

*Healing*  
THE **HEART**

OLIVIA REIGN

# Healing the Heart

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*A Small Town Second Chance Romance*

Healing the Cowboy Series

Book 3

# Olivia Reign

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# Chapter One

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## John

### *Eleven Years Ago*

*Oh, God. This is it.*

This was the day my life crumbled to pieces.

From the rickety back porch of my old house, I watched as frigid rain lashed the small farm in all directions. I didn't have to think too hard about it to know that this season's crops that my wife and I had pinned all our hopes on were...gone.

A lightning bolt struck overhead, lacing the sky with light for a moment, then disappeared before rolls of thunder crashed over the rugged landscape.

The rain pounded the ground in sheets of white torrents, digging rivers into the loose soil plowed up for planting and flattening the crops already ready for reaping. Retreating into the house, I skirted around the buckets on the floor, almost overflowing with water from the leaking roof, and went to the bedroom, lit by a lamp, where my heavily pregnant wife was waiting.

"How bad is it?" Emily asked while rubbing her belly.

"I—" I said, sitting at the end of the bed and taking her swollen feet on my lap to rub them. I didn't want to worry Emily, not at this stage of her pregnancy, and certainly not when everything else was going to hell. Even while I knew it was gone, I could not tell her that. "—couldn't see much. I'll get a clearer picture when the rain lightens up."

The rain battered the roof, and I winced when I heard another shingle shatter. This house was a termite-ridden artifact still resting on rotten bones. I should not have brought anyone to live in this death trap, much less believe I could raise a family on this land. It was a few rounds of crop rotation from being barren.



“Remind me to check the nursery list,” Emily replied. “We need to get more supplies.”

“I know, sweetheart,” I replied, feeling my stomach cramp at knowing we were on the brink of utter despair.

I had to get us out of this place and into somewhere better. I could not leave us toeing this line because we would fall over it one day. If we didn’t change—if *I* didn’t change—we would never get out of this rut.

“Sure,” I replied.

A horrendous crash had me jumping while Emily gasped, and I placed her feet on the bed before running to the window. The backyard shed was now a hunk of shingle, rusted metal, and buried tools.

My gut sunk even further when blue lightning streaked across the sky, and the flash of light illuminated the sky briefly—right before a bolt struck the tractor, and something exploded.

I was not outside to feel the shrapnel hit me, but I knew right there—things had not been the best the last few months, no, this year, but now, there was no coming back from this.

Resting my throbbing temple on the cold glass windowpane, I sucked in a breath, the smell of sodden earth rising from the ground. The idea I had let ruminate in the back of my mind for the past month surged to life again, and I didn’t know if this was a sign that I had to take that chance and push it forward or what, but it was the only way I could see out of this mess.

The worst thing was that it would get worse before it got better. Hopefully, Emily and my child will be there with me when it does.

Returning to the bedroom, I felt like my feet were tied down with buckets of lead, and her anxious look did not make it better. Sitting near her this time, I took her hand. “Emily, there is something I need to tell you, a chance I need to take,

and I have to do it, no matter how long of a shot it is or how long it will take.”

She swallowed. “What is it, John?”

“I need to leave this place to find something better and...I know for this part, I won’t be able to take you with me,” I said tenderly. “But this will only be for the best.”

“W-what are you saying?” Emily said, her blue eyes wide with wonder.

I leaned in to rest my forehead on hers and whispered, “Please, trust me...and pray this works because it is the only shot we have.”

\* \* \*

### *Present Day*

The pouring rain—that had grounded my jet for the night—washing down the expansive windows at the Waco Airport reminded me of that fateful night I had decided to change my life.

The freak storm raging outside these four walls could continue until the next day. Since I had not anticipated this, I was waiting in the airport coffee shop for the nearest Hilton Hotel to send me confirmation for my emergency booking.

The room was almost empty except for the barista and this petite woman sitting across from me that I’d been trading glances with. She was an elegant beauty with dark brown, curly hair piled on her head. Sitting profile from me, I could only see the slope of her jaw and sensual pout.

*What would it take to have her tonight?*

Slumping into the corner, she finished her coffee and looked up at the barista as if she were judging if getting another cup was worth it. She looked up, and her sensual lips were now a tight line...even while a blush rose on her cheeks.

I was not one to pick up women on a whim, but I'd been on a roller coaster from hell with meetings back-to-back, little time to eat, and absolutely no downtime for myself. I could not remember the last time I'd had a woman in my bed, and there was no way I could bring a random woman to my home on the ranch.

It was better to do it on the road, with no full names, callbacks, connections, or complications.

*How would those lips look thoroughly kissed?*

Calling the barista over, I dipped my voice, "Would you please do a refill for my drinks and hers."

The young man nodded and returned to the bar while I stood, grasped my beige Stetson, and crossed the room right as the waiter set our drinks before us. Her lips parted in surprise.

"You look like you could use another, and I dearly need some company," I said, my deep southern rumble breaking the still air. "But if I have overstepped—"

"No, no," she said sweetly, shifting her passport out of the way. "I was just surprised that you would even notice me."

"A pretty girl like you," I said, "C'mon now, stop being coy. There must be men lining down the road to get your attention."

"I'd agree with you, but history hasn't proved you right," she laughed, her eyes flowing to my hat. "...You're a cowboy."

"Something like that, yeah," I replied. At this stage in the flirting game, it was not wise—or necessary—to brandish my wealth. "Have you ever met one before?"

"Yes, but not one so clean and in a designer suit," she said.

"I'd rather be in my normal jeans and t-shirt," I replied. "How are you all alone in the middle of the night?"

"My connected flight got grounded from San Antonio," she replied. "It didn't even leave the gate before this storm

blew in. I had hoped to leave here by morning, but I'll be here a while."

"So now that there is no dream guy out there waiting for you, would you let me guess why you're moving?" I asked. "And I'd like to make a game out of it."

Her brows lifted. "A game? And what does the winner get?"

"A single request," I replied, giving her a slanted grin.

"As in buying another coffee, a phone number, becoming friends on Facebook?" she asked innocently.

"Something...more." I stretched out a leg, brushing hers. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

I was enjoying the way she blushed five shades of pink. Her big brown eyes latched onto mine, and I only saw her body flushing that shade in my bed. Her gaze was quicksand, and I wanted to get dragged straight under.

"Rayna," she replied.

"Pleased to meet you, Rayna," I replied. "I'm John. So, San Antonio..." I paused to consider what to say next. There was no hint of a ring on her finger, so I assumed she had no man waiting for her.

She was not dressed in business clothes to show that she had to get there and get back immediately, and the coup-de-grace, I looked down at the ticket stub poking out of her passport and noticed the 'one-way' stamp. Hm.

"You have a new job there," I said, "Right or wrong?"

"Right," she replied, her lips parted, and she flashed a white-toothed smile at me. "Are you reading my thoughts?"

"No, I just pay attention," I replied. "You have a beautiful smile. Anyone ever told you that?"

"Once or twice," Rayna replied. "So, this game of yours goes both ways, doesn't it?"

“It does,” I replied, leaning in. Rayna’s eyes met mine, and her gaze pulled the floor from under me. She was beautiful, and I could see myself mapping her body with my lips. “Shoot. Remember, it is one hitter or quitter.”

“You are West Texas, but...” she paused. “...You live and run a business in Houston.”

“Half right,” I grinned. “I was from West Texas, Sparenberg to be precise, but I moved away a long time ago, an’ no, sweetheart, it’s not Houston.”

Rayna pouted. “I suppose I lost then.”

I leaned in, and our forearms nearly brushed each other. Holding Rayna’s gaze with mine, I said, “Yes, but it’s not a bad thing to lose. What are your plans for tonight? Have you had a room lined up?”

She shook her head. “I was hoping to find a comfy bench to wait the night out.” A slow smile curved her lips. “Why? Are you offering?”

“I am,” I replied, dropping my tone. “I told you, I’m looking for company, and on a rainy night like this, what’s better company than with a sweet lady?”

“Well, John...” Her hand rested over mine, and her fingers traced an unknown pattern on the back of it. “I’d like to take you up on that offer, with one condition...”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

“That you don’t think less of me for being *company* with a man I just met,” she replied.

“I would never do so,” I replied. “You’re not one of those people who forgets a name ten seconds after they’re told it, are you?”

“No,” Rayna replied, “Why?”

“Because...” I leaned in closer, voice going to a hush, “...I want to hear you scream it over and over again.”

# Chapter Two

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## Rayna

I should have known John was not an ordinary man.

When a chauffeur came and whisked us into a sleek black limo, his sharp suit and spotless beige Stetson, aside, should have been clue number two.

He didn't check in when we got to the Hilton; the concierge showed us to a private elevator, clue number three.

We'd flirted in the car, with me sipping champagne and brushing hands, with heated looks and suggestive whispers until the vehicle stopped at the hotel. I didn't go home with men I had just met, but there was something different about John, so I took a chance.

“Where—”

The moment the hotel elevator door dings closed, John's hand slid behind my head, and his lips crushed mine in a frantic kiss. I grabbed his shoulder and had to tip on my tiptoes to meet him. He backed me against the wall as his mouth moved masterfully over mine.

He tasted like Irish Whiskey and strong coffee—it was heady.

We were in our sliver of reality as we kissed each other hungrily like we'd been starving all our lives. John's tongue was plunging between my lips, thrusting in and making me hope that another part of him would also be thrusting deeply.

The stubble on his cheek scraped my cheek while a guttural groan vibrated from his chest, making my pussy grow slick with need. I whimpered as his lips parted from mine to take a breath, and the next moment, his tongue found mine, and I sucked it hungrily, my body begging to be horizontal with this man.

John broke the kiss again and met my eyes, his pupils wide and dark, with a bare rim of blue around them—static electricity sparked when his lustful eyes fixed on mine.

“I can’t wait to get you into my bed,” he growled.

“Well, get me there, cowboy,” I sucked in a breath.

The elevator stopped, and John took my hand and led me down the hallway to the single door. He slid the key in, got the door open and inside the lush hotel room, and dropped the keycard into a bowl before having me up against the wall again. “Tell me what you like, sweetheart?”

I could barely concentrate, “Like?”

“What do you like in bed?” John asked. “Lips, tongue? Touches, teasing? Do you build up or go off like a rocket?”

“Tongue and teasing,” I replied. “I take a while to get there, but when I do—”

His mouth latched on my neck, right over a sensitive spot, and I arched under his harsh kiss. John pulled away from me, and the next thing I blinked, I was in the large bedroom and was pulling, ripping, and shucking clothes away.

He laid me on the bed, grasped my lacy underwear, and pulled. “I’m glad you said that because I want this to linger.”

John lifted my hips a fraction, right before his mouth sealed over me, and he sucked on my clit before he slid his tongue inside me, and I just about died in ecstasy. “You are so wet for me,” he murmured against my wet flesh and licked straight up my folds.

While tunneling my fingers into his thick hair, I held his head firm, my back arching as he spread my legs wider, lapping me up and down, hitting every nerve ending just right. His hands held my hips down to the comforter, anchoring me to the bed. The more he tortured me, the more I felt like I would fragment into a thousand little pieces.

His lips and tongue worked together on my slick, swollen flesh, and I bucked up against his tongue with a shriek. John



was cruel, bringing me to the brink of shattering before pulling away, letting me drip right back to zero...before starting over again.

I was going to go mad.

His mouth left me, and John slid two fingers inside me, anchoring me there as he arched up and unhooked my front-clasped bra with his other hand. The fingers inside me curved against my G-spot and rubbed determinedly. His mouth closed around my nipple and sucked in demanding pulses.

My body clenched hard, needing to be filled, but I could barely suck in enough air to keep my consciousness, much less string two words together to ask for what I wanted. John must have read my mind because he slid his fingers deeper and pulled out, delivering brisk thrusts to wind me up even more.

“John...” my belly tightened. “Please.”

“Please what, sweetheart?” he asked, and the teasing in his voice made me want to smack him.

My heart pounded against my ribs so hard I wondered if it was medically possible for it to bust through my chest. John’s fingers stretched me wide; the roughness of his rhythm made me arch into each thrust, seeking more.

“You keep getting me to the brink,” I said. “Over and over again, but then you drop me.”

“It’ll make everything all that better,” John murmured while removing himself from my body to shuck the rest of the clothes he wore.

Joining me on the bed, he kissed me again, and his hand slid down my side, and his scent washed over me. I smelled leather and coffee and a rich, musky cologne that screamed luxury, just like the rest of John.

His hard cock pressed on my inner thigh, the rigid length of him leaking in demand against me. I wanted him so badly I was aching.

“You’re so beautiful and sexy,” he said against my skin, his fingers finding my tender nipple and rolling it between his thumb and index finger, playing my body like a skilled guitarist. The heat of his blistering stare told me everything I needed to know that he was dying to get inside me as desperately as I wanted to feel him there.

“What are you waiting for?” I asked, sitting up to shuck my bra away. “You look hungry? What is stopping you from taking what you want?”

A sly half-smile curved his lips, and he plunged his fingers inside me, punching a cry from my belly. “You’ve got a smart mouth.”

“I’ve been told a time or two,” I panted.

Pulling away from my body, he gripped my hips and folded my legs to my chest while he reached for a condom in the bedside drawer, ripped it open with his teeth, and, while holding my gaze, slipped it on and slid his fingers up my sex. “You’re so deliciously wet,” he growled, low and throatily.

I felt John line up his thick hard cock with my entrance and held me fast while he inched inside me. I grabbed his arms as he stretched me, filling me up and making me lose my mind. I held on tight as he began to rock inside me, testing the waters, and I loved how thick he felt inside me.

John’s grip on me tightened, and there was that warm, leathery, rugged smell I’d come to love so much. Heat rushed between my legs at his rough, strong hands on my skin, his cock inside me. I was fucking helpless against him.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and a drop splattered right on my top lip, and I licked it off. We found our rhythm, and I was lost in his technique. I held fast to him as he claimed me, gliding in and out, taking me harder and faster.

He stopped then—even while holding me—switched our position, and I was on top. “Ride me, sweetheart,” he commanded me, grabbing my hips and lifting me down on him. “Up and down, just like this, baby.”

The sounds of our bodies, of him pumping me, our slick skin slapping on skin faster and faster, filled the room. It sounded obscene, but the pleasure was out of this world. My clit rubbed against him as his pleasure possessed my body.

“John, J-John, that’s so good,” I cried out, my body bouncing on his and my channel clamping around him. The tension searing through my veins coiled up like a tight knot in my body swelled up and *shattered*.

I came with the force of a nuclear bomb, riding him hard, clenching and trembling with fireworks exploding behind my eyes.

John let out a roar gripping my hips. “Fuck! Yes, ride me.”

He groaned as his body seized up and detonated inside the condom, tripping off another orgasm to crash over me, spinning me and turning me upside down.

“Oh G-God.” I rested my palms on his chest, and while my body shivered and shook, wave after wave crested in me until the last ounce of pleasure was wrung out of me.

I collapsed breathlessly on his massive chest, and John’s strong hands coasted over my arms and up my back. Utterly spent, I could only stay where I was and listened to his heartbeat pound against my chest. Completely spent, I barely had a few moments to feel him pull from me and rest me on the sheets beside him.

“You were sublime, sweetheart,” I heard him whisper. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.”

I wished I knew what he meant because by the time he came back...I was dead to the world.

\* \* \*

Waking up, I already knew I was alone in bed. I didn’t have ESP, nor did I reach over to feel the other half of the bed—it was simply a sense. Blinking my eyes open, I realized I was

right. John was gone, and, sitting up, I realized the room was empty of his possessions.

Well, at least he had not kicked me out at daybreak, where, from the blinking time on the bedtime clock, seven-thirty had to be the time he had left me.

Sitting up, I rested my back on the tufted headboard and took a long breath, ruffling a strand of hair that dangled over my eyes. “Well, that’s that, I suppose. At least I didn’t lose it in some dingy motel. Five stars, pretty good for a one-night stand.”

I reached over and realized my phone was on the nightstand, and I checked for messages about my flight to Waco and my drive to Hill Country. I’d let John think San Antonio was where I was headed because it seemed easier than telling him my life story.

He’d been quite right in guessing I had a job lined up, and it was the best job I had wanted for years. Being a guidance counselor for an elementary school had finally come around, and that was where I was headed.

A text said my flight was scheduled for one pm that day, so there was no reason to rush out of his hotel—even if staying felt cheap.

I stared at the cream sheets while processing what I’d just done. I’d just had sex with the hottest man I’d ever met, and now he was gone, but my body still remembered his touch. It had been too good to be true, but nothing could come from it. Even when I knew that, I was still disappointed. We were worlds apart.

Sighing again, I looked around the room, realizing that I’d been so frazzled yesterday, I hadn’t taken the time to notice how luxurious this place was. The hotel room had crystal-dripping chandeliers, thick carpets that I could sink my feet into, and crystal shot glasses on the wet bar.

“John has to be stinking rich,” I muttered while looking at the paintings on the walls. Slipping out of bed, I went to look

through the bay window that formed an entire wall, showing me the whole skyline over the city.

I wanted John back, but...

God, I couldn't stand myself.

There was nothing to regret. We had a good time. It was a friendly conversation and incredible sex. What was there to be sorry about, that John hadn't given me a commitment or even told me his last name?

*It was a good time, Rayna. Let sleeping dogs lie.*

Turning, I headed to the bathroom but stopped as I passed the bedside table on the side he had slept and saw the note on top. John had a strong, masculine hand.

*Rayna, you have no idea how hard it was to leave you here, but I had to get to my flight, and I didn't want to wake you. You've given me a night I will not forget any time soon, and I hope you'll take advantage of the hotel until you have to leave as well. Anything you want is available to you; call down and ask. I don't think we'll cross paths again, but I wish you all the best.*

*John.*

I...did not know what to feel after that.

I found the bathroom fully fitted with a tub big enough to seat three people, a glass door, and a walk-in shower with a rainfall shower head and side jets; then, I stepped inside, still feeling pitiful.

I hoped by the end of the shower I'd get over it, over him. I had to.

Washing generously, I let the hot water sluice away the tension in my body while I forced myself to think about my new job in Hill Country.

I stepped outside, wrapped up in a thick towel, and then went to dress while calling down for a breakfast tray. I didn't want to linger in the room too much after I ate, and while I

waited—for some reason, masochistic, I reckon—I tucked John’s note into my handbag.

I glanced around the room at all the luxurious things around me. It was all good and well, but it was not for me. I sighed and turned to the nearest mirror. “Time to get back to the real world.”

# Chapter Three

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## John

### *Six Weeks Later*

After another long, international business flight, malfunctioning interpreting software—I'd come so close to calling Umamashi Hisoke's wife his *jackass*—I was back home on my ranch.

With a relieved grunt, I left for the house, eager to see my daughters later on but not so eager to catch up with the paperwork I was sure was piled up in the office, waiting for me.

*I'd prefer to know about school trips, making a volcano with coke and mentos, or sports days. Anything better than more work.*

My house was more silent than expected, but it was lunchtime on a Wednesday. My kids were at school, and the guys were on the ground. I hadn't expected Sarah, my dearest friend and sometimes babysitter, to come to the office with a shocking—and worrying report.

"They did *what*?" I stared at Sarah, not believing what she had to say about my daughters. I shook my head. "Are you sure they almost set the hay thresher on *fire*?"

"Yep, right before they almost flooded the place," Sarah Lakes twisted her lips wryly while bushing her dark hair from her forehead.

"Who was the ringleader, Sam or Harper?" I asked. At eight, Harper was only two years younger than Sam, but my youngest could be very devious when she wanted to be. "I have to put a strike under their name this time."

"This time, Sam," she replied.



I sighed; this was not the news I had wanted to hear. Sam was my oldest, and she started to act out at ten.

“Christ,” I huffed while tugging my suit jacket off and loosening my tie. “How bad was the damage?”

“None,” she replied. “Ben caught them right before it got serious.”

“Oh, thank God,” I replied, mentally noting to give Ben another raise. “I’ll talk to her, to them, when they get home. Thanks for telling me, Sarah.”

“Any time.” She smiled. “Dinners at five. I hope that exotic food has not turned your stomach from homegrown.”

I laughed. “Heck no. Nothin’ beats a good old steak dinner for me.”

“Glad to know.” Sarah laughed as she left the office, and I rolled my neck before reaching for the file on top of the five-inch pile.

Flipping it open, I made to look over it but then stopped—and my mind flew back to Rayna. I shivered again because, damn, that woman had rocked my world and yanked the ground from under me.

Countless times in the last month had I been tempted to go to San Antonio and find her—but then, I stopped. What would happen after we spent another night together if it had gotten that far? What was to say she was still single and willing to mingle?

“Bad idea, ol’ boy,” I murmured, forcing my eyes on the paper. “Just keep it movin’.”

I grabbed a pen and began making notes, thinking about how to approach Sam later. Sam had been acting out lately, and I wasn’t sure what had caused it or what I’d have to do to cure it.

Well—I looked at the clock on the wall and noted the time—I had a few hours to figure it out.

\* \* \*

I headed upstairs to my daughters' rooms when I realized Sam and Harper were home. They had a full suite in their rooms, each with a full suite bathroom, but the problem was, their rooms were only divided—or connected, if you wanted to think of it that way—by a single door. It made it easier for them to conspire together.

I got to Sam's room first, knocked twice, and stepped inside, "Samantha," I said sternly.

Her tawny head jerked up from the book in her hand, and I saw panic flash across her face enough to let my frustration simmer slightly. God, she looked so much like her late mother. It hurt me a little. Only this time, she was not going to be like her mother.

Over my dead body, was she going to make the mistake we had. She would not end up with an unplanned pregnancy and a shotgun wedding. Hell, she might not even have a boyfriend until she was twenty-one.

"Sam," I said, "Go get your sister and return here. We need to talk."

"Yes, Daddy," she replied, sliding off the bed and moving to the door between the room and slipping through it.

While she was gone, I turned to the large photo of me, two-year-old Sam on their ma's lap, and baby Harper in my arms. "Emily, you've got to help me here."

When Harper and Sam came in, both heads were bowed, eyes on their shoes, and they looked like prisoners on death row. It was hard to be harsh with them, but they had nearly destroyed an expensive piece of equipment, topped it off by nearly flooding the place, and damn almost killed themselves.

"Which of you two wants to start telling me what happened with the thresher?" I asked, looking at Harper, who started to show the facial tics she always had when her secrets

were bubbling up. My youngest could not keep a secret to save her life. Sam, on the other hand, was Fort Knox.

Neither of them uttered a word, and I waited to see if it was guilt kicking in or if they had planned to be quiet. They didn't speak at all, and I sighed. "Do you girls know what happens when you go to court? If a plaintiff shows up without the defendant, the judge will likely give the default judgment against you, which might go from fines to being put in jail, and since you two do not want to defend yourselves, jail it is," I said, looking into Sam's eyes. She shifted her gaze away. "Sam, you're grounded for two weeks, no riding or swimming —"

"Dad!" she finally spluttered in defiance.

I continued, "And I'm sorry, Harper, but you too. You know what my grandmother, God rest her soul, always said? *If dumb was dirt, you'd be covered in it*, and you two are like dirt mountains now. And tonight, at dinner, you two need to go and thank Ben for having the sense to check on you two so it hadn't ended worse than it had. Do you understand me?"

Harper nodded, and I looked at Sam; she had a mulish clench to her jaw that, I hated to say, I was getting too familiar with these days. I didn't know what to do about it. She had not said anything that was bothering her—if anything was bothering her.

There were no reports of bullying from school, no talk about a boy she might like—God help me on that one—or anything about difficult classes that she was failing. There was no indication of that in her last report card, so I was at a loss for what was going through her head.

*Is it puberty? Are these hormones going off in her head?*

"Sam?" I looked at her expectantly.

"Fine," she huffed.

I eyed her. "Check that attitude with me, young lady, or you won't have any TV either."

Her shoulders slumped, and the Dutch strength she had evaporated, and she leaned into my side. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

I let up a little. “I accept that, but you need to think these things through, Sam. You’re getting older now, and soon enough, you’ll be Harper’s role model. You need to make better decisions.”

After kissing both of their foreheads, I rubbed their backs. “Okay. I’m going to nap, okay? I’ve been on the plane for a long while, and Jet-lag is a bi-bother,” I barely caught myself, and thankfully, neither one noticed. “Okay, finish your homework, and I’ll come down at supper in an hour.”

Sam went to her bed, and soon after, Harper clambered beside her; after a soft look, I left for my rooms, knowing I was going to sleep like the dead.

\* \* \*

Sunday suppers at the Rolling Ranch were always special. The day was beginning to hover into twilight, and the air was a dusty rose mixed with fired oranges and reds from the Texas sun. In the distance, the herd was already moving, drifting west toward the mountains.

Seven years ago, this land in the back half of Hill Country, which they said was uninhabitable because of all the rocky land, the cedar, mesquite, and cactus plants had made it scrubland. Even the realtor had told me that it was madness to buy it, but I’d see more to it than what they had.

My ranch wasn’t for beef production; we specialized in bull sperm. Of the five thousand acres I had—relatively short for a beef ranch but average for a stud one— half of it was for the bulls, the rest were divided for turkey hunting, the lakes were stocked with fish every spring and autumn for fishermen, and we had a petting zoo on the other side so the hunters would not accidentally rifle a baby goat.

“Are you people going to gawk at my food or eat it?” my housekeeper Ella asked while resting a salad platter on the table.

The old, scrubbed table groaned with platters of barbecue chicken and roast beef, side dishes of mashed and sweet potatoes, roasted vegetables, macaroni and cheese, and fragrant apple pies.

I hugged her with one arm and kissed her cheek. “Don’t worry, Pattie. We’re all grateful.”

Ben came lumbering up the short stack of stairs and doffed his old, weathered Stetson. It was clear he had cleaned up from a long day on the ranch, as his clothes were spic-n’-span. Worn jeans over clean boots and a faded flannel. His gray hair was still thick in his sixties, and his trimmed beard was salt-n’-pepper.

*I’ve heard around town they call him Daddy material.*

“Evenin’ folks,” his old lazy drawl rushed over us. “Mighty fine spread you’ve got here, Miss Ella. My stomach will love it, but I doubt my doctors will.”

I snorted. “Stop foolin’ anyone. You’re as healthy as one of those bunking broncos on the ridge.”

The other fifteen ranch hands came unto the long wraparound porch and said their hellos and good evenings, poured some ice tea and began settling down when Sam and Harper came down in cleaner clothes, hair brushed into ponytails, and warm smiles on their face.

Sam went to hug Ben first. “Thank you, Uncle Ben, for the other day. I’m sorry about making you worry.”

Wrapping an arm around her, Ben hugged her tight, then pulled Harper in, ruffling her hair while squeezing Sam. While Harper mumbled her apology, he said, “It’s all right, princess. You’ll figure it out soon enough. Both of you. And no harm done, right?”

I smiled as the two took their seats, and supper began. Micah and Jack, two herdsman, were cracking jokes about their time trying to get this stubborn old bull into the mounting of the dummy cow.

“And even after fifteen tries, a cloth with cow hormones waved in his face, stroking his back leg until my hand went numb, and dodging three almost fatal hooves to the head,” Jake gestured widely, “The big guns had to come out.”

“Ugh,” Dusty groaned. “Not *those* guns.”

“Oh please, it’s a long rubber glove and some lubricant,” Sam snorted derisively while stabbing at her peas. “Don’t be such a baby.”

While she was not wrong, it was not her place to be so blunt or rude. “Samantha,” I warned.

She flushed red to the tips of her ears and ducked her head, “Sorry, Dusty.”

“It’s all right.” He grinned. “But you were right. I was a baby, damn near ready to bawl my eyes out. Eventually, I got his tail up and—”

“That’s quite enough,” Ben said firmly. “We all know what happens next. Please, we’re eating here. Spare us the gruesome mental images.”

“Well,” Mitch grunted, “While I was arm-deep in, y’know, Jack the genius here decided that the stimulator was not oiled enough—”

My brows shot up. “What?”

“Exactly,” Micah rolled his eyes. “He grabs the sterile jelly and goes to town on the thing while I am still arm’s deep in the bull, praying for judgment day to come already and take me, the thing hops up on the dummy cow, and now, I have to drop to my knees so my arm doesn’t snap in half. Tail flinging into my face while I am inches from gonads bigger than my head, a position I never want to be again, thank you very much. Now, I’m praying for death because I will never get the smell of a

bull's backside out of my nose—" Micah turned to me, his face dead serious, "—bossman, I need a raise."

The whole table burst into laughter while I lifted my glass of iced tea. "I'll table it for the next budget."

While the attention shifted to another topic, my eyes landed on Samantha, and I wondered what to do. Nothing came to mind, but I hoped that soon enough, something would.

\* \* \*

The call came in at twelve-thirty in the afternoon two days later, just as I sunk to my office chair after a long morning of riding with my men over our land to inspect the herds. I'd just showered and looked forward to a hearty lunch when my landline rang.

I answered, thinking it was a work call, only to hear a female on the other line. "Hello, is this Mister Maxwell?"

"Speaking," I replied. "May I have the pleasure of knowing whom I'm speaking with?"

"Miss Everett," she replied. Her voice was soft, slightly melodic, and calm—the perfect voice of a guidance counselor. "I am your daughter Samantha's guidance counselor. There's been an incident—"

I groaned and clasped my hand over my eye. "Oh, God. What did she do?"

"She fought with a classmate," Miss Everett replied. "Don't worry; no one had a broken bone, but a budding male ego is bruised, but even so, it is school policy to call in the parents when these things happen. Can you meet with me by one thirty?"

I checked my watch. "I'll meet you at one. Thank you, Miss Everett."

"You're welcome, Mr. Maxwell," she replied. "See you soon."

Hanging up, I tilted my head back and said a little prayer about what to do when I got there and that this did not blow up into something worse. Shoving from the desk, I went to grab my keys and headed out to the school.

The elementary school dearly needed an uplift; the front façade looked like two twelve thousand feet cinder blocks with steel bones and glass eyes, plopped on with ten acres of land. The exposed brick was worn and weary, and I felt the heat radiate off the wall as I stepped through them.

*Should I have placed them in private schools? I have more than enough money for it.*

Even as I thought about it, I knew the answer. It was the same. Sam and Harper needed to know what it was like to be in the real world, not the silver-spoon pampered, isolated, my-way-or-no-way some rich kids thought the rest of the world was like.

A passing teacher gave me directions to the guidance counselor's office, and I got to the wooden door with a square of frosted glass in the middle. After rapping on it three times, I rocked back on my heels, mentally repeating the litany of apologies I would give to the lady when the door opened.

And when it did, and I saw the woman before me—all cinnamon hair cascading over her shoulders in shiny waves, big brown eyes luminous, stunningly beautiful with her heart-shaped face and full-bodied lips, body so perfectly curved and proportioned—every word died on my lips. At the same time, every drop of blood fell to my feet.

Jesus H Christ, I knew those lips. I knew that body, had touched it, had dreamed about it, had ached to leave my mark on it again.

“Rayna...”



# Chapter Four

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## Rayna

**W**hen Sam's dad stepped into my office, I stopped, and my jaw dropped.

Samantha's father was...Jesus Christ, John. The man I'd had sex with a month and a half ago.

I was flat-out shell-shocked. If a nuclear bomb went off two feet away, I would have never been any the wiser.

He was clad in a pair of snug dark wranglers, a matching Stetson, and a black t-shirt that hugged his broad shoulders and chest, showing his bulging biceps. He looked worlds away from the man in the suit.

He lifted his head, and his face twisted in recognition. A mix of emotions coursed through me as our gazes met, and I felt the same emotions inside me—shock, horror maybe, curiosity, and a trailing after that...a bit of heat.

My body reacted, and the rush of emotions made me hot and uneasy.

I cleared my throat as another long look passed between us, and I tried to brush the feelings inside me away. It was unbelievable to have such an intense physical and emotional reaction to him after I had not seen John—or expected to see him—again.

“Mister...Maxwell,” I said, shoving my memories back and taking on my professional manners. “Thank you for coming in.”

I knew one thing. I was an idiot, an unprepared idiot. When I'd moved to this small town—well, in people, not cattle—I'd heard rumors about our local celebrity, Mr. John Maxwell.

*He's richer than God.*

*He's a hunk.*

*He's a widower who might be looking again.*

I'd heard all the rumors—but what I should have done was google him.

“It's...you,” he said without heat or derisiveness. “I can't believe it's you.”

I had no answer. I knew I was happy Samantha was not there. From the few times I'd spoken with the girl, I realized she was intuitive and picked up on things. Thank God she wasn't there to experience this weird vibe her father and I had going on.

I gave him a tight smile even while my nipples instantly went hard and rubbed against the inside of my bra. Thank God I still have my flimsy cardigan on to hide the reaction.

“I thought you said you were going to San Antonio,” John mentioned.

“I didn't think telling you the direct truth was wise,” I replied uncomfortably. “I didn't feel it was necessary. We had not expected to see each other again, and I certainly didn't want any complications.”

“Complications...” he said. “Did you follow me here, darlin'?”

I murmured under my breath and then reminded myself to pull it together. It was hard not to think about that night when his rumbly voice washed over me. How the hell was I supposed to handle this? My pulse thudded in my ears.

“What? *No*. I-I—” I tried again, focusing on being calm, relaxed, and collected instead of making an ass of myself in front of this man. “It might be best if we put that indiscretion behind us. We were in an airport coffee place, and—” I sighed, “It's safe to say we never expected to see each other again, so...shall we start over?”

Something flashed over his face, but it vanished in the next second. “Sure. Pleased to meet you, Miss Everett.”

Relief flooded me. “Same to you, Mister Maxwell.”

“Now, what happened with Sam?” He leaned forward, pinning me with his intense gaze that still—and secretly—made me shiver.

“She fought with one of her best friends, a boy named Tyler,” I replied, flipping a file open. “He is a grade older than Samantha and seems to take more to boy friends than girls.”

“She does so at home,” he said. “Well, there are more cowboys than women folk on the ranch. It’s what she was born into, so I suppose it’s natural for her to have boys as friends. Plus, she’s a tomboy.”

“I see,” I replied. “But the fact that the two are friends perturbs me. Friends don’t suddenly fight like that. From what I understand, they were playing some game, trading friendly insults about the other family, and Tyler must have said something to set Samantha off, and she hit him.”

Mr. Maxwell’s eyes closed tightly, and I could see strain turn his face rigid—right before he slumped over, caged his face with his hands, and rubbed it harshly. “Is this...this the first interaction she’s had like this? I mean, had there been other kids?”

“Mr. Maxwell—”

“John, please,” he grunted.

“John then,” I added, resting my forearms on my desk and lacing my fingers. “No, from my records, she has not fought anyone else. But if I may ask, has Sam been acting up at home?”

“Yes...” he peeled his hands from his face. “She’s been acting up, going off on her own on her horse, locked up in her room at times, outbursts too. She’s been sullen, reticent, with a poker face that makes her look like a wall. I think...I think I’m to blame. See, I’m hardly home, and with her mom gone...it’s been a lot.”

There were so many things to explain pre-teen rebellion. While he had a point, he had jumped over so many other

legitimate reasons that I knew it would be hard to talk him off this ledge.

“Your concerns are valid, John, but there are many multifactual reasons why Sam feels the way she does,” I replied. “Have you ever sat with her and talked about her feelings?”

His lips flattened. “I wish I could tell you yes.”

“I think you might want to,” I replied.

He leaned forward and raked a hand through his hair. “I’m not the best at emotions, Miss Everett. I grew up feeling that the less I let them rule me, the more I would be in control. Sometimes, I think Sam got that feeling from me because, as I’d said before, sometimes she would go as blank as a slate, but now—” He sighed. “If we were to talk, I don’t know what I would say to get her to open up to me.”

“You would need to start creating a safe space,” I replied. “Is there a place on the ranch where you can talk, a place she likes to go?”

“The pond,” he replied. “She loves swimming.”

“My advice is to take her there,” I replied. “Start the conversation with something personal to you; open the conversation with ease so she feels comfortable speaking with you. Maybe something silly or embarrassing, but don’t beat around the bush after that. Tell her you’ve noticed something is bothering her and that it’s safe to tell you what she is feeling.”

His mouth was slanted.

*He’s got sexy lips...*

“And if that doesn’t work?” he asked.

“Don’t get frustrated,” I replied. “Try again a few times. She might understand that you are serious about taking time to help her get through her problems.”

He nodded. “Is Sam under any disciplinary action? Is she suspended or expelled?”

“No, S-John,” I just barely caught myself. “This is her first infraction. She will have detention, though.”

“Has she apologized to Tyler?” John asked his tone firm this time. “She knows that such things are not allowed at home. I’d expect her to do the same things here.”

“She did so almost as soon after the fact,” I replied, hoping it would remove that thick knot in his brows. “Samantha is a truly responsible young lady.”

Scruff surrounded full lips, and though I had never been into facial hair before, I quite liked the look of it on him. The shadow of a beard belonged on his face, and I felt attraction flush my chest.

“Do you have a notepad and a pen?” he asked.

“Um,” I looked to my desk and the pad of Sticky-Notes and plucked a pen from the holders. “Here you go.”

He took the pen—like his daughter, he was left-handed—and scribbled something on the paper. Sliding it back to me, John added, “This is my personal cell number. I would like you to use it in an emergency when I am out of the house or on a business trip.”

I took the pad with reverence as if holding the holy grail and made a mental note to put this in the school records. “Thank you, John. Would you like to stay until Samantha comes out of class?”

“Miss Everett—”

“Rayna, please,” I jumped in.

His lips twitched. “Rayna then...” my name on his lips made my legs tighten under the table. “...a pack of hyenas couldn’t move me. I need to speak with my daughter as much as you do.” His long leg stretched out and bumped mine before he drew it back. “Sorry about that, but I’m staying put.”

I sucked in a breath, unready to be so surrounded by him. His musky, spicy cologne filled my airspace...and my lungs. “Um, sure. Would you like some coffee while we wait?”

“Coffee, black, please,” he requested.

“I’ll get you a cup, and I apologize in advance. It...” I paused and searched for the right words, “...might not be the best blend you’ve tasted.”

“Is it sludge skimmed off a tar road?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Then I don’t mind,” he replied, raking his hand through his hair, skewing the already tousled hair that much more. “Trust me; I have had worse. Believe me. I won’t mind.”

With a nod, I turned to the door but glimpsed him removing his jacket with a sexy flex of his shoulders and then peeling it off with sleek grace. My heart thundered in my ears while I went to the break room and made a cup of black coffee but carried a handful of creamer and sugar just in case.

When I returned to my office, I rested the cup before him, getting another whiff of his cologne. When I met his gaze, his blue eyes were not filled with questions but held...heavy desire.

Our fingers brushed while pulling away, sending familiar sparks right through me. Oh God, help me to get through these next few hours without spontaneously combusting.

