

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored straw cowboy hat and a dark, heavy jacket over a blue button-down shirt, is leaning against a wooden fence. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a field or farm. The overall tone is moody and rustic.

He wanted her, but  
feared commitment. The  
last thing she wanted was  
a cowboy. Could he  
change her mind? Could  
she change his?

# HANK

MEN OF CLIFTON MONTANA BOOK 32

*Bestselling Author*

SUSAN FISHER-DAVIS

HANK

Susan Fisher-Davis

**Men of Clifton, Montana**

**Book 32**

Hank Men of Clifton, Montana Book 32

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You can find Cody on Instagram at:

[@varanocody](https://www.instagram.com/varanocody).

To JW Photography and Covers

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### Chapter One

“No way. That ain’t happenin’ sweetheart,” Hank Barnett said as he put his hands on his hips and gave his sister an angry look.

“Come on. It’s just for a few weeks.”

“What happened to the other guy?”

“The physician advised him to rest in bed after he injured his back.”

“Sure, he did.”

“Hank, I’ll do anything you ask if you do this for me.”

“No.” He sauntered to the table, pulled a chair out, and sat down. “I am overwhelmed with work on the farm.”

“Like what? It’s winter. You don’t plant wheat at this time of the year.”

“I still have other things to do. I have to clean the barn every day.”

“Oh, forgive me. I didn’t recall that takes all day.”

“Don’t be a smartass, Kat.”

“So you clean the barn in the mornings and do this in the afternoon. Please.”

Hank gave a resigned sigh. He loved her, but she drove him up a damn wall.

“Kat, I’m positive you can find someone else. What about Jeff? He’s your husband. He should do it.”

“He can’t because one of us has to care for the kids. Unless you want to do that.”

“Oh, hell no. I would sooner confront a snake than those two-year-old little heathens.”

Kat gasped. “My children are not heathens.”

“Please. They make the terrible twos look like a vacation.”

When she snorted out a laugh, he grinned.

“They can be a tad bratty.”

“A tad? Have you met them?”

“Stop.” She sighed heavily. “I’ll look into finding someone.”

“Good.” He stood. “I’ll catch up with you later. Say hello to Jeff for me.”

“I’ll track you down if I can’t find anyone.”

“I don’t question that at all. Talk soon.” He kissed her on the cheek quickly, walked outside, and headed for his truck. He hoped she would find someone else because he knew she would never give up on him if she didn’t.

\*\*\*\*

Marlowe strolled around the store, wondering what to get her mother for Christmas. She enjoyed this time of year, but the shopping part she could do without. When she spotted a display of robes, she moved them along the rod.

“Come sit on Santa’s lap, sweetheart.”

Marlowe glanced over to see the store Santa talking to a little girl. How fair was it that the man had the most seductive voice she’d ever heard and wasn’t calling *her* sweetheart? She mentally shook her head. Who knew what was under that artificial beard? He could be old as time. She chuckled, then walked to a table of sweaters.

“Not with a voice like that.” She groaned.

She stood next to the table, listening to him talk to the little girl, and when the child giggled, she almost did too.

“Make sure you leave cookies and a glass of milk for me,” Santa said.

She thought *she’d* like to leave him cookies and milk, then laughed. When a lady across from her looked displeased, Marlowe shrugged.

She chose another sweater after laying one on the table. She couldn’t make her feet move. Santa made her want to sit on his lap and tell him everything he could give her. She walked a little closer, watched him set the little girl on her feet, and waved a little boy to him. The little boy told Santa what he longed for while chattering a hundred miles an hour.

Marlowe ran her eyes over Santa’s fake beard, red suit, and down to his feet to see... *cowboy boots*? Was Santa a cowboy? She grinned as she looked at him and noticed he was looking in her direction.

She saw him put the little boy down, fold his arms, and cock his head as he looked at her.



“What about you, darlin’? Would you like to sit on Santa’s lap?”

*Would she ever!*

“Uh, no, thank you, Santa.”

“Oh, come on.” He patted his thigh. “You can tell me what you want, and I’ll do my best to make sure you get it.”

Marlowe smiled as she thought about what she wanted and whether he could give it to her. She stepped closer.

“And what if Santa can’t get it?”

“I’d probably give you something else. Something that would bring a rosy hue to those cheeks.” He winked, and her heart slammed against her ribs.

*Oh, boy. It was sweltering in this store.*

“You think my cheeks need a rosy hue?”

He grinned, and she cursed that damn white beard because she couldn’t see his smile. Only that the corners of his eyes crinkled. She could feel the heat in her cheeks as he continued to look at her.

“There you go.”

“What?”

“Your cheeks are red, darlin’. Why is that?” He tilted his head.

“I have no idea,” she said, but grinned when he chuckled.

“You can tell me all your secrets. Santa doesn’t gossip.”

Marlowe laughed. “I don’t have any.”

“Sweetheart, everyone has secrets.”

“Do you?”

“Sure. I’m Santa. I have to keep a lot of secrets. Those are my secrets.”

“That’s true.”

He patted his thigh again. “Come sit and tell me what you want for Christmas.”

“I—”

“Don’t you believe in Santa?”

She smiled. “Of course I do.”

He leaned forward. “Then prove it, darlin’. Tell Santa what you want him to bring you.”

Marlowe took her bottom lip between her teeth. Did she dare? *If you don’t do this, you will regret it. Do it!*

She took a deep breath, walked up the three steps, and stared into a pair of light gray eyes. She sat on his lap and cleared her throat. He smelled entirely too good, and it wasn’t sugar cookies. It was sexy. Santa can’t be sexy. Can he?

“So, tell me what you want,” he said in a low tone.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do, sweetheart.”

Startled, she looked at him and gazed into his eyes. There was no way she wanted him. She didn’t even know what he looked like. She quickly stood.

“Uh, thanks so much, Santa.” She started down the steps.

“If you decide to tell me what you want, I’ll do my damndest to give it to you.”

Marlowe suppressed a shiver, nodded, ran down the steps, and left the store. She had to get back to work.

\*\*\*\*

Hank chuckled as she ran off. He didn’t know who she was, but he sure wanted to. She was beautiful, with her blonde hair and blue eyes. He’d love to kiss every one of those freckles across the bridge of her nose.

“You’re not supposed to flirt. You’re Santa, for God’s sake.”

He glanced at his sister, wearing an elf costume beside the chair.

“I wasn’t flirting, Kat.”

“Please. I know you, remember? You were flirting.” She shrugged.

“I know you’re my sister, and I love you, but you’re wrong.”

“Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that.” She sighed. “I can’t wait for this to be over. I hate this damn costume.”

“Where’s your Christmas spirit?”

“I think it ran out the door with that woman you were flirting with.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” he growled. He looked at her to see her rolling her eyes.

“I can’t believe you were having fun when you didn’t want to do this.”

“I didn’t think I’d enjoy it, but the kids are fun. You know, yours could learn a thing or two by watching these kids.”

“Shut up. You love my kids.”

“Yeah, I do.” Hank looked at her. “If you hate this so much, why did you do it?”

“Oh, I don’t hate doing this. It’s the costume I hate. It’s a little skimpy.”

“I bet Jeff likes it,” Hank said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“You have no idea. Let’s get some lunch, then get this day over with. Jeff’s bringing me lunch. I’m going to meet him in the breakroom. Do you want to join us?”

“I think I’ll head to the diner.”

“I’ll put the sign up.” Kat walked down the steps and placed the ‘Back in one hour’ sign beside the velvet rope.

Hank walked behind the red curtain and down the hallway. Since he had only an hour, he called Connie and placed his order. It was lunchtime, and he didn't know how long he had to wait, but he wanted to get a head start.

After he stripped off the suit, he pulled his coat on and walked out the back door to the alley. He strode up the back street until he reached his truck and drove to the diner in Clifton. Then strolled around the front.

Opening the door, he heard the bell jingle and stopped when he saw how packed the place was.

"Hank? Your order is almost ready," Connie said as she hustled around.

"That's fine, Connie." He folded his arms and leaned back against the window to wait. He straightened up when he saw her. The woman from the store. He grinned. How was that for fate?

He was surprised that she worked here, but he hadn't been in for a while. He watched her laugh at something Jim Barton said, making him grin.

She entered the kitchen and returned with a to-go bag. And he hoped it was his. He saw her look at the ticket attached to it.

"Hank Barnett," she called out.

"Thank you, God," Hank murmured as he went to the counter and removed his wallet from his back pocket.

"You're Hank?" She smiled at him.

"I am." He stared into her eyes, and when he saw her eyes widen, he did all he could to not grin.

"Uh, okay." She handed him the ticket.

"Thank you." He removed cash, paid her, and stuck a ten-dollar bill in the tip jar while keeping his eyes on her.

"You're welcome," she said in a low voice, then walked to the register to ring it up. "Would you like a receipt?"

Hank smirked. “Not unless you write what you want Santa to bring you on it.”

When she gasped, he grinned, picked up the bag, touched the brim of his hat, and strode out the door. At least he knew where to find her.

\*\*\*\*

Marlowe needed to catch her breath. So, that’s what was under the fake beard and red suit. *Wow!* When he spoke, she knew it was him, and looking into those light gray eyes sealed the deal.

What a good-looking man. His hat covered his head, but she could see his dark hair on the nape of his neck, and she wanted to sift her fingers through it. He was tall, and even though he wore a coat, it hung open, and her eyes instinctively went to his fly. She closed her eyes and groaned. His lips were perfect, with a full bottom lip, Cupid’s bow upper lip, and his grin was beautiful. His jaw was covered with scruff, and she wanted to sit on his lap. *Sit on his lap?* No. She wanted to straddle him while they were both naked and sweaty.

“It’s so hot in here,” she murmured as she returned to the kitchen.

“Did you say something, hon?” Connie asked her.

“Just mumbling to myself.” Marlowe smiled.

“I do that all the time.” Connie smiled as she walked past.

Marlowe laughed. “I think we all do.”

Connie grinned. “Thanks for taking that order out, hon. Two girls out, and I’m swamped. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. I was glad to help. I’d better get going. I hope Owen enjoys his ice cream cake.”

“I’m sure he will. Thank you, Marlowe. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You too. Bye.”

As Marlowe walked to the door, she thought of Hank Barnett, but the last thing she needed was another man who thought he could control her. She nibbled on her bottom lip. Hank Barnett seemed trustworthy, but Marlowe knew better than to trust too easily.

She and her best friends, Peyton, and Dylan felt the same. They had all been in relationships that quickly went south and swore they were better off alone. The only thing a man was good for was sex; sometimes, he wasn't even good enough for that.

Later that evening, Marlowe, Peyton, and Dylan sat in the living room of Dylan's house.

“What's going on with you, Marlowe? You seem quiet.” Dylan sipped her wine.

“Nothing, really.” She huffed. “I miss having a man in my life.”

“What? Where did that come from?” Peyton sat up.

“Don't you?”

“I miss sex. I do not, however, miss a man.” Peyton raised her eyebrow.

“I met a gorgeous man today.” Marlowe grinned.

“Of course, you did. This is Clifton,” Dylan said.

“True. I was shopping in Walton's store today, and Santa flirted with me.”

“Santa? Do tell,” Dylan said.

As they listened, Marlowe told them about meeting Santa, who turned out to be Hank, and how handsome he was.

“He said I could sit on his lap and tell him what I want him to bring me.” Marlowe laughed. “I wanted to say he could bring me him.”

“That good, huh?” Peyton took a sip of her wine.

“Tall, dark hair, beautiful light gray eyes, and a body to die for.” Marlowe sighed. “And when he grinned... oh, my. His smile is gorgeous. I want him.”

“What if he’s married?”

“Well, if he is, his wife needs to know how he flirts, and that is something I would never get involved with. Married, engaged, or involved is off limits.”

“Here. Here.” Peyton held her wineglass up, and they clinked glasses.

“But how were you the one who gave him his order at the diner?” Dylan asked her.

“I dropped off Owen’s ice cream cake, and Connie was bustling around. Two girls were sick, so she asked me to take the to-go order out.” Marlowe shrugged. “I did.”

“Mama?”

Dylan looked over the back of the sofa.

“Hey, baby. What are you doing up?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

Marlowe smiled as she watched Dylan’s daughter, Zoey, climb onto her mother’s lap.

“You sit here with us, and if you fall asleep, I’ll carry you to bed.” Dylan kissed Zoey’s head.

“Okay, Mama.” Zoey smiled and leaned her head against Dylan’s chest.

“Maybe we should say goodnight now in case you fall asleep,” Marlowe whispered.

“Okay.” Zoey giggled.

“Goodnight, Zoey,” Peyton and Marlowe said.

“Night, Aunt Peyton and Aunt Marlowe.”

In no time, the little girl fell asleep. Dylan carried her to her room and then returned to the living room.

“That is the only good thing Travis Martin ever gave me.” Dylan plopped back onto the sofa.

“It is. At least you got something from him other than misery.” Peyton sighed.

“We have no luck with men. Why is that?” Marlowe shook her head.

“I’d love to find a good man, but it will be a cold day in hell before it will be another damn cowboy,” Peyton muttered.

“We must bring all the bad cowboys our way. Look at other women in this town, Hartland, and Spring City. They have wonderful men who are cowboys. We got the bad leftovers.” Dylan poured more wine into her glass.

“Drugs, women, and booze. That’s the men we got. Travis could have killed Zoey,” Dylan snapped.

“Thank God he didn’t. You got the drug addict, I got the womanizer, and Marlowe got the drinker.” Peyton huffed.

“Not only that, but Travis was horrible in bed. He only cared about himself. I have no idea what it’s like to have an orgasm with a man.” Dylan sighed.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I don’t either. Johnnie usually passed out before I was even into it.” Marlowe smirked.

“Now, see? That is what I don’t get. Trace loved fucking other women, and I’m not sure why, because he sucked at it. Of course, he only cared about himself getting off. No one else mattered.” Peyton shook her head.

“Some men are like that.” Marlowe sighed.

She’d love to find a man who wasn’t just in it for himself. What good was sex if you couldn’t enjoy it?

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Hank pulled his coat around him and held his hat on his head as he trudged through the snow to his house. The wind was enough to make a man wonder why he did this.



When he entered the house, he sighed at the warmer air and removed his coat, hat, and gloves. He walked to the laundry room, hung up his hat and coat, but placed the wet gloves on the heat register to dry them.

He grew organic wheat for Ash Beckett, but still had things to do around his farm. There were horses to deal with, and stalls had to be mucked out daily. It kept him busy, and this time of the year, he needed to be.

Despite being unable to grow or harvest anything, he found plenty of other work to keep him busy until he could start planting again come spring. He'd been growing wheat for Ash and loved doing it.

Although he didn't need to do anything, he was not the type of man to lie around. Hank had to work, or he'd go nuts. He bought the land twelve years ago, and Hank wasn't sure what to do with it, but one day he ran into Ash, and they wanted to work together. Ash paid him monthly to grow wheat, even in the off-season, but Hank didn't need the money. His bank account was healthy because he made the right choices. He started saving money when he was fifteen and worked on a pig farm for Jim Barton.

Hank grinned and shook his head. He had loved the job, but those pigs smelled terrible. He knew Jim was used to it, but after working there one summer, Hank knew he had to move on to something else.

He had no inclination to run a ranch or a farm. Still, when his great-grandfather passed and left him money, Hank wanted to build himself a home and raise horses.

It wasn't until he talked with Ash, he knew growing the wheat would give him purpose, so he signed a contract with Beckett Feed and never looked back.

His stomach growled, and he realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast, which was hours ago. He glanced at the clock and groaned. He had two hours before he was due at the department store.

He grinned as he thought about heading for the Clifton Diner once he finished being Santa and maybe seeing *her* again. She had been on his mind for days now. He would love to see her again and ask her out if she isn't involved with someone. He hoped not because if she was, he'd back off. Getting involved with a woman already with someone was asking for trouble, so he stayed far away.

After eating a sandwich, he pulled on his coat, slapped his hat on his head, and pulled on a pair of dry gloves. He opened the door, stepped onto the porch, and immediately wanted to go back inside.

It was a bitterly snowy day, but little kept the people of Clifton, Spring City, and Hartland from getting out. The towns only came to a standstill if it snowed so much no one could get out.

As he drove to the department store, he shook his head at the people milling about. He knew most were Christmas shopping and realized he needed to get busy too.

At lunchtime, he stripped off the red suit, hat, white gloves, and went out the back door to the alleyway, then drove to the diner. It was snowing harder, and he wanted to get home before the roads worsened, but he had a couple of hours left at the department store.

Entering the diner, he glanced around but didn't see her. Well, hell. He'd been hoping to see her again. He grinned when he saw Connie coming his way with a coffee carafe. She smiled at him as she poured him a mug.

“What can I get you, Hank?”

“My usual is fine, Connie. Thank you.”

“I'll be right back, hon.”

“Uh, Connie?”

“Yes?”

“Is the woman who gave me my to-go order last week working today?”

“I'm not sure...”

Hank saw a frown crease on her forehead.

“She was here last week.” He huffed. “It was a hectic day. I called in my order, and she brought it to me.” He was feeling a little embarrassed.

“Oh, you mean Marlowe Buckley. She doesn’t work here. She stopped to drop something off, and I had her take your order to you.”

“Oh. I thought she worked here.”

“No, she’s at Scoops of Joy.”

“The ice cream shop?”

“Yep.”

“Okay. Well, dessert might be in order,” he said, grinning.

Connie laughed. “Yes.”

Once he finished eating, he paid the bill, stuck money in the tip jar, and walked outside into frigid weather. He pulled the collar on his coat up and tugged his hat lower, but it didn’t help with the wind.

Looking up the street, he saw the blue awning over the ice cream shop and walked to it. It had been years since he’d been there. Not since old man Roosevelt died and the shop along with him. He had heard someone reopened it years ago, but he never made it there. That was about to change.

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Marlowe smiled as she scooped chocolate ice cream into a cone and handed it to the little girl. She took the money from the little girl’s mama, rang it up, and gave her change. When the bell for the door chimed, she looked over to see Hank Barnett enter the shop. He glanced around and grinned when he saw her, then walked to the counter and stared into the glass cases holding buckets of ice cream.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” He folded his arms and leaned against a case.

“What would you like?”

When a sexy grin lifted his lips, she swore she burst into flames.

“What’s good?”

“Everything.”

“I’ll take a vanilla cone.”

“Vanilla? Just plain vanilla?”

“Is there something wrong with vanilla?”

“Of course not, but we have all kinds of flavors.”

She watched him look at the flavors on the board behind her on the wall. She bit her lip to keep from grinning because he looked to be concentrating. Then he shook his head.

“Vanilla, please.”

“All right. One scoop or two?”

“One.”

“Regular cone or Waffle?”

“Regular.”

Marlowe nodded, then made his cone. She handed it to him, being careful not to touch him.

“Here you go.” She told him the cost, took his money, and handed him the change.

“Thank you,” he said, then licked the ice cream while keeping his eyes on her.

*Oh, boy.*

“You’re very welcome.”

He leaned close to her.

“I don’t believe you told Santa what you wanted yet.”

“Maybe I told another Santa.”

“Bite your tongue. I’m Santa.” He winked. “Any uh... *fake*, Santa can’t give you what I can.” He grinned.

*Oh, boy. Oh, boy.*

Marlowe couldn’t speak to save her life. The man was so friggin’ sexy, and watching him lick that ice cream had her wanting him to lick her.

*Oh, boy. Oh, boy. Oh, boy.*

“Uh...”

“I’ll be at the store for another two hours. If you’re free, come by and sit on my lap, and tell me what I can give you.”

She stared into his eyes and knew this was a bad idea. He would break her heart. Been there. Done that. *No more cowboys.*

“I’ll think about it.”

“Tell your boss you need to talk to Santa.”

“My boss?” She laughed. “I’m part owner here, Santa. Shouldn’t you know that?”

“I’m swamped this time of year. Some things slip by me.”

Marlowe laughed harder.

“That’s a good one. You’re good at thinking on your feet Santa.”

“Darlin’, I’m even better off them. Thank you for the cone, but I need to get back. I can’t be late for the kids.” He turned to leave, but looked at her. “I’ll save you a seat.”

She smiled as she watched him go out the door as Peyton entered. He touched the brim of his hat, nodded, and walked off.

Peyton looked at her, back at Hank, and sighed. She walked behind the cases.

“As much as I hate to say this, that is one good-looking cowboy,” Peyton said.

“That’s Santa,” Marlowe said, grinning.

Peyton gasped. “The one you saw at the store?”

“Yes. He said he’d save me a seat.” Marlowe laughed when Peyton burst out laughing.

“It’s too bad he’s a cowboy.”

“Yeah, since we’ve sworn off them...”

“Oh, no. Don’t you dare, Marlowe. You know he’ll break your heart.”

Marlowe sighed. “I know, but... seriously, look at the man. I told him he was good at thinking on his feet, and he said he was even better off them. Why do I find that so believable?”

“I don’t know because I believe it too. Look, Marlowe, it is up to you, but be careful. I’d hate to see you get hurt again.”

“I sure don’t want that either, but something about Hank Barnett draws me in. I just might talk to Santa after work.”

Smiling, she knew she’d do just that. The idea of sitting on his lap had her biting her lip to hold back a groan. Yeah, she’d sit on his lap and tell him exactly what he could give her.

## Chapter Two

Hank grinned as the next little girl approached him, smiling shyly.

“Hi, sweetheart. Come tell Santa what you want him to bring you.” He chuckled when she giggled and held her arms up for him to lift her onto his lap. “What’s your name?”

“Don’t you know?”

*Oh, shit.*

“I do, but I want to be sure I have the right person.”

She placed her little mitten-covered hands over her mouth and giggled more, then put her hands in her lap and smiled at him. She was adorable, with her big blue eyes and red hair.

“My name is Zoey Martin. My aunt Marlowe brought me since Mama’s busy.”

Hank looked at the line of kids with their parents and spotted Marlowe at the front. He was hoping there weren’t two women with the same name. She smiled at him when his eyes landed on her.

“Your aunt, huh? Does she need to tell Santa what she wants too?”

He laughed when the little girl nodded her head.

“You saw that, didn’t you? She thinks you need to sit on my lap.” He grinned when her cheeks turned pink, but she smiled.

“I saw her.”

“So?”

Marlowe glanced around and then leaned close.

“I’d love to sit on your lap... Santa.”

Hank stared at her, and it took all the strength he had not to let Zoey down and pull her aunt onto his lap.

“Anytime, darlin’. Anytime.”

“Are you married, Santa?” Marlowe asked him as she tilted her head.

“No—”

“Santa! What about Mrs. Claus?” Zoey asked him.

Hank saw Marlowe flatten her lips to keep from grinning and then looked at Zoey.

“Well, that is a good question, Zoey. I no longer have a Mrs. Claus, so I’m no longer married.” He winced at that comment and heard Marlowe snort. He shrugged when he looked at her. “This kid is too smart,” he muttered.

“You have no idea,” Marlowe said.

After listening to Zoey babble about everything she wanted Santa to bring her, he set her on her feet, stared at Marlowe, and raised his eyebrow. She smiled and shook her head.

“How will Santa know what to bring you, Marlowe, if you don’t tell him?”

“Maybe later.” She grinned. “I’m sure others would be jealous to see me sitting on your lap... Santa.”

“Who cares?”

Marlowe stepped closer. “I don’t, but I also don’t want people talking about me. I have a business to run.”

Hank sighed. “All right. Can I take you to dinner?”

“I’m not—”

“Come on. What will one dinner hurt? If we don’t like each other, we won’t see each other again.”

“What if we do? I’ve been burned by cowboys and sworn off them.”

“So, because I’m a cowboy, you won’t go out with me?”

“Right.”

“But I’m Santa,” he said, trying not to laugh.



They stared at each other until someone in line cleared their throat. Hank shifted his eyes to see everyone staring at them, and he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Sorry, everyone. Santa's trying to get a date here," he said and laughed when the people in line did.

"Just go out with the man before my son gets his second wind and starts screaming," a woman said.

Hank looked at Marlowe. "You heard her."

She huffed. "All right. Dinner."

"Great. Text me your number, and I'll be in touch." He told her his number and watched her enter it into her phone, then she texted him with her number.

"Come on, Zoey. We need to get you home. We don't want Mama to worry, do we?"

"No." Zoey grabbed her hand and pulled her.

"Bye, Santa," Marlowe said, grinning.

"For now," Hank said.

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"I'm having dinner with him tomorrow night," Marlowe said, almost laughing at Peyton's and Dylan's looks.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Peyton asked her.

"No."

"Then why?" Dylan tilted her head.

Marlowe shrugged. "I like him."

"He's a cowboy." Dylan frowned.

"I know." Marlowe huffed. "It's just that he's so..." She waved her hand.

"Hot? Sexy? Gorgeous?" Peyton grinned.

“Yes, yes, and yes. I know I’m asking for heartache, but what if I’m not? What if he’s a wonderful man who will treat me like a queen? We’ve seen it happen.”

“Sure, we have, but not for us. You’d think after the second one breaking my heart, I would have stopped, but no, I had to fall for Trace, and he was a pig, and don’t even get me started on my father.” Peyton sighed.

“I should have stopped after the first one, but I fell hard when I saw Travis riding that bull. He could hide his problem so well.” Dylan shook her head. “He fooled me.”

“We were fooled by all three of them. I felt the same way when I saw Johnnie riding a bull. I knew not to get involved because I should have stayed away after being with Bobby. Some rodeo cowboys only care about their conquests.”

“I got Zoey out of it, though.”

“There is that.” Marlowe smiled. “I’m going to go out with Hank; if he’s a dick, I won’t go again.”

“Okay. We’ll keep our fingers crossed for you,” Dylan said with a smile.

Marlowe sat on the sofa the following evening, waiting for Hank to arrive. She was a bundle of nerves. The night could go well or end in disappointment. She hoped it wasn’t the latter.

When a knock sounded on the door at five-thirty, she jerked in surprise, stood, walked to the door, and pulled it open. Her heart hit her stomach, looking at him. He wore a sheepskin coat, which hung open, and she saw a red dress shirt. His jeans were dark blue, and he wore distressed cowboy boots. His black hat sat perched on his head, and he held a pink carnation.

“For you,” he said as he handed it to her.

Marlowe smiled, took the flower, and waved him inside.

“Thank you. I love carnations, and pink is my favorite color.”

Hank grinned. “I did good then, huh?”

“Yes.” She laughed.

“This is a nice apartment.”

“I like it. It’s convenient, too, since it’s above the shop.”

“You look beautiful,” he said.

Marlowe blushed. It had been a long time since anyone complimented her. She wore a blue dress that matched her eyes, ended just above her knees, and hugged her like a second skin. On her feet were black, knee-high leather boots. She watched his eyes roam over her.

“Thank you.”

“No. Thank you.” He grinned.

“Well, you’re welcome, and you look very handsome... for a cowboy.”

