



GRUMPY COWBOY

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

max monroe

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m a x m o n r o e

Grumpy Cowboy

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Grumpy Cowboy is a full-length romantic comedy stand-alone, sexy single dad novel.

At the end, we've included an excerpt of ***Single Dad Seeks Juliet***, the first hilarious romantic comedy stand-alone from our best-selling ***Single Dad Collection***.

Now that you know, don't contact a witch to put a hex on us because ***Grumpy Cowboy*** concludes at around 90%. We are horrible at writing through any sort of pain. ;) ;)

Also, due to the hilarious and addictive nature of this book's content, the following things are not recommended: reading in public places, reading in bed next to a light-sleeping spouse and/or pet and/or child, reading while eating and/or drinking, reading while operating heavy machinery, and reading during your (or your children's/spouse's) Zoom meetings. Also, if suffering from bladder incontinence due to age/pregnancy/childbirth/etc., we recommend wearing sanitary products and/or reading while sitting directly on a toilet.

Happy Reading!

All our love,

Max & Monroe

To Max's knowledge of bull sperm collection—Monroe both
loves and hates you for it.

And to anyone who says romance novels aren't real books—
with all due respect, you can kindly go fuck yourself. *Kisses!*
Mwah!

INTRO



May 8th, Saturday

Circle Dub Ranch, Hollow Rock, Utah

Rhett

“Who’s watchin’ Joey tonight, Rhett?” Chase Walker asks from his spot ten feet away, atop the fence rail to one of the paddocks on his parents’ ranch, Circle Dub.

We’ve known each other since we were in diapers and went through school together at only a year apart, but our lives these days couldn’t be any more opposite. He’s on the Professional Rodeo Circuit, making a living as a bucking bronc rider, and I’m here in Hollow Rock, running my family’s ranch, Shaw Springs. I’m a single dad raising my five-year-old daughter, Josephine, and he’s a single guy with a laundry list of rodeo cowgirls he’d like to work through by the time his birthday hits.

Yeah. Completely different lives.

Still, he’s a good friend, and nights out like this for me are beyond a rarity. Sometimes, it’s nice to let go of all the pressure of being a single father and a boss and just have a good fucking time.

“My mom has Joey,” I answer. “She likes to do a girls’ night with her once a month. Somethin’ about reminding her that there’s more to life than dirt and horse shit.”

“There is?” Lynn, another bronc rider from the professional circuit and a guy I’ve only met a half a dozen times, asks, smiling flagrantly. “Maybe that’s my problem. My mama never taught me that.”

“You’ve got a helluva lot more problems than an affinity for horse shit,” Cutter James, a younger bull rider from the circuit I’m hanging out with for the first time, challenges with a chuckle. “According to Mandy Waters, one of them is in your fucking pants.”

“What?” Lynn retorts. “She said that shit?”

Chase and Cutter just laugh and take swigs of their beers.

“Who is Mandy Waters?” I ask, and Chase smirks over at me.

“She’s the exact kind of woman you’ve been known to despise.”

I quirk my brow. “What do you mean?”

“A rich, gorgeous, perfectly done-up *city girl* who found her way to a rodeo and had the unfortunate opportunity of getting up close and personal with Lynn.”

“You got a thing against city girls?” Cutter questions, and I roll my eyes.

“I don’t have a thing against anyone. I just have *preferences*. And I prefer them to be natural, raw, *wild*. Women who’ve never stepped foot on a ranch and spend more time in the bathroom piling on makeup and hair spray have proven to be nothin’ but fuckin’ trouble for me.”

“Yeah, but your baby mama Anna is as wild as they come, certainly knows her way around a ranch, *isn’t* from the city, and look where that got ya,” Chase teases, and I can’t not laugh.

Frankly, he’s not lying. Anna *is* as wild as they come, and our relationship ended with me being a single dad and her still

running around trying to sow a whole county's worth of oats.

"Maybe me and women just don't mesh at all," I respond, and Chase chuckles.

"Maybe you just need to spend a night with a crazy-ass, nothin'-but-trouble cougar of a woman by the name of Donna Dorset—that fucking woman *loves* her some rodeo cowboys—and you'd realize sometimes a little trouble is worth it."

Instantly, Lynn and Cutter burst into laughter, but also, they nod at me with wide, knowing eyes.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about or who Donna is," I say with a shake of my head. "But by the sounds of it, I'm thinking that's a good thing."

"You don't know because you're here in Hollow Rock, pissin' into the wind on your daddy's ranch instead of out there on the road with us," Chase teases with a knowing smirk. "When are you gonna grow a set and tell your old man where to shove it? You shoulda never left the tour."

I laugh. I've spent a lot of years wishing I'd had the courage to tell off my dad and keep riding broncs, but the more time that's passed, the easier it's become to accept. My daughter Josephine sure as hell has a better, more stable life here, and all it takes is seeing her hardly present mama blow through town every six months or so to hammer that in. Plus, it's been a decade since I stepped out of the rodeo spotlight, and I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations on my stepping back in has long passed.

Not to mention, I wouldn't dream of shaking up Joey's life like that.

My daughter is my priority. Always.

Chase is still a kid at heart, however, and I'm about as well-off wasting my breath on detailed explanations with him as I'd be slicing my own throat. No, to get him off my ass, I simply have to dish the shit-talking back just as hard as he serves it.

"I don't know," I retort with a sly grin. "Maybe I'll tell him when you tell yours you're out here in the middle of the

night ridin' next year's crop of broncs that aren't supposed to have ever been rode before."

"*Shit.*" Chase snorts, spewing some of his beer all over his shirt. "I guess I'll just have to wait and see you in hell, then. My dad catches wind we're out here, and all four of us will be in the back of a cop car. And I don't know about Cutter and Lynn, but I know for a fact you and I aren't that fond of the law," he adds as he jumps down off the fence and crushes the mostly empty beer can, tossing it to the side.

"You mean the law isn't that fond of us," I correct.

You'd think with the way Chase talks, we're still wild, twenty-year-old stallions with something to prove, but I'm thirty-six. I'm a responsible, grown-ass adult now, with a daughter to think about when I make decisions, but back when I was younger, I made a lot of questionable choices and partook in a number of dangerous exploits. The sheriff knows my first name intimately, and Chase Walker was right there with me more than a time or two.

Hell, that's part of the reason why my dad didn't want me to stay on the rodeo tour. There was always some sort of trouble, and like it or not, I had a real way of finding it.

It's also part of the reason Joey's mama Anna and I weren't meant for the long haul. I grew up; she didn't. In fact, she's still following the rodeo circuit just like she was when we first met. Most likely, drinkin' and partyin' and knockin' boots with a new guy every weekend.

And the only feelings I have about that revolve around our daughter and wishing Joey didn't have to pay the price for her mama's immaturity.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Chase agrees. "Anytime I see Sheriff Laycliff in the diner, he gives me more than a small amount of stink eye. Pretty sure he'd be happier if the tour ran yearlong and I never came back home."

I don't bother mentioning that at thirty-five years old, pretty soon, he's going to age out of the rodeo lifestyle anyway. Or that he should probably start trying to make a

better impression now if he plans on coming back to Hollow Rock full time.

But nights like this aren't the time for serious talks of that sort. I'll reserve the call to reality for an occasion with less company and harder liquor.

Nights like these are meant for laughing, cutting up, and shit-talking.

Which I have no problem doing.

"Well, the sheriff isn't the only one who prefers not to look at your ugly mug." I smirk. "Frankly, I'm thankful for the low-light conditions tonight."

"Fuck you, Jameson," Chase crows, using my last name for added emphasis. Lynn and Cutter snicker from their spots on the top of the fence rail across the paddock. "You're sure doin' a lotta shit-talkin' for a guy who hasn't gotten on a bronc yet. Cut, Lynn, and I have all been on a couple tonight. What're you? Scared?"

I roll my eyes at his baiting and take a swig from my can of Coors. "I haven't been on a bronc because I'm not an idiot. I've got responsibilities to go back to, unlike the rest of you. A ranch to run, a daughter to raise, that sort of thing."

"Hey!" Cutter yells, offended, although I'm sure it's only on a very shallow, superficial level. There's still a smile on his face and a beer in his hand, and if he'd really taken issue with what I'd said, he'd have already been off the fence and headed my direction at full speed.

That's the thing about most of us cowboys—we're hotheaded.

Crazy. Wild. Hair-trigger type of people. If we weren't, we probably wouldn't get on the backs of angry, thousand-pound-plus animals every chance we got.

"Come on," Lynn taunts. "All I hear every night on the road is the legend of former bronc rider Rhett Jameson. How unbelievably good he is. How natural his fucking seat seems. How I'll never live up to his record. How the women wet their panties for him every time he stepped into the ring. I mean,

I'm finally in the *Oh Great One's* presence, and I'm not even gonna get to see you take a ride?" He shakes his head and turns to Cutter. "It all sounds like bullshit to me. I think Chase has been mooning over a figment of his imagination all these years, Cut. What do you think?"

Cutter smirks, his big mouth curling up mischievously. "I think you're right, Lynn. I don't see any champions here. Just a big ole pussy and his favorite admirer."

They both laugh boisterously, and Chase cuts hard eyes in my direction, clearly more affected by their razzing than I am. It makes sense, though. As of tomorrow, after they leave to head to their next stop on the tour, I won't have to hear any more of it. Chase, on the other hand, will be eating shit until the end of time if I don't step up to the challenge plate.

After I consider it for another long moment, the familiar excitement of giving myself over to the power of a wild horse sings through my veins, and the pull of my long-standing friendship with Chase pushes me over the top.

Fuck it.

These assholes want something to talk about after they leave, I'm going to give them something to fucking *talk* about. It's been a year or two since I've been on a bronc bareback, but your muscles don't forget something you've trained them to do for nearly thirty years. No, they remember, even when you feel like you don't.

I toss my mostly empty can aside and jump off the fence, into the paddock, and start walking in the direction of the grazing pack of geldings. They look mild-mannered enough from here, but I know for a fact that the moment I toss myself up on one of their backs, all hell is going to break loose and then some. Chase's dad is one of the biggest, best bronc contractors in the West. He supplies broncs to rodeos all over this side of the country, but this crop here is meant for next year's professional circuit. They're the meanest, baddest, biggest bucking horses the world has to offer. They've literally been bred for the sole purpose of sending cowboys flying toward the earth at speeds much greater than gravity.

And yet, I keep heading toward them. There's probably a reason my mama always told me I must have been born with one screw loose.

Chase whoops and hollers in the background, telling Cutter and Lynn things like *I can't wait to watch you eat shit* and *Both your mamas are about to spread their legs in their beds without knowing why*.

Rhett Jameson, he says, is so fucking good on a bronc, he makes women orgasm telepathically.

The corner of one side of my mouth curves up at that last one because even I have to admit, Chase Walker is one hell of a hype man. The truth is, he's giving me a lot more credit than I'm probably due. It's been almost a year since I've made a woman come, period, let alone with the power of my mind. Since Samantha Holsten, my occasional hookup, went and met some beef farmer and got married, I haven't had it in me to troll the waters for a new partner.

Scanning the group of horses, I pick through the ones in the front quickly. Two on the left have already been worked over by Chase and Cutter tonight, and one on the right has been subjected to the same from Lynn.

Two in the middle look at me out of the sides of their eyes, watching my approach closely, and I study the minute differences in their stances. One, a red roan, and the other, a bay with legs the color of midnight.

I have no doubt they're both more of a ride than the average Joe would bargain for, but the bay, in particular, looks like he has the kind of flare that, if being scored, would land me right at the top of the leaderboard.

And tonight? After the way Cut and Lynn threw down the gauntlet? He's the one.

"Somebody got a timer ready?" I ask, glancing back over my shoulder. Chase holds up his phone as evidence that he's more than just a mouth, and I turn back to my opponent and heave one last relaxing breath.

It's just like old times, I tell myself silently. Just do exactly what you've always known how to do and don't overthink it.

Eight seconds. Eight fucking seconds.

Feet soft as a whisper, I move toward the bay gelding slowly. He watches me the whole time, and I know, without a doubt, I'm going to have to get ahold of his mane as soon as I'm at his side.

One step, two, and a final third, I reach out slowly and grab a huge chunk of shiny black hair in my hand, say a prayer, and swing myself up and over his back in one smooth motion.

As soon as my ass hits his back, he explodes like a stick of live dynamite. Straight up at first, and then ass over end, he bucks like his one and only goal in life is to put my face in the dirt.

Vaguely, I can hear Chase as he cheers with every passing second. Around to the left and back to the right, this bad boy is quick as a whip. My legs chug with the pump of his bucks, and my heart pounds wildly inside my chest.

This thrill—it's one of a fucking kind. It's exhilarating in a way I can't describe and terrifying in a way that makes me want to do it even more.

It's a test of mental and physical endurance that only a select few can handle, and by the growing sound of Chase's roars, it seems like I'm still one of them.

Hard humps and soul-destroying kicks, the beast between my legs thrashes like a badass, and I tighten my hand in the hair of his mane.

By my count, I'm less than two seconds away from a full eight, and all it takes is three more gyrations up and down for Chase to yell out confirmation.

“That's it! Eight fucking seconds! Rhett Jameson, motherfuckers, let's gooo!”

Allowing myself a smile, I prepare to dismount, watching and waiting for an ideal time to launch myself off and to the

side for a crash-landing on the ground. Out here, in a paddock, riding a completely unsanctioned bronc, it's not like I can sit around and wait for a pickup man to come get me on his horse.

The only way off this fucker is from his back to the ground, and timing it right is the difference between getting fucked up and not.

One buck turns into two, and I listen to the sound of my bronc's breath. He's huffing loudly, becoming more and more agitated the longer I'm on his back, and I'm approaching the window where if I don't get off him soon, at an angle and trajectory of my choosing, he's going to make some decisions of his own—ones I'm not likely to enjoy.

Committed to letting go at the bottom of the next jump, I wait for his next buck to cycle and then release my grip on the coarse fibers of his mane. Unfortunately, thanks to the imperfect terrain of uneven paddock ground, he hits bottom before I'm expecting and jars me into the swell of his back.

As a result, when he bucks again, with my grip already released, I make my exit with little to no control over the angle and descent of my body.

With a snap and a pop, I hit the ground directly on my left knee, driving all the weight and force of my ride right into it and sending a crack through the air that breaks all the previous calm of the dark night.

“Shit!” Chase yells as I roll over and blink through my body's attempt to check out of consciousness. The agony in my leg is real and potent, and I know without a shadow of a doubt, I've destroyed more than a little something inside of it.

Vaguely, I hear the sound of three sets of boots hitting the dirt and pounding toward me, and I hold on to the cadence of each of them as a way to keep my heart from pounding all the way outside my chest.

Overcome, I turn my head to the side and get sick, right there on the grass next to me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Chase chants as he slides to a stop like he's stealing home plate in baseball and puts a supportive hand

under my head.

“My leg,” I manage to croak, clammy sweat dripping from the skin above my top lip directly into my mouth. “It’s not good,” I continue, forcing myself to speak through several heavy swallows.

Chase nods. “I know, buddy. Cutter’s called an ambulance. You just hang tight, okay?”

My head jerks in the affirmative, and I lick my lips against the searing, mind-numbing pain. “I guess your daddy’s gonna know what we’ve been up to now.”

Chase nods. “I know. I’d tell you off, but I’d say the fact that my dad’s not the only one who’s gonna know is punishment enough.”

Damn straight. *My* dad, Tex Jameson, is going to have my ass for breakfast. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if he lets whatever’s broken in my leg heal just to break it all over again himself.

I carry far too many responsibilities on our family’s ranch to get injured and be out of commission for an extended period of time.

Fuck.

“Look at it this way,” Lynn remarks from above me. “At least Cut and I know Chase wasn’t full of shit all this time. Rhett Jameson can ride himself a goddamn bronc.”

Cutter laughs. “Fuck yeah, he can. It’s the gettin’ off that’s the problem.”

I want to laugh, but at the thought of what this is going to mean for running my family’s business, Shaw Springs Ranch, over the summer, my pain hits an absolute pinnacle and I pass right the fuck out.

I can only hope God takes pity and sends some sort of an angel to solve my problems.

One thing’s for sure...*I’m gonna need one.*

ONE



June 7th, Monday

Shaw Springs Ranch, Hollow Rock, Utah

Rhett

I tuck the crutch tighter into my armpit and circle Huck's hindquarters with my free hand on his ass. My daughter Joey follows, watching as I do my best impression of a one-legged man.

It's been just shy of four weeks—and *one two-hour surgery*—since I injured my left leg, and the first three of them were spent almost entirely in bed. All thanks to a patella fracture and patella tendon tear—or as I like to call it, *a totally fucked-up leg*.

For a man like me, that kind of inactivity just about made me lose my mind. My leg may not be any better than a two-by-four right now, but I'll tote the fucker around painstakingly if it means I can start to find some goddamn normalcy again.

“Come here, darlin’,” I tell my daughter, shoving the stool closer to Huck with the edge of my huge leg brace. “You climb up, and I’ll hold his head.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Joey replies. Her blond pigtails bob from side to side as she flashes a grin my way and steps up onto the

stool. She proceeds to give Huck a pat on the neck and grabs on to a piece of his mane like I taught her.

Joey has been riding since the time she could walk and, frankly, does it better than a whole host of the guests we see come through our ranch on a yearly basis, but she's still my baby girl, regardless.

I don't worry about myself—haven't even considered a possibility other than making a full recovery from this shit—but riding in an ambulance in the middle of the night and going in and out of consciousness the whole time feels a lot different as a father than it did as a professional bronc rider.

Without Joey's mama in the picture, it's up to me to be everything she needs and then some, and knowing I let my ego lead me to decisions that make that harder to do is a difficult realization to come by.

Joey settles into the saddle and shoves her tiny boots through the stirrups, anchoring on the balls of her feet to give herself leverage. Huck is a big horse, nearly sixteen hands of brute muscle, but he's smart too, and he knows to treat riders like my Joey with extra care.

“Okay, darlin’, go on and give him his head and get on out to the arena. Walk, trot, and canter—no runnin’, you hear me?”

Joey looks down at me with a toothy, mischievous smile, and I narrow my eyes.

“*No runnin’*, you hear me?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Like, no fast runnin’?”

“No runnin’ at all.”

“Not even a little runnin’? Like, just a little faster than a canter? You’d hardly even know the difference, really.”

“*Joey*, I said, no runnin’. Period. End of story.”

“This story is pretty boring,” she mutters, and it takes everything inside me to keep a straight face and not laugh.

I swear, some days, my daughter is five going on eighteen.

“Josephine Jameson, that’s enough sassin’.” I give her a stern stare, and finally, she rolls her eyes back at me and nods.

“Fine. No runnin’. Promise, Daddy.”

“Good. Now, Ms. Sassypants, I’ll be out there with ya in a couple minutes, and if you keep that promise, I’ll let ya go buck wild for a little bit,” I offer, making the apples of her cheeks lift to the corners of her eyes.

“Yippee!” she exclaims, and all I can do is grin.

There’s no denying that, when it comes to being adventurous, my little girl is a bit too much like me.

I slap Huck on the butt, and he walks off with Joe, out of the barn hallway and around the corner to head for the arena.

Alone in the alleyway, without a horse to lean on now, I struggle to make my way back to the stall walls and pull myself up to take some of the weight off my good leg.

My injured one is locked straight in a brace the size of this fucking ranch and aches like a son of a bitch. It’s sore all the time, and the pressure of the blood pooling in it feels like a thousand tiny needles, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to go lie back down in the house.

Or take any of that fucking pain medication Dr. Namath keeps pushing on me.

I open the stall door next to me with a hard shove and hobble inside with the help of my good leg and my crutch.

“Hey there, Sonny,” I say to my personal horse. He’s quick as lightning and about the best at herding cattle I’ve ever seen, but he also has a need for more exercise than the bombproof geldings we put our guests on.

As far as I know, Ronald and Tiny, two of our ranch hands, have ridden Sonny a few times since I got hurt, but for my painted boy, that’s not nearly enough.

“What do you think? You wanna go for a ride?” I ask him.

I’m not sure how, but there has to be a way to get myself up on his back if I try hard enough.

I grab his rope halter off the door and hobble back to slide it gently over his head. He gives me no trouble, clearly just as eager to be out and moving as I am.

With his attached lead line in my hand, I tuck my crutch under my armpit and limp back into the hallway with Sonny in tow.

I drop the lead line, and he stops immediately. On a ranch that's over two thousand acres, it's really important that our horses learn to ground tie during their training. When you're out in the middle of nowhere, camping overnight while gathering cattle, there's not always something to tie off to. And the last thing you want is to wake up and find out your horse left your ass there to walk.

The grooming brushes are in a container on the floor of the hallway, and with a locked-out brace, that's a bit of a problem. I turn back to Sonny and smile.

"Guess you're just gonna have to be dirty today, bud."

He huffs a puff of air out of his nostrils, and I take that as his agreement, leaving him to stand in the hall and working my way over to the saddle pad and saddle in the tack room.

I'm walking back out the door when a voice calls out from behind me.

"Rhett? What in the hell do you think you're doin'?"

I close my eyes and sigh, not bothering to turn around.

"What's it look like, Tiny?"

"Looks like you're about to strap yourself to a doomed rocket ship like in that movie Armajellin."

"*Armageddon*," I correct with a roll of my eyes and finally turn to face him. "The movie's name is *Armageddon*, Tiny."

If there's one thing Tiny, one of our oldest ranch hands, is really talented at, it's giving his own pronunciations and names for things. And oddly enough, he looks a whole lot like Steve Buscemi, one of the actors in the very movie he's trying to reference.

With his small frame, big eyes, and a slightly crooked mouth, if we tossed a cowboy hat and some dirt on Steve Buscemi, he and Tiny could be twins.

“Well, whatever,” he says. “That one with Bruce Willis.”

“Bruce *Willis*,” I correct with a nod. “I know the one.”

“If you know the movie, then why the hell are you tryin’ to recreate the ending?”

I shake my head. “I’m hardly sacrificin’ myself to an asteroid,” I contest. “I’m taking my horse for a ride in the arena with my daughter.”

“I have to say, I don’t think Tex would like this too much.”

“I don’t care if Tex likes it,” I say with frustration, tossing the pad and saddle up on Sonny’s back. “He’s my daddy, sure, but Tiny, I’m a grown man. I can make my own choices.”

“Don’t really seem to me like you’re actin’ like you’re grown. What happens to the ranch if you hurt that leg even more and end up back in bed? We got a whole lot of shit comin’ up. Guests for the summer, hostin’ the Fourth of July Extravacanta thingamabob. I know I’m pretty, but you’re the face of this place, son. Without—”

“Enough!” I explode. “If you don’t want to watch me do this, go somewhere else, all right?”

Tiny shakes his head and backs away slowly, turning and leaving the barn with a scowl. My chest rises and falls with the overzealous clash of emotions going on inside it.

The battle between what I want and what I’m expected to keep in mind is violent and tumultuous, and these days, it feels a lot like it never ends.

The weight of responsibility on my shoulders is heavy enough already, but with the addition of my injury, it’s become awkward to carry.

But I’ll be damned if I’m going to give up my freedom.

And I don’t give a fuck what my doctor or Tiny or my dad or any-fucking-one has to say about it.

TWO



Tex

“Tiny, I swear to God, if you walk past my door one more time without gettin’ your ass in here, I’m gonna go nuclear.”

He jumps at the sound of his name and walks at double the speed as he steps inside my door and closes it behind himself.

The good thing about getting as old as I am is that your reputation means something. And Harry “Tiny” Minnow has been working on my ranch for long enough that he knows I don’t make idle threats. I don’t say something unless I mean it, and I always follow through.

To run a ranch of this magnitude, it has to be that way. You need thick skin and a quick mind, and you need to be ruthless when necessary. There are always a million and one problems to be solved, and everyone is looking to you to solve them.

It’s a big responsibility, but it’s also a huge honor and it has been for the last fifty years—the pride of my life. But I’m getting old. I’m pushing seventy and I’m ready to retire. Ready to spend some time with my wife and play with my granddaughter.

But I can’t do that until I feel like my son is ready to step up to the goddamn plate.

“What’s the problem?” I ask, not bothering with any preliminary bullshit.

“Problem? Who says there’s a problem?” Tiny says like an asshole. I rock my neck back and forth and sigh.

“Your eyes say it, for fuck’s sake,” I retort with a narrowed gaze. “You look jumpier than a damn jackrabbit. More than usual. You think I can’t tell when there’s a problem just by lookin’ at ya?”

Tiny nods, licking his lips nervously. “Okay, fine, there’s a problem.”

But when he doesn’t expand further, a deep sigh slides through my lungs. “And what is it?”

“What is what?” Tiny asks.

Dear God.

“The fuckin’ problem, Tiny.”

“Oh, *right*,” he answers quickly with big eyes. “I saw Rhett out at the barn earlier this mornin’,” he rambles as quickly as his slow drawl will let him. “He was gettin’ ready to saddle Sonny.”

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter, sinking my head into my hands.

Tiny nods enthusiastically. “I tried to stop him, but well... he didn’t take too kindly to me tellin’ him what to do.”

No kidding. Only one person more bullheaded than me and that’s my son Rhett. It’ll make him a good boss one day, when he can get his head out of his own ass and stop being so damn stupid and careless.

“All right.” I nod. “I’ll handle it from here.”

Tiny nods, clearly relieved to be absolved of this responsibility. I shoo him out of my office with a wave of my hand, and he takes off like a three-legged cat, more than ready to get out of my lion’s den.

“And, Tiny?” I call when he makes it to the door. He turns around to meet my eyes, and I level him with a stern stare that’s sure to make a showing in his nightmares tonight. “Next time you wait this long to tell me shit like this, I’m gonna

snatch off what's left of the hair on your head myself. Understand?"

He nods fervently.

I jerk my chin up. "Good. You can go now."

To an outsider, it might seem like I'm being hard on him, but it's necessary.

I love Tiny like family, but he's been working at my ranch long enough for me to understand the man needs clear, stern directions in order to guarantee a follow-through.

I release another heavy sigh and scrub a hand down my face before leaning into my desk on splayed hands. The surface is covered with cattle contracts and applications for workers and profiles on some of our VIP guests. There's a mile-long to-do list for setting up for our big summer rodeo celebration and exhibition, and I haven't eaten a goddamn bite of anything for lunch.

Still, I know that if I don't put all of that shit aside and get my son in hand, he's going to end up with a permanently fucked-up leg and a bitter taste in his mouth for the life that should be bringing him joy.

The life I *know* he's meant for, a life that will bring him the purpose he's been searching for, if he'll just let himself accept it.

I pick up the phone and dial the one person I know he'll answer to—my wife. With a sweet manner and a strong heart, she's the woman you go to with your problems, knowing she's going to keep them safe and guarded. She's the love of my life, and even as a grown man, the one woman my son'll actually listen to.

If I call Rhett in here to the office, I can almost guarantee he'll turn me down or stand me up without guilt. But if his mama calls him—that's a whole different story.

Boys always listen to their mamas, even when they're full-fledged men.

Well, at least, the good men do.

And at this point, I'm damn desperate enough to set myself up to get in trouble with both of them. Because make no mistake, when my wife realizes I've used her to trap her only child, *her baby boy*, in a conversation he doesn't want to have, there's going to be hell to pay.



Sitting in my favorite leather chair in the living room with a newspaper in front of my face, I wait patiently for my son and granddaughter to arrive for dinner. There's a roast in the oven that smells like heaven, and I only wish I were going to get the chance to eat it. In fact, it's almost worth waiting until after the meal to have the conversation with Rhett I know I have to have, but only *almost*.

There's been enough beating around the bush, enough coddling, and it's time he got served a slice of cold, hard truth.

The front door opens, and Joey's laugh precedes her as she comes running down the hall.

With big blue eyes, blond hair and dimples, my granddaughter is the kind of adorable that has the power to win anyone over. She's the apple of my wife's and my eye and has become a constant source of joy for everyone around her since the moment she made her debut into this world.

"How's Grandma's girl?" my wife Jenny coos as Joey slams into her with a hug. I fold the paper and set it down on the table beside my recliner, crossing my ankle over my knee as Rhett comes limping into the room.

"Good," Joey says, her sweet voice turning into a laugh as Jenny gives her a tickle. Rhett smiles, a rare occurrence these days from my solemn son, and steps forward to give Joey a rub on the head.

He's been through a lot over the years; I know this much is true. Between giving up his dreams of the rodeo and the tumultuous situation with Joey's mostly nonexistent mama Anna, shit hasn't exactly been easy on him.

But I know he's a good man. A smart man. And he's the only one who can handle stepping into my shoes and fully taking over this ranch.

I just wish he wouldn't be so damn dumb sometimes and do shit like ride a bronc in the middle of the night and screw up his leg for no other reason than feeding his fucking ego.

I take a deep breath and stand from my chair as Jenny offers, "Come on, food's almost ready."

"Actually, Jen, I need to have a word with Rhett first. You and Joey go on and get set at the table."

Jenny's suspicious eyes narrow on my face, and Rhett tenses.

I gentle my voice with my wife. "Please, Jen. It's important."

She nods finally, but to say she's unhappy about it would be a major understatement. Her current expression tells a story, and this age-old tale starts with *Your ass is sleeping on the couch tonight.*

I sigh. I'd already figured as much.

"Come in, son," I say to Rhett as the girls retreat to the kitchen. "Take a seat."

He shakes his head, his mouth an unshakable firm line. "I think I'll stand."

I nod. I figured as much on that one, too.

"We need to talk about the way you're handling yourself these days."

"No, sir. We don't."

I shake my head. "Dammit, Rhett. Yes, we do. I should've tanned your ass for pulling the stunt that got you like this in the first place, but I'll be damned if I didn't let my concern as a father get in the way of givin' you the lashin' you needed. What in the hell are you thinkin', gettin' on horses and runnin' amok while your leg's still like this? Dr. Namath fuckin' told

you you're not ready for any of that shit. Are you tryin' to ensure you can't walk permanently?"

"First of all, I'm bigger than you, Pops. So, tannin' my ass would've provided quite the challenge." He shakes his head before offering an infuriating smirk in my direction. "And secondly, I'm pretty sure I *walked* in here, didn't I?"

"Don't get smart with me, boy. You know damn well what I'm talkin' about. Don't act like you're dumb."

"No, Dad, you're actin' like I'm dumb. I'm a grown man, and I can do whatever the hell I want. I know my limits better than anyone."

"Bullshit. You know your ego. That's all."

"Fuck this," he says, turning and spinning like a top on his one good leg. I only wish he understood how ridiculous he looks trying to storm away right now.

"Fuck nothin', Rhett. You start actin' smart, or I'll make sure you do, you hear me?"

He turns back around with a snarl. "And just what in the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means if you keep actin' like you need a damn babysitter, I'll fuckin' get you one."

"Fuckin' hell, when are you going to realize I'm not a child? I'm thirty-six fucking years old," he snaps, and it looks as if any second steam might come shooting out of his ears.

I can relate. "I'll realize it when you start actin' like it."

"It's always the same with you. Same bullshit. Just a different day. I'm out of here," he huffs, turning back around and hobbling toward the door in a hurry.

I shake my head and sigh again. *Pigheaded, prideful idiot.*

"Tell Mama I'll be back for Joey in the mornin'!" he yells right before the screen door slams behind him.

Jenny and Joey peek around the corner from the kitchen with wide eyes, and I lift a hand and shake my head. I'll do what I have to do to make sure he doesn't hurt himself, but the

truth of it is, the rest of it, he's going to have to realize all on his own.

It's the way my daddy made me learn, and the same thing his daddy did for him.

We Jameson men are a little like mules...you've gotta kick the stubborn right out of us.

"You and Joey go ahead and eat, darlin'," I say to Jenny. "I've got a phone call to make."

And a favor to ask.

I pick up the rotary phone on my desk, carry it over to my chair, and spin the old dial to a number I know by heart. I know it's rare these days to still be using relics like this, but there's just something about it that feels so much better than a fucking cell phone. Plus, we don't get any damn service out here anyway, so a landline or a radio is the only form of communication you can count on.

Frank Kaminsky is an old and dear friend. When we were teenagers, he worked this very ranch with me and my grandfather, stomping on chicken shit in the back of a spreader as we used it as compost. And now, he's the owner of the Salt Lake Slammers professional basketball team and one of the smartest guys I know.

It rings twice in my ear before he answers. "Tex Jameson," he says fondly. "To what do I owe this extreme pleasure?"

I laugh slightly, but with the way the whole situation with Rhett's got me feeling, it's not with a ton of humor.

"Ah, cut the shit, Frank. You quivered when you saw my number on the screen."

He chuckles. "Only a little. Years of summers spent with you have dulled my sensitivity a good bit."

I smile. "That's good. Most people find me incorrigible."

"Don't worry," he remarks. "That's only because you are."

Sounds about right.

Sighing heavily, I dive into the meat of why I'm calling in the first place. "Listen, I need your help. My son hurt himself real bad about a month ago, and as you'd imagine, he's not great at following the doctor's treatment plan."

Frank laughs. "Mm-hmm. Good to hear he's like you."

I roll my eyes. "I know. But it's the younger, more stubborn version of me, and both of us know what a problem that can be."

"Damn straight," Frank agrees.

"I thought maybe with your players gettin' ortho injuries and such, you'd know of someone I could reach out to for individualized treatment. His doctors here are fine and all, but none of 'em are willin' to do a home health plan and oversee it in person. And Rhett needs the kind of rigidity he can't escape. Any recommendation would be appreciated."

"I tell you what, Tex, I'll do you one better. The team just hired a new secondary physician. She's smart as a whip but could probably use some training in showing these big old guys who's boss, too. I can't think of a better crash course for either of them than throwin' them together."

"He's got a broken patella and a torn patella tendon, Frank. Had surgery to repair it, but it's the whole rehabbin' the fuckin' leg that's causing the problem. I'll probably need her expertise full time for about two months. I'm willing to compensate her well, but the biggest question is, do you think she can handle it?"

Frank laughs. "Definitely. She's smart as all get-out. Top of her class and came highly recommended from her previous employer. I think she'll do exactly what you need her to."

"And you think she'll be okay with a grumpy cowboy like my son?" I question on an exasperated sigh. "I mean, are you sure she's prepared for what she's walkin' into?"

"Not at all," Frank says. "But I've got a feelin' that'll be at least half the fun."

I smile. "Call me if you have any problems talkin' her into it. The sooner she gets here, the better."

“You bet.”

“I owe you one, Frank.”

“Nope, buddy. This just makes us even.”

I hang up the phone and scrub my hands over my face.

And hope like hell that this girl finds a way to be exactly what Rhett needs.

THREE



June 14th, Monday

Leah

The small plane comes to a stop on a dirt runway, and I look out the window to a vast Southwestern Utah view. Giant cliffs sit off in the distance, surrounding us on all four sides.

To my right, a large meadow filled with yellow flowers contains giant cows with big-ass horns, grazing on grass.

And when I glance out the window on the opposite side of the plane, I note what looks to be the peak of a large, rustic building, possibly a lodge, nestled down a hill.

Holy shit. No wonder Frank Kaminsky let me take one of the small team planes out here. This place, the location of my new but temporary job, is in the middle of nowhere.

So much for your daily Starbucks runs...

“Welcome to Shaw Springs Ranch,” Tom, the pilot who flew me out to No-Man’s-Land, USA, announces over his shoulder. “I’ve known the Jameson family for a long time, Dr. Levee, and I can’t deny this ranch is downright breathtaking. People come from all over the world just to enjoy the peace and serenity here. I’m certain you’re going to love it.”

Love it? That feels like a bit of an overstatement for a woman like me.

I mean, if I could choose my dream vacation destination, it would revolve around art museums and drinking expensive coffee at cafes in Paris.

Not locations where the only place to land a plane is on dirt.

But despite my inner concerns over Wi-Fi connectivity and wondering how I'm going to curb my caffeine addiction, I do manage a smile at his words. I might be a city girl through and through, but I *can* appreciate the beauty of my new surroundings.

This is more than just taking a simple hike in a pretty park; this is nature personified.

People take photographs of places like this and publish them in travel books.

Hell, social media influencers create entire careers from traveling to beautiful spots like this.

Tom unbuckles his seat belt, takes off his headphones, and opens the hatch on the door. "Tiny!" he exclaims the instant a burst of fresh air whooshes inside the plane.

"Tommy Boy, how's it hangin'?" a male voice responds. It's jovial and warm and laced with a western accent that reminds me of melted honey.

"Good. Good. Mr. Kaminsky keeps me busy, as you know," Tom answers and gestures toward me with his hand. "Mind your head while getting out, Dr. Levee. You can go on with Tiny, and I'll handle your suitcases."

I follow his instructions, unbuckling my seat belt and carefully exiting the plane.

Once I clear the threshold of the door, I come face-to-face with the man I'm assuming is Tiny.

He looks to be late fifties, has on a pair of worn-in cowboy boots with an equally distressed hat, and his clothing is covered with the kind of dry mud that makes it apparent he has no qualms about getting his hands dirty.

“Dr. Levee?” he asks, a full-toothed, crooked smile encompassing his face.

“Yes, but you can just call me Leah.”

“Leah.” He tests out my name on his tongue while giving my current attire—a Pucci summer dress with yellow heels—a once-over. “Pretty name that matches the pretty, and *very* colorful, lady, but I think I’ll just call ya Doc.”

I snort at that, unsure of what to say. “Uh...okay?”

The man just keeps on grinning. “I’m Tiny, by the way. One of the ranch hands here at Shaw Springs.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Tiny.”

“The pleasures are all mine, Doc,” he responds, and as I make my way down the small set of stairs, he holds out a gentlemanly hand to help.

I take it without question, using his strength to avoid an embarrassing spill, but the second my yellow stilettos hit the dirt, I sink about an inch into the ground.

Shit.

Tiny doesn’t miss a beat. “You might wanna consider some different footwear, Doc,” he says, his voice teasing and his eyes staring down at my favorite heels in amusement. “Fancy-pantsy shoes like that will get ya in nothin’ but trouble ’round here. And that dress of yours is mighty pretty, but it’s at high risk of gettin’ ruined on this ranch.”

“Well, Tiny, I’m one of those crazy types of women who can do just about anything in a fashionable outfit and a pair of heels.”

“Whatever you say, little darlin’,” he responds, and his eyes crinkle around the corners with a smile when he meets my eyes again. “Just mind the cow and horse shit.”

Cow and horse shit? *Gross.*

All of a sudden, my heels and favorite Pucci dress—a gorgeous, short-sleeve shift dress with a mirage of yellows and pinks and purples and blues—are feeling...out of place.

It's safe to say I didn't really think the whole "new job on a ranch" thing through when I got dressed this morning or when I packed my suitcases over the weekend for my two-month stay at Shaw Springs Ranch.

But it's not like I'm here to do hard labor. I'm here to help the ranch owner's young son recover from a bad knee injury with personalized daily medical care.

Plus, I wear dresses and heels like this to work all the time. Even before I took my newest job as a physician for the Slammers basketball team, I'd wear pumps and stilettos while I was making ortho rounds at Salt Lake Regional Medical Center. And I just paired my favorite designer dresses and skirts and pantsuits with my white lab coat.

Frankly, it wasn't unusual for me to wear heels during surgery beneath my scrubs and protective booties.

Basically, I like to wear clothes and shoes that make me feel good and confident, and I'm a strong advocate for all women being their version of fashionable in *every* situation.

But I didn't exactly picture dirt roads and cow dung as part of the deal when I agreed to come out here to help Tex Jameson's son rehab a patella fracture and patella tendon tear that underwent surgery four weeks ago.

Truthfully, I don't know if I packed much of anything that would be considered good in conditions where horse shit is a thing.

Although, in my defense, when Mr. Kaminsky called me about the opportunity, I only had a week's time to decide, pack, and make sure my older brother Sam could keep my plants watered and mail organized.

Hell, even my closest girlfriends—Carla and Taylor—only found out two days ago that I would be gone for the summer.

And, considering we had planned on attending several summer music concerts together, they were none too pleased with my unexpected and last-minute absence from Salt Lake for the next eight weeks.

I carefully adjust my feet to a harder spot of ground so I'm back to my normal five-foot-seven height, and Tiny gestures for me to follow him toward an ATV that sits just off the runway.

Or is it a TTV? A BTV?

Hell, whatever those four-wheel, all-terrain vehicles with a roof that are all the rage for the adventurous, nature-y types who like to go off-roading are called, it's one of those.

"Hop on in, and I'll get your bag," Tiny instructs, but then when he turns back toward Tom and sees that I have more than one bag—*six suitcases, actually*—he starts laughing. "How long you plannin' on stayin', Doc?"

"Just the two months Mr. Jameson requested."

"Six suitcases for two months?" he asks, and I cringe.

"I might've gone a little overboard on the packing."

Yeah, and it's too bad you probably packed the entirely wrong wardrobe.

Gah. Fingers crossed that I at least packed my favorite pair of neon-pink Adidas running shoes.

Tiny chuckles at my wide-eyed expression. "Well, Doc, how about I take you to the lodge so you can chat with Tex, and then I'll come back for your things?"

I nod. "Sounds good to me."

When he pulls away, I silently wonder if my luggage is just going to sit there in the dirt or if Tom is going to wait until Tiny comes back before leaving the ranch, but I bite my tongue because I'm certain that's being pushy...and prissy for men like these two.

Instead, I offer up a silent prayer that none of those big-ass cows makes their way over to my belongings. Those horns could do some serious damage to my favorite Kate Spade suitcases.

The ride to the lodge is bumpy, and Tiny appears to have zero concern for avoiding holes or rocks or pretty much any-

damn-thing, and my whole body—*especially my boobs*—vibrates with each rough jar of the vehicle.

This situation is a perfect example of why it can be a real pain in the ass being a curvy girl with double D breasts. I feel like someone has put me inside a washing machine and set it to extra-fast drain and spin. At this rate, I'm liable to knock myself out with a boob-sucker-punch to the face.

I glance around, trying to find a seat belt or something to, you know, prevent an untimely death, but when I come up empty-handed, I grip the edge of my seat as tightly as I can, in hopes it'll prevent me from falling out of this thing.

Goodness. There has to be a better mode of transportation around here...

"Is this how you normally get around the ranch?" I ask, pushing my voice to a higher-than-normal volume so it can be heard over the whip of the wind.

"I prefer my horse," he answers, glancing at me out of his periphery. "You ride horses, Doc?"

"Uh. No." I shake my head on an awkward laugh.

"Have you ever been on a horse?"

"Also, no." I shake my head again, but the movement forces pieces of my long brown hair to almost blow into my mouth. I grimace and try my best to readjust my face in a way that prevents me from eating my own hair the whole ride to the lodge.

"Where ya from, Doc?"

"Salt Lake City."

"That's not too far."

"Mm-hmm," I respond, but my thoughts are the exact opposite. *Sure, not too far distance-wise, but this place is worlds apart from what I'm used to.*

Whereas my apartment is located in downtown Salt Lake, in the middle of the hustle and bustle, this ranch makes me feel like I'm on a different fucking planet.

There's no Starbucks.

No restaurants.

No nightlife.

No cars.

And besides Tom and Tiny, I've yet to see another human being.

I'm thankful when Tiny pulls us to a stop in front of an impressive and huge rustic lodge. "Here we are," he says and cuts the engine. "Tex should be in his office."

Careful not to trip over the gravel pathway, I follow him toward the entrance and through the large wooden doors. The moment we step into the interior, I'm shocked at just how big the structure is on the inside.

The strong smell of cedar assaults my nostrils, and my eyes don't miss the massive fireplace in the center of the main room *or* the dead animal heads that hang proudly all over the walls.

Holy cowboys and cowgirls. This is the kind of lodge or cabin or whatever you want to call it that you'd see in a Western-style Hollywood movie. Any second, I feel like a young Brad Pitt dressed as Wyatt Earp might come sidling out in sexy chaps and boots and spurs.

Certainly wouldn't be the worst thing to happen...

Tiny leads me out of the main gathering room, past what looks to be an even larger dining room, and down a long hallway.

Once we reach the end of it, he comes to a stop.

He raps his knuckles against the closed door three times, and it's followed by a husky male voice responding, "C'mon in!"

"I've got the good doctor here, Tex." Tiny opens the door and gestures for me to step inside.

A large desk that looks like it took three giant trees to make sits in the center of the room, and behind it is an older

but handsome man who matches this lodge to a T. His skin is tanned, his face is clean-shaven, and his aqua-blue eyes are downright striking. Wrinkles form around his lips when his gaze meets mine, and his mouth crests up into a friendly grin.

“Dr. Leah Levee,” he greets, and the way he says my name makes me feel a genuine welcoming. “I’m Tex Jameson,” he continues and stands to his feet, holding out a hand to shake mine. I step forward and accept the affable gesture.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Jameson. And please, just call me Leah.”

His grin grows. “And you just call me Tex. Mr. Jameson makes me feel too damn old.”

I smile. “Okay, Tex.”

“What cabin are we puttin’ her in?” Tiny asks.

“Three.”

“That’s a great cabin, Doc,” Tiny comments. “Clean, spacious, and with a great view of the cliffs. I reckon you’ll feel right at home there.”

And *I reckon* it’s going to take a lot for a girl like me to feel right at home in a giant, away-from-most-civilization ranch like this, but I keep that snarky thought to myself and just offer a simple, “That sounds great.”

“Okay, Doc. Tex will take it from here,” he adds over his shoulder as he walks back to the door. “I’m gonna be headin’ on my way, but I’ll make sure your bags get to your cabin, ’kay?”

“Thank you so much, Tiny.”

He heads out the door and back down the hallway, and Tex motions for me to take a seat across from him.

I adjust my dress and sit down in the thick leather armchair positioned in front of his desk.

“Glad you could make it,” he says and sits back down in his cozy desk chair. “Did you have any trouble gettin’ out here?”

I shake my head. “Mr. Kaminsky was nice enough to lend one of his planes.”

“*One* of his planes.” Tex smirks. “That bastard has more money than he knows what to do with.”

I want to say that from the looks of it or the fact that he’s paying me a lot of money to stay out here for the next two months and help his kid recover from his orthopedic injury, Tex Jameson *also* has a lot of money, but I figure that’s a little too forward of a comment for someone I just met mere minutes ago.

So, instead, I just smile.

“Well, darlin’, I can’t deny your job might come with some difficulties.”

I quirk my brow. “Difficulties?”

“My son, Rhett, well, he can be a bit of a stubborn mule,” he begins to explain.

“Well, Tex, I’m sure I can handle it. I worked at Salt Lake Regional for three years and handled a lot of pediatric ortho cases. Tough boys are my specialty.”

“That’s good.” A laugh jumps from his throat, and a smirk follows. “Because my son Rhett is definitely a tough *boy*. I take it Frank gave you the lowdown on everything?”

“Somewhat,” I answer. “I know Rhett is fourteen and recovering from a patella fracture and patella tendon tear. I also know he had surgery four weeks ago.”

“*Fourteen?*” he questions, and his face scrunches up in amusement. Instantly, I’m confused and tilt my head to the side.

“Is your son not fourteen?”

Tex just laughs and shakes his head. “Well, some days, he can act like he’s eighteen, even twenty-one on a good day.”

I grin at that. “Teenage boys can be difficult.”

“Teenage boys. Young boys. Grown boys. All ages of the male species are difficult, darlin’.”

“You won’t find me denying that one.”

Tex chuckles. “I can already tell, beneath that pretty exterior, you’ve got some fire and sass about ya. That’s certainly gonna come in handy when it comes to dealing with Rhett.” He leans back in his chair and takes off his hat, tossing it onto the desk. “Can you promise me you’ll stick it out for the full eight weeks? Even when Rhett is givin’ you a hard time?” he queries. “Dr. Namath thinks, with your hands-on help and expertise, two months is a long enough recovery duration to get a stubborn jackass like my son safely back on his feet. Which is the whole reason you’re here. If left to his own devices, he’d never get back to one hundred percent.”

Jackass.

Stubborn.

Giving me a hard time.

Sheesh. How bad is this kid?

I’m picturing all sorts of temper tantrums and spoiled brat nightmarish scenarios.

But I’m also picturing the generous paychecks these eight weeks will provide *and* the fact that I’ll be able to pay off my student loans and get on my boss’s good side in the process. I may have been hired as one of the Slammers team physicians, but I’m currently only second in line. One day, I want to be the number one. Calling the shots. Making the decisions. Running the whole show.

So, taking this job for one of Mr. Kaminsky’s closest friends seemed like a win-win situation. Even if it comes with some struggle.

“I’m sure I’ll be able to handle whatever Rhett throws my way.”

“Now that’s the kind of attitude I like to hear.” Tex’s grin grows, and he reaches out to slip his cowboy hat back on. “I’d say it’s a good time to get you settled into your cabin, and then you can head on over and meet Rhett and start doing your smart doctor thing.”

“That sounds like a plan, but if you don’t mind my asking, is Dr. Namath Rhett’s current ortho physician?”

Tex nods.

“I’d love to get his phone number so that I can give him a call and get a full briefing on your son’s case. Mr. Kaminsky assured me that I would be able to get that done before I officially started to take over his care.”

“That won’t be a problem, darlin’,” he responds. “How about you write your number down here, and I’ll get in touch with Dr. Namath for ya?”

“Perfect.” I nod and quickly jot down my cell number with pen and paper he slides across his desk.

“Now, the cell service around here can be tricky at times, but I’ve got a good map for you that shows all the best spots to make calls if you find it difficult from your cabin,” he states and stands to his feet.

Best spots to make calls? I think to myself. That doesn’t sound promising.

But he doesn’t give me any time to question it.

With him to his feet and already on the move, I have no other option but to follow his lead out of his office door.

By the time we step outside the lodge, he hands me a map, a sheet of paper with important phone numbers for the ranch and staff, and a set of keys. “You can borrow my Jeep while you’re here to get around. But I should warn ya, this ranch is over two thousand acres, so make sure you keep this map handy until you get the lay of the land.”

Over two thousand acres? That’s insane.

I can’t even calculate how big that actually is. I just know it’s a lot of land.

Surely it’s enough to put at least one Starbucks out here...

“That’s my Jeep,” he says and points to what has to be the oldest working Jeep in the fucking world right now. Its doors are rusted out, and it has more layers of dust and dirt than ten

car washes could remove. “Just filled the tank for ya, so you should be good to go.”

I nod and try to hide my shock over driving this deathtrap around.

“I circled your cabin—*cabin number three*. It’s a straight shot from the lodge, only a mile up the road.” Tex pats my shoulder. “And I also circled Rhett’s house on the map for ya, so once you get settled into your cabin, you can head on over to his place.”

Rhett’s house? He doesn’t stay in the same house as his dad?

“I’ll make sure my wife Jenny stops by to see you later today. If there’s anyone who can make ya feel at home around here, it’s her. But don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything. My number is on the sheet.”

“O-okay, Tex,” I stutter out, my mind bouncing around to all the things he keeps flinging my way.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I gotta head back inside and get back to work,” he states at rapid-fire pace. “Real glad to have you here, Leah, and I’m sure I’ll see ya later tonight. There’s no doubt in my mind, my Jen will want to have you over for dinner.”

All I can do is nod. Though, inside, I’m a ball of fucking anxiety. I feel like I’ve been tossed to the proverbial wolves and now my only option is to sink or fucking swim.

Tex’s boots crunch against the gravel as he turns back to the lodge, and I hesitantly make my way over to the Jeep in hopes I can figure out how to drive the damn thing.

I lift my fingers to the door handle but pause when Tex’s voice fills my ears again.

“Oh, and by the way, Rhett doesn’t know you’re here,” he calls toward me. “So, if he gets pissy with ya, tell him I’ll be in my office and more than happy to have a word with him.”

Wait...what? He doesn’t know I’m here?

I blink several times, but before I can even inquire further about that mind-blowing statement, Tex is back in the lodge and out of sight.

And I'm just left standing here, staring at the keys and map in my hands.

Holy hell. What have I gotten myself into?

FOUR



Tex

“What are you doing over there?” My wife’s voice startles the hell out of me, and I quickly back away from the curtains and try to act like I’m doing something manly like checking the strength of the lodge’s foundation.

In reality, I’m spying on a certain lady doctor. Mostly trying to make sure she gets the Jeep started up okay, but also, pretty damn entertained watching her stomp around on them pointy shoes that don’t belong in a place like this while cursing at the hard-as-hell-to-open driver’s door.

It might seem mean how I left her standing there in a colorful getup with just a map, keys, and her jaw damn near touching her toes, but there’s always a method to my madness. Or should I say, in this case, a method to my *meanness*.

“Tex?” Jenny’s voice fills my ears again, and I pretend I’m being productive.

“Thought I saw some instability here.” After a few taps to the wood of the large wall in the entryway, I nod. “But don’t worry, everything appears good. Though, I still might call the contractor to come out and take a look just in case.”

When I turn around to face Jenny, she’s standing there, staring at me like I’ve got two heads, with a sassy hand to her hip. Even though she looks prettier than a Sunday morning

sunrise in her favorite pair of Levi's and old cowgirl boots, I can tell she is ready to ream my ass.

“And you expect me to believe that?”

Yep. She's definitely ready to ream me a new one.

Doesn't mean I'm not going to try like hell to avoid the subject of what I was actually doing or *who* I was actually snooping on through the window.

“What are you talking about, Jen?” I retort like I'm not full of crap. “You know this lodge here is a relic. It's important I keep an eye on it for any issues. One small crack in the wall or a leak in the ceiling that's left unfixed could end up costing us thousands.”

She purses her lips. “So, you weren't just watching the pretty doctor you hired for Rhett struggling with that piece of junk you call a car?”

Shit. Caught red-handed.

“Exactly how long you been standin' here, honey?”

“Long enough to watch you all but shove her out of the lodge on her pretty heels with some excuse of having work to get back to. When, I know for a fact, the rest of your day is pretty damn clear.”

I sigh. I swear, my Jenny, she doesn't miss a fucking beat. Even though she told me this morning she'd be busy in the lodge kitchen cleaning and organizing all day, I guess she found some time to check up on me.

It's like she's got a pair of eyes in the back of her head and her hearing is better than a damn dog.

“Tex, I'd say it's high time to fess up.”

Looks like the ole cat is out of the bag and the wife isn't gonna tolerate anything but the truth...

“I take it you've figured out I've hired a doctor to come stay at the ranch and help Rhett get back on his feet.”

She guffaws and tosses a sarcastic hand in the air. “You hired her to *help* Rhett? Pretty sure you mean you hired her to

keep his ass in line.”

“Which he needs.”

She quirks one eyebrow. “More like, *you think* he needs.”

“And you don’t think Rhett needs that?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, old man,” she retorts and points one bossy index finger in my direction. “I know Rhett needs a little kick in the butt sometimes, but I also know he’s not a boy anymore. He’s a man, and a man should have the right to make his own decisions.”

“Yeah, well, if I don’t open your son’s eyes and make him see that his current path will lead this ranch down the shitter, then I’ll be out herding cattle until I’m a hundred. Is that what you want, honey? Me trying to herd cattle and run a ranch when I can hardly remember my own fuckin’ name?”

Jen sighs and steps closer to me. “You know that’s not what I want.”

“Then, tell me, what’s the alternative?” I question. “What would you have me do in this situation?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugs and tosses the towel in her hand over her shoulder. “But I know a good start would be to stop being dishonest with your son.”

“You think I should’ve told him about hiring Dr. Levee?”

She nods. “I do.”

“And I’m guessin’, if you knew I let Frank Kaminsky tell Dr. Levee that Rhett is a fourteen-year-old boy, you’d probably also think I shouldn’t have let that happen either?”

“*Texas Jameson,*” she retorts with narrowed eyes. “That doctor thinks Rhett is a teenager?”

“Like I said, it wasn’t me!” I quickly respond with both hands held high. “It was Frank.” “Wasn’t you, my patootie!” she chastises. “You obviously went along with it. Not to mention, you and Frank just about share half a brain when it comes to this kind of stuff. I can’t for the life of me understand why it is that men are incapable of fully growing up.”

I flash a flirty smirk and waggle my eyebrows at her. “It’s why we need wonderful women like you to keep us in line.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, don’t think you can try to distract me with your flattery!” She takes the towel off her shoulder and whips me in the side with it. “You old bastard, you!”

I laugh and raise both of my hands up in the air again. “C’mon, Jen, you know if that doctor would’ve known what she was really walking into, she would’ve never come out here. And, trust me, Rhett needs this. Just a week ago, Tiny caught him out in the barn saddlin’ Sonny.”

“No, he didn’t.” She tries to refute the idea that her baby boy is a fucking troublemaker.

But I don’t have any problems setting her straight. Even if it means another night on the couch.

“Jenny, I know you think Rhett is a good boy, but I’m tellin’ you, that son of ours is as stubborn as they come. If I didn’t bring someone out here to help him safely get back on his feet from that knee injury, I feared he’d end up losing the fucking leg. All them years of ridin’ broncs has only made him more willing to take unnecessary risks. More willin’ to choose ego over rationality.”

Jen shakes her head and steps closer to the window to peek out the curtains.

I’m not sure if Dr. Leah Levee has managed to get out of the lodge parking lot yet, but with the way my wife huffs out a sigh, I can imagine there’s still a bit of a struggle going on.

“Tex, don’t you think you should at least give her something better to drive?” she requests. “Making a pretty city girl like that drive around in your old hunk of junk just seems downright cruel.”

“I’m plannin’ on switchin’ it out for one of the trucks later.”

“Why later?” she asks, glancing at me over her shoulder.

“Because that ole Jeep of mine is good for one thing and one thing alone—breaking the fuck down. And guess who’s

gonna have to come to her rescue?”

She inhales an exasperated breath. “Rhett.”

“Now you’re getting the idea. I’m just encouraging some bonding, is all.” I grin and step forward to stand beside my beautiful wife, and with my arm around her waist, *after* I give her ass a little squeeze, I watch out the window with her.

Dr. Leah Levee has now managed to get inside the Jeep.

And thankfully, it’s only a few minutes later before the engine roars to life.

The thing sounds like shit, but I’ve had it long enough to know it should get her to her cabin and Rhett’s house before it gives out.

And I have a feeling the timing will be perfect.

No doubt, by then, Rhett will need something to force him to have some fucking patience and help her out. Thereby, *hopefully*, forcing him to fucking listen to her medical advice.

It might seem like a bit of a long shot, what I’m doing, but I’ve always had a good sense of knowing how certain things will play out. And more than that, I’ve also been blessed with the foresight of knowing when to meddle.

“So...tell me, Tex, what exactly do you think is gonna happen when that beautiful doctor shows up at your son’s house and finds out he’s no teenage boy?”

“Well, honey, that’s where you come in.”

She turns around and meets my eyes. “Me?”

I nod. “A few hours from now, I need you to head on over to Cabin Three and check on her.”

Jenny rolls her pretty eyes. “I should’ve known you’d rope me into this somehow.”

I smirk and press a kiss to her forehead. “You should take it as a compliment. I know I can always count on that kind heart and sweet, soothing voice of yours to smooth things over.”

She sighs. “Tex Jameson, you’re a real asshole, you know that?”

“I do,” I respond without hesitation and with a big ole smirk. “But that’s why I have a perfect woman like you by my side.”

She quirks a brow, and I have no problem obliging her silent question.

“See, sweetheart, when I do asshole shit like let a pretty doctor think our grumpy cowboy son is a teenager and she finds out he’s a stubborn, grown-ass man, I know I can count on you to be the one to reassure her that not everyone on this ranch is an asshole and convince her to stick it out.”

“Why does everything have to be so darned complicated with you?” she questions on a snort. “Why couldn’t you just be a normal person and handle things like normal folk do?”

“Because you wouldn’t have married me forty years ago if I’d have been just a normal guy,” I retort and grab both of her hips. “Both you and I know you were a wild little thing back in the day, and it’s that untamed spirit of yours that helped ensure our son grew up to be a fantastic pain in the ass.”

Jenny just rolls her eyes. “You’re a strange man, Tex Jameson. A strange, strange man.”

“Yeah, but I’m your man, honey.”

“That’s true,” she responds with a genuine grin. “And you’re also the man who’s going to have to deal with the *fantastic pain in the ass* when he finds out his daddy hired a pretty doctor to take care of him for the summer.”

I grin and nod at that.

There’s no denying Rhett’s going to be pissed off more than a hive of angry bees when he finds out the beautiful, curvaceous lady standing at his door is actually his personal doctor for the next two months.

Truthfully, I didn’t know Frank Kaminsky was going to send over a goddamn modern-day brunette version of fucking

Marilyn Monroe, but I'll be damned if it isn't going to make things a hell of a lot more interesting around here.

If Tiny had to practically wipe the damn drool off his shirt earlier when he brought her to my office, I can only imagine what my son will think when he sees Dr. Leah Levee for the first time.

I'm just hoping she'll know how to handle the stubborn son of a bitch.

Or, if she doesn't know, that she'll learn quick.

Because the sooner she can get Rhett back on his feet, the better off everyone will be.

FIVE



Leah

The steering wheel vibrates erratically in my hands, and I sigh as I turn onto a gravel road I'm pretty sure will lead me to Rhett Jameson.

What a freaking day.

I'll be honest, when I boarded a private plane this morning to head out to a ranch to take care of a teenage ortho patient, I didn't visualize being tossed a pair of keys to a crappy car, given a map I can hardly read, and being left to my own devices to figure shit out.