\* \* \*

When I arrived home that evening—a tiny little cottage that came with the job—I kicked off my modest heels, passed the hallway, and tipped right into my bed.

Those two hours had been the most challenging in my life, heart-fluttering, knee-weakening, head-spinning hours. John’s presence was magnetic. You could not be near him without your attention being dragged there.

It had been so goddamn hard not to think of how he had hauled me unto his lap, settling me on his cock and ordering me to ride him. That cowboy made my body sing notes I've never been close to touching before. I still remember his lips, hands on my body...and hard, rough sex...

“Ugh,” I grunted, sitting up and shaking my head. “Get it together, Ray. It won't happen again. Even worse, you're his kids' guidance counselor, for God's sake. Don't shit where you eat. Remember what Daddy said.”

Despite that memo to myself, my mind lingered on John all day, and while I warmed up my leftovers for dinner, I wondered what dinner looked like at his house. If he was as rich as they said, did he have an army of fancy chefs at his beck and call?

*Beep!!*

The microwave jolted me out of my thoughts, and I got my food out, sat at the small round table, and ate. The baked chicken I'd made yesterday felt a bit lackluster, and I didn't know why.

I had this weird taste in the back of my mouth...or maybe it was a craving in the middle of my belly. Finished, I washed up, parked my butt in front of the TV, clicked the medium flat screen, and opened Netflix.

A few episodes of a mildly funny rom-com in, I shut it off and headed to the bathroom for a shower but decided to fill the tub instead. Maybe a hot soak would get rid of these jangly nerves still jumping in my middle.

Dropping some scented oils in the water, I shed my clothes and stepped in. The moment the water touched my lady bits and sent a zing through me, I realized what the trouble was. I wanted John and a replay of that night. Since I had left John's bed, I'd been left wanting; arousal had smoldered in my belly, low and hot, even though it would never be realized again.

Restless hunger consumed me, and I couldn't stop thinking about him, his sex, and how he had mastered my body. The



harder I tried to shove those thoughts away, the harder they became to ignore. My blood heated, and my clit throbbed, my body clamoring for an orgasm.

Tilting my head back, I traced the tips of my fingers down my chest, then cupped each full breast in turn. Gently, I tugged on my nipples, pinching and rolling them, and the heat tingled. I wanted it to sizzle.

Not to be deterred, I sat up and pulled out a wicker drawer that held some of my waterproof toys and grabbed a small vibrator. Closing my eyes, I remembered when John undressed me and lay on the bed. The hunger in his eyes, the firm grip of his callused touch, and holding unto the memory tweaked my nipples again.

“Yes,” I whispered to the empty room, lifting my hips from the tub.

With my eyes still closed and my head filled with him, I had the vibrator on, parted my folds, and placed the rotating, ridged head of the bullet against my clit. The sensations made my head spin, and I kept it there, riding the highs until I moved it inside me. I slid two fingers into my slit and rubbed my clit, rapidly moving my fingers wrist to keep up with the sensation spiraling inside my body.

My breaths came faster and sharper and sharper. I dug my heels in and lifted my pelvis as the vibrator pleased me in erratic, undefinable patterns that short-circuited my brain.

God, I wanted his mouth back on me.

Making tight circles around my clit with my thumb—imagining his hand there instead—I moaned in ecstasy. My heart pounded as erratically as the pulses inside me. I rubbed faster and harder. Burning red lust poured through my veins, consuming me with an uncontrollable need as I got very, *very* close.

Heat rushed to my head like a tsunami, and I shattered with a scream, “Fuck!”

Pure bliss followed the rush, and I shuddered and moaned through it. Dropping my head back on the rolled-up towel under my head, I sighed and gently pulled the toy out. I wondered if I had gotten him out of my system...

The scary answer was that I would not know until I spoke to him again, which terrified me.

# Chapter Five

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## John

Sam did not sulk on the way home. She didn't do much of anything except stare out the window. Gritting my teeth, I looked at Harper. She looked worried and chewed on her lower lip, something her mother had done so frequently that it made my heart trip.

God knew I was not ready to have that talk later on, but Miss Everett had been assured it would be the first chink into breaking into her armor. We would talk at the riverside, and I would try to coax out whatever bothered her if it took me a hundred years.

Miss Everett had tried to convince me that my absence was not why Sam was being so...confrontational, but I knew I had a part to play in her actions. After all, she had taken my stoic nature, and while I had once considered it a good thing, something that would protect her was now shutting us all out.

When we went to the ranch, I sent them up to their rooms to wash for dinner, and when Harper scampered off, I held Sam back. Her eyes flickered with fear, but I kept my tone calm, "After dinner, I want to walk with you, okay? I'm not mad, I promise. Okay?"

"Okay, Dad," she said so quietly it was a mere octave above a whisper.

I sent her off and turned to head to the kitchen. God knew I needed a drink.

Sarah and Marcella, our housekeeper, or Ella as we called her, were there, putting the last touches on dinner. Ella was basting a turkey while Sarah was dicing some tomatoes for a salad.

"Any coffee on tap?" I asked, looking around the room. "Blacker than a coal mine and probably as bitter?"

Ella looked sympathetic while she moved to the coffee pot. “How is Sam doing?”

“Not so well.” I raked my hand through my hair. “She got into a fight today, and the reasons behind it are a bit...odd. Anyway—” I took the cup Ella handed me and nodded my thanks, “— I’ll be getting to the bottom of it today...hopefully. Wish me luck.”

“Will the girls be having dinner at the same time?” Sarah asked.

“Yes,” I replied while heading to my study. “That hasn’t changed.”

Inside my office, I set the coffee to the side, booted up my computer, and took out a few files. While the calving season was from January to April, many ranches sought premium bull semen year-round, and to my amazement, just last week, the manager of Twisted Twines’ ranch, the owner of Tender T’s steaks, had reached out to me. Those cuts came from steers, and they wanted about forty thousand straws of Angus semen to replenish their stock—to start.

It was not the price we offered that made me so happy to do business with them. It was the connection with such a predominant company. My humble ranch in contract with them would take my name worldwide.

I worked through the afternoon, headed to the dining table for dinner, and met Sam and Harper there. Harper was telling Sarah—and, by association Sam—about her upcoming spelling bee, where the winner would win a small basket of candy and stickers.

Sam was eating but soon enough began pushing the rest of her food around her plate, and I felt my heart sink a little at seeing how sad she was. I finished my food and ducked into the kitchen to grab a few drink bottles before rejoining them.

“Are you finished, Harper?” I asked, and when she nodded, I added, “Go with Sarah and do your homework. Sam and I are going to talk a little, okay.”

Harper looked at her sister first—more proof that my little girl saw her sister as her hero and role model—before she looked at me. “O-okay.”

She headed to her room with Sarah following her, and I handed Sam a drink before saying, “Let’s head out, okay.”

\* \* \*

At the metal bench near the pond’s edge, I gazed out at the sky; not a single cloud marred the endless blue sky while wildflowers, filled with the Yellow Rose of Texas bushes, dotted the landscape, their lemony heads nodding in the gentle breeze. Rainbow-colored birds fluttered around the various trees we had hung bird feeders, too, from the oak and maple branches, all around the perimeter.

Sam was sitting beside me, her hands clenching the edge of the bench, and I breathed deeply of the fresh air to banish the confusion in my heart as I surveyed the land. The lake gleamed in the sunshine, ready to be stocked for fishing, and black-bellied ducks sailed along peacefully on the calm waters.

“Sam—”

“I’m sorry,” she exclaimed. “I never meant to hurt Tyler.”

Surprised but not displeased, I used the opening she gave me. “Why did you punch Tyler? I’m told he is one of your friends?”

“He might not be anymore,” she mumbled with a shrug. “I dunno.”

“You don’t know why you punched him?” I asked. “C’mon, Sammie, you must know why you lashed out. Tell me. I promise I’m not mad.”

When she kept silent, I decided to do what Miss Everett had told me. Looking out to the peacefully lapping water, I admitted, “You want me to tell you a secret? When I was

eleven, my dad told me to clean and take a hay bale to the cows half a mile away. I thought I was smarter than him, so I gassed up the old rickety tractor, lugged the bale into the loader, and drove it out. I thought I was all grown up, but I had not remembered a two-foot ditch just before a waterspout in the back pasture.

“Long story, my dad found me knocked out in the pasture while the tractor was upended, its wheels spinning in the air, and the cows munching hay off my forehead,” I said. “I had the worst goose egg on my head and was banned from picking up eggs for a month.”

She laughed. “It’s hard to think about you doing something silly.”

I snorted. “That was the low monkey on my totem pole of silly. The thing is, sometimes, Sam, we don’t think things through before we do them. Do you think that might be what happened with you and Tyler?”

“...No,” she said.

I cocked my head at her hesitant tone. “You don’t think so, or are you not sure?”

Her shoulders were hunched. “I dunno, Dad, I just...it just happened.”

I was not going to accept that. “Think harder, Sam. Why would you punch your friend?” Her face turned mulish, and I began to feel irritated too. “Did he say something to upset you?”

“No.”

“Did he do something then?”

“No,” she replied stiffly.

“Sam, I cannot help you if you don’t tell me what happened,” I replied.

“Nothing happened, Dad,” she said. “Now, can I go?”

“No, you cannot go,” I said. “What happened after Tyler told you about his aunt? Why did you call him an idiot?”

“He sounded like one,” she replied.

I pressed my lips tight. “Before we get to why you thought he sounded like an idiot, have we not talked about you calling people names, Sam? You cannot call anyone an idiot, a baby, or a jackass.”

Her head snapped, and I said, “I know you said it about Kenny last week. You know better, Sam; why aren’t you doing better?”

“I don’t know!” she shouted, then gazed up at me, her eyes filled with tears. “...I don’t know.”

Those last words, whispered into the air, rang in my ears as if they had been shouted from the rooftops. Instantly, I wrapped my arm around her and held her tight, guilt, fear, and dread curdling in my chest. It pained me how scared she was.

“I’m sorry I scared you, baby. I’m all right, I promise,” I said softly. When she didn’t move, I picked her up and sat her on my lap. I cleared my throat and added, “We’ll figure it out together, okay? I promise we’ll figure it out.”

With her tucked into my side, I held her tight. God knew I was not ready for her to grow up so quickly. I loved her with all my heart and half of her dearly departed mother’s, too. I missed how her toddler self would wrap her arms around my neck and hold on tight, feeling the wet kisses she planted on my cheek.

I wanted her innocence back, but things were changing so quickly that I felt we were off track and hurdling down a path with thickets closing in, and I needed to find a way to get us back into the clear.

*But how do I do that? I may need some professional help.*

\* \* \*



I was past tuckered four days later, with the back and forth with the Twisted Twine's ranch managers—I had not spoken directly to the head honcho yet—we'd agreed on the substantive order they needed from us, not to mention a long day on the ranch.

Thankfully, Sam's antics were not added to my stress list, which was a breath of relief. She was holding her head down and doing her work, and I had not heard a pip from her. I didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad one.

The warm shower I'd had earlier had taken some of the tension out of my body, but a nugget of apprehension rested in my belly. It was as if I kept waiting for the other boot to drop and crush the toes on my other foot.

With a glass of scotch, my mind wandered back to Ms. Everett...Rayna.

God above, she was still so beautiful. She was fresh, wholesome, and gorgeous with dark hair, lightly tan skin, and a petite body. Her eyes were a sparkling, clear brown and had a slight feline tilt at the corners.

*She's a beautiful woman, I acknowledged. There's no harm in admitting that.*

What I did not want to admit was that throughout the meeting, flashes of her breasts in my hand, her hips under my grip, came to mind. She might have been dressed down for business, but her body was made for sex, and all I wanted to do was get naked and fuck her again.

I remembered how her deep blue wrap dress complimented her skin perfectly and fit her like a glove. While she had a cardigan over it—proper school attire—the v-neckline of the dress had drawn my eye, and my gaze lingered on her enticingly full breasts beneath the cloth. Her hair had sometimes shifted, showing her delicate neck and a thin chain circling it.

I'd taken care not to stare too much, but I had not imagined the way her gaze would roam over my face and land on my

lips—right before darting away.

I wondered...

Sighing, I threw back the rest of my drink; it was better not to think that way. This was a woman who would be in constant connection with my children. Mixing business and pleasure was not a good idea, even if she was inclined that way. I was sure it would come back to bite me in the ass.

I hadn't had a woman in so long that I briefly wondered if that part of me was dead and had withered away. The drive to pull my family and me so far away from poverty and climb the success ladder had taken over my life that I had let my physical needs drop to the side.

As much as I was tempted, I had to remember that my daughters' needs come first, and I needed a distraction. Throwing back the rest of my drink, I stood and made my way out of the house and to the stables, nodded to a few of the guys there, and went to saddle my horse.

It was about seven in the evening, and nightfall came around ten. I had time to wander. I headed out to the trails and mounted the hills, feeling the fading sunlight dapple over my skin through the breaks in the tree covers.

It was quiet out here by my lonesome. All I heard were the constant thud of my horse's hooves and the occasional bird twitter or a critter's rustle in the underbrush. This was the quiet I needed in order to think. What was I going to do about Rayna?

Every base desire I had was trained on her; everything I *shouldn't* be thinking about her obliterated whatever professional code I had left. Hell, we've already fucked, so almost every code was out the window with her...except the one where we do it again. And God knew I wanted to. I hadn't worked her out of my system yet—which was strange because when I did find a woman to share the night with, that was it. Nothing about her lingered.

Rayna was the exception to the rule.

I broke through the trees and came to a hillock that crested over a wide valley. From this vantage point, the scale of the rolling hills and sun-dappled valleys took my breath away. Wildflowers of every color, shape, and size dotted the landscape, with the far-off mountains sparkling in the distance. There wasn't another home in sight.

What did I want to do? Play it cool and shove the past behind us or...make it known that I still wanted her and see where that went? How did I even start that conversation?

The constant battle of *we're all adults here*, versus *she works with my child* replayed in my head like a merry-go-round. Should I do the right thing or let my desires take over? What was I going to do?

*Here's a thought. What if I make it plain what I want and leave the ball in her court?*

It would all be up to her...and God knew I wanted her to want the same thing I did. We'd keep it discreet; no one would know.

But why did a treacherous voice in my head start laughing?

# Chapter Six

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## Rayna

I had not expected to find John in my office, on Thursday morning, almost a week after our first meeting. This time, he was not sitting, but standing near my windows, looking extremely handsome in his fitted blue suit. His dark hair looked damp and was curling around his collar. I felt the sudden urge to brush the stray locks off his high forehead.

As he gazed out the windows, his still, solitary pose made my heart twist. He looked... alone, as if he carried the world's weight on his broad shoulders. My eyes traced over the broad expanse of his back before I cleared my throat.

“Mister Maxwell?”

He turned, his brows lowered, and a tight draw had his mouth rigor mortis. Now, I grew worried, “May I—” I changed tactics, “—Is something wrong? Is Samantha doing well?”

“I...am not sure,” he replied. “Last week, I did as you'd advised, and we went to talk; she kept brushing the situation off. I pressed the issue, asking why she had punched Tyler, and she blurted out that she didn't know. Is...is that acceptable? Can she react without reason?”

*This is what I had feared.*

“Please, sit,” I said, then eyed his suit. “Unless you have a prior obligation, that is. I wouldn't want to keep you.”

But then, I wondered if those words made any sense. Why would he come to me and instigate a conversation if he did not have time?

“Oh, now.” He shook his head. “I just got off the plane from Dallas. I have time.”

I wanted to ask him what was in Dallas, but from his attire and knowing his job, I guessed it was some corporate meeting,

a few hours of dialogue, hand-shaking, and moving more money around than I would ever see.

“Now, would you tell me what Samantha said?”

His face took on the confliction of a man who did not know up from down when dealing with an unruly child. He rubbed his forehead. “She said she didn’t know. How can you not know why you did or did not do something?”

I reached for my notes on Samantha. “John, I think there is something more to the story between Samantha and Tyler than what we were told, but I cannot seem to get the true story.”

His handsome face dimmed, and he leaned forwards, fiddling with his Fossil Watch. “Maybe we can get someone to tell us...” he murmured, wincing. “...her sister, Harper. Those girls tell each other everything, and though I don’t like it, I don’t think there’s any other way. I’m a bit desperate here.”

“You want me to ask Harper?” I asked quietly, making sure that was what he wanted. “I will if you think it is the best course of action.”

“Unless you can magically make what we need to know to present itself on a paper in the air, then yes,” he replied. “I hate knowing this is what I must resort to, but it is what I must do.”

“All right,” I said calmly, standing. “I’ll go get her from Miss Jackson’s class.”

Moving from the room, I headed to the *third*-grade row, and after a quick conversation with Harper’s teacher, I gently guided the young girl back to my office. She was confused, but I assured her she was not in trouble.

“Daddy,” she exclaimed, running to him, and John stepped out of his seat to scoop her onto his lap. His face changed then, from serious and doubtful to lighthearted and happy. The face was of a father happy to see his child.

“Hey, munchkin.” He smiled. “Sorry to pull you out of class. I know we’re having a lot of fun there.”

Harper’s nose wrinkled. “It was math. I don’t like math.”

“You and me both,” he replied, “Listen, Harper, I...I don’t think Sam is happy. She’s not smiling like she used to, and I cannot remember the last time I heard her laugh. Do you think so, too? Do you think she’s unhappy?”

The happiness Harper had displayed just a moment ago vanished, and she nodded somberly to her father. “She’s been crying, too.”

John’s eyes flickered to me but went back to his daughter. “I know, sweetheart. And I think it happened after she fought with her friend Tyler, but she won’t tell me why. Do you know why she is so sad?”

“I...I dunno...” Harper bit her lip. “She asked me to keep it a secret.”

“That’s okay,” John replied. “I like secrets. Maybe we can share this one, just you, me, and Sam, okay?”

It took a moment, but Harper nodded. “...she said Tyler told her that she didn’t have a mom, so she couldn’t say anything about his aunt.”

The pieces began to fall, but I knew it was not all. I knew it was not a silver bullet cure. There were many subtexts to a girl feeling insulted about her mother. There was resentment, pain, feeling like an outcast, unsure of herself, or unable to rationalize the changes in her body.

What more was she feeling?

“That’s good,” John replied. “Thank you for telling me. Did she say anything more?”

“She said she didn’t like how other girls looked at her,” Harper replied. “She said they said she is a boy in girl’s clothes.”

Oh, God, this was worse than I thought.

I made to ask, but John’s eyes shot to me, and I realized that Harper had not remembered I was in the room with them. Which was why she was spilling her sister’s secrets—so I clamped my lips shut.

“Does Sam have any friends, munchkin?” John replied. “Any girl friends?”

I prayed that the answer was yes—but fate must have had it out for me because Harper shook her head no.

The blows kept coming. Sam was resentful that her mother was gone. She had no friends, and I suspected she had a crush on the same Tyler she had punched. Sam was an outcast, and boy, did I know how that felt.

John hugged Harper and kissed the top of her head while pain creased his brows. It vanished when he pulled away and then held out his pinkie finger. “Pinkie promise? I promise to keep her secret.”

Harper circled his fingers with her tiny one, and she smiled. “Promise, Daddy.”

“Thanks, baby girl,” he smiled. “Okay, you can go back to class now.”

She perked up. “Can we have pizza for dinner, Daddy?”

“Well, I don’t know what Ella made for dinner already. You know she is very fussy about her food and us wasting it, but we’ll figure something out,” John promised.

I gently led the girl back to her class after Harper hopped off his lap, only to realize it was over. With no more math and a promise of pizza, Harper was decidedly happy. I headed back to the office, wondering about this Ella lady. Was she John’s girlfriend?

A twist of something—that was decidedly not jealousy—wringing tight in my lower belly, but I shoved it away and ignored it. I closed the door behind me as I joined John and sat.

He rubbed his face. “Is...is it as bad as I think it is?”

“It is,” I replied, barely keeping the *‘it’s worse.’* “Sam is facing many challenges, but they can be overcome. She might feel like an outcast, but she can overcome them—” My mind slipped back to the times in grade school when I was the



underdog, how the girls would tease me about my humble clothes and how I would come in late smelling like cows and grass. My eyes sharpened. “—we can overcome them.”

John’s gaze fixed on mine. “How would you know that?”

“Because I was the black sheep way out in Fredericksburg, farming peaches and milking cows,” I replied, keeping my tone calm. “I know what it is like to be overlooked and dismissed while trying to keep my head high. Even the boy I liked didn’t see past my overalls and overbite until junior year when I began to fill out.”

When he spoke again, his voice was strangled. “Are you insinuating that Sam likes a boy?”

Ah, the dreaded day a man found out his little girl had eyes for a boy. “I know you might not like it, but it’s possible. And I suspect she might like Tyler.”

A strangled groan left him, and he sank six inches into his seat, almost shrinking into himself. It was almost comical but for the pure distress radiating over his face. I kept my expression neutral. “I know, it’s every dad’s nightmare knowing their little girl is starting to like boys.”

He snorted and raked a hand through his hair. “At least they start later than boys do. I wanted a wife when I was in the third grade.”

Our eyes met, held, and my heart lurched. His expression was light and teasing, holding the same glimmer from that night in the coffee shop. John looked almost devilish, and then his gaze shifted, his eyes turning deep, mysterious, and daring simultaneously. The color was the deepest blue I’d ever seen. I’d probably drown in them if I were close enough.

He stared at me, unflinchingly silent...and the air shifted.

I swallowed hard, trying to shift into business mode, but my heart was pulsing in my throat. Despite all this, I needed to find a way to keep it together around him instead of turning into putty every time he looked my way.

Yet my belly still fluttered, some feminine part of me helplessly captivated by the fact that such a handsome, sensual man would look at me with burning possession in his eyes.

“Erm...” My legs clenched tight under the table as I battled for anything to say.

John stood and went to the door; the click of the lock sounded ominous, and something hot and cold darted up my spine. What was he doing?

He grasped my chin, forcing me to meet his smoldering gaze. “I never forgot about you, you know.”

*What do I say to that?*

“I—” I clenched my eyes tight, warring my common sense with my desire. “...Don’t do this.”

“Do what, Rayna?” he asked, and I could feel the heat of his gaze burning a landing strip over my skin.

*Please don’t tempt me with something we both know I can’t have.*

“I...we can’t,” my words came out a bare octave above a whisper. “It would be a massive conflict of interest.”

“You’re right, it is,” he replied, and I did not dare take a breath of relief because I sensed more was coming. “It would be all shades of wrong, upside down and sideways, but how long are we supposed to pretend we don’t feel the same—”

“I don’t—”

His eyes narrow. “Don’t lie to me. You want a second roll in the sheets just as I do...” He reached over the table and fixed a hand around my neck, leaning in to whisper a kiss over my lips, lick the seam and then bite on my lower lips.

The shock of wetness between my legs told me my denial of wanting him was longer than a certain river in Egypt.

“It’s not proper,” I said, and my deflection felt so weak I cringed.

“Yes, it’s not,” John replied, millimeters away from my lips. “But tell me something here and now. Do you want me? If you don’t, I’ll leave.”

“And if...” I swallowed, hating how my resolve just crumbled with this man. “...I do? What...what possibly could happen?”

He grinned, and I felt like I’d just made a deal with the devil. “So many, *many* things. And I can’t wait to show you *all* of them.”

# Chapter Seven

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## John

I knew I'd played dirty with Rayna while discussing Sam, for God's sake, but I wasn't about to play some maypole dance around what I wanted, or in this case, *who* I wanted. I'd gotten what I wanted, but in doing so, I had checked off about a dozen boxes of *wrong*.

It was callus of me to seduce her; *check*.

It was the worst place to proposition her; *check*.

If this went sideways, I would make a massive mess for Sam; *check*.

I would be forcing us to sneak around like a pair of coyotes at midnight; *check*.

*But* if we got enough time to let this magnetic attraction between us blaze and burn out—as it would eventually do—and we went our separate ways in peace, it might all be worth it. Adding to that, I had learned not to hesitate to get what I wanted; either I went for it, or I didn't.

Sitting back in my seat, I barely held back a smile. “So, shall we resume the previous conversation?”

Her eyes darted up, and I could see the ‘*Are you serious*’ question splashed over her face. I kept my expression neutral but allowed a smile to play over my face. I tilted my head. “What do I do about Sam?”

Rayna shook her head as if to say *I don't believe this*, and I wouldn't blame her for that. I had spun her reality...again.

“I think you should ask her again,” Rayna said, calmer and steadier than I'd expected. “But this time, try to come at it from another angle. Ask her about her friends and lead it to Tyler.”

I barely held back a grimace; lately, it was dawning on me that I was seriously fumbling about this parenting game. I

should have had a stronger hand at home, but my business had come first while thinking everything was fine.

It was not letting this do-as-you-please business continue with the girls, and if I needed backup from a professional, even better.

“Come over to the ranch this Saturday,” I said, then tacked on, “If you have time, that is. I want to give you a better idea about Sam, about her environment. I’ve heard it plays a great deal into shaping who they are.”

It might have sounded like a flimsy excuse to get her on my turf—and it probably was—but I seriously worried if being surrounded by too many men was affecting Sam.

Rayna looked contemplative. “Wouldn’t that be a bit strange for Sam? To see me at her home?”

“I’ll explain it to her,” I replied.

Still, she looked apprehensive. “But about...us? How will that go about?”

“I’ll take care of that, too,” I replied.

Rayna bit her lip. “I...I’ll come.”

Relief swamped me. “I’ll give you the directions.”

\* \* \*

The heat on Saturday morning was sweltering hot. I couldn’t count the number of times I had to sweep my hat off my head to mop the rivers of sweat washing over my face and down my back.

Bluebonnets covered the slopes beside the roads and the trails along the hill rise where the three-hundred-thick herd roamed and grazed. Most of the herd stayed together, but occasionally, a steer would wander off on her own, or a calf would find itself trapped in a crag.

A week ago, we had added two more guys to our family, and as I crested a hill, I saw a figure about a hundred yards away applying a fence stretcher to a run of wire. That had to be Scotty, one of our new ranchers/handyman.

I turned my horse as the bulls and steers lumbered past me, heading down the rise to the valley below. The herd was intact, well mostly; a few were out of place, but nothing to worry about...until, with just a flicker of my eye—I realized something was wrong.

Old Goliath, a big, two thousand-pound beast, was heading to Scotty; the man was not wiser. Jesus Christ.

“Scotty!” I shouted, sucked in a breath, and then yelled louder. “Scotty!”

This time his hat moved as he turned and saw the bull coming to him and went pale as a sheet. “Don’t run!”

I kicked my horse into a gallop while grabbing my rope from the saddle bag. I quickly mounted up. It had been a long time since I’d done any roping, but I still remember the ropes.

Goliath was barreling down, his dark red hide as bloody as the ground would be if I didn’t get to Scotty in time. The old beast was making the dirt fly up and surround him in a cloud of dust, and his horns—though shaved down—were still as huge as the Devil’s pitchfork and would do massive damage.

Ben and Jake had realized what was going on and were speeding to Scotty forty feet in. I gave my horse a swift kick on his flanks, and he broke into a sprint, edging over Goliath and blocking him from his line.

The other two followed me and hemmed him in. I whipped the rope over my head, threw it, and snagged one of the horns in one try. I gripped the saddle with my thighs and knees to keep my seat, and Goliath bellowed and yanked his ugly head, trying to break free.

Ben’s lasso wrapped around Goliath’s neck, easing some strain from me, and by a stroke of luck, Jake’s rope grabbed his bind hoof, and we got him on the ground. Before I could

get down, Ben and two more got behind us while the seasoned cowboy hogtied the beast like a trussed chicken.

I leaped off to rush to Scotty, who was gray with fright, and grabbed at him to make sure he didn't faint. "It's all right, Scotty. You're fine."

His Adam's apple bobbed. "Is...it always like this around here?"

God, I hope this didn't mean he would quit. "Sometimes, yeah," I said. "But most times, we have a hand on ornery old beasts like him."

A little color had returned to Scott's face. "Why isn't he on the butcher's table if he is that old?"

"As bad as he is, he is one of our best studs," I replied. "You know what, Scott, take it easy this evening, okay? I know that had to be a fright."

"Nah," he shrugged, then turned back to his tools. "It scared me right, but I still got a job to do. Thanks, though, and I keep that offer for a rain check."

"No problem," I replied, watching Ben continue untying Goliath.

It stood, shook its head, and went off to a patch of grass to graze. With a sigh, I tipped my hat back and gazed up at the cloudless, late-spring sky, its fierce blue contrasting with the red-shouldered hawk riding the thermals over the valley. The rocky outcroppings were dotted with cedar, prickly pear cactus, and tufted grasses.

Turning, I gazed over at the property line and up to a ridge, and a flash of movement along the ridgeline caught my attention. With a tight grimace, I recognized the neighboring ranch's current owner, Brandon West, mounted on his gray gelding, and a woman, Maria, his secretary, his partner in trying-to-outdo-me-at-every-turn and possibly girlfriend, followed on a brown mare. The two were mean peas in a pod, and I did my best to ignore their machinations.



“Kid’s got a point,” Ben approached me and nodded to Scott. “It is about time we get rid of the old fart.”

“I guess,” I replied. “A few last harvests first, then we can send him to pasture.”

“Got it,” Ben sighed, plucking his hat off and wiping his face, the gray in his beard contrasting his tan skin. “This heat is a killer. We don’t get Indian Summers this early.”

“Maybe it’s a heat wave,” I suggested, getting back on my horse. My mind landed on Rayna, and I wondered—hoped—that she would come over. “Either way, let’s get this round-up done. I’ve got things to do.”

\* \* \*

After two o’clock, I returned to the ranch, hustled up the stairs to grab a cold shower, and wondered what was for dinner. Ella didn’t have a set menu for each week, and our meals were made by what spirit told her to make.

“Rayna...” I rolled my neck. “...shall I see you today?”

The water washed over my head, and I grabbed a shampoo bottle, dumped half the contents in my hand, and began to scrub the grime out of my hair. I hoped she did come so we could get somewhere with Sam.

Finished, I stepped out and grabbed two towels, rubbed my hair dry with the shorter one, and wrapped my waist with the other. Dropping the towel, I stepped into my boxer briefs and jumped into my jeans when someone knocked on my door.

It was probably Sarah. “Come in.”

But...it was not my old friend. Instead, Rayna stood at the door, eyes wide as dinner plates.

I guessed my prayers had been answered.

This was not the first time she had seen me naked—or half naked—but her eyes still traced over my chest like a map, the

trail under my belly button leading to the treasure chest. Her eyes snapped up, red flooding her face.

“Um, s-sorry, I got turned around s-somewhere, and I knocked on the wrong door and—” she spluttered. “A Miss Ella sent me up to find Samantha and—”

I shrugged on a t-shirt. “It’s fine, darlin’. I certainly don’t mind.” Sitting on a chair, I tugged a pair of boots on. “I’m glad you came. Have you ever been on a ranch this size before?”

“No,” she replied. “I have not seen much of it, but from the size of the gate, I can see it’s massive.”

“Not that massive,” I replied. “We’re a stud ranch, not one of the big beef suppliers. C’mon, I’ll show you around.”

“Thanks, but I’m here to find Samantha,” she said bashfully. “Maybe next time?”

Boots on, I stood, went over to her, and wondered how best to do this.

I decided it was best to proceed cautiously and take small steps. After studying Rayna, I held her hand and momentarily rubbed my thumb over her knuckles. With the other, I trailed my knuckles along her cheek, smiling when her breath hitched.

There was a stilted silence, but I broke it, my voice suddenly deep and husky. “You’re stunning. You know that?”

Her lashes fluttered as I stroked her skin softly, and her cheeks flushed red. Rayna looked at my lips, and I saw the same longing in her eyes that burned through my chest.

I didn’t have to sift through a mountain of memories to remember their heat and fullness on mine, the way they had wicked kissed over my skin, and I found my body reacting. God, I wanted that again, wanted her again.

Shifting my hand, I tilted her head and leaned in, inching so slowly that she had every opportunity to pull away—but she didn’t. Just as my lips brushed hers—someone pounded on my door.

Yanking away—the spell was unequivocally broken—I went to the door and ripped it open, completely unhappy with being disturbed. I opened my mouth to demand why I was being bothered when Sarah’s look of utter distress made me snap my lips tighter. And it was not only her; four of my guys were behind her, and they barged into the room.

“What is going on here?” I asked, angling my body to shield Rayna.

“She’s gone, John,” Sarah said.

“Who is gone?” I asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Samantha is gone, John,” Ben said tightly. “Sarah checked the whole house, and the guys and I looked over the ranch. She ain’t here. Samantha ran away.”

“*What?*” I shouted, fear crippling my whole body. “Jesus.”

Every thought of finding a private place with Rayna, I was still profoundly attracted to her, flew out the window. I had to find Sam; anything else would come after.

# Chapter Eight

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## Rayna

The shift in John's demeanor told me that this man loved his children more than himself and that God would have to help anyone who might have taken Samantha. My gaze snapped to a few of the guys, two of whom were trading looks at each other while shooting a few sneaky ones at me.

I knew they had questions, but those could wait until later when we found Samantha.

"You're sure she's gone?" John demanded, and I could see the protective parent and the boss in him coming out. "Could she be hiding in the stables or the petting zoo?"

"We checked..." an older man said gruffly, "...all her favorite places. We were just about to call the cops but came to see you first."

John rubbed a hand over his face. "I suppose that is the only option we—"

"No, wait," I stopped him, and every eye in the room flew to me. I swallowed, my mind working furiously. "Maybe we can find her. You said you checked all the places she used to go, right, places she can walk there? What about places she can ride? Does she have a bike or a horse?"

"She has both," John replied.

"Her horse is here," one of the men replied. "I checked the stables. Ricky is munching away on hay as cool as he can be."

"Okay, but where would she go?" I asked. "The town's library or the park? The local ice cream shop..." I began to think over the options; the last one had me wincing. "John, do you think she could have gone to—"

"The cemetery," he said grimly. "It's a possibility, but still, Ben, you, and Jake go check the library, Carlos and Dusty, the park, and Micah, handle the ice cream place. Rayna, come

with me, please. Sarah, please stay here in case she comes back.”

I nodded and rushed with him to the front, where many vehicles were parked. We got into his truck, and John turned, then sped out from the front drive like a bat out of hell. I kept silent as he drove, noting the tension in his arms and the ticking muscle in his jaw.

*He's angry and worried but can't determine which wins.*

The graveyard was not that far—or maybe it was, seeing as John was breaking every speeding limit known to man—and we got there at the other end of town in record time. John parked the car quickly, and we jumped out. The medium plot, about an acre and a half big, had neat rows and headstones, and we passed a square that was being prepared for another casket. I didn't know what it was about graves, but the air always felt silent and still over these dearly departed souls.

We passed a few graves with scattered flowers; one even had graffiti on it—how disrespectful—and a few with headstones so faded and weathered the names were gone. John was striding firmly to a plot up a hillock and toward a spreading oak tree where I assumed his late wife was resting.

A dingy sneaker poked out from around the tree as we broke the hillock, and John broke into a sprint. I followed quickly and saw when he collapsed, his hand slamming on the earth while his head bowed.

He didn't have to say or shout a word; even ten paces behind him, I could feel the relief washing over and through him. I got to the top and saw him there, and Samantha curled up on the ground before her mother's gravestone—completely asleep, her bike beside her.

I slapped my hand over my mouth as tears slipped from John's eyes on seeing his missing child. My heart lurched to the side, and I swallowed thickly. This was what a father who would give his life to his child looked like.

I got to his side as he dashed the tears away, then went to lift Samantha from the ground gently and into his arms. Samantha stirred, and her eyes opened a little. “Daddy?”

“I’m here, baby,” he replied, and I heard a crack in his voice. “I’m here.”

Stepping away, I watched as he carried her down the hillock, and I felt the tight knock of tension in my belly begin to fray out. Thank God I followed my instincts and thought this was where she could have come. I grabbed the bike and rolled it down behind them.

John carried her down to his truck and sat her in the back seat of his double-cab Chevy Silverado, then turned to me as I rested the bike in the back. A strange fire flickered in his eyes as he reached out and wrapped me into a warm hug, holding me tighter than I had been held in a long time. I could feel the soft trembles in his arms as he held me. It was as if he could siphon his strength from me. It took me a moment, but I hugged him back.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice raw and ragged. “Thank you.”

I swallowed. “I’m just happy to help. If I can ask, how old was Samantha when she passed?”

“She was six,” John replied.

Six was an age when a girl had a firm bond with her mother and could remember her.

“I don’t want to open a can of worms, but how did Emily die?” I asked.

“She had an undiagnosed heart condition,” he replied. “A hole in her heart that worsened after giving birth to Harper. A blood clot traveled to her head, and she had a severe stroke while we thought she was recovering. By the time I got to the hospital, it was all over.”

I reached over to console him and held his hand. “I am so sorry.”

He held my hand tight and let out a long sigh. “I am so mad at her, but I know yelling won’t help.”

I looked over my shoulder to make sure Sam was still asleep. Even though she was, I still dropped my voice. “I know it’s hard, but when you can speak with her, try and keep calm. Tell her how worried you were and everyone here who cared for her. Make her understand what she did was unacceptable, and she must be punished.”

“But she is already on punishment,” John replied through grit teeth. “Clearly, it is not working.”

For the first time in a long while, I was genuinely stumped. “Maybe this time, if she tells you why she ran off without anyone knowing, you can ease her punishment a little?”

“I don’t know, Rayna,” John replied, starting the truck and heading to the street.

“Why don’t you let me talk to her?” I offered. “It’s why I came this way anyway.”

“That would be best,” he replied. “I don’t think I can talk to her anytime soon. I have a lot of steam to blow off.”

When John drove us back to the ranch, I kept my questions measured and stable, turning the attention from Sam. “How big is your ranch?”

“Five thousand acres,” he replied. “It may sound very small; trust me, I know. Last week I went to a massive seventeen-thousand-acre ranch in Dallas with bulls as plentiful as the sand on Galveston Beach, but my business isn’t about supplying beef. It’s about making sure the supply of it is the best. We do selective breeding from bloodlines rich in genetic reliability.

“But our land has more than beefy boys; we’ve got a petting zoo for kids, a lake stocked with seasonal fish because some people come here to fish, and we have hiking trails all around,” he said while turning off to the secluded ranch road. “While there isn’t an off-season, semen is always in demand worldwide at various times of the year. We have those to give



back to the community who supported us in the worst years. School trips, out-of-towners, tourists, they all come round at a time or two, and they don't spend a penny on those attractions."

"That's..." I paused. "Very generous of you and good business too."

He grinned. "I'd like to think so."

When we got to the house, John carried Sam into the house and to her room. He rested her on the bed but gently shook her awake while I stood behind them. "Sam, wake up. We need to talk."

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. I could see the fright in her eyes. "...Dad?"