Hank chuckled. “Some of us clean up good. We’d better go. I have reservations for six.”

“Okay. Let me get my coat.” She removed her coat from the hall tree, but Hank took it and held it for her. “You have manners.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I shouldn’t be, I suppose. Most cowboys do.”

“Yes, ma’am. My mother raised me to be respectful, especially to women.”

“Do your parents live in Clifton?”

“Yes, they live just outside of town.”

Marlowe nodded as she picked up her purse, opened the door, and stepped onto the stoop. Hank pulled the door closed, and she locked it. He took her hand and led her down the steps.

“Where are we going?” she asked once they were inside the truck.

“Hartland Restaurant. Is that all right with you?”

“I love their food.”

“Good. I do too.”

They arrived at the restaurant, and Hank drove into a spot to park. She glanced over at him and smiled.

“You’re killing me,” he said.

Marlowe laughed. “I’m not doing anything.”

He opened his door and stepped out.

“Not doing anything, she says.” He shoved the door closed.

She watched him walk around the front of the truck to her door and open it. He put his hand out to her, and she placed hers in it. When he kissed her palm, she sighed. He held her hand as they walked across the parking lot and entered the restaurant.

A young woman stood at a podium, smiling at them.

“Hello, welcome to the Hartland Restaurant. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes, for Barnett.” Hank smiled.

Marlowe watched the woman look through reservations, but she kept sneaking glances at Hank, who seemed oblivious to it. She picked up menus.

“Please follow me.” She led them through the restaurant to a booth. “Will this do?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s fine.” Hank helped Marlowe remove her coat and sat after she did.

The hostess handed them the menus.

“Your server will be right with you. What can I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have sweet tea, please.” Marlowe smiled at the woman.

“Same for me,” Hank said.

“I’ll be right back with those.”

“Thank you,” Marlowe said as she picked up the menu.

Hank did the same.

“I’m always at a loss what to get here,” he said.

“Everything is so good.” Marlowe scanned the menu.

“I’m going to get the ribeye.”

“That sounds good, but I’m more hungry for fish. I love the blackened trout.” She set the menu down. “I’m going with that.”

Marlowe glanced around the place as they ate their meals, then back at Hank. He was so damn handsome.

“So, tell me how you became Santa.”

“My sister roped me into it.”

Marlowe laughed. “How?”

“Well, she’s the elf, and the other Santa hurt his back, so she asked me to do it. Of course, I initially said no, but she is my baby sister, and I’ll do anything I can for her.”

“That’s sweet.”

“She’s devious. She knows she can get me to do about anything.” Hank shrugged. “I didn’t want to do it, but once I did, I enjoyed it.”

“You seemed to be.”

“So, who was the little girl you brought?”

“That is my best friend’s daughter.”

“She was a beautiful little girl.”

“She looks like her mama.” Marlowe grinned.

“How did you open the ice cream shop? I remember the Roosevelt’s owning it, but it was closed for a while.”

“Peyton and I lost our jobs at the same time. I was a bookkeeper, and Peyton was in management. One day, we were walking past the parlor, and she said it would be great if it was still open, so we opened it.”

“Is Peyton Zoey’s mama?”

“No. Dylan is. She raises bulls for stud service. She does very well at it.”

“Dylan, Peyton, and Marlowe. Different names for women. I know there are women named Peyton, but I’ve never heard of a woman named Dylan, and your name is very different.”

“It was my grandmother’s name. As for Dylan, her parents loved the name and decided that’s what it would be, whether a boy or a girl.”

“It’s different. So, she doesn’t own the shop with you and Peyton?”

“No. She is way too busy on her ranch.”

“Are they married?”

“No. None of us are any longer. All of us were married to cowboys who didn’t treat us right, so we’ve sworn off them.”

“Is that so? You can’t blame all cowboys for what a few did.”

“It wasn’t just those. We’d been in relationships with cowboys before and ended up with broken hearts. Cowboys are heartbreakers.”

“I think you should let me prove you wrong.”

“I’m afraid of that. Look, Hank, I like you. I do, but after two unsuccessful relationships and one failed marriage, all with cowboys, why should I take another chance?”

“Then why go out with me?” He tossed his napkin onto the table, sat back, and folded his arms.

“Now that is the question. I like you, but it scares me.”

“Hell, all relationships scare me. I had been in a long-term relationship, and it didn’t end well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It’s hard getting over that hurt. Tell me what you do when you’re not playing Santa.”

“I grow wheat for Beckett Feed. I have a small ranch with a few horses, but the feed brings in the money. Ash has a goldmine with his feed.”

“Yes, he does. Dylan uses it too.”

“How long have you been divorced?”

“I’m not divorced. I’m a widow.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“How could you?”

“True.”

“I’ve been a widow for three years. Peyton and Dylan have been divorced for two years. We’ve been friends since grade school and are always there for each other. Johnnie, my husband, hated the friendship we had. He actually told me once that I wasn’t allowed to see them. I laughed. They’re my friends. Sisters I never had. I will not stop seeing them. I don’t know what I would have done without them.”

“We all need friends like that.”

“Yes. How old are you?”

“Thirty-eight. You?”

“Thirty-two.”

“So, tell me, Marlowe Buckley, is this our first and last date?”

“How do you know my last name?”

“Connie. I went into the diner and didn’t see you, so I asked her about you. I thought you worked there since you brought my lunch to me.”

“I was dropping Owen’s ice cream cake off. It was his birthday, and he loves ice cream cake.”

“Did you bake it?”

“Yes. Do you want one for your birthday?” She tilted her head.

“As long as you bring it to me, yes.”

Marlowe laughed. “I can do that.”

“What happened to your husband, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“We were separated because I couldn’t handle his drinking anymore. He would ride those bulls drunk as can be.”

“Bull rider?”

“Yes. So were Peyton’s ex, Trace, and Dylan’s ex, Travis. We met them at a rodeo years ago.”

“I see. I’d have to get drunk, too, to get on one of those.”

“Taking a drink to get your courage up is one thing. Getting so drunk you can barely hang on is another.”

“How did he die?”

“After his ride, he jumped off the bull but fell, and the bull stepped on his chest, killing him instantly. It upset me, but not like it should have. We fought so much about his drinking. I even told him it would kill him one day.”

“You were young.”

“Twenty-nine. Johnnie was thirty.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not. It took me a long time to get past feeling guilty—”

“For what?”

“Not making him stop drinking.”

“That is not your fault. He was an alcoholic, and sometimes they don’t want to hear about not drinking. A good many alcoholics deny their addiction.”

“Yeah, Peyton and Dylan made me see that.”

“Wait. Was he Johnnie Buckley?”

“Yes.”

“I remember now. He was at the top of his game when he died.”

“Yes, he was.”

“I didn’t know he had a drinking problem.”

“He drank himself to oblivion most every night. I did all I could, but it was too hard. He thought he was invincible.”



“None of us are.” He stared at her. “So... back to the question. Is this our first and last date?”

She stared into those light gray eyes and hoped he didn't try to talk her out of her panties because she'd be ahead of him. She'd get them off before they left the restaurant. She smiled.

“I think we can try this again. If that's what you want.”

“Oh, I want, darlin'.”

The heat poured into her cheeks, and she watched a smile lift his sexy lips.

“I feel you will not be easy to deal with, Hank Barnett.”

“You wouldn't want me too easy, would you?” Hank picked up his drink and took a sip.

“Nope.” She frowned. “I'm not a slut.”

Hank choked on the drink he took.

“I didn't think you were,” he said when he stopped coughing. “Why would you say that?”

“Well, I'm thinking about how we met, and I don't want you thinking I talk to all... Santa's like that.”

Hank laughed, and she loved the sound.

“Nah, I know you're not a slut. A man knows.”

“If you say so. I'm wondering who else you spoke to like that.”

“Not one person. I knew I wanted to get to know you when I saw you.” He shrugged. “But if you tell me this is the last date, I'll accept it. I'm not a stalker.”

“I know. Like I said, we'll try again.”

Hank nodded and cut into his steak. Marlowe cut a piece of fish, put it in her mouth, and moaned at the flavor.

“This is so good.”

“I've never had anything bad here. Grant has a great place.”

“I loved his music. I’ve never met the man.” Marlowe sighed. She’d love to meet Grant Hunter but had never lucked out. She was such a fan.

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“That’s about to change,” Hank said as he nodded in the direction behind her.

Marlowe frowned, glanced over her shoulder, gasped, and looked back at Hank.

“Oh, my God! He’s here. I’m fangirling here.”

Hank grinned, shook his head, and slid from the booth.

“Grant. How are you?”

“Hank, I’m good. How are you?”

“Great. This is Marlowe Buckley. Marlowe, Grant Hunter.”

“Ms. Buckley, it’s nice to meet you,” Grant said as he put his hand out.

She placed her hand in his, and Hank watched her cheeks turn pink.

“Please, call me Marlowe. It’s nice to meet you too. I’m such a fan.”

Grant grinned. “Glad to hear it. I’m sorry to run off, but I’m picking up dinner for me and Jessa. You two enjoy your meals. They’re on me. Goodnight.”

“Thanks, Grant. Goodnight.” Hank slid back into the booth and looked at Marlowe to see her staring after Grant. He cleared his throat, and she looked at him.

“He is so gorgeous.”

“He’s a cowboy. He runs a ranch,” Hank said.

“So? That is one cowboy I’d change my mind for.” Marlowe laughed.

“He’s married,” Hank snapped, then grinned when she laughed harder.

“I know he is. Have you met his wife?”

“Yeah, Jessa is great. I went to their wedding.”

“He seems so... normal.” She chuckled. “Does that make sense?”

“Yes, but that’s because he is.”

Once they finished eating, they left the restaurant and walked to the truck. Hank loved holding her hand. He just needed to ensure he didn’t do something to piss her off because he wanted to see her again.

As he drove her to her apartment, he knew he would do his damndest to talk her into bed. He had never felt such a connection to a woman so fast.

After he parked, he exited the truck, walked around, and opened the door for her. She smiled as she placed her hand in his and stepped out. He grinned as he followed her up the steps.

She inserted the key on the stoop and opened the door but turned to look at him, and his heart dropped to his stomach. Would he, at least, get a goodnight kiss?

“I had a great time. Dinner was excellent, and you were a perfect date.”

“A perfect date? With a... *cowboy*?”

Marlowe laughed, and he couldn’t help but grin.

“Yes, with a cowboy.”

“It doesn’t have to end,” he murmured as he touched her hair.

“Hank...”

“You could sit on my lap,” he said, trying not to laugh.

Marlowe burst out laughing and then stared at him.

“I could, and we can talk about the first thing that comes up,” she said, then snorted out a laugh when Hank chuckled.

“An oldie, but a goodie.”

“Yes.”

He stared into her blue eyes and was sure he was drowning. He couldn't catch his breath, but he didn't care. He wanted to be with her in any way he could.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked.

“Please.”

Hank took a deep breath, cupped her face in his hands, and lowered his lips to hers. He swore lightning struck him the minute they touched. He lifted his lips from hers and gazed into her eyes. She looked as confused as he felt.

“Hank?”

“Again?”

“Yes, please.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into him.

Hank slipped his arms around her waist, tugged her close, then lowered his lips to hers and kissed her deeply. When she moaned, he couldn't help but groan. Raising his lips, he leaned his forehead against hers.

“Can I come in?”

“I don't—”

“Marlowe, I won't do anything you don't want me to. I swear to you.”

She glanced at her watch.

“It is early. Okay, but don't think it means anything.”

“Yes, ma'am. I would love a cup of coffee, though.”

“All right. Come in.” She entered the apartment with him behind her.

Once inside, they removed their coats, and Hank removed his hat and carried it to the sofa.

“Have a seat. I want to get out of these clothes and wear something more comfortable. I won't be long.”

“You could leave the boots on,” he said and grinned when she laughed. He sat on the sofa, glanced around, and waited.

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Marlowe closed the bedroom door and leaned against it. She shouldn't have let him inside the apartment. She wasn't sure she had enough strength to tell him no.

“He's going to break your heart,” she whispered.

Pushing away from the door, she stripped off her dress and boots, then pulled on a T-shirt, lounge pants, and thick socks.

She took a deep breath, opened the door, and walked to the living room to see Hank with his head back and his hat covering his face.

“Are you tired?” she asked as she sat in the recliner.

Hank removed his hat, raised his head, and frowned.

“Why are you way over there?” He placed his hat on the arm of the sofa.

Marlowe grinned. “Way over here? It's not even five feet.”

“Too far, darlin'. Come sit beside me.” He patted the sofa cushion.

She tilted her head. “Are you Hank now or Santa?”

When he grinned, she smiled. He had a gorgeous grin. His teeth were white and perfect. Sure, some things seemed perfect, but it all came down to him being a cowboy.

“I can be whichever one you prefer right now.”

She stood. “I'll get your coffee.”

When she walked past the sofa, he took her hand, making her stop and look at him.

“It's all right. I don't need it. Come here and sit with me. I want to know all about you.”

With a sigh, she sat beside him and folded her hands in her lap.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Have you lived in Clifton all your life? Where is your family... siblings, things like that?”

“Okay. Yes, I’ve lived here all my life. My family is also here, but no siblings. Just my parents and grandparents. What about you?”

“Well, you know about my sister. She’s my only sibling and a pain in the ass.”

Marlowe laughed. “But you love her, don’t you?”

“I do. Tell me about your husband.”

“Johnnie was a fantastic bull rider. If you know anything about him, you know that.”

“Yeah, I’d seen him a few times. He was one of the best.”

“He got badly injured. A bull stepped on his arm and broke it in two places, so he was given pain meds. Strong ones, and he got addicted to them. I gave him an ultimatum, he either went to rehab, or I was divorcing him. He went and was fine. At least, I thought he was, but he hid it well. Once he was released, he found something else for the pain. Alcohol.”

“Damn.”

“It was awful. He was so different from the man I married, and as much as I tried to help him, he didn’t seem to want it. All he wanted was alcohol to numb the pain. He’d get fall down drunk. He had drawn the meanest bull on the circuit on his last ride. He was so out of it he didn’t have a care in the world. His ride was going well, but the bull bucked him off, and when Johnnie hit the dirt, the bull came down on his chest. Crushing it. He died instantly.” She shook her head. “I was sad that he died, but my love for him left long ago.”

Hank touched her hair. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s been three years.”

“So, who were the other cowboys?”

“Only two others. One liked other women too much, and the other just left. No goodbye, see you later, go to hell... nothing. I thought I was in love. Those two were before I met Johnnie, and none since.”

“We’re not all bad, Marlowe.”

“Maybe not, but—”

“What about men you’ve dated since he’s been gone?”

“I’ve dated a few. Nothing to write home about.”

“No cowboys, though.”

“Nope.”

“So, what happened to them?”

“I wasn’t interested in going further with either of them.”

“Maybe because they *weren’t* cowboys.”

“Yeah, right. Peyton and Dylan are the same. We have sworn off cowboys.”

“And yet, here I am.”

Marlowe grinned. “Yes, here you are. I’m not sure about seeing you, Hank. I know I’m sending mixed signals, but I’m also petrified of being hurt again.”

“Sweetheart, there are more cowboys in this town and the other two that would make it a little difficult to ignore. You want fancy, move to a big city.”

She gazed into his eyes, and her heart hit her stomach. God! Could she go through it again? What if Hank was a good man? What if he wasn’t? Did she deserve to take another chance? The thought of this man hurting her scared her more than anything else.

“We’ll see. What about you? Have you been married?”

“No. I came close, but it didn’t happen.”

“Why not?”

“She decided she didn’t want to marry me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure that hurt.”

“It did. So much so that I’m a little mistrustful about relationships too.” He took her hand. “But I’d like to see if this amounts to anything. I’ll be honest here, Marlowe. I have never been so attracted to a woman so fast. I knew I wanted to get to know you when I first saw you.”

“I do like you, Hank, but I don’t want another broken heart.”

“I don’t either. I’m surprised I’m willing to see you. I don’t date.”

“Oh, is that right? So, you thought you’d take me out for a nice dinner, and I’d hop into bed with you, is that it?”

He grinned. “Well, hell yeah.”

Marlowe widened her eyes, then she burst out laughing.

“At least you’re honest about it.”

Hank stood. “Yeah, but you know what? I will leave to show you I’m serious about getting to know you.”

“You’re going to leave? Without trying to convince me to go to bed with you?”

“Yes, I’m leaving without trying to get you into bed, but don’t expect that the next time. You’re beautiful, sexy, sweet, sexy—”

“You already said that.” She smiled as she stood.

“It bears repeating.” He cupped her cheeks in his hands, lowered his head, pressed his lips to hers, and slowly raised them. “Goodnight, Marlowe. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’d like to see you again, but you give it some thought. If you’re not interested, I’ll accept it.”

“I am interested, Hank, and that scares me.”

“We’ll take it slow.” He picked up his hat, perched it on his head, walked to the hall tree, removed his coat, and shrugged it on. He looked at her, touched the brim of his hat, and opened the door.

“Lock this behind me. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Sweet dreams, Marlowe. I hope they’re of me.” He walked out,



closing the door.

Marlowe stared at the door, tempted to open it and call him back. She wanted to think it through before deciding.

She liked him. There was no escaping that, but she'd been hurt so much in the past. This was why she was so afraid of knowing Hank. He was a wonderful man and seemed genuine, but so had the others.

With a heavy sigh, she locked the door and went to her bedroom to get some sleep. She was off tomorrow but had things to do, so she wanted to get up early. She knew she had a restless night ahead of her.

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Hank climbed into his truck and drove home. He hoped she would see him again, but he knew his chances were slim. What the hell was wrong with cowboys?

"It's not like we're all bad," he muttered.

He sighed as he drove through town. It was still early, but he'd go home, get some sleep, and try to get Marlowe Buckley out of his head.

The following morning, his ass was dragging. He got no sleep. He tossed and turned, just thinking about Marlowe and if she'd see him again.

He made his way to the barn with a hot cup of coffee in his hand and entered. He walked along the aisle, looking into each stall to see that some were already cleaned and fresh straw was down.

When he walked out the other end, he took a deep breath of the frigid air, which seeped into his lungs, then blew it out, forming a cloud.

"Hank?"

He turned to see one of his ranch hands, Carl, walking toward him.

“Good morning, Carl.”

“Morning. We moved the horses to the west pasture, and Gary’s cleaning the saddles. Do you have feed coming from Ash?”

“No, is it low?”

“Getting there. You know they eat more in the winter.”

“Yeah. I’ll call him. Is everything else all right?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be in the feed barn.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get with you once I call Ash.” Hank sipped his coffee and then walked back to the house. He needed to call Ash before he got busy and forgot.

He entered the house and went to his office. He sat behind his desk and called Ash.

“Hello?”

“Cassie? It’s Hank. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Hank. You?”

“Same. Is Ash around?”

“Yes, let me get him. It was nice talking to you.”

“You too.” He genuinely liked Cassie, Ash’s wife. She was a sweetheart.

“Hank? What’s up?” Ash asked when he got on the line.

“I could use some feed. I’m not out, but if the weather worsens and you can’t get a truck here, I’m screwed.”

Ash chuckled. “Can’t have that, can we? I’ll get a truck there today.”

“I appreciate it, Ash. You and Cassie have a wonderful Christmas.”

“We plan to. You do the same.”

“Don’t spoil her so much.” Hank grinned.

“Too late.”

“Yeah, I figured. Talk soon.” Hank disconnected and shook his head. He’d love to have a woman to spoil. Marlowe popped into his head. He knew he would be so disappointed if she didn’t want to see him again.

His day moved quickly, and soon, he was on his way to the department store for the kids. Only two more weeks and this would be over. He had fun, though. It surprised him. He enjoyed it so much. He’d always liked kids and wouldn’t mind having a few of his own, but he wasn’t sure he wanted marriage anymore.

Sylvia ripped his heart out, and that was hard to get past. It had been five years ago, but that pain was still fresh in his heart.

As he sat on the chair talking with children, he wondered what Marlowe was doing and got his answer when he saw her walking through the store, and he grinned. Maybe she wanted to see him, too.

Hank listened to the little boy telling him what he wanted and smiled at the boy’s mother when she rolled her eyes.

“I think he just mentioned everything in the store,” she said.

“Along with every other store.” Hank grinned as he set the little boy on his feet. “Now, you be good. Listen to your mama, and Santa will do his best to get you everything you want.”

“Okay, Santa. Bye,” the little boy said, waving as his mother took his hand and led him away.

Hank glanced around for Marlowe but didn’t see her. Had she left? Without talking to him? He clenched his jaw and mentally swore.

“Who are you mad at?” Kat asked him.

“No one,” he snapped, then glared at her when she laughed.

“Oh. I see now.” Kat smiled.

“What is it, you see?”

“Her.” Kat inclined her head to where Marlowe stood by a clothing rack.

“We went out last night.”

“Really? Did you have a good time?”

“Yeah, but she’s not interested in me since I’m a cowboy.”

“Then why go out with you?”

“Well, I kind of talked her into it.”

“Are you going to ask her out again?”

“I’m giving her time. I like her.”

“Don’t do to Marlowe what you’ve done to other women,” Kat said.

“What’s that?”

“Break her heart. Ever since Sylvia—”

“Why do you keep bringing that up? It’s been years.”

“Because she is the one who broke you. She is the one who made you so afraid of commitment.”

Hank had no idea what he could say. Kat was right, but it was different with Marlowe. *Was it?* He shook his head. He just didn’t know. He wouldn’t mind finding out, but he didn’t want to endure that pain again.

“Hi.”

He looked to see Marlowe standing by the steps.

“Hey. Are you going to tell Santa what you want this time?” He grinned when she smiled and moved up a step.

“I might.”

“Do you want to sit on my lap?”

Marlowe moved up the steps, stopped beside his chair, and smiled.

“I would love to, but I think we should know each other better, don’t you?”

“I do. Will you go out with me again?”

“Yes. My friends think I’m nuts, but I like you, Hank.”

“And I like you. How about we go to Dewey’s tonight?”

“That sounds like fun. You can pick me up at eight.”

“Eight? How about a burger at the diner before that?”

“I’m meeting Peyton and Dylan for dinner. Maybe another time, but I’ll be ready at eight... cowboy.”

He grinned at her hesitation, but she winked at him and walked off. He couldn’t take his eyes off her and could not wait to see her tonight.

## Chapter Three

“Hank’s taking me to Dewey’s tonight,” Marlowe said while they sat in the diner having dinner.

“You’re going out with him again?” Peyton shook her head.

“I am. I like him.”

“He’s a cowboy, Marlowe. He’ll break your heart,” Peyton said.

“Let her do what she wants, Peyton. It’s her choice,” Dylan said as she dug into her salad.

“I know it is, but who picks up the pieces when he breaks her heart? We do.”

Marlowe shook her head. Out of the three of them, Peyton was way more determined to stay away from cowboys. She’d dated more than either her or Dylan had, and Marlowe was sure no cowboy would ever rope her again.

It was sad because Peyton was such a great person and Marlowe knew it was hard finding a good man, but Peyton would never think of a cowboy as a good man. Not after having her heart broken too many times.

“It’s what we will always do for each other. We’re not going to get through life without being hurt again. It might not be from a heartbreak, but there are all sorts of ways to get hurt. Physically and mentally.” Dylan smiled at Peyton.

Peyton sighed. “I know.” She looked at Marlowe. “I’m sorry. It is your choice, and I will be here for you no matter what. If he hurts you, I will take great delight in removing his balls... slowly.”

Marlowe laughed. “I’ll let him know.”

“Why isn’t he married? He’s very handsome.”

“When did you meet him?” Dylan asked Peyton.

“I didn’t. I happened to be going into the shop when he was coming out.”

“So, even though he’s a cowboy, you think he’s very handsome.” Dylan tilted her head.

“I didn’t say cowboys were ugly for God’s sake, Dylan. I said they were heartbreakers.”

“That’s true, Dylan. She knows there are some gorgeous, sexy, cowboys around here but she believes they’re all heartbreakers.” Marlowe smiled.

“They are,” Peyton hissed.

“Not true, and right there is a perfect example. Trick Dillon is a one-woman man. He loved his first wife, Kaylee, very much, and after she died, he found Rayna, and he won’t hurt her.” Marlowe sat back and folded her arms as she watched Trick and Rayna sit at the counter with their little girl.

“Okay. Okay. There are a few who are good men.” Peyton looked at Trick. “He is just so gorgeous.”

“One of many in this town and the other two. There are bad men in every way of life, but I think, well, I hope, the good outweigh the bad and if it’s a cowboy, so be it.”

“I cannot believe you, Marlowe. You had a horrible marriage.” Peyton stared at her. “We all did, and let’s not mention the cowboys before or after them.”

Marlowe huffed. “I know. I do, Peyton, but I really like Hank. If he starts pulling away or isn’t a good man, I will drop him like a hot potato.”

“Please do it before you fall for him, because I have a feeling that man would be easy to fall for.” Peyton dug into her salad.

“Back to your question. He said he came close once to getting married, but we didn’t talk about it. I do want to know what happened though.”

“Yeah, you need to talk about your pasts if you want any type of future,” Dylan said.

“I know. I can’t say I’m not scared. I am, but I like him. He makes me laugh.” Marlowe grinned.

“That is a wonderful quality in a man. I love a man who can make me laugh.” Peyton said. “I just haven’t had much to laugh about lately. I hate being alone, but I dread the thought of being hurt again.”

“You’ll never be alone. You have us.” Marlowe put her hand on Peyton’s.

“But no love life. I want to find someone. Just not a damn cowboy.”

“Now, what’s wrong with a cowboy?” Connie asked as she refilled their iced tea.

“Connie, we three don’t want anything to do with them. Well, two of us, anyway.” Peyton scowled at Marlowe, making her laugh.

“What cowboy got to you, Marlowe?” Connie smiled.

“Hank Barnett. I went out with him last night, and we’re going out again tonight. He’d better not break my heart.”

“Hank is a wonderful man. He’s sweet, kind, funny, and, not to mention, very good-looking. You could do a lot worse.”

“I have, Connie. It’s why I’m cautious.”

“Well, my advice is to see where it goes. You won’t get through the rest of your life without a broken heart here and there. Some are worth it. Some aren’t. Take a chance.” Connie smiled and walked off.

“Oh, I plan on taking a chance. Just not with another cowboy,” Peyton muttered.

“What makes you think another man wouldn’t do the same thing?” Dylan asked her.

Peyton huffed. “I don’t know. I’m crazy, I know, but it’s always been cowboys. Maybe another type of man would be different.”

Marlowe laughed. “Seriously? You think it’s only cowboys who break hearts?”



“Nothing but cowboys broke mine.” Peyton stared at her. “And yours. And Dylan’s.”

“Touché.” Marlowe raised her glass.

She hoped Hank didn’t hurt her because she wasn’t sure how much more heartache she could endure. He scared her. She liked him a lot already, and if she kept seeing him and fell for him, what then? What if he was only in it for sex? That was all some men cared about. She knew there were women like that, too, and maybe they all needed to get together so the rest could find someone to settle down with.