The ride from the lodge to my cabin, while only a mile up the road, took a good twenty minutes. All thanks to the lovely way the engine on this damn car Tex loaned me started smoking every time I got the speed up over ten miles an hour.

It's no wonder Tiny prefers his horse. If it's either off-road vehicles like he tried to kill me in on the way to the lodge or pieces of crap like this, I'm starting to think maybe I should consider learning how to horseback ride.

Fortunately, when I arrived at Cabin Three, I found all six of my suitcases waiting for me.

The instant I stepped inside, after making a quick pit stop in my new bathroom, I tried to call my brother and text Carla and Taylor, but the cell service wasn't cooperating.

I'm hoping later tonight, after I see my patient, I'll find a way to ET-Phone-Home.

Overall, my new home-away-from-home is nice and quaint and clean, and the view is better than anything I've ever seen. Even though the decor is bland for my tastes, it's nothing a quick run to Target to purchase some flowers and curtains and other cutesy things can't fix.

However, I highly doubt this Jeep would make it the forty miles to St. George where the nearest Target is located.

I snort in horror at the mere thought of that road trip and accidentally push my foot to the gas pedal too hard. Instantly, the engine roars and smokes its protest.

"Sheesh. Chill out. Twelve miles an hour shouldn't kill you, Karen," I mutter and tap the dashboard.

It might seem odd to have already given a name to a vehicle that isn't mine, but with the way this Jeep bitches and complains with every little thing, I can't deny it's basically the Karen of inanimate objects. If your name is Karen, and you don't like to nitpick from your high horse, I'm sorry. Your parents had no idea what they were setting you up for.

When I spot a large cabin nestled in the woods up ahead, I grab the map from the passenger seat to verify it's the house Tex circled.

Thankfully, it is, and I let Karen know we're almost there.

"Hang tight, old girl. Just a tiny bit longer and we'll be there."

She putts and whines but manages the job, and it only takes a few more minutes before I pull to a stop in front of the house.

With a large wraparound front porch and big, open windows on the sides, it's a true beauty.

The kind of home you'd want to raise a family and, eventually, grow old in. I don't even live here, and I can imagine lots of summer nights spent on that front porch, sitting in the rocking chairs and drinking lemonade.

Once I cut the engine, I use all my might to grip the door handle and shove it open. At first, it creaks and groans in argument, but after a few pushes of my shoulder, it gives way so I can step out.

I teeter on my heels a bit when I come in contact with more damn gravel, but I right myself with a hand to Karen's side.

Goodness. These people really need to learn the convenience of concrete out here.

One foot in front of the other, I head up toward the house and don't stop until I reach the entrance. The main door is wide open, and only a screen door separates the outside from the inside.

Gently, I rap my knuckles against the wood, and moments later, an adorable little blond-haired girl comes running down the hall and right toward me.

She pushes the screen door open with one of her cowgirl boots and steps out until she can keep it open with just her hip. With pigtails and dimples and big blue eyes, she just might be the cutest kid I've ever see in my life.

Is this Rhett Jameson's little sister?

"Who are you?" she asks, ignoring any sort of greeting and getting straight to the point.

I grin. "My name is Leah. What's your name?"

"Joey," she answers, her small hands moving with her words. "Well, Josephine, but everyone calls me Joey."

"That's a very pretty name."

"And you're a very pretty lady," she says, and her eyes move up and down my body, taking in my hair and my face and my dress and my shoes. "Maybe the prettiest lady I've ever seen. Are you in movies?"

"No, I'm not in movies," I answer on a soft laugh. "But you know what's funny?"

"What?"

“You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen in my whole life.”

She giggles, and then her eyes get big. “Wait...oh my goodness! Are you here to teach me how to braid my hair?” Her button nose crinkles up in the most adorable way. “My granny told me she’d teach me how to do it, but I think she can’t remember, and is that why you’re here? Because you know how to do it?” she asks, and her short legs bounce up and down ever so slightly.

“Uh...” I pause, completely entranced by this sweet little human, but also utterly confused. “Actually, sweetie, I’m not here to teach you how to braid your hair. I’m here—”

“Aw, shucks.” She swishes one fist from her right hip to her left hip, and her tiny mouth points down at the corners.

Immediately, I feel like the worst human being alive, and it takes everything inside me not to step inside the house and ask her to get me a hairbrush.

But I rein in the emotion and offer up something I hope will soften her disappointment.

“How about this? Since I’m going to be here for the summer, I’ll make sure someday *very soon*, I teach you how to braid your hair.”

“Yeah?” Her big blue eyes light up like the sun. “Ya promise?”

“I promise.”

Truthfully, I’m just assuming this young girl lives here on this ranch, but I have no idea.

I don’t know if she’s Tex’s daughter or someone else’s daughter. I don’t really know much of anything. Haven’t known much of anything since I told Frank Kaminsky I’d take this job.

But so far, feeling out of the loop appears to be par for the course.

The girl steps out of the house on her tiny cowgirl boots and wraps her arms around my waist. “I’m so excited, Leah!”

I'm shocked at first by her instant affection, but it doesn't take long before I'm putty in her teeny hands.

"Me too, Joey." A tickled laugh emerges from my lungs, and I pat her head tenderly.

Eventually, she steps back and puts one hand to her hip. "So, if you's supposed to be here all summer but it's not just for my hair, why are you here?"

"I was just about to ask the same thing, Joey." A deep, raspy voice fills my ears, and that's when I realize someone else has joined our conversation at the door.

My eyes move up, up, *up* past Joey and land on a pair of perfectly worn-in jeans, over a shirtless and firm set of abs and an even firmer chest, and they don't stop until they meet aqua-blue eyes that are pointed directly at me.

Holy shit.

This rugged, fine-as-hell specimen standing right behind Joey isn't just any man; he's the manliest man I've ever laid eyes on. His body is stretched tight with the kinds of firm muscles that do *not* come from protein shakes and a gym membership to LA Fitness. *No*. These are *real* muscles, made from hard, sweaty work on a big-ass ranch like this.

If you typed the words "hot cowboy" into Google, I'm pretty sure this guy would be the number one search result.

And he looks so damn strong, so physically capable of anything, I honestly think he could lift a car just for the fun of it.

With brownish-red hair that looks almost gold in the sunlight, a sharp jaw that's peppered with some scruff, and full lips that are set in a firm line, I can't help but wonder *who is this guy?*

Rhett Jameson's...older brother? His uncle?

Some kind of familial male figure?

He clears his throat, and that's when I realize just how long I've been standing here staring at this slightly irritated, but also handsome-looking, cowboy like a moron.

Uh...hello? Earth to Leah? Now would be a really great time to remember how to speak...

SIX



Rhett

With the length of time it takes the fancy-shoe-wearing stranger to string some words together, her mouth gaping like a fish the whole time, I consider going back in the house and calling an ambulance to come deal with her stroke.

And when she does get some words together, it's not like she clears everything up in a blink.

"I-I'm sorry?" she stutters, shoving on the tops of her knees to stand up straight again. She's tall, attractive, *dangerously curvaceous*, but she looks entirely out of place on my ranch.

I doubt she spends much of her time climbing through fence rails or the like.

This woman has *citified* written all over her expensive attire and done-up face.

That's not to say we don't have city folk come out here all the time for the "Dude Ranch" experience, but this chick takes all that to a whole new level. Guests usually at least go to the trouble of buying a brand-new set of boots and digging a pair of jeans out of the back of their closet.

Dressed in fucking high heels and a bright-as-hell dress that looks like a rainbow puked on it, she has made zero effort to conform to country living. It looks like someone plucked a

celebrity out of fucking Hollywood and dropped her right on my front porch.

Honestly, there's a part of me wondering if Chase managed to send her here as some sort of sick fucking joke...

"What're you doin' here?" I repeat slower. Joey giggles and waves, obviously taken with the magic of swanky clothes and makeup she's never seen before, and I grab her shoulder and pull her body back into my legs, further covering the full brace I have on my bad leg.

"Oh. Yes. I'm sorry!" the city girl says with a laugh of her own. "I'm here as a favor to Mr. Jameson." She rolls her eyes. "Well, technically, it's a favor for my boss, Frank Kaminsky, and a job for Mr. Jameson, but—" She waves a hand in front of her face. "Never mind. I'm talking nonsense, I'm sorry. Those details don't matter. I'm looking for Rhett Jameson."

Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me. My spine tenses at her words, and when Joey turns to look up at me over her shoulder, I give it a squeeze to suggest she stay quiet.

"Well, you've found him," I say simply, pointedly choosing not to elaborate further.

"Oh thank God!" she cheers with a clasp of her hands, peering around me curiously. "Is he inside? I'd love to introduce myself."

My eyebrows draw together, and Joey, once again, damn near jumps out of her skin to set the record straight. I gently squeeze her tiny shoulder again and order, "Why don't you go on into the kitchen and clean up your lunch mess, Joe."

"But, Daddy!" she protests loudly, stomping a tiny, defiant foot. "I want to keep talking with Leah!"

"Joey," I warn. "Go clean up. Now."

She huffs and spins on her heels, bumping into my leg just slightly as she makes her angry exit. I cringe and strain the muscles in my neck against yelling out in pain, and then when she slams the door at the end of the hall, I shake my head. Goddamn, it's like she's got the sass of a full-grown woman

already. I don't know how I'm going to handle her when she's a teenager.

And she's smart too. She knows that, on a normal basis, that door slam would have landed her a talkin'-to, but she's used the circumstances of a stranger on our doorstep against me.

When I look up to meet Leah's eyes again, hers are fixated directly on the giant brace over my left leg.

I move that leg just enough to break her concentration and smirk as her wide-eyed gaze jumps to mine. She looks downright scared and confused.

"You...you can't be Rhett Jameson," she finally breathes, shaking her head slightly as though she's trying to jiggle some kind of nonsense out of it.

I shrug. "Well, darlin', I am. Now...who the hell are you?"

Her head bobbles again, shaking back and forth mindlessly. "But you're not fourteen years old." Her eyes jerk up to mine again, and her chin tucks into her chest. "Right? I mean, I'm sure the rate of maturation is a little different out here with all the manual labor and... But you can't be fourteen." She scans my body up and down again, pausing on my bare chest and licking her lips almost imperceptibly. "Definitely not possible."

"No," I agree. "I'm definitely not fourteen. Haven't been in more than two decades. Question is, why do you think I should be?"

She rubs at her temple with two red-fingernail-tipped fingers and shakes her head, her mouth sucking air like a fish again. Growing more frustrated by the second and with my leg aching like a son of a bitch, I slam a hand into the doorjamb and lean some of my weight into it.

"Could you spit it out, honey? If you haven't noticed, standin' here waitin' for you to put your thoughts together isn't exactly pain-free."

"Oh my gosh, I'm sorry." Determined, she nods and puts a sentence together. "I'm Leah Levee. *Dr.* Leah Levee, and I'm

here to do personalized medical, physical therapy, and rehabilitation care for two months for...well, *you*, I think. Though, you are not *the you* I thought was you, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around how all our wires got crossed this badly."

A fucking doctor? For me? I shut my eyes for a brief moment and let out a harsh sigh.

Already, I have a pretty strong sense of *who* is behind this, but before I draw any final conclusions, I try to get the pretty city girl to confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"Tell me again, who sent you here?" I ask, anger building in my chest like lava bubbling to the top of a volcano.

"Um, his name is Tex Jameson. But I think...well, I guess he's your father?"

Goddamn, sometimes I hate being right. Instantly, my dad's words pop into my head. "*If you keep actin' like you need a damn babysitter, I'll fuckin' get you one.*"

That motherfucker.

The screen door slams against the threshold as I turn and spin, shoving it out of the way and limping back into the house and down the hall as fast as I can. Joey peeks out from the kitchen and watches as I grab the phone next to the sofa in the living room, pick it up, and start dialing immediately.

I only vaguely note that Dr. Leah has followed me inside, somewhat cautiously, and is now standing at the entrance to the living room. Joey bounds out of the kitchen and across the hall to stand in front of her again, her petite hips swinging back and forth in delight. It's on the tip of my tongue to snap at them both, but the sound of ringing in my ear reminds me to save my anger for the man who deserves it.

My father.

"That's my daddy," I hear Joey tell the doctor, hooking one of her tiny thumbs across her chest toward me. "He's a real-life cowboy, with some of the fastest reflexes in the world! He used to be in rodeos, but now he just stays here with me. We've got all sorts o' stuff 'round here on the ranch, though.

Chickens and bulls and horses, and we used'ta have a pig named Pete, but now he's bacon," she recites with a snort, the goddamn phone still ringing in my ear.

I'm beginning to think that if I want to have it out with my father, it's going to have to be in person. Tex Jameson knows what he's done, and now he's hiding.

I slam the phone back down on its base, and Leah jumps, her eyes widening again as she glances between my sweet girl and me.

One clearly enamored of her, one just as transparently annoyed.

"Daddy, can Miss Leah stay and go feedin' with us later?" Joey asks sweetly, running across the room to tug on the belt loop of my jeans. "I wanna show her Charles Chickens and Moby Chick."

She turns around like a whip to look at Leah again, and I grind my jaw to keep myself from spouting off in a rage in front of her.

"Those're my favorite chickens, Miss Leah. I named 'em and everything."

"You named them?" Leah asks, her eyes widening in wonder. "I didn't think you were old enough to know about Charles Dickens and Moby Dick."

Joey snorts. "I'm *almost* six," she says with the emphasis clearly stating she interprets it different than we do. To my Joey, six is almost full-grown.

"Oh, well," Leah says with a smile, playing along. "That definitely changes things."

It's sweet of her not to belittle Joey like a lot of people do. My girl's smart, quick, clever—and to her, age is just a number.

But fuck, it's not enough to cool all the anger I'm feeling about my father trying to saddle me with some ritzy city doctor without my permission. It's no wonder she thought I

was fourteen, really. Because that's sure as shit the way my old man still treats me.

I shake my head and tug gently on one of Joey's pigtails. "No, baby. Miss Leah's got to be going," I say, the directive meant for more than just my girl.

Leah gets the message too, slowly nodding to signify she understands. "I'm super tired right now anyway," she says to soften the blow to Joey. "I still need to get settled in my cabin and get some rest. I appreciate you inviting me, though."

Joey runs over and hits Leah full speed in the legs, hugging her tight and turning her cheek to lean it into Leah's warmth.

Leah's hand moves slowly, almost like she can't believe the tenderness my daughter is showing her, and gently, ever so reverently, she strokes at the top of my baby girl's head.

I clear my throat, and she pushes Joey back gently before tapping just the tip of one finger to the apple of her cheek. "It's been so nice to meet you, Joey."

Joey giggles. "Next time, you can do my hair!"

Leah smiles, but it's vaguely sad. I think she's at least smart enough to realize that as far as I'm concerned, Joey and I aren't going to see her again.

"Next time."

With a deep breath, Leah straightens to her full height and fixes her fancy, so-bright-it's-practically-blinding dress. It wasn't out of place, but I think for some reason it makes her nerves feel better to pretend like it was.

And *fuck*, I hate that I notice how goddamn curvaceous and tempting her body is when she turns and heads down the hall toward the door. It's like her ass is purposely swaying back and forth to throw my focus off-kilter.

Don't even go there, you bastard.

With a roll of my eyes, I hobble along to follow her, ordering again, "Joey, stay here."

“Okay, Daddy.”

I get to the front door as she’s opening the door of my dad’s old Jeep and preparing to climb inside, and I push through the screen to catch her attention. When she looks back up at the house, I do my best to be a decent human being. As far as I can tell, she’s been swindled just as hard as I have.

“I’m sorry you went to all the trouble and that you got dragged into the middle of this shit. But this is a whole lot bigger than you realize.”

She shields her eyes from the sun with a hand atop her forehead and nods. “I’m just here to help with your knee.”

“Darlin’, come on now. You’re smarter than that. My dad’s been tryin’ like hell to turn me into a puppet, and you’re just decoration on the strings. Besides,” I continue with a shrug. “My knee’s fine. Healin’ by the day. And I can assure you, I’ve been through a lot worse. Just part of the cowboy way of life.”

She opens her mouth to speak again but then, seemingly, thinks better of it.

With a final wave, she climbs up into the Jeep and turns over the key with a crank. It whines and sputters, but it’ll be damned if it’s going to start.

Why on earth would he have given her that old piece of shit to drive around? It’s like he’s asking for fucking trouble. Lord knows this ranch has more than a few trucks and SUVs that he could’ve loaned, but ole Tex gave the fancy doctor the one vehicle I wouldn’t trust on a seventy-degree sunny day.

I sigh heavily as she tries again and again and again, almost definitely flooding the engine by pumping her foot on the gas pedal.

“Stop, stop!” I yell when she cranks it over again and holds it while it whines. “Goddammit,” I mutter to myself, shuffling to the edge of the porch and leaning into the railing so I can hop down the steps on one foot. Each jump jars my knee enough to make me grit my teeth, but I seal my lips and bear it until I make it to the bottom and go back to waddling.

Leah hops down out of the Jeep and jogs toward me, holding out a hand toward my leg. “You really shouldn’t do that,” she says with a fine sheen of panic in her eyes. “You’re only four weeks out from surgery. You should still be using crutches at this point.”

The irony of the situation damn near makes me laugh.

“Darlin’, I was just about to tell you the same thing. Are you tryin’ to kill this old junker on purpose, or is it just a happy accident?”

“What?”

“The Jeep, Leah. You can’t just keep crankin’ and floodin’ the engine like that. You’re only makin’ it worse.”

“Funny. Because with the way you’re moving around, I could say the same about your knee.”

I narrow my eyes. “My knee is fine. And I’ll grab some tools to get it runnin’ again.”

“How about you tell me where the tools are, and I’ll go get them.” She scowls toward me, her eyes openly challenging, and suddenly, I’m not feeling so sorry for roping her into my anger anymore.

“Sure.” I smirk. “I need a can of starter fluid, a flathead screwdriver, and a socket wrench with a five-eighths and thirteen-sixteenths head.”

“Right.” She nods five times like that’s somehow going to make her know what the hell I’m talking about. “Of course. Anything else?”

I already know she doesn’t have a clue what any of those things is, but the fact that she’s trying to act like she does is pretty fucking amusing.

And call me evil, but I’m more than willing to sit back and watch her fail at her own game.

“Just a rag.” I nod toward the side of the house. “Garage should be open. Everything’ll be in there.”

She nods again and takes off in the direction of the garage, and my fucking eyes don't ignore how good her hips look swaying back and forth as she moves on them ridiculous, don't-fucking-belong-out-here shoes.

I wait until she rounds the corner and then let loose with a smile.

Well, for as frustrating as this day has been, at least this should be entertaining.

SEVEN



Leah

How in the heck have I gone from trying to introduce myself to my new patient to stomping toward a garage to find tools to fix a broken-down car?

I run a hand down my face as I continue to walk toward the back of the house.

To be honest, I don't know why I care so much to go to these lengths, but there is just something about the stupid smug smile on Rhett Jameson's face that makes me want to find every darn item he mentioned.

Sadly, I don't even think this is about protecting his injured leg from unneeded activity.

Ha. Probably because it's definitely not...

Fine. It's not. The bastard triggered me. He wrote me off as some woman from the city who doesn't know shit about cars or ranches or whatever the hell else he's assumed I'm a moron in.

Well, you don't know anything about cars or ranches...

Ugh. It doesn't matter that he's sort of correct; it's the fact that he just *presumed*.

After stepping through the side door of the garage and pulling it shut behind me, I flip on the light switch next to the

door and dig my phone out of my bra. It's a strange place to keep a cell phone, I admit, but when I wear a dress without pockets, it's the most convenient of all locations.

"Google, google, google," I mutter to myself, willing the processing system on my iPhone to work faster. I click my bookmark in Safari with the hopes of getting there quickly, but the little blue line at the top of the screen barely makes it out of the gate.

Come on, you stupid phone! Get some freaking service!

"Please," I whisper-yell, banging on the side of my hot-pink case. "Do not let me down in my time of need!"

Sure, I don't have a clue what any of the things he said are, but I do have a good memory. I figured I'd be able to come in here, Google what they looked like by typing in their names, find them all, and shove his arrogant assumptions right back down his heavily corded throat.

I glance at the bars of service in the top right-hand corner of the screen, and the one fleeting bar I thought I had disappears like a puff of dust in the wind.

No Service, it says then, taunting me with a proverbial flatline.

What is it with this place and freaking cell service?

So far, everywhere I've been since I left the lodge—*my cabin, the drive here, Rhett Jameson's house*—I've had exactly zero luck with reaching the outside world.

It's like the land repels any form of digital contact.

"Dammit!" I huff with a stomp of my heel, tucking my lifeline back into the cup of my bra and scanning the walls of the garage. Statistically, there's a pretty low chance I'm going to pick the right thing since there are tools everywhere, but I'm just stubborn enough to try anyway.

Going back there with my tail tucked between my legs isn't an option. He quite obviously thinks I'm an incapable idiot. I may not be rural-savvy, but I was at the top of my class

in medical school, and I'm not going to let a stubborn, self-righteous cowboy defeat me that easily.

I spot a shelving unit full of cans, bottles, and containers and decide to head there first. Of all the things on his list of items, starter fluid seems like it has the highest probability of being labeled.

I thumb through cans on the first two shelves quickly, and finally, when I get to the third, a can stating "Engine Starting Fluid" is right in the front of the mix.

"Aha!" I shout victoriously, tucking it into the crook of my arm and moving to another item he rattled off. A rag is pretty easy, and after looking long enough, I find out he has a stack of them on top of one of the cabinets, covered in old grease stains and dark marks. I grab one of those too, but I hold it away from my dress just in case some of these stains aren't quite as old as I think they are.

Pucci isn't cheap, for goodness' sake, and even though I bought this secondhand, I'll be damned if I'm going to let grease soak into the silk fabric.

Next, I move to the rolling toolbox in the corner and start riffling through the drawers as fast as I can. I know, at this point, I've been gone for quite a while, and I'm not entirely sure how he'll react to that.

Anger. Worry. Humor. He seems to have all three in varying degrees of intensity at any given time, and honestly, I'm not used to the kind of men that wear their emotions so plainly on their sleeve, even when they're conveniently shirtless like Mr. Rhett Jameson.

Most of the men I've met, dated, been in a short-term relationship with, like trying to be *mysterious*. They belittle when they're mad, shift blame for the sole purpose of their convenience, and all in all, try to make it seem like I'm the one who can't keep a steady read on the situation.

But Rhett reacts completely different than I've grown accustomed to with the opposite sex. He seems like the kind of

guy that tells you like it is, for better or worse, and never tries to sugarcoat something just for the sake of appearance.

It's shocking when it's not what you're used to, but I have to admit, a small part of me seems to find it exhilarating too.

I find a screwdriver with a flat head, though I really have no clue if it's even close to the right size, and that only leaves the socket wrench with two heads. *Whatever it is that means.*

I sigh with frustration and continue digging through the drawers as quickly as I can. The problem is, now that I've gathered all the easy items and moved on to this one, I *literally* have *no* clue what I'm looking for.

I do *not* know what a socket wrench is. But I have a feeling it's important.

"Dammit," I blow out in a puff of frustration. I'm going to have to go back out there and, at the very least, ask him what it looks like.

It's the last fucking thing I want to do, but fuck, I have no choice.

I carefully gather the things I've managed in my hands and turn to head for the door, only to jerk to a stop with a squeal. Standing in the doorway to the garage, leaning against the jamb, is Rhett Jameson with an undeniably sexy but arrogant smile on his face.

I take a deep breath to gather the shake in my throat so it won't translate to my voice and walk toward him confidently.

"I've got the starter fluid, the rag, and the screwdriver. I was looking for the socket wrench."

Rhett starts to move toward me, and I hold out a hand to indicate he should stop. "Just tell me what drawer it's in, and I'll get it."

He smirks. "The one you were just in, darlin'."

Ah, fuck. Of course it is.

"Right. I'll just grab it, then."

I go back to the drawer and grab the only kind of tool in there, looking through the strips of what must be the “heads” that are magnetically attached to the sides. Luckily, they’re labeled, so it doesn’t take me too long to find the sizes he needs.

When I walk back over and hold it out for him to take, he laughs. “I’ll admit, you did better than I thought you would.”

I lift my chin higher, the corners of my mouth curving up slightly.

I’m ready to bask in my victory, but he gives me no time. A swift feeling of disappointment takes up residence in my belly when he limps around me back over to the other side of the garage and replaces half of what I’ve gotten with slightly different versions.

“Don’t take it too hard,” he says as he passes me on his way out of the garage. “You were close.”

Yeah, I think, but not close enough.

Instead of being impressed and asking me about the kind of help I can offer him for his knee that he appears persistent in hobbling around on *without* crutches, he’s on his way back to the Jeep to send me on my way.

Well, Tex definitely told you one truth about his son...

Yeah. Rhett Jameson is a stubborn jackass.



I glance in the rearview mirror at the grumpy cowboy getting smaller by the second as I drive away from his house.

The Jeep’s up and running thanks to Rhett’s quick check and cleaning of the spark plugs and I don’t even know what else he fiddled with under the hood, and I’m officially exhausted.

My emotions feel like they’ve been put in a salad spinner and flung to all holy hell.

Excitement, panic, frustration, *arousal*—I’ve felt a little bit of all of it in the last twenty-four hours, and while, this

morning, I thought I knew what the next two months of my life were going to look like, now I'm not too sure.

If Rhett doesn't let me stay and help him, will Frank Kaminsky even want me back?

I mean, he practically elbow-wrestled me into doing this favor for him by implying what a "good impression" it would make on him if I could come out here and manage this. "*This is the kind of on-the-job training you're going to need heading into the season,*" he'd said. Honestly, I hadn't had a clue what he'd meant, but I'd nodded anyway, not wanting to seem like a dimwit—a painfully ironic tidbit now, considering I've never felt more in the dark.

I just can't figure out why someone like Rhett Jameson wouldn't want my help.

I mean, the bastard isn't even using crutches right now. He's just hobbling around on that leg without any real concern for the damage he might be doing to the unhealed tendons and bones that just underwent surgery a month ago.

It's like he wants to barrel through his recovery like a fucking race car driver, and I know with certainty, that kind of recklessness won't have him speeding across the finish line with a black-and-white checkered flag waving him on to victory. If anything, he'll be lucky if he gets an opportunity to make a pit stop and regroup before his damn race car explodes.

Why can't he understand that a well-thought-out care plan for his rehabilitation would make a truly substantial difference in getting him back to the kind of physical abilities he must be used to?

And what a bounty of them there must be, I can't help but think to myself, gripping the steering wheel tighter and picturing the stark lines and shadows created by the cut of his muscles.

I bite into my lip a little and hum. *Lord Almighty, the way that man must look when he's having sex with a woman whose presence he doesn't resent...*

Maybe, if I'm lucky, I can get him to pick up an ax and swing it around before I leave, at least. You know, just to see what those muscles look like when put to use.

Maybe I could even get a quick video to send to Carla and Taylor.

They'd certainly enjoy the show.

Ugh. Stop being a fucking pervert.

I sigh heavily, before glancing back down at the map I've been following since my arrival, and then concentrate as hard as I can to ensure I don't miss the cue to turn—a giant shrub on the left-hand side of the gravel road.

I shake my head. *Never, ever would I have believed I'd be where I am right now.*

Thankfully recognizing the foliage-style street sign, I turn down the drive for Cabin Three, kicking up a holy mother cloud of dust behind me as I hit the gas.

The Jeep strains under my command, but at this point, if I break down, I can walk the rest of the way, and even a second of extra time spent waiting for the simple reward of solace feels like too much.

I round the final curve at the old girl's full speed, but when the path I'm expecting to be clear is anything but, with a Volvo station wagon backing its way up the small gravel driveway that leads to my cabin, I slam on the brakes and pray to Jesus this thing stops better than it goes.

I close my eyes and cross my arms over my chest as though that'll somehow protect me if I have some sort of reversing-backend-into-speeding-frontend-collision and wait for the impact to hit.

When it doesn't, I open my eyes to complete encapsulation by a cloud of dust.

Holy hell. A rush of adrenaline dumps into my veins, and my heart responds accordingly, kicking into the kind of high gear this damn Jeep is utterly incapable of on inclines.

And all I can do is sit there, staring straight through the windshield like a woman whose life just flashed before her eyes.

Not even ten seconds later, the sounds of a door slamming shut followed by quick footsteps over gravel fill my ears, and it's not long before the driver of my almost collision comes into view.

"Oh my heavens!" she shouts as she jogs toward me. The instant she reaches the driver's side door of the Jeep, she yanks the damn thing open with a harsh tug that makes her cowgirl boots slide over the gravel a bit. She rights herself quickly, though, filling the open space in my door, and then her hands are on my face, touching my cheeks tenderly as her eyes search for injuries. "Honey! Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I nod. "I might've seen the light for a second—*possibly even briefly said hello to Jesus*—but I'm fine." My heart also seems to be doing its best impression of a drumline inside my chest, but now that I've seen the way the woman's eyes have widened at my casual claim of seeing God's *actual* son, I don't expect it's going to slow down anytime soon.

Surprisingly—and thankfully—a small, amused laugh spills from her lips. "Well, anyone good enough for a visit from Christ himself is good in my book." I almost snort as she continues, "Which means I like you already." Then, she winks.

I have no idea who she is or what she's talking about, but I'm still busy finding my equilibrium.

Obviously better at coping with the aftermath of a near-collision than I am, she releases her hands from my face and lets out a big exhale, stepping back just a touch.

It's only then that I notice just how lovely she really is. Her face is soft with wisdom, and her blond hair is laced with a little bit of salt and pepper that only makes her more stunning—and she wears her jeans and trim, western-style

button-down like she knows *exactly* who she is and who she wants to be.

I'm not one to dwell or flounder with self-doubt, but the kind of confidence and self-awareness she so obviously has seem like a distant goal for a woman my age, still trying to make a place for herself in this world.

"I guess I scared you, huh, honey?" she asks, and I offer a simple nod.

"Just a little bit. I-I wasn't expecting anyone to be here." I stumble some to explain. The only other explanation is that, after my pseudo-meeting-more-like-dismissal with Rhett, I was so excited to get back to the cabin—*and possibly pack up to leave*—that I was taking the final curve like Mario Andretti.

"I was just stopping by to check on you and make sure my husband did a better job of giving you advice than he did of giving you a vehicle. When I got here and didn't see you, I figured he'd managed to bugger up the both of 'em."

"Your husband?" I ask, and she smiles before shaking her head.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I can't believe I ran my mouth this long without introducin' myself. I'm Jenny. Tex, the fool with the big smile and crappy loaner Jeep, is my husband, and Rhett's my baby boy. Though, I have'ta admit, there's not much baby left in him these days."

I snort. *I'll say*. The man's practically all hard muscle and independence. The day they make actual babies like that is the day a lot of moms walk off the job.

"It's nice to meet you, Jenny. I'm Leah."

"Trust me, I know who you are. Already heard a lot about ya."

I cringe, hoping her son didn't manage to sneak in a phone call after I left his place. Surely his opinion of me wouldn't have given the best impression. "I'm hoping what you've heard is good?"

“Don’t be silly.” She waves a hand in the air. “I’m pretty sure Tex is already half in love with you himself. Thinks you’re a real hoot, and just between us girls, I’m guessin’ the pretty dress and heels don’t hurt either.”

My eyes widen at the insinuation, and she laughs. “My Tex has a real sweet spot for us ladies. It’s the boys he has a harder time with.”

I suck my lips into my mouth to keep from agreeing with her. I honestly don’t know enough about Tex to even pretend to agree with her. But if this were a courtroom, the way Tex’s son Rhett talked about him would probably be bagged, tagged, and labeled as Exhibit A.

“Now, what do you say we head on into the cabin and enjoy some of the fresh muffins and lemonade I brought over?”

Instantly, my stomach growls, and I remember just how long it’s been since I’ve had anything to eat. This morning, before the sun was even up and before I boarded my flight, I had a slice of turkey bacon and a bottle of water, and it’s now nearing late afternoon.

Needless to say, I’m so hungry that Jenny could be a serial killer with a body in the trunk and I’d still take her up on her offer.

I mean, I’d call the police. Just *after* I got the muffins.

“I’d love that.”

“Me too.” Her smile is sweeter than sugar. “Just leave this old POS here, and hop in the Volvo with me. We’ll pull up closer, and then I’ll get the snacks from my trunk.”

I do as she suggests, hopping in the passenger side of her car to ride the 100 feet to the front of the cabin, and then follow her lead and climb out when she shuts off the engine. While she grabs the basket of goodies from her trunk, I climb the short flight of front steps to the porch, unlock the cabin door, and walk inside.

It’s not long before we’re both sitting at the small kitchen table with Jenny’s freshly poured lemonade and blueberry

muffins in front of us.

I take a sip from the glass and a bite from the baked good and savor the refreshing, sweet flavors of *homemade*. I don't even bother hiding my small moan of approval.

“You like the muffins?”

“More than like. I'm pretty sure I'm in love. If this muffin keeps it up, we might be engaged by the end of the day.”

She giggles at that and takes a sip from her glass. “It's no wonder Tex was so tickled with you, Leah. You're cute as a button.”

I blush a bit, shrugging my shoulders at the unexpected compliment.

“So, if you don't mind me askin', where were you before? I was worried you'd broken down somewhere.”

“I went to your son's house to...uh...introduce myself.” *Which went horribly wrong and I'm pretty sure I really pissed him off, but no big deal.*

Her eyes stretch wide, and she shakes her head. “And I imagine that went really well, huh?” she asks, sarcasm laced heavily through her every word. Still, this is her son we're talking about, and the last thing I want to do is get too comfortable bad-mouthing him to his mama.

“Meeting your adorable granddaughter Joey was the highlight of my week,” I say honestly, omitting the rest for the sake of us both.

Your son, on the other hand... Well, he wasn't too thrilled. Or welcoming.

Jenny purses and smacks her lips together. Clearly, she's read between the lines just fine. “My Rhett can be like that. Especially when it's over something his daddy arranged without his permission. And something this big?” She laughs a little and shakes her head. “Probably went over like a hooker teaching Bible school.”

Her transparency takes me off guard, but also, it makes me feel as if I can tell her anything. Like, whatever I say right here

at this kitchen table will stay between us.

Maybe that's naïve, but her soft voice and friendly smile and gentle eyes make Jenny Jameson's presence feel like a big comforting blanket on a cold winter day.

Her eyes hold no judgment and even less impatience.

And that's when it occurs to me that this conversation with her is probably my one and only chance to turn this situation around. And if I don't give it to her straight, I might as well just give it up now. The complete, mostly unfiltered truth is the only shot I have left to avoid crawling back to Salt Lake City with my tail between my legs. Somehow, I don't think Frank Kaminsky would welcome me back to my job at the Slammers with open arms after I fucked up a favor—and job—for one of his oldest and dearest friends within twenty-four hours of my arrival.

“Honestly? Yeah.” A laugh jumps from my throat. “Rhett seemed about as excited to see me as I am to see my period while I'm wearing an all-white outfit. I mean, I think he was actually trying to keep in mind that I didn't hire myself, but when he tried to call your husband to let off some of the steam in his pot, he didn't answer. And then, well, the Jeep broke down and he had to fix it, so...”

She tsks her tongue. “Oh, for heaven's sake, that's some introduction.”

I nod. “Basically, it was just one big disaster after another.”

Jenny sighs and rolls her eyes. “I swear, sometimes, my husband—and son—could really use a boot up their stubborn asses.”

“I take it Rhett and his dad are kind of...at odds with each other occasionally?”

“Occasionally?” Her eyes go comically wide. “These days, it's a rare occurrence to see them getting along. Like oil and water, the two of 'em. They're *always* battling. But it shouldn't be a surprise, really. They're cut from the same obstinate cloth, too much pride and ego and likeness between

them to mesh well together. It's like watching two big bulls banging horns."

She sighs and takes another sip of lemonade as a wave of realization washes over me. I glance down at my fingers and mindlessly run them along the well-worn, but obviously loved, dining table.

This is a long-standing, ongoing battle between father and son that, quite frankly, I don't have any business thinking I have the tools to solve. Neither I, nor my older brother Sam, have spoken to either one of our parents in years. They're both raging alcoholics and put the "hell" in unhealthy relationship. Once we were out of the house and on our own, keeping our distance from them, unfortunately, became a requirement to live normal lives.

Truthfully, I can't even fathom what it's like to have love and conflict mingled together like the Jameson men.

Rhett *really* doesn't want my help—even though, by the looks of the reckless shit he was doing without crutches, he really fucking needs it—and although Tex was insistent that I stick out the two months, he didn't exactly fill me in on the kind of resistance I'd be up against.

Trying to wrap my head around all this, *navigate my way through it*, feels like someone dropped me off in the middle of the woods without Wi-Fi or sustenance and told me to find my way back.

I mean, am I in way over my head?

It sure freaking feels like it...

"No, don't do that," Jenny says, interrupting my thoughts, and I jerk my eyes back up to meet hers. "Don't give up. Don't sell yourself short because my son was being a hardheaded, most likely mannerless, moron. You're the right woman for the job, I can tell."

"But...how did you... I didn't say anything."

Jenny grins. "You didn't have to, darlin'. You've got the urge to flee written all over your pretty face."

I swallow hard at being read so easily, and Jenny reaches out and covers my hand with her own on the table. “Listen, Leah, I know Rhett is...*difficult*.”

Ha. Understatement.

“And I know he’s stubborn,” she continues. “I know he’s set in his ways and doesn’t want help from anyone, but I also know he needs the chance to change both. Truthfully, this ranch needs him recovered. Tex is getting old and can’t always be doin’ all the things he used to do. He needs to retire soon, and the only way to do that is for Rhett to be healthy and ready to take it all over. And Rhett needs all that too, darlin’. He just hasn’t fully realized it yet.”

“What are you saying?”

“You need to stay and do the job you were hired to do,” she says, like it’s just that simple, patting my hand before pulling hers away.

“I hear you, I really do, and I want to stay, but it’s going to be very hard to treat a patient who wants me gone. I can’t imagine chasing him around the ranch for the next two months is going to do anyone any good.”

“Look at it this way. At least he’s only got one good leg. How fast can he really be?” she teases.

Regardless of how stressful this feels, I can’t hold back a smile.

“Jenny,” I murmur, and her grin turns serious again.

“You agree to stay, and I swear I’ll do all I can to help you sort the rest. I know it’s more than you bargained for, but can you promise me you’ll at least hang around and try?”

I think for a few seconds, but the truth is, there’s only one way to answer her question.

“Of course. Yes.” Frankly, I really need this job to work out. Not only could I use the money, but I really don’t want to go back to Salt Lake City and have to tell my new boss that I had to give up on the big favor after a damn day.

I mean, he definitely threw me to the fucking wolves on this one, but I want to take my career to the next level. I want to eventually be the *primary* team doctor for the Salt Lake City Slammers, and if I don't succeed here, I can pretty much guarantee that'll never happen.

“Well, okay, then.” Hands to the table, Jenny stands to her feet. “Looks like I best be heading back home to get goin’ on dinner. You like chili and cornbread?”

“Made by the baker of these muffins?” I ask rhetorically. “Uh, *yeah*.”

“Perfect,” she says with a small smile. “Come down and eat dinner with us tonight. I’ll have it on the table around seven.”

I nod. She winks.

“Bring your appetite, okay? You’re gonna need to keep up your strength.”

I raise my eyebrows at her words, but she just smiles.

“Don’t you worry, honey. It’ll all work out just fine. Promise. My boy’s tough on the outside but sweet in the middle. You stay the course, and we’re all gonna be better for it.” She pulls her keys from her pocket and lays them on the table next to my hand. “I’m gonna take the Jeep and leave you my car. When you come tonight, I’ll make Tex switch it out for somethin’ more reliable, okay?”

I open my mouth to tell her I’m sure the Jeep will be fine, but she’s already shaking her head and heading for the door.

And then she’s gone, leaving me sitting there, wondering how in the hell a simple two-month job on a ranch to help a fourteen-year-old boy heal from a knee injury turned into me going head-to-head with a thirtysomething, grumpy-as-hell cowboy with six-pack abs and a giant chip on his shoulder.

What in the world have I gotten myself into?

I can only hope it’s not more than I can handle.

EIGHT



Rhett

Heading to dinner at my parents' house is the last thing I feel like doing after the bullshit my dad tossed my way today, but when Jenny Jameson puts her foot down and demands that you show up for dinner, you best be showin' up at your mama's kitchen table, ready to eat.

I still haven't had a chance to talk to ole Tex yet, but I figure I'll keep my cool through the homemade meal and save the talking-to for afterward. Preferably, when it's just the two of us and we're far enough away from the house that my mama and Joey don't have to overhear it.

Joey bounces in her seat the entire drive from our cabin, the only one in this truck who's actually looking forward to a family dinner.

And the second I pull to a stop in front of my parents' house, she is out of the passenger door and flying up the porch before I can even get my busted-up leg to move a fucking inch out of my seat.

"Joey, slow down!" I yell out my open door as she almost rips the screen door off the hinges in her hurry to get to her grandma and grandpa.

Two hands locked around the stiff, immovable brace, I groan and grimace as I rotate the damn thing out of the truck,

prop myself against the opened driver's side door, and ease myself from sitting to standing.

Fuck this fucking leg. I'm so sick of everything taking five times as long as it normally does. Just showering to get ready to come tonight was an ordeal and a half, and I don't even want to think about what my schedule for tomorrow's going to look like.

On a sigh, I start the process of limping toward my parents' place.

I'm halfway up the porch and almost to the screen door when I spot the old Jeep sitting to the left of the house. It's empty, and there's no sight of the city doctor with the ridiculous high heels and curvy hips.

Did she already hit the fucking road and head back to wherever she came from?

My stomach clenches with something that feels a lot like disappointment, but I write it off as utter nonsense. There is no way in fucking hell I wanted Dr. Leah Levee to hang around here and bug me every day about my leg. I need her doctor help like I need a goddamn hole in my head.

I can't deny, for most men, her curvy body is something dreams are fucking made of, but I don't have time to busy myself with that kind of shit.

I have a daughter to raise and a ranch to run and a prideful son of a bitch by the name of Tex Jameson to let know how I really feel about him inserting himself into my business and hiring a doctor to take care of me like I'm some kind of fucking kid.

Fourteen-year-old boy, my mind muses, and I shake my head on an exasperated sigh.

If there's one thing I can agree on about my daddy, it's that he never fails to get real creative with his bullshit.

Once I'm in the house, I head down the entry hall toward a kitchen full of the kind of laughter and chatter only my mom and Joey can get into that quickly. I swear they've both got the gift of the gab.

I round the corner into the kitchen to find Joey bouncing at my mom's side as she stirs a pot on the stovetop. It smells delicious, and I have to admit, I'm thankful for the fact that I didn't have to make something for Joey and myself tonight. After all the excitement of this afternoon, my knee is sore as hell and my back aches from overcompensation.

"Tex, Rhett, take a seat at the table. Dinner's just about ready," my mom calls over her shoulder as she pulls cornbread out of the oven.

"Good to see ya, Rhett." My dad offers a friendly grin my way as he gets up from his recliner in the living room, slaps me on the shoulder, and takes his seat at the head of the table.

Has he lost his damn mind? Or is he honestly getting old enough that he's actually forgotten the shit he pulled today?

I stand there, staring at the scene before me.

I feel like I've been shoved into an episode of fucking *Leave It to Beaver*. Everyone is just acting like there's nothing wrong with how this day has gone—like I wasn't the center of a setup the likes of which professional criminals have never even seen.

"Sorry I'm a little late," a voice calls from the front hall, making my back pull up even straighter.

That better not be who I think it is.

Eyes narrowed, I turn to look down the hall toward the front door and find all of my suspicions are unfortunately true.

Bottle of wine in hand, city doctor Leah Levee looks up from taking off her shoes by the door and stumbles under the weight of my hard stare.

"Leah!" Joey yells, shoving past me and barreling right into the center of Leah's long, tanned legs.

Son of a bitch.

"Daddy, now Leah can show me how to braid my hair after dinner!" my Joey exclaims, and it takes everything inside me to force a half smile to my lips and offer a small nod.

I can feel Leah's eyes looking directly at me, but I refuse to acknowledge her presence with eye contact. Not fucking happening. I've already made it more than clear to her where I stand with her being on my ranch.

"All right, everyone sit down," my mom instructs again, and when Joey keeps standing there, smiling up at Leah, my annoyance starts to get the best of me.

"Joey, you heard your grandma. Take a seat," I say, and I hate how stern my voice sounds.

But fuck, I can't help it. My daughter is taking to this city doctor like she's God's motherly gift to little girls, and I'm hatin' every damn second of it. Soon, Dr. Leah Levee will be gone, and the last thing I need is for my Joey to have some kind of misplaced disappointment about a complete stranger. She already has more than enough disappointment to handle when it comes to her mother.

Joey pouts but listens, trudging down the hallway with the excitement of a sloth. Leah follows cautiously, skirting past me with a nod of her head when I make no effort to get out of her way. It takes me a minute, but eventually, I force myself to move in the direction of the table, if only to take a seat and some of the stress off my throbbing leg.

My mom carries over a plate of cornbread, setting it at the center of the table, and smiles up at the new arrival, who's taken a seat at the table next to my daughter.

"Leah, I'm so glad you made it. My car didn't give you any trouble, did it?"

Leah shakes her head and reaches down beside her chair for her purse. "Not at all! Let me get you the keys before I forget." She holds them out for my mom, who takes them with a smile.

"I see you brought a bottle of wine too."

"Yes, I hope that's okay. I managed to pick this up in the gift shop before my flight out here, and I just wanted to say thank you."

“Leah, did you know my granny makes the best cornbread in the whole world?” Joey interrupts, bouncing up and down on the surface of her chair.

“I didn’t know that, but I’m not surprised.” Leah smiles at Joey and leans across the table to whisper conspiratorially. “She brought me some blueberry muffins earlier today, and they were the best muffins I’ve ever had.”

Joey giggles.

“Jenny, you made muffins and didn’t share any with me or Josephine?” my dad questions, a teasing tone to his voice, and when my mom brings the pot of chili over to the table, she proceeds to smack him across the shoulder with a kitchen towel.

“I saved a few for Joe, but you don’t need any more muffins, old man. I know you snuck three of them from my basket before I could take them up to Leah’s.”

Take them up to Leah’s?

Like the damned doctor now officially lives on the ranch?

What is happening right now?

She hasn’t even been here a fucking day, and it’s like they’re just making her a part of our family.

Anger floods my bloodstream, and I can feel the vein at the center of my forehead start to throb. It takes everything inside me not to let everything I’m currently feeling explode from my lips like a bomb.

I only manage to sit there for another few minutes with my mama talking to Leah about when she usually heads into town to get groceries before I can’t take it anymore.

Up from my chair, I push myself to standing and meet my dad’s eyes. “I need a word with you.”

He furrows a brow. “We’re eating, son. We’ll talk after we finish.”

“No.” I shake my head. “We’ll talk now.”

I don’t wait for his response.

Instead, I head straight out of the house, moving as fast as my braced-up leg will allow, and I don't stop until I'm on the front porch and the screen door slams shut behind me.

It's not long before my dad makes his way outside, and the scowl that mars his face nearly makes me laugh. The fact that he has the audacity to look *that* pissed *at me* for the crap he's trying to pull is downright hilarious.

"What's so fuckin' funny?"

"The fact that you look pissed *at me*," I retort.

"You're damn right. You don't leave your mother's table in the middle of the meal she's worked hard on, and you definitely don't do it in mixed company. I swear to Christ, I don't even know if the boy I raised is in there anymore."

A harsh laugh is jarred free from my lungs. "You hire some fucking doctor behind my back, tell her I'm a fourteen-year-old kid, force her on me, *and* invite her to dinner without even so much as a conversation with me about what you've done, and I'm the one whose behavior is in question?" I shake my head. "You're gettin' more delusional by the day."

"Son, I fuckin' told ya, if you needed a babysitter, I'd hire ya one. Just be glad I was nice enough to saddle you with one this pretty."

"I don't need a fuckin' babysitter!" I shout. "I need you to stop meddling in shit that you don't belong in."

He scowls. "You don't need a babysitter? You're gettin' on fuckin' horses, for shit's sake. You shouldn't even be tottering around on the damn thing like you are, and you're out there actin' like you can rope the fuckin' wind. Give me a break, Rhett. You'll end up losing that leg if you keep pullin' the shit you're pullin'."

I turn away from him and run a frustrated hand through my hair, damn near ready to pull some of the strands straight out of my head.

"I swear," I mutter. "It's a real talent that one man can be this infuriating all the goddamn time."

He laughs at that. “The feeling is mutual, son.”

With a shake of my head, I grab the handle on the screen door and open it wide with a yank. It flies back and hits the house, and I don’t bother looking back or apologizing for it. I head straight for the kitchen, keen to get my daughter and get the hell out of there, but when I arrive, Joey’s sitting in Leah’s lap, smiling like she’s in heaven.

My mom catches a glimpse of my face and stands up from the table to come toward me. Her voice is gentle, soft—goddamn traitorous—as she says, “I know you’re upset, baby. I was too. But I wouldn’t be condonin’ this if I didn’t think it was what’s best, you hear me?”

I hear her all right, and I’ll be damned if I don’t want to retort with a growl.

But my mama knows—seems like she always does—and puts a hand to my elbow softly. “Look at your baby girl, son. Look at the way that innocent baby looks at that woman and tell me that doesn’t tell you everything you need to know.”

“She’s dazzled,” I rasp, the low, hard tone unmistakable in my voice, but my mom shakes her head and whispers again.

“She’s more than dazzled, Rhett. She’s smart and she’s a good judge of character, and you know it. Look at her with unvarnished eyes and give this a chance. Give *yourself* a chance to get *better*,” she insists.

I let my head fall back for a minute and blow out a deep exhale.

This is complete shit. The whole situation. But I can’t seem to do anything but agree.

“Fine,” I say, meeting my mom’s eyes again before glancing over her shoulder to my happy little girl.

If everyone wants the city doctor to stay, she can stay. That doesn’t mean I have to accommodate her.

“Can Joey spend the night with you tonight?” I ask, and my mom nods immediately.

“Of course. Why?”

Instead of answering, I turn to Leah and wait for her to look up and notice me. When she does, her eye contact sticks and holds.

“How about this?” I ask her as Tex takes his seat back at the table. “If you can find me, you can treat me.”

“Rhett,” my mom breathes, no doubt disappointed in my behavior as I turn and hobble my way straight out the door. I make my way down the porch steps and back to my truck, climbing in as gingerly as I can. I’ve just gotten my leg swung inside and my hand on the door when someone grabs it and yanks it back open unexpectedly.

“Do you mean that?” Leah asks, slightly out of breath from the jog out of the house.

My eyes narrow. “Do I mean what?”

“That if I find you, I can treat you.”

I consider her for a minute, and she squares her shoulders under my scrutiny.

This woman might have just become the biggest pain in my ass, but she has some thick skin, I can at least give her that.

But that’s all I’m giving her.

“Like I said, if you can find me, you can treat me.”

She sticks out a hand for me to shake, and some weird part of me feels the need to clarify.

“I don’t know if you really know what you’re signin’ up for, darlin’. You’re gonna have to find me more than once, and it’ll never be in the same place. Truth is, around here, I doubt you’ll even be able to keep up.”

“I know what I’m signing up for,” she insists. “Now, shake my damn hand.”

“Okay. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Our hands glide together, her fingers clutching around mine with a flash of electricity that zaps me all the way to the base of my spine. Leah snaps out a shake, then turns on her fancy heels and, hips swaying, heads right back into the house.

Ready or not, here we go.

NINE



June 22nd, Tuesday

Leah

I slug a sip of coffee from the to-go mug I found in the cabinet of my cabin and place it back in the cupholder of my updated ranch vehicle, a much, *much* newer F-150, with a fancy Shaw Springs Ranch logo emblazoned on the side.

After an awkward but delicious dinner a week ago with Joey, Jenny, and Tex, Jenny ordered Tex to take me up to the lodge and give me a vehicle I could depend on. I can't be sure, as I haven't known the two of them for long, but if I were making an educated guess based on the light in Jenny's eyes as she ordered it, I'm pretty sure the only alternative for Tex if he didn't comply would've been death and dismemberment.

That night, I drove home in my loaner truck, more than ready to step up to the challenge Rhett laid out—*if I found him, I could treat him.*

Well, after seven days of attempting to chase him around the ranch, I'm finding it's not as easy a task as I originally thought.

Truth be told, I didn't even think it'd be easy. I knew it'd be hard. I just didn't think a full week would pass without me even getting a damn ice pack on his injured knee.

He's basically Carmen Sandiego, and I'm a clueless ACME agent always ten steps behind him.

Where in the world is the fucking grumpy cowboy?

Thankfully, after several days of figuring out his usual routine on the ranch, last night, after I managed to have a long conversation with Dr. Namath about Rhett's current plan of care while I stood outside at one of the "good cell spots" on the map Tex gave me, I headed back to my cabin, made up a game plan, and tucked myself into bed immediately.

If I hadn't, I wouldn't even be functioning right now.

Sky still dark with the cool air of predawn, I flip through the pages of notes I made on Rhett's case and glance up to his front door yet again.

The house still seems dark to me and his truck is still out front, but after the difficulty I've had trying to find him, I wouldn't put it past him to have snuck off to Mexico on a horse in the middle of the night.

I check my watch. It's almost five a.m., and the first light of the day is only about thirty minutes away. The one good thing about playing CIA agent for the past week is that I've learned the basic ins and outs of the ranch. I know the typical routine for the guests who stay here to get the "Dude Ranch" experience. And I also know that Rhett Jameson starts his days bright and early.

"Come on," I mutter to myself, admittedly eager to see Rhett choke on his freaking tongue upon noticing me out here.

I won't deny that when a person challenges me directly—*especially* when they goad me to take their bet and savor the taste of my perceived defeat prematurely—I turn into a bit of a maniac.

Not in the manic sense, though—the calculated kind. I plot, I plan, I lay down a strategy, and I put in the work. Even if that means I have to play freaking stalker and sit outside his house at an ungodly hour of the morning.

My brother Sam knows this best, perhaps, after making a simple bet with me about who had the better ability to

consume a whole cake every day for a month without gaining weight.

It was a dumb, childish contest at best, but holy hog heaven, did I take it seriously. I made three trips a day to the gym and limited my liquid intake to water only. Other than the cake, *which there was a lot of*, I gave up all other carbs, went high protein, and spent all of my off time hitting the weights.

At the end of our joke, I'd turned into half a bodybuilder, and Sam had lost the definition in his precious abs.

Basically, all I'm saying is that Mr. Cowboy doesn't know what's about to hit him because I don't play around.

A flash of light shifts in the darkness, and I look up from my notes, grab my coffee cup, and take another swig.

A lamp shines through the curtains, and a shadowed figure moves slowly around the muted room. I can't tell much about anything, but unless Chewbacca broke in to Rhett's house in the middle of the night and took his place, I'm guessing that's him.

With the engine of my truck off, and all the lights out, I'm just a woman in the darkness for right now. But soon, so soon, Rhett's going to get the sweet taste of making a deal with Leah freaking Levee.

"Yeah, buddy. You don't know who you're messing with," I taunt the empty cab and rub my hands together with glee. I will find a way to treat his damn leg, even if it kills me. Or I get arrested for stalking and he has a judge slap a restraining order on me. You know, whichever comes first.

When the front door opens, my excitement crescendoes, and I reach forward to the dangling keys and crank the engine without thought.

It roars to life, and unfortunately, so do the headlights, beaming Rhett in the face so hard that his body jerks to the side and he loses his balance on his good freaking leg.

He goes down, and I scream inside the cab of the truck like a banshee.

“Shiiiiit!”

Scrambling, I grab the handle and shove the door open with my sneaker-covered foot, jumping down to the ground with a thud. I don't bother with shutting the door as I rush toward him, my hand at my mouth and my heart trying to pound its way out of my chest.

Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. Please let him not have injured himself even more. That would so be the definition of failing at my job.

Come heal this guy, Leah, they say, and then I proceed to break him even more?

Gah. Talk about a freaking disaster!

As fast as my Adidas running shoes can take me, I run across the gravel of the driveway and up the stairs of Rhett's front porch. The whole way, my mind repeats, *Please, let him be okay! Please, let him be okay!*

When I reach him, he's sitting up in the doorjamb with his eyes closed and his head leaned back against the wood. I hesitate to speak, given the fact that this is all my fault, but I really doubt touching him without permission is going to make this any better.

My gaze moves over his body in a panicked rush, searching for anything abnormal.

Jeans, a lot of bulging muscles beneath his white T-shirt, cowboy hat, boots, leg brace...

Instantly, I'm thankful his injured leg is at least protected.

After another minute or two goes by and he doesn't budge from his spot, I decide to take a more vocal approach.

“Uh...are you okay?” I ask softly, hoping not to startle him again.

“I've been better,” he says with an edge of pain in his voice, and I wince.

“I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to blind you. I just got excited about succeeding in our deal, and well...yeah, I'm sorry.”

His eyes pop open and meet mine. “Our deal?”

“Yeah,” I confirm. “I found you.”

“No offense, Doc, but it’s been so long since we made that deal, I thought you’d already left.”

“It was only a week ago,” I correct. “And I’m not stupid, Rhett. I know you’ve been doing your best to avoid me. But obviously, you’re not as sneaky as you thought.”

“Darlin’, you do realize I’m at my house, right? This is about as un-sneaky as a man can get.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I smirk down at him. “The fact of our situation remains, I found you.”

“Are you expectin’ a congratulations or somethin’?”

“I mean, kind of?” I shrug. “I figured you’d be across the border by now.”

“Pretty sure you’ve got that twisted.” He laughs. Though, it’s without humor. “I’m not the one who should be running away from this ranch.”

Hold up. Is he insinuating that I should be the one running?

Instantly, my guard goes up and I narrow my eyes. “What are you trying to say?”

He just flashes a smirk in my direction, and with his muscly biceps bulging, he pushes himself to standing. A small grunt leaves his lips when he bears weight on his braced leg, but he swallows back the discomfort. “How much do you know about ranch life, Leah?” he eventually asks, and I tilt my head to the side.

“What do you mean?”

“Before arriving here a week ago, had you ever been on a ranch? Seen how shit goes on a ranch?” he queries and doesn’t hesitate to take inventory of my attire. His scrutinizing gaze moves from the laces of my running shoes up to my favorite neon-pink Lululemon leggings and doesn’t stop until it reaches my formfitting tank top embellished with a flowery

flair. “From the way you’re dressed right now, I’m going to guess that’s a big fat no.”

Uh...excuse me?

It’s not like I’m in my preferred high heels. This morning, when I got ready, I purposely dressed in my most reliable athleisure—that *I was super thankful to find in my suitcase, mind you*. I’m basically Sporty fucking Spice out here, ready to chase Rhett Jameson around these wide-open spaces until I can treat his leg.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

Other than the amused chuckle that leaves his lips, he doesn’t respond.

I furrow my brow and open my mouth to ask him again, but he just heads inside his house, leaving me standing there on the porch.

What the hell?

I hesitate at the threshold, trying to decide if private property trespassing laws apply to physicians trying to treat stubborn patients, but before I can come to a decision, Rhett is back out the door and hobbling down the porch steps and toward his garage.

I grimace at his retreating form. *Goodness, he really shouldn’t be moving around like that...*

A little over five weeks after surgery and you’d think Rhett Jameson has been given the all clear for full-weight bearing on his leg. But I know for a fact that’s not the case. I talked to his doctor last night. And he confirmed what I already knew—all this activity he keeps doing was *not* approved in his surgical discharge instructions. Not to mention, he should still be slowly transitioning from crutches.

I shudder to think about the last time he even used crutches to get around.

Or iced his knee.

Or stretched his knee.

Or took a fucking ibuprofen.

From the looks of his current activity mind-set, this cantankerous man is a poster child for everything you're not supposed to do after a major orthopedic surgery.

Eventually, when I realize he's almost out of my viewpoint, I follow his retreating form.

No way in hell I'm going to let this man out of my sight after everything I've been through to track him down. I woke up at four in the morning just to get him in my freaking sights, for fuck's sake.

Half expecting that I'm going to have to resort to actually chasing him, I'm shocked when I find him grabbing a duffel bag out of the bed of his truck and turning back around to meet my gaze.

"Let's go," he says, but when I don't respond, he smirks. "We got a long day ahead of us, and you're driving."

I almost ask him what the day actually entails but bite my tongue in the name of keeping the peace. I mean, he's actually choosing to go wherever he wants to go in the same vehicle as me. That certainly feels like a monumental victory.

I'll figure out the details of the day as they come.

"Looks like Tex gave you something more reliable to drive," he notes when we reach the F-150.

"Yeah, though, I'm assuming it was more out of pressure from your mom than anything else."

"I'd say that's an accurate assumption," he comments and opens the passenger door. "She's about the only one who can pressure that hardheaded bastard into doing anything that isn't his idea." A sigh leaves his throat, and his voice is laced with just enough frustration that I know to stay far away from this line of conversation.

Rhett and his dad are on shaky ground at best, and I'd prefer not to add that to the mix of my already challenging task of convincing this stubborn cowboy grouch to let me help him rehab his knee.

Don't forget, insanely hot cowboy.

I roll my eyes at myself. At this point, Rhett Jameson's looks don't mean shit to me. All I'm focused on is doing the job I was hired to do.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

I shake myself out of my stupid, pointless thoughts and open the driver's side door.

"So, uh, where we headed?" I ask once we're both inside the cab and buckled into our seats.