"Sam, explain to me why you thought taking off in the middle of the day, without telling *anyone*, was smart?" John asked. As calmly as he stated the question, I could hear his anger behind it.

"I—" she bit her lip. "I didn't think I'd take that long."

"Sam, that is not the point," he said tightly. "Why did you run off at all?"

John was getting angry, and I had to jump in. "Mister Maxwell, why don't you let me handle this," I asked. "Let Sam and me talk for a while?"

The tick in his jaw reappeared, but I didn't focus on it; the moment he left the room, I took his place on the side of the bed. Call me crazy—or hypervigilant—but I *felt* he had not gone far. He was probably just outside the door, listening in.

"Hey, Sam," I said, friendly.

She blinked. "Miss Everett? W-what are you doing here?"

"Your dad asked me to stop by and chat with you," I replied. "I might not look like it, but I'm a big ol' tomboy myself. I rode horses, fished for dinner, helped my dad feed

our foals and pigs, and picked a lot of peaches, and I mean a *lot*.”

“You were?” she asked innocently, making my heart twist.

“Sure was,” I replied. “And many girls back then would be mean to me. Because I had to help around the farm before I went to class, I smelled like horses and corn, which bothered me for a long while. I hated that I was unlike other girls. I liked boys a lot—” a strangled groan came from just outside, and I smiled, “—but I couldn’t get into makeup and manicures or writing love poems for the newest hot guy on TV. I’d rather be out there riding or fishing.”

“Didn’t your mom help you with those?” she asked, picking at the sheets.

“My mom...” I paused; was it the right time to pick at that scar? “My mom was not in my life. She came from a big city and married my dad, but the farm life was not for her. She left after I was born, and we, my dad and I, never heard from her.”

Sam’s eyes went wide. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay now, but back then, I was very hurt and angry about it, and it came out in many unhealthy ways,” I said. “I’d get mad at the slightest thing and didn’t even know why, but then one of my schoolteachers pulled me to the side and told me one thing I never forgot. She said emotions are like anything else you decide to do. If you can think about solving a math problem, you can decide how to control your emotions.

“Then she gave me a book and told me when I feel angry, to write it down, then draw a line, and on the other half of the page, list why I got angry. She said, ‘I can promise you that some of those reasons will seem silly but write them down anyway. After that, take a break, then go back and read what you wrote; I promise you, you’ll feel a little foolish about them.’ I did it, and guess what? She was right.”

From behind me, in my handbag, I pulled the book I had brought with me and handed it to her. “I think it’ll help you too. I want you to write down the things that bother you a lot,

and the next day, I want you to read over them and think if they still bother you. Sometimes they do, and sometimes they won't. This is all for you, Samantha. No one is going to read it unless you choose to let them do so, okay? It's not much, but it's got stickers inside."

Sam looked at the diary, then nodded. "...Okay."

Relief washed through me strongly, and I hugged her warmly and then stood. "I'll see you at school, Samantha. Have a good night."

Leaving the room, I realized my suspicions were correct. John was a foot away from the door, if that much. "Eavesdropping?"

"More like monitoring the situation," he grunted. "C'mon. I'll walk you to your car."

"I hope she will do as she promised me," I said.

"Sam may be a bit troubled, but she always backs up her word," John replied. "I do not doubt she'll do right as you said."

When we rounded the corner and got to my car, he jerked to a stop, looked at my little two-door thing, and burst out laughing.

I had to smother a laugh. "It's tiny, I know."

"One of my legs is longer than this thing," he snorted.

"Cocky much," I teased while fishing out the keys from my pocket—only he grabbed my hand, turning me back to him.

This time, the air between us had changed to soft and tender. "Thank you," John murmured. "It means a lot to me that you came to help Sam."

"My pleasure," I replied.

"I couldn't help but overhear what you said about your childhood—"

“No,” I gasped sarcastically.

His lips twisted. “And since you know what it feels like, then you would have a better handle on what might be going through Sam’s head than anyone else. I want to hire you. I’d like you to come to the ranch on weekends and talk with Sam, Rayna.”

Hearing my name in his rumbly, rough drawl made a shiver race down to my toes and back up again.

“Sorry?” I said, swallowing over the lump that had just lodged in my throat. “...You want to hire me?”

# Chapter Nine

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## John

“Yes,” I replied. “There is no one else who would understand her, and I know this would be us doubling down on the conflict of interest part, but I cannot see another way through this. If you will counsel her, the best I can do is compensate you for your time.”

She licked her lips as I watched her tongue run across the delicate skin. It was a cruel reminder of the feel of her lips on mine, the taste of her kiss, and how she had made my world’s realities disappear that night.

“You have my number, right?” I raised my hand to catch a strand of silky dark hair that had escaped her ponytail and slid the strands between my callused fingers. Slowly, I tucked it behind her delicate ear. “Think about it and call me after.”

The electricity between us grew like a summer storm. If I listened closely, I bet I could hear the thunder rumbling, and I forced myself to drop my hand, even though I didn’t want to. It would be so easy to reel her in and kiss her again.

*Slow steps. Remember, slow steps.*

“Safe trip home.”

Her lips flickered up in a half-smile. “Thank you.”

She slid into the driver’s seat, and I backed away as she drove off. When her tiny little bug disappeared around the bend, I stood there in the dark, wondering if I should have kissed her or if it was wise to stay away for now.

Turning, I trudged back to the house, feeling a bit hopeful and defeated at the same time. It made no sense, but I’d long realize that some things in life were utterly unbalanced and sometimes just whacko.

Stepping inside, I almost bumped into Ben. “Sorry about that.”

“Naw,” Ben shook his head. “I wanted to talk to you for a spell. Walk with me?”

A part of me had known this was coming, and I could not tell Ben no. He’d been with me from the beginning and was like a father to me and my girls. He was my sounding board, and more than once, he’d walked me off a few cliffs I’d been on the verge of flying off.

Stars shone brightly, glittering in a velvety sky, and when the breeze picked up, I smelled rain in the air. We walked toward the stables that would be empty this time of night, and when we got there, Ben turned and rested his back on the closed door.

“You want to tell me about that young lady from earlier? She seemed to have gotten Sam’s number?”

I raked a hand through my hair. “She’s Sam’s guidance counselor from the school. I’d asked her to come by to talk to Sam about a few things to see if she would get a clue as to why Sam is acting up, but...” I shrugged. “It’s too early to tell.”

“Ah, I see,” Ben nodded. “And why is it that she already has *your* number?”

I tried to play dumb. “What do you mean?”

“Do I look like I just fell off the turnip truck?” Ben guffawed. “I hate to break it to ya, but I wasn’t born yesterday, Johnny boy.”

“Fine, fine,” I gave in. “We met a few weeks ago at the airport in Waco.”

“The night your flight was delayed?” Ben asked. “And by met, do you mean bumpin’ uglies?”

Jesus, I felt like a teenager having the birds and bees talk with his dad. “Yes, Ben, and before you even have to ask, you think she still has my number because she does. I still want to have...something with her.”

“Even though she’s Sam’s teacher?” Ben said. “You know that might make things sticky?”

“Oh, I know it already,” I scuffed my boot on a tuft of grass. “I suppose you’re going to tell me to keep it in my pants?”

“Actually,” Ben plucked his hat off and fingered it. “I think it’s about time you have a woman in your life. Even if things get dicey, you’re a smart man, John; I know you’ll figure it out.”

That was not what I’d expected to hear, but it was welcomed anyway. “Oh...well, thanks.”

“Take care of it,” Ben nodded to the house. “I’m heading to my cottage. G’night.”

“Same to you, Ben,” I replied, watching him wander into the darkness. As the ranch’s foreman, he had a two-bedroom place there. It was only fitting, and I felt strange to stick him with the other young guys in the bunkhouses.

Turning back to the main house, I went inside, my gut rumbling with hunger. I realized I’d barely eaten anything that day, just coffee and two trail bars. I felt like I could eat a horse.

Luckily, when I got inside, Ella was ready with supper on the table, brisket with all the fixings. I went to call the girls down and got to Harper first, she hopped up from her homework as if it had burned her, and I lifted her into my arms.

“You’re growing too fast for me, little lady,” I said, kissing her cheek. “Slow it down a little.”

Giggling, she held onto me while I knocked on Sam’s room. “Sam, supper time.” I opened the door and saw her shove the diary Rayna had given her under a pillow. I pretended I didn’t see it. “C’mon, missy. You’ve had a long day.”



We all descended to the little dining room we used when it was just ‘us’ time, as we spent most mealtimes with the guys. Gently, I lowered Harper into her seat and kissed Sam’s head when she took hers. “Eat up, guys.”

Sam made her plate but began pushing her food around. “Dad...”

“Hm?”

“...Are you still mad about today?” she asked quietly. “I’m sorry I did it.”

“I was,” I replied. “And to be fully honest, I still am a little. I wish you could have told me or someone, Sam. Any of the guys would have driven you out there.”

“I know,” she replied.

“Promise me you won’t do it again,” I asked. “If you need to go somewhere, tell me or Ben, okay.”

“I promise,” she replied, then dug into her food. “Is Miss Everett goin’ to come back?”

I stilled. “She might pop in a time or two; why?”

“I like her,” Sam shrugged. “I wonder if she can still ride a horse.”

I closed my lips as the memory of her riding me presented itself front and center. Instead of saying *yes, she can*; I said, “Well, when she comes back, we’ll have to ask her.”

\* \* \*

That night, at about ten, when I was showered and ready for bed, I got a text...from Rayna.

*Despite all my reservations, common sense, and doubt, I trust you...so yes.*

“Yes...to what exactly?” I asked myself before I pressed the call button.

“Hello?” Rayna said.

“I need to know what you mean by yes,” I said, gazing out the window to the gibbous moon rising in the east. “Yes to Sam, yes to me...or both?”

“...Both,” she replied, a bit breathlessly.

Pleasure and relief flowed through me like a river breaking its banks. “I’m beyond pleased to hear that.”

“I’m surprised you’re awake at this hour,” she replied. “I’d intended for you to see the message tomorrow morning.”

“Most nights, I don’t go to bed until nearly midnight,” I replied. “When I’m done with the boys on the ranch, I head to my office to do work on the administrative end, but today... today was not the usual.”

“I’d say,” she replied. “How is Sam holding up?”

“She’s come around,” I replied, “And speaking of Sam, she likes you. Would you mind coming back tomorrow so you can talk?”

“Sure,” she replied, then her tone turned sultry. “...are you sure only Sam wants to talk to me?”

“Oh, Sam wants time with you, but after that—” I rolled my neck. “—it’s our playtime.”

Stunned silence echoed from the other half of the line until she muttered, “You might be the death of me.”

I laughed, and she chuckled. “Good night, John...sweet dreams.”

“Oh, they will be,” I replied, closing the call and dropping the phone onto its charging pad. For once in a long while, I could not wait for the next day to come.

\* \* \*

It took almost everything inside me not to steal Rayna away from the moment she stepped foot into my house, but I was

stronger than that. I'd waited years to find a woman like her; what was so horrible about waiting a few hours?

Oh, I'd gone down to greet her when she arrived, greeted her, and sent her with Sarah to Sam's room before I'd escaped to my office for some necessary video calls. I was glad my PA, Ewan, somewhere in Houston where my business's "official" headquarters sat, was taking notes. My attention was squarely on Rayna and the private moments we'd have for ourselves later.

"...and the profits are up," Ewan said, and I dearly hoped this was the end of this damned meeting. "In about five minutes, all stakeholders will get an email about the specific breakdowns in the profits and all the particulars."

I counted the seconds until the meeting wrapped up, and the moment the screen went black, I hot-footed it out of the office and to the stables. I needed fresh air and a ride while my mind rested on Rayna.

*Someone will tell her where I am if she gets here in time.*

"Hey, bossman," Dusty called over while leading his horse into the stable. "The flood lights on the east pasture went out. Do we got any spare?"

"We should," I replied while getting my horse ready. "The supply shed must have some."

"I'll check," Dusty replied, then gave a lone-wolf whistle. "Well, hullo there."

I turned to see Rayna walking in, her face a bit pink either from the walk or Dusty's hound dog whistle. She was standing in a little white shirt that had to be at least two sizes too small, so my eyes went to her breasts and high-rise dark blue jeans stuck into some old army boots. What made me laugh was the plastic Stetson atop her head.

"Um, hi," she replied, giving us a small wave.

"What in God's name is that?" I asked, reaching out to pluck the travesty off her head. I spun it. "And where did you

get it? A kid's toy store?"

"Amazon," she blushed prettily. "But I never realized that it was made of plastic. I was horrified when I got it an hour ago but decided to wear it anyway."

Snorting, I dropped the thing on a shelf, went to the tack room to pluck a spare Stetson from a rack, and then handed it to her. "Wear this until I can get you a new one."

Her head snapped up. "What? A new one?"

"Yes, during our ride," I replied. "I want to show you a few places on the ranch. You can ride...can't you?"

She must have heard the pointed insinuation in my tone because, goddamn, she had ridden me so good that night.

"Yes, I can," Rayna replied.

"Good." I shot her a smirk while going to another stall and coxing a golden mare out. "This is Goldilocks. She's a sweetheart. C'mere and meet her. Pet her and let her get to know the sound of your voice."

Rayna reached out a tentative hand and stroked her neck, smiling when Goldie shook her head and nickered and jingled a little while stamping her hoof. "You're a pretty girl, aren't you," Rayna replied. "My dad never had horses this pretty."

"Really?"

"Yep," she replied. "Just over the hill, brown horses with slack jaws and knobble knees."

Snorting, I went to get her saddle and got it strapped down pretty quickly, then walked Goldie around to her. "Ready to get on board?"

"Yeah," she said, sounding surer of herself this time.

Just as she grabbed the saddle horn, Carlos, Micah, and Jack came in, chatting about something or other, and before I could ask her if she needed a boost up, she grabbed the saddle horn, stuck her boot in a stirrup and hoisted herself into the saddle with a swift, smooth glide that made my jaw drop.

Somebody whistled, and I spun to see Carlos grinning like a fool and Jack shaking his head in amazement.

A fantasy slid into my mind, only in it, she's not riding her horse; she's riding with me.

*"Where are we going?" she asks.*

*"You'll see when we get there," I grin, grab her hand, and haul her up into the saddle with me. "Keep your cute butt in one place, or I might be forced to cut this ride short."*

*"Yessir," she replies breathily as her silky hair tickles my nose.*

*"You know the drill, missy, hold onto the saddle horn," I say while grasping the reins.*

*As she did so, she made this cute little roll of her hips that had my cock swollen in seconds. Oh, hell in a handbasket, this will be one heck of a ride with her tight little butt bumping up against my swollen cock for two miles.*

*I give my horse a quick nudge, and we are off into the trails and secluded forestry; my arms are locked around her on both sides, keeping her pressed against me.*

*With her so close, her hair tickling my face, the scent of her skin warm and stirring, her bottom pressed so tight on my cock, my blood roars with fire. I'm so hard I can hammer nails right now. Her smell changes the more we ride, and the slight musk from her smell makes me smile.*

*I lean in and nibble on her ear, raking my teeth gently over her lobe. Teasing her as my raging cock bangs against my zipper. "You're so fucking wet for me," I whisper. "I can smell it."*

"Bossman?" Dusty tapped me on the shoulder, jerking me out of my fantasy. "You doing okay? You looked like you went to meet Jesus a while ago."

I shook the fantasy off and shot Dusty a glare. "You'll be meeting Jesus if you keep that up."

Turning to my horse, a big black and gray Duke stallion, I swung into the saddle. I turned to look at Rayna again and gave her one last checking look before heading toward the back gates. There was a little meadow between the ranch proper and the east trails, and we trotted over it quickly.

When Duke began to pick up the pace, Rayna rode right on with me as the scenery showed pure forestry, mostly wildflowers, pockets of violet, and sunshine yellow dotting the land until we got under the tree line. The weather was crisp, but the sun was strong and warm.

“You okay over there?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she replied, looking at me.

Rayna’s big brown eyes told me everything I wanted to know; she still desired me and wanted to be fucked again. I’ll bet her pussy was dripping on the saddle, just like my daydream, but hell if I knew how that would go.

Through the break in the trees, we could see the summit of Brushy Knob Mountain as we took the trail’s incline. The steed followed the usual path, going along the endless ranch property until we reached a clearing outside some woods. The whole valley smelled of fresh-cut grass and evergreens.

“Your ranch is amazing,” Rayna said, breathless as she looked around. “I never seen a place like this before. It’s beautiful.”

“That’s the beauty of Hill Country. The air’s clean, the water’s pure, and the people all look out for each other,” I replied.

“I’ve never breathed air so clean,” she added.

The plateau peaked, and we began to descend toward the valley floor, the rocky cliffs on the other side—we had bulldozed the path down to the meadow—were dotted with cedar trees, prickly pear cacti, and tufted grasses. Bluebonnets covered the slopes beside the roads and the trails along the valley floor where buffalo herds once roamed.

There was a quaint stone bridge over a bubbling creek, and the horsed plodded over it until we got to the other side and to the ancient oaks I wanted to stay under for a while. The picnic basket was already hanging from a limb, far out of the reach of any roaming critters.

We came to the tree, and I hopped off while Rayna reigned Goldy in. “Need a hand?” I asked.

Rayna tilted her head up. “And they say chivalry is dead.”

I watched as she swung off and landed on the ground like a ballerina on a stage.

“Are we hitching them? What about the horses?”

“Duke won’t go anywhere,” I said. “Well, probably to the brook to munch on the grass there. Goldie is a diva. She will lie in the sun and preen like a country queen on a haystack ride.”

“She does that?” Rayna asked.

As sure as sunshine, while I got the basket down, Goldy wandered into the middle of the meadow and laid down, tossing her mane like some hot model in a shampoo commercial. Rayna laughed, came to my side, plucked her borrowed hat off, and looked around. “Can you tell me how you came across the gem of a place?”

“It was unwanted land,” I replied. “All scrub and brush, rocks and poor dirt, but I saw something in it that others didn’t. It took me four years to get it started, and from then, we’ve been building all along.”

“See that wide spot in the creek down there,” I said, pointing to the downside. “The current run pretty fast where the creek bends, but over there—” I pointed to the other side, “—the water’s much calmer and surprisingly deep. It’s double jeopardy, so no visitor comes here.”

“And you know this—”

“Because I nearly drowned in both parts,” I snorted. “Twice.”

Spreading out the blanket, I felt pleased when she took my hand and sat, resting the hat to the side. “Do you usually make picnics for women you hardly know?”

“Maybe that’s the reason,” I replied while laying out the tortillas, taco mix, fresh fruit deviled eggs, sandwiches, cutlery, cups, and napkins. “It’s only decent. Things aren’t one-sided around here. You’re helping Sam out, and I want to know what makes you, *you*. Not a lot of people are so self-sacrificing.”

She nudged my shoulder with hers. “Not so self-sacrificing. You are paying me, y’know.”

“Still,” I replied, opening a bottle of iced tea. “Tell me about yourself.”

Rayna took the cup and looked down, her cheekbones pink. “...Is that really what you want to ask me?”

Something inside me twisted, and I took care not to look at her. “What else would that be?”

She looked me square in the eye and bit her lip, letting the question hang in the air for a heartbeat. When she finally took in a breath, it was like I felt it in my lungs. “I...maybe, I...um...I probably shouldn’t have come. It’s better if I don’t...” She made to get up, and my hand shot out, grabbing her wrist.

Slowly, I pulled her back and twisted her a little, and she bent her knees, and I pulled her onto my lap. I ran my fingers through her long silky hair. “Tell me what you want.”

Rayna’s eyes flickered between my eyes before she closed the space and kissed me. Her soft, warm, plump lips pressed to mine, making heat race through my chest and my cock swell. I cradled her face and kissed her gently until something clicked.

I wanted to take what was mine, and a bolt of lust roared through my blood as I turned the tables and kissed her hard and hungrily. She was on my lap, pressing me down on the cool grass until she was on top of me and gyrating her hips over my thickening cock.



I grabbed her hips and shifted so I could slide a thigh between her legs for her to ride, and Rayna rocked on it, gasping as her sensitive clit got friction from two sets of denim between us. I tugged her shirt up and pulled her bra down to release her plump breasts, and my mouth sealed over the left one, sucking hard. I found the other one with my fingers and flickered hard.

Holding her hips, I moved us, harshly rutting us together and amping her pleasure until—she screamed as an orgasm tore through her, her hips jerking out of her control, groaning, “Oh God.”

“No,” I grinned. “Just me.”

Rayna folded against me, burying her face into my shoulder as she tried to catch her breath and thoughts. That was quite possibly the strangest orgasm she’d ever had, as we both had on all our clothes—although hers were askew.

I nosed at her ear. “I can’t wait to get you back in bed.”

# Chapter Ten

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## Rayna

**A**nd he would do that too—I knew it. It was not an *if* but a *when*. This man was my kryptonite, and despite the challenge of me being his child’s guidance counselor and the scandal that it would make if it got out...I still wanted him.

Lifting my head, I gave him a shaky smile. “I can’t seem to stay away from you.”

“And I’d hate for you to do so,” John replied, his blue eyes roaming over my face. “We have a good thing going, Rayna, and you can’t tell me it’s not.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “We do, but this is a fling. I don’t think you’re in the mood to be finding another mother for your girls.”

As terse as my words seemed, I’d learned long ago that conversations like these had to happen first to cut out all the other bull. If it was only friends-with-benefits, the lines had to be drawn there so nothing could overlap. Emotions had a sneaky way of wheedling themselves into things they didn’t need to be a part of, and it was easier to keep things casual if that was all it was.

“No,” he replied, his thick drawl flowing over me like warm honey. “I’m not wife-shopping, nor am I putting myself on the husband market. This will just be good fun.”

The tension in my spine eased. “I can work with that.”

His hands—large, callused, and long-fingered with blunt nails—settled on my backside. “You know, I didn’t think I’d see you again.” His tone was thick and sexy. “Don’t you think it’s funny that you ended up in the same town as I am?”

“My memaw would have said something like it’s meant to be, but—” I shrugged. “—coincidences happen.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. Never have and never will, but I’m glad you’re here,” he replied. “How long are you going to stay? There’s going to be a ripping sunset tonight.”

“How can you tell?” I asked. “I know you cowboys can smell rain on the air and hear a lost calf bleating from two miles away, but how can you tell about a sunset?”

“See all them clouds?” He nodded his chin upward. “It’s science. The higher the clouds are in the sky, the more beautiful the sunset. They give the sun somethin’ to reflect off, and we get all the gorgeous colors. The sky will be set on fire tonight, and if the winds pick up, it will be a cloudless night with bright stars.”

“I don’t know if I should...well, not tonight,” I replied. “It’ll be strange for your girls to wake up and see me in their home.”

“And I won’t let you sneak out at night,” he replied. “That ain’t fair to you.”

*At least he won’t be treating me like a dirty little secret. It is still a dicey situation, though.*

John brushed the callused tip of his thumb over my lips, and I barely moaned. My nerves were singing with the orgasm I had, my panties still damp. Unable to keep up, I shook my head, and a wave of my now-loosened hair fell over his wrist.

My hair contrasted with his tanned skin, which fascinated me a little. “Anyone ever told you that your lips were made for kissing?” he drawled.

“No,” I whispered.

“It’s a crying shame,” he replied, smoothing his thumb back and forth over my lower lip. “I could be kissing these peachy lips all night.”

This close, his blue stare was reawakening places in my body, and my breasts grew heavy, and the nipples went as tight as rubber bands. My breathing grew choppy as he snaked his hand up and around to my cheekbone.

“Your lower lip is as ripe as Georgia plum,” he dragged his thumb over the mound. “I can’t wait to feel these lips wrapped around me again.”

His dirty words spiked my simmering lust, and I wrapped my fingers around his firm hand. His hand was broad, rough skin, tanned from the sun and sprinkled with faint hair. I turned his hand over and ran my thumb over his palm, tracing the lines as if I could read our future from them.

Damn it, I wanted his touch again, feeling his hands coast over my body another time. I examined his hand. I murmured, “You know, my daddy used to tell me I could find all I needed to know about a man by his hands.”

“Is that so, sweetheart?” his voice was a husky rumble. “So, what is mine tellin’ you?”

“You’re not afraid of hard work,” I replied. “You said, by the strength of your hands and the sweat of your brow, you will make it. You don’t feel comfortable in an office, and you don’t let people do your work for you so you can enjoy the profits. You rope with the best of ‘em.”

“That’s right,” he replied, switching our hands and grasping both of mine. “Have you ever been tied down, tethered to a bed while your lover takes his fill of you?”

“No,” I replied, feeling very uncomfortable and interested at the same time. “I haven’t tried that before.”

“Do you want to?” he asked, gripping my hands and fixing a tight seal around my wrists with his fingers so that they felt like manacles. Something zipped right through me.

The energy snapping between us pulled our mouths together for a hot, lust-filled kiss. Fiery desire ignited in my belly as he ran his tongue along mine, and his tongue plunged boldly inside. He kissed me as if he owned me, and his unapologetic possession sent a singing sweetness through my blood. Instinctively, I followed his lead, letting him in deeper, meeting his tongue with mine.

John pulled, sucking a breath. “Christ. You’ll make me come in my pants like a twelve-year-old boy.” He then pierced me with a long look. “I want to fuck you so badly.”

I wanted the same; I wanted him...but not here.

“Another time,” I whispered, touching his stubbly cheek. “But for now, I need to go home, cowboy.”

He sighed, leaned in, and angled his head, nose brushing mine. My lungs filled with his scent—leather, spiced musk, and sweaty man. He was all the things I thought embodied the perfect cowboy.

John nuzzled against me, and I let my eyes slip shut as he hugged me tight. I couldn’t help but melt with how his hard chest pressed against mine and his biceps flexed.

“Rayna?” he said so quietly.

“Yes?” I opened my eyes to find his hovering an inch away.

“It’s on.” He kissed me.

\* \* \*

That night, after I’d stepped into my shower in the modest cottage the school had offered me, I tilted my head back under the shower.

Mr. John Maxwell was thunder to my senses. Though I’d been born and raised around cowboys—my father had once had a small operation—I’d never met a cowboy like John. The men my dad had on the peach farm way out in Fredericksburg had all been old and shuffling; some others were young and gangly...but John was another thing altogether.

There was no denying the man was sexy and charming, and even though I would never have a wild fling with a cowboy, it didn’t mean I couldn’t look and appreciate. And with that cowboy’s case, I could appreciate plenty. He was tall, drop-dead gorgeous, with solid shoulders, cut biceps, a defined

torso, and long, sturdy legs that ended in dark brown work boots.

I was sure he was a man used to getting any woman he wanted. I bet half of my middling bank account.

I knew his two beautiful daughters were like night and day. His youngest, in grade three, was a shy little girl who ducked her head and stuck her nose into a book, while his older one was outspoken and played touch football better than a Pop Warner Rookie.

I stepped out, dried off, moisturized, and dressed. Putting my hair up in a grab clip, I left to heat my leftover dinner, and then, even though I did not take work home, this issue with Sam had me invested.

It worried me when a young girl acted out without a clear explanation, and while Harper had given us a clue, I wondered if there was more to it. We would be in the dark about the root problem until Sam or one of her friends confessed what had happened.

While my foot heated in the oven, I flipped open Sam's file to look for something—but found none. Her grades were all A's and B+'s; there were no records of her reporting being bullied and no marks about her bullying others.

There was nothing there.

“Just when I thought this would be easy...” I mumbled.

Thinking back to what Mr. Maxwell—John—had mentioned, I wondered if there was a nugget of truth to what he said, but not about the part of him being missing. Not to dismiss it—it was a valid point—but his mention of Sam being surrounded by cowboys struck me. Maybe she had picked up some aggression from them? Was there any female presence in the house at all?

I went to get my food, set it on the table then went to get a legal pad and a pen. I began jotting down the many reasons Sam could be acting out. She was ten; it was when her body

was changing. Maybe she didn't know how to deal with those new feelings.

I hoped she was not dissociating or developing sleep or eating disorders. Was it anxiety, heartache, or depression? Was it jealousy?

Sighing, I shifted the papers to the side and ate dinner. If I were to get the answers, they would have to come from Sam, not from any diagram or preset study about rebellious preteen daughters.

Kids had unique personalities, reasonings, and actions that fit into some reconstructs, but for the rest...no. To assume every child fit into the same mold was like trying to force a circle into a square; it did not work that way.

I wondered if John would be talking to Sam again and what he would say when he did. I just hoped he would take the tips I gave him and use them wisely. If not, it would make my job that much harder going forward.



# Chapter Eleven

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## John

I could feel that Harper had entered my room about five minutes ago, but I kept pretending to be asleep. We haven't done this game in a while, and I wanted to savor it, to take us back a few months in time.

I could count the moments before she scrambled into my bed and kneed my arm like a dough ball. It was our Sunday morning tradition, so I kept my face still and breathed deeply until I felt the king-size dip as she crawled onto it.

"Daddy," Harper shook me. "Daddy, wake up."

I turned over and snored, very loud and incredibly fake. She huffed and crawled closer. "Daddy, wake up. Wake up."

I threw in a pig's grunt just because, and I knew, at this point, I was giving my ruse away. My kids knew I was a light sleeper, and I didn't snore, but this was fun.

"Daddy." Harper poked my cheek. "Wake up. It's waffle day."

Oh, that was what this was about. Once a month, I commandeered the kitchen from Ella and cooked up a waffle storm for my girls. It was one of the few things and times we had together as I was always on the move, either on a plane, the road, or the ranch. The rare Sunday mornings were ours, and my waffles were things of legend.

"Wakey, wakey, Daddy." She poked me in the forehead. "I'm hungry, and I want eggs with my waffles. If you keep sleeping, Ella will make waffles, but yours are better. Wake up."

Flinging my eyes open, I stretched my hands out, grabbed her to spin her around, and started a tickle war with her back to the mattress. Honestly, it wasn't that much of a war; it was not as if she could get back to me with all her squirming,

laughing, and twisting on the bed. I dug my fingers under her rib cage, and she tried to slap my hands away.

“Stop, d-daddy! Stop t-tickling me!”

“I heard *more, Daddy, more,*” I teased, tickling her armpits. “*I love being tickled by you. You’re the best!*”

After a few more tortuous minutes of howling, kicking, red-faced laughter, I relented and released her before kissing her cheek. “Good morning, sweetheart, and of course, I’ll make the waffles. We do not want any substandard waffles this morning, do we? Only daddy’s cinnamon, chocolate chip waffles will do.”

Harper nodded, then lopped her arms around my neck for a lovely morning hug. “Morning, Daddy.”

“It’s the very best, pumpkin’,” I replied, hugging her back. “So, what do you want to do today, y’know, after I make breakfast? Do you want to go riding with Daddy, swimming? We could take the old boat out for a fishing trip.”

“I want to go see the bunnies,” she replied. “And the new baby goat Uncle Ben said we got for the petting zoo.”

“All right, a day with the tiny baby animals is what it’ll be,” I replied.

“...Daddy,” Harper asked, and something in her tone made me a bit wary. “Is Sam going to be okay?”

I pressed my lips tight for a moment. “Yes, princess, Sam will be right as rain soon. She’s just having a rough patch, okay? Things are confusing for her, but she’ll be all right.”

“Is Miss Everett helping her?” Harper asked while plucking at the sheet. “I like Miss Everett. She’s nice.”

“Me too, sweetheart,” I replied, smiling. “I like her too.” Sitting up, I said, “I’m going to brush my teeth and wash up, okay, sweetheart? Go downstairs and wait for me. We’ll make the best waffles you’ve ever tasted.”

She scrambled off the bed and left the room while I ruffled my tangled bedhead of hair, slipped off to the en-suite bathroom, and cleaned up. I would have my time in the shower with fantasies of Rayna *after* I had served up the waffles for Harper and Sam.

Tugging on a shirt, I padded barefoot down to the kitchen where Harper was chatting Sarah's ear off, and Sam was curled up on a chair with a beat-up copy of *The Hardy Boys* in hand. I smiled, happy that she was there.

Dropping a kiss on her head, I said, "Good morning, Sam."

She looked up, smiling. "Morning, Daddy."

I greeted Sarah at the counter before scooping Harper up and sat her on the table. "Are you going to be my sous chef today?"

"A...soos chef?" she asked. "What's that?"

"Sous with a 'u.' It means the person who helps me cook my recipe and improve it after a few years," I grinned. "So, will you measure the flour and salt?"

"Yes, Daddy." Harper nodded, her pigtails flying.

I plunked out a large bowl, and we got to measuring, dropping, and whisking away until I had the batter in the waffle maker and steaming away. "Hey, Sam, do you want to go fishing today after we go to the Petting Zoo?"

She looked up from her book, face falling. "I've got homework, a book report."

Ah, that explained *The Hardy Boys* book. Opening the waffle maker lid, I removed the crispy brown waffle. "Want some help with that?"

"No." She sighed while turning a page. "I've got it."

"Well, I want to read it over when you're done, and you will not say I can't, missy."

Sam shrugged. "Sure."

I cracked ten eggs into a bowl and whisked the eggs while the butter melted in the skillet; Harper sat on the counter, swinging her purple legging-clad legs as she kept chatting... and chatting more. I didn't know where Harper got that. It wasn't from me. I was somewhere between a lock box and Fort Knox when it came to vocalizing my feelings, but if chatting was an Olympic sport, my little girl would have won gold.

I shared the fluffy eggs onto a platter and carried that one and the other piled with waffles to the dining table. "C'mon. Let's eat."

Harper looked down at me as we sat. "Daddy, are we missing something here?"

What did she mean? I looked down and then laughed. "So sorry, princess. Little idiot me forgot the orange juice. We must get our daily dose of vitamin C, haven't we? Forgive me, your highness."

Getting the juice, I poured our glasses. "Here we go."

We were halfway through when Ella poked her head in. "Someone is here for you, John—"

As I looked up, Rayna was walking in, pink-faced. Again, she was wearing jeans with a loose, graphic tee this time. Her hair was down with soft waves cascading through her dark brown hair, and the touch of eyeshadow made her eyes pop so prettily. My fork stopped halfway to my mouth.

She stopped just inside the doorway. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to intrude."

"You aren't—"

"Miss Everett." Harper shot out of her seat to run over. "You're here."

Rayna nodded, then reached into her bag and pulled something out. "Yesterday, I gave your sister a diary, and I thought it was unfair, so I brought you one, too. And like your sister's one, it had stickers."

Harper smiled. “Thank you.”

By this time, I had gotten my stride and stood. “Hello, Miss Everett; please, take a seat.”

Her face held a little embarrassment. “I didn’t come to—”

“Don’t matter,” I grinned. “You stepped into a country home on a Sunday morning, and you are going to get fed, so stop refusing, or I’ll be liable to tie you down.”

Rayna’s head dropped, and she looked to the ground while a riotous red blush climbed up her cheek, threatening to take over. Even though I didn’t mean it that way, the idea of being tied down and teased by me was a total turn-on. Good to know.

“How do you like your waffles?” I asked, piling a few on a plate. “Butter, syrup, or fresh fruit?”

“Butter, please,” she replied, and when I looked at her, she smiled. “I’m a southern gal too, and I never refuse butter.”

Laughing, I got the butter crock out of the fridge and set the plate in front of her. “Bon appetite.”

“Thank you,” she replied and tucked in. Almost instantly, she clapped her hand over her mouth before swallowing. “Oh, my goodness, these waffles are perfect.”

“Why, thank you,” I replied. “I’m not only good for roping mad bulls.”

“You made these?” Rayna met my eyes. “I thought it was Miss Ella.”

“Daddy makes the best waffles,” Harper crowed out. “It’s why today is waffle day.”

Rayna looked profoundly impressed. “Every Sunday is waffle day? You two girls are so lucky.”

“...It’s the third Sunday every month,” Sam pitched in. “Daddy is gone a lot but tries to stay for Waffle Sunday.”

“I’ll have to ask you for the recipe,” she said, cutting into another waffle.

“It—”

“Top secret,” Sam and Harper said together.

I leaned back in my chair with a smirk. “They said it. It’s true. Now, what brings you to our neck of the woods again?”

She closed her utensils. “That was wonderful. I was hoping to see a little more of your ranch today. I’m not afraid to admit, I googled this ranch, and I see you have a petting zoo?”

My eyes flickered to Harper. Was she clairvoyant? “Well, Harper here wants to see our new rabbits today. I suppose we’ll go together.”

“Are you coming with us, Sam?” she asked.

“No.” She shook her head, her messy ponytail lopsided. “I’ve got a book report to finish.”

“Oh,” Rayna replied. “I’m sure you’ll be great.”

“If not, can you talk to Mrs. Heather for me?” Sam gave Rayna a dry smile.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Rayna promised her.

I stood and kissed Harper. “You guys finish up and keep Miss Everett’s company. I’ll be upstairs for about ten minutes.”

After giving Rayna another look, I headed upstairs and went directly to my shower. Peeling my clothes away, I dropped one by one until I stepped into the glass enclosure naked. I’d wanted a wonderfully hot and steamy shower to fantasize about, but now I needed a cold one to clear my head.

After seven minutes flat, I dried off and dressed in jeans, dry sneakers, and a gray shirt. As I was about to leave the room, I pivoted, headed back to my bedside drawer, and slipped a condom into my back pocket. Who knew if we would get a moment alone? I was not going to waste a moment if we got one.

I headed down to meet the girls and found that Harper was, as I'd expected, chatting Rayna's ear off, but kudos to Rayna. She looked as if she was as invested in the conversation as if she was talking to a judge. Sam was gone.

I hid my disappointment.

"Where's Sam?" I asked.

"She went to her room," Rayna replied. "She said she wanted to finish the report before dinner so she wouldn't have to worry about it. Smart girl."

"She didn't leave abruptly or—"

"No, no," Rayna smiled. "She was very polite and smiling when she went off."

That took a load off my shoulders. "Well, Harper, let's go see the bunnies."

\* \* \*

The petting zoo was a half-acre spit of land with white-picket fences for the baby goats, pygmy donkeys and sheep, and pink and blue painted chick coops and rabbit hutches. There was even one for some guinea pigs, and over to the left was an artificial pond for tiny ducklings waddling with their little tails off under the shade of an old oak tree.

We stopped to pick up some carrots and lettuce leaves from a tray and headed to the hutch. When we opened the larger door, at least seven little rabbits hopped out of the tinier wooden hutch to sniff the food.

I leaned on the doorjamb and crossed my arms while I watched Harper giggle and laugh while their tiny noses wriggled at the treats she brought them before nibbling on the leaves. While she held out the carrot, a tiny kit climbed up her arm, and a giggle burst from her lips.

It seemed that Harper's happiness was infectious, and even while I kept an eye on Harper, my attention was transfixed on



Rayna. She smiled at Harper before training her gaze away and examining the cute little hutch. While Harper alternated between petting and giggling and feeding the rabbits, Rayna was looking around, trailing her fingers over the woodwork and looking over the fresh hay scattered around it.