Marlowe would love to have kids. Every time she was around Zoey, she wanted to have a family of her own. Did Hank want kids? He seemed to love them. She smiled as she thought about him playing Santa. What man who didn’t like kids would do that?

“Let’s get out of here. I need to pick up some things,” Dylan said as she pushed her seat back and stood. Marlowe and Peyton did the same.

“Did he kiss you?” Dylan asked.

“Yes.” Marlowe grinned.

“And?”

“Toe-curling, girls, toe-curling,” Marlowe said, making them laugh.

The women paid their bill, walked outside, and went shopping. Marlowe looked forward to seeing Hank tonight and hoped the date went as well as last night’s.

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Hank parked by the steps, picked up the bouquet of yellow roses and climbed the stairs. He took a deep breath at the door, blew it out, and knocked. She opened the door, and he lost all coherent thought as he gazed at her.

“Are you going to keep staring at me?”

“I could.” He held the roses out. “For you. I hope you like roses.”

“I love them. Thank you. Please, come inside. It’s so cold.”

He removed his hat and stepped into the apartment.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“I’m wearing jeans and a sweater.”

“So? Who says you can’t look beautiful in jeans and a sweater?”

“Well, thank you. You look very handsome.”

Hank grinned. “I’m wearing jeans and a T-shirt.”

“So? Who says you can’t look handsome in jeans and a T-shirt?” She laughed.

“Why, thank you, ma’am. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, just let me put these in water.”

Hank nodded and watched her move around the small kitchen, looking for a vase. When she found one, she held it up and smiled. Then she filled it with water, stuck the roses in it, and looked at him.

He walked to her, cupped her cheek, and lowered his lips to hers.

“I don’t think I can kiss you enough,” he murmured when he raised his lips.

“I hope not.” She walked to the hall tree and removed her coat, but Hank took it from her and held it for her. She slid her arms into it and turned to look at him.

“You have manners, Hank. I like that.”

“I know you don’t like cowboys, but most of us were raised right.”

“On some things, maybe.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to argue with you. I’ll just have to prove you wrong.”

Marlowe smiled. “I look forward to that.”

“Oh, me too. You have no idea.”

They walked out onto the stoop, and Marlowe locked the door. Hank took her hand to help her down the steps.

“Thanks for the support,” she said.

“You’re supporting me, too. If I go, you go.”

“Right back at you.”

He chuckled as he led her to the passenger side, opened the door, and helped her while she slid onto the seat. He closed the door, strode around to the other side, and climbed inside.

Glancing at her, he smiled, started the truck, and drove them to Dewey’s bar. When they arrived, he couldn’t find a place to park, so he rode around the back and parked.

“Typical Saturday night at Dewey’s.”

“Do you come here a lot?” Marlowe asked him.

“Maybe a few times a month. You?”

“No. Peyton, Dylan, and I avoid this place.”

“Why? Don’t you like good music and fun?”

“It’s a cowboy bar, Hank. We don’t do cowboys.”

“You don’t... *do* cowboys?”

“You know what I mean. A lone woman in this bar gets hit on constantly. In fact, some that aren’t alone do. Cowboys don’t care who they rope into bed.”

“Ouch. Damn, Marlowe. Why are we even doing this?”

She heaved a sigh and reached for his hand.

“I’m sorry. You must be so confused.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Hank, I like you, and if I can get over the fact that you’re a cowboy, maybe this could work.”

“I don’t want you to get over the fact that I’m a cowboy. It’s what I am. You can’t ignore it.”

She stared at him for a few seconds, then nodded.

“You’re right. I can’t ignore it. We’ll see how it goes if that’s what you want.”

“What do *you* want?”

When she nibbled on her lip, he almost groaned because he’d been thinking about doing that since he first saw her. He sighed when she nodded again.

“I want to see where it goes.”

“Good. So do I.”

“Oh, and Peyton said if you hurt me, she’ll remove your balls... slowly.”

Hank gave a mock shudder.

“Damn.” He grinned when Marlowe laughed. “Come on, let’s go inside and have a good time.”

“Do you dance?”

“Slow.”

“That’ll work.”

As the evening wore on, Hank realized he was having a great time. They danced several times, and he enjoyed watching her in the line dances. She was a fun date; he knew he wanted to see her again. If he didn’t mess up tonight, for God knows what reason, he’d ask her out again.

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Later, as Hank drove her home, Marlowe wondered if she should let him come inside. He parked beside the steps and stepped from the truck. She watched him through the windshield as he strolled around the front. Then he opened her door, put his hand out to her, and held it while she stepped out.

Marlowe stared into his eyes and saw them linger on her lips. Had a man ever looked at her like this before? Not that she could remember. He slowly lowered his head and hovered his lips above hers.

“Can I come in for a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.” She stepped back, walked up the stairs, and unlocked the door. She pushed it open and entered the apartment with Hank behind her.

They removed their coats and hung them up, then Hank took his hat off and set it on the arm of the sofa.

“Have a seat. I’ll get the coffee.” She raised an eyebrow. “You want coffee this time, right?”

Hank blew out a laugh. “Yes, please. It’s cold out there.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back. Make yourself comfortable. The TV remote is on the end table.”

He nodded, and she watched as he sat on the sofa, picked up the remote, aimed it at the TV, and turned it on.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Marlowe asked from the kitchen.

“It’s a little late for that. I’ll go after I drink my coffee. I have to get up early.”

“On Sunday?”

“I run a ranch. I work every day.”

“True.”

The coffee machine sputtered. Signaling, it was done. She removed the mug and set it on the counter.

“It’s ready. Do you need cream and sugar?”

“Black is fine.”

“Ugh. How anyone drinks it black is beyond me.”

“Try it.”

“I have. No way. It’s too bitter. I need cream and sugar. Lots of cream and sugar.”

“Oh, you’re one of those.”

“One of what?” She handed him the cup.

“You like a little coffee in your cream and sugar.”

She widened her eyes and then laughed. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

Hank chuckled, lifted the mug to his lips, and sipped the hot brew.

“Tell me about coming close to being married.” Marlowe stared at him.

He sighed, set his cup on the coffee table, and looked at her.

“Sylvia and I were college sweethearts. We talked about getting married all the time. I was ready once we graduated, but we waited until we got established a little better. Money-wise, job-wise, you know, so we could be prepared. After getting to that point, we knew it was time. She made elaborate plans, and I was all for it. I wanted everyone to know I was marrying the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. It took her two years to plan it.”

“What happened?”

Hank’s jaw clenched, and she knew it was still painful.

“She left me at the altar.”

Marlowe gasped. “What? After all the planning? She just left you?”

“Yes. I was humiliated, but most of all, I was completely devastated. Kat says Sylvia is why I’m leery of commitment. She’s probably right. Getting stood up is one thing. Getting stood up at your wedding is another.”

“Did you hear from her?”

“Yeah, she called me the next day and apologized, but said she couldn’t go through with it. I was pissed. I chewed her out and hung up on her. That was five years ago.”

“And no one since?”

“No serious relationships.”

“You said you don’t date. What is this, then?”

“You changed my mind. Now, I need to change yours.” He leaned close and kissed her lips.

“I think that will be harder to do,” Marlowe whispered when he raised his lips.

He stared into her eyes.

“I hope not, darlin’. I want to get to know you, but if you don’t want the same thing, I’ll go, and you’ll never hear from me again.”

She nibbled on her lip as she stared into his eyes.

“I like you—”

“And I like you, but, honestly, Marlowe, any man can hurt you. You could hurt me, but I’m willing to take a chance again. You have to want this, too, though. I’m not going to stay where I’m not welcome.”

“It’s always a damn cowboy.”

His lips rose in a grin. “A damn cowboy. We’re an awful bunch.”

Marlowe smiled. “Some of you. How’s that? See? I’m coming around.”

“Glad to hear it.” He stood. “I’d better go.”

“So soon? You haven’t finished your coffee.”

“Marlowe, if I stay, it’s not for the coffee. I want you, but I will not push you.”

She stood, touched his chest, and gazed into his handsome face.

“What if I push you?”

Hank hissed in a breath. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I want you to stay tonight.”

“I want to—”

“Then what’s the problem?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Third date?”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma’am. Definitely.”

Marlowe grinned. “So, where will we go this time?”

“How about the diner?”

“It’s a date.”

“I’ll pick you up Friday around six. Will that work?” He picked up his hat.

“Sounds perfect.”

“Good. Walk me to the door.” He put his hand out for her.

“It’s right there,” she said, grinning as she pointed at it.

“Woman, walk me to the door,” he growled, making her laugh. He grinned, pulled her to her feet, and went to the hall tree. He removed his coat and pulled it on. Then he took her hand again and pulled her close. “I’ll need a kiss to keep me warm on the ride home.”

“I think I can help with that.” She slid her arms around his neck and pulled his head down. “Kiss me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he whispered before he settled his lips on hers.

Marlowe moaned as he deepened the kiss. Just as she got into it, he lifted his lips and smiled.

“I’ll call you or send a text. You could stop in and see me at the store. You never told Santa what you wanted.”

“I’m looking at what I want, but Santa will be a gentleman and leave me for the night.”

Hank blew out a laugh. “It’s killing me, trust me.”

“All right, then. I’ll see you Friday. Maybe we can go to Dewey’s again after dinner.”

“I’d like that. I’d better go.” He opened the door, kissed her lips, and walked out.

Marlowe watched him go down the steps and get into his truck. He started it, waved, and drove off. She closed the door,



locked it, and leaned back against it.

“What are you doing?” she asked herself.

Shaking her head, she knew she didn't have an answer. It was a damned if you do, damned if you don't, kind of thing. She wanted to be with him. She liked him, but she was scared.

She knew it wasn't fair to think only cowboys would break her heart, but it seemed like that was the only man who broke hers. She'd dated several men, other than cowboys, since, but she had been the one to break it off.

Maybe she wasn't meant to be with anyone. She shook her head. That would never do. She wanted a man in her life. She wanted that all-consuming love that some of her friends had... with cowboys. Why couldn't she find it? Was it possible it was Hank? He was cautious, too, and she could certainly understand why.

Her heart ached for him. It must have been so devastating to be standing at the altar, waiting, and his bride didn't show up. Marlowe couldn't imagine the hurt and embarrassment he felt. No wonder he was skittish.

She yawned and headed for bed. She'd see where this was going with Hank and if he hurt her, she'd help Peyton remove his balls... slowly and painfully.

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Hank drove to his parents' house Sunday for lunch, after he finished in the barns and checking the fence. He had ranch hands, but he let them off on the weekends in the winter since there wasn't much to do, but once spring rolled around, they worked every day, only rotating days off, so the seed could be planted.

It took time to cultivate the land and plant. He loved doing it and was happy Ash took a chance with him. Being a part of Beckett Feed was something to be proud of. Ash had several ranches growing for him, and he had saved a lot of farms and

ranches by doing so. The economy was tough, and some ranchers and farmers lost their homes. A home that had been in their families for generations.

Hank hated seeing it happen to anyone, but he knew a few of his friends had come close until Ash stepped in and worked with them.

Boone Evans came to mind. Hank watched Boone struggle with his farm after his father passed away and he came close to losing it, but Preston Mitchell, a good friend of Hank's and Boone's, suggested Boone talk to Ash. He did, and never looked back. Because of Ash, Boone kept his farm, and grew barley for Ash.

Hank grinned as he thought of Cord Maddox growing flaxseed and sunflowers for Ash. His brother, Reece, teased him constantly about growing flowers. Cord didn't care. He loved working with Ash, just as Hank did.

Hank drove up to the house, parked, and went inside. He sighed at the warmth as he removed his hat and coat then hung them up.

"Mom? Dad?" he called out then headed for the living room.

He grinned when he saw his dad asleep in the recliner.

"Hank." Darlene Barnett entered the room and hugged him.

"Hi, Mom. Something smells good."

"Fried chicken." She smiled at him.

"My favorite. How long has he been asleep?"

"I'm not asleep," his father said.

"You were dead to the world, Matthew Henry," his mother said.

"Bull," Matthew said.

Hank and his mother laughed, then he sat on the sofa.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hank. How are things on the ranch?"

“Good. Not much going on right now, but soon.” He looked at the Christmas tree in front of the picture window.

“Are you ready for Christmas?”

Hank glanced at his mother, then back at the tree.

“I’m getting there. It looks like you’ve shopped enough for all of us.”

“She goes all out. Every year, it gets worse.”

“Please. Like you don’t love spoiling your grandchildren.”

Hank’s father winked and grinned at his wife then pushed the footrest down, stood, and hugged him.

“Let’s eat. I’ve worked up an appetite,” Matthew said, slapping Hank on the back.

“How do you work up an appetite by sleeping?”

Mathew tapped his temple. “All of the things going on in here.”

Hank laughed when his mother shook her head.

“Well, we’d better eat then. God knows, you can’t have too many things going on in there.” Darlene walked to the kitchen.

Hank looked at his dad to see him staring in her direction then he looked at Hank and grinned.

“She loves me.”

Hank chuckled. “Damn good thing. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

Hank laughed as they sat at the table, listening to his mother and father tease each other. He wanted this life. His parents and sister had it. Why couldn’t he?

“Do you have your tree up yet?” his mother asked.

“No. I might go today and get it. I know it’s going to be busy everywhere.”

“Christmas is less than two weeks away. You’d better get one, or you’ll miss out.”

“I’ll go to Nick’s farm. I won’t miss out by going there.”

“No, you won’t. We got ours there.” His mother smiled.

“It’s a beautiful tree, but I don’t think Nick sells a bad tree.”

“He seems so happy now.”

“He is, Mom. Paige and his kids are everything to him.”

“You need that in your life, Hank. You’re not getting any younger.”

Hank huffed. “I know, Mom. I’m...” He shook his head.

“Scared? Can’t blame you there, son,” his father said.

“She tore me apart, Dad.”

“It’s been a long time, Hank. Surely, you’re over her.”

“I am, Mom. I think she killed any love I had for her that day.”

“So, are you seeing anyone?”

He grinned and told them about Marlowe.

“She doesn’t like cowboys, though?” His dad raised an eyebrow.

“No, sir. But I think I’m changing her mind.”

“She needs to change yours about relationships.”

“Yes, ma’am, and I believe she is. I like her. A lot, but we’ll see.”

After lunch, he helped his mother clean up, watched a little TV with his father, and then headed to Richards’ tree farm. It was frigid out, but he had to do this or not get a tree, and that just couldn’t happen. This was his favorite time of the year. He grinned as he drove along the two-lane blacktop. He hoped to spend Christmas with Marlowe and couldn’t wait until Friday.

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Marlowe's teeth chattered as she followed Peyton, Dylan, and Zoey through the rows of trees. She still hadn't found one she liked. Not because no good ones were left, but because all the trees were beautiful. Nick Richards took pride in his tree farm, and it showed.

She stopped, tugged her beanie lower, and put her mitten-covered hands in her pockets. She saw she had stopped in front of a tall Douglas Fir. It was so pretty and full.

"Hey, Marlowe."

"Nick! How are you?" she asked as she hugged him. "Where's Paige and those adorable kids of yours?"

"Paige is helping in the tent, and my mom has the kids today. She takes them on weekends we're open."

Marlowe glanced around. "You have a goldmine here, Nick."

"I wouldn't care if I didn't make a dime. I love this."

"Unless you have to cut a tree," Wilder, Nick's brother, said as he passed them and winked at Marlowe.

"No one asked you," Nick snapped, making Marlowe and Wilder laugh.

"You don't like to cut them?" Marlowe tilted her head.

"I—"

"As long as he doesn't cut himself, he's fine. The sight of blood makes him pass out." Wilder grinned.

Marlowe sputtered out a laugh. "You have a tree farm where trees have to be cut, and you can't stand the sight of blood?"

"Thanks a hell of a lot, Wilder." Nick looked at Marlowe. "I have workers cut the trees. I don't pass out, as Wilder says. I just get a little queasy."

Marlowe bit her lip to keep from laughing. A big man like Nick and the sight of blood made him queasy. She saw Nick frown at her.

“I’m not laughing,” she said, but turned her back to him.

“Yeah, right,” Nick muttered, then grinned when she looked at him.

“I’d better find Peyton and Dylan, but I want this one, Nick.” She pointed at the tree.

“All right. Jose will cut it for you and haul it back to be wrapped. I saw Peyton in the next row, but no clue on Dylan.”

“She has Zoey with her, so I’m sure she’s looking at every tree you have.”

Nick chuckled. “No doubt. Our kids are the same way. I need to head back to the tent. You enjoy the rest of the day and have a Merry Christmas.”

“You too, Nick. Tell Paige the same and kiss those kids for me.”

“Will do.” Nick touched the brim of his hat and walked off.

Even though he ran a tree farm, Nick Richards was a cowboy who loved his wife and kids. He was another example that not all cowboys were heartbreakers.

Walking along a row, she spotted Peyton talking with a tall man in a cowboy hat. Seriously? The woman trusted cowboys as far as she could throw them, but she was talking to him as if she knew him. Maybe Peyton did, but she didn’t.

“Hey,” she said when she reached them and looked at the man. She clenched her jaw to keep it from dropping open. His nose had been broken at some point, and there was a long scar on his right cheek, but he was still very good-looking. He stood tall, probably the same height as Hank.

“Marlowe! Did you find a tree?” Peyton asked her.

“I did. It’s on its way down to get wrapped.” Marlowe glanced at the man and back at Peyton.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Marlowe, this is Creed McBride. Creed, Marlowe Buckley.”

“Ms. Buckley, it’s nice to meet you,” he said in a deep voice.

“Please, call me Marlowe. It’s nice to meet you, too.” She shook his hand while glancing at Peyton, who didn’t notice.

“I’d better get going. I have to find a tree and get some shopping done. You ladies have a lovely day, and try to stay warm.” Creed touched the brim of his hat, nodded, and walked off.

Marlowe narrowed her eyes at Peyton.

“What?”

“*He’s* a cowboy.” Marlowe glanced over her shoulder to watch him stroll off.

“It’s not like that. He’s a friend. I’ve known him a long time.”

“Well, someone else needs to grab onto that man. He’s sexy as hell.”

“Cowboy,” Peyton said with a shrug.

“I know, but I think we’re wrong about clumping them all together.”

“*What?* Are you serious?”

“I am. I like Hank so much, and I keep seeing women in love with their cowboys, and it makes me realize that there are probably more good than bad.”

“Then why do we only get the bad ones?”

“Maybe that will change.” Marlowe smiled.

Peyton shook her head. “Not for me, it won’t. I need to find a tree.”

Marlowe watched Peyton stalk off, and she knew no matter how much she tried to convince her friend otherwise, Peyton would never take another chance. It saddened Marlowe because Peyton was such a good person and deserved a good man. She snorted. Didn’t every woman? With a sigh, she followed Peyton.





## Chapter Four

Hank parked his truck as close to the tent as possible, but the place was packed, as usual. He could see flurries blowing by, and it even *looked* cold. Taking a deep breath, he stepped from the truck and immediately wanted to get back inside.

“Shit, it’s cold,” he muttered as he pulled his hat down lower and the collar of his coat up. He removed his gloves from the pockets, pulled them on, buttoned his jacket, and walked to the tent. He grinned when he saw Nick and Wilder Richards talking at the entrance to the tent.

“Hey, guys,” he said when he stopped beside them.

“Hank, how are you?” Nick asked him as he shook his hand, then Hank shook Wilder’s.

“I’m cold is how I am.”

Nick chuckled. “Best weather for finding a tree.”

“You’re busy today.”

“Every day now. The closer it gets to Christmas, the worse it will get.”

“Is Paige here today?”

“Yes, she’s inside the tent. Mom has the kids.” Nick grinned.

“I’ll say hello to her when I grab a big cup of hot chocolate. Damn, why is Christmas in the winter?”

“Come on, Hank. Santa’s sleigh needs snow.”

“Sure he does.” Hank chuckled. “I’ll see you later, Nick. I’m going to get my hot chocolate, find a tree, go home, build a fire in the hearth, then park my ass in front of it.”

Nick laughed. “Sounds good to me. I’ll do that later, but with my wife.”

“Yeah, fuck you, Richards,” Hank said as he walked off, but grinned when he heard Nick laugh.

Hank entered the tent, looked around, and smiled when he saw Paige, Nick’s wife, sitting at a table talking with customers. He made his way there.

“Hi, Paige.”

She looked at him, stood, and hugged him.

“Hank. It’s so good to see you.”

“You too. You get more beautiful every time I see you,” he said and grinned when a blush moved into her cheeks.

“Thank you. And you get more handsome.” She smiled.

“I’m sorry I missed the kids.”

“Rona has them today. She and Stephen love having them.”

“I’m sure they don’t spoil them either, right?”

“Oh, no. No more than Nick does.”

Hank laughed. “I completely understand.”

“I’d better get back to work. Did you find a tree?”

“I haven’t made it up there yet. I had to get something warm in me first. Today’s the coldest day of the year, and I’m out looking for a tree.”

“Tis the season.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you in a little while, Paige. I’m going to head up there once I find someone.”

“Nick’s here somewhere, along with Wilder.”

“I saw them both, but I can wait.”

“There’s Wilder. He can take you.”

“Great. Paige, you and your family have a wonderful Christmas. I know you and those kids will be spoiled.”

“Every year, Hank. Every year. Have a Merry Christmas.” Paige resumed her seat and waited on the customers.

Hank saw Wilder strolling toward him, pulling on gloves.

“Hank, do you need a ride up, or are you taking your truck?”

“A ride would be nice, Wilder.”

“I’m free. Come on, then.” Wilder grinned, and Hank followed him to a truck and climbed inside the cab. He sighed at the warmth.

“You must have just gotten back. It’s still warm.”

“I did, right before I saw you at the tent.”

“How’s Rory?”

“She’s wonderful. She’ll be here later.”

“Is the dairy farm doing well?”

“It is. In fact, Rory’s getting a few more Jersey cows in the spring. Business is good.”

“So, you don’t miss working with the MDOL?”

“I did, at first, but the farm keeps me busy. I don’t have time to think about it now. I love the farm.”

“And Rory.”

Wilder glanced at him and grinned.

“Very much so. You need to find a good woman, Hank.”

“I’m trying to. I met someone, but we just started going out. We’ll see.”

“Only way to find that special someone.”

Hank nodded. He wanted to find someone special, but would he be able to take that plunge and get married? After what Sylvia did to him, the thought of going through it again terrified him. He can still remember the fear and confusion he felt that day, standing there waiting for her, only to be told she wasn't coming. Then the pain hit, and he swore never again. No one deserved that.

If she didn't want to marry him, why go through all that to not show up? She told him she didn't want to marry him, and he didn't understand. They'd been together for years. They were in love. At least he was. Now, he wasn't so sure about her.

It took him a long time to get over the embarrassment of being stood up at the altar, but his friends rallied around him, and he knew he had to move on from it.

Sylvia never entered his mind as much as she used to. Before, hurt was all he felt when he thought of her at first, then came anger, and now, indifference. He just didn't care what she did, or did it with or to.

Wilder halted the truck, and they got out of it.

“Wilder? I appreciate you driving me.”

“It was my pleasure. Look around, and let one of us know if you find one, and it will be cut for you and loaded. There are workmen up here all day.”

“I hope they keep warm.” Hank chuckled.

“They have a tent with a stove in it. I'm sure you can find someone. They'll call one of us to get you if no one's around.”

“I appreciate it, Wilder. You and Rory have a Merry Christmas.”

“I appreciate it. You do the same, Hank.” Wilder saluted, climbed back into his pickup, and drove off.

Hank's breath formed a visible mist in front of him due to the cold air. Damn, it was cold. Walking along a row, he saw a toddler, no more than three or four, running through the trees.

She was laughing and enjoying herself in her pink snowsuit, covered with the cold, wintry precipitation, and he couldn't help but chuckle as he watched her. She squealed with laughter when a woman, he supposed, was her mother, caught her and lifted her up. He thought the little girl looked familiar. No doubt from the store where he played Santa.

“Hank?”

He turned to see Marlowe behind him.

“Hey. I didn't know you were coming today, or we could have come together.”

“I'm here with Peyton and Dylan. We get our trees together every year.”

“I see. Did you find one?”

“I did. It's a beautiful Douglas Fir. Neither Peyton nor Dylan has decided yet.”

“It's hard to choose.”

“Have you found one?”

“No. I just got here.”

“Can I keep you company?” Marlowe smiled at him.

“I would love it, darlin'.”

“Okay. Let me tell Dylan.”

Hank nodded as he watched her walk toward the little girl and the woman. Marlowe talked to her for a couple of minutes, and then both women turned to look at him. He saw the woman nod and walk off, and Marlowe walked back to him.

“She hasn't found one yet, so I have some time.”

“Isn't that the little girl you brought to see Santa?”

“Yes. I'm not officially Zoey's aunt, but I love her like I am.”

“She's adorable.”

“She is,” Marlowe muttered.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Maybe I’ll tell you about it one day.”

“Okay. Well, let’s get started. It’s too damn cold out.”

“It’s freezing.”

“I think my balls are a loss.” He grinned when she burst out laughing.

Hank took her hand, and they walked along the rows. He stopped in front of a twelve-foot Balsam Fir and nodded.

“This one.”

“You must have tall ceilings.”

“Twelve feet. Once this one is cut, it will be just right.”

“It’s so pretty.” She leaned close and inhaled. “Oh, my God. It smells fantastic.”

“Balsam’s have a great scent. Hey, do you want to help me decorate it?”

“I’d love to, but only if you help me with mine.”

“Agreed.”

She stretched out her hand for him to shake and grinned when he shook his head.

“No?”

“No, to sealing it with a handshake.” He cupped her face in his gloved hands, pressed his lips to hers, then raised them and stared into her eyes. “Now we have a deal.”

“All right. When do you want to do this?”

“You tell me. I can make time anytime.”

“I’m off Tuesday.”

“That will work. I’ll come to your place, and we’ll head to my place once we finish your tree.”

“Sounds good. Around ten, or is that too early?”

“Early? Darlin’, I’m up before the sun, so whatever time you get your ass out of bed is fine with me.”

Marlowe laughed. "I'm up by seven, so ten would be perfect."

"Sir?"

Hank saw a man walking toward him with a saw in his hand.

"Yes?"

"Did you find a tree? I can cut it for you if you're ready."

Hank looked at Marlowe.

"I'm going to get my tree and head home. I'll see you Tuesday."

"Can't wait."

Hank grinned. "Me neither. I'll call you later. Have a good day."

Marlowe smiled, nodded, and walked away. He wished it wasn't so cold because he'd love to spend the day with her. Take her horseback riding and then head home to warm her up. Soon. He hoped.

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"Did you find one yet?" Marlowe asked Dylan when she reached her.