"To enjoy the simple pleasures of ranch life." He smirks over at me, but it's not a pleasant smirk. Or even a friendly smirk. It's more of an "I can't wait to be an even bigger pain in your ass" kind of smirk.

Okayyy...whatever that means...

I start up the engine, and he proceeds to play navigator, giving me succinct directions to wherever it is we're headed. *Take a left at the bottom of the hill, veer to the right at the fork in the road, follow the path for another mile.* That sort of thing.

Other than Rhett's occasional instructions and the truck's tires crunching on gravel and rocks, the cab is completely silent as we head down a long and winding path.

"Take a right here," he says, and I follow his directives dutifully, turning onto a road that opens up to a big, gorgeous meadow with pretty yellow flowers.

It's all so beautiful it takes a Herculean effort to keep my eyes focused on the road and not let them wander over the breathtaking view.

"The barn and stalls are just down there on your left," Rhett says and points an index finger forward.

I nod and, eventually, pull us to a stop in front of an impressive-looking structure that is the barn and stalls. I know this because I already stopped by a few of the barns and stalls on this ranch during last week's never-ending quest to find this cowboy bastard.

I cut the engine and turn a little in my seat to face him. “So, uh, now what do we do?”

“It’s feedin’ time.”

“We’re eating breakfast here?” I ask, scrunching my nose up in confusion.

I mean, considering I’ve only had some coffee, I could definitely use sustenance, but this doesn’t seem like the greatest place to dine.

“*We’re* not eatin’, darlin’.” He smirks and points toward a small, gated area where a few horses roam about. “They are.”

“Oh, okay.”

“The longhorns, too.” He moves his finger out toward the meadow where a bunch of those big-ass cows with even bigger horns stand around. “And you’re gonna be the one to feed ’em.”

“Wait...*I’m* feeding them?” I ask, and I don’t miss the way his lips fight the urge to lift up into amusement.

The horses, I can sort of understand, even though I have no idea how you feed a horse. But the cows with the horns? *What the hell?* Aren’t they supposed to just munch on the meadow grass? *Pretty sure, unless you want to lose a limb, it’s smart to keep your distance from those big fuckers...*

“Yeah. You’ll be feedin’ them. You know, since I’m the one with the bad leg,” he answers and makes a show of searching my eyes. “You have a problem with that, darlin’?”

He’s fucking goading me. And truthfully, I kind of do have a problem with it, *especially with those beastly horned cows*, but I know Rhett *wants* me to have a problem with it, so that leaves me with only one response.

“Nope. No problem at all,” I lie, and he grins.

“Well, that’s real good news, Dr. Leah. Because there’s a lot of important work that needs to get done today, and my injured leg means you’re the perfect woman for the job.”

The stubborn jackass. He's doing this on purpose. A big master plan on how to push me to the brink of throwing in the towel and leaving the ranch.

Which is *not* going to happen.

Seven days of this tracking-him-down bullshit means I'm all in. Fucking laminate that shit because I won't be backing down.

His eyes look over at me like I'm the most entertaining thing in the whole fucking world. Though, I'm certain it has nothing to actually do with me. It all revolves around the things he's planning to throw my way.

Too bad for him, I never back down from a challenge.

I only strive to use whatever I can to tip the scales in my direction.

"Sounds like a perfect plan," I lie again. "And you know what's great?"

"What?"

"While I do the feeding, you can elevate and ice your leg."

He flashes a sly smile. "Don't got any ice out here, darlin'."

Lucky for me, I planned ahead.

"I guess it's a good thing I brought my bag full of medical tricks, then, huh?" I retort with a sugary-sweet smile.

He just stares at me, furrowing his brow, and I go in for the kill.

"You know, since treating that leg of yours is the whole reason I'm here."

Suck on that, cowboy.

Come hell or high water, I *will* find a way to do the job I've been asked and make sure Rhett Jameson's knee is fully healed and rehabilitated before I leave this ranch.



The instant I managed to get the stubborn bastard to take off his knee brace so I could properly elevate and ice his leg, I realized just how poorly he's been taking care of himself since his surgery.

Severe swelling stretched from his upper thigh all the way down to his ankle.

I told him as much when I placed the disposable ice pad on his knee.

Although, he appeared to give exactly zero fucks, only offering an irritated grunt and an "*Enough of the chitchat, darlin'. Them horses need feedin'.*"

It was more than apparent that his focus was more fixated on getting me started on my day of fun.

And by day of fun, I mean day of hell mixed with *hard fucking labor*.

I have no idea how long I've been out here, working my ass off, but with the way the summer sun is beating down on my shoulders and sweat is making my sports bra stick to my boobs, I'd say at least six hundred hours. Maybe seven hundred.

I grimace as I shovel fresh horse shit out of one of the empty stalls and just about gag when the lovely aroma hits me straight in the face.

Goodness. What have they been feeding these horses?

I know they ate some special kind of feed this morning because I had to drag heavy barrels of it out to their troughs, but I'm starting to wonder if they let these horses binge on Taco Bell at night.

Once the stall is crap-free, I add a cozy pile of fresh hay across the ground and move on to the last and final stall.

Thank everything.

Never in a million years did I think this is where I'd end up when I told Frank Kaminsky I'd fly out to Shaw Springs Ranch and help the owner's son rehab a patella fracture and tendon tear.

But why in the hell would I? Cleaning horse shit isn't a typical job responsibility for an orthopedic doctor. There certainly wasn't a single question about it on the MCAT.

I only have to gag fifty more times before I finish up on the last stall, and by the time I head back out into the sunshine, I'm grateful to find Rhett where I left him—sitting cozily on a pile of hay with his leg still propped up on a blanket.

Though, the ice pack is long discarded, sitting haphazardly off to the side of his knee.

“Stalls are all cleaned,” I say and walk over to him and take a gander at his leg. The swelling has gone down so much that his leg no longer looks like an oversized tree trunk. “Oh, look, you actually do have a knee and an ankle,” I comment and lean down to riffle through my medical bag to grab another disposable ice pad.

“I don't need any more fuckin' ice,” he retorts, but I ignore him, activating the ice pack with a pop and placing it on his leg.

Rhett sighs. “You just can't help yourself, can ya?”

“Nope,” I answer and grab four ibuprofen and a small bottle of water from my bag. “Even if I have to clean horse shit out of stalls every damn day, before I leave this ranch, that leg of yours will be fully rehabilitated.” I hold the pills and water out to him. “Now, take these.”

“I'm not takin' any fucking drugs.”

I snort. “It's ibuprofen. Not ecstasy.”

He stares at me, and I stare right back at him, still holding the medicine and water in front of his face.

“Don't be a baby, Rhett. It's just a little medicine.”

He shakes his head, snags the pills from my hand, and swallows them down without the water.

“See? That wasn't so hard.” I smile at him and open the bottle of water for myself, drinking most of it down in three big gulps. Lord knows I could use the extra fluids after being put to work all damn day.

I swear, every muscle in my body aches from all the manual labor.

Muscles I didn't even know I had are screaming in pain.

"So, shall we head back and eat some lunch and..." I stop myself before I tell him about my other plans. Medical-related plans. I still have no idea how I'm going to persuade this grouch to let me do some stretch work and administer deep tissue massages. I mean, convincing him to ice his leg was hard enough.

"And what?" he asks, and I shrug.

"And...uh...you know, take a load off."

His responding sly smile makes me instantly suspicious. "There's still work to be done."

I stare at him. *Still work to be done?*

"First, the horses you just fed need exercisin' in the pasture."

I almost add, *and cleaned up their foul-smelling shit*, but I bite my tongue.

No way I'm going to let him know just how awful I really think that task was. If he knew I had to gag my way through every single stall, with the way his calculating brain works, he'd make a point to have me out here every day for the next two months doing just that.

Or worse, send me in the direction of those big cows with the horns. It was scary enough setting out alfalfa in the meadow for them to graze on.

Ew. Gross. I don't even want to think about the kind of disgusting mess those big beasts leave behind after they finish eating.

So, I do what anyone in my position would do; I suck it up, plaster a smile on my face, and focus on giving the horses some exercise.

"Okay, then," I state with a nod. "You stick with the ice pack, and I'll get the horses some exercise."

But when I turn on my heel, his sarcastic voice stops me in my tracks.

“Darlin’, you and I both know you don’t have a fuckin’ clue what you’re doin’. So, why don’t you turn back around and let me give you some instructions.”

His words are like nails on a chalkboard, scraping straight up my spine and fueling nothing but anger and irritation.

With the way he talks, you’d think I was the biggest moron on the planet.

I made it through med school, for shit’s sake. Pretty sure I can figure out how to exercise some damn horses.

“I’m a big girl, Rhett,” I toss over my shoulder, heading to the gated area where the horses are finishing eating. “I can figure it out.”

TEN



Rhett

“What in tarnation is she doin’?” Tiny questions, both hands on his hips as he stares out toward Leah, who is currently in the pasture with the horses.

I have no idea how long he’s been standing there, but I can’t deny the show that is currently occurring before us is something we’ve never seen out on this ranch.

I bite back the urge to laugh.

“She teachin’ them fuckin’ aerobics?” he asks, narrowing his eyes to get a better look. Once he comes to the realization that what he’s seeing is actually real, his jaw just about hits his damn boots.

“Well, Tiny, I told her to get the special feed horses some exercise, and that’s pretty much led us to here.”

Truthfully, once Leah refused to take any of my instructions on how to “exercise the horses,” I’ve had the pleasure of watching her run around the pasture like a maniac.

Jumping jacks, sprints, lunges, squats—you name it, and she’s out there doing it to an audience of about ten confused-as-fuck horses.

If Jane Fonda would’a made a career out of teaching livestock aerobics, I have a feeling this is pretty close to what

it'd look like.

“Let’s go, you guys! You can do it!” she shouts and starts running from one side of the pasture to the other.

Tiny’s eyes go wide, and he turns to lock his gaze with mine. “You didn’t tell her that all she had to do was open the fuckin’ gates and let ’em roam?”

I shrug. “She didn’t give me a chance.”

“Sure, she didn’t.” He rolls his eyes and chuckles. “You’re a real evil bastard, ya know that?”

“What?” I retort. “She doesn’t want my advice, and it sure as shit ain’t my business to force it on her. I reckon she’s just one of those people who have to learn the hard way.”

“So, just like you, then, huh? What’a they call ’em? Kin fed spirits or somethin’?”

I roll my eyes, and Tiny laughs. He’s been around since I was a kid. He knows me just about as well as anyone. Sure, he may talk slow or get the wrong word occasionally, but he’s a keen observer and then some. If he weren’t, my dad never would have kept him on our staff this long.

“And how long has she been out there like this?”

“I don’t know. Twenty, thirty minutes, tops.”

“*Rhett*,” Tiny says, and I groan.

“I know. Two more minutes and I’ll put an end to the charade, I swear.” I shrug and take a swig from my water bottle, shifting the melted ice pack on my knee and smiling. “Come on. Tell me you’re not enjoyin’ this just a little.”

Tiny looks from me out to the pasture where Leah is crow-hopping from one foot to the other, stretching her arms over her head with each jump. The horses are largely ignoring her, though one filly named Jasmine is completely enraptured. Ears perked and eyes wide, she can’t look away from the crazy lady with the sudden movements.

“I’m not enjoyin’ this. Though, if I were, I’d probably be smart enough not to say so, just as a matter of respect for the

good doc and all.”

I snort. *He’s loving this.*

Discarding the ice pack, I re-tighten my brace and press my weight into my hands to shove up to standing. Leah leans down with her hands on her knees and heaves a few deep breaths of exhaustion. A fine sheen of sweat makes her dark hair stick to her face, and I have to fight to keep my mouth from curving up into a smirk.

“All right. It’s time to be movin’ on to the next task anyway.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Tiny asks. “And also, *why?* We’ve got plenty of ranch hands ’round here to do all this work while you heal that damn leg, yet you just ain’t lettin’ them do it.”

“There’s always somethin’ that needs done around here, Tiny, and you know my job is to oversee the action. Today’s action just so happens to be in Barn Six, over with the longhorns.”

He shakes his head. “You must be one sick, sadistic son of a bitch.”

I laugh. “Why?”

“Cause you know damn well how that doc’s gonna react to collection, and still, you’re gonna put yourself through the mayhem anyway.”

“Hey, she’s the one who wanted to follow me around so she could see to my leg. It’s not my fault that the longhorns are part of today’s agenda.”

“Yeah, right,” he retorts. “The longhorns don’t need’ta be on your damn agenda, and you fuckin’ know it.”

“Actually, Ronald has somewhere to be,” I retort. “And if the good doctor doesn’t want to chase my leg around, she’s more than welcome to see herself out of today and go into town and shop or do some spa shit or whatever it is she likes to fucking do.”

“So what, she’s tryin’ to make your leg better. What’s the big deal about that?”

“It’s not about the leg,” I contest. “It’s about control for Tex, and you damn well know it. I’m on my ass puttin’ ice on my leg all day, and he makes sure everything gets done the way *he* likes it.”

Tiny shrugs. “I don’t know. Looks to me like you’re standin’ a whole lot easier on that thing. Not wincin’ in pain or anything. It’s been so long since I’ve seen your forehead without all them fuckin’ wrinkles, I was startin’ to think you were older than me.”

Tiny’s in his late fifties and looks it. He’s a good worker and in decent physical shape because of it, but with the hard life he’s lived, he’s not likely to win any beauty contests anytime soon.

Maybe that’s why his words have more impact than I’m expecting them to.

Surprised at myself, I look down at my leg and take stock. The pain has eased from a seven to a four, and it doesn’t feel quite like I’m dragging around a swollen club anymore either.

“Hey,” Leah says from right behind me, startling me away from the kind of realization I probably wasn’t ready to have anyway. “I, um...”

I turn around to face her and have to chew the flesh of my bottom lip to stop from laughing. She’s slick with sweat and red in the face, and all of her normally perfect looks are notably marred.

Don’t get me wrong, she’s still fucking beautiful, but now, it’s looking a little less varnished.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I just...how long exactly are they supposed to exercise? I’m doing my best out there, but they don’t seem particularly interested in burning calories. Most of them have just been eating grass the whole time, actually. Not that I don’t understand the draw of a good snack, but—”

“Leah,” I cut in, interrupting her ramble.

“Yeah?”

“They’re good. All you had to do was turn ’em out. They’ll exercise themselves out there plenty.”

“What? Turn them out?”

“Open the gate and let them roam,” I clarify. “That whole show you just put on was noteworthy, darlin’, but what it wasn’t was necessary. The point of turnout time is so they stretch their legs themselves. If we’re gonna work ’em, we put ’em in an arena.”

“Are you serious?” She glares. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug, smirking. “Probably because, way I remember it, you weren’t too interested in hearing my advice.”

“That’s not advice. That’s *essential information*.”

I tilt my head to the side and laugh. “Well, I guess you’ll know for next time.”

“Next time?” she asks, her breath catching in her throat and creating a sound of desperation.

I nearly laugh, but it’s hard to do when she’s looking this pitiful. Maybe later, when she’s had time to wipe the sweat-streaked mascara out of her eyes, I’ll enjoy it more.

“Yeah, darlin’. Horses get fed twice a day. This group’s on a special diet, so we’ve gotta feed ’em in the stalls, and horses in the stalls means shit to clean. Just because you did it once doesn’t mean it’s done.”

“Oh my God. Why? Why do you do this?”

At that, I have to laugh.

“It’s a way of life. And I’ve never been scared of work.”

“I’m not scared to work either. It’s just...a lot.”

“Ranch life is more than a pretty backdrop. It takes a hell of a lot to keep this place goin’, and I’m responsible for much of it. What do you think, I just like to suffer for the hell of it? I

can't sit around worrying about my leg 'cause there's no time to sit around, period."

"You're right," she says with a resolute nod.

"I am?" I ask, hesitant to trust such a speedy switch to agreement.

"Absolutely. There are things to be done, and they're not going to do themselves, and I get it. You can't just sit around waiting for your stupid leg to heal to do them, right? They have to get done now."

"Exactly."

She nods again, and I let a smile crack the corner of my mouth. Finally, someone's understanding around here.

"You can't sit around, and you can't wait for it to heal," she continues then, gabbing like I suppose women like to do—largely for no reason since the point's already made. "You have to get out there and make sure that one, two, maybe three months from now, you don't ever have to do this work again."

"What?"

"Oh," she says through a fake laugh that makes my smile disappear. "Well, yeah. I mean, that's how it works. You beat your leg into the ground, abusing it so it doesn't heal, and in two or three months, the damage is so irreparable that you're permanently wheelchair-bound. Then you don't have to worry about any of this anymore because it's officially above your pay grade. Your job is to sit. *All* the time."

I grind my teeth as my jaw tightens. There's just about nothing I hate more than being talked down to like I don't understand that actions have consequences. I know that overworking my leg isn't good for it, but I also know that I'm not like most patients of hers. I know my physical limits, and I'm designed to push them. But that doesn't mean I'm a complete idiot.

I know my stopping point.

"I'm not stupid. I know my body and—"

“I’m sure you do, Rhett,” she cuts me off. “I’m sure you know it just the same way I know horses. Clearly, I’m a professional, right? I don’t need your help, *right?*”

“This is not the same damn thing as you doin’ jazzercise with my damn horses for the last half hour. I’m *in* my body, I know it.”

She shrugs. “I’m on your ranch, Rhett. In fact, since I’ve been here for seven days now trying to track your stubborn ass down, you might even say I live here. I could tell an outsider that, and they might actually assume I know something. But sometimes, geography isn’t the whole story.”

My eyes narrow, and she returns the gesture before continuing. “I’ve spent over a decade learning all about the limitations of your leg injury and the right ways to bring it back. How long have you been thinking about that leg, Rhett? If I had to guess, I’d say it started sometime around the day after it happened. I think that puts me in the lead.”

“Fine.” I shake my head. “You want to make sure I don’t do shit you deem I shouldn’t? Well, then buckle up, sweetheart, because we’re already late for our next stop on the schedule. But if I were you, I’d make sure you wait around to get some advice on how to handle yourself. If you don’t with this task...you’re sure to regret it.”

ELEVEN



Leah

“What...and I mean this in the nicest, most non-offensive way possible...but what in the ever-loving hell is going on here?”

My eyes bounce like ping-pong balls, trying to focus on one of the many happenings in front of us, but it's too much. I'm on sensory overload, and I don't even know how to process what I'm seeing.

I mean, that's not true.

I'm processing it fine. It's the acceptance of reality and putting it into words that are giving me the biggest struggle.

There's a big boy cow, up on his hind legs, his giant horns stretched way out to each side of his head, and a man stands at his side with a tube of some sort in his hand. There's another big cow or whatever in front of it, just sort of standing there while someone holds its head in a fenced-in area with a lead line.

And it's *very* apparent the big boy cow is thinking he's getting some *bow chicka wow wow* action. *Literally.*

The guy with the horns is in full-on hump mode, and I don't really understand how or why. Obviously, I get why he's in the mood to hump—he has a penis. But why he's doing it

into a large tube held within a man's hand is a different question entirely.

“Longhorn bull sperm collection.”

Sperm collection? Oh, holy humping jackrabbits.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I nearly have to pick my jaw up off the ground.

“So...” I pause, squinting toward the insane scene that lays before me. “That guy is really holding some kind of sleeve on that bull's—”

“Penis,” Rhett finishes for me. “Yep.”

“And he's...he's...”

“Collecting sperm to sell.”

“W-what kind of buyers are looking for sperm, exactly?” I ask, more than just a little shocked that this is even a thing. I mean, *who* would want cow sperm? And *why* would they want it?

“All kinds,” Rhett answers like this is the most normal thing he's seen all day. “We've got some of the finest longhorn bull stock in the country. Other people want their herds to be the same. Since it'd be hard for us to cart our bulls all over the States, breedin' every cow under the sun, this is the way it's done. We collect the sperm and ship it out to 'em, and they inseminate their females.”

“Well. That's just... Well, it's great. Really ingenious. And that guy looks like he's doing a really fine job of collecting it. Truly. A professional, which I'm sure you have to be in order to do something this sensitive...”

I'm rambling at this point, but who could blame me? Witnessing sperm collection wasn't exactly something that was on my to-do list when I came out here. Pretty sure this isn't on most people's to-do list. Like, *ever*.

Rhett smirks, and I lick my lips nervously when realization hits me. *Holy hell, he's not expecting me to do this shit, is he?*

“Ronald is definitely a seasoned professional at collection, but he has somewhere else to be. Which is why we’re here. We’re takin’ over.”

“We’re...we’re doing that?” I ask with an index finger pointed toward the cow that’s currently humping with a purpose.

Rhett nods. “Or I am. Or you are. I guess that’s up to you, Doc. Since you know best with my leg and all. Wouldn’t wanna be pushin’ it and actin’ like I know more than I do, right? That was your point before, wasn’t it?”

A humorless laugh jumps from my lungs. “Oh, wow. You must think you’re pretty clever, setting me up like this.”

“I know you might be used to people planning their days around you, darlin’, but I can assure you, that’s not what I’ve done. This collection happens twice a week, every week, and we haven’t arranged anything special just for you.”

My cheeks redden with embarrassment, and I swallow my thick saliva down. The truth is, I did let my head get away from me for a minute, and I was thinking they’d set this up for me.

Which is both ludicrous and seriously self-centered, and being forced to confront it head on feels unexpected.

But he’s right. And if I’m anything, it’s willing to admit when I’m at fault.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize. “You’re right, and I don’t know why I suggested it. I know there’s a lot of stuff that goes on here that I have no idea about, and honestly, I wasn’t expecting to have to learn. I kind of thought we’d be doing more of your treatment, I don’t know, inside a house.”

Surprisingly, for maybe the first time ever, he smiles at me. And holy hell, if it doesn’t transform his face into the kind of mug you have dreams about.

Why is it that a little dab of carefree happiness makes everyone hotter?

“Ain’t much of anything that happens inside a house around here.”

I chuckle. “I’m starting to get that.”

“So, what do you say? Am I steppin’ in for Ronald, or are you?”

I glance back to Ronald and the bull as he shoves off his faux mate and lands back on the ground with his front hooves. He looks tremendously satisfied with himself, and honestly, why wouldn’t he be. As far as I know, Ronald just sent him into the orgasm stratosphere.

“So...what exactly do I have to do? Jerk him off?”

Rhett makes a noise in his throat—I’m pretty sure it’s the sound of him choking—and looks straight at me. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

“How much wrist action?” I expand. “Do they like a gentle touch or something a little rougher? Or do I—”

“Leah, stop,” he cuts me off, and he bites his bottom lip in what appears to be an attempt to hide his amusement. Though, what he’s amused about is beyond me. To me, there’s nothing amusing about jerking off cows.

“What? I’m just trying to make sure I take your advice this time. Pump it fast, pump it slow—whatever you say, your wish is my command.”

“Leah—”

“Really,” I continue, my eyes fixated on Ronald as he steps back to do whatever it is you do with the cow sperm you’re going to ship halfway across the country. “I realize I was pigheaded and stubborn before, and I don’t want to let you down this time. Don’t want to let down the collection cause. So, you just let me know exactly how I need to have my grip and—”

“Leah, darlin’, *stop.*”

Finally, I look up to meet his eyes, and his expression has changed completely. To be honest, he looks about ready to explode. I’m not sure what I’ve done to make him upset now,

but he looks seriously tense. Tight shoulders, flexed jaw, he's standing so still it's like he's made of stone.

“What?” I question with both arms out in front of me.

“You don't have to...jerk. You don't have to move at all. Once the sleeve's on there, the bull will pretty much do all the work, and they'll do it quickly.”

“They're that into...well...Fleshlights for bulls?” I laugh. “God, I can't even believe there's someone who makes them. Or are they just regular Fleshlights? Do you get them from an adult cow store?”

Rhett shakes his head. “They're synthetic cow vaginas, and they're manufactured specifically for this purpose. And for these bulls, who've been doin' this since they were calves, it's the only form of pleasure they know.”

“So...they just come here and get their kicks two times a week?”

“Pretty much.” Rhett nods. “Makes the whole process a whole lot easier, seein' as they like it.”

Damn, when I think about it, that's certainly not a bad life. These bulls just come here twice a week, have a bit of pleasure-induced fun, and don't have to worry about calling anyone the next morning.

They get their rocks off on the regular and have zero complications. No commitment. No marriage. No dating. No repercussions or girl cows getting mad at them. Hell, they don't even have to pay child support to all their baby cow mamas. They just come as they please, *literally*.

“And that other cow, the one not doing the humping, I'm guessing she's like the vagina decoy?” I ask. “The one the bull thinks he's giving it to?”

“Yeah, somethin' like that.”

“So...” I pause, almost holding back from the current glaring question in my mind, but then I just can't help myself. “What's it feel like in there?”

“Leah. Come on.” Rhett sighs, takes off his cowboy hat, and runs his hand through his hair, before putting his hat back on. “Are you really askin’ me that?”

His eyes are wide with the words he won’t say. *It feels like a cow pussy, Leah. That’s the whole point.*

“I just mean, is it wet? Dry? Cold? Warm? I’m suddenly in need of answers I never knew I had questions for.”

Rhett chuckles. “It’s warm and wet, just like a man likes it. We put some lube in there and heat it to the right temperature to simulate the real thing, and they pretty much come as soon as they put it inside.”

“One-pump chumps? All of them?”

“Believe it or not, that’s actually what we’re lookin’ for here. The sooner we fill a vial with their semen, the better. We’ve got a hundred bulls to work through in a day, and that’s the kind of thing that takes time, even if they go quick.”

“That *so* doesn’t apply to the human equivalent,” I say before thinking better of it, and once again, red spreads into my cheeks.

Thankfully—surprisingly—Rhett doesn’t call me on it. Instead, he hobbles forward toward Ronald to take over.

I jump into action without thinking then, because I know damn well he doesn’t need to be standing next to a full-grown, huge bull when he can’t get out of the way quickly if he needs to. At least, not without doing so much damage to his leg that it’ll be over for him here at Shaw Springs.

I mean, these bulls appear pretty controlled and used to the hump schedule, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t any risk involved.

They’re fucking bulls. They’re giant beasts. They’re basically walking, grunting, “I’m a huge risk” billboards.

“I’ll do it,” I nearly shout, the words just flying out of my mouth before I can stop them as I jump forward with a hand in the air to volunteer. “I’ll collect the sperm. I can do it.”

Good God, what is happening to me right now?

Ronald and Rhett glance between each other, and then do some sort of nod in private, manspeak communication. I wait for Ronald to move the bull who's just finished back out of the way and return with another before stepping forward.

Ronald nods in introduction, rather than sticking out a hand, but given where it's been for the last few hours, I don't object.

"Hi there," he says cordially.

"Hi," I respond. "I'm Leah."

"Nice to meet ya."

I smile nervously. I cannot believe I'm about to hold a cow Fleshlight for a bull while he blows his load.

This is so crazy, it almost doesn't seem real.

I'm a doctor, for God's sake. And suddenly, I'm working in the adult bovine industry, procuring sperm to be sold in the online marketplace.

Yeah, and sadly, this is about to be the most action with a penis you've had in months...

Oh my God. I roll my eyes at myself and try to keep my mind-set professional.

I am a serious bull sperm collector. I'm just...doing my job here. Just helping bulls blow their loads in the name of the national cow population. It's basically a patriotic duty. Like joining the military or running for president.

Goodness. Even I'm having a hard time acting like that thought process is completely normal, but when Ronald starts to give me instructions on the hump-inducing device, I'm well aware time is officially up and I'm about to go where most women—*most human beings*—never thought they'd go.

Right into the ring with a horny bull and a fake cow vagina in my hand.

Holy shit.

TWELVE



Rhett

I watch as Ronald places the large tube in Leah's now-gloved hand, and the enjoyment that I thought I would get out of putting her in this situation doesn't come.

If anything, I feel like I'm living up to what Tiny called me earlier—*a real evil bastard*.

But despite my newfound reticence, the show goes on. Once Ronald is confident he has her all squared away with instructions, he offers a wave goodbye before he heads out, and Leah is locked and loaded and ready to begin her task of her first sperm collection.

Fucking hell. This feels wrong.

If my mama found out I put a woman like Leah Levee in this situation, she'd beat the shit out of me.

And kindhearted Jenny Jameson isn't exactly one for violence.

Most women around here wouldn't think twice about this shit, but I know for a woman who lives her life in bright dresses and six-inch heels, this kind of thing has to come as a hell of a culture shock.

A part of me wants to tell Ronald to stop and finish the rest of the collections before he leaves, but I know he has plenty of

other shit to get done today—plus, a whole other part of me feels vindicated in the choice.

Leah's known I haven't wanted her help for well over a week now, and still, she's insisted on inserting herself into my days anyway. She's had an out—*she's had several, really*—so in that sense, I feel like all's fair in this kind of war.

Eyes back toward the ring, I watch as Tilly, one of our younger ranch hands who's apprenticing under Ronald, offers Leah an encouraging smile as he holds the female cow still.

Leah licks her lips nervously and steps up to the bull, her eyes damn near bigger than the bull's, and it all feels like a real kick to the fucking gut.

Shit. I can't let this continue.

“Hold on!” I shout toward the two of them, and Leah pauses to glance at me over her shoulder. “Don't do anything just yet,” I instruct, my words firm enough to get my point across.

Both Leah and Tilly stay rooted to their spots, and I hold up one finger. “Give me a minute. I need to check on something before we proceed.”

Without delay, I turn on my heel and hobble toward the truck where my bag sits inside the back seat. Handheld radio in my hand, I hit the button and signal over to my oldest and most reliable ranch hand.

“Tiny, where are ya?”

The speaker screeches and squeals, but within thirty seconds, he's responding.

“Still over at the stalls. Need somethin'?”

“Yeah,” I answer. “Ronald had to leave. Need ya to take over bull sperm collection.”

“No shit?” he retorts, and I don't miss the amusement in his damn voice. “You finally realizin' you gotta stop tryin' to do everything?”

Nosy bastard. I roll my eyes. “Just shut up and get over here, all right?”

“Copy that.”

After I slide the radio into the back pocket of my jeans, I head back toward Leah and Tilly. Thankfully, they’re both right where I left them—Tilly still keeping one of our females in place and Leah standing there with the fucking tube in her hand, only a few feet away from the next bull.

“Tilly, take a ten-minute break,” I instruct. “Leah, follow me.”

“What?” she asks, waving the tube around in confusion. “Where are we going?”

“We got somewhere else to be.”

She squints toward me. “But I didn’t collect any of the sperm...?”

“Tiny’s gonna take over.”

“Why?” she retorts, putting her free hand to her hip. “You don’t think I can do this?”

“Never said that, darlin’. We just got somethin’ else we need to do.”

“But you’re thinking it.” She narrows her eyes, and when I realize she isn’t going to budge from her spot, I step forward to get the process moving quicker.

“I’m not thinkin’ anything,” I say and reach out to take the tube from her hand, but she yanks the damn thing away.

“You don’t think I can handle this,” she spits. “What? You think I’m too girlie for this or something? That this is men’s work and the women should be back home in the kitchen cooking meals? That’s misogyny at its finest, Rhett.”

Oh sweet Jesus. This situation has nothing to do with me being sexist. It has to do with me feeling badly for putting her in this situation in the first place, given her lack of experience with this sort of shit. If this is the thanks I get for calling it off, though, I’m not entirely sure why I’ve bothered.

“Darlin’, I never said any of that.” I sigh and reach out to take the sleeve again, but she pulls it farther away from me.

“It’s not the flipping fifties, you know,” she continues on her ramblin’ rampage. “Women can do everything men can do. If we want to jerk off bulls into a fake cow pussy, we can do it.”

Tilly chokes on his own saliva when the word *pussy* falls from Leah’s lips.

And here, I was worried I was going to traumatize her. *Ha*. This woman is so fucking stubborn that she’s now fighting me over collecting a bull’s sperm.

If I weren’t so damn annoyed, I might actually be amused.

“Leah, relax,” I state, and despite my rising irritation, I try my best to calm her down. “I’m well aware you can do this. Truly. No one is doubting that.” I glance at Tilly. “Right, Till?”

But all he can offer is a manic nod with wide eyes. Poor kid is about to be the only one walking away from this situation traumatized.

“Then let me do it,” she declares with that sassy free hand of hers on her hip again. “This bull wants to get his rocks off, and I want to help him get his rocks off. So, go away and let me collect the sperm.”

Christ. Leah Levee might be more fucking obstinate than me.

Never in a million years did I think I’d be arguing with a woman over something like this, but here I am.

“What are y’all doin’ here?” Tiny’s voice fills my ears, and I glance over my shoulder to see him walking up toward us.

I sigh.

Tilly just stands there looking like a deer in headlights, confused as hell over what to do.

But Leah? Oh, she’s confident in her task. “Just trying to collect sperm, but Rhett appears either insistent on slowing us

all down, or he doesn't think I can do it. I'm guessing it's probably a little of both."

"Is that right?" Tiny smirks and glances between the two of us.

We're basically in a Wild-West-style standoff, and it's all over the cow vagina sleeve still gripped tightly in Leah's hand.

"Yep," she answers, glaring at me.

But her words don't stop Tiny. He strides right past me and directly to her, and without saying anything, he takes the tube out of her hand.

"I'm sure ya'd do a fine job, Doc. But see, my mama—*may she rest in peace*—she'd spin in her grave if she knew I'd let a pretty woman like you be involved in a dirty task like this when I could'a done it for ya."

"But—" Leah starts to interject, but Tiny is having none of it.

"You go on with Rhett now," he says and takes her place near the bull.

Leah scowls at me, her eyes showing that she knows full well I called Tiny to take over for her. But instead of offering another feisty response, she stomps away from all of us and heads toward the truck without another word.

Tiny smirks at me.

Tilly looks relieved.

And I run a hand down my face on an exasperated sigh.

How on earth did this situation end with her being the one mad at me?

All because I stopped her from taking part in goddamn bull sperm collection.

Son of a bitch.

My first instincts about Leah Levee stand correct—*she's going to be a real pain in my ass.*

THIRTEEN



Leah

Gravel crunches under my shoes as I stomp away from Rhett, and I don't stop my fast pace until I reach the truck.

"The fucking nerve of him," I mutter to myself.

It's like he thinks I'm too delicate or something to handle the stupid task of collecting bull sperm. Like it's a man's job, and because I'm a woman, I'm not strong enough to do it.

I was going to fucking do it!

I could've easily done it, but then Rhett decided to step in and stop me before I could even get started on the first freaking bull.

Seriously, what the hell is his problem?

It's like he wants to make everything as difficult and exasperating as possible for me.

I roll my eyes and swing open the driver's side door of the loaned F-150. Once I hop inside, I slam my hands against the steering wheel and let out a harsh exhale while I mentally curse Rhett Jameson.

Mr. Know-It-All.

Fucking jerk.

Broody, asshole cowboy.

If he isn't acting like a pompous ass about his beloved ranch and all the responsibilities that come with it, he's acting like he went to fucking medical school and knows how to handle his own knee injury.

God, he's infuriating.

Maybe the most infuriating man I've ever met in my life.

Which, considering my dad is a real piece of selfish, irresponsible work, I would've thought no one would be able to take his coveted top spot.

Apparently, though, I was completely wrong.

Rhett Jameson is—

“Rhett Jameson is what?”

The deep, husky voice startles me, and I look to my right to find the cowboy-devil himself standing there, the passenger side door wide open and his eyes directed at me.

I have no idea how long he's been standing there or how long I've been verbalizing my inner monologue out loud. *Shit.*

“Go on,” he continues, and I don't miss the way his lips crest up into a knowing, confident smirk. “Finish what you were saying, darlin'. I mean, with all that passion you had backing up them words of yours, it sounds like it's somethin' you need to get off your chest.”

“No, that's okay,” I retort and narrow my eyes toward him. “I'm going to keep my thoughts to myself.”

“It's a little late for that, wouldn't you say?” he tosses back, and that stupid smirk only grows wider. “So, go on. Tell me how you really feel.”

I glower at him, and he just continues to stare back at me, far too relaxed and amused for my liking. I should probably feel like a kid who just got caught with their hand in the cookie jar, but if anything, I just feel more pissed.

Like, *infuriatingly* pissed.

The kind of anger that makes your blood boil and your reactions occur before your brain even has time to contemplate

them.

“I’m waitin’,” he says, crossing his muscular arms over his chest.

The combination of those two words and his smug expression is what pushes me over the edge.

“Fine,” I spit, my words completely fueled by emotion rather than actual logic. “You want to know how I really feel?”

“I’m all ears, darlin’.”

“I think you’re being a real asshole, Rhett Jameson. And you’ve been nothing but a pompous, know-it-all prick to me since I stepped foot on this ranch,” I proclaim, and his response is the opposite of what I’d expect.

Instead of getting offended or mad, he simply chuckles. “Considering I think you’re a real pain in my ass, then I’d say we’re pretty much even, wouldn’t you?”

“*I’m* a pain in your ass?” I question and scrunch up my nose in annoyance. “Pretty sure it’s the other way around.”

He eases himself into the passenger seat and shuts the door. “You remember how to get back to the lodge from here?” he asks, but I’m not ready to leave yet. *Oh no*. Pandora’s box of bullshit has been opened, and I have more to say.

“I could’ve done it.”

“Could’ve done what?”

“With the bulls,” I explain. “Just because I’m a woman, doesn’t mean I couldn’t handle it.”

He lets out a deep, irritated sigh. “This had nothing to fuckin’ do with you being a woman.”

“Then why’d you call Tiny over?”

“Christ, darlin’. How long you gonna be pissed about this?” he retorts, completely avoiding the question.

“As long as it takes to get a straight answer out of you.”

“Because you looked fuckin’ uncomfortable.” He sighs, takes off his cowboy hat, and tosses it down onto the dashboard. “And even though I’m an asshole like you say, I don’t get enjoyment out of making people feel bad,” he finally answers and turns slightly to meet my eyes. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need you to focus on the important shit, like driving us to the lodge so I can check on inventory for the guests arriving this weekend before I have to head to Barn Four to deal with the chicken coop.”

“I wasn’t scared shitless. Or miserable,” I retort, and he shakes his head on a laugh.

“Whatever you say, darlin’.”

“I would’ve done it.”

He shuts his eyes and leans his head back against the seat. “I’m well aware of that.”

“And I would’ve done a damn good job.”

“Of course,” he says, but his voice is all placating. “You’d be the best damn bull sperm collector this ranch has ever seen. Hell, Ronald would’ve started to get worried about job security.”

I quirk a defiant brow at him. “I know you’re patronizing me, but I’m going to ignore that and tell you the facts...”

“And what are those facts, darlin’?”

“I wasn’t scared about collecting the stupid sperm, and I would’ve done a good job,” I declare. “So damn good, those bulls would’ve thought a fucking bovine hooker stepped on to this ranch and would’ve felt obliged to pay me commission. Or, at the very least, leave me a tip on the freaking nightstand.”

A smile starts to spread itself over his mouth, and Rhett bites his bottom lip to try to fight it. But it’s no use. A big-ass grin followed by a hearty laugh transpires, and the whole time, he’s just looking at me with amusement in his eyes.

“What?” I question. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you’re pretty fucking hilarious,” he comments. “Bovine hooker? Tips on the nightstand? I mean, hell, Leah.” A few more laughs jump from his lungs, but eventually, once they slow, his eyes switch from amused to serious. “Listen, I know you could’ve done it. There was never a question in that. I can see from the short time I’ve known you that you’re a strong, determined woman.”

His words take me by surprise, but I still feel compelled to ask once more. “Okay, but why didn’t you let me do it, then?”

“Because that’s the kind of situation someone should choose for themselves,” he responds. “Not get forced into. If you’re still geared up to do it when you’ve been here a while, you let me know, and we’ll head right back to Barn Six to collect as much specimen as you can handle.”

I open my mouth to respond, but the radio on the dashboard screeches, and a tiny, adorable voice comes through. “Josephine to Rhett. Josephine to Rhett.”

He smirks and grabs the receiver. “Rhett to Josephine. What do you need, honey?”

“Josephine would like to request to be picked up at Jenny Jameson’s house so she can help feed the chickens.”

Rhett’s eyes meet mine. “Looks like we’re gonna have to make a pit stop on the way to the lodge.”

I nod. “More than happy to oblige.”

Pretty sure I’d do just about anything for that adorable kid of his. She’s like the real-life version of a walking, talking sunshine-unicorn-rainbow. I mean, she’s not even in this truck with us and just her voice had the power to stop us mid-bicker.

“Okay, Joe,” Rhett responds into the radio. “We’re just leaving Barn Six and getting ready to head to the lodge, but we’ll swing by and get ya first.”

“What is your ETA, Rhett?” she responds, and I can’t not grin.

“She’s incredibly professional on the radio,” I comment and Rhett chuckles.

“Tell me about it. Some days, I swear, she’s five going on thirty,” he jokes and then proceeds to answer her. “ETA is fifteen minutes.”

“Copy that, Rhett,” Joey answers. “Josephine out.”

The responding smile on Rhett’s lips makes my heart do weird things inside my chest.

Which is completely stupid.

This man might be sinfully good-looking and the love and adoration he shows for his daughter could pull at any woman’s heartstrings, but ninety-nine percent of the time that I’ve been here, he’s either been avoiding me or been a big fat jerk.

Bottom line, Rhett Jameson might look like God’s gift to women, but it doesn’t take a genius to understand he’s nothing but certified trouble.

The last thing I’m going to do is let myself feel a certain way about a broody cowboy who walks around with an eternal chip on his shoulder.

No fucking thank you.

So, I do exactly what I should do in this situation. Focus back on the whole reason I’m here—Rhett Jameson’s busted-up leg.

I turn around in my seat, snag another disposable ice pack from my bag and activate it with a pop before placing it across his knee without asking for permission.

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ kidding me,” he responds on a groan.

“If you haven’t figured it out yet, it’s my responsibility to make sure that knee of yours gets healthy again, and I take *all* of my responsibilities seriously. So, no, to answer your question, I’m not kidding,” I answer and start the engine. “Now, remind me how to get to your parents’ house from here.”

He huffs out an exasperated breath.

But also, he keeps the ice on his knee and starts to give me directions.

Hallelujah.

A teeny tiny win at best, but a fucking win, nonetheless.

Just think, only about one million of those tiny wins to go and Rhett Jameson's leg might actually be fully rehabbed before you head back in August.

Holy hell, it's going to be a long summer.

FOURTEEN



June 25th, Friday

Leah

I'm finding that Fridays at Shaw Springs are busy, especially when there is a new group of guests arriving to stay for the weekend.

This morning, I juggled forcing medical care on Rhett while following him all over God's creation on his numerous tasks to ensure ranch readiness. Cabins were checked to make sure they were clean and set up for new guests. Horses in the stalls were double-checked for cleaning, brushing, and other types of prepping for fun-filled days of taking tourists horseback riding.

Basically, we've been going nonstop since seven this morning, and I'm just thankful that I've managed to get him to stretch his knee, keep his brace on, and administer ice and ibuprofen during the few moments of downtime. Or, you know, when I stepped up to do the various chores while he chilled out—*bitching the whole time*—for a damn minute to rest his leg.

It's only been four days since I managed to track him down and actually start doing a semblance of my job, and so far, our relationship mostly just revolves around me nagging him to let me take care of his injured leg and him stubbornly making that difficult.

Not to mention, we bicker. A lot.

Honestly, right now is about the only moment we haven't been squabbling with each other, and that's only because he's on the opposite side of the room, getting ready to greet the newcomers.

The main area of the lodge is filled with faces I've never seen before. They stand around in small groups, chattering while Rhett slowly makes his way toward the front of the room. Joey sticks right by his side, her dainty fingers tucked into the front pocket of her dad's jeans.

Once Rhett reaches the massive fireplace that frames the room, he turns around and faces the new guests. "Good afternoon, everyone," he greets, his voice loud enough to hush the small crowd and grab their attention.

The ages of the group range from young to old—*young couples, families with small children, families with less-than-enthused teenagers, and retirees*—and, besides the teens, they all appear incredibly excited to start their vacation at a real-life dude ranch, their focus completely fixated on the cowboy in the front.

And I don't miss the way the female gazes in the crowd look at Rhett.

Their eyes are big and wide, and their lips are slightly parted. It's almost as if they can't believe this male specimen in the boots and hat standing before them is even real.

I wish I could say they're exaggerating, but I'd be lying.

The first time I laid eyes on him from his front porch, the man didn't have a shirt on, and I felt like I'd died and gone to hot cowboy heaven.

Basically, if you mixed a young Clint Eastwood with his son Scott and seasoned it with a little *Legends of the Fall* Brad Pitt, you'd have a pretty good idea of what it's like seeing Rhett Jameson for the first time.

Of course, once he opens his sarcastic, stubborn, grumpy fucking mouth, it changes things dramatically, but I have a

feeling that's only a *me* thing. Surely he doesn't treat the guests of Shaw Springs Ranch the same way he treats me.

Only doctors trying to take care of his knee injury receive that kind of special treatment.

"Let me be the first to welcome you to Shaw Springs Ranch," Rhett continues, and, to my surprise, his smile actually reaches his eyes. "I'm Rhett, and this lady right here is my daughter, Josephine."

Joey offers a wave. "Hi, y'all."

Rhett glances down at her proudly before lifting his gaze to the crowd again. "Shaw Springs was started back in the 1800s by my great-great-grandfather, Samuel Jameson, as a working cattle ranch. And my Josephine is actually the first member of the sixth generation to live here. Though, we've certainly changed a little since back then," he says, pausing briefly to flash a knowing smirk. "But I think you'll come to find during your stay here, we're prone to makin' everyone feel like family. It's actually our number one goal. So, if you don't feel like family by the time you leave here, take it up with Tex in the complaint department. And just so you know, Tex is my dad, and he's been known to be a real hard-ass."

The crowd laughs, taking Rhett's comment about his father as a mere teasing jab, but it's almost comically sad how much he's probably *not* joking.

"For the rest of the evening, I invite you to get settled in your rooms, all assigned on the cutesy little cards there on the dining table," Rhett continues with a gesture, making everyone in the crowd glance to the side where the huge lodge kitchen is located. "Dinner'll be served around seven, and then tomorrow morning, we'll see you bright and early to work on getting everyone all set with horses that match your skill level for the tour."

"Woo-hoo!" one exuberant twentysomething man in the crowd hollers, but an older woman on the opposite side of the room with a concerned look on her face raises her hand.

Rhett nods toward her. "You have a question, ma'am?"

“Yes,” she responds, a slight nervous lilt to her voice. “I... uh...I don’t have that much experience with riding horses. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Not at all.” Rhett shakes his head. “Don’t worry. We’ve got ’em all, rangin’ from peppy to practically lifeless, and we’ll make sure we pair you with the right one. Normally, I’d be helpin’ y’all, but as you can see,” he says and grabs his braced leg with two hands. “I’m recovering from a bit of an injury. But don’t worry, you’ll be in good hands with Rodney, one of our ranch hands and all-around horse expert.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we’ll be safe out there, even if we have no experience?” the woman probes further, and Rhett nods.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Besides making you feel like family, it’s our top priority to ensure your safety, and Rodney will do just that tomorrow while you’re horseback ridin’. I promise you have nothin’ to worry about besides havin’ fun, all right?”

His words appease the woman’s nerves, and she responds with a nod of a head and a relieved, “Sounds great.”

“But, speaking of safety,” he announces, and I don’t miss the way his eyes flit across the room to mine for a brief second. “We have our very own doctor on staff here for the next few months, so if you need any medical assistance, medical advice, have any medical questions this weekend, please don’t hesitate to direct them to Dr. Leah Levee. She *loves* to help. *Loves* to offer medical advice. And it won’t cost ya a dime. It’s all on the house while you’re here.”

Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

“Dr. Levee, mind raising your hand in the air so the crowd can see ya?” Rhett requests, and the bastard has the audacity to smile at me as everyone looks around the room to figure out who this loves-to-give-free-medical-advice doctor is.

I really want to flip him the bird.

But, of course, I simply lift my hand in the air and force a smile to my lips.

“Nice to meet you, everyone,” I say. “I’m Leah.”

“Hi, Leah!” the older woman who just asked the horseback-riding question greets a smidge too enthusiastically.

Oh boy, I have a feeling I’m going to be seeing a lot more of her over the next few days.

It’s not that I mind helping people out. I *am* a doctor, and I took an oath to do just that.

But it’s more the fact that finding ways to treat Rhett Jameson’s knee injury is a full-time job in and of itself. I can’t imagine tossing the task of giving out medical advice to a group of thirty-plus strangers into the mix.

I’m more than aware this stunt of his is all in the name of distraction and keeping me from being on his ass about taking care of his leg.

Crafty, conniving bastard.

“Now,” Rhett says, grabbing the attention of the crowd again. “I’ll hang around for a bit if y’all have any questions, but other than that, please make yourselves at home.”

I watch as the group disperses, most heading toward the long dining table near the lodge kitchen to grab their room assignments, and to my utter enjoyment, Joey comes running toward me with a big grin on her face.

It’s certainly a welcome distraction from strangling her father.

“Leah! Leah!” she exclaims as she closes the distance between us. “Are you gonna go ridin’ tomorrow?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Horseback riding?”

“Yeah. With all the new guests,” she answers, nodding so fast it makes her blond pigtails bounce up and down.

“Oh, honey, I’ve never been horseback riding before,” I admit honestly.

“That’s okay! Rodney will be there, and he’s one of the best! Almost as good at teaching ridin’ as my daddy! And he’s so nice and funny! You’ll love him!”

Her exuberance makes me grin. “Well, I don’t know. I think I might be busy helping your daddy out tomorrow.” *More like, chasing him down in between all the fucking free medical advice I’m probably going to have to give out this week.*

“Aw, shucks,” she responds, and her lips turn down into a pout. “It’s a shame you don’t have a nurse or somethin’ to help ya out with my daddy’s leg.”

“A nurse?” I question, more than a little curious to understand what she means.

“Yeah,” she answers. “My granny Jenny loves this TV show with lots of doctors, and when I watch it with her, I always see the nurses helpin’ the doctors out. And if you had a nurse here, then the nurse could help my daddy while you went ridin’ with me tomorrow.”

“Oh, I see.” I smile down at her, but then, as I’m staring into her big blue eyes, I get an idea. A brilliant, payback-is-a-bitch of an idea. “Wait...you know what, Joey? I don’t know about tomorrow, but I think I have a plan that might make it possible to go riding with you sometime soon.”

She claps her hands together. “Really?”

“Uh-huh,” I respond and hold out my hand for her to take. “But we have to keep it a secret. Are you good at keeping secrets, Joey?”

“Oh yeah!” She places her tiny hand in mine, and her cute blue eyes go wide with seriousness. “I’m the best at keepin’ secrets!”

“Well, follow me, sweetie. We need to head to Tex’s office real quick to grab a pen and paper to write everything down.”

Since I arrived here, I’ve been struggling with how to get that stubborn cowboy to stick to my medical treatment plan, and unless I want to follow him everywhere, at all hours of the day and night, there are certain things I simply can’t get him to do.

Until now, that is.

Oh, hell yes.

Rhett Jameson might think he's real clever, but little does he know, I can be real fucking clever, too.

I'll keep doing my job. I'll keep on his ass. But it's safe to say, I've also found a way to get some help during the evening and nighttime hours when it's impossible for me to be there.

FIFTEEN



Rhett

Damn, what a long day.

Fridays on the ranch are always busy, but today felt extra insane because of a certain doctor who appears content to be up my damn ass.

I slide my boots off my feet and ease myself to the couch. On the way down, a sharp pain hits my knee and I grimace, but once I'm finally sitting, it eases.

And as soon as I loosen the stiff brace around my leg, I breathe a huge sigh of relief.

Fucking finally.

I swear, the day I don't need this fucking brace is the day I start a big-ass bonfire in my backyard and watch the damn thing go up in flames.

Honestly, if my fucking daddy hadn't hired a doctor to stalk me all over the ranch, I'd probably try to go a few days without the fucking thing, but Lord Almighty, my ears couldn't handle the verbal backlash I'd get from Dr. Leah Levee if I did.

Frankly, when she dropped Joey and me off at my house a little while ago, I expected that crazy doctor to try to follow me inside and glue one of her goddamn ice packs to my knee.

But she didn't.

To my utter surprise, she didn't bitch at me for telling the ranch guests she's their on-call doctor during their stay. She didn't even try to give me medical advice or demand I follow some kind of nightly fucking routine that we both knew I'd ignore.

She didn't do anything besides offer a simple goodbye before heading back to her cabin for the evening.

I guess I should probably just be grateful that tonight equals a few hours of not having her in my ear, telling me all the shit she thinks I should be doing.

"Daddy! What're ya doin'?" Joey shouts, popping out of the hallway and startling me out of my thoughts.

I sigh and then, I smile. "Joe, unless you wanna give your daddy a heart attack at the age of thirty-six, use your inside voice, please. It's just me and you in this house, baby. No need for yellin'."

"Sorry, but you shouldn't have your leg like that."

"What?"

She huffs and puffs and puts a hand to her hip. "Your leg shouldn't be like that."

"Then how should it be?"

She rolls her big blue eyes and stomps her tiny cowgirl boots over to the other side of the couch. Once she has a pillow in her hand, she moves toward me and sets the pillow down on the coffee table. "Lift your leg, Daddy," she instructs, and in the name of keeping the damn peace, I listen. After four long-ass days with Dr. Leah Levee, I certainly don't need another woman riding my ass about this fucking injury.

Slowly, and with two hands carefully bracing my knee, I lift my leg up and rest it on the pillow Joey is keeping steady.

"Better?"

"Uh-huh," she says, and then she's off again on her boots, the sounds of them click-clacking across the hardwood floor as

she makes her way into the kitchen.

Before I know it, those boots are heading my way again, only this time, a frozen bag of mixed veggies and a pill bottle are in tow.

“What’re ya doin’, Joe?”

“You need to ice your knee, Daddy,” she responds and sets the bag carefully on my knee before I can stop her. “And you need to take the medicine that your doctor told ya to take.”

“Baby, I’ve been icin’ this knee all day. And I already took medicine earlier.”

“That’s real good, Daddy, but you need to ice it more, and you need to take your medicine again.”

“Says who?”

“Says me,” she answers, and that sassy hand of hers is on her hip again.

I furrow my brow. “And who put you up to this?”

“Dr. Namath, remember?” She rolls her eyes. “He told us all this stuff after your surgery.”

“You remember all that?”

“Of course I do. I want you to get better, Daddy. I want to make sure your knee gets all healed up so we can go horseback ridin’ together again. I miss it so much.”

Shit. If that doesn’t hit me square in the chest, I don’t know what would.

“I miss it too, Joe,” I answer, and once I down a few of the prescription-strength ibuprofen that Dr. Namath gave me after surgery—*don’t worry, the bottle is childproof*—I reach out my arms for her to sit in my lap. “C’mere, baby. How about we watch a movie before going to bed?”

“*Frozen?*” she asks, climbing into my lap and smiling up at me. “It’s already in the DVD player.”

Considering I’ve seen that movie more times than any human being should have to see any movie, I *know* it’s already

in the DVD player. To be honest, I'm shocked the damn disk still works.

The man in me wants to say hell no, but because of a little something called unconditional love, the father in me says yes.

"Sure. Why not. Grab the remote and hit play."

Once Joey gets the movie going, she cozies up to me with her arms around my neck and her head against my chest.

"Love you, Daddy," she whispers as the opening credits start to play.

I smile down at her and kiss her forehead. "Love you too, Joe."

It's moments like these that make me certain I'm exactly where I need to be.

Sure, my original plan didn't revolve around having a little girl or settling down at the ranch as a single dad. I'd wanted to stay on the rodeo circuit and ride broncs until my body couldn't handle it anymore.

I'd loved it. Lived for it, even.

But the day Joey came into this world and the nurse placed this tiny human into my hands, everything changed.

I knew, right then, that I'd do anything for this little girl, even if it meant giving up my own dreams to make sure she had a good and stable and happy life.

So, yeah, even though I've seen *Frozen* one thousand times, I'll keep watching this damn movie if it means I get to experience quiet nights like this with my daughter.



Thirty minutes into the movie, Joey's tired yawns came quicker and quicker.

And even though she kept telling me she didn't want to go to bed until the movie was over, about an hour in, her eyes grew too heavy for her to fight the sleep battle any longer.

With my daughter fast asleep in my arms and while bearing most of my weight on my good leg, I carefully ease myself to standing and carry Joey into her bedroom.

Luckily, she's a tiny thing and it's not much effort to limp the short distance from the living room, down the hallway, and into her bedroom.

Gently, I lay her down on her bed, and it's only when her head hits the pillow that her eyes flutter awake.

"Daddy, I'm not tired," she says, her voice sleepy and adorable.

"Baby, it's time to go to bed."

"But the movie wasn't over."

I grin down at her. "We can finish it tomorrow night."

She nods and shuts her eyes again, but a few seconds later, those eyes of hers pop back open. "Oh no, I forgot to tell ya to take a hot bath."

"What, honey?"

"For your knee, Daddy. The heat will help. Then ya need to ice it again before you go to bed."

"Baby, it'll be fine. Go to sleep."

"No, Daddy, you gotta promise me you'll do it," she responds and starts to sit back up in bed. "We can't go ridin' if your leg doesn't get better."

I smirk down at her. "We'll figure it all out in the morning,"

Joey glares. "No, we'll figure it out now."

Christ.

"Okay, Joe. How about this? If you promise me you'll go to bed now, I'll take a hot shower and do some more ice before I go to bed."

"Deal." She nods, then yawns, and not even a minute later, those eyes of hers are closed tight and her breaths are coming out in soft, deep waves.

A low, amused chuckle spills from my lips as I reach down to remove her shoes from her feet.

First, her right boot and sock, but then, when I take off her left boot, a crinkled-up piece of paper falls out onto the bed.

I furrow my brow and pick it up.

Once I have it unfolded, I see that it's a handwritten note—half of the handwriting is my daughter's messy scrawl, and the other half is very legible and feminine in nature.

supar Sacret Leeah an Joey_plan

- 1. Put Daddy's knee on a pillow.**
- 2. ice it wit frozen stuffs**
- 3. Have Daddy take his medicine from Dr. Namath.**
- 4. tell hims to do buble bath**

A surprised, albeit exasperated-as-fuck, laugh falls from my lips.

And here I thought my Joey was just being sweet and wanting to make sure my knee was healing.

Looks like the joke's on me.

Dr. Leah Levee has now wrangled my baby girl into helping administer her medical dirty work. Less than two weeks on my fucking ranch and the doctor has managed to get everyone on her side, including my own kid.

Well, everyone but me, that is.

I'm still hoping that city girl will eventually get the point—*that I don't need her damn help*—and head on home.

Ha. That's rich coming from the man whose fucking knee hasn't felt this good since before he fell off that bronc...

SIXTEEN



June 26th, Saturday

Leah

The screen door swings open, and Rhett steps inside wearing nothing but a cowboy hat, a pair of well-worn Levi's, and boots.

He's shirtless and slightly sweaty, and I'm not sure if I should thank the rising summer heat in Utah for making it a frequent occurrence that Rhett spends the better part of his day showcasing the rippled muscles of his abs and chest or if I should be annoyed that the man who seems to thrive on making my life difficult looks that damn delicious with his shirt off.

Sigh. It's quite the mental conundrum.

And, trust me, I know a thing or two about him making my life difficult. Today alone, I've done three free assessments on ranch guests and answered that woman who was worried about horseback riding's medical questions about hypertension and diabetes.

"What the hell are you doin' here?"

Those are the first words out of his mouth when he spots me sitting on his couch.

I flash a sugary-sweet smile his way. “Oh, you know, just waiting on my *next* patient to get home so I can treat his knee. Already finished up with my other four patients about an hour ago.”

He smirks, but then he scowls. “You do realize you already saw me this morning over at Barn Three, right?”

“I know, but see, this whole treating your leg thing is actually a full-time job. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

This morning, I tracked him down over at the stalls and managed to get some ice and ibuprofen down him. I also managed to get him to do some stretching.

And sure, I might’ve left him with the impression that I was done for the day, but I wasn’t. I knew he’d be taking a lunch break at his house this afternoon and made damn sure I could capitalize on it.

And today’s afternoon task is incredibly important. It involves attempting to finally get my hands on that leg of his and administering a deep tissue massage so I can get a good feel for what state those injured tendons of his are in.

“So, what?” he questions, taking off his hat and tossing it onto the coffee table. “You’re breakin’ in to my house now?”

“Nope,” Jenny answers for me, stepping into the living room from the kitchen. Her smile is knowing. “I let her in.”

Rhett lets out an exhale and moves his irritated focus to his mom. “And why are you here?”

His mom is completely unfazed and puts a hand to her hip. “Because Joey met a new friend while she was horseback riding this morning and wants to go swimming at the lodge pool. So, we had to stop here to get her suit.”

Right on cue, Joey comes running down the hallway with a pair of goggles and a yellow bathing suit in her hands. “Daddy, I met a new friend today! Her name is Kayla, and she’s staying in the lodge with her mama and daddy until Monday morning!”

His daughter's exuberance eases the tension from his face. "That's great, baby," Rhett says with a soft smile and reaches out to feather her hair with his hand.

She giggles and jumps out of his reach. "You want to go swimmin' too?"

He shakes his head. "Not today, but you have fun, all right?"

"Y'all set, Josephine?" Jenny asks and Joey nods.

"You betcha!" She wraps her arms around Rhett's waist and hugs him tight. "Love ya, Daddy!"

