaced. “When I had choir class, the teacher put me in the back so my voice didn’t project as far.”

“That’s not very nice,” Rhett said, rubbing my leg. “No teacher should ever make a child feel bad like that.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, I guess.” Why did the man have to be so damn perfect? He was all southern charm and simple sense. I didn’t want to delve into childhood trauma on our first real date. “So, burgers for dinner?”

“Sliders,” he answered. “Garlic fries on the side.”

“Seems risky to eat garlic on a date,” I joked, secretly wishing I’d brought my toothbrush. Maybe I could sneak some of his toothpaste and scrub my teeth after dinner.

“What’s wrong with garlic?”

Could he be that naive? “The whole kissing thing.”

He chuckled, and I realized he’d been teasing me. “A little garlic won’t stop me from tastin’ those pretty lips again, Scarlett.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say as heat crept up my cheeks. He was so sure of himself, and I wondered how set he was on dinner and a movie. I fell silent for the rest of the drive, listening to him hum and sing songs I didn’t recognize with his southern twang.

Rhett lived in a newer area of Portland with condo buildings across from cafes. He pulled into his spot in the underground parking and tapped my knee, silently instructing me to wait for him. Always the gentleman, he liked to open my doors.

“I think I’ve got the cake if you can grab the wine,” I said when he opened my door.

He still helped me down with his free hand, leading me to the elevators and his place. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't overstuffed furniture that looked comfortable enough to sink into and a cowhide rug under a thick wooden coffee table. A big screen TV filled most of one wall above an electric fireplace. To my right was a state-of-the-art chef's kitchen in natural wood and white accents. A long wood dining table sat before a wall of windows that overlooked the neighborhood. Wood floors covered the entire area; another wall was filled with family photos and what looked like rodeo memorabilia.

It was all so... Rhett.

"Do you like it?" he asked, a hint of hesitance in his voice. Raising a hand, he removed his hat and hung it on a hook by the door, smoothing his light brown hair.

I nodded. "It's homey. Where do you want the cake?"

"Homey is a good description," he agreed. "I care more about comfort than style. You can put the cake on the counter unless it needs to be refrigerated."

"It should be fine sitting out for a couple hours." I followed him to the kitchen, set the cake where he indicated, and then removed my shoes since he'd toed off his boots by the door. "How can I help?"

"Do you know how to use an air fryer?" he asked, pointing to the black appliance. "The fries can go in while I make the burgers."

“Yeah, I can do that.”

Rhett turned the fire on under a griddle and set a basket of par-cooked potato wedges on the counter. The burger patties were already made, so I popped the fries in while he cooked the meat. He even put the buns on the griddle and covered them with a lid to heat them.

“Gluten-free.” He motioned with the spatula. “Condiments are in the fridge.”

“What all do you want?” I asked, looking in the fully stocked refrigerator. I pulled out the ketchup, mayo, lettuce, and sliced tomatoes.

“Whatever you like is fine.”

I left it at that and looked through the cabinets until I found plates, setting two on the counter about when Rhett pulled the burgers and buns off the grill. He arranged them on the plates, four for each of us. It was unlikely I’d be able to finish all of them *and* fries, but I was sure going to try.

When the air fryer beeped, Rhett pulled the fries and tossed them with a bit of salt and garlic butter he’d warmed on the stove. The whole condo smelled amazing, and I wondered why we’d waited so long to do this.

“I thought we’d eat while we watch the movie,” Rhett suggested, picking up the plates and leading me to the living area. He moved the coffee table closer to the couch and picked up the remote, selecting a Western I’d never seen. “Have a seat. I’ll grab you some water and a glass of wine.”

“Thanks.” A man who would keep me hydrated? I was going to check him over for warts or something. The man had to have a flaw somewhere. I bit into the slider and closed my eyes as the flavors burst over my tongue. “Oh. This is so good. Please feed me every night.”

Rhett chuckled as he brought a tray of drinks to the table. “I’m not opposed to that idea, darlin’.”

He ate his food but kept his eyes on me as I moaned my way through the first burger, alternating bites with garlic fries. I tried to pay attention to the movie, which was a comedy about an estranged husband and wife. I found myself enthralled by it, laughing as he spanked her.

“I knew you’d like it,” Rhett said confidently, pushing his empty plate away so he could put his feet up.

“Good choice.” I finished the last of my food and pulled my feet up.

Before I could curl up, Rhett pulled me to him, draping my legs over his lap and wrapping an arm around me. “I like you close.”

“Can I at least have my wine?” He let me lean forward and pluck the glass from the table. We watched in near silence.

When I’d finished my first and second glasses of wine, the movie held less appeal than the man next to me. I gathered the courage to set my glass down, drawing Rhett’s attention. My tongue darted across my lower lip, and Rhett drew a deep breath, his eyes focused on my mouth.

I shifted, straddling his lap, and his arms wrapped around my waist as I pressed my lips to his. It was soft at first, exploratory now that we weren't somewhere public. My fingers toyed with the ends of his hair and down across his jaw. I wasn't in a rush, and he met the pace I set, running his fingers through my hair and letting our tongues give and take.

He tasted of wine, the garlic long gone. My hips rocked against him, his erection pressing between my legs and making a delicious pressure build inside me. I unbuttoned my vest, shrugging it off behind me.

"May I?" Rhett whispered against my mouth, his fingers moving to the buttons on my shirt.

"Please."

He trailed kisses down my neck as he freed the buttons, opening the shirt enough to bite where my neck met my shoulder lightly. I whimpered at the unfamiliar sensation. None of my other partners had used their teeth like that.

One of Rhett's thick arms anchored me to him as he stood, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, clinging tightly since I couldn't cross my feet behind him. He supported my butt while he walked down a hall and into a dark bedroom, laying me on soft, cool covers on his bed. Then his weight lifted off me, and he flicked a lamp on next to the bed.

"I want to see you," he rasped. I took my shirt off, and he leaned down, running his large hands up my arms and behind my back, deftly unhooking my bra and removing it. He gazed at me in awe, and I felt truly beautiful with his darkened blue

eyes taking me in. “I could look at you forever. You’re perfect, darlin’.”

My entire body blushed. “You haven’t even seen all of me yet.”

“I can fix that.” Rhett hooked his fingers under my leggings and drew them down my legs, removing my socks at the same time. He bit his lip and cupped my mound with his palm, moving back and forth, finding my clit beneath the black lace fabric. In one quick motion, he’d divested me of my underwear. “I’ve been dreamin’ of this. Every fuckin’ night.”

I squirmed as he parted me, and his fingers plied my flesh, stroking and teasing me. He circled my entrance, finally pressing one, then two fingers inside. I gasped at the thick intrusion, then moaned when he found my g-spot and curled into it. His tongue found my clit, flicking it in time with his fingers, and I arched forward with the building pressure, spearing my fingers through his locks and holding his face to me as I moved my hips against him.

“That’s it, darlin’,” Rhett growled against me. “Come on my face so I can get inside you.”

The thought of his cock sent me careening into my orgasm, my body tensing, then shaking uncontrollably. I cried out his name, and he gentled his motions, finally pulling away when I took a deep, shuddering breath.

“That.” I couldn’t find the words. “Yes. Please and thank you.”

“We’re not near done, Scarlett.” He pulled his shirt over his head and worked the buckle on his belt, then paused, glancing at me.

It was so vulnerable, and I realized he needed as much reassurance as I did. I pushed to my knees and ran my hands through the hair on his chest. I kissed his jaw, his neck, moving down until I grazed his nipple with my lips and sucked it briefly. He groaned and tore the belt free. I reached for his jeans and unfastened them, drawing the zipper down. Rhett was hot and hard through his boxer briefs.

“More. I want everything.” I reached into the fabric, withdrawing his thick length and pausing briefly at his size as he shoved his clothes off. That was going to be a challenge. Rhett held his breath as the flat of my tongue ran up the underside of his shaft, then circled the head before I drew him into my mouth.

“Fuck, Scarlett.” He said my name like an oath, his hand guiding my head in a slow rhythm. That seemed to be his preference. Slow, steady, passionate. I looked up, watching his parted lips, fluttering eyelids, and keeping eye contact when he looked down at me, watching my lips drag up his length.

Rhett was all male power barely reined in, holding back to give me a moment of control. And that was fucking arousing.

Chapter Twelve



THE HEAD OF MY cock dragged against the back of Scarlett's throat, and I felt my legs shake as she sucked harder. Her hand cupped my balls, tugging gently, and I nearly shot my load down her throat.

"Darlin', hold on." I pulled her hair, and she dragged in a breath as she released me with a *pop*. "I want to be in you."

"Condom?" she asked, moving back onto the bed.

"Yeah." I found the box in the dresser and pulled a couple out, hoping to manifest a long night with the beautiful woman in my bed. I rolled the protection onto my dick and knelt on the bed between Scarlett's parted thighs, testing her with my fingers, stretching her to take me. "You're so wet for me."

She shifted her hips as I positioned myself at her entrance, dragging the head of my cock through her arousal before pressing forward. Her body stiffened as I tried to fit, and I

paused, giving her a moment to relax. Even when I felt her go soft, I was afraid I'd hurt her because she gripped me like a vise.

“You okay?” I asked, bracing myself over her on my arm. She looked up at me and nodded, her brow furrowing as she moved her hips, attempting to take more of me. I stilled her hips with my other hand. “I'm in no rush, darlin'. We've got all night. I'll get it in there, trust me.”

“Sorry,” she whispered, her breath catching as I withdrew a bit and moved another inch deeper.

“Shh.” I captured her lips, never wanting her to question whether she pleased me. She always would. “You're doing everythin' right. We're gonna take it slow. Just feel me.”

I repeated the motion and glanced down, seeing her stretched around half my length. To distract Scarlett, I stroked the side of her breast, letting my fingertips graze over her nipples, working them to tight peaks. Her eyes closed, and she tipped her head back, her lips parting and letting out sounds of pleasure sweeter than a love song.

When I thrust slowly and paused again, her lids lifted. “Am I taking it all?”

“Almost.” I chuckled as her eyes widened, and she looked down. I pulled away so she could see between us. “Only a couple more inches now.”

“*Fuck, Rhett.*” She breathed as I gave her another inch. “There's so *much* of you.”

“I can stop,” I offered, teasing her nipples again. “This shouldn’t hurt.”

“It’s not pain-pain.” Her voice caught on a whimper. “I’m full. It’s... so good. I want all of it.”

I dropped my weight, and the last of me entered her tight, hot channel, my pelvis flush with hers. Her skin was molten against mine, an inferno we stoked with every shift of our bodies. “You’ve got all of me, Scarlett.”

That single sentence threatened to take on another meaning altogether when she smiled at me, blinking rapidly. At first, I thought I’d hurt her, but she rolled her hips and laughed happily, pulling my lips to hers. Her laughter and moans tied for the best sounds I’d ever heard.

“*Move*, Rhett,” Scarlett begged.

So I moved, slowly at first, getting her used to me. As she met my thrusts with lifted hips, I picked up my pace, trying not to lose control and give her more than she could handle. Alternating between slow and deep and shallow, fast motions, I worked Scarlett toward another orgasm while holding off on my own.

She grew louder as I filled her fully again and again, and the room filled with sounds of sex. I ran my nose along her jaw until my lips were next to her ear. “Say my name, darlin’. It sounds so sweet on your lips.”

“*Rhett*,” Scarlett moaned, her muscles tightening around me. “Rhett, I’m so close.”

I reached between us and circled her clit with the pad of my thumb, angling deep inside her pussy, feeling her getting wetter as she panted. She clutched my shoulders, the bite of her nails shattering my control.

“*Rhett*,” she gasped, pulling me closer. “I’m coming.”

Scarlett was beautiful as she came apart under me with a long, low moan, her legs shaking around my hips, her entire body flushed. I stopped holding back and palmed her ass, drawing her close and burying myself deep as I pulsed inside her hot pussy.

“*Fuck*, Scarlett,” I exhaled in primal satisfaction. I stroked her hair away from her face and kissed her until my dick stopped twitching, making her pulse around me, drawing pleasure out for us both. My left leg and hip ached, but I ignored the pain, reluctant to part from Scarlett.

“I can feel your heart beating against my chest,” she whispered, stroking my back softly with one hand while she placed the other over my heart. “So fast. I want to rest my head here.”

I swear my heart skipped a beat at her words. “Let me get you cleaned up, and I’ll hold you while you fall asleep on my chest.”

“Deal.”

I pulled out of her and rubbed her thighs since they’d been spread so far to accommodate me. She sighed happily, and I hurried to the bathroom, trying to minimize my limp so she

wouldn't notice. After disposing of the condom and washing, I ran a washcloth under warm water and returned to the bed, carefully cleaning Scarlett and helping her under the covers. It only took a minute to return the cloth to the bathroom. I pulled a clean pair of boxer briefs from my dresser and slipped my legs into them.

"I'll be right back," I said, looking back at where Scarlett was reclining against my pillows. She looked so right there.

She nodded, and I made a quick trip to the kitchen, cutting the cake she'd brought and putting a generous slice on a plate with a fork. Then I put the rest of the food away and cleaned up the dinner dishes. When the kitchen was sparkling, I grabbed a couple of water bottles from the fridge and took them and the cake back to the bedroom.

"A girl could get used to this kind of treatment, cowboy," she teased, sitting up and baring her gorgeous breasts. She made no move to cover them, and I admired how dark her rosy nipples had gotten.

"I hope so." I settled next to her and offered her a forkful of the cake. Her eyes rolled back, and she leaned against the headboard as she muffled a moan. "Keep makin' those noises, and I won't let you leave."

She giggled and took the water I offered, opening it and sipping. "This is the best night I've had in a long time, Rhett. Thank you."

"I should be the one thankin' you." I swiped a bit of the chocolate from her lips and licked it from my finger.

“Spendin’ time with you has made my year.”

Her small hand cupped my cheek, and she kissed me before taking another bite of cake, then offering one to me. The rich chocolate was decadent and melted in my mouth.

“What is this sorcery?” I asked, taking another bite. “Incredible.”

“Flourless chocolate cake with a layer of ganache on top,” she explained, holding up another bite. “It’s like having cake and a truffle.”

“Yeah,” I stole the bite from her and laughed at her feigned outrage, giving her the next taste. “You’re not allowed to leave if you make things like this. I’ll keep you tied to my bed when I’m not here.”

Scarlett’s eyes heated at the mention of being tied up, and I tucked that information away for later. It could be a fun thing to explore in the future.

When the cake was gone, I set the plate on my nightstand and pulled Scarlett to my side, her head resting against my chest like she wanted.

“Hmm,” she sighed, her breath soft against my skin. “I’m not sure I want this night to end.”

“I’ll still be here in the mornin’,” I assured her, stroking her long hair and working a couple tangles free. “Sleep now. Sweet dreams, darlin’.”

Scarlett’s breaths evened out as she drifted off in my arms, and I marveled at how lucky I was to have met her despite the

circumstances. As my eyes grew heavy, I hoped the morning would come quickly so I could spend more time with her.



Fingertips grazed my nipple, and I frowned, slow to understand what was happening. Then I smelled Scarlett, caramel and a hint of her shampoo. I inhaled, and she stirred as my chest rose, shifting the leg she'd flung over mine during the night and brushing against my morning erection. Her hand trailed down, palming the length.

I chuckled at her playfulness. "Mornin', darlin'."

"Mm, good morning," she said sleepily, her eyes opening and meeting mine. "Your morning voice is sexy."

"Well, stay the night again, and you'll get to hear it more often," I rumbled, stroking the wild tendrils of dark hair that fanned across my body and the pillow. I reached for my phone and glanced at the time. Nearly nine. It looked like I wouldn't be making it to the gym, so I texted the guys to let them know. "What do you say to breakfast?"

"What if I'm hungry for something else?" Scarlett stroked my cock again, and it twitched in her grasp, making her giggle.

"How are you feelin' this mornin'?" I rolled to face her and slipped a hand between her legs, brushing my fingers over her

sensitive opening. She winced, and I had my answer. “I’m not going to fuck you when you’re already raw from last night, darlin’.”

“Fine,” she pouted. “But I want pancakes.”

“How about waffles?” I countered.

She grinned. “Even better.”

I worked my arm out from under her and rolled off the bed, my dick still eagerly pointing at the object of my affection. Scarlett lifted a brow, and I wagged a finger at her, lest she get any ideas. After brushing my teeth and relieving myself in the bathroom, I pulled on a pair of grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt.

“I left a spare toothbrush in there for you. Feel free to shower, too. There’s a towel and washcloth on the rack.”

“Thanks.” She slid her feet out from under the covers and stretched, her nipples pebbling as the air hit them.

My mouth watered to taste them again, but then I’d probably fuck her, and I didn’t want to hurt her. I settled for reaching out and grabbing her wrist as she passed, pulling her into my chest and lifting her chin to plant a kiss on her cheek. I knew women could be weird about kissing before they brushed their teeth. She smiled shyly and gave me a peck on the cheek in return.

“Don’t take too long, or I might eat all the waffles myself,” I teased, squeezing her hand before releasing it.

Scarlett narrowed her eyes at me and stood in the bathroom doorway, holding the door. “If you eat all the food, you’ll find out what I’m like before I’ve had coffee.”

She shut it behind her, and I laughed as I made my way to the kitchen and started in on breakfast. I didn’t know what all Scarlett would want, so I heated the griddle and waffle maker, then made the gluten-free waffle batter I’d purchased and pulled some eggs and bacon from the fridge. I worked my home kitchen like a restaurant, setting up an assembly line of tasks to pour batter into the waffle maker and then lay the bacon out on the griddle.

When those were done, I scrambled the eggs in a bowl and poured them over the bacon grease, quickly cooking them to perfection. Scarlett emerged from my room in her shirt and pants from the night before as I was plating everything. I even had some strawberry compote and whipped cream in my fridge to add to the waffles.

“My stomach is screaming,” she quipped, pulling one of the plates over and walking it to the dining table.

I usually ate at the counter, but sitting with Scarlett at the table felt pleasantly domestic. “I should have offered you somethin’ to wear.”

“It’s fine.” She waved it off. “I put the outfit on right before you picked me up last night and only wore it for a couple hours before you stripped me. I’m good to go.”

I froze with a piece of bacon halfway to my mouth as she casually put memories of last night in my mind. She still had a

few buttons undone on the white shirt, and I was tempted to free a few more to see the swells of her breasts. I restrained myself and popped the bacon into my mouth.

“So you’re off work today?” Scarlett asked, cutting her waffle into perfect, bite-sized squares.

I nodded. “Yeah. Is it too soon to ask if you want to hang out for the day?”

“No.” My stomach fell, thinking she’d rejected me, until she continued, “I don’t know why we haven’t done this already. I like spending time with you.”

Thank goodness. I couldn’t keep the grin off my face. “Anythin’ particular you want to do?”

“Well,” the corner of her mouth quirked up. “Maybe we could make use of that massive shower you’ve got? You know what they say about muscle soreness—keep moving. I think a workout is in order.”

“You make a convincin’ argument.” I pretended to contemplate her words. “I suppose I could help work those muscles.”

Scarlett shifted restlessly in her chair, picking up the pace as she ate breakfast. I opened my mouth to tease her again, but my phone rang at the same time. Shooting her an apologetic look, I stood. “Give me a minute.”

I grabbed my phone from the kitchen counter and saw my parents’ number. My mother called at least three times a week, so of course, she would accidentally interrupt my morning

with Scarlett. If she heard a woman in my home, she'd grill me until I'd spilled every detail about her.

"Mornin'," I answered, hoping I didn't sound guilty.

"Rhett." My mother's voice was clipped, and I frowned. She was rarely in a poor mood. "It's Granddaddy."

"What's wrong?" Scarlett tipped her head questioningly at the change in my tone.

"He's in the hospital," she continued, her voice tearful. "He cut himself on some barbed wire and tried to treat the infection himself. Now it's spread, and the doctors aren't sure he's gonna pull through."

Pain lanced through my chest at the news. Distance didn't diminish how close I was to my family, and I couldn't imagine saying goodbye to my grandfather—couldn't fathom never again hearing his laughter as he sat at the dining table with his morning coffee, recounting stories of his youth. "I'll catch the first flight I can get."

My mother sighed gratefully. "Thanks, honey. I know your dad and Granddaddy will appreciate you being here. We all will. Text me your flight information when you know more, and we'll make sure somebody is there to pick you up."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll get a rental. You just focus on what's going on now."

"Okay," she agreed, which spoke to the gravity of the situation. Usually, she'd argue until she won the argument.

“I’ve got to get back to the hospital. I just came home to get a couple things done. Love you, honey.”

“Love you, too, Ma.” I stared at the phone screen for a minute after she ended the call, frozen in my racing thoughts.

“Rhett, is everything okay?” Scarlett asked. She was at my side, her hand stroking my arm reassuringly.

“I have to go home.” My voice came out ragged. “My Granddaddy is in the hospital.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, not prying. “When do you need to leave?”

“As soon as I can find a flight.” I opened a flight search and typed in the destination, looking for the first flight and booking it in haste. “If I hurry, I can catch a flight in three hours.”

Scarlett’s eyes were filled with worry when I looked at her. “How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “It depends...”

She nodded in understanding and squeezed my hand. “Then I’ll drive you. It wouldn’t make sense to pay for parking.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I protested weakly, out of habit.

“I know, but I want to.” She cleared her throat and shooed me out of the kitchen. “Go, shower, and pack. I’ll clean this up and be ready to go when you are.”

The back of my eyes burned as I cupped her cheek, lowering my head to kiss her. I whispered against her lips, “Thank you.

It means a lot to me.”

She nodded, blinking rapidly, and I left her there to get myself together. I rushed through a shower and threw my bathroom necessities into a toiletry bag. When I was dressed, I pulled my suitcase out of the closet, filled it with enough outfits to last at least a week, then added shoes and my toiletry bag. I shot off texts to my restaurant manager and pit masters, letting them know of the family emergency. The staff was well-trained, and I could trust them to run things in my absence.

Scarlett had cleaned up and finished dressing by the time I wheeled my suitcase out. I slid my laptop and chargers into my leather messenger bag and grabbed my coat and hat while I shoved my feet into my boots. It only took half an hour to complete all the tasks, but I'd still have to hurry to catch the flight once we made it to the airport.

“Ready?” she asked, slipping her purse over her shoulder.

“Yeah.” I held the door for her and followed behind with my luggage. We caught the elevator, and she climbed into the Jeep while I put my things in the back. “I’ll drive us there. You’re okay dropping my car off?”

“It’s no problem,” she assured me, buckling in.

I wasted no time getting on the road and working through Portland traffic to get on the freeway that would take us to the airport. Scarlett didn’t make meaningless small talk, and I appreciated the space she offered and her quiet presence. It was nice not to be completely alone.

When I pulled to the curb at departures, Scarlett hopped out and waited for me on the curb. She wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me tightly. I held her close, taking her warmth and silent support, breathing her in to keep the memory of last night at the forefront of my mind during the flight.

“I’ll text you the codes for the garage and stuff,” I said, handing her the keys to my car. “If you need anythin’, text me, and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

“Should I take the trash out when I drop the Jeep off?” she asked, thinking of things I hadn’t considered.

“Please. And thank you again, Scarlett.” I brushed my thumb over her cheek, taking in her green-gold eyes and memorizing every bit of her face. She smiled, and I wrapped my palm around her neck, crushing my lips to hers in a kiss that communicated more than any words I could think of. We were breathless when I finally pulled away, slinging my messenger bag over my shoulder and making sure my wallet was in my back pocket.

“Have a safe flight, Rhett.” Scarlett clasped her hands behind her back, rocking on her heels. “I hope everything turns out okay.”

I mustered a smile for her and nodded. “See you soon, darlin’.”

She waved as I turned away and steeled myself against whatever might greet me back home. I’d made it through security and boarded the plane when my phone buzzed with a

message letting me know the Jeep was safely in its spot and the garbage was taken care of.

Whatever brought Scarlett into my life—fate, providence, random chance—I was grateful for it. She was unlike any other woman I'd met.

Chapter Thirteen



MY DAYS WERE STRANGELY empty without the coffee deliveries from Rhett. We texted here and there, but he spent most of his time in the hospital at his grandfather's side, keeping his spirits up as he fought off a massive infection. Both sets of my grandparents passed when I was younger, but I still remembered the sting their deaths caused. I wouldn't wish it on anybody else, even though it was inevitable. It was never fair.

I was getting ready for dinner at Eli and Simon's house—the house we all used to share in college and for a few years after. It had been just like a sitcom, with drama from relationships and jobs. Eli and Simon kept their relationship from us until Jamie found out and couldn't keep the secret. The rest of us eventually moved out, and the happy couple bought the house. It made dinners comfortable because it was returning to a place that felt like home.

I pulled a black band hoodie over my t-shirt, exchanged my sweats for my favorite pair of worn jeans, and then shoved my feet into a pair of sneakers. The oven timer dinged, and I headed downstairs to pull the cheddar biscuits out. Simon made amazing fried chicken, and the rest of us had been assigned sides and desserts. After popping the biscuits into a towel-lined bowl and wrapping them up, I retrieved the pumpkin spice cake I'd made, already in a container for transport.

I made it to Eli and Simon's right on time. Judging by the cars in the driveway, Jamie, Ella, and Lucia were already there. I parked and carefully balanced the biscuits on top of the cake container as I climbed the front steps, giving the doorbell a courtesy ring with my elbow before entering.

The couple's corgis came scurrying to greet me as fast as their short little legs would allow. I laughed, sliding my shoes off and briefly setting the food on the bench so I could remove my coat and hang it with my purse, slipping my phone into my pocket.

"We're in here, Scarlett!" Eli called out. The girls were sipping wine as they hung out in the massive kitchen. Simon was finishing up the chicken.

They'd all dressed casually, in sweats and leggings. Eli and Simon wore coordinating jogging outfits in blue and silver. Because they were always a little extra, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

“Looks like I got here just in time.” I breathed in the nostalgic scents as Jamie handed me a glass of wine.

Simon waved his tongs at me. “I’m keeping your chicken strips warm in the oven.”

I lifted my glass toward him gratefully. “Thanks.”

He usually fried my things before cooking everything made with regular flour. I never had to worry about my friends disrespecting my food needs. They still remembered how sick I’d gotten before figuring out gluten was the culprit.

“Okay, tell us all about the cowboy.” Jamie shook her shoulders suggestively and poured herself more wine.

“Maybe I’ve decided I don’t kiss and tell,” I teased playfully.

Eli gasped. “Don’t you dare get puritanical on us now!”

“How big is it?” Ella asked. I shot her a quelling look. “What? It’s what we’re all wondering.”

Her twin high-fived her. “Asking the important questions.”

“We even have a betting pool,” Jamie added. “So you’re going to make one of us twenty bucks richer.”

I snagged a carrot from the veggie tray and popped it into my mouth. “I want a cut of that.”

“Deal.” She leaned her elbows on the counter. “Now, spill.”

“Well, he’s over six feet tall,” I said vaguely. “And he’s a big boy everywhere.”

“I knew it!” Eli clapped his hands, and Simon snapped the tongs at his ass, making him jump away.

“You be careful whose dicks you’re fanboying over, mister,” Simon said, shaking the tongs threatening. “Or I’ll take away the one you get to have.”

Eli wrinkled his nose and blew his husband a kiss. “It’s always you, bebe.”

Simon rolled his eyes and returned to the food preparation, satisfied for the moment.

I tried to think of a way to discuss the topic without getting too specific. Rhett might not want everybody to know the exact inches. I hadn’t gotten a chance to measure, either. “You know the moment in books where the heroine wonders if it will fit?”

“*Giiirl*,” Eli covered his open mouth with his palm. His wide eyes darted to a smirking Simon. “I had that moment once.”

“No. Nope.” Ella covered her ears. “You’re violating the twin pact. No personal details about sex lives.”

Eli pursed his lips and rolled his eyes at her. “You’ve walked in on us twice.”

“And I’ve gone to therapy to try to erase that image from my mind,” she shot back.

“Hey, my ass is glorious.” Simon struck a pose. “And my—”

“Before you wax poetic about your dick, remember we’ve probably all seen it when it wasn’t so glorious,” Jamie warned. “You can thank all those times you didn’t bother to wrap the towel around your waist on the walk from the bathroom to your bedroom.”

Simon snapped his fingers closed against his thumb, motioning her to shut it, and she mocked him with mimicry as she giggled.

“So,” Lucia interjected. “You were saying, Scarlett?”

“I was saying it was like that.” I swirled another carrot through the dressing. “It took some... maneuvering... but worked out just fine.”

“*Fine?*” Jamie repeated. “Eli’s homemade yogurt is *fine*. Sex should never be referred to as *fine*.”

Eli shrugged. “She’s not wrong. On either count.”

“Best orgasm of my life,” I amended, my face heating. “And I ached deliciously for three days after.”

They all cheered for me, and I covered my face with my hand as I laughed. When they quieted, I added, “But I’m not giving you a measurement. I didn’t ask him for a measuring tape.”

They booed, and Jamie threw a piece of celery at me that bounced off my shoulder and into Eli’s wine glass, drawing another round of giggle as he fished out the vegetable stick and tossed it in the trash.

“No food fights in my kitchen, children,” Simon chastised, lifting a large tray of fried chicken and setting it in the center of the rest of the food. “Let’s all stop dickdreaming and get to eating.”

I grabbed a plate, happy to have the subject shift away from my sex life. Simon pulled my chicken tenders from the oven

and I piled a few on my plate with veggies, a biscuit, and Ella's fifties-style strawberry jello salad. We sat at the dining table fully decked out in fall décor in shades of white, orange, and red. There were even a few tiny gold pumpkins and leaves scattered throughout the centerpiece.

Eli stood at the head of the table and tapped his knife against his wine glass. Everybody quieted in preparation for the tradition to come. "Ladies and gentleman. It's time to say the blessing."

He waved the hand holding his wine glass. "May this food we eat nourish us from our head to our feet. May we work hard and stay off the streets, and may our friendship never be beat!"

"Eat! Eat! Eat!" we chanted, clapping to the beat. "Huzzah!"

The tradition began as a joke in college, but it stuck as we grew up and moved into adulthood. An outsider would probably think we were part of an eccentric cult, but what was friendship if you didn't get a little weird with each other? My friends were my safe space, always accepting and encouraging. I could always count on them for hype and honesty because they would always have my best interests at heart.

The banter continued as we decimated our little potluck dinner, moving straight to dessert when the main course was over. I sliced my spice cake, and Lucia brought out her triple fudge brownies. They had fudge chunks in the brownie, a layer of fudge over that, and a white fudge drizzle decorating

the top. I'd helped her modify the recipe for gluten-free flour a few years ago, and I'd been able to enjoy them since.

I bit into one of the deathly decadent chocolate squares and leaned back in my chair, completely at ease. That's when my phone vibrated on the table next to my plate, and Rhett's name popped up for a video call. Before I could put my brownie down, Jamie dove for the phone and ignored my pleas—muffled by a mouthful of brownie—for her not to embarrass me.

She swiped to answer the call and stood, moving to the head of the table so Rhett could see all of us. “Hey, cowboy! Nice of you to join us for dessert. Say hi to everyone!”

“Howdy, ya’ll,” Rhett drawled, playing along even though he sounded tired.

A chorus of hellos echoed around the table, and I waved sheepishly. He blew me a little kiss. “Hey, darlin’.”

“Hi,” I called back over everybody's sentimental cooing.

“I didn't mean to interrupt your meal,” he apologized.

“You're not,” Jamie rushed. “We've adopted you as our boyfriend, so you're always welcome.”

Rhett looked a little puzzled. “Is that so?”

She nodded vigorously, taking a bite of brownie with her free hand. “As long as you perform all your boyfriendly duties to our satisfaction.”

“Jamie,” I warned, slowly rising from my chair and creeping around the table so I could tackle her if she said something wildly inappropriate. Or when, because it was nearly guaranteed.