"Yes. Finally. I need to find someone." Dylan glanced around and waved at a man with a saw.

"Aunt Marlowe?"

Marlowe kneeled. "Yes, Zoey?"

"I'm cold."

"Oh, honey, come here. I'll warm you up, then we'll find Aunt Peyton and go home. You can get some hot chocolate before we go."

"Yay!" Zoey jumped up and down, clapping her hands.

They watched the man cut the tree, push it over, and carry it to a truck. He told them he'd wait if they wanted him to. Marlowe took Zoey's hand, and they went to look for Peyton.

They found her two rows over, talking to another cowboy. Marlowe frowned.

"For someone who doesn't like cowboys, he's the second one I've seen her talking to," she muttered.

"What?" Dylan stopped and looked at her.

"I found her earlier talking to Creed McBride, and now this guy. She hates cowboys, but apparently has no trouble talking to them."

Dylan laughed. "We *do* talk to them, Marlowe."

"Yes. *We* do, but Peyton doesn't."

"She might not want one in her life again, but she's not rude to them. No doubt, he's asking her out, and she will politely turn him down."

As Marlowe watched, the cowboy touched the brim of his hat and walked off. Another cowboy bites the dust.

"Who was that?" Dylan asked Peyton when they reached her.

"I have no idea. He asked me out."

"And you said no." Marlowe grinned.

"And you know why. Why would I even consider it?"

"Your stubbornness knows no bounds." Dylan shook her head.

"Like you'd go out with another cowboy. She," Peyton pointed at Marlowe, "will get hurt. I can see it coming."

"It's my decision, Peyton," Marlowe snapped.

"Sure. I know that, and I'll be there for you when he breaks your heart. Because he will."

"I'm not listening to this. I'll be in the truck." Marlowe walked away from them before saying something she'd regret and never wanted to do that to either of her friends. Marlowe



liked Hank a lot, and she would see where it was going. If he hurt her, she'd get over it and never be with a cowboy again. Heartbreakers, every one of them.

She opened the door and slid onto the seat to wait for the others. She hoped she was doing the right thing by seeing Hank. Sighing, she supposed she'd find out.

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Hank drove to Marlowe's apartment Tuesday morning. He couldn't wait to see her again. After parking, he stepped from the truck, and climbed the stairs. He was glad to see they were clear since it snowed last night.

Reaching the stoop, he removed his gloves, stuck them in his coat pockets, and knocked.

It opened and she stood there smiling at him.

"Come in."

"Thanks. I think it's colder today than yesterday."

"Feels like it."

Hank stepped inside, removed his hat and coat then hung them on the hall tree. He saw the tree in the corner beside the front window.

"It looks good there."

"I love a tree shining from a window. It's a welcoming sight."

"It is for sure." He walked closer to it. "Let's get started. I'll string the lights."

"Thanks. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I would, Marlowe. I need warmed up." He looked at her and raised his eyebrow.

"I bet. Let me get your coffee."

"Marlowe?"

“Yes?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Of course not.”

“Okay. You seem... quiet.”

“I’m fine, Hank. Peyton and I had an argument. We’ll get past it, but I hate fighting with either of them.”

“I’m sure, but that’s not the first disagreement between you, is it?”

Marlowe laughed. “Far from it.”

“Then it will pass.”

“I know. I’ll be right back. The lights are on the sofa.”

“I’ll get started then.”

He watched her walk to the kitchen and wondered what had happened between her and her friend. He hoped it had nothing to do with him. He knew how much cowboys had hurt Marlowe and her friends. Hank knew he had a difficult task ahead, but he was hoping it would be worth it.

“Here you go.” Marlowe handed him a cup.

“Thank you.” He took it from her and sipped. “That feels good going down.”

“Is your first name Henry?”

“Nope. My given name is Matthew. My middle name is Henry.

“Then why don’t you go by Matt or Matthew?”

“My father goes by Matt, except Mom calls him Matthew. I’m named after him. Right from my birth, my grandpa started calling me Hank. His name is Henry Matthew, but he goes by Hank too.” He shrugged.

“Well, you look more like a Hank than a Henry.”

“How does one look like a Hank?”

Marlowe laughed and shrugged. “Like you do. Hank is a cowboy. Henry is a businessman.”

“I’m both, darlin’. I run my ranch and farm and take care of all the business side of it.”

“Yes, but you are more cowboy, wouldn’t you say?”

“All my life.”

“See? Hank.”

Hank shook his head and chuckled.

“God help me from a woman’s way of thinking.”

Marlowe chuckled and sat on the sofa.

“It’s nice having someone tall do that.”

“How did you do it before?”

“Stepladder.”

When he groaned, she laughed.

“How tall are you?”

“Six-five. You?”

“Five-seven.”

Hank nodded as he draped the strands. He wondered how he’d get through the day being close to her and not dragging her to bed. Shit. He’d better think about something else, or he’d embarrass himself. It wasn’t fair that a woman could conceal if she’s sexually stimulated, but not a man. His damn dick would betray him every chance it got. He smirked. A woman couldn’t hide it in bed though, not if the man was doing his job, and Hank wanted her there so much.

“Damn it,” he muttered.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about something.”

“Okay.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Tell me why you seemed upset Sunday when we were talking about Zoey.”

“That little girl is so precious, and she will never know her father. Which is a good thing because he is not a good person, but she should have a father figure in her life. Daughters and their fathers share a unique bond.”

“Are you a daddy’s girl?”

“Yes. He spoiled me rotten while I was growing up. Do your parents have a ranch?”

“No. It didn’t appeal to Dad. The man who got me interested in ranching was my grandfather. He owns a small property, but he no longer has livestock other than a few horses. He used to own cattle but sold it when he decided to retire.”

“Is your grandmother still living?”

“Yes. Both sets of grandparents are.”

“I never met my grandfathers, but both grandmothers are alive, and they have both remarried. My step-grandpas are awesome.”

“That’s great. Sometimes they’re better than the biological ones.”

“That’s true. It takes a strong individual to enter a ready-made family and bond with them.

Hank nodded then stepped back from the tree.

“Do you want to light it or wait?”

“Let’s do it now in case we have lights out.”

Hank shifted his gaze to her.

“You didn’t check?”

“Nope.”

“Wonderful,” he muttered and grinned when she laughed.

He noticed her crouch down, turn on the lights, and sit back. All of them glowed. He held out his hand to help her stand.

When he pulled her up, he couldn’t resist kissing her. She held him tightly and pressed against him.

Hank placed his hands around her waist and pulled her tightly against him. He glided his palms down to her ass, where he grasped it in his hands, and squeezed, causing her to moan, and him to groan.

He lifted his lips from hers.

“You are so beautiful, Marlowe.”

“Thank you. You’re very handsome, Hank...”

“But?”

“No but. I’m taking this one day at a time. You just remember if you hurt me, there are two women who will take great delight in torturing you.”

When he shuddered, she laughed.

“Females don’t have to do anything to torment a man, and you know it. You’ve been torturing me since the day we met.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He planted a soft kiss on her lips.

“I don’t want to torture you. I want to get to know you. I cannot believe I’m going out with you.” She shook her head.

“I’m glad you decided to take a chance.”

“Me too. We both have some emotional baggage to work through, but maybe, together, we can.

“I’d like to try. Okay, it’s your turn. Get the decorations on this thing so we can go to my place and decorate mine. I already strung the lights.”

“I can’t wait to see it. You’ll have to do the top though.”

“No worries. The ladder is already in the living room. Get busy,” he said, as he sat on the sofa.

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Marlowe huffed and pivoted to glare at him.

“If you keep telling me where to put the decorations, I’ll show you.”

Hank burst out laughing then she did too. He demanded so incessantly that she lobbed one of the unbreakable ornaments at him. He ducked but chuckled.

“Sorry. I can see the empty spaces. You can’t.”

She walked over to the couch, sat down, and stared at the tree, then jumped up.

“I see a spot.” She picked up an ornament, placed it on the branch, then stepped back. “Do you see any place I need to put one?”

“No. I believe you got it. Come here. It’s pretty.”

Marlowe walked back and sat on the couch. She smiled at the sight of the tree beautifully lit.

“I love Christmas.”

“Me too. It’s my favorite time of the year.”

“And you’re Santa.”

“I am. So, when are you going to sit on my lap and tell me what you want?”

“I told you what I wanted.”

He gazed at her, and she gazed back, then he stood.

“Let’s go to my home. I can whip up some lunch.”

“All right.” She scowled. What was that all about? In a matter of seconds, he’s talking about her sitting on his lap then in the next, he’s ready to leave. *Men.*

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Hank drove them to his home. He knew that he had confused her by changing the topic so abruptly, but he became anxious. He glanced at her, and his heart skipped a beat, and it terrified him. What if he fell in love with her and she didn’t

love him? Or she claimed she did, but didn't? What if he was stood up at the altar again?

"You need to stop," he murmured.

"What?"

He quickly looked at her and then back to the road.

"Nothing. Talking to myself."

"You do that often?"

"Actually I do." He smirked. "I even answer myself."

Marlowe giggled. "Me too."

He turned into the driveway and drove to the house. He heard her gasp and looked at her.

"It's lovely."

"Thanks." Hank looked at the modern farmhouse with pride.

"I'm excited to see the inside."

"Let me park the truck inside the garage and we can go in that way."

As soon as he entered the garage, he hit the remote to close the door. He looked at her.

"Ready?"

"I am." She swung the door open.

"I can get that."

"I'm fully capable of opening a door."

"Okay." He pushed his door open and stepped out, then watched her walk around the front of the truck. He sauntered to her, took her hand, and led her into the kitchen.

She let out a sudden breath as she let go of his hand and ran hers across the white marble countertop. He gazed at her as she inspected the white cabinets and stainless-steel appliances. She turned to gaze into the living room. The stone fireplace was centered on the wall that towered over twelve feet high and was flanked by two enormous windows. A ladder stood

next to the Christmas tree, which was in front of one of them. He loved this house.

“Your tree is in the perfect place.”

“My thoughts exactly. Would you like me to take your coat?”

“Can I take a look at the rest of the house?”

“Absolutely, but how about we finish the tree first, and then we can relax?” He helped her out of her coat.

“Okay. I hope you have enough decorations.”

“I do. I get a tree that big every year.”

She strolled to the fireplace, glanced over her shoulder, and smiled at him.

“Can you make a fire?”

“Absolutely.” He sauntered to the hearth, squatted down, opened the flue, lit a match, and put it under the kindling. The fire crackled and snapped as the flames wrapped around the logs.

“Are those the ornaments?” she asked him in a shocked tone.

Hank chuckled. “Yes.”

Three piles of boxes, four feet high, sat next to the fireplace.

“Do you use them all?”

“Every one of them. I’ll begin with the top. You can start at the bottom.”

“We’ll meet in the middle,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, ma’am. Tell me about Dylan and Peyton. You told me you’ve been friends since grade school, but how did you meet your husbands?”

“We loved rodeos. We have since we were young girls—”

“Please tell me you weren’t buckle bunnies.” Hank grinned.



Marlowe laughed. “No. We just loved the sport. It was exciting. We got into it because of Peyton’s father. He was a champion bull rider.”

“Who was he?”

“Tim Abbott.”

“I remember him. He was damn good.”

“Yes, but that’s another story. Anyway, Dylan met Travis first and fell in love, then Peyton met Trace and I met Johnnie.” She shrugged. “We were in love. We traveled with them. When Dylan got pregnant, she stayed home and then Peyton and I decided to stay with her. She didn’t have an easy pregnancy. She almost lost the baby. She needed us, so we came back here. We stayed with her on her father’s ranch until Zoey was born. Peyton and I returned to the rodeo.”

“And?”

“Peyton caught Trace in his trailer with a woman. She’d had enough and left him.”

“What happened with Dylan and her husband?”

“It’s not my story to tell. It’s not a good one. I can’t do that to Dylan. It’s hers to tell.”

“I understand. It’s fine. So, she ended up divorcing her husband too, then what?”

“She’d been staying with her father for a year when he passed away. He left her the ranch and the business. She raises champion bulls and sells their sperm. Her father did it for years, but since she’s taken over, it has prospered.”

“That’s good. You seem close.”

“We’re very close. Our husbands hated that closeness.”

“They were jealous of it.”

“Yes, but they were not going to tear our friendship apart.”

“Good for you. It’s good to have friends like that.”

“Who is your closest friend?”

“Creed McBride.”

“I met him at the tree farm. He was talking to Peyton. He’s very sexy.”

“Whatever. He’s my best friend, but I have a lot of friends.”

“Most men do. Women are more... cautious, I’d say. We don’t trust easily.”

“No shit.” He grinned, and watched her open one of the boxes and began putting the ornaments on the tree and all he could think of was getting it done and showing her his bedroom.

## Chapter Five

Marlowe did everything she could with the tree. She couldn't get to some spots, so she sat on the sofa and watched Hank finishing the tree. As soon as he did, he took the ladder down and carried it to the garage.

When he came into the living room, he sat beside her, and they looked at the tree.

“Do you want to plug them in?”

“I'd be happy to.” She got up, moved behind the tree and plugged in the cord, then walked back to the sofa and stood beside it. “Oh, it's breathtaking.”

“It is, isn't it? Nick has beautiful trees.”

“This one must have been one of the prettiest.”

“Yours is as well.” Hank held her hand.

“I know, but this one is just...” She waved her hand. “Stunning.”

She turned to look at him and saw him staring at her. She grinned, walked to stand in front of him, and then straddled his lap.

“I think I need to tell Santa what I want him to bring me.” She put her hands on his shoulders and her lips against his neck. His hands grasped her waist.

“And what is that?”

Marlowe lifted her head, gazed into his eyes, and smiled.

“You.” She kissed him and moaned when he deepened the kiss.

He shifted his hands up from her waist to under her breasts. She held her breath in anticipation. Then she sighed when he cupped them in his hands. When she squirmed against him, he took a deep breath and moaned. She could feel his hard cock

against the juncture of her thighs, and she wanted him desperately.

She murmured, “Take me to bed, Hank,” and he sprang to his feet, still clasping her, and carried her down the hallway.

He walked into a room, kicked the door closed, strode to the bed, and placed her on it. He removed his boots, and so did she, but he shook his head when she unsnapped her jeans.

“I want to do it. Please.”

Marlowe was turned on as she watched him undress down to his blue boxer briefs. Good God in heaven! Hank’s body was muscular and full of strength; but his frame was long and lean. His muscles were pronounced, and his body was firm and supple. His skin was tan from years in the sun. He was so handsome. His eyelashes were long and thick, framing his eyes. His face was clean shaven, accentuating the sharp lines of his jaw. His eyebrows were thick, his nose straight and his jaw strong. The sight of his chiseled abs and rock-hard pecs were almost enough to make her have an orgasm. The sight of his chest hair, lightly dusted over his torso was sexy to her. And she knew she was in so much trouble.

He leaned over her, unzipped her jeans, pulled them down, and dropped them. He stared at her, crooked his finger for her to sit up, and when she did, he lifted her shirt off and tossed it.

Marlowe lay down on the bed in her purple satin bra and matching panties and stared into his eyes, then grinned and crooked her finger at him as he’d done to her. She saw a slow grin lift his lips, then he leaned down and put his lips against hers.

He raised his lips slowly, causing them to cling together, and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Are you positive?”

“I have never been so certain of anything.”

He exhaled a laugh. “Thank God.”

Marlowe chuckled, then became serious.

“I want you so much, Hank.”

“I want you too, sweetheart. More than you could ever imagine.

She moved her hand and squeezed his hard cock through the material.

“I think I have a good idea,” she whispered.

Hank spread her legs with his knee and settled between them. He placed his face in the crook of her neck, then slid his lips up to her ear and took the lobe between his teeth. He then kissed the shell of her ear, and she could feel his warm breath against her skin.

“I want to fuck you, Marlowe,” he whispered in her ear, making her shiver.

She cupped his face in his hands, making him raise his head and look at her.

“I want you to fuck me, Hank. Hard.”

He groaned, moved to the end of the bed, and stood. He shoved his boxer briefs down and his hard cock stood at attention. He leaned over, hooked his fingers in the elastic of her panties and pulled them down. Crawling back up her body, he grasped her arms, pulled her up, kissed her, unhooked her bra, and removed it.

He lowered her to her back, and stared at her breasts, then he lowered his lips to her nipple and sucked while he used the pad of his thumb on the other one making them both stiffen into peaks. She grabbed fistfuls of his hair.

Hank raised up, kissed her lips, then moved back to her breasts, then down her stomach. Marlowe held her breath. She wanted this so much, but she'd been disappointed before.

He kissed the insides of her thighs, as if teasing her.

“Do you like that, baby?” he whispered, then moved his tongue between her curls.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“You taste like heaven, darlin’,” Hank continued, and she felt his warm breath against her thigh. He moved to the other

thigh and did the same. He kissed her all over, teasing her, making her breath come in fast, hard, excited breaths.

As his mouth continued driving her crazy, she felt him slide his hands under her ass and lift it off the bed, holding her in place.

“Put your legs over my shoulders,” he said in a low voice, holding her in place with his hands. She did.

“Jesus, you’re beautiful,” he whispered.

She was on the verge of saying something back, but she couldn’t get the words out. She watched him, waiting for his next move.

Hank ran the tip of his tongue along her slit. The touch made her shiver.

Marlowe moaned and her head fell back. Hank opened his mouth, lowered his head, and took a long lick up her slit. He raised his head and gave her a sexy grin.

“I knew you’d taste good,” he murmured as he kissed his way back to her lips.

She needed more. So much more. She was sure this time would be different. Hank took his time, placing butterfly kisses as he moved back down her body. When he reached the strip of curls again, she felt him nuzzle her. He buried his face, then licked gently along her skin. When he licked her clitoris, she moaned. She gasped as his lips closed around the sensitive nub. He sucked it into his mouth, flicking it with the tip of his tongue, making her gasp. She squirmed, lifting her hips, opening her legs wider.

“I want to drive you wild,” Hank whispered as he continued sucking her clitoris.

“God! Hank, you’re killing me,” she groaned.

“I don’t want to do that.” He continued to suck on her and she sucked in deep breaths as the feeling rushed over her.

Marlowe placed her hand over her mouth, and groaned as the orgasm rushed over her.

“Let it out. Let go, baby,” he murmured.

She screamed out then gulped in deep breaths. Hank moved up her body and she could feel him reaching into the nightstand. She heard the condom wrapper, but she couldn't open her eyes to save her life.

Hank hovered his lips above hers. She opened her eyes and stared into his.

“Let's go for another one,” he said, then pressed his lips to hers as he inched into her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and moved in rhythm with him.

He rolled to his back, pulling her on top of him. She sat up, and rode him. His hands cupped her breasts then he sat up and she rode him hard.

Marlowe wrapped her arms around his neck and ground against him. The feeling rushed over her again and she came. Hank groaned against her lips as he came, and she could feel him throbbing inside her. She put her forehead on his shoulder as she tried to catch her breath. He breathed hard against her neck.

“Damn,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she breathed out.

She raised her head, and looked into his eyes, then they both grinned and laughed.

“I'm sure Santa will want to bring that all the time. Damn, that was good.” Hank kissed her lips.

“I think good is an understatement.” Marlowe raked her fingers through his hair.

“You're so right about that. How about a shower?”

“Yes, please.”

“Can you stay tonight?”

“I have to work tomorrow, but I can leave here early if you're sure.”

“I asked, didn't I?”

She got off him, and scooted off the bed.

“Yes. Come on. I need a shower.”

“Okay. Bathroom’s right there,” he said, and pointed, but didn’t move.

Marlowe laughed as she headed for the bathroom.

“You’re the one who suggested a shower. You know where to find me.” She smiled then entered the bathroom. She laughed when she heard him muttering, but he came into the bathroom, and she watched him remove the condom, then she looked at his dick.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what? Like I want you again? I do, Hank. That was so amazing.”

He pulled her into his arms.

“I think so too. Let’s shower. Do you ride?”

“I just did.” She laughed.

“Horseback, smartass.”

“Yes. It’s been a while, but I’ve always loved riding.”

“Well, how about we go for a ride? I’ll put you on a good horse.”

“I’d love it.”

“Great. It’s fun.”

“But it’s so cold.”

“Yeah, but it’s invigorating. If you’d rather not, we can do it once it warms up.”

She was happy that he’d mentioned more time with her.

“We can go today. As long as you promise to warm me up when we get back.”

“No problem there, baby.” He grinned, then turned on the shower and helped her into the stall.



Marlowe could get used to this, but she knew it was too soon. She was anxious to see where this would go. It was a long time before they emerged from the shower.

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Hank stole a glance at her as they rode together. It had been so much more than good. He shook his head in disbelief. Then came the shower, and he swore. Hank pulled up on the reins to get Marlowe's attention.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"I didn't use a condom in the shower," he said.

"I'm on birth control and I'm safe," she reassured him.

Hank let out a sigh of relief.

"Me too," he said, "but I never go without one usually. It just slipped my mind with you."

"Same here," Marlowe replied with a smile.

Hank grinned back. "Good."

"I agree. You know, it is really exhilarating being out here. I'm still chilled to the bone, though."

"My favorite way of riding, no doubt."

After an hour or so of riding, they returned to the stables and cooled their horses down before walking back to the house. Hank realized he wasn't feeling anxious, which surprised him; after all, Marlowe and he hadn't known each other for long. He was very much enjoying spending time with her, not to mention the sex.

Marlowe snuggled up next to him on the sofa as they watched movies together, and he couldn't help but feel that he could get used to this if he wasn't careful. He had to remain level-headed to ensure that his emotions wouldn't spiral out of control. But based on his current state, he had no doubts that he'd fall for her eventually.

“What do you do for Christmas?” he asked.

“I spend the day with my parents then the day after, Dylan, Peyton, and I get together to exchange gifts. What about you?”

“I’ll go to my parents’ house for dinner and exchange gifts then come home.”

“You’re alone?”

“Once I get home, but getting here is so relaxing after being around Kat and Jeff’s twins.” He shuddered, making her laugh.

“How old are they?”

“Two.”

“Oh, boy.”

“Exactly. I told Kat they made the terrible twos look like a vacation.”

Marlowe laughed. “They can’t be that bad.”

Hank leaned back and looked at her.

“I am not exaggerating.”

“Don’t you like kids?”

“I love them. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be Santa.”

“Well, there is that.”

“They’re good kids. Just... loud.” He chuckled.

“I’m sure. I love kids. Every time I look at Zoey, I realize how badly I want them.”

“You have time.”

“I’m thirty-two, Hank. It would have to be soon. I don’t want to be in my forties before having kids.”

“So, why didn’t you and your husband have kids?”

“We talked about it, but he was always on the road, and I didn’t want him to be a part-time parent. I told him until he quit, the kids would have to wait.” She shook her head. “He

quit but not in the way we expected, but by then, I knew I'd never have kids with him."

"Because of the drinking?"

"Yes. I couldn't take it anymore."

Hank touched her hair. "I'm so sorry, darlin'. Even though you were divorcing him, his death had to be hard on you."

"It was but only because I felt guilty."

"Marlowe, you had no reason to be guilty about anything. You didn't make him drink and you sure as hell didn't kill him. He did that to himself."

"I know but it's still hard. He was such a good man in the beginning, but when he finally made it to the top, he spiraled out of control, and his injury devastated him. He dealt with it the only way he thought he could. By the time he died, I was so fed up with all of it. I stopped going to the events after I saw some men trying to sober him up before a ride."

"Damn. I'm so sorry you went through that."

"Damn cowboys is what it is."

"Here we go again." Hank frowned.

"Hank, I do like you. I mean, that's obvious. I don't go to bed with just any man, but every time I'm involved with a cowboy, rodeo or otherwise, I get my heart broken every time. I've dated enough of them to know to stay away from them."

Hank moved away from her and stood.

"Then why are we doing this?"

"Because I like you—"

"I'm a cowboy," he snarled. "I run a ranch and farm and I work my ass off at both. I am not out to hurt anyone. I consider myself a good man. I don't cheat on any woman I'm seeing. One at a time is more than enough, for sure."

Marlowe slowly stood and glared at him.

"What does that mean?"

“It means a man’s a fool if he tries to juggle more than one woman at a time. Just one of you keeps a man on his toes. Add in another and it’s nothing but trouble.”

“Do you speak from experience?”

“No, I do not. I know some guys who are like that. I don’t know how they keep up.” He shook his head. “My mama didn’t raise no fool.”

She heaved a sigh. “Look, I know I’m not making sense, but I don’t want to stop seeing you. I do like you Hank, and I’m hoping you change my mind.”

He nodded. “All right. I guess I can’t really say anything when I’m too afraid of commitment after what Sylvia did.”

“Then you see where I’m coming from.”

“I do. I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?”

“Unless you don’t want to see me anymore.” Marlowe stared at him.

He pulled her close. “That’s not an option.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Good. I do want to keep seeing you, Hank.”

“Then you will.” He lightly kissed her lips. “Let’s relax for the rest of the day.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

The day passed quickly and then they crawled into bed. Hank held her all night and knew this was where he wanted her to be, but he also knew he had a long way to go before he had her trust, and she had his.

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Marlowe sat on the sofa at Peyton’s house. She gazed at the TV screen, thinking about Hank, and smiling.

“No smiling,” Dylan said as she entered the room.

Marlowe chuckled. “I can’t help it. I had a great time with Hank.”

“Hank the cowboy,” Peyton added after entering the room with a large bowl of popcorn.

“Yes, Hank the cowboy. I know what you’re worried about, Peyton —”

“Do you?” Peyton exhaled. “I’m glad you’re content. Truly, I am. But a part of me is scared he will wind up hurting you.”

“If he does, I’ll deal with it. We have to take risks to find the right person for us.”

Peyton sunk into the sofa.

“I know that. You two can do what you please, but think about how we all got hurt in relationships with cowboys. Every single time, we suffered. And I’m done with it; I want a man who devotes himself only to me and not every other woman he sets his eyes on. Does nobody remember vows anymore? All of us were faithful and still got our hearts broken.”

Dylan grasped Peyton’s hand. “Yes, we were. We understand how much you’ve been through, and we’ve all had our experiences with bad men, but Marlowe is right. We must take risks. Otherwise, we won’t ever be content.”

Peyton heaved a sigh. “I know that, but I can’t bring myself to become interested in that type of man again. There are plenty of other men out there.”

“And any of them could mistreat you. Just because he wears a hat and boots doesn’t make him a cowboy. You need to remember that.” Dylan raised her eyebrows.

“I’m aware of it. I don’t want any cowboys, real or fake.”

“There aren’t many fake ones around this area. You’ll have problems finding someone other than a cowboy, Peyton. I guarantee it.” Marlowe tilted her head.

“Whatever. I’ll be alone then. Let’s switch topics. How was your date with Hank?”

Marlowe could feel the heat in her cheeks and did all she could not to look at her friends because they would know.

“Marlowe?” Dylan frowned at her.