"Love you too, baby," he says, and that soft smile is back again. But when his eyes meet mine, the slightest hint of a scowl starts to replace it. "Did you ask Leah if she wanted to go swimmin' with ya?"

"She can't." Joey shakes her head. "She's workin'."

Rhett tilts his head to the side and places both hands on his hips as he looks down at his daughter. "Workin'?" She doesn't look like she's workin' to me. She looks like she's just sittin' on my couch."

"Because she was waitin' for you, silly," Joey answers and rolls her eyes. "And she's here because she's gotta help get your knee all better. *Duh.*"

With that, she stomps her little boots over to me and proceeds to not-so-quietly whisper into my ear.

"Don't worry. Last night, I got him to do almost everything on our list."

I lean back and smile at her, whispering, "That's fantastic."

Her responding smile lights up her face. "The only thing my daddy doesn't like to do is take a bath, but that's probably 'cause he thinks baths are for little kids and women. Not big, strong men like him. So, he took a shower instead. That's okay, right?"

I have to laugh at that, and I lean forward to whisper into her ear, "That's more than okay. I'm very proud of you for

helping your daddy get his knee better.”

Joey surprises me by wrapping her arms around my neck and hugging me tight.

And then she’s off on her cowgirl boots again, running over to Jenny, who is now standing at the front door.

“Let’s go swimmin’, Granny!”

“See y’all later,” Jenny says with a smile as she opens the screen door, and it’s not long before both she and Joey are walking down the front porch steps and toward the Volvo station wagon that sits in the gravel driveway.

Once they start to pull away, Rhett turns his attention back to me.

“You know, last night, I found the strangest note crumpled up inside my daughter’s boot,” he states, and his eyes narrow with insider knowledge. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would ya?”

I tap my finger on my chin dramatically and shrug. “I don’t think I do...”

“Liar,” he retorts and shakes his head. “I can’t believe you’d stoop so low as to use my own daughter to do your dirty work. Gettin’ an innocent five-year-old to do your job? You should be ashamed of yourself, darlin’.”

I snort. “Oh, let me be the first to assure you that there is absolutely no shame in my game, cowboy,” I retort. “Your constant unwillingness to follow my medical advice and let me take care of your knee has forced my creative hand.”

“Real creative using a man’s daughter against him.”

I shrug. “I never said I’d play fair.”

He huffs out an incredulous laugh and heads into the kitchen.

And I waste no time getting off the couch and following him.

He grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and sighs when he turns around and finds me in the same room. “What are ya

tryin' to achieve here, Leah?"

"My job."

He rolls his eyes and guzzles down half the bottle of water in three large gulps.

And I hate how my eyes fixate on the corded muscles of his neck, watching them flex as water slides down his throat.

Why on earth did God think it was a good idea to give this stubborn bastard the golden ticket in attractive looks? I'm sure there's a reason, some kind of lesson in avoiding temptation, but man oh man, the sight of this shirtless, rugged, muscular male specimen is quite the distraction.

Once he finishes off the rest of the bottle, he tosses it into the recycling and strides out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

Social manners and formalities should probably make it impossible for me to follow, but desperate medical treatment times call for desperate measures.

By the time he takes a right into his bedroom, I'm hot on his tail.

"Christ," he mutters and runs a hand through his hair. "What are ya doin' in my bedroom? And what the fuck is all this shit?" he asks, glancing around to see where I've already set up everything I need for the deep tissue massage.

"Take off your brace and pants, Rhett."

His blue eyes go wide with surprise. "Excuse me, darlin'? You think maybe you should offer to buy me dinner first?"

"Not like that." I roll my eyes. "I need you to take off your jeans so that I can massage your leg."

"A fuckin' massage?" he retorts. "My leg doesn't need a trip to the spa."

"Why does everything have to be so difficult with you?" I ask on a sigh. "Like, are you this obstinate all the time or are you doing this special just for me?"

He just stares at me.

“Look, Rhett, from the way I see it, you have two options here.”

When I don’t expand, he narrows his eyes. “Are ya gonna tell me the options, or am I supposed to guess?”

“Option *one*,” I elaborate. “You let me do what I need to do as your hired physician so that I don’t have to keep bugging you about it all day long.”

“And option two?”

“You can keep making everything incredibly challenging and ensure that I keep bothering you all day, every day, until I succeed in my task of making that knee of yours healthy again.”

“And I take it option one includes me taking off my pants.”

“Precisely,” I answer with a nod, pointing one index finger toward his bed that I’m going to utilize as my makeshift therapy table. “Take off your pants. Get on the bed.”

When he doesn’t make a move, I add, “If you would like me to step out for a minute so I don’t see anything while you get yourself situated, I can do that.”

He scowls at that. “Darlin’, I’m not insecure about you seeing me in my skivvies.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You,” he comments on a smirk. “You are my problem.”

“And the sooner you let me do my damn job, the sooner I can officially get out of your hair and be a distant memory.”

He huffs out a sigh, but eventually, he begins the process of taking off his brace before moving to his belt and jeans.

I wish I could say I remain completely professional during the whole process and don’t sneak a peek at what Rhett Jameson looks like in just a pair of black boxer briefs, but yeah, my far-too-curious eyes can’t seem to help themselves.

Thick but lean muscles highlight his thighs and calves, and it’s more than apparent that the bottom half of his body most

certainly matches the top.

My goodness. All those hours doing hard labor on his ranch have certainly *done his body good.*

When my eyes locate a more-than-healthy-sized bulge beneath his briefs, my mind can't stop itself from thinking, *Holy huge packages. This cowboy is big...everywhere.*

Oh. My. God. What is wrong with me? Quickly, I avert my eyes and stare at an adorable picture of him and Joey that sits on his dresser. Truthfully, the photo doesn't make me feel any less dirty that I was just thinking about Rhett Jameson's penis, but it at least distracts me long enough for him to get on the bed.

In the name of keeping my sanity, I walk into his master bathroom and snag a clean bath towel from the shelf—even though I already set two towels out on his nightstand before he got home—and once I make my way back over to him, I waste zero time covering his body so that my eyes can only focus on his injured leg.

“Now what?” he asks, and I grab my bottle of massage oil from his nightstand.

“Now, you just lie there and relax while I do all the work,” I say, but the second the words leave my lips, my cheeks heat with a hint of irrational embarrassment.

I've massaged and stretched and worked with thousands of legs.

And a lot of them have been connected to adult men.

But why does the mere idea of massaging Rhett Jameson's leg feel like I'm about to do something incredibly naughty?

Probably because you're wondering what he'd look like without the towel or those formfitting black boxer briefs...

Immediately, I shake off the rogue thoughts.

I will *not* think about what he looks like naked.

But how about what all those muscles look like while he's having sex?

No. No. NO.

I refuse to do anything but see this as a doctor treating a patient in a completely professional, focused way.

Considering you're about to massage him on his bed with him practically naked, that's a pretty big fucking ask...

“Mind explaining how you massaging my leg is going to fuckin’ help?” he questions, thankfully pulling me from my insane and useless inner monologue.

“Because during your surgery, they had to cut into the muscles and tendons around your knee joint, and that kind of trauma causes painful inflammation and muscle spasms,” I say and squirt some of the massage oil into my hands. “And deep tissue massage that focuses on the quadriceps and hamstring muscles in your thigh can help relieve the tension that causes the inflammation and spasms.”

“No offense, darlin’, but it all sounds like a bunch of fuckin’ hogwash to me.”

I ignore his comment and gently place my hands on either side of his hamstring and being to carefully knead my fingers into the tight flesh. It’s not long before I identify several knots that have locked themselves inside the muscle.

“You feel that?” I question, lightly pushing my fingers against the biggest knot.

Rhett grunts. “Uh, yeah, I fuckin’ feel that. It certainly doesn’t feel good.”

“This knot right here is a buildup of fluid and blood inside your muscle,” I explain. “And massage provides the counterpressure that’s needed to force it back into your blood vessels where it belongs. The more of these I get rid of, the less pain and discomfort you’ll have and the quicker your knee can heal.”

Slowly, I increase the pressure of my fingers while I continually watch his face for signs of it being too intense or painful.

“And while you think it’s *all a bunch of hogwash*,” I repeat his earlier words. “It’s not. It’s actually very important and a step that’s often skipped during postoperative rehab. Not only does massage help with inflammation and pain relief, but in your case, it will help with alignment.”

“Alignment? I got surgery because I fell off a bronc, darlin’. Not because my shit was out of place.”

“You just love questioning everything I say, don’t you?”

He just shrugs.

“I’m aware your knee wasn’t out of place, but between the surgery and the severe injury you endured, you basically need to retrain the parts of your knee that work together to do so effectively. If they don’t work together efficiently, then everything will be out of alignment. If that happens, then healing, stretching, and rehabbing are of zero use. You’d just end up back in surgery down the road.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I add, “I mean, maybe you learned differently where you got your medical degree, but all my years of training taught me that the right kind of massage is vital.”

The hint of a smirk lifts one corner of his mouth up. “You’re feelin’ mighty proud of yourself with that little dig, aren’t ya?”

I shrug, but also keep steadily increasing pressure to his hamstring muscle with my fingertips.

“Well, I can tell you one thing, I’m not gonna let you do this shit as often as you and Joe keep tossin’ those fuckin’ ice packs at me. If you haven’t noticed, I don’t have time to be lying flat on my back all damn day.”

I grin at that. “Just so we’re clear, it’s your stubbornness that led you to that many ice packs.”

He quirks a brow. “And how’s that?”

“Oh, c’mon,” I retort. “If you would’ve been following doctor’s orders from the start, the swelling and inflammation would’ve never gotten that bad.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Your leg looked like a tree trunk.”

He snorts at that. “You have a real gift for exaggerating, you know that?”

I roll my eyes. “And you have a real gift for being pigheaded.”

For the most part, Rhett just lies there with his eyes closed, and the same irritated scowl he tends to have when I’m around doesn’t grow deeper.

“You do this shit for all your patients?” he asks, his husky voice eventually breaking the silence.

“Before I left my practice to take a job with the Slammers? No, I didn’t have time to do this with all of my patients,” I answer honestly. “But I did have a few massage therapists that I trusted, and I referred my patients to them.”

“*You* work for the Salt Lake City Slammers?”

“I do, but why are you saying that like it’s a shock?”

“No offense, darlin’, but you don’t come across as the kind of woman who’s into sports.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Just because I like wearing heels and nice clothes and putting on my makeup and fixing my hair doesn’t mean I don’t like sports.” I mean, truthfully, I didn’t get a job for the Slammers because I like basketball. I got the job because I want to succeed in my career as an orthopedic physician and surgeon. And I want to have the financial stability I never had growing up.

When it comes to my brother’s and my childhood, it wasn’t abnormal for us to go hungry some nights because our parents were too busy feeding their alcohol habit.

“So, you like sports?” Rhett asks, pulling me from my walk down unfortunate Memory Lane.

“I mean, sort of?” I respond and he laughs.

“How much do you even know about basketball?”

“I know enough.”

“Sure ya do.”

I dig my fingertips into the top of his hamstring muscle, and he grunts in discomfort.

“Christ, no need to take it out on my leg.”

“Oh, sorry. Was that too much for you?”

He glares at me. “You know damn well you did that on purpose.”

“I would *never* intentionally hurt a patient.” I feign outrage. “That goes against my oath.”

He smirks at that. “Somethin’ tells me I’m an exception to your oath.”

“Well, I’ve never had to chase around a patient on a two-thousand-acre ranch just to get him to let me help heal his knee.”

“And I’ve never seen a physician try to teach horses aerobics,” he retorts on a sly grin.

“I was *not* teaching them aerobics,” I protest, and he just chuckles.

“Whatever you say, Doc. Pretty sure my filly Jasmine is still traumatized from watching the scary lady in neon-pink spandex do jumping jacks and squats in the pasture.”

“New rules,” I say, and he looks at me with a quirk of his brow. “No talking during massage.”

That spurs a laugh from his throat.

“This your way of tellin’ me you don’t want to talk about your new aerobics gig?”

“It’s my nice way of telling you to shut up for a while so I can focus on your leg.”

Rhett chuckles, but thankfully, he closes his eyes and keeps his mouth shut for the time being.

All this constant verbal judo we have going on is enough to make my head spin, and I savor the rare moments of silence

while I continue to massage his leg.

Moving my fingers up and around his knee, I carefully prod around the reconstructed patella tendon, examining its current state before slowly easing my hands farther up his leg to his quadriceps muscle.

More knots make themselves known as I explore the prominent muscle and slowly increase the pressure into each one to help work out the tension and fluid that have built up inside the taut flesh.

Eventually, I have to adjust the sheet that covers his body to reveal a little more of his upper thigh, and when my gaze spots the hint of his boxer briefs, it just kind of fixates there.

Don't do it, Leah. Do not think about what lies beneath those briefs.

I try really hard to divert my brain to a safer mental route, but it becomes an impossible feat when my fingers locate another knot in his quad muscle that sits too close to his you-know-what for comfort.

A few more inches and I would nearly be right there.

Right at the promised land of cowboy cock.

Oh my God. Stop it. This is so unprofessional.

It definitely is completely wrong, and I should not be thinking about any of the things I'm thinking of, but holy hot bod, when my fingers hit a particularly tender spot on his upper thigh and a soft—and *insanely sexy*—grunt escapes Rhett's lips, my nipples take that as their cue to join in on the inappropriate, horny fun and tighten beneath my bra and tank top.

Get it together, Leah!

I don't know if it's because I'm in one seriously long sex drought or because Rhett Jameson's rugged hotness is a one hundred on a ten-point scale, but my body appears impervious to the memo of keeping shit professional.

He opens his eyes, and I don't miss the way his gaze flits from my eyes to my lips to my chest to my fingers that are

currently still touching him.

And I hate how fucking tempted I am to change up the purpose of the massage.

The urge to just...touch him and caress him and *feel* him instead of only treating him is so strong that I feel like my head might explode.

My mind races with a million different conflicting emotions.

Maybe you should move your fingers up a few more inches and to the left...

No! No! Don't do that!

But, like, you should probably do it...you know...just to make sure all of his muscles are in good shape...

My cheeks heat and the room feels like it's been relocated to the surface of the sun, and all of a sudden, the tank top and jean shorts I bought at Target the other day when I drove into town with Jenny are feeling like they weigh one thousand pounds.

Rhett's eyes meet mine again, and I don't miss the way his lips are ever-so-slightly parted.

If he keeps looking at me like that, I don't know what I'm liable to do...

SEVENTEEN



Rhett

Fuck, this is starting to feel too good...

If I would've known agreeing to let Leah massage my leg would've led to me lying flat on my back—in *my fucking bed*—while she threads her fingers up my thigh, I sure as shit would've never taken my pants off in the first place.

Christ. I *hate* how good her hands feel on my skin.

And I really fucking hate that every time I see her, I feel like she's wearing fewer and fewer clothes.

Today's outfit consists of a pair of cutoff jean shorts and a loose tank top that teases the curves of her breasts, which might as well be a fucking bull's-eye.

Shit.

I shut my eyes for a moment and try to think about anything but how soft Leah's hands feel or the way her breasts move up and down as she works her fingers into the muscles of my thigh.

All the shit I need to get done for the upcoming Fourth of July celebration.

The ridiculous shit Tiny says on a daily basis.

Goddamn baseball.

I roll through every possible thing that would serve as a good distraction from the woman who's currently touching me, but when I open my eyes again, every thought disappears in a dangerous poof.

Her eyes lock with mine, and she doesn't stop moving her fucking hands across my skin. And it should be illegal for this doctor to ever administer a massage to any of her male patients, especially when she's dressed like this.

It feels too damn good, and my cock really wants to take notice.

Son of a bitch.

This woman looks like a goddess standing before me, and I'm starting to forget the actual purpose of this massage. Hell, I'm not even sure if I remember I busted my fucking knee at this point.

We're just staring at each other, and her hands don't stop moving, touching, *caressing* me.

And my dick has definitely taken notice, already hardening beneath my fucking briefs.

Temptation floods into my veins, and every cell inside my body wants me to lift my hands, pull down her tank top, and suck one hard nipple into my mouth.

Because her fucking nipples *are* hard.

So hard, they're practically waving at me from beneath her damn shirt.

She bites down on her bottom lip, and *fuck me*, the urge to pull that full mouth of hers to mine and feel if those lips are as soft as they look is beyond enticing.

Hell, the urge to pull her onto my lap so her luscious thighs are straddling my hips is almost too much to control.

I don't know whether I need to shove her hands off me or act on animalistic instinct.

But before I can even decide, something shifts in the air and Leah yanks her hands away from me like my skin is on

fire.

“Uh...” She pauses, blinks several times, and clears her throat. “I...uh...I think that’s about it for today.” Her voice shakes with shock and nerves and I don’t know what else. “Yep,” she adds on a ramble as she quickly tosses the towel back over my leg. “You’re all set. Alllll set. Good to go. Massage time done.”

I stare back at her, completely at a loss for words.

I have no idea what just happened or why I was feeling the shit I was feeling, but with the way she keeps dropping shit as she tries to stuff it into her bag, I can assume I’m not the only one who’s confused.

“So...uh...we’re done?” I eventually question, sitting up slightly on the bed. “For the whole day?”

“Mm-hmm.” She nods but avoids my gaze completely and strides into my bathroom to grab a fresh towel even though there’re still two towels sitting on my nightstand.

“So, yeah,” she continues and tosses the towel my way. “You’re all set for the day. Just make sure you do some ice tonight, and... uh...yeah...uh...I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And then, she’s gone. Out of my bedroom, down the hall, and once the sound of her footsteps reaches the front of the house, I hear the screen door creak open and slam shut.

What the fuck was that?

As I get up off my bed and wipe the massage oil off my leg, I realize my cock is still hard as a hammer beneath my briefs.

Pretty sure you’re not supposed to get hard-ons while your doctor is massaging your leg, you sick bastard.

I’m also pretty sure that I should avoid having Dr. Leah Levee massage my leg.

Like, at all fucking costs, that shit shouldn’t happen again.

Too bad you’re already wondering when the next deep tissue massage will occur...

EIGHTEEN



Leah

The instant I'm out of Rhett's house and in my loaner truck, I waste no time starting the engine and getting the hell out of tempting-cowboy dodge before my libido has any more time to act a fucking fool.

What in the hell happened back there?

In the rearview mirror, I glance at Rhett's house as it disappears with a cloud of dust behind me.

Never in my career have I ever fantasized about having sex with a patient.

Not one single fucking time.

Yet, back there, that's exactly what I did.

I groan and grip the steering wheel tighter as I turn onto the road that leads to my cabin.

In reality, after the massage, I should've pushed his leg through some stretching, but hell's bells, it was more than apparent my stupid, horny body couldn't handle anymore up close and personal contact with Rhett Jameson today.

Are you sure, though? Because you could've easily just slid down those briefs of his and saddled the fuck up. And, boy oh boy, from the looks of it, that cowboy is packing some serious—

Oh. My. God.

Is this a stroke?

Am I having a stroke?

I force a deep inhale and exhale into my lungs.

“Stop being a lunatic,” I tell myself out loud. “Just chill the fuck out and stop thinking about what that man looks like naked. Or while he’s having sex. And definitely *don’t* think about what he’d look like while having sex with you.”

I cringe, and when I see my cabin up ahead, instead of turning into the driveway, I drive straight past it and head to the closest “cell spot” that Tex showed me on the map.

The instant I get there, I slam on the brakes, grab my cell phone out of my bag, hop out of the truck, and start walking until all the bars on my phone appear.

Fingers to the keys, I type out a message to Carla and Taylor.

Me: Anyone around to offer some advice?

Carla: GIRL, I thought I’d never hear from you. I’ve tried to call and text and email, but you never answer.

Me: It’s because this ranch is in the middle of nowhere and the cell service and WI-FI is total shit. I’m standing in a meadow right now just to text you. Not even joking.

Taylor: How is the ranch life, by the way? Getting along with your patient?

Me: Getting along with my patient? HA. Not even close. Nothing is what I thought it would be. This ranch is gorgeous, but it’s out in the middle of nowhere. Literally. It’s an hour drive just to reach civilization. And my patient isn’t 14 yrs old like my boss told me. He’s a 36 yr old hot, grumpy cowboy who doesn’t want me around.

Carla: A hot, grumpy cowboy? This sounds promising.

Taylor: LOL.

Me: It's not promising. We spend most of our time together bickering and arguing, and he's so freaking stubborn it's not even funny.

Carla: But he's hot? And he's a cowboy? This sounds like a situation I'd volunteer to be in...

Taylor: For real. This is some sexy, enemies-to-lovers kind of shit.

I roll my eyes and type out a response.

Me: I'm not in a romance novel, Tay. This is real life. And he's a bit of a dick.

With a big dick.

I grimace. For the love of everything, I really need to stop thinking about Rhett Jameson's penis.

My fingers hover over the screen as I contemplate if I should tell them about the entire massage thing that just went down. I mean, it was the whole damn reason I texted them in the first place.

But something tells me they're only going to cause me more confusion.

Hell, before I came here to the ranch, they were on my ass about putting myself out there and dating again.

And I know it's been a long-ass time since I've dated or done pretty much anything with the opposite sex, but *hello? I've been busy for the past eight years with my job.*

Carla: I'm pretty sure I'm going to need to see what this hot cowboy of yours looks like.

Taylor: For real. Pic or he doesn't exist, Lee.

Yep. Definitely not going to tell them about the massage.

Instead, I'm just going to focus on forgetting that insanity even happened.

It's the only way I'll be able to move forward from this and actually do my job.

I mean, I can't be getting all fucking turned on every damn time I see Rhett with his stupid shirt off. He's shirtless all the freaking time. And my job makes me have to be around him all the freaking time.

So, yeah, I have to move past this.

Lock the memory up tight in the deep recesses of my brain and forget about it altogether.

Me: I'm not sending you horny bitches a picture of my patient. Anyway, I have to get going. I'll try to text and call when I can, okay?

Carla: WTF? I thought you said you needed advice with something...

Shit. Quickly, I scramble for a reasonable excuse.

Me: Never mind! Sam just got back to me about it. All is good in the ranch hood. See ya on the flip side!

God, I'm being so weird. I know I'm being weird, and I know they're going to know I'm being weird.

Taylor: You're acting so strange, dude. Are you sure you're okay?

See what I mean?

Me: Promise. Love you and miss you both like crazy. P.S. You bitches better enjoy the Maroon 5 concert tonight for me.

Carla: Girl, I'll try to flash my tits at Adam Levine in your honor.

I snort. Carla is a die-hard Adam Levine fan. Like, she doesn't care what anyone says about that man; she fucking adores him.

Me: First of all, that's public indecency and illegal. Secondly, I gotta go.

Carla: It's only public indecency if Adam Levine doesn't enjoy it. Which he will. I have a great rack.

Taylor: Don't worry, Lee. I'll make sure this crazy bitch doesn't get arrested.

Me: Perfect. Love you! Bye!

Once I slide my phone back into my pocket, I hop into the truck and head to my cabin. And the whole way there, once I'm done mentally berating myself for letting my thoughts get so out of hand during Rhett's massage, I make a few very important promises—*I will put that massage in the past. I will keep shit professional. And I will not, no matter how tempting it is, touch Rhett Jameson's penis. Not with my hands or my mouth or my horny fucking vagina.*

Because, holy hell, I was hired to rehab his knee.

Not ride him like a rodeo queen.

NINETEEN



July 2nd, Friday

Leah

“Now,” Rhett says, settling his hands in his pockets like he always does at the end of this speech atop the hearth of the lodge fireplace. “I’ll hang around for a bit if y’all have any questions, but other than that, please make yourselves at home.”

A round of applause breaks out, the happiness and anticipation of a new crowd of ranch guests palpable in the room. The only thing that’s different from the past couple of weeks and what Rhett calls “intake day” is that the size of this crowd is nearly double anything I’ve seen on any other occasion. To be honest, I didn’t even know they had enough lodging to accommodate this many people at once.

Needless to say, Shaw Springs Ranch pulls out all the stops for Fourth of July weekend.

I watch surreptitiously as Rhett steps down off the hearth gently and works his way through the crowd, stopping occasionally to shake hands and glad-hand some of the VIPs that have shown up this weekend. I don’t specifically recognize anyone as, like, an actress or anything, but from the way other people point and whisper at them, I’m pretty sure I’m one of the only ones who doesn’t know who they are.

Joey is the first to make it to me, bobbing and weaving through the forest of legs between us, and I actually jerk back a step when she slams into me with a hug.

“Whoa, there, Jo-Jo.” I laugh. “Where’s the fire?”

She giggles, taking me literally. “There’s no fire yet. That’s usually somethin’ they do outside at night.”

I smile. “Makes sense, honey, but I was just asking why you’re in such a rush. Does the fastest little girl in the room get a prize or something?”

Joey giggles more, her nose wrinkling up this time. “Was I really that fast?”

“Fastest I’ve ever seen, I think.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and she jerks her head at the lodge doors and grabs my hand. “Wanna go outside and race me?”

I smile as I consider it. I mean, I’m not all that fast, but I wouldn’t exactly be trying to win. Maybe some outdoor racing with my best girl wouldn’t be such a bad idea. I glance up at Rhett again just as he throws his head back and laughs at one of the female guests. Blond hair, big boobs, and a perfect body, she’s like a walking advertisement for sports cars. She reaches out and touches Rhett’s elbow, and then his shoulder, and then even slides her hand all the way down to rest on his forearm. All of her touchy-feely flirting sets me on edge, and Joey tugs on my hand again.

“Leah, come on.”

With effort, I tear my eyes away from sexy-whatsheerface and the man I have absolutely no claim over and look down to the sweet, blond-haired girl who doesn’t make me want to lash out irrationally.

Goodness knows, it’s taken me long enough to put the massage thing behind me from a week ago. The whole “fantasizing about my freaking patient while providing a massage to my patient” situation really messed with my head.

Ha. Messed with your head? As in, past tense? Girl, this is the present, and you’re still going there when it comes to Rhett

Jameson.

Gah. I have to stop.

“Hello? Leah?” Joey bounces with impatience.

“Okay, yes. Let’s go outside and race.”

Maybe the physical activity will level out my hormones or something. I glance back up at the catalyst of all my unrest to find him *still* talking to the same woman. She laughs again, but Rhett’s eyes move off her for the first time as a *different* woman approaches him, a crowd of rowdy guys around her taunting one another and laughing.

She’s voluptuous and skinny at the same time, and the features of her face are so overproportioned, they ooze sex appeal. She’s wearing a button-up blouse that looks like the American flag, but it’s more than clear that when men around her pledge their allegiance, it’s to the boobs inside.

It’s not like she has it unbuttoned indecently low—she’s just that well-endowed.

A huge, sparkling buckle sits at the front of her hips, and if I didn’t know it’s the kind of style all these rodeo types wear, I’d liken it to the kind of chastity belt that’s there for the sole purpose of enticement and inviting attention.

With blond-brown hair and big, unmistakable blue eyes, she is the Kate Upton of rodeo queens, hands down.

Beyond all that, though, is the familiar way she looks at Rhett. It’s not the longing, wishful way that the other woman did—it’s *knowing*. Without a shadow of a doubt, this woman has seen the inside of Rhett Jameson’s pants.

My gut roils, and I shake my head to clear it. And Joey, once again, tugs on my hand. “Come onnnnn.”

Willing myself to end the misery, I tear my eyes away for a second time and follow Joey’s lead out the lodge doors and over to a patch of grass so we can have the race to end all races.

As Joey giggles in the free space and spins around with her arms out to the sides, I resolve to one thing—I’m going to run

like the freaking wind and show this little girl the time of her dang life.

I only wish I could use the same kind of speed to put some distance between me and my very much unwelcome feelings about the grumpy cowboy.

TWENTY



Rhett

“What happened?” I ask Chase with a jerk of my chin as he, Cutter, Lynn, and another bull rider by the name of Bo come to a stop behind the one woman in this world I have true, unending disdain for. “You all get the last pick on rodeo queen selection when you split into teams for the day?”

Anna rolls her eyes and jabs me in the chest teasingly, and I have to grind my jaw to keep myself from shoving her away.

I’m not rough with women—ever—but I’ll be damned if the touch of this bitch doesn’t make my balls want to crawl up inside my body. Instead, I circle the wrist of her hand she’s left on my chest and toss it back in her direction.

“I don’t know why you have to be so rude, Rhett,” she contests, ignoring my gesture of displeasure completely. “I just came to say hello.”

“Oh, I know, sweetheart. You’ll just have to excuse me for not jumpin’ for joy and shit. After all, hello is the furthest you ever take it. Three seconds later, you’re flyin’ out of town without so much as a wave.”

“Why’re you so angry all the time?” Anna asks, so out of touch I can’t stand it. “That’s what I wanna know.”

“That’s what *you* wanna know?” I challenge. “Well, I wanna know how a woman can be so cold she doesn’t even

give a shit about her own flesh and blood? That's what *I* wanna know."

The ice that must run in the veins of someone who can't acknowledge their daughter is something I doubt even reaches Utah. It's so fucking glacial, I imagine it only exists in the arctic.

"Hey, kids," Chase says as a means to intervene. I can feel the vein in my forehead bulging and pulsing with every beat of my heart, but the rage for this woman burns so deep, it feels nearly impossible to stop it. "How 'bout we shelve this conversation for now in the name of not havin' a domestic right in front of the rest of the guests?"

I glance to my left to see the crowd of incoming guests is congregated around the dining room table, still getting their room assignments, and force myself to take a deep breath.

I don't want to back off. I want to put the screws to this woman and then some. I want to finally give her the tongue-lashing she motherfucking deserves for deserting my Joey.

But she isn't worth it.

She isn't worth the thought, the time, the effort—not when all of that is better spent with the girl she won't even acknowledge—the center of my world.

My Josephine.

Eventually, I assent to Chase with a curt nod. Even though I'm finding the strength it takes to put all this shit from the past to the side seems to get harder and harder to muster every year.

"Come on, guys," Chase directs. "Let's go back over by the exhibition, set up, and eat some lunch before we have to get warmed up and shit for the run-through."

Anna rolls her eyes and then smirks, lifting her hand in a wave just to mock me before turning to sashay away. I grind my jaw so tight I nearly bust through my own mouth, but Chase reaches up and places a calming pat to my chest.

“I’ll keep her away from you from now on,” he guarantees. “When she started in this direction, I didn’t know this was where she was headin’.”

“What’re you doin’, Chase?” I ask in a heated whisper, now that Anna, Cutter, Lynn, and Bo are all out of hearing distance. “Fuckin’ *her*? Can’t y’all find any other pussy on the goddamn planet earth?”

Chase shakes his head and holds up both hands in a defensive salute. “It’s not like that, Rhett. I swear. I know Anna just as well as you do, and she could have a pussy made of gold and I’d not dip my shit in there. Swear it. Same for the other boys. They all respect you more’n that, I promise.”

“Then what in the hell are you doin’, traipsin’ around with her? Standin’ right behind her while she ambushed me like that? Goddamn.”

“We’re just keepin’ her out of trouble. Keepin’ her distracted. Last thing I want is to see her break your sweet kid’s heart over and over again.”

“I don’t even know why she’s gotta come back every year for this fuckin’ event. She knows damn well I don’t want her here.”

“Because she knows damn well she’s gonna get an emotional rise outta you, bud. She loves the attention, you fuckin’ know that. Don’t matter to her if it’s positive or negative, just as long as you’re thinkin’ ’bout her.”

I roll my shoulders back and sink the grip of my hands into the back of my neck. I know Chase is right, and still, I can’t seem to help myself.

Finally, I nod, and he pats my shoulder. “Not one of us boys blames you. We know how tough this shit must be. But I reckon’ the day she’ll stop fuckin’ with you is the day you stop givin’ a shit, ya know?”

I’m not so sure she’ll ever stop tormenting me, but instead of saying as much, I nod.

“Well, it’s good to see ya, even if you’re keepin’ company with the devil,” I say, “but I’ve got shit to do.”

Chase laughs. “Good to see me? It’s good to see you upright on two feet. Last time I saw you, you were flashin’ in and out of consciousness as they loaded you into an ambulance.” He smirks then, wagging his eyebrows and adding, “It was one helluva ride, though, I’ll give ya that. Cutter and Lynn practically worship at the altar of bronc-ridin’ great Rhett Jameson now.”

I shake my head and laugh, and with another slap of my shoulder, he takes off at a jog out the doors and in the direction of Bo, Lynn, Cutter, and the woman who shall not be named.

I take a deep breath and follow, tipping my hat down slightly to shield the sun as I step through the big French doors and scan the area.

It doesn’t take me long to spot Joey and Leah, running full steam through the grass on the other side of the fire pit and gazebo area.

They’re barefoot and laughing, and Joey’s face is alight with the kind of happiness that makes being a father feel like the biggest honor of my life.

And Leah, well, *fuck*, she looks the prettiest I’ve ever seen her.

Honestly, after reminding myself of what ugly actually looks like talking to Anna, and then seeing Leah laughing with my little girl like she’s the best thing in the world, I don’t know that God even makes anything better.

The bold thought takes me by surprise—so much so that I stop walking and pause before stutter-stepping back into motion. Unfortunately, the unexpected movement jolts my knee, and a zap of pain runs through it that I haven’t felt in weeks.

I reach down as I grimace, pausing again, and before I know it, Leah is there, grabbing me by the arms and searching my eyes.

“Are you okay?” she asks seriously, trying to make the kind of eye contact my emotional awareness isn’t quite ready

for. Instead, I look around her to Joey as she runs toward us with a smile on her face.

“Daddy!” she yells, completely out of breath and almost wheezing but doing it through a huge smile. “Leah and I been racin’, and I won *twice!*”

“That’s pretty impressive, darlin’,” I tell her, gritting my teeth as I try to stand up straight again. Leah notices the strain and takes charge immediately.

“Stand right here, do you hear me? Don’t *move*. I’m going to get a chair so you can sit and I can take a look at your knee.”

I should probably be annoyed by her fussin’ over me like a damn kid, but for some reason, the annoyance never comes. If anything, I just feel grateful.

I watch Leah walk away briefly before smiling at Joey as she grabs my hand. “You okay, Daddy?”

“Fine, baby. Just stepped a little funny, is all.”

Her eyebrows crease in the center, and she frowns. “Why aren’t you wearin’ your brace?”

I roll my eyes at her timing. Leah has just arrived back with a chair and is placing it behind me.

Given the opening, of course, she can’t help herself. “Good question, Joey. I was just about to ask the same thing.”

I sigh. “You said yourself I didn’t have to wear it all the time at this stage.”

Leah snorts. “Except when you’re busy. Which you *obviously* are today, are you not?”

“I might have a thing or two going on,” I admit.

Leah shakes her head, her eyebrows raised with knowing scorn. “A thing or two plus thirty.” I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing as she works to roll up my jeans and look at my leg and then turns back to Joey with a soft smile. “Hey, Jo-Jo, how about running and getting me an ice pack from the lodge freezer, would you?”

Joey nods exuberantly and takes off, and I have to steel my features against melting at the cutely personal nickname.

Leah pokes and prods at my skin, massaging the muscle above my knee with a gentle pressure. It's a bit uncomfortable, given the public setting, and I have to clear my throat when my mind starts to wander into the territory of imagining her hands massaging other places—of the memories of her massaging me in nothing but my goddamn underwear.

Fuck, Rhett. The last thing you need right now is a hard-on.

Softly, she sucks the flesh of her lips into her mouth and then sits back on her heels in the grass to look me in the eye, taking her hands away. It's somewhat awkward as we wait for Joey—at least, for me, since I've just been imagining an adult film featuring the two of us—so Leah talks to fill the silence. “Good job. Again.” When my eyebrows pinch together, she clarifies. “You know, with the welcome speech.”

“Thanks,” I say, skeptical of her tone. It's not that it's mean-spirited or anything, but it doesn't sound entirely serious either. There's something more up her sleeve and another comment to come, I can tell. I'm just not sure what it is yet.

“Pretty soon, I think I'm going to be able to give the *Welcome to Shaw Springs* speech myself. A couple more run-throughs, and I think I'll know it word for word.”

“Makes sense. You Hollywood types are good at learnin' scripts.”

“Me? You're the one following a playbook here, buddy. Maybe you're the one who's made for Hollywood, and you don't want to admit it for fear that it'll jeopardize your manhood.”

“Listen, darlin', my manhood's just fine. I'd say I'd prove it to ya, but I'm pretty sure you'd object.”

Her eyes go wide, and I can't help but chuckle.

“Relax, Leah. I don't think there's much chance of me droppin' my pants here in the middle of the lodge lawn.”

Her throat bobs with her swallow, and a pang of awareness ricochets around my chest. *Fuck.*

Desperate to distract myself from my hormones, I keep talking. “Truth is, if I don’t follow a script, I start to lose sight of how new this is for these folks every time. It’s old hat for me, but if I don’t give ’em all the details, they’ll be out there in the pasture tryin’ to do aerobics with the horses.”

“Ha-ha,” she mocks. “Very funny.”

“The truth always makes for the best jokes, don’t it?”

I expect her to laugh back at me, maybe even resort to a little innocent violence, but instead, she seems preoccupied. Finally, she glances over her shoulder quickly, obviously checking the area for something, before venturing, “I know it’s none of my business...but that woman before...in the lodge... Who is she?”

“Which one?” I avoid, but Leah just shakes her head.

“Rhett. You know which one.”

“Her name is Anna,” I say carefully, scanning the area myself to make sure Joey hasn’t snuck up on us before I speak. “And she’s Josephine’s birth mother.”

“*That’s* Josephine’s mama?”

“No, darlin’. Ain’t nothin’ ‘mama’ about her. But she is the one I got pregnant and the one who popped Joey out in the hospital. It’s just that, for Anna, that’s the moment when her obligation and responsibility ended.”

“Has Joey ever met her? Does she know who she is?” she asks rapid-fire, her mouth moving a mile a minute.

“She blows through town once a year—twice maybe, if Kanab is on the pro circuit—but when she does, the last thing on her mind is Joey.” I glance at my daughter as she bursts through the doors of the lodge, an ice pack raised high above her head in a proud display. “My Joey’s smart, and I’ve done my best to explain the situation to her, so I’d say she knows. But the last damn thing I’m gonna do is force my girl on

someone who doesn't want her and break her heart even more. Over my dead fuckin' body."

Leah nods enthusiastically. "I agree. As long as she has the tools to make her decision for herself when she's older and you don't actively keep her away from her mother, letting the natural pace of contact take shape is the best way to go. I can tell you," she continues with a tone that reeks of personal experience, "a forced relationship with a parent is definitely *not* better than no relationship at all."

There's a story there, one I desperately want to ask her about, but I know now isn't the time. Frankly, today and tomorrow aren't really the time for much of anything. It's, hands down, the busiest time of year at Shaw Springs, and it takes more than enough hours and mental capacity on its own.

I don't need to be delving into Dr. Leah Levee's family history—and I need to be diving into the things she's making me feel even less.

"I got the ice!" Joey shouts enthusiastically, coming to a panting stop beside us and holding out the medical packet.

Leah takes it gratefully and smiles at Joey. "Man, that was fast, Jo-Jo! I swear, you're definitely the fastest person on this ranch."

"Really? I kind of felt like it took me a while this time."

"Are you kidding? I barely even had time to blink!"

Joey's eyes widen in wonder, and if I could see my own, I can't guarantee they wouldn't be doing the same.

Comparison, when it comes to yourself, is the thief of joy. My mama always said it, and now that I'm older, I know she got it from Theodore Roosevelt.

But what neither of them accounted for in their saying is that sometimes, when you're looking at two people outside of yourself, comparison doesn't steal. In fact, it gives the gift of clarity.

Leah Levee isn't an uppity girl with a too-good-for-you attitude like Anna Morrow.

She's nothing like what I pegged her as when we first met.
No, Dr. Leah Levee is just the opposite.

TWENTY-ONE



Leah

This afternoon, after icing Rhett's knee and procuring his brace from his truck, Joey and I sent him on his way to work on everything for the big extravaganza tomorrow. They have events to set up and seating to stage and a whole number of volunteers to train and assign.

And although Rhett was poised to take Joey with him, I figured a little bit of girl time and a lunch picnic sounded like a much better idea.

Which it was. We danced and ate a boatload of cheese and sliced meat from the ranch guest market and laughed ourselves silly until my stomach hurt. But once Jenny showed up on babysitting relief duty before dinnertime, Joey went home with her, and I was left to my own devices.

And, honestly, after the amount of manual labor I've been doing in Rhett's place to keep him from reinjuring himself, I was kind of looking forward to it. A little R & R. A little recoup. And a few mindless rom-coms on the old DVD player.

Remote in hand, I lift it toward the small television to hit play, but the soft sound of thumping against my front door stops my finger in midair.

My eyebrows draw together.

Who in the world would be here right now? The whole ranch is busier than I've ever seen it, and from what I understand, that's completely unlikely to stop until tomorrow.

Plus, it's pretty darn dark outside, and I figured I'd be long forgotten until the end of events tomorrow night.

When another delicate knock sounds from the other side, I toss the remote down on the couch and head for the door. It's strangely timid, and pretty much an entire half of me is wondering if wild mountain lions can make that sound to fool unsuspecting victims in the middle of the night.

Nevertheless, I can't Google it, thanks to the lack of Wi-Fi I'm actually starting to get used to, so the only way to find out is to check for myself.

I tread gently to the window and pull back the curtain with the kind of hesitation that suggests I actually think it'll affect a mountain lion's ability to sense my presence. Like, if I'm too loud, that's when it would attack and shoot into my cabin like it's in *The Matrix* or something.

Geez, Leah. Get it together.

Scraping the curtains back all the way, I jump when a cute, toothy smile turns to look at me, and it's very much not the cute, toothy smile of a mountain lion.

Scrambling, I drop the curtains back into place and race around to the door to open it as quickly as possible. "Oh my God, Joey! What are you doing here? Where's your dad?"

"Still workin'," she says simply as I shuffle her inside the door, close it behind her, and lock it. She might not be a mountain lion, but for God's sake, there must be some out there, and she was just standing on my stoop waiting for me to open the door for who knows how long!

I didn't even have my freaking porch light on.

"Does he know where you are? How did you get here?"

"Oh yeah, he knows." Joey smiles. "There's some emergency or somethin'. Bulls broke through the fence, I

think. Tiny brought me over after I told everyone you said I could come over here if I needed to.”

I’m not about to discredit a five-year-old for the sake of being right, but I definitely didn’t say she could come over. I mean, I don’t mind, but I definitely didn’t *say* it. Maybe, though, that means she actually likes spending time with me, and man, does that feel good.

“And what? Tiny just dropped you off and left? What if I wasn’t home?”

“We could see ya movin’ through the curtains.”

Holy hell, what?

Suddenly, I’m reconsidering all the naked dancing I’ve done through the living room on my way to make coffee in the mornings. Somehow, I’d just assumed that being so out in the middle of nowhere meant I was invisible. But evidently, I’ve been performing the ranch’s unofficial burlesque show for everyone within a mile radius. Still, I don’t have time to think about that now, so I scrub my hand down my face to clear that idea from my mind and move on.

“Okay, well, no big deal. I’m glad you’re here, actually. I was just about to pick a movie to watch, and now you can help me.”

“Yay!” she says with a bounce that makes her hair fall in her face. I reach forward to move it aside and notice the smudges of dirt on her normally pristine skin. It seems that even for five-year-old Josephine, today has been a long day.

“Maybe you can take a quick shower first, though. Would you like that? I’m sure I have something you can put on that’ll be more comfortable than your jeans and boots.”

“Can you braid my hair after?” she asks excitedly, rocking up onto her toes and clasping her hands in front of herself.

“Definitely,” I agree. “That sounds like a perfect plan. And when it dries, it’ll have a pretty wave in it for tomorrow.”

“Eeep!” she squeals with enthusiasm before taking off down the hall.

This certainly isn't the plan I had for the evening, but somehow, it feels as if it's transformed into something better.



My T-shirt hangs off Joey's shoulders and just about drags on the floor, but she looks excited to be wearing the mark of Adam Levine's face even if she doesn't know who he is.

It's the kind of sleepover magic every girl feels the first time she spends her night doing unexpected and girly things.

Over the last hour and a half, I've stood outside of the bathroom shower curtain while she shouted questions through it to me during her shower, braided her hair, and painted her nails with the light pink polish she found on my nightstand.

And I've laughed more than I can remember in the last five years, and I've done it with a human who's only existed for that long.

I don't know what that says about my social life of the recent past, but as Joey flashes her nails and spins in a circle in my T-shirt, I can't really find even an ounce of flesh inside me that cares.

"Do I look like you?" she asks with a giggle that just about turns my chest into molten lava. I've never really meant something to a kid, what with my only sibling taking his time settling down just like me, but the way they look at you with this unconditional reverence...it's no wonder people decide to have them.

"Almost exactly. Except *way* cuter."

She giggles again and jumps up onto the couch with a twist. I scroll through the shelves of DVDs and eventually come upon *Tangled*. I'm not too ashamed to admit this is one of my favorite kids' movies, and I saw it in the theater all by myself when it came out.

It was mostly because, as a child of my generation, I loved Mandy Moore.

But I left the stadium seating of the AMC 15 in Salt Lake City with a whole hell of a lot more than I bargained for and a forever love for Rapunzel.

“Have you seen *Tangled*?” I ask, holding it up so she can see the case.

“Yes! It’s one of my favorites!”

I smile. “Mine too. How about you load it up in the player, and I’ll make us some popcorn?”

“Ohh! Yes! Extra butter!”

“You got it. Extra butter coming up!”

If I were this child’s mother, I’d probably need to concern myself with including some sort of healthy option along with the fat-smothered popcorn, but I’m not. And plus, this is a sleepover. If this isn’t a time to eat your weight in junk food, I don’t know what is.

I skip-run into the kitchen and grab two of the biggest bowls I can find from the cabinet while Joey bounds over to the DVD player and gets it going.

Next, I grab the popcorn packs and place one in the microwave, dig in the fridge for some beverages, and when I spot a lone cucumber on the shelf from my most recent well-intentioned grocery run, glance back at Joey. She’s got the movie cued up and is waiting patiently, but she also looks like she’s had a pretty long day.

Mayyybe it’s not such a bad idea to include something nutritious.

With a huff, I grab the cucumber and a knife from the drawer and make quick work of cutting it into slices.

“Okay, this is weird, Leah,” I mutter to myself quietly. “You’re officially doing weird things because of weird, compulsion-like feelings. This should probably be assessed by a mental health professional at your earliest convenience.”

“What did you say?” a tiny voice suddenly asks from my side, making me jump what feels like ten feet in the air and almost drop the knife. I glance down at Joey, wide-eyed and

excited, and I toss the knife into the sink before I can come close to slicing off my finger again.

“Nothing, sweetie,” I lie, hoping to all hell that she didn’t actually hear what I was saying. “Is the movie ready to go?”

“Uh-huh,” she agrees with a nod. “All we need is the popcorn.”

“Here, why don’t you take this glass of lemonade in there for yourself, and I’ll bring in the popcorn and cucumbers when the microwave goes off.”

“Popcorn and *cucumbers*?”

I nod, licking my lips. “Yep.”

“Is that...like...something you normally eat together?”

“Definitely,” I find myself lying. *God, Leah.* “It’s something everyone eats in Salt Lake City.”

“Oh,” she accepts with a nod. “Okay.”

I smile as she tiptoes into the living room while holding the glass of lemonade with two hands, and I finish up everything for the food.

I grab the rest of our movie snacks and follow her into the living room.

I set everything down on the coffee table next to her drink, and she bounces forward immediately to grab one of the popcorn-filled bowls.

In an effort to be a good influence, I take a slice of cucumber from the plate and pop it into my mouth before grabbing a bowl of my own. Before I know it, she moves forward to do the same.

“Tasty, isn’t it?” I say around a mouthful, making her laugh almost uncontrollably. “What?” I ask around my chipmunk cheeks purposefully. “Do I sound funny or something?”

She giggles some more and points to my mouth. “You’re not supposed to talk with your mouth full!”

“I’m not?” I ask, still not chewing my food. “Am I being rude?”

Her peals of laughter only intensify, and I can’t help but join in. Seeing her like this, spending this time with her, brings me to life and settles a lead ball in my stomach at the same time.

Because I’m blessed to be here, but after today, I know firsthand there’s a woman who’s had this privilege for five whole years and hasn’t even bothered to take it.

How? I wonder to myself. How on earth do you not fall in love with a little girl like this? How don’t you give your life, your blood, your sweat to making sure her dreams come true?

I didn’t understand it with my parents and the way they resented Sam and me, and I don’t understand it now.

This little girl deserves a mother who wants to lay the world at her feet.

Not someone who hardly acknowledges her existence.

If I ever start a family, have a family of my own, I’ll make damn sure I’m ready to be the mother my child deserves. The kind of mother Joey *should* have.



Rhett’s knock against the front door is strong and true, entirely different from his daughter’s knock just five hours ago. It’s the middle of the night, and Joey’s sleeping form is tough to scoot off my lap, but I make sure to manage it quickly in the hopes that I can stop him from knocking again and waking her up.

Once I gently set her head atop a cushion on the couch and sweep the small piece of hair that’s escaped her braid out of her face, I rush over to the door.

Unbolting the lock, I turn the knob and quickly open it, only to put a gentle hand on Rhett’s chest, push him back, and pull the door loosely shut behind me.

His eyebrows draw together at my actions, but I drop my voice to a whisper, put a finger to my lips, and smile. “Sorry.

Jo-Jo's sleeping on the couch. I don't want to risk talking in there and waking her up."

The corners of Rhett's lips curve up affectionately, and my heart skips a beat in my chest.

Quiet, girl, I tell it sternly. Calm down.

"That's sweet, darlin'. But my Joey could sleep through an earthquake and a tornado at the same damn time. In fact, I've never seen anyone sleep as deep as she does."

"Oh," I mouth, and he chuckles, reaching out to smooth my jaw back into a smile with his thumb. My back straightens at the rough feel of his callused skin against my smooth, and a jolt grabs my arousal by the horns and refuses to let go.

My breath feels shaky in my chest, but I do my best to cover it up.

"You wanna let me inside now?" he asks with a smile that borders on sexy. "I'll get her out of your hair, and you can get some sleep."

Before I even know what I'm doing, I shake my head, and his forehead pinches together.

"No?" he contests softly, something in his aqua-blue eyes I'm terrified to inspect.

"No," I say through a hard swallow. "I mean, yes." I shake my head again and start over. "I was just going to say, why don't you leave her here? She's already asleep, and you're going to be just as busy in the morning as you were tonight, right?"

He nods. "Probably."

"Well, I'm not. So, just let her sleep here, we'll eat breakfast in the morning, and then go on the guest ride over at the lodge barn. She's been begging me to ride horses with her for a while now, so I think it's time. And then we can just meet up with you afterward for the exhibition and everything."

"Are you sure?" he asks, almost disbelievingly.

“Yeah.” I smile. “It was really nice having her here tonight. She’s a great kid, Rhett, and it’s no trouble at all. This way, maybe you can actually get some real rest and recharge for another busy day tomorrow.”

Tension crackles between us, and I swear, for one short instant, we actually consider kissing each other. I can’t really explain how I know the feeling is mutual, but I do know that I feel it.

In the end, though, reason prevails, and I step back so hard I bump into the unlatched door and almost fall right through.

Rhett catches me, thankfully, sending us both into laughter we don’t expect. The quick movement, however, reminds me to be a pain in his ass and doctor his knee.

You know, Leah, the actual job you’re here to do.

“Don’t forget to do your stretches and brace up tomorrow, okay? I don’t want to see you without it.”

He shakes his head and sighs, but what he doesn’t do is fight me on it.

Well, that’s a first.

Backing away slowly, he tips his hat and then turns to walk gently down the stairs. When he gets to the bottom, he glances up at me over his shoulder, the perfect picture of the grumpy cowboy I know and...actually kind of like.

Except this time, all the grumpiness melts into a downright sinful smile.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Dr. Leah. Take care of my girl.”

“I will,” I promise with a nod, and then I thank God that she’s here. Because as I watch Rhett Jameson climb into his truck and drive away, I know without a shadow of a doubt that if she weren’t, I’d be nursing my arousal to sleep with a hand in my pants and a sexy, rugged cowboy on my mind.

The last thing I need to do is give these strange feelings and fantasies any encouragement.

TWENTY-TWO



July 3rd, Saturday

Rhett

“Okay,” I tell Tiny over the radio, taking a swig of my second travel mug of coffee for the day. “I’ll take care of it when I get over there.”

“How long?” he asks, a bit of panic in his voice that nearly makes me laugh.

Tiny is a simple guy who likes simple thinking. He likes working at Shaw Springs because, for the majority of the year, his days are predictable—dependable, even. But the chaos of this event always sends him into a tailspin, even when things are going according to plan. There are too many unknowns, too many decisions that have to happen on the fly, and mostly, too many damn people.

Tiny has known and loved horses for fifty years. And that’s it. Anything else is beyond foreign territory.

“Fifteen minutes,” I tell him before hanging the mic of the radio on the hook and popping open the door to my truck.

I toss my now-empty mug on the passenger floorboard and spin to climb out with a smile. All in all, the day isn’t going too bad. I prepared to have gone through four mugs of coffee at this point, so two is really pretty good, and despite the fear in Tiny’s voice, we haven’t even had any issues this morning.

The animals have stayed in their pens, setup is getting finalized, and the guests of the ranch are ensconced in all sorts of activities to keep them busy until it's go time. If it weren't for the fact that the vendors only show up the day-of to set up, we might have been ahead of time. As it is, though, I've got fifteen food trucks to greet and stage, a whole group of rodeo folks to herd, and a volunteer staff I have to make sure is ready to handle the influx of everyone who's not staying on the ranch.

Guests are outfitted with armbands that give them access to everything with their stay, but everyone else has to pay an entry fee and get marked as they come inside the gates.

I grab my brace from the bed of the truck and strap it on since I'm not in the mood to get yelled at by a feisty doctor, and I only took it off for the drive. Once my leg is secured, I head toward the barn down below, where a group of guests has gathered for their horseback riding orientation and horse selection with Rodney.

As it happens, it seems Leah is up to bat for her turn with selection.

I smile when I see she ends up with Saunders and watch as my daughter walks him around by the lead line.

He's one of our most bulletproof horses at the ranch. He's had kids, elderly, brats, and screamers on his back, and not once has he reacted adversely. He takes his role as a caretaker seriously and wears his nickname "The Babysitter" quite well.

I have zero doubts Leah will be just fine on him, no matter how little experience she has. Even if she decided to stand up and do the polka on his back, he'd take it.

Still, I can see she's feeling somewhat tense just from the number of times she's nodded at Rodney in a fifteen-second span, and I laugh as Joey sinks her head into her hands dramatically while listening.

Obviously, Leah must be putting on quite the show of commentary.

I walk slowly toward them as Leah steps up to Saunders's side with Rodney and waits while he puts the stair steps down in front of her.

Cautiously, she puts a foot in the stirrup and lifts her body up onto the saddle as instructed. She's nervous, though, I can tell by the pink of her cheeks and the shake in her arms.

Even though I've made it within hearing distance, I suddenly have the desire to step even closer—to provide comfort—but given the fact that she doesn't know I'm here watching, it doesn't seem like the most viable of options.

Instead of kicking her leg over Saunders's back and mounting all the way, she leans her body into the saddle and freezes, clutching at Saunders's mane and the cantle of the saddle. She might as well be Elsa for how well she's doing an impression of ice.

Obviously, a dad can't watch *Frozen* six hundred fucking times without knowing who Elsa is.

"What's a'matter?" Joey asks from her place holding the lead line. "You stuck 'er somethin'?"

"No. Well, yes. Frozen in terror, I suppose," Leah mutters to the crowd and my perplexed daughter. Rodney steps forward then, a smile on his face and eagerness in his bounce.

Reaching up, he places a hand to the back of her left thigh and squeezes, and my chest locks up so damn tight I can barely breathe. I'm not entirely sure why, but the urge to intervene is suddenly damn potent.

"Go on, Miss Leah," Rodney says congenially. "Saunders isn't goin' anywhere, and I'll hold you steady from here. Just swing your right leg up and over."

Leah's head shakes back and forth rapidly. "I, um... No. I don't think I can. I need to get down."

Rodney chuckles good-naturedly and squeezes her thigh again, and before I know it, I'm standing next to him, gently pulling him out of the way.

“Hey there, Rhett,” Rodney says, clearly surprised, and Leah’s head whips around at the sound of my name, her dark hair flying up and out like a dramatic fan.

I want to be angry that I’m suddenly doing things outside the bounds of my normal control—making moves without any thought or restraint—but unfortunately, the real fear in her eyes is enough to calm any would-be embers on the inside of me.

“It’s all right, darlin’,” I find myself saying with a gentleness I normally reserve for kids. “Saunders here is like an old grandma. Sweet as pie and gentle as hell. He won’t hurt you, no matter what you do.”

She shakes her head again, and I smile. “Just swing your leg on up there. It’ll feel better once you’re settled in the seat and you’ve got both feet in the stirrups.”

“But that’ll mean I’ll be *on* him.”

Rodney and I both chuckle, and I try to ignore the overwhelming urge to tell him to get the hell out of here. The source of my inconvenient jealousy or not, he’s just doing his job.

“That’s kind of the point, Leah.”

“I just...I don’t know that horses are for me, you know? Certain people are horse people, and then other people are definitely, like, hamster people. I think I’m a hamster person, personally.”

I shake my head with a smile at how funny she is.

“I’m not gonna let anything happen to you. Hell, Joey’s not gonna let anything happen to ya either. You’re surrounded by horse people, darlin’, and if you just relax, I think you could be one too.”

Finally, Leah takes a deep breath and loosens her clinging hands. I reach up and put my hand where Rodney’s once was, and terrifyingly, I do *not* feel anger. I don’t feel frustration. I don’t even feel apathy. I *feel*—too damn much of an emotion I’m completely unwilling to name.

Carefully, I pull my hand back and put it to Saunders's neck to give him a rub and a pat instead. I swear the look he gives me out of the corner of his eye is a knowing one. Horse sense is a thing, but I never knew it applied to *this*.

Shaking visibly, Leah finally kicks her right leg up enough to crest the saddle, and she lays over into the horn, clasping it with both hands for dear life.

I chew my lip and tip my hat to hide my face as amusement washes over me.

"I can't believe you've been here almost an entire month without gettin' up on a horse before. How the hell did you manage that?" I comment, looking up at her in the saddle.

"With careful avoidance," she responds cheekily, and I can't help but laugh.

"Are you gonna ride with us, Daddy?" Joey asks, the hope in her voice nearly enough to kill any mortal man. But I know I don't have time, and frankly, if Leah has anything to say about it, I don't really have permission either.

"I wish I could, baby girl. But I gotta go over to the exhibition arena and help make sure everything's going okay. Tiny's probably in the middle of a panic attack as we speak."

Joey smiles a knowing smile, having literally grown up around Harry "Tiny" Minnow.

"We've got a lot goin' on here tonight, but next time Leah gets on a horse, I promise to ride with y'all, doll."

Leah looks down at me and mouths the word *never*.

It's funny enough to make me chuckle, and when I turn away toward Rodney, his eyebrows are nearly inside his hairline.

"What?" I ask him, to which he shakes his head. "What?" I say again.

He groans but finally states, "It's just...you seem happier than normal, is all."

"What?"

He shrugs, but the rest of what he leaves unspoken is pretty damn clear, regardless. He thinks Leah Levee is influencing my mood for the better. In fact, he's probably even assuming it's because we're sleeping together.

Normally, I'd discredit those kinds of thoughts immediately. But given the fact that I'm about to leave him alone with her again, and the image of his hand on her thigh is burned on the side of my brain, maybe it's not such a bad thing if he's got some assumptions.

I shrug back at him then, and I can't seem to stop myself from reaching up and patting Leah's thigh pointedly as I say goodbye. "I'll see you girls over by the exhibition, okay?"

Joey nods, and Leah assures me verbally, "Yes. Go. We've got everything covered here. As long as I survive this ride, that is."

"You're gonna be fine, Leah!" Joey insists, adorably exasperated.

I laugh and lift my shoulders. "See that? The expert has spoken."

"Oh God. The expert is smart, I'll give you that, but she's also five."

"You're gonna be fine, darlin'," I say softly, leaning up toward her enough so that she's the only one who can hear me. "If not, all these people'll answer to me."

Knowing if I don't tear myself away now, I never will, I leave that as my parting line and make my way back toward the truck to head over to the arena.

I don't know what's going on with me the last couple of days, but the more time that passes, the more it seems like the pyrotechnics tonight won't be the only fireworks on this ranch this summer.



I sling the last of the temporary fencing into the bed of my truck and dust off my hands before leaning down and

adjusting my brace.

I'm tired, but overall, my leg feels good. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to say that without the help of my brace taking some of the stress of the day off it, but I'll be damned if I'm going to admit that aloud anytime soon.

It's better if I don't do anything to swell Dr. Leah's ego up any bigger.

Something pokes me in the ribs, and I turn around, expecting to see any face but the one I do. Safe to say, after yesterday, I really thought I was done seeing this face altogether.

"Hey, Rhett. In a better mood today?" Anna asks with a wink and a smile as I stand up straight again and lean into the bed of my truck to keep my distance.

"Hey, Anna," I greet, clenching my jaw against the annoyance I feel every time I see her. I'd rather have nothing to do with her at all, but after what Chase said yesterday, I'm starting to wonder if the key to ending all this shit really is to just act like I don't give a fuck.