“What are my duties?” Rhett asked—the poor, unsuspecting man.

“Oh, the usual,” Jamie singsonged. “Coffee dates, dinner where you bring that delicious barbecue, movie nights.”

“Deal.” He nodded. “That sounds reasonable.”

Jamie held a finger up. “I wasn’t finished.”

I groaned, drawing her attention to how close I’d gotten. She skirted away from me and dropped into her chair. “There’s one other very important part of this.”

Rhett lifted a brow. “And that would be?”

“We’re all just looking out for Scarlett, you understand.” She was making a speech now. I was about two seconds from forgetting our traditional blessing and disowning the neon-haired menace.

“As you should,” he said solemnly. “Wouldn’t be very good friends if you weren’t protective.”

My heart melted a little more as he drizzled more of his sweet words on everything else he’d done that was damn near perfect.

“Oh, that was good. We like that,” she praised. “Part of looking out for our friend Scarlett is making sure she’s

satisfied in all areas of the relationship.”

“Nope, you’re done.” I rushed for her, but Eli caught me around the waist and pulled me into his lap, laughing maniacally. “Rhett, I’m sorry!”

“So we’re going to need to know the exact measurements of that meat stick,” she continued as I swore at her, struggling against Eli’s hold. “For science, of course.”

“For science.” Rhett chuckled, getting the drift of her innuendo. “Well, anecdotally speakin’, it’ll fit. Those muscles are made to stretch.”

“So you’re really just dedicated to Scarlett’s fitness routine. Working out all the muscles.” Jamie’s remarks were so close to the conversation I’d had with Rhett the morning after we’d had sex that it was obvious we shared a type of hive mind.

He nodded. “Regular physical activity is very important for a body’s health. And I want to keep Scarlett *very* healthy.”

“Have *mercy*.” Simon fanned himself.

I was going to die on the spot. “Hi, the vagina owner is sitting right here! Can we leave a little mystery, please? You’re all horrible, you know that, right?”

Rhett joined in with my friends’ laughter, and eventually, I gave in and giggled, too. It was surreal to have my maybe-boyfriend fit in so well with all of my friends.

“So if I guessed he had a foot-long, would that make me the winner of the pot?” Lucia piped up.

Rhett gave Jamie a dubious look. “You’re betting on the size of my—”

“Yes,” I interrupted him, snatching the phone out of Jamie’s hand while she was laughing hysterically. “And if you care for me at all, you won’t tell them. Make them suffer, so none of them win.”

“Gotcha.” He gave me an amiable smile. “Miss you, darlin’.”

“I miss you too,” I whispered. “Can I call you when I get home? It’ll be an hour, maybe.”

“Yeah, I’ll probably be up.” Rhett waved and ended the call when I wiggled my fingers back at him.

Complete silence descended on our dinner part as I glared everyone down. They started fidgeting restlessly, and I let them fucking sweat. “I have never, in all the years I’ve known all of you, embarrassed you like that.”

Jamie pressed her lips together and refused to meet my gaze. Simon stroked the stubble on his chin, and Lucia sank low in her chair. Even Eli’s smile dropped.

“You all deserve to be shunned,” I continued, standing and taking my empty plate to the sink. Their eyes followed. “But *I* am a *good* friend. So I will let you off with a friendship fine.”

“A fine?” Ella echoed.

“Yes.” I held up the bowl containing their five-dollar bills. “I’m taking the pot and buying myself something sexy for the

next time I get to see how many inches that *meat stick* is. Because you'll *never* find out!"

They protested, throwing napkins at me as I cackled and gathered the money, folding it and stuffing it in my pocket. "Thank you all for your contribution to my sex life. I should be able to at least get something suitable enough to be ripped off."

"Maybe you should buy the cowboy some rope," Jamie suggested. "I'm sure he worked with it plenty in the rodeo."

"I don't think getting tied up is my thing," I said, washing my dish and placing it in the dishwasher. I packed up the last slices of cake and shook out the towel that carried biscuits, dumping the crumbs in the trash. "I hate to run out on you, but I've got this hot cowboy waiting for me to call."

"Not a single one of us is going to hold that against you," Eli said, wagging his brows at me. "Go get you some good phone sex."

"I swear, all you people think about is sex."

Simon placed his hands on Eli's shoulders. "Almost, but not quite. Goodnight, doll."

I said my goodbyes and got myself home as quickly as the speed limit allowed, pulling my phone out as soon as I'd shed my coat and shoes. It rang as I took my dishes to the kitchen, and Rhett appeared on the screen.

"I'm glad you made it home safe, darlin'."

I sighed and carried the phone up to my room. “I’m sorry about everybody earlier.”

“That’s nothin’. You’ve never sat around a fire with a bunch of ranch hands, shootin’ the shit after a long day.”

I laughed, pulling my hoodie over my head. “I think I’m okay missing out on that one.”

“Mm,” Rhett hummed. I looked over to find him biting his lip. “Darlin’?”

“Yeah?” I toed my socks off and tossed them in the laundry basket.

“Let me see you.”

I turned, realizing he’d taken off his shirt, too. “You like to watch?”

“If I can’t be there to touch you, I want to watch you touch yourself.”

“Only if I get to watch you, too,” I countered.

He smirked and reached for the waistband of his pants. “Deal.”

Chapter Fourteen



“STOP TRYIN’ TO CLIMB out of the chair,” my mother chastised Granddaddy as I pushed his wheelchair up to my parent’s front porch. My brothers helped me lift the thing, and it was a tight fit through the door.

Granddaddy barely waited until I’d stopped before he was pushing himself to his feet and dropping into his favorite chair in the living room, my mother pecking at him the whole time. He looked more frail than when I last saw him, but that was partially because of his health. He still had his sparse white hair parted smartly on the side and combed over, but his jeans and plaid shirt hung a little loose on his frame.

“Woman,” he grouched back. He pointed a bony finger at my mother. “The good lord hasn’t come for me yet. Stop treatin’ me like I’ve got a foot in the grave.”

My mother fisted her hands on her hips. Her typically smooth hair was a little frizzy from running around preparing for his arrival home all morning. She still wore her sunflower apron over her jeans and pink blouse. “Don’t you talk like that, Granddaddy. Death was standin’ in the doorway awaitin’ the word.”

“Boys, lend your granddaddy a hand,” he pleaded, looking at us.

My youngest brother Lorne stepped into the fray, while Vaughn and I moved back, knowing it wasn’t our fight. He was lankier than me and Vaughn, and a little lighter on the life learning. What he lacked in experience, he tried to make up for with the length of his hair. It reached his shoulders now. “Mama, maybe Granddaddy is hungry.”

She turned toward him, her eye twitching in a way that warned him to run. He didn’t, and I wasn’t about to save him. “Honey, bless your sweet heart. I’m so glad you offered to help with dinner. Come with me, and I’ll getcha started in the kitchen.”

Lorne shot us a desperate look, and Vaughn shook his head. “On your own, man. Stepped right in that shit pie with your whole boot.”

“You may be grown, but I’ll still wash your mouth out with a bar of soap, Vaughn Roberts!” Mama called from the kitchen. “Get your rear in here, Lorne!”

“Let’s get out while we can,” Vaughn murmured, moving toward the door. He and I used to get mistaken for twins

because we looked so similar. The last five years had changed that. We were the same height and had the same hair and eyes, but Vaughn's muscles were tightly honed from physical labor on the ranch, and mine bulkier from lifting. And he didn't have a limp.

"Go," Granddaddy urged in a rasped whisper. "Save yourselves. It's too late for me."

"I should get my bag packed." I tipped my head toward my grandfather. "Don't give her too much hell, ya hear? She's just happy you've come home."

He waved me off. "She's put up with me for this long. A few more years won't hurt."

I chuckled and headed upstairs to my room, which still housed some of my childhood belongings, though my mother had replaced the old bed with a king-sized set that took up half the space. Booted footsteps followed me, and Vaughn took up a chunk of space just inside the door.

"It means a lot to Dad and Ma that you came back," he stated, leaning his broad body against the doorframe. "They've missed you. We all have."

"I know." I pulled my suitcase onto the bed and began folding things neatly, leaving out a set of clothes for the following day. When I found out Granddaddy was well enough to return home, I booked my flight back to Portland. I'd been away from the restaurant—and Scarlett—for a week.

"Have you given any more thought to comin' home?"

My living across the country was a topic that didn't make any of us happy. "I've got responsibilities in Portland. I'm not ready to put somebody in charge of the restaurant full-time. And even if I came home, I'd leave the next time I find a location for Rhett's."

"Is two not enough for you?" he asked, kicking the back of his boot against the frame. "You've proven you're successful. You did that when you opened the first one."

The flagship restaurant was running without a hitch; I'd stopped by a few times to check in and ensure everything was going well.

"It's not about provin' myself to everyone else," I explained. For the thousandth time, probably. "I want to see how far I can take this. I imagine Rhett's as a household name with locations all across the country. Imagine Granddaddy's recipes, immortalized and enjoyed by all those families."

"I think Granddaddy would probably like to see you more while he's still around." Vaughn wasn't pulling any punches, and I wondered if our mother had put him up to it. She'd said something similar in the hospital a couple days ago.

I tossed another shirt into my suitcase. "It's not that I enjoy bein' away."

"Yeah, I know." He gave up on the attempt at a lecture. "Ma wants you to come home for Christmas."

"That's in a little more than a month," I pointed out, packing my extra shoes. I'd put everything away except my toiletries,

tomorrow's outfit, and what I had on my body. "I'll see what I can manage after bein' gone for a week this month. I was supposed to put on a big Thanksgivin' meal, but I've lost a week of workin' on it, so I'm thinkin' of movin' it to December."

"That food critic thing?"

"Yeah. It's more important than I thought it was," I admitted. And it wasn't just proving myself to Covington. I wanted to make Scarlett proud of my efforts. Her opinion was quickly becoming more important than all others. She'd called every day to find out how Granddaddy was going, and she didn't even know the man.

"You know Ma." Vaughn's rugged hand, weathered from working the ranch, ran across his jaw. "She's worried this'll be Granddaddy's last Christmas."

"That man is healthier than all the horses on this ranch," I laughed. "That infection would have killed others, and he turned it around in less than a week. He's liable to outlive us all."

Vaughn's grin was lopsided. "Maybe. He won't be helping with the ranch jobs anymore. Dad's gonna tell him when he's been home for a while and has a bit more strength."

"I don't envy him that job. Granddaddy won't know what to do if he's not useful."

"Whittlin'."

"What?" I asked, confused.

“He started it a couple years back,” Vaughn said. “Haven’t you seen the little figures in his place?”

Granddaddy had his own small house on the property. He and Gramma had moved out there when my parents married, and he stayed put after his wife of over fifty years passed almost a decade ago. Every time my parents offered a room in the big house to him, he declined.

I shook my head. “No. I guess I haven’t been in there in a while.”

“Dad’s hopin’ to convince him to sell the pieces at craft fairs or to tourists.”

“From wranglin’ cattle to whittlin’ steers?” There was no way. “I don’t see him takin’ that one easy.”

“Not my problem for now.”

Vaughn stuck his head out the door when Ma hollered for everyone to get to the table for dinner. He was gone before I could offer to race him. Some things never changed, no matter your age. Beating your siblings to the table for a chance to swipe a bite of something when Ma wasn’t looking was one of them.

I sauntered behind him, pulling out my phone when it rang as I took the stairs down to the main floor. Scarlett was video-calling me. She was probably just finishing with clients for the day. I stopped outside the dining room and answered, not wanting to miss a chance to see her beautiful smile.

“Hey, darlin’.”

“Hey!” She gave me a little wave, and I realized she was standing in her kitchen. “I was going to try out a couple of recipes and I thought I’d call and see how everything is going.”

“I was gonna call you soon. I booked a flight home for tomorrow,” I said. “Granddaddy came home today.”

“That’s amazing!” Scarlett’s face brightened at the news. “I’m so glad he’s doing better. And that you’re coming home. I can pick you up if you want.”

“If you’re sure.” I leaned my shoulder against the wall and stretched my leg. “I should be back in the evenin’ about dinner time.”

“Then I’ll pick you up and make sure you’re fed,” she offered.

“I won’t turn down one of your meals.” A throat cleared behind me, and I turned to see my dad, with everyone but Granddaddy, standing behind him.

“I told you I heard him talkin’ to a girl last night!” my mother whispered excitedly.

I closed my eyes, realizing they’d likely seen and heard Scarlett. I’d have some explaining to do. “Look, dinner’s on the table here, and I need to get sat. I’ll call you after, okay?”

“Yeah, talk to you soon.”

“Bye, darlin’.”

I ended the call and slipped my phone back into my pocket, nodding my head at Dad. He was an older version of me, with graying hair and weathered lines around his eyes. If you asked, he'd tell you they were lines of a life well-lived. The more the merrier your days had been. Then he'd kiss my mother and say she was the reason he had so many, because he'd been the happiest man alive since he'd met her.

“Son.” He slapped me on the back and kneaded my shoulders. “I think your ma wants a word with you at the table.”

I groaned, and he let out a deep laugh as we sat down. We bowed as he said grace over the food and told us all to hold back until our ma had gotten the first serving of the meal she'd spent time making for us. It was a tradition ingrained in us from early childhood and enforced even further when they had teenage boys running around eating everything in sight.

“So,” she started, beaming at me. “Darlin’, hm? What’s her name, Rhett?”

“Scarlett,” I said reluctantly.

“Oh!” She bounced in her chair and grabbed my dad’s arm. “Did you hear that, Vernon? Rhett and Scarlett! It’s like it’s meant to be!”

“Seems providential,” my dad wisely agreed, indulging her.

“Oh, yes.” Ma nodded. “What does she do? Where did you meet her? Tell us everythin’.”

I took a deep breath and started from the beginning, knowing my mother wouldn't accept anything less. It wasn't a chore to talk about her, and by the end of the night, my mother was no doubt hearing wedding bells in the future.



Cool, damp Northwest air surrounded me as I stepped out of the airport in Portland. I savored the scent of rain that still lingered and looked at the cars lining the curb.

“Rhett!” Scarlett’s eyes were smiling at me before I could see her mouth over the heads of other passengers waiting for rides at the arrivals section of the airport. People parted for me as I wheeled my bag through the crowd to get to her, where she leaned against my Jeep.

“Hey, darlin’.” I popped my bags in the back and swept her up into my arms, spinning her around as I kissed her.

I’d just visited home, but Scarlett gave my heart the same feeling. It was confusing and incredible at the same time. I breathed in her caramel scent before setting her back on the ground and taking the keys from her hand. She took my hand as I held the door open for her, climbing into the passenger seat. It was where she belonged—at my side.

I guided us through the airport traffic and through the tail end of Monday evening work traffic downtown before

reaching my building and parking in my spot. Scarlett filled the entire drive with questions about my trip and updates about her week, even though we'd spoken every day.

I took Scarlett straight upstairs and was surprised by the smell of spices and meat that permeated the condo. She grinned at me. "I told you I'd have dinner ready for you."

"You're too good to me." I dipped my head and kissed her again. As soon as we ate, I'd spend the rest of the evening as close to her as possible. Abandoning my bags at the door and getting out of my boots and hat, I wandered to the kitchen. "What did you make?"

"It's a southwest chicken soup," she said, following behind. "Since I didn't know how long it would take to pick you up, I used your crock pot."

"Good call." I opened the lid and breathed in the salsa and green chiles she must have added.

"Go wash off the travel germs, and I'll serve it up," she said, playfully pushing me away from the food.

Not one to argue with good sense, I left her there to shower and change into fresh clothes. That was the best part of coming home—smelling like home again. That, and sleeping in your own bed, but I doubted we'd be sleeping much.

Scarlett had steaming bowls of soup sitting on the dining table, and she waited for me in her seat. She'd topped it with crushed tortilla chips and sour cream. I dug in, nearly inhaling

the first bowl and grabbing a second while she still worked through her first serving.

“I want the recipe,” I said between bites.

She laughed. “I’ll email it to you. Can’t beat this on a cold, rainy evening. It’s like a hug in a bowl.”

“I think I’d prefer your hugs, still,” I said. It was cheesy, but I didn’t care. “All of them. In fact, I think maybe we should go to bed and... hug.”

“You think so, huh?” Scarlett’s gaze heated, and she pushed her chair back, taking the bowls to the sink.

“Leave it,” I said. “I’ll wash them. Then I hope to find a *very* naked woman waitin’ for me in my bed.”

“Naked?” she repeated teasingly.

“With your legs spread,” I added. “I’ve got a hankerin’ for dessert.”

Scarlett giggled and jogged to the bedroom while I washed the dishes as fast as I could. I unplugged the crock pot to let the soup cool before I put it away, then stalked toward my room, peeling my shirt off on the way to save time.

I stopped in my tracks when I entered, seeing Scarlett exactly as I’d asked. Wearing nothing but a saucy grin—and my black Stetson.

“*Fuck.*” A feral growl rumbled in my chest, and I nearly tripped, stripping out of my sweats and boxer briefs. I dove on the bed, hooking my arms under her thighs and making her

squeal as I pulled her to me. “I missed you so damn bad, Scarlett.”

“Me, too.” Her words cut off on a gasp as I buried my face in her pussy and ate her like I’d promised. I was selfish, making her come again and again for my pleasure, because I couldn’t stop once her flavor was back on my tongue.

When I finally pulled away and replaced my fingers and tongue with my cock, Scarlett was writhing and desperate. And so wet that I sank inside her fully in one long, slow thrust. She fluttered around me, adjusting to my size and so damn hot and tight that I feared I wouldn’t last as long as I wanted.

“This,” I whispered against her ear, nibbling on her lobe. “This is exactly where I want to be. Here, with you. In you. And I never want to leave again.”

Chapter Fifteen



MY HOUSE SMELLED LIKE pumpkin and spice and everything nice. Since Thanksgiving was only a week away, I'd been working on my fall holiday recipes for the cookbook. Today I was focusing on every recipe that contained pumpkin. There was a risk of getting so sick of the ingredient that I wouldn't want anything pumpkin for at least a month, but I was willing to chance it to take advantage of all the Thanksgiving food ingredient sales at the store.

I paced back and forth in my kitchen, still nervous about Rhett's arrival, even though he was regularly around. And in me. His presence made me simultaneously on edge and relaxed. It was oxymoronic, but I hadn't figured out how to balance all those emotions out. And I wouldn't wish to see him less.

When he knocked on the door, I jumped, then chastised myself for acting ridiculous. Pulling my shoulders back, I hurried to let him in.

“Are you ready to become a pumpkin?” I asked as I opened the door.

Rhett gave me that easy grin and swept me into his arms, enveloping me in a hug that had me melting against him. “I hope that’s a dirty offer, darlin’.”

“Sorry.” I steadied myself and led him to the kitchen, showing him the counter full of ingredients. “I mean, you may become a pumpkin after tasting everything we’re making today.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and perused the items. “That’s a lot of canned pumpkin.”

“I found a good deal on it,” I explained. “And this way I don’t have to save the tiny bit of leftover in the can. I can use it for other recipes.”

“Smart.” Rhett rolled up the sleeves of his red plaid shirt and washed his hands. “Where do we start?”

“Gluten-free baking isn’t much different from what you already do,” I explained, pulling out the recipes we were using. “I try to craft recipes that can be made with regular flour, too. So many people get fancy with their special flour blends, and the average home cook exploring gluten-free baking for the first time may not have access to specialty ingredients.”

“Makes sense,” he said as he picked up a pumpkin chocolate chip muffin recipe. “So you don’t add anythin’ special?”

“I mean, skill and love count, right?”

“Always.” Rhett lifted my chin and pressed his lips to mine, and I raised up on my toes, pulling him to me. For a moment, I forgot what we were supposed to be doing. He smiled and bit his lower lip as he backed away. “I appreciate the skill.”

And the love? I wanted to add. I didn’t, unsure if we were there yet in whatever we had with our budding relationship. It wouldn’t be fair to start that if I wasn’t ready to say the words with my whole heart. I loved spending time with Rhett, loved getting to know him as a person—and physically—but I didn’t know if it went so far as love yet.

“I brought you a gift.” Rhett set a bag on the counter. “Though knowin’ what I do about today’s plans, you might not want it.”

I hushed him and grabbed the gift. “I’ll always want something you’ve brought.”

Nestled in the tissue paper was chocolate syrup and —“Pumpkin spice syrup for coffee.”

Rhett’s rumbling chuckle turned into full-on belly laughter as I dissolved into giggles. It was fate that he’d picked today to bring me that particular gift.

“Well, when in Rome.” I put the syrups next to my coffee machine and grabbed two mugs. “Can you grab the cream?”

Rhett handed me the bottle of it from the fridge, and I frothed it to soft peaks, adding it after I'd put a few pumps of the syrups into each mug. I quirked a brow and offered him one of the mugs.

He lifted his mug and clinked it against mine. "Here's to becomin' pumpkins."

"Fair enough." The coffee was pretty damn good, even if it was pumpkin spice. "I'm not going to complain about this. Thanks for thinking of me."

"It'd be harder for me not to have you on my mind, darlin'."

I shook a finger at him. "No. Don't start talking sweet to me, Rhett Roberts. We have things to do."

"And what happens if I talk sweet, Scarlett?" he asked with a smirk, his free hand wandering around my waist, then lower to cup my ass through my jeans.

"You know very well what your voice does to me." I didn't need to say it. Rhett was an expert in making that drawl of his thicker to make me tingle all over. "There's no time to make a stop in my bedroom."

He looked pointedly around the kitchen. "Doesn't have to be in a bed."

"Stop," I laughed. "No canoodling anywhere right now. Baking."

"Fine," he sighed. "But I reserve you for canoodlin' later this week."

“Deal.” I started opening cans of pumpkin puree. “Let’s get started.”



“I’m going to freeze my tits off out here,” Jamie groused, pulling the collar of her coat higher.

Rhett patted her on the back. “Suck it up, buttercup. You haven’t felt cold until you’re out lookin’ for an injured steer in the middle of a snowstorm at two in the mornin’.”

“You have not done that,” she fired back. “Have you?”

“You’ll never know for sure, will you?” he teased, grinning.

“Come on.” I pulled on the sleeve of his black leather duster. “We need to get in line if we don’t want to stand in the cold longer.”

“You can have my scarf if you need it,” Simon offered to Jamie. “Eli can keep my blood heated.”

The guys all chuckled at that, and Jamie swiped the scarf from Simon’s neck, wrapping it around her head until all we could see were her eyes. There was only one group waiting in front of us, and they were just climbing on the wagon.

“Shouldn’t be too long until the other one is back, folks,” the worker told us.

“We should have stopped for hot chocolate and cider first,” Ella said, rubbing her hands together.

“Then you’d have to worry about spilling it all over yourself on the hayride,” Lucia pointed out.

“Did none of you think to dress warm?” Rhett asked.

“This *is* warm for Oregon,” Ella explained. “Jeans, sweaters, coats, hats.”

We’ll all dressed the same, except for Rhett, who looked like a ranch hand from the movies with his long hat, long coat, and cowboy boots. I half expected him to hop on a horse and pull me in front of him to ride off together.

“At least it’s not raining,” Eli pointed out.

Jamie slapped a hand over his mouth. “Shh, don’t jinx it.”

“Relax, there’s not a cloud in the sky.” Rhett pointed up, where the moon shone with a ring around it because the temps had unexpectedly dropped. In the northwest, the weather had a habit of fucking with the people that lived in the area. It would rain for days on end, then the temperature would drop down to freezing, and the skies would clear up, stealing any chance of seeing snow.

I heard the bells before the horses and wagon came into view through the trees. The seven of us climbed onto the fabric-covered hay bales, huddling close for warmth as the driver urged the horses forward. It smelled of animal and grass and was a lot less romantic than I’d hoped as we bounced around with every bump in the muddy road.

“When you said you wanted to give me a taste of fall in the northwest, this isn’t quite what I imagined,” Rhett whispered close to my ear. “We have hay and wagons in Texas.”

I looked at him. “What did you think I was suggesting?”

“Honestly, I thought it was a euphemism until you told me we were going to a farm.” He chuckled, and his arm tightened around my waist, pulling me closer. “I haven’t been on a hayride in years.”

“Don’t forget the hay maze after,” I reminded him.

“Never,” Rhett said with mock severity. “I wouldn’t want to miss out on any fall tradition.”

I laid my head against his chest and kissed his jaw. “What would you say if I told you I’d never done any of this until I was trying to impress you?”

He laughed. “I’d say I’m glad you find me important enough to impress.”

“You two are disgustingly cute, you know that?” Ella wrinkled her nose. “I’d tell you to get a room, but you’d probably leave early to do it.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Eli said, looking at Simon as the wagon came to a lurching stop, sending us all tipping toward the front. Rhett caught me, and Jamie slammed into my side, while Lucia nearly fell off the hay.

She was the first off the wagon, looking back at the horses warily. “I think I’m too old for that.”

Jamie looked at the parents waiting with their kids for the next round and murmured, “Riders beware.”

Their eyes widened, and I couldn’t help but laugh at how dramatic she was. “It wasn’t that bad, but I’m sure the maze will be better.”

“Um, no thanks.” Ella held up her hands in surrender. “I’m heading back to the barn for some cider and live music.”

Lucia pointed after her. “I’m following.”

That left five of us until Eli and Simon exchanged a look. I sighed. “You’re abandoning us, too?”

“Not abandoning,” Eli said. “More like sending you support from afar. We’ll save you a seat at the table!”

I turned to Jamie. “Well?”

“I’m game!” she said. “But my game is the horseshoe toss by the barn, so I’m going to go win me some tickets and a free cider.”

Rhett rocked on his heels and eyed the entrance of the maze. “I’ll give you a thirty-second start.”

“What?”

“When I reach zero, I’m comin’ in after you,” he began. “So you’d best hurry your sweet little ass up. Thirty.”

“Rhett.”

“Twenty-nine.”

I took off, cursing under my breath as the height of the hay bales cut the light off. The first turn ended abruptly, and I

doubled back, heading in the other direction, counting in my head. Thirty seconds ended too quickly, and I had no way of knowing how far I was in the maze. Others seemed to be of the same mind as my friends, because the maze appeared to be empty.

“Are you runnin’, darlin’?” Rhett’s voice was muffled, but too close for comfort.

My breaths came in panted bursts, puffing white out in front of me in the moonlight. All I could hear were my feet crunching on the wet hay-covered ground and my heartbeat in my ears, a rapid pounding as I felt the adrenaline rush.

“I can hear you, darlin’,” Rhett taunted, his voice louder. “What should I do when I catch you?”

He was baiting me, and I pinched my lips together, refusing to give away my position by answering. I slowed my breathing and stepped as lightly as possible, slapping a hand over my mouth when I ran into a creepy-looking scarecrow at a dead end. I spun around, running into the solid mass of one tall Texan.

Rhett’s arms wrapped around my waist, hauling me against his chest. He leaned close and bit my neck in a way that made me go limp in his hold. “Gotcha.”

I wish I could have railed at him for cheating, but he’d caught me fair and square. My half-hearted struggles were no match for his strength. He simply picked me up and carried me. A gap in the bales marked the end of the maze.

“You were so close,” he murmured. “But now I’ve got you. Come with me.”

Rhett took my hand and led me in the opposite direction of the path that wound back to the main barn. Instead, he guided me to one of the outbuildings, where hay was stacked in tiered bales. They were dark, with no sign of people.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to be in here,” I said when he stopped in a shadowed corner.

“I think I’ve got you exactly where I want you, darlin’,” he purred, dipping his head to kiss me. I could barely see him under his hat, but every inch of him was hot against me. He slipped his long coat off and draped it over one of the bales. “On your knees.”

Oh, so that’s where we were going. I knelt on the coat and Rhett’s hands roughly reached around, deftly unfastening my jeans and pulling them down with my panties, exposing me. His breathing was heavy as I heard the telltale sound of his belt buckle, then the zip of his jeans. A hand roughly pressed me forward until I braced on my hands, then his fingers were inside me, drawing a low moan from my throat.

“Shh,” he hushed me. “Somebody might hear. Or see.”

My pussy fluttered around him at the prospect of getting caught. It was a rush, just like it had been at the haunted house. I’d discovered something new about myself—fucking in public, just out of view, turned me on.

“Fuck, you just soaked my fingers, Scarlett.” Rhett’s fingers found the spot I needed, and he teased me on the edge of an orgasm until I whimpered helplessly. “You like the idea of me fuckin’ you right here where anybody might walk in.”

“Yes,” I breathed, squeaking when he pulled his fingers free and notched the head of his cock at my entrance. I pushed back on him, gasping at the stretch as I took him inside.

“That’s my girl,” he encouraged, working all the way in. “I love how you surround me. Steady now.”

It was the only warning he gave before rocking his hips. Rhett liked to move slow, but deep, hitting my g-spot with every languorous thrust. He braced himself on one of the bales, holding my hip and moving faster.

“Please,” I begged softly. “Harder.”

“Ah, darlin’.” Rhett’s control snapped, and he grabbed me with both hips, surging deeper, faster and faster. “Work yourself for me.”

His hands took my weight, and I slipped a hand between my legs, my fingers moving back and forth over my clit until I moaned Rhett’s name as my muscles tightened and I broke free, my orgasm flooding my body.

“Damn,” Rhett grunted, planting deep and following with his release. He rubbed my sides under my clothes where he’d gripped my hips. “Did I hurt you?”

I righted myself and pulled my clothes back into place as he slipped free and tucked himself away. “Let’s make an

agreement. If you hurt me, I'll let you know."

"I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I know, and I'm glad you care," I said, standing and stretching my legs. I rubbed my face, which felt hot after the exertion. "But it kind of ruins the afterglow."

Rhett nodded, buckling his belt. "You'll tell me if I do somethin' wrong?"

"Promise."

"Then I'll try not to ask." He picked his coat up and shook the hay off, then slipped it back on.

"Have I told you that you look a bit like The Duke dressed like that?" I flirted, following him out of the building and back around to the main barn. The quick bout of sex had heated my entire body, and I unzipped my coat to let some of the cool air in.

Rhett chuckled and took my hand. "No, but I hope it's a good thing."

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "Makes me want to wear your hat again."

He growled and squeezed my hand. "Later."

The others were waiting for us around one of the tables inside. It felt like I was leaving a fantasy and facing the real world again.

"Did you save us cider?" Rhett asked jovially.

“Fuck, Scarlett, what happened to you?” Jamie rushed forward, grasping my chin and examining my face.

“What do you mean?” I felt my face, which was still warm. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, darlin’.” Rhett sounded concerned, and my heart beat faster. “Are you allergic to hay?”

“No, why?”

“You’ve got hives,” Ella touched her own face, showing where I had marks.

Eli covered his mouth with his hand. “Girl, you need to get some meds.”

“Is it bad?” I asked, turning to Rhett. The burning sensation wouldn’t stop, and I pulled on the bottom of my sweatshirt, trying to let more air in.

Rhett nodded. “I think I need to take you to the hospital, darlin’.”

“It burns,” I told him. He looked so remorseful that I didn’t fight him as he led me out of the barn to a chorus of well-wishes from my friends. By the time we reached the Jeep, I was miserable. I groaned as Rhett buckled me in, pulling my coat off and wishing I could strip naked.

“Just hold tight, darlin’,” he soothed as he climbed behind the wheel. “I’ve got you.”

Chapter Sixteen



LUCK HAD ABANDONED ME, and fate had a dark sense of humor. First, the gluten. Now Scarlett was covered in red and white welts because I'd fucked her on hay.

After spending three hours in the emergency room while she got lots of steroids and antihistamines, I'd taken Scarlett home because she'd insisted it would make her feel better to sleep in her own bed. It wasn't how I'd imagined spending the night at her house for the first time.

"Come on, darlin'." I held her door open, and she practically fell into my arms, looking up at me sleepily.

"Your eyes are like the clearest summer day," she murmured as I held her. "Like a cloudless sky I could stare at for hours."

"Tell you what," I said, practically carrying her to her doorstep. "I'll let you stare at me all day tomorrow if you'd like."