Marlowe sighed. “We... had sex yesterday.”

“Oh, my God! How was it?” Dylan sat forward on the sofa.

Marlowe sighed. “Fantastic. He is no slacker in bed.”

“Most good men aren’t.” Peyton laughed.

“That is the truth,” Dylan said.

Marlowe nodded in agreement. She had loved being with Hank. He showed her how it should be between a man and a woman. She grinned.

“I had orgasms.”

“*Orgasms?* As in more than one?” Peyton’s eyes widened.

“Yes. Two during sex and one...” She shook her head.

“One? What?” Dylan asked her.

“He, uh, performed oral sex on me. You know I always thought Johnnie was bad at it, and after Hank... oh, my.”

“Oh, man. I hate you. Trace was so bad at that. He was like a cow chewing cud,” Peyton said, and Dylan and Marlowe burst out laughing.

“And you had an orgasm that way?” Dylan looked at Marlowe in awe.

“Yes. It was...” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to describe it. Amazing? Fantastic? Thrilling? Yes, yes, and yes.”

“You bitch. It’s not fair.” Dylan huffed and folded her arms.

Marlowe and Peyton laughed.

“I need a man, like yesterday.” Dylan sighed. “I can’t remember the last time I had sex, and please don’t ask me if it was good. Since I can’t remember, it couldn’t have been.”

“I’m in the same boat. I have never had mind-blowing sex.” Peyton sighed.

“Same here.” Dylan shook her head. “I hope I never hear from Travis again in this lifetime. He could have killed my daughter.”

Marlowe put her arms around Dylan.

“I think we all would have gone mad if he had, but it would have devastated you. It was a stupid move on his part. How damn desperate was he?”

“I would die for her,” Dylan said with a catch in her voice.

“We know you would, but she is safe. Far from him, and he can do nothing about it.” Marlowe squeezed her hand, and Peyton put her head on Dylan’s shoulder.

“Thank God. I hope I never hear from Trace again, either. Marlowe, that’s one thing you don’t have to worry about.”

“I would never wish Johnnie dead, but I am so glad to be away from him.” Marlowe sniffed.

Marlowe looked at Peyton.

“I’m sorry about Sunday.”

“Please. It’s forgotten. You know we never hold grudges. I pissed you off, and for that, I am sorry.” Peyton touched her hand.

“It’s not the first time we’ve pissed each other off, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. There is nothing that will tear us apart. If we didn’t let three lousy husbands separate us, nothing will.”

“True.” Peyton sighed. “Marlowe? I’m happy for you. I truly am, but you and Dylan are the sisters I never had, and it would kill me to see either of you hurt... especially by a man. I’ve been burned so many times that I’ll stay away unless he is the best thing since sliced bread.”

“You just never know. Never say never, Peyton. You could meet a man, fall head over heels in love, and find out he’s a cowboy.”

“Honestly, I would love to fall in love again, but I’m so scared. You and Dylan have been hurt a couple of times, but

I've been through five relationships, and all of them broke my heart. None as badly as Trace did, but I still got hurt. I just hate the thought of going through that pain again."

"I know, and we've been with you every step of the way, and we always will be. If Hank hurts me, and it scares me he will, I'll get over it. I'll have to."

"You know that we're here for you, too."

"Yes." Marlowe hugged her.

"I need to get the Cokes."

"Yeah, we can't have popcorn without Coke."

Marlowe smiled as she watched Peyton leave the room. It wasn't their first argument, and it wouldn't be the last, but they never got so angry that they didn't get past it. She loved her friends and couldn't imagine not having them in her life. If any man tried to part them, there would be hell to pay.

The next day, Marlowe drove to see her parents. She tried to do that every weekend, though at times, it wasn't possible.

When she parked at the house, she exited the vehicle, climbed the steps, knocked on the door, then opened it.

"Mom? Dad?" she called out as she removed her coat and hat.

"Hi, honey," Sharon Johnston said as she entered the kitchen.

"Where's Daddy?"

"Right here, toots." Cliff Johnston said, and pulled her into his arms.

"Are you hungry, honey?"

"I am, Mom."

"Well, dinner is ready. I made chicken and dumplings."

"My favorite." Marlowe smiled.

While they were sitting around the table, Marlowe couldn't stop thinking about Hank.



“What’s that smile for?” her mother asked her.

Marlowe set her fork down, picked up her napkin, and wiped her mouth.

“I met a man.” She almost laughed at the looks on her parents’ faces.

“Oh, honey, that’s wonderful. Who is he?”

“Santa Claus,” Marlowe said, and giggled. She explained to her parents how she met Hank, making them laugh.

“What does he do besides making toys for kids?” her father asked.

“He grows wheat for Beckett Feed, and raises horses.”

“Wait. He’s a... *cowboy*?”

Her parents knew about her swearing off cowboys, so they had to be shocked.

“Yes, he is. I know, but he’s a good man, so we’ll see.”

“Well, we hope it works out for you. We know you’re disappointed in cowboys but most of them are hardworking men and honest. Just because you got a bad one—”

“More than one, Mom. But I’m willing to see what, if anything, happens.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you, honey. We want you happy.”

“I want that too.” She shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Her father chuckled. “And just how do Peyton and Dylan feel about you with a cowboy?”

Marlowe grinned. “They told me they’d support me. I know Peyton isn’t happy, but she knows it’s my decision. I’m sure if Hank hurts me, she will hunt him down.”

Her parents laughed.

“Of course, she will. She loves you and doesn’t want to see you hurt. We don’t either, but this is your decision, Marlowe. We’re here for you.” Her mother smiled at her.

Marlowe nodded. She knew her parents and her best friends would stand by her no matter what, and for that, she was grateful.

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The day before Christmas Eve, Hank smiled as he watched the kids waiting in line. Today was his last day, and he would miss it as much as he hated to admit it.

It had been more fun than he thought, but a few kids were bratty. He told them to settle down or they'd get coal in their stockings, and it worked.

He wasn't seeing Marlowe tonight, but he wanted to give her the gift he had bought her. He was sure she wasn't expecting anything, but when he saw it, he thought of her. He hoped they could get together.

Hours later, he swore he'd never do this again. The kids were extra loud, and he was getting a headache. He cursed as he rubbed his temples.

"We're almost done," Kat whispered.

"Thank God. Why do they wait until the last minute?"

"It's like this every year. The closer we get to the holiday, the wilder the kids get."

"I was just thinking earlier about how much I enjoyed this, and in one day, they have changed my mind," Hank muttered.

"And you say my kids are heathens."

"They are."

"Stop it."

Hank chuckled. "You know I love them, Kat."

"I do." Kat smiled at him.

"Are you and Jeff ready for Christmas?"

“As ready as we’ll ever be.”

“Same here.”

“Are you getting Marlowe anything?”

“Yeah, I already bought it, and no, I’m not telling you what it is.”

“Who am I going to tell?”

“No one, because you don’t know what it is.”

“You’re a mean ass.”

“I’m a mean ass? I played Santa for you.”

“Okay. I’ll give you that one, but you’re being mean about her gift. I wouldn’t tell her.”

“I don’t have to worry about that. I’m. Not. Telling. You.”

He watched her turn her back to the line and raise her middle finger at him.

“Merry Christmas... Santa.”

Hank laughed. “Right back at you.”

When the day was finally over, Hank entered the back room, removed the Santa suit, left by the back door, and walked to the diner. He couldn’t wait to see Marlowe.

He’d love to spend Christmas with her, but she went to see her parents, and he saw his. There was no reason they couldn’t get together on Christmas Eve or later Christmas Day.

He removed his cellphone from his pocket and called her, but it went straight to voice mail. He entered the diner and took a stool at the counter. The place was packed as usual.

Reaching for the menu, he shook his head. He knew what he wanted. He smiled when Lanie Donovan filled his glass with water. He gave her his order and waited.

When the bell jingled, he grinned when he saw Alex Reeves enter and sit beside him.

“Hey, Alex. How are you?”

“Good, Hank. You?”

“Same. How’s the job going?”

“Great. I just wrapped up a case in Kalispell.”

“Rustlers?”

“Yes.”

Alex was a MDOL agent. He worked in the theft division, and Hank along with other farmers and ranchers appreciated everything he did.

“Anything new?”

“Always. Theft seems to be at an all-time high right now.”

“Damn. I’ll keep an eye on my horses.”

“Do that. I don’t think they care what they steal. They’re in it for the money.”

“Are you doing all right now, though?”

“I’m trying.”

“I’m sure it was tough getting back out there. You almost died, Alex.”

“It was hard to do, but I’m hoping the more I’m out there, the better I’ll be.”

Alex, along with three other agents, one of them being his good friend, Creed, had been shot and one of them died. They weren’t the first agents to be shot, but it still had to bother them. It must be scary to go back out there and not know what or who you were looking for. Hank wasn’t sure how the men survived unless it was pure determination.

“So, are you seeing anyone?” Hank picked up his water.

“No time.”

“Make time, Alex.”

Alex sighed. “I’m not interested in settling down. Not anymore.”

“I definitely understand.”

Alex nodded, but said nothing. Hank knew it was a challenging subject for him. If Hank was skittish about

relationships, Alex was dead set against them. Hank knew being a livestock agent was dangerous, but Alex was a good man who deserved a good woman. Not one like his ex-wife.

Once Connie came by to take their orders, the men talked about other things and enjoyed their lunches.

Later, when Hank walked out of the diner, he glanced up the street to the ice cream shop and wondered if Marlowe was there.

“Only one way to find out.” Hank walked along the sidewalk, smiling at people he passed. He opened the door to the shop and came to a halt. It was packed. He saw Marlowe behind the glass case scooping out ice cream, and another woman was waiting on customers. He wasn’t sure if that was Peyton or an employee. He pushed through the crowd to get to the case.

“Hey,” he said and watched Marlowe raise her head. She spotted him, and a huge grin lit up her face.

“Hi. I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I had lunch at the diner.”

“And now you need dessert?”

“Of course.”

“Vanilla cone?”

Hank grinned. “Yes, ma’am, but I’ll wait. These people were ahead of me.”

“All right.” Marlowe returned to scooping the ice cream, handed the cone to a woman, and waited on the next person.

Hank couldn’t keep his eyes off her as she smiled and laughed with her customers. He could tell she loved what she was doing.

A few minutes later, she held up a vanilla ice cream cone and smiled at him. He pushed away from the wall and walked to the cash register. He paid for his cone, took it from her, and licked it. A blush moved through her cheeks, and he raised his eyebrow.

“What’s that blush for?”

“I’m not blushing.”

He chuckled. “Sure you’re not. Hey, do you have a minute? I want to check with you about something.”

“Sure.” She walked from behind the cases, and they sat at one of the small tables.

“I’d like to see you over Christmas, but we’re doing different things.”

“Yes. I’ll be at my parents’ house until around six.”

“What about Christmas Eve or later Christmas Day?”

“I don’t do anything on Christmas Eve.”

“How about then? I can pick you up—”

“I’ll drive. There is no sense in you making two trips. I can’t stay the night.”

“I know. Okay, if that’s what you want. I believe Santa left you something under my tree.”

Marlowe gasped. “Really? Santa is the best.”

Hank laughed. “Thank you. Are you open tomorrow?”

“Only until noon. I can come out after that unless it’s too early.”

“No, that’s perfect. We can go for another ride.”

“Horseback?” she asked him, and he could hear the laughter in her voice.

“Both.” He laughed when she did.

“Sounds good. I’d better get back to work. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She stood.

“Yes, ma’am.” He got to his feet.

“Come over here first.” She walked behind the cases. “Peyton? Come here, please.”

Hank watched as the woman Marlowe had called Peyton approached him. She was gorgeous, her dark hair was pulled

back in a ponytail and her blue eyes were the color of the sea. She was tall, with an amazing figure, her Cupid bow lips tilted up in a grin when she saw him.

“Peyton, this is Hank Barnett. Hank, this is my friend Peyton Donahue.” Marlowe introduced them and Peyton reached out her hand to him with a smile.

“Hi, Hank, nice to meet you.”

“And you too, Peyton. I’ve heard a lot about you,” he replied as he shook her hand.

“Don’t believe anything.” She laughed.

“It’s all good though.” Hank smiled.

“Then it’s true.” Peyton chuckled.

Hank and Marlowe laughed.

“I would never tell lies about you, Peyton,” Marlowe said.

“I never worry about that. I need to get back before the natives get restless. Hank, it was really nice to meet you. Don’t hurt my girl here or you’ll be on my shit list, and trust me, that is one place you don’t want to be. Bye.”

Hank shook his head because he knew it wasn’t an idle threat. He’d do his best not to hurt Marlowe. He looked at Marlowe to see her staring at him with a grin on her face.

“She terrifies me,” Hank said, and laughed when Marlowe did.

“She should.”

“I thought she hated cowboys?”

“Hate is such a strong word. She doesn’t like them, but she’s not rude.”

“Well, I’ll do my best not to get on her shit list then.”

“Or Dylan’s.”

Hank sighed. “Yes, or Dylan’s. Damn.”

Marlowe giggled. “We’re close.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“You don’t want on mine, either.”

“Hell, I don’t want on any woman’s.”

Marlowe grinned. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait, sweetheart.” He kissed her lips, touched the brim of his hat, and walked out.



## Chapter Six

Marlowe smiled, watching him go out the door. She glanced around and noticed women staring after him. She wasn't surprised. The man was sexy.

With a sigh, she returned to work. It amazed her that people didn't care what the weather was. They would eat ice cream.

She shook her head. It was good anytime of the year. She smiled as she thought about Dylan drinking hot chocolate all year round. Her defense was that people drink hot coffee or tea all year, so why not hot chocolate?

"He seems nice," Peyton said.

"He is." She looked at Peyton. "I really like him. I'm scared of being hurt, but I don't want to stop seeing him."

"If you're willing to take that chance, Marlowe, I'm happy for you. Just be careful."

"I will. I'll run if it looks like it's the same pattern."

"You'll know it if it happens, but I can see he likes you. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

"Really?"

"Yes. He's taken with you."

"I am with him, too." Marlowe sighed. "We'll see."

"It's all we can do. Dylan and I will be here for you, no matter what."

"I have no doubt about that."

"Just like we know you'd be there for us."

"Always."

The women smiled at each other, then returned to waiting on customers.

On Christmas Eve, Marlowe and Peyton closed the shop at noon and agreed to meet the day after Christmas.

Marlowe walked around the back and climbed the metal stairs. She was eager to see Hank.

She entered her apartment, removed her hat and coat, and headed for the bathroom to shower. She got a little messy scooping ice cream some days, and today had been one of those.

After a quick shower, she pulled on a black turtleneck sweater, jeans, and snow boots. She shrugged into her coat, picked up the three brightly wrapped presents, and walked out of the apartment. She gasped when she saw heavy snow falling.

“What the hell, Clifton? It wasn’t snowing fifteen minutes ago.” She shook her head as she carefully descended the metal risers. The snow was already covering them.

She placed the gifts in the back of her SUV, slid onto the seat, pressed the button for the heated seat, and sighed when she felt the heat warming her butt.

“Warm butt, warm heart,” she said, laughing.

Marlowe couldn’t wait to see Hank. He was coming to mean a lot to her, and it terrified her. No one wanted a broken heart, but everyone in life went through it. Some more than others, like Peyton, but Marlowe liked him so much, and the thought of not seeing him bothered her even more.

She took her time as she drove along the snow-covered roads. They were terrible in town, so she knew they’d be worse on the way to Hank’s. Was it worth it?

“I hate driving in snow. Thank God it’s not—” She stopped when she heard ice pinging off the roof and could see it bouncing off the hood. “You just had to say something, didn’t you?”

If she could get there, would she be able to leave? Pulling onto the berm, she pulled her phone from her pocket and checked the weather. She was surprised to see a winter storm warning in effect.

“What?” She shook her head. She knew it happened all the time here, but why today?

She could not drive to Hank's only to get stranded. She had to visit her parents tomorrow and have dinner with them. They'd be disappointed if she didn't attend, especially on Christmas.

With a heavy sigh, she called Hank.

"Hey, darlin'. Are you on your way yet?"

"Hank, I'm not going to make it. It's snowing."

"What? Since when?" Marlowe could hear him walking through his house, then a door opening. "Shit. Yeah, I see that, and ice, too. Marlowe, don't drive out here. We'll get together in a few days. This will get worse before it gets better."

"I know. I'm so disappointed."

"Me too, but it'll be fine. I'll call you tomorrow."

"All right. Bye."

"Bye, sweetheart." He disconnected, and she wanted to cry.

Taking a deep breath, she checked traffic, made a U-turn, and drove home.

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Hank placed the phone on the kitchen counter and sighed. Damn it. He'd been looking forward to her coming here for the day. With a resigned sigh, he made a cup of coffee, then walked to the living room and the picture window. He stared at the falling snow. It was beautiful, but didn't mean much right now. He wanted Marlowe here with him, and since that wasn't going to happen, he'd be bored to death.

Turning, he sat in the recliner, lifted the footrest, and turned on the TV. What a way to spend Christmas Eve. He glanced at the tree and looked at the presents surrounding it. There were a few piles of them for his family, but there were also a few presents for Marlowe. He hoped she liked them.

Since it was his favorite time of the year, so he always went a little overboard, especially for his family. He grinned, thinking about his niece and nephew. He loved to give his sister a hard time about them, but he loved them and planned on spoiling them every chance he got.

Hank would love to have kids one day. He and Sylvia talked about that, and they both wanted them. At least, he thought she had, but that would never happen with her. He hoped he would find someone who wanted the same things he did. Marlowe popped into his head. And he would love to see if they had something between them.

He knew he was beginning to have deep feelings for her, which terrified him. He had loved Sylvia so much, but she tore him apart. As Kat had said, she was the woman who made him fear commitment. Being stood up at the altar would do that to a man.

He'd never been as embarrassed as he was that day...

Hank stood at the altar, grinning as he looked to the vestibule when the music started. But she didn't appear, and he frowned.

"She's probably still getting ready. You know Sylvia always runs behind," Creed, who was his best man, stated.

"Something's not right," Hank muttered as he continued to wait.

The music stopped, and people began murmuring. Hank saw the priest nod to the organ player, and he began playing *Here Comes the Bride* again, but she still didn't come out. He was really panicking now. He looked at his parents in the front pew and could see the worry on their faces.

Taking a deep breath, he walked to the door where he'd entered and headed for the room he knew she was in. At the door, he took a deep breath and knocked.

"Sylvia? Is everything all right?"

When she didn't answer the door, he knocked again, then sighed when he heard the lock turning, but it wasn't Sylvia. It was her best friend, Carly.

“Carly? What’s going on?”

Hank knew something was wrong when she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Carly.”

She gazed at him with tears in her eyes and shook her head.

“She left, Hank. She said she couldn’t marry you. I’m so sorry.”

“She... left? Why?”

“All I know is what she said.”

Hank was devastated. The woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with didn’t want the same thing. He leaned against the wall beside the door and hung his head. How was he going to go out there and tell everyone?

“Hank. What’s going on?” Creed asked him as he strode toward him.

“She left, Creed. She told Carly she didn’t want to marry me. I don’t get it. She was fine last night at the rehearsal dinner.”

“She left? What the hell?”

“I don’t know how I’m going to face everyone when all I want to do is get out of here.”

“I’ll take care of it. Go now before the guests do. I’ve got this.”

Hank nodded. “Thank you.”

Creed nodded, then headed back to the door for the altar.

“Go now, Hank,” he said over his shoulder.

Hank sighed, pushed away from the wall, and looked at Carly.

“You might as well leave too Carly. I’m sorry.”

“Hank, you have nothing to be sorry for. I tried to talk her out of it, but her mind was made up.”

“Well, it’s better it happened before the wedding. I’m leaving. Thanks for everything, Carly, but have your husband take you home.” He walked out the door into the bright sunshine, climbed into his vehicle, and drove home. Alone.

It took a while to get over it. She called him the next day, trying to explain, but he didn’t want to hear anything she had to say. He hung up on her, and three days later, the ring he’d bought her came in the mail. No note. Just the ring. He ended up selling it since he couldn’t return it.

Hank sighed. Did he want to go through a relationship again? He shook his head. He just wasn’t sure. There were too many trust issues. He knew Marlowe had them too.

How would this ever work between them? Hank didn’t want to be alone, but he didn’t need to be stood up again. Unless someone had gone through it, no one knew how that felt.

He knew engagements got broken, but why wait until the day of the wedding to call it off? The night before, at the rehearsal dinner, she’d been fine. What happened to make her change her mind overnight?

Hank didn’t care where she was or who she was with. Good luck to the next sucker, was his thought.

As the day wore on, Hank sat in front of the TV, watching movies. He could see the snow still falling and he was glad that Marlowe hadn’t tried to drive in it, but he hated the idea of not seeing her. Heaving a sigh, he closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

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Christmas Day arrived with more snow, and Marlowe didn’t know if she’d even make it to her parents’ house. She stood at the window, staring at the street below. It was covered with snow, and ice glistened on top.

Shaking her head, she picked up her phone and called her mother.

“Marlowe, this weather is awful,” her mother said when she answered.

“I’m not going to make it, Mama.”

“I know, honey. We’d love to have you here, but we don’t want you traveling in this. It’s too bad.”

“There’s ice on the snow, too. I wouldn’t mind if it were just the snow, but not ice.”

“We know. You stay inside where it’s warm. Maybe you can make it tomorrow before you see Peyton and Dylan.”

“I’ll try, I promise. I’m going to call them to see if they’re okay. I’ll call you later. Tell Daddy I love him. Love you, Mama.”

“We love you too. Talk soon.” Her mother disconnected.

Marlowe sighed and walked to the sofa, then plopped down onto it. What a day. She loved a white Christmas, but not to where you couldn’t go anywhere. She looked at the presents under the tree and wanted to cry. For heaven’s sake, it’s Christmas; some people would have to wait a day or two to celebrate it. Marlowe had been so looking forward to her mother’s turkey and stuffing.

“Damn it.” She picked up the remote, turned on the TV, and settled in for a dull day.

Reaching for her phone, she called Dylan first.

“Merry Christmas, Marlowe,” Dylan said when she answered.

“Merry Christmas to you and Zoey, too. Was Santa good to you?”

“He was to Zoey for sure. Are you able to go to your parents’ today? I know the weather is bad.”

“No. I’ll be here all day. Alone. I hate it.”

“I bet. I know how you are about Christmas. Have you talked to Peyton yet?”

“No. Have you?”

“A few minutes ago. She’s visiting her mother, but it’s only a few blocks away. She said she’d probably walk.”

“In this? That woman is nuts. As much as she hates snow, she will walk in it.”

Dylan laughed. “You know Peyton. Hardheaded as they come.”

“Did Zoey like her presents from Santa?”

“Of course. They’re strewn all across the living room.”

Marlowe chuckled. “Well, she’ll get more from Peyton and me.”

“Wonderful,” Dylan muttered, making her laugh.

“I just wanted to check in. Stay inside where it’s warm, and hopefully, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. We’ll be here. We love you.”

“I love you both.” Marlowe disconnected and called Peyton.

“What is this I hear about you actually walking in the snow?” Marlowe asked when Peyton answered and smiled when she laughed.

“I can’t drive there, and it’s not far. I’m sure my mom will send out a search party if I don’t get there. What about you? Can you get to your parents?”

“No. I didn’t even make it to Hank’s last night. This is not a good Christmas.”

“Only because you have a man. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t care if it snowed up to your ass.”

Marlowe laughed. “You, Peyton Roselyn Donahue, know me too well.”

“That I do. Have you talked to Dylan?”



“I just hung up from her. I told her I’d try to get there tomorrow, but I won’t unless the weather lets up.”

“Same here. I have presents for you, Dylan, and Zoey, but I’m not going out in this unless I can walk, and, no, I will not walk to your apartment or Dylan’s house.”

“Spoilsport. Okay, let’s just plan to get together tomorrow. I’m going to watch the parade and then some movies. Main Street is covered in snow and ice. I doubt anyone will go anywhere. I don’t think we should open tomorrow.”

“I agree. I don’t think anyone would come in anyway. Another day isn’t going to hurt us. Call me later.”

“Definitely. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Marlowe disconnected and tossed the phone onto the cushion.

As she stared at the TV, her phone vibrated, and she glanced down to see Hank’s name.

“Merry Christmas, Santa,” she said cheerfully.

“Merry Christmas to you. Was Santa good to you?”

“He didn’t leave anything for me here, but I think he may have left something at my parents’ house.”

“I’m sure he did, plus he brought some things here for you as well.”

“Busy man. Are you going to your parent’s place today?”

“No, Mom is having dinner tomorrow. I’m about to go muck out the stalls in the barn though. I miss you.”

“Me too. Hopefully we can get together soon.”

“Agreed. I better go finish up so I can stay inside where it’s nice and warm afterwards. I’ll talk to you later, darlin’.”

“Sounds good. Bye.” She ended the call.

The next morning, the roads were clear amid the falling snow. She took a peek outside to see folks walking around Clifton as usual; they never stayed inside for long. She knew

she had to go to her parents' house, so she closed the curtains, changed out of her comfy clothes into jeans and a blue sweater, put on a coat and beanie, grabbed a broom, and opened the door, only to find the veranda steps covered in ice and snow.

"Shit," she muttered.

Taking a deep breath, she swept each step clean with her broom as she descended the stairs. Unlocking the vehicle, she started it up and cleaned off the SUV before going back up the stairs to get the bag of kitty litter for the steps. After tossing it onto the steps, she collected her parents' presents. With them tucked away in the back seat, she climbed into the driver's seat and drove off into the snowy landscape toward her folks' home. Daunting weather hardly deterred her, getting away from her apartment was what mattered.

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Hank slipped into his coat, placed his hat on his head, and tugged on his gloves. He opened the door and nearly slammed it shut. The frigid air filled his lungs as he walked down the steps to the truck. He pulled the door open, started it to warm up, and then worked on clearing off the snow and ice.

When he finished, he returned to the house to get the gifts he needed to take, walked back outside, hopped into the truck, and drove to his parents' place.

As he drove along, he couldn't help but think of Marlowe. He wanted to see her, but didn't know when that would happen. He knew she would visit her parents and get with Peyton and Dylan, so where did he fit in?

He wondered if her shop would open today. He would try if he thought he could get into town without ending up in a ditch, but he knew the back roads were probably still covered in snow and ice.

He pulled into the driveway leading to his parents' house and parked beside the back porch. He got the presents, walked

up the steps, and knocked on the door. It opened, and he smiled at his mother.

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” he said, then kissed her cheek.

“Merry Christmas, honey. Come in before you freeze.”

“Are Kat and Jeff going to make it today?”

“She said they’d try. Is it still bad?”

“The roads out this way are clear, but I’m not sure about the road leading to town.”

“Jim Barton was out here this morning. He plowed everyone’s driveway but told your dad he was heading home after ours. He said it was too cold.”