"Lookin' good as always, even with the bum leg. I almost forgot about what happened to ya when I saw ya yesterday since you weren't wearin' the brace."

I glare at Chase as he comes to a stop behind her, clearly having been moving at a jog, and he shakes his head swiftly, hooking a thumb at Cutter, who slides to a stop beside him. Apparently, he's the one with the big mouth and lack of respect for when to keep it shut, but I guess I'll at least give them both credit for their hustle. It seems she got loose, and they were trying to run her down. I just wish they'd managed it before she got to me.

"I meant to come by after it happened, see if y'all needed any help," Anna continues, "but rodeo season's been real busy, ya know?"

I nod, just for the sake of peacekeeping and not making a scene at Shaw Springs's biggest event of the year, but the truth is, I *don't* know. I spent plenty of time on the circuit fucking

around and drinking and all sorts of other shit, but I didn't have a daughter at the time. When something is important, there's plenty of time to be found. Anna just doesn't want to find it.

Something catches my eye over the top of her shoulder, and when I realize what—or *who*—it is, I don't even bother dismissing myself before stepping around her and walking toward them.

Leah smiles at Joey and laughs out loud at something she says before reaching down and playfully pulling at one of Joey's sweet pigtail braids. Obviously done by Leah this morning before they left the house, it's a hairdo dream come true for my little girl.

I've tried to braid her hair before, but it's never quite turned out. I don't know if my fingers are too damn big or if I'm just not doing something right, but seeing her beaming like she is now makes me think I need to give it another try.

After all, I'll be the only option once Leah's gone back to the city.

I rub at my chest, tight from the stress of the day, I'm sure, and smile as the girls finally make it over to me.

"Well, what do we think? Are we a horse person or a hamster person?" I ask with a laugh.

Joey giggles, and Leah smiles. "The horse wasn't so bad. I'm willing to give it another try, just to see if the abject terror lessens."

"Riding Saunders is like riding a Cadillac. You can't tell me he didn't take care of you."

"He did. You're right. But we're still in the 'getting to know you' phase. No man I've ever met is the same on date three as he is on dates one and two. Only time will tell how Saunders and I are going to get along."

I chuckle. "Makes sense, I suppose."

"It does."

“When you’re crazy,” I add, and she sticks out her tongue, which makes Joey laugh again.

“Come on, let’s get over to the bleachers. If we don’t, I don’t think there are gonna be any seats left.”

Joey reaches up for Leah’s hand with her right hand and then does the same with mine on her left. Together, as a group of three, we make our way over to the side of the arena where the opening ceremonies of the exhibitions are beginning.

It hits me then, how much has changed in a month. Not only have I gone from avoiding Leah like the plague to purposely spending time with her, but my Joey almost looks like a new little girl, there’s so much light inside her.

I look over her head to Leah and smile.

“I didn’t get to mention it before, but I like your boots. Never thought I’d see the day you put ’em on,” I comment with a chuckle.

She sticks out her foot and turns it from side to side jauntily as we walk, almost like she’s doing some sort of line dancing jive. “I know! They’re your mom’s. She said she had a spare pair she never wears and then just gave them to me when we stopped there this morning to get a fresh outfit for Joey. I seriously can’t believe how nice your family is sometimes.”

“They’re only nice when they like you,” I correct, and that makes a smile the size of Texas bloom on the surface of her face.

“You think they like me?”

“More than they like me, darlin’,” I tease, making both her and Joey laugh.

“Daddy!”

“I’m just teasin’, baby,” I correct before mouthing over her head to Leah, “Not really.”

Leah laughs again but tries to smother it with her free hand. I try not to watch, but I can’t help myself. Her face is

alive and free and alight with humor—all things I never expected it to be when she first arrived here.

She's beautiful always, but today, it seems like there's something magical in the combination of her dark chestnut hair and midnight-blue eyes.

Which is probably why I'm caught off guard when a hand presses into my chest to stop my forward motion. I'm officially tired of being touched by people without giving my permission, and my temper swells and bubbles under the surface when I look up to meet the eyes of the offender.

Worn gray hair and weathered skin around hazel eyes, Clay Walker looks to be every bit of who he is—Chase Walker's daddy, and the man whose bronc started this whole damn story.

TWENTY-THREE



July 3rd, Saturday

Leah

A second ago, we were walking. Now we're not, and a man I don't know has his hand on Rhett's chest.

There's tension in the air, and I find myself holding my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Joey, however, upon looking up to see who it is, is unfazed.

"Mr. Walker!" she shouts, which prompts him to move the hand from Rhett's chest and hold it down low so Joey can give it five instead.

"Well, hello there, Josephine. How's everything? Did ole Tex put you in charge of the ranch yet?"

She giggles, and at the sound of it, the rocks in my shoulders finally give way. There's a hint of contention here—the way Rhett is still looking at him with a touch of uncertainty assures it—but at the base of it all, this is a good guy. The high five and cute talk with Joey have proven it.

And that, I can work with.

"Daddy, can I go sit with Granny?" Joey asks, pulling free of our hands and speed-hustling toward a waving Jenny before Rhett can even answer. He rolls his eyes and says to her retreating back, "Sure thing, baby doll. Thanks for asking."

His sarcasm is nearly as thick as his muscled forearms.

The unknown Mr. Walker smiles slightly at that but doesn't make any move to relieve us of his company, so after a small sigh, Rhett completes the formal introductions, if only under minor duress.

“Leah, this is Clay Walker. Clay, this is Dr. Leah Levee.”

“Doctor, huh? You the one Tex brought in to babysit Rhett?” Clay asks with a wink that makes Rhett's jaw go hard and his eyes shift away.

I force a smile and nod, all while sticking out my hand for him to shake.

The thing is, we all know he's teasing, but I imagine out here in the rough country of Utah, men spend so much of their time trying to be tough that any insinuation against their manhood is a hard pill to swallow. Not because they think women are inferior—pretty much the opposite from what I've seen. It's just that they carry a very heavy burden on their shoulders, wanting to be the one to ensure their families and property are taken care of with the utmost respect.

Being talked down to, no matter the subject matter or the person doing it, never feels good. The only thing I can do is try to move the conversation along.

“I've been entrusted with Rhett's recovery, and it's going really well. I'm very happy with the progress his leg is making, and he should be back to a hundred percent in no time if we keep this up.”

“Well, that's good. I mean, as long as you can keep yourself from playin' around on my broncs goin' forward. Wouldn't want this to happen again because of some need to prove somethin' to all the boys who made a career out of it, you know?”

Wow. That was definitely a jab if I've ever heard one, but Rhett keeps his cool and shakes his head. “I don't plan to do any more bronc ridin' anytime soon, sir. Yours or any others.”

“Well, that's good. Takes some of us longer to grow up than others, I guess, but eventually it happens.”

Feeling antsy at the serious attack on Rhett's character, I can't help but speak up. Though, I'm careful to do it without any aggression. You catch a lot more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. Of that much, I'm certain. "I don't think Rhett needs to grow up much more," I say with a teasing smile. "I don't know that I've ever met someone who takes all of his responsibilities so seriously. Any more stony-faced jaw ticks out of this guy, and his face just might freeze like that."

Clay laughs, thankfully, and for now, it seems like the bulk of the tension between the two of them is broken. As a person who's not exactly prone to conflict of any kind, I'm tremendously proud of myself for not turning, running, and cowering in the corner while two tough cowboys duked it out.

Evidently, I'm turning into a sturdy, strong-willed rancher girl after all.

I look down out of an involuntary compulsion to hide my reddening cheeks and see that there's a glob of horse poop stuck to the toe of my new boots, and it takes all the strength inside me not to scream out in hysteria.

Okay, so maybe I'm not at full ranch girl status, but I'm getting there...

Surreptitiously, I try to twist my leg down and around so I can wipe the offending substance in the grass.

"Come on, Dr. Leah," Clay invites. "Why don't we find some seats? I think the exhibition's about to start."

"Um, okay," I hedge hesitantly. I really didn't expect to be sitting with a complete stranger while I figured out how everything worked about rodeo. In fact, I planned on sitting next to Rhett and asking every ridiculous question I could think of, and now, that seems like it would be kind of embarrassing for me, to be honest.

"Have you ever been to a rodeo before, hun?" Clay asks, and I shake my head in the negative.

"Ooh, doggie," he cries out, slapping his thigh for extra emphasis. "You're in for a treat, then."

"Really?"

“Oh yeah. Best entertainment there is, if you ask me. Though, I suppose I may be a bit biased since I make my livin’ from it.” He winks.

I glance back at Rhett as Clay loops my arm in his without warning, and Rhett rolls his eyes—but he does it with a smile. Clearly, we’ve moved on from the portion of the interaction where Rhett’s manhood feels threatened and are now entering the *these fucking old guys and their showboating* portion of the afternoon.

“See, doll, rodeo’s more than a show—it’s a lifestyle. It’s grit and nerve and a whole hell of a lotta work. Even me, with the livestock rearin’, it’s a science, ya know? Not quite as crude as all those city folks seem to think,” Clay explains as we walk.

I suck my lips into my mouth as he adds, “No offense, of course.”

I laugh. “Of course.”

Clay leads us around one end of the arena toward the stands, and with a quick glance back at Rhett to see he’s still with us, I admit, “Since I’ve never actually seen a rodeo in person before, I don’t even know all the things that can be done. I mean, other than riding stuff, what actually happens?”

“Well, there’s quite a few events today, and at an actual scored event, even more. But I imagine you’ll see some bull and bronc ridin’, steer wrestlin’, ropin’, mutton bustin’, and probably a barrel race exhibition or two. Anythin’ else, Rhett?”

“Just some ranch sortin’ and a cuttin’ and reinin’ horse exhibition. And food and drinks and fireworks, of course.”

Clay laughs and rubs his belly with his free hand. “Oh yeah, the food. My favorite part.”

He turns toward me, rotating us both so he can look at Rhett directly as he asks, “Tell me you got that taco truck again, I beg ya.”

“We did.” Rhett grins. “Plus, another. Two taco trucks for you to eat your heart out.”

Clay chuckles. “Okay, okay, I’m starting to like you a little again.”

My cheeks feel like helium balloons, they shoot upward so easily. I’ve never spent a lot of time around people like this—people who tease and taunt and give one another shit, but at the end of the day would do anything for that very same person.

My life has walked a much more distinct line—people were either nice or mean, and there wasn’t any crossover between the two in the name of playfulness. I’m not sure how to reconcile the two, other than I feel a lot happier knowing there’s at least some good in everyone around me rather than having to try to decipher from the jump if someone is good or evil.

Clay releases my arm to climb up the bleachers a few rows and then reaches back down with a hand to help me up. I’m about to take it—because holy hell, that’s pretty chivalrous—but Rhett’s hands settle on my hips and take me by surprise.

I’m not offended by his touch—to be honest, it feels too good.

But I am seriously shocked at how easy it is for him to lift me from one row of bleachers to the next without even moving from his spot on the ground. I don’t weigh a ton, but I am a full-grown woman, and he does have a bum knee. Apparently, though, his superhuman, rancher-god type of strength trumps all of the above.

A smidge self-conscious over the sudden heat I feel flooding my face, I look down to double-check my footing—and hide my face—and spin around to take the seat next to Clay. Rhett follows behind, carefully climbing up the rungs with his braced knee, and takes the seat on the other side of me, effectively blocking me in between two huge cowboys.

If I would have attempted to predict where I’d spend my time celebrating the Fourth of July a couple months ago, I can tell you for sure, it wouldn’t have been here. If Taylor and Carla could see me, looking like this, sitting where I am, they would flip.

Rhett leans toward me, whispering, “The first thing that’ll happen is the opening ceremonies. Usually, all the barrel racers and steer wrestlers and ropers’ll ride their horses around the arena a few times, carryin’ the flag as ‘God Bless America’ plays, and then they’ll all come to a stop in the center for the national anthem. Then we’ll get into the mutton bustin’ first.”

“Right. Of course.” I pause and chew on my lips silently for a few seconds before asking, “And mutton bustin’ is...”

Rhett chuckles softly. “Mutton bustin’ is a kids thing. They’ll ride sheep kinda like they’re bulls. It’s all just for fun, though.” He pauses. “Well, technically, all of today is just for fun, but you know what I mean. Mutton bustin’ is usually the first step in a young cowboy’s career.”

I hum. *Huh*. Kids on sheep. Sounds pretty cute, to be honest.

Clay elbows me suddenly, pulling my attention to the other side as several cowgirls and cowboys come riding into the arena, all of them with huge poles and flags tucked into a pouch on their stirrups. Their horses are sleek and shiny, and their outfits are decked out ornately. The women are in full hair and makeup, rhinestones on their chaps and shirts and boots and, quite frankly, everything.

I’ve never worn an outfit like that before—people would look at me like I had two heads in Salt Lake City—but I’ve got to admit, I’m pretty into it.

All that sparkle looks like a whole lot of fun.

The last woman to enter the arena is one I recognize immediately as Anna—the birthgiver. She looks beautiful, I can’t deny that, but there’s lead in my gut every time I look at her and think about the callous way she’s abandoned her daughter.

She’s glitz and glam on the surface—a real rodeo supermodel—but underneath, I don’t even know if there’s real flesh and bone.

I mean, there couldn’t be...

Not with the way she ignores Joey's existence entirely.

I glance up at Rhett to find him staring at her. His jaw is relaxed and his eyes contemplative. I'm not sure what any of it means.

My mind, obviously, has several narratives of jealousy it'd like to push on me—*he's still in love with her; he misses her; he wishes things were different*—but the rational part of me knows better.

I definitely didn't miss the speed and apathy with which he left Anna standing by his truck to greet Joey and me when we arrived.

The crowd goes crazy as she does a fancy quick spin, her horse's hind hooves planted in the sand of the arena as the flag whirls gracefully. She smiles huge, does a semi-bow, curtsy thing from the top of her horse and then winks to the crowd as she presents the flag and the National Anthem starts.

I have to actively work to keep myself from laughing aloud. Instead, I lean toward Rhett and whisper, "She sure likes the attention, huh?"

He scoffs but doesn't say anything else. I'm pretty sure, however, the sound is meant to convey his agreement.

After standing for the National Anthem, all of the cowboys return their hats to their heads, and the group of flag-wielding riders clears the arena. A chatter starts up in the crowd again, and then an announcer comes on over the PA system.

"Welcome, boys and girls, to Shaw Springs Ranch Fourth of July Extravaganza! How about we give a huge round of applause to the Jameson family for all their hard work on today's events before we get started!"

A roar comes over the crowd, and several men all around us lean forward to slap Rhett on the back. My eyes are like ping-pong balls as they bounce around, trying to figure out where all the hands and arms are coming from.

Rhett takes his hat off briefly and waves it above his head, and I see Tex, a few bleacher sets away, do the same thing.

Jenny stands up and waves too, and it's only then that I notice Joey isn't sitting with her anymore.

The panic is immediate and intense.

“Rhett!” I say sharply—much more sharply than intended. “Where’s Joey? I thought she was with Jenny, but I don’t see her anymore.”

He glances that direction but pretty quickly turns back, shakes his head, and even pats my leg right above the knee. “Relax. She’s probably in the back, all suited up for her turn on the sheep.”

“Wait...Joey is muffin bustin’?” I nearly yell. Both Clay and Rhett laugh, Clay even more so than Rhett. Honestly, he’s too uproarious for my taste, and I don’t even know what he’s laughing about.

“It’s *mutton* bustin’,” Rhett corrects. “Not muffin.”

“Who cares!” I whisper-yell. “I don’t care if it’s blueberry or corn or freaking cranberry muttons. I care that Joey is doing it!”

He laughs again, and it’s a good thing his brace is there because I get too violent with his leg when I slam down my fist. But he’s fine; I know he is since I got all plastic with my blow, so I ignore my mistake and focus on what’s important. *Joey.*

“How are you so calm right now? Couldn’t she get hurt?”

Rhett shrugs. “In theory? Sure. But she could get hurt doin’ anything, darlin’. And she’s been doin’ these events at local rodeos for goin’ on two years now. You don’t have to worry about her. These other kids do—she’s pretty stiff competition.”

“So, what am I supposed to do? Just sit here and watch her get thrown to the dirt?”

Rhett reaches over and grabs my leg, but unlike my volatile reaction, he leaves it there to give me a rub of comfort. “It’s sweet that you’re worried, Leah. Really. But I promise you, she’ll be all right. I wouldn’t let her do it if it was as big’a

deal as you're makin' it seem. She's gotta hold on for six seconds, and I can almost guarantee ya she will. She's good. Focus on that, maybe, instead of all your doom and gloom, and get excited. She's gonna give ya somethin' to cheer for."

My nerves battle stoutly against Rhett's words and the common sense they attempt to elude. I'm used to caring for the well-being of my patients and my brother and my friends, but none of those feel like *this* does.

This is more extreme—almost instinctive in nature. After just a month of time here at Shaw Springs, I care about that little girl more than I've probably cared about anything before.

Scooting to the edge of my bleacher seat, I lean forward to make sure I can see the whole arena clearly and lick at my lips. My feet bounce and my fingernails dig into the flesh of my palms.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen," the MC announces proudly from the center of the arena, swinging an arm toward the metal gates at the end. "If you'll all turn your attention to the chutes, our first mutton buster is none other than Josephine Jameson herself, and she's ready to give us a show."

The crowd cheers and I whoop, my nerves so alive I actually bound upward with the sound. "Come on, Joey!" I yell like a woman possessed.

Rhett chuckles and leans forward to look around me as the first gate on the left opens and a sheep with a little girl decked out in pink gear atop it shoots out like a rocket.

"Wooo! Joeyyyy!" I scream as the sheep runs full steam toward us, its body rocking Josephine around like she's a doll. Thankfully, her hold looks secure, her feet locked to the back and her hands entwined thickly in the sheep's shoulder wool.

The buzzer sounds loudly, and I lose all semblance of control, jumping straight up in the air and shouting like a banshee. "*Woo-Hoo!* You go, girl! You killed it! Hell yeah, Jo-Jo!"

The crowd of people around me laughs and claps, Rhett included, but as she dislodges herself, tucks and rolls, and

comes to a standing position in the dusty arena right in front of us, he climbs down and gives her a high five through the fence. Seeing her face beaming inside the cage of her helmet, I'm suddenly ready to drive her around town, looking for all the sheep we can find.

“See, darlin’,” Rhett says as he takes his seat beside me again. “I told you she’d be fine.”

“She’s more than fine,” I say automatically, looking at her pigtail braids that she had me redo this morning. “She’s magnificent.”

TWENTY-FOUR



July 3rd, Saturday Late Night

Rhett

She's magnificent.

Along with three full hours of an unexpectedly bloodthirsty spectator approach from Leah throughout the events of the exhibition rodeo, those two words have been all I can think about since the moment they came out of the good doctor's mouth.

Both in the context she used them—to describe my reason for living and the center of my world, my daughter—and for a different one entirely. I, as it happens, can't seem to stop myself from applying those same words to her.

It's been a month since she showed up on my doorstep with more makeup and attitude than I was prepared to handle, but it might as well have been a year for all the things that have changed.

When she got here, we were enemies, pitted against each other as we both fought to win in the war of *I've got something to prove*. But now, Leah's relaxed and open and, as she showed this afternoon with Clay, ready and willing to defend me when my character is attacked.

She's fun to be around and a stable, dependable influence in my daughter's life, and the more time I spend with her, the

more I start to feel like I don't know how it's going to be without her when she leaves.

With the fireworks getting ready to start, Leah, Joey, and I set up on the grassy knoll just on the south side of the arena. It's one of the best spots for watching the fireworks in that it's got a good view, but it's also decidedly distant from the bulk of the crowd down by the pond.

I had thought we'd be watching the show as a threesome, until Tiny showed up and offered to take Joey to the best viewing spot in the place.

Joey looks up at me with her big blue eyes and pleads, "Please, Daddy? Please can I go up on the roof with Tiny?"

Tiny smiles his goofy, crooked-toothed smile. "Promise to watch her every second, Rhett. Ain't got anything to worry about."

I sigh heavily, but eventually, I nod. I remember the wonder of this fireworks show I used to feel as a kid and know all too well that Joey could use a little more of that feeling in her life. Between her mother wantin' nothin' to do with her and my well-intentioned shortcomings, she's not exactly won the damn lottery when it comes to her upbringing. I just hope one day she'll be able to see how much I tried, even when I failed.

Plus, I don't actually hate the idea of being alone with Leah, as strange as that thought sounds even to my own mind.

"All right, darlin'. Go ahead. But you be careful, and I want you back here right after they're over, okay?"

She nods excitedly, reaching up and putting her hand in Tiny's with a smile.

"Mind Mr. Harry, you hear me?"

She giggles and nods. "I will, Daddy."

"Have fun, chica," Leah says with a thumbs-up, to which Joey returns the gesture enthusiastically.

We both watch as Joey skip-walks her way back over toward the main building, while Tiny looks down at her with a

goofy smile and listens to god knows what she's probably chattering on about.

“Looks like it's just the two of us,” Leah remarks, her voice a touch shakier than normal. I smile at that because it makes the whole situation feel more human.

“Don't worry,” I tell her. “I won't bite.” She starts to laugh, but I talk over her seriously to add, “Unless you ask me to.”

Sudden silence descends between us, and she drops to the blanket we have spread out almost violently. I can't say for a fact that her knees gave out, but it sure as hell seems like it.

And I'm supposed to be the one with the bum leg.

I get down much more gently, swinging my legs out in front of us and crossing them at the ankles before leaning back into my hands. She mimics my posture, and our shoulders rub infinitesimally.

Suddenly, a whistle cracks through the air and a bright light streaks into the sky before exploding what feels like directly above us. I know it's not—they set up almost three hundred yards to our north—but that doesn't mean the percussion of each blast doesn't vibrate right in the center of our chests.

Leah's face tips up as she watches the display with unconcealed wonder. And the longer they go on, the lower her guard becomes, her body shifting toward mine more and more by the second.

Leah's side rubs against mine in a way that sparks my awareness to an eleven on a scale of ten. A simple brush of her arm feels like she's taken her hand and put it directly around my heart.

I don't know what it is about the crack and pop and flash of the brightly colored celebration in the sky, but it makes the space between us—the past conflict between us—feel practically nonexistent. I can feel the pulse of her breath pointedly, so when the cadence of her inhales increases, it's not something that goes unnoticed.

I don't know what it is about us, what it is about *her*, that's suddenly driving me to distraction, but I can't focus on anything but the way her lips look as she runs her tongue across them and glances up at me.

I've never felt anything like this—anything this potent—even with Anna. With her, back then, it was rushed and rough and bold. At times, the intensity far outweighed any of the actual feelings.

But this...it's as if I'm sitting right in a puddle of every emotion I never knew how to feel. Like there's a peace in the connection with a woman I don't understand entirely. Like finding out all the little pieces that make her gives me a purpose I didn't know I needed.

The weight of my stare must eventually become unbearable, because she turns to look at me with a quizzical light to her eyes. But when she sees what's in mine, all the air in her lungs leaves in one swift rush.

“Rhett?” she questions, searching the depths of my gaze for a transcript of words I can't find a way to say.

Words like *I like you* and *I want you*.

Silently, I slip my hand into her hair until it settles at the back of her neck and lift with a pressure I can't control.

She doesn't fight it, doesn't even challenge, and before I know it, I'm not even applying the weight of my hand at all. I'm chasing her as she moves toward me all of her own free will.

I glance to her perfect, pink, unvarnished lips—a change she's made over the last couple weeks that I can't say I don't like. She's beautiful, so much so, she doesn't need any of the shit she thought she did before—tight dresses and high heels and fancy blouses. All she needs is to be herself.

My heart thuds in my chest, and my dick wakes up as the potential for touching my lips to hers becomes real and immediate.

Her tongue darts out from the small diamond-shaped gap between her lips in a nervous attempt to moisten them both,

and my dick jerks.

Fuck.

I have to taste her. Now.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly as I get closer and closer to connecting us, and her eyes are hungry—*wanton*. She's just as eager as I am, and I can't fucking wait.

A huge roar from the crowd, one completely unlike the shouts of *ooh* and *aah* we've been hearing for the last several minutes, jars my attention out of the hammock of Leah's eyes and brings me back to the world around us. Almost immediately, upon breaking the spell of our connection, there's the kind of scream no one can ignore.

Both Leah and I look to the epicenter of the chaos, as a crowd closes in tightly and swiftly on someone or something on the ground in the center. It isn't until I spot my mom and get a look at her face, terrified and drawn, that I realize something really isn't right.

Leah and I both jump up and take off at a run, me being as careful as I can not to put too much undue pressure on my leg, and fight our way through the crowd of spectators. When we finally get to the center, we find my dad on the ground, sweat beaded all over his brow, his hat on the ground beside him, and he's clutching his chest.

"Dad!" I yell, dropping to the ground next to him and lifting his head into my hands.

He groans, and Leah takes that as her cue to get rough with the people gathered on the other side of him. "Move!" she yells. "Get out of the way! I'm a doctor!"

People finally clear a path, and Leah drops to her knees in the dirt next to Tex and puts her fingers to the inside of his wrist to feel his pulse.

Calm and assured, she looks to my mom and starts issuing orders. "Call 9-1-1. Tell them we need a medevac chopper, and we need it now." Mom nods, but she's shaking, so Rodney grabs her radio from her belt and starts calling in to dispatch.

“Tex,” Leah says with a steadiness I don’t even remotely feel. “I think you’re having a heart attack right now, but I don’t want you to worry, okay? I’m here, and I’m going to make damn sure you make it out of this alive.”

He groans, and she hardens her jaw infinitesimally before barking orders again. It figures that the ambulance that had been here for the rodeo exhibition left half an hour ago, thinking the dangerous part of the event was well-past over. “Go get the medical bag from my truck. Now!” she yells.

Tiny takes off running, and I’m left to see Joey standing there, looking down at us with shock and dismay. Chase is the first face I recognize in the crowd, and I yell orders at him immediately. “Chase, get Joey out of here! Please!”

He jumps into action, spinning Joey around and placing a comforting arm around her shoulders as he drags her away, practically kicking and screaming.

When Tiny comes back, Leah takes the bag from his hands and ruffles through it quickly, pulling out a bottle of aspirin and popping the lid off crudely. She dumps a couple pills into her hand and then forms a funnel with her palm to dump them into my dad’s mouth.

His color doesn’t look good, but Leah’s voice is still a soothing melody. “Chew those for me, Tex, okay? And then swallow. I know it’s hard and that it hurts, but concentrate on chewing those up. They’re going to help.”

Next, she turns back to the bag and comes out again with a tablet of something, ripping open the packaging and again directing it to his mouth.

“Hold this under your tongue, Tex,” she commands, rubbing his arm with her free hand in a soothing stroke. “I know this is hard, but you’re doing great.”

My throat feels so clogged it’s sealed right off, and the overwhelming panic at the sensation of suffocation is painful. Still, I don’t want to take anything away from the actual emergency, from my dad getting the care that he needs, so I reach out and take one of his big hands in mine and squeeze

tight. Rodney pulls the radio away from his ear to update us. “Helicopter is five minutes out. They were already on a run back from Kanab.”

“You’re okay, Dad,” I say, looking into his normally strong eyes as he tries to blink through the pain. “Leah’s taking good care of you, and a life flight is almost here. You just relax.”

Moments feel like hours as we sit there, doing nothing and waiting for the helicopter to arrive. Leah monitors my dad’s vitals diligently, and a number of fellas from the crowd set up a landing zone so it’s ready, and I live so many years in that short eternity that I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to turn them back.

When the helicopter finally lands, and the emergency personnel rush to my dad’s side, stepping away from him and letting go of his hand becomes one of the hardest things I’ve ever done in my life.

Leah, though, she dives right in with her professional hat, asking them a million questions and making just as many remarks a minute.

“Where are they taking him?”

“No, not there. Salt Lake City.”

“Yes, on my authority.”

“He’s had aspirin and a nitroglycerin tablet, and his pulse is tachycardic, though I’ve managed to bring that down some.”

Her voice fades some as she jogs next to them while they wheel my dad toward the helicopter on the stretcher, and Mom and I run along after her.

“...fluids...ride along...no...I know...” I hear brokenly through the whoosh of the chopper blades still tuned up and spinning.

Leah nods then and returns to Jenny and me at a jog as they load Tex’s stretcher inside and start working on him immediately.

“They can only take two passengers, ride along,” Leah says matter-of-factly to my mom and me while holding her

hair back out of her face in the intense chopper wind. “You two should go, and Joey and I will drive up to Salt Lake City and meet you.”

My mom hurries off to load up without any question, but as my mind races, I know that’s not the best decision. Immediately, I shake my head resolutely. “No, Leah. You go with him. You’re the doctor. I’d rather you be there than me. You’ll know what to do.”

She considers me closely for a fraction of a second, but ultimately, we don’t have a whole lot of time to be mulling over our decisions.

She nods, leans forward to kiss my cheek, and then promises in my ear with steely determination. “I got him, okay? I promise you—I’ve got him. You and Joey drive safe and slow, and we’ll see you when you get there.”

And then she’s gone, quickly loaded inside the helicopter and behind the closed door. I watch her face through the window as the helicopter takes off, and a violent wind nearly blows me back from my proximity.

A huge part of my world is in that chopper, thanks to a dramatic change of events I never saw coming.

One thing is for sure—I better get moving.

Because clearly, in this life, there’s no time to waste.

And that’s a lesson I’ve got to learn in more ways than one.

TWENTY-FIVE



July 4th, Sunday, very early

Leah

The medical team that met us on the roof wheels Tex through the emergency room doors at a run, leaving Jenny and me standing in their wake. The doors slam shut with quiet mocking of their role as a barrier, and for the first time since Tex dropped to the ground in pain, Jenny breaks down in tears.

I pull her suddenly frail-seeming body into a hug and hold her as tight as I can, trying to force all the comfort and heat of my body to leave and seep into hers. “Shh. It’s okay, Jenny, I promise.”

Her sobs are nearly silent but full-body-racking, and a sick thud in my gut challenges me to take them all away. To remove the pain and the stress and the worry. Unfortunately, I know I can’t.

All I can do is be here, and thankfully, be confident that the quick moves I was able to make on-site mean that Tex is going to be okay. He might have to cut back on the red meat some, but I have every belief that we prevented the worst of the damage by thinning his blood and getting the helicopter there so quickly.

Now, my worry has shifted. From the medical emergency for which I felt at least a modicum of control and knowledge,

to the man I'm slowly losing my head over and his several-hour drive to get here under emotional distress.

When Jenny gets her sobs under control and pulls away to sink into one of the waiting room chairs, I take a deep breath and think about what I can do to calm my current anxiety.

I reach for my pocket and pull out my phone, something I can hardly believe I still keep charged and carry with me everywhere I go, open up the screen and my contacts, only to quickly realize that it might as well be an actual brick for all the good it'll do me right now.

I don't want to put any other stress on Jenny, especially not now that she's just found the strength to pull herself together, but I don't think I can wait another minute before assuring myself that Rhett and Joey are okay either.

Cautiously, I sit down in the chair next to Jenny and place a kind hand to her shaking knee. She looks up at the contact and meets my eyes, so I chance a calm, gently toned question. "Do you...do you have Rhett's cell phone number? I just want to check in on him and Joey and give him an update, but... well, at the ranch, as hard as it is for me to believe, I've gotten so used to not using my phone. I don't even know his number."

Jenny nods, grasping me by the wrist with a little bout of motherly dismay, her forehead crumpling from top to bottom. "Oh my goodness, of course. I can't believe I didn't even think to call him!"

I shake my head. "You have enough on your plate, Jenny. You just worry about Tex and yourself. Leave Joey and Rhett to me, okay?"

"Here," she says, digging her phone out of her purse and shoving it at me. "You can just take mine. I hardly even know why I have the damn thing since I don't know how to work it. I know his number's in there somewhere, though."

I squeeze her leg. "Don't worry. I'll figure it out."

"Okay," she agrees, looking down at her hands and staring at them mindlessly. I've seen this before, with other survivors

in emergency scenarios as they come to grips with the fact that their body still functions normally while their loved one's does not. It takes a minute of silence, but she finally clenches her hands into fists and then claws them into a clasped knot in her lap. "I guess I should go find the administrative office the doctor was talking about and get all the paperwork filled out, huh?" she asks, looking up to meet my eyes with her own. They're bloodshot, the skin around them mottled, but she still looks like the beautiful, strong woman who came to my door after our near-collision on my very first day at the ranch.

I smile tenderly, placing my hand over hers and rubbing my thumb gently against her skin. "Whenever you're ready will be fine, Jen. There's no rush."

She shakes her head and pats my hand with one of her own before standing up. She slings her small western-style purse over her arm and squares her shoulders resolutely.

"I think I'm better off just doin' it now," she says. "Sittin' here doin' nothin'll drive me right crazy anyway."

Boy, do I understand that.

Idle hands and minds were the precursor to Rhett's and my almost kiss too, and that *had* to be temporary insanity—right?

Sure, Leah, tell yourself whatever you need to not to implode from the sheer disappointment that nothing actually got to happen.

After a quick acknowledgment from me that she should do whatever makes her feel best, Jenny disappears down the hallway, and I sit back down in the chair and start scrolling through her contacts list until I find the number I'm looking for under **Rhett Jameson**.

Some women might have their son's name in there as a nickname or something cutesy, but not Jenny. And frankly, that's probably because it's not Rhett. He's not the kind of guy you call *baby boy* or some shit.

He's all man in a way that even his mama knows it.

Which is a freaking unicorn-like mythical creature in the interactions I've had with men and their families in the past.

Most of them were bordering on codependent with their mothers, they still had so much growing up to do.

I hit the button to call and put the phone to my ear, waiting nervously as it rings.

The truth is, I don't even know if Rhett's got his phone on him. It's such a different life there on the ranch, from the rest of the urban world. Here in Salt Lake, it's weird if people don't have their phones; on the ranch, it's pretty weird if people do.

Probably the most surprising thing about it all, though, is that I find myself preferring the second.

"Lo?" Rhett answers on the third ring, his voice deep like always, but with the addition of an extra rasp. If I had to guess, I'd say that he's tired and emotionally drained, which, of course, makes me feel like it's all the more important that I called.

"Rhett, it's Leah. I wanted to let you know that we made it here, to Salt Lake Regional Medical Center, and your dad is with the doctors now. He's doing well, though, okay? We didn't have any more major episodes on the flight in, and all of his vitals are stable. They're going to work to ensure he stays that way, but I promise, you don't need to stress too much. He's doing really well, and we acted fast enough that I think we prevented the worst of the damage."

"Thank God," he breathes on an exhale that I feel all the way to my soul. Even with the distance, even through the phone—I can feel Rhett's relief as sure as I could if it were a physical touch. The connection crackles, and I'm not sure, but it might be more about him struggling with his emotion than cell phone service.

While there's absolutely no boundary for what kind of emotion is acceptable in a man, I'm still careful not to mention that I notice. I'd like to think that Rhett would be comfortable being anything he needs to be in front of me, but I'm also not naïve enough to believe we're to that stage of our...well, relationship, for lack of a better word.

He's a tough, rugged cowboy who can literally handle having his knee shredded in a bronc riding accident. When he makes the decision to expose himself to me emotionally, I know for certain it'll need to be on his own terms.

"How are you and Joey doing?" I ask instead of calling attention to anything else.

"Better now," he says simply, and I close my eyes to keep myself from saying something I know it's not my place to say. Still, the emotion of what he and Joey must have been going through, all alone in that truck with no information or comfort, is enough to spill a single, fat tear from the corner of each of my eyes. "We should be there in about an hour or so, and I'm hopin' Joey'll keep sleepin' until we get there."

I don't question how fast he's been driving that has enabled him to shave nearly a third off his travel time, though the impulse to do it is strong. Hopefully, now that I've given him an olive branch of news to hold on to, he'll take his time for the rest of the drive.

"I'm glad she managed to pass out, but how are you doing? I know you must be exhausted after how busy the last couple days have been."

"I'm all right," he insists. "Tired but wired. You don't have to be worryin' about me. Just...let me know if anything changes with my dad, if you don't mind."

"Of course. And anything you need, just call me back, okay? Even if it's just a question you think of that you'd rather not wait to have answered. I've got your mom's phone on me, and I'll keep it where I can feel it vibrate."

"Thanks, Leah."

As silence breaks out, and the sounds of the road and Rhett's steady breathing become all I can hear, I consider mentioning the moment that was almost a kiss.

A flash fantasy of his hands tangled back in my hair and his lips against mine hits me squarely in the chest and holds it, making a slow burn roll all the way down to the space between my legs.

I bite hard into my lip to keep myself from moaning audibly, and I almost have to slap myself silly as Rhett's voice comes back over the line.

"Leah, you still there?"

I swallow hard, praying my voice will come across as a fraction of normal. "Y-yes. I'm sorry."

"Okay, well...I guess I'm gonna concentrate on drivin'. And I'll see ya when I get there."

"Of course," I agree. "I'll let you know if I get any other updates."

"Thanks, Leah."

"Safe travels, Rhett."

I pull the phone away from my ear as the line goes dead, and then out of pure reflex, pull it in tightly to my chest and think back to the kiss again.

My mind races in a million different directions, but at the end of it all, I have but one, resolute thought.

I *want* it—the missed opportunity.

And for the first time since our almost kiss happened, I consider the possibility that it might not come back around again. The prospect of what that might leave me with is downright terrifying—unrequited love...or lust, at the very least.

I mean, what will I do then? *What if he decides it wasn't a good idea after all?*

TWENTY-SIX



July 4th, Sunday

Rhett

The room is quiet other than the infrequent beeps of some machine, and the smell is chemical in nature.

I know for a fact that taking a man straight from the middle of a two-thousand-acre ranch and setting him in the middle of a hospital is bound to make him feel like a fish out of water, but even if that weren't the case, I don't think I could ever feel comfortable here.

Leah, though, as I saw in the hall when I left Joey with her to sleep, appears to have zero unease about the hospital. Her posture is relaxed, her eyes are calm and assured—this place that feels so foreign to me, to her, feels like a slice of home.

I have to imagine, then, that upon arrival at Shaw Springs, maybe she felt a little bit like I do now—like the world around her was a strange and uncertain place and like everything she's ever thought she knew to be true was maybe only true part of the time.

I lean forward and rest my forehead on the side of my dad's bed, clasping my hands in front of my face as he sleeps. I've been here for the last three hours, waiting for him to wake up and tell me *you've got a hell of a lot of growin' up to do.*

My mom has been in and out of the room, but for her, sitting around and waiting felt like giving in to what could have been.

It's funny how something like this makes you appreciate so much you never thought you could—things that, at one point, you outright hated.

The meddling, the pressure, the tough love from my dad—all of it always felt like a burden I didn't think I'd earned. But seeing him like this—seeing him helpless like he was last night—has completely recharacterized it all in my mind.

He wasn't demanding—he was demanding more *from* me because he could see the strengths I possessed.

He wasn't preaching to me—he was preaching *for* me, his hope to lift me up and give me the tools to succeed.

He wasn't trying to be in charge of my life—he was trying to get me to take charge of myself.

“Rhett,” my old man says, his voice gravelly and weakened in a way I've sure as hell never heard.

Quickly, I jerk my head off the bed and reach out to take his hand in mine. It's the first time I've heard him speak since last night, and it only half sounds like him. He's clearly been through the wringer and then some; his normally pinkened skin is pale and sunken, and his messy hair is going every which way without a hat.

A sick twist grabs hold of my stomach as I read the truth plain as day in his eyes.

If it weren't for Leah being there—if it weren't for getting lucky—he very well might not be here anymore.

All the fights and arguments we've gotten into over the years feel like a lead weight on my shoulders. I don't know that I'd go back and change the past if I were given a second chance if I didn't know this feeling, but right now, feeling the way I do, I know I'll think harder going forward.

“Yeah, Daddy,” I say through a tight throat after forcing a swallow. Sometimes, to outsiders, the impulse of a grown man to call his father “Daddy” seems out of place. But I can say

with the certainty of all thirty-six years of my life, that I wouldn't be able to change it right now if I tried. On the outside, I'm a grown man with thick skin and a hard head. But on the inside, it's been a long damn while since I've felt this much like a scared little boy.

"Cheer up, boy, and stop lookin' so sad, all right? I'm doin' just fine, but watchin' your heart break like it is for much longer, I think, might just turn that around."

"I'm...just...I'm sorry—"

"Rhett, no. Don't go doin' that, okay? Ain't no one sorrier than me for stickin' my head in my ass so much."

"Daddy—"

"I've gotta learn to take it out every once in a while. Look around and such."

"I haven't exactly been seein' things clearly, old man."

He chuckles then, coughing a little and grabbing at his chest at the movement. "Ow, fuckin' hell," he rasps. "Remind me not to fuckin' laugh again for a while."

I smile.

"Listen, you're my DNA, and I'm pretty sure the Y chromosome of that shit is at least ninety percent stubborn mule. I've never taken any real offense to your attitude because I had the same goddamn one with my daddy.

"That said, if you tell your mother I took the Lord's name in vain just now, I promise you there'll be hell to pay, you hear me?"

I can't help but laugh. The relief of seeing my dad be so much of himself is swift and potent.

"I won't tell, old man. I swear."

"Good man. I guarantee that wouldn't be good for either one of us."

"I know." I smile at him. "And I also want you to know that I'm gonna make a bigger effort to take what you say to heart when you're tryin' to give me advice, and to take Leah's

orders seriously, too. I realize now that you were just tryin' to make sure I came out of this with a leg that functioned."

He wheezes then, shifting slightly in the bed before challenging, "Oh, come on now. Tell me that's the only thing I've gotten you out of this."

"What do you mean?"

"Boy, don't tell me you ain't looked at that girl. Come on now. I'm an old man, but I ain't blind. There's a lot to that one between the body and the brain."

I shake my head, though not necessarily in denial. Obviously, after the way things transpired last night, there's something more than just a working relationship between Leah and me.

But the last place I want to have all of my emotional realizations over the matter is in a fucking hospital room at my stricken father's bedside.

"Why don't we just table that discussion for a while," I suggest, and again, he laughs and clutches his chest.

"Uh-huh, that's what I thought."

I roll my eyes but counteract the expression with a smile. He's still frustrating, but man, I'm happy to be sitting here letting him give me shit.

"Oh, honey, you're awake!" my mom says with pure delight as she walks through the door and turns her plain walk into a jog.

"Yeah, darlin'," my dad says, turning his eyes from me to the love of his life. When my mom makes it to his opposite bedside and leans down to touch her lips to his own, I know it's my cue to give them some time to themselves.

"I'll be back in a little bit, Dad. Gonna check on Joey and maybe get her some food, okay?"

Tex smiles at that and gives me a thumbs-up. "Hell yes. Feed my granddaughter, and then bring her in to see me. I wanna give her a hug and a kiss and let her know that I'm doin' just fine."

“I will.”

“She’s out in the hall with Leah,” my mom says helpfully.
“Maybe you can feed both of them while you’re at it.”

Just like Tex, there’s a hint in her words I won’t touch on for now.

Instead, I bid both of my parents a salute and head for the hallway.

Destination: two very important girls.

TWENTY-SEVEN



July 4th, Sunday

Leah

Mindlessly, I stroke Joey's soft hair as she sleeps in my lap. Her petite hands are tucked together under her cheek, and her breath comes out in steady, even waves.

I have to pee like a racehorse, but I wouldn't dare move from this spot for anything—not even the very real possibility of bladder damage.

Something about her sweet cuddles is a soothing balm to the tattered edges of a long and restless night here at the hospital watching people I've come to care about struggle with the fear of a loved one's health scare.

In need of a distraction from the growing urgency in my abdomen, I pick up my abandoned phone from the seat of the chair next to me and tap the screen to wake it up. Several messages are stacked recklessly atop one another on the home screen, the result of weeks and weeks of being incommunicado with the world outside of Shaw Springs Ranch.

There are several messages from my brother Sam, who is thankfully easygoing and smart enough not to freak out and call the police after not being able to get in touch with me while I've been on this job in the middle of nowhere. And an

almost insanely lengthy chain from Carla and Taylor that they've had going since the last short exchange I started with them in the middle of a meadow.

I hold the phone up in front of my face so it'll unlock, open the message app which boasts an ungodly sixty-three unread messages, and scroll down to click on Sam's contact first. After scrolling back up to the beginning of his new messages, I start reading.

Sam: How goes it at your new home, home on the range? Tell me, is it really where the deer and the antelope play?

I smile at his ridiculousness and scroll down.

Sam: You know, I heard that too, sis. So glad to hear we're on the same page.

Sam: I really enjoy these meaningful chats with you. We should have them more often.

Sam: WHAT? You want me to have your car? You're giving it to me as a gift?! Seriously, Leah, that's so generous of you.

Sam: I don't know if anyone's ever mentioned this to you before...but you're really too chatty. You should tone down the messages a bit, it's getting overwhelming.

Sam: Okay, but for real...you better text me as soon as your stupid phone works again. I want justification that I'm doing the right thing by not freaking out that you're not answering me at ALL. And perhaps, also, a cookie. Thank you.

I make a mental note to call my brother and set things right just as soon as I don't have a sleeping girl in my lap and some time to myself. Sam's such a positive force in my life, and honestly, I don't know what I'd do without him.

And if our roles were reversed, I'd be freaking the flip out like a lunatic by now.

Scrolling up through the message app, I stop on the group message with Carla and Taylor and click it open to read through what they've had to say.

It will probably be a lot less calm than Sam, but I can pretty much guarantee it'll be just as colorful.

Carla: You know, I'm not sure I'm loving the whole knock and dash you did on us the other day, Lee. I mean, you tell us all about some hot, disgruntled cowboy and get our hopes up for little western-outfitted babies, and then you just DISAPPEAR? That's damn near criminal.

Taylor: RIGHT? My sweat glands haven't been the same since you dangled the hot guy carrot and took it away! I'm sweating right through my pajamas at night, dammit.

Carla: To be fair, Tay, you've been having night sweats for longer than Lee's been gone. Remember last summer when we went to Vegas and we woke up so wet I thought we both peed the bed?

Taylor: CARLA. I thought we agreed never to speak of that again?

Carla: We won't. In a public forum. But everyone in this group message already knows about it, and you're acting like Lee's disappearing act has single-handedly turned you into a sweat hog.

Taylor: FINE. It didn't cause it, but it's not helping, okay?

*Carla: Why don't we focus back on the problem here...
LEE AND HER REFUSAL TO SHARE
INFORMATION*

Taylor: Rude.

Carla: For real.

I start to scroll down to a whole other set of messages from a couple days later, but Joey stirs in my lap and looks up at me with big, sweet eyes.

I click the button on the side of my phone to shut off the screen and toss it back to the seat of the chair next to me.

“Hi, sweetie. Did you get some good sleep?”

She nods, rubbing at her eyes with the backs of her hands, and I sweep some of the loose strands of blond hair out of her face with soft fingers.

“How about you and I go down to the cafeteria and grab some food?” I say, just as Rhett comes through the door of Tex’s room. His steps are swift, and he seems to be on a mission.

Even his face is serious and determined, and Joey must sense it because she jumps up and off my lap and stands to the side. I shake in my spot on the small chair, willing my body to burrow itself back through the thick hospital wall and into another dimension where Rhett isn’t looking at me like that and I’m guaranteed to feel no bodily harm.

I don’t know what he’s thinking, and I sure as hell can’t tell what he’s feeling, because just like always, he’s a mystery.

“Stand up,” he orders suddenly, his voice rough and commanding and brutal.

I do as he asks, not even by choice but my sheer involuntary compliance, and between one breath and the next, everything in my world changes.

Rhett pulls me into a hug.

But not just any hug. It’s bone-crushing, body-squeezing—earth-shattering.

I feel like his heart is laid out and bare, and if only I would let him, he would move it to the inside of my chest right next to my own.

He’s tall and strong and warm, and by God, he feels better than any human I’ve ever been in this close of contact with. I never imagined that someone who smelled like leather and horses would be the kind of person I sought out for peace and comfort, but I’ll be damned if being wrapped up in Rhett Jameson’s arms doesn’t feel like a whole new level of home.

Of comfort.

Of unexpected happiness.

His lips whisper softly into the veil of my hair at my ear, and a shiver runs unchecked down my spine and out the ends of my toes. “Thank you,” he rasps, the weight of those two words enough to make it feel like my feet sink right into the hard tile floor.

I nod right there, in the tight envelope of his hold, against the column of his corded throat and do my best to hedge the sting in my nose enough to prevent it from turning into tears. “You’re welcome. I mean, of course. I’m just glad I was able to help.”

His hold doesn’t relent, and frankly, neither does mine. I can’t do anything but push the surface of my body closer to his, mindlessly desperate to achieve complete and total contact.

I have to be closer—I *need* to be.

“You didn’t just help,” he tells me roughly, moving our heads so that his lips are the ones at my throat now. “Leah, you saved his life, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to properly thank you.”

I squeeze him harder, clutching my arms around his back.

“You don’t have to, okay? You’re doing it right now.”

After a heavy, warm, shiver-inducing sigh against my throat, unfortunately, he pulls back and puts far too much distance—a foot or so—between us. I feel cold and empty and downright terrified of the reason for both, so in an attempt to cover up my spiraling emotions, I take a dive into an awkward attempt at humor.

“Though, I suppose, if you really want to thank me, you could take Joey and me down to the cafeteria for some food.” I turn to Joey and whisper conspiratorially. “After doing my residency here, I happen to know they’ve got a killer piece of chocolate cake with our names on it.”

“Yeah!” Joey agrees loudly with a thumbs-up. “Can we go, Daddy? Can we?”

Rhett smiles. “I was already plannin’ on it, but even I’ll admit, the promise of chocolate cake sealed the deal.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, an objective comes to mind and develops its very own rabid dog of influence.

Before we leave Salt Lake City, in a couple of days when we know everything with Tex is truly good, I'm going to get Rhett and Joey out of this hospital and show them just a little tiny sliver of *my* life.

It'll do them good to get out and get the fresh air, and it'll do me some good to see my brother.

Resolute, I grab my phone with the objective to text Sam back while we eat and set up a plan, and with the other hand, grab the tiny counterpart of Joey's that she's got reached up and waiting.

And now...chocolate cake, Joey, and Rhett. I'm not sure it gets much better. Though, I have to admit, a stop by the bathroom won't hurt.

TWENTY-EIGHT



July 7th, Wednesday

Rhett

Leah looks absolutely stunning in high heels and a yellow-and-pink sundress that buttons all the way down the front. She walks across the parking lot toward Joey and me just outside the front door of *Flan Solo*, which is evidently Leah and her brother Sam's favorite restaurant in Salt Lake City. Her hair is down and around her shoulders, and her eyes look so sharply blue tonight it's almost as if she dyed them.

She hasn't worn her hair down in nearly a month, having fully given herself over from the done-up princess that arrived to a true working ranch girl.

She looks beautiful both ways, but I'd be lying if I said she didn't take my breath away tonight. And after several days in the hospital with no time or space to even consider addressing the kiss that very nearly happened before Tex's heart attack, it's almost as if it's amplified.

Joey squeezes my hand to get my attention, and I glance down at her, albeit distractedly. It's not like me not to give my daughter my full attention, but tonight, Leah's smile seems to be inescapable—a dangerous thought since we haven't even made it inside the restaurant yet.

“Daddy,” Joey says, calling for my attention again, noticing that it’s drifted against my best intentions.

I nod and look down at her again, trying to focus on her sweet face and shaking my head just slightly to clear it.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Leah looks like a real live Barbie doll tonight.”

I nod. *I couldn’t agree more*

Leah smiles and waves at us excitedly, and Joey waves back. I grin, but I don’t necessarily trust my limbs to cooperate right now if I attempt a wave, seeing as a whole hell of a lot of my body’s blood supply is currently trying to migrate to my dick.

It isn’t actually until Leah pulls up short and waits for a man to catch up, looping her arm through his and leaning into him that I even notice her brother exists.

But the way he’s looking at me now that I have spared him a glance suggests he’s been observing me for a while.

Leah breaks away from her brother again when they get to us and pulls Joey in for a hug against her legs. Joey’s chin rests against Leah’s stomach as she looks up at her and makes silly faces.

I tear my eyes away again and stick out a hand to Leah’s brother, Sam. He looks a lot like her, the same hair and eye color and skin tone, but he’s got a little bit of an edge that I very rarely see in her, too. I’m not sure if it has something to do with the responsibility of deadbeat parents or something else, but I can tell right off the bat that he’s got a keen sense of character judgment.

“Hey there. Sam, right?”

He takes the hand I offer and shakes it firmly. “That’s right. And you must be Rhett.”

I nod congenially, settling one hand on Joey’s shoulder as she steps back to her position beside me and slipping the fingers of the other into the pocket of my dark-wash jeans. They’re new, as is everything we’re wearing at this point since

we left the ranch to head here in such a hurry, but they'll get broken in in no time once we get back home.

Joey holds out a hand then, like a miniature adult, sending a pang to my chest over how fast she's growing up. "Hi, Mr. Sam. I'm Josephine Jameson, and I really like your sister."

Sam smiles huge, leaning down to get closer to her level and accepting her shake. "Well hello, Josephine. Are you sure you like my sister that much? Doesn't she smell sometimes?"

Joey shakes her head with a giggle. "Nooo."

Leah rolls her eyes but lets out a cute laugh of her own at the obvious teasing.

"Oh. Well, that's good, then."

I don't necessarily want to rush things along, but I'm also fucking starving, so that only leaves me with the option of a quick verbal nudge. "Ready to go inside, then?"

Leah nods enthusiastically. "Yep. I can't wait for the crispy mac and cheese."

I grin. "I guess it's a good thing I put our name in with the hostess, then, huh? We just have'ta let her know we're all here."

"Yesss!" she cheers. "Way to be assertive, cowboy."

Sam watches us closely, glancing back and forth between the two of us as I smile, and Leah sticks out her tongue in a dramatic show of sass. I wave a hand in the space between us and give Joey a little push to move her toward Leah. "Ladies first."

"Oh. Why, thank you," Leah chirps happily. She's super bubbly tonight, and I have a feeling it's because she's just happy to have us and her brother and a night out at her favorite restaurant all at the same time.

When we all get inside, I make quick work of letting the hostess know we're ready to be seated, and she escorts us to a table toward the back of the restaurant that has leather-seated chairs and a crisp white tablecloth over its top.

Sam takes the seat on the opposite side, Leah and Joey take the seats across from each other, and I take the seat across from Sam.

I have a nearly blinding urge to stick my hand under the table and give Leah's leg just the slightest of touches, but because of the company we keep, I don't.

Sam, though—he smiles at me in a way that says he knows I want to.

“Is Sam short fer Samuel?” Joey asks, pulling Leah's brother's attention away from me, thankfully. I take the opportunity to look Leah up and down one more time, and I can tell you it doesn't help the redistribution of my blood supply at all.

With a cute beachy wave in her hair and long, full eyelashes framing her sparkling blue eyes, she's stunning. Add that to the way her dress hugs her sweet body in all the right places and she has me convinced I've never seen a more perfect package.

Luckily, Sam's answer gives me something else to concentrate on, if only for a little while, because if left to my own devices, I'd be liable to jump across the table right here and pull Leah's body flush against mine.

“Yes, it is, actually. How did you know?”

Joey laughs. “It was my great-great-great-grandfather's name too. He's the one who started our ranch.”

I knew that, Leah mouths teasingly, referring to knowledge she's gained from the welcome speech she's so fond of mocking.

“Well, that's pretty awesome,” Sam replies. “I've never been too keen on my name, but now, maybe I'll be able to associate it with a cool story. I mean, if you like living on a ranch, that is. I've never been to one myself.”

“You haven't?” Joey asks, shock and awe in her tiny voice.

“Nope. I work in a boring, pointless job titled Corporate Analyst.”

I cringe—I can't help it—and Sam notices. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to take any offense to my clear contempt for the corporate world.

“I know. Sounds awful, doesn't it?” he agrees with a chuckle instead.

I nod and shrug slightly, and he laughs even harder.

“Oh, come on,” Leah chastises. “You have a really important role, and you worked really hard to get where you are. Be proud of it.” Sam blushes as she adds, “I am.”

Then she turns to me with a cute smile. “We can't all collect bull sperm for a living.”

At that, both Sam and I both burst out laughing.

“You should come visit sometime, Sam. We're always looking for volunteers for collection.”

Leah laughs. “Okay, I admit it. It's funnier when it's someone other than me.”

I smirk. “I actually thought you handled yourself pretty well, darlin'. For what it's worth.”

“You?” Sam asks, his eyes wide and his smile huge. “You? My sister? Leah Levee collected bull sperm?”

“I *tried* to collect bull sperm,” she says, but then she shakes her head and drops her face into her hands on a moan. “It's a long story, really. Let's not get into it now.”

It's not the usual dinner conversation you'd hear at a nice restaurant in the middle of Salt Lake City, but it is what we need to break the ice. The rest of dinner is filled with laughter and joking and an overall sense of acceptance. I don't feel like Sam's watching me as much, and hell, maybe it's because I'm not acting as suspicious.

Joey's still tickled pink to be out to dinner like a real grown-up, and I'm still smitten with a woman I never expected to be, but all in all, it's the breath of fresh air and relaxation we all needed after the way this week has gone.

Sam says his goodbyes first, heading back to his car with a wave and a promise to take time off from his job he hates to come visit the ranch one day, and Leah hangs back with Joey and me while we wait for the quick rain shower that just popped up to pass before making our way to my truck.

Leah frowns a little and then sighs, and suddenly, my good mood starts to take a bit of a nose dive. It doesn't exactly sound like she's gearing up to give me good news, and to be honest, I'm not really sure I wanna hear it.

“So...I-I talked to Tex's doctors today, and they've said they plan to send him home in a couple days. I guess my boss Frank is going to loan us his plane again to fly your mom and him back, and I know you all have your truck, but he's asked me to come into work tomorrow and maybe even stay an extra day, just to go over everything for the upcoming season before he flies me back a day later than your parents.”

The news stings more than I expect, given the fact that not too long from now, she'll be set to leave the ranch for good, but in the interest of not ruining any more of a good night, I keep that tidbit to myself.

Instead, I smile and pull her into a hug that feels too damn good.

“That's all right, darlin'. I'm just glad you're comin' back—glad you're going to be there to help see to both of us, me and the old man.”

Talk about the understatement of the century. She leans in and puts her lips to my cheek, letting them linger there in a gentle kiss just long enough to make me close my eyes against the permeating warmth in my chest.

“I'm glad too.”

With one last smile and a hug for Joey, she retreats across the parking lot, back to her car and away from us for the next little while.

Watching her walk away is harder than I ever dreamed it would be.

And that worries me.

Because if it's this hard now, what in the hell is it gonna feel like when Dr. Leah Levee moves on from us for good?

TWENTY-NINE



July 10th, Saturday

Leah

“Home sweet home,” Tex muses as he sits down in his favorite leather recliner.

After a short flight via private plane from Salt Lake City, we landed on the dirt runway of Shaw Springs Ranch. I thought I’d have to stay the extra day at work with the Slammers, but for whatever reason, Frank declared he’d seen everything he needed to, dismissed me with a smile, and sent me on my way to catch the plane with Jenny and Tex.

Given the choice, I probably would have driven back with Rhett and Joey, but they’d already left an hour before.

Upon arrival, it didn’t take long before we were swarmed by Tiny and other staff wanting to check on Tex.

He took all the attention in his usual gruff manner and told them he was fine, and then proceeded to say, “*Now, get your asses back to work. This ranch ain’t gonna run itself.*”

Oddly enough, everyone responded with smiles and laughs.

The man is a hard-ass, but he’s also a beloved hard-ass.

Now that we’re back at his and Jenny’s house, the main focus is getting him all settled in and comfortable. He’s been

given the all clear from his medical team at the hospital, but the stress his body and heart have gone through will require a slower pace and low-stress mind-set to ensure a healthy recovery.

It's become a full-team effort, and I'm honored and happy to be a part of this team.

While Joey helps Rhett outside with a loose fence post, I'm inside making sure Tex has all his medications lined up and laid out for the coming days.

It's imperative that he sticks to doctor's orders from here on out.

Proper diet, medication regimen, and frequent blood pressure checks—I have no qualms with being the bad guy in this scenario and enforcing the health rules if I have to.

Lord knows I've already gained some experience in handling stubborn Jameson men.

Jenny flashes a smile at her husband, relief still evident in her eyes, and heads down the hall to their bedroom with a new rolling suitcase in tow.

I can only imagine the anxiety and worry that've been plaguing her over Tex's heart attack. I'm just thankful he got the care he needed and he's stable enough to finish his recovery at home.

Home sweet home, as Tex calls it.

It's an odd feeling for me right now, this sense of actually understanding those three words.

I never would've thought I'd feel reprieve in being back at the ranch, but I do.

Shaw Springs Ranch has become a place that I actually *want* to be.

It's kind of insane, to be honest. I always considered myself a woman who thrived in a busy, urban environment, but that's beginning to feel like a false assumption when living on a ranch like this has provided such peace for my soul.

“So, what do you think, Leah?” Tex asks as I finish up organizing his medications in the kitchen.

“What do I think about what?”

“You think you’re going to be able to keep up with treating two Jameson men now?”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “You’re both stubborn as hell, but I think I’ll manage.”