“Yeah,” Scarlett breathed.

I set her down at the door, holding her shoulders so she wouldn't slump down. “Where're your keys, darlin'?”

“Endless ocean eyes. Sometimes like stormy seas when you're sad. I don't like it when you're sad. It makes me sad, too.” The meds had done a doozy on her, and it was clear she'd be no help. “You should always be happy, Rhett. Promise me.”

“I promise I'll try.” I fished through Scarlett's purse until I felt the cold metal of her keys, then pulled them out and unlocked her door. It took some coordination to get her shoes off. When I faced the stairs, I gave up on getting her to walk and tossed her over my shoulder, taking the steps two at a time.

“*Whee!*” she cried out when I dropped her down on her bed. “Flying in those blue eyes, baby.”

“I think whatever they gave you has you flyin' high.” I chuckled and looked in her closet. “Where are your pajamas, darlin'? Just point for me.”

Scarlett's arm shot straight up off the bed, and she cocked her wrist at an angle, pointing her finger at the dresser. I found an oversized t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

“Okay, you're gonna have to be a bit less boneless and help a man out.” I helped her sit up and pulled her sweatshirt and t-shirt off together, only to have her flop backward when her arms were free. “Not yet. Let's get you naked.”

“*Mm*, nakie,” she repeated with a giggle. “I like being naked with you. How ‘bout you get naked, too?”

“It’s unfortunately not that kind of night, darlin’.” I unhooked her bra and got it off, then quickly slipped the sleep shirt over her head. She had enough wherewithal to stick her arm through the sleeves. I let her lay back while I removed her pants and socks and replaced them with the soft cotton shorts. In the dim light, I could just make out the turkeys printed on the material, and it made me smile despite the circumstances.

I managed to pull the covers back and get Scarlett under them, tucking the comforter close to her chin. When I turned to go, she stopped me with two simple words. “Don’t go.”

I turned, and her eyes met mine. She wasn’t lucid, but she patted the empty spot behind her, and I had no good reason to deny her. It wasn’t the first night we’d spent together. I stripped down to my boxer briefs and circled around to the opposite side of the bed, sliding in behind her and pulling her back to my chest.

“Sleep, darlin’.”

“*Mm*,” Scarlett hummed, burrowing into me and resting her head on my arm. “You make everything better.”

I didn’t share her sentiment, but I was glad she didn’t blame me for what had happened. I felt guilty enough for both of us. While she fell sound asleep, I dozed on and off, waking every time she stirred in case she needed something. I gave up on sleep when the sky lightened, and she didn’t budge when I slid

my arm out from under her and tucked a pillow at her back to cocoon her.

I dressed and then sat in her living room for an hour before getting restless. So I left her a note on her nightstand telling her I was running home and would return soon. It didn't take long to get home to shower and change. I was worried my clothes might still have hay on them, and I didn't want a repeat of the previous night.

As soon as the pharmacy opened, I was there picking up her prescriptions and all the ingredients I'd need to cook her breakfast. Since I didn't know where Scarlett kept a recipe for gluten-free pancakes and I didn't want to wake her, I'd found her gluten-free flour and resorted to an old recipe from childhood.

We'd called them Granddaddy's pancakes, made with flour, sugar, milk, and eggs. It was simple and resulted in a crêpe-like pancake, perfect for filling and rolling. Remembering Scarlett's tears last night, I groaned and flipped the pancake I was making. There wasn't much I could do to fix what I'd done. The doctors had done their part, and I was sticking around to make sure she got better.

I slid the finished pancake onto the stack I'd already made and switched the burner off, running water in the pan and leaving it in the sink. She couldn't have alcohol with the meds they'd given her, so I poured orange juice into fancy glasses, skipping the champagne.

When I heard Scarlett in the shower, I assembled plates for us, stuffing the pancakes with berries and a cream I made up with a little sour cream and powdered sugar. I drizzled a little more over the top of the rolled pancakes and added bacon and eggs to the plates before setting them on the table. It was probably too messy for breakfast in bed.

I found her standing naked in the bathroom; her back to the mirror, head turned to see the marks on her back and side. She caught me watching and gave me a wry grin. “This isn’t the reminder I want to have of our night together.”

“I picked up your meds.” Holding up the bag, I took the box out and opened it. “Turn around so I can put this stuff on it.”

Scarlett didn’t protest as I applied the steroid cream to the handprint-shaped masses of hives from mid-back to her ass. “In case I haven’t said it enough, I’m really sorry. I wouldn’t have taken you in there if I’d known this would happen.”

“And here I just thought you were secretly trying to take me down.” Her words were laced with dry humor.

“Well,” I said, playing into it. “When the gluten didn’t work, I decided to try another approach.”

Her shoulders shook with laughter, and I turned her to face me, kissing her forehead and running my fingers through her wet hair. “I made you breakfast to make up for it.”

“I guess I’ll accept your apology,” she conceded, lifting a finger in the air. “If there’s bacon.”

“Three slices each,” I confirmed.

“Then you’re forgiven.” She pulled on a t-shirt and sweats, forgoing the undergarments.

I could see the hardened points of her nipples through the white fabric and averted my eyes. Now was not the time to get hard and drag her to bed. She needed to rest and recover.

Scarlett let out a happy noise when she saw her food, and plopped indelicately into her chair, not bothering to wait for me before digging in. I moved more slowly, savoring my bites and watching her pleasure. It warmed my chest when she was happy.

After eating half the first rolled pancake, she paused and pointed a fork at me. “I’ll have you know I’m trusting you made all this gluten-free. But it’s so good it might be worth getting glutened over.”

“I plan to do my damndest never to see you sick like that again, darlin’.” I scooped up a forkful of eggs. “I found your flour in the pantry.”

“I always knew you were resourceful,” she said with her mouth full, shoving her dark hair behind her back when it threatened to fall into her place. “So tell me what we’re doing for Thanksgiving at the restaurant.”

“You don’t have to worry about that right now.” I’d planned on having Scarlett come to the restaurant and help teach the kitchen staff how to handle gluten-free prep and maybe give us a few recipes to try making.

“Rhett, I’m not broken,” she said, exasperated. “I’m a little itchy. That won’t stop me. How about I come by in a couple of days.”

“Sure,” I conceded with a sigh. As much as I thought Scarlett should rest for a few days, it was clear she had other ideas. “That works for me.”

“Great!” She grinned at me. “I’ll take payment in the form of those smoked chicken thighs and a bucket of barbecue sauce.”



True to her word, Scarlett showed up at the restaurant two mornings later, complete with a bag full of printed booklets with laminated covers to distribute to the staff. She stood in front of them in the kitchen, smiling and holding one up. I leaned back against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest, content to take her in.

She didn’t try to dress up to meet the staff. She looked casual with her jeans and black t-shirt, her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. I loved how her green-gold eyes shone when she was excited about something.

“I know some of you probably don’t give a fuck—” She looked at me. “I can say fuck, right?”

I nodded and tried not to laugh. “Yeah, they’ve heard it a time or two.”

“Oh, good.” She resumed her presentation. “Some of you probably don’t give a fuck about anything gluten-free, and I get that. It’s not something that affects you, and remembering all these new rules is tedious.”

Everybody listened carefully, and I found myself relaxing by the time Scarlett brought out the recipes and gathered the gluten-free flour to teach us how to make pies. It was convenient for the season and a perfect way to end a meal of southern barbecue.

“I know some people thicken pie filling with flour, but cornstarch is naturally gluten-free.” Scarlett tossed the apples Dolly chopped up into a pot with a bit of water, sugar, spices, and cornstarch. “How’s the custard coming along, Curtis?”

“Pie tins are filled, and I popped them in the oven,” he replied, cleaning his prep area.

“Perfect.” She glanced at me while stirring her filling. “The pecan pies?”

“Done.” I tipped my head toward my sous chef, Lex, who had come in on her day off. “But I think I caught Lex stealin’ a sample.”

“You dirty liar!” She snapped me with the towel at her waist, and I jumped back, but couldn’t avoid the sting of the tip.

“Don’t let him get away with that.” Scarlett laughed at our antics and pulled the saucepan from the stove, carefully dividing the apple filling between the pie tins with the crust already lining the bottom. “Okay, these are ready.”

“I got it.” I moved the pies to a tray and put them in the second oven to bake. “Let me fix you a plate while we wait, darlin’.”

“I hope you have those thighs ready,” she said, rubbing her hands together.

I leaned close and murmured suggestively. “Oh, baby, my thighs are always ready for you.”

Her eyes darted down like I’d intended, and I took her hand, letting her feel me under the counter where nobody could see. “This seems highly unprofessional, chef.”

“I’ll admit you reduce me to my baser urges, darlin’.”

Scarlett laughed and pulled away, wandering to the meat prep area where Ruben had just brought in a tray of chicken thighs. She sweet-talked that man into giving her two on a plate, and the others rushed to offer her food they knew she could eat.

When she returned with a plate piled high, I motioned to the dining room. “It’s pretty slow right now. Why don’t you go grab a table, and I’ll meet you out there? One of the servers can grab a drink for you.”

“I’m not waiting to eat, so you’d better hurry.” Scarlett blew me a kiss and disappeared through the door to the front of the house. I grabbed myself a plate and followed, coming around the corner in time to hear a scoff that was filled with such disdain it made me stop in my tracks.

“What are you doing back here?”

“Um, hi,” Scarlett responded. “I came to do some education, and now I’m eating lunch.”

“It wasn’t enough that you tried to ruin Rhett already?” Diedre spat. “Now you’re back to cause more trouble?”

“No trouble, just help.” Scarlett was staying calm, but if I knew her, she probably wanted to snap back at the younger woman. “Maybe you should have sat through the education so you understand how important it is to write down food allergies when you’re taking orders.”

There it was. I didn’t wait for Diedre’s response, coming up behind her and setting my plate across from Scarlett’s. “I don’t remember askin’ anybody to champion me.”

Diedre’s face turned cherry red as she stumbled over her words. “I—I was just... I mean, she... It wasn’t fair to you.”

“It was an accident,” I corrected her. “And life isn’t fair. It wouldn’t feel fair if I fired you on the spot, would it?”

She looked at her feet. “N—no, sir.”

“Rhett.” Scarlett shook her head, mouthing *don’t*. And saved the server’s job. Maybe she did it because of lingering guilt over the reviews, but I wouldn’t go against her wishes.

“I never want to hear you speaking to somebody like that again in my restaurant. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Diedre whispered.

“You’ll find time to read one of the booklets Scarlett brought. You have no excuse to make any mistakes when it

comes to allergies.” I lifted my brows when Diedre started to make a face. “No more excuses. Next time you’re done. Get back to work.”

She scurried off, and I took Scarlett’s hand. “You’re too nice sometimes.”

“Everybody is brash when they’re young,” she replied with a shrug. “Now, you’re in for something special. Watch how I can finish these thighs.”

I chuckled and started in on my food, the incident all but forgotten now that I was focused on Scarlett. “Should I buy a shirt that says *my girlfriend eats better than yours?*”

She paused with the fork in mid-air. “Girlfriend. That’s the first time you’ve said it.”

“Yeah, darlin’.” It was past time I’d made it official between us. I wanted to call her mine. I took her free hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles, making her blush pink. “That okay with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then show me how my *girlfriend* can tuck it away.”

Chapter Seventeen



“DARLIN’, WE NEED TO get goin’ if we’re gonna be on time,” Rhett called up the stairs. “I’ve got all the food packed in the Jeep.

“I’ll be down in a minute!”

He was a damn angel. Only his wings would be plaid flannel and his halo made of a ring of sausages. Much like the ones he’d smoked for Eli and Simon’s friendsgiving dinner on Sunday evening.

I swiped a wine-colored gloss on and added a bit of hairspray to set the loose curls, then fluffed it at the roots before twisting it up on the back of my head and pinning it in place. It showed off the loose turtleneck on my rusty orange sweater dress. The sleeves were oversized, while the body clung to my curves.

I decided to skip the maroon belt—who wanted to restrict their stomach on a holiday that was practically dedicated to consuming as much food as possible? No, I'd do my part and sample every dish on the table until I looked six months pregnant. Better to bloat of my own volition than from an accidental gluten exposure.

My phone vibrated with a text message from Eli. *I know you're still doing your hair. Get your ass in the car.*

That was an awfully accurate assumption. I picked up my phone and texted him back as I headed downstairs. *When did you get Rhett's number?*

“So you're talking to my friends now?” I asked casually as I put my boots on.

Rhett leaned against the door and held his hands up. “They texted me first.”

“You realize that means you're one of them now, right?” When he grinned, I shook my finger at him. “That's not necessarily a good thing. Wait until you get a call at two in the morning asking for food because they couldn't possibly think of grabbing midnight tacos when you no doubt have some ribs in the fridge.”

“That sounds more like a memory than a hypothetical.” He chuckled and held the door open for me. “Which one of them did that?”

“Eli,” I responded as the devil himself texted back a paltry excuse about Jamie accidentally memorizing Rhett's number

when he called me. Rhett held my door open and helped me up into the Jeep. “Simon was out of town, so he was lonely and couldn’t possibly wait until the following day to come over for my chocolate cake. So he was at my house by three and we ended up cuddling on the couch while we ate cake and watched old reruns of Golden Girls.”

“Could be worse.”

“I swear, if you tell me you had to walk naked through a thunderstorm while wild pigs chased you as you tried to find some kind of livestock, I’m going to slap you with one of those sausages,” I threatened playfully.

“Hey, you don’t know that it didn’t happen.”

I rolled my eyes and turned the music up to end the conversation. It only made him laugh, and then he sang the rest of the way to Eli and Simon’s house. I couldn’t be annoyed with him when I listened to his beautiful voice crooning love songs as the rain pelted the windows.

Rhett pulled an umbrella out and held it over my head when we arrived so the food wouldn’t get wet, and I didn’t even bother telling him Portlanders didn’t use them on principle. He proved chivalry wasn’t dead with every gentlemanly action.

“Finally!” Eli threw his arms up when we walked through the front door, arms heavy with food. He hugged us both and waved us through to the kitchen. I let the scents and sounds envelop me like a warm hug. It was one of those things that always felt like home.

I let Rhett walk ahead and leaned toward Eli. “If you ever use him to pester me about being on time again, I’ll block your number on both our phones.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, sweetie, I still have the others.”

I rolled my eyes and set the pies and cheddar biscuits on the counter. Simon waltzed by and collected my coat, and Jamie helped move things to the table. Unlike some families, our friendsgiving meal was served at one time, with mains, sides, and desserts all arranged on the table. Eli reluctantly removed the centerpiece so we could make everything fit. Rhett handed the cornbread dressing to Ella and brought his other covered dish as we sat down.

“What did you bring, cowboy?” Jamie asked, peering at the food.

“My ma’s cornbread dressing.” He pointed to the dish, then set the other on the table and removed the lid, revealing the smoked sausages. “And since all ya’ll seem to have an obsession with sizable sausage, I figured I’d bring you some.”

Eli’s jaw dropped. “You did *not*.”

The others muffled their laughter as they eyed the large sausages in the dish. Rhett had strategically placed them in the very center of the table, like a phallic centerpiece. It was fitting, given who we all were.

“Point to you, cowboy.” Jamie made an invisible tick mark in the air. “Well played.”

Rhett tipped his hat to everybody before removing it and setting it on the back of the living room couch. There was no prayer or going around the table, and we didn't have to suffer through the awkward moments of saying what we were most thankful for and inwardly grimacing when somebody else took our answer first.

Eli cleared his throat and tapped his wine glass with his knife. "You know the drill. Everybody is in charge of serving whichever dishes are closest to them. Call out what you want when your plate goes around."

"Pass your plates for turkey!" Simon carved the bird and placed slices on our plates as they were passed to him.

Rhett leaned close and murmured, "You get what's on this side, and I'll get what's on the other. Then we can switch."

"Good plan." I filled my plate with a little bit of everything on my side of the table—turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans, dressing, biscuits, fruit salad, and, of course, sausage. While Ella went for dessert first, I preferred to leave it for the end of the meal—a reward for making it through everything else. Plus, I was tired of desserts after two weeks of baking and photographing things for the cookbook.

We fell into easy conversation, and I found myself quieter than usual because I was enjoying how Rhett interacted with the friends I'd known for years. An outsider wouldn't have been able to tell that he was new. We'd drawn him into the fold completely, and I got a lump in the pit of my stomach at

the thought of things ever ending between us. He just *belonged*.

“I’d just like to thank Scarlett for finding a good southern boy to date,” Jamie said dramatically. “Rhett, you’re a good influence. She never made us pecan pie until you came into her life.”

“It’s my ma’s recipe.” His chest puffed up as he shared a bit about the history of the dessert in his family.

I’d never realized listening to somebody speak with pride about those they love was such a turn-on, but I had to shift in my seat with the building pressure low in my abdomen. Rhett caught my eye and raised a brow, his lip curling into a knowing smirk. I subtly nodded toward the door, and his large palm landed on my thigh, squeezing his agreement.

He pushed his chair back and stood, pulling my chair out for me. “I think we’re gonna head out. It’s gettin’ late, and the rain’s only pickin’ up out there.”

“You can just tell us you want to go home and do the nasty,” Lucia teased. “We fully support that type of exercise, if you’ll recall.”

“Especially after a big meal,” Jamie added. “Go work off those calories. Some of us should get to, at least.”

“Go kick off the Christmas season with a little holiday magic,” Eli teased. “Don’t worry about your dishes. I’ll drop off your things in a few days, just in case you need a little time.”

“Thank you.” I leaned down and kissed his cheek, then waved to the others. “Have a good night, everyone. See you next Sunday.”

As we pulled out of the driveway, Rhett flipped the radio on, and music filled the vehicle. He began singing along, and his enthusiasm was contagious. I joined in and didn’t feel an ounce of hesitation about the quality of my singing compared to his. We were laughing over tequila mistakes by the time Rhett pulled into my driveway.

Like every other car ride, he opened my door and helped me out. I found myself anticipating that brief moment our hands touched; the electricity that sparked between our fingers and shot to my heart, spreading warmth throughout my soul.

Only, this time, he didn’t let go. His long, thick fingers slipped between mine, and I looked down at the size disparity between us. Somehow, even with our many differences, we fit perfectly. I handed him my keys, and he opened the door, holding it so I could enter.

“Thanks for inviting me tonight,” Rhett said. His thumb ran along my jaw, and he drew me to him for a soft kiss. When he pulled away, I saw his intent to leave like the southern gentleman he was, but I didn’t want him to be chivalrous.

I reached out and fisted the open collar of his maroon pearl snap dress shirt and dragged him inside with me. “It’s time for bed. Lock the door behind you, Rhett.”

“Whatever the lady wants,” he said, humor lacing his words. The lock clicked, and I kicked off my shoes and shrugged off

my coat. Rhett wasted no time lining his boots up beside mine and hanging his hat over his jacket on the hook.

“Race you upstairs,” I teased, bolting ahead of him.

His feet pounded on the wood behind me. He had height, but I was nimble and more familiar with the house. I’d almost reached the top when I made the mistake of glancing behind me. Rhett was taking the steps two at a time, gaining fast. I squealed and took off again.

My fingertips had just reached my doorway when a powerful arm wrapped around my waist and lifted me entirely off the ground. I was suddenly face-to-face with Rhett, and he had a triumphant grin on his face.

“It’s a cryin’ shame you keep losin’ these races, darlin’.” He tossed me on my bed and slid his hands up my bare legs, slipping under the hem of my dress and reaching for the waistband of my lace panties. “What’s my reward this time?”

“Winner’s choice,” I breathed.

Rhett’s chuckle sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine and straight to my core, which was already wet. My body recognized that of my lover and practically flooded my underwear to prepare.

“I think I’ll start here,” he murmured, inhaling me and dragging the scrap of black lace down my thighs.

His lips worked back up, and I squirmed when the kisses tickled my inner thigh. A giggle transformed into a desperate moan as he parted my labia and swiped his tongue up my slit.

My hips bucked off the bed as he licked and sucked me, then slowly inserted two thick fingers. He knew exactly how to ply my body.

I watched the pleasure on his face as he devoured me, curling his fingers until the pressure inside became unbearable, and I shattered, my cries echoing off the walls. “Rhett!”

His drawl held a hint of gravel as he moved back and stripped out of his clothes. “I’ll take the grand prize now.”

I reached out and ran my hands down his chest, grasping his cock and stroking it, feeling the bead of liquid at the tip and swiping over it with my thumb. Rhett watched as I brought it to my mouth and sucked his taste, keeping my eyes on his so he could see how much I enjoyed it.

“You test a man’s control, darlin’.” He pulled me into position and lifted my hips.

The head of his cock entered me painfully slow. Rhett was never in a hurry when it came to sex. He fucked me like he was savoring a good glass of wine. His patience had been perfected over all those years babying meat until it was just right.

He moved like he was *making love*.

I froze, drawing in a sharp breath and closing my eyes. Rhett wasn’t just fucking me. It was more than that. His movements, the words he said—it was deep and unifying, like our souls intertwined for those minutes we were intimately connected.

Everything seemed new when I opened my eyes and looked at him again. I had a new awareness, and my hips rolled to meet him as he worked into me. He groaned when I flexed my muscles around him, my pussy sucking him in completely. I wanted to be as close as possible.

“More.” I tipped my hips again.

“Scarlett.” Rhett’s face was strained. “I don’t want to h—”

“Please. Don’t hold back,” I begged breathlessly. “Not now. I want all of you.”

He cursed low, and his fingers sank into my thighs, where they gripped his hips, thrusting and holding deep as he pressed my legs together and moved them over his shoulder. His lips were a whisper across my ankle. “Ah, Scarlett, you make me forget myself. I’m lost.”

His hips snapped forward, and the new angle was where I needed it most. I whimpered as he withdrew and reached a hand between my legs to circle my clit.

“Not lost.” My free hand found his where he gripped my thigh tightly. My tongue darted across my lower lip, the words catching as I struggled to hold my climax off. It was barreling its way between us too soon. “You’re *mine*. Come with me, Rhett.”

My orgasm pulsed from my center, taking him with me, his cock swelling then filling me. He gently lowered my legs and braced himself over me, stretching me, enveloping me. He

stroked my hair and kissed my forehead as our chests heaved from the moment's intensity.

Our breaths melded as Rhett's whispered drawl caressed the depths of my soul. "You're mine, too, darlin'."

Chapter Eighteen



I'D SMOKED AN ENTIRE flock of turkeys for the restaurant's Thanksgiving special. And the entire menu was gluten-free, thanks to Scarlett. We took something like three hundred orders for the meal. Given business was typically slow surrounding the holiday, and we closed for a couple days so the staff could celebrate with family and friends, the income was worth it.

True to my family's southern traditions, I served up the turkey with mashed potatoes, green beans, sweet potatoes, cornbread dressing, and their choice of pumpkin or pecan pie. The cheddar biscuits didn't make the cut because they didn't stay together well when packed with the other items. The dishwashers were finishing up for the day, and the rest of us were putting things away for Saturday's food service.

“You have plans for tomorrow, chef?” Dolly asked, washing her hands.

“My girlfriend invited me to Thanksgiving at her parents’ place.”

Her eyes widened. “Wow, meeting the parents. That’s a big step.”

“Yep.” I’d been thinking about it all week. My parents already loved Scarlett, and they hadn’t met her. I didn’t know how her family would feel about me. “Are you taking the kids to the coast?”

Dolly’s in-laws lived at the beach, so they often traveled south for the holidays since her parents lived in Wisconsin. “We’re heading down tonight and staying through Monday. The kids are ready to build sandcastles in the rain.”

I chuckled at that. Kids had a resilience that was often lost when crossing into adulthood. The same thing made them run out in the snow barefoot to catch snowflakes. I remembered sitting on the front porch as thunderstorms rolled through the sky over the ranch, heedless of the danger lightning posed.

“I hope all y’all have a good time, then.”

“You too, chef.” She untied her apron and hung it on the wall peg. “I’m going to head out if you don’t need me for anything else.”

“Nah, you’re good.” I pulled my ballcap off and ran my hand through my hair. “I think we’re done. Just gotta get everyone out the door so I can lock up.”

The restaurant never closed completely, even on holidays. It was a pain in the ass to shut the smokers down and get them up and running right again, so either DJ, Ruben, or I stopped by to check on them. They also connected to an app so we could check on them anytime, and it would notify us if the temperature drastically changed.

“Let’s wrap it up, y’all,” I called out to the kitchen. “Make sure you take your meals with you when you leave.”

I ensured they had enough food for themselves or their families and an entire pie each. It was only fair for them to partake of the food they’d worked hard to make and serve.

After one last check around the kitchen and front of the house, I hung my apron and gathered my coat and food, locking up on my way out. My phone rang as I climbed into the Jeep, and I started the engine to connect it to the Bluetooth.

“Hey, Ma.”

“Rhett, honey!” she chirped. It was the third time she’d called to check in this week. “How did the big day at the restaurant go?”

“We did well.” I buckled my seatbelt and pulled out of the lot. “Sold somethin’ like three hundred family meals.”

“That sounds amazin’!”

“How is everythin’ back home?” I wasn’t sure what could have happened in the forty-eight hours since I’d last spoken to her.

“Oh, busy, busy.” Pans clattered in the background. “I’ve been preparin’ for tomorrow. Just cleanin’ up for the night now. Your cousins came to town.”

“Oh?” Most of my family stayed close to Roberts, but Val and Cash high-tailed it out of there after finishing high school. Cash worked his ass off to get a law degree and practiced property law out of Atlanta. Valerie taught at a small private school in Houston but didn’t make the trip home often.

“Everyone is comin’ over around lunch.” She ran water in the background, and I could practically see her standing at the kitchen sink with the single light on above it, scrubbing dishes and placing them in the drying rack because it saved electricity. “You know it goes. Chit chat and cookin’ until supper, then the men’ll nap, and we’ll have dessert before everyone heads out.”

She rambled about the same things she told me the last time she called. The same things I remembered from childhood because not much changed in Roberts. I could practically smell the food on her table, hear Granddaddy snoring as he rested his eyes after dinner, and taste the phantom brown sugar sweetness of pecan pie on my tongue. “Sounds like a good time, Ma.”

“We’re gonna miss you.” Her soft-spoken words held the sting of a dagger to the heart.

Turning into the gym parking lot, I pulled into a free spot and cut the engine. “I miss you, too, Ma.”

“Have you decided about Christmas yet?” She asked at the end of every conversation we had.

Caught up in a moment of homesick weakness, I sighed. “I’ll come back for Christmas.”

“Oh, honey, you’ve made my day!” she gushed, clapping her dishwashing gloves together. “It’ll be just like old times. Everybody misses you so much, Rhett. It’s not the same without you here.”

I didn’t bother to remind her I’d just been home for a week. She’d start on how important it was for me to be present while Granddaddy was still with us. I’d made that mistake earlier in the week, and I still regretted it. Not that I was trying to escape my family or my hometown. I had aspirations for the restaurant, which required me to travel to other locations to build what I hoped would be a legacy.

“It won’t be long until I’ll be eatin’ all the food in the house again, and you’ll be so sick of me you’ll practically kick me out of the door.”

“Never,” she laughed.

“I gotta get in the gym. The guys are waitin’ for me.” I said as I reached into the back seat for my gym bag. “Wish everyone a happy Thanksgivin’ from me, yeah?”

“Will do, honey. You have a good night and a fun time with Scarlett’s family tomorrow.” I heard her muffled snuffle, and it took all of my resolution not to comfort her and agree to drop

my restaurant projects to move back home. “I love you, Rhett.”

“Love you too, Ma.”

I ended the call and blew out a long, frustrated breath as I hurried through the rain that started on my way across town. The gym was busier than usual, with everyone getting their workout in before indulging in all the Thanksgiving offerings the following day. I changed quickly and joined Craig and Rodrigo, who had warmed up on the treadmill.

“I thought you were going to ditch us for a woman,” Rodrigo puffed out as he jogged.

I chuckled and stretched as they finished. Getting on the treadmill after standing at the restaurant sounded like torture.

When we got to the benches, I put all my stress onto those plates, loading them on and pressing them until my upper body burned.

“What’s eating at your ass?” Craig asked, stepping away from his spotting position at the end of my set and switching places with me.

Rodrigo hopped right on that bandwagon. “Trouble in paradise? Is the little lady mad at you?”

“No,” I replied. “And no. My parents aren’t makin’ it a secret that they’d appreciate it if I moved back home.”

“My mamá is a force when she wants something. And she’s not afraid to throw a chancla if one of her kids doesn’t do what she wants.” He motioned throwing a sandal. “If I had a dollar

for every time she used me for target practice, I'd be as rich as the high rollers that come into the club."

"My ma isn't like that." How did I describe Ruby Roberts? "She's this little slip of a woman who's all sugar and sweetness. Until you cross her. Then you'd better pray for intervention 'cause she'll whip your hide with her words alone."

Craig laughed. "I'd put her up against my mother any day. She's the queen of guilt trips. If she doesn't like something, it's my problem to fix, not hers."

"Mine is working on the guilt angle, I think," I said, helping him get the bar up on the last rep. "After Granddaddy came home, she started mentionin' how lonely it was back on the ranch without me. Then she'd ask if I'd come home for Christmas and stay a couple weeks."

"So, are you going down there?" Craig asked, moving out of the way for Rodrigo.

"I told her I would today." My head was still jumbled, so I started on the dumbbells. "I know she'll ask if I can stay through the New Year next, but I don't know if I can leave the restaurant that long."

Rodrigo's voice strained as he pushed the bar up. "Afraid they can't handle it?"

"Not at all," I countered. "That place ran smoothly when I went to Texas, and I have full confidence that they can run it

as well as me—if not better. That’s the goal, anyway. I never intended to stay in Portland indefinitely.”

“Right, the two-year plan,” Craig mentioned. “You come, you cook, you leave.”

I shook my head at him. “It’s not quite that cut-and-dry, but that’s the general idea. If I can get a few places across the country, I expect additional places will go up faster. Maybe even franchising in the future.”

“I thought you said your family supports you.” Rodrigo shook his arms, and we moved on to the leg press.

“They do,” I confirmed, taking a seat at the machine. My hip already ached, so I didn’t want to lift too much, but keeping those muscles strong was crucial to my mobility. “It’s not common for families to spread out too far. They’d prefer if I let somebody else set up the restaurants while I run the one back home.”

Craig gulped his water and used the back of his hand to wipe a few stray drops. “It sounds like you’ll get there eventually.”

“Not soon enough for them.”

“So you’re thinking about giving up what you want to do for their comfort?” Rodrigo asked, his lips twisting.

Moving the safety into place, I dropped my legs and rubbed my left thigh before standing. “Maybe I’m just feelin’ guilty because it’s the holidays. When my ma called about Granddaddy, I hated bein’ so far away. She’s right that he only has so many years left.”

“None of us are guaranteed more time on earth.” Craig’s palm landed on my shoulder. “Might be something to think about if it’s bothering you so much.”

“It’s... complicated.” I thought about the woman I cherished. “It’s not just about me anymore.”

“You mean Scarlett.” Rodrigo clutched his chest. “It’s so romantic.”

I nodded. “I’d have to leave her behind if I moved back.”

“Aren’t you going to do that anyway?” Craig asked.

“I guess so.” It wasn’t a reality I wanted to face. “Maybe I was hopin’ she’s open to movin’.”

“You’ve talked about how close she is to her friends.” Craig looked doubtful. “Who do you think she’ll choose between you and them?”

I rubbed at my chest, where an ache bloomed outward from my heart. “I don’t know.”

“Might be something to think about before you make any big decisions,” Rodrigo pointed out. “My love... we’re like one soul in two bodies. We both want three kids. How many do you want?”

“We’re done with two,” Craig said, signaling no more with his hands.

It had been years since I’d talked about kids. Grace was firm that she only wanted one child, and it had to be by c-section so her *womanhood* wasn’t ruined—her word, not mine.