Leaving the rabbits, Harper ran up to me. “Daddy, can we go see the donkeys?”

I blinked. “Those ornery bastards—buggers?” I quickly corrected myself. “Why? They are so grumpy.”

“They’re not that grumpy,” Harper pouted. “If you give them sugar cubes, they’ll love you for life.”

My brow shot up. “Is that so? And how do you know that young lady?”

“‘Cause I taught her so,” Ben said while strolling into the zoo with a pack of rabbit feed in his arms. “I told her about carrots and apples too. They might be nothin’ more than food grubbers, but she’s got to know how to deal with ‘em when she and Sam take over this place.”

I pretend to scowl. “You’re sending me out to pasture already? Ben! I thought you were my friend!”

“I am your friend, which is why I want the girls to know what to do later on.” Ben grinned, tipping his hat to Rayna. “You know, I can take over here if you want to show your lady friend around the rest of the ranch.”

What an old sea dog.

Well, hell, I wasn’t going to pass up a free pass to get Rayna alone. “I’ll take you up on that offer.”

While Ben drew Harper to his side and showed her how to feed the animals, I went to Rayna and dipped my mouth to her ear. “Take a walk with me?”

She looked at me like a deer in headlights but nodded quietly, and we slipped out of the zoo and strolled to the stables. At this time of day, most of my guys were on the ranch

or resting in the bunkhouse after a night shift, so I knew we had some time alone.

I closed the door behind us and had her against it in seconds. Instantly, the air shifted, and the tension that crackled between us sent goosebumps prickling over my skin. My hands clasped her face as she blinked, and I knew she felt the electricity spark. The heat in her glistening brown stare told me everything I needed to know.

She wanted me.

Her breathing got heavier while I brushed my nose across hers. “Tell me you’ve been thinking about me like I have fantasized about you...” I ran my thumbs over her nipples, and a breath left her mouth. I was so ready to fuck her. Her nipples were as hard as rocks. “...I want you in so many ways. On top of me, below me, in the shower, in my pool, dripping wet...” Her body was vibrating under mine.

“...I want your mouth on me. I want my lips on you. Have you been picturing my cock, Rayna? Imagining how big my cock is and how good it’s going to feel inside your slick, tight pussy?”

Rayna grabbed my arms, and the look in her eyes was pure want. “...And more.”

“Get on your knees, sweetheart,” I said, stepping back and undoing my belt. “I want you to wrap those pretty little lips around me.”

She grasped the waistband of my boxer briefs and tugged them down before eyeing my turgid cock with hungry eyes. I was as thick as a baseball bat, standing straight up and pointing at her.

A soft sound left her mouth as she wrapped her silky hands around my dick without hesitation; she wrapped her lips around my crown. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as she licked the underside, swirling her tongue around my head and sucking on me like a damned lollipop.

“Rayna,” I grunted, the fucking words punching themselves out of my lips. In answer, her moan vibrated through me as she took me most of the way down and back up, coating every inch with saliva and pre-cum.

My heart raced as I moved my hand down and grabbed a fistful of her thick, silky hair. I held it out of the way, lustfully watching her lips stretch around my cock. I thrust up a little, rolling my hips as she fucked me with her mouth, just as she did that first night, only better.

As my gaze dipped, her eyes met mine as she sucked me down her throat again. With tight pressure around me, she slipped a hand in and massaged my balls. How was I so lucky to find an undercover porn star wrapped up in such conservative clothing.

My head began to spin as she sucked hard and squeezed my heavy aching balls with just the right amount of pressure.

“Fuck, baby, just like that...” My muscles hardened as I tried to hold back...but I was right on the edge, and her mouth was not what I wanted.

# Chapter Twelve

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## Rayna

**T**his man had hypnotized me; why else would I have thrown caution to the wind and fallen to my knees right before him? Fuck me. I whimpered over his girth as I sucked it hungrily, my pussy leaking for this beautiful man.

His hold on my hair tightened, not to push me deeper—but to pull me away. With fire in his eyes, John got me to my feet and kissed me, hard and deep, his tongue plunging between my lips, fucking my mouth the way I remembered him taking my body.

I hung onto him, taking the rough kiss and giving as good as I got. The stubble on his cheek was rough on my skin as he groaned into my mouth, making my pussy drip with need. I wanted him so badly I was aching at my core.

“It’s not going to be soft, Ray,” John husked in my ear. “Not gentle either.”

Did it matter that I wasn’t in a house and lying on a bed? No. All I wanted was him—all of him. “I don’t care,” I replied breathlessly. “But where?”

He glanced to the left, and I followed his gaze to land on a stack of hay bales in the corner; instantly, my filthy brain shifted gears. That would be a roll in the hay if he took me there. As I’d suspected, he took my hand and took me over, but then paused, and after a quick kiss, left to...somewhere and came back with a large blanket to spread over it.

John turned back to me and tugged me into another kiss, expertly sweeping his tongue between my lips, tempting and teasing me with deeper, hungrier kisses. His hands slid down my back to palm my ass and cupped my curves in his palms.

Pressed so close, his hard cock throbbed through two sets of denim, showing me without question that he wanted me.

Gasping from the kiss, John broke it and met my eyes. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere,” I replied, reaching for his pants button again. I didn’t know when he had done his jeans up again, but they had to go—*now*. “But your cock will.”

“Where is this brazen part of you coming from?” John asked, grinning while peeling my hand away, lifting and dropping me on the bale.

I giggled against his lips when he struggled with the laces on my boots, dragged them off, and then went for my jeans. He swept them off momentarily, then passionately leaned in and caught my lips.

I craved feeling his cock pumping inside me again, and my nipples were so hard I felt the tips chafe against my bra. My pussy pulsed for him again, my inner thighs wet and waiting. He bent down and brushed his lips against my cheek, and I held my breath.

His tongue swept into my mouth as one of his hands held the back of my head in place for maximum penetration. When he broke apart, we were both panting. “You sure can kiss, cowboy,” I murmured.

“Hold that thought.” He shot me another spine-melting smirk while slipping between my legs.

I arched my back needily and wrapped my leg around his while he shoved the rest of his pants down and wrapped a hand around his hard, curving cock. He grabbed my legs and pulled me closer while taking a condom packet out from his back pocket and ripping it with his teeth.

“It’s going to be rough,” he warned while his finger found my slippery wet slit. I gasped in a sharp breath at how wet I was and how easily he pressed a finger and another inside me. Already I was seeing stars, and when his other hand stroked my thigh, igniting my skin, I was starting to grow desperate.

“Stop teasing me,” I groaned.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he growled, low and huskily into my ear while his massive thumb circled my clit.

“If you keep that up,” I gasped for a breath. “You’re going to make me come before I want to, cowboy.”

His laugh made my belly tighten as I cried out, balancing on one heel, the other still clinging to his arm. “I don’t mind,” he replied, assaulting my throbbing nub again. “I love watching you come.”

“You’re a cruel man,” I gasped as pleasure started singing in my veins. I could feel the buildup thickening my blood. I rocked my hips, humping his palm, feeling his fingers, impossibly, all over me. My body wrapped around his fingers as I shuddered and shook, bucking against his hand.

The blinding orgasm hit me like a tidal wave crashing to the shore, dragging everything under, and I was swept out with it. John held me steady as the sensations began to simmer instead of sear. I could only let out a long, aching moan.

I barely had time to recover as John kneeled, and his thick head was prodding against my sensitive lips. I felt his thick length inside me, each ridged inch so thick. I felt him pressed past my vulva and into my tight channel.

Even as turned on as I was, I had to stop him halfway in with a whimper.

“Easy, baby,” John soothed me, his hand coasting over my hip and belly. “Breathe in. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He was right, but I wondered where to draw the line between not injuring myself and wanting him to fuck me again. His fingers tightened around my hips, holding me in place. “I’m not going to hurt you, Ray.”

I know it was reckless, but my desire for him trumped any safety concerns. “I don’t care. Fuck me.”

His grip tightened. “...No.”

My head tilted back, and I sucked in a deep breath, forcing my body to relax and take him because I needed this more

than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. Finally, my body folded around him, cupping him like a glove.

"I'm ready now," I replied.

My words were the trigger that pulled the hammer back, and God, John went off blasting. John held the front of my legs, his elbows under my knees as he began pounding his hard cock into my needy pussy, slamming into me so hard a galaxy was shot off under my eyes.

Our bodies were suddenly slick with sweat, slapping against each other as he took me deep and hard. It was rough, it was hard, it was animalistic...but God, I loved it. Every drop of his lust matched mine, and I ached for more. It felt like cotton was stuffed in my ears, and I could not even hear my voice, but I knew it was babbling, groaning, and begging for more.

I knew I wasn't even thinking straight, but it didn't matter.

John's moans tore through me as he drilled into me, harder and harder, rough and raw, skin-on-skin, the sounds of sex filling the room. My blood heated to a blistering boil, and I heard him grunt from the bottom of his gut. When I managed to peel my eyes open, I saw him looking down, probably watching his cock plunge into me, coming out creamed with my wetness.

The world started spinning. "Milk that cock, baby."

It was as if he uttered magic words, and my body obeyed. My hips started rolling, grinding, riding him as my body pulsed and tightened around his throbbing cock. John reached between us, and his thumb strummed my slippery clit as he thrust deep inside. Every joining brought new sensations to my already electrified body, and my body locked up as I edged to climax.

"Come for me!" John demanded.

My world was on fire, with my back bowing off the haybale, clenching, and unclenching coming undone, as my scream became wordless. John was not that quiet; his raw roar



rang through my ears as he gripped my ass, holding me still, and I could feel his cock pulsing inside me.

John never let go of me until our bodies returned to Earth, but my body fluttered around his cock. For several moments, we both stayed there, locked together, sucking in air, trying to bring our heart rates back under control.

When John finally pulled out and rolled to the side, he reached out and brushed my long hair away from my eyes. I turned to his side and nuzzled into his shoulder, utterly boneless. “How did you do that?”

“Do what, baby?” he asked.

“Move the earth and send me into orbit?” I sighed. “I’ve never been fucked that way, and I don’t think I can feel my legs right now.”

“Then I did my job right,” he grinned.

“I don’t think I’ll survive with you,” I said while sleep threatened to claim me.

His laugh was rich and warm, flowing over me like honey. “Darlin’, you might want to bite those words ‘cause we’re just getting started.”

\* \* \*

It was not elegant, but we washed up in the large horse shower and redressed. I didn’t know about John, but my nerves were still singing from that scintillating sex. There was no question about cleaning up; the kids might not know what sex smelled like, but the adults surely did.

As we headed out of the stable—thankfully with no interruptions—I was sure that the night we’d shared that night at the airport had only been a teaser, and what we’d just shared was the appetizer. The entrée might kill me, but I was willing to taste it.

“What relation are you with Ben?” I asked as we meandered back to the main house. “He looks like a seasoned cowboy. How did you find him?”

“He found me,” John replied. “I was about twenty-seven, with my wife in a crumbling home, a plot of unworkable land, and on the verge of an aneurysm. I was in a bar in Houston, debating if I could rationalize buying another beer, when he strolled over and sat me down. He asked me what was bothering me, and two hours later, with my guts spilled over a dinky, dirty bar floor, he told me he would help me out.

“See, Ben’s been an old-schooled cowboy from before I was even born, and he told me he had a bit of money saved up that he was never going to use. He said as long as I gave him a house to lay his head when he was in his twilight years and pledged not to send him into a nursing home, he’d take a leap of faith with me, and it paid off.”

“That’s great,” I replied.

“And when he realized I had two daughters, by default, he is their godfather and honorary grandfather,” John said as we approached the back wraparound porch. “He’s like the father I never truly had.”

I eyed John, noting the dip in his tone. I sensed a story there but didn’t have the personal connection to ask him to tell me more. Maybe with time, I would build our relationship to where he would tell me.

It was the afternoon, the Texas sky was dotted with cloud puffs, and the scent of cut grass filled my lungs. It was going to be a nice sunset, I could feel it—sadly, we didn’t get the chance to as the moment we set food into the house, a grim-faced Sarah came to us.

“John...” Her eyes flickered to me but then back to him. “I don’t want to upset you, but *he* is here.”

The stress she had put on the ‘he’ made me curious, and when I looked at John, every iota of peace—that had been

there a moment ago—was gone. His firm jaw went rigid, and his eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t tell me, but more than likely, it will be something petty,” Sarah replied. “He is in your office.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” he replied, then looked at me.

“Should I go?” I asked.

After a moment, he shook his head. “Come with me.”

As we walked, I asked, “Who is this man?”

“His name is Brandon West, and he owns the ranch next to mine,” John said. “He hates the air I breathe, and I have suspicions about why. First is that I am doing better than he is, even though he’s got a similar operation alongside his beef production gig, but what I think he hates the most about me is that I came from nothing while he suckled a silver spoon all his life.

“His folks own probably half of Houston’s top communities, have stocks in every automotive plant, and own an oil field somewhere. To know that a guy who came from rags is doing better than he is has stuck in his craw.”

“Ah,” I nodded. “And what is it about him being petty?”

“He’s always petty,” John replied. “It could be a tree hanging over his fence, or a bull might have strayed over there, leaving tracks on his lawn. The pettiest thing he had ever done was track me down to tell me my birds were crapping on his bulls. First, I don’t have birds, and how in God’s green earth am I supposed to control that? I was ready to raze his land and salt his fucking fields at that point.”

“Like the Romans did at Carthage?” I laughed.

“Yep.” He said just as we came to his office door, and he pushed it in.

I entered to see a man as tall as John, with dark hair and cold blue eyes. He was handsome, objectively, with his high cheekbones, a narrower nose, and firm jaw jutting arrogantly,

but his eyes held ruthless savagery. Behind him stood a woman with dark brown hair down to her back, Mediterranean tan skin, and...just as spiteful as the guy.

“Mister West and Maria,” John said calmly. “This is a surprise. Would you care to tell me what the cause of this unexpected visit is?”

John was as cool as a cucumber, but I—and I think everybody else heard the true meaning of his words. *What the fuck are you doing here?*

“The fencing on the east line.” Brandon’s voice was cold and pompous. “I thought you had agreed to change it, and it is still crumbling. You must take care of it before one of your mediocre animals wanders over to my herds.”

“We’re taking care of it,” John replied. “This could have been an email instead of you coming over here.”

“I believe it warranted a face-to-face because this is a second warning. If it gets to a third, the law will be involved,” West said.

I could not guarantee it, but I swear I heard John’s teeth grind, but the way his jaw worked, I was sure that was the case. “The soil is full of clay, West. We needed to get the right amount of lime it would need. It will take some time.”

“I assume you are a smart man; get it done,” West stood, looked at me, and then returned to John. “And it is Miss Hernandez to you, Maxwell.”

Fury lashed through John’s eyes; his tone was as warm as Antarctica this time. “And you will make an appointment to see me instead of waltzing into my home as if you own the place.”

“This hovel?” West laughed mockingly. “Oh, please. Now, if you will excuse us—”

“You’re excused,” John growled.

The two walked out, sharing smarmy looks, and John closed the door behind them. He then turned to me, his lips

bloodless. “Now you see why I am not fond of that guy.”

“My gran would say he’s gotten a stick so far up his ass; you can see it when he yawns,” I replied.

A corner of John’s mouth ticked up, and he circled his desk to slump in his office chair. Pushing it away to stretch out his long legs, he tilted his head to the side and began rubbing the side of it. “I don’t know what to do with that asshole, y’know, aside from rearranging his nose, which will call all the hounds of hell he and his rich papa have at their disposal down on me. Even worse, he’s been badmouthing me around our circles for years, calling me some hooligan, and I would have to prove him right.”

I perched on the edge of his desk, and he gave me a tight smile. “See, from what I know, that smartass went to Yale or Dartmouth or some rich Ivy League shindig when poor little ol’ me only went to Texas A&M, with a year between, just because I had to get my business up and running.”

“Well, you’re doing better than he is,” I said. “He’s probably jealous.”

“He’s an entitled asshole who is petty and likes to throw up problems in my way every step he can do,” John grumbled while reaching for his cordless and jabbed a number. “Ben, can you get Carlos and Scotty up here double-time...yes, *he* came over with his passive-aggressive; well, my mistake, there was nothing passive about it. He’s on about that damn east fence.”

He waited a moment, then nodded. “I’ll see you in fifteen.”

I felt it was my time to go and said so. His face fell a little, but he nodded. “I understand. I’d wanted to show you more of the ranch, but we got blindsided a bit.”

“We did,” I agreed sadly. I did want to have more time with him, but this matter was one I knew he had to take care of urgently to avoid another visit—or lawsuit—from that prick. I got to my feet, brushed his hair, plucked out a strand of hay, and then showed it to him.

He laughed.

“Next time, I want the full tour,” I replied. “I want to see what you’ve created.”

“And you’ll get it,” John replied, his expression slipping to sly. “Maybe even more. Just tell me when you’re free.”

My brows shot up at his enigmatic words, but I didn’t dig into those either. I felt it would be better to be pleasantly surprised than be expectant. I dipped my head for a kiss, then smiled. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Before his company came into the room, I left and got into my car, promising myself to do more than jump into bed with John...but with how tempting John was, that was to be seen.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## John

**E**vening descended earlier than expected. The sky was streaked with pink and oranges. From the patio of my room, I braced my arms on the baluster and gazed out, watching the Texas sunset swallow up the sky with a beautiful bounty of crimson and oxblood.

It had been three days since Rayna had left the ranch, and because of Brandon's bullshit, I had to double-time it with my guys to fix that damn fence. I was either on the ranch or in the office, dealing with paperwork for the business, scheduling orders, and working up invoices.

That didn't mean my nights were not filled with her, though. I dreamed of her for those nights in a row and regretted that she was not in my bed. Laying there, as hard as granite, I had to remind myself to keep our lives separate to protect my girls.

*And her job. If they discover this entanglement, her job will be in danger.*

Those mornings had been frustrating, and I had to have some self-love inside the shower, but I had to remember to stick to the lines. Rayna was primarily there for Sam. What we had on the side was something extra, a perk; it could not start to overtake the true reason for her being there.

It was Thursday morning, and I headed down to see the girls off to school before I headed to my office. Ben was waiting for me there, and the first thing out of his mouth was, "That doggone fence is fixed. That thing is studier than a brick shithouse from the stone age."

I laughed. Ben did have a peculiar way with words. "So, I can get that asshole off my back now?"

"Yep," Ben replied, turning away before returning to me. "Make sure this game you're playing with Miss Rayna is



smart, John. You don't want those girls to be lookin' at you sideways in the next coming months."

I knew what he meant. I didn't even want to know how he had known or sensed that Rayna and I were bumping boots, but it didn't matter. "It's all strapped up, Ben. Nothing is slipping with us, and Rayna is not that kind of girl. She ain't playing games with me or would try to trap me."

"I feel that too, but just be careful," Ben eyed me.

Inside my office, I debated which medium was the best way to contact West, a phone call to his office or an email. Perhaps I should turn the tables on him and drop into his ranch unexpectedly, but...no. I did not need the drama, so I emailed his secretary about the fence and moved on to more important matters.

I reached for my phone as it beeped.

Rayna: *I'm free tomorrow.*

*How about a night in the town?* I replied.

Rayna: *Sure.*

*Text me your address; I'll come to get you tonight.* I sent back.

After she sent me the address, I called my pilot. When Bennie answered, I told her, "Gas up the plane for a round trip to Austin."

\* \* \*

I barely hid my grin when the car drove past the entire airport complex to a separate road, and the small landing strip came into view where my Falcon sat in wait. Rayna stared at the plane, then whipped her head to me, "But...but you said a night in the town."

"I did," I said while stepping out into the dusk. "I just didn't say *which* town, did I?"

Her jaw dropped a little, showing hints of her teeth, but my eyes were drawn to the bold rub red lipstick she wore. Red lipstick was sinfully sexy to me, and so was her cute, black wrap dress that ended four inches over her knee. Her hair was curled, and her makeup was soft and delicate...except for those devilish lips.

I wore dark jeans, a simple button-down sports jacket, boots, and Stetson; proper casual dress for a Texas boy if you asked me. Those monkey suits were for when I had meetings in New York or Washington, not for an upscale steakhouse restaurant in Austin.

A fluttering breeze washed a tendril of hair across her face, and I couldn't stop myself. I hooked it with a finger and guided it behind her ear, but then took a detour and trailed the tip over her peachy-soft skin.

Instantly, I clenched my teeth against the urge to toss her over my shoulder caveman-style and get her back into the car. My cock demanded that I get her into bed, and pronto...but no. This relationship could not just be all about sex.

*But isn't that the deal?*

I buried that traitorous thought under a mountain of denials. Rayna was not just some sex doll I could use and put back in a box when I was done. She was a human being and deserved some courtesy.

Besides, I had the means and money to do more than plain old courtesy. My version of plain old courtesy was sweeping us off for a private flight, a night in Austin, and a stay in a five-star hotel with an airtight confidentiality agreement.

"It's the least I can do," I replied. "Besides, I've wanted to get out of the city for a while, and what better way to do it than with company?"

She gave me a dry look, but the corner of her mouth twitching up gave her dead away; I held her arms. "Let a southern gentleman do what a southern gentleman does."

“And what’s that?” She swayed closer, lashes fluttering seductively.

“Take you out to eat,” I replied, then tacked on, “...In a place where the thousand-count napkin cost more than Louboutin shoes.”

Rayna shook her head. “All right, cowboy, you can take me out in your fancy white jet.”

“Yeah,” I replied as I looped my arm with hers. “Cinderella’s white carriage got a major upgrade.”

Arm in arm, we took the stairs up to the plane, and when I reached the top step, I paused and pivoted to look over the tarmac. Something about this vantage point still got to me after ten years. It still felt like I was walking through a dream in many ways.

“...John?” Rayna’s voice was quiet and questioning.

I turned back, “Yeah.”

Her eyes darted to me and then out to Bennie, my pilot, standing still in her dark uniform at the doorway. Bennie, short Bettina Bongiovanni, smiled. “Hello, John.”

Even after fifteen years in the Airforce, her accent was still as thick as if she had stepped out of Sicily. I kissed her cheek. “Hello, Bennie, and thanks for coming up so soon. This is Rayna. Rayna, my pilot Bettina Bongiovanni, retired US Airforce and decorated veteran from the wars in Iraq.”

Rayna’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God. That’s... unspeakably impressive.”

“Thank you, dear,” Bennie replied. “And before you ask, because I can see it on your face, I am not back in the dear Mediterranean sipping cocktails and marinating in the sun because I’d go stark crazy doing nothing.”

Giggling, Rayna nodded. “I know the feeling.”

“Please,” Bennie said. “We’re all ready to fly.”

As we entered the plane, I watched Rayna look over the plush cream leather seat, the couch further down, and the bar fitted with deep mahogany wood and chrome lining. With the glass coffee table before it, the cabin looked more like a living room than a plane. As we sat, Frank, the sole flight attendant, came with a tray of two champagne flutes.

“May I offer you anything else before we depart?” he asked.

“Thank you, but no,” I said, taking one and then handing the other to Rayna. “We’re all set.”

She was looking everywhere and now was overwhelmed at the same time. “Thank you,” Rayna said softly. “This is all so incredibly beautiful.”

The seatbelt sign flashed overhead, and Bennie’s voice came through the speakers, rattling off the weather facts, flight time, and countdown to take off. I had told her not to mention the destination, something Rayna picked up and looked at me as we taxied down the runway.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

I sipped my champagne. “Trust me?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Then lean back and enjoy the ride,” I said, kissing her cheek. “Believe me. You won’t be disappointed.”

\* \* \*

The moon wasn’t high over Austin, but it didn’t matter. The sky was peppered with lights of every size and color, from the streetlights to the long strands of red rear view lights on the highways to the large golden ones on skyscrapers.

As we lowered to the airport, Rayna turned to me. “We’re in Austin, aren’t we?”

“Bingo.” I smiled while the plane taxied to a stop. “And we’re going to RibEye.”

“The most famous steakhouse in the county,” she replied. “No wonder you said their napkins cost more than Red Bottoms.”

A Bentley awaited us on the private strip, and we slipped inside the air-conditioned interior. The moment the door closed, the car sped off into the night. Rayna grasped my hand and turned it over to trace a finger over a long scar that went up my wrist.

“What happened here?”

“I was working with my father as a teen,” I replied. “I was cleaning Dad’s hayrakes and wasn’t paying attention. One night in the ER, ten stitches and a lot of pain medication later, I had the scar to prove it.”

“When were you working with your dad?”

“From the time I could walk to the time I got married,” I admitted. “My dad passed away a few months before my wife gave birth, and I inherited the farm.” I shook my head. “And I’m being generous when I say it was a farm. It was a half-acre plot of land with dying crops and animals on it...”

On a good day, I was not particularly eager to delve back into my memories, so it shocked me how little it now bothered me to admit all this to Rayna. “...and then a huge storm annihilated the rest of it one day. Then I knew I had to change, or we’d die soon after the farm went. Emily went to live with her parents for a while. I sold the land and began looking for another life.”

“You found it.” She smiled.

I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. “I did.”

When we arrived at the restaurant, we stepped in, and I saw her smile from the corner of my eye. The restaurant was designed in a rustic theme with open-face brick, beige and brown walls adorned with abstract art and sconce lights on the

wall. A long bar with leather seats and lighting that looked like old-timey lamps hung upside down and dangled from the ceiling.

Wait staff in simple black clothing meandered through the tables while I spoke to the hostess, got our table, and were led to a private nook above the ground floor. This high up, we got a spectacular view of downtown Austin.

“This is so lovely,” Rayna tilted her head. “And a steakhouse is so you, isn’t it?”

“I may be rich but still have southern roots.” I grinned. “Give me a good piece of beef any day of the week, even that fancy schmancy caviar and frog legs rich folks are supposed to dine on. I’ll throw you out if you give me a plate of fish for Sunday dinner.”

A soft laugh escaped her as she met my gaze, and Rayna sipped on her water before glancing around the restaurant. “If you could live in places like this, would you?”

“Hell no,” I replied. “I’d stifle and suffocate if I lived in the city.”

“Which kind of leads to my next question,” Rayna stated. “You can afford all the private schools in the county. Why are you girls in public schools?”

“Because they need to learn how to interact with everyone, and that starts with, God knows, I hate this term, but *normal* people. People who get by on one paycheck or have to hustle to get their next meal. They need to have equal respect for the janitor as much as the CEO.”

A tender emotion rested on her face, a mix of respect, understanding, and kindness. “And that is the best way it should be.”

# Chapter Fourteen

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## John

**W**e were in the hotel by eleven, and the room was luxurious. It was all soothing cream and shard shades of brown. The en-suite had a glass shower with jets big enough for a party of four, an intimate claw-foot tub, and heated floors. The room had a balcony, French doors, and a bed the size of a small continent.

The food we had and the dessert after that lulled us into a sleepy daze or soft desire. There was no single noise except for the sound of our kissing, our shoes hitting the floor, and the rustle of our clothing as we shed them off. By the time the floor was littered with our clothes, I was sure this was leading to sleep. I just wanted to be close to her.

When she got into the bed, clad in her underwear and bra, Rayna buried her face into my neck and whispered something I didn't catch. My left hand threaded through her hair as I kissed her temple and forehead. The wine was still lulling me into sleep; by the time I checked, Rayna was dead to the world.

I soon followed her.

Waking up at dawn, I felt her soft breath skittering over my collarbone. Her head was still nestled into my neck, and her leg was thrown over my hip, nestled right between my leg, cradling my boxers-covered cock. With her breasts pressed against my body, I walked the fine line between comfortable and aroused.

It felt nice cradling her, and I tugged the soft cotton sheets a little higher on her shoulders, only for her to stir, rubbing her leg over my morning wood. Somehow, just like last night, while I was aroused, I didn't want sex...which was strange for me, but I accepted it as new and refreshing. I didn't wake her. I was content just lying here with her in my arms.



Comfort was something I was not used to. Most days, I was on the ranch's lands sweating, riding, and roping before dawn and back in the office by nine that evening, working until midnight. Even before that, in the days I had worked with my dad and the years building the company, comfort was a luxury I never honestly had, and now that I did, I did not want to give it up.

Through all the years of fighting and building, gaining all the big boy toys, the planes, the latest cars, and the seaside properties, I'd never really slowed down to savor anything, and honestly, a part of me had felt empty. But now, the crazy thing about being with Rayna, I did not feel that way. With her, just like this, wrapped around me like an octopus, I felt a contentedness I hadn't experienced before.

I started to drift off again, only to hear my phone go off on the bedside table, more vibrating up an earthquake than ringing, but it was loud enough to stir Rayna. She let out a grumble while rolling over. "Tell whoever is calling that you're dead."

I laughed. "I think my answering it will contradict that statement, don't you?"

"Whatever, just shut it off." She mumbled.

As I reached for the phone, I realized something more. Rayna was a sleepyhead. Slipping out of bed, I walked to the window and answered the call. It was Ben. "Morning Ben, what's going on?"

"Half of the fourth tool shed's roof collapsed on itself sometime last night," Ben said gruffly.

I frowned. "What? How is that possible? Did a freak storm roll out last night?"

"No," Ben grunted. "And that's what I need to tell you. We inspected the shed, and the tools were fine, but half the nails and screws that held the roof together were gone, John."

"You mean to tell me someone stole some rusty nails?" I gaped. "What sense does that make?"

“None whatsoever,” Ben huffed. “It’s more like a prank; maybe some goofball kids decided on some hair-brained dare or something, but since nothing else was stolen, it’s more of a nuisance than a crime.”

I rubbed my face. “Well, we’ve had pranksters before. Let’s count our blessings that it wasn’t a pack of thieves raiding the feed silo. I’m sorry this disrupted your day Ben but see to it.”

“Yep, will do,” he replied.

I turned back to Rayna, who was still in bed, possibly sleeping, and placed the phone back on the table before slipping back into bed with her. When I shifted to pull her closer, she shifted into my hold and slit her eyes open. “Bad news?”

“Not really,” I said. “More a nuisance than bad. The nails on a shed mysteriously disappeared last night, and the roof fell. It’s probably some kids trying to prove something. We’ve had pranksters before, so I’m not worried.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “I hope this isn’t anything bad.”

“It’s not,” I replied, my eyes roaming over her sleepy face, the soft plush of her lips still kiss-swollen from last night. My arms slid up the middle of her back, making her breath catch. “I’m going to kiss you now. You have about five seconds to say stop,” I whispered against her lips.

The last thing I expected was for her to fix a hand around my head and kiss me, her thumb coasting over my jaw, feeling the day’s growth tickle her skin. Rayna’s kiss was not soft or tentative, it was deep and needy, and I matched her instantly.

When I deepened the kiss, need pooling low in my belly, Rayna straddled me and unhooked her bra, peeling it off and showing me how aroused she was. Her nipples were tight and hard. Instantly, I sucked one into my mouth and swirled my tongue around the tight tip that made her arch against me, panting.

“You’re so sensitive,” I murmured, holding her hips tight. “Have you ever come from having your tits sucked before?”

Rayna rocked on my thighs. “No.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” I flashed her a grin, then set my mouth upon her right tip, applying a hot, deep pull, and Raya gasped, grabbing my head and trembling.

My other hand found her other breast, pinching and playing, rolling and tugging on the stiff bud while my tongue lavished attention upon its twin. Rayna was rocking on my lap, a soft puff of air leaving her lips as I kept sucking, then switched and playing with her other breast.

Her legs were moving restlessly, and I switched from having her straddle me to placing a thigh between her legs and gripping her hips, yanking her down on me. I could feel her panties getting wetter as she rocked and gasped when my thigh hit her exactly where she needed it.

I could easily have her on her back, a condom on, and have sex...but I wanted her to experience this. Her hips moved of their own accord, rubbing her sex against the rigid thigh, and she was trembling, coming to her peak.

She grabbed my shoulders and cried out as she came, my hands on her hips and my mouth on her breast. Before Rayna had the strength to lift her eyelids and meet her heavy, slightly satiated gaze with mine, I had our positions reversed and had her on her back. I didn’t know, but I had an inkling Rayna liked to be handled a bit rougher.

Her pleased gasp told me I was right.

Before she could speak, I’d swept her panties off, pushed her thighs apart, and had my mouth on her wet slickness. The hot swipe of my tongue on her most intimate place made her cry out, and strangled sounds tore from her throat as I ate her.

Lifting my gaze, I held hers, dragging my tongue up her quivering seam. Rayna shuddered at the sensation my wicked tongue caused. I captured her clit between my lips, sucking and lashing it simultaneously, and she rode my face, faster and

faster, and—suddenly, her hips bucked, a garbled shout leaving her lips, and she climaxed.

Pulling away, I kissed her inner thighs and sat back on my haunches. Even though my cock was so hard, I ached; I didn't particularly think Rayna could handle a third orgasm.

She looked up, and then her eyes dipped to my crotch. "Are you—"

"I'm fine," I replied.

Her mouth twisted as she sat up. "...Liar."

This time, she angled to rest on the mountain of pillows behind us, curved her body around me, and then kissed my ear while sliding her hand into my boxers. "Big...fat...liar."

I watched her pull me out and stroke my thick shaft to the rhythm of her sweet breaths panting in my ear, her hand stroking up and down. Swiping the leaking pre-cum from my cock's swollen head with her thumb to spread it down on me, Rayna asked, "Slow and long or hard and fast?"

My laugh was tight. "With how turned on I am, slow and long might kill me."

Instantly, she tightened her grip and shuttled her hand over my cock in a slick, fast grip—up and down, up and down—all the time I was watching. She stroked faster and faster, working me into a frenzy, the almost obscene skin-on-skin slapping sound of her hand on my dick filling the room.

Twisting my head, I kissed her as my balls pulled tight and high by the ache of my arousal, and my heartbeat slammed out of my chest.

Up and down, up and down, up and down, *up and down.*

The orgasm ripped through me as my cum shot over her hand, going off in spurt after hot spurt, covering her hand with it. My head was swimming and my blood humming, and even while pleasure stained under my skin, I watched her wipe her hand onto the sheets.

If she had licked her fingers...God only knew what I would have done.

With my blood calming, I turned to her, “Rayna, do you like it when a man has his hands all over you? Is it hard sex, kinky stuff, some bondage? What gets your motor running?”

Her face pinked. “A few of those...with some boundaries, yes.”

I tucked myself back into my boxers and checked the time; it was almost ten. “I’ll call for breakfast before we shower, and while we eat, you can tell me all about it.”

\* \* \*

Three hours later, I was back on the ranch, striding to where Ben and the others were fixing the roof that had mysteriously become unscrewed. Half the roof’s broken shingles were on the grassy ground, the beams on another pile.

Ben came to meet me. “We found out what happened.” He flipped an elbow bracket in his hand. “The brackets holding the beams were the ones with the nails pulled out, but I can’t get behind how none of our cameras caught the doggone perpetrators.”

My jaw stiffened. “If these were kids, we would have caught something. Kids are sloppy. They don’t notice or care about where cameras are positioned.”

“So...” Micah paused to dust his hand off his jeans. Squinting, he looked at me. “You think this was planned, a set-up? Someone sent some cat burglars to mess with our shit?”

My mind landed on Brandon, but I brushed it off. West would not lower himself to do something this childish...but the asshole was pretty petty.

*And rich.* I reminded myself. *Rich enough to have employed any number of thieves and bums to do his dirty*

*work. But why go through all this trouble to remove nails? Did he plant something in here?*

“Maybe, but make sure you search the whole shed,” I ordered. “Make sure that the only things that are here are the things we left here.”

Dusty’s head poked up, and he whistled in disbelief. “You think someone dropped some drugs in here?”

“I don’t know, but I just want to cover all my bases,” I replied. “We don’t need anything here that will go out and mess up our business with Twisting Twines Ranch. They are the biggest client we’ve ever had, and I’ve heard the owner is cautious with whom they deal with.”

As I backed away, Ben moved closer and dropped his head. “Are you thinking it was...*him?*”

I held back an urge to twist my head toward West’s ranch. “I don’t know, but I wouldn’t pass it by him. West is a pompous asshat who thinks everyone must pander to him and that no one without a rich family and blue blood is worthy of existence.”

Ben nodded, then scratched at his graying chin. “So, how are things with your lady friend?”

“Very well,” I replied, unwilling and unable to keep anything from Ben. “Rayna is a very special woman.”

I stood there, waiting and watching for the men to sift through the rubble and account for every piece of equipment we had in there. The sun was beating down, but I did not move one inch until I knew nothing illegal was in my shed.

Little by little, they had the brackets back up, and the beams with shingles attached in place, and to my comfort, nothing illegal was hidden among my tools. My teeth ground. If this had been West, he made my men waste hours of their time when we could have been doing something fruitful.

*But why? What for? To annoy me? Is he a grown man or a ten-year-old? Should I be expecting eggs on my windows and*

*doors next time?*

“It’s all clear, boss,” Dusty came to us. “Everything checks out.”

With an aggravated nod to Dusty and a huff under my breath, I headed to my house and entered my office, only to slump into my chair and increase the AC. Even though I had no proof—and while my ranch had suffered a few things from kids a couple of years ago—I felt in my gut that West was behind this. I didn’t know why and could not confront him without any proof.

All I could do was swallow the burn and move on. I would not let this slip by now. I could only keep my eyes peeled for whatever more antics West had up his sleeve.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Rayna

**I**n my office Monday morning, I found my attention drifting back to the unexpected getaway John had whisked me off to Austin three days ago. It wasn't only about the luxurious mini vacation he had taken me on; it was also about me getting to know him.

It turned out our resident billionaire was not some cookie-cutter guy with a big company and money to flash around. He'd had a tough, gritty past that had forged him into the honorable man he was today. I'd also cracked the mystery of why he allowed his children to stay in a public school when he could have had them in any posh academy in the state.

John Maxwell was a decent fellow, well, more than decent. He was down-to-earth, straightforward, humble, smart, and hardworking. In a different life, he would be the sort of man I'd love to have married—based on those characteristics alone, *not* his money. Those traits alone could make me happy, even if he were blue-collar or top management.

“Miss Everett?” Principal Morton came in. “Do you have a moment?”

My head snapped up. “Yes, sure. What do you need, Mrs. Morton?”

“Have you found out why Samantha had that tussle with Tyler?” the older woman asked. “Any admission, explanation, even a clue?”

I bit back a grimace. “Sadly, no. Neither party is talking. Why?”

“I've gotten a phone call from Mr. Hollins, Tyler's father —” instantly, my stomach sunk to the bottom of my knock-off Jimmy Choo's. “—and he is demanding an explanation and an apology from her and her father at the same time, he is willing to take legal action. And he is a lawyer, so he can do it, too.”

My jaw felt glued together. “Legal action? B-but no one was hurt that much. Isn’t that an extreme thing to do?”