Right on cue, Jenny walks back into the living room and points a stern index finger at her husband. “If you don’t follow her medical instructions, you’ll have to answer to me. So, yes, I think we can all agree there’s not gonna be any darn problems with you being bullheaded, right?”

Tex chuckles. “You got it, boss.”

Jenny just rolls her eyes and walks into the kitchen. “Now, who wants some lunch? Leah, you hungry, sugar?”

“Actually, I have to run into town—”

“You’re going into town?!” Joey exclaims at the tops of her lungs as she barrels through the screen door and into the kitchen.

“Sure am,” I answer through an amused laugh. “I need to go to Target to grab a few things.”

“Oh my stars! I *love* Target!” she cheers as Rhett steps into the room. “Daddy, I’m gonna go with Leah into town!”

A knowing and downright handsome smirk makes its debut on his lips. “Joey, what have I told you about inviting yourself places?”

She huffs out a sigh. “You said it’s rude and I need’ta ask, not tell.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s fine,” I chime in. “She can ride with me into St. George, if that’s okay with you?”

“You sure?” he questions, and I smile.

“Honestly, I’d love the company.”

“Can I go, Daddy?” Joey asks, cupping her hands together in front of her chest. “Please, please, please, can I go with Leah?”

Rhett shakes his head, chortles, and reaches out to ruffle the top of his daughter’s hair. “Yeah, you can go.”

“Yes!” Joey pumps one little fist into the air.

“Jenny, do you need me to get anything for you and Tex while I’m out?” I ask, and she glances over her shoulder to offer a thankful grin.

“If you don’t mind grabbing a few things for me, I’d be forever grateful.”

“Of course, just give me a list, and I’ll get it.”

Jenny wastes no time grabbing a pen and paper and jotting down a short list of various things—eggs, milk, sugar, stuff like that.

“Is there anything I should be doing right now?” Tex asks from his recliner, and I shake my head.

“Nothing but relaxing for the next few days.”

“I can rest today, but tomorrow, I’m gonna have to head into the office and see how much of a mess this ranch is in since both Rhett and I have been gone.”

I shake my head again. “Actually, *no*, you’re not going to do that.”

“Relax, old man,” Rhett comments. “I’ll handle it.”

When Tex starts to open his mouth, Rhett adds, “And I’ll come by and update you on everything.”

That seems to settle Tex’s concerns. Well, *most* of his concerns.

“And I’m just supposed to sit on my ass and twiddle my goddamn thumbs? I mean, I’m not the only one who’s got some medical shit going on. What’s Rhett allowed to do, Leah?”

Rhett bursts into a hearty laugh. “You worry about yourself.”

Tex smirks.

I snort. But also, I don’t hesitate to include my two cents. “Rhett’s current plan of action revolves around him wearing his brace when he’s busy and—”

“*What?*” Rhett scowls. “I thought you said I’m nearing the time when I can be done with this thing for good.”

“I *said* you’ll be able to take it off for the most part and only wear it when you’re doing strenuous activities, but you also tweaked it the other day outside the lodge and I’d really rather be on the safe side.”

The instant the word strenuous comes out of my mouth, my mind threatens to think about all the various inappropriate strenuous activities it can conjure up. All of them revolving around a very naked cowboy.

Dear God. Don’t go there.

“No offense, Dr. Leah, but I think this knee is just about healed.”

I narrow my eyes. “*No offense, Dr. Rhett*, but you’re wrong. That tendon of yours still has about another three months before it’s completely healed. So, now is definitely not the time to go cowboy-buck-wild.”

Rhett flashes a grin that borders on sexy, and for some insane reason, I blush.

“And what else can I expect?” he asks. “You still gonna be pushin’ ice packs and massages and stretchin’ and water therapy at the lodge pool on me?”

I nod. “Damn straight.”

Tex chuckles, chiming in with, “Remember what you told me in the hospital, boy.”

Rhett rolls his eyes. “I thought you were dyin’. I can hardly be held accountable.”

Tex opens his mouth to respond, but before he can get the words out, Joey is at my hip, tugging on my shirt and talking loudly enough to distract him. “Can we go? I’m ready!”

“Yep,” I say and lean down to whisper in her ear. “Let’s get out of here before your daddy and granddaddy can cause any more trouble.”

“We better leave quick, then!” Joey giggles. “My granny Jenny says they’re always startin’ trouble!”

“Who’s startin’ trouble, Josephine?”

Joey giggles some more. “No one, Grandpa! Mind ya beeswax!”

Once I grab Jenny’s list from the kitchen, I take Joey’s hand and walk out of the house and toward the truck Tex loaned me.

But before we can get in, Rhett’s voice fills my ears. “Wait!” he calls from the porch, making his way down the steps.

He tosses me a pair of keys. His keys. To *his* truck.

“What’s this?”

“Take my truck. Tank is full and tires are new,” he answers. “My dad’s truck is about due for an oil change, and the back tires are lookin’ a little worn.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I recall one time you referring to your truck as your *baby*.”

He smiles. “Positive. I want you girls to be safe, and Joey’s booster’s already in the back seat.”

The gentleness in his voice rattles my equilibrium. Honestly, it hits me square in the fucking chest. And to my surprise, when both Joey and I get inside his truck, Rhett walks around to the driver’s side and leans against the doorjamb, his head peeking in through the rolled-down window.

“Be safe, okay?”

I nod. “We will.”

“Call me on the radio if you have any trouble,” he instructs and then meets Joey’s eyes. “And you be on your best behavior and listen to Leah, got it?”

“Got it, Daddy.”

Rhett reaches out and tenderly pats his hand over the top of mine. “See ya when you get back.”

The gesture is so simple, yet it makes my heart flutter inside my chest.

And the way he smiles at me, his entrancing blue eyes filled with something I can’t fully discern, I have the odd urge to take a mental picture of him so I can keep this memory locked tight in my mind.

Once I start the engine and Rhett is making his way back inside his parents’ house, I can’t help but think how different he seems from when I first met him.

I thought he was an asshole grumpy cowboy with a perpetual chip on his shoulder.

But now? I don’t see him like that anymore. Sure, he can be really obstinate sometimes, but he’s also incredibly sweet and kind. He’s a father and a son and a man who loves and cares and provides for his family.

It’s almost as if I’m *really* starting to like this cowboy. Like, a lot.

Probably too much.



“You think we got everything?” I ask Joey as I push our cart away from the checkout line and toward the exit doors.

We’ve spent a good ninety minutes inside Target, and it shows inside our cart.

The damn thing is filled with all sorts of goodies—items on Jenny’s list, items on my list, as well as a few items that Joey convinced me to get her in the name of adding some *cowgirl pizzazz* to her bedroom.

Honestly, I don't know how the two of us ended up in the decor section, but Target is a black hole vortex of shopping. You truly never know where you'll end up or what you'll end up leaving with. It's an affliction I like to call *the Target Trance*.

Though, I can't deny, I'm excited to help Joey put up the pink lace curtains she picked out as well as the new polka-dot comforter and sheet set she wanted for her bed.

Once we'd decided on a theme—*pink cowgirl rustic*—we went a little wild with buying bedding and cutesy pictures to hang on the walls.

“Leah! Look!” Joey exclaims once we reach the outside air. “Puppies!”

I look to my left, and sure enough, there is a tent with a sign that reads Adopt-A-Pet right in front. Two women dressed in matching green polos greet customers as they stop to look at the puppies running around inside a caged-off play area.

“Can we go see them?” Joey cups her hands together in the same manner I saw her do with Rhett earlier today. Her big blue eyes stare up at me, and I don't know what kind of human being could actually say no to this little girl, but I sure as hell know it's not me.

“Sure. Why not.”

Plus, I can't deny I'm a lover of all things tiny, adorable animals.

Joey squeals in excitement, hops off the back of the cart, and runs down the sidewalk as fast as her boots will take her.

I follow behind her much slower, pushing our cart filled with Target loot and avoiding running over anyone's feet.

Once I get there, she's already talking to one of the ladies in the green polo shirts.

“What's this puppy's name?” Joey asks and points to the smallest, strangest-looking tiny dog who is sitting all by himself in the corner of the play area.

“That’s Ernie,” the woman answers with a smile. “He’s a Chihuahua mix.”

“Why’s he all by his self?”

“He just gets a little nervous around other puppies, I think. Well, and people, too.”

A little nervous? The dog is shaking like a leaf, and his already big eyes look like they might pop out of his skull.

“And why is he here?”

“Well, because his mama left him with us so we could find a good home and a good family to take care of him.”

Oh no. Oh no-no-no.

I look down at Joey, and her bottom lip is already puckering out.

“His mama left him?”

Shit.

“Uh-huh,” the lady answers, and the saddened look that takes shape on Joey’s face could make a grown adult cry.

I know this because I feel like crying. I swallow back the emotion and start to tell Joey it’s time to go, but thanks to the lady in the green polo’s commentary about dogs without mamas, she’s too fixated on the shaking small dog.

“You poor little fella.” Joey leans down and carefully reaches out to touch the top of Ernie’s head, and he looks up at her with big, rounded eyes. “It’s okay,” she whispers, and the dog moves as close to her as the fenced-in area will allow.

“Aw, I think he likes you,” the lady says.

“It’s probably ’cause I know what it’s like to have your mama not want to stay with you.”

Oh, hell’s bells. My heart wants to break in half at her words. Obviously, Anna’s absentee parenting has had more of an effect on her than Rhett even thought.

“I wish I could take him home and be his mama,” Joey says and locks her big blue eyes with mine. “I think Ernie

would be so happy with me, Leah, don't you?"

I have no idea what to say.

For one, I'll be honest, Ernie is about the ugliest dog I've ever seen.

And two, the fact that this little girl has to voice that her mama doesn't want to stay with her is one of the worst things my ears have ever heard.

"Can I get him, Leah?" Joey asks. "Can I adopt Ernie so he doesn't have to be alone and scared without a mama?"

I open my mouth like a fish trying to gulp water, and no words come out.

Holy hell, how can I tell her that we can't take this dog home?

"The adoption fee is only fifty-five dollars," the lady updates, more than motivated to get this dog adopted. "And for another fifty dollars on top of that, we can make sure you have a cage and a dog bed and toys and food for Ernie."

I should say no. Obviously. I'm definitely not the one who should be making this decision.

But doing what I should do and doing what my heart is begging me to do are two very different things.

And when I hand my credit card off to the lady, it's pretty apparent which path I choose.

Uh oh.



We're about fifteen minutes from the ranch, and I look over to see Ernie—who is now sporting a sparkly blue collar and a T-shirt that says *Yeehaw!*—all curled up in Joey's lap. Her face is covered in a constant smile, and her fingers keep caressing the fur of the dog I definitely should not have adopted.

I didn't even call Rhett.

I just got so lost in the moment, so lost in Joey's sadness, that I adopted the damn dog without her daddy's permission

and...*shit*.

“So, uh, you think your daddy is going to be mad about Ernie?”

Joey looks over at me and nods. “Probably.”

“Uh...have you ever asked him if you could get a dog before?”

She nods again. “Yep.”

“And I take it he said no?”

“Yep.”

Fuck.

This is all information I probably should've asked before I, you know, adopted this fucking dog.

“So, how exactly do you suggest we break the news to him?”

“I'm not too sure.” Joey shrugs. “Maybe Ernie should stay at your cabin for a little while until we can find a way to sneak him into my house so my daddy doesn't find out.”

I'm not sure why I thought a five-year-old would be able to help me figure out how to handle this situation, but yeah, it's apparent Rhett is not going to be happy about this.

“You know, Friday is my birthday,” Joey comments. “Maybe you can just act like you got me Ernie for my birthday?”

“Your birthday is Friday?”

“Uh-huh.” She smiles proudly. “I'm gonna be six years old.”

“So, almost a full-fledged woman then, huh?”

She smiles proudly. “Pretty much.”

Goddamn. She's cute. No wonder she talked me into adopting Ernie.

“You know what's kind of crazy, Joe?”

“What?”

“My birthday is Friday too.”

“It is?” Her blue eyes light up.

“It really is.”

“How old are you gonna be?”

“Definitely not six.”

Joey giggles. “Well, I know that. Duh!”

“I’ll be thirty-three.”

“That’s three years younger than my daddy.”

I nod and take a right onto the road that leads into the ranch.

“You know what I think?”

“What do you think, Joey?”

“I think you should stay on the ranch forever and fall in love with my daddy and then get married and then you can tell him about Ernie and then he won’t be so mad about it.”

A laugh jumps from my lungs. “That’s quite the plan.”

“It’s a good plan,” she states with conviction. “Because you’d stay on the ranch with us forever and my daddy wouldn’t be able to be mad about Ernie because you’d be his wife and I know that wives get to make all sorts of rules because my granny Jenny does it all the time with my granddaddy Tex.”

Man, to be young and naïve again.

There’s so much to unpack in everything she just said, I don’t even know where to start.

But I don’t have time to ponder if I should be telling a five-year-old about the reasons people get married because the dashboard screeches and Rhett’s voice echoes inside the cabin.

“Where you girls at?”

Joey wastes no time grabbing the receiver and answering. “We’s almost home!”

“How many minutes?”

Joey looks at me, and I tell her ten.

“Ten more minutes, Daddy!”

“Now, Joey, did you mind your manners and not con Leah into buying you all sorts of stuff?”

Joey glances down at Ernie and then at me, and I glance in the rearview mirror where all of Ernie’s belongings and the Target bags filled with Joey’s bedroom decor are located.

Whoops.

When Joey doesn’t respond, Rhett’s voice fills the cab again.

“Josephine Jameson, you better not have talked Leah into buying you things that we both know you don’t need.”

“I didn’t ask Leah to buy me things I didn’t need,” she eventually responds. “Promise.”

Then she looks at me. “Don’t worry, Leah. It’s not lyin’. I needed all those things.”

“The stuff for your bedroom, sure,” I agree. “But Ernie?” I question with a half smile and half grimace. “You really think your daddy is going to be okay with him?”

Joey’s eyes go wide, and she shakes her head. “He’s gonna be mad ’bout Ernie. That’s for sure.”

“I’ll meet you girls at Leah’s cabin, all right?” Rhett adds. “See ya in a few.”

Joey looks at me with big, wide eyes. “How we gonna hide Ernie if Daddy’s at your cabin?”

“Honestly?” I sigh. “I have no idea.”

Oh boy.

THIRTY



July 10th, Saturday

Rhett

Leah pulls my truck to a stop a few feet away from her cabin, and I start to walk down the steps of her porch and toward the girls.

“Stay there, Daddy!” Joey shouts through the open window of the passenger door. “We don’t need no help! We got it!”

I tilt my head to the side in confusion, narrowing my eyes as I peer through the windshield toward Leah and Joey, who appear frozen in their seats.

What the hell is goin’ on?

More than a little suspicious now, I walk toward the two of them.

And once I’m about ten feet away, Joey’s eyes go wide, and Leah leans her head back against the headrest.

The instant I step up to the driver’s side door, the window already down, I look inside and spot a shaking furball sitting in my Joey’s lap.

What the fuck is that?

“Is that a damn rat?” I question, my eyes going wide. “In a T-shirt?”

“It’s a dog, Daddy,” Joey answers.

“*A dog?* I thought you two went to Target.”

“We did,” Leah responds, and I don’t miss the slight grimace that mars her face.

“Last I checked, they don’t sell dogs at Target.”

“They don’t,” Leah agrees, and her smile drips with apology. “But sometimes, they set up adoption tents *outside* of Target.”

I glance back and forth between the two culprits. Joey clutches the T-shirt-wearing rat-dog in her arms, and Leah looks like she can’t decide if she should sprint from the truck or wiggle into the floorboards.

“So, whose dog is this supposed to be?” I ask, already knowing by the damn collar and T-shirt that my daughter probably thinks this dog is hers.

“It’s Leah’s!” Joey chimes in, her voice far too amped up and excitable to be believed. “Leah fell in love with Ernie and the lady said he has no mama, so Leah wanted to be his mama. Ain’t that right, Leah?”

I move my gaze to Leah, and all she offers is a shrug. “I guess it was something like that.”

“Something like that?” I question. “You sure my daughter didn’t con you into adopting her a dog?”

“No way!” Joey answers before Leah can even open her mouth. “I didn’t do that, Daddy!”

I narrow my eyes at my adorable but certainly lying-ass kid.

“I mean, I might’ve told Leah it was a good idea. And that Ernie should have a mama...”

“*Joey.*”

“I’m no con, Daddy!” she shouts so loud that the damn rat-dog in her lap yelps and burrows himself into her T-shirt.

“Josephine Jameson, you know how I feel about lyin’.”

She huffs out a sigh. “Yeah.”

“Did you get Leah to adopt you that dog?”

“Maybe.”

I furrow my brow at her. “Maybe?”

“Okay, fine,” she says on a heavy sigh, and her bottom lip starts to tremble. “But I couldn’t help it, Daddy. Ernie looked so sad, and his mama just left him, Daddy! She left him and I know how that feels, so I thought I would be able to take good care of him because my mama leaves me all the time, ya know? I know that doesn’t feel good sometimes.”

By the time she’s done, a few tears drip down her cheeks, and I feel like the meanest bastard on the planet.

Fuck.

I let out a sigh and look down at the ground, and Leah leans closer to me to meet my eyes. Her face still looks guilty as hell but apologetic, too.

“Yeah, so,” she whispers toward me, low enough for my ears only. “That’s pretty much how I ended up adopting your daughter a dog without asking you. I’m sorry. Like, so, so sorry. I know I shouldn’t have done it, but the whole thing just broke my heart, and before I knew it, I was driving back with a dog in a *Yeehaw* T-shirt.”

I meet Leah’s eyes, and she offers another small, please-forgive-me smile.

“Please let me keep Ernie, Daddy. Please-please-*please*. Bless his little heart, he needs a mama. He needs a family. He don’t have nobody but me and you and Leah.” Joey snuffles and tucks her chin into her chest and grips Ernie so tight, the dog’s already bugged-out eyes look like they’re about to pop out of his head.

“That’s one ugly fucking dog,” I whisper back to Leah, and she snorts.

“Trust me, I’m aware.”

I stare over at the dog—a ball of fur and nervous tremors wearing a T-shirt in ninety-degree Utah heat.

“Why ya got a T-shirt on him, Joe?” I question. “It’s hot enough to melt cement out here.”

“Because he gets cold a lot. See? He’s shaking ’cause he’s cold.”

“I don’t think he’s shaking because he’s cold.”

“He also gets a bit nervous sometimes.”

That dog isn’t a little nervous. He’s scared shitless. I think a feather falling from the sky would have him running for the fucking hills.

And he’s now been brought to a ranch with roaming animals that are a million times his size.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say you’re gonna have to make sure that dog doesn’t get anywhere near the horses or the bulls,” I comment. “Or the chickens. Or, well, pretty much everything on this ranch. The fear he’d feel is liable to kill him. Not to mention the coyotes at night. There’s no way we can let ’em out alone.”

“He’ll be fine, Daddy. If you let me keep him, I’ll take good care of him.”

I shake my head and smirk down at Leah. “You owe me.”

“I’m very aware of that. Name the price and I’ll pay. Promise.”

Name the price. Goddamn. All sorts of dirty fucking things fill my head, and every single one of them includes a naked Leah Levee on my cock.

Quickly, I shake off the rogue thoughts and look toward my master-manipulating kid.

“Fine, Joe,” I agree. “Ernie can stay with us, but you’ll be the one responsible for him. You’re gonna have to feed him and bathe him and clean up his poop, you hear me?”

She nods, eyes serious. “I promise, Daddy! I’ll do everything!”

“Okay. Sounds like we have an understanding.”

Joey cheers and hugs her tiny, ugly-ass dog, and before I know it, she’s hopping out of the truck and heading up to Leah’s cabin. With Ernie in tow.

“Where ya goin’?” I call toward her.

“I need to pee!” she shouts over her shoulder.

“Again, I’m very sorry.”

I look down at Leah and laugh.

“Please tell me that dog is the only thing you brought home for her,” I say and make a show of leaning into the truck and looking toward the back seat where Target bags are piled high.

When she tries to block my view, I reach one hand to her ribs and playfully tickle her skin.

She squeals and laughs and slaps my hand away. “Mind your business! There’s nothing in here you need to see!”

We’re both laughing by the time I pull away, and I can’t stop myself from noticing just how fucking beautiful Leah looks when she’s laughing and smiling and carefree.

Fucking hell. She’s a damn goddess.

My chest tightens, and I busy myself by stepping back and opening up the door for her.

“Thanks for taking Joe with you today, even though you brought her back with a fuckin’ dog,” I tease, and her responding smirk is equal parts amused and mischievous.

“So, now probably isn’t the time to tell you that I kind of, sort of, maybe bought her a few things to help decorate her room...?”

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ kiddin’ me.”

Leah grimaces.

“Christ, my kid, I swear, she could talk a poor man out of his fuckin’ shoes.”

She laughs at that. “I won’t deny that your daughter is *dangerously* cute and well versed in pleading her case. *Especially* if her case revolves around getting something she wants.”

“She’ll probably make one hell of a lawyer.”

Leah nods and grins. “Yeah. I wouldn’t be surprised if she could talk her way into law school already.”

I sigh and open the back passenger door to start unloading the bags, but she stops me before I can get started.

“Honestly, most of those bags are either for your parents or your house,” she states and reaches in to grab only two of what have to be fifteen bags from the back seat. “These are mine.”

“Of course.” I shake my head on a chuckle. “Well, how about this? You drop those off inside and come with me and Joe to drop the rest off at my parents’. Then, we can head back to my place to eat some dinner.”

“You sure you want to eat dinner with the woman who adopted your daughter a dog without your permission?”

I chuckle. “Frankly, darlin’, I can’t think of anything I’d want to do more than have dinner with you tonight.”

Well, that’s partially true.

There are certainly a few other things I’d love to do more with Leah, but none are appropriate in the company of a five-year-old little girl.

Her cheeks flush pink, and a smile lifts up the corners of her mouth.

“So, sound like a plan?” I question and reach out to brush a piece of her hair behind her ear.

Leah nods. “Sounds like a *fantastic* plan.”

I don't know why her response makes me feel like I can walk on fucking water, but it does.



The sky is pitch black by the time I drive Leah home, and the wheels of my truck crunch over gravel as I bring it to a stop in front of her cabin.

“I had fun tonight,” Leah says from the passenger seat, her voice quiet in the cab.

“I did too,” I tell her and steal a glance in the rearview mirror to see that Joey is sound asleep in the back seat with Ernie curled up against her.

“And sorry again about, you know, the dog.”

I chuckle softly at that. “Yeah, well, I wouldn't say I'm exactly thrilled that I'm now the owner of a rat, but I definitely understand how it went down.”

“You're a really good dad, Rhett. I hope you know that.”

Her words give me pause, and I search her eyes. “You think so?”

“I know so,” she answers without hesitation. “My mom reminds me a lot of Joey's mom. She was never very good at sticking around or being in the motherly role. Though, I didn't have a dad like you to pick up the slack.”

“That's fuckin' awful. I'm sorry.”

“Me too,” she responds with a nod. “Luckily, I did have Sam, and he always looked out for me.”

“He's a good man.”

Her smile is reminiscent. “He is. I mean, he's still a pain-in-the-ass brother sometimes, but for the most part, he's one of the best.”

“Do you want to have kids of your own someday?”

“I'm not sure,” she answers, and her teeth dig into her bottom lip.

“You don’t think you want to get married?”

“It’s not that.” She shakes her head. “It’s just...I don’t know. A child is a huge responsibility, and I’ve been on the receiving end of what poor parenting can do to you. I guess I just want to make sure if I ever do have kids that I’m ready to be the mom they deserve.”

I hate that this beautiful, intelligent, kind, and strong woman has these kinds of doubts.

It’s one thing if she simply doesn’t feel that she wants kids, but it’s more than apparent to me that the thing that would hold her back from having kids is a fear that she wouldn’t be a good enough mom.

Which is fucking ridiculous.

I mean, look at how she is with my Joey.

I’ve never seen a more lovable, kind and caring, maternal soul in my life.

It’s why my daughter is so in awe of her. It’s why Joey always wants to spend time with her.

Without even knowing it, Leah gives Joey all the maternal things that she craves because her own mama isn’t around.

Suddenly, the urge to pull her closer to me is too strong to deny.

“Come here,” I say and lift up the center console so there’s nothing in between us anymore.

Leah tilts her head to the side in confusion, and I don’t hesitate to wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull her close to my side.

“I already know the kind of mother you’d be,” I whisper, and she looks up at me with searching eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“Because I just know,” I answer honestly. “You’d be an amazing mom. You care, but you also know how to loosen up and have a good time. Any kid who would have you as a mom

would grow up with nothing but love and support and encouragement and comfort and safety.”

“You really think that?”

“Leah, I know that.” I reach down and lift her chin so her eyes lock with mine. “You’re amazing.”

Silence stretches between us, and we just stare at each other for the longest moment.

My eyes flit down to her lips and back to her steady gaze, and the urge to lean forward, to press my lips against hers, becomes all-consuming. It’s the only fucking thing I can think about. We’ve been dancing around it for too fucking long, and I can’t take it for even a minute longer.

I want to know what those full lips of hers feel like.

I want to know what she tastes like.

I want to know what her soft breaths feel like against my skin.

Fuck it.

I give in to the desire, slowly moving forward, closing off the distance, the entire time my eyes watching hers, making sure she’s thinking and feeling the same things I’m thinking and feeling.

And when she abruptly closes the distance of our mouths and presses her lips against mine, I know I’m not the only who’s been waiting for this to happen since the night of my dad’s heart attack—or, honestly, probably before.

Her lips are softer and smoother and silkier than my brain could’ve even fathomed, and the instant they part, I slip my tongue inside and can taste the remnants of the sugar cookie she had at my house after dinner.

A little moan leaves her throat, and the sound is so good, a tempting combination of sexy and sweet, it’s practically my undoing.

Hands in her hair, I pull her body even closer to mine, as close as two people can be inside a truck without actually

having Leah in my lap.

But fuck, that's definitely an urge I'd love to give in to.

Leah's thighs spread over my hips.

Her pussy pressed against my cock.

Her full breasts in my face.

And her moans filling my ears.

My dick reacts, growing harder by the fucking second.

Fuck, the things I want to do to this woman.

Another small moan spills from her lungs, and I'm so tempted to reach up and cup her full breasts in my big hands, but the sounds of a little voice echo inside the cab.

"Daddy, I don't feel good," Joey groans, and I'm shocked that I almost forgot she was in my damn truck.

Instantly, Leah pulls away, separating us quickly, and I look up in the rearview mirror just in time to see Joey lean forward and vomit all over the floor.

Well, *shit*.

"Oh no," Joey says, her voice tearful. "I didn't mean to throw up, Daddy."

"It's okay, baby," I quickly reassure her.

Leah leans over the back of the front seat and brushes Joey's hair out of her eyes. "Are you running a fever?" she questions and gently places her hand on my daughter's forehead.

"Is she?" I ask, and she glances back at me.

"She's definitely warm."

"I don't feel good." Joey groans again and then leans forward to dry heave a few times.

Leah grabs Ernie, hands him off to me, and proceeds to gently pat my daughter's back for comfort.

"Well, any chance the doctor's still on call?" I question, glancing down at the still-sleeping dog in my lap before

looking up at meet Leah's eyes.

"Of course." She smiles. "How about we get her inside my cabin so she's more comfortable."

I nod and hop out of the truck. With Ernie gently clutched in one hand, I round the front of the hood and to the back passenger door where Joey sits.

Leah doesn't hesitate to take Ernie from my hands, and I carefully lift Joey into my arms and carry her inside.

No doubt, my truck needs a good wash after all the vomit, but I'll deal with that later.

Nothing takes priority over my little girl.



"Daddy, am I going to live?" Joey asks, her eyes shut and her voice sleepy.

"Yeah, baby, you're going to live." I snort and roll my eyes, and Leah just smirks over at me from the other side of the small twin bed Joey has been resting on since we brought her inside a few hours ago.

It's nearing two in the morning, but thankfully, for the past hour or so, Joey has managed to not vomit, keep some juice and crackers down, and her fever has certainly gone down too.

All thanks to Leah.

The instant I brought Joey inside the cabin, Leah jumped into action.

Within minutes, she managed to get a bucket and cold washcloths and a fan, and even made sure the guest room bed had sheets and pillows for Joe to lie on.

"And what about Ernie?" she asks, and I tilt my head to the side.

"He's fine. He's asleep on Leah's couch in the living room."

"That's good, but do I still get to keep him?"

I reach down to brush sweaty pieces of her hair out of her eyes. “Of course you do, baby.”

“But what if he gets sick, too?”

“Dogs don’t get sick from people. They get sick from other dogs.”

“That’s good news,” she comments, her eyelids fluttering with impending sleep. “I guess we can just consider Ernie a birthday present, then, huh?”

I shake my head on a soft laugh. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Leah’s birthday is this Friday too, Daddy. Same as me. We should get her a present.”

I look up and meet Leah’s eyes. “Really?”

She shrugs and nods. “Oddly enough, yes. And I’ll be the ripe old age of twenty-one.”

Bullshit, I mouth, and she grins.

“Fine. Thirty-three. But no presents needed.”

“What do you normally do on your birthday?”

“Well, normally, I grab dinner and eat cake with my girlfriends, but it’s no big deal. I mean, the older you get, the less exciting birthdays are, you know?”

I do know that the older I get, the less I want to celebrate my birthday.

But this conversation isn’t about me. It’s about her. And right then, I decide that this Friday, I’m going to make damn sure that both Joey and Leah have a good birthday.

I have no idea what that will entail, but I have a week to figure it out.

After everything she’s done for me, for my dad, for my whole family, I’ll be damned if a woman like Leah Levee doesn’t deserve to be celebrated.

Joey’s breaths grow soft and even, and when it’s apparent she’s fallen asleep, Leah carefully checks her temperature one

more time with a digital thermometer. She gently presses the device to her forehead and waits for the beep.

She glances down at the number and smiles up at me. “She’s officially broken her fever.”

“Glad to hear it,” I say and stand up, motioning for Leah to follow.

Once we’re both in the living room, she says, “I think it’s best if she stays here for the night.”

“I agree.”

“And, you know, you can stay here, too...if you want...of course...only if you want...”

I smirk and step toward her, closing off the distance between us. “I definitely want, but what do you want?”

“I want you to stay,” she whispers, her eyes looking up into mine.

“And if I stay, where do you want me to sleep?”

Without another word, Leah takes my hand and quietly leads me back into the hallway and into her bedroom. “Would you sleep in my bed tonight?” she asks and quickly adds, “But not for anything other than just...lying with each other.” Her eyes flit down to her bare feet like she’s too nervous to wait for my answer.

I lift up her chin so her gaze locks with mine again. “You askin’ me to hold you tonight, darlin’?”

“Maybe?”

“Well then, maybe I’d love nothin’ more than to do just that.”

My words urge an amused smile to her lips, and I tilt my head to the side in confusion. “What’s so funny?”

“Well...I think you and I both know that we’d maybe...much rather do other things than just lie in bed together tonight, but the current circumstances of a sick little girl make that impossible.”

“Darlin’, you and I both know there’s no maybe about that,” I answer and proceed to take off my T-shirt. “It’s a fuckin’ fact.”

She watches me with wide eyes, but once I take off my boots and slide beneath her covers, she finds the nerve to follow my lead.

With her body turned away from me, Leah removes her shirt, then her jeans, and my eyes take in every inch of the bare skin of her legs and her back and her elongated neck. *Damn. She’s beautiful.* Too soon for my liking, she lifts a nightdress over her head, and the material falls down her body, covering all the parts I’d much prefer to keep bare.

When she turns around, I realize the damn thing is flimsy as hell, showing the curves of her breasts and hips in a way that threatens to make my head spin.

And when she gets under the covers and presses her body against mine, she feels so good, so soft, so fucking tempting, that I realize just lying together in bed might be far more challenging than I originally thought.

Fuck me.

I grip her hips and pull her back firmly against my chest, and I don’t hesitate to skate my hands down her arms and across her belly. “Darlin’, just so we’re clear, you’re drivin’ me fucking crazy right now.”

She lets out a harsh breath. “Ditto, cowboy.”

I groan and reach up to grip both of her full breasts in my hands. “Fuck. You feel so good.”

A soft moan escapes her lips, and it only urges me on further. My thumbs flick at her nipples and my cock grows hard against her ass, and those soft moans keep falling from her lips.

“It’s takin’ everything inside me not to slide this nightdress up your thighs and yank my cock out of my pants.”

She lets out a whimper, and I groan.

Both of us know tonight is not the night, but that doesn't make it any less tempting.

Any less painful not to give in to the temptation.

"Fuckin' hell, Leah," I mutter and let my head fall back against the pillows. "This is startin' to feel a lot like torture."

A half giggle, half whimper emerges from her lungs. "Tell me about it."

Fuck.

I shut my eyes and try to keep control, but my willpower feels like it's hanging by a damn thread. And when I attempt to inhale a deep, cleansing breath in through my nose, the floral scent of her hair does nothing to dampen how turned on I am by her.

Everything about this woman has become a temptation. Her smile. Her laugh. Her smart mouth. Her feisty humor. Her fucking gorgeous body and mind-blowing curves. And all of it is right here, in this bed, with me.

This is going to be a long fucking night.

"Yeah. This is...I don't know...*Shit*..." She pauses, glances over her shoulder at me, and then climbs back out of bed and to her feet.

I sit up, resting my body on my elbows. "Where ya goin'?"

"I think you and I both know nothing good is going to happen if we keep lying in that bed together."

"Yeah." I chuckle.

"So, how about we meet in the kitchen for some pancakes?"

"You're gonna make pancakes?" I question. "At nearly three in the morning?"

"Don't tell me you're too good for pancakes, cowboy."

"Fuck no, I'm not. I just wanted to make sure you weren't expecting me to do the cooking."

“Smartass.” She giggles and picks up a pillow to toss at my head. “Now, c’mon, get your lazy ass out of my bed and get in the kitchen so I can distract us with food.”

As she walks out of the bedroom and down the hallway, her perfect ass sashaying with each step, I can’t wipe the smile off my face.

Damn, Leah Levee. What are you fucking doing to me?

THIRTY-ONE



July 13th, Tuesday

Leah

“Mornin’, darlin’,” Rhett greets as I walk out my front door.

It’s another morning on the ranch and another morning that I’ll spend riding around with Rhett, trying to help him with all sorts of tasks while tossing in some important medical care and instructions.

And the further we get into his recovery, the less I end up doing.

Now, mostly, I just serve as a spectator. Which, you’d think I’d loathe the idea of it or find the whole thing really boring, but I don’t. This time together has become something I actually look forward to.

Especially when I walk out of my cabin and find him standing outside his truck waiting for me.

Dressed in his usual jeans, boots, and T-shirt, Rhett looks like the kind of hot cowboy that Hollywood actors playing roles in Western-themed movies only dream of embodying. His smile consumes his whole mouth, and his blue eyes shine from beneath his cowboy hat.

Damn, this just might be my favorite part of the day.

“How’d ya sleep last night?” he asks as he opens the passenger door for me.

“Pretty good,” I lie. Honestly, I tossed and turned for most of the night, my body feeling more like a live wire every day that I spend in close proximity to this man.

It’s only been three days since we kissed in his truck. Seventy-two hours since we attempted to lie in my bed together, only to realize that the temptation was too strong for either of us to withstand.

That night had ended with us eating pancakes until the sun came up and checking on Joey every hour or so.

We talked and laughed and kissed a few more times, but other than that, we didn’t let anything else happen.

It honestly would’ve felt wrong if we had. I mean, Joey was sick with a stomach bug, and neither one of us wanted to get so lost in the moment that we wouldn’t have been able to hear her if she needed something, or worse, if she started to get sick again.

But fuck, I can’t deny that ever since that night, my body has been on constant alert, completely fixated on what it would feel like to be in a bed with Rhett again. *Though, this time, you’d definitely want to see him completely sans clothes...*

I hop into the passenger seat, and he shuts my door for me.

“How about you?” I question as he gets inside the truck and starts the engine. “Did you sleep okay last night?”

“I’m gonna lie like you and say yes.”

My mouth falls open. “Who says I was lying?”

“Darlin’, your body is like an open book,” he says, his eyes flitting over to me in amusement, and then, subtly glancing down at my chest.

I follow their lead and note that, sure enough, my nipples are so damn hard they could probably cut fucking glass.

Goodness gracious.

“Maybe I’m just cold,” I retort, and he chuckles.

“It’s already eighty fuckin’ degrees out,” he retorts with a sly, knowing grin, and I reach out to slap a hand to his shoulder.

“Shut up.”

He laughs some more and puts the truck into reverse to back us up a little before slipping the gear into drive.

But before he presses the gas, he leans toward me and whispers into my ear, “Just so you know, you’re not the only one feelin’ out of sorts for the last three days.” With one discreet hand, he reaches up to brush his fingers over my tank-top-and-bra-covered nipple. “I can’t stop thinking about the other night.”

A shaky breath escapes from my lungs.

“And I’m hoping one day real soon, I’ll get to finish what we started.”

Oh boy. Me fucking too.

Eyes back to the road, Rhett presses on the gas and pulls away from my cabin.

The sun shines in through the window, and I slip on my favorite pair of sunglasses to shield my face from its rays.

“Did you talk to your dad this morning?” I ask, in the name of changing the subject to something less distracting.

“He was still asleep when I dropped Joe and Ernie off at their house, but I talked to my mama. She said he’s doing pretty good. Mostly just bitching about his new, salt-restrictive diet.”

I smile over at him. “So back to his old self, then?”

“Yep. I’d say so.”

“I’ll stop by his house this afternoon to do my usual blood pressure check and assessment. Surely he’ll bitch at me about that, too.”

Rhett smirks and glances at me out of the corner of his eye. “I think it’s safe to say that’s a certainty.”

“So, what’s on the agenda today?”

“Your favorite,” he says. “Bull sperm collection.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m fuckin’ with you,” he retorts, and I shake my head on a giggle. “Though I know you could handle it, no problem, it’s not what needs to be done today. With the rodeo in Kanab coming up in less than a month, the big focus right now is on preppin’ and finishin’ up maintenance work in the barns and stables and doin’ a yearly overhaul on the lodge. We’re the biggest, closest stable to the arena in Kanab, so we get a huge influx of both people and animals when it rolls into town.”

“And I trust if it’s anything strenuous that you’re planning on wearing your brace and doing the stretches I taught you before you get started?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“What happens if I don’t wear my brace and do the stretches?” A rogue grin stretches across his face as he pulls the truck to a stop just outside of the stables.

“Trouble happens.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Big fat trouble.”

“Does this trouble include those glorious tits of yours in my mouth and you riding my cock?”

His blunt but incredibly dirty question catches me off guard.

It also turns me the fuck on.

“Oh my God. I can’t believe you just said that,” I respond, and my mouth is a half gape, half smile. “I kind of feel scandalized.”

Rhett is completely unfazed. “Well, I did say it, and you still didn’t answer my question, darlin’.”

“Well, cowboy, no brace and no stretching equals no tits. *And* no cock-riding.”

“Did you just say tits and cock, Dr. Leah? Out-fucking-loud?” he retorts. “Now, *I* feel scandalized.”

I reach out and playfully shove him in the shoulder. “I thought cowboys were too tough to feel scandalized?”

“We are,” he answers with a sexy grin. “And don’t you worry, darlin’, I’ll be following doctor’s orders today. If tits and cock-riding are on the table, you say *jump* and I’ll just ask *how high?*”

I snort at that. “If you’re jumping, you better have that damn brace on.”

“Of course you’d say that.” Rhett laughs, hops out of the truck, and rounds the front to open my door.

But the instant I’m out of my seat, he shuts the door and gently pushes my back against it.

He presses his hard, muscular body tight against mine, and then, he shocks the shit out of me by pressing a kiss to my lips.

I moan at the incredible feel of his warm mouth, and a familiar aching throb makes itself known between my legs.

Holy hot cowboys. Why does this always feel so good?

Everything about Rhett screams sex and temptation and orgasms and *pleasure*.

I can’t remember a single time in my life when I experienced this kind of desire for a man. It’s an intensity like I’ve never known. Never even knew existed.

And to think, we haven’t even had sex.

Good God. What will happen if we do have sex? Spontaneous combustion?

He groans and slides his fingers into my hair as his tongue begs entrance into my mouth.

My lips part without hesitation, and the instant he deepens the kiss, it feels like every nerve inside my body, nerves I

didn't even know I had, wakes up and starts begging for more.

More kissing.

More touching.

More everything if it involves him.

Spontaneous combustion risks be damned. I'll risk it all!

But quicker than it started, he pulls away and rests his forehead against mine. "You drive me fuckin' crazy."

A raspy laugh escapes my throat, mingling with my panting breaths. "Yeah, well, you're the one who started that."

"I did, and I certainly don't fuckin' regret it." He smirks down at me and reaches up to slide my hair behind my ear. "Now, if you don't mind, I have to stretch out my leg and put my brace on so I can get to work."

The man doesn't waste any time.

Once he does all the stretches I taught him, he secures his brace over his leg, and I follow his lead over to the other side of the stables where a few of the ranch hands are busy with relocating big barrels of hay and chopping up logs.

Rhett grabs an ax, and when he starts chopping at a big tree trunk that's twice my size, I'm shocked to silence over how insanely strong he really is.

He makes it look so easy.

Like anyone can just pick up an ax and slice through a log without breaking a sweat.

He's like the cowboy version of the Incredible Hulk. Only replace the green with nothing but rippled muscles beneath smooth and tanned skin.

It's safe to say I'm starting to understand just how physically capable Rhett Jameson is.

When I first met him, he was hobbling around on an injured leg.

But now that he has several weeks of recovery under his belt, his physical prowess and unbelievable strength are

proving to be downright mind-blowing.

It's also insanely fucking hot.

Yeah, that too.

Sheesh. Someone get me a fan. A cold washcloth.
Something. Because it feels a hell of a lot hotter out here than eighty degrees.

THIRTY-TWO



July 16th, Friday

Rhett

At a little after six, I step inside the lodge and find balloons and streamers and family and friends and staff and this weekend's ranch guests chatting in small groups throughout the space. Along the wall beside the large fireplace sit a few long tables covered with catered food, courtesy of the ranch kitchen crew.

A big banner reading *Happy Birthday, Leah and Joey!* hangs proudly across the mantel.

Everything is ready to go, and for some strange reason, I'm nervous as hell.

For a man like me, being nervous isn't really something I waste my time on. Years of riding broncs and putting myself in high-risk situations taught me to push any worry and concern out of my mind and focus on the things I could control.

But right now, everything that was in my control is done.

And all I'm left with is unease over Leah's reaction. I know my Joey will eat up this birthday bash like cake, but Leah? I'm not so sure.

She has no idea that, with the help of my mama and a few ranch staff, I've put together a big surprise joint birthday party

for her and Joey.

No idea that I had Sam and her two closest friends Carla and Taylor fly in for the big night.

She doesn't know anything.

Right now, she's back at my house, helping Joey put the finalizing touches on her redecorated room—courtesy of all the shit she bought my daughter at Target the day she brought home that little fucker Ernie—and she thinks I'm going to pick the two of them up in about thirty minutes to come eat a quiet birthday dinner at my parents' house.

I have no idea what she's going to think when she steps into this lodge and sees what I've done. And the uncertainty of it all, for once, feels all sorts of uncomfortable.

It's because you fucking care about her, you dense bastard. A lot.

"You planned quite the night, son," my dad remarks, and I look to my right to find him standing beside me with a big-ass grin on his face. I also don't miss the bottle of beer in his hand.

"Thanks," I answer but then glance down at the contraband beverage. "Mama know about that?"

Ever since he got back home from the hospital, both my mama and Leah have been watching him like a hawk. His medications, his diet, his activity, pretty much everything he does is being scrutinized like it's an application for a job at a nuclear bomb storage facility.

"Hell no, she doesn't know." He slices his eyes toward me with a knowing stare and points an authoritative finger. "And she don't need to know. It's just one beer. It's not gonna kill me."

I let out a quiet wolf whistle and shake my head. "She finds out you're sneaking booze, and she's gonna have you sleepin' outside. Pretty sure Leah will be ridin' your ass, too."

He points the tip of his bottle toward me. "Which is why this stays between me and you. We've bonded now,

remember?”

I semi-snort. “I won’t say a fuckin’ thing. But I’d like to suggest you maybe try harder at keeping it under wraps before we both end up buried where nobody’ll ever find us.”

He lets out a deep sigh. “I swear, I can’t take a shit without Jenny or Leah finding out.” He lowers his voice to a mocking rendition of a woman. “How many loafs did you pinch off today, Tex? Were they hard or soft?” He shakes his head again with a groan. “Jesus.”

I chuckle at that. “Well, I’d like to show some sympathy, but see, a while back, my daddy hired a doctor to come out to the ranch to ride my ass about my leg. So, I’m sure you can see where I’m torn between feeling bad for ya and wantin’ to celebrate.”

“Touché, son. Touché.” A hearty laugh pops from his lungs, and he reaches out to wrap a firm arm around my shoulders. “You know, now that I’ve got two women nagging me about my fuckin’ salt intake and blood pressure and the damn heart pills my doctor prescribed, you’d think I’d feel some regret over bringing Leah out to the ranch, but I can’t seem to feel anything but relief that she’s here.”

I tilt my head to the side.

“Without her, I’d probably be ten feet in the ground and that fuckin’ leg of yours would be a useless stump of flesh.”

I smile. “Nah, I’d find somethin’ to do with the leg. Use it to hammer nails or some shit.”

Tex guffaws, reaching out to grab me by the shoulder and give me a playful shake, and then, suddenly, turns serious. “Okay, then. So, you’d find a use for the leg. But if not for her, me and you wouldn’t have gotten a second chance at being the real father and son we both deserve.”

His words nearly take me back a step.

“I’m proud of you, boy,” he continues and squeezes my shoulder. “Hell, I’ve always been proud of ya. I know there’s a lot of times we haven’t seen eye to eye, but I want you to know I’ve always been proud of ya. And sometimes it

might've felt like I was too hard on ya, but it was only because I knew what you were capable of. Knew the man you were. Knew the things you could achieve. And all I really wanted to do was be the father you deserved. The man you could look up to and be proud of as well."

"You are that man," I respond, meeting my father's soft gaze. "You've always been that man to me. Even when we weren't seein' eye to eye."

Tex Jameson might be a stubborn son of a bitch, and more than a few times, I've felt like strangling him with my bare hands, but he's always been a man who's lived his life to love, support, and provide for his family.

Sure, I might not always agree with him, but that doesn't mean that his intentions are wrong.

Deep down, I'm pretty sure I've always known that.

He pulls me into a gruff hug and smacks a hand to my back a few times. "Love ya, Rhett."

"Love you too."

Once he releases me, he glances around the room, probably to make sure my mama is nowhere to be found, and takes a hearty drink of his beer. "All right, now that we got all that emotional shit out of the way, how about you go get the girls so we can really start celebratin'?"

I grin. "Yes, sir."

Tex finishes off his beer, discreetly tosses it into a nearby recycling bin and hollers toward Tiny, "You got the fire pit started out back yet?"

Tiny's eyes go wide, and my dad sighs.

"Fuckin' hell, Tiny. What're ya waitin' on? A fuckin' invitation? Get out there and get it going before the girls get here," he commands, and Tiny scurries off with his tail between his legs.

The whole scene makes me chuckle.

Tex Jameson will never lose his firm edge. Even after the moments where he gets all fucking soft and tells me he loves me.

And I can't deny that's something I'll always admire.

He never minces words, never says shit he doesn't mean, and that's why when he lets his guard down and expresses emotions, you know it's not bullshit. If anything, when it comes to a guy like my daddy, it only makes those rare moments with him even more meaningful.

Once I offer a quick hello to Leah's brother Sam and check in with my mama that everything is set to go, I head out of the lodge and in the direction of the truck.

It's time to celebrate Joey and Leah.



The instant I step into my house, I spot Ernie sound asleep in his crate in the living room and my ears are hit with the sounds of chatter and giggles. I'm already smiling as I walk down the hallway to Joey's room.

I pause just outside the threshold and take in the view that is Leah hanging a painting—a pretty pastel picture of a sunset—on the wall above Joey's bed, while my daughter smiles and giggles and dances around like a giddy little girl as she looks around her room.

Once Leah adjusts the painting, she steps back. “All right, Joey, what do you think? Did we achieve your design goal?”

Joey holds both of her arms out wide and spins around. “Yes! This is the perfect room for a cowgirl like me!”

Leah laughs, and Joey rushes over to her to wrap her arms around Leah's waist.

“Thank you so much for helpin' me, Leah.”

Leah grins down at my daughter and hugs her right back. “You are very welcome, sweetheart.”

The whole scene is beautiful, but it's kind of heartbreaking at the same time.

Besides my mama, Leah is the closest my daughter has ever had to a mother figure in her life. And it is really sad that her own mama can't realize how special this little girl really is. How it's a fucking honor to get to spend time with her, to watch her grow up.

I don't even know if Leah realizes how much of an impact she has on Joey. It's like it just comes naturally to her.

"Oh my gosh, Leah! I have the best idea everrrrr!" Joey exclaims. "We should redecorate the whole house like this!"

Leah chokes on a laugh. "Uh...well...I'm not so sure your daddy would be a fan of all this pink and frilly lace."

"Pretty sure you're right about that one," I announce, and both of them look over at me, completely unaware of how long I've been standing there.

Leah smirks, and Joey spins around on her feet again.

"Daddy! What do ya think? Isn't this the most perfect room ever?"

I look around the small space of my daughter's bedroom, my eyes grazing over the girlie pink and feminine lace and the paintings on the wall with cowgirl hats and cowgirl boots, and I can't find a single reason to disagree.

"Yep, baby. I'd say this is the most perfect room ever," I answer and rest one arm on the doorjamb. "Now, are the birthday girls ready to go eat some dinner?"

"Yes!" Joey cheers and stomps out of the room on her boots.

The sound of the screen door slamming shut follows mere seconds later.

"I guess she's excited about the birthday cake Jenny promised," Leah comments with a grin.

"Yeah," I retort, and when she goes to step through the doorway, I surprise her by wrapping my arms around her waist and pressing my lips to hers for a deep kiss.

And I don't pull away until I hear a familiar little moan escape her throat.

"What was that for?" she asks, staring up at me with unfocused eyes.

"It was a little taste of what's to come."

Both of her eyebrows shoot up. "What's to come? As in, *tonight?*"

I wink at her. "Darlin', once we eat dinner and have some fuckin' cake, me and you are gonna spend the rest of the night alone."

Leah tilts her head to the side. "Alone? As in, just the two of us?"

"Joey will be having a sleepover at her grandparents' house tonight."

"Which means, we're going to have our own sleepover?"

I lean down and press another kiss to her lips. "Yeah, but I don't plan on either of us doing much sleepin'."

"Well, hot damn," she comments with a big ole smile. "This birthday is off to a really good start."

Oh, you have no fucking idea the things I have in store for you, darlin'.



Ten minutes later, I pull my truck up to the lodge, and Joey gets skeptical.

"Daddy, why are we at the lodge? I thought we were eating dinner at Granny's house?"

Shit. I didn't anticipate this one.

Quickly, I rack my brain to find a reasonable answer.

"Uh... Because your granny forgot to get your birthday cake out of the lodge kitchen fridge and asked me to pick it up on the way to their house."

"Oh," she says.

“So, we’ll just wait in here?” Leah asks, and I shake my head.

“No, you two are gonna need to come inside and help me carry a few things.”

“What things?” Joey contests. “I thought you said it was just a cake.”

Fucking hell, my kid is too smart for her own good.

“Just get out of the truck and listen to your daddy,” I retort, and my daughter huffs out a sigh.

Leah grins over at me and, thankfully, follows my lead, opening the passenger door to get out. Which then encourages my strong-willed daughter to do the same.

My heart starts racing in my chest as we close the distance to the lodge entrance doors, and I have to force a calming inhale and exhale of oxygen into my lungs.

Fuck. Here’s to hoping Leah likes surprise parties...

Hand to the door, I take another deep breath, and then I open it up, making sure Leah and Joey walk inside before me.

Immediately, the lights turn on and everyone jumps to their feet, shouting, “*Surprise!*” and “*Happy birthday, Joey and Leah!*”

“A surprise party! For me!” Joey squeals at the tops of her lungs and rushes over to my mama to wrap her arms around her granny.

Leah just stands there, her eyes wide and unblinking as she looks around the room filled with people and decorations.

When she hasn’t blinked at all in at least thirty seconds, I start to worry that she’s freaked the fuck out.

Or mad.

Or upset.

But when she finally turns to look at me, a moist sheen of emotion illuminating her pretty navy eyes with anything but

melancholy, I remember that, sometimes, a woman cries because she's happy.

"Did you do all this?" she asks, her voice shaking around her words.

"I just wanted to make sure you had a good birthday."

"Am I seeing things, or is that my brother and Carla and Taylor over there?"

"I might've asked them to come down and celebrate with you."

"Rhett," she says, her voice barely a whisper. "This is... I don't know... Oh my goodness..." She pauses and then steps forward to wrap her arms tightly around my neck and pull me into a firm hug. "Thank you," she whispers into my ear and presses a soft kiss to my cheek. "This is...well, it's the sweetest, most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me."

For a second, my breath gets all tangled up in my lungs, but eventually, I just wrap my arms around her waist and squeeze her sweet body back.

"Happy birthday, Leah," I say, grinning down at her. "Now, let's go enjoy this party, shall we?"

"Yes, please."

As we head into the lodge and start chatting with everyone in attendance, I can't deny that her reaction was far more than I could've ever imagined.

It was priceless. And it makes me want to do more shit like this for her.

Fucking hell, I'm starting to think I'd do just about anything to see that kind of happiness in her eyes.

THIRTY-THREE



July 16th, Friday

Leah

“So, that’s the grumpy cowboy,” Carla says over her glass of wine, and Taylor nudges me with her shoulder while a big goofy grin sits prominently on her face. Both of them have their eyes fixated on Rhett, who currently stands on the other side of the room, chatting with Tex and another man I don’t recognize.

This is the first moment since Rhett caught me by absolute surprise with a birthday party that I’ve had a chance to chat with my friends. And the fact that he flew them out here *and* they dropped everything to be here makes me feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

“That’s him,” I answer. “Rhett Jameson. The grumpy cowboy.”

“He doesn’t look all that grumpy now,” Taylor comments, her eyes still looking across the room. “I mean, he threw you a freaking surprise birthday party.”

God, I still can’t believe he did this. To be honest, I felt like bursting into tears over how sweet and thoughtful it was. *No one* has ever done something like this for me.

“For real, Tay,” Carla agrees and meets my eyes with a pointed stare. “Though, the last we heard from you, he was a

dick and you guys didn't get along. Something's not adding up."

I shrug. And take a sip of my wine.

"Did you seriously just shrug at us? No explanation. No updates. Just a freaking shrug? We've been demon-texting you for an age with no answer—and before you say you had no service, consider that we're standing right next to you now—and you're going to try to hold out on us?" Carla scoffs. "You better fess up, girlfriend. Right quick." She eyes me with a look that says, *If you don't give us an update, I'll resort to violence.*

"Fine. *Relax.* No need to get bitchy." I hold up one hand in the air on a laugh. "So, I guess you could say things have changed since I last talked to you guys. Which, by the way, I'm so glad you're here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we're glad to be here too, but let's focus on the important shit," Carla declares. "What is going on with you and that cowboy? And why in the hell have you not updated us on any of this insanity?"

"My questions exactly," Taylor agrees, tossing her long red hair over her shoulder. "We texted you like one million times."

"Which is why I'm currently super pissed at you," Carla states and pokes me in the shoulder with her index finger. "The last time you even tried to contact us was back in freaking June. It's July, by the way. And from what I heard from Sam on the flight over here, your ass was even in Salt Lake around the Fourth."

Whoops. "Sorry about that." I cringe. "In my defense, when I was in Salt Lake, it was because Rhett's dad had a heart attack. So, my mind was pretty focused on that."

"Well, I totally forgive, but only if you spill the freaking beans."

"Same," Carla agrees with Taylor. "You'll officially be forgiven if you tell us what in the hell is going on with you and that hot-as-hell man. I mean, I didn't even know men like him still existed. It's practically criminal they're hiding them

all the way out here. He makes the men in Salt Lake look like the MySpace of the dating pool.”

“Wait...does that mean he’s the Instagram?” I furrow my brow. “Or the TikTok of dating?”

“Well, I know he’s definitely not the Facebook or Twitter,” Taylor comments on a laugh. “Otherwise, I’d just feel sad and angry when I look at him. Which I don’t. I only feel incredibly jealous that one of my best friends is possibly getting to ride that stallion.”

“For real,” Carla snorts, but then she fixes her gaze on me. “Please, for the love of everything, fulfill our dreams. Tell me you’ve done the nasty with that fine-as-hell man.”

“Well...” I pause. “Not to disappoint, but it hasn’t gone that far yet.”

Which, honestly, should actually be considered a crime. I’m a walking, talking, living, and breathing ball of horny these days because of it.

“Hasn’t gone that far?” Taylor inquires with narrowed eyes. “But it’s, like, *gone places*, though, right?”

I nod. “I can confirm that things have happened.”

“What kinds of things?” Carla queries.

“None of your business kinds of things.”

“So, what, are you guys like together?”

Are we together? Hell’s bells. I don’t really know what we are.

I mean, we don’t hate each other.

We definitely like and care about each other.

And we’re obviously insanely attracted to each other.

Not to mention, we spend pretty much all of our time together, a very small fraction of which is dedicated to the reason I came here in the first place—rehabilitating his knee.

“Honestly? I don’t know,” I answer and shrug both shoulders. “I don’t really have a label for it.”

Dating? My boyfriend? I'm confused on why those terms don't feel right, but at the same time, would make sense.

We've been through a lot together, and putting a label on whatever it is that's happening between us almost makes me feel like I'm downplaying it.

I mean, this is about way more than just him and me. His daughter has become astoundingly important to me as well.

"I guess we're just kind of letting whatever happens, happen." I shrug, and both Carla and Taylor look at me like I've got a wart the size of Brazil on my forehead.

"What?" I question.

Carla grins. "You're totally falling for him."

"For sure," Taylor adds. "I knew this was going to be some enemies-to-lovers kind of shit. I freaking knew it."

"Stop trying to make everything a romance novel, Tay." I roll my eyes on an amused chortle.

Carla opens her mouth to add something that is most likely useless and/or inappropriate, but thankfully, a cute young lady by the name of Joey steps into our circle and tugs on my shirt.

"You ready to cut the cake with me, Leah?"

"You betcha." I grin down at her before looking up at my two best friends. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to excuse myself from the interrogation," I say and wink at them. "And head on over to the cake table with Joey."

"You guys gonna come over and sing to us?"

"Will we get in really bad trouble with your daddy if we don't?" Carla asks inappropriately through a smile, and I do my best not to make it obvious when I send a sharp elbow right into the center of her ribs.

Joey's eyebrows rise up and down as she cluelessly surmises, "I don't know 'bout gettin' in trouble, but it'd for sure be rude."

I snort a little too loudly for my public threshold of embarrassing acts' sake and nod. Taylor agrees too. "Very

rude, indeed. Don't worry, honey, Carla and I wouldn't miss it."

And I take Joey's outstretched hand and head on over to the cake table that was set up for the best damn birthday party I've ever experienced in my whole life.



I step out of the women's bathroom in the lodge, and a squeal jumps from my lungs when two strong arms wrap around my waist.

"What the heck?"

"It's time to go, darlin'." Rhett is right behind me, and his voice is hot in my ear. "I can't wait any longer to get you alone."

"But we haven't—" I start to refute, but when he pushes his front against my back and I feel his arousal on my ass, I stop midsentence.

"My parents already left with Joe."

"You don't think I should try to say goodbye to everyone else? I've barely even talked to my brother."

He turns me around and puts two hands on my shoulders. "Darlin', it's past midnight, most of the guests have already left. And your brother and friends are currently boozed out of their minds and outside with Tiny and the rest of the ranch hands, doing god knows what. No one is even going to notice that we left, and trust me, if they did, they'd understand why. You're so fuckin' gorgeous tonight I can hardly stand it."

My breath catches in my throat, and my stomach tightens with arousal.

"And I've already put Rodney in charge of making sure all three of 'em get back to their cabins safely tonight."

Well, shit. Sounds like he's got it all covered. The party has pretty much come to an end.

"So, I guess we can go, then, huh?" I say with a secret smile.

He presses a kiss to my lips. “Fuck yes, we can.”

“Are we going to my cabin or your place?”

“Darlin’, I want you in my fuckin’ bed.”

He holds out his hand for me, and I take it without question.

Because...*yes, freaking, please!*

THIRTY-FOUR



Rhett

The drive from the lodge to my house feels like it takes an eternity, mostly because I was ready to dip out more than three hours ago.

Not that it wasn't a good party, because it was, but hell, I need to be alone with this woman. In my bed. With her naked and riding my cock. And absolutely zero interruptions.

Thank fuck, it's finally happening, I think to myself when I pull my truck to a stop in my driveway. Immediately, I cut the engine and turn to face her.

"Did you have a good time tonight, darlin'?"

"I had the best time." She smiles back at me. "Thank you for making this one of the best birthdays ever."

"You're welcome," I say softly, reaching out to brush some of her hair out of her face. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, but also, I'm even gladder your birthday isn't over yet."

"It's already after midnight."