“Mr. Barton doesn’t need to be out in this.”

“Try telling him that.”

“It would do no good. Where’s Dad?” he asked as he set the presents on the table and removed his hat and coat.

“He’s in the living room. Go join him. I’ll bring you a cup of coffee.”

“Thanks, Mom. I could use it.” He hung up his hat and coat, picked up the presents, and headed to the living room. “Merry Christmas, Dad.”

“Merry Christmas, son.”

Hank strode to the tree, set the gifts down, then sat on the sofa and watched TV with his dad.

Later, after everyone finished eating, gifts were exchanged. Hank loved everything he got, and he loved his family, but he wanted to leave so he could call Marlowe and make plans with her.

He grinned when the twins started fighting over each other’s gifts, and then he laughed when Kat glared at him.

“What did I tell you?”

“Shut up. You love my kids.”

“I never said I didn’t. I said they were heathens, and this proves it.” He burst out laughing when she threw a sofa pillow at him.

An hour later, he was ready to go home. It was getting late, and he didn’t want to drive after dark since the road could be covered in black ice. He got to his feet, told his family he loved them, then left and went home. Alone. Again.

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A few days later, Marlowe huffed as she tried to keep up with the customers. Why did everyone in Clifton, Spring City, and Hartland need ice cream right now?

“Cabin fever,” Peyton whispered as she passed her.

“That must be it. We were all trapped inside for a couple of days. I don’t blame them, but they all didn’t need to come in at once.”

Peyton laughed then waited on a customer. Marlowe was ready for the day to end. She was finally seeing Hank tonight and she was so eager to be with him. She hoped he liked the presents she got him. Men were so hard to buy for. She was anxious to see what Santa left her under his tree.

“Are you and Hank going out tonight?”

“No. I’m going to his house, and we’re staying in to watch movies.”

“Good thing you’re off tomorrow.” Peyton grinned.

“Why?”

“I can’t have you coming in late. Tardiness is not acceptable.”

Marlowe laughed. “Like you’re never late.”

“I’m the exception. Tardiness runs in my blood.”

“That is no lie. I am anxious to see Hank. I miss him.”

“Uh, oh.”

“Yeah, I know.” Marlowe shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Has he mentioned New Year’s Eve?”

“Not yet. Are you doing anything?”

“I’m going to Dylan’s. I’ll spend the night. If you and Hank don’t go out, come over.”

“I will. I’d better get to work, so this day will end.”

At the end of the day, Marlowe climbed the steps to her apartment, opened the door, slammed it shut, and flopped onto the sofa. She was exhausted. What a long day. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes with a heavy sigh, then she got to her feet, removed her coat and hat then hung them on the hall tree.

She needed to find something to eat, but she was just too tired. It hadn’t slowed down at the shop until they locked the doors. She loved owning it, but there were days when she and Peyton would be run ragged.

“Perks of owning a business,” she muttered.

As she placed a microwave dinner into the oven, she wondered if Hank would come here instead of her going to his place. She pulled her phone from her pocket and called him.

“Hey, you. Are you on your way?”

“No. Hank, can you come here instead?”

“Sure, but what’s wrong?”

“I’m just tired. I think the last few days have caught up to me.”

“Okay. I’ll load the truck and be right there.”

“Thank you. I’ll be waiting. Please drive carefully.”

“Yes, ma’am. I won’t be long, darlin’. Take a bath and relax.”

“I’m going to. I’ll see you soon.”

“All right, baby.” He disconnected.

She hit 'cancel' on the microwave. She just wasn't hungry for that dinner. Maybe she could get Hank to pick something up for them. She picked up her phone again.

"What's up?"

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

"Will you pick something up for us? A pizza or burgers?"

"I can do that. How about you call in a pizza, and I'll stop and get it."

"Wonderful. Tell me what you want on it."

She listened as he told her, and she smiled because she liked the same on her pizza.

"I'll call it in now and then I'm heading for the tub."

"Too bad I can't join you."

"We can always do that later."

"Sounds good. Order the pizza, darlin'. I'm leaving in a few minutes."

"All right. See you soon." She disconnected, then headed for the bathroom. She needed to relax. Today had been hectic. Not that she didn't like it being busy, but today went above and beyond. She pulled her sweater off as she walked along the hallway. She just hoped she didn't fall asleep in the tub.

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Hank drove into town and was thankful the roads were cleared. He figured Jim Barton had done most of it. The man might be in his eighties, but little got him down. As he entered town, he was surprised at how deserted it seemed. No one was around. He pulled into the parking lot of the pizza parlor, then entered the store. A few minutes later, he was on his way again.

He passed the diner and smiled when he saw lights on inside and he could see it packed with customers. No wonder no one was on the streets. They were all inside the diner.

He turned into the alley that ran along the back of the ice cream shop and parked by the steps. He looked up at them and sighed. He'd been hoping she would go to his house, but he didn't want her driving if she were tired.

Opening the door, he reached for the pizza on the passenger seat, stepped out, and shoved the door closed. Then he opened the back door and removed the gifts he'd brought. After getting them situated with the pizza box, he climbed the steps, and knocked on the door. He heard the lock turning and then it opened. He grinned when he saw her.

She wore lounge pants, an oversized T-shirt and her hair was in a messy bun; he'd seen nothing more beautiful in his life.

"Come in," she said as she pushed the door open wider.

Hank stepped inside the apartment and sighed at the warm air. He placed the pizza and gifts on the table, removed his hat and coat, and hung them up. He turned to look at her, and his heart pounded against his ribs. He shut his eyes and groaned when a sly smile lifted her lips.

Marlowe strolled toward him and toyed with the buttons on his flannel shirt.

"Are you hungry?" she whispered, and he knew damn well she wasn't talking about the pizza.

He wrapped his hand around her nape, pulled her close, and kissed her lips. When he lifted them, he stared into her eyes.

"I'm starving."

She smiled. "Good. How about we have some food first?"

"First?"

"Yep." She grinned.

"You're driving me insane."

Marlowe snickered. "I don't want that to happen. I just want to make up for lost time with you."

"Damn it, Marlowe. How am I expected to eat when I can only think of taking you to bed?"

"You'll manage. Let's eat."

They sat together on the sofa, eating and watching movies.

"So, was Santa good to you?" Hank asked then took a bite of pizza.

"He was. How about you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He stood, walked to the table, and picked up the presents, then returned to the sofa and sat. He placed the parcels on the coffee table. "These are for you."

"I can't wait to open them. Yours are under the tree."

"Eat then open your gifts."

Marlowe nodded and bit into her slice of pizza. Hank grinned as he watched her pull the slice from her mouth with a long string of cheese stretching out. She laughed and twirled the cheese around her finger then stuck it in her mouth.

After they finished with the pizza, they exchanged gifts. When he handed her the small box, he was nervous. What if she didn't like it?

Marlowe ripped off the paper, opened the lid, and gasped when she saw the blue earrings.

"Oh, Hank. They're beautiful."

"I'm glad you like them."

"Open yours."

Hank opened the gifts and was happy with the shirts, but it was the new Stetson he really loved. It was black felt with a thin leather strap above the brim. He placed it on his head.

"I love this. Thank you."

"I thought of you when I saw it."

"That is exactly why I bought the earrings."



She smiled then sat beside him on the sofa and snuggled against him.

As the night dragged on, Hank happily held Marlowe as they watched a movie. She sat up and he looked at her as she stood. Then, with a grin, she climbed onto his lap and kissed him, and he slid his hands to her waist.

“I want you,” she said in a whisper against his lips.

“And I want you,” Hank murmured.

Marlowe moved back onto his thighs, unbuttoned his jeans, and pulled the zipper down. She smiled at him, then took hold of his hard cock and slid her mouth over it.

He swallowed hard as he watched her go up and down on him. God! He wanted her so badly.

“Marlowe,” he groaned.

“Give me one more minute, Hank,” she answered.

“A minute might be too long.” He moaned as he fought for control.

But Marlowe kept sucking on him and Hank ran his fingers through her hair and prayed he didn't embarrass himself because he was damn close to coming.

“Please, you gotta stop. I want to be inside you, Marlowe,” he pleaded.

When she rose and removed her shirt, revealing her bare breasts, his relief was short-lived and soon replaced with awe as she slipped off her pants and stood naked before him.

“You are so damn gorgeous,” he whispered.

“Condom?”

“Do we want one?”

“Please. Let's not take any chances.”

He reached into his jeans pocket for his wallet and handed her a condom. Then, she opened the package, and rolled it down over his hard cock. She ran her hands over her body and

inserted a finger between her legs. When Marlowe moaned, Hank sat up, grasped her arms, and drew her close.

However, she shook her head and stepped back from him and continued to touch herself. Hank knew he was going to come if she didn't stop teasing him soon. His teeth clenched when she squeezed her eyes shut and groaned as she came. Shit!

Marlowe then straddled him once more, took him inside and began rocking against him. Hank put his knuckle against her clitoris and when her breathing quickened and loud cries escaped from her, he could feel her clenching around his cock and knew she had another orgasm. He gripped onto her hips tightly and matched each one of her movements until he groaned and came.

Once he was able to catch his breath, their eyes met, and their lips met in a long, intimate kiss.

“Damn, that was good,” he said between breaths.

“Yes,” she said when she could speak.

“I don't know about you, but I'm ready for bed. It's been a long day.”

“I'm ready too. I'm so glad I'm off tomorrow.”

“Excuse me? You just returned to work.”

“Holidays are nuts. I think I could sleep for a week.”

Hank pushed to his feet, put his hand out to her, and helped her up.

“Not without me, you won't. Let's hit the sheets, darlin'. Maybe we can head to my place tomorrow and go horseback riding.”

“I'd love to.”

Marlowe smiled at him, and led him to the bedroom.

## Chapter Seven

Hank hugged her and laid his cheek on her head. She sighed and put her arm across his waist.

“Are you doing anything for New Year’s Eve?”

“I usually don’t do anything unless I go to Dylan’s. Why?”

“Well, we could go to a party at the town hall in Spring City if you’d like.”

“I’ve heard about it but have never gone. Do you go every year?”

“Not every year. In fact, I haven’t been there in two years or more. It’s always a good time, but I hated going alone. Even though my friends go.”

“I’d like to go. If you’re sure.”

“Of course, I’m sure. I’ll introduce you to anyone you don’t know.”

“I’d love to go.” She raised her head and stared into his eyes. “I can dress up, can’t I?”

Hank grinned. “Yes. Most of the women get all dressed up.”

“I have a little black dress.”

“I can’t wait to see it.” He yawned. “I’m sorry, darlin’. I’m tired.”

“Then let’s get some sleep.” She kissed his cheek and placed her head back on his chest. He held her tight as sleep overtook him.

On New Year’s Eve, he walked up the stairs to her apartment and knocked on the door. He was eager to see her and when she opened the door, he almost tripped on his tongue. She was beyond beautiful. She looked stunning in a skintight black dress with shimmering ribbons through it that sparkled when she moved, and her blonde hair flowed around

her shoulders. On her feet were black stilettos and her legs looked tight and toned. Hell, he was dying here.

“Come in.” She opened the door wider, and he stepped across the threshold to enter the apartment.

“You look amazing,” he said.

“Thank you. So do you.”

Hank didn't know about that. He wore dark blue jeans, a red button-up shirt, his distressed cowboy boots, and the hat she'd bought him for Christmas on his head. She would outshine any woman there tonight. Of that, he knew, and he was proud she was with him.

When she moved to the hall tree to get her coat, he bit his lip to hold back a groan when he saw the seam running up the back of her stockings. Holy hell. How was he supposed to get through the night?

“Something wrong?” she asked him.

He looked at her and narrowed his eyes when he saw a smile playing around her lips. She knew damn well what was wrong. Then he chuckled.

“I wouldn't say something's wrong.” He inclined his head to her legs. “Those stockings will keep me hard all night.”

She laughed. “Then I won't tell you I'm also wearing a garter belt, and I'm going to let you unhook these stockings later.”

“If you're wearing a garter belt, I don't need to unhook them. We can leave them on.”

Marlowe gasped. “You, Hank Barnett, are bad.”

Hank raised his eyebrows. “What? I'm being honest here. I'd love those legs, stockings and all, wrapped around my waist later. Hell, I might have to find a closet in the town hall.”

Marlowe laughed and shook her head. He grinned as he helped her into her coat. Then they walked out onto the stoop. He waited while she locked the door, then took her hand and led her down the steps to his truck. He held her hand as she

slid onto the seat, then he strode around the truck, climbed inside, and drove to the Town Hall in Spring City.

If the weather cooperated, they'd have a good time, but Hank knew how quickly the weather could change in the area. If it snowed enough to get dangerous, an announcement would be made, and people left before it got worse. No one wanted to get stranded.

Once he parked, they exited the vehicle and walked to the doors. He could hear conversations, laughter, and music the closer they got. Hank held her hand as they walked across the parking lot.

"I hope we can find a place to sit," Marlowe said.

"I can guarantee we will. A lot of my friends are already here, and they'll have a few tables put together."

"Sounds fun."

"It always is."

They entered the building, removed their coat, and handed them to the woman behind a counter. She took their coats, handed them tickets, then waited on the next person. Hank retook Marlowe's hand and led her through the crowd while looking for his friends. He grinned when he spotted them. They had two rows of ten tables each butted together.

At the table, everyone said hello, and he introduced Marlowe to those she didn't know. Being from Clifton, and having the ice cream shop, she knew a lot of them.

"You have the best ice cream, Marlowe," Willa Callahan said after being introduced and told about the ice cream shop.

"It's nice to meet everyone, and thank you, Willa." Marlowe smiled as she slid onto a metal chair.

As the night wore on, Hank was having a great time. He'd danced several slow dances with her. He didn't fast dance. He had no desire to embarrass himself on the dance floor. Especially when men like Devin Callahan, Brett Watkins, and Liam Flynn were out there. Those guys put other men to shame.

He laughed when Devin asked Marlowe to dance, and her eyes widened.

“I’m not sure I can keep up with you,” she said.

Devin grinned. “I’ll go easy on you.”

When she looked at Hank, he shrugged.

“Go for it,” he said.

Marlowe stood, took the hand Devin offered, then followed him to the floor. The band played *Fast as You*, a song by Dwight Yokum, and Hank watched Devin spin her around the floor. He grinned every time he saw her laughing. She was having a great time.

At midnight, the countdown began, and everyone counted. When the new year rang in, everyone cheered. Hank pulled Marlowe close.

“Happy New Year, darlin’,” he said, then kissed her.

“Happy New Year, Hank.” She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Let’s hope it’s a good one.”

“Any resolutions?” She grinned.

“Not yet. You?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“As long as it isn’t to stay away from me.”

Marlowe laughed. “I break them all the time. You can see how my resolution to never date another cowboy went.”

Hank chuckled. “Make it no cowboys except me.”

“I could do that.”

“Do you want to go yet?”

“Not yet. I’m having a wonderful time. I know a lot of the people sitting with us, not all, but I like them. What a great bunch.”

“I’ve been friends with the men since most of us were kids.”

“You need friends like that. I have that with Dylan and Peyton.”

“I know you do. Okay, we’ll stick around for a while. Since the weather’s cooperating, we’ll stay.”

He watched her take her cellphone from her pocket and grin. She opened the message and laughed, then held the phone up for Hank to see. It was a photo of Dylan and Peyton with party hats on, and holding glasses of wine with ‘Happy New Year’ on it.

Hank chuckled. “They look like they’re having fun. I’m sure you miss being with them.”

“I do, but I love this.”

A little while later, Hank laughed when Marlowe collapsed onto her chair after a line dance.

“I should have gotten in better shape before tonight so I could keep up.”

“You’re in great shape. You had fun, though, right?”

“I’ve had a ball. I am ready to go whenever you are.” She glanced around. “It looks like everyone is leaving.”

“Yeah. I’ll get our coats in a minute. I’d rather sit here than stand in that line.”

“Makes perfect sense. That way, I can catch my breath.”

“I’m glad you had a good time.”

“I really did.” She smiled at him. “I usually don’t go out, but I’m so happy I did.”

“Me too, darlin’. I am ready to get some sleep, though.”

“Oh, me too. I’m glad I’m off tomorrow.”

“We’ll go riding.”

Marlowe smiled and nodded. He was happy to see her enjoying herself and with him. He knew he had a long way to go as far as gaining her trust, but she had to gain his too.

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Marlow gazed around the room with a content smile, waiting for the line at the coat check to thin out. When she looked over at Hank, he was staring at her.

“What?” she asked warily.

“Will you come home with me?”

“Yes,” Marlow replied, “But can we swing by my place so I can change?”

“No.” Hank declared firmly. “We can stop at your place to grab clothes for tomorrow, but you don’t get to take off those stockings or shoes.”

She shook her head and scoffed. “Men,” she muttered under her breath.

Hank looked at her in mock seriousness and stood, extending a hand to help her. “If you say so,” he said with a grin. “Let’s go.” They went to collect their coats, and Hank handed the woman their ticket and a ten-dollar bill as they left.

“Thank you so much,” she said as he put his hat on his head and started helping Marlowe into her coat.

As they exited the building, they halted when they saw fat snowflakes coming down from the sky.

“Oh, my,” Marlowe exclaimed. “I don’t think we should try to make it to your place, Hank. Why don’t you stay with me tonight?”

“All right, this is Spring City, after all, and like Clifton, it doesn’t have to be calling for snow; we still get it. Let’s get to your place before it gets any worse.”

He drove them both to her apartment and soon enough, they were in her warm home, taking off their outer clothing and heading straight for bed.

The following morning, Marlowe stretched her arms above her head and looked at the empty side of the bed. She smiled when she smelled bacon frying.



Tossing the sheet aside, she stood, pulled her robe on, and walked to the kitchen. She stopped in the doorway to watch Hank. He had his back to her, and she skimmed her eyes down that broad back to his tight ass in those Wranglers.

“Good morning,” she said and watched him turn to face her.

“Good morning.” He set the spatula down, strode to her, kissed her lips, and moved back to the stove. “Are you hungry?”

“I am. That bacon smells so good.” Her stomach growled and Hank chuckled.

“Take a seat. How do you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He began opening cupboards. “I need a bowl.”

“Second door to the left of the stove.”

“Thank you.” He removed the bowl and cracked several eggs into it. After adding a little milk, he beat them with a whisk then poured them into the pan.

Once the eggs were ready, he scooped some onto a plate and set it on the table.

“This smells so good.” She pulled a chair out and sat.

“Eat up. The snow has tapered off and we can go to my place and go riding.”

“I loved riding in the cold.”

“I do it all the time. It doesn’t matter how cold it is, it’s great being out in it.”

“I’ll bundle up.” She picked up a fork and dug into her eggs and moaned after the first bite. “You can cook for me anytime.”

“I’d love to, darlin’.” Hank winked, making her laugh.

Once they finished with breakfast, Marlowe packed a bag, and they walked out to Hank’s truck and climbed inside.

“I’m glad you warmed it up,” Marlowe said.

“The seats heat too. Just press the button on the dash and your butt will be warm in no time, though I’d rather be the one to do that for you.”

Marlowe laughed. “Sounds good to me, cowboy.”

“You’re too easy.” Hank grinned.

“Do you think so? Well, I’ll have to play harder to get then.”

“No. Please don’t do that.”

“Too late for that, anyway. I’m only easy with you.”

“Damn good thing, and you were far from being easy.” He shook his head.

“I didn’t like cowboys.”

*“Didn’t?”*

When she laughed, he did too.

“Caught me.”

Marlowe shook her head as she realized she liked *this* cowboy. Hank was a wonderful man, and she had a lot of fun with him. She was willing to find out where this was going. The thought that her heart could be broken yet again by another cowboy scared the hell out of her, but life was about taking chances, and she wanted to take them with Hank.

She just wasn’t sure how he felt about the relationship. Was he willing to see if this would lead to something permanent, or was he too skittish to try that route again? She wanted a lasting relationship this time. A man to love only her and not a whiskey bottle or drugs. She mentally shook her head. She had tried so hard to stand by Johnnie, but things spiraled out of control, and all he cared about was numbing his pain in any way he could.

“What are you thinking? I can hear the wheels turning,” Hank said.

“About Johnnie. I tried to help him,” she whispered.

“I know you did, but Marlowe, he had to learn to help himself. He had to *want* to stop drinking. Apparently, he didn’t.”

“He even went to rehab. I told you this before.”

“Why are you thinking about it now?”

“Because I realized how much I like you, Hank, but I am so scared. Johnnie didn’t start out bad.”

“So, you think I could turn... bad?”

“Truthfully, no. You’re a good man, but so was he. He just got caught in the middle of things and didn’t want to stop. He was at the top of his profession, but when he got hurt, he should have done as the doctor told him. There was to be no riding until he was completely healed. He couldn’t do it. He abused pain meds like candy, and when they were no longer available, he turned to whiskey. I’m sorry. I know I already told you this. I’m trying to convince myself that it wasn’t my fault.” She looked at him. “I want to see you, Hank. I’d like to see if we have anything here.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing? I like you a lot, Marlowe, so I’m not seeing you just for sex. Although that is amazing, it’s not all about that.”

“I agree. I’m sure you don’t want to get hurt any more than I do, but we have to keep going to see, don’t we?”

“I believe so.”

Marlowe smiled. At least they were on the same page, and she hoped it amounted to something because she knew she was already in a lot of trouble here.

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Hank knew that Marlowe needed to be sure he wouldn’t hurt her, and he would try not to, but even he was afraid. He wasn’t enthusiastic about going through that pain again. It had

been a long time since it happened, but the memory was still vivid in his mind.

He pulled into the driveway of his home and parked near the porch, glancing at her before turning off the engine.

“Let’s take your stuff inside, then go for a ride.”

“Sounds good.” Marlowe stepped out of the truck, grabbed her bag from the back seat, and joined him at the front of the vehicle. Hank took the bag from her and held her hand as they walked inside. The kitchen felt much warmer, and both exhaled in relief.

“Do you need anything before we head out?”

Marlowe smiled up at him and touched his face.

“A kiss.”

“My pleasure,” Hank murmured before pressing his lips to hers. He moaned when she wound her arms around his neck and leaned closer.

“Are you sure you want to take this ride? You know what Montana weather is like,” he said when she pulled away.

She laughed softly. “What kind of question is that? Of course, I want to go for a ride.”

Hank chuckled and winked playfully. “We can do that once we get back. Let’s leave now before it gets too cold.”

Marlowe rolled her eyes. “I don’t think it could get any colder than this.”

“Don’t say that out loud,” Hank warned with a smirk. “Montana will prove you wrong real fast.”

“That’s true. Forget I said it.” Marlowe smiled.

“Let me take your bag to the bedroom, then we can go.”

“All right.”

Hank stared at her for a few seconds, then carried the bag to the bedroom. He set it beside the bed. He glanced at the doorway and sighed. He was in some serious trouble here. The feelings he had for her scared him. Sure, he knew the odds

were that it wouldn't happen again, but it wasn't a hundred percent, and he had no desire whatsoever to feel that way or be humiliated again.

"It's been five years," he muttered, then shook his head. It didn't matter if it was fifty years ago. It was something he'd never get past. He could never explain to anyone the feelings that went through him that day. The thought of going through that again made him wonder if he ever wanted to get married.

Taking a deep breath, he returned to the kitchen to see Marlowe looking out the window in the door. She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled.

"It's snowing harder again."

Hank walked to the door and looked out the window.

"Do you still want to go?"

"Of course. Unless you don't."

"I love riding in it, but if you'd rather not, I'm sure we can find something to do." He grinned.

"We'll go riding."

"Damn it." Hank grinned when she laughed. "Come on, then."

Marlowe placed her hand in his, and they walked out of the house and then to the barn. After saddling the horses, they headed out toward the east pasture.

Hank glanced at her to see she had the wool scarf he'd given her up over her nose, but he could tell when she smiled at him because of her eyes. Damn, was he falling too soon? They haven't been seeing each other for long, but how long does it take to fall—*whoa!* Who said anything about love?

"Asking for more damn heartache, Barnett," he muttered.

"Did you say something?"

Hank shook his head. "Talking to myself."

"Is it a good conversation?"

"Probably not."

Marlowe laughed. "I have a lot of those, too. But talking to myself is my way of having an intelligent conversation."

"You'd like to think so, wouldn't you?" He laughed when he heard her gasp. "I'm kidding. I'm sure it's a brilliant conversation."

"You'll pay for that remark."

"Son of a bitch. I said I was kidding." He tried not to grin.

Marlowe laughed, and the frigid air formed a cloud before her.

"Are you warm enough, Marlowe? Whenever you want to go back, we can."

"I'm fine so far. Your land is beautiful, Hank. Especially in the snow."

"This field is where I plant come spring. Rows and rows of wheat as far as you can see."

"You love it, don't you?"

He glanced at her. "I do."

"I can tell." She shivered. "Is it getting colder?"

"Feels like it. How about we head back and get warm in front of a fire?"

"Sounds good." She turned the horse, nudged it, and tore off through the field. Snow flew up behind the horse as it ran.

Hank shook his head as he watched her ride away. He nudged his horse and ran after her. He knew he'd catch her because there weren't many horses faster than his. He grinned as he got closer. He saw her look over her shoulder and laugh.

When he got to her, he rode alongside her, reached over, and pulled her out of the saddle and onto his lap. She screamed but held on to him.

"My horse," she said.

"Will find her way to the barn." Hank kissed her beanie-covered head.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and placed her head on his shoulder; nothing felt so right.

He rode them into the barn, lowered her to her feet, and then dismounted. He nodded toward the door, and she turned to see her horse riding into the barn.

“Told you,” he said, cupping her face in his gloved hands. “They know where their food is.”

“I’ll get her, and after we cool them down, we can go inside and warm up. I’m freezing.” Her teeth chattered.

“You can go inside. I’ll take care of them.”

“No. I know the rules. You ride, you put the horse up. I know what I’m doing.”

“I know you do, but if you’re cold...”

“You’re cold too, Hank. It will be quicker if we both do it.”

“All right.” He pulled her close. “I promise to warm you up.”

“And I will hold you to that promise.”

Hank grinned and kissed her lips. They cooled the horses, then walked to the house. Once inside, they removed their coats and hats. After hanging them up, Hank took her hand and led her to the living room.

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Marlowe sat on the sofa and watched Hank light the logs in the fireplace and the flames wrapped around them, cracking and popping. She smiled when he looked at her. He was such a wonderful man, and she hoped he didn’t break her heart.

Hank sat beside her, took her hand, and then looked at her.

“I like you, Marlowe.”

“I like you too. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m aware of that. We’ve both been through a lot, but I’m willing to see if this goes anywhere. I know I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

“I feel the same. You know how I feel, but you have changed my mind, Hank. I just hope it continues.”

“I do, too. I’m not sure where this will go, but don’t we deserve to find out?”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath. “Hank, I have to get this out. I want to get married again one day and have kids. I’m thirty-two, and I don’t want to wait much longer. I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m just telling you that is what I’m looking for.”