“I think I’d like a couple, at least,” I answered. Scarlett hadn’t mentioned kids, but I still dreamed of that Halloween scene with our hypothetical family. Maybe it was time to ask her about it.

“You’d be the dad of the block, flipping burgers and smoking meat for all the summer barbecues.” Rodrigo mimed the action. “Get you some white socks to wear with khaki shorts and sneakers. A nice polo. The whole middle-class picture.”

I looked down at my t-shirt, athletic shorts, and ankle socks with my sneakers. I couldn’t even picture what Rodrigo described. “Not really my style.”

The conversation trailed off, and I returned to working my ass off, so I was too tired to care about the troubles rumbling around in my head like distant thunder across the landscape of my life. My limp was more pronounced when I walked through my front door, but my mind hadn’t settled.

I showered, pulled a pair of sweatpants on, and headed out to the kitchen to distract myself. In less than twenty-four hours, I’d meet the people who raised Scarlett, and I didn’t know enough about them to make a good impression. The stories she’d shared painted a picture of a loving family, though her parents spend much of their retirement traveling. They celebrated Thanksgiving as their major holiday because there was a senior cruise they went on every year for Christmas. I couldn’t imagine my parents choosing time alone over time with our large family.

Opening the pantry, I reached for the gluten-free flour I kept on hand for when Scarlett was over. She might be the expert, but I'd been paying attention and learned a thing or two. I lined up everything I'd need and started measuring per the recipe I'd found. It wasn't one of Scarlett's, but I couldn't call her up and ask her for a recipe for her surprise.

The plan was to meet in the morning and hang out while cooking for the afternoon meal. Meat was my specialty, but I was a quick study. Knowing Scarlett, she would be so distracted cooking for others that she wouldn't remember to feed herself. So I'd look out for her.

Chapter Nineteen



MY ALARM WENT OFF too early. I dragged myself out of bed and grabbed my phone, anticipating the good morning message Rhett liked to send me. It was there. The man was always up before me, even though he always seemed to be up later than me.

The shower usually helped me wake up, but today, it only made me feel like climbing back under the warm covers when I had to get out into the cool air of my house. There'd been a freeze warning overnight, and no matter how long the heat ran, the inside of the house reflected the cooler exterior temperatures. I didn't envy those who lived where it snowed. Portland shut down entirely with an inch of snow or a little ice on the roads.

I looked out the window, trying to determine whether the dark, shiny stuff on the road was rain from last night or black

ice. It could be nearly impossible to determine until you slid on it, and I didn't want to be carrying food for the Thanksgiving meal when that happened.

I grabbed a pair of black cotton shorts and a purple tank top, throwing a sweatshirt with a turkey and the words *gobble 'til you wobble* over the top to keep me warm until the heat in the kitchen did the job. Grabbing an elastic off my nightstand, I twisted my hair on top of my head to keep it free from ingredients while I cooked.

As I was pulling ingredients out, Rhett knocked on the door. I flipped on some Christmas music and waltzed to the door, knowing he'd be watching.

"Mornin', darlin'," he greeted me with a broad smile as I opened the door. "Should I be wishin' you a happy Thanksgivin' or Christmas?"

"I'll take either as long as you get in here and stop letting the cold air in." I pulled him inside and kicked the door closed, hugging myself as I ran back to the relative warmth of the kitchen. "Roll up those sleeves, and I'll put you to work."

Rhett dropped a plastic storage bag on the counter, and I peered at the muffins inside. "The coffee shops were closed, so I brought you this treat instead."

With a squeal of glee, I opened the bag and pulled out one of the muffins, inhaling its cinnamon scent. "Apple?"

"Yeah," he confirmed. "I found a recipe and used your flour."

I took a bite and moaned, savoring the spices and the sweet apple chunks. Carefully, I set the muffin down and threw my arms around Rhett, smacking my lips against his loudly. “You’re the best. And these are amazing. I didn’t even think about breakfast.”

“I figured somebody needed to look after you,” he said with an affable grin.

My lack of breakfast was proof that he was right. “Well, thank you for thinking of me. I’m still putting you to work, though. Let’s knock out the mini cheesy muffins first. Then we can do the pies and finish with the delicata squash, so it’s still warm when we get there.”

“Sounds good to me.” Rhett washed his hands and clapped them together. “Put me to work, chef.”

We spent the next several hours working on recipes and chatting while we waited for the food to finish baking. The timer for the squash went off while we were having a particularly spicy discussion, our lips locked together. Rhett lifted me onto the counter, stepping between my parted thighs.

I pulled away, panting. “Rhett. It’s ready.”

His fingers slipped into my shorts, finding me without underwear and swiping through the wetness gathered there. “Yeah, you are. So ready for me.”

“No.” I had to shove him away and hop down. He looked at me, confused. “The squash is ready. The timer is going off.”

“Oh, right.” He slipped his wet fingers into his mouth while I pulled the trays of squash from the oven.

I set it on the stove to cool before putting it in a travel container and washing my hands. “I’m going to run up and get dressed. Shouldn’t take me long.”

“Is this a quick get-ready like when we went to Eli’s?” he questioned playfully. “Is your mom gonna text me out of the blue askin’ where we are?”

I laughed as I headed up the stairs. “No, she doesn’t have a network of spies like Eli.”

My parents didn’t get fancy for holidays. My mother always said being comfortable made for better conversation, so I put on a pair of jeans with some give in the waistband and pulled a navy sweater over my tank top. I did a quick pass of makeup: a little mascara, blush, and tinted gloss, then pulled the elastic out of my hair. My long, dark tresses fell in waves since they’d still been damp when I put them up. I pulled the top section back and clipped it to hide the dent the elastic left and stepped back, double-checking that everything was as it should be.

Rhett glanced at the clock when I returned, nodding his approval. “You’re right, that was quick.”

“My mother doesn’t have Eli’s style expectations,” I snickered. The counters were clear, and the sink was devoid of dishes. “Did you do the dishes and put the food in containers already?”

“I figured I’d be useful while I was here,” he said with a shrug. “You ready to get goin’?”

“Yeah.” I slipped my feet into my shoes and pulled my coat on, adding a scarf for extra warmth. “Did you notice whether the roads were icy on your way over?”

“Just wet,” he replied, putting his things on and helping me load all the food into his Jeep.

“Did you bring pie?” I asked, seeing the tins in his back seat. “I thought I told you that you didn’t need to make anything.”

“Scarlett, we made hundreds of pies at the restaurant.” Rhett held my door open, and I climbed in. “Two pies wasn’t puttin’ in any effort. My ma didn’t raise me to show up somewhere empty-handed.”

“Fair, I guess.”

I gave him directions, and we headed out of Portland to the small bedroom community I grew up in. Hop fields and other farmland surrounded it, and I could see Rhett relaxing in the more familiar landscape.

“You didn’t mention you grew up in a farm town,” he said as we drove through the quaint downtown area. “This reminds me of home.”

“Well, I’m glad you like it.” I pointed to the turn he needed to take. “It’s not a farm town, per se. Most people who live here either farm or commute to work. My parents don’t own a farm.”

Their sprawling Victorian home came into view at the end of the road, and Rhett stared when he parked in the driveway. It was large for the style, painted in shades of green and white, and looked like a child's dream dollhouse.

"You also didn't mention that you grew up in a fairy tale home."

I shrugged. "It was just a regular house to me."

"And I grew up with a few cows in the backyard," he scoffed. "This is impressive."

"You can tell my parents that," I offered as he helped me out of the vehicle. "They're proud of the upkeep they've done with the house. It's on the historical registry."

"Homes this beautiful should be preserved." He helped carry the food to the door, and I rang the bell. We weren't a family that just walked in.

My mother opened the door, beaming, motioning us inside. Her dark, stylish bob was streaked with grey, and she wore a maroon sweatshirt with a fall motif, jeans, and black house slippers. Her brown eyes shone as bright as her smile, and I prepared for her hug. "You're here! Come in, come in! You must be Rhett."

"Yes, ma'am." Rhett inclined his head, unable to tip his hat with his arms full of food.

"Oh, and manners, too! I'm Kristine." She led us to the kitchen so we could drop everything off. "Ed! Max! They're here!"

I snagged a handful of mixed nuts my mother displayed on the counter, listening to the original wood flooring creak as my dad and brother approached.

“I hear we have a new friend,” my dad said, rounding the corner. His dark hair was starting to thin on top, and what used to be six feet of height had shrunk an inch or two over the years. He wore the same navy zip-up hooded sweatshirt I swear he’d owned since I was born, and the belt holding his jeans up was a little snug. I walked into his arms and breathed in his spicy cologne. He patted my back and turned to Rhett. “It’s so good to meet one of Scarlett’s *friends*.”

He said it like friend meant something more, but they’d never referred to the people my brother and I dated as anything more than friends. I never asked why; it was just how they operated.

Max leaned against the door frame, a younger version of my dad with teasing hazel eyes that promised he’d try to embarrass me if I gave him the chance. That’s what little brothers were good for, after all. At least he wouldn’t be gathering nightcrawlers and putting them on people’s pillows like he had when we were younger.

“Dad, Max. This is Rhett.”

Rhett held his hand out to my dad first. “It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

“We don’t stand on that kind of formality here, Rhett. You can call me Ed.”

“I’ll try,” Rhett chuckled.

“It’s good to see my sister with a boyfriend, finally.” Max squeezed his hand, but Rhett smiled back, silently meeting the challenge. “But if you ever hurt her, know that the neighbors down the road have pigs, and nobody would be the wiser.”

That made Rhett laugh outright, even as my mother scolded Max. He patted my brother on the shoulder. “I’d do the same if somebody didn’t treat my little sister right.”

“Scarlett, why don’t we let the boys talk while we put the food out?” my mom suggested.

I reluctantly grabbed a dish and followed her to the dining room, nervous about what my dad and brother would say without me in the room.

“You must like this young man,” my mom observed, leaning her hands on the back of one of the dining chairs. “You look worried about what they might talk about.”

“I’m not worried about Dad,” I clarified. “But it’s been years since Max has met anybody I’ve dated. I don’t trust him not to tell Rhett my most embarrassing stories.”

“You’ll upset yourself for nothing,” she advised, retracing her steps to the kitchen. “Besides, he’ll forget what Max has to say when I pull the photo albums out and show him your baby pictures.”

“Who’s baby picture?” Rhett asked.

Raising my brows at my mom, I said, “Nobody’s.”

“Scarlett’s,” my mother answered at the same time.

“We are not looking at anybody’s baby photos today,” I said firmly.

“Shame.” Rhett’s lips quirked with the laughter he held back.

“Rhett, can you carry the turkey for me?” my mother asked, pointing to the plate with the fifteen-pound bird. It was more than we would eat in one sitting, but she loved having her leftover turkey sandwiches when she finished her black Friday shopping.

“Yes, ma’am.” Rhett followed us to the table.

My mother had decorated it with red, orange, and yellow candles surrounded by faux fall leaves. A little turkey decoration sat on each end of the main décor. She had matching plates and napkins. Even the glasses on the table had a fall motif.

We sat and said what we were thankful for, and I quickly realized I hadn’t needed to worry about Rhett and my family at all. His easy mannerisms fit right in. He didn’t even mention the dry turkey or the burned onion crisps on top of the green beans. After the meal, the men sat in the living room watching football while my mom and I wrapped up the food.

“I like him,” she said, rinsing the turkey platter and handing it to me to hand dry. “It seems like he’s from a nice family, and he’s kind to you.”

“Yeah.” I put the platter away and dried the next dish. “I like him, too.”

“Is he coming shopping with us?” she asked with a smirk.

I shook my head. “Not a chance. I don’t want to scare him off. He needs to be eased into our kind of crazy.”

My mom and I laughed. Our post-Thanksgiving tradition started back when I was still a child. We executed a black Friday shopping with military precision.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” She handed me a booklet. “This year’s targets.”

I glanced through the laminated pages of the small book she’d made. It was our shopping list, and we wouldn’t leave the stores until we’d acquired every item within the plasticized pages. “I’d better get Rhett and run home. You’re going to pick me up later?”

“I’ll be there about nine,” my mom confirmed.

When I retrieved him, Rhett was half asleep on the couch, head tipped back and mouth slightly open. He cleared his throat, stretched, and thanked my family for having him. I dozed off on the way back to Portland, waking to the cold air filtering through the open car door and Rhett gently shaking my shoulder.

“We’re home, darlin’,” he murmured, kissing my lips.

I gasped, startled by his unexpected proximity, and he jumped back, whacking his head on the doorframe. He groaned, and I reached out to rub the spot, only to be stopped by my seatbelt. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t expect you to be in my face.”

“You’re fine.” He helped me down and led me to the front door, following me inside.

“My mom will be here in less than an hour,” I explained. “Do you want to hang out until then?”

“Yeah, I can do that.” He walked straight to the refrigerator and peered inside.

“I don’t know how you can eat again.” I patted my bloated stomach. “I’m still full and probably will be for another day.”

“My ma always called me and my brothers bottomless pits,” he joked, pulling out a container of cheese dip and finding tortilla chips in the pantry.

We sat on the couch and watched part of a holiday movie until I excused myself to get ready for the long night. Rhett turned from where he still reclined on the sofa when I returned, his eyes wide and mouth open as he took in my black outfit.

“Remind me,” he started, his voice catching with laughter, “Are you shoppin’ or robbin’ someone tonight?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Maybe because you’re dressed like a cat burglar.” He swept his hand down, motioning to my outfit. “The black hat doesn’t help. I half expect you to pull it down and find it’s got holes for your eyes, nose, and mouth.”

I tapped the shopping booklet against my lips. “Not a bad idea.”

“What is that?”

“Everything we’re shopping for,” I explained, leaning over the back of the couch and showing him the pages. “Organized by store and section.”

“This thing will weather any storm.”

I ran my fingers over the plastic. “It comes in handy with all the rain.”

“Amazin’,” he breathed.

A knock at the door announced my mother’s arrival. I left Rhett on the couch and greeted her at the entrance. She was dressed like me and swiped black paint under my eyes, laughing. “You ready to seize black Friday?”

Rhett had moved from the couch and stood beside my mother, trying to hide his laughter behind his palm. “Well, if anybody can conquer the aisles, I believe it’s the two of you. Especially since you’ve got the booklets and... a fanny pack?”

My mom patted the pack at her waist. “It’s for all the receipts!”

“Of course it is. It was good to see you again, ma’am.” He shoved his feet into his boots and donned his coat, leaning down to brush a chaste kiss across my lips. “Have a good night, darlin’. And good luck.”

I could hear his rumbling laughter all the way to his Jeep. When I turned to my mom, her gaze was assessing.

“What?” I asked, looking at my outfit to see if anything was out of place.

“Well, he didn’t call the cops or run away, so I think he’s passed the second test.”

I couldn’t help but giggle at that, locking the door behind me as I followed her to the car. “How many tests are there?”

Her tone sombered. “As many as it takes to know he’s the one for you.”

“You think it’s possible?” My heart raced at the prospect of permanency.

“Only you can determine that.”

Chapter Twenty



S CARLETT WAS LIKE THAT last piece of pie on Thanksgiving—you didn't want anybody else to have it, but you didn't want to finish it because you'd be left wanting more. I wanted more of her as often as I could get it.

I'd just seen her three days ago, but she seemed too far away already. So last night, I invited her to help me put up holiday decorations. If she thought it was odd, she didn't mention it. That left me to drag the box of Christmas décor out of the guest room closet before she arrived.

The bell rang as I was making a second cup of coffee. When I opened the door, Scarlett stood there, arms laden with bags of baking supplies. "Here, take this."

She handed me one of them, and I got out of her way as she marched to the kitchen. "Darlin', if you wanted to bake, I could have gotten the ingredients for you."

“It wasn’t any trouble to bring it with me,” she called back, putting something in the fridge. Her head popped up above the door. “I did forget the vanilla. Do you have some?”

“I’m sure.” I set her bag on the counter and looked through my spice cabinet, pulling the container of pure vanilla extract from the back. “Will this work?”

“Perfect.” She bounced over and added it to the ingredients she’d lined up at the back of the counter. When her black sweater rose, I took the opportunity to admire the way her ass filled out the light denim she wore. She spun unexpectedly, catching me ogling her behind. Scarlett lifted a brow and smirked. “It’s not even noon, Rhett.”

“I can only desire you after lunch now?” I asked.

She stepped close and ran her fingers up my black and grey plaid shirt, teasing the hair on my chest where I’d left the top two buttons undone. My cock grew thick, pressing against the zipper of my jeans. “No, but we have things to do today.”

“I guess we’ll have to get everythin’ done quickly, then.” I toyed with her curled hair, running my fingers through the soft strands at the back of her neck and drawing her to me for a lingering kiss. I pulled away when she whimpered. “How long do you think it will take to decorate?”

She licked her lips. “Not long, I hope.”

“I pulled the box of decorations out,” I said, pointing to the plastic bin on the coffee table.

“Where’s your tree?” she asked, looking around.

“My tree,” I repeated. Shoot. It completely slipped my mind when I asked her to come over. Her green-gold eyes crossed as I tapped her nose, thinking of an excuse. “I thought you could pick one out with me.”

“Really?” she glanced at the clock on the stove. “We’d better get going if we need to find a tree *and* decorate!”

Before I could say anything, she’d pulled her coat and hat on, slipping her feet into her shoes. I guess we were going tree hunting. I donned my jacket, boots, and hat and grabbed my wallet and keys. Scarlett waited as I held the door for her, and we headed down to the Jeep.

I stopped at the parking garage entrance. “Which store should we go to?”

“Store?” she asked in disbelief. “That won’t do. We should go to a tree farm!”

“Won’t that take all day?”

Scarlett bit the inside of her cheek as she contemplated that. “Okay, compromise. We find a charity that’s selling trees and pick one of those. That way, we’re supporting something local.”

“Deal.” It was better than traipsing around the wilderness with a handsaw. I pulled onto the road and glanced at her. “You’d better tell me where to go, darlin’, or I’ll just drive around the city.”

“Oh, right.” She tapped away at her phone and gave me an address.

The lot was nearly empty when we arrived—Sunday morning always seemed slow in the city. I followed Scarlett, content to let her debate the merits of each tree with herself as I nodded to whatever she decided.

“How about this one?” She pointed to a seven-foot-tall noble fir tree. “It’s not too tall, but it has more room for hanging ornaments.”

I barely saw the tree because I was too focused on Scarlett’s pink cheeks and radiant smile. Her eyes sparkled with happiness as she looked up at me. “I think it’s perfect.”

The world slowed as she caught on to my underlying meaning, and her lips parted. I needed to taste her.

“You’re perfect, you know that?” I leaned down and brushed my lips across hers, tasting the lingering caramel from the coffees we’d picked up on the drive over. She gazed at me like I’d hung the moon when I pulled away. “I like the tree. But darlin’, you could have picked a dead stick, and it would still be perfect because I’m with you.”

Her voice rasped softly when she spoke. “Is that some kind of southern flattery?”

“No, it’s the truth.” I picked up the tree and took it to the lady with the cash box sitting next to the sign proclaiming all proceeds would go to supporting families in need over the holidays. There were tables of handmade garland, and I ran my fingers over the fresh needles, reminiscing over childhood holidays with the green stuff hanging everywhere. “I’ll take some of these, too.”

I looped a couple over my neck and asked Scarlett to grab three more. It was roughly fifty feet of garland. Enough to add a little bit of holiday spirit to my condo. I handed the cashier an extra fifty over the cost of the greenery, and she thanked me, calling one of the men to help me get the tree on top of the Jeep.

I turned the car on and let Scarlett sit in its warmth with the garland piled in the back, while using bungee cords to secure the tree. I thanked the man and got behind the wheel, turning the Christmas music up. Scarlett hummed to the song, and I joined in until we were both singing about peace on Earth. Grandma had just gotten run over by a reindeer when I pulled into my parking spot. It took a little maneuvering, but we managed to get the tree and all the garland upstairs in one trip.

I found my tree stand and got the fir set up by the window in the living room. Standing back, I admired my handiwork.

“It looks more festive already,” Scarlett said, brushing her floured hands on her jeans and running her fingers over the branches to fluff them up. She’d been busy in the kitchen while I did the grunt work. “Do you need help with the lights? I was about to roll out the dough.”

“How ‘bout I get the lights on, and you get the cookies in the oven? Then we can do the ornaments together,” I suggested, brushing a little flour from her cheek. She nodded and returned to the kitchen while I untangled strands of lights and wove them through the branches, careful to make the lighting even.

The whole place smelled like holiday spices and gingerbread as we picked up ornaments and hung them on branches. Scarlett held up a cotton ball snowman. “Childhood art project?”

“Ma sent most of that stuff to me last year because she said I needed a little touch of home,” I explained, showing her an angel made out of noodles painted white.

“It’s so cute.” She put it on the tree. “My mom has an entire box of stuff my brother and I made over the years. I’m sure you’ll see it at some point.”

“I’d like that,” I drawled, my body warming at her mention of the near future. I wanted to see the funny little crafts she’d made, to find out how her family celebrated the holiday. “I thought you said your parents go on a Christmas cruise yearly?”

“They do,” she confirmed. “But my mom still decorates the whole house and puts it away when they return after New Year’s.”

The timer on my oven beeped, and Scarlett hurried to remove the cookies from the oven. I followed, peering over her shoulder at the little gingerbread people. She glanced up at me, grinning. “I’ve got icing for when they cool.”

“They smell good.” I tried to reach for one, but she slapped my hand away.

Shaking a finger at me, Scarlett used her other hand to push me back. “Don’t you dare touch them before they’re cooled

and decorated. They taste better when they have faces.”

“First, you go out cat-burglin’ with your mother. Now you tell me you enjoy eating faces. Should I worry?” I teased.

“I don’t know, maybe,” she taunted playfully.

She followed me back to the living room, and I picked up a strand of garland, looping it over her and drawing her to me. “I’ve gotta admit, I kind of dig the air of danger.”

“Hm,” Scarlett hummed, rising on tiptoe and drawing my face to hers, initiating the kiss. She slipped her tongue into my mouth, tormenting me. “You trust me that much?”

“I do,” I breathed.

“I have an idea.” Her smile was sly as I followed her gaze to the coiled rope hanging on display across the room.

“Scarlett,” I warned.

She feigned innocence, clasping her hands behind her. “Is that something special?”

“It’s just a decoration,” I answered, trailing after her as she reached for it and plucked it from its place.

“I think I’m going to catch me a cowboy today.” Scarlett bit her lip and waggled her brows at me. “Do me a favor and get all those clothes off so I can tie you to the bed.”

My jaw dropped. Who was the vixen standing in front of me?

Her confidence turned to worry when I didn’t move. “If you’re okay with it, I mean. I would never make you do

something that weirds you out.”

“No.” I shook my head as all the blood flowed south. “I’m game. Let’s go.”

She squealed and slapped my ass when I tossed her over my shoulder and ran to my room, letting her slide down my chest to stand beside the bed. Her hungry eyes followed as I stripped out of my clothes, leaving them on the floor as I stalked toward her and tossed the rope to the mattress. Lifting the hem of her sweater, I drew it over her head and removed the t-shirt underneath, leaving her in a white lace bra.

When I unbuttoned her jeans, she gently pushed me back. “On the bed for me. I want you to watch.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I settled on my back, and Scarlett reached for the rope, her eyes questioning. I nodded, and she approached.

“Hands above your head,” she purred, looping the rope around my wrists, then tying it to the headboard. Her breasts hung in my face, and I tried to kiss them, but she pulled away and slid from the bed to remove her bottoms. “You can look but can’t touch.”

“You’re tryin’ to torture me.”

Scarlett unhooked her bra, stroking her hands over her breasts, moving them down to slip her fingers under the lace of her panties, and turning. I watched her ass as she slid them down her legs, glimpsing the glistening lips of her pussy between.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” She darted out of the room before I could ask what she was up to, leaving me helpless until she returned a moment later, wearing my Stetson. I chuckled as she smirked and struck a pose, tipping my hat at me.

“C’mere, darlin’,” I urged. “I’ve got a tongue for you to ride.”

She paused when she climbed on the bed. “I don’t want to suffocate you.”

“Darlin’, you’re not a danger to me.” Not my body, at least. My heart was another matter. I chuckled as she hesitantly straddled my shoulders. “And if I died, it’d be a pleasure to meet my end buried in your sweet pussy. Now, sit.”

Scarlett held on to the headboard and lowered onto my face, moaning as I worked my mouth between her thighs, running my tongue up her slit and finding that firm little clit. I flicked it, making her twitch and squirm. When her arousal wet my short beard, I tipped my chin and thrust my tongue inside her, reaching as far in as I could, pulsing and swirling. I let her moans guide my actions, enveloped in her scent and flavor. She began to grind against me, and I sucked her clit into my mouth, pulsing my tongue against it until she shattered and soaked my lips.

Panting, her legs shook as she moved off my face and leaned down to kiss me, letting me share her flavor as our tongues played against each other.

“We’re going to do that again,” she vowed, breathless. “And soon. But now it’s your turn.”

My cock throbbed, bouncing in time to my pulse as she fisted it and stroked from base to tip, squeezing precum from the tip. I groaned at how close it felt to being inside her. “*Fuck.*”

When she lowered her lips to me, sucking me inside her hot mouth, I gripped the ropes, slamming my fists against the headboard. Her sultry laugh vibrated down my shaft, and my balls drew tight to my body. She’d make me embarrass myself if she kept working me like that with her mouth and hand.

“Darlin’,” I strained. “It’ll be over before we’ve begun if you keep that up.”

Scarlett pulled off me with a pop, saliva trailing from her lips to my cock. Her lids were heavy as she gazed at me. “Time for me to take a ride.”

“Fuck, yeah.” I held my breath as she straddled me and positioned my tip at her opening, biting her lip as she worked her way down my length. “Just like that, darlin’. Take all of me in that tight little pussy. *Damn.*”

With Scarlett in control, I focused on watching my cock disappear in her body, how her lips stretched obscenely around my girth. Her thighs shook as she slowed her movements. I wanted to slam her down all the way, but the ropes held me back.

“I’m so full,” she murmured, placing her hands on my chest as she sat down completely.

“You take me so well, darlin’,” I praised. “Move for me. Let me feel you.”

Her whimper was melodic as she rolled her hips, then moved up and down slowly. The room was silent, save for the sound of our heavy breaths and the wet sounds of sex as she worked me. I clenched my abs as she slowed, biting my lip and needing her to move faster.

“Scarlett, I need you to move,” I pleaded. “I want to feel you come. Fill you with mine.”

She leaned forward, licking my bottom lip and sucking it into her mouth.

“*Fuck.*” I tried to kiss her, but she pulled back. She stilled completely, then flexed her inner muscles around me, drawing out the torture. I growled. “Scarlett.”

“*Hm?*” she purred innocently. Her words dripped with sensuality. “What’s it you like to say to me? Take it slow. We’ve got time.”

She teased me to the brink of my sanity, laying flush against my chest and moving her hips until only the head of my dick remained inside her. Torturously slow. Then she slammed back down, and I cried out at the sudden change in sensation.

Again.

“*Woman.*”

And again.

Until my control snapped. I worked the knot on the rope as she kissed my neck, flinging it free as I loosed my hands. Scarlett gasped when I wrapped my arms around her waist, holding her to me.

My voice was gravel against her lips as I snarled the warning, “Hold on, darlin’. The ride’s about to get *rough*.”

Her nails dug into my shoulders as I thrust upward, not holding back as I slammed my cock into her pussy over and over, drawing cries and then screams from her pretty little lips.

Her walls tightened around my length in a vice grip. “That’s it. Let go. Come for me, darlin’.”

When I was lodged deep, I added a swivel of my hips, and she cried out, “*Rhett!*”

Scarlett’s body shook as her orgasm hit. I thrust twice more, then flooded her with my release. I stroked my hands up her back, spearing my fingers through her hair and pulling her lips to mine. I fell into her sated gaze, flushed face, and glistening red lips swollen from my kisses.

Scarlett possessed me wholly, irrevocably. She was the first person on my mind when I woke and the last person I thought of when I fell asleep. She graced my dreams every night, and every moment we spent apart felt like a piece of my heart was missing.

I cupped her cheek, stroking her face with my thumb, and shared the words that had sat unspoken on my tongue countless times in the past week. “I love you, Scarlett.”

Her breath caught, eyes glistening with unshed tears as she ran her fingers through my hair, then laid her hand on my chest over my heart. She looked down at where she toyed with my chest hair, then looked up, a shy smile curving her lips. I knew at that moment what she would say.

Scarlett kissed me, whispering the words into my mouth, my soul. "I love you, too, Rhett."

Chapter Twenty-One



I COULDN'T STOP FIDGETING. My knee bounced under the table, and I gripped my to-go coffee cup hard enough that I was worried the lid might pop off. Taking a deep breath, I tried to release the tension in my fingers as I looked toward the front of the café, waiting impatiently.

Doubt crept in. *Maybe she won't show.*

I'd nearly convinced myself to give up when a petite blonde in a red trench coat strode through the door. Her hair was short, barely above a buzz cut, but the messy styled locks combined with her angular features gave off an air of confidence. My hand shook as I lifted it to wave.

She acknowledged me, then stopped to order a coffee. My throat was dry, and I had the barest hint of a tension headache at the back of my neck. Before I could work the knots out of my shoulders, she approached, sitting across from me.

“Scarlett.” Her soft voice didn’t fit her look.

I smiled nervously. “Cora.”

“I follow your blog,” she admitted, sipping her drink. “I think what you do is great for the food community.”

“Thanks,” I murmured at the unexpected praise. “I do what I can.”

“You wanted to talk to me?”

I guess we were cutting right to the heart of the matter. “Yeah. You ate at Rhett’s, but after I got glutened, you publicly stated you wouldn’t review the restaurant until the owner proved he took his customers’ needs seriously.”

She nodded. “I stand by that. It’s his responsibility to educate his staff and show a concerted effort to do what’s right.”

“And he has,” I insisted. “I’ve been in to educate the staff and helped him add new menu items. He’s also created a new menu with clear labels for those with alternate food needs. The Thanksgiving menu had an entirely gluten-free option.”

“I hadn’t heard,” she said, tapping her finger against her coffee cup. “That’s certainly moving in the right direction.”

“What if I told you he’s doing the same for Christmas?” I rushed. “Would you consider trying Rhett’s again?”

“I might.” Cora tipped her head to the side, narrowing her eyes as she examined me. “It means that much to you.”

I nodded. “It does. Rhett’s nothing like the public tried to make him. He’s sweet and caring, and—”

Cora’s lilting laughter interrupted me. She waved a hand in the air. “I’m sorry, but it’s clear that he’s caught your favor.”

“He has,” I admitted bashfully. “I feel responsible for what happened and think he only deserves the best.”

“Then I will try my best to stop by for his Christmas dinner,” she said. She looked down at her phone when it vibrated. “Shoot me the details. And Scarlett?”

“Yes?”

“I can only promise a fair and honest review,” Cora said seriously. “I never review as a favor and won’t try to sway anyone. Rhett’s food must speak for itself.”

“I understand. Thank you.” I traced the letters on the top of the coffee lid. Then my eyes shot up to hers. “One more thing. Please don’t tell him I said anything.”

Her brows shot up in surprise. “He doesn’t know you’re meeting me?”

“No, and I’d prefer he not find out.”

“Fair enough. I’ve got to run, but it was nice meeting you.” She stood and picked up her coffee. “Maybe we can do this again, and you can tell me more about your blog.”

My eyes widened. “Yeah, definitely.”

“And you can share the story that led to this meeting here,” she laughed. “I have a feeling it’s a good one.”

I grinned. “Oh, it is.”

“Have a nice day, Scarlett.”

“You too.”

The patrons in the café seemed to move out of the way as Cora exited, commanding the surrounding space without a word. She was girl boss goals.

I took a long drink of coffee and sighed, slumping in my chair. Whether what I’d done was good or bad, the wheel was in motion. Now I had to make sure Rhett’s Christmas menu would impress. His meat needed no help. But I’d give him my best gluten-free recipes.