“It is, but he says, and I quote, *he doesn’t get why that hoyden of a girl is so free to use her fists.*”

Head jerking back, I asked, “*Hoyden?* Haven’t heard that term in a while.”

“I know, well, not outside my regency binge reads.” Mrs. Morton sighed. “I wish this would all just go away.”

“I—” I considered my options. “—Let me talk to Tyler alone again. Maybe he’ll tell me what happened this time, and we can straighten this whole thing out. Can you send for him?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Whatever you need.”

As she left, I rubbed the back of my neck, my hand bypassing the still-tender hickey John had left three days ago. He could not have done a better job of reminding me that I was his if he had branded me with a cattle iron.

I needed to get to the bottom of this and not only spare John and Samantha some heartache and trouble but stop the media attention it would draw to John. I had a hunch he’d liked to stay under the radar.

When Tyler shuffled into my office, I gave him a comforting smile, but I don’t think he saw it because his head was down. “Please, sit, Tyler.”

At ten-and-a-half, Tyler was a handsome boy with a mixed heritage; his flyaway brown-blond hair and tan skin were already drawing eyes. By the time he touched sixteen, he would be a stunner.

I rounded my desk and drew up the chair next to him—me sitting behind a large table would be incredibly intimidating—and rested my hands on my lap. “Tyler, I’m sorry to pull you out of class, I know you like science a lot, but I have to get you help, okay.”

He looked up. “You want me to help you?”

“Yes,” I gave him another encouraging smile. “Tyler, what does your dad do for his job?”

He sat up, chest-puffing a little. “He’s a lawyer, and I want to be one, too.”

“Good,” I replied. “You know lawyers have a lot of power and can harm someone if they want to, and your dad may harm your friend Samantha and her dad if she won’t tell him why she punched you.”

“What?” he asked, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry, Tyler, but your dad may sue Samantha and her dad,” I said. “But he won’t do it unless he understands what happened, just like we all want to do. You can help me by telling me what happened that day so Samantha and her dad won’t have to go to court and get a lot of bad attention.”

He hung his head again and gripped the edge of his chair. I waited, “Tyler?”

“...It’s my fault,” he said. “I don’t want Sam to get hurt. I-I said something that wasn’t nice, and I’m sorry.”

“What did you say, Tyler?” I reached over to touch his arm. “You won’t get in trouble, I promise.”

He sucked in a breath. “I said...I told her that she wasn’t a girl.”

I held the shock from my face with an iron-clad determination, even while most of my blood was located somewhere in the Antarctic. No wonder Samantha had snapped, not with all the things she had been feeling about being an outcast from the other girls. Not feeling like one and then being told she was not one must have been the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“Did you say sorry about it?” I asked.

He shook his head, and darn it if he didn’t look tortured about it. “Will—” he swallowed. “Will that stop Sammie from getting hurt?”

“Yes, Tyler,” I replied. “It will help, but one day, you, your dad, Samantha, and her dad will have to sit down and talk about it, okay? Maybe I will be there, but I promise you, you’re not in trouble.”

“I like Sam,” he replied. “I don’t know why I said it.”

I had to strike while the iron was hot. “Tyler, do you know that Samantha doesn’t have a lot of girlfriends, that she likes boys more?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I-I didn’t know.”

“Well, it’s true,” I replied. “And what you said hurt her a lot because she is still a girl, and I remember when I was her age. Not having girl friends makes you feel like no one understands or cares about you. How would you feel if you had no boy friends here? You wouldn’t feel good, would you?”

He shook his head again.

“And that is how Samantha feels, but I am sure if you apologize, she’ll feel better,” I added. “Okay? Can you do that for me? Can you apologize to Sam at recess?”

“Yes.” He nodded, his expression clearing. “I’ll do that.”

“Good.” I smiled, then went to my drawer and pulled out two lollipops. “Give her one while you’re apologizing. Now, go back to class.”

Tyler took them and left, allowing me to sink to my seat, feeling like a ton of bricks had just been lifted off my shoulders. Now, I had something to work with. I reached for my landline, called Mrs. Morton, told her what I had found out, and then asked her to schedule a mediation meeting with both families before I hung up.

Now, I needed to find a way to help Sam embrace who she was.

\* \* \*

Channeling my inner James Bond, I stood in a doorway and gazed out over the playground, looking over at Samantha. She was on the swings but just sitting and scuffing her sneakers on a tuft of grass. Tyler walked over to her and said something that made her look up. I was too far away to hear what he was saying, but from his constant words, it was more than a paltry “I’m sorry.”

He dug into his pocket and handed her one of the sweets I’d given him. Samantha took it with a smile, and then Tyler took the other swing near her. Soon they started a game of who could swing higher, and I retreated into the school to have my lunch.

Giddy with relief, I took out my cell and called John...but it rang out to voicemail. A little disappointed, I left him the message, telling him what I’d learned from what the principal had told me, and then told him what Tyler admitted. Then, I suggested ways to approach Samantha.

Ultimately, I tacked on, “I think it will be best for you to do it, but if you need me there with you, I’ll come.”

Hanging up, I set the phone aside, dug into the lunch I’d packed, and went about my job for the rest of the day with a lighter heart and a smile.

\* \* \*

That night at my cottage, I had showered, dressed, arranged my files for the next day, and slipped into bed when my phone buzzed. A smile tilted the corners of my mouth when I saw who it was.

“Hey, handsome,” I greeted.

He laughed softly. “Back at you, beautiful.”

Cradling the phone between my ear and shoulder, I turned on my side. “I suspected you were busy. Long day, huh?”

“Very,” he said, and I heard the fatigue coming through his tone. I wanted to be there with him, perhaps sitting on his bed and massaging the strain from his back. “But I got your message, and God knows the worry I had before seemed to shift and double down now. I’m glad I know what happened, but I feel like I am failing my baby girl in ways I can’t even see, much less solve.”

“I understand,” I replied, holding back the sigh. “Have you decided to go and talk with her then? Tyler did apologize to her today, so maybe hold back and pretend you heard it when we all get together?”

“I suppose,” he replied, and I heard a rustle. Maybe it was his clothes or sheets. “It is private, and I want her to have privacy too. Maybe I should let her have her secrets, but...”

“But, what?” I asked after his long pause.

“What if something like his happens again?” he asked. “Something worse.”

I had not the first clue as to his feelings about his daughter, but I could only offer him some comfort, a little as it was. “Now that we know a little about what’s troubling Samantha, we can work with her. Children are very receptive to help when it’s tailored to their problems. We’ll help Samantha, believe me.”

“I have to,” he said. “I’m a fish trying to grow wings here.”

A soft snicker left me. “Don’t worry. You’ll be mastering both worlds very soon. You have an expert to help you, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” John replied, his tone slipping to sultry. “You’re gifted in many, *many* things.”

Instantly, lust simmered through my veins, making me shift and squirm at the memory of how his face dipped between my legs and how his tongue worked inside me. The sudden change in topics was another thing that made me feel uneasy, but perhaps I was reading the signals wrong.

“Why, thank you,” I replied softly. “...Aside from the thing with Sam and the meeting, is something bothering you?”

“I have to fly out to Dallas tomorrow to meet with a large beef producer for an in-person meeting, and I’m stressing about it,” he groaned. “I’m told it’s more of a pitch meeting with other big-wigs in the room, vying for his contract, and God knows I am not that suave in the boardroom.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really,” he echoed, “It’s why I hired a million and one marketers and product managers to do those stuff for me, but now, I’ve got to put my big boy britches on and do it myself.”

“Do you know who you’re up against?”

“Nope.” He popped the ‘p.’ “They left that out in the welcome packet.”

“Well...” I pondered, “...I know pitches are made to sell a fantasy, to use a story to sell an idea, a dream, but I think...I think you should make your results work for you. Surely, you have some stats or graphs that show how better your product is than its competitors. Use the facts, John. Facts don’t lie. They’re not promises either; those are proven results.”

“Good strategy,” he murmured. “But I’ll be away for at least three days.”

“Oh, how will I do without you,” I teased.

“Prepare for a rough ride when I return,” John growled. “Your body is my playroom now, and I want to sample all the toys.”

I guess I had not misread the signs at all.

Heat rushed between my legs at the thought of his lips, rough, strong hands on my skin, and his turgid cock pressing into me. I was fucking helpless with that tone, so low it sent a shiver from the back of my neck to the tips of my toes. It was naughty, filthy, and so seductively dirty. The memory of our sex has my blood pumping and nerve endings begging for more.

His voice was a rough, low growl. “If I slid my hand into your panties right now, I’d find your delicious pussy soaking wet for me, wouldn’t I?”

His words hit me like dynamite, blowing my senses to smithereens. God knew I’d never, ever had anyone talk to me as dirty as he does, and my pussy was instantly throbbing for him. I couldn’t think straight. It was like I were a puppet, and he was pulling my strings. I sunk deeper into the mattress.

“I wish you were here in my bed, but I’ll have to suit myself with imagining all the ways I’m going to fuck you,” he said.

My back arched, and my hand drifted to my breast; my nipples were hard as rocks under my camisole. I was not wearing a bra, and the cloth was rubbing against me just right. The friction against my nipples was driving me insane. John could not see or touch me, but he would make me come with his voice.

“You’re a jerk,” I said. “Turning me on with no way to get me off.”

“Good.” John’s voice was a pleased purr like a big cat just waiting to pounce. “Now, you’re walking the thin line I am, and I bet you’ll be ready to take every inch of me when we meet again.”

This man...was going to be the death of me. I knew it.



# Chapter Sixteen

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## John

**W**hen the hired car pulled to the Twisted Twines ranch, I had to do a double take. The house looked so much like mine I wondered if I had turned around somewhere between the airport and the hotel and returned to Hill Country.

The enormous wraparound porch was familiar, but then I took in the sprawling three-story limestone and cedar-board house, with tall trees swaying in the background, and knew I certainly was not in Kansas anymore.

Grasping the briefcase, I stepped out and tugged my jacket down, my eyes flitting over the line of cars parked before the house, and one of them looked somewhat familiar. Who was it? I racked my brain for a moment, trying to remember who, but then I gave up. I had more important things to worry about.

A woman with neatly pinned gray hair came to meet me. “Hello, I am Alma Voss, Mister Portman’s housekeeper. I assume you are Mister John Maxwell? You’re the last to arrive, but please, let me show you where the others are. Follow me.”

She led me to a room where a warming ripple ran up my spine even before I stepped foot inside. Alma knocked and then held the door for me. I crossed the threshold and—damnation—fucking Brandon was seated on a plush chair, swirling a glass of brandy and looking as smug as a bug.

My hand tightened so fiercely on my briefcase’s handle that it went numb. Tearing my gaze away from the smarmy bastard, I turned to Hunter Portman, nodded, and held out my hand for a shake. “Portman.”

“Thank you for coming, Maxwell.” He grasped my hand in a strong grip.

The man's hand felt like mine, rough and full of calluses. I supposed he was hands-on on his ranch too, but God knew how; this ranch was bigger than a small country. "Thanks for having me. Am I too late?"

"No." He shook his head. "You're just on time. We're all just chatting, but now that you're here, we should get this along. Take a seat, and soon, you'll have your pitch. I believe you're right after West here."

I turned to Brandon. "Funny. I didn't know to expect to see you."

"Neither did I," he replied, his tone calm and cool but his eyes brimming with malice and superiority.

I spotted Hunter looking between us from the corner of my eyes. "You two know each other?"

"We're neighbors," I replied shortly, returning to my seat. "You could consider us Germany after World War two, divided by one iron curtain."

"As peaceful as it too," Brandon replied stiffly.

"...I see," Hunter replied, his gaze shifting between us. "Well, let's begin. Mister Owens, you're up."

An older gentleman, probably in his early forties, stepped up and made his pitch, stating his reputation, people he had worked with, and companies who had vetted his operation, name-dropping all the way. I could see that Hunter was not impressed.

The second guy was more detailed but pushed his newest experimental procedure, making Hunter reject him. No one was interested in investing in something that *might* work instead of something that was *proven* to work.

Brandon then stood. "Dim the light, please."

Of course, he'd come with the projector, bells, lights, whistles, and flashing teeth worthy of a Colgate commercial. To his credit, Brandon had done his homework and shown what needed to be shown, but he had not done one crucial

thing, talked about where his stock came from, the genetics of it all.

When it was time, I handed Hunter a folder with all the pertinent printouts and information. “Good stock comes from good breeding, and good breeding means the selective method but in a way that runs the risk of reducing or removing other genes from the overall pool. Yes, we examine the genetic components of our stock, but we do not believe in removing any trait from an animal.”

“Then what do you do to have strong stock?” Owens asked.

“Trade secret,” I said, looking at Brandon. “Not a word of that will pass my lips.”

“That is a bit unfair, don’t you think?” Brandon said calmly, but I heard the poison behind his words. “We all laid out our methods.”

“And so have I,” I replied smartly. “But only to the man who matters here. Rest assured; I am not interested in your methods because the ones I use are tried and true.”

Brandon’s lips pinched so hard I wondered if there was an invisible lemon he was suddenly sucking on.

“I think I have enough to consider for the moment,” Hunter said while looking up. “Please, join Alma in the dining room for lunch. I shall have a decision made by that time you’re finished.”

While the others stood, Brandon left the room first, his face set in stone. When the room cleared, Hunter sat back on his office chair and looked at me. “West isn’t fond of you, is he?”

I laughed. “Call it like it is. West hates the air I breathe because I came from nothing, and I am still doing better than he is, while he came from eons of money but is still lingering behind.”

“Ah,” Hunter replied. “I see. I’ve had business with people like him. Anyway, you should go and have lunch too. I’ll be going over all the proposals.”

With a nod, I followed the noise to the dining room, where a veritable feast was spread on the long table. I saw roasted beef, glazed ham, yellow rice, a mountain of mixed vegetables and other sides, and many pies. My Ella would have loved to get the recipes for all these foods.

I poured a glass of iced tea and sipped it, undecided about what to eat. Brandon’s venomous voice slithered into my ear. “You think you’re so smart, don’t you?”

“Reasonably so,” I replied calmly. “Lovely presentation, by the way. Did you take acting classes at Dartmouth?”

“Yale,” he said stiffly. “And no, I did not. What you saw in there was pure business acumen.”

“Well, good for you.” I lifted my glass in a lazy salute.

I had no intention of staying anywhere within ten feet of the insufferable prick and possibly heeding the increasing impulse of putting my fist into his face. I needed this account, not necessarily to put another thorn in West’s side—although that would be a massive perk—but to set up a long-standing account that would keep us in the green for decades to come.

When I decided to fix my plate and sit to eat—no barbaric standing and eating around here—I tasted beef with flavor that five-star restaurants didn’t have. I had to get the recipe, or Ella might not talk to me for months.

I was halfway through my apple pie when Alma came and tapped me on the shoulder. “Pardon me, but Mister Portman wants to speak with you.”

My chest swooped as I closed my utensils, stood, and nodded to the rest, studiously ignoring Brandon’s hateful glare. When I reentered Hunter’s office, I prepared myself for anything that would come, and when he stood and gave me a grin, my blood rushed to my head.

“You chose me?”

“I chose you.” He replied. “Out of all the proposals given here, yours had the information I needed, down to the last chromosome. You came with facts, figures, results, and almost accurate growth projections, so I am choosing you. I don’t need the dog and pony show, I need things to back words up, and yours had it.”

“Thank you,” I replied, my mind darting to Rayna and her suggestion.

Hunter tilted his head. “Is there something else...”

“No,” I shook my head. “I remembered a special lady who told me to come armed with facts, not stories. She was right on the money.”

“Ah,” Hunter went to a bar and poured scotch into two glasses. “Women do seem to have insight we boars don’t. Well, you can tell your special lady she made you a rich, well, *richer* man.”

“I surely will,” I said, “But before I go, can you persuade your housekeeper to give me the recipe for her beef? My cook would guard it with her life.”

A soft laugh came from the doorway, and I turned to see a petite blonde woman there. “Well, I’m glad you like my recipe.”

Hunter crossed the room and kissed her cheek. “Maxwell, meet Ava, *my* lady.”

“Ma’am.” I nodded.

She waved me off. “I’m too young to be a ma’am, but I’ll have the recipe for you before you leave. But I need to speak with Hunter for a moment.” She looked regretful to tear Hunter away, but I didn’t mind.

Portman turned to me. “We’ll get in touch, Maxwell. I give you my word.”

“Thank you.” I took my glass with me, leaving the room and feeling my chest expand two sizes. Today had been a shocker, but it had worked out, thanks to Rayna. God, I had to give her something for it, and while it felt transactional to get her something bright and shiny, it only felt right.

When I got back to the dining room—surprise, surprise; West was gone. He had probably guessed Portman had gone with my pitch and had left in a huff knowing he had been looked over—again. Oddly though, it felt like a hollow victory.

As Hunter’s lady promised, I left the ranch with a folded piece of paper I would be handing to Ella when I got home.

\* \* \*

When I entered my home, Harper and Sam were curled up in the rarely used living room with popcorn buckets and watching an animated movie. I stopped to kiss them on their foreheads. “Hi, girls. How have my angels been?”

“Fine, Daddy.” Sam looked up. “Do you think we can go fishing tomorrow?”

Tomorrow was Friday, and with nothing foreseen, I didn’t see why not. “Sure, munchkin. Harper, do you want to come with us?”

“Sure, but I don’t want to touch the eeky worms,” she shuddered. “They’re gross.”

“Don’t worry.” I ruffled her hair. “Sam and I’ll touch ‘em for you.”

After diverting to the kitchen to hand over my precious possession, I went to my room, craving a long, warm shower. While I stripped down, though, a thought lingering at the back of my head surged to the forefront—Brandon West. If he had been behind the shed suddenly collapsing, would he take me besting him at the Twisted Twine’s ranch contract as more motive to screw with me? If so, what would he do next?

*If, John, that is a big if. No one knows for sure if it was him or not.*

After the last two days in Austin, hammering out details with Hunter and his lawyers drafting up the contracts and terms, I had not even spared Brandon a thought. But now that I was merely a few miles, forestry, and canyon hill from his ranch, the thought was brimming in front of my mind.

As the hot water untied the knots in my shoulders, my thoughts turned to Rayna. Stepping out, I rubbed my hair towel-dry, gazed at myself in the mirror, and wondered if I should shave off the five o'clock shadow that had come four hours early. My hair was getting a touch longer than I usually kept. It was brushing my collar and heavy on the back of my neck. I'd run to the barber tomorrow or so. Right then, I had some celebratory fishing to do.

\* \* \*

At the edge of the gleaming inland lake, I snapped the buckle on Harper's life jacket. "And what are the rules in the canoe?"

"Elbows in the canoe and don't rock it," Harper said smartly. "Try to stay in the middle and grab on the canoe if it gets rocky."

"Right." I looked over to Sam, who was finishing putting her life jacket on quickly and efficiently.

Finished with Harper, I went to double-check Sam. I knew she had done this a hundred times over, but I would not let her get into the canoe without checking. If I didn't, and something did happen, Emily would probably slap me from the grave.

"I got it, Dad," Sam huffed.

"I know, Sam, always the independent one, but I still want to check," I said, giving her a small grin. "It's the dad in me."

With her jacket on the right way, I turned and held the boat for the two girls to step inside, then pushed the rowboat out



and, after getting in, grasped the oars. The pristine lake sat before them with a family of ducks happily quacking and paddling in the distance. Puffy clouds hid the sun. I was grateful it would not be a scorching day.

When we got to a decent place, I handed the fishing rods out and fixed the worm on Harper's while Sam had hers done in minutes.

"We're in the perfect spot," I said, looking around, taking in the warm scents of the forest and the creek, the coolness of the air on my skin. "And it's so quiet."

The point where I had taken us was relatively deep and wide, carving a path through the hills around us. Further up were the rapids and white-water sports daredevils loved, but this little offshoot was calmer. The flow was broken up by an islet of naturally gathered silt land.

Out here, surrounded by nature, I felt some of the tension of the last few weeks bleeding away—the vandalism, Brandon's schemes, Sam's trouble at the school, and the flickering worries about where this thing with Rayna was headed. They all flitted away, and none mattered out here except for the soft light dancing over the water, Harper's constant and comforting chatter, and the rustle of birds in the trees.

Other than eating together on Sunday nights, this was the first real time we'd three spent together. As much as I liked it, I realized that I couldn't remember the last time we had done this. Guilt pooled in my gut like an acid churn.

"Dad," Sam's voice broke through my musings. "I think I got something."

"Okay, you know what to do. Take it nice and slow, and reel it in. Don't jerk the line, now." I coached her into bringing the fish in. She reeled in a six in Sunfish. It was a decent catch, but nothing we wanted. "You know what to do, Sam."

She gently pulled the fish off and released it into the water. We continued fishing, with a few other catch-and-release,

before Harper pulled in a big rainbow bass. I had to grab her to steady the line and hold her while she reeled it in, but it was quite a catch.

“There we go. That’s a nice one.” I praised her while I dropped the fish into the cooler. “Ella might like this one.”

When Sam reeled in another rainbow bass, I praised her. “You’ve got the angler touch.” I smiled broadly while taking it and dropping it into the cooler. “You’d do well on a nature test.”

“You mean like those where they dump you in a forest with a knife and a canteen?” Sam replied. “I think they do those in boy scouts. Tyler told me he had done a few of them last weekend.”

Astonished to hear that, I jerked the rod a little. When had she talked to Tyler since she had punched him? I kept my tone calm. “When did he say this?”

“A couple of days ago at recess,” she replied absently while her attention was on her fishing line. “He’s my friend again, and he said he was sorry about what he’d said to make me hit him.”

“And what did he say?” I asked.

“He said he was sorry for saying I wasn’t a girl,” her cheeks were pink. “He told me that he didn’t mean it that way, but what he meant was that I wasn’t girlie. He said he liked that I’m not like the other girls.”

I opened my mouth but shut it instantly before taking on another tactic.

“How did he suddenly come and apologize?” I asked.

“He said Miss Everett got him to tell her because his dad was going to do something nasty to us if he didn’t know what happened,” Sam said. “I think he said Miss Everett said he would take us to court. But that’s all gone now. All we have to do is meet with Tyler’s dad and explain everything.”

Wait? What? Wouldn't that have been something Rayna should have told me when we spoke? How could she have left that out? I made a mental note to call Rayna when I entered the house. We needed to talk about this.

"Well, that's good, kiddo," I said, smiling broadly. "I'm glad you two are back to being friends."

"Me too," she said. "I like Miss Everett."

"You do?"

Sam shrugged a single shoulder. "Yeah, she's nice and pretty."

Pretty was an understatement. Rayna was drop-dead gorgeous.

"Daddy," Harper whined. "Can you get me another worm? A fish took the last one."

Reaching for the can, I smiled. "Sure, sweetheart."

\* \* \*

When I got in and washed the stink of fish off me, I grabbed my phone, ready to call Rayna, when I saw a red dot on my voicemail icon. I pressed it, held the phone to my ear, and heard Rayna's voice on the other end, explaining the situation with Tyler, his dad, and some mediation day.

*Jesus.*

But at least my irritation vanished. She had not left me in the dark about it, and now that I knew what was coming my way, I could prepare for it. Unlike Brandon. I didn't know what that sneaky sonofabitch was up to, but I knew he was furious that I'd won the Twisted Twines contract over him.

Dropping the cell, I wandered to my row of French windows that gave me a panoramic view of most of my land. Sometimes it still boggled me that all this had once been a dream in the back of my head. I'd done all this for my girls—

that ironically, I hadn't spent much time with them in the last couple of months.

I wanted them to be free of worrying about where their next cent and meal would come from. I wanted them to be happy and content.

But I was not. For years I had shoved my needs behind me, making sure everything was set for the girls, telling myself that my time would come eventually—but somehow, it never did.

*A life of ironies.*

Turning away, I shook my head and headed to my office. I could worry about that another day. Right now, I have work to do.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Rayna

I didn't do mediations often—well, never before—but knowing the severity of the issue with Samantha and her dad, I had to be there.

“Mr. Hollins,” John reached out for a shake, and Tyler’s dad met him. Lucas Hollins was a tall man, tall enough to be a basketball player, but he was a corporate lawyer with sharp eyes and tailored clothes to show it. “I’m sorry we had to meet his way.”

“So am I,” Lucas replied. “Please, come in. Miss Everett, is it?”

I nodded. “Pleased to meet you.”

I was surprised the man was so calm; from the tone of Rayna’s message taken from the principal, I thought Tyler’s dad would be spitting fire and chewing iron.

He showed us to the living room, and I gazed around in appreciation. Tyler’s home was beautiful in a modern, Architectural Digest way. It was all cream, dark wood, and chrome. I preferred something a little more lived-in myself—the homey, country style of John’s home came to mind—but I was not there to critique the man’s house. I was there to make sure Samantha, John, and Tyler’s folks came to an amicable resolution.

An apprehensive-looking Tyler and his mother—a pretty blonde woman in a summer dress—came in, and Tyler looked at John, me, and then Samantha. Then, he gave a wide smile, and with the way Samantha returned it, I recognized puppy love when I saw it.

“Tyler—” his father began.

“It’s not her fault, Dad,” Tyler blurted. “I said something nasty. Don’t be mad at her.”

Lucas's eyes flew to his wife, who looked as shocked as he was. "What did you and why did you say it, son?"

As Tyler explained the debacle, I stole a look at Samantha and John. He held her close, one arm around her shoulder and rubbing her opposite arm comfortingly.

"I didn't mean it, I promise," Tyler said. "I like Sam. I really do."

"And I'm sorry I punched you," Sam said shyly. "I was just upset."

"I understand it as a bad day; we all have those," Lucas said. "But what if another bad day happens, and you choose to do it again? One might be an accident, but a second time is a choice, and I will not stand for that. What if the roles were reversed, Mister Maxwell? What would you say about that?"

"I would not stand for that either," John replied. "It's not right for anyone to beat anyone. It was not right back in the so-called boys-will-be-boys' days and it's not right now. Sam and I have talked about it, and she's given me a promise that nothing like this will happen again. I know you don't know her, but I do, and believe me, when she promises something, she never breaks it."

Mr. Hollins looked doubtful, so I added my two cents, "I know Samantha as well, and I can assure you, she is truthful and is not afraid to admit her faults when it comes to it. I will keep an eye out for her at school. For them both, actually."

While the man considered my offer, I felt a bit out at sea. Aside from making the kids do a blood bath or sing kumbaya, I didn't know what would assure Lucas they would stick to their word.

Finally, he plucked his rimless glasses off and rubbed his forehead, "I suppose—" he then looked at the two kids, "And you both promise to be on your best behavior?"

"Yes," Tyler and Samantha said at the same time.

“Good.” He placed his frames back on, then looked at John. “I’m sorry to bring you out here on such a matter, but I think it’s time we get to know each other. Do you have time to stay for a bit and talk? Possibly fire up the grill?”

Grinning, John said, “Do you make your own sauce?”

“No,” he said, “It’s from a bottle.”

“Heresy,” John shook his head. “From one man who knows beef, let me cue you into a little secret. Homemade is the best, and I’ve got a killer recipe for it—”

\* \* \*

Later that evening, as we walked to our separate cars, the vivid sunset painting the sky a splash of orange and red, John got Samantha into the car and then shut the door.

Turning to me, he said, “Thanks for coming. It surely helped us out.”

Temporarily distracted by how the sunset turned his dark brown hair into a burnished bronze, I shook myself out of it and said, “It’s my pleasure. You know I gave you my word to stand with you and Samantha. Why would I back out at all?”

He lifted his hand—aiming, I knew, for my face—but remembering Samantha in the truck, he dropped it on my shoulder instead. “Thank you, but I’m still a bit...bothered. You know that old adage about nature versus nurture? I think my nurture might have spoiled Sam a bit. Perhaps it wasn’t the best thing to have her around so many guys.”

I shook my head. “You’re wrong. I’ve been thinking about it, and I realized something, You’ve raised a smart, resilient little girl, but the matter here is not that Samantha doesn’t know she has a feminine nature. She’s never been in touch with it, which is okay. Take it from me. Many tomboys grow up to be some very special, sensual, and sexy women.”



His warm chuckle flowed over me. “I can see that...but I think Sam might need a helping hand. If...if I gave you the time and money, would you take her out, show her the other half of the coin? Go shopping, have facials, manicures, whatnot?”

My brows shot up. “Um, sure. I’d love that.”

Shooting another heart-stopping grin, John added, “I’ll come to your place tonight to talk about it.”

Instantly, my body flushed. I could bet there would be more than talking going on. “You remember the way?”

“I couldn’t forget it if you knocked me over the head and spun me around,” he replied, and his eyes darkened while opening his truck’s door. “I’ll be there at eight on the dot.”

And damn if that didn’t keep me on edge for the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

The crickets were chirping when I heard tires crunch on my driveway. For the past three hours, all I did was try to distract myself—unsuccessfully—from his arrival. I’d cleaned the cottage from top to bottom, done a load of laundry, had a store-bought pie warming in the oven, and stocked my fridge with drinks and beer.

I’d showered and shaved, only to go back and wax and exfoliate myself because I wanted to feel soft, sexy, and sensual. This thing with John was nothing more than a friends-with-benefits thing, but it didn’t matter. I wanted the best experience with him all the time.

Opening the door, I stepped aside as he came in, and oddly, the tiny room seemed to shrink two sizes with his powerful presence inside it.

He took off his hat and looked around. Probably for the first time since the night he had whisked me off to Austin, he

had not taken the time to do so.

“This is...cozy,” he murmured.

I laughed. “Stop being so polite. It’s a shoebox, but it came with the contract, so I took it gratefully. And just like my car, your legs are probably longer than this room. Can I get you anything to drink, water, iced tea, soda, a beer?”

Resting the Stetson on the back of the couch, John nodded and turned to me. “Oh, yes, I am thirsty, but I think I’ll be taking that drink now—” his hand reeled me like a fish on a line, and his mouth met mine.

His lips were soft yet firm, his hold on my body assured and possessive. He tasted of coffee and whiskey, hot, sweet, and so damn good, I wanted to kiss him all night. John’s hands circled my waist as the kiss turned deep and carnal, drawing my body against his. His hands then dipped to my thighs, lifting me. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck.

Holding me firm, he kicked the door closed with a heel as he intensified the kiss. One of his hands traveled up my back and into my hair as he walked to the bedroom. The twin mattress was not much, but it was sturdy and would hold us just fine.

John kissed me like a parched man dying for water. The combination of his weight pressing down on me and the passion in his kiss made me shudder beneath him. He was so strong, so masculine, and I felt like a tiny little bauble under his hold.

Pulling away, John whisper-growled, “Let’s get you out of these clothes.”

While trading kisses, he stripped me bare, then did the same for himself. Kneeling on the mattress, he rested a three-foil packet of condoms on the night table, tugging something out of his discarded jeans pocket. Rope—but it wasn’t any old rope; it was red and thin but looked strong.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Part of our fun tonight,” he replied, gently pushing me down on the bed. Grasping my hands, he pinned them over my head and kissed my lips before diverting. He kissed the tender skin on the side of my neck, his warm, intoxicating breath coasting over my sensitive flesh. A fire built under my skin, and I closed my eyes as he kissed my collarbone.

A sudden gasp left my mouth as he caressed my breasts, squeezing one of my nipples between his index fingers and thumb, sending bolts of lust searing between my legs while suckling and teasing the other with his teeth.

“Keep your hands where I placed ‘em,” he ordered.

I couldn’t suppress the needy moans and soft breaths that punched their way from my lips as he continued his erotic exploration of my body, with his mouth, fingertips, and the end of his hair tickling my skin and driving me out of my mind. His hard body pressed against mine, skin to skin, his palm sliding down my sides to—bypass my aching core and kiss down my legs.

At my feet, he looked up. “Turn around but keep your wrists in the same place.”

With his help, I was on my belly—and John started the same torture again, only from the bottom up this time. By the time he was kissing my ass and gripping my thighs, I knew he could see or smell the wash of arousal coating my pussy.

His tongue licked a long, wet stripe up my spine, and his mouth found my ear. “On your knees, baby.”

As I got to my knees, he undid the length of the rope, tied my hands to the headboard with them, trailed his hands down, and cupped and massaged my breasts. “You’re so soft. Like a kitten.”

Feeling his chest hair brush my back, I laughed. “You’re not.”

His hand met my ass and suddenly spanked me. The slap, oddly, had me *more* turned on. “No more sass from you, missy. Remind me next time to bring a blindfold as well.”

Spreading my legs wider, I heard the soft rip of the condom, and I tensed in anticipation for him—but his fingers met my dripping sex instead. John folded himself around me, pressing his chest to my back as he stroked me, sending my already erratic nerve endings into a frenzy. He dipped his finger inside me, pushing deeper, and sparks lit behind my eyes.

I needed more than his hand, and he knew it with how slowly he was pleasuring me. He was drawing it out so the sensation would build and build, doubling up on each other until the moment he got inside me and I would explode.

*Devious man.*

I didn't realize I had said those words until he asked. "Excuse me? What did you say?"

"I said—" his finger brushed over the spot that made my toes curl, and my body begged for him. Fighting back a gasp, I said, "—you're a devious man."

"More sass," he rumbled. "Hadn't I warned you about that?"

One of his hands moved to grip the front of my thighs while he fingered me leisurely, then added another, and the feeling doubled. If only it were the other way around, the heel of his palm would be hitting my clit with every pass, and that tiny little omission made me want to cry.

I couldn't help it anymore. I thrust back, taking his fingers with reckless abandon, chasing the thin line ahead of me. I needed to get there and then tip off into pools of pleasure. The line was getting closer...and closer...and as I got to the edge...

John pulled his fingers out of me. I wanted to scream.

"That's your punishment for all that sass," he said in my ear, grasped my hips, and then—he was there, filling me, inch by inch. I could feel how huge and hard his cock was, pressing through the folds and into my channel, and then, with one snap

of his hips, he surged forward, his cock stretching me until almost the breaking point. It was so carnal I had to moan.

“Do you feel me?” he demanded as he thrust again. “It’s all for you.”

I was in the most submissive position I had ever found myself in, but instead of feeling subdued, I felt powerful, worshipped, adored even.

The stretching sensation as he filled me completely left me breathless, and I felt my muscles clenching around him. It was a dance we both knew well by now.

My core muscles could not hold me in place once he began his steady thrusting, and I fell back on the bed on my elbows, stretching my abdomen, allowing him to sink deeper inside me. The shift in position had opened me up even more, and the sensations rushing to my head made me feel as if I’d taken every hallucinogenic drug ever made.

My whole body was on fire. I had never experienced anything so intense in my adult life.

My lips couldn’t form words when he fucked me hard and fast, letting the desire from last night build and pull us into climax. His body used mine in a way that felt primal. I hadn’t gotten my orgasm, but I was screaming out in ecstasy.

John was pounding into me again. I couldn’t even feel the rope around my bound wrists or the restriction keeping me where I was. All I felt was him hammering over that spot that made my head light. I could barely feel the orgasm building inside me as my cries of pleasure blended with his groans.

The constant slap of skin sounded like music, the increasing tempo coming to a crescendo, and without warning, I screamed out, every part of my body splintering apart as I clenched down on him, milking him until my knees nearly gave out. John grabbed me and held me still as he roared with his orgasm.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Rayna

The crickets had gone silent by the time I roused from my sudden sexual blackout, and I found myself wrapped around a still-sleeping John, instinctively nestling into his body heat to chase away the cool air inside. I had left a window open.

Through the fluttering curtain, the full moon shone brightly through the window, telling me it was well past midnight, and I wished I didn't have to think about anything but this man and this moment—but sadly, I did.

That orgasm he gave me defined the term earth-shattering, and I wondered if it had also shifted something inside him. It was clear I hadn't had any idea of the size of the can of worms I'd been steadily opening when he had asked me to agree to the arrangement, and now I had no idea how to get the lid back on.

I knew we were only two lonely souls seeking comfort from each other...but now, it was more than that. I was involved in his life and engaged with his kids. I even knew about the man's enemy, for God's sake. Granted, there were still things I didn't know, but I didn't realize the extent of the life he had lived before he'd made his millions. I didn't know anything about his extended family—if he had any, that was, nor did I know what made him tick.

Well, aside from my body.

He was the epitome of a sexy cowboy. Long, lean limbs that I knew were corded with muscle and sinew. As he was still sleeping, I trailed my fingers idly along the hard contours of his chest and smiled when the flat nipples hardened under my touch. Light brown furring covered his chest, the hair narrowing into a line over his abdomen, dipping over eight-pack abs leading...down...down...to the still sizable bulge of his quiescent manhood.

I lifted my gaze up, tracing the broad span of his shoulders and past the granite edge of his jaw to meet his eyes—opened eyes. He had been watching me all this time.

“Like what you see?” he asked, voice rough with sleep.

“Isn’t it obvious,” I replied, shoving my worries to the back of my head and hoping they would stay buried for a long while. “You’re a handsome man.”

“Tell that to my eighty-pound ten-year-old self.” He smiled, sliding a hand up my arm. “Or my buck twenty-fourteen-year-old self.”

“You were slender as a kid?” I frowned.

“Don’t believe me? Remind me to show you the pictures someday,” he replied, his fingertips trailing over my skin. “Life was messing with me for a very long time. I was a skinny, wisp of a kid, like a grass blade. I got all the nicknames, was teased within an inch of my life, got the stuffing knocked out of me for years until I was sixteen and then fate decided to change its mind. I shot up six inches in a year, got heavy, got some muscles on me, and soon I was standing taller than my bullies. Needless to say, they got real quiet and respectful around me all of a sudden.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You didn’t dish it back out to them?”

“No,” he grinned. “But they expected it every time I passed them by. That was more satisfying than stomping a mud hole up their assess.”

“Do you whisper such lovely sonnets to all the girls?” I teased.

“No,” he replied. “My mouth is better useful in dirty-talking lovely women to an orgasm.”

Reaching up, I kissed him softly, even though the sensation made my already sensitive nerves raw. I loved the rough rasp of his beard growth against my cheek and the calluses on his fingertips.



“I know,” I replied. “But right now, I want to learn more about you.”

His left eye squinted. “You want to learn more about my childhood? Why?”

“Why not?” I asked. “I want to know about the mettle that made you into the man you are now.”

An oddly sounding laugh left his mouth as he flopped on his back. “This is the strangest pillow talk I’ve ever had.”

“Humor me,” I said, resting my head on his arm.

“It’s not pretty,” John sighed, his arm skating under me to grip my opposing shoulder and pull me forward. His fingertips drummed on the crook of my collarbone and shoulder.

He told me stories about his childhood, a history that crossed the line between tragic and heartbreaking.