Hank raked his fingers through his hair and sighed.

“Marlowe, honestly, I’m not sure marriage is how I want to go.”

“What? Why be in a relationship if you don’t expect it to lead to something?”

“I understand what you’re saying, but to go through that pain again...”

“The odds of that happening again are low.”

“But it could. You have no idea how it felt,” he snapped.

“And you have no idea what I went through with Johnnie. All he did was get drunk, and lie. I won’t have that in my life again, but it doesn’t mean I’m not willing to take a chance with someone. I was hoping this would amount to something, but if you have no intention of making a commitment, then why bother?”

“Marlowe—”

She stood and glared at him.

“I’m taking a chance with you,” she snapped. “I said no cowboys ever again, but you had me convinced you weren’t like that.”

“Like what? Honest?”



“You weren’t honest, Hank! Not once did you say you’d never get married.”

Hank got to his feet, and his eyes narrowed as he stared at her.

“Just when should I have brought that up? When we first met? What was I supposed to think after you tell me no cowboys?”

“Well, you obviously thought you could change my mind. But now, I’m an idiot... *again*, because I believed you.” She walked toward the hall.

“Where are you going?”

She turned to look at him. “To get my bag and then I’m going home.”

Hank folded his arms and stared at her.

“Just how do you plan on doing that?”

Marlowe gasped. “You’ll take me—” She stopped when he shook his head. “Or I’ll call Peyton.”

“Shit. Marlowe, let’s talk about this.”

“We did, but apparently not enough.” She went to the bedroom, grabbed her bag, and headed for the kitchen where she pulled her coat on in jerky movements. She was so pissed she’d be surprised if steam wasn’t coming from her ears. She tugged the beanie down on her head, opened the door, and walked to the truck.

She climbed into the cab and tried to keep the tears at bay. She *knew* it. She knew he would hurt her. She fell way too fast, and now she was paying for it. *Again*.

She watched him come out of the house, walk to the truck, climb in, and start it. He never looked at her as he drove her home.

When he pulled around the back of the building, he parked and looked at her.

“Marlowe...”

Without a word, she opened the door, climbed out, picked up her bag, and slammed the door closed. She strode around the front and started up the steps.

“Marlowe, can’t we talk about this?”

Taking a deep breath, she looked at him and shook her head.

“We’ve said all we need to. Goodbye, Hank.” She turned and ran up the steps, then entered the apartment. She slammed the door as hard as she could, then opened it and shoved it closed again in frustration.

After removing her coat and beanie, she sat on the couch and stared at the wall. She should have stuck to her guns and not gone out with him. She knew he was trouble the minute she saw him. Damn that man!

Marlowe sat on her sofa, watching TV the following day, when her phone buzzed. She picked it up to see Dylan’s face. Marlowe didn’t want to talk to her because she would know something was wrong, but if she didn’t answer, Dylan would keep calling or show up. They had all agreed to always answer when one of them phoned.

With a sigh, Marlowe answered.

“Happy New Year, Dylan,” she said.

“Happy New Year to you. Did you have a good time last night?”

“I did... for a while.”

“Uh, oh. What does that mean?”

“I’m not seeing Hank anymore.” She mentally swore when her voice caught.

“What did he do?” Dylan growled.

As Dylan listened, Marlowe told her about last night, trying so hard not to break down.

“I will remove his balls... painfully.”

“God only knows what Peyton will want to do to him.” Marlowe smiled.

Dylan laughed. “Yeah, maybe we should just let her have a go at him. Marlowe, I’m so sorry. Do you want to come here? Zoey and I would love to have you.”

“No. I’m afraid I won’t be very good company. Damn it, Dylan. I should have known better. No cowboys, and what happens? I fall for one again.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I knew what to tell you.”

“I know. Peyton is the one I’m worried about. She warned me, and I thought I knew so much better. She was right. I fell for him, and he broke my heart. In such a short time.”

They talked for a while, but Marlowe just wanted to be alone and not talk about Hank. She knew she’d think about him, but she couldn’t speak about him for fear of breaking down. She was so sick of crying over men and especially cowboys.

“When are you going to learn?” She sniffed. “Now. I’m going to learn now. No cowboys. Ever again.”

## Chapter Eight

Hank walked from the barn, pulling his gloves off and stuffing them into his coat pockets. It was February and bitterly cold, but he didn't care. He was miserable without Marlowe. He hadn't seen her in a month and missed her so much, but he knew he had some thinking to do. Did he want to take that chance again? He had strong feelings for her, but could he be in love with her in such a short time?

"Since when does love go by a timetable?" he murmured as he climbed the steps, wiped his feet, and entered the kitchen.

It was too cold outside, but the stalls had to be mucked out. Hank's ranch hands didn't have to do much in the winter except check the fence and clean the barns, but that was fine. They worked their asses off in the hot summer, and he paid them well. A rancher or farmer baked in the summer and froze in the winter. It was a fact of life.

He removed his coat and hat and then hung them up. He stared at the hat Marlowe had bought him for Christmas and hated how things ended with them. What if he wanted to marry her, and she did what Sylvia had done? How would he ever survive that pain and hurt a second time?

In his heart, he knew the odds of him going through that again were slim, but it didn't mean it couldn't happen. Sylvia almost destroyed him, and he swore he'd never go through it again.

His good friend went through several engagements and swore never again, but now Noah Conway found a good woman and settled down. Could Hank have that? With Marlowe?

He missed her. He wanted to call her but feared the reception he'd get. She'd been so pissed the last time he saw her, and it was his fault. He should have been more upfront about his feelings about marriage.

"She had a terrible marriage," he muttered.

That hit home. She'd been hurt, but wanted to find love again and raise a family. He wanted that, too, but that pain never disappeared, and he could admit he was a wuss when making a commitment again.

He had to grab a shower, since he was expected at his parents' house for dinner. He spent as much time with them as he could. He didn't want to look back after they were gone and regret the times he hadn't visited.

Later, as he sat at the table, he moved the corn around on his plate, not really hungry.

"Hank? Are you going to eat your food or play with it?" his mother asked him.

"Sorry, Mom. I'm not very hungry."

"What's going on with you, son?" his father asked him.

"Nothing." He sighed. "Everything."

"Is it the ranch?"

"No, Dad. It's... a woman."

"The one you were seeing around Christmas?"

"Yes. It's over between us."

"Hank, you seemed happy." His mother frowned at him.

"I blew it. I told her I didn't think marriage was an option for me."

"Why? I thought you wanted to settle down and have kids."

"I did... but after being stood up—"

"You can't think that would happen again?"

"Who says it can't, Dad?" He shook his head. "I never even knew why. Sylvia owed me that much, at least. Maybe if I understood what had happened, I'd be better about it, but I have no idea why she didn't want to marry me."

"And you shouldn't care anymore. It's in the past. If this woman is your future, you need to have a serious discussion with yourself and then her."

“I know, Mom, but—”

“Life is full of disappointments, and we have to get past them. We can’t let them rule our lives. We make ourselves happy first. If you want her in your life, Hank, you’d better do something before another man snatches her up.”

“I don’t want that to happen, but I’m not sure she’ll even see me again. I hurt her.”

“Well, that is also a fact of life. We all get hurt. Hank, do you want to be alone?” His mother stared at him.

“No, ma’am. I want what you and Dad have.”

“Then you’d better get your ass in gear and go after her. Eat your dinner,” his mother said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

After dinner, he helped clean up, then drove home. He knew his parents were right. He did need to have a talk with himself, and then see Marlowe. He was afraid he’d ruined it with her, but he had to know for sure.

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Marlowe handed a little girl an ice cream cone and smiled. The shop was busy. Spring was on its way in Montana.

“Enjoy and come back and see us.”

The little girl smiled and waved as her mother led her from the shop. Marlowe watched them leave and her heart ached. She wanted children so bad.

“Are you okay?” Peyton asked.

“No, but I will be.” She looked at her. “I miss him so much, Peyton.”

“I know you do. I’m so sorry. Give him time. He’ll come around.”

“It’s been months, Peyton, so I don’t think he will. He’s too afraid of getting married.”

Marlowe had told Peyton and Dylan about Hank being stood up, and they understood his hesitation, but they also thought he needed to get over it.

“We want a good relationship in our lives, and we’ve been through hell and back with some men, so Hank needs to realize it wasn’t meant to be with her, and move on,” Dylan had commented.

Marlowe agreed. If she, Peyton, and Dylan wanted to find love again, why wouldn’t he? She believed she wasn’t meant to spend her life with Johnnie and someone new would come along. She’d been hoping it was Hank. Maybe not at first, but later, after getting to know him, she knew she wanted to be with him. She thought he was different.

“That’ll teach you to think,” she muttered.

When they closed for the day, she climbed the steps to her apartment, opened the door, and entered. She tossed her purse onto the bar, and after locking the door, she headed for the bathroom to take a bath. Then she’d watch TV for a while and head to bed.

Just once, she’d like to get a full night’s rest without thinking about Hank. Why did she fall for another damn cowboy? What was wrong with her? The minute she found out he was a cowboy, she should have run in the opposite direction and never looked back.

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As winter moved into spring, Hank couldn’t stop thinking about Marlowe. He missed her so much, but maybe it was for the best. His fears kept him at a distance in any relationship.

“How are you ever going to have kids if you don’t settle down?”

Hank sighed as he rode his horse along the fence. He had strong feelings for her, but was it love? Even if it were, could he take a chance with her? Would Marlowe stay with him?

After all this time, he still feared the rejection and he knew, in his heart, that if Marlowe left him, he'd never survive it.

“You don't have her now, Einstein.”

The last he'd heard, Sylvia was married now with two kids. He hoped she was happy. He really did. She'd found someone new, and he was still struggling to get past the pain, and her leaving him with no real explanation.

“It doesn't matter now.”

He rode along the fence, not really seeing it. His mind was racing. He was terrified of falling for Marlowe and his heart would be broken again. That was life, but some people seemed to go through it more than others.

He stared up at the blue, clear sky. It was going to be a beautiful day and he wished he was spending it with Marlowe, but he wasn't sure she'd ever speak to him again.

It was coming into his busy season. Winter wheat was planted early enough in the fall as to have four to six weeks of growth prior to dormancy. This provides ample time for plants to establish a root system and produce tillers. Tillers will form during the fall, but produce most of their growth in the spring. The wheat he'd planted in the fall would be harvested in late May and his busy time would begin.

He reined his horse to a stop and glanced around his land. What good did it do him to do all of this without her by his side? That's where he wanted her. Right beside him, but he needed to get himself to where he wasn't afraid to take a chance again.

With a deep sigh, he spurred the horse and ran it back to the barn. It was time to do some serious thinking. Did he want to be alone for the rest of his life or did he want Marlowe with him? The answer was simple, but was the risk too big?

When he finished cooling his horse, he strode across the yard, entered the house, walked to the living room, and sat on the sofa.

Taking a deep breath, he removed his phone from his pocket, scrolled through the contacts until he found the



number he was searching for, and called it.

“Hello?”

“Sylvia? It’s Hank.” Silence met him. “Sylvia?”

“I’m here. Hank, why are you calling me?”

“Why did you leave me at the altar?”

“After all this time?”

“You owe me an explanation. I don’t give a rat’s ass how long it’s been. You humiliated me.” He tried to curb his temper, but this conversation wasn’t going to be easy.

“Hank, I can’t apologize enough. I knew I didn’t love you enough. Not how you deserved.”

“You were fine the night before.”

“Not really. I was having doubts, and I shouldn’t have. If I loved you enough to marry you, I wouldn’t have had those doubts. I never meant to hurt you. Are you married now?”

“No. Do you know why? Because of you. I can’t go through that again. Not just the part about you leaving me at the altar. All of it. I loved you, Sylvia and you destroyed me that day.”

“But you got over it, didn’t you? Doesn’t that show you that we weren’t meant to be together?”

Hank sighed. “I got over loving you, but not the humiliation. If something embarrassed you, would you want to do it again? Even if the odds of it happening again were slim, would you do it?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Then you get where I’m coming from. I met someone, Sylvia, and I’m terrified to commit to her. She is the best thing that has ever happened to me, but I ran her off because of you,” he snapped.

“I’m sorry, Hank. I don’t know what else I can say. If you love her, you must take that chance. If it doesn’t work, then it

wasn't meant to be. Just like we weren't, and you should admit that."

"I do admit it. In fact, if we had gotten married, we'd probably be divorced by now, but that's not the point, is it? You shouldn't have let it go as far as it did. I could have done without being stood up. You have no idea how that felt."

"No, I don't but it was for the best. Hank, you have to see that. You're such a good man, and you'll make someone a wonderful husband. It just wasn't with me. Talk to this woman you're in love with. Tell her how you feel. Let her decide, Hank."

"I didn't say I was in love with her."

When Sylvia laughed, he gritted his teeth.

"You are if you're so upset that you call me after five years. You said it yourself, she's the best thing to happen to you. Don't let her go, Hank. You'll regret it. You need to get married, have those kids you so desperately want, and be happy. I am."

Hank sighed. "I'm happy for you, Sylvia. I am. I'm not sure if Marlowe will even talk to me."

"Make her. You used to make me listen. Maybe that's why I didn't tell you I couldn't marry you. I was afraid you'd talk me out of it. You, Hank Barnett, can talk anyone into doing anything. Whether they want to or not. I've seen you in action."

A grin lifted his lips. She was right. He did need to see Marlowe and see if he could salvage the relationship.

"Thanks, Sylvia. I think I'll try to do that, and thanks for not hanging up on me."

"I would never do that. I've thought about you a lot over the years. I want you to be happy, too."

"We'll see. Well, take care. I'm glad we talked."

"Me too. Goodbye, Hank." She disconnected.

He put the phone on the arm of the sofa and stared into the empty hearth. Could he talk with Marlowe about this? The last time they'd been together hadn't gone well, but Sylvia was right. If Marlowe meant so much to him, he had to do something to keep her in his life.

Sighing, he got to his feet. He'd get something to eat, shower, and head to bed. Maybe he'd get his courage up to see Marlowe tomorrow. He hoped so anyway.

The following day, he drove into town and his gut was in knots. What if she wouldn't talk to him? What would he do?

"Not much you can do," he muttered as he pulled into the parking lot of the diner. He needed some food in him first. Maybe help him gain some courage.

When he entered the diner, people waved or called out to him. He nodded, then took a seat at the counter. The bell above the door jingled and he glanced over his shoulder to see Creed enter, and take a seat beside him.

"How are you, Hank? I haven't seen you in a while."

"I'm good, Creed. You?"

"Busy."

"I've heard rustling is at an all-time high around here."

"It is. I don't know what's going on, but it's getting ridiculous."

Hank looked at him.

"Are you doing okay, now?"

"Yeah. I lost a year, but I'm fine now. I just wish we would have caught them."

"They're still out there?"

"Yes. Anytime someone was arrested, it was never one of them."

"I'm sure you want to get them."

"They killed an agent and would have killed me, Alex, and Eli if help hadn't arrived. All of us want those bastards."

Hank nodded. It was a little over four years ago when Creed, Alex Reeves, Eli Hawkins, and Mac Carter, all Montana Department of Livestock agents, caught rustlers trying to steal cattle. It didn't go well. Mac had been killed, and Alex, Eli, and Creed were shot. Creed was in a coma for six months, and had amnesia for six months after waking. Although he seemed to be fine, Hank knew it still had to weigh on his mind at how close he'd come to dying. Hank wasn't sure how the man coped. The memories alone were enough to keep a man indoors, and to know those men were still out there, had to be alarming.

Once Connie brought his lunch, he picked up his burger and took a bite, trying not to moan at the taste.

"Are you seeing anyone, Creed?" Hank picked up his glass of tea and sipped it.

"No. You?"

"Was."

"Was?"

"Yeah, I'm an idiot."

Creed chuckled. "Aren't all men when it comes to a woman?"

"Ain't that the truth," Hank said.

"What happened?"

If anyone else had asked, Hank would tell them to mind their own business, but Creed was a close friend. The man had been through a lot and not from just the shooting. He'd lost his wife and baby years ago. Hank would love to see his friend settle down, but he was sure, like him, Creed had some issues to overcome.

How any man would want to get married and have kids after what he'd gone through, Hank couldn't imagine. He took a deep breath and told Creed about Marlowe and what happened between them.

"You know, when I first met Marlowe, she told me she didn't date cowboys anymore and I convinced her to take a

chance on me, and she did—”

“And you broke her heart. Just like she thought you would. Damn, Hank. Grow some balls and tell her how you feel. You’re right. You are an idiot.”

“What a good friend you are, jerk-off.”

Creed burst out laughing.

“You’re the one who hurt a woman, *who you said you wouldn’t*, by the way, and you call me names?”

“Defense mechanism. You know, you should find someone too.”

“It’s hard to do, Hank. I wouldn’t mind settling down, but I’m not sure I’d want kids. I don’t want to put another woman through that.” Creed looked at him. “You know, like you not wanting to be stood up again.” He raised his eyebrow.

“I get it. My situation is nothing like yours but that doesn’t make it less scary.”

“You do what you think is best, but if it’s bothering you that much, you need to talk to her.”

“I came into town to do that.”

“So, why are you here at the diner?”

“Trying to get my courage up.” Hank shook his head.

“Shit, you need to go to Dewey’s for that. Connie doesn’t serve hard liquor.”

Hank grinned. “I could sure use some.”

“You know, men think they rule. We don’t. My dad always says my mom is the boss. He said after seeing her job, he didn’t want it. Women can terrify a man with just a damn look. Wren would shoot me a look that should have dropped me where I stood.”

“My mom does that. You know that *Mom look*.”

“We’ve all seen it. Seriously, Hank. You’re not going to know where you stand if you don’t talk to Marlowe.”

Hank sighed. "I will. I'll head to her shop once I finish my lunch."

"Good."

Nothing more was said between the men. Hank knew Creed was right. How would he know if he had another chance or not if he didn't try?

After finishing his lunch, he paid Connie, slapped Creed on the shoulder, and walked outside. He stared along the sidewalk to the awning over the ice cream shop. *Shit!* He didn't want to do this.

"Man up. Grow some balls," he muttered then took a deep breath and walked to the shop.

Opening the door, he stepped inside, and groaned at the line of people in front of him. He looked over their heads but didn't see Marlowe. Peyton was behind the glass cases, waiting on people and another woman was helping her, but Marlowe wasn't around. He pushed his way past the line of people and shot them a look when they grumbled about him jumping the line.

"Hush, I'm not here for ice cream." He stepped in front of the case. Peyton glanced at him and did a double take.

"Hank. What are you doing here?" she asked him with suspicion. He was certain she knew what had happened between him and Marlowe.

He mentally snorted. Of course, she knew and no doubt, so did Dylan, and he was sure they weren't fans of his right now.

"Is Marlowe around?"

"She took today off." Peyton looked over the customers. "Next."

Hank was sure he'd just been dismissed. Well, if Marlowe was off today, maybe he could catch her at home. He nodded at Peyton, though she didn't look at him again, and walked out. He walked to the alley behind the stores, then to the steps of her apartment. He wasn't sure of the welcome he'd get, but he hoped she didn't kick him down the metal steps.

As he stood at the bottom of them, he stared up at the stoop. Would she even answer the door when she saw it was him? He should put his finger over the peephole. He chuckled because there was no way she'd open the door without seeing who it was.

Taking a deep breath, he climbed the stairs, and knocked on the door.

"What do you want, Hank?" she called through the door.

"I'd like to talk to you, Marlowe. Could you open the door?"

"Oh, so now you want to talk. I think we said all we needed to. Go away, Hank."

"Marlowe, please—"

"Go away," she shouted.

Hank shook his head. He knew it wouldn't go well, but he'd been hoping she'd, at least, open the door.

"I'm not leaving until I say what I came to say."

"I'm not listening."

*Hardhead!*

"Fine. I'll say it anyway. Marlowe, when I met you, I was instantly attracted to you, but the feelings scared me. I know being stood up probably won't happen again, but you never know. I loved Sylvia. Well, I thought I did but it wasn't meant to be. I faced that a long time ago, but Marlowe, I'm scared. I'm scared of losing you, and even though we're apart now, I'm hoping you'll forgive me and see me again. I'm... crazy about you, darlin'." He stared at the door, but when he didn't hear anything, he took a deep breath. "Okay, Marlowe. I'll go and you'll never hear from me again. I wish you luck in all you do."

Hank waited a few more seconds but the door didn't open. He had ruined it with her, and he had no one but himself to blame. He'd go home, get his Callahan whiskey out of the cupboard, and get good and drunk. He trotted down the steps, climbed into his truck and drove home.

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Marlowe sat on the sofa as tears rolled down her cheeks. She wanted to open that door, but she couldn't let him back into her life. He hurt her, and she knew he would.

"You have no one to blame except yourself. You knew not to get involved, but you did it anyway." She shook her head. "You deserve this."

She brushed the tears away, stood, then walked to her bedroom. She had some errands to run and once she got home, there was no way she was going back out until work tomorrow.

After getting dressed, she pulled on a light sweater, opened the door, and peered out. She was sure he was gone, but he was also very stubborn. If he thought he could wait her out, he would.

She didn't see him or his truck, so she stepped onto the stoop, closed and locked the door behind her, then jogged down the steps. She strode through the alley and around the front.

It was early, but there were a good many people out and about. It was April and the Clifton Bed and Breakfast, and the Bur Oak guest ranch in Spring City, were open. The towns thrived during the season.

Marlowe entered the pharmacy to pick up some supplies, and smiled when she saw Kenzie Porter walking around.

"Hey, Kenzie."

"Marlowe! How nice to see you."

"You too. How have you been?"

"Wonderful. You?" Kenzie tilted her head and Marlowe was sure Kenzie knew all was not right.

"I'm okay. How's Cash? Sunny and Pops?"



“They’re all doing great.” Kenzie smiled.

“I’m really happy that you and Cash got back together. I know you were miserable without him, even though you wouldn’t admit it.”

Kenzie laughed. “There was no way I’d let that man know I still loved him.”

Marlowe grinned. “I don’t blame you, but it worked out, didn’t it? You’re both very happy.”

“We are. Even more so now.” Kenzie grinned. “I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, my God! Kenzie, that’s fantastic. I’m so happy for you both. Please tell Cash for me.”

“I will. He’s on cloud nine. We all are. I’m sorry, but I’m picking up a prescription then I have to return to work. Have a wonderful day, Marlowe. I hope to see you again.”

Marlowe smiled, and nodded then watched as she got her order, and walked out. She was happy for Kenzie and Cash. They’d been through so much, and now were having a baby. She sighed as she wondered if she’d ever know the joy of being a mother. She had wanted children so badly, but she was glad now that she hadn’t had any with Johnnie. She was sure he wouldn’t have been a good father. His drinking was more important than family.

Hank entered her mind, and she shook her head. That was over and there would never be another cowboy in her life. She knew better, but saw him anyway. What is it with men? Women usually want to settle down, have a family, and find a good husband, but men couldn’t care less about it. Some of them thought of marriage as a noose around their necks. But she knew a lot of men who were more than willing to settle down, be a good husband and father. Why couldn’t she find a man like that?

She entered the ice cream shop and smiled at all the people inside. Then she made her way to the back office, waving at their employee as she did. She entered the room to see Peyton sitting at the desk.

“Hey.”

Peyton looked at her and frowned.

“Why are you here? You took today off, remember?”

“Yes. I just wanted to stop in to see how it’s going.”

“It’s fine.” Peyton tilted her head. “Did you see Hank?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“He came here looking for you and I’d say by the sadness in your eyes that it didn’t go very well.”

“I didn’t really *see* him. He came to the apartment.”

As Peyton listened, Marlowe told her what Hank had said.

“Wait. You listened to him... *through the door*, but didn’t talk to him? Marlowe, that is so unlike you. I would think you’d confront him.”

“I couldn’t. I knew if I opened that door, he’d convince me to give him another chance. Peyton, I have heard that conversation so many times, and look where that got me.”

“I think Hank is different,” Peyton said.

“What? You hate cowboys.”

“I don’t *hate* them. I just don’t want another one, but you were so happy with him. I think you need to listen to him, Marlowe. Seriously.”

“I cannot believe you’re even suggesting it.”

“I love you and I don’t like seeing you hurt, and you are hurting, Marlowe. A lot.”

“I miss him,” she whispered.

“Then talk to him. If you don’t want to take my advice, then talk to Dylan. See what she thinks. If we both agree that you and Hank need to talk, then do it. We want you happy and you were when you were with him. Give him a chance.”

Marlowe sighed. “I’ll think about it. I’m going to go see Dylan. I’ll see what she thinks. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Marlowe left the office, walked through the shop, and outdoors. The crowd of people was getting larger, and she knew it would be another good year for tourism in the little towns.

She loved it here and never wanted to leave. She didn't want to run into Hank, but she knew she'd just have to be prepared for that situation. He didn't seem the type of man to give up, but he told her he'd leave her alone and she knew he was a man of his word. She admired that because the men she'd been associated with, never were.

She sighed as she walked around to the alley to the back of her apartment and climbed into her SUV. She'd visit Dylan and tell her about Hank. She knew Dylan would be honest.

“Just like Peyton,” she murmured as she drove out of the alley to head for Dylan's ranch.

## Chapter Nine

Hank was miserable. He missed Marlowe but he told her he'd leave her alone and he would. He really messed up and he didn't know how he would ever be able to fix it. He was in love with her.

He'd barely slept since leaving her place. He was running on fumes and his ass was dragging.

There was so much to do but he couldn't concentrate on any of it. He had the men tending to the crop, but he didn't want to do anything.

Why should he when the woman he wanted beside him wanted nothing to do with him? He didn't know what to do. He tried to get her to listen, but she wouldn't even speak with him, and it had cut him to the core.

It was still chilly in the mornings. Hank stood at the fence, leaning against the post, thinking of her. Would he get past this? He wasn't sure he wanted to.

"Hank."

He turned to see Carl strolling toward him.

"Carl, what's up?"

"We checked the fence and it's fine."

"Good. I think we're okay as far as rustlers. I don't have many horses, and we keep them close."

"That's true, but you never know. Those guys couldn't care less who they steal from."

"I know. Just have the guys take everything to the pasture and get started with the planting."

"Yes, sir."

Spring wheat varieties of hard red spring and durum are planted in the spring, typically in April and May, and are harvested starting in August. It was always a busy time for the farm, and he hoped it would take his mind off Marlowe.

That might work during the day, but at night, he lay in bed, thinking about her. He needed her back in his life. He just didn't know how to go about it.

Later that day, he had to make a trip to the Feed Store. He needed a new set of reins and couldn't wait any longer. He pulled into the parking lot, exited his truck, and entered the store. It was packed as usual on a Saturday.

As he walked through the store, he saw Dylan. He was hoping she wouldn't see him because he was sure she'd tear into him. Marlowe's friends were loyal if nothing else. He quickly picked up a set of reins and walked to the counter. He hoped to get out of here before she saw him.