Hopefully, he’d thank me later.



“Pass the peppermint schnapps, would you?” Ella held up her mug. “I’m about to add a little Christmas spirit to this hot cocoa.”

I slid the bottle across the counter. Ella tipped it over her cup, and it came out fast. She gasped and righted the bottle, giving a little shrug. “Or maybe a lot of spirit. Ho fucking ho.”

“Who’s a ho?” Eli asked, breezing into the kitchen with an empty bowl. He placed it under the popcorn maker, measured kernels into the metal well, and then turned it on. We were

doing a Friday night movie night instead of our usual Sunday because of the task we had to accomplish.

Christmas music blared through the house, and I barely heard Rhett's knock. I cupped my hands around my mouth and called out, "Come in! It's open!"

"Eli messaged and said he needed emergency chicken nuggets," Rhett said, strolling into the kitchen with a fast food bag.

"My nuggies!" Eli exclaimed, abandoning the popcorn and clutching the bag to his chest. "Ah, *precious*, you're mine now."

"Really?" I shot him an exasperated look. "We didn't have enough snacks here?"

"I don't see nuggies," Eli shot back, pulling one from the bag and popping it into his mouth. "Problem solved. Thanks, Rhett!"

"Not a problem," He answered back, shaking his head.

"Did you eat?" I asked, sipping on my hot cocoa.

"At the restaurant," he confirmed. "I'll take a drink, though."

"Spiked cocoa or spiked cider?" Ella asked, pointing to the pots on the stove.

"Cider, please."

I handed her a mug, and she ladled cider into it, then added a shot of rum, swirling a cinnamon stick in the beverage to mix

it. Rhett thanked her and wrapped an arm around my waist, kissing the top of my head.

“How was your day, darlin’?” he asked, sipping the cider.

“Good.” I leaned against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “I did the intro for the holiday recipes. And I think I’ve got a few things that might work for the restaurant.”

“Nice. You should come by next week, and we can work out a menu for Christmas.”

“Yeah, I can find time to do that,” I agreed. I still felt nervous about meeting with Cora earlier in the week, but my intentions were good.

“Movie’s starting!” Jamie called out from the living room.

I snagged the bowl of popcorn and grabbed Rhett’s hand, leading him out to our makeshift workstation.

“What’s all this?” he asked, looking at all the open boxes on the coffee table and fireplace. “Wait, aren’t those things from your black Friday booklet?”

I was surprised he remembered. “Good eyes. They’re Christmas boxes for orphaned children. We fill them with things like toiletries and small toys. You can get started. Just look at the list in the box and find the items. When you’re done, stack them against the wall.”

Several finished boxes were already stacked. We had fifty to fill, and the movie made the perfect backdrop to our task. Rhett picked up a list, rubbed a hand over the beard he was

growing out, then looked through the bins and started selecting things.

I half-watched the small-town southern romance Jamie picked, suspicious she did it on purpose because I'd told her that Rhett and I had progressed in our relationship with the exchange of love. She was making ours into a stereotypical romance, and I might never hear the end of it.

Rhett looked at the scene on the screen and frowned. "Why is he makin' that horse jump when the path is right there?"

"Because it's cinematically pleasing," Eli said with a flourish.

Rhett scoffed. "They don't neigh when they jump, either."

"Don't ruin the cheesy fictional romance, cowboy." Jamie threw a piece of popcorn at him, but he bent his knees, dropping to catch it in his mouth. "Okay, new game! Open again. Let's see if I can make it."

Rhett dropped his jaw, and Jamie held a piece of popcorn in front of her eyes, gauging her target. She let it fly, but it fell uselessly against his black t-shirt.

"Shit. I can do better." Jamie bit her lip and lifted her hand higher.

That time, it hit Rhett in the eye. "Ow! Good thing you're not shootin' a BB gun. I'd lose an eye."

"Ha!" Eli pointed at Jamie. "You'd shoot his eye out!"

“I’ll shoot *your* eye out.” She threw a whole fistful of popcorn at him, and he held a throw pillow to deflect the kernels.

“Honey, the only one allowed to shoot my eye out is Simon.”

“I’m not listening!” Ella singsonged, plugging her ears. “I’m going to call your husband and tell him you can’t be trusted to behave when he’s not here.”

“You act like he didn’t marry me knowing full well I’m a complete menace,” Eli laughed, dropping onto the couch.

Ella rolled her eyes at her twin. “And I question his sanity every day for it. Sometimes, I wonder if I could keep him and give you back.”

“I’m afraid you’re stuck with me for life, dear sister.” He draped the back of his hand dramatically across his eyes, then parted his fingers and stared at her through them. “And beyond, because I’m going to haunt your ass until you join me in the afterlife.”

“*How sweet.*” She pretended to gag, then closed the box she’d been working on.

Between the five of us, it didn’t take long to finish the rest of the boxes. I curled up next to Rhett on the loveseat and drank another spiked hot cocoa as we watched the last part of the movie. I smiled as the male love interest realized he was in love with the city girl and hopped in his car, determined to bring her back to the farm.

Rhett didn't seem to agree. He rolled his eyes, and I elbowed him. "Now what's wrong?"

He held a hand out, motioning to the screen. "We're supposed to believe that a guy runnin' the farm his grandfather left him all by himself is gonna up and leave everythin' to fly across the country? Irresponsible."

"Again, it's not *real*, cowboy," Jamie grumbled. "It's supposed to be over-the-top. He'd sacrifice everything to have one more day with her."

"I can't respect a man who'd sacrifice his animals."

"Tell you what." I squeezed his arm to diffuse their argument. "You can pick the next movie."

"And I'll mock it," Jamie added with a smirk, shoving a fistful of popcorn into her mouth. "Look, she sees him waiting for her on the doorstep!"

Rhett opened his mouth to comment, but she pointed a finger at him without looking at him. "Not a word, cowboy. Not a single word."

I giggled and whispered, "What was it that time?"

"He wouldn't have survived hours sittin' outside in the middle of a snowstorm like that," he murmured.

I couldn't argue with that, I guess. "But she saved him by making him hot tea and putting a holiday blanket over his shoulders."

"She would've had to reheat the mansicle at that point."

I didn't bother arguing with him. When the movie was over, I baked off chocolate peppermint cookie dough I'd made earlier, and we refilled our drinks. When I returned with a plate of the confections, they were all standing and looking at the TV.

Jamie slapped the remote into Rhett's hands. "Let's see what you've got, cowboy."

"Let's try a classic," Rhett said, selecting White Christmas from the menu.

"Can't beat that one," Eli said, pulling a blanket over his lap.

"Fine, you can live another day," Jamie said begrudgingly.

Rhett shot me an alarmed look, and I covered my laugh with my palm. "I swear—not burglars, not murderers."

"Come over here and convince me," he said playfully, dropping to the loveseat and patting the spot next to him. He even waved the soft purple blanket he'd bought me in the air.

I set the plate on the coffee table and hopped onto the cushion next to Rhett, laying my feet across his lap and arranging a throw pillow under my head. He covered us with the blanket and worked his thumbs over my feet like the first time he'd come to movie night. I tried to focus on the movie, but he had me so relaxed that I felt myself dozing off.

"Hey, darlin'," Rhett whispered. "Let's get you to bed."

I blinked, seeing him kneeling next to the sofa. "Is the movie over?"

“Yeah, the others are crashing here for the night,” he said.

“Okay.” I dragged myself from the couch and reached for the cookies to put them away, but the coffee table was empty. Eli snored softly on the sofa, so I tried to be quiet as I moved to the kitchen. That was spotless, too. “Did you clean again?”

Rhett shrugged. “Jamie helped.”

“Thanks.” He followed me up the stairs and hovered in the doorway.

“Well?” I motioned to the bed. “Aren’t you going to stay?”

“I didn’t want to presume.” He closed the bedroom door behind him and started removing his pants, folding them, and leaving them on the dresser.

“Well, consider this your open invitation to spend the night whenever you’d like.” I stripped and pulled an oversized t-shirt on, twisting my hair on top of my head and securing it with the elastic on my wrist.

“Careful,” he snickered, climbing into my bed and pulling the covers down for me. “I might never leave.”

I slid into my spot and drew the covers up, snuggling up to him and kissing him goodnight. “I might be okay with that.”

He didn’t answer, but smiled and stroked my back. He was warm, and his motions soothing. “I love you. Goodnight, darlin’.”

“Goodnight, Rhett. Love you.” I found myself wondering what life would be like if we got to go to bed together every

night. Closing my eyes, I let that contentment wash over me as I drifted to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“I DON’T KNOW, RHETT,” Jamie hedged. “I’m not sure I can keep this secret from my best friend.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed at my temple, trying to remember why I’d chosen this particular friend to take into my confidence. “Please, Jamie. I’m not askin’ you to lie to her.”

“It’s a lie of omission,” she pointed out. Of course, she couldn’t just offer her assistance. She had to make me sweat first.

“Only if she directly asks about the topic,” I reasoned. “Has she ever asked if you think I’m out ring shoppin’ for her?”

“Well, no,” she started. “But she could, and then I’d have to lie.”

“Let’s worry about that if it happens, okay?” I never thought getting a little help ring shopping for Scarlett would be so

difficult. “Right now, I just need to know her ring size.”

“Fine. She’s a size six.”

I nearly choked on my coffee. “You made me go through all that when you already know?”

“It was fun to hear you sweat,” she said flippantly. “Scarlett let me borrow one of her rings a few weeks ago. I haven’t returned it yet.”

“Good.” That didn’t sound right. Was I supporting a criminal action? “I mean, not good you kept her ring. Good you could tell me the size. Actually, you should probably return that ring.”

“If I do it now, she might get ideas.”

“Oh.” I guess I didn’t understand how women thought. I’d never think of an engagement just seeing a random ring. I’d only thought of engagement rings one other time, and I preferred not to remember my near mistake. While losing Grace hurt at the time, it was the best thing for me because she never loved me for who I was, only the clout I could give her.

“Don’t get her the typical circular diamond,” Jamie advised. “Scarlett finds them boring.”

I looked at the website on my computer with all the pretty diamond solitaire rings. “Women talk about weddin’ rings when they aren’t gettin’ married?”

“Oh, cowboy, women start planning their weddings when they’re children,” she shared, blowing my mind. I couldn’t

remember my little sister doing that. “Some have entire binders detailing their dream wedding.”

I drummed my fingers on the table. “Does Scarlett have one of those?”

“Not that she’s ever mentioned,” Jamie replied. “I could snoop around her house if you’d like.”

“Because that wouldn’t clue her into somethin’ being off,” I said flatly. “We’ll stick to subterfuge and not wander into espionage and burglary.”

“You’re no fun,” she pouted.

“I’m lots of fun.” I thought about all the *fun* I had with Scarlett. “Lots of *legal* fun.”

Jamie huffed. “Do you have any friends with more questionable morals?”

“None that I’d let get near you.”

“Afraid I’d break their hearts?” she teased.

“No, they use women and leave them behind for the next rodeo,” I explained. “I wouldn’t let any man like that near enough to crush your heart.”

“Rhett, you can’t go acting all chivalrous like that,” she chastised. “It makes it hard to tease you.”

“I’m sorry for ruinin’ your fun, Jamie.”

“So, about the engagement,” she continued. “When are you thinking of popping the question?”

“Soon.” I’d thought of several ways to do it, but all required planning on my part and Scarlett’s unsuspecting participation. “I’m gonna invite her to go home with me for Christmas.”

“Oh, a meet-the-parents situation!” I could practically see her bouncing with glee. “Are your parents the kind who make everybody family or the kind who might bury her out back on the range for getting close to their precious baby?”

“I think you listen to too many of those crime podcasts.”
Who thought about shit like that?

“There’s no such thing, Rhett.”

I sighed, tired of her word games. “My parents are amazing and kind, and probably already planning my wedding because they love Scarlett from what I’ve told them. So they’re more likely to build us a house on the range than bury one of us there.”

“Good.” There was a long pause, and I checked to see if the call had disconnected. Then I heard Jamie’s breathing. “She deserves the best, you know.”

“I do.”

“And I think you’re about as close as it comes.” Her laugh hitched. “I talk shit because you can take it. Sarcasm is my love language. But I love Scarlett like a sister, and I’ll always want what will make her happy. You make her happy, Rhett.”

“Thanks, Jamie.” I cleared my throat. “I’ll do my best to make her happy for the rest of our lives.”

She coughed. “Okay, enough sentimental shit. I’ve got work to do, and you’ve got a ring to shop for. Call me if you have any problems or need me to break into Scarlett’s house.”

“Jamie, I said not to—”

“Bye!” she called, cutting me off and ending the call. I couldn’t help but laugh. Scarlett’s friends were a trip, but I found they’d grown on me almost as much as she had.



Tonight was the night. Scarlett was on her way over, and I had everything ready for dinner. She’d been by the restaurant twice during the week to help me plan the Christmas menu and work with the staff, but this night wasn’t for business. I planned to wine and dine her, then invite her home for Christmas. Despite my nerves, I wouldn’t chicken out. The engagement plan depended on it.

I had a backup plan for a New Year’s engagement if she didn’t want to go to Texas with me, but it would feel lonely to spend Christmas without her, even if I was surrounded by family. She belonged at my side, wherever I was. It would be tempting to stay in Portland with her, but I’d promised my mother I’d be home for two weeks.

The rain pelted my windows, reflecting the city’s lights in their gravity-driven rush to the bottom. Few cars ventured out

in the wind that lashed through the spaces between downtown buildings. I was glad there weren't trees surrounding my building because the trees I'd seen earlier had swayed in ways that made me nervous.

The lights flickered, and I looked nervously at the rice cooking on the stove. Scarlett wanted to make dinner together, but I figured I could start the rice.

She knocked on the door, and I opened it to find her standing there with a bottle of white wine and a grocery bag. The tendrils of her dark hair that had escaped her hood were damp, and her coat streaked with rain. She handed me the items she held and pushed the hood back off her face.

"It's a bit blustery out there tonight." Scarlett shrugged out of her coat and kicked her shoes off by the door. She sniffed the air and shot me an accusatory look. "Did you start already?"

"Only the rice," I said, setting the wine on the counter and opening the grocery bag. She'd brought ice cream. "I thought I told you not to worry about dessert tonight."

She raised a shoulder and widened her eyes innocently. "Then I guess neither of us listens well, and we're even."

"Do you want to make the peanut sauce while I start on the chicken?"

"Yeah, I can do that." Scarlett washed her hands and took the apron I offered her. She rummaged in the lower cabinets,

pulled out my blender and a cutting board, and handed the latter to me.

“Thanks.” I found the ingredients we needed in the refrigerator and set them on the counter, where Scarlett promptly began organizing them.

I used my phone to turn on holiday music and watched Scarlett sway her hips to the beat. Her black leggings made her curves less noticeable, and her oversized t-shirt hid her glorious breasts. None of it detracted from her beauty.

I had to look away long enough to cut and season the chicken breasts and veggies, lining them up in order of use for the wok. When a bit of water tossed onto the metal surface sizzled and steamed immediately, I added a little oil and tossed my chicken in.

The blender turned on, and Scarlett finished the sauce before I'd even added the veggies to the pan.

She shot me a saucy look. “I win.”

“Oh, is it a competition now?” I asked, looking her up and down. “I’ve got some things I excel at. Like makin’ you beg. Leavin’ you boneless and unable to form a coherent thought from so many orgasms.”

“Careful, I might make you put your mouth where your audacity is,” she quipped, pouring the sauce into a bowl and cleaning up her workstation.

“I’ll stop makin’ dinner right now and eat you instead,” I threatened playfully.

She laughed and tried to snap me with the hand towel. “As much as I appreciate that offer, I’m starving, and your cock doesn’t fill me in the same way that chicken will.”

“Fine, I’ll give you real food.” I grabbed the pan handle and tossed the chicken until it was cooked, then added the vegetables and tossed until they were only slightly crunchy.

“Here.” Scarlett spooned some of the peanut sauce over, and I pulled it from the heat, tossing it to coat.

She wafted the scent toward her with her hand. “It smells incredible.”

“Can you grab plates, please?”

“Yeah.”

As she reached into the cabinet and I tried to catch another glimpse of her ass, the lights flickered briefly, then everything went black.

“Shit,” Scarlett whispered.

“You okay?” I asked, setting the pan down and trying to figure out where my phone was. I followed the music and finally found it, turning on the flashlight. Scarlett stood next to the counter, clutching two plates to her chest. “Are you afraid of the dark?”

“What? No,” she laughed. “I just don’t know your kitchen well enough to avoid touching the hot stove.”

“I don’t have a generator, but I can turn the fireplace on,” I offered, using the phone light to make my way across the

living room. It was eerie to look out the windows and see nothing because the city lights had all gone out. The wind was nearly howling, and I could still hear the rain.

It only took the tap of a button to turn the gas fireplace on, but it illuminated little past the living area. My mother had given me some decorative candles, so I grabbed them and took them back to the kitchen, finding matches and lighting them. That gave us enough light to see the food and plate it. I laid butter lettuce leaves on the plates and added rice, the chicken mixture, and a little extra peanut sauce. It was the Thai version of tacos.

“It’s kind of romantic if you think about it,” Scarlett said, as we sat at the dining table with three candles. I could make out her facial features, though they were shadowed as the candles flickered with our breaths.

“Yeah.” I picked up one of the butter lettuce pockets and took a bite, grunting my approval.

Scarlett moaned, and I nearly dropped my food. “You can make this anytime. I would eat it every night.”

“Good to know.” It didn’t take long to finish, and then there was a long, awkward stretch of silence where neither of us knew quite what to do. I didn’t want the evening to end like that, though. “How about we pour some wine and play cards in front of the fireplace?”

“I like that idea,” Scarlett agreed. “I haven’t played cards in years.”

“You never play with the others?”

“Have you met them?” She laughed. “We can get a little competitive, so we try to avoid games where there has to be a clear winner.”

“Is it that bad?” I asked. “My siblings and I are competitive, but still play games when we go home.”

“Let’s just say that one disagreement resulted in blood being drawn, and that was the last time we ever played Monopoly.”

My eyes widened. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

I grabbed the plates and deposited them in the sink to wash later, then plucked two wine glasses from the rack and filled them with the white she’d brought. It would be sweet enough to drink after dinner. I pulled a pack of cards from the utility drawer and set them and the wine on the coffee table.

“Wait just one moment.” I held a finger up and rushed to my room, gathering the pillows and a few spare blankets from the closet. “We can make a little nest in front of the fire.”

Scarlett helped me arrange everything, then snagged her wine glass and curled up on the blanket. “Cozy.”

“We could do Slapjack with one deck,” I suggested, unsure of her card skills.

“Sure.” Scarlett pulled the cards from the box and shuffled them so swiftly I was glad I hadn’t suggested anything more

complex than a game requiring hand-eye coordination. She dealt our cards and gathered her pile. “You can go first.”

“Thanks,” I said, resigned to my likely loss. I laid the first card down, creating a center pile, and Scarlett followed. Cards flew fast, and I saw the jack just before her hand slapped down on it.

“Jack!” She collected all the cards and put them in a separate pile.

“Luck,” I muttered, throwing the next card down—which happened to be another jack I was unprepared for.

Scarlett squealed and slapped her hand down on it. “How’s that for luck, babyyy!”

I would never play cards with the woman again. “Why don’t you go first?”

“It won’t stop me from dominating you at cards,” she purred. “Or in the bedroom with your rope.”

“Woman,” I growled. “You’re trying to distract me, and I won’t allow it.”

“Lil’ ole me?” She imitated a southern belle drawl and pressed a hand to her chest. “Two more. Think you’ll get any?”

I tossed my card down, and the game was on again—for all of ten seconds until she got another jack. Then another six cards after that. Scarlett did a little victory dance from her position with her legs crossed, letting the cards rain down over her.

“You’re pickin’ those up,” I said, pointing to the mess.

She finished the last of her wine. “Fair. Why don’t you go grab the ice cream and a spoon?”

Scarlett held her glass up, and I took hers and mine to the kitchen, exchanging them for the peppermint ice cream she’d brought. And one spoon, because we were adults and we could share. She was reclining on the pillows like Roman royalty when I returned, and I lowered next to her, pulling her between my legs so I could hold her. I set the ice cream next to me and offered her a spoonful.

“*Mm*,” she moaned. “I feel like a princess.”

“Without power, it’s kind of a medieval fairy tale,” I said dryly, taking a bite of ice cream.

She sighed and took another bite, burrowing into my chest. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just glad I’m here... with you. Because I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I kissed the top of her head.

Scarlett stole the spoon and grabbed a scoop of ice cream, stuffing her mouth full.

“Come home with me for Christmas,” I whispered against her ear, cringing as soon as the words were out because it hadn’t been nearly as romantic as I’d planned.

Her head whipped around, and she stared at me in shock. “To Texas?”

“That’s where I live.”

“To meet your parents,” she added.

“Yes, we’d be stayin’ at the ranch,” I explained. “I’ve met your family and want you to meet mine. So come home with me. You don’t have to stay the whole two weeks, but I’d like you to be there for Christmas, at least.”

“You’re sure?”

“One hundred percent.” I brought her hand to my lips.

“Okay,” she whispered, nodding her head. “I’ll go with you.”

My heart swelled, and I wrapped my arms around her, making her squeak as she nearly dropped the spoon. “Thank you. I promise to make it your most memorable Christmas ever.”

Scarlett laughed and turned to kiss me. “That’s a lofty goal. But if anybody can do it, you can.”

We sat there, eating ice cream and cuddling until Scarlett dozed off. I moved the carton away and lay behind her, pulling her into me and covering us as I watched the flames in the fireplace flicker and pictured the possibilities for the future.

Chapter Twenty-Three



MY ALARM HAD YET to trill its annoying song, but I was wide awake and staring at Rhett's calm face, lax in his slumber. The restaurant's Christmas dinner was today, and the staff was undoubtedly already hard at work preparing for all those who'd made reservations. There was no breakfast, but both lunch and dinner were the same special. Rhett and I had worked most of yesterday to pre-make as much as possible.

I might have been more anxious about it than Rhett, but he was always mellow, rarely showing strong emotions. He showed love through attention to detail about my needs and always being there for me. And he wasn't afraid to share the words.

He may not have bought me bouquets of flowers, but he regularly gave me coffee and food, and that first care basket

said a lot about his character. There were nice guys, but Rhett was a good man, and I was grateful to have him in my life.

His lashes fluttered, then those blue eyes met mine, and his lips spread into a serene smile. “Mornin’, darlin’.”

His rumbling drawl had me wet almost instantly, and I reached under the covers, finding his cock already half-hard. It pulsed in my hand as I worked it. “Let’s make it a *very* good morning.”

“Every mornin’ is good if I’m wakin’ next to you, darlin’.”

Without warning, Rhett flipped me onto my stomach, pulling my hips up and burying his face between my thighs. I swore and whimpered as his tongue dragged over my clit, circling and flicking, working me up to an impatient frenzy because he ignored the part of me that wanted attention the most.

“Rhett,” I whined, swaying my hips and pushing back against his face. “Fuck me, please.”

“So polite,” he murmured against me. “Good manners are so important.”

Slowly, he pressed a finger inside of me, thrusting lazily. It wasn’t enough, and the man knew it. One day, I would take my time and torture him like he was doing to me. Right now, I just needed to be filled.

“*More.*”

“Didn’t you ever learn patience, Scarlett?” Rhett teased, easing another finger inside me. “Maybe we should work on that.”

“I swear, Rhett.”

“I used to get my mouth washed out for that.” His fingers left me bereft, and I cried out, only to have my mouth filled with my flavor as he shoved them inside. “Go ahead, darlin’, rinse that mouth out.”

There were no words, no protests. I didn’t know I needed it, but his fingers filling my mouth was undeniably erotic. I sucked, licking myself off him until he pulled free, and I felt his cock at my entrance.

“I’m so fuckin’ hard for you, Scarlett,” he groaned, pressing me flat to the mattress under him as he slid inside my pussy. It felt even tighter, with my thighs pinned between his, every inch of his shaft sliding against my inner walls. I arched my back, lifting my ass to take him deeper.

Rhett braced his forearms next to my head, his breath coming in inaudible gasps as he worked in. He moved my hair to the side, his lip brushing the side of my neck, sucking gently and making me clamp down around him.

“*Oh, shit,*” I breathed, tingling from head to toe. I was so full, so enveloped by Rhett. It was difficult to tell where I stopped and he began. “Rhett.”

“You need more, darlin’?” he rumbled low against my ear. His hand slipped under my hips, fingers finding my clit and expertly teasing, pushing me to the edge and gentling his touch when I thought I was about to come. His fingers slipped over my clit again. “How’s that?”

“So good,” I purred. Then he stopped again, and I growled at him. “*Please*, I need to come.”

“Then come all over my cock, darlin’.” He thrust deep at the same time his fingers circled my clit, and I shuddered, my inner walls spasming hard around him. He kept pressure on my clit, drawing my pleasure out and coaxing a second, smaller release from me when he planted deep and spilled inside me.

I heard him lick his fingers when he removed them from my clit, then stroked up my side. My entire body was sensitized, and I twitched at the touch, goosebumps washing over me.

When Rhett’s weight lifted off me, I was instantly cold, missing the security I felt in his arms. He held a hand out to me, and I placed my palm in his, letting him pull me out of bed.

“Come on, let’s get showered.” He took me to the bathroom, and we brushed our teeth as he ran the shower.

Then he peed in front of me, and I averted my eyes. Wasn’t that a hallmark of a lasting relationship? The ability to pee unashamedly in front of your partner? Was I a bad partner for feeling too shy to do the same? I crossed my legs, realizing how badly I needed to.

Rhett caught the motion and was gentleman enough not to mention it. “I’ll be right back.”

He didn’t mention why he was leaving me alone in the bathroom and closing the door behind him, and I didn’t care if

he was doing it to make me feel more comfortable. I hurried to relieve myself and hopped in the shower just as he returned.

Once Rhett climbed into the shower, we had limited space to move around, given his sheer size. He let me have the water first, leaning against the back shower wall and watching as I put on a show for him, sudsing my body with a washcloth.

“If I didn’t have to get to the restaurant, I’d take you up against this wall right now,” he said, lips parted in longing. He took the washcloth and cleaned my back for me, lingering over my ass. I giggled as he made himself an excuse. “Just want to be thorough.”

“How thoughtful of you.” I reached a soapy hand down to his balls, cupping and rolling them before showing the same attention to his hardening length.

Rhett groaned, closing his eyes as I worked him full mast and removed my hand. “I feel like you’re punishin’ me.”

“I thought you liked all the teasing.” I smirked and lifted a brow. “Just giving you a taste of your own medicine. You’ll have something to anticipate later.”

“Darlin’, I anticipate every night with you.” He leaned down and lifted my chin, kissing my cheek, then lips. The water washed over us as our mouths collided, losing ourselves until Rhett’s phone rang where it sat charging on the counter.

“Damn,” he breathed against me, kissing me one last time before quickly rinsing and grabbing a towel as he stepped out

to answer. When the call ended, he called out, “I’ve got to get in earlier than I thought. DJ is goin’ home sick.”

“Okay, I’ll be out in a few.” I finished washing my hair and shaving, then toweled my body and hair so I could throw clothes on before Rhett left.

“Sorry I have to run,” he said when I entered the kitchen. He downed the last of his coffee and rinsed the cup, putting it in the dishwasher. The man was tidier than almost anyone I knew, without being a neat freak. “Are we stayin’ here tonight?”

“Unless you want me to come to your place after you close.” I made myself a cup of coffee and added a generous amount of caramel syrup.

“I can come here since I don’t know when we’ll be done.”

“That works for me.” I pointed to the tin on the counter. “Grab a couple of muffins to take with you. I know you’ll forget to eat. Nobody wants a hangry chef.”

He reached in and took out two pumpkin muffins, biting into one and lifting it toward me. “Thanks. Love you.”

“I love you, too. Have a great day.” He kissed me as he passed. “Break a leg!”

His brow lifted, and I slapped a hand over my mouth, realizing what I’d said. My face heated with guilt. “Fuck, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean—”

“I know, darlin’.” He chuckled and drew me into a hug, holding both muffins in one hand so he could pat my back.

“It’s not bad luck to just wish me luck. For future reference.”

“Got it.”

He donned his hat, coat, and boots and was out the door too soon. I tapped my fingers nervously and took another drink of my coffee. I’d be counting down the hours until he was done at work. I’d considered asking my family to drive up and go to dinner with me, but I didn’t think I could keep my cool sitting in the restaurant, especially if I saw Cora Covington.

So I’d invited Jamie over to help me pass the time. When she arrived after lunch, I was a mess, pacing the floors and checking every notification on my phone to see if Rhett had texted me.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked warily. Her jaw dropped. “Oh, fuck, are you pregnant, Scarlett?”

“No!” I slid my hand down my flat stomach, which definitely didn’t contain a tiny life. “I’m on birth control.”

“That’s not foolproof,” she said ominously. “Have you missed a period? I’ll go get you a test right now if you want.”

I grabbed her arm as she hopped up from the couch. “I’m not pregnant. I’m nervous.”

“About what?”

“I met with Cora Covington,” I admitted, feeling a little lighter after sharing my secret.

Jamie’s face scrunched in confusion. “Who?”

I sighed. “The food critic that refused to review Rhett’s.”

“Why would you meet with her?”

“To ask her to reconsider,” I explained. “I asked her to try the Christmas special at Rhett’s, and she agreed.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jamie still looked uncertain. “Why are you freaking out if she’s doing a favor for you?”

“I’m nervous for Rhett, because I didn’t tell him.”

“Oh, nope. No.” She waved her hand at me. “I’m not keeping this from him. Enough secrets.”

“What?” I couldn’t remember any other secrets I’d told her recently.

“Nevermind. Do I have to lie to him?”

“Doubtful.” I tapped my cheek. “He’ll no doubt find out when she posts her review. If she doesn’t, I’ll probably let it go and not mention it. I didn’t tell him because I didn’t want to pile more stress on him.”

Jamie laughed. “You two are made for each other, you know that?”

“When you love someone, you do whatever possible to make them happy.”

“Girl,” Jamie took a chip and dipped it in queso. “That man is head over boots for you. I doubt there’s much you could do to disappoint him.”

“Still...”

“No.” She shook her finger at me. “Stop overthinking everything. You can’t reason with love. It’s a force of its own,

and no scholar, scientist, or creative has ever deciphered it fully. Just love him and let him love you.”

“You make it sound simple.” Loving Rhett was easy, but not necessarily simple. We came from different backgrounds, and I still worried I wouldn’t mesh with his family. “What happens if his family doesn’t like me?”

“What if they love you?” Jamie countered, leaning toward me. “If Rhett’s family is anything like him—and they did raise him—I think you’ll fit right in.”

“We’re going to be there for two weeks. I can’t help but wonder if I need an exit strategy.” Maybe it was nerves, but I didn’t like the idea of being trapped somewhere unfamiliar. “He told me I don’t have to stay the entire time if I’m uncomfortable, but that would seem so obvious.”

Jamie perked up. “I’ll be your excuse! If you want to come home, text me that there’s no snow in Texas, and I’ll call and be so dramatic about injuring my back that you’ll be obligated to catch the next flight back to Portland.”

There was a reason I’d stuck with my group of friends. We were willing to do almost anything for each other. “It’s not a bad idea. I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Now that we’ve solved that issue, let’s talk about food.” Jamie could change the subject faster than she took a breath, giving you mental whiplash. “You promised to cook for me if I came over to occupy you for the evening. What are you making for me?”

“I figured I’d make dino nuggies, mashed potatoes, and peas,” I said with a shrug. It wasn’t fancy, but it was the kind of comfort food that made for a good night.

“This is why I love you.” She crunched on another chip even though we were discussing the next meal. “You love food, but you’re not an ass about it. Fancy, simple—you do it all.”