I shake my head. "I don't give a shit. Our celebration is just beginning, and if I have to get you on board, I'll set all the clocks in the house back twenty-four hours."

With that, I hop out of the truck and round the hood, laughing at the way her mouth gapes like a fish through the

windshield. Once I get Leah's door open, I don't wait for her to step out. Patience long gone, I grab her by the waist and toss her over my shoulder.

"Rhett!" she shouts. "Your leg! And you don't even have your brace on!"

"My leg is fuckin' fine. It's a different appendage entirely that needs your help."

"Oh my God! This is the exact opposite of what you should be doing right now!" She slaps me on the back, and giggles follow. "You're nuts!"

"Well, I'd say that's a given, considering how long you've been drivin' me fuckin' crazy."

Across the gravel and up the steps of my porch, I don't put her down until we're inside the house and in close proximity to my bedroom.

Once she's on her feet, I push her gently up against the wall of the hallway and press my mouth to hers. "I want you," I whisper against her lips. "I fuckin' need to feel you. Taste you. Fuckin' slide inside you."

She moans. "I want that too."

Fuck. How can one woman make me feel this insane with desire? With absolute need?

I don't bother trying to figure it out.

Instead, I guide us into my bedroom, kissing and mingling our excited breathing the whole time. She tastes like birthday cake and sex and sin and all the tempting things she's been driving me wild with the past few weeks.

She tastes like everything I've ever wanted and didn't even know I needed.

But fuck, I *need* her. The intensity is raw and palpable and so acute it's primal.

It's like I don't even have a choice—like I can't go on without knowing what it feels like to be inside her.

She clutches at the material of my shirt, and I yank it over my head without delay. Her dress is next and then her bra, and between each panting breath and each erratic crash of our lips, another item of clothing is removed. I don't stop until the only thing left between us is her silky, lace panties.

When she goes to tug them down, I push her hands away.

"You're not taking those off until you're dripping with need for my cock."

She whimpers, and I lean down to suck one full breast into my mouth, teasing the hard nipple with the tip of my tongue.

Her hands are in my hair and her chest heaves up and down with needy breaths, and I don't think my cock has ever been harder in my life.

"Rhett, *please*," she begs, but I just move my mouth to her other breast. I'm going to tease us both until satisfaction is the only tool left for survival.

"Please, what, darlin'?"

She moans and jolts her hips forward.

"Please keep doing this to your perfect tits?" I smirk against her skin and then flick my tongue against her nipple. "Or should I move my attention somewhere else on this sexy body of yours?"

A whimper escapes her throat.

With my hands on her hips, I gently ease her onto the bed, and when I stare down at her, my chest expands at the sight. Her thighs tremble with need, and her full tits heave up and down with each panting breath. Her hair fans out around her, and her eyes are completely unguarded, just wide and open and showing me everything she's feeling.

"I could stare at you all night," I whisper against her skin as I lean forward to skate my tongue across her breasts and down her belly.

"Please don't do that," she says, through a half giggle, half moan. "I'm definitely going to need more from you tonight than staring."

I grin, continuing to slide my tongue across her hips, only pausing to place openmouthed kisses on her skin. She reaches down and pulls my hands up to her breasts, and she arches her back when I grip the pliant flesh.

I only stop my mouth's momentum when I reach the edge of lace and silk, and Leah pushes her hips toward me.

“Take them off.”

“You wet for me, darlin’?”

She nods and pushes her hips up again.

I move my mouth over her panties, and when I hover over her clit, I can tell she's soaked through the silk material.

“I want you,” she whispers and reaches down to grip my hair. “I want you inside me, Rhett.”

Fuck, there's nothing sexier than this.

Leah, hot and wanton, and her body showing me how much she wants this. How much she wants me.

“I'm glad, darlin', because I fuckin' want you too.” I grip her panties with my teeth and yank them down her legs and toss them onto the floor.

Once I locate a condom in my nightstand, I slide it over my hard cock, the entire time keeping my eyes locked with hers. Hands wrapped around her ankles, I pull her down to the edge of the bed, and then I spread her thighs so I can ease myself inside her.

My eyes fall closed at how tight and wet and warm her pussy feels wrapped around me, and every inch farther I get, the more intense the pleasure feels around the head of my cock.

“Oh, holy hell,” she mutters through a moan, and her back arches when I push myself to the hilt.

I'm not normally a man without stamina, but fuck, I've never felt anything this good.

My jaw clenches and I grip her thighs. “Fuck, Leah, you feel too fuckin' good.”

“Uh...like you should talk,” she whimpers, and her breaths turn into staccato pants. “This feels insane. What is happening? Did we accidentally take ecstasy at my birthday party?”

Her words make me chuckle, but that only forces my cock to push deeper inside her.

None of which makes this any less intense.

“Holy shit,” she whispers. “We should have done this a long time ago.”

Fucking tell me about it.

I slide my cock in and out of her, each thrust feeling better than the next. And I don't stop until the urge to see what she looks like riding me becomes too strong to deny.

With her legs wrapped tight around my waist, I lift her off the bed and change positions. And the instant my back is on the bed and she's straddling my cock, I know this is the best damn idea I've ever had.

Parted lips, heated eyes, flushed skin, and brown hair hanging down her back, she's a vision of sex and beauty.

The best damn thing I've ever seen in my fucking life.

“Ride me, Leah,” I tell her and grip her hips. “I gotta see what you look like when you come around my cock.”

Her gaze flashes with lust and seduction, and it urges a crazy mix of pleasure and adrenaline to dump into my veins.

And my heart prances into a rapid rhythm when she slowly starts to lift her hips up and down.

Her pussy tightens around my throbbing cock, and I reach up to grip her tits with both of my big hands.

Leah moans and her head falls back, and she just keeps riding me.

The whole time, I don't take my eyes off her face. I fixate on the way her mouth parts with each moan and the way her eyes fall closed. And I watch the way her teeth dig into her bottom lip as she races to her pleasure.

Her rhythm becomes erratic as she gets closer to the edge, and I move my hands back to her hips to help steady her as she brings herself to climax.

Fucking stars dance behind my eyes when her pussy grips me so tight, and the instant her body falls forward and moans and incoherent words spill from her lips, I can't hold back.

I come hard inside her.

"Uh...holy hell," she whispers through hiccuping breaths. "*Holy fucking shit, Rhett.*"

"Yeah." I grunt when her pussy keeps gently clenching around me, like little tremors of pleasure she can't control or stop. "Fuck."

"What the hell was that?" she asks, and her warm breath brushes against my chest.

"Whatever it was, it was incredible."

She smirks down at me. "Like, so incredible, you want to give it another go?"

"Damn, woman." A laugh jolts from my lungs, and I reach up to grip her bare ass. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Leah giggles and rests her chin on my chest. "I might be trying to kill both of us."

"Yeah." I smirk down at her. "Pretty sure I'm going to need sustenance and a little recovery time before I can go again. And, you know, those pancakes of yours might be exactly what the doctor ordered..."

"That saying doesn't work in this scenario," she retorts. "Because you're *ordering the doctor* to make you pancakes. Not the other way around."

"I wouldn't say I'm orderin' her. More like, *suggestin'*."

"Would you like me to make you some pancakes, Rhett?"

"Wow, Leah. That would be fantastic. And it's so thoughtful of you to offer."

She snorts at that but proceeds to hop out of bed. “All right, cowboy. Meet me in the kitchen.” With one wink in my direction, she turns on her heel and calls over her shoulder, “I’ll be the naked chick with the spatula! Cooking her bossy cowboy some pancakes!”

Her bossy cowboy.

Damn, I love the sound of that—love the sound of our lives intertwining.

I can’t help but wonder... *Maybe Leah Levee is the angel I was praying for when I fell off that fucking bronc and hurt my leg.*

THIRTY-FIVE



Leah

After thirty minutes of my trying to cook up a late-night meal while Rhett made a job out of distracting me with his busy hands on my bare breasts and ass, a plateful of blueberry pancakes sits beside me on his kitchen counter.

And a sexy, naked Rhett stands between my thighs.

“A naked cowboy and a plateful of blueberry pancakes,” I say and smile at Rhett as he puts a forkful of pancakes into his mouth. “Pretty sure life doesn’t get much better than this.”

He chuckles and stabs a few pieces onto the fork. “Would you like another bite, madam?”

I grin. “Yes, please.”

A forkful of pancakes is gently pushed into my mouth, and I moan around the deliciousness. “*Mmmm-mmm-mm...* These might be the best pancakes I’ve ever had. Whatever wonderful, amazing, talented person made these is a freaking food genius.”

Rhett smirks and sets down the fork to grip my thighs. “On that, we can certainly agree.”

“On the part about me being a food genius, or the part where I’m wonderful and amazing and talented?”

He presses a kiss to my lips. “All of the above.”

“You know, the Rhett I met when I first stepped foot on this ranch, I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have agreed.”

“Well, darlin’, that Rhett was a fuckin’ stubborn prick with baggage and assumptions and only a teeny tiny lick’a sense.”

My eyes flash with amusement. “And who is *this* Rhett?”

“He’s a man who’s really likin’ this beautiful woman.”

“You like me?”

He nods. “I sure do, darlin’.”

I lean forward to press my lips to his, and I let the kiss linger for a while before pulling away and tapping my nose against his. “That’s good because I like you too.”

His responding smile could light up the whole room. “That’s good to hear, darlin’, because I have some plans.”

“Ooh! Plans. Plans sound exciting! What kinds of plans?”

He spreads my thighs with his hands. “My cock back inside you kinds of plans. You know, all in the name of likin’ you so much.”

I giggle, and he lifts me up and off the counter and turns us around to set me on his kitchen table.

“Rhett!” I chastise and slap a playful hand on his bare chest. “You have to stop doing shit like that! You don’t have your brace on.”

“Sometimes, darlin’, a man likes to live dangerously.” He waggles his eyebrows at me, and with one hand, he grips his now-hard cock and rubs it against my clit.

Oh myyy...

“This seem like something you’d like to explore further?” he questions, looking up at me from beneath hooded eyes.

I nod. “Uh-huh.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I went ahead and brought a condom into the kitchen, then, huh?” he says and grabs exactly that from behind me on the table.

“Wait... When did you bring a condom in here?”

“When I walked in and saw you cooking me pancakes in your birthday suit.”

I giggle at that, but when he slides the condom over his cock and begins to slide himself inside me, my breath gets caught up in my lungs.

“Damn, you learn something new every day.”

“Huh?” I ask, trying to concentrate through a whole lot of distraction. “What did you learn?”

“Yesterday, I had no idea this kitchen table was the perfect size for fuckin’. After today, I know,” he says through a grunt, and he lifts my thighs up higher off the table.

I lean back on my hands and wrap my legs around his waist, and the change in position urges him to go so incredibly deep it makes my eyes want to roll back inside my head.

“Fuck, it just keeps getting better and better,” he says through a groan, and all I can offer is a whimper in response.

I don’t know what it is about this man or what is about us together, but *holy shit*, this is the kind of sex that makes your body feel like it’s going to explode.

It’s the kind of sex that makes you want to have *more* sex.

The kind of sex that is so intense, so passion-fueled, so downright mind-blowing, it makes it feel like it’s not just sex, but *more than just sex*.

Holy hell, cowboy, how am I going to survive this?

THIRTY-SIX



July 23rd, Friday

Rhett

Joey begged me to let her and Ernie spend the night at her grandparents' house tonight. And, normally, I probably would've just told her no, but the idea of being alone for the night when Leah is alone for the night was too much temptation to deny.

You'd think, after all the fucking the two of us have been doing for the past week, that my dick would need a break, but that's not the case.

Despite spending nearly every moment of time since we told her brother and friends goodbye the morning after the birthday party thinking about, plotting a plan, or sneaking away to have sex, I still need to be alone with her more. I need to take my time with her, to explore, to feel like I'm not on a goddamn time clock.

I'll admit, it's been fun coming up with ways to give her an orgasm in my truck or behind one of the barns or any of the other damn places on this ranch we've been sneak-fucking at, but it's not enough anymore. My woman is a delicacy, and I want to devour her slowly and without haste.

So, with Leah on my mind, once I got Joe all settled with my mama and made sure my dad realized Ernie would be

scampering around the house in one of those fucking T-shirts my daughter is insistent on putting him in, I headed straight for cabin number three.

My brakes squeal from the dust-filled air as I come to a gentle stop in front of the front porch, and after I turn off the truck, I grab the radio and attempt to get Leah's attention.

Not too long ago, I gave her a handheld radio to keep at all times, whether it's with her at night when she's alone in her cabin or when she's roaming on the ranch by herself.

"Hey, Leah," I say into it and wait patiently for a response.

But when a minute passes by, I try again.

"Leah, come in, Leah."

Another thirty seconds pass by and I'm just about to try again, but the radio scratches and screeches and her voice fills the inside of my truck.

"Rhett?"

"Yeah, darlin', do me a favor and switch your radio over to the private channel."

"The private channel?" she repeats, and I can hear the concern and worry in her voice. "Oh shoot. Okay... Yeah, I'll do that right now!"

I almost want to laugh at how she's basically getting riled up for nothing.

Knowing everyone on the ranch is nosy as hell, I might've told Leah that channel thirty-four is a top-secret station that I'll use when I have to tell her something super important.

And that super-important shit mostly revolves around having the opportunity to flirt with her and ask her inappropriate things like, *What are you wearing?* and *Would you like to come over and ride my cock?*

Radio switched over to channel thirty-four, Leah is already there, bombarding my ears with questions.

"Rhett? Are you okay? Is Joey okay?" she rambles. "Did something happen with Tex? What about—"

“Darlin’, everything is fine,” I cut her off before she can get herself more worked up. “What are you doing right now?”

“Uh...I was actually getting ready to hop in the shower. Why? Do you need me to come get Joey or something?”

“Nope. She’s stayin’ at my parents’.”

“Oh,” she responds. “Then, what are you doing right now?”

I smirk. “Sitting outside Cabin Three.”

“You’re outside my cabin? Right now?”

“Uh-huh,” I answer without any shame. “I was hoping maybe you’d like some company in that shower.”

When she doesn’t respond, I start to wonder if she didn’t hear me.

That is, until ten seconds later when the front porch light flips on and the door opens.

And right there, before my very eyes, stands Leah, naked as the day she was born.

She rests one elbow on the doorjamb and smirks out at me. Her head is held high, her eyes bright with confidence, and her fucking body might as well be a siren’s call for my now-hardening dick.

The radio is still in her hand, and she lifts it to her lips. “What are you waiting for, cowboy?”

Well, I’ll be damned if that isn’t seriously fucking sexy.

I don’t waste any time with a response.

Fuck *no*. Now’s not the time for talking.

Now’s the time for putting my money where my mouth is and reacting on fucking instinct. And every cell inside my body is ripe with desire and need for the naked goddess standing in that doorway.

Out of my truck and to my feet, I stride right toward her, and I don’t stop until I’m through the screen door and pulling her into my arms.

The warmth and softness of her bare tits press against my chest as I kiss her with the kind of passion that has us both panting.

“Rhett,” she whispers, her voice more of a moan than anything else.

And it’s that sound, that desperate, needy sound, that spurs me into action.

I grip her ass with my big hands and toss her over my shoulder.

She squeals in surprise, but I ignore all her complaints about my leg and instructions to be careful.

I could give two shits about the tendon that’s apparently “still healing.”

I’m a man on a mission to get this gorgeous fucking woman back in that shower so I can join her and make her come on my tongue.

When I step into the bathroom, the sounds of the water fill my ears, and steam is already billowing toward the ceiling, and I realize she really wasn’t lying about almost getting ready to take a shower.

If this isn’t prime-fucking-timing, I don’t know what is.

Shower curtain pulled out of the way, I set Leah back to her feet beneath the warm spray of water, and I don’t even bother taking off my fucking clothes. Stepping right in with her, I kneel on my good knee, grip her ass with both of my big hands, and yank her bare pussy right toward my face.

“Rhett!” she shouts when my lips latch on to her clit, but that shout quickly turns into a moan when I slip my tongue inside her.

“Fuck, you taste like fuckin’ honey, darlin’,” I say, looking up at her.

Her lips are parted, her eyes are alight with heat and desire, and her breasts heave up and down with uneven breaths.

I reach up and grab her thick tits, rubbing my thumbs over the nipples in sync with the rhythm I'm sliding my tongue in and out of her.

My clothes are drenched and my cock aches like a motherfucker beneath my jeans, but I don't let anything deter me from making her come.

Ladies first, fucking always. That's the gentleman's way.

Mouth around her clit again, I suck at the swollen bud and flick my tongue against the bundle of nerves until I feel and hear Leah's body react.

Her legs shake and her breaths grow more ragged, and the second her fingers reach out to grip the damp material of my T-shirt, I know she's close.

"That's it, darlin'," I whisper against her skin. "If you come on my tongue like a good girl, then I'll let you come on my cock."

It doesn't take long before she's shouting my name, and her pussy clenches and vibrates against my mouth. And I don't hesitate to watch her catch fire, to watch the way her orgasm makes her eyes fall closed and her lips part even farther. Or the way her breasts push forward and her hips jerk toward my face.

I don't miss a single reaction of her body.

This has become my favorite fucking thing to see.

And thankfully, since I'm the one who gets to make her feel this way, it'll be etched in my memory until the end of time, a sight to see even if I turn up blind.

THIRTY-SEVEN



July 30th, Friday

Rhett

“C’mon, darlin’,” I encourage with a hand toward Leah.

She looks up at me, her eyes glancing between me and my horse Sonny. “What do you mean, come on? I can’t just jump up. I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not exactly known for athleticism.”

“What? You mean to tell me you’ve decided you’re a hamster person after all?”

“I didn’t say that, but this is a *new* horse. It’s not Saunders. We have to start the whole *get to know you* process over again.” She glares, and I chuckle.

“Well, this is my horse, and we’ve known each other for years. Since I’m going to be the one controlling him, it’s all good, darlin’. All you’ve got to do is give me your hand, and I’ll do the rest of the work.”

Leah huffs, crosses her arms, and stares out toward the distance.

“I won’t let you fall. Promise.”

“You swear?”

“Swear.” I make a little cross over my heart. She uncrosses her arms, huffs out another breath, but doesn’t make any move to follow my lead. “Just so you know, we’re losin’ daylight, and the surprise I have for ya involves the sun.”

She scrunches up her nose. “There’s a surprise involved?”

“Sure is.” I wink down at her. “And it’s a good one, too.”

Her top teeth dig into her bottom lip. “And you promise you won’t let me fall on my ass?”

“If you fall on your ass, I give you full permission to kick me directly in mine with a pair of those pointy-fucking heels you love so much.”

On a deep inhale and exhale, Leah steps forward and puts her soft hand into mine. Without delay, I pull her up and behind me, carefully instructing her on when to grip ahold of Sonny and when to swing her leg over the saddle. Doubled up like this, she’s got to sit behind the saddle on just the pad, with the cantle in between us, but I know Sonny’ll take care of us both.

She lets out a relieved giggle once she’s safely in her seat and wraps her arms around my waist. “You are so lucky you didn’t drop me, cowboy, because I already knew the shoes I was going to wear to kick your ass.”

That spurs a chuckle to pop from my lungs, and when I tap my heel to Sonny’s side, he begins a controlled trot away from the barn and toward the dirt path that leads to the back entrance of Dixie National Forest.

It’s hidden toward the back half of the ranch, but it’s actually one of the main reasons the Jameson family even bought this land. Besides the acreage and the location and the view, the proximity to one of the country’s hidden and often forgotten gems was the final selling point.

The wind brushes across my face as Sonny picks up the pace, and I’m pleasantly surprised when Leah releases one of her arms from my waist just to hold it up in the wind.

Her following laughter is giddy, and it’s so fucking sweet, it makes my chest feel like melted butter.

“Exhilarating, ain’t it?” I glance over my shoulder to look at her, and she flashes a big, gorgeous smile at me.

“It’s unbelievable!” she shouts over the wind. “Now, I’m starting to understand why you love riding so much.”

Damn, this feels amazing.

This beautiful woman wrapped around me while Sonny leads us toward the sunset? There isn’t anything better than this.

The adrenaline pumping through my veins combined with the way it makes my heart kick up into a quick rhythm reminds me so much of the way I felt when I used to ride broncs—straight-up addictive. But it’s a dangerous kind of addictive that isn’t satisfied with just one hit.

No fucking way. It makes you want to do it more and more and *more* until it’s all you can think about. All you want. Desire. Crave. *Need.*

Hell, I could do this with Leah every damn evening and I don’t think I’d grow tired of the way it feels to have her this close to me. To hear her laugh and see her smile, all while I’m doing one of my favorite things in life—*riding*.

A future with her is far too easy to picture, and it takes a Herculean effort not to let my brain wander down that way of thinking.

Tonight isn’t the night to be having any fucking world-shattering revelations.

It’s about showing Leah the most beautiful place on the ranch to witness a sunset. It’s about watching wonder fill her eyes and happiness spread across her face. It’s about seeing her smile and hearing her laugh and enjoying the carefree woman I’ve grown to adore with an intensity that makes me feel something I’ve never felt for a woman.

Something I’m not ready to admit to myself.

After another mile or so, I guide Sonny past the gates that separate the ranch from the national forest, and it’s not long

before I can tell Leah is glancing around at the change in scenery behind me.

“Where are you taking us?”

I grin over my shoulder. “Somewhere with a bit of elevation and that’s going to blow your mind.”

She snorts but doesn’t say anything else, and I switch my focus to safely getting us to our final stop. The path that leads us there is completely uphill and a bit rocky and bumpy in areas, but Sonny keeps his composure and manages it without any issues.

Once we reach the perfect spot, nestled right in between the pink cliffs, I hop off Sonny and loosely wrap his lead line around a nearby tree. With one gentle pat to his head, I let him know he did me proud, and then proceed to hold up a hand to Leah to help her off my horse.

She hesitates for a moment but, eventually, lets me help her. Once she reaches the halfway point of her descent, I wrap my arms around her waist and finish the rest for her.

The moment her feet hit the ground, she smiles up at me. “You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“I was taking too long to get off Sonny, so you took matters into your own hands.”

I lean forward and press my lips to her mouth before moving them to the shell of her ear. “Maybe I just wanted an excuse to touch you,” I whisper.

Her responding smile is downright sassy. “Or maybe you were just impatient?”

“Guess we’ll never know.” I shrug, and she sticks out her tongue at me. “Now, just out of curiosity, do you want to see the surprise? Or do you just wanna stand around and bicker with me because you’re feelin’ fuckin’ pent-up and horny?”

“Who says I’m horny?”

I nod toward her chest where her tits look thick and heavy, and her nipples press hard against her tank top.

“I’m cold,” she retorts, and I reach out to touch my hand to her cheek.

“You feel warm to me, darlin’.”

With a playful hand to my chest, she shoves me away.

“All right, cowboy. It’s time to put your money where your mouth is. Show me the surprise.”

I nod and grab the blanket I packed from where I strapped it on Sonny’s saddle horn.

“Follow me.”

A few minutes later, I locate the special spot, lay the blanket across the ground, and pull Leah down to sit in between my spread legs.

We’re all alone out here, sitting at higher elevation than the land below us, and the space between us is filled with a peaceful kind of silence that only being out in nature can provide.

“It’s time,” I whisper into her ear, and she starts to turn to look at me, but I squeeze her shoulders and add, “Right there. Watch the sun as she announces to the world that it’s time to sleep.”

Her gaze jerks back toward the horizon, and it only takes a few moments before a hand comes up to her mouth. “Wow,” she whispers. “Just...*wow*.”

“I know,” I agree and wrap my arms around her waist so that her body can rest comfortably against me. “That’s exactly why I wanted you to see it.”

The sky is cotton-candy pink with hints of blues and purples and oranges, and the sun bounces off the cliffs in the distance, making them look almost metallic.

I lean back so I can see the expression on Leah’s face as the sun makes her final descent. Her lashes flutter as she blinks several times, and her lips form a perfect little O shape.

“I can’t believe this is real life.”

I grin. “Oh, but it is real life, darlin’.”

And damn if I’m not starting to wish that this, nights like this with Leah, were the *real life* of my future.

THIRTY-EIGHT



Leah

With the warm night breeze blowing through Rhett's truck, I hold my hand out the open passenger window and let it skate through the air.

After Rhett took me to a Jameson family secret spot in Dixie National Forest to watch the sunset, we rode Sonny back to the stables and got him settled for the night.

It was dark by the time we hopped into his truck to head back to his place.

Patsy Cline serenades us from the radio, singing about walking after midnight and the moonlight and searching for her love, and I just feel...good. Happy, even.

The past few weeks have been some of the best of my life, and it's all because of the handsome cowboy in the driver's seat.

I look over at Rhett and note the way the moonlight falls over his face, highlighting the lines of his strong jaw and curve of his full lips.

His mouth is relaxed, and when he feels my gaze on him, he glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "What are ya doin', darlin'?"

I shrug. “Just looking at you and thinking about what a great night this has been.”

His mouth curves upward, and he reaches out to rest his hand on my thigh. “You enjoyed watching the sunset?”

“I enjoyed watching the sunset with you.”

He squeezes my thigh and flashes a wink in my direction.

When Patsy Cline’s song comes to a close, the radio switches over to a new one. A soft drumbeat starts it off, and it appears Rhett recognizes it before I do.

“Well, hell,” he mutters on a grin and turns the steering wheel so sharply to the right that my hand jolts up to the handle above my door.

“Ah! *Rhett!* What are you doing?” I screech when he directs us completely off-road, in the middle of one of the meadows on the ranch.

The bastard just laughs. “Making sure this night ends with some old-fashioned romance.”

“*Romance?*” I nearly shout when he skids the truck to a stop. “Taking us off-road isn’t exactly my idea of romance, you crazy man.”

He just chuckles and reaches out to turn the radio up as loud as it will go.

And that’s when my ears turn their attention to the words of a song I still don’t recognize.

The man is literally singing my name over and over again.

“What is this?”

“Darlin’, this is Roy Orbison,” he comments. “He was a fuckin’ legend and one of my all-time favorites, who just so happens to have a song called ‘Leah.’ Which is quite the wonderful coincidence, if you ask me.”

Rhett hops out of the truck and rounds the hood with quick steps. He wastes no time helping me out of my seat with a gentlemanly hand, and I squeal when he steps back to spin me beneath his arm.

“Dance with me, darlin’,” he says, and my jaw falls open.

“What do you mean, *dance with you*?”

He wraps his arm around my back and pulls me tight to his chest, all the while he guides us into a two-step rhythm. “I mean exactly what I said. Dance with me.”

“Holy hell, you can, like, really dance.”

“What? You think cowboys can’t dance?” he challenges and spins me around again before pulling me flush against his body. One hand skirts down my back and grips my ass through my jean shorts. “Let me be the one to correct that false assumption right fuckin’ now,” he whispers into my ear. “Cowboys can dance. Oh, we can definitely fuckin’ dance. We just gotta find a woman who inspires us to *want* to dance.”

My heart beats rapidly in my chest, and I stare up at him, watching the way his face morphs into a soft smile and his eyes peer into mine with the kind of tenderness that makes my breath get all tangled up in my lungs.

The radio switches over to another oldies-style country song, and Rhett just keeps on dancing us around the meadow. And the only lights guiding our path are the moonlight above our heads and the headlights from his truck.

“Dancing with a handsome man in the middle of a dreamy meadow,” I say through a soft laugh. “This is some Edward Cullen kind of shit.”

“Edward Cullen?” Rhett furrows his brow but keeps moving us around the meadow in a slow, rhythmic pattern that matches the beat of the song. “Who’s that?”

“You know, from *Twilight*...”

“Is that, like, a fuckin’ band or something?”

I burst into a fit of laughter. “Oh my God, Taylor would die if she heard you say that.”

More confusion consumes his face in the manner of a tilt of his head and a narrowing of his eyes. Which only makes me more amused.

“Edward Cullen is a vampire from a famous series,” I eventually explain. “The first book is called *Twilight*.”

“What in the hell do fuckin’ vampires have to do with us dancin’, darlin’?”

I shake my head on a smile. “Just forget I said anything and keep romancing me, cowboy.”

There’s no way in hell I’m going to try to explain *Twilight* and sparkly vampires and shape-shifting werewolves that imprint their love to this rugged man. Pretty sure if I tried, his head would flipping explode.

Though, one day, I’d love to watch my best friend Taylor give it a try.

A new song comes on the radio, and it’s one I actually recognize—“It’s Your Love” by Tim McGraw. And the lyrics resonate so hard, they make goose bumps appear on my arms and my heart migrate to my throat.

I’m almost overwhelmed by how good I always feel with Rhett. How right it always feels. How, in such a short time, he’s become so important to me.

He’s someone I care about, *deeply*.

He’s a man who makes me feel stronger, more confident, and beautiful. And the way he looks at me sometimes, well, it makes me think about what a future with him would be like.

God, I think I’m starting to want that kind of a future a little too much for comfort...

Emotion threatens to pull me out of the moment, but when Rhett surprises me with another twirl beneath his arm, I’m yanked right back to the present, where a handsome cowboy is grinning down at me like I’m the best thing since sliced bread.

He twirls me again and again and moves us fast and slow, and when the song comes to an end, he grips my back and dips me like I’ve only seen people do in movies.

And he holds me there, his face peering down at mine. “What do ya think, darlin’?”

“I think you can dance,” I whisper toward him. “And you’re crazy good at old-fashioned romance.”

He smirks at that.

And then he moves his lips to mine and takes my mouth in a deep kiss.

Damn, this cowboy. It’s starting to feel like he just might have my heart.

THIRTY-NINE



August 7th, Saturday

Rhett

Joey jumps down out of my truck, slams the door, and takes off like a shot for a whole tangle of people making their way to the gate of Kanab Arena, the official stop of the Professional Rodeo Circuit this weekend and just about the last place on earth I want to be.

I roll down my window, put two fingers in my mouth to whistle loudly, and reach up and out to flick my hand in this direction when Joey stops on a dime and turns to look back at me anxiously.

“Get back here,” I tell her, just as Leah is jumping out of the truck herself and running toward Joey with some kind of natural-born parental-style panic. If it weren’t for the fact that I’m here under complete duress, I might actually find it in me to smile about how sweet my woman is with my girl and how much she cares about her.

“Come on, Daddy!” Joey whines uncharacteristically, an outburst I know is born of nothing more than excitement.

Two days ago, she heard them talking about the big show rodeo on the radio while we were driving in the truck—specifically, the new opportunity they were giving young riders to be showcased, live, on national television.

A brand-new, open-call mutton-busting event, they said, open to all children between the ages of four and seven who could make the trip to Kanab today and be ready to ride.

“I’m gonna miss the sign-offs!” she huffs, clearly meaning the entry signups that the radio host specified closed at noon.

I roll my eyes since we’ve got at least an hour before then. “Relax, baby, we’ve got time. Get on back here and get your stuff outta the truck.”

She sighs dejectedly, but Leah, the mama wolf who’s made it to her by now, squeezes her shoulder in consolation. “You can’t ride without your gear, can you?”

“No,” Joey agrees before hedging smartly, “but I can sign up without it.”

I laugh before grabbing my wallet from the console and hopping down out of the driver’s seat to meet my approaching girls. “Come on now,” I counsel Joey. “Work smarter, not harder. You know that. We’re gonna get all’a our stuff in one go, so we don’t have to come back out here for it, and we planned good and well for the drive to take much longer to make sure we made it here in time. I know you’re excited, baby, but you don’t have to worry. You’re gonna ride today, I promise.”

“Oh-kay,” she finally agrees dramatically, stepping around me to open the back door to the cab of my truck and pull out her hot-pink gear bag. She slings it over her shoulder and raises her eyebrows at me sassily. “Are we all ready now?”

I swear. I’m gonna be in trouble one day. I scoff and chuck my girl on the chin. “Watch the attitude, baby girl. And, yes, we’re ready.”

As I’ll ever be.

Quite frankly, there are people here and memories of a lifestyle that I really don’t have any interest in seeing anymore, and there’s only one thing, one person who could get me to give up the peace of mind that comes with avoiding it—Josephine Jameson.

Seems like maybe there are two people now...

I shake off all those annoying thoughts and take Leah's hand with my right and Joey's with my left. As a unit, we walk through the parking lot and up to the gate to wait our turn to get inside.

When I step up to the booth to buy our tickets, the man inside recognizes me instantly, and I groan internally. It doesn't happen as often anymore, now that I'm getting older and it's been a while since I've been on the circuit, but the rodeo lifers still know me when they see me.

"Holy shit, Rhett Jameson in the flesh! I can't fuckin' believe how cool this is."

"Hi," I say simply, never one to be good at being gushed over, and Leah's eyes bug out at my side. I can tell she wants to run her mouth off at my curt response, but she at least has the good grace to contain herself for now. I reckon it won't last long, though.

"Man, this is awesome. I can't wait to tell my girlfriend I saw you here. She's, like, to this day, one of your biggest fans."

"I'll bet," Leah says under her breath, and I just shake my head.

"I need to sign off for the mutton bustin'!" Joey shouts, trying to make herself heard from her spot way below the counter.

The ticket dude stands up and leans over then and smiles. "Oh man, hey there, little person. Signups are gonna be on the south side of the arena, down by the chutes. Find the big guy with the black hat and bright blue chaps, okay?"

Joey nods enthusiastically, grabbing Leah's hand and dragging her away from my side immediately. "You can finish up and pay while Leah takes me to find that guy, right, Daddy?"

I don't get the chance to answer before they're gone at a jog, Leah waving over her shoulder and then giving me the thumbs-up to assure me it's all okay.

The tension in my shoulders says otherwise, but I don't bother with fighting it. I know at this point it won't do me any good.

I finish up at the ticket booth and walk inside, looking over everything I know so well, and yet can't hardly remember. I've been avoiding coming back here for years, terrified of all the stark reminders of what used to be.

Being on the circuit, partying and sleeping with random women, including Anna—being in a different city every night—it all feels like a lifetime ago now that I have my life on the ranch with Joey.

It feels like a young man's game that I'm not young enough for anymore, and to be honest, in an unexpected twist, it actually feels good to get confirmation. Feels good to be here.

I'm not just content with my life; I'm *happy*.

And now that Leah's a part of it, too? I don't know that I've ever been happier.

Mood significantly lifted, I turn and head toward the back of the chutes where I know I'll find my girls. It's a packed house, with people everywhere, even this early, and occasionally as I walk, someone who recognizes me will wave.

I tip my hat in recognition but don't take it much further—the last thing I want is to get trapped in another loop of enthusiastic small talk.

Finally, I make it to the back of the arena and spot my girls, Joey's bright pink standing out against all the duller colors of the cowboys. She's getting her gear on with Leah's help, though I know for a fact she's still probably got at least an hour before she rides, and the unbridled eagerness in her every move makes me smile.

I'm thrilled to death that she's found something she loves this much at such a young age, and if I'm a smart man—which I like to think I am—I'll do everything I can to foster it.

I sway and weave my way through the crowd, making my way over to them, and I get within ten blessed feet when a hand presses into my chest, stopping me cold.

Now, I know at least a dozen cowboys and cowgirls I wouldn't mind seeing here, but wouldn't you know, it's the one and only one I'd do anything to avoid.

“Rhett Jameson,” Anna says, a coy lilt to her voice. “At an actual rodeo, in the flesh. I 'bout near thought I'd die before I saw the day you came back here.”

There are a million things I could say and just as many comebacks I could make, but the truth is, none of them seem to matter at all anymore.

For my purposes, the less I deal with Anna Morrow, the better, but I'm not going to waste any more energy on my anger either.

I feel like I can finally let it all go. I don't *want* her to come around. She made her choice—a fucking dumb choice—but Joey is better off without her anyway. It's a shame Anna's missing out on our daughter, but that's her choice, not mine.

“Hi, Anna.”

“Hi, Anna?” she taunts back. “Is that really all you have to say to me?”

I consider it briefly, and then I shrug. “You know what... yeah, it is.”

For the first time ever in all the years she's been toying with me, concern flashes across her face, and I swear, it pains me to admit it, but Chase Walker was damn right. All Anna's ever wanted is the attention—even if it came with a raging pot of anger—from me.

“I hope you have a good life, Anna. I really do. Because I've got one I never could have ever dreamed of. And you and me—all this drama—it's done.”

With a smile and a wave, I step around the woman who, for years, plagued my thoughts with all the could-have-beens

she never made, and I walk toward the two who make everything in the future look bright.

Joey and I...we're doing just fine, have been for years.

And now, with Leah in our lives, I can say with confidence that we're not doing just fine anymore.

We're doing great.

FORTY



August 10th, Tuesday

Leah

Arms filled with two bags of groceries, I walk out of the small mom-and-pop grocery store in Kanab and head toward the truck. Tonight, I promised Rhett I'd make him my famous fettuccine alfredo. And in return, he promised me a quiet night with just the two of us. He also promised that he'd bring the dessert.

Though, he didn't refer to chocolate cake or ice cream or pie.

His exact words were, *"You make dinner, darlin', and my tongue will make sure that sweet pussy of yours gets one hell of a dessert."*

That cowboy of mine might be a true gentleman at heart, but damn, he's got a talent for dirty talk.

Needless to say, I had no qualms with running into town this afternoon to get everything I needed to make homemade pasta.

As I close the distance to the truck, I feel a vibration against my side, and I stop in the middle of the parking lot, glancing around the mostly empty space.

When I feel that same sensation a second and a third time, it dawns on me—*my phone*.

I almost laugh at the absurdity.

Quickly, I juggle my bags into one arm and pull my cell out of my purse and look at the screen to see ***Incoming Call Frank Kaminsky***.

Shoot. My freaking boss is calling me!

The boss that, for the last few weeks, I've pretty much forgotten all about.

Hell, the last time I talked to him was right after Tex had his heart attack.

I fumble with the phone in my hands until I can steady it enough to hit accept.

"Hello?"

"Well, I'll be damned." Frank's voice fills my ear. "I've been trying to get ahold of you for two days now."

"Sorry about that." I grimace and hold the phone to my ear with my shoulder. "Cell service on the ranch isn't—"

"I'm just messin' with you, Leah," he says. "I know that bastard Tex is too cheap to get a good cell connection out there. But I also know he prefers it that way. The man has never been much for modernizing shit. Speaking of the old bastard, how's he doing?"

"He's actually doing really well," I answer and finish the short walk to the truck.

"I take it you've been keeping an eye on him since the heart attack?"

"Yep," I answer. "Doing my best to keep these Jameson men healthy."

"Jameson men are a special kind of breed of stubborn."

I laugh. "That they are."

"And how's your actual patient doing?"

“Uh...really good, actually. Brace is off and he’s full-weight bearing. Pretty much back to all of his normal cowboy, rancher activities. It’s safe to say his leg has made a full and healthy recovery.”

“Good to hear,” he comments. “Sounds like everything is on track as we planned.”

“Yes.”

“Then, I’d say we’ll be on schedule for you to head back home on the sixteenth.”

“The sixteenth?” I question with wide eyes, and when I realize it’s already the tenth, my heart seizes up in discomfort.

“Yep,” he answers. “I’ll send a plane out there for ya, and then you can get back to your actual job here at the Slammers. The team is looking forward to having you back.”

I don’t even know what to say to that.

I mean, that’s *so soon*.

And it’s like I’ve gotten so used to living out here that I lost sight of my reality—I’m *not a permanent fixture on the ranch*. I was only hired for eight weeks, and well, that eight weeks is almost up.

I drop my bags beside the truck and just stand there, staring at myself in the reflection of the driver’s side window.

Where did the time go?

“Leah?” Frank’s voice startles me. “You still there?”

“Y-yeah. Yes, I mean. I’m still here. Sorry.” I put a hand to my forehead and shut my eyes. “So, you’re going to send a plane out for me on the sixteenth?”

“Yep,” he responds. “See ya in six days. Can’t wait to have you back.”

A second later, the line clicks off, and I’m left standing in the middle of the parking lot, trying to wrap my head around it all.

In less than a week, I’ll have to leave the ranch.

Leave Joey and Jenny and Tex and all of the staff and ranch hands I've come to call friends.

I'll have to leave Rhett.

This man, in a matter of two months, has flipped my world upside down, and now, I don't know what's supposed to happen when it's time for me to say goodbye.

FORTY-ONE



August 10th, Tuesday

Rhett

“All right, cowboy,” Leah announces as she carries two plates filled with homemade pasta over to the small kitchen table in her cabin. “I hope you brought your appetite because dinner’s ready.”

The table is all set with cutlery and napkins, and she’s even created some ambiance with a flowery tablecloth and candlelight in the center.

“Darlin’, you’ve outdone yourself,” I tell her, and the moment she sets our plates down, I grab her by the waist, spin her around, and pull her into my arms. “Thanks for preparin’ all this.”

“You’re welcome.” She grins up at me. “And I can’t deny I might’ve been extra motivated when you told me you’d be bringing the dessert.”

I reach down and squeeze her ass. “Oh, you have no idea what’s comin’.”

She giggles, and I use that time to steal a sweet kiss. But once temptation prevails and I deepen the kiss, she pushes me away on another giggle and tells me to sit my ass down and eat before the meal she’s cooked gets cold.

The second I'm sitting across from her and my face hovers over my plate, the aromas of cheese and salt and olive oil fill my nostrils. "Damn, this smells good."

Leah smiles and lifts her glass of water to her lips for a sip.

"How'd your day go, by the way?"

"It went fine." She shrugs. "Mostly just ran errands in town. And, uh..." She pauses for a few seconds before finishing her thought. "Frank Kaminsky called me this afternoon when I was leaving the grocery store."

"Yeah?" I take another bite of the fettuccine alfredo Leah made tonight and grin at her from across the table. "Darlin', this is delicious, by the way."

"Oh, uh...thanks. Glad you like it."

The smile that appears on her lips looks off. Forced, even.

"Everything go okay with the call?"

"Well, yeah," she says but then pauses.

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh." She shrugs and stares down at her plate, her hand moving her fork through the noodles without any real purpose. "He just wanted to see how you and your dad were doing."

"Did you tell him that you never want to take care of another Jameson man?"

That spurs a laugh from her throat, but it doesn't last long. "No, but I did let him know that Tex was doing really well. Which he was relieved to hear. And I let him know you're well on your way to a full recovery."

"All thanks to a bossy doctor." I wink at her, and she rolls her eyes.

"And...uh...since my eight weeks are just about up, he also mentioned that he'd be sending a plane out here for me on the sixteenth."

“The sixteenth? That’s...soon,” I say, but it’s more to myself than her.

Frankly, I don’t know what to do or say.

I mean, *the fucking sixteenth?* In less than a week, she’s just going to pack her shit and go? I know that’s been the plan all along, but lately...I guess I’ve failed to really consider it. I don’t want her to leave.

“Yeah.” Her mouth turns down at the corners. “It is.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What do you mean?” she says. “I don’t really have a choice. Frank only let me take a leave from my job with the Slammers temporarily so I could come out here and help you. I have to go back. My whole life, my career, it’s in Salt Lake City.”

Her whole life.

Even though I don’t fully understand why, those words make me grimace.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she continues. “I love it out here. I’ve loved the time I’ve spent here. Especially the time I’ve spent with you. Even when you were being a total asshat,” she teases, but I’m having a hard time finding anything funny right now. “I guess the reason I’m bringing this up is...because I don’t know where...we go from here. Me and you, I mean...”

She looks at me from across the table for a brief moment, but eventually, she looks down at her fingers as they fidget with her napkin.

“Well...” I pause and try to take a cleansing breath to ease the growing tightness in my chest. “It’s going to be pretty hard with you all the way in Salt Lake and me here on the ranch.”

“I know,” she agrees and meets my eyes again. “But, I mean, people do long-distance relationships all the time, right?”

“Yeah, I know a lot of people make long-distance work, but Leah, I don’t live a normal life out here. You know that as well as I do by now. You can’t just call me on the phone

anytime, and the same goes for me callin' you. And baby, I'd want to be callin' you."

"So, you don't think we could make it work?"

I run a hand through my hair. "Do *you* think we could make it work?"

"During the season would be hard because of all the traveling I have to do, but in the off-season, I'd definitely have more time to come out and visit. And maybe you and Joey could come to Salt Lake and visit me sometimes?"

None of those options feel good, nor do they feel possible. I work twelve-, fourteen-hour days most of the time, and with ranch life, there isn't an off-season.

Fuck.

"Leah, you've seen how my life is out here. And half of that time, my dad was still doing a lot on this ranch," I answer honestly. "With him out of commission and me eventually taking it all over, the opportunities for me to leave for any extended period of time are slim. If any."

Her shoulders sag, and she stares down at her lap again. "So...you don't think we can make it work?"

I wish I could tell her that I did.

I wish I could tell her a lot of fucking things, all of which would make her and me feel better about this. But I got nothing.

She's leaving.

And all of my responsibilities—the ranch, my daughter—they're here.

Son of a bitch.

"I take it that's a no, then," she mutters, and her lip trembles with emotion. "You don't think we can make it work."

All I can do is shake my head. I've never been one to sugarcoat shit. And I sure as hell can't risk sugarcoating shit when I have a little girl whose stability relies on me.

It's going to be hard enough on Joey when Leah isn't here anymore.

Hell, I don't think I've fully realized the consequences of that, but I can't imagine prolonging Joey's pain with false hope that she'll still get to see Leah sometimes.

This is a lose-lose situation all a-fucking-round.

The selfish part of me wants to tell Leah to stay, but how can I ask that of her when she just told me that her whole life is in Salt Lake?

Her career is important to her. She's already made that very clear to me, and I refuse to be the man who asks a woman to give up on her dreams. Hell, we still haven't given this, whatever it is that's happening between us, an actual title.

None of it makes sense, but that doesn't explain this sense of impending doom that sits inside my chest like a fucking rock.

"Well, I guess that settles it, then, huh?" she retorts, and I don't miss the way her voice vibrates with anger. "You say we can't make it work, so that's that."

"Leah, that's not—"

"It's fine, Rhett," she cuts me off and stands up from her chair abruptly. Plate in hand, she takes it over to the trash can and scrapes a full helping of pasta into the bin.

"You're mad at me," I state, and she whips around to glare at me.

"I'm not mad," she refutes, even though everything about her current defiant stance says the opposite. "Why would I be mad? If you don't think we can make it work or it's not worth trying to make it work, then that's fine. I mean, it's not like we've professed our love to each other, right? If anything, this is like a summer fling, you know? No big deal."

A summer fucking fling.

No big deal.

Obviously, the pain I'm currently feeling is one-sided because I certainly haven't looked at us as a summer fling. *Fuck*, I was more than a little tempted to ask her to stay but felt like that was a real bastard move to ask her to give up her career to stay here with me on the ranch.

Apparently, all these feelings, all this fucking discomfort over the idea of her not being here anymore is for naught.

Because we're a *summer fucking fling*.

We're *no big deal*.

A fun fucking memory we can reminisce on when we're old and gray.

"That's right, darlin'," I comment on a harsh laugh and stand up from my chair. "There's nothing to get worked up over because it's all *no big deal*."

She just stares back at me, mouth gaped open wide enough to catch flies.

"And you know what? Why wait until the sixteenth, ya know? Let's just cut our losses now," I say and grab my plate off the table and walk it over to the kitchen sink. "It's been real fuckin' fun, darlin'. Thanks for all the fuckin' fun this summer," I say and slide my hands into the pockets of my jeans. "Have a safe trip back to Salt Lake."

With a quick kiss to her forehead, I walk out of her cabin and out of her life without another word.

A summer fucking fling.

Who would've thought something that's *no big deal* would hurt this goddamn bad.

FORTY-TWO



August 11th, Wednesday

Rhett

I slept like shit last night.

All damn night, I tossed and turned over that horrible conversation with Leah.

I shouldn't have left like that. I shouldn't have let my pride get in the way.

I know that whole *summer fling* bullshit was just that—total and utter bullshit. And I know she's been feeling about me the way I've been feeling about her. We've shared too much, experienced too many things together, for me not to see that we're both deep in our feelings over each other.

Deep down, I want to try to find a way to make this work between us.

I still don't know what that would entail or if it's even possible, but I'm willing to try.

All morning, I've been wondering if she'd show up at the stalls to help with the horses. Or if I'd see her at the chicken coop after lunch. But when she went MIA on the ranch, I told Tilly to take over for me in Barn Three so I could make this shit right.

I pull up to her cabin to find the screen door wide open and the truck my dad loaned her nowhere to be found.

That's odd...

Out of my truck and up to the house, the moment I step inside, I'm shocked to see Francine, one of the ladies on our cleaning crew, walking out of Leah's bedroom with her arms full of bedding.

"Oh my goodness!" she shouts and jumps back a step. "You scared the shit outta me, Rhett!"

"Sorry about that," I apologize and run a hand through my hair. "What are you doing here, exactly?"

"What do you mean?" She starts to shove the bedding into one of her laundry sacks. "Miss Leah left early this morning. So, Randall and I came over to get the cabin cleaned up again for guests. He just left about ten minutes ago to grab some Clorox wipes and toilet paper from the lodge."

What? Leah fucking left? This morning?

When I just keep standing there, staring at Francine, she tilts her head to the side in confusion.

"Did ya need something, honey?"

I shake my head, but it's all I can do. The ability to speak disappeared the second Francine told me that Leah left.

No goodbye.

No nothing.

She just hauled ass out of here like a criminal in the middle of the night.

My shock turns to anger, and I clench my fists at my sides to try to temper the intensity that rushes through my veins.

Leah fucking left without telling me. And she even left without saying goodbye to Joey.

My daughter is going to be fucking heartbroken over this.

Yeah. Well, that makes two of you.

I shake my head, turning on my heel to get the fuck out of Cabin Three and all the memories of Leah it contains, but Francine's voice stops me before I can make it inside my truck.

“Rhett, honey! Wait!”

I look up to find her running down the porch steps and right toward me.

By the time she reaches me, her breaths are coming out in quick pants. “Oh boy, I'm outta shape.” She half laughs, half wheezes. “These were left on the nightstand for you and Joe.”

Two envelopes are placed in my hand.

I glance down to see my name and Joey's name written across the front in Leah's familiar scrawl.

She left me a fucking letter?

To say what? Thanks for the fun?

I turn on my heel again and open the driver's side door, but when I glance over my shoulder and realize Francine is still standing there, utterly perplexed by my silent reaction, I offer a polite nod. “Thanks, Francine. See ya later.”

She smiles and waves, and I can't even find the strength to force my lips to do anything but stay in a firm line.

My jaw clenches as I start the engine, and without hesitation, I take those two envelopes from Leah Levee and shove them both in the center console of my truck and let the lid slam shut.

If she was too much of a fucking coward to say goodbye to Joey and me in person, then I'm going to be too much of a prideful son of a bitch to read whatever bullshit she probably wrote down.

And to think I thought we'd actually been on the same page.

That she'd been feeling about me the way I was feeling about her.

It's almost like she pulled a fucking Anna and just walked right out of Joey's and my life without saying goodbye. Without a single fucking thought of how it would make us feel.

Maybe Leah isn't the woman I once thought she was.

Maybe she's just like everyone else—*selfish as fuck and not worth my time.*

FORTY-THREE



Leah

“Lenny said you wanted to talk to me,” I greet as I step inside Frank Kaminsky’s office at the Slammers’ main headquarters in downtown Salt Lake.

He grins at me from behind his fancy desk. “C’mon in, Dr. Levee. It’s good to see ya. How are ya doing? Was the flight in this morning okay?”

Seeing as this is my boss, normally, I’d feel pressure to keep my thoughts to myself.

But with the way this day has gone since I got out of bed this morning, I don’t feel like beating around the bush. Frankly, I don’t feel like doing much of anything but keep trying to get ahold of Rhett.

“Well, to be honest, I’ve been better,” I answer honestly. “Getting woken up at five in the morning to head back to Salt Lake several days early wasn’t the best way to start the day.”

“I apologize for the last-minute change, but Dr. Hall had to take a short leave of absence late yesterday to handle some personal medical issues, and we needed to make sure we had a doctor on the court because, as you know, the guys are in the middle of their most grueling part of preseason training. Not to mention, we had too many injuries pop up in the preseason last year. We couldn’t take any risks, Leah.”

All I can do is nod.

“Everything go okay with the Jameson family?” he asks with a knowing grin. “The men behave themselves?”

“Uh, yeah.” I shrug. “It went well.”

A little too well, even.

Because the instant I stepped foot on the plane this morning and it went wheels up out of Shaw Springs Ranch, I’ve had a knot in my chest the size of a boulder.

And I’ve cried three times.

Felt sick over leaving the ranch without getting a chance to say goodbye to Rhett and Joey.

Haven’t been able to eat a damn thing.

“Tex still doing okay after the heart attack?”

I nod. “He’s doing great.”

“Good.” Frank taps his fingers against the desk. “Well, I just wanted to bring you in here and make sure you’re all settled in, but I also wanted to talk to you about taking over Dr. Hall’s position. He’s going to be phasing out of his place here with the Slammers. He’s reaching the age where he wants to retire and spend the rest of his days relaxing at home with his family, rather than dealing with six-foot-five, smartass basketball players.” He smirks. “And I’d like to see you take over his position.”

My mouth falls open. “You want me to take over Dr. Hall’s position?”

“This is lookin’ to be his last season with us.”

This news should bring me joy.

Hell, it should make me want to jump out of this chair and *scream* for joy.

But there is nothing joyful about this.

If anything, I just feel even more sick to my stomach.

And numb. I feel so fucking numb right now. It feels like everything that was important to me was ripped away from me

the second I got on that plane.

“Wow,” I mutter and look down at my lap. “I...I don’t know what to say. Or what I want to do.”

“Are you having doubts about your position in this organization?”

“Honestly, Mr. Kaminsky, yes, I think I am having doubts about working for this organization.”

The words just shoot from my mouth before I can even think about them.

Oddly enough, though, I don’t want to take them back.

When I realize Frank is gawking at me with shock and that my abrupt delivery might’ve been pretty fucking harsh, I try to smooth it over the best I can. “Shoot. That didn’t come out the way I meant it. What I’m trying to say is that I thought this is where I wanted to be, working for your great organization, but I don’t think this is where I belong.”

He just stares back at me.

“I...uh...I’m really sorry,” I backpedal. “I just... It’s been a long day, and I think I just need to get some sleep and start fresh in the morning. Now probably wasn’t the most optimal time to have this conversation.”

“That’s reasonable.” He nods. “Normally, I’d be pretty pissed that someone I’ve handed a great opportunity to is pretty much shitting all over it, but I’m going to be nice and give you the benefit of the doubt. You did me a favor by going out there and helping Rhett. And, honestly, it was a blessing you were out there when Tex had his heart attack.”

Just the mere mention of Rhett’s name makes my heart want to fall out of my chest.

“So,” Frank continues. “Let’s shelve this conversation until you’ve gotten back into the swing of things here. We’ll revisit this next week.”

“Okay.”

The conversation comes to an end, and I head out of his office with a head that's spinning faster than a fucking top.

Frank Kaminsky just told me he wants me to take over Dr. Hall's position, and I pretty much told him I didn't want it.

Surely I'm going to regret those words after I sleep on it, right?

I mean, *what the fuck?*

That position is what I've wanted. What I've been working for.

But why does it feel like it's not where I should be?

Because you left your fucking heart at Shaw Springs.

Tears threaten to prick my eyes for the fourth time today, and I shake it off and focus on heading back to the practice court. I have three players to check out and a hundred other things to get settled. I don't have time for tears.

I do, though, have time to grab my cell phone out of my purse and try to call Rhett's landline one more time.

It rings and rings and rings, and just like the ten other times I've attempted to call him, it goes to his answering machine.

Which, unfortunately for me, is full and unable to accept any more messages.

I silently wonder if he even remembers he has a fucking answering machine.

You shouldn't have gotten on that plane this morning.

Shit. I sigh. I should've at least told the execs from the Slammers organization that I couldn't leave until I spoke with Rhett.

Because leaving things the horrible way we left them last night?

That, right now, is my biggest regret.

FORTY-FOUR



August 13th, Thursday

Tex

“Tex! Tex! Wake up!” Jenny’s voice startles the shit out of me, and I pop my eyes open to find her standing over me.

“What the hell ya doin’, honey?” I question and rub at my eyes with one hand. “Is something on fire?”

“Frank is on the phone.”

“*Huh?*”

“Frank Kaminsky,” she repeats. “He’s on the phone.”

“What time is it?” I ask, and she glances at the watch on her wrist.

“A little after five.”

“Hell, I fell asleep in the recliner again, didn’t I?”

“You sure did.” She smiles down at me and reaches out to touch a gentle hand to my cheek.

I’m telling ya, ever since I had my heart attack and everyone’s been hassling me to relax and take things easy, I’ve sure become too damn lazy. Like clockwork, I just up and fall asleep in the middle of the damn day.

You'd think all this healthy eating and medication keeping my heart in check would give me more energy, but fuck, it's like I've turned into a fucking cat.

"Gettin' old is a real bitch," I mutter, and my wife flashes an amused smile at me as she walks back into the kitchen.

With a grunt, I ease my body out of the recliner. My hips pop and my knees crack with my first moves, but eventually, I'm on my feet and heading into my office.

My rotary phone is sitting off the hook, and I grab it and put it to my ear.

"Ya there, Frank?"

"I'm here," he answers. "Though, I thought maybe Jenny'd forgotten about me."

I chuckle. "Nah, she had to wake my lazy ass up from a nap."

"A nap?" he asks, surprise in his voice. "Tex Jameson takes fuckin' naps now?"

"Apparently," I respond. "I think those damn Salt Lake doctors of yours fucked me up when they were treating my heart attack."

"You feeling good, though?"

"Yeah. I'm feeling and doing good."

"Glad to hear. Was real worried about ya."

"Ah, c'mon, Frank. You know I'm too much of a bastard to up and die this early. Surely I'll be around for another twenty or so years just so I can give you a hard time whenever I can."

He laughs. "Well, speaking of doctors, that's actually why I'm calling."

"Yeah?"

"What the hell did ya do to my doctor?"

My head jerks back. "Huh?"

“Leah Levee,” he expands. “I sent her to ya, and she was motivated and ready to seize the fucking day, ready to work to be my number one doctor on the Slammers team. But after she came back from your ranch, it’s like she’s had a fuckin’ brain transplant or some shit.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“She’s not happy,” he says. “Talking about stepping down from her position on the Slammers and going back to her orthopedic practice after this season is over. Which, to be honest, is a real fucking pain in my ass because my number one doctor is probably going to have to retire soon. He’s getting old and dealing with some medical shit. It’s why I had to have Leah come back to Salt Lake a few days early.”

“Well, shit.”

“What do you mean, *well shit*? Did something happen out there?”

“Pretty sure a lot happened out here, Frank,” I answer honestly. “But none of that shit is my business to tell.”

“You can’t be fucking serious.”

“Don’t ask me, Frank. I’m not telling.”

“*Son of a bitch.*”

Yeah, son of a bitch is right. Pretty sure I gotta do some investigatin’ to figure out what happened. Careful investigatin’, though. Not pushy. Not pryin’. But enough to get an idea of what really went down between Rhett and Leah.

“Hey, Frank, I gotta go.”

“Of course you do.”

I chuckle. “See ya around, bud.”

The instant I hang up the phone, I walk into the bedroom, open the drawer of my nightstand, and pull out a little black box that Jenny made me get out of the lodge safe about a month ago.

Well, I’ll be damned. I think my Jenny was right.

And now it's making sense why Tiny's been saying Rhett's been a real asshole the past two days.

Pretty sure my son is in love.

"Jenny!" I call out from the bedroom. "You heard from Rhett today?"

"Yeah," she shouts back. "He's gonna drop Joe off in about an hour before he has to go do something over in one of the pastures."

Looks like I have a little time to figure out how in the hell I'm gonna broach this subject without pissing off my son.



The instant Rhett steps through my door, the facts are written all over his goddamn face.

Pain. Misery.

Fucking heartbreak.

Shit.

Once I say a quick hello to my Joey, I revert my focus to Rhett.

"You got a minute, son?"

He nods. "I can give you about five minutes."

"Perfect."

He follows my lead into the office, and the second we're both in there, I gently shut the door.

He furrows his brow, and I try my best to go at this with the kind of finesse my Jenny is skilled at employing.

"Have you talked to Leah since she went back to Salt Lake?"

His jaw clenches. "Nope."

Yep. Now it's making sense why he's been such a fucking grouch to Tiny and the rest of the ranch staff.

I'm real tempted to tell him just that, but I bite my tongue and keep my restraint.

The restraint I told him I wanted to have when I was in the hospital.

Thankfully, while I'm mentally bumbling around trying to find the right words, he offers up a bit more information.

"Pops, whatever you're trying to find out about Leah, I'm not gonna know," he adds. "Haven't spoken with her since before she left. Hell, she didn't even say goodbye to me when she did leave. She just left some fuckin' notes for me and Joey."

"What did they say?"

"I don't fuckin' know. I didn't read them."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Now, this is just me talking," I begin to say, carefully trying to tiptoe around this land mine. "Not me getting in your business, all right?"

Rhett nods.

"But have you considered, maybe, *reading* the notes?"

His jaw clenches again. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Well, because Frank Kaminsky called me this afternoon and proceeded to ask me why his doctor came back from our ranch looking all miserable and shit."

That stops him in his prideful tracks. "What?"

"Leah isn't happy," I continue. "She's already told Frank she's probably going to step down from her position with the Slammers."

"S-she's not stayin' with the team?"