"Hank."

"Shit," he muttered when he saw her barreling down on him.

"Dylan." He touched the brim of his hat.

"You need to get Marlowe to listen to you."

*What?* He sure hadn't expected that.

Hank sighed. "I tried, Dylan. She made it clear she was done with me."

"Then why is she so miserable? She misses you, Hank."

"I miss her too, but she won't listen."

"Make her. Go camp out on her stoop if you have to, but get her to listen."

"I can't believe you're telling me to do this."

"Because she was so happy when she was with you. You, Hank Barnett, need to man up and get that woman back. If you don't want to get married, fine, but tell her. If you're willing to be with her without marriage, tell her. You have to make her see you two belong together."

"I've thought of nothing else for months. I miss her terribly, but I don't want to be shot down again. I poured my heart out to her, and it didn't faze her a bit." He shook his head. "I'm not sure I want to go through that again."

“I don’t think you will. She’s missing you just as much, Hank. Go make her listen. It’s Tuesday, she’s off today, and I know she didn’t have any plans.”

Hank nodded. “I’ll go to her place once I get out of here.”

“Good, but I’m telling you that if you hurt her, you will lose those precious balls of yours.” She walked off.

Hank shuddered. Women had no problem threatening a man about his balls. He chuckled, and men never took the threat lightly. He knew he didn’t.

After paying for his items, he walked outside, climbed into his truck, and drove to the alley behind the shop. He parked and stared up at the door. Did he really want to go through this again?

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door, stepped out, and climbed the steps. At the door, he sighed, and knocked. Then waited.

When he didn’t hear anything, he knocked again. He looked over the rail of the stoop and noticed her vehicle was gone.

“Son of a bitch. The one time I get the nerve up, and she’s not home.” He turned to go down the steps when he saw her at the bottom of them.

“Marlowe.”

“What are you doing here, Hank?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“We said all we needed to.” She climbed the steps, moved around him, and unlocked the door. She entered the apartment, turned to face him, and closed the door in his face.

“Motherfucker,” he swore, and pounded on the door. “Marlowe, are we seriously going to do this again?” When she didn’t answer, he wanted to bang his head on the brick wall. Talk about a stubborn, hardheaded woman. This one took the cake.

He removed his hat, raked his fingers through his hair, and resettled the hat.

“Marlowe, come on. Let’s talk about this. I’ve missed you.”

“Please leave, Hank. I’ve learned my lesson once again.”

“Damn it, woman! I’m in love with you,” he shouted.

When he didn’t hear anything more, he sighed, and walked down the steps. He was done. There wasn’t anything more he could do. He stopped when he heard the lock turning, then the door opened. He looked up at her from under his hat and his heart broke when he saw the tears staining her cheeks.

“You... love me?”

“With all my heart, Marlowe.”

“I love you too,” she whispered, but he heard her.

He ran up the stairs, pulled her into his arms, and sighed when her arms wrapped around his waist. He placed his cheek on her head, and just held her. He never wanted to let her go.

“Let’s go inside, Hank.” She took his hand and led him into the apartment then to the sofa.

Hank removed his hat and coat then placed them on the arm of the chair. He nodded for her to sit, then he did. He took her hand and stared into her eyes. He could see pain there and he was sure she could see it in his eyes too.

“Marlowe, I’ve been so miserable without you. I’m sorry I hurt you. That was never my intention. I’m just a wuss when it comes to commitment. But I do want to be with you. I want to marry you and have kids with you. If that’s what you want.”

“I do, Hank, but you have to be sure. You have to know that I am not going to abandon you. In fact, if we’re going to do this, we can just go to the courthouse one day. I don’t need a big wedding. I had one and look how that turned out.”

Hank ran his hand along his nape. “Yeah, same here. But I want what you want, Marlowe. I want you to be happy.”

“I am now, Hank. I was devastated when you brought me home that night. I didn’t want anything to do with you. I was sure you’d done exactly what I thought you would. Hurt me.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. I would never intentionally hurt you. It’s my fears that pushed you away when all I want is to have you close.”

She leaned close and kissed his lips.

“I need you, Hank.”

“I need you too, Marlowe.”

She stood, took his hand, and led him to the bedroom.

“I hope I make it,” he said, and grinned when she laughed.

“I hope you do too.”

Once inside the bedroom, she wrapped her arms around his waist, and he lowered his head to kiss her lips. Cupping his hand around the back of her neck, he deepened the kiss, then without taking his lips from hers, he lifted her, and placed her on the center of the bed, then lay down beside her. He toed off his boots, and she kicked off her shoes.

Hank knew he needed to slow down, or it would be over before it started, but he wanted her so much.

He lifted her sweater over her head, and tossed it to the floor, then he moved his hand down her belly to the waistband of her jeans. He unsnapped them, lowered the zipper, and slipped his hand inside. He raised his head and stared into her eyes.

Her lips curved into a smile as her hand ventured inside his boxer briefs and she squeezed his cock, causing him to moan. Rising from the bed, he pulled down her pants, then stood back to take in the sight of her. He had never loved a woman more, not even Sylvia.

He discarded his jeans and T-shirt before climbing atop her, careful to keep his body weight off her.

“This feels like coming home,” he whispered against the shell of her ear.



“To me too,” she answered, affectionately running her fingers over his face.

“Damn, I forgot to get a condom,” he sighed, pulling away from her.

“Hank? I don’t want anything between us anymore.”

“I don’t either.” He leaned down and kissed her neck before traveling down to her chest and taking one of her nipples into his mouth as he toyed with the other. His desire for her was so intense that it made time stand still; his fingers played amongst her curls, seeking what lay beneath them and tasting the sweetness that awaited him. He moved down her body and spread her legs wider as he buried his face between her curls. As he swiped his tongue across her, she gasped in pleasure. He kept at it until she called out his name as she came undone around him.

Hank moved up her body and inched into her. He groaned when he felt himself buried deep inside her and moved his hips, taking her over the edge. When Marlowe came, he groaned low in his throat. He came and buried his face in the crook of her neck and tried to catch his breath. Hank slowly lifted his head and looked into Marlowe’s beautiful blue eyes before lightly kissing her lips and rolling off her to lie beside her. He pulled her into his arms and sighed contentedly as she draped an arm across his waist and put her head on his chest.

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Marlowe was happy, but cautious. What if he really didn’t want to marry her? She sighed.

“What’s wrong?” his voice rumbled under her ear.

“Nothing.”

“Marlowe.”

She pushed up from him and stared at him.

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Don’t doubt me now, Marlowe. I’m here, aren’t I? If I thought I couldn’t commit to you, I wouldn’t be. I don’t care where you want to get married, just as long as you do. If you want to get married in the Clifton church, we will. It is all up to you. I will do whatever makes you happy.”

“You make me happy, Hank. I just want you to be, too. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Well, how about you talk it over with Peyton and Dylan because I know they’d want to be involved.”

Marlowe laughed. “You know them too well already.” She nibbled on her bottom lip. “If I tell them we’re getting married at the courthouse, I know they’ll accept that, but they won’t be happy about it.”

“We can get married in the church. Just promise me you’ll show up.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I love you, Hank. I want to marry you. Obviously, Sylvia wasn’t sure. I am.”

“I talked to her.”

“What? When?”

“I called her and asked her why—”

“You still have her number?” Marlowe wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“I do, but only because I thought if I deleted it, I’d never find out why she did what she did. It’s deleted now. Of course, she was shocked to hear from me after all this time, but once we talked, I felt better. She knew something I didn’t. We weren’t meant to get married. She’s happy now, and I’m glad for her. She told me I needed to make you listen to me. She said I could always make her listen, and maybe that’s why she didn’t tell me she couldn’t marry me. She was afraid I’d talk her out of it. I probably would have given it a good shot. I’m glad now that she didn’t show. We weren’t meant to be. I am meant to be with you.”

“I think so, too. Even though you’re a damn cowboy, I love you.”

“Well, this damn cowboy won’t hurt you. I would do nothing to make you want to leave me. Ever.”

Marlowe nodded and yawned.

“I’m so tired. I’ve barely slept since you left.”

“I haven’t either. Oh, and just so you know, Dylan told me I needed to make you listen to me and camp out on the stoop if needed. Then she calmly told me if I hurt you, I would lose my precious balls, and I have a feeling she wouldn’t do it quickly.”

“No, not Dylan. She’d remove them as slowly and as painfully as she could.” Hank shuddered, and Marlowe laughed. “But, if she and Peyton like you, you’ve got it made. We are always there for each other and always will be.”

“I know. I think it’s great that you have friends like that. I’ll just have to be careful around them until they decide if they like me.”

“Well, if they don’t, don’t worry about it. I do.”

“That’s all that matters, isn’t it, baby?”

“Yes. Can we take a nap? I’m exhausted.”

“Sure. Then we’ll go to my house. I want you to move in with me, Marlowe.”

“Hank, I’d love that, but only if you’re sure.”

“I wouldn’t have asked.” He hugged her. “Let’s get some sleep. It’s been a while since I’ve held you while we slept.”

She snuggled against him and sighed when he placed his cheek on her head. She was happy she listened to him this time. She was in shock when he said he was in love with her. She loved him so much, and hearing he felt the same made her happier than she’d ever been. She knew Hank would never do the things Johnnie had. Hank Barnett was a good man. They’d have their ups and downs, but she knew they could work through anything.

Later that day, Hank drove them to his house. She was so eager to move in with him. She wanted to talk to Dylan and Peyton about it, but it was her decision, and she wanted to be with Hank.

“I’ll need to pack some things this weekend.”

“I can help.”

“You have work to do. I know you’re busy now with planting. Peyton and Dylan will help me.”

“Okay, but it’s no problem if you need my help.”

Marlowe glanced at him.

“We’d probably do better on our own.”

“I get it. You’re telling me you don’t want me there so you can gossip about me.”

“How did you know?” She laughed when he shook his head.

“It’s fine. I will be busy, but I’m serious. If you need me, call me.”

“I will.” She shook her head. “I still have to tell them I’m moving in with you.”

“How about I disappear until they get used to the idea?”

“You don’t have to. Even if they don’t like the idea, they know it’s my decision, and they’ll support me.”

“I don’t doubt that. I’m glad you have them as friends.”

“I am, too.”

“How would you choose who to have as your maid of honor?”

“Both of them. We did it for each other when we got married. I could never choose between them. How about you? Who would you have for your best man?”

“Probably Creed.”

“Creed seems like a nice man.”

“Yeah, one of the best. I’m sure he’ll do it if he’s not on a case when we get married.” Hank sighed. “He was my best man at my first wedding.”

“So, he knows about Sylvia.”

“Hell, the whole town does, but it’s been years.”

“You decide what kind of wedding you want, Hank.”

“No. Marlowe, this is *your* wedding. Your day. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“As I said, I’ll talk with my girls first, then decide.”

“Sounds good.”

Hank pulled up to the porch of his house, parked, and stepped out. He strode around the front, to the passenger side, and opened the door for her. She placed her hand in his and stepped down from the cab.

They spent the rest of the day watching movies and relaxing. Marlowe had never been so content.

Later, when Hank had to check something in the pasture, she called her parents.

“Marlowe, honey. How are you?” her mother asked her.

“I’m fine. Is Daddy home?”

“Yes, do you need him?”

“I want to talk to both of you.”

“Okay.”

Marlowe smiled when she heard her mother call for her father, then she put the phone on speaker.

“We’re both here, honey. What is it?”

Marlowe took a deep breath.

“I’m getting married.” Silence met her. “Mama? Daddy?”

“Married? To Hank?”

“Yes, Mama. He asked me and I said yes. We haven’t set a date or where, but I’ll let you know once we work out the

details. Daddy, will you give me away?"

"I'd be honored," he said in a choked voice.

"Thank you. I'll let you know everything once Hank and I discuss it. I wanted to let you know."

"You sound so happy, honey. You deserve that after what you went through with Johnnie. We love you, and can't wait to meet Hank."

"I'll bring him for dinner Sunday, if that's okay."

"It's perfect. We'll see you both then. We love you."

"I love you both." Marlowe disconnected and smiled. She *was* happy.

She parked at Dylan's house beside Peyton's vehicle Friday evening, then entered the kitchen.

"Hello," she called out, removing her light jacket and hanging it on a peg.

"Hey." Peyton smiled as she entered the kitchen, poured Marlowe a glass of wine, and handed it to her.

"Thank you."

"Aunt Marlowe," Zoey yelled and ran toward her.

Marlowe squatted and caught Zoey in her arms.

"Hi, Zoey. How are you?"

"Good. Come see my new Barbie."

"Another new Barbie?" Marlowe looked at Peyton and raised an eyebrow.

"What? She didn't have this one."

"Peyton, the girl won't be able to get inside her room if you keep this up," Marlowe whispered.

"She's my niece, and since I probably won't have kids, I live vicariously through her."

"She has enough Barbies."

"Bite your tongue. No female has enough Barbies."

Marlowe laughed. She knew Peyton loved the dolls, and she was passing the love of Barbie to her niece.

“Can we sit down? I need to talk to you both.”

“Of course.” Peyton took her hand, and they entered the living room, where Dylan sat on the sofa.

“Hi,” Marlowe said to her as she sat beside her.

“What’s up?” Peyton asked her.

“Hank and I are back together.”

“That’s great, but is it going to work?” Dylan asked her.

“Yes. He asked me to marry him—” She stopped when they jumped up.

“What? Did you say yes? When’s the wedding?” Dylan smiled.

“I said yes, and we haven’t discussed a date. We’re trying to decide on the location.”

“The Clifton church. Where else?” Peyton frowned.

“That’s just it. I’d love a church wedding, but we’ll go to the courthouse if Hank is too nervous.”

“You will do no such thing,” Dylan snapped. “It is your wedding day. Sure, you got married in a big wedding to Johnnie, but this one can be small, but please, have it in the church.”

“She’s right, Marlowe. It can be a small, private affair, but you need to get married in the church. Almost everyone who gets married in Clifton does it in that church. It’s a tradition around here. No matter how small you have the wedding, people will be outside to celebrate with you and Hank.”

“True.”

“What does Hank think?”

“That it’s my day, and I should do what I want.”

“I knew I liked him,” Peyton said, making Dylan and Marlowe stare at her with their mouths open. “What?”

“You? Like a cowboy?” Marlowe teased.

“I never said I didn’t like them. I said I didn’t want another one.” Peyton shrugged.

“You know, Peyton, a day might come when a sexy, gorgeous cowboy comes along, and you won’t be able to resist.”

“Who says I need to resist? I’ll use him for sex.”

Marlowe and Dylan laughed.

“I don’t know, Marlowe. All he’d have to do is buy her a Barbie she doesn’t have.” Dylan grinned.

“You can make fun all you want, but no matter what he does, whoever he is will not win my heart. Not even for a Barbie.”

“Anyway, I’m moving in with Hank and need help packing. Can you help?”

“Of course. When?”

“Tomorrow, if you can.”

“Sure. It’s Saturday, and I know we can get the employees to cover. What about you, Dylan? Can you get away from here for a while?”

“Yeah, I’ll have CeCe watch Zoey, so she’s not in the way.”

Marlowe nodded and smiled at her friends. She was happy they were excited for her and Hank. She loved him so much.

“I’m not even scared,” she said.

“Good. I think he’s a good man, and I think he’ll make you happy.”

“He does.” Marlowe sighed. “Okay, let’s talk about this wedding, then tomorrow we can pack. I’ll start on it tonight after I get home.”

The women raised their drinks, clinked glasses, and sipped. Marlowe was ecstatic about being with Hank. Now, her two best friends needed to find someone.



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Hank was on cloud nine. He was happy that he'd gone back to see Marlowe. He'd been ready to beg if need be. She was his everything, and he'd show her how much he loved her every day.

He wasn't even nervous about getting married. He knew she'd show up because he knew, without a doubt, that she loved him.

Walking through the Feed Store, he wondered how Marlowe's day was going. She was packing things up, and he was curious about how much she'd gotten done.

"Hank."

He turned when he heard his name and saw Creed walking toward him.

"Hey, Creed."

"How's everything going?" Creed asked him as he tilted his head.

"With Marlowe, you mean?"

"Yes."

Hank grinned. "We're getting married."

Creed laughed. "That's great. I'm happy you worked it out."

"I am, too. We haven't decided on a church wedding or going to the courthouse, but either way, I'd like you to be my best man."

"Seriously? I'd love to."

"Great. I'll get back to you when I have the details. Marlowe said she was going to discuss it with Peyton and Dylan."

"If she's talking to those two, then I'd bet money you'll get married in the church."

Hank chuckled. "I agree."

“Are you nervous about it?”

“No. Honestly, I’m not. I know she’ll be there.”

“I think so, too. I’m happy for you, man.” Creed shook his hand.

“I’m happy, too.”

Creed’s name was called over the PA system when his order was ready.

“Keep me posted, and congrats to both of you.”

“Thanks, Creed. I’ll call you.”

Creed nodded and walked off.

After getting his order, Hank climbed into his truck and pulled out of the lot. He decided to get something to eat while he was in town and drove to the diner. He parked, entered the restaurant, and sat at the counter.

“Hi, Hank.” Lanie smiled at him.

“Hi, Lanie. I’ll just take my usual.”

“Coming right up.”

Hank nodded, turned on the stool, and rested his elbows on the counter behind him. He glanced around and waved at people he knew. Many patrons were tourists, and the place was packed, as usual. When Lanie set his order down, he turned around and dug into his food.

After he finished his meal, he walked out to his truck and drove out of the lot. As he passed the ice cream shop, he turned into the alley and rode around the back of the building. He grinned when he saw three SUVs with the back hatches open beside the steps.

He parked, climbed out, and walked to the steps. He looked up when he heard the door open and smiled when he saw Dylan carrying a box down.

“Can I get that for you, Dylan?” he asked and watched her stop on the step, shift the box in her arms, and look at him.

“Oh, hey, Hank. Thanks, but I’ve got it.” Dylan turned to the door. “Marlowe, your cowboy is here.”

Hank laughed as she descended the steps and stopped beside him.

“Don’t you dare hurt her, Hank.”

“I won’t. I love her, Dylan.” He shrugged.

“I know you do, but we’ve all been there. We swore off cowboys, and now she will marry another one.” Dylan shook her head. “We’ve seen what she’s been through, so we will not be gentle if you hurt her.”

Hank widened his eyes, swallowed hard, and nodded as Dylan stared at him. Then she continued down the steps, placed the box in a vehicle and walked back up the stairs. He watched her, then turned to see Marlowe, and grinned when he saw her smiling at him from where she stood on the stoop.

When she walked down the steps, he moved up to meet her. She stopped on a step above him. He leaned close and kissed her lips.

“Hi, darlin’.”

“Hi, cowboy. What are you doing here?”

“I had to make a trip to the Feed Store, and then I had lunch. Now, I’m talking to you.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed her lips to his, and moaned when Hank pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. They sprang apart when someone cleared their throat. He saw Peyton standing on the step above Marlowe with a large box in her arms.

“Sorry,” he muttered, moving to the side to let her pass. “I could take that, Peyton.”

“I’ve got it, thanks.”

Hank waited until she reached the bottom of the steps before looking at Marlowe.

“She terrifies the fuck out of me.”

Marlowe burst out laughing.

“God help the man who tangles with her.”

“No shit.”

“I need to get back to packing.”

“Okay, I have to get back to the farm and get busy. The door’s unlocked, so you can take the boxes inside when you’re ready.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, yeah. Why not? You’re going to live there, Marlowe. I just wish I could help, but I’m too busy. I really shouldn’t have stopped for lunch.”

“I’m so glad you did.”

“Me too. I’ll get a key made for you.” He kissed her lips. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.” They stared at each other.

“I have to go,” Hank said.

“I know.” She didn’t move.

“Come on. For God’s sake, go away, Hank. Marlowe, get busy,” Peyton said as she climbed up the steps and passed them.

Hank chuckled, and Marlowe laughed.

“I’m going, Peyton.” He looked at Marlowe. “I’ll see you at home, darlin’.”

After touching the brim of his hat, he jogged down the steps, climbed into his truck, waved, and drove home. He hoped they had a good day, and the rest passed quickly so he could get home to Marlowe.

Later that evening, he entered the house and halted. Boxes sat everywhere. He shook his head.

“Marlowe?”

“In here.”

He hung his hat on a peg, then walked to the living room to see her unpacking a box and putting photos on the mantel.

“Is it okay if I put these up here?”

“Of course. It’s your home, too.”

“I just don’t want to overstep.”

“You could never do that. Sweetheart, we’re getting married. I want you to be comfortable here.”

“I am. More than I thought I would be.”

“Then that means it’s right.”

“Yes.” She grinned. “Peyton and Dylan love the house.”

“That’s not important. I only care if *you* love it.”

“I do, and I love you. I’m sorry so many boxes are all over the place.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure you’ll get them unpacked. I can help tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’d like that.”

“Once I finish my chores in the morning, we’ll tackle those boxes.”

Marlowe smiled, and he’d do anything to keep that smile on her beautiful face. He should have known she’d come to mean so much to him. The first time he saw her, he wanted to know her. He didn’t think he’d fall in love, and he certainly didn’t know he’d want to marry her. But he did. There was nowhere he’d rather be than beside her for the rest of his life.

He’d met her parents and loved them. They adored Marlowe and they knew he did too. It was coming together, and he was ready to start his life with her.

He knew she’d never stand him up. She’d be there, and he couldn’t wait to make her his in every sense of the word. He couldn’t care less where they got married, as long as it happened, and he had no doubt that it would. He trusted her, and she felt the same. He’d never doubt it.

# Epilogue

Hank stood in the back room of the church with his father. He wasn't nervous... yet. His nerves would probably kick in when he had to walk out there. *God! What if she didn't show up?*

"Stop it, son."

"I'm trying, Dad."

The door opened and both men turned to see Creed enter the room, carrying three bottles of beer. He handed them each one, twisted the cap off his, and took a long swig. He lowered the bottle and Hank frowned.

"What?" Creed raised an eyebrow.

"Is she here?"

Creed chuckled. "Yes."

Hank blew out a sigh of relief.

"Thank God."

"Come on. You knew she'd be here. She's crazy about you, though I can't see why."

"If we weren't in a church, I'd tell you what I think of that comment."

Creed chuckled. "I'm surprised you don't anyway."

"I'm nervous," Hank said.

"I thought you said you weren't." His father frowned at him.

"I wasn't until I got here."

"She's here, Hank."

"I know she's here right now, Creed, but—"

"Nope. Don't even think about it."

Hank opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't know what he could do to convince himself she wouldn't leave him. All the feelings he had the last time he was in a church to get married, came rushing at him, and he was sure he was going to be physically sick.

"Sit down, son. You're getting all worked up for nothing."

Hank nodded, sat down, clasped his hands, and stared at the floor. He was just waiting for the ax to fall again.

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Marlowe stared at her reflection in the mirror, and her eyes filled with tears. Her gown was beautiful. The tight bodice hugged her breasts, and the full skirt flowed around her. Little white pearls were sewn into the lace and around her neck, she wore the eternity necklace Hank had given her.

"No, no, no. Do not cry." Peyton blinked her eyes.

"*You're* crying," Marlowe pointed out.

"I'm allowed." Peyton touched her hand. "I'm happy for you, Marlowe. I truly am. I think Hank will love you until his last breath, and I'm sure he'd never intentionally hurt you. I want you to be happy."

"I am. More than you could know." Marlowe squeezed her hand. "I want you to be happy too."

"Do not try to convince me to find a cowboy." Peyton frowned.

"You do need a cowboy. One who will make you see they aren't all bad. You too, Dylan."

"Hell, no."

"Are you okay?"

"No. I'm pissed about someone cutting my fence. MDOL is sending someone out, but I'm not sure when. I just hope it's not in Clifton rustlers."

“We’re so sorry, Dylan. I’m sure someone will be there. They have to be busy. Hank said Creed told him rustling was at an all-time high in Clifton and surrounding areas.”

“I know. MDOL told me that when I called them, but I was expecting someone sooner than this.”

“It’s only been a few days, Dylan. Let them do their jobs.”

“I will. Anyway, let’s get you married to that sexy cowboy.”

“You know, *that* is the problem I have with staying away from cowboys. So many of them are so friggin’ sexy.” Peyton sighed.

The women laughed then the door opened, and Marlowe’s father stuck his head inside.

“Ready, honey?”

“I am so ready, Daddy.”

“Good. Hank’s here and I’m sure ready to marry you.”

“I hope so. I know I’m ready to marry him and spend the rest of my life with him.”

“I’m so glad you picked a fall wedding. It’s not too hot, and it’s a gorgeous day,” Dylan said, smiling.

Marlowe placed her hand on her father’s arm, walked from the room, and to the vestibule.

Her bouquet shook in her hand as she waited for the music to start.

“Relax,” her father whispered.

“I didn’t think I’d be nervous.”

He kissed her temple.

“It’s your wedding day. Let’s get you to your future husband.”

“I’m ready.” She nodded and smiled, then watched Dylan and Peyton walk down the aisle.



She took a deep breath when the music began, and walked to Hank.

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Hank stood at the altar and sucked in a deep breath when he saw her. She was stunning in that white gown. He could see her beautiful smile behind her veil, and he couldn't help but smile.

"I told you," Creed whispered.

"I know. Thanks for trying to keep me sane."

"*Trying* for sure."

Hank chuckled. Creed was right. He was sure he'd driven Creed, his family, and Marlowe crazy, but he was right where he wanted to be. Where he needed to be. With her for the rest of his life. They wanted kids, and he was ready to get started on those, but maybe in a year or two. He wanted time alone with his wife.

*His wife.* He never thought he'd say that. Not after the fiasco with Sylvia, but he knew he'd love Marlowe for the rest of his life.

When she reached him, he stepped down, took her hand in his, and looked at her.

"You look beautiful," he whispered.

"And you're very handsome in your tux."

"I can't wait to get out of the damn thing."

She leaned close.

"I can't wait for you to get out of it, either."

When the priest cleared his throat, Marlowe and Hank laughed.

"Sorry, Father." Marlowe smirked.

"Somehow, Marlowe, I don't think you are," the priest said.

“Does he know you or what?” Hank said and chuckled.

Marlowe shook her head, stepped up next to Hank, and squeezed his hand.

“I’m so ready for this,” she whispered.

“I was born ready. Let’s do this, darlin’.”

After the ceremony, pictures were taken, and then everyone headed for the town hall in Clifton to help the newlyweds celebrate, and Hank couldn’t be happier. He glanced at Marlowe as they made their rounds to see a smile on her face. He knew she was as happy as he was.

He grinned as he thought about how much of a fight he’d put up playing Santa Claus, because it was the best decision he had ever made. He got a gift that would last him for the rest of his life. He knew that with all his heart.

\*\*\* The End \*\*\*

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