“My mom was a city girl who left to find a slower pace of life, but soon enough, that slow pace began creeping up on her, so she left my dad just after I was born. Never heard from her again. The last time I think I heard something about her, I was about eleven or twelve and heard she had made a big break somewhere, but when that movie bombed for its blatant sexism, she disappeared for a couple years.”

“That happens to many stars,” I said. “At least she didn’t start doing porn.”

“You spoke too fast,” he snorted. “That is exactly what she did, but it didn’t matter; she was out of our lives, and we were never in hers. My father raised me to never give up, even when times were slim. Then, I married my high-school sweetheart, and Emily stuck with me through the worst years. It’s a shame she didn’t see what came after that. When she died—”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said softly.

John shook his head, his fingertips still dancing over my skin. “You would think after so many years it wouldn’t hurt so much to talk about, but it does. Emily was my whole life back

then. If she had asked me to get her a shooting star, I would have damned well found a way to do so because she was my everything. When she passed, I found myself without a purpose. Like a ship just drifting away on an endless sea. I didn't know what to do with myself.

“I mean, I knew what to do, I had two girls who counted on me, but every day felt harder than the last one. It was hard to get up from bed sometimes and even harder to return at night...” His words were getting slow and slurry, and I knew he was about to fall asleep again.

And I was right, but not before he murmured. “...until you.”

I didn't sleep a wink. How could I, after he had admitted something I knew he had not meant to say? Emotions I'd never anticipated were creeping into this arrangement faster than expected, but I doubted there was any way to slow it down. It was as if it were a train that had lost its brakes and was speeding off the rails to a cliffside.

I did not want to know what that end would be.

By morning light, I slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb him, and fished for my clothes. I had my underwear on and his t-shirt before I went to use the bathroom, washed up, and made breakfast.

I had the coffee on and went about scrambling eggs for a loaded frittata. While peeling the potatoes, I paused and sucked in a breath. John's life was still hitting me hard. I know I didn't have it all that well, but chopping wood for light at night and cooking, much less having to go hunt or fish for their daily meals. I wanted to cry.

A hand pulled the knife from mine and set it aside before John turned me and held my face, his eyes searching mine. “You're upset.”

I could not lie. I had no reason to. “Yes, and it's because of what happened to you.”

John easily lifted me to sit on the counter and slipped between the V of my feet. “Listen to me, Rayna, I’m touched that my former life bothers you so much, but you don’t have anything to cry about. I made it past that time. I’m better now.”

Shaking my head, I replied, “I’m upset for the child you once were. And if you were being honest with yourself, some part of that kid that had to walk three miles to go to school and hunt fish on Saturday morning never really left you.”

“You’re right. That kid has not left me, and because of him, I am the man I am today. That kid wanted better, and I proved him right. There is nothing to cry about, baby.”

He had called me that a few times, but now I felt like one. Sighing, I reached around his bare chest and hugged him while resting my forehead on his collarbone. We stayed like that until the tantalizing scent of coffee grew heavy.

“I’ve never smelled that blend of coffee before,” he said, pulling away. “What is it?”

“Jamaican Blue,” I replied. “Got it for a steal a couple months ago. I only use it sparingly, but I thought it would be good for you to try.”

He poured a cup, and I watched his back muscles flex while adding a single sugar, then took a sip. His brows shot up. “Holy...this is good.”

I hopped down from the counter and went back to peeling the potatoes. “Glad you like it. Now, I know your cook may make a mean breakfast, and you’ve probably been spoiled with recipes going back a few decades, but humor me... again.”

\* \* \*

I was puttering around the house later that evening, unsure what to do with myself, when my phone lit up with a text from John.

*What are your bank details?*

Huh? Why did he want to know that? So I asked him, and he replied, *I want to cover your time with Sam this weekend. Whatever you choose to do, let her know it's fine to be girlie at times, too.*

Oh. That was what he meant. After a quick check with my online banking app, I sent him the info and made a pot of tea. My phone pinged, and I opened my app—only to nearly faint. I had to grab the counter while I reread the figure that had popped up.

“Five thousand dollars,” I gaped. “He sent me five... thousand...dollars.”

I'd pictured about five hundred bucks or less in the back of my mind, but he had wired me more money than I could bank in four months. I called him back, and the moment he answered, I said, “Did you make a mistake, John? We're not flying out to Cabo. This is just some shopping and little face care.”

He laughed. “I supposed I had slipped with the extra zero —” we both knew he was lying. “—but it doesn't matter. It's yours.”

Something twisted inside me, and oddly, I felt uneasy. Who would ever give someone five thousand dollars on a whim? I knew he was rich, but...this felt wrong, like some kind of payoff or something. Like I was a sugar baby, and he was my Daddy.

“No, John, I'm not keeping it,” I replied. “Five hundred is more than enough. Go back and retract the transaction.”

He sighed. “You won't let this slide, will you?”

“What was your first clue?” I replied sweetly.

This time, he laughed outright. “Fine, fine, but this time, humor me. Let me leave a thousand instead of five, and I'll take the other four back. You'll be spending a lot of time with Sam, and you'll need it one way or the other.”

I considered it and realized he was right; we had a way to go with Sam, so maybe it was best to take his offer. “Fine, we can do that but don’t go pulling something like this again, or I’ll be withdrawing the money, and you won’t like where I’ll be shoving it.”

John’s deep laughter eased the pulsing knot that had formed inside my chest while I went to make my tea. “That’ll work.”

I smiled. “Thank you, go back to work, cowboy. I’ll see you soon. Oh, by the way, you left the rope here.”

“Keep it,” his tone dipped. “We’ll more than likely use it again. You do have a smart, sassy mouth.”

“Aw, so you do whisper poetry into girl’s ears,” I replied while adding a spoonful of loose sugar. “Sweet talker.”

“I’ve got to go but look out for that withdrawal,” he said. “And by the way, sorry for not telling you before, but I won the contract I was worried about.”

“You *did!*” I exclaimed. “That’s wonderful. How was it?”

“I’ll give you the details the next time we have a moment alone,” he replied. “Just know, you told me what to do, and because of you, I won. My ranch will be set for another ten, fifteen, twenty who-knows-what years.”

I felt genuinely pleased. “I am so good.”

He snorted. “Oh please, don’t get so humble on me.”

Taking my tea to the couch, I curled up and smiled while dunking the tea bag a few times. “I’m happy for you. And I’ll look forward to that moment we have for ourselves.”

“So will I, sweetheart,” he replied. “So will I.”

# Chapter Nineteen

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## John

“‘**Y**ou’re sure about that?” My gaze flitted from Ben to Dusty and then to Jack. “You’re double sure?”

“Yep,” Ben replied, plucking his hat off and finger-combing his hair. “The sheriff said not one of the usual suspects had any idea about the roof, and no silly kid is bragging about it on the internet, y’know the whatchamacallit, Facepage or Insta somethin’-or-other.”

“I wouldn’t have tagged them for it anyway,” Jack shrugged. “That operation was way too sophisticated to pull off for a bunch of snot-nosed kids looking for a good time. And real thieves would have headed for the machine sheds or the garage. This was not an amateur thing, boss.”

I sagged back into my office chair and rubbed a hand over my face, unsure of what to do. “But why? I don’t get it. Why break in and just trash my shed? Why would you pay someone to do that?”

“To get on your nerves?”

“To make you focus on something else so you’re unprepared for the other thing that’s coming?”

“It’s the tip of the iceberg,” Ben said. “It’s the beginning of a war.”

I looked at them. “You’re all right in some way. This is too petty to stand alone, and something more is coming, but what?”

“I’d be more concerned about the who, not the what,” Jack replied.

“Oh, I have my suspicion about the who,” I growled. “And we all know who it is, but until I get any proof, I cannot accuse West of this bullshit. And now that I won the contract, I am sure he will strike again. I just don’t know where.”

“Like what?” Ben asked. “Think he’s going to poison the water wells or raze the ground and salt the fields?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” I replied. “I think we need to revamp our security. I’ll make the call with better sensors, motion lights, backup generators, cameras, etc., and Ben, I need you to oversee the jobs for me. We’ll catch this sucker if it is the last thing I do.”

“Alrighty.” Ben nodded.

“Thanks, guys.” I nodded as they filed out.

When they were gone, I reached into my drawer, pulled out a migraine pill bottle, uncapped the water bottle on my desk, and swallowed two. Now, I had to be on edge, looking out for West’s next act, and wouldn’t be at ease until it happened.

If I didn’t need something else to worry about, I still had twenty contracts to fill, and now, when we finalized the Twisted Twines contract, I would have my hands full with work. Sam was another worry in the back of my head, but now that I knew Rayna was helping her, the vivid fear I once had mellowed to a calmer concern.

Sam had gone off with Rayna that morning, and I hoped the two would compromise about what to do. I knew Sam was very averse to what she considered girly things, like playing with dolls, dressing up, or talking with other girls about boys—God help me with that.

*If anyone can get through to Sam, it is Rayna. She’s been in Sam’s shoes.*

I tilted my head back and gave myself time for the pills to work when my mind drifted...to Emily. Something twisted in my gut; it was not guilt, it was not sorrow or pain, it wasn’t even shame. I wasn’t hung up on the idea that she would look down on me or hate me for moving on with my life and filling the void she had left. As a matter of fact, I thought she would like Rayna.



No, it was not one of those emotions. I felt regret...regret that she had not lived long enough to see her kids grow and blossom into the sweethearts they were.

“Oh, Sugar-bun,” I sighed, using Emily’s old nickname. “I wish you were here.”

My phone rang, and I reached for it. It was my PA in Houston. “Ewan, what do you have for me?”

“Just a reminder, sir, that the county fair is coming up in two weeks, and I want to check in if you would like me to set up your usual booth,” Ewan said. “You know it is a wonderful marketing opportunity, and I think even the smallest presence would do much.”

I rubbed my face. “I don’t know, Ewan. I think I already have enough clients for a while.”

“You do know there is something called a waitlist,” Ewan said. “Your business is going to expand, sir, and you will need a constant stream of clients going forward. This is the perfect chance to start that list.”

Even with my reservations, business sense and strategy prevailed. “Sure, set it up, and give me the specs.”

“I surely will,” Ewan replied, then paused, “But fair warning, sir, from the manifesto I am seeing, Brandon West will also be there with his larger-than-life, bull riding, roping, ranching setup. I am aware that you’ve bested him with the Twines contract. Do you think it will be fine still?”

“You could have led with that, y’know,” I grumbled. “I really do not want to see the petty man anywhere.”

“So...what I am hearing is to make the arrangement but keep your business at the opposite end of the field from his,” Ewan replied.

“I suppose,” I replied. “Just keep me abreast of your arrangements.”

“Will do,” Ewan replied.

When we closed the call, I headed out to get something to eat because my stomach was rumbling and grumbling like an ogre. “I need to stop thinkin’ I can survive on coffee for hours.”

When I got to the empty kitchen, I opened the fridge, took out a tray of cold cuts, potato salad, and some fresh vegetable salad, and made a plate. With my food ready, instead of sitting, I leaned on the counter and ate while my mind ran to Rayna and Sam. I had to have some faith in Rayna to somehow balance Sam out, so she could embrace both parts of her person.

The doors opened, and Harper came running in, her backpack half off her back and her hair a mess. “Whoa, girlie. Hold your horses,” I called out as she ran to the fridge. “What happened to your hair?”

“Jungle gym,” she replied while tugging a juice box from the chiller. “I played a lot today.”

I was still stuck on how my daughter’s hair looked like she’d done a spinning headstand on it and then fixed it with cement. Harper hopped up on a stool and jabbed the straw into the box. She swung her pretty pink-pony-clad leggings while drinking.

“Where’s Sam?”

“She’s out with Miss Everett,” I replied. “You remember when you asked me if Sam would be okay? Well, Ms. Everett is helpin’ her get better.”

“That’s good.” Harper nodded. “I want Sam to get better.”

“So,” I cut into my beef. “What happened at school today?”

“Math,” she wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like math.”

I laughed. “Neither did I, kiddo. You must’ve gotten that from me. Your mom, God rest her soul, was a whizz at math. No wonder Sam is so good at it.”

“I like story time,” Harper replied. “It’s fun, and Mrs. Powell does so many voices for the people in the book; it’s funny. I want to talk like her one day.”

I finished my meal and played a sneak attack on Harper, grabbing her out of her chair, spinning her around, making an airplane of her, and zooming her around the room. She was giggling her head off, and I was laughing too. This felt so natural, so soothing to just play around. I rarely had times like these with them, but I treasured every single one I could do with them.

“I know you’ll be like Mrs. Powell, sweetheart, because you’re a chatterbox.” I laughed, throwing her up and catching her. “You’ll talk the ears off an elephant.”

“And me,” Sam said behind us, and I turned with Harper still in my arms and saw Samantha and Rayna there, both holding a few bags in hand.

Sam didn’t look different, but I saw paint on her nails when she brushed her hand over her face. So, they had gone for the manicure, and when I looked carefully, her hair looked...glossier? I didn’t see any makeup—thank God because I was not ready for *that*—but she looked like a happy, content ten-year-old.

I put Harper on her feet and watched as she ran to hug Sam while my eyes were on Rayna. She looked good; her hair was pulled up into a ponytail, and she was dressed in blue jeans and a red knit sweater. She had warm eyeshadow on and pink lip gloss.

I couldn’t wait to taste it.

“Hey, Sam.” I smiled. “How was your day?”

She shrugged, but the smile on her face told me something different: she was happy. I was glad she didn’t look confused or bamboozled about being thrown into girlie stuff—or maybe she had only dipped her toes in—and I was pleased.

“So, it was good then?” I pressed. “You don’t have to tell me every moment of your day, but just your favorite part.”

Sam nibbled on her lip. “Ummm...looking at clothes. Miss Rayna said if I want, the next time we go, I can get my ears pierced.”

My brows shot up, and I looked at Rayna. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Rayna replied.

“Sam, why don’t you go put your stuff away and start on your homework? I’ll get you two down for dinner,” I replied.

When the two scampered off, I nodded to my office. “A moment?”

Nodding, Rayna followed me to my office, and the moment the door closed behind us, I had her up against the door and brushed my lips over her cheek. “What is the flavor of your lip gloss?”

“Red cherry,” she whispered.

She shivered against me, and the barest brush of her mouth made my cock harden, and she swayed closer, eager to find my lips again. This time, the kiss deepened: slow and soft, my mouth exploring hers, tasting. She slid her hands up over my chest, relishing the feel of my solid muscles as my tongue dipped between her lips, tantalizingly slow.

The glorious desire for her burst into life and flooded my bloodstream, setting my whole body alive. My hard body pressed into hers, and she molded to me, fitting herself right against me, slitting together like two puzzle pieces.

I eased her lips open and stroked my tongue into her mouth, letting our tongues twine, and Rayna let out a breathy moan of pleasure and desire. She arched up against me, running her hands over my chest before slipping her hands under my shirt. Her touch wreaked pure mayhem on my senses.

I spun out from zero to a solar flare in five seconds flat. If it were only so easy to lock her up, remove her clothes, and get a hard, quick, satisfying fuck against the door, I’d have done

it, but an alarm bell rang in the back of my mind that my kids were home.

Reluctantly, I pulled away but nuzzled my nose into her temple. “You’re addictive.”

Her laugh was soft but pleased. “My granddaddy would say you’re like putting a bottle of brown liquor in front of an addict.”

“God, I want you in my bed right now,” I replied. “I don’t think I can get enough of you.”

“With the blindfold this time?” Rayna teased, but as lighthearted as it seemed, it felt like torture. I did want her in my bed, with the blindfold on, and while I had teased her with the rope the other day, I was not the kind of guy who delved into that kinky style. I just wanted spice.

“Don’t tempt me,” I said while moving to get behind my desk. “Tell me about how it went with Sam today.”

“Do you have anything to drink in here?” she asked.

I gestured to the dry bar at the end of the room and the mini fridge there, and she took out a bottle of vitamin water. “Sam was hesitant at first, but I told her she didn’t need to do anything she didn’t want to do. We could just look if she wanted, and we roamed the mall a while before asking me if she could get her hair done. We got that done, and while in the middle, she asked about her nails, so we got that done too. Don’t worry; she’s got a small bottle of nail polish remover; she’ll take the color off later.”

As before, she perched on the edge of the chair. “But nails and hair aren’t what makes the girl. She had to embrace that part of herself. It will take some time to embrace all that, but let’s be real. I’m not aiming for her to start jumping on the bed, singing into the back of a brush, or plastering her walls with pop icon posters. I just want her to know that being tender and vulnerable isn’t bad.”

My lips twisted a little. “About that meeting with Tyler’s dad and what he said about liking Sam. Was that a *friendly*, I

like you, or was that pre-teen boys, I *like* you.”

Rayna’s face turned mischievous. “You might want to start preparing for their wedding.”

I growled. “Stop needling me.”

“Why, big bear man?” her lips quirked. “Is Goldilocks too much for you?”

As I went to reply, Carlos burst into the office. “Bossman, you need to come to the calving barn. It’s urgent.”

Instantly, my thoughts snapped from the dozen ways I would lure Rayna into my bed and the incident with the shed the other day. Was this another sabotage attempt? “Why? What’s going on?”

I was up and around my table, hurrying after Carlos with Rayna on my heels. “Some of the calves just started collapsing. Jake spotted it, called Ben, who then discovered the communal water trough reeked of insecticide. We pulled the calves away, but five passed, sir.”

“Insecticide?” I snapped, jumping down the stairs two at a time. “How the hell did that get in there?”

“No idea, sir,” Carlos replied as we busted through the back door and ran to the calving shed.

When we ran through the door, Ben was resting a tarp over a calf and shaking his head while coming up from his crouch. “Ben,” I called out, striding to him. “What happened?”

“Hell, if I know,” he said grimly. “As far as I know, the pump was on last night, and nothing was awry this morning.”

“You’re telling me someone came in the middle of the night to spike the trough?” I asked, almost seething.

“Possibly,” he replied.

I turned to Dusty. “Call the cops. Get them here, pronto. I need someone to dust this trough and the pump for prints. I need them to check whatever was in the water and determine what poison it came from. Listen to me, no one touches

anything until the cops get here, and then, we call the disposal crews.”

Turning back to the door, I looked. “Did we find any sign or tampering on the door?”

“Nope,” Micah replied while striding closer. “I checked them all, boss. The front, side door, and the back. Not a sign of any jimmying.”

“Then let the cops check the windows, the vents, and the damned drains,” I replied firmly. “I do not want one inch of this place unchecked, and I hope they find any clue that hints to Brandon West. I know that smarmy bastard is behind this. I just need to prove it.”

My bold statement had four heads snapping at me, and I admitted my suspicion outright. I saw Dusty on the phone from the corner of my eye, so I kept my tone even.

“I know this might sound ludicrous, but since I won the Twines contract, I feel deep in my gut that Brandon will do something to screw me up. We all know he is a petty man with a holier-than-thou attitude. I know he wants me gone from the industry and will do whatever he can.”

“And he’s got the money and resources to do it, too,” Ben chimed in. “But it will be a damned hard job to trace these incidents back to him. You know no one of his men will squeal like a stuck pig.”

“And his girlfriend slash secretary slash seasoned conniving manipulator is a human Fort Knox,” Jack added. When heads turned to him, he added, “I made the mistake of dating her sister, Anna. Trust me when I say the whole family is a bunch of money-hungry, conniving, male-manipulating sorts. I ran and never looked back.”

“My point is that Brandon is very close and has access to any criminals he can get,” I said. “I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

“The cops are on their way,” Dusty said. “And I asked them to bring a forensic team with them.”

“Good,” I replied, crossing the room to crouch and lift the tarp.

The calf’s vacant eyes hurt me down to the depth of my soul. Such an innocent life snuffed out by jealousy. We never ate our stock; they went to pasture until they passed from old age. The beef we ate came from sustainable beef farms.

I put the tarp back and stood. “Where are the rest of the calves now?”

“Getting fresh water from buckets,” Carlos replied. “*Washed* buckets, sir.”

“Keep an eye on ‘em,” I ordered. “I don’t trust anything when it comes to *him*.”

A few of the guy’s eyes flickered to Rayna, some with interest that had the caveman in me ready to rear up and roar, but I had more problems than going Neanderthal and protecting what was mine. Besides, I knew she wouldn’t give them a second look anyway.

The air was tense as we waited for the cops to come over, and when they did, there was a marked cruiser and a darker, unmarked detective car where three people emerged. I immediately spotted the detective, male or female. They all had the same look: dark clothes, flat shoes, and the one-sweeping look.

The lady strode closer and held out her hands. “Mister Maxwell? I’m Detective Juliann Bowser. The Captain reviewed your report and extended all resources to you and your case. Can you tell me what I should be looking at?”

“A case of suspicious poisoning,” I replied, shaking her hand. “A few weeks ago, an equipment shed was broken, and the roof was pulled apart.”

Detective Bowser turned to the other two people and introduced them as the forensic team. I had Ben show them where the trough was, and while they went to work, Juliann asked me to show her where the shed was.



I stood to the side as she looked around, her dark blue eyes as sharp as razors. She dipped her hand into her jacket and pulled out a nitrite glove before prodding at the elbow bracket. “Did you report this incident?”

“No,” I said regretfully and rubbed my face. “Now, I wished I had. We’ve had vandals here a time or two and harmless kids who do silly dares, and we believed it was one of those.”

“I see,” she replied. “Mr. Maxwell, who are your enemies?”

My head tilted. “Isn’t the question, do I have enemies?”

“By nature of your status and wealth, you have enemies,” Juliann replied frankly. “Some are just envious, some are outright hateful, but those are a few who hate you from afar. The dangerous ones are the ones who are closer and pretend to smile with you.”

“Oh, the one I can tell you about has never smiled at me,” I replied. “Brandon West, who owns the ranch next to mine, has outrightly stated he hates me. Even worse, I just won a contract he was frothing at the mouth for.”

As we returned to the calf shed, I told her about the contract and Brandon’s and mine’s interaction. When we stepped into the shed, the techs shook their heads, and one stood up with a vial in her hand.

“Detective, a screen test shows enough pesticide to kill a two-thousand-pound bull in an hour,” one of them, a man, said. “Imagine what happened in minutes with the calves.”

“And prints?” she asked. “Whole, partials, anything?”

“No,” he said. “Whoever did this was smart and took countermeasures. There were no prints, fibers, hairs, spit, or nothing to identify who they are.”

“Can you identify the chemicals?” Juliann asked. “Perhaps we can work with that?”

“We can run deeper searches in the lab,” he replied. “Most likely, we will be able to identify the specific makeup.”

“I’ll take it from there.” She nodded. “Can one of you show me where you think the break-in may have come from?”

Ben tipped his hat. “Right this way, miss.”

When they went off, I found Rayna and went to her side. With my back to my guys, I let my boss’s mask fall momentarily. She saw the flashes of worry and fear I would not dare show anyone else. In the next moment, my expression firmed.

“I should have reported the first incident,” I said. “It was stupid of me not to have done so.”

She rested a hand on my arm. “You’re doing it now, and if these attacks continue, you’ll have a trail of evidence. Eventually, something would be traced back to West if he is behind these things.”

“My gut tells me he is, and I am never wrong,” I replied, returning to the group. “He’s pulled some petty stuff in the past, but this is twice those. For him to devolve into killing my stock is a leap and bound over what he’s previously done, and I suspect he is just starting.”

“What—” she looked around, disbelief painted on her face. “—could be worse than this?”

“Believe me, Rayna, things will get worse,” I said grimly. “I just don’t want to know what he’ll do next.”

# Chapter Twenty

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## Rayna

“We found how they got in,” the detective strode back to us. “Come with me.”

John did not hesitate to follow, nor did I. We went to the back part of the shed, where there were mostly pallets for feed and spare buckets. Above was a lattice-grilled section that now swung free with the wind outside.

The space was at least a foot and a half wide and two feet long. Someone had to be very slender and flexible to have used that as the backdoor. Another forensic person came up with us, and when the detective asked for a ladder, John got one for her.

“Fingerprint kit,” she asked the guy and took a small box from the man. Detective Juliann climbed up to the window and began dusting.

I turned to look around, trying to see if there were any more points of entry, and then my eyes landed on a blinking camera. What? Had John not remembered that?

“John,” I grabbed his shoulder. “You’ve got cameras.”

He looked shell-shocked, and his head snapped up. “Jesus. I—” he spun. “Ben, the relays for the cameras are backed up for how long?”

“Forty-eight hours, boss.” Ben’s lips pressed tight, and he looked a bit taken aback as well as he plopped his hat on. “I’ll go check these servers. Scotty, you’re the whiz. Come with me.”

“I’ll be seeing those tapes, too,” Detective Juliann replied. “It might help.”

Suddenly, I felt that my presence was more harmful than helpful, and I turned to John. “I think I should go.”

Behind his calm look, John was incredibly strained. I could see it in the tight crinkles around his eyes and the grim set to his mouth. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“You don’t have to—” The stiff look he gave me made me click my mouth shut so quickly that my teeth clicked. I relented. “—okay.”

It was cool midday, and one or two tufted clouds dotted the endless blue Texas sky. Multicolored birds fluttered from the trees around, and a soft breeze filled my lungs with the myriad smells of wildflowers. The crunch of gravel under his boots was the most predominant sound as we walked to the car.

At the door, I turned. John hugged me and stroked his hand up and down my back. His eyes squeezed shut, and I melted into him, my head rested against his chest. His warmth seeped into me as I fit against him perfectly, my soft breasts pillowing against his lower ribs. The smell of his sweaty, spicy citrus-musky cologne flowed through my nose, and it was a powerful moment that I couldn’t explain to anyone.

“I think you know our plans were splintered today.” He sighed, nosing at my ear. “I’m sorry.”

As big as John was, I knew he needed someone to lean on, and I had a feeling he’d been needing it for longer than right now. “Plans change, I know,” I reminded him. “And something like this is a huge shift.”

“I’ll get it back on track,” he murmured, kissing my cheekbone and pulling away. “I promise.”

“Call me,” I replied before slipping into the car and returning to town.

\* \* \*

When my alarm blasted off the next morning, I slapped my hand out hard enough that it tumbled to the floor. I then turned over, trying hard to grasp the fleeting memories of my dream.

I remembered John kissing me, holding me, caressing my skin while whispering sweet promises in my ears. Some of them were too sweet because I distinctly remembered him saying *together forever*, and I knew that could not—would not—be possible. Aside from the scintillating sexual tension we had with each other, we were worlds apart.

Forever for was just that...a dream.

And as for my dream, it faded away into nothingness, and I had to let it go. Turning onto my belly, I sighed and dragged a pillow over my head. Even though I knew he was not there, I reached out for John...and I had expected the other side of the bed to be empty.

I flopped on my back and sighed. John had not called or texted me since that incident with the calves three days ago. Every day, I saw Sam, and while I yearned to ask her about her dad, I had to hold back. She didn't need to know—or get a hint of—what was happening between me and her dad.

It was Friday now, and by noon, I was off duty. The kids would be out playing their hearts out on Sports Day, and then, two weeks from then, we had the town's center Daddy-Daughter dance that I hoped John and his girls would attend.

For now, though, I had to get to work and, after that, run some errands. Grumbling, I slid out of bed, stood, and hustled to the kitchen to put the coffee maker on, then went to the bathroom to shower and dress.

All week I'd kept my eyes on Sam, and while she still played with the boys, I'd seen her talk to a few girls and have lunch with two. I didn't know if she was trying to see if she and the other girls had a few things in common or if she were just that different.

I took time to moisturize, something the tomboy I used to be would have scoffed at, but now, I knew it was wise to take care of my skin.

Skin soft and silky, I had my makeup on and dressed in a soft powder blue blouse and pencil skirt. I got my travel cup of

coffee and grabbed my handbag and some folders before heading to the school.

Pulling to the intersection, I paused at the stop light and reached for my cup of coffee. The light turned green, and one-handed, I turned to go right when a big jeep came out of nowhere and almost t-boned me.

Frightened, I stomped on the brake and jerked the wheel, bringing the car to a dead stop, flashing the coffee onto my blouse and lap, but the burning pain didn't even register as I watched the jeep rush on. With shaky fingers, I settled the cup back in the holder, eased my foot off the brake, and drove to a soft shoulder, sucking in air to calm down.

Hunched over the wheel, I tried to recall what had happened. Had I checked my rearview mirror? Yes, but I knew I had not seen that monster jeep anywhere near me.

Sharp knocks on my window had me looking up to meet a few concerned gazes. The passersby must have seen the almost-accident and were checking on me. I rolled down the window.

“Are you all right?” A young man holding a cup of coffee and a box of bagels asked.

“That jeep came from nowhere,” someone else added.

A blond lady with a frou-frou puppy in her handbag asked, “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“I'm fine, thanks, and I appreciate your concern, but I'm not injured, just a little rattled—” I looked down at my clothes, “—and covered in coffee.”

“You sure you don't want the police?” the first man asked.

“I'm sure, thank you,” I tried to assure them.

Some still had doubt in their eyes as they walked away. After pulling myself together and moving from the curb, I headed back home to change. I crawled the way back home to shower and dress. Could I show up for work as rattled as I was...maybe not.

I called the principal, told her what'd happened, and she told me to stay home and take the day off and that the interim counselor could take over if needed. When I hung up, I hesitated to make the next call, but I felt like this would be something John would want to know.

“Ray?” he greeted me, his tone calmer than I had expected. “You called right on time. I need to hear your voice right about now.”

I bit my lip. “Um, John, I have to tell you something. I nearly had an accident today, don't worry, I'm fine, but I am a bit rattled. I called my principal, and she gave me the time off, so I decided to let you know—”

“Are you home?” John interrupted.

“Yes...”

“Stay there,” he said. “I'm coming to you.”

I knew by now not to tell him not to come. John was the kind of man who, when he got something stuck in his head, ran with it. “I'm...thank you.”

When I sat the phone down, I looked around. The place wasn't dirty or messy; it just felt tiny, too tiny for John. I'd much rather be at his ranch, in his spacious living room, or riding down one of his forest trails.

Fifteen minutes later, I didn't expect John to appear on my doorstep with a bag of food under his arm and a basket dangling from the other. “What—”

“Are you goin' to let me in?” his brow ticked up.

I stepped aside, and he came in, went to my kitchen, and placed the items down, and I followed him after closing the door behind us. The moment he was free of them, he grasped me, lifted me to the table, and kissed me, but it was not an ordinary kiss.

It was like being hit by lightning as every cell in my body seemed to sizzle with need. His deeper, hungrier kisses, seasoned with fierce possessiveness, sent sweetness singing



through my blood. My awareness of anything vanished—the room, the almost-accident, the cold wood under my bottom.

Instinctively, I followed his lead, letting him in deeper, meeting his tongue with mine, kissing, eating, and sucking with equal measure. A rugged sound tore from his chest, and the kiss grew even more scorching. He pierced my mouth with a stabbing force that reminded me of how masterful he was inside me.

Fire spread out over my skin, the tips of my breasts tightening, itching for contact, but then his kiss changed from tempting and teasing me into a playful, tender kiss that led to nips and kisses.

He pulled away while I squirmed. “So...bed?”

John snorted through his nose. “Not yet. I just wanted to convince myself that you were okay.”

All my addled brain heard was, *not yet*.

My gaze dropped to the baskets of food. “You went shopping?”

“More like raided my fridge and cupboards,” he replied while moving to unpack. I saw boxes of macaroni, plastic containers of potato salad, wedges, rice, and a tub of ice cream that he instantly placed in the freezer before handing me a bag of chocolate chip cookies.

“Cookies?” I smiled, taking them. “Why, thank you. I like chocolate.”

“Most women do,” he grinned while pulling out two packets of raw steak. “Now, let me whip up dinner.”

“You’re going to cook for me?” I gaped. “Let me rephrase; you’re going to cook steak for me?”

“Why’re you surprised?” he asked, looking into my cupboard and pulling out seasoning.

“Um, because you’re a billionaire with a talented chef at home,” I replied. “If I were in your shoes, cooking would be

the last thing I'd be concerned about."

"You're right about Ella," he replied. "But remember, I wasn't always rich and could afford a chef. I had to juggle things for a while before better pasture came along. And I grew up basically having to care for myself."

"Ah." I popped open the bag of cookies. "How do you like your steak?"

"Rare to medium rare. Like my daddy used to say, bust the horns off 'em, wipe its rear end, and run it through a brush fire." John's lazy drawl had me shivering. "But I think you're a medium to well-done kind of girl."

"Just medium," I replied, plucking out a cookie. "Well done, tastes like rubber."

I watched him move around my dinky kitchen with ease, seasoning the steak with salt and pepper, garlic, rosemary, a dash of this, a splatter of that, something else I didn't catch into a bowl—because I was watching John work—and soon the steaks were on the skillet.

"I suppose you want to know what happened earlier?"

"I'll like to, yes," he replied, calmer.

"There's not much to tell," I replied. "At this one stoplight in town, I was about to turn into the crossroad when this big jeep came flying in, almost T-boning me, but I stomped on the brake, and it flew down the road. Never saw it again. I'd spilled coffee all over myself, so I had to return home to change. I called the principal, explained what happened, she gave me the time off, and then I called you."

A tick started to jump into John's jaw as he dropped knobs of butter into the pans with garlic and rosemary. He tilted the pan and started basting. His movements were smooth, practiced, and even motioned, even with the irritation ticking at his jaw.

I stalled in picking up the next cookie. "What's going through your head right now?"

“It just does not feel right,” he said. “First the attack on my ranch, then this with you? I may not be superstitious, but this feels connected.”

“You think West organized this?” I asked incredulously.

“I wouldn’t put it past him or that gorgon lady of his,” he replied. “They are both incredibly petty, and I’ve heard from the horse’s mouth that Miss Hernandez is from a family that excels in manipulations.”

“But why try to kill me? How would that—?” I asked then something struck me. “...because I’m connected to you, right. If I get hurt, you get hurt.”

“Yes,” John replied while plucking the steaks out and putting them to rest. He placed the hot pan in the sink, braced his hands on the edge, and hunched over. “But it’s another thing we can’t prove...yet. Do you remember what the car that nearly ran into you looked like?”

“It was almost a blur,” I said while thinking back. “It was big, blackish, maybe dark blue. I don’t know.” In the end, I almost apologized, and John seemed to understand. He gave me a sympathetic smile. “Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” he said, reaching for plates and popping the potato salad and rice tubs open. “I am glad you’re not hurt, though.”

I slipped off the counter and wrapped my arms around his middle while he held the two filled plates aloft. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He angled his head to kiss my temple. “Me too. Now, let’s eat.”

One hour later, with my belly full of sumptuous food, wine, and ice cream topped with cookie crumble toppings, I leaned into John’s side, and my head fell into the crook of his neck. “I feel like a double-stuffed Oreo.”

“Good analogy,” he replied, tilting his head, eyes deep and smoldering. “Now, I get to lick you all over.”

I shook my head and laughed. “I’m too full for sex. As a matter of fact, I think I’m about five minutes away from falling asleep on you.” I reached for his hand and laced our fingers together, “Stay the night?”

“You couldn’t stop me,” John replied. “But I’ll have to come back later, sweetheart. I need to return to the ranch, tie up some loose ends, and come right back.”

I nuzzled into his warm skin. “I’ll be waiting.”

\* \* \*

By sunset, I was curled up on the couch, with a bowl of ice cream on my lap, doused with coffee liquor—another little gem in John’s basket—while I watched some silly little rom-com. I wondered what John was doing.

A beam of golden-orange light reflected off the window and broke into a rainbow splatter over my kitchen. Without thought or reason, my mind turned to the remains of my dream that morning, and I bit my lip.

*Only in another life. This one is too complicated.*

My phone rang, and I looked at the caller ID. It was Jessica, another new hire at the school, but she taught kindergarten. “Hey Jessie, what’s up?”

“Mrs. Morton told me what happened,” she rushed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “Got a little rattled but not injured. Nothing happened to my car.”

Her breath of relief was audible. “That’s good to hear. Are you at home? Do you want me to bring you something? My mom made approximately two tons of meatloaf and lasagna. I could bring you some.”

“Thanks, but not tonight,” I said. “I just want to rest for a while and take it easy. You could bring it over tomorrow, though.”

“Sure,” Jessica replied. “Glad to know you’re okay.”

“I am.” We chatted until I heard the telltale crunch of tires on my driveway. “Um, I’ve got to go, Jessica. Thanks for checking on me.”

“No problem,” she replied. “See you tomorrow.”

I dropped the bowl in the sink, then went to answer the door and stood on the threshold as John jumped out of his truck. In profile, his lean, corded body, clad in dark blue wranglers, scuffed brown boots, a fresh white tee, and that telltale Stetson on, screamed classic Texan.

He shut the door and then headed to me. I stepped in and away to let him in, kicked the door closed with my heel, and then leaned on it. “Long day, cowboy?”

“The longest,” he took his hat off and dropped it on a table. “I’m thinking I’ll be needin’ some TLC to get over it.”

“Right this way,” I said, taking his hand and leading him to my bedroom. “Shoes and shirt, off.”

While I went to my bathroom for the massage oil, I heard the thump of his boot and the soft susurrations of him shucking his shirt. Steeping in, John’s back was a work of art and a beautiful sight. My gaze trailed over his skin, mapping every muscle, his flexing shoulder right down to his tight obliques.

“On your belly,” I ordered.

His head swiveled to look at me with the bottle in my hand. “You’re going to give me a massage, sweetheart?”

“Yep,” I replied. “Probably not the best one you’ve had, but I know how to work tension out of a man.”

He chuckled, his tone warm and rich before he did as I asked and laid on his belly, pillowing his head with his arms. I straddled his upper thighs and ran my hands up his back first, sliding my fingers up his nape and into his hair, scratching the soft, sensitive scalp.

His soft moan reverberated through his back, and I smiled a few more times while doing it. “Relax, John. Whatever happened out there is out there. Forget them.”

“Aren’t I the one who is supposed to be comforting you?” He twisted his head to look at me.

“This comforts me,” I said, popping the bottle and drizzling some on his back. A droplet arched over his shoulder and dropped on the sheets.

“Shouldn’t you have laid a towel down first?” he asked.

“I planned on getting these sheets washed anyway,” I said, digging the heels of my palms into his upper back, right under his shoulders. His muscles were tense and rigid, and I used my thumbs, pressing them into circles as I rubbed his firm skin.

Fixing my thumbs on either side of his spine, I ran both hands right up to his nape and eased the pressure on the way down. His constant groans and moans were making other thoughts circle through my head.

I worked at him until the tension was all gone from his body, his breathing had evened out, and I thought he was asleep. Gently, I swung my body from him, took the bottle back to the bathroom, and washed my hands.

Back in the bedroom, I dimmed the lights and crawled into bed with him, not really minding the rough touch of his jeans as they brushed my skin—except the jeans were gone, and the moment I slid under the covers, John grabbed hold of me.