I shake my head. "Doesn't sound like it. Sounds like she's mostly just hanging around because the top team physician is having some health problems. It's why Frank had her leave the ranch earlier than she'd planned."

Rhett blinks several times and just kind of stands in my office, staring straight ahead at the wall, but mostly, nothing at all.

I know that look.

It's the look of a man who thought he knew what was going on, but in reality, he didn't know shit.

And I'm hopin' and prayin' it's also the look of a man who's going to get his head out of his ass and go after the woman he so obviously loves.

FORTY-FIVE



Rhett

I feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience as I walk out of my parents' house and get into my truck.

I'm supposed to meet Rodney over in the pastures to look at some of the fences, but after talking to my dad about his conversation with Frank Kaminsky and hearing shit about Leah, I can't find the focus to do anything but sit there, staring at the center console of my truck.

She's not happy.

She's miserable.

She's probably going to step down from her position with the Slammers.

It's why Frank had her leave the ranch earlier than she'd planned.

I repeat my dad's words over and over again in my mind.

Have I been wrong about what's really going on?

Was there a reason Leah didn't say goodbye to me and Joe?

I can't stop myself from opening the console and pulling out the half-crumpled envelopes. I grip them tightly between my fingers, and my heart and brain war over the decision to read them.

My heart wins out, and before I know it, I'm opening the one with Joey's name.

Leah's handwriting is scrawled across the page, and I can't stop myself from reading.

Jo-Jo,

I want you to know that you are the smartest, fastest, most gorgeous girl I've ever met in my whole life. The eight weeks I got to spend with you on the ranch were some of the best I've ever had. I'll never forget about our sleepover or our Target trips or the day we adopted Ernie or the time we went horseback riding or...well, it's safe to say, you and I made a lot of memories together.

I have to go back to Salt Lake City to help take care of big, huge basketball players on the Slammers team.

Honestly, I don't want to go back. The ranch has become my favorite place to be, and you have become one of my favorite people ever.

Just know, if you ever need anything, I'm always a phone call away, okay?

That's my cell → 801-555-4532

I know I didn't get to say goodbye and I hate that so much, but I'm starting to think that's a good thing. Because this isn't goodbye. This is just see you soon.

Love you, pretty girl,

Leah

Fuck. I sigh. Lean my head back against my seat.

Those words don't sound like a woman who purposely didn't say goodbye. Who didn't care about hurting my daughter.

It sounds like the complete opposite.

It sounds like the Leah I know.

The one that feels like she took my heart with her when she left the ranch.

On a deep inhale and exhale, I find the strength to read the next letter.

The one written for me.

Rhett,

It's just a little after 5:30 a.m., and I don't have much time.

Frank sent my plane a few days early, and I'm being hurried to get out the door by a few of the Slammers' execs, but there's no way I was going to leave without saying goodbye to you somehow.

God, I hate the way we ended things last night.

I absolutely hate it.

I hate that I got angry and said things like summer fling and no big deal when that's the complete opposite of how I feel about you.

I'm so sorry. So, so sorry.

You mean too much to me, take up too much space in my heart, for you to be a fling.

It's why I wanted to try to make the long-distance work.

I honestly don't know how I'm going to be able to move past our relationship. How I'm going to be able to move on. There are three words that I desperately want to say to you, but I refuse to say them for the first time in a letter.

But I'm sure you know. You HAVE to know.

You have my heart, Rhett. You've quite literally changed my life.

And this ranch, well, I've never had a place, not even as a little girl, that's felt like home as much as being here with you and Joey does.

I just...I hate that we're leaving things this way.

And I really hope you'll call me because there is so much more I want to say.

But I guess, the most important thing of all is...all you have to do is ask me to stay.

Love,

Leah

I stare down at the paper in my hand. A million things are running through my mind—my dad's words, Leah's words, the way I feel about her.

She should've never fucking left.

She should still be here. With me. With Joey. At the ranch.

This place feels like her home because it *is* her home.

She belongs here with us.

I don't have to think twice about my next move. Out of the truck, I stride right back into my parents' house and find my dad sitting in his recliner.

"I need a plane."

"Right now?" he asks, but that's all he asks.

"Tonight or tomorrow. I've got somethin' to get ready, but after I'm done, I want to leave as soon as possible. If you can't get it by tomorrow mornin', I'll drive."

Getting to his feet, he strides into his home office, and I follow right behind him. Within a minute, he's on the phone and making calls.

And five minutes after that, he's chartered a plane to come to the ranch by tomorrow morning.

"Nine a.m.," he updates. "It's the earliest I could get. Will that work?"

"Of course, that'll work," I say and let out a relieved breath from my lungs. The earliest I would have gotten there without getting Joey out of bed before the sun to drive would

have been noon. This should buy me a couple hours. “It’s quite possible you just saved my ass.”

“Yeah?”

My old man knows me so fucking well that he already knows what’s going on without me telling him a single word. Or him asking a single question.

And time and time again, he proves to always have my back.

If this isn’t what makes family so great, I don’t know what does.

“Yeah,” I answer and walk straight over to him to lean down and wrap him up in a big hug. “Love ya, old man.”

“Love you too, son,” he says and pats a hearty hand to my back. “Now, I think it’s safe to say you better get on outta here and get ready to head to Salt Lake in the morning.”

“Damn straight.” I grin and step back. “I don’t know what is gonna happen, but I’m gonna try like hell to make sure I come back to this ranch with Leah.”

His smile damn near lights up the whole room. “So, I guess it was a good thing I hired that doctor to babysit you all along.”

I narrow my eyes at him. But I also laugh.

“Too soon?”

“If I manage to get her back here where she belongs, then by all means, I give you free rein to make as many jokes as you want.”

He chuckles at that.

“Ornery bastard.”

My dad just grins, but then he furrows his brow. “So...not trying to be nosy or pushy, but are you planning on asking her to marry you?”

That question should probably be insane.

And up until this very moment, I hadn't really thought about what I was going to say or do; I just knew I needed to go to her. But subconsciously, I think I knew that's what I was going to do all along. Of course I want to ask her to marry me.

I want to spend the rest of my life with the woman I love.

"You know what?" I eventually answer. "Yeah. That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Wait right here a minute." He holds up one finger and walks out of the office. And a minute or two later, he's stepping back inside with a little black box in his hands.

He pops it open and reveals a ring that's been in our family for many, many years.

It was my grandmother's ring. And before that, it was her mother's ring. And before that, it was her mother's ring.

"About a month ago, your mama told me to get this ring out of the safe in the lodge and put it in our bedroom, and honestly, I thought she might've gone nuts," he comments. "But hell, if that woman doesn't always know every-fucking-thing."

"What?" My jaw damn near hits my boots. "She knew?"

He nods. "She fucking knew."

I take the ring box out of my dad's hand and stare down at it.

"That girl belongs at this ranch," he says, his voice quiet. "She's the one for you. I knew it after we got back from the hospital. She's strong and smart, and she knows how to handle you when you're being a real prick."

I laugh.

"And she's soft and kind and treats Joey like one of her own."

I nod at that.

"She's the one, son," he says. "Now, all you have to do is go get her and convince her to spend the rest of her life with a stubborn son of a bitch," he teases and pats a hand to my

shoulder. “Who is also a strong man with a heart of gold who provides and cares for a family. A man who’s been through hell and deserves to have a woman like that by his side.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Go get her, son.”

Go get her.

I really fucking hope it’s that easy.

Because when I look toward my future, I see her.

FORTY-SIX



August 14th, Friday

Leah

My mind is a basket case of anxious thoughts.

I can't stop thinking about Rhett or Joey or what's going on back at the ranch.

I can't stop wondering if he's read my letters.

I can't stop regretting leaving the ranch the way I did.

And I certainly can't stop wishing I could turn back time and do it all differently.

On a deep inhale and exhale, I force my mind to focus on finishing up wrapping Kevin Bird's ankle so he can get back to practice.

"You okay, Doc?" he asks, his curious eyes looking down at me as I add an ACE wrap over the blue medical tape.

"Yep."

"You sure?" he questions. "Because you look like something's bothering you."

The fact that I look so bad that a big-ass professional basketball player who's currently busy with rigorous training notices, tells me all I need to know about my current state.

I'm sure my tired, swollen, red eyes and current messy attire of jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt aren't helping my facade, but I'm finding it harder and harder to get through the day when I feel like someone yanked my heart right out of my chest.

"I'm good," I answer and force a smile to my lips. "You don't worry about me. You just focus on making sure this ankle feels stable enough to practice."

He rotates it from left to right, then up and down, before testing several circular motions. "Feels good. Thanks."

"All right," I say and stand to my feet. "You're all set. Stop by after practice to sit in an ice bath."

"Will do."

Once he leaves my exam room, my shoulders sag, and I have to rest my hip against the table just to stay upright.

All the lack of sleep and appetite over the past few days are really starting to catch up with me.

Thankfully, I have the weekend off—

"Knock, knock," a male voice grabs my attention, and I look up to find Gary, one of our physical therapists on staff, standing outside my exam room door. "You have visitors."

My head lurches back. "What?"

"They're waiting for you in the lobby."

Confused, I open my mouth to find out who the visitors are, but Gary doesn't stand around long enough for me to ask him.

Welp. Thanks a lot for the info, Gare.

I roll my eyes, but also, once I run a hand down my T-shirt and fluff up my hair, trying to straighten myself up a bit, I head out the door and down the long hallway that leads to the lobby area of the arena.

My eyes are fixated on the ground as I go, but when they lock on a pair of familiar boots—actually, *two pairs* of boots—I jerk my eyes up and find the last two people I ever thought

I'd see in this arena. Standing there, holding a sign with neon-pink glitter proclaiming my name and a brand-new pair of sparkly cowgirl boots, are the two most important people I've ever met.

"Rhett? Joey?" I question, and I feel like bursting into tears over the sight of them.

For the past three days, I've been trying to get ahold of Rhett without any luck.

Even when I managed to get ahold of Tex this morning before I headed to the stadium, he told me Rhett was busy with some chores on the ranch and he'd try to get him to call me back.

Frankly, I was starting to think that maybe Rhett was really and truly done with me.

Like, even though I'd poured my heart out to him in a rushed letter before I left the ranch, he didn't want to make it work between us.

"W-what are you doing here?" I ask, looking directly at Rhett.

"Well, there's a new job opening," he says matter-of-factly. "At the ranch. We're lookin' for a full-time doctor to stay out there."

I snap my head back in surprise. "You came here to offer me a job?"

"Yeah." He smirks, and it's like he doesn't realize that the past three days have been absolute hell. He's acting like we didn't leave things with him storming out of my cabin and me carelessly tossing out words I didn't mean.

I open my mouth, but then I shut it again because I have no idea what to say to any of this.

I mean, that's really why he came here?

To ask me to work on the ranch?

"But actually, that's not all," he answers my unsaid questions, and Joey bounces on the heels of her boots.

“Tell her, Daddy!” she whispers, tugging at the pocket of his jeans.

He smiles down at her. “Don’t worry, Joey, I’m gettin’ there. You gotta be patient.”

She giggles, takes a step behind him, and all I can do is stare back at Rhett and try not to feel like I’m going to pass out from the shock of him actually being here.

“Every man has two lives. The second life starts when he realizes he only has one,” he says, and his eyes lock with mine. “That’s a quote from a famous philosopher, and it’s one my dad always used to say when I was growing up. Honestly, that quote didn’t mean shit to me. Well, not until you stepped on to my ranch.”

He steps closer and reaches out to take my hand into his.

“We only have one life, Leah. One life to live. One life to love. One life to find happiness in. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to let another day go by without you by my side.”

A sheen of fresh tears blocks my vision.

“Come home, darlin’. Come fuckin’ home to the ranch with me where you belong. Because you’re not a damn hamster person. You’re meant for horses, and you’re meant for me.” He grins and sets the pair of sparkly cowgirl boots by my feet. “Even if that means addin’ a whole hell of a lot of sparkle to my life.”

“Tell her she can stay at our house, Daddy!” Joey whisper-yells toward him, and a soft chuckle leaves Rhett’s lips.

“We want you to stay with us. Not in a fuckin’ cabin. But in our house, because you belong there. With us. Every goddamn day.”

“And don’t forget to tell her we love her, Daddy!” Joey chimes in again. This time, her voice isn’t even close to a whisper.

Rhett sighs, but also, he smiles and glances over his shoulder to say, “I’m gettin’ to that, baby. Give a man a minute to tell the woman of his dreams he’s in love with her.”

My lungs spasm with a hiccuping breath.

He's in love with me?

Rhett's mesmerizing eyes lock with mine again, and he lifts my hand to his chest, holding it against his heart. "Leah Levee, I'm in love with you. The day you left, I went to your cabin to try to make shit right with you. To try to figure out a way to make the long-distance work because I couldn't picture a future without you in it. But when I got there, you were gone, and I felt like my heart got torn out of my chest."

God. That's exactly what I didn't want to happen. My heart clenches inside my chest over the mere idea that I put him through that. Even though I've been living in my own kind of hell here, I still never wanted to make him feel bad.

"I'm so sorry, Rhett. I-I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to you and Joey," I say on a rush, but he calms me by tenderly gripping the hand he's still holding against his heart.

"I know, darlin'. I know. Which is why I'm here," he says and proceeds to get down on one knee. His *good* knee. "On my fuckin' knees, asking you to come home. Asking you to spend your life with me on the ranch. Leah, I'm asking you to marry me. Be my wife. Be the mama Joey's never had. The one you've been to her all along. You're our family, and we want to keep you forever."

Several tears seep from my eyes.

"Don't forget about Ernie!" Joey whispers, and Rhett smirks at me.

"Ernie misses and loves you too, by the way."

I laugh. I can't help it. This man, the one whom I love so, *so* much, came all the way here to profess his love to me—*with glitter*. And his little girl, the one I've grown to love and adore like my own child, is standing right behind him with the biggest smile on her face. Her head nods and her eyes are wide, imploring me to say yes.

But no imploring is needed.

“Rhett,” I say, and my voice shakes with emotion. “I love you. With everything inside of me, I love you.”

He smiles up at me. “Are you sayin’ what I’m thinkin’ and fuckin’ hopin’ you’re sayin’?”

I nod, and more tears stream down my cheeks. “I’m saying yes, Rhett. I want to marry you. I want to be your wife. I want to be Joey’s mama. And I want to come home.”

He pulls a small black box out of his pocket and opens it up to reveal a ring inside. And he slides that ring down my finger. I’m pretty sure it’s vintage and beautiful, but I don’t have to really look at it because Rhett gets back on his feet and pulls me into his arms.

“I love you, darlin’.”

Lips to mine, he kisses me the way only Rhett knows how to kiss.

How my *future husband* knows how to kiss.

“Yippee!” Joey shouts from behind us before barreling into us at full speed and wrapping her arms around our legs. “This is the second-best day of my life!”

Rhett chuckles, pulling away from the kiss and glancing down at his daughter. “The second-best day?”

She rolls her pretty eyes. “Daddy, you know the day I became a mama to Ernie was the most special, best day of my life.”

“Well,” I say and reach out to pull Joey closer to us. “I can say with certainty this is the very best day of my life.”

“It is?” Joey replies, smiling up at me.

“Are you kidding me?” I respond. “I get to marry the best, most handsome cowboy in the whole world, and I get to call the prettiest, most special girl my daughter.”

Joey wraps both of her arms around my waist and buries her face into my stomach. “I love you, Leah. So, so much.”

I kneel down and meet her eyes. “I love you too, Jo-Jo.”

And Rhett just stands there, looking down at the two of us like a man whose entire world stands right before him.

I know this because that's exactly how I'm looking right back at the two of them.

My future husband. My daughter. My family. My *home*.

EPILOGUE



Shaw Springs Ranch, One Year Later...

August 20th

Leah

I bolt upright in the bed and glance left and right with wild, panicked eyes. The sound of gunfire in my dreams sounded entirely too realistic, and my heart races inside my chest.

Rhett sits up in the bed next to me, rubbing at his eyes with the long fingers of his incredibly sexy hands. He's still as beautiful now as the day I met him—if not more so, since I'm now privy to all the intimate details of his body I wasn't back then.

Suddenly, another crack echoes in the air, just like the sounds I thought were in my dreams, and I reach over to shake Rhett's shoulder aggressively.

“What in the hell was that?”

He takes his hands away from his eyes and looks at me more closely, smirking just slightly when he gets a good look at my obvious mania.

“That's just the youth hunt, darlin'. Happens every third Saturday in August. Normally, I'd be out there too, but with the way you've been feelin', I begged off this one.”

With the way I've been feeling, I'm starting to wonder if the whole ranch has been relocated to the bow of a rocky ship without my noticing. Nauseated, dizzy, utterly fatigued—I don't know what in the world is going on with me.

Now, add in random gunfire from the “youth hunt”—whatever that is—and I think Rhett, Joey, and I may have joined a group of marauders to rob people on the high seas. I mean, that's the kind of thing you usually ask your spouse about before getting involved in it, but men have been known to make mistakes before.

“Are we aboard the *Black Pearl*?” I ask, having new faith that Rhett will understand my reference after being forced to watch the entire *Pirates of the Caribbean* DVD collection a couple weeks ago. “Are you going to start going by Captain Rhett Hawk or something?”

He chuckles, pushes himself up to sitting with his back against the headboard, and crosses his ankles out in front of him. “I told you, darlin', the shots you're hearin' are just the youth hunt. Not a pirate takeover. You musta missed it last year, havin' run off on me without tellin' me how you really felt about me and all.”

I roll my eyes at his obvious teasing and redirect. “Tell me...how is it that I've been here an entire year, we're *married*, and I'm still getting surprised by stuff on the daily?”

“Ranch life knows how to keep the mystery alive?” he offers cheekily, and I must admit, looking at his perfect, sleepy smile aimed at me in bed makes it quite hard to maintain any sort of hostility at all. Even when my PMS has apparently decided to wreak havoc on my entire body this time around.

“We're an old married couple now,” I insist. “I have the photos and video and memories of you and me and Joey and Tex and Jenny and the minister all there at the lodge while we promised to love each other through thick and thin, sickness and health, and bull sperm collection to prove it. There's not supposed to be any *mystery* left.”

Rhett guffaws before turning to put his face in my neck, nuzzling me there. “I still can't believe you used the word

‘sperm’ in your wedding vows. I think about it just about every day.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, get your laughs in, but you’re the one who still agreed to seal the deal *after* I said it.”

“Are you kidding? That’s the moment I knew I’d never regret the decision a day in my life, Leah. I don’t want some cookie-cutter, stuck-up wife. I want you—the woman who I know is gonna make me laugh all day long, every day, for the rest of my life. The woman who’s gonna love Joey and me so hard she’d put herself through anything just to be with us. The woman who woke up to gunshots this mornin’, sweatin’ and scared at an unknown situation, feelin’ sicker than shit, and still, is lyin’ here next to me, makin’ me smile. I love you, and I promise you this, I’ll keep on doin’ it until the day that I die.”

“Rhett,” I breathe through the unexpected emotion clogging my throat. *How does he always manage to be so freaking sweet out of nowhere?*

“I love you, darlin’. Would do anything for ya. You know that, right?”

I nod fervently. I know. *Man, do I know.* He shows me every single day how much I mean to him. From bringing me a hot cup of coffee in bed before he leaves for work in the morning, to making time for me anytime I call him on the radio—no matter how busy he is—to watching every ridiculous movie I want, to making love to me like I’m the most special, beautiful, perfect woman in the world nearly every night, Rhett Jameson is the kind of man women who grow up like me never know to dream of. And our marriage is the kind that lasts.

There’s a sharp bang on the door of our bedroom, followed by the swift motion of it flying open and swinging into the wall behind it as Joey comes running into our room and jumps up onto the bed like a rocket.

Rhett and I shift slightly as she wiggles her way in between us in the bed and climbs down under the covers. At seven years old, she’s starting to turn into a little lady, but

she's no less wild than the day I met her, and I doubt she ever will be. I think, with her DNA, it's probably next to impossible not to have some pep.

"Joey," Rhett says, his voice a whisper of authority mixed with a bellow of amusement. "What did I tell you about knockin' on our door before you come in?"

Joey smiles, contesting cutely, "I knocked."

I have to bite my lip to keep from snorting as Rhett's eyes narrow. "Knock *and wait*, doll. One loud bang before you shoot through the door does not count as a knock."

"Oh. You really should'a been more spe-fis-ic then when you told me the first time."

"Josephine Jameson," Rhett chastises, and I smile.

"It's *specific*, baby," I correct gently, making her head whip to me as her cheeks lift up toward the ceiling.

"Spe-cif-ic," she says, sounding out each syllable until I nod. I'm not naïve. I know she's using my lesson as a very *specific* tool for avoiding her daddy's ire, but I don't mind. In fact, I pretty much love it.

Not that that's a surprise—I love everything about being a parent to Josephine.

Rhett rolls his eyes and climbs out of the bed with a shake of his head. He's used to the two of us girls ganging up on him by now, but that doesn't mean he doesn't scowl about it every now and then, reminding me that he's still the handsomest grumpy cowboy I've ever met.

Ernie comes trotting in the door, barking his request to be put on the bed since he can't climb up on his own, and Rhett obliges, tossing him right on top of Joey and me before disappearing into the bathroom.

Ernie fake snarls and barks and licks all over Joey's face until she dissolves into a fit of giggles. I pull them both into a hug and try not to react when my stomach roils at the movement.

What in the world is going on with me lately? I just can't seem to find my equilibrium anymore. I wonder if I have vertigo?

"I'm so excited to go to Target today," Joey tells me, rocking Ernie back and forth in her arms like a baby. "I *love* shopping for school clothes."

"I'm excited too, Jo-Jo."

Joey and I always have the best time on our shopping outings together, and we do them with a tiny bit more frequency than Rhett would like. Still, he never suggests we don't go.

"I'm not," Rhett comments from the bathroom—from the sounds of it, while brushing his teeth. I roll my eyes and laugh as he continues, "Who knows what you'll come home with this time."

"We only brought home a dog one time," I contest. "And Ernie here thinks it was one of the best things we've ever done."

Rhett chuckles as he exits the bathroom and flips off the light before leaning into the bed to give both me and Joey a kiss. They're both sweet, but mine lingers longer and promises all sorts of sexy things he intends to do to me tonight. *I can't wait.*

"Promise me," Rhett whispers against my lips. "You won't bring home any more living creatures than you leave home with this morning."

"I promise," I say sweetly before pecking him on the lips one more time.

"You'll call me if you aren't feelin' okay?" he asks then, making my heart flip over in my chest. Rhett Jameson, if you can believe it, is the most caring man I've ever met, despite how grouchy he was when everything started.

"Yes. But don't worry. I mean, I'm a doctor, for heaven's sake. What's the worst that could happen?"

He shakes his head at me slightly, before leaning down and kissing me one more time, ruffling Ernie's head and chucking Joey under the chin, and then heading out to take care of business.

One thing is for sure—my man knows how to run a ranch, but it's the least of all of his talents.

Because, hands down, Rhett Jameson is the best husband and father in the world.



Rhett

The screen door slams behind me as I set my lunch cooler down by the door and kick off my boots. One of the rules of living with a grown woman is that you take off your boots when you come in the door.

One of the rules of living with a grown woman named Leah, is knowing that she won't kick up a fuss if you don't—it'll just cost her time and energy in cleaning.

And because I care about her and her time, I do my best to make her life easier rather than harder.

It's normally bustling in here by the time I get home at the end of the day, so the glaring quiet of the house right now seems eerie. They're home, I know, because Joey called me on the radio to let me know that dinner was at seven and I wasn't to miss it.

She's a bossy thing, but man, I love that about her. Last thing I want my kid to do is eat shit from other people. Sometimes, I'll be around to make sure she doesn't. But others? She's gonna have to have the skills to ward it off herself.

“Joey? Leah? Where the hell is everybody?” I call out into the empty space as I make my way through the living room toward the kitchen.

“In here, daddy!” Joey calls from the kitchen, influencing me to speed up my steps.

When I round the corner, my weird arrival home gets even weirder. Joey and Leah are both seated at the table, a cake with burning candles on top of it in front of them and pink, blue, and white balloons covering the entire surface of the tile floor.

“Surprise,” Leah says, her face a complex mix of excited and nervous that I’ve never seen before.

“Surprise, what? What’s going on?”

“Jo-Jo, why don’t you get daddy a beer from the fridge,” Leah suggests instead of answering me, shoving the chair beside her out with a foot and gesturing toward it.

Joey jumps up with a mumbled, “Got it!” and yanks open the door to the refrigerator. There’s a beer right there in the front, on a low shelf she can reach without help—a place they’re not normally kept—and at the sight of it, I’m starting to think this entire thing is a whole lot of planning away from impromptu. I search the recesses of my mind for an occasion I’ve forgotten about, but as hard as I try, I can’t think of any.

Joey hands me the beer before bounding back around the table and climbing up in her chair again, and with the way the two of them are staring at me, I’m starting to think I’m the target of something nefarious. *Did they bring home another damn dog?*

“Leah darlin’, I’m gonna need you to be tellin’ me what’s goin’ on soon, before you can officially say you’ve witnessed two Jameson men have a heart attack.”

Leah’s face gapes at my audacious assertion. “You know what?” she snaps, grabbing something from behind the cake and slamming it down on the table in front of the chair she’s kicked out. “Here. I was trying to be all cute about it, and you had to go and bring up one of the worst days of our lives. Tex is alive and well, and so are you—and apparently, more than that, you’re virile enough to go against statistics.”

Joey giggles from her spot on the other side of the table, getting up on her knees in her chair so she can look over the

cake at me.

I look from Leah to the object she set down, and then slowly, I sink to my knees.

I recognize the shape and the feeling of seeing this test in front of me, but the amount of happiness dumping into me? It's completely unfamiliar.

"You're...you're pregnant?" I ask, staring down at the test that proclaims with digital wording that she's very much so.

Pregnant, it reads again and again as my eyes bounce back and forth over and over.

When I finally tear my eyes away from the test to look at her, Leah is nodding and smiling, and a couple happy tears run down her face in an apparent surge of good hormones. "Joey and I were in Target, and she said she needed toothpaste."

"I did!" Joey adds enthusiastically, absolutely thrilled to be a part of this whole thing.

Leah laughs a little before continuing, "I ran down the aisle to get it, and on the way back, I looked over and saw the pregnancy tests. Instantly, nausea *and* awareness hit me like a freight train. My boobs are bigger and everything, but I didn't even think about it because I've been on birth control."

"Mama says I'm too young to know what that is right now," Joey chimes in.

I lick my lips and shake my head at the complete out-of-body experience of finding out this news with my daughter in the room—of finding out this news at all. When I left this morning, I told Leah not to come home with any more living creatures than she left with—and she didn't. But, boy oh boy, was the joke on me.

"But you took the test?"

Obviously, she did. I mean, it's sitting on the table in front of me. But right now, my head feels too much like my ass and vice versa to make a ton of sense.

Leah takes pity on me and doesn't tease. "Yes. While answering a million questions from Joey," she says with a

laugh. Looking me in the eyes, she shrugs. “I know it’s not the normal thing to include her in the part where you find out, but I don’t think I could have stopped it if I’d tried. Once she saw the test in the cart, she was like a miniature Sherlock Holmes.”

Joey gives the thumbs-up, and I can’t help but laugh.

We’re having a baby! Joey is going to be a big sister! And more than that, she’s getting the family she’s always deserved. A daddy and a mommy, and now, a little baby brother or sister.

New reality finally clicking into place, I shove the chair I never sat down in out of the way and scoop Leah up and into my arms. She comes willingly, clinging around my neck and shoving her face into my chest.

I can feel her heart racing, her blood zinging so fast through her veins it’s almost as if she’s vibrating. I lean down and take her mouth with mine, sweeping my tongue inside to get a tiny, sweet taste of my beautiful wife.

“I love you, Leah,” I whisper in her ear while Joey bounces up and down around us in a tribal-like dance. When I pull back to look into the woman of my dreams’ eyes, they’re bright with a touch of healthy fear and shiny with emotion. She has *never* looked more beautiful than she does right now, carrying a child we made with love.

“I love you too, Rhett. But...well...now, what do we do?”

It’s a complex question, but I’ll be damned if it doesn’t have a simple answer. There’s only one thing left to do when you have everything.

“We be happy.”

Leah smiles and nods, tears flooding her eyes as she pulls me tightly against her again and presses her lips to mine. I drink in every blessed moment until she pulls away, before adding playfully to the to-do list.

“And, I guess, wait patiently to see if I’m gonna get any manly backup around here.”

“You think it’s going to be a boy?”

“Darlin’, I don’t have one damn clue. But I know I can’t wait to find out.”

THE END

Want to know what Rhett and Leah are having? Love Rhett, Leah, Joey, and the crew and want to read more of them?

Well, we have *great* news!

You can go back to Shaw Springs right now and find out what our favorite cowboy has been up to since finding out his awesome wife Leah is pregnant and more (including catching up with Jake, Holley, Lauren, and Garrett) in this

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**SINGLE DAD SEEKS JULIET
EXCERPT**

**SINGLE
DAD
SEEKS
JULIET**

m a x m o n r o e

INTRO

Chloe

“No, you lunatic! I am not typing those words about my father—*ever*.”

“Oh, come on!” my best friend and altogether wild woman, Hailie Hargrove, teases, setting her chin on my shoulder and rubbing it into the muscle awkwardly. “Not even if there were a werewolf chasing you? And I’m not talking about dreamboat Jacob Black trying to imprint on you either. I’m talking full-on werewolf with beady eyes and sharp teeth that *can’t* be deterred by humans *or* hella sexy vampires.”

I roll my eyes and jerk my shoulder to make her weirdo chin find another home. “For the sake of our friendship, you need to stop rereading *Twilight*.”

“It’s not my fault Stephenie Meyer released *Midnight Sun* and I’m back on my Team Edward bull-shizzle,” she responds, acting like her words provide a perfect explanation for the fact that she’s read the *Twilight* series no fewer than fifty times.

No joke. She’s been reading that series since we were, like, twelve. And considering we’re both seventeen—*almost eighteen*—now, her obsessive love for a fictional vampire is going five years strong without any signs of letting up.

Don’t get me wrong, I love *Twilight*, but Hailie could stand to read about some socially conforming mortals every once in a while.

“It would do our friendship some good if you fit in a few John Green or Jenny Han books between your Edward Cullen binges.”

“Speaking of us talking about my vampire boyfriend and your dad’s penis, do you think Edward’s penis sparkles in the sunlight too? I mean, his skin sparkles, but does his—”

“I don’t care about Edward’s sparkly penis, Hail!” I cut her off on a whisper-yell. “And *we* are not talking about my dad’s penis. *You* keep trying to. But I am not.” *Ew*. Just saying those words threatens my gag reflex. No teenage daughter should be forced to think about her father’s...*you know what*.

“Okay, fine. *I’m* the one talking about your dad’s penis,” she corrects. “And *you’re* the one who never answered my question.”

“Because your werewolf analogy was horrible, and the question was so ridiculous. it didn’t deserve a response. Saying illicit things about my father’s penis-power, as you so eloquently put it, would do absolutely nothing for me in a chase with a werewolf.”

“Oh geez. What is that? What are you doing there? Are you trying to be *rational*?”

I skewer her with a glare, but my best friend is undeterred. She swings her long dark locks over her shoulder and scoffs.

“That’s so boring, Chloe. You need to live a little.”

“Excuse me? What exactly do you think I’m doing here?” I question and scrunch up my nose. “I’d say typing up a personal ad for my dad for the Bachelor Anonymous contest—*that he has no freaking clue about and will most likely kill me for—is living a lot.*” My laugh is equal parts amused and terrified. “Heck, I should get it all in now. Just live. It. Up. Because when Jake Brent finds out I entered him into a dating contest, I’m going to be D-E-A-D, dead.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart! Chances are, he’s never even going to know you did it. They only notify the winner, right? Out of, like, hundreds of entries, he’ll probably never win.

Especially since you're too much of a prude to tell everyone about his big dick energy."

"Oh my God. Shut up," I whisper.

"What?" Hailie questions like it's no big deal that she's still talking about my dad's... *Good God, don't you dare even think it!* "You know your dad is hot, right? I mean, back in the day, he was a big bad military god and *still* has the body to prove it. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that man is packing some serious heat in his pants." She laughs, waggles her brows, and then adds, "Just deal with it, Chlo. Your dad is a total babe!"

"Keep your voice down," I hiss. "He is right outside in the family room."

"That's the only thing that's lame about him," she whispers and rolls her grayish-blue eyes toward the ceiling. "What kind of parent doesn't let their almost eighteen-year-old daughter keep their computer in their bedroom?"

"A dad who was a Navy SEAL," I say matter-of-factly. "Plus, we share this computer. It's just easier to keep it in the den."

"Sure, Chlo-Chlo." She snorts. "You live in the bougie part of San Diego. You have a formal living room, a family room, and a *den*. Not to mention, you have to go through a gated, Fort Knox-esque entrance to even get to your house. Pretty sure your dad can afford to buy you guys separate computers. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though. He refused to let you have a phone *or* the Gram until you were fifteen."

The Gram—*aka Instagram*. Hailie's favorite social media app on the planet. If I had a dollar for every selfie she's involved me in, I'd probably be able to afford my own college tuition.

Not even kidding. "Do it for the Gram!" should be written on her freaking tombstone.

"Hailie, shall I remind you that you live in the same *bougie* neighborhood as me? Your house is literally right across the street from mine," I retort, but she ignores me completely and

rambles on about anything but the darn personal ad I'm trying to write.

"Although, I guess I sort of get it," she continues. "If I had a daughter who looked like you, all long legs, gorgeous blond hair, and big, pretty eyes, I'd probably lock you in a closet until you turned thirty-five."

We are polar opposites when it comes to looks. Where I'm tall with blond hair, Hailie is short with dark hair. I look like I was born and raised in our home state of California, and she looks like she came from some exotic Mediterranean country.

"The same can be said for you," I counter. "You're like a teenage version of Megan Fox and have had boobs since we were in sixth grade."

Hailie shimmies her chest, and I let out a deep sigh when I realize just how off track she's managed to get us.

"Do I need to remind you that today is the last day to enter this contest?" I glance over my shoulder and glower at her with a stare. "I need you to stop shaking your ta-tas around and help me write this thing."

"I've *been* helping," she whines. "You just don't want the help I'm giving."

"That's because you've taken a leave of absence from reality, Hailie. You really think I'm going to write about my *dad's penis* in a newspaper personal ad? Can you even fathom the number of hours I'd have to spend in therapy if I did something like that? Not to mention, if my dad actually *saw* it? The money he saved for my college tuition would end up going to our freaking therapists!"

"I don't know why you make that sound like such a big deal. Everyone is in therapy these days, Chloe. *Everyone*."

"News flash, girlfriend," I say and shoot a pointed look in her direction. "If I don't have money for college tuition, then you'll end up going to Berkeley by yourself."

When Hailie and I were thirteen, we begged my dad to drive us seven hours to see the Golden Gate Bridge. And my dad, being the awesome dad that he is, gave in and took us on

a three-day trip to San Francisco. We did all kinds of touristy things that weekend, but the one thing that stuck with us girls the most was walking around Berkeley's campus.

Ever since then, that school became our dream college, and we've been bound and determined to go there together.

"Fine." She blows an annoyed breath from her pursed lips. "How about this? *Man seeks woman. Not to turn his world upside down, but instead, to help him keep it right-side up. Must have sense of humor, heart of gold, and big, fat tits.*"

I choke on my spit as a laugh catches in my throat, and Hailie has to slam the flat of her palm on my back to save me.

It makes a hell of a ruckus, and the door cracks open gently. "Everyone okay in here?" my dad asks.

Of course, Hailie cackles like a hyena. A nervous habit she's had since we were in elementary school.

"Yeah, Dad. We're good," I sputter over my best friend's insanity. He smiles, obviously surmising by my track record of staying out of trouble that I'm continuing my streak, and chalks up Hailie's laughter to her being her usual, crazy self.

Instantly, though, with him standing mere feet away from the computer screen that showcases the evidence of my in-process crime, cramps make my toes curl into the carpet, and an anxious twist wrenches my belly.

Why am I doing this? He's going to kill me.

I hold my breath and hope he doesn't decide to come any closer.

"Okay. Then I guess I'll leave you girls to it," he agrees with a laugh, and I offer up a silent *thank you* to the Big Guy upstairs that I will live to see another day.

And while I hate when Hailie rambles on about my dad being *a total babe*, with him standing right there in the doorway, his thick, dark hair kind of mussed and his handsome smile and bright-blue eyes directed at me, I can't deny he is an aesthetically good-looking man.

I study his face and the lines around his eyes. Lines I *know* are there from laughing with me, and before I know it, I'm trying to picture him after I've left for college next year. I'll be over seven hours away from him, and he'll be here, alone, in this big house, having completely wasted all his best years raising me by himself.

He's such a good guy, and I *hate* the idea of him feeling lonely at all. *That's why I'm doing this*, I remind myself. *For him.*

He'll freaking hate it at first...but he'll thank me later, right?

Goodness, I hope so.

I turn back to the computer as he shuts the door and try really hard to focus. Hailie is right about one thing. There will probably be hundreds of entries, which means this thing is going to have to be *good* if he's going to win.

Even the title needs work. ***Man Seeks Woman.***

It's so mundane. So regular. So blah.

I need a wow factor. Something that'll hook everyone right from the start.

"We need a better title," I tell Hailie. "Something that really grabs people." She opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off preemptively. "And it *cannot* have the words dick, cock, or penis in it."

She frowns but laughs at the same time. "Don't worry, Chlo. My vocabulary is bigger than that. And I've moved on from your dad's dick—at least metaphorically speaking. In some sense, I feel I'll never move on from your dad's big, beautiful—"

I slug her in the shoulder, and she laughs.

"Fine. How about *Single Dad Seeks Juliet*?"

"Single dad? Should I really say that?"

She nods with wide, convinced eyes. "Oh *yeah*. That's, like, at least fifteen percent of Jake's hot factor."

I groan. “You know I hate it when you call him Jake.”

“I could call him *Daddy*. But somehow, I thought you’d prefer this.”

“Forget it.” I cringe. “Let’s just get back to the ad.”

I turn back to the computer and start to type inside the personal ad template on my dad’s Bachelor Anonymous application.

Single Dad Seeks Juliet.

Yeah. That’s it. It’s got flair without being too ridiculous. I mean, it *is* for a contest being run by our local paper in which readers vote on the personal ad of their choosing to select an anonymous, unnamed bachelor who will be farmed out on several dates to find his Mrs. Right, so a certain amount of absurd is welcome—necessary, even—but I don’t want it to be too over the top. It should, at the very least, capture some sense of who my dad is as an actual person.

Fingers poised at the keyboard, I continue.

At 40 years old, after almost eighteen years of raising my daughter on my own, I’m ready to find someone for myself. I’m loyal, passionate, grounded in reality, and looking for someone who can say the same. I’m looking for my Juliet—without the tragic ending. Sense of humor is an absolute must.

Hailie looks over my shoulder, reading along with me as I type. When I get to the end, she whispers the addition of a finale so close to my ear, I squirm. “P.S. You’re beautiful. Yes, you.”

“*What?*”

“Talking to the reader always ups a feeling of engagement. That ad with that ending?” She shakes her head. “He can’t

lose.”

“Great,” I say aloud as I type the addition into the template on the *SoCal Tribune*’s website.

On the inside, I am a *mess*.

But Hailie? Apparently, she’s just *peachy-keen-jelly-bean* with the whole sordid situation and reaches around me, scrolls down to the end of the page, and clicks the big red *Submit* button at the bottom.

“Hailie! What the heck?” Panic makes my heart lurch inside my chest like it’s stubbed its toe on the leg of the living room sofa.

But my best friend just smiles at me. “Too late to back out now, sweetcheeks.”

It’s really happening. My dad, Jake Brent, is officially in the running to be Southern California’s first Bachelor Anonymous.

Holy macaroni.

I want happiness for him more than anything in this world. He’s the best dad, and he deserves it. He deserves to find a woman who will make him happy. Someone who will make him laugh and smile. Someone he can spend time with when I’m away at college and no longer living at home. Someone he can build a life with.

But I can’t help but ask myself...*Am I really prepared for him to win?*

Because if he does, I can guarantee he’s going to be *pissed*.

Gah. Immediately, I glance at the date on iCalendar—*June 15th*. And then, I scour *SoCal Tribune*’s website to find out when the last round of voting for Bachelor Anonymous will occur—*July 26th*.

So...okay...almost six weeks of summer to enjoy until I have to worry about whether or not I’ll make it to see the first day of my senior year of high school...

Fingers and toes and pretty much everything crossed the next month and a half moves like Hailie that time she attempted to try out for the track team in the name of her crush on Taylor McKinley and ran the sixty-yard dash in a staggering two minutes—*aka very, very, very slowly*.



Holley

Today might be a Tuesday, but it's feeling all kinds of Monday.

My work to-do list is a mile-long, and I have the lovely—*cough* painful *cough*—pleasure of fitting in a quick meeting with my editor in chief before I start my day.

With the fresh cup of coffee I snagged from the shop up the street in tow, I tip-tap my heels across the shiny white tile floor as I take a left out of the elevators and head down the long hallway that leads to Gloria Favorelli's large corner office. Her door is already open, and the lively, early-August sun peeks its rays through the partially opened blinds of the window behind her desk.

And unfortunately for me, once I step inside, she doesn't waste any time diving into the meat and potatoes of why she requested this powwow.

“Are you just as thrilled as I am about our Bachelor Anonymous contest, Holley?” Gloria asks, a far-too-happy smile on her face.

Sigh. I sit down in the chair across from her desk, and it takes a Herculean effort not to let out a deep, heaving, frustrated breath. Of all the journalists at the *SoCal Tribune*, for some insane reason, Gloria chose me—*the woman who, just a little over six months ago, ended a more-than-a-decade-long relationship*—to run this three-ring dating circus.

“Oh yeah,” I answer, the phony friendly tone of my voice not at all matching the pain that’s already starting to make its way inside my chest.

I had a feeling this was why she wanted me to stop by her office this morning, but I was desperately hoping it was about something else. Like, her telling me I’ve been switched to a new assignment and will no longer be running the dreaded Bachelor Anonymous contest.

Hello, wishful thinking? It’s me, Holley.

“So, I take it we’re all set with our bachelor and his five lucky dates?”

“Yes.” I dig deep and force a smile to my face. “He has officially been chosen by the readers, and I’ll be meeting with the five selected women today.”

“How exciting!” She flashes a grin in my direction and rubs her hands together.

“Uh-huh.” I grind my back molars together. “*So exciting.*”

I’m probably the last woman on earth who should be spearheading a contest that involves helping people find love, yet here I am, pretending to be absolutely *delighted*. Call it survival. Call it a desire to keep my job. Call it a thirty-three-year-old woman in the middle of some kind of nervous breakdown. Whatever the reason for my agreement, the fact remains that I am a journalist through and through, and no matter the story, I will write it.

“So, tell me about our bachelor. What’s his name? What’s he like? Is he as hunky as we’re all hoping he’ll be?” she asks, her voice giddy and her short red hair bobbing up and down with each enthusiastic word. For a woman who can be such a hard-ass about deadlines, Gloria is the world’s biggest romantic. Her penchant for watching every single season of *The Bachelor* is proof of that. Also, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out where she obtained the inspiration for this contest.

Thanks for nothing, Chris Harrison.

“His name is Jake Brent,” I answer, but I choose to skirt around the whole issue of my not actually being in contact with him yet. “And...he’s certainly *something*.”

“I have to tell you, Holley. I’m a little jealous that you get to be the one who goes on all the dates with our bachelor and witnesses the swoony romance in real-time,” she says through a little squeal. I swear to God, if her smile grows any bigger, it might break her damn face.

Yep. I’m *so* lucky. Not only do I get to run the whole freaking contest, I also get to discreetly attend the dates as a third wheel. *FML*.

“Well, you know, I’d be more than happy to let you take my place,” I respond without hesitation, but what I really want to say is, *Seriously, Gloria, for the love of everything, put me out of my misery and sacrifice yourself to this stupid contest you created!* “Pretty sure that’s the benefit of being the boss,” I add, in a sad, pathetic attempt to persuade her. “You get to call dibs on any assignment you want.”

“Don’t be silly.” She waves off my words with a casual hand. “You’re going to have so much fun with this.”

Oh yeah, Gloria. So much fun. A deathly, so-painful-it-feels-more-like-hell amount of fun.

“And what about his dates?” she asks. “Were you able to find five women that you think meet the criteria?”

Was I able to find five women? Yes.

Was it a horrible, mind-numbing process that took me days upon days of scouring through a weirdly peppy cesspool of hundreds and hundreds of female applicants? Also yes.

“Uh-huh. And actually, they should be here in the next fifteen minutes or so to sign NDAs and get abreast of how the contest will move forward.”

“Fantastic. Sounds like everything is running smoothly on your end, then.”

“Sure is.” Considering I’ve yet to officially talk to our Bachelor Anonymous, it’s safe to say things aren’t exactly

running smoothly. But if there's one thing you learn as a journalist early on, only tell your dictator—I mean editor in chief—what you *need* to tell them. And right now, all Gloria needs to know is that the contest is in progress.

“Well, if you don't mind,” I add before she can ask me any more giddy fucking questions I don't have answers to. “I'm going to head out and get ready for my meeting with the five women.” She gives a little nod of approval, and I waste zero time hauling ass out of her office.

Once I'm settled at my desk, I prepare myself for the first priority of the day—the nerve-racking phone call to Mr. Bachelor himself.

It takes several deep breaths and numerous more read-throughs of the bullet-pointed *and* numbered notes I took in preparation.

1. ***1. Name: Jake Brent. (Don't forget to identify yourself as Holley Fields from the Tribune!)***
2. ***2. Tell him the readers loved his personal ad submission and he has been selected as the Bachelor in the SoCal Tribune's Bachelor Anonymous Contest.***
3. ***3. Give some time for him to react positively; act supportive and excited.***
4. ***4. Tell him it's best if we get together in person to go over all the details and sign some paperwork; ask what time works best for him. Possible locations if he doesn't suggest any: Grey Street Coffee, Ballard's Restaurant.***
5. ***5. Don't forget to ask if he has any questions about the way the contest works; detailed rules and procedures listed on paper under this one.***

Hello, neurotic, right?

Well, trust me, there's a reason for my neuroses, and it revolves around my lifelong track record of turning into a flustered, stumbling mess on a dime.

When I'm confident I have all the important reminders laid out in front of me, I pick up my phone from its cradle and carefully dial the numbers from Jake's application one by one.

Here goes nothing...

When the first ring sounds over the line, I take a deep breath and toss my reading glasses onto the top of the desk.

Of course, I panic then, because I'm not going to be able to read any of my notes without my damn glasses, and I scramble to get them back on my face as the line clicks over to answered.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi." I stumble over my words, briefly surprised by the young, female voice. Cold calls are not my forte—to be honest, they're not even my "five-te." While I may be a confident, successful, intelligent woman by some measure of the world, I am also an eternally awkward mess. Babbling, stuttering, fumbling—I'm guilty of all the cardinal tells. "May I speak with Jake Brent, please?"

"Oh! He's not in right now," the girl says cheerfully. "Can I take a message?"

Shoot. I wasn't entirely prepared for this. I was expecting Jake himself to answer the phone, to be able to follow my little prewritten script, and I foolishly didn't prepare a backup script for the instance of leaving a message. Still, there is an actual human waiting on the phone for me to get my shit together, which becomes even more apparent when she prompts, "Hello?"

"Ah...yes," I force through my saliva-filled throat. "I'm Holley Fields with the *Tribune*. I'm just..." I glance down at my notes, and in all of two seconds, I try to soak up as many bullet points as I can. "I'm...uh...calling regarding his entry into the Bachelor Anonymous Contest. He's been selected, and I need to go over the details. Can you tell me when might be a better time to reach him?"

There's a muffled shuffle and a muted yell on the other end of the line, and I draw my eyebrows together slightly. When a

thud sounds in my ear, I pull my desk phone away from my face to look at it—as if the clunky plastic handset will tell me anything—and then put it back. I still hear a small scream in the background. What is happening over there? *I swear to Jesus, this guy better not have a secret wife. I cannot redo this contest! The voting already took six weeks to process. Not to mention, the additional seventy hours of work I had to suffer through last week, just to choose the damn women!*

“Did you say Holley Fields?” the woman asks, an edge to her voice that I can’t exactly place. All I know is she no longer sounds easy like Sunday morning.

“I did.” *I said it quite well, actually, thank you very much, I congratulate myself. Eloquently, even.* “And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

I smack my forehead. Now I sound like the Queen of England.

“Chloe,” she says simply before adding, “Chloe Brent. Jake’s daughter.”

His daughter?

Of course, it’s his daughter, you moron! His personal ad is titled Single Dad Seeks Juliet!

Oh hell. Suddenly, the reason I gave for calling seems a little *too* detailed. I sure hope she knew her dad was signing up to be part of an all-out dating meat market since I just outed him. Yikes. You’d think nearly ten years of journalism experience would’ve prevented that horrible mistake, but here I am, fumbling and bumbling my way through this call.

Oh well, at least it’s not a secret wife, right? Now, that would be bad.

“Ah, okay. Well...hmm...okay.” I pause, tripping over my own words. On a quiet breath, I sink my head into my hands and find the strength to try again. “Do you know when a better time would be to reach your dad?”

“He’s, uh...” She pauses almost long enough to confuse me before continuing. “Pretty hard to get ahold of on the phone.”

Sooo...how am I supposed to get ahold of this guy? Literally all other forms of communication are escaping me right now. How can someone be hard to get ahold of by phone? Isn't it surgically attached to his hand like the rest of us?

"All right. Hard to get on the phone..." Holy hell, this conversation has turned remarkably uncomfortable. "Should I...email?"

"He doesn't really do that either," she says, and I internally snort. What's left? A carrier pigeon? Are they even still working, or did some union put a stop to that?

"Is he of this world? Or a goblin of some sort?" I find myself asking sarcastically before I realize I'm shit-talking to a stranger. A stranger who just so happens to be the daughter of this year's Bachelor Anonymous, mind you. I slap a hand over my mouth and bang my head against the desk.

Thankfully, she laughs.

"My dad isn't a goblin," she says through a final snort. "He's one hundred percent a human man, and he'll be at Coronado Beach tomorrow morning. He's literally there every morning, just after sunrise. A bit of a creature of a habit, I guess you could say."

"Coronado Beach?" I repeat and mentally calculate that it's only a short drive from my house. Ten, fifteen minutes tops.

"Yep. You can find him there."

And, what? I'm just supposed to stumble around the beach for a couple hours until I find him? Pretty sure I'm going to need a meet point that's a little more detailed than an entire freaking beach...

"Maybe I should just give him another call ton—"

"No!" she says quickly, and I squint, curious as to her intensity. "He won't be home. But I'll let him know that you called, and he'll be expecting to see you tomorrow at Coronado Beach. Right across from the Hotel Del."

“But he doesn’t even—”

The line goes dead before I finish the rest of my thought, “*know what I look like.*”

Well, that didn’t go as planned...

I pull the phone away from my ear slowly before replacing it back in the cradle. I’m not sure what level of awkward I’d classify that conversation as, but it was definitely on the spectrum. Still, I guess being the daughter of a single man who’s entered himself in a bachelor competition has to be a little unsettling. I know I probably wouldn’t have known what to say or do in that situation either.

Which is exactly why you shouldn’t have given so damn many details at the beginning.

I cringe and offer up a silent prayer that my minor conversational fuckup doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass. The last thing I need is Mr. Bachelor threatening to sue the newspaper because I accidentally spilled the beans to his daughter.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

You’d think, at this stage in my life, I’d be better prepared for my blundering, but no.

My foot-in-mouth syndrome appears to be chronic.

Goodness, I really hope I didn’t traumatize his daughter with my slipup.

My dad had the good grace to be perpetually single after my mom passed. Don’t get me wrong, I want him to be happy—I’ve always wanted him to be happy, and I know a large part of that would be amplified by a companion in his life. But the interviews I’ve spent the last week doing in order to narrow the Bachelor Anonymous dating pool have been irrefutable proof that it’s scary out there in the open seas of desperate women.

I sigh, and when I look up from my desk, I come face-to-face with the only five women who seemed like it wouldn’t be an actual crime to make our nominated bachelor date. In the

glass-walled conference room across the hall from my office, they sit, waiting for me to join them.

Damn, sometimes Dolly—one of the main office assistants here at the *Tribune*—*is far too prompt.*

I sigh again. I thought I'd be meeting with them after getting verbal confirmation of participation from our *bachelor*, but I was clearly a little too ambitious with my timing.

Oh well. The NDA I've had the legal team draft should be all-encompassing. Even if we had to make a change to Bachelor Anonymous at the last minute, it wouldn't make a difference in the paperwork.

At least this part will be out of the way.

I shove my chair back with my hips and press the button on the front of my computer monitor to shut off the screen. The glass walls may have seemed like a good idea to the designer when they remodeled the *Tribune* two years ago, but I can tell you, they were *not*.

My neighbor to the left—Fritz Callo, the contributor responsible for the oversensationalized Men Want More column—is a snoop and, in all honesty, kind of a pervert. I make a point to steer clear of him and his wandering eyes at all costs.

Meanwhile, to the right of me sits Gianna Welsh, the woman in charge of obituaries. Sounds innocent enough on the surface, but let me tell you, she spends half her workday video-chat flirting with all the widowed men. I can't even count the number of times I've seen her reach into the V neck of her top to pull her boobs up and inward for more camera exposure just before signing on to—or *during*—a call.

I do have to hand it to her, though. She's frighteningly, impressively shameless. Everyone in the office other than the editor knows of her behavior and knows of it well. I'm actually surprised her name didn't show up on any of the applications I've been sorting through over the last two weeks for this contest.

But I guess all the competition for his affection makes Bachelor Anonymous too hard of a mark.

The hustle and bustle of the office amplifies as I shove through the glass door of my office and step out into the hall. A huge network of cubicles just on the other side of Fritz buzzes with the anxious anticipation of our print deadline. Beat reporters pull phones away from their ears and cover the mouthpieces to shout at their compadres, and runners sweep the grid, looking for articles that can get picked up, proofread, submitted to the editor, and fast-tracked over to layout. The timeline of our paper's release never changes—ever. And yet, we're almost *always* comically, *agonizingly* in a rush. Either the expectations to fit this much work into the timeline given are ridiculous, or we're staffed mostly by procrastinators.

Based on myself, I'd wager a guess that it's a healthy mix of both.

My phone pings with a text from my blazer pocket, and I pull it out quickly to make sure it's not something of immediate importance. A single text from my dad previews on my home screen, cutting the message off somewhere in the middle.

Dad: Went fishing this morning. Caught some bass and a couple of sunnies, but when I went to take the boat out of the water, my stomach got to gurgling something fierce. Nearly crapped myself right...

A small smile curls one corner of my mouth upward as I click the screen off and put the phone back in my pocket. *Dad and his fish-capades*. He'll be going on about this for a while—I'm sure of it. I expect no fewer than twenty texts in the next hour. But with the time constraints of getting this contest/dating column up and off the ground, I'll have to humor him later.

I shove open the glass door to the conference room—where the bachelor's future dates sit—and step inside, letting

the weight of the door bring it closed behind me.

Five sets of eyes come up from their phones and land squarely on me. The technology in their hands ticks in my mind like bombs. Normally, I wouldn't look at something so harmless so skeptically, but I know the power of social media these days.

All it takes is a tweet to bring a whole empire crashing down. By my calculations, that means it would only take about twenty characters to ruin me and my contest.

Quickly, I set my folder down on the table and open it up. Five NDAs are stacked on top, and if I were an investigator, I'd be slamming them down on the surface in front of each subject. But, obviously, this isn't an interrogation and I'm not the FBI.

Calmly as I can, I take the stack and pass it around to each of the ladies. Honestly, these NDAs cannot get signed soon enough if they're going to be the official contestants. Thankfully, though, at this stage in the competition, there isn't that much meaningful information they could have leaked. I haven't revealed the Bachelor to them—or myself, frankly. All I have is a weird phone conversation with Jake Brent's daughter. Until he signs all the documentation, it could all go down the drain.

Ha. Ha-ha-ha.

Man, nothing makes you laugh in absolute terror like the threat of sheer and utter devastation to your livelihood, right?

“Hi, ladies,” I greet, trying my damndest to make a smile reach my eyes. I'm a skeptic at my best, and a cynic at my worst. Honestly, since my breakup with Raleigh, I'm barely functioning on a human level.

I'm more like Skeletor, the almost human woman.

Though, considering everything I've been through with my bastard ex, I think that's pretty damn understandable.

Ugh. Do not go there, Holley.

On a discreet breath, I shove all thoughts of Raleigh Reynolds and his cheating dick aside and focus on the job at hand—this dumb, wait, I mean, *awesome* contest.

“Thanks for your patience as I finished up a call...” I smile conspiratorially. “With your bachelor!”

They all clap and giggle, and I have to fight the urge to cover my ears. It’s good that they’re excited. It wouldn’t make for an interesting read if they were feeling super lackluster about the whole thing, but that doesn’t make me enjoy it any more. Frankly, the shrill sound of their joy kind of makes me want to ralph.

“Let me tell you...he is great,” I lie. *I know absolutely nothing about him—don’t even know for sure who he is.* “You’re all going to be so thrilled with the man who’s been chosen.”

They all squeal. I wince and look around to make sure I haven’t somehow stumbled into the middle of a pig farm, but all I find are relentlessly attractive, svelte women.

“Great,” I mutter to break up the noise. “I’m so glad you’re all excited. But in order to get started, we need to get some paperwork out of the way. First, you’ll find a document in front of you. It’s a nondisclosure agreement. Essentially, it means that you agree to keep the details of the contest to yourself. That means your dates, the bachelor, your involvement in the contest...anything pertaining to Bachelor Anonymous, you’re strictly—legally—forbidden to talk about.”

“But what about, like, Twitter?” one of them asks, her blond bob swinging side to side.

“No Twitter.”

Her eyebrows knit.

“Instagram?”

“No. No social media platforms, no texts, no phone calls, no letters...” I laugh to myself. Suddenly, I have a handle on every method of communication, and yet ten minutes ago, all I could come up with was carrier pigeon. “It’s all legally

forbidden. You are not to discuss the details of this with anyone.”

Another woman with wavy auburn hair opens her mouth, and I cut her off. “Not your mom. Not your sister. No one.”

They all kind of frown, but I charge ahead. “It’s like being on a jury. You are sworn to secrecy over the details until the contest is completely over. And even then, you’ll have to be released from your nondisclosure agreement in order to share anything.”

“What’s the point if we can’t share anything?” the blonde asks again.

“To find love,” I offer. “To meet someone you can spend the rest of your life with.”

“But, like, how would that work? My mom is going to want to meet the guy I marry,” the blonde asserts.

I nod, though I kind of want to smash my head into the table. Really, though, it’s my fault. I should have seen this coming. When there’s this much hair spray in a room, the fumes are at least partially noxious. I should have told Dolly to put them in a room with a window.

“The nondisclosure will almost definitely end after the contest is over,” I begin to explain. “And then, you’ll be free to share your relationship wherever you and your partner like. But it’s an integral part of the contest now. It’s to protect both your and the bachelor’s privacy as you get to know each other.”

Four of five women put their pens to the paper and sign. One, though, she’s a holdout for some reason. To be honest, I can’t tell if she has a genuine problem with those terms or if she’s still trying to make sense of it all in her head.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that these women have done nothing to wrong me, no matter their striking likeness to Raleigh’s assistant, and smile.

“Is there something I need to explain more?”

She shakes her head but doesn't offer up any explanation for her hesitance.

“Are you uncomfortable with the terms? You're free to back out at any time if this makes you uncomfortable, and we'll fill your slot with another contestant.”

That apparently strikes a chord. She picks up the pen and signs her name at the bottom of the paper.

“Great,” I approve with a smile, collecting the NDAs and filing them in my folder immediately. “Now we can move on to the fun stuff.”

More squeals fill the air, and I reach into the folder, pull out the next round of forms, and mentally brace myself to be stuck in this room of giggly squealers for the next hour and a half.

Lord, please give me strength.

[Keep reading here!](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, THANK YOU for reading. That goes for anyone who has bought a copy, read an ARC, helped us beta, edited, or found time in their busy schedule just to make sure we stayed on track. Thank you for supporting us, for talking about our books, and for just being so unbelievably loving and supportive of our characters. You've made this our MOST favorite adventure thus far.

THANK YOU to each other. Monroe is thanking Max. Max is thanking Monroe. Blah, blah, blah. We do this every book. And we can't stop, won't stop! If you don't believe us, we challenge you to go read all of them and see for yourself. HAHA!

THANK YOU, Lisa, for agreeing to be a part of this insane 2021 schedule. Somehow, we're nearly halfway through the year and still surviving. And guess what? We have great news! There will be two more editing projects coming to you very soon. LOL. On a sidenote, we're pretty sure we all deserve a trip to the Bahamas or something after this.

THANK YOU, Stacey, for making the insides of our book look so damn pretty and rolling with the crazy schedule punches we throw your way. You are the absolute best!

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work do not go unnoticed. We love youuuuuuuuuuuuu!

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THANK YOU to our Camp members! You guys are the best! THE BEST, we tell you! You've made Camp the coolest place to be and one of our favorite places to go to procrastinate. We can't wait for all the fun we've got planned for this year!

As always, all our love.

XOXO,

Max & Monroe