I laughed and pushed myself off the couch. “I’m glad you appreciate that I throw frozen prepared foods into the rotation. It means you’re easily impressed.”

She was nonsensical because it distracted me. I knew it, and I’d never stop her because that was how you knew Jamie cared.

“I’ll watch while you cook,” she offered, sitting at the kitchen counter while I pulled things out for dinner. “Now impress me, baby.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



TABLES WERE TURNING NONSTOP at the restaurant, and my staff was running around, keeping up with the demand. This was why I made the pre-holiday meal reservation only. It was the only way to accurately estimate the food we'd need to feed the customers.

I carved another turkey and set the tray under the warming light. It was going out as fast as I could break it down. I loved the rush, though. Feeding others and knowing they were happy made me feel accomplished. It was one reason taking Rhett's nationwide mattered so much to me. I could make people across the country happy and provide a place to create memories as a family.

"Corner!" Curtis called out, hauling a pot of potatoes hot off the burner. He strained them and got to work with the

immersion blender, adding butter and cream to create a smooth vat of mashed potatoes.

I grabbed another turkey and started carving while Ruben brought more meat from the smoker to rest. The brim of my backward-facing ballcap was soaked with sweat after hours in the heat, and my day was far from over.

“Chef, the steers are here!” Lex said, tying on his apron. “I’m off break. I’ll take over.”

“Thanks.” I finished the turkey and put the pan under the warmer, shoving the bones into the trash. There were too many to keep for stock. I snapped my black gloves off and wiped the sweat from my brow, washing my hands and hanging my apron on the way out of the kitchen.

I could hear the dining room conversations buzzing back in my office. After allowing myself a couple minutes to breathe, I changed into the outfit I’d gotten especially for this day. Donning the red clothes, I added a fake beard, matching hat, and cowboy boots. My cowboy Santa costume was complete.

I found the couple who owned the longhorns waiting out back with their massive animals. Longhorns reminded me of home with their six-foot span of curved horns and thick bodies. They were docile enough for the public to interact with, and they tolerated being hooked up to the decorated wagon filled with candy and small toys to give out to the children, like giant puppies.

“Thanks for stoppin’ by.” I offered my hand in greeting. “The guests will filter through here and take pictures.”

“We’ll help direct them.” The man pointed to ropes attached to traffic cones. “They can line up there so they’re safely out of the way.”

“Perfect. I’ll go grab what I need and be right out.” I returned to my office, picking up the oversized bag with all the goodies to give out. I tossed it in the wagon and climbed up to the bench, ready to put on a good show for the families.

“Yeehaw! Merry Christmas!” I called out to the kids, circling my lasso and doing some rudimentary tricks I’d picked up over the years. “Have ya’ll been good for your ma and pa this year?”

The little boy with brown hair and eyes looked up at me in awe. “I’ve been good. My sister takes my toys and drools on them.”

His parents chuckled. The toddler in their arms must have been the culprit he spoke of. She was chewing on her thumb as she watched the longhorns and reached out with her other hand. She squealed excitedly. “Cow! Moo!”

“Well, how ‘bout I give you some candy she can’t drool on,” I suggested, handing him a little bag.

“Thanks!” he trilled, shoving a piece into his mouth. He moved on with his parents, exclaiming, “I didn’t know Santa was a cowboy!”

“Well, look what the Gorge winds blew in!”

I saw Matteo and Macy standing with a to-go food bag. I’d intentionally made the portions large enough to leave leftovers

for the average person.

“Ho, ho, home on the range!” I bellowed, placing a hand on my belly and exaggerating a shake. “What do we have here? A mighty fine lil’ missus, I’d say.”

“Careful, cowboy,” Matteo warned with a grin. “I’d hate to wrangle you down from your... wagon.”

I swung the rope and let it fly, lassoing my friend as he turned. “Not so fast there, pardner!”

Macy giggled, and one of the longhorns turned its massive head, making her gasp and cover her stomach protectively with a hand. My brows shot up, and I pointed down, questioning. She nodded sheepishly. “We just found out.”

“And we’re thrilled,” Matteo added, stepping out of the lasso and drawing Macy to his side. He kissed the top of her head, beaming. “The first of many, hopefully.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she warned. “You’re not supposed to mention more until the first one sleeps through the night. Or at least until the morning sickness is gone.”

“Well, congratulations.” I reached into my bag to find what I was looking for. “Let me be the first to give the baby a gift.”

I handed them a box that contained a bright red ball. Matteo nodded. “Thank you. The baby’s uncles will be very jealous they didn’t think of it first.”

“Think of what, first?” A tall man with dark, wavy hair and a small girl on his hip stopped behind Matteo.

“Rhett gave your niece or nephew a gift already,” Matteo explained with a smirk.

The other man shot me an accusatory look. “That’s not fair. And I’m not sure it counts since the baby isn’t born yet.”

“Gabriel, take the loss.” Another man with greying hair and a beard slapped him on the back. He held the hand of a woman with vibrant red hair, and I realized when the third man walked out that they were the Rivera brothers. It had been a while since I’d seen Julian, and I hadn’t met the others.

Julian waved as he herded the children. His blonde wife rushed after a little boy, catching him before he could run up to the longhorns. She hooked a thumb behind her as she held the boy’s hand. “Jane is in the bathroom with Olivia.”

Their group reminded me of a herd of elephants in a wildlife documentary. I couldn’t tell which child belonged well, but the adults had formed a circular border around them to keep everybody together. It probably wasn’t something I should point out to billionaires.

“Have all ya’ll been good this year?” I addressed the kids, who shouted a chorus of replies in the affirmative. A dark-haired girl who couldn’t have been more than six ran out with a woman who must have been her mother and Gabriel’s wife. “Well, then, I think you deserve some candy and toys.”

I handed out the gifts, then posed as they took a group photo with me and the longhorns before moving along and making room for others. For the next three hours, I put on a show and gave treats to the families who came through the restaurant.

When I finally climbed down from the wagon, my left leg was stiff and aching from balancing every time the longhorns shifted.

“Mr. Roberts.”

I dropped my hand from my lower back and faced the vaguely familiar petite blonde woman before me. “Ma’am. I hope you enjoyed your dinner.”

“Immensely, thank you.” She smiled, and I returned it cautiously. “You don’t recognize me.”

It was more of a conclusion than a question. “Sorry to say I don’t.”

She held her hand out. “I’m Cora Covington.”

“Miss Covington.” I shook her hand, wondering what you said to a food critic who had just eaten at your restaurant. “Thank you for returnin’.”

“I almost didn’t,” she admitted. “But Scarlett was rather persuasive.”

“Scarlett?” When had she met Cora?

“I told her I wouldn’t tell you, but I think it’s safe to divulge that tidbit now.” She shifted her purse on her shoulder. “She asked me to give you another chance. Said the public had misunderstood you.”

“Oh.” She’d blindsided me, and my brain was working double time to process her words.

“For what it’s worth, she was right.”

I nodded. "I'm glad you think so."

"I'll let you get back to work, but I just wanted to tell you I enjoyed every part of the meal," she explained. "Your staff is inviting, and the food is as fantastic as I remember. The gluten-free items were delicious."

"You can thank Scarlett for that. She helped us learn the recipes."

"Fabulous collaboration," Cora praised. Her smile was sly as she continued, "I hope to see more of it in the future. For many years to come."

"You and me both, ma'am."

"Good." I seem to have passed some test because she nodded her approval. "You can expect a review on my blog tomorrow."

"I appreciate it."

She walked away, and it took me a good thirty seconds to pick my jaw up off the ground. Scarlett had arranged for a food critic to review the restaurant. And she hadn't said a peep about it. I pulled out my phone to text her, then put it back away. It was a conversation I wanted to have in person.

When I got back inside, the staff had already cleaned the restaurant, and I made sure they all made it out the door with a box of food before gathering my things and heading over to Scarlett's. The porch light was on for me, and I tapped on the door before she called out that it was open.

The lingering scent of cookies greeted me when I entered, kicked my boots off, and hung my coat on the door. Scarlett ran down the stairs, and I caught her when she threw herself into my arms. I breathed her in, that faint scent of caramel and the mint of her shampoo. Sugar and spice from whatever dessert she'd no doubt made. She only wore an oversized t-shirt and shorts, and I could feel her heat through my jeans.

“Hey, darlin’.” I kissed her, tasting a bit of that sweet. “How was your day?”

“My day?” she repeated, pushing her hair out of her face. “It was good. Jamie came over for dinner. But that’s not what’s important. How did it go at the restaurant?”

“Everythin’ was fine,” I answered vaguely.

“Fine?” Scarlett practically vibrated with nervous energy. “Just fine?”

“Yeah,” I said, taking her hand and leading her to the bedroom. “The food went over well with the customers.”

She let go of my hand and stood by the bed, staring at me. “It went over well?”

“Are you havin’ trouble hearin’, darlin’?” I asked, furrowing my brows.

“No, I heard you.” She shook her head, and her shoulders dropped. “I guess I just expected... I don’t know what.”

“What should I have to talk about?” I pressed, moving closer. “Any ideas?”

Scarlett bumped into the bed, her breathing fast. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe I should have talked about the praise from customers,” I started.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Or maybe I should tell you that all the kids loved the longhorns and cowboy Santa, and I gave out nearly all the toys.”

Scarlett grinned. “That’s really sweet.”

“Or maybe,” I smirked at her, softening my words, “I should ask what the fuck you were thinkin’, sending Cora Covington to my restaurant a second time.”

“Oh no,” she squeaked, hiding behind her hands. “You saw her?”

“She searched me out to tell me I should thank you because she enjoyed our fabulous collaboration on dinner.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened, and she whispered, “She liked it.”

“Yes, she liked it.” I pressed my lips to hers, only to be pushed away when she flung her arms out.

“She liked it!” Scarlett jumped up and down, grabbing my hands and kissing them. “She liked it!”

I chuckled and wrapped my arms around her. “That’s what I said.”

“I’m so glad!” Scarlett finally stilled and cupped my face with her hands. “It’s what you deserve.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, turning my head and kissing first one palm, then the other. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Now, if you’d kindly get your sweet ass on the bed,” I tossed a squealing Scarlett onto the mattress, laughing as she sprawled. Humor turned to hunger as she flushed a pretty shade of red. “I intend to make love to you until dawn.”



We didn’t quite make it to dawn. We passed out around midnight; Scarlett curled up in my arms as I rubbed her back. I hadn’t set an alarm, but I was already awake, dim light filtering through the curtains in Scarlett’s room.

I slid out from under her sleeping form, placing a pillow where I’d lain so she wouldn’t wake up. Quietly, I ran to the bathroom, pulled a pair of boxer briefs on, and then pulled my laptop out of the bag I’d left by the front door. I set it on the kitchen counter, opened it, and turned it on. The startup sequence seemed to take forever.

When the home screen finally finished loading, I clicked on the browser and opened it, entering Cora Covington’s name in the search bar. Her website was the first result, and I clicked, drumming my fingers on the counter as it came up.

At the top of the blog was a new post made late last night. My chest tightened as I read the title: *Season's Eatings from the South*. Cora went on to talk about how she felt like she was in Texas when she walked into Rhett's, and the food was as authentic as it came. I silently pounded the counter in victory as I read every bit of praise she had given me.

"What's going on?" Scarlett asked sleepily behind me.

I turned to find her rubbing her eyes, looking delightfully disheveled in my t-shirt. Scooping her into my arms, I spun her around. "We did it! Cora posted her glowin' review last night!"

Scarlett laughed, kissing me, and I looked up at the woman I loved. "I'm so proud of you, Rhett. I didn't have a single doubt."

Chapter Twenty-Five



FLYING WITH RHETT MEANT trying to squeeze myself in the half seat left when his broad shoulders took up more space than his allotted place on the plane. He needed the aisle to stretch his leg, and on the second leg of our trip, a man nearly as big took up the window seat. Claustrophobia had never been one of my concerns, but I was rethinking my reluctance to pay for an upgrade to first class on the way home.

While the Texans bundled up in coats, I'd removed my windbreaker and tied it around my waist when we left the airport. Sunny skies and mild temperatures greeted us, as well as a truck tall enough that Rhett would have to help me into it.

The man that climbed out looked so much like Rhett that I did a double-take between the brothers. They wore cowboy hats, plaid shirts, jeans, and cowboy boots. They even had the

same star belt buckles. He and Rhett collided, laughing and slapping each other on the back. When they stepped back, the brother turned to me.

“Rhett, how’d you convince this lovely gal to come home with you?” he drawled. “I’m Vaughn, the better-lookin’ brother.”

“Scarlett.” I held my hand out, and he took it, kissing my knuckles. I looked wide-eyed at Rhett, who had narrowed his eyes at his brother.

Vaughn tipped his hat and gave me a mischievous wink. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am. I’d be happy to steal you from this ol’ geezer whenever you want an upgrade.”

“That’s enough.” Rhett stepped between us and opened the truck’s back door so he could help me up.

“She should take shotgun to see the sights,” Vaughn suggested, tossing our luggage in the back.

“She wouldn’t enjoy your wanderin’ hands.” Rhett closed my door and exchanged a few words with his brother, and Vaughn threw his head back and laughed before they filled the front seats.

“What do you want to do while you’re in the great state of Texas, Scarlett?” Vaughn asked as he pulled into traffic.

“I guess I just want to meet the family and see the ranch,” I said with a shrug. “I’ve never seen a town named after somebody I know.”

Vaughn grinned. “Well, I hope you’ll be duly impressed.”

We drove through the city, then into what must have been the Texas wilderness. I watched the scenery pass, turning to trees and grassland between the towns. There were more hills than I imagined, but no mountain ranges that I could see.

“It’s greener than I thought it would be,” I murmured against the window.

“The northwest is always green, right?” Vaughn asked.

I shook my head, but he wasn’t looking. “No, the grass usually dies in the summer. It gets green again when the fall rain starts. The trees are the opposite. Green in the summer, then we get a few weeks of fall colors before a windstorm blows all the leaves away, and the branches are bare again until April. Except for the evergreens.”

“We’ve got evergreens and live oak that stay green,” he supplied. “It won’t get cold enough to snow for Christmas, though. It’s usually in the sixties. Maybe ten degrees cooler at night.”

I could see why Rhett told me I should bring t-shirts, jeans, and sweatshirts instead of my flannel pajamas. Back home, it had dipped low in the forties and down into the thirties at night. When I looked at the truck’s dashboard, I realized Vaughn had the air conditioning running.

It was my first time in the South, so everything seemed new, yet not altogether foreign. There were hills around the town I grew up in, too. What we didn’t have in large amounts was cattle. Toward the end of our drive, I saw more and more ranches along the road.

A quaint welcome sign marked the beginning of Roberts. Vaughn waved his hand at it, and I got the impression he was showing off his forearms under the rolled sleeves of his red flannel shirt. “Welcome to our town. If ya’ll don’t mind, Ma asked me to stop at the store on the way home.”

“I’d like to pick up a couple things, anyway,” Rhett said with a nod.

One main street ran through town, and the buildings were all charming brick in shades of red and white, like something you’d see on a postcard. They were all lined with white lights, and the windows were dressed in holiday decorations. Most buildings were titled by their purpose—post office, police station, and general store, where Vaughn parked the truck.

Rhett held my door and lowered me to the ground, taking my hand as we stepped onto the sidewalk. Several people called out to him by name, and I realized just how small the town was.

“Why don’t you wander around a bit?” Rhett suggested, handing me a basket. “Check out the local wine selection.”

“There are wineries here?” I took the basket and headed in the direction he pointed as he laughed behind me.

When I found the small wine selection, a woman with greying hair was pulling bottles out of a box and shelving them. She looked up and smiled. “Hey, sweetheart, can I help you find somethin’? Looks like you’re new here.”

“Uh, yeah,” I replied, caught off guard by her forwardness. “I’m here visiting with Rhett Roberts.”

“Oh, how nice! I’m Mabel.” She dusted her hands off on her slacks and drew me into a hug. I froze, unsure how to react. “I’ve known Rhett and his family since I was a child. His daddy dated my sister before he settled down with Ruby. What happened to the boy is a shame, but he made the most of it.”

Was she referring to his bull riding accident? Years after the fact? After he’d become a successful restaurateur?

Unwilling to feed into gossip, I plastered a smile on my face and ignored it all, changing the subject. “He said you have an amazing selection of local wines, and I couldn’t pass up picking up a few to take as a hostess gift.”

“Well, aren’t you a sweet thing?” She pointed to some wines and began talking about them. It was better than her gossiping about Rhett. “And this one is just down the road. You’ll pass it if you’re headed out to the Roberts’ ranch. Might be hard to see with the sun settin’, but you should make time to visit while you’re here.”

“I think I’ll ask Rhett about it,” I said with a nod. I added three of the wines she’d talked about to the basket. “Vaughn asked if there was anything particular I wanted to do while I was in town. A little wine tasting sounds just perfect.”

“Tell Willie I sent you his way if you go,” she said as I walked away. I said something to satisfy her nosy behavior and turned down the nearest aisle, pretending to be engrossed in the products on the shelves.

“I’m surprised you’re in town,” a nasal drawl whined on the next aisle.

“It’s still my hometown,” Rhett responded flatly.

The woman scoffed. “You know that it’s not really your home anymore. Your heyday was back when you still had two good legs.”

Oh, hell no. That bitch did not, in essence, call Rhett a cripple. I waited, but he didn’t defend himself like I expected.

“My family still lives here, and I’ve got the flagship restaurant,” he replied.

“We both know what I mean,” the mystery woman continued. “You were never the same after. It’s why I couldn’t marry you. Before, you were excitin’—goin’ somewhere.”

“You mean I was winnin’ prizes.”

The woman murmured something I couldn’t understand, and I crept closer.

“It was more than that. You were set to take on the ranch after your bull ridin’ career ended. All that land. The family name. You gave it all up. And for what? A barbecue joint? I could throw a rock and hit a dozen.”

“The food business can be lucrative.”

“Sure it can.” Her words dripped with sarcasm. “It sure hasn’t helped with your health. I thought you’d let yourself go after the accident, but look at you now. It’s shameful that you can walk around with pride.”

That was it. I hoped somebody at the ranch could lend me a shovel because I would murder this woman and bury her in the back forty. Maybe find somebody with pigs who could give a girl a hand.

Rounding the corner, I sidled up to Rhett, reaching up and drawing him down to me for a long kiss—with tongue. “I found the wine we needed.”

“Good,” he said absently.

I turned and acted like I’d seen the blonde for the first time. “Oh, sorry! I didn’t see you there.”

When she didn’t move, and Rhett still seemed frozen, I held out my hand to her. “Hi, I’m Rhett’s girl Scarlett. Who are you?”

“Grace.” She looked at my hand with disdain, but manners compelled her to take it. Her grip was weak, and I used all my strength for good measure, making her whimper before I released her.

“Hm,” I tapped my chin. “I don’t think Rhett has ever mentioned you before.”

“Rhett and I were engaged.”

“Not quite,” Rhett spoke up finally, wrapping an arm around my waist like I was his anchor. “I never bought you a ring or got down on one knee.”

“Well, that wouldn’t have been possible after the accident now, would it?” Grace sneered, clearly upset by my presence and Rhett’s backbone.

“Oh, aren’t you precious?” I said like an adult admiring a misbehaving child, smirking at her. “I can’t imagine why the two of you didn’t work out. Maybe Rhett realized he didn’t want any shrews in his family’s home.”

Grace sputtered, stumbling over her words. “Well, I never.”

“Oh, you must be parched.” I touched my throat lightly. “Mabel has some bottled water over in the refrigerated section. Maybe you should try sucking down something as cold as your heart.”

Rhett covered his laugh with a cough, and Grace glared at me. “Mabel?”

“Oh, yes, lovely lady. She’s known Rhett all his life,” I gushed, knowing the woman was probably listening. It was unlikely her gossip radar missed much, especially in a store where sound carried. I wouldn’t put it past her to have had the ceilings built to create a covert echo chamber only she could hear behind the counter. I motioned between us like we were conspirators. “I could introduce you if you’d like. Put in a good word. I bet she’s got a friends and family discount.”

Grace’s jaw dropped. “What is happenin’ right now?”

“Oh, you poor thing, there you go, needing something to wet your whistle.” I clicked my tongue and stepped forward. “Bless your heart. Run along now. Rhett and I have places to be.”

I didn’t wait for her to answer. Rhett kept his arm around me as we checked out and climbed back in the truck to wait for

Vaughn, who emerged a few minutes later with several bags.

“Ya’ll ready to go?” He asked, settling behind the wheel and looking at the wine beside me. “Maybe you should open one of those bottles and have some before we get back.”

Rhett punched him in the arm. “Stop tryin’ to scare her, you ass.”

“What?” He held his hands up in surrender. “I’m only thinkin’ of Scarlett’s comfort. It can’t hurt to imbibe a bit before facin’ the firin’ squad.”

“Dude.” If Vaughn hadn’t pulled out of the parking lot, I’d bet Rhett would have hit him again. He turned back to me. “Don’t listen to him. Everybody’s excited to meet you.”

“If Granddaddy asks you to sneak him the whiskey, don’t do it.”

Rhett nodded. “He’s right about that one. Granddaddy doesn’t have the same tolerance he used to, but doesn’t always remember that.”

“Okay, so wait to drink until after I meet the family, and don’t get Grandpa smashed.” I made an invisible checkmark in the air. “Seems easy enough.”

The sun had gone down when we were in the store, which meant it was likely dinner time or later. I hadn’t asked whether Rhett’s family planned on having us eat the evening meal with them. That reminded me of what Mabel said.

“Can you point out Willie’s winery? Mabel said it was on the way to your house.”

“We just passed it,” Rhett said, hooking his thumb over his right shoulder. “’Bout a quarter mile back. I’ll take you after Christmas if you want to try the wine.”

“Sounds good.”

Vaughn pulled onto a long drive with a sign that read Roberts Ranch overhead. Grassland and trees surrounded us, but it took another five minutes before the house came into view. The sprawling two-story stone building was impressive. Small lights lined the end of the driveway, and Vaughn pulled up in front of the main door and hopped out to grab our bags.

When Rhett helped me out of the truck, two dogs resembling Oreo milkshakes ran up, barking and jumping up on Rhett. He laughed and squatted, patting their heads. One of them nosed my hand, and I stayed still while the dog sniffed me.

“That’s Clyde,” Rhett explained. He pointed to the other dog. “And that’s Bonnie. They’re big softies; once you’ve petted them, you’ll own their hearts.”

I stroked Clyde’s head, and Bonnie shouldered him out of the way to get a turn, uncaring that I had two hands available. I snapped my free fingers, and she sat next to me. “That’s a good girl. Plenty of love to go around.”

After getting the affection they needed, the dogs ran off, and I stared at Rhett’s childhood home. Somebody had put lights on each story, and lit garland framed the many windows. A Christmas tree stuffed full of lights and ornaments stood through a large bay window.

“Do you like it?” Rhett interrupted my gawking.

I nodded. “It’s amazing.”

“Just tell Ma that,” Vaughn said, carrying our bags. “She’ll make you an honorary daughter.”

The front door opened as we approached, hitting the wall behind it. A dark-haired woman wearing jeans and a white shirt with a tan cardigan, who looked about my mother’s age, burst out with her arms spread wide. “You’re here!”

Somehow, even with her petite frame, she seemed able to envelop Rhett in a motherly embrace that translated into her deep love for him.

Rhett hugged her back. “Hey, Ma. It’s good to be home.”

She wiped her eyes as she withdrew.

Rhett held a hand out toward me. “Ma, this is Scarlett. Scarlett, meet my mother, Ruby.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I held my hand out, but Ruby knocked it away and wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tightly. My eyes widened, pleading for Rhett to help, but he and Vaughn just snickered behind their mother. So I put my arms around the woman and relaxed. She smelled like holiday spices, vanilla, and, oddly enough—home.

Chapter Twenty-Six



I WAS STRUCK BY the sight of Scarlett at the breakfast table with my family. She'd survived meeting them last night, though Granddaddy had already returned to his place. I planned to take her out to his house today after breakfast. Dad, Vaughn, and Lorne headed out early to complete chores and do the rounds with the cattle, leaving the three of us with small talk.

“Did you sleep well last night?” my mother asked, passing the bowl of scrambled eggs.

Scarlett nodded and scooped some onto her plate before handing it to me. “Yeah, thanks.”

“It’s always hard sleepin’ away from home,” Ma said thoughtfully. “Let me know if you need anythin’, and we’ll make sure you get it.”

“I appreciate that.” Scarlett shoved a forkful of eggs in her mouth and smiled. She buttered some of the gluten-free toast my mom had made from a cardboard-like loaf of gluten-free bread she’d found and looked to me for a distraction.

Clearing my throat, I wiped my mouth with a napkin. “I thought we’d head out to the barn and take a couple of horses to tour the ranch. At least enough to give Scarlett an idea of what we do here.”

“Oh, that’ll be fun!” Ma added bacon to her plate and cut it up in the eggs. “Have you been on a horse before, Scarlett?”

“No,” she admitted nervously.

Ma waved off her concern. “Don’t worry a bit about it. Rhett’ll make sure you’re taken care of. He’ll have you ridin’ in no time.”

Scarlett finished her food and stood, picking up her plate. “Thanks for the meal, Ruby. It was great. I’m going to go get my coat before we go to the barn.”

“Leave that plate,” my mom instructed, tapping the table. “I’ll get it all cleaned up.”

I chuckled when Scarlett nodded and reluctantly put the plate down, then hurried out of the dining room. My mom turned to me. “She’s sweet as pie, Rhett. I’m so glad you brought her. How are your plans goin’?”

“Everythin’s fallin’ in place,” I said, lowering my voice in case Scarlett was still downstairs.

“And she doesn’t suspect anything?”

“Not that I can tell.” I grinned and grabbed the plates, knowing it would irk my mom. “Now, don’t let the cat out of the bag for the next couple days.”

Scarlett was standing in front of the Christmas tree when I was ready, looking like a pretty picture in her jeans, lightweight white sweater, and boots that wouldn’t survive a day on the ranch. She’d braided her hair down her back, and I had some good ideas of what I might do with the long woven strands later, away from everyone else.

“You ready?” I asked after my boots on the hardwood floor alerted her to my presence. I unbuttoned the top button on my light blue shirt and adjusted my belt. I’d exchanged my black Stetson for a tan one I’d left behind. It was warm enough that I didn’t need a coat for a short ride.

She turned and clasped her hands together. “As I’ll ever be.”

I helped her into Vaughn’s truck, and we drove out to the horse barn, where I saddled a quarter horse for Scarlett and one of our draft horses for myself.

“This is Sharpie,” I said, stroking the tan and black horse. “My sister Hope named her that because it looked like somebody colored her mane, tail, and halfway up her legs.”

“I can see it,” she giggled.

“She’s sweet and docile.” I briefly explained the basics of horsemanship and showed her how to communicate with the mare. “Ready to try?”

Scarlett lifted her shoulders and slipped leather gloves on her hands to protect her from lingering hay on the horse. “I think so.”

I helped her get her foot in the stirrup and swing over, rubbing her thighs when she tensed in the seat. “If you stay tense, you’ll make the horse nervous, and your muscles’ll be screamin’ at you for days.”

“I feel like I might tip off at any moment.” Scarlett took a deep breath and settled into the saddle, loosening her grip on the reins.

I stroked her leg while stroking Sharpie, who was very tolerant of the new rider. “Good. You’re gonna be fine. Just follow me.”

I mounted the Clydesdale, named Dale, and gave him a good pat. Clicking my tongue, I led us out of the barn at a snail’s pace so Scarlett could get used to the movement. She was a trooper, and after a few minutes, her body moved naturally with Sharpie’s. I took her around the barns and ventured out where some of the nearer cattle were grazing.

“When I think of ranches, I always think of wide-open land covered in grass and little else,” she said as we moved through the trees.

It was what I’d grown up with, so cattle in the forest seemed natural. “Our cattle still graze, but the trees also offer protection from the elements. It’s not like the movies where we have to drive them places all the time. These guys get to wander as they’d like. There’re a couple springs out here, but

they're runnin' a bit low with the drought. It's enough to water them, at least."

Scarlett's brow furrowed. "Like hot springs?"

"No, fresh and cool. We don't swim in them, though."

They were a little further out than I wanted to take the horses, so I looped around and headed toward Granddaddy's house. It had a hitching post out front, so I dismounted and wrapped the horses' reins around the wood before helping Scarlett down, letting her slide slowly against my chest. Mostly so I could feel her breasts pressed against me.

I stole a kiss from her, then put her gloves in my back pocket, took her hand, and led her to the front door, knocking out the pattern we'd always used. Scarlett's knuckles were white. "Relax, darlin', you'll love him."

The front door opened with a creak I made a mental note to fix later, and Granddaddy's smiling face greeted us. "Boy, it's about time you got over here to see your old granddaddy!"

"You'd already gone to bed when we got in last night," I explained. His house still looked exactly how my grandmother used to decorate it: ivory lace curtains framed by a thicker powder blue on the edges, floral wallpaper that had to be fifty years old by now. Curio cabinets displaying my grandmother's prized china and tufted cream-colored couches half a century old.

He hugged me and patted me on the shoulder, then held his arms open for Scarlett. "You must be the lovely Scarlett

Rhett's been talkin' about. Good to see my good sense passed on to the younger generation."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Roberts." Scarlett gently hugged my grandfather.

He scoffed and waved her off. "None of that now. You just call me Granddaddy like the rest of'm. Come on in. I've got some sweet tea chilled."

"I can't turn that down." Scarlett followed him and sat where he pointed at the small dining table as he poured tea into small glasses. There was something about the older generation using dishes nearly half the size of modern versions.

"Tell me, Scarlett, is my grandson treatin' you right?" He handed me the glasses, and I set them on the table before taking the place next to Scarlett. Granddaddy lowered himself into the chair, sighing when he'd accomplished the task.

"Of course. He's a complete gentleman," she replied, politely sipping on the tea. "Oh, this is good. We don't have this back home."

"There's nothin' like good 'ole Texas sweet tea." Granddaddy punctuated his words with a tap of his finger on the table before he picked up his glass. Age had given his hand a bit of a tremor, making the ice in the glass quietly clink as he drank. His smile faltered, then recovered. "My late wife made it best, but she left me her recipe. The love I put in it doesn't quite match hers, though."

Scarlett swallowed hard and nodded. “I taste it just fine, Granddaddy.”

He reached out a weathered hand and patted hers gratefully. “Ah, sweet girl, makin’ an old man feel a little less lonely for a spell.”

Scarlett and I sat with Granddaddy, listening to his embellished tales about the ranch until it was nearly dinner time. I made our excuses, and we rode back to the barn. Scarlett insisted on trying to help me, so I showed her how to remove Sharpie’s saddle.

“Like this?” She held the ends of the saddle and heaved it off the horse’s back, unprepared for its weight. It came crashing down on her, and I rushed to catch her as she tipped backward.

“Not quite, darlin’,” I chuckled, righting her and taking the saddle.

Scarlett crossed her arms over her chest. “You make it look so easy.”

“It is for me.” I shrugged and finished taking care of the tack. “You get used to it after a while.”

One of the hands came in to feed the horses as they returned for the night, and he took Dale and Sharpie for me so I could get Scarlett back to the house. We parted ways to get showered and changed since we smelled like horses and wilderness. Nobody would have minded, but Scarlett was self-conscious about it.

Ma made roast and potatoes, cleverly avoiding gluten in everything but the rolls the rest of us ate. She offered Scarlett some of the gluten-free bread, but Scarlett declined. I couldn't blame her. After dinner, we played card games and Boggle, where Granddaddy whopped us all with his vocabulary. I checked the dictionary twice, certain he'd made up a word, but he laughed when proven right.