“Thanks for working the kinks out, sweetheart,” he murmured, trailing his mouth from my ear to my lips, but he bypassed my lips and nuzzled my throat. “You said you planned on washing these sheets, right?”

“Uh-huh,” I was already panting.

His hands had strayed up my tank top and teased my ribs before cupping my breast. He grasped the edge of my blouse with his teeth and tugged it up to my chin, baring my body before his mouth sealed over a turgid tip.

I dimly heard what sounded like rain pattering against the roof, and soon that pattern became a steady stream. I arched my back to press my body further into his hand, aching for him to strip me bare and have his way with me. I wanted to give him anything and everything.

I notched my knees to the waistbands on his pants and began to push them, pleased with myself when I got them an inch down. He chuckled and grabbed at my knees.

“Feeling a little needy, huh? Patience never killed anyone, sweetheart.”

“Easy for you to say,” I laughed. “You’re not the one dripping like the rain outside.”

He rutted his groin against mine while reaching up to kiss me, and I loved feeling the rasp of the day’s beard growth against my cheek, the rough material of his jeans against my inner thighs, and the smooth slickness of his skin. Each contrasting sensation made my already sensitive nerves raw, making his kiss much sweeter.

He skillfully swept his tongue between my lips in a soul-stealing, deeply passionate kiss that left no doubt in my mind about how I needed him inside me. John pressed open-mouthed kisses to my jaw and throat, sucking slightly with each kiss and making my core drip with anticipation.

Gently, he stripped me, stitch by stitch, and paused to kick off his jeans before rejoining me in the bed. He turned me on my side, kissing down my jaw and neck. His hands felt like they were everywhere, sliding over my side, over my trembling belly, and hitched my leg up.

“Your body is like a playground,” he murmured in my ear.

“Y-yeah?” I laughed softly. “You figure?”

“Yes,” he stroked me, teasing my swollen clit as I squirmed against his attentive fingers. I could feel his hot cock on my backside, but he kept himself away so his fingers could continue to play. He dipped into my passage and slipped his

slick fingers inside me. “And if I see anyone else on it, I am cracking skulls.”

“Enough.” I grabbed his hip.

“What did I say about patience?” He bit my ear.

“You’re horrible.” My body was undulating under his while I squirmed with the pleasure I had, anticipating the pleasure I could be feeling.

His lips coasted over my shoulder while I let his clothed cock notch at my opening and slowly but steadily fill me with his thick, throbbing length. I reached up, slid my hands into his hair, and held on as he grabbed my hips, holding me.

I gripped the sheets with my free hand as he took me deep and hard. Our bodies grew slick with sweat, moving and grinding against each other. His deep rumble and groans vibrated through the bed and me as we fucked each other.

John’s pace bordered on the hard and rough, our skin-on-skin contact like a match on a striker, the sounds and smell of sex filling the room. My blood heated to a boil, and while my head swam, I heard him grunt, drilling my body harder and harder.

Possessed with chasing that scintillating high, I was panting, grabbing, rolling my hips, trying to get him deeper inside me, wanting him, *needing him*. My body started to pulse and tightened around his shuttling cock. I felt him reach over my hip to stroke my clit.

“Come on my cock, Rayna.”

I felt the world set itself on fire as pleasure raced up my spine and my world splintered around me. I screamed, trembled, clenched, and unclenched. I felt and heard John let go and roar, gripping my ass and pulsing inside me.

After a long moment, trapped in suspension, I sagged to the pillow and felt John drop small kisses on my overheated cheek and shoulder. His hand held my hip as he slowly pulled out of me and went to take care of the condom.



He was gone for probably two minutes, but it felt like two years. I wanted him back, sex-smelled, sweaty skin and all. The errant thought that I may be getting more attached than the situation called for—God forbid being codependent—sprung up in my mind, but I brushed it away.

“It’s just great sex,” I murmured to myself. “That’s all it is.”

If only I had believed the lie I was telling myself.

John came back into the bed and pulled me to his side. “Do you want to shower?”

“No,” I nuzzled into his warmth. “I just want to stay here, surrounded by you.”

His arm snaked around my shoulder. “You want to cuddle up with a hot, sweaty man.”

“Biology,” I murmured. “Let me suck in the pheromones.”

John laughed hard enough to give me a flash of his unseen-before dimples, his baritone right and warm. “Okay. I see where this is going.”

“As long as it has you not going anywhere,” I felt sleep overtaking me. “I’m fine with that.”

Soon enough, I was dead to the world.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## John

I hated leaving Rayna in bed, but I had to go home. Detective Juliann had prewarned me that the lab had the results of the contents from the trough, and I had to go examine them. Then, I had to prepare for the town fair and the daddy-daughter dance and review the specs Twister Twines had sent over with their finalized contract.

After debating with myself for ten minutes, I pulled myself together and slipped out of bed. Rayna looked so innocent, so vulnerable, sleeping there, with her hair tossed on the pillow and her long lashes swept her cheek. Her lips were parted, and the bottom one was still kiss-swollen, and I wanted to kiss her—but refrained.

Emotions I had not expected—and could not afford to feel either—assaulted my heart like a sledgehammer. In weeks I’d tapped a tender well of emotion I had not counted on. Fuck, what was I going to do? I’d crossed so many lines with her that the whole situation was a blur of emotion.

Unable to stop myself, I stroked her hair, and Rayna leaned into my touch like a kitten seeking the sun. A surge of emotion emerged in my chest again, warm and prickly.

Moving away, I went to her kitchen, and as a paltry gift, I got her coffee maker on, scrambled up some eggs with all the fixings, and had bagels toasting away. Slipping the plate into the warmer on her stove, I ducked my head into the room to check on her, then spotted her lipstick on the table.

Grinning, I uncapped it—bold red, my favorite—and scribbled a note on her mirror, then ducked out, closing the door behind me.

“Now, Detective,” I said while driving away. “What do you have for me?”

\* \* \*

Spotting the grim look on the detective's face the moment I stepped into the precinct, I knew whatever she had to tell me would not be nice.

"Mister Maxwell," she greeted me. "My office, please."

I entered her office and saw the piles of folders on her desk, the coffee maker bubbling away in the corner, and the bookshelf crammed with books of all sizes. She stepped around the table and slid a folder to me. "It's worse than we thought. One of the chemicals in that trough was Triaryl phosphates."

"Our men found that even if these animals were given five, ten, or even 20 grams per kilogram, they would have developed diarrhea, severe abdominal pain, dehydration, and eventually comatose. No, the levels were so high the animals skipped all those and died in convulsions. Not only that," she said, "The calves didn't have a snowball in hell's chance of surviving because we found rodenticides in the mix as well."

My addled brain took a long while to catch up, but rage swept through me like a bushfire when it did. "You mean to tell me this fucker put rat poison in there too?"

"Not only any rat poison but bromadiolone," she added. "Usually, zero-point zero, zero-five percent of bromadiolone is lethal. The levels in the trough were zero-point ten percent. Overkill, Mister Maxwell, that is what we call overkill."

Decimals were kids' stuff, but I wasn't too shabby either; this attacker had reduced the thousands to hundreds and even rounded up. "They were practically dead from the first swallow," I grounded out, dropping the folder in disgust and dismay. "Can you trace these to the owner?"

"Unfortunately, we can't. As hideous as it is, you can find these chemicals in almost every household and farming shop in the town, much less the state, but we'll try our best."

“Thank you,” I replied, rubbing my face. “Do you have any leads on the break-in?”

“We’re running down leads on that, too,” she nodded. “See, for a job like that, it had to be a skilled thief, someone with the tools to get in and out without detection. The camera footage your men gave me was good, we don’t know who the person is, but from the figure we’ve found there, we have the bodily characteristics and type to match with any suspect we’ll fether out.”

I’d seen the same footage and knew that the perpetrator was a slim person, about five foot six, and from how they twisted and turned, they had to be double-jointed. They had worn all black and a hood that only left out the eye space, the slit showing very common brown eyes. Identifying the guy with no fingerprints or DNA left at the crime scene would take a miracle.

“Please relay to me whatever you find.” I stood, lifting the folder. “May I have these?”

“Sure,” Juliann replied. “I have my own.”

With a final nod, I left the precinct for my truck, revved it up, peeled out of the parking lot, and headed back to the ranch. I stopped at the town bakery to pick up some treats for Sam and Harper, then drove home.

I called Ben inside and handed him the folder when I entered my office. “There was rat poison in there, Ben, strong rat poison too. Enough to make sure half the calves were dead if you hadn’t jumped in.”

“Jesus take the wheel,” Ben whistled as his eyes ran over the words. “If West is behind this, he’s a downright wicked sonofabitch.”

“I know he is, but I just need to prove it,” I replied. “Unfortunately, those chemicals are so popular in almost every household.”

“Cept this one,” Ben jabbed a finger to the bottom. “Says here it found traces of Toxaphene. That doozy was banned in

Texas from the nineteen ninety. Who the heck would have that shit still around?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, taking the paper. “She didn’t mention that. Why, though?”

“Bigger fish to fry,” Ben replied. “A trace doesn’t mean much of anythin’.”

“Maybe...” I said while looking over the list. “But it might help eventually.”

My phone rang, and I saw Rayna’s name light up on the screen. A smile curved the corner of my lips. “Hello?”

“John?” There was a tremor in her voice that instantly removed the slight happiness I’d just felt. “I’m at the supermarket with a friend and...and I think I know who would have t-boned me. She just pulled out of the lot.”

“*She?*” I frowned. “Who is this she?”

“Miss Hernandez,” Rayna replied. “West’s secretary.”

My blood ran colder than the Arctic. “Do I need to come get you?”

“No,” she replied. “I’ll be fine. My friend Jessica is here with me. She drove me to the supermarket and will stay with me later.”

“Good, stay with her,” I replied, my eyes meeting Ben’s. “Because I have a sudden visit to make.”

I shut the call off and grabbed my hat from the table. “Come with me. We’re going to West’s place.”

“Do you want me to carry the shotgun, the combat knife, or the garrote wire?” Ben asked, reminding me that he was once in the Marine Corps.

“I need you to be my witness that I didn’t do anything stupid,” I replied, grabbing my keys. “And possibly bail me out if I do.”

\* \* \*

West's ranch had a pair of ostentatious metal gates with two rearing bulls topping the metal twists. I gunned the truck, heading at a clipped pace down the driveway, and dust flew off my tires into a tornado. I didn't care. I would tear through the goddamn place if I had to. I didn't care about the quirky signs or the horses grazing on the land. All I needed to do was find West and the woman I'd had slapped with cuffs and dragged to jail—if I had the power.

The house was a carbon copy of the hundreds of ranch houses in Texas, with a multi-storied, long porch, sandstone bricks, and red slate roofing. I stomped on the brake, yanked the vehicle into park, and jumped out.

I marched up to the door and banged on it, my fist clenched so hard the pain reverberated up my arm, but I kept pounding until West yanked the door open and stepped out.

The moment he saw me, his gaze went haughty and scornful. "What are *you* doing darkening my doorstep?"

"Repaying the same unexpected visit you did when you dropped on my doorstep," I snarled. "Your Miss Hernandez almost crashed into—" how was I going to describe Rayna so they wouldn't get suspicious. "—Miss Everett's car yesterday. Care to answer that, West?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he replied coldly. "She never said anything to me."

"Well, Miss Everett said it to me, and she described the hideous jeep she was driving as well," I added. "The big, black jeep you retrofitted into the size of a dinosaur. Give it up, West. I demand a confession and an apology."

"You'll get nothing," he sneered. "You have no proof."

"Get her down here now," I ordered.

“Miss Hernandez is otherwise engaged,” he said smoothly. “Even if she were not, I would never subject her to answering your baseless claims.”

God knew the only thing I wanted at that moment was to put my fist through his face, and from the smug smirk he wore, he knew it too. If I didn’t know he could sue the skin off my ass and wipe my face with it, this dance would have long ended with his jaw spinning to the other half of his face.

West stepped closer, a malicious glint in his eyes. “You want to use that clenching fist of yours, caveman? Go ahead, do it.”

“If you don’t know that I can see a trap from a mile away, then you ain’t as smart as you think you are,” I replied icily. “I won’t lie, I’d love to see your smug face eat dirt, but you’re not worth the trouble. Especially when you’ve been trying to up man me for years but still aren’t even close.”

His eyes flashed with fire, and I knew I’d broken through a chink in his armor. “Admit it, West; you’re jealous of me. The poor, uneducated simpleton who has more clout with his piddling five-thousand-acre ranch while your eleven thousand is still trailing miles behind. Isn’t that so, West?”

“Get the hell off my ranch before I have the police throw you off like the trash you are,” he snarled.

“Same to you,” I replied. “If you step anywhere near me, I’ll have a restraining order slapped on you so quick, your head will spin. And tell your woman I will have the confession, one way or another.”

Not caring about his glare searing over the side of my face, I hopped down the few steps and strode to my truck, glad when Ben jumped inside in a second. Before I turned the vehicle, I saw a shadow at the window above the porch and spotted Maria there right before she dropped the curtain.

*Otherwise, engaged my ass.*

I drove home, mindful not to let my anger wrap us around a tree.



“You rattled him back there,” Ben said when we were half a mile away.

“I’d have preferred to rattle his teeth in his head,” I replied as we got to the highway. “Pompous asshole.”

“For a moment there, I was wondering if you were going to accuse him about the calves, too,” Ben added. “But I’m glad you didn’t.”

I hated to admit I’d forgotten about that part; all I wanted was justice for Rayna. “He doesn’t need to know that yet. But he will when we get a few solid leads to make us legally look his way. We need to reel that fish in before we fry it.”

When we returned to the ranch, I was taken aback when I saw Rayna’s car parked at the front drive. Before I could run off and find her, I gave Ben instructions about revving up the surveillance around the ranch and to let me know if we needed more equipment.

“Will do.” He tipped his hat.

I returned to the main house, hopped to the front porch, and headed inside my office—but she was not there. I turned around and nearly ran into Sarah, who pointed me in the right direction. She was on the porch with Sam, flipping through a magazine.

Rayna looked up while I was discreetly looking over her for any sign of bruises or injury. Just as she told me, though, she looked unharmed. I leaned on the doorjamb and crossed my legs, “My, my, what do we have here?”

Sam smiled. “Miss Rayna said she would come by with some magazines I can look through to see where we’ll go shopping next.”

“Really,” I stuck my head over her shoulder. “And you’re going to shop at...the Bowling Alley?”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s just an Ad. Are you sure you’re smart?”

“Hey!” I narrowed my eyes. “No more smart-alecky comments from you, miss lady. You’re walking on thin ice already.”

Sam laughed and then grabbed the magazines. “I’ll go look these over in my room.”

When she left, I took her vacated seat and stretched out a leg to brush Rayna’s. “How are you?”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## Rayna

“Pretty well, considering,” I brushed a few tendrils of hair from my face, then met his eyes. “About Mr. West, did you prove it?”

“In all but me getting a solid yes from the colossal douchebag, pretty much,” he replied. “I may have added another layer to our animosity, but it was already higher than the Empire State Building, so—” he shrugged a single shoulder. “—I ain’t crying no tears. When Ben and I got there, he put us off, saying Maria was not there, but as we left, I saw her through the window above the patio.”

“But...” I paused, trepidation curling in my gut. “...why scare me? I have no...forgive me for saying this; beef with them. Why try to run me over?”

John looked as if he’d swallowed something bitter. “Because if you’re with me, they need to get rid of you too, or at least show that you’re in danger of being collateral damage.”

“Should I go to the police then?” I asked worriedly. “Maybe tell that same detective who is handling your case? Perhaps it would deescalate the problem?”

I considered it. “It couldn’t hurt.”

“Then I’ll do that,” I replied, reaching out to him. “Are you sure this is going to be okay?”

“It will be,” John replied. “I’m just on edge, expecting West to retaliate, but what grabs my garters is I don’t know when or where that will be. I don’t know what he’ll bring this time, which drives me up the wall. I mean, can you imagine what is next after killing five calves? Mass genocide? An ambush? Going after my kids?”

John jerked dead at those words, his eyes flying wide as the unconscious thought soon became very conscious and real.

His face reddened, and his jaw went hard as flint. He spun. “If that motherfucker thinks he can even lay a finger on my kids —”

I lurched from my seat and grabbed him. “John, look at me. Calm down. We’re not there yet. And God forbid we ever get there.”

The look on John’s face made me want to run and hide. I was sure the devil himself was not as ferocious looking as John was at this moment. “Listen to me. When I make this report, and they warn him, he will think twice about doing such a thing.”

The iron in his spine flagged, but his face still remained fierce. Eyes flashing, he said, “If we were elsewhere, I’d be kissing you right now.”

It took a lot for me not to smile or, even worse, slip into his arms. We were outside, and anyone could come across us at any moment. Still, I did my best and wrapped my hand around his arm. It was paltry comfort, but it was the best I could do.

“Do you think it will do any good to tell them about it? To warn them about West?”

“No,” he replied staunchly. “It’s my responsibility as their father to ensure it never gets that far. I’m not filling their heads with unnecessary fear.”

“And I’ll do my part, too,” I replied, reaching for my handbag. “Sam and I are shopping tomorrow, so I’ll go to the police now.”

I went to head out, but John broke his rule and reached out, held my arm, and pulled me in for half a hug, brushing his lips across my temple. The intoxicating smell of leather, male spice, and his heat flooded my senses and tempted me to stay but...another time.

“I’ll be back,” I promised, then slipped away and headed out to my car to do whatever I could do to help John.

\* \* \*

“Miss Everett?” Detective Juliann said while striding through the local police department lobby. “You asked for a meeting?”

“Yes,” I said while shooting an apprehensive look to the cops operating the front desk and the other few lingering around the coffee machine. “Um, may we talk in private?”

“Sure,” she nodded. “This way, please.”

I followed her to a room that was tiny but serviceable, and I noted the broad desk crammed with files. “Coffee? The one in the front room is sludge.”

“Thank you, milk and two sugars, please,” I replied as she made a to-go cup. When she rested the cup before me, I added. “I don’t want to take much of your time, but a day ago, someone tried to collide with my car. I didn’t know who it was until I was at the supermarket, and I saw Miss Hernandez, Mister West’s girlfriend or secretary, I don’t know, get into the same vehicle.

“You know I was there when they discovered the dead calves,” I paused. “I spoke to John about it, and he went to get answers from Mr. West with his friend Ben; he didn’t allow John to speak with her, and John feels that it could be a planned thing.”

“Hmm,” Detective Juliann replied, her sharp eyes meeting mine. “If you don’t mind me asking, are you and Mister Maxwell intimate?”

“Yes,” I replied, unwilling to hide anything from her lest it would come back to bite me—and John—in our asses. “But it’s not something we need to be known because I’m working with his children. You know, conflict of interest and all that.”

“I see,” Detective Juliann nodded. “I know these things all too well, but your relationship might not be as important as Miss Hernandez almost assaulting you. Are you making a

formal complaint? Because if you are, we are obligated to verbally warn them.”

“If it would help to make them think twice about any more attacks,” I replied. “Yes.”

She moved around her desk, took up a clip, slotted a sheet on it, and then handed me a pen. “Please, give your statement, and I will personally deliver the warning.”

It didn’t take me long to write down my statement; with all the things I remembered about the jeep, both from the almost-hit and the supermarket, I even jotted down the license plate for good measure.

“Done,” I said, then handed the clipboard.

“You know, rarely do I see a professional grudge turn into a personal one,” Detective Juliann said while taking the sheet. “And while I don’t want to scare you, I must warn you, they almost always get deadly.”

The pit in my stomach sank another inch. “How deadly?”

“Morgue deadly,” Detective Juliann replied.

I bit my lip. “John was worried that he might draw his kids into this, and I would hate for it to get this drastic. You don’t think so, do you, that they would harm a child to further this feud—” but the look on Detective Juliann’s face made me feel sick, “—would they?”

“I hate to tell you, but there have been cases,” she replied. “If Mr. Maxwell does change his mind, we’ll be happy to put plainclothes police officers at the school to watch them.”

“I’ll tell him,” I replied, reaching for my bag. “I just hope it never comes to that.”

“None of us do,” Detective Juliann replied, her mouth tilted in a pained smile.

I headed to my home, unsure if it was best to go right back to John. Perhaps he needed some time to himself to consider what his next steps with West would be. I’ve never had

enemies as badly as John, and frankly, I'd hate to have anyone willing to harm me and be ready to drag children into the fight.

"Knock on wood; it never happens," I murmured as I took a detour to the local bakery.

I wanted to grab some sweet treats, and I had the baker fill a box with soft baked cookies, brownies, bear claws, and sweet rolls, then strolled through the shelves to pick up a box of coffee K-cups pods, then went to cash out my goods—and jerked to a stop.

Miss Hernandez was there, looking at the sweets, and when the server went to the back room, I couldn't help but feel this was too much of a coincidence.

"What are you doing here?" I asked bluntly.

She turned. "This is a public bakery, is it not?"

"Are you following me?"

Her dark eyes traced over me from the tip of my head to my shoes, and her lips lifted in scorn, wordlessly telling me that I wasn't worthy of her attention. "Now, why would I do that?"

"Because when you are suddenly here with me, someone you almost ran into and might have *killed*, anyone would want to know," I replied.

"Killed?" Her brows shot up, and her slight smirk unsettled me. "According to who?"

"Me and half a dozen witnesses," I replied.

She laughed, her dark eyes spitting with animosity. "*Malparido*, I dare you to call anyone who *thought* they saw such a thing and get them to testify in court. Nothing will come from it, and do you really think you're special to that man, Maxwell? *Estúpida*, you're only the flavor of the month for him. By next month, he will have moved on to a new plaything. *That* is your reality."



I refused to let her nasty words pierce my skin. “That might be the case, but your employer is still miles behind John, and chances are he will never catch up. That is *your* reality, isn’t it?”

Her eyes were squinted with spite, and bitter lines bracketed her mouth. “Not for long; it won’t be.”

The door to the backroom swung open, and the lady returned with a box in her hands. Miss Hernandez took it, popped her card over the paying console, and stalked away without a second look at me.

The attendant looked at me then her eyes flew to the door, “Ummm?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, but the tension from seeing her did not lessen when I paid for my things with my credit card. As I left the bakery, I only thought, “Not for long, it won’t be...what does that mean? Sounds like they already have a plan in place...what is it?”

When I got into my car, I had the windows up and called John. He answered, “Hello?”

“You remember when you said you don’t believe in coincidences? Well, I’m starting to follow you on that because Miss Hernandez was right behind me in *Nutterbutters*. She denied the almost-accident, but I don’t care about that. What worries me is what she said before she left.

“Granted, I should have been a girl scout, but this time, I taunted her saying that her reality is that her boss would never catch up to you, and she said, *not for long, it won’t be*,” I told him. “I can’t help but think they’re planning something even worse than the calves.”

“This is what I am afraid of,” he replied grimly. “But what I hate even more is knowing I don’t know what to expect from him or when it will come.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, as I was about to hold out the door for Samantha to slip inside my car, ready for our next shopping trip, three vehicles, Ms. Hernandez's included, came screeching to a stop at the step of John's house.

I'd had to yank Samantha away while she, West, and four men jumped out in nothing less than an ambush. West took the steps in one jump, only for the screen door to bang open, and Ben came out with a shotgun in hand and John right behind him.

"Why the fuck are you on my land?" John growled. "You're not welcome here."

"When one of your people decides to threaten one of mine, you're damn sure I will be here, unwelcome or not," West sneered.

"Threat? What threat?" John yelled back. "You're insane. I'll give you one minute to get off my property, or I will call the police."

I quietly opened the door and whispered to Samantha, "Get in now."

Her eyes, wide with questions and fear, made me even more determined to protect her from what would happen. With a quiet nod, she sunk into the backseat, and I closed the door right as West said, "Maria told me that woman over there threatened her saying you were going to wring her neck the next time you saw her over a simple misunderstanding."

*What?*

I spun around and glared at the two. "*Excuse me?*"

West looked at me and then cut his eyes away dismissively, but I was not having it. I stood by John and then looked at Miss Hernandez's smug face. "I didn't say anything of the sort to you."

"Yes, you did," she replied.

"When?" I demanded. "Were you high? I only asked you in the bakery if you followed me and looked at me as if I were

mud under your fake Louis Vuitton boots, so don't lie. We can return to that bakery and get the attendant to prove it."

"Sure, we can," Miss Hernandez replied, her smile sly, which made something twist in my stomach.

I was sure they had done something to ensure the lady wouldn't testify. Had they paid her off, or had her dismissed?

"All I am asking is an apology from her," West replied.

John's head snapped back, and fury darkened his face. "You mean you want me to give you the same thing you refused to give me? Get off my land, West."

West's first punch was unexpected, and John could not block it, and the sound of West's fist smashing against John's face made me feel sick. The sick sound of flesh and bone hitting flesh and bone had nailed my feet to where they were, and even when the chock passed, everything in me wanted to leap in, but I could not move.

When West's second fist flew out, John turned and flicked his head away from the punch. John dodged the blow and threw one of his own. His fist connected with a crack against West's jaw. John dropped a little and went in low, plowing his fists until West lost his balance and, the next instant, tumbled down the stairs.

My attention flew to Samantha, and I spun to see Sam's wide-eyed and pale face, and everyone around seemed as shocked as I was. But then, a flicker from the corner of my eyes had me looking back to see John as he pressed his scuffed boot into West's chest.

John leaned down and said in no uncertain terms, "Get. Off. My. Land."

He pulled his foot away and watched as West scrambled to his feet and went off to his car before they hopped in and drove away—but before they left, the two shot a secret smirk as if West's humiliation meant nothing to either of them.

Why did I feel we had just been played like fools?

I forced myself forward and went to John, unsure if I should touch him or not. “What the hell was that?”

John’s jaw was working as his fist flexed. “I don’t know, but I can smell the dead fish stinking to high heaven. Why did he come to me at all?”

“He was lying,” I said. “I never told her anything like that!”

“I know,” he replied, turning to Ben. “We have the camera’s on, right?”

“Yep,” Ben replied.

“Good, Micah and Dusty, go to *Nutterbutters* and ask about Miss Hernandez and Rayna. Ask them to pull receipts if they have to.”

“Yessir.” Dusty nodded, then turned to Micah, and the two went off.

“You ran into Maria?” Jack asked as he came forward, his brows knitting together in a frown. “Why?”

“I went to the bakery, and not two seconds later, she was there, so I asked her if she was following me, and she mocked me, calling me a, let me see if I can say this right, *malparido*,” I said. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“I do,” Carlos said, his face tight with horror. “In Argentina, where she’s from, it means a bastard, and it is one of the worst insults because it has another meaning like many Argentinian words do. It also means miscarriage. She’s literally saying you weren’t even worth being born.”

The air turned grim, and I turned to the car where Samantha still sat, but she was looking away from us. “Oh shit, Samantha.” My eyes flew to John. “She saw all of it.”

“I’ll get her,” he replied, striding to the car. “Ben, get that footage.”

While he went off, I thought of what would be best to do and say while John opened the door and lifted Samantha out.

Cradling her in his arms, he carried her into the house while I, after shooting a look at the guys around us, followed them.

He carried Samantha to his office and sat her down while I closed the door behind us. “I’m so sorry you had to see that kiddo.”

Samantha’s eyes held deep confusion. “You keep saying it’s not right to fight, but you punched him.”

“I know,” John replied, grief and strain lined his face. “I know I keep saying that, but sometimes, situations change. It’s never right to put your hands on anybody, but sometimes, it’s called self-defense when someone strikes you first. You saw how Mr. West punched me first.”

“Yes, but *why*?” Samantha asked, her brows furrowing.

“Samantha, do you know why Rachel and Connie always argue in class?” I jumped in.

“Because they both want to be the smartest kids in the room,” Sam rolled her eyes. “Like we all don’t know.”

“Well, Mr. West is like that with your dad,” I explained. “They both work with livestock, and Mr. West doesn’t like your dad because your dad is more successful than he is.”

“Oh,” she said, then gave me a look. “But why doesn’t he like *you*?”

“Because Miss Everett is here with us,” John replied. “He does not like anyone who is here with us.”

Her gaze swung between us. “Does that mean me too?”

Sometimes we don’t give kids credit when credit is due.

John looked at me before he replied. “I didn’t want to say anything, Sam, because I know I can protect you, but now that you do know, I want you to be very careful, okay? No running off, and when you’re at school, don’t talk to strangers. Not even if they say I asked them to pick you up. The only person who will come for you and Harper are me, Uncle Ben, and Miss Everett.”

“I know it’s scary, Samantha,” I added. “But it’s true. I don’t think anything will happen, but we need you to be a big girl and be smart now.”

Samantha still looked worried, but she nodded anyhow. “Okay.”

“You know, we don’t have to go shopping now if you don’t want to,” I offered gently. “If what you saw a while ago was too troubling, we can do it tomorrow if you want?”

She considered it, then shook her head. “It’s all right. I want to go.”

I didn’t question her. “Okay then.”

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## John

I couldn't sleep.

As much as I tossed and turned, flipped the pillows, and changed positions, sleep could not come to me. Micah and Dusty had not found the lady Rayna had spoken to at the bakery, telling me that the lady had left in a hurry, which smelled as fishy as could be. Clearly, West had paid the woman off.

Eventually, I sat up, slipped out of bed, and shrugged on a pair of jeans and a shirt. With my boots on, I grabbed my keys and headed to one place—or, should I say, the one person I knew could put me at ease.

Rayna.

I hoped she would forgive me for showing up unexpectedly in the dead of night like some creeper, but I could only think she would be a good listening ear to the worries keeping me up. I grabbed a few things and then left for the truck.

As I stepped outside, the night felt normally quiet, the wind whistling through the trees and the soft echo of an owl's hoot. The crickets had long gone to bed. I put the things in my hand in the backseat and hopped in the driving seat. The drive down to town was easy as no traffic was on the road.

About two miles into the town, I saw the construction for the annual fair was on target, with walls going up, portions being sectioned off, and walkways emerging from the ground. I hope my PA had gotten my spot on the other side from West—the asshole.

Just like out of town, the roads were empty, and the only sign of life was the street light and the few colored lights coming out of the shops. I drove past the school and headed to



Rayna's cottage, and when I got there, I was surprised to see the light on.

Was she up?

I shut the truck off and headed to the doorway, and as I went to knock, Rayna opened the door for me. She was clad in a thin pink robe and must have been wearing shorts underneath it because her legs were showing from the knee down.

Rayna gave a sympathetic smile. "Can't sleep, huh?"

"Not a blessed wink," I replied. "May I?"

She stepped aside, and I went inside and realized the kitchen light was on and the kettle was steaming on the stove. She went to her cupboard and took down a mug. "I was just making some tea. Do you want a cup?"

"Sure," I replied, taking one of the barstools. "It's fair to say that today was disturbing, but was there a specific part keeping you up?"

"Samantha," she replied while taking out the box of tea. "Even while we went shopping, she didn't vocalize what she felt while you and West fought. I didn't ask her, but it is bothering me."

My gut curdled a little. I was worried about Sam, but the greater worry was for John, "I cannot help but think there was something more to West's hypocritical presence today. Can you imagine he came to get me to apologize for something he failed to give me and with such smug cockiness too?"

"That bothered me too," she replied, handing me a cup.

"I don't know why they decided to turn up on my ranch when he booted me off his," I growled. "What trick was up his sleeve?"

"You think there is one?" Rayna asked.

"There is always one," I replied after a sip. "I just don't know what it is."

“And that’s another horrible thing,” she sighed. “If only we had a way to know what he was up to.”

Wrapping my hand around the cup, I looked around the room and wondered if I could sleep there or just go back home after we talked. But then, another idea came to me. “Let’s get out of here.”

She looked at me. “What?”

“Get dressed,” I replied. “Shoes, shirt, whatever, and let’s take a ride.”

Rayna blinked but then smiled. “Sure. Give me a minute.”

She placed her cup in the sink, then went to her bedroom, and I heard rummaging. As much as I wanted to join her, tell her I’d changed my mind, and end up fooling around in bed, I had to stifle my baser urges because not all problems could be fixed with a round of hot sex.

She emerged in faded jeans, boots, an overlarge sweatshirt, and a cap jammed on her head. “Where to, cowboy?”

“Somewhere I haven’t been in a long time,” I grabbed my keys and nodded to the door. “Let’s go, baby.”

\* \* \*

I drove us down a back road I know Rayna had no idea existed, a three-mile stretch of rural road that led up into the hill, but not near my part of the country. We’d left the pavement-lined highways and were now on a rural stretch with tree branches that arched over the road like a net, creating a long, dark tunnel.

Moonlight glimmered on the rough road, guiding us up the hill to a clearing. I backed the truck up to a space between two trees with long interlocking branches that created a private canopy, but the moon and stars were still visible.

“Grab those things from the backseat,” I requested as I hopped out and went to pull the tailgate.

Rayna handed me the pillows and blanket, and I spread them out in the bed before kicking my boots off and helping her up. I backed up to the rear panel, and Rayna tucked herself into my side.

“Back when I was in the trenches building my company, I used to come here when I felt like it was too much,” I said while gazing up at the stars. “I did a few things. Sometimes I would stare at the sky, talk to God, scream my frustrations, talk to Emily as if she were still here, cry, or just sleep till morning light. Somehow, I always felt better after.”

“I can see why,” Rayna said. “It’s peaceful out here...and beautiful.”

A sea of sparkling stars stood against the midnight-blue starry sky, while the rolling hills stood sentinel in the distance. I wrapped my arms around her from behind and kissed her cheek. “It’s almost as gorgeous as you.”

“Why, thank you,” she replied, drumming her fingertips over my side. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

My eyes traced the constellation I was pretty sure was Cancer. “Y’know, when you come from nothing, some of the simpler things in life seem the best. A star-studded sky out in the country air is priceless. I wouldn’t trade it for the nicest suit in a five-star hotel. I’d prefer a hanger steak thrown on the grill than filet mignon seared in stainless steel.”

She eyed me. “If you sear my steak in a stainless steel pan, I’m walking out.”

Humored, I reached for her and tickled her side, and Rayna let out a peak of laughter while batting my hands away. “So... kiss it in the pan an’ give it to you?”

“If you give me a blue steak, I’ll get my shotgun.” Rayna giggled, then rested her cheek on my chest and traced patterns on my belly. “But I do get what you mean. I’d rather go swimming in a creek than at the pool in the gym or go apple picking in an orchard than buy ‘em in a store. Do you know,

my grandmother handed me a cast iron skillet that her grandmother used.”

“No, but that is interesting. Do you cook with it or use it to bash a bad boyfriend’s head in?”

“Both,” she smiled.

“Remind me not to get on your bad side,” I replied.

“Aside from a certain person who shall not be named here, has anyone truly gotten on your bad side?” she asked.

“Well, there was Marcus Billings from seventh grade who had made it his mission to make fun of my stuttering back then when I stood at the front of the class and said I wanted to be a rancher,” I replied. “Last time I checked, he is on his third wife right now, one of those society blonde women torn from a magazine and has boobs straight from a plastic surgeon’s table. I sent him a prime rib on Christmas. I doubt she knows how to cook it.”

“You had a stutter?”

“Oh yes, I had the works. Buck teeth, coke bottle glasses, and skinny like a reed. Ol’ man Jebson use to call me a pipe cleaner with doe eyes,” I peeked at her. “You think I was always this hot?”

“And modest, too,” Rayna rolled her eyes. “So *very* humble and meek.”

“And don’t you forget it,” I replied.

“It’s what I’m trying to middle the line with by showing my girls some of the simplest things in life while they know they can have the best,” I added while tangling my fingers into her hair. “And it is why I am sure I will be convicted of murder if West goes after my girls.”

“He would be foolish to act on it now that I am sure he knows we have him in our sights for his girlfriend trying to kill me,” Rayna replied. “He must be smarter than that. If anything happens to your kids, he will be the first person the cops will suspect.”

“He’s got the resources to make this happen like he was never involved,” I grunted. “We still have no idea who he hired to break in and poison my calves.”

“I—” Rayna started before she gasped. “Look there, is that a—”

Since my eyes were on the sky, I saw it too. “A shooting star, yes, sweetheart, it surely is. Make a wish.”

She closed her eyes, smiled before her ashes fluttered, and whispered, “I hope it comes through.”

I craned. “You gon’ tell me what you wished for?”

Rayna narrowed her eyes. “You know that is not how it works.”

“Hey, I tried.” I laughed, then dipped my head and captured her mouth in a light, playful kiss...right before I dug my fingers into her side and tickled her again.

\* \* \*

Three days passed, three days of peace, that grew suspicious as the clock ticked away. I’d expected something to come from West—but nothing. It made me uneasy, but I would not roll up on his ranch and demand he tell me what he was planning. How much sense did that produce?

I was ticking off our progress with Twisting Twines’ ranch. We had harvested fifteen thousand of their forty and were aiming to get the next fifteen in the four days or so when Ewan called.

“Hell—”

“May Day,” Ewan said. “We have a situation on our hands that will be a major problem if we don’t get ahead of it right now!”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

I heard some clicking in the background, “Are you on your laptop?”

“Yes?”

“Open the link I just sent you,” Ewan replied as a message popped up on my laptop, and I clicked it.

The browser opened to a seven-minute clip of Brandon West on his ranch, giving a reported tour of his farm and acting all pleasant and cordial, talking about his business, his new initiative of making a training course for kids to learn how to ride and parenting with the local 4-H clubs.

“And this is free, yes?”

Brandon flashed his Colgate smile that was sure to fool some people, but sure as shootin’ was not going to fool me. “Completely free. See, my family gained wealth over the years, and my philosophy is to give back to the community as best as possible. What is better than fostering education and skills in the next generation?”

“And we applaud you for it.” The lady smiled while looking at the horse West was patting and lifting her hand. “May I?”

“Sweetheart is as gentle as can be,” West replied, “Matter of fact, she is one of the older mares we used to train kids to ride. You can touch her to your heart’s content.”

“Thank you,” the reporter said while stroking the horse’s neck. “As generous as you are, not everyone seems as willing to see eye-to-eye with you. A nasty video leaked last night about you and a fellow ranch owner, and our studios had to reach out to you to see if it was true. I think we have a clip about it...”

My gut flipped over on itself while a square cut on the screen, and I saw a clip of me and Brandon talking, and I know this was the moment before he threw the first punch—but the video went on and showed me punching him.

My jaw dropped. “What the fuck?”

It continued to the point where I slammed my boot on West's chest and me telling him to get off my land. The video didn't have audio, so no one knew what was said, but I knew one thing, it was ugly.

The clip cut off, and the reporter asked West, "That other person was Mister John Maxwell, the owner of Rolling Ranch, is it not?"

"He is," West said.

"And what was the discussion about?" she asked.

"A casual business venture, but he was an intolerant brute and unable to have a decent conversation," West said, while my teeth were grinding so hard, I was surprised I was not swallowing enamel-coated dust. He gave a nonchalant shrug. "Guess not everyone is not as understanding and business minded as I am."