At the night's end, Scarlett and I reluctantly went our separate ways. I woke in the middle of the night, long after everyone was asleep. Quietly, I snuck down to Scarlett's room, carefully avoiding the creaky floorboards. When I slipped inside, she was sprawled across the queen bed, covers half off and revealing a holiday nightshirt. For a moment, I stood there watching her chest rise and fall, listening to the soft purr of her parted lips. I could just make out her facial features in the dim illumination from the nightlight.

A glance at the clock told me our time together was limited, so I stripped out of my clothes and carefully pulled Scarlett's covers down. The shirt had ridden up, revealing she wore nothing underneath. My cock strained for her, anxious to be inside her again.

I covered Scarlett's mouth as I covered her body with mine. She startled awake, blinking rapidly as she saw me, eyes widening when she felt the tip of my dick at her entrance. "Shh, quiet, or they'll hear you."

"What if somebody catches us?" she whispered when I removed my hand and trailed it down her body, between her

legs, to stroke her firm clit.

“They won’t,” I promised, dipping a finger inside her heat and spreading her arousal to her clit so my finger could move more easily. I stroked her lazily, adding another finger and stretching her. Scarlett’s hips lifted to meet mine, and I found that soft, spongy spot in her that made her slick for me.

Withdrawing when I felt her inner walls tighten, I kissed her and rolled off the bed, standing and repositioning her so her knees were at the edge and her pussy at the perfect height for me. When I entered her, she whimpered, grabbed a pillow, and buried her face to muffle her quiet sounds of pleasure.

I took my time, savoring how every inch of me filled her, how she fluttered around me as I grabbed her hips and made sure there wasn’t any bit of space I didn’t take up. Scarlett’s fists gripped the pillow as she pleaded softly with me to make her come.

Her soft flesh was hot under my fingertips, where they hooked over her hipbones. Hot and wet from her pleasure, my balls slapped quietly against her. “Touch yourself for me, darlin’.”

One of Scarlett’s hands snaked down to her clit, stroking as my thick length moved at a punishing pace. She gasped at the onset of her orgasm, and I pushed her head into the pillow, muffling the cry she couldn’t hold back. I bit my lip hard as my cock twitched, pouring myself into her, unable to resist the pull of her pussy any longer.

She turned her head to the side, sucking in a long breath as I withdrew, using my fingers to press the milky fluid back inside her as it tried to trickle down the inside of her thighs. “Don’t make a mess, darlin’. Keep it all right there for me.”

I pulled my boxer briefs on and climbed into bed with her, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her back to my front. Her t-shirt was damp with sweat, and it took a few minutes for her breathing to even out.

“Okay,” she whispered. “But why was that so hot?”

“It’s the thrill of discovery,” I murmured against her ear. “Same as in the haunted house and at the farm. You like the threat of getting caught. It makes you so fuckin’ wet, Scarlett.”

She covered her breathy giggle with her palm and threaded her fingers through mine. “I guess I do. Maybe we should try it in one of your barns.”

“Not a chance in hell, darlin’,” I said. “Not risking you touching any hay. It was hard enough to get you in and out of there without a reaction yesterday.”

Scarlett huffed, silently pouting. She couldn’t see my smile, but I grazed my lips along the shell of her ear, nibbling at her neck. “Maybe I could find a tree to hold you against.”

“I’m listening,” she whispered, turning to look at me.

“I’d have you wear a dress, then tear your panties from your body and lift you into my arms.” I described the fantasy I came up with when I was giving her a tour. “You’d feel the

rough bark against your back, my cock drivin' up into that tight pussy, knowin' somebody might ride by at any moment."

Scarlett's hips wiggled, pressing her ass back against my cock, making it hard again. A look at the clock told me I'd run out of time. "Sleep now, darlin'. I want to feel you soft in my arms before I have to leave you."

"I love you, Rhett," she whispered, settling in.

"Love you, too."

It took her nearly a quarter of an hour to be asleep enough that I didn't fear my moving would wake her. I tucked her in and searched for my sweats and shirt, pulling them on before tiptoeing to the door just after five.

Carefully, I closed her door behind me, watching it like I could will the hinges not to creak. My parents were on the other side of the upper level, but they'd be up soon to do chores.

"Well, well, well."

I spun and nearly punched Vaughn where he lurked in his doorway. I'd miscalculated, and he was already dressed for work.

"What do we have here, big brother?" He wore a shit-eating grin and inclined his head toward Scarlett's room. "Settin' a poor example for the rest of the impressionable children."

"Like you've never spent the night with a woman," I scoffed in a whisper.

“Not in my mama’s house,” he said, feigning shock. “Imagine the heathen that would stoop so low.”

“Shut up, asshole.” I waved him off as he joined me, stopping at the staircase. “If you breathe a word of it, you’ll find fire ants attracted to the honey I leave in your boots.”

Vaughn chuckled and trotted down the stairs, flipping me off behind his back. I sighed, creeping back to my room and forcing myself to get another hour of sleep, dreaming of Scarlett and that salacious trip to visit a tree.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



THE WHOLE FAMILY WAS assembled when I reached the kitchen for breakfast. They were all hanging out talking because Hope had finally gotten in half an hour before. She lived in New Braunfels and woke up early and drove to make it for the Christmas Eve festivities.

Hope was a younger version of her mother, petite, with dark hair and an attitude as big as Texas. I supposed she needed it, growing up with three older brothers.

“When that big lug pisses you off, you just come find me, and we’ll steal ice cream and watch a movie,” she was saying.

“You don’t have much faith in me,” Rhett mumbled, scooping another spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth. Ruby made the slow oats with cinnamon apples spooned on top.

“I do,” Hope insisted. “I have every faith you’ll mess up at some point.”

“Be nice,” Ruby chastised, from where she was cooking eggs at the stove.

Rhett’s dad, Vernon, wrapped his hand around her waist and kissed her, making her giggle.

“I aim to keep Scarlett perfectly content with me,” Rhett said confidently, taking a swig of his coffee.

“Content enough to need a shotgun weddin’,” Ruby murmured with a sly smile. It took me a second to realize what she’d just said. My spoon dropped into the oatmeal.

Rhett choked, spraying coffee over his bowl. His eyes widened at his mother. “Ma!”

He turned to Vaughn, pointing his spoon. “I warned you.”

His brother held his hands up. “Don’t look at me. I didn’t rat you out.”

“About what?” Lorne asked, confused.

Ruby pointed a spatula at her oldest son and lifted a brow. “I know everythin’, Rhett.”

My face blazed with embarrassment. She’d just announced to everybody that she knew we’d had sex under her roof. I wanted to crawl under the table and hide. Hell, I’d even ride off into the sunset on Sharpie without complaint.

Rhett’s dad brought him a damp cloth to clean up the coffee and chuckled, slapping his son on the back hard enough to jolt him before wandering back to the kitchen. “I’ve lived with it for nearly forty years.”

With a flick of her wrist, Ruby walloped Vernon with the spatula she held, pointing it at him threateningly. “You be careful, mister, or I won’t kiss you under the mistletoe.”

“Can’t have that now, can we, sweet pea?” He cupped her face and gave her another kiss, dissolving that disapproving glare. Her eyes softened toward her husband, and she gave a halfhearted huff, straightening her shoulders.

Rhett gave them a wide berth as he rinsed the coffee cloth in the sink. His mom held the spatula out to him. “Rhett, put this in the sink and get me another spatula.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, doing as she asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hope whispered reassuringly. “She’s not mad. She doesn’t get much chance to embarrass Rhett anymore. It’s all in good fun.”

“Right.” I wasn’t convinced.

She shot me a sympathetic look. “You’ll see. If they’re jokin’ about you, it means you belong.”

It offered little comfort, given the topic, but I would cling to the hope that his mother didn’t think I was some hussy trying to disrespect her under her roof.

Rhett’s family didn’t choose between having a big meal on Christmas Eve or one on Christmas Day—no, Ruby Roberts went all out for both. She conscripted Hope and me, forcing us to chop and mix until our fingers were numb. I had to forgive her because she’d ordered the gluten-free flour I used and told me to make whatever I wanted.

I picked my gingerbread cookies, and the two helped me roll out the dough, cutting it with the antique tin cookie cutters Ruby had previously that belonged to Rhett's late grandmother. I remembered what Granddaddy said about adding love and mentally channeled that into those cookies, hoping a little Christmas spirit worked in. Maybe the love was all the conversation and laughter we shared throughout the process.

When I brought the plate of cookies out after lunch, the men were adding more fresh garland to the main living area. It amazed me that there was any more space to decorate. Rhett pulled me to him, snagging one of the cookies and kissing my forehead.

"It's kind of like us," he said, holding up the greenery and pointing to the cookies. "Garland and gingerbread. Wild and sweet. With a little *spice*."

I giggled and shoved a cookie in his mouth. "A girl could fall for a guy with that kind of poetry."

"Good thing I've got practice catchin' you, then, darlin'."

Ruby stood in front of Vernon, his arms wrapped around her waist. They gazed at us fondly, and I blushed from the attention.

"They remind me of us, don't you agree?" she asked, looking up at her husband.

The corners of his eyes crinkled, the blue twinkling in adoration. "Sure do, sweet pea."

I could see Rhett and myself in their position when we were older. He'd no doubt find me just as attractive after my hips widened from childbirth and I had a bit of a tummy. Rhett would probably make it his new favorite feature on me, telling me it gave him his sons and daughters.

Rhett grinned at his parents. "Get a room, you two."

Vernon laughed and tossed a strand of garland at his son, and Ruby shook her head. The back of my eyes stung as I was overcome with emotion, and I looked at the Christmas tree decorated with a lifetime of shared memories. Realization hit me—I wanted the happily-ever-after with Rhett.



Rhett's family attended their town's Christmas Eve church service, and they dressed up for it. My parents had taken me to church as a child, so it was familiar. The service was less about religion and more about community. Everybody came to see each other and offer well-wishes. Smiling faces, sentimental songs, and little white candles with cardboard holders lit for the duration.

I stood outside the building after, breathing in the cool evening air and staring at the darkening sky. The service had been at four, no doubt to accommodate the traditions all the townsfolk seemed to share. So many people had approached to

see Rhett and meet me it quickly felt overwhelming. While I was comfortable in smaller, intimate settings with others, a couple hundred people was a little much.

“You okay, darlin’?” Rhett asked, approaching in his jeans, white dress shirt, and a dress jacket that made him look like an actor in an old western. He even wore a bolo tie with a star that matched his belt buckle. He placed his hat on his head and looped an arm around my waist. “Ready to head back for dinner?”

“Yeah,” I said, grateful to be out of the spotlight. I secretly hoped dinner was a quick affair because I wanted to take a walk with Rhett and maybe act out the scene he’d whispered to me in the early hours of the morning. I clenched my thighs and smoothed the skirt of my deep red dress, hoping he’d have the chance to muss up my curled waves.

We sat up front in the truck while Vaughn, Lorne, and Hope took the back seat, crammed in like sardines.

“It’s just like high school,” Lorne said, elbowing Vaughn. “Ma used to make Rhett drive us all, and we’d always pick somebody up on the way.”

“Remember homecomin’?” Vaughn pitched in. “I think we fit eight people in that beater of a truck you had and a few more in the bed.”

Rhett chuckled. “Then we broke down on the way home, and Dad told us we should have left more time before curfew because we were late. He had us up muckin’ stalls first thing the next mornin’. I was never late gettin’ home again.”

“I was too young,” Hope said. “I never got in trouble.”

Lorne tugged on her braid. “That’s because you always blamed it on us, and Ma believed you.”

“Not my fault I was more convincin’ than you,” she shot back with a wicked smile, whacking her brother’s hand away.

I was content to listen to their stories as we made the short trek back to the house. When we arrived, Ruby made everyone line up in front of the Christmas tree for a holiday photo because everybody was dressed up.

“Come on, Scarlett,” she motioned.

I shook my head and stepped back. “I don’t want to intrude. I can handle the camera.”

“Nonsense! You belong over here with us.” She turned to Rhett and gave him a look that was imploring and chastising at the same time. “Go get your lady, Rhett.”

She wouldn’t hear my offer to take the photo instead of being in it, and Hope set up a tripod. Granddaddy stood in the center, bracing himself on a hand-carved wooden cane, and the rest of us lined up around him. Rhett held my hand, and it only took us five tries to get everybody with a nice smile and their eyes open.

Bonnie and Clyde made a ruckus outside, and I tried to see what was going on out the window, but it was hard to see in the dark other than the shadow of another vehicle and the sound of a car door slamming.

“Oh, good, they made it for dinner!” Ruby hurried toward the door, the rest of us following to see which guests had arrived. She hadn’t mentioned any other family coming over.

It reminded me of how enthusiastically she’d greeted me when I arrived, flinging the door open without thought and opening her arms—to my family.

My jaw dropped, my eyes filling with tears as Dad, Mom, and Max were hugged and allowed entry. “How are you here?”

My mom embraced me, holding my arms as she took me in. “Rhett flew us out.”

“B—but... the cruise,” I stammered.

She pulled a wadded tissue out of her purse and blotted at the tears escaping and threatening to ruin my mascara. “Easy plans to change. We wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to meet everybody.”

I knew she was lying about the cruise, but I said nothing. My family was spending Christmas together—with Rhett’s.

“Come on, all ya’ll!” Ruby waved her hand in the air. “Food’s gettin’ cold!”

She and the others had put all the food kept warm in the oven and stove during church on the long table decorated with more fresh garland and glass ornaments. Roast, vegetables, potatoes, fresh bread—and cheddar biscuits for me. It was simple but filling, and the food was a backdrop for the relationships fostered at the expansive table.

Plates were passed and filled, and stories were exchanged. White-collar and blue-collar occupations didn't matter, and cultural differences between the Northwest and South dissolved as we found similarities in love and laughter.

My dad nearly beat Granddaddy at a round of Boggle, but age and wisdom prevailed over vigor. Ruby brought another plate of my cookies, setting it on the coffee table. Vernon handed out glasses of eggnog Ruby made, spiked with his favorite whiskey.

Hope sat down at the piano along the wall, and the Christmas carols began. Nobody mentioned off-key notes or missed words. It was comfortable and uplifting, like a temporary holiday utopia I didn't want to leave. Texas may not have snow, but it had everything else that mattered, save my friends. They would have loved Rhett's family.

Rhett's hand stroked absently up and down my back as his baritone filled the air. I snuck bites of gingerbread, eating the head first because that was the only way to consume them. Otherwise, you wondered if they'd scream if they suddenly came to life. I smiled to myself, silently laughing at my dark humor.

"Darlin'." Rhett took my hand and pulled me from the others to the Christmas tree, taking my drink and setting it down with his. "I wanted to give you somethin'."

"Rhett, exchanging gifts without the others is rude," I whispered.

“You’re perfect, you know that?” He shook his head and chuckled, then produced a little black velvet box from his pocket. It wasn’t until he lowered to one knee, wincing slightly at the position, that I realized the significance of that particular jewelry box. He opened it, revealing a gold ring with a kite-shaped amethyst surrounded by diamonds.

“Rhett,” I whispered. I couldn’t look away from his face, his eyes as he held my gaze.

“Scarlett Harrington,” he began, taking my hand. “You came into my life like a whirlwind. And through the ups and downs, I’ve only grown to love you more. You’re the first thing on my mind in the mornin’, the last one I think of at night, and I can’t imagine a life without you by my side. You’ve made me think, made me laugh, and if you’ll have me, it’ll make me the happiest man in the world. I love you, Scarlett. Will you marry me?”

I couldn’t stop the happy tears that cracked my voice when I squealed, “Yes!”

Reaching down, I helped pull Rhett to his feet, and he wrapped his arms around me, picking me up and kissing me deeply as he twirled me in a circle. Our families clapped and cheered in the background, but I was focused on the man laughing before me.

He finally lowered and picked up the little box where it had fallen in our haste, making sure the ring was still there before plucking it from the velvet and slipping it on my left ring finger. He kissed it, then held my hand up for the others to see.

“She said yes!” his voice boomed, filled with joy.

Another round of congratulations went up, and my mom and dad hugged me. Even Max got in on it, completing the little group hug circle. Hope was next, her embrace more gentle. Then it was Vaughn and Lorne, who both kissed me chastely on the cheek. Vernon approached with his arm wrapped around Granddaddy’s shoulders to support him and gave me a peck. I gave Granddaddy a small hug.

“Welcome to the family, Scarlett,” Granddaddy said. “I’m right proud to have you join us.”

“Thank you,” I sniffed, refusing to cry more.

Until Rhett’s mom stood in front of me, her happy tears trailing down her face. She didn’t hide them as she nearly suffocated me with her bear hug.

“I knew it was love the first time he talked about you,” she sobbed. “He couldn’t have picked a better woman, and I’m so glad I’ll get to call you daughter.”

“Thank you for raising such an amazing man,” I said, nodding. “And thank you for being so kind.”

“I can’t claim sole responsibility for that, but it makes a mother’s heart glad.” She clasped my hands in hers and squeezed. “I can’t wait until you move back to the ranch! We’ll have so much fun together.”

The smile on my face froze. “Moving back?”

“Oh, well, not for a few months yet, of course,” she said like it was a given. “We’ll get to see you in the fall, and I’ll have to

be content with that.”

“Of course,” I repeated, unsure of what to say. Rhett hadn’t mentioned leaving Portland. I looked to him for help, and the guilty look on his face sucked the pleasure out of the evening, making my heart hurt with betrayal. I made a quick excuse about being a bit overwhelmed and needing some air, slipping out the front door and fisting my hands on my hips as I stared at the starry night sky.

“Scarlett!” Rhett called out as he came after me.

I whirled on him, unwilling to hear him speak pretty words if they were a lie. “You’re planning to move back?”

“Yes,” he answered, then shook his head. “No. I mean, that was the original plan. Two years in Portland, then back home to plan my next move. Now, I don’t know.”

“How could you not mention something so important?” I asked, hurt bleeding into my words.

“I fell in love with you, and the only thing I thought about was our future. I didn’t think about where we’d live.” His pleading eyes made me feel bad, but it wasn’t me in the wrong. “Please understand.”

“No,” I said, swiping a hand through the air. “You don’t get to keep something like that from me and ask me to set my feelings aside to understand yours. I need to sit with this pain and process how I feel. Give me that space, Rhett.”

He reluctantly nodded and backed away. “Yeah. But whatever you feel, remember that I love you. And you love

me, too, darlin'.”

I turned away, holding my breath until I heard the front door close. Letting out a heavy sigh, I kept my eyes on the stars above, hoping something celestial might grant me an answer. It was Christmas, after all.

No miraculous solution sprinkled down with unexpected snow, like in the movies. Instead, my chest ached, and I grew cold, hugging myself against the night wind.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT of tossing and turning, I finally gave up on sleep when I heard my dad getting up. I dressed and met my dad and brothers downstairs to help them with chores because I needed the physical labor to take my mind off things with Scarlett. I'd fucked up, and I wasn't sure where we stood. It had been whiplash to go from our engagement to her enraged response. I couldn't blame her, though.

"Mornin', Rhett," my dad said with a nod. "You comin'?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"You're with Lorne, then," he said, tipping his head toward my youngest brother. "First pair done gets the first of the cobbler."

The promise reminded me of Christmas mornings in childhood. My siblings and I would race downstairs first thing,

sitting around the tree in our pajamas and gazing at how the lights reflected off all the shiny gifts that appeared overnight, as if by magic. After a few minutes, we'd start guessing what was in the packages, then resort to shaking them and listening.

Ma and Dad wandered in behind us, and Dad would tell us the animals deserved our attention before the presents. So we'd all get dressed and take care of chores before coming back in, red-cheeked and smelling of hay and horses. Ma ushered us to the table, where she'd have fresh apple cobbler waiting—with a big scoop of ice cream melting over each serving. It was a treat to have dessert for breakfast, and I had to admit that even as an adult, it was still special.

We drove to the barns and split up, feeding and caring for the animals. My hip throbbed when I'd finished mucking stalls and dragging bales of straw and hay around. Ranch work differed from going to the gym and lifting under controlled circumstances.

It reminded me why I couldn't take the operation on for my dad and why Vaughn had taken my place. My mistakes and failures sat heavily on my shoulders, sucking the joy from the holiday.

“Here, I'll grab that for you.” Lorne took the hay bale from me and cut it open, filling the feeder in the stall. There was no place for pride when it came to the animals' well-being. I couldn't do the job as well as my dad and brothers.

We still finished our tasks before them, winning us the coveted first bowls of cobbler. Before enjoying it, we all

showered and changed to save Scarlett from coming in contact with hay. It seemed only to bother her if she touched it, but we undoubtedly had bits on our clothing. Ma had been vacuuming the house twice a day to keep it free of the offending grass. I wasn't even sure Scarlett knew.

The house smelled like apples and coffee when we came downstairs. My mother waited in the kitchen, shooing us to our seats. "Who am I servin' first?"

"Rhett and Lorne," my dad said with a chuckle.

She set bowls of steaming apple cobbler in front of us, bringing the ice cream to the table and scooping generous spoonfuls on top. My dad and Vaughn had to watch as Lorne and I made a show of *oohing* and *ahhing* over the sweet treat and crunchy oat topping. When we'd had our first bites, my mother served them, then sat down to have a bowl with us.

Hope wandered in, still dressed in red flannel pajamas, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Did you start without me?"

"You're two hours late," Vaughn pointed out. "You're lucky we left any for you."

She shot him a dirty look and got a bowl of cobbler, eating it while appearing half asleep still. My dad set a cup of coffee in front of her, along with her favorite vanilla creamer. "No grumps on Christmas. Caffeinate, girl."

"Thanks," she muttered, filling her cup to the brim with creamer. It was a miracle she brought it to her lips without spilling. "Now it feels like Christmas."

I heard the soft footfalls on the stairs before Scarlett entered the dining room, offering everyone a weak smile. “Good morning. Merry Christmas.”

We echoed her sentiments, and she stopped by the coffeepot to fix herself a cup. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her lids were slightly puffy, like she’d been crying. My chest hurt because I was the reason for her unhappiness, and I didn’t know what to do to make it better.

“Help yourself to the cobbler, Scarlett,” Ma said, motioning to the dish on the stove. “Ice cream’s on the table.”

“Ice cream for breakfast?” she asked, taking a bowl from the cupboard and adding a spoonful of cobbler. She put a spoon in the bowl and carried it and her coffee to the table, slowing as she saw the empty seat beside me. I pulled it out, hoping to avoid a scene. She sat, murmuring her thanks. “Pass the ice cream, please. Might as well.”

I handed her the carton, and she added a dollop to her food, getting a bit with her bite of cobbler. Ma smiled when Scarlett sank into her chair, savoring the taste. “I made plenty for seconds.”

“It would be rude of me not to show my appreciation for the food you prepared,” Scarlett said between bites.

Hope snickered and rose from her chair to get more. “I know I’m practicin’ gratitude. It’s amazing as always, Ma.”

The oven timer went off as Scarlett’s family arrived with Granddaddy. They’d stayed out at his place since he had extra

rooms.

“Turkey’s on the smoker, and this old man needs to take a load off.” Granddaddy promptly sat in his chosen chair in the living room and called for cobbler. Ma rolled her eyes but served him some from the fresh batch.

I might have been the one with the restaurant, but so long as Granddaddy breathed, he was the pit master in our family. There was no arguing, and I didn’t bother to give the man input because he’d been smoking perfect turkeys longer than I’d been alive.

While the Harringtons initially questioned dessert for breakfast, they quickly became converts. Ed had three bowls before Kristine dragged him away from the table, scolding him to leave room for other meals. Max asked if my mother would adopt him and make him some every week.

As the others moved to the living room, I hung back to talk to Scarlett. She avoided my eyes until her bowl was rinsed and put in the dishwasher.

“You don’t look like you slept well, darlin’,” I observed, reaching out to run my thumb over her cheek.

She jerked away from me, sidestepping my touch and leaving my hand to drop back to my side. “What an odd way to insult me first thing in the morning, Rhett.”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that,” I said. “It’s not fair to put words in my mouth, even if you’re mad at me.”

“And here I was, wishing a few more words had come from your mouth, so I didn’t have to hear them from your mother.” Her voice was flat, but anger still simmered in her eyes.

“I’m sorry—”

Scarlett held a hand up, sighing. “Look, I don’t want to fight with you right now. It’s Christmas. Whatever is going on between us, it shouldn’t ruin the day for our families. This isn’t the time to tackle the issue.”

“Can we talk later, then?” I asked, desperate to work through this bump on our road to forever.

“I don’t know.” Scarlett bit her lip and looked away. “I don’t think I’m ready yet.”

“Come on, you two!” Ma called out. “Stop canoodlin’ in the kitchen and come open gifts!”

Scarlett took that opportunity to turn away and refill her coffee before hurrying out of the kitchen. Of course, they’d left two seats on the couch so we could sit next to each other. I didn’t like how she tensed when my arm brushed against hers.

My mother placed small, square boxes in everybody’s hands, stepping back proudly when she finished. “Okay, open!”

It was tradition, but Scarlett’s family had no idea. We opened the shiny gold paper and the little white boxes inside to find her handmade ornaments, each tailored to the individual’s tastes. This year, she’d made tiny snow globes. Mine had a little man in front of a smoker, holding tongs. Scarlett’s had a woman with a plate of cookies that looked an awful lot like

her gingerbread people. I suspected that's why my mother had asked for a photo of the cookies she'd made the day we decorated my condo.

Ma lived to make people happy, and the ornaments were another way she could do that. I thanked her along with the others, and we moved on.

Granddaddy gifted everybody one of his carved figurines. I guess the hobby must have stuck after all. Scarlet smiled softly as she ran her finger over the little dog that resembled Clyde, with its one bent ear. Mine was Bonnie, making a matching set.

Scarlett's family brought everyone something from the northwest: whiskey for the men and local honey for the women. Granddaddy promptly declared he must taste it and opened the bottle, taking a swig where he sat in his favorite chair. "Not Texan, but still damn good."

"Granddaddy!" Ma scolded. "Watch your language around the kids and guests."

"Apologies," he said with a roll of his eyes. Then he muttered, "It's not like they've never heard or said the word. You'd have to live under a rock..."

We did our best to hide our laughter as Ma shot him a quelling look, and Granddaddy returned it with one of mock innocence.

After gifts, the women retreated to the kitchen, and Dad and I took Ed and Max on a tour of the ranch. In the truck this time

to save the hassle of saddling horses and teaching beginners how to ride. We could drive the access road that circled the property, showing them what was left of the springs and where the cattle had settled for the day. They had enough questions to take up the rest of the morning, and we returned just after lunch to smells of turkey and pie.

The ladies had made an easy lunch of leftover roast beef sandwiches, and we ate them in the living room while watching football to stay out of their way. The sounds of the game and running commentary by my dad and Ed, with occasional opinions from Granddaddy, lulled me to sleep, and I napped on and off until dinner was ready.

Vaughn punched me in the shoulder, and I opened one eye at him. “Next time I have to wake you up, I’m gonna do the same, but lower.”

His hand instinctively went to cover himself, and he laughed nervously. “I’ll be lockin’ my door.”

“It could be tomorrow. Could be in ten years. You’ll never know,” I taunted, smirking.

“Come on, boys,” Dad said, his palms landing on our shoulders. “Don’t keep your mother waitin’.”

Christmas dinner with my family was the source of inspiration for the version I served at my restaurant. Smoked turkey, cornbread dressing, green bean casserole, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, homemade cranberry sauce—none of that gelatinous stuff, and Ma’s homemade rolls. She’d even figured out a gluten-free dupe for Scarlett, which was

impressive. I'd have to get the recipe from her later and add it to the restaurant menu.

Pies were in the oven baking while we ate, and there seemed to be a temporary truce between me and Scarlett as she sat next to me and even let me hold her hand under the table. She stopped me and gave me a disapproving look when I squeezed her thigh and moved my hand inward and upward. I couldn't blame her for that; it might have been too much.

After sampling the apple, pumpkin, and pecan pies, everybody was loosening belts and making excuses to go to bed. I followed Scarlett upstairs, leaning against her doorway as she opened the door.

"I'm still not ready, Rhett," she said quietly, fiddling with the doorknob. "You've barely given me twenty-four hours. In that time, I've gotten engaged and been crushed because I don't know whether I know or understand you after all."

"You know me, Scarlett," I insisted in a hushed tone.

Her vulnerable eyes rose to meet mine. "Do you know whether you'll stay in Portland or move?"

I couldn't give her the answer I thought she wanted. A single day wasn't enough time for me to make such a big decision, either. "No. But I promise you I'll consider it while you're thinkin'."

She nodded and let me kiss her on the cheek. "Goodnight, Rhett."

“Goodnight, darlin’,” I said as she shut the door. “I love you.”

When her answer didn’t come through the door, I sighed and turned away, heading downstairs to the den. It was the room we used to watch movies with friends as kids because it had a door that closed. I crossed the floor and squatted in front of a cabinet, opening it and sifting through the DVDs inside until I found the one I’d been searching for.

I put it in the machine and turned the TV on, pressing play when the disc loaded. Fast forwarding, I found the last time I’d been on a bull and hit play. The scene played out in front of me as I watched. The scents of the arena filled my nose, the dirt, manure, leather, and tobacco biting. My blunt spurs settled in front of the rope, my knees high because I’d gotten so tall. I could practically feel the flat rope against my gloved hand. How I’d wrapped and re-wrapped it in that chute as I waited for the horn.

It blared, and I was off, my arm taking the force of the bull’s erratic bucking, whirling, and twisting. My free arm stayed above my head as I used my hips for balance, my thighs gripping the bull. I could feel my grip shift slightly, and I clenched my fist for all I was worth.

Five, six seconds.

The bull bucked to the side, and the rope in my hand slipped. The crowd roared, cheering me on, but it felt like I could feel every beat of my racing heart in my ears.

Seven seconds.

Then he stopped suddenly, kicking, and my hand jerked free. Time seemed to slow as I sailed through the air, and I tensed, waiting for the landing.

But it never came. The TV shut off.

“What’re you doin’ in here?” my dad asked, taking a seat next to me. His greying hair was a bit mussed, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone. He looked tired.

“Watchin’ my past mistakes,” I replied, gripping the armrest on the leather couch.

“*Hm.*” He crossed an ankle over the opposite knee. “You know, I never thought of it as a failure on your part. I hope I didn’t make you think that.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You’ve always supported me.”

“At first, all I could think about was how our dreams ended,” Dad admitted, rubbing his knee. “But then that belief shifted. I stopped seein’ it as the end and started to see it as your beginnin’.”

I looked over at him. “You never said that.”

“Well, I’m sayin’ it now,” he said with a quirk of his lips. “You taught me somethin’ with all you went through, Rhett, and I’m thankful for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I used to think that the Roberts’ legacy was this ranch,” he explained, motioning. “It’s how I was raised, how Granddaddy was raised before me. You taught me that legacies aren’t

always physical locations you can point to on a map. Sometimes, they're in the memories you make with the ones you love. The most important legacy is the lasting impression you leave on future generations."

He was hitting a little close to home with his admission, and I wasn't entirely comfortable with that. I'd expected to spend the night wallowing in self-loathing, and here he was fucking with that.

Dad tapped my arm with two fingers with a surprising amount of force. "The Roberts' legacy is so much more than land and cattle. It's the sons and daughter I've raised. It's everythin' each of you has built for yourselves. And make no doubt about it: I'm proud of all you've accomplished."

"Thanks," I mumbled. While my family was loving, Dad rarely had heart-to-heart talks with me.

"You think I don't see things because I'm out working so much," he said. "But I have my fingers on the pulse of everythin' that happens in this family—including what's goin' on with you and Scarlett. Care to talk about it?"

"She's angry with me," I admitted. It felt good to say it out loud. "And I don't blame her. I got so caught up in *us* that I forgot to tell her I planned to return to Texas in the summer."

"And how do you feel?" he asked.

Running a hand through my hair, I blew out a frustrated breath. "I had a plan. Two years, then back home before

startin' another location. I'd always planned to come and settle back home when things were established."

Dad nodded slowly. "What're you thinkin' now?"

"I don't know!" I threw my hands up in the air. "I want to marry Scarlett—I can't imagine another future. But I don't want to give up my plans, don't want to give up movin' home. Maybe that's selfish, but it's how I feel."

"I can understand that," he acknowledged. He couldn't leave it there, though. "Just like your legacy isn't in how many restaurants you open, home isn't those dots on a map."

Dad stood, groaning when his knees popped, and patting my shoulder as he walked to the door. Before he left, he pointed those two fingers at me. I felt like a child again, back when he knew I hadn't learned a lesson and needed to make a point so I'd remember what was important.

"Love is a legacy, Rhett. And love makes a home."

Chapter Twenty-Nine



CHRISTMAS WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY THE best and worst of my life. I spent the day trying to forget what happened after the engagement, but Rhett was by my side for the first half of it. Seeing our families getting along so well had me torn because I still wanted to marry Rhett. I just wanted to start our life together with complete transparency.

I would allow myself to be picky about it, because deciding on a life partner was more than finding somebody who could make you laugh and give you orgasms. It was about finding somebody comfortable enough to be themselves because they knew you loved and accepted them unconditionally. It was knowing they would do the same for you.

Whether Rhett forgot to tell me about his big-picture plans or left them intentionally vague, it stemmed from the same issue.

It should have been a given for him to share his dreams for the business.

I had the luxury of not needing to settle. My businesses supported me; I didn't need a man for that. My friends fulfilled me emotionally, and I was happy staying single if it meant not bending who I was to somebody's insecurities. If Rhett wanted to be my husband, he'd need to learn to open up and trust me without fearing my rejection.

I frowned. But hadn't I rejected him as soon as I was upset? Not exactly, but kind of. I needed to take some time and think about things, but Rhett needed to know what he wanted, too. His doubt about everything was part of the problem. I didn't want him to give up anything for me, but I wanted a roadmap to follow for the future.

I stared down at the ring on my finger, unable to remove it. The amethyst glinted in the evening sunlight. After dinner, I'd walked out to the paddock to watch the horses before they were put in the barn for the night. It was quiet, except for the birds' songs and the horses' chuffing. Sharpie meandered over to me, nuzzling the hand that draped over the fence.

"I don't have any treats for you," I apologized, turning my hand over so she could see. When she bumped my hand again and turned, I took the hint and pet her withers until she'd had enough.

The temperature was starting to drop, and the light breeze made its way up my purple cotton dress. It was my compromise between dressy and casual since it was soft but

showed off my curves. And I might have wanted to make Rhett do a double take after he'd responded so well to me wearing dresses.

Back home, he saw me almost exclusively wear jeans and leggings because I rarely needed to dress up. I was a big fan of comfort over nearly everything else, but the weather in Texas was still nice enough for dresses, and I'd packed them because I wasn't sure how fancy Rhett's family got for the holidays.

I reached to pull the hem of my dress down but lost my grip on the fence, then my footing. Before I could crash to the ground, thick arms wrapped around my body, and I was pulled against Rhett's chest, smelling his familiar cologne spice.

"Careful, darlin'." He let me slide down his body, feeling how sturdy he was. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good." I turned around and stepped back, looking up. The brim of his hat shadowed half of his face, making his dark gaze even more intense. "What are you doing out here?"

"Lookin' for you," he said, toeing the dirt with the tip of his boot. "You don't have to talk. I just wanted to be near you."

I took a deep breath and leaned against the fence. "I'm ready to talk if you are."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

"I thought about what you said," he began, his voice vulnerable. "And I understand why you were upset. I never intended to hide anythin' from you, but I'm sorry I hurt you. I

should have talked more to you about the future, and I'm willin' to do that now."

"I can appreciate that," I said. "I felt so caught off guard when your mom assumed we'd be moving here. It was like everybody knew something I didn't, and it hurt that I didn't find out from you first. Then I got to thinking about other things we never talked about."

"Like what?" He braced an arm against the fence, settling in to focus on my words.

"Like kids. Do you want kids?"

He nodded. "I do. You?"

"Yeah, and maybe more than one," I admitted. "Seeing how you and your siblings get along makes me think a big family might not be so bad."

"We still fought plenty when we were younger," he warned. "But we love each other, and that's what matters most."

His words could apply to more than sibling relationships. He and I loved each other, and maybe that could be enough for us.

"Right now, the big question is where you expect us to live—both now and in the long term."

"Originally, I thought I would move back home. I had it all figured out because I believed my legacy—the most important thing I could do—was in the restaurants. When my rodeo career ended, I was desperate to prove I wasn't worthless."

He cleared his throat and looked into the trees. “It’s taken me time to understand that I’m not just what I do. You met Grace.”

“Yeah, and I thought she was a real bitch.” Even the thought of her made me angry all over again.

“I did real well on the rodeo circuit,” Rhett explained. “My growth spurt came late, and I didn’t want to give up bull ridin’, even though I’m taller than the average bull rider. I learned to make it work. And I had Grace, who was a little demandin’, but I thought she loved me.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, and I saw the lingering pain in his eyes as he continued. “The recognition and the money were good, and I never considered a different career. Until I got thrown at seven seconds. Fractures in my leg and hip, and pelvis.”

“Oh, Rhett.” Horrified, I reached out and laid my hand on his arm.

He covered my hand with his. “In an instant, my career was over. My world became operations, recovery, and physical therapy, so I could walk again. It was during the physical therapy stage that Grace told me she was done because I’d let myself go.”

“What the fuck?” I spat. How could a person be so cruel? “But you couldn’t walk!”

“I realized later it had very little to do with my body shape and far more to do with my inability to continue the rodeo

lifestyle.” Rhett’s fingers threaded through mine, and he stared at the size difference, brushing his thumb over my hand. “Grace never loved *me*. She loved the fame and the fun.”

“You didn’t deserve that,” I said quietly. It wasn’t enough for what he’d been through.

“I know, but it ate at me, anyway. It didn’t help that I never regained full strength on my left side. I couldn’t work the ranch anymore, which meant givin’ up my inheritance to Vaughn. And I don’t begrudge him that. He’s probably even better at it than I was.”

“I didn’t realize that’d happened.” It was another thing I felt like I should have known.

“For years, I was determined to make somethin’ of myself, and I have. I fixated on tangible goals until I met you. Now, it’s not about openin’ as many restaurants as possible; my goal is to live a memorable life with you.”

I felt tears sting the back of my eyes. “I want that, too.”

“So, it doesn’t matter if I have two restaurants or twenty. I don’t care if we live in Portland and visit Texas. We’ll live wherever you’re most comfortable.” He cupped my cheek, his fingers trailing down my jaw to lift my chin. “Wherever we settle, it’ll be home because I’ll be with you, Scarlett.”

“You mean it?” I choked out as I felt the first tear slip down my cheek, and Rhett kissed it away.

“Promise, darlin’.”

I raised on my toes and threw my arms around his neck, pulling him down and meeting his lips with mine. He hadn't just said the right words—he'd given me part of himself.

“So, what d'ya say?” He pulled away and held up my left hand. “Do you still want to marry this man before you, Scarlett?”

“More than ever,” I whispered.

Rhett swept me up in his arms like he had two nights ago, spinning me around until I was dizzy and laughing.

I felt my dress creeping up and wriggled in his hold. “Rhett, put me down before the whole ranch sees my ass.”

“That's just for me.” He grinned, setting me on the ground and taking in my outfit. “A dress, hm?”

“Yeah.” I spun so he could see it. “You saw it all day long.”

“That I did,” he murmured, stepping close. “And you know what else?”

I took a step back at the undercurrent in his tone. “What?”

“I thought about chasing you into the trees.” He moved forward, and I moved back. “Then, when I caught you, I'd do everythin' I promised the other mornin'.”

Shaking my head, I looked around for an escape that didn't involve the forest. “I'm not running blindly when there are fire ants, snakes, and your psychotic excuse for pigs.”

“How about we compromise?” he suggested.

“I like the sound of that.”

Rhett's lips curved in a devilish grin, and he swooped me up in his arms, tossing me over his shoulder and marching toward the treeline. I pounded my fists on his back and protested, but he didn't stop.

"Quiet now, Scarlett or somebody might hear and come lookin'," he warned, going past the first row of trees and to one that wasn't directly in view of the ranch.

He lowered me to the ground, and I crossed my arms, pinching my lips together as I narrowed my eyes at him. "You think you can just haul me out here and have your way with me, Rhett Roberts?"

"That's exactly what I'm hopin', darlin'." His hand shot out, hauling me to him. "I still remember how much you liked that idea. I think I promised to lift your dress..."

He pulled on the hem of my dress, raising it to my waist. He fingered the dark lace I wore. "And tear your panties off..."

With a jerk of his hands, Rhett tore the sides of my panties and held them up, smirking. "Look at that. They came right off. I think I'll keep them as a trophy."

He stuffed them into his pocket and slowly made a show of unbuckling his belt, then undoing his pants and freeing his thick cock. I reached for him, but he lifted me to straddle him, and my thighs clamped tight around his hips, his shaft nestled in my slit and bumping my clit as he moved.

My back collided with a tree, the rough bark catching on my dress, and I groaned at the added pressure of Rhett's dick

against me. He supported my ass with his hands and let the tree help me balance.

“Put me in you, Scarlett,” he demanded, voice needy.

I grasped his length and positioned him at my drenched opening, wetting the tip to ease his entrance. He waited for me to remove my hand and thrust upward, hard, not holding back, as he filled me in a single movement. I cried out at the overwhelming feeling of being stretched around his cock, impaled and helpless, as he moved inside me.

“Fuck,” he growled, forehead resting against mine. “I’ve missed this.”

“It’s been two days,” I moaned, fingers digging into his chambray shirt.

“Not this.” His hips jerked again, and I whimpered. He balanced me with one hand and placed the other over my heart. “This. The love. The closeness. Feelin’ you soft in my arms.”

“Me too.” My head tipped back as he shifted his hips and hit where I needed it most, every glide putting pressure on my clit. I got lost in the sensation, Rhett’s heat, how he fit inside me so perfectly. His low moans rumbled into my chest when his cock pressed against the deepest part of me, stimulating my pebbled nipples.

He’d been right. I loved the idea that we could be caught. That jolt of fear if I thought I heard a noise sent adrenaline surging through my body, heightening everything. I tightened

around him, making each withdrawal slower, only to have him shove back in me without hesitation. It was like he couldn't stand being outside me. I was so close, but part of me didn't want the moment to end.

Rhett's lips coaxed mine apart, and his tongue explored, playing with mine in time to the thrust of his hips. He tasted sweet, like whatever dessert he'd no doubt been sampling from the kitchen after dinner. "Open your eyes, Scarlett."

My lashes fluttered as I focused on him, his eyes a deep azure in the last light of the day. His brow furrowed as he plied my body with his cock, holding me on the edge. Just when I thought he might deny me, his fingers dug into my ass hard, and he pulled me onto him as he stilled inside me, his pulsing cock sending me flying into an orgasm that threatened darkness at the edges of my vision.

I shook as he filled me with his warmth, sighing and clutching me to him. Slowly, he lowered me, his cock slipping free and a trickle of liquid following. I clung to his shirt, steadying myself on wobbly legs.

"Rhett," I motioned downward. "I cannot walk back in that house with your come spilling down my thighs."

He chuckled, pulling my ruined underwear from his pocket and wiping me. "As much as I'd love to know you're walkin' around covered in me, we probably shouldn't scar the others. You might want to run upstairs and put another pair of panties on to avoid makin' a mess. Ma's getting' dessert ready."

“And you came out and fucked me against a tree?” My mouth dropped open, and I quickly righted my dress and smoothed my hands through my hair.

Rhett tucked himself back in his jeans, righted his clothes, then brushed bits of nature from my back. “More than worth bein’ a few minutes late.”

He took my hand and led me back to the house, opening the door quietly so I could sneak upstairs. I heard Ruby asking about me as I grabbed the first pair of panties I found in my bag and quickly used the bathroom to clean up what I could. The full coverage brief should contain anything Rhett left behind until I could shower.

“There she is!” Granddaddy waved his hand as I came down the stairs to join them in the living room, where everyone had gathered for leftover pie and ice cream.

I sat next to Rhett on the couch as Ruby started handing out bowls to everyone. Something brushed against my head, and I looked up to find Rhett’s dad holding a twig, his lips pressed into an amused smile. My face flamed, and Rhett chuckled.

“Hey,” he whispered low enough that nobody else could hear. “What do you think about a western winter weddin’?”

Chapter Thirty



I WATCHED THE EMOTIONS flicker across Scarlett's face as she stared at the dress. It was clear to see she loved it. My mother dabbed her eyes with a tissue, and Scarlett's mother pressed her fingers to her trembling lips as we stood in Granddaddy's living room, staring at the wedding dress he held.

"It was my Judy's," Granddaddy said, stroking the aged lace lovingly. "She'd have been proud to have you wear it, Scarlett."

"Oh, Granddaddy." Scarlett's voice hitched, and she threw her arms around him, nearly bowling him over. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

He laughed and "I'm glad you think so."

The women had gone wedding dress shopping twice in the last week after the engagement, and both times came back

empty-handed because nothing felt quite right to Scarlett. Hope finally found a white dress that Scarlett said she'd settle for, but she wasn't overjoyed. When Granddaddy invited us to his house today, I had no idea what he'd planned. He was sly and had saved Scarlett's big day by giving her a new memory with a sentimental meaning behind it.

"Can we alter it in a day?" Kristine asked, looking between the dress and Scarlett.

"I'd wager she's the perfect size for it. If not, I can take it in a bit." Ma held it up to her and then shot me a look. "You shouldn't be here for this. Bad luck to see the bride in the dress before the weddin'."

"You're kiddin'," I scoffed. When she pursed her lips, I sighed. "You're not kiddin'."

"No, now shoo!" she shoved me straight out the front door. "You'll see your bride in the dress at your weddin'. Go find your dad and brothers."

Since we'd brought the truck, I tossed the keys on the front seat and trekked back to the main house on foot. It was almost eerily quiet, and I didn't see the guys anywhere. I wandered to the kitchen, making myself a cup of coffee and grabbing a muffin to tide me over the next hour until supper.

As I stood staring out the window at the property, thinking of everything I needed to get done before the following evening, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Bonny and Clyde weren't barking, so it must have been one of the hands.

I set my muffin and coffee down when I could have sworn I heard a door closing.

“Dad?” I called out. “Vaughn?”

No answer. I frowned. It was unlikely anybody had snuck onto the ranch, but maybe one of the animals wasn't where they were supposed to be. I left my coffee and shoved the last bite of muffin in my mouth, then went to check it out.

A figure popped up as I came around the corner, and I caught Vaughn's maniacal smile just before he slipped a burlap bag over my head.

“Fuck, Vaughn!” I yelled through the material, trying to take him out. More arms wrapped around me, and soon, I was on the cool, hard floor. “This isn't funny, man!”

“Just give in, Rhett,” Lorne growled as I struggled. He was pulling my arms behind my back, binding my wrists in rope.

“What the hell has gotten into you two?” I couldn't buck them off.

“Now, the feet.”

What the hell? “Dad?”

“Relax, son,” he said, like he was talking to an angry mare. “This is tradition. It'll be over soon enough.”

“You know, they have hotlines for this kind of thing!” I shouted as they hogtied me and lifted me off the ground. I took small satisfaction at their strained grunts as they struggled to carry my weight. “That's right—all muscle under the paddin',

boys. Just wait ‘til I get out of this. I’m gonna throw you into the biggest cow pie I can find and rub your face in it.”

Their boots clipped over the stone in front of the house, and then somebody let go, and I smacked against the flat rocks, knocking the wind from me.

“My bad.”

“With all due disrespect, fuck you, Vaughn,” I hissed, trying to catch my breath.

They rallied, but it took them a minute to load me into the back of the truck. I realized somebody was sitting where my knees were, and I rolled, kicking my boots to the side.

“Shit, man!”

It’d been Lorne.

“I hope you’ve got a bloody nose, you ass,” I hissed, sputtering to keep the burlap out of my mouth. I felt the rumble of the truck’s engine, then every bump in the road, especially as one particular natural urge made itself known. “Vaughn, if you don’t stop soon, I’m pissin’ on Lorne.”

“Simmer down,” Dad said, patting my boot. “We’re nearly there now.”

I breathed a sigh of relief when the truck pulled to a stop, but that was quickly replaced with mortification when I heard a familiar voice.

“Oh, my, is this some kind of brokeback gift for us?” Eli’s voice teased as the door opened. “Rhett, I must say you look

good, all tied up. There's something about a helpless cowboy, right, Simon?"

"If he weren't marrying Scarlett, I'd let you take him home," Simon replied.

"A little help, please?" I called out.

"Right," Eli patted my calf gently and tugged on the rope where it ground into my wrist, making me wince. "How do I untie these fancy knots?"

"Those knots aren't fancy," Vaughn laughed. "Here, let me get that for you."

Eli snickered. "I think I like all these southern men. Manners and chivalry."

My hands and feet were released, and I groaned as my muscles relaxed. I felt like an animal released from captivity as I pulled the burlap from my head. My family stood behind Eli and Simon, everyone grinning at me.

Eli threw his hands in the air. "Happy bachelor party!"

My family blew noisemakers, and they yanked me out of the truck. My dad slapped me on the back. "Come on now, let's have some fun before I pass you off to that lovely lady."

We'd come to the local bar, which was by no means the place to party. It had pool and darts, though, and a game of longhorn ring toss. *It might not be so bad with a bit of alcohol.*

Nobody blinked at the Western-style getup Eli and Simon wore. Eli sported a light blue embroidered shirt with a row of

tassels across the chest, and Simon wore a red version. Instead of cowboy boots, they wore leather shoes that looked as out of place as the rest of the outfit. The only normal part was the jeans, but theirs looked poured onto their bodies.

“What kind of Texas cocktails do you have?” Eli asked the bartender. She glanced over at Vaughn questioningly. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. The girl had the good sense to smile broadly and offer something she no doubt created on the spot.

“So, you and the bartender?” I asked Vaughn.

He sucked air through his teeth. “A couple times.”

“Small-town girl,” I pressed, lifting my brows. He was only two years younger than me. Maybe it had something to do with getting married, but it wouldn’t be unreasonable for my brother to settle down.

“Not from here,” he muttered, watching her from under the brim of his hat. “From Chicago. Recoverin’ city slicker.”

“But she’s here now.”

“Uh-huh.” He wasn’t going to give me anything else on that front.

I grabbed a pool cue off the wall, and my dad joined me, racking the balls and chalking his cue.

“Your break,” he offered.

I lined up my shot and sent balls scattering over the well-worn green felt. We shot back and forth, exchanging playful

barbs. Lorne tried to teach Eli and Simon the ring toss, but the couple spent more time commenting on the horn-span. Vaughn leaned close to the bartender with a relaxed smile as he talked to her while she worked. It was a leisurely, laid-back evening and pretty enjoyable if I forgot the part where they kidnapped and hogtied me. I could still taste the burlap, and I'd probably be picking fibers out of my hair for days.

“What are the girls up to tonight?” I asked Eli, figuring he'd know.

“Movie night,” he answered between sips of his drink. “Jamie and Ella were right behind us. Lucia is on a work trip, so she couldn't make it.”

Simon chuckled. “No male strippers?”

“I'd like to see them try to come in with Ma there,” Vaughn laughed.

“None of that nonsense, now,” Dad called out. Regulars filtered in and out of the bar, but it had thinned out in the hours we'd been there. It seemed not as many people frequented the establishment between Christmas and New Year.

Eventually, I started yawning, and Dad herded us all out the door, taking the lead in the truck so Simon and Eli could follow in their rental. The girls had all gone to bed already, and I thanked everybody for taking me out—but not for the kidnapping. I couldn't wait to pay it forward to Vaughn and Lorne for their weddings.

I thought I'd be nervous the night before the ceremony, but I only felt sure about making Scarlett my wife. When my head hit the pillow, I was out, meeting the woman I loved in my dreams.



The last day in December was sunny, with not a cloud in the sky, as everybody took the access road to one of the natural springs on the property. Scarlett and I originally wanted a New Year's Day ceremony, but Pastor Ford told us he didn't work that day, and both sets of our parents insisted he officiate the wedding.

The men arrived first, climbing out of the trucks and lining up, preparing for the women to arrive. Ma had been unmoving about her insistence I didn't catch a glimpse of Scarlett in the gown until the ceremony began, so I hadn't even been able to wish my soon-to-be-wife a good morning.

Before breakfast, they shooed us over to Granddaddy's house, and Dad cooked us all bacon, eggs, and toast. I was sure the women didn't have to eat brown eggs and blackened bacon. I used the toothpaste in the bathroom to scrub my teeth after. We had little to do for the rest of the day, so Granddaddy pulled out Grandma Judy's old photo albums and told us stories, then taught us all how to whittle until we had to get ready.

I looked around at all the men who'd raised and grown up with me. Even Eli and Simon had a place in my heart, despite them trying to get me to wear chaps for my wedding. We all wore blue shirts, bolo ties under vests, long black blazers, and jeans and boots on the bottom. The matching black Stetsons added the finishing touch.

“Okay, boys,” Pastor Ford boomed, standing in the clearing around the spring. It was picturesque, with a small, grassy wooded rise behind it and the blue sky above. “Line up now and look sharp. Here come the ladies.”

That's when the nerves hit. My palms grew damp, my breaths shallow.

“You ready?” Dad leaned in and asked.

I looked at him wide-eyed. “A little late to ask now, don't you think?”

He chuckled. “Just remember—kiss her first thing in the mornin' and last thing at night. No argument is worth haulin' into the next day. Be a man and work through it. Listen to her, respect her, and most importantly—love her with all you are. Because if you do that, son, all else'll fall into place.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He wrapped his arms around me, slapping my back and murmuring, “I love you, son.”

Then he stepped back from my brothers and me to wait for the girls next to Granddaddy, who supported himself heavily on his cane. The vehicle doors opened, but I still couldn't see

Scarlett. I tapped a booted foot on the grass, impatient to see my bride.

Jamie held her hands to her mouth. “Everybody close your eyes! Cover them with your hands!”

“Is she serious?” Lorne asked, looking at me.

I nodded. “Yeah, she is, so do it. I want to get married today.”

Vaughn picked up his guitar and started strumming with his eyes shut. Covering my face, I considered peeking, but I only had one shot at this. So I closed my eyes and waited.

“Look at your bride, Rhett,” the pastor said gently.

My eyes snapped open, and I forgot how to breathe. Scarlett stood in my grandmother’s dress, which looked like it’d been made for her. The cream lace covered her arms, nipped in at the waist, then flared out, ending below her knees. Her hair was curled and styled over her shoulder, and she wore her very own pair of boots as her father led her down the aisle after the others took their place in a semicircle around the pastor and me.

I sucked in a breath as my eyes locked on her brilliant smile because Scarlett’s happiness sustained me. Tears fell as she came close and stopped in front of me. The most radiant thing I’d ever laid eyes on. I subtly wiped them away, and Ed put her hand in mine where it belonged.

“Hi, Rhett,” she whispered, her eyes glistening with her own unshed tears.

I grinned at her. “Hi, Scarlett. How you doin’, darlin’?”

“I’m getting married,” she said with hushed excitement.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “Me, too.”

“Hats off, men,” the pastor intoned, removing his own as soon as we complied. Then he began the ceremony with a prayer of thanks.

Our vows were simple and traditional. I slipped the matching wedding band on Scarlett’s finger, surrounding the amethyst with more diamonds and smaller purple gemstones. She slipped a gold band with a small row of inset diamonds on my ring finger, and I was content to belong to her for the rest of my life.

Lorne shooed away a few cattle who had come to explore what we were doing, and Bonny and Clyde ran around his legs, nearly tripping him as he returned. The dogs came to sit next to Scarlett and me. The whole thing only lasted a few minutes before Pastor Ford ended it with a blessing.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” he said, looking between us. Scarlett had stopped trying to hide her happy tears, dabbing them with a handkerchief tucked discreetly into her bouquet of purple sweet alyssum. “You may kiss your bride, Rhett.”

I drew her to me and dipped Scarlett, sealing our promise with my lips on hers, breathing her in and daring to take a taste before righting her and holding her until she regained her balance.

“That made me lightheaded,” she giggled. “I love you, husband.”

“I love you, too, wife.” I stroked my thumb over her cheek as she swayed toward me. “No swoonin’ on our weddin’ day, darlin’. I’m already yours, Scarlett, as long as I live. If you want to be in my arms, all you have to do is ask.”

Rhett's Barbecue Sauce



Ingredients:

2 Tablespoons butter

2 cups ketchup

1 12 oz fancy root beer or sarsaparilla

1/3 cup apple cider vinegar

1/2 cup molasses

1 Tablespoon worcestershire

1 teaspoon Urfa biber

2 teaspoons cracked black pepper

6 cloves garlic, finely minced



Method:

1. Melt butter in a pan over medium heat. Add garlic and cook until slightly brown.
2. Stir in remaining ingredients.
3. Bring mixture to a light boil (on Medium) for 7-10 minutes.

Serve over your favorite selection of meats (best over beef, chicken, and pork).

Scarlett's Gingerbread Cookies



Ingredients:

1/2 cup softened unsalted butter

3/4 cup dark brown sugar

1 egg

1/2 cup molasses

1 Tablespoon orange juice

1 Tablespoon orange zest

2 teaspoons vanilla

3 cups gluten-free all-purpose flour

1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder

3/4 teaspoon baking soda

1/4 teaspoon salt

- 1 Tablespoon ground ginger
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg



Method:

1. In large bowl, cream butter and sugar.
2. Add egg, molasses, orange juice, orange zest, and vanilla.
Beat until smooth.
3. Mix in dry ingredients until dough has formed.
4. Refrigerate 1-2 hours.
5. Preheat oven to 375°
6. On a floured surface, roll out dough to 1/4 inch and cut into desired shapes. Arrange on a nonstick sheet pan.
7. Bake 7-10 minutes. Let cool 5 minutes on pan, then transfer to cooling rack until completely cooled.

Enjoy plain or with your favorite icing.

Acknowledgements

I'm going to call this book the lucky thirteenth release. It's crazy to think about making it to the teens, and I'm so grateful for all those who have been by my side on this journey.

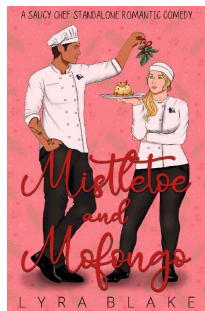
My husband has survived all of my brainstorming sessions, and now he's ventured into narrating with me, which is lots of fun. He's the real MVP, friends. I wouldn't trade him for the world. You can thank him for the bomb BBQ sauce recipe.

Thank you to all of my Alphas, Betas, and ARC readers. You make up this incredible team of eyes and constructive criticism that makes my books what they are. I'm forever grateful for all of you.

Sarah, your art brings my characters to life. Thank you for sharing your talent with me.

And my lovely readers. You're amazing. I love writing stories for your enjoyment. Thank you for taking a chance on an indie author.

Mistletoe And Mofongo



Together they'll discover the perfect recipe for love.

Celebrity chef Matteo Gonzalez believes home is where your family is, which led him to settle in the Northwest. Life's losses taught him to treasure those he loves, and his Abuelita's passion for food gave him the foundation that he shaped into a successful career.

A year ago, Macy Hart's life was turned upside down when her husband left her a Dear, Jane letter and little else. After losing everything, she is desperate, cynical, and can't see past her regrets.

When the two meet unexpectedly in a coffee shop, things get hot (literally). Much to Macy's horror, she leaves a lasting

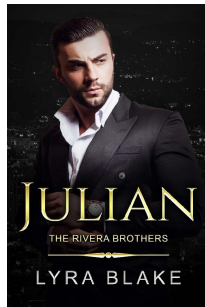
impression on both Matteo's mind and clothing. Macy hopes she'll never see the attractive stranger again, but fate has other ideas and—*surprise*—he's the owner and head chef at El Corazón Borikén where she's interviewing for the position of sous chef.

A firm believer in following his heart, Matteo hires Macy and makes it his mission to change how she sees the world—one recipe at a time.

Like sugar and salt tantalize in a dish, their opposing personalities spice things up in and out of the kitchen. Slowly, Macy allows herself to live again and Matteo finds a woman he can love. That is, until Macy's soon-to-be ex-husband comes crashing back into town with big promises and small apologies.

Will the twists of life tear Matteo and Macy apart, or will the love they found while making mofongo bring them together under the mistletoe?

Julian



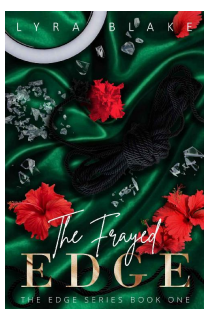
He's the most powerful name in marketing, but she's about to turn his world upside down.

Julian Rivera has dedicated his life to building Atabey Industries with his brothers, and now he rules the marketing world. After his executive assistant takes early maternity leave, he hires Luna, who ignites his lust and tests his willpower. Unable to resist his attraction, Julian pursues the woman who runs his life and makes him laugh with every mishap. When he finds evidence someone in the company is selling secrets, it looks like Luna may not be who she seems. Julian's heart and his company are on the line. Will the truth be able to salvage his trust, or will he lose the love he's found?

She's a good girl, but he makes her want to throw caution to the wind.

Exchanging sunny California beaches for the rain and wind of Portland is a small price to pay for the job of Luna's dreams. Only, her hot new boss makes every day a challenge. As the attraction between them grows, Luna is torn between risking her career or giving in to her feelings for Julian. Just when everything seems to be working out, Luna's loyalty is called into question. Can she keep her job and her man, or will her dreams lay shattered in the aftermath?

The Frayed Edge



*Warring personalities laced with undeniable attraction...
and a safeword.*

Chase Stevens is a fixer, he makes problems disappear for a living. His nature is controlled, Dominant in the bedroom, but when his best friends' sister Isabella Rivera is near, he loses grip on that tight restraint. Their personalities can't help but clash while sizzling attraction simmers underneath the surface. Consent is everything in the lifestyle, and Isabella is reticent to give up her freedom and independence to allow Chase into her heart.

*A broken heart and shattered soul reach for each other,
searching for a way to live again.*

An invisible threat turns into very real danger when Isabella disappears and Chase races to find her in time. When her world falls apart, he must put his own feelings aside and do what is best for Isabella. Can they move forward together, or will the frayed edges of life separate them forever?

Of Grief And Gratitude



Riona

Romeo is the worst client I've ever had as a fixer, but I can't quit. Duty to the O'Connor family dictates I answer when they ask, since they helped raise me after my father's death. I'm in too deep, though. Romeo's commanding voice... those muscles... they make me want to act in a very unprofessional manner. Even when he blackmails me for his own gain.

Romeo

I'm the black sheep of the Neretti family, Chicago's ruling Mafia. My father, the Don, has never cared about me—until a video from my subscriber-only website leaked to national tabloid media. He brought Riona in to fix my reputation and

prevent more scandal, but I'm not interested in reformation. Until my mother, the only person who has ever loved me, thinks we're dating. I'll do whatever it takes to not break her heart. After all...

Family is everything.

Books By Lyra Blake

The Rivera Brothers

Julian

Gabriel

Xander

The Edge Series

The Frayed Edge

Over The Edge

The Darkest Edge

Crave The Edge

The Neretti Mafia

Of Grief And Gratitude

Of Murder And Matrimony

Of Desire And Deception

The Saucy Chef Series

Mistletoe and Mofongo

Garland and Gingerbread

Dark Desires Novelettes

A Night With The Demon

About The Author



For legal purposes I must disclose that this bio is being transcribed as Lyra is a little... tied up... doing research for her next novel.

Lyra Blake hails from the PacNW, keeping it weird with her sarcastic wit and gutter mind. She is fueled by caffeine and whiskey- with a dash of chocolate thrown in for good measure. When she's not writing, you can find her spending time with her husband, children, dogs and cats. You'd never know her if you passed her on the street, but that's just how she rolls.