I watched the rest of the video just to make sure he had not uttered another libelous statement about me, then paused the video. Rage was simmering in the middle of my chest, and every nerve in my body was alive with fury.

"Sir?" Ewan asked. "Are you still here?"

"Oh, I'm here," I replied.

"What are we going to do about this?" Ewan asked. "From my end, I can get a gag order on the press and probably find \_\_\_"

"No, Ewan, don't worry about it. I'll take care of it," I told my worried PA. "Believe me, when this all ends, we'll see who is the brute here."

As soon as he hung up, I called my lawyer while accessing the video Ben had sent to me the very night after West had assaulted me. I don't know what media magic they had used to edit the video—I hadn't even seen anyone with a camera—to make me look like a barbarian. Still, this time, everyone was going to know the truth.

“Arthur,” I said as soon as my lawyer answered the phone. “I don’t know if you’ve seen the local news, but I have a case of libel to give you.”

I told him the fact, sent him the link Ewan had sent me, and then I sent the true recording to him and said, “I don’t know what you will do with all this but make sure it’s enough to get him galloping. If you can sue the smirk off his smug face, I’ll take that too.”

“Don’t worry, John,” Arthur replied. “I have enough to set the suit in order. It will slap his table by tomorrow morning, and the clip will be at every media house by tomorrow night. He’ll be ordered to formally apologize if he doesn’t want half of his assets liquidated and donated to every charity in the state, and believe me, with the dough he’s got, it will be more than enough to stretch.”

“Thank you, Arthur,” I replied.

Hanging up, I rubbed my face. Rayna was right; something had been amiss, but who had realized we had been filmed?

“Boss?” Micah knocked on the door.

“Yes?” I asked.

“So, I went back to the bakery and got the video feed from the day Miss Rayna went to the bakery...” He lifted a flash drive and twiddled it between his fingers. “And it’s got audio.”

“Well, this day is getting better and better,” I said, reaching for the drive while spinning the laptop and playing the clip Ewan had sent me. “Listen to what West’s cheap shot this time.”

As Micah watched, I picked up my phone and texted Rayna, telling her about West, and sent her the clip as well, but then added, *Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it handled.*

Micah’s low whistle returned my attention as he shook his head. “What a low-down sonofabitch.”

“That he is,” I replied. “But that fucker doesn’t know how to play poker because he lost his royal flush.”



“The cameras we’ve got,” Micah gave a slow grin.

“The cameras we’ve got,” I replied with a nod.

With a laugh, Micah stood and went to the door, only to pause with his hand on the knob and pivot back to me. “Sir, this Miss Everett, she’s more than Sammie’s teacher, isn’t she... well to you?”

“It’s...a long story, but yes,” I replied. “Keep it hush-hush, okay?”

“Bossman, I’m pretty sure everyone knows about it *except* the kids,” he replied but still saluted me. “You two aren’t all that *suave* if you get my drift, but you’ve got my word.”

I groaned. “Go look about some bulls or something.”

“Yessir.”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

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## Rayna

The night of the daddy-daughter dance was surreal. We'd converted the gym into a fairytale, a countryfied spin on Cinderella, had grown up a cowgirl and wore leather boots instead of glass slippers.

There were hay bales in the corners, with pumpkins propped on them, orange and gold streamers with balloons, a long buffet table with food piled on the tables, and smaller round tables in muted beige tablecloths behind them.

The music was a mix of upbeat pop songs and snaggy country hits. As far as the night went, it was a success. About thirty-something daddy and daughter-pairs had shown up for the night, but I still hadn't seen John and Sam yet.

"Rayna," Jessica said while passing with a jug of lemonade. "Can you go back to the kitchens and get the other jug, please?"

"Sure," I replied while heading to the cafeteria kitchen and bypassed the cooks laying out sandwiches and fried chicken on serving trays while I got the large glass jug.

I backed out of the swinging door to the gym and almost ran into John. He grabbed me right before I tripped over my feet and held me upright. "Whoa there."

His warm drawl made me shiver. "Oh, thank you."

As I stepped back, he reached down and lifted Harper into his arms. Samantha was standing close to him, and all three matched. John wore dark jeans and a blue and brown plaid shirt, Sam wore a large patchwork brown and blue shirtdress and leggings, and Harper wore a flouncy, princessy, blue tulle dress and brown leggings.

"You three look like you stepped off a postcard." I smiled while setting the jug on the table. "I'm glad you're here."

“You look so pretty, Miss Rayna.” Harper giggled.

“I think you’re lookin’ in the mirror, sweetie, because I can’t hold a shine to you,” I replied as John set her down on her feet.

“You girls go get somethin’ to drink.” He nodded to the table and dropped his voice while they were off. “She’s right, though. You do look nice. Is there a boy around you’re planning to go do-si-do with?”

“Nope,” I replied, slanting him an eye. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Oh, I see,” he teased. “You’re planning on knockin’ boots instead.”

I gave him the most innocent look I could conjure. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You’ll see what I mean later tonight,” he said, gaze smoldering. “Don’t go to bed early.”

With that tantalizing whisper, he went to join his girls, and while they enjoyed the night, I kept an eye on them. Less than an hour in, the phone in my pocket vibrated. I plucked it out discreetly while smiling at John and Samantha line-dancing to a Dolly Parton song.

The text was anonymous.

*Watch your back.*

My blood frosted to ice in my veins.

I didn’t know exactly who it had come from, but it didn’t take a massive stretch of the imagination to suspect the sender. The biggest mystery was, how did West know my phone number? Swiftly, I screenshotted it just in case, then shoved the phone back into my pocket. I pretended nothing had happened.

This night was about happiness and a getaway from all the trouble that had begun to be nightmarish. I shook the uneasiness off and decided to join the party, putting up fake

resistance when John pulled me into the newest line dance. It was pretty risky, but I decided to take it. There was no judgment, no perfect steps, just a community of friends, music, and laughter.

\* \* \*

When I stepped out of the gymnasium to get some fresh air a few hours later and under the bleachers, I breathed in the cold air with relish and relief. Gazing up at the cloudless sky, filled with stars, I wrapped my arms around my middle.

I'd come to this town to have a new start, and the one night I'd shared with the handsome stranger had been the icing on the cupcake. I'd not expected to find companionship, a bedmate, or love...but fate had tipped me right into that pool.

I had never expected John Maxwell.

“Star gazing, sweetheart?”

I looked over my shoulder. “Something like that, yes.”

“What’s on your mind?” He came closer.

Turning my gaze back to the stars, I said, “That I’d never expected to meet you again, much less slowly but surely fall in love with you...” I didn’t need to hear his swift breath intake or see his mouth drop. “...and while I know this friends-with-benefits thing was only that, some additional fun while I helped Samantha, that ship sailed.

“I know you were not looking for anything serious or more than what it was, but—” I gave a soft shrug and a wry smile. “—blame it on my silly heart. I don’t expect you to return my *oh—*”

John’s hand fixed around my arm, and he pulled me into his arms before dropping his mouth to mine with a groan. Scorching hot fire blazed through my body the moment our lips connected. I loved feeling the rasp of the five o’clock shadow against my cheek, and roughness of his fingers, the

heat from his skin, and the spicy scent of his cologne. Each sensation made my already sensitive nerves raw, making his kiss much sweeter.

He maneuvered me to a wall and held me there, his mouth moving over mine so expertly. My hands slid up his arms to hold onto his shoulders while his groin pressed into my belly—he was hard.

Heat rushed between my legs at the thought of his rough, strong hands on my bare skin, his lips sucking marks in secret places, his fingers teasing me, taunting me. I was fucking helpless.

“I missed you,” he growled, inching into the vee of my jean-clad legs.

My head felt full of air. “I missed you too.”

John’s laugh was deep and husky. “That’s not what I meant, but—” his hand slipped between my legs and cupped my pussy. “—let’s go with that.”

The heel of his hand pressed on my clit, and he pushed hard, making pleasure zing up my spine. “You’ve got no idea how much I want to fuck you,” his tone was dark and liquid desire. “I’d bet if I slid my hand into your panties right now, I’d find your delicious pussy soaking wet for me.”

“Keep doing that,” I gasped. “And I’d be Niagara Falls.”

“You want me to tongue-fuck you, Ray? Want to feel my slick tongue on your clit?” He whisper-growled in my ear. “Slide my tongue on your slippery folds, tongue-fuck you, suck on your clit...make you come in my mouth?”

I was trembling by that point and could barely see straight. “I want to feel you so bad.”

“Aww, you do?” His nose traced over my jaw and ear before his mouth sealed over the lobe, sucking, and licking, sending another hot wave of fire through my system. Lost in a daze of bliss, I was just a whisper away from coming like a

nuclear explosion with this big, gorgeous man who had me under control.

His touch was working me into the stratosphere.

“Come for me, like a good girl.”

The wickedness of his touch and husky command threw me over the edge into bliss. I threw my head back and cried out with pleasure coursing through my veins, but his constant caresses kept me soaring. Each time I thought it was over, he unleashed another gust of pleasure that kept me floating.

His hands moved from my pussy to hold my sides while his nose ran over my cheek. “You’re stunning when you come.”

John’s arms slid around me when my forehead dropped to his shoulder. This wasn’t my life, was it? I was sure he was dreaming, walking on water somehow. I knew I would step off the dock and plummet to the water—who knew how deep it was—but as soon as he grazed my lips with his, I abandoned all worry.

His kiss was tender, closed mouth, and when the kiss ended without wild tongue-tangling, I felt a new warmth.

“Have you ever danced under a moonless night?” he asked, and I burrowed closer to his heat, though I was far from cold.

“No,” I replied, “I haven’t had a lot of romantic moments lately.”

“Hm,” John turned us around, and we swayed, my arms wrapped around his neck while his hold tightened on my hips. “How do you find this one?”

“Quite...magical,” I replied, smiling.

His smile was warm. “You’re not alone, you know. About your feelings. I love you, too, something I never thought I’d feel again after Emily passed.”

Something stopped in my chest, possibly my heart. He had not said he was *in love* with me, but love still meant something. I kissed his cheek. “How did that thing with West go?”

“The news people won’t show the truth, and he’s suddenly *overseas*,” John’s face twisted in disgust. “But he’ll get a nasty surprise when my lawyer gets to him.”

“He ran away?”

“Like a dog with his mangy tail between his legs, but we’ll get him eventually,” John replied, pulling away to pluck his vibrating phone out of his pocket. “Ben...what? Who do you say is at my ranch?”

The air had suddenly changed, and a cold, foreboding chill shimmered over my skin. Something was wrong. I just didn’t know what yet. Anger and frustration rippled off him in tangible pulses.

“*What?*” John roared. “I’m coming right now.”

A tremble ran through me, making my skin flush with goosebumps, but not the good kind. I knew I shouldn’t leave with him, but I knew enough people were in the auditorium to look over the girls. “What happened?”

He peeled the phone from his ear. His lips curled in a snarl. “Health inspectors and people from the Animal Health Commission have stormed my ranch using a *tip* from a secret informer about unethical practices and illegal drugs. They’ve condemned my ranch closed *indefinitely*.”



# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## John

I was living a nightmare.

Everything was coming out of the woodwork now; the people from the government agency were crawling over my ranch like fire ants, looking for a dead body to drag away, even though they had not found a shred of evidence their mysterious tipper had told them about. Even worse, word had gotten out to the press, and they had resurfaced that damned clip about me fighting West.

“The stocks are falling like flies,” Ewan mourned over the phone. “A few are still holding stalwart, but if we keep getting deserted because of these lies, it will hit us hard.”

The headache I had, thrumming in the back of my head, bloomed into a full migraine and set my temples on fire. “So, we’re losing customers and investors.”

“Sadly, sir,” Ewan said, “Yes.”

I rubbed my stinging eyes, “Please call me back when you’ve got better news. I have a lawyer to call.”

When the call ended, I dialed Arthur and reined in the caustic mix of fury and frustration in my chest. Just as he answered, I couldn’t get a word out before he said, “I know what you’re calling about, John, and believe me, it gets my goat too. No media house is willing to show the real tape, and I believe West might have paid them off by using his father’s influence to stop it. You know the West’s family has got shares in media.”

The pen in my hand snapped in half. “I’ll kill him.”

“As your lawyer, I officially did *not* hear that,” Arthur grumbled. “Believe me, I’ll get the truth out there, no matter how many gag orders and false accusations West lobbies at you.”

“The shares are dropping too, and I—” The phone beeped with an incoming call, and I saw Hunter’s name flash on the screen. I grimaced. “—Arthur, I’ve got to call you back. A call’s coming in, and I’ve gotta get it.”

“Sure,” he replied.

“Mister Portman,” I greeted. “I have expected your call for a long time but do not fear it. Before you say anything, please let me assure you everything you hear being banded around the news is pure bullshit. Pardon my French.”

“...Well, that’s reassuring to hear,” Hunter replied gruffly. “But I’m simply calling to ask if you’ll have my order in time.”

“When I can get these narcos off my property, I will have it done. It was almost finished before they came, and I project that I’ll have that shipment for you in days when they leave.”

“Hm,” he replied. “I’ve heard whispers about you and West. Is he trouble for you?”

“More like a thorn in my side,” I replied. “It’s not proven, but I am sure he hired someone to sabotage my calves, killed them with poison, staged a fight to manipulate to make me look like a bastard, and had his woman try to kill *mine*.”

It was the possessiveness that the last word came out in that jolted something inside me. Was Rayna mine? Did I think of her that way? I was truthful when I said I loved her.

“Jesus Christ, Maxwell,” Hunter said. “I thought the man was a petty pissant but not *this*.”

“He’s been a pissant for a long time,” I replied. “At any chance he got, he tried to undermine me, but he’s not gotten the best of me, and so help me God, he will never. I just need to find a way to see through his games.”

“You know, I have the name of a good security company you could hire if you feel like something is about to shift sideways,” Hunter replied. “The owner is a good friend of mine from our military days.”

I grabbed a pen. “Please,” and added, scribbling the name and number. “Thank you.”

“No problem, just tell Clarke that Hunter sent you, and he’ll bump you right up the list,” he replied.

“If I have to, sure,” I replied, rubbing my forehead. “If you would excuse me, Portman, I have to go and take care of something.”

“No problem,” he replied.

I hung up, stood, strode to inspectors’ vans, and banged on the door. When no one came, I strode inside the main stable. Ben, Micah, and Jake oversaw the government peons as they dug up my place like scumbag rats. I had had enough.

“Have any of you found this so-called evidence?” I roared, jerking the men bagging baggies of feed and chemicals for testing. “If you have not, you need to leave and get this goddamned shutdown over with! Enough is enough.”

“Sir—”

“Have you found anything?”

“Well...no, but—”

“Then get out,” I ordered. “All this is a diversion and smokescreen from one petty asshole who cannot bear to see an *imbecile* doing better than him. Nothing is illegal here; if you have not found it in three days, you will not find it in three more. So again, get out. Be free to take whatever samples you have and go back to your labs, but for now, I have a business to run, and you are all hampering it.”

The five men looked between each other before one of them, the head bulldog gave the orders to leave, and I stepped aside as they filed out.

I ground my teeth. “Should have done that two days ago.”

“I thought so myself,” Ben said while approaching me. “Those men irked the living daylights out of me.”

Turning to him, I said, “Now that’s done, but with them gone, we need to pick up the pieces and get ready for the fair.”

“We’re still going to that?” Ben asked, his brows shooting up. “With all the bad press and all?”

“I’m not going to make West’s propaganda scare me,” I replied. “One pretty boy with a load of cash will not scare me. I’ve been through things that would send West shivering under his bed. So no, he is not going to get me rattled.”

“...That’s good to hear,” Rayna said from behind us.

I turned to see her and Sam and realized they had just come from another outing. Sam was aware of West, so I didn’t need to try to cover my words. “And I mean it, too. Hey Sammie, did you enjoy today?”

“Uh-huh,” she replied, nodding.

“Excuse me, guys. Ben, you’re in charge, so do what you see needs to be done,” I said while leaving the room.

I knew Sam was approaching that independence age, but I hauled her into my arms anyway.

“Daddd!” she complained.

“Deal with it, kiddo. You’ve got me for a long while,” I said as we walked to the house. “From the corner of my eyes, I spotted Rayna’s sweet smile, and even with all the chaos around me, I felt some comfort. “Now, how about dinner?”

“I ate a lot of pretzels at the mall,” Sam replied. “I’m full, plus I need to finish some homework.”

“Junk food, missy?” I pretended to glare while setting her down.

She rolled her eyes. “We eat burgers here a lot. I don’t see the difference.”

“Hey, check that attitude, missy,” I called while she went up the stairs, but she turned and came to wrap her arms around my middle in a quick hug before darting off again.

I turned to Rayna. “Well, that’s surprising.”

“She’s a kid,” Rayna replied. “They’ll surprise you.”

I grunted. “Do you want a drink? I do.”

“It’s...” she checked her watch. “...two in the afternoon.”

“It’s five somewhere,” I replied, heading up.

\* \* \*

Striding to my cabinet, I fixed us two glasses of scotch and handed her one. “In the newest addition to the troubles West had levied on me, my ranch has been out of production for three days, the rumors are making my investors fly away like bees from vinegar, my stocks are dropping, and we still have no leads on who killed my calves.”

Her face twisted. “That’s horrible. He seems bent on undermining you in every way he can.”

“He is,” I took a sip. “But he’s a weak, petty fool who thinks I’ll tuck my tail between my legs and run. I’m not the one raised on filet mignon and caviar with servants bowing down to me. He’s got all bark and no bite.”

Rayna set her cup aside, still half full, and came around to me as I leaned on my desk. She clutched my shirt and tugged a little. “I’m sorry.”

I sat my cup to the side. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about...” Tilting my head to the right, I grasped her chin. “But you can give me something to not think about it...”

Sliding my hand behind her neck, I dipped my head and pressed my lips to hers. She tasted like cherry lip gloss and warm, burning whiskey on her tongue. It was like setting fire to a powder keg. Taking her mouth in a penetrating kiss, I stabbed my tongue between her lips the way I wanted my cock to hammer between her legs.

She took the rough kiss and matched it, gripping me tighter and pressing her breasts on my chest. Without warning, I grasped her hips, spun us around, and sat her on the table, breaking away quickly only to spin the lock on my door and then went back to her.

“I’m going to fuck you,” I said brashly.

Rayna smiled, dropped her head back, and gripped the table. “Please.”

Slipping between her legs, I slid my hands under her blouse and pulled it over her head, exposing those delicious tits. Finally, finally...her nipples were mine. I undid her bra, cupped her left breast, and sucked that nipple hard while my fingers traveled over her stomach’s silky curve and undid her pants. I slipped my hand past her panties and found her smooth, silky pussy dripping wet for me.

“You’ve been waiting for this, haven’t you, sweetheart...” I growled, dipping one finger and then another into her tight passage.

“I meant it when I said I missed you,” she groaned, arching back, giving me better access to her tits as I sucked harder, grazing her clit with my thumb. “*All of you.*”

I pulled my hands out and ripped her jeans and panties away. She looked so innocent, her brown hair splayed out on the table, lying bare, waiting for me to take her. If she felt a fraction of my lust for her, this would be a hard, rough ride.

Unwilling to wait, I spread her legs open wide and looked down at the site of her pretty little pussy, dripping for me. Any other time, I would have buried my face in her pussy, but now, I ached to get my cock inside her.

Pulling my belt, I opened a drawer and took out a condom. Her brows shot up. “Prepared, aren’t you?”

“I’m a boy scout,” I replied, ripping it with my teeth as Rayna cupped her breast and fingered her nipple with a sigh. The sound went to my cock, and I was ready to fuck her.

With one hand under her thigh and the other on her knee, I spread her legs wider and pulled her close, lining her up against me.

“Please, hurry,” she whimpered.

Holding my thick, throbbing cock, I guided it into her slick pussy an inch, just enough for her to know what was coming. Then—with one hard thrust, I was inside her tight fucking hole. She gripped me like a chokehold, taking every inch as I pushed deeper into her tight body, driving into her with borderline madness.

With one hand behind her for a brace, she gripped the back of my neck, and her hips soon matched my rhythm, her tits bouncing with every hard thrust. I kept my hands around her legs, my grip hard and bruising as I pumped faster, fucking her deep and hard. Our bodies, slick with sweat, slapped against each other, and the table creaked and rocked beneath us as we went at it like a train off its rails, rushing for a cliffside.

This was real.

This was primal.

This was a pure need and untamable lust.

Red-hot lust doused me in flames, and I grunted as I pumped in and out of her. It was rough and blistering, skin pounding on the skin, while the sounds and smell of sex filled the room. Rayna was undone, her mouth open, but no screams came out; she was panting, rolling her hips, taking every thrust I gave her.

She needed me as much as I needed her. Her body was throbbing and tightened around my thickening cock while my blood heated to a boil, and fire raced up my spine. All this was reckless, wild, untamed as I piledrive her body harder and harder. Looking down, I watched as my massive cock plunged into her body.

“Come for me, Ray.” I reached down and stroked her slippery clit as I thrust deep inside. “Come for me. Show me your bliss.”



My balls tightened, her body clamped around me, and I saw a flaming nebula go off behind my eyes. I let go of the last ounce of control and roared, pumping every drop of cum I had into her.

I feel frozen, lingering between heaven and earth, until I felt her hand stroking through my wet hair. Instinctively, I turned my head to meet her lips, kissing her tenderly, pulling away to brush my cheek against her as she buried her head into my shoulder.

I kissed the tender skin beside her ear and whispered, “C’mon, let’s get cleaned up.”

Fifteen minutes later, after quick showers—separately because I knew I’d succumb to temptation if we washed up together—we were back in my office. Platters of food were laid out; roasted fish, slivers of beef, loaded baked potatoes—with more butter than my arteries would like—and fresh salad.

“Samantha is coming along,” Rayna said, her damp hair drying by the open window as she came to the table. “She’s starting to embrace both parts of herself.”

“That’s good news,” I replied.

“Don’t expect her to be prom queen anytime soon, but she’s seeing that being girly is not that bad.”

Her phone lit up, and she dropped her fork to reach for it, then swiped whatever was open. Her brows shot up. “Oh wow. John, where is your TV? You might want to see this.”

“Downstairs,” he said. “Why?”

“Let’s go.” She grinned mischievously.

After covering our food, we left the room below, and I switched on the TV. The news channel I had left it on a few days ago popped up, and the anchor was looking wry.

“...In other news, the report we had received about a tussle between rival ranch owners and a clip we had aired about a fight between Mr. West and Mr. Maxwell has gone deeper than we had imagined. We have just received an unaltered

recording from the Maxwell Estate, which is the true story of the confrontation between Mister Brandon West and Mister Maxwell.”

We stood there as the full recording of West punching me first was shown, and then the rest of the fracas until West and his entourage packed up and left. I turned to Rayna and found her smiling. Reaching out, I tugged her into a one-armed hug. “You had something to do with this?”

“That anchor? She’s the mom of one of my students,” she replied. “I told her what happened and asked her to contact your lawyer. I guess she’s a real journalist.”

Laughing, I said, “Remind me to thank you later, too.”

She hugged me tight and smiled, her eyes brimming with desire. “I’m looking forward to that.”

Tugging her in, I kissed her softly, ready to go back upstairs and thank her again...until I heard, “...Dad?”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

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## Rayna

O h no.

I lurched away from John, but he held onto me, keeping me right by his side, and from the corner of my eyes, I saw John's jaw flex and firm up. He turned with me and only dropped his arm when Samantha took another step, her gaze flittering between the two of us.

"Dad? What's going on?"

He smiled thinly. "Sam, I suppose you saw me kissing Miss Everett, did you?"

"Um, yeah," she replied. "But why? Well, I know why, she's pretty and all, but I don't understand..."

"I'll explain," John said. "But not here. Let's go to the kitchen."

My feet felt like lead when I followed them to the kitchen and stood aside as John took out some drinks for us. I took my glass and fell quiet, unsure what to do now. Our little secret had been busted wide open, and I didn't want to make another wrong move.

"Sammie, Miss Rayna and I met before I saw her at your school," John started, and I tensed with apprehension at where he was going. His gaze flickered up to give me a reassuring look before he continued. "And we became friends, but things changed when she decided to help you. Yes, she's pretty, but she's smart and kind too. I like that."

"...But what about Mom?" Samantha asked.

I felt a bit of chill settle into the lowest parts of my stomach. A part of me wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer.

"Kiddo, I don't think Mom would hate that I took an interest in someone else," John said kindly. "You like Miss Rayna, don't you?"

“Well, yeah,” Samantha replied. “But it’s Miss Everett. Won’t it be...strange if everyone knows about it? Even at my school? They’ll tease me *forever*.”

“Which is why no one needs to know yet,” John replied gently. “It’s very new, Sammie. With grownups, friendships like this, relationships like this, it’s much more delicate for you and your friends at school to understand, Sam. Sometimes they don’t work out...”

My head jerked back like I had whiplash.

“...which is why we’re still working things out,” John replied.

“Soooo?” Sam drew the word out and then wrinkled her nose. “The two of you aren’t like getting married?”

A strangled sound came from John’s throat—it sounded mocking and a bit disparaging. As if what Sam said was not only out of the question but an impossibility. “No, Sam, we’re not getting married.”

Maybe I was reading into this more than I should have, but even knowing that did not stop the blows from coming.

“She’s your girlfriend, then?”

“Yes, Sam, she is,” John replied.

Something...something didn’t feel right.

I felt like the ground beneath my feet had shifted, and the rush of emotions consuming me was too strong to ignore. John’s seemingly blasé comments about our relationship dug deep inside me and shredded our blossomed connection to shreds. I could understand his need to keep things G-rated for Sam, but I felt...cut to the core...hurt...rejected.

The high I had felt a moment ago had withered into nothing, and I felt the inescapable need to be somewhere else.

He’d said he loved me, but now, it felt like something he’d said at the moment, just to match my words.

“Oh, is that true, Miss Everett?” Samantha blinked at me.

I kept a calm face and even managed to give her a smile. “It’s right.”

The doubt as to whether she would accept us or not hovered in the air. I knew it would be hard for many children to accept a strange woman instead of their birth mother, but there could be a chance with how much time had passed between Sam’s early years and her mother’s death.

Once again, Sam looked between us, and just as I expected her to huff and declare she didn’t like it, Sam gave a simple one-shoulder shrug. “Okay. I’ll be doing my homework.”

John’s eyes flew to mine before he looked back to Sam. “Sure, kiddo.”

When she went off, drink in hand, I found it hard to look at John and used my phone as a smokescreen instead. “I think I need to go home now.”

His left brow ticked up. “So suddenly?”

I tried to smile, but I felt hollow. “I’ve got to take care of some things from the school.”

John’s eyes clouded over, but he nodded reluctantly. “I’ll see you at the fair?”

“Count on it,” I managed before darting up to get my things and heading out.

On the drive back, I forced the riot of emotions deep down until I could barely feel them. On the outskirts of the town, I could make out the vicinity of the fairgrounds heading to the main road. The mountains stood sentinel in the distance against the darkening blue sky that would soon turn dark and star-studded.

When I got to my door, I shut the car off and—could not get out.

The way John acted a while ago made me feel like I wasn’t even his girlfriend, more like a plaything, which amplified the emptiness inside me. Indecision and emotion overwhelmed

me, and while I wondered if I was overthinking, that didn't stop me from feeling as if I were suffocating.

The warmth that once spread through me at the memory of John's touch disappeared again, and I feared nothing would ever bring me the same kind of warmth his affection gave me.

In fact, this time might be the one time I truly had my heart broken by a fling.

\* \* \*

Noise.

The first thing that swept over me was the noise and the smell of caramel popcorn. Large white tents and booths were up, and the aromas of burned sugar, cinnamon, and coffee were thick in the air as I passed a local coffee booth and, beyond that, rye and hops from a beer one. I passed tables of desserts, local honey, handmade toys, and small supplies for animals.

I stopped to watch a little girl hang onto her dad's leg while he tossed rings over bottles for a prize and soon handed the child a large fluffy panda. I wandered through the fair, spotting a huge banner with West's logo and a large mechanical bull set up for riders.

Stopping, I saw Miss Hernandez's thick ponytail disappear around a corner. Ducking away so she didn't see me, I hurried off to John's corner but slowed my gait as I neared.

I'd done a lot of soul-searching last night. In the middle of feeling hurt, I forced myself to listen to a counseling session I would have given to any of the kids going through an existential crisis and realized that it was hasty—and foolish—of me to jump to conclusions.

*If we get a minute, I may be able to tell him how I felt about last evening and how it hurt me. Maybe, he could explain to me what he felt too.*

John's booth was more of an enclosure with pygmy horses for kid's rides, horseshoe ring tosses, and samples of their roasted beef for snacks while John and a few of his men talked about his business. I caught him while he was handing out a pamphlet.

"Can we talk for a moment?" I asked quietly.

His eyes were guarded, but John nodded. He looked rough around the edges, still handsome but rough; his jaw sported a three-day scruff, there were dark circles under his eyes, and his hair was unkempt as if he had raked his hand through it a million times, but he was still the most attractive man around.

"This way," he motioned with his chin. "We can talk in private over there."

Under the spreading oak he led us to, I felt the calming breeze fluttering through the leaves, dancing over my skin. John stepped closer and lifted his hand to touch me but dropped it at the last moment. "Are you okay?"

"No," I replied honestly. "I'm not. That day...when we spoke to Samantha, it seemed like you...you were talking about our relationship as if it were nothing. Is it? Tell me now so I can stop myself from—" From what *exactly*? I'd already told the man I was in love with him...—"—thinking you feel the same about me."

"*What?*" John's eyes popped. "I never want you to feel that way. I thought I was only making it simpler for Sam. She's been through so much lately, and I...you have to understand, I lost the love of my life the day after Harper was born. I became a dad and a widower at twenty-four with a family I had to take care of while nursing a shattered heart and in the middle of getting a company off the ground. I was numb for a while—unable to believe I would find another to care for and protect."

He stepped closer and placed both hands on my arms. "But I can't deny that a pang of guilt doesn't, that I'm somehow being unfaithful to Emily, does stop me for a time or two, but



the truth is, for the first time since I buried my wife, I want...I want to try with you, but I'm too chicken shit to say the words. Why? Because I know things can be ripped away in a blink of an eye, and that scares the shit out of me. I don't think I can handle another hit to the heart like that. You deserve better."

My heart swelled at the honesty in his words. "I understand, but are you saying..."

"Give me a little time," he swirled his thumbs over my skin. "But the last thing I want to do is make you think what we have isn't important or that I don't cherish it because I do."

With a squeeze, his hand slipped down and laced his fingers through mine. It comforted me even though a kernel of doubt still rested in my chest.

"C'mon," John replied, his eyes clearing up. "Let's enjoy the festival."

I slid my arms around his middle and rested my temple on his chest. Maybe I had overreacted; perhaps something could come from this.

"Trust me," John replied.

"Okay..." I nodded.

\* \* \*

Arriving home at about ten that night, I only thought about a warm shower and bed. I was past the point of being tired. I closed the door behind me, dropped my keys on the table... then heard a gun click.

Frozen where I stood, I watched someone flicker on a light, and West emerged from the gloom holding a silver gun in one hand. My eyes flickered from the gleaming gun to his smug smirk and haughty eyes.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Sit down. We have a lot to talk about," he said, gesturing with the gun to my couch.

As if I were a marionette and he was pulling my strings, I took three jerky steps to the couch and sat. My hand clenched on my thighs; the urge to form a fist and slug him tingled through my veins.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked. “And how did you get into my house?”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to be making demands, are you?” he asked. “Sit and open that, then press play.”

I looked where he was gesturing and saw a tablet. Taking it, I pressed the power button, and it opened to a media player. Pressing play, I watched...myself. It was John and me under the bleachers from that night, and my face flamed at seeing his hand on my crotch, pleasuring me. A dozen questions blasted through my head simultaneously, but the only one I could say was. “Why did you record us?”

“To get the last nail in Maxwell’s coffin,” he sneered. “See. Hours ago, an associate of mine was at his ranch, injecting a certain cocktail into every bag of feed and trough of water, and got to his herd with poison darts. He’s done, and so are you.”

My heart skittered to a stop. “So, you did poison those calves?”

“Me, dear, no.” he snorted. “I would never do something so plebian. If anything, it was a trial run.”

My teeth ground as I looked back to the recording and saw that it had changed. Instead of me and John kissing—as I remembered it to be—the man was peeling my jeans off and unbuckling his belt.

My jaw dropped.

I sat there, frozen in ice, watching the two—who certainly were not John and I—have sex on the wall. The actors were clever, with the man hiding his face and the lady’s hair covering hers, but anyone would think it was me and John wrapped up in illicit sex.

“You...” I couldn’t find the words. “...fucking sonofabitch.”

“I’ve been called worse.” He shrugged.

I dropped the tablet like it was a hot iron. “That was not us.”

“It wasn’t?” he cocked a brow. “Sure does look like it to me...and everyone else will think so too when I decide to leak it.”

“Every...one?” I felt horror race down my gut and bile shoot up the back of my throat.

“Well, yes, the principal at your school will see it; the investors Maxwell managed to take from me will see it and drop him like the piece of shit he is,” West replied. “I imagine his dead wife will see it from beyond the grave too.”

“Now, hold on,” I spat. “That’s crossing the line.”

“Do I look like I care?” He rolled his eyes. “But you can stop it... by packing up, leaving town, and never contacting Maxwell again.”

I ground my teeth. “That doesn’t guarantee you won’t release any of the other copies you have stashed away.”

“No...” He grinned nastily. “It won’t. You’ll have to trust me. Won’t you?”

“I’d rather stick my head in the middle of a hungry lion’s mouth,” I said. “Than trust a big snake like you.”

“Well then,” he said, reaching for his phone and clicking a number. “Get the file and start to upload it. It’ll take two minutes...good.”

I didn’t know if the man was bluffing, but I couldn’t let him see my fear. Sharks like him could smell blood in the water. He casually took the tablet, punched in something, and then turned it to me to show a countdown clock.

“If you don’t agree to my terms, by the moment this clock hits zero, that file will be loaded on porn sites, Facebook,

YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and every social platform you can think of will have your disgusting tape on it. All you have to do is agree to my terms, and I won't leak it."

"That doesn't mean you'll never leak it," I said through grit teeth.

"Seventy-five seconds," he said, brushing off my concerns.

"How do you look yourself in the mirror?" I asked.

"Quite easily, with a cup of coffee in hand," he replied. "Fifty-three seconds."

"You're a bastard," I said while fear coiled an icy grip around my heart.

"Nothing I haven't heard before." He smirked. "Oh, look at that, twenty-seven."

"Shut it off," I said.

"No. Eighteen."

Fear nearly crumpled me in half. "Stop it."

"Agree to my terms, Nine..."

Panic erupted in my belly, sending my thoughts scattering to every corner of the room. When the clock hit three, I shouted, "Fine! *Fine!* I'll do it. Shut it *off!*"

He jabbed the clock and leaned into his phone, "You heard that...good?"

I sat, trembling while the sickening feeling that I just made a deal with the devil sunk into my veins. West stood as easy as he pleased, gathered his things, and headed to the door. I managed to get on my feet and followed him to the door.

"One more thing," I stopped him as he turned. I reared back and delivered a blistering punch into his jaw. West's head snapped to the side, and I hoped I'd broken something to mar his pretty face. "Get out of my sight."

He rolled his neck and thumbed a thin line of blood draining from his busted lip. "Why, you're as savage as

Maxwell is. Why had I expected any different?"

With that, he walked away, and I slammed the door behind him; my stomach upended, and my heart shattered. With my back on the door, I slowly sank to the floor and grabbed my face with both hands. I didn't know if West had surveillance on my house, but I scrambled up and grabbed my phone. If anything, this would be the last contact we had.

I called John, hunkering down and away from any windows.

The ringtone sounded like a death knell in my ears, and I prayed he would pick up. I had to tell him about what West had done. If only I'd been smart enough to record him; shit.

When John finally picked it up, there was wind in the background. "John, I need to tell you something important."

"Can you tell me later," he said. "I've got to get back to the ranch. There's a crisis there."

So, he knew, "It's—" I couldn't get a word out because of some sudden static. "—It's West, John. West set you up. He —" another screech. "—he told me he ruined you."

I didn't know if he heard me or not, but then, a rush of wind, John's yell, the screech of tires, and a thin thud. The phone had landed somewhere—then went silent.

"John? John! Are you there? Tell me!" but no word came, and fear paralyzed me again. Could I break my promise and see John and risk that nasty video getting out?

I slumped near the bottom of the couch and stared at my phone, crippled.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## John

I hated it when deer ran into the road.

It'd caused me to drop the phone and slam on the brakes just to stop a foot from the damned thing. Its huge eyes glinted amber in the headlights before it jumped away. Cursing under my breath, I got the truck going again and started off to the ranch, my foot heavy on the gas.

Micah had called me while I was packing up at the fair, telling me that someone had broken in again, but there was something to show for it this time. I'd told him to call the detective, then booked it out, leaving the rest of the cleanup to Ben and his guys.

"I wonder what he needed to show me..." I mumbled as I rounded a corner and got to the house. Throwing the car into park, I jumped out and headed to the principal barn.

I got there just as Detective Juliann was walking out, a grin on her face. "You're here. Good. Come inside. The intruder was sloppy this time."

"Sloppy, how?"

We walked in, and instantly, I was drawn to a cut-open gate and saw a strip of cloth hanging from it. "And there is blood, too," Detective Juliann nodded. "Micah here said he spotted movement on the camera and rushed to look when the intruder jumped and rushed to the backdoor. They cut themselves. Ripped their shirt on the way. Whoever it is would have a nasty cut and is most likely heading to the hospital. I've alerted all the hospitals to look out for any person with that cut and hold them."

"Damn," I said. "And you're sure that will help?"

"The wound was deep enough that we got blood and collagen from the dermis," she replied. "That's a deep cut, and

unless that person is a doctor, they will need medical attention at some point. We just need to wait them out.”

I turned. “And what were they after this time?”

“That,” she pointed to a bottle resting on a trough. “They didn’t get to open it yet. We dusted it for prints, but that came up empty. We’ll have to rely on blood and the cloth strip. It’ll get us somewhere, trust me.”

I let out a breath. “If you could tie it to West, I’d finally have the last nail in his coffin to stick it to him.”

“Let’s hope the trail leads there,” she said, sticking a hand in her pocket while turning to her tech guys. “Mech, are you done here?”

“Almost,” the man replied before turning back to his powders and vials. “Gimme five minutes.”

She checked her watch. “I need to go home too. My husband is forgiving, but I doubt he would like to miss another dinner.”

I frowned. “Dinner? It’s almost ten o’clock?”

“My husband is a pilot,” she replied. “His hours are very... erratic.”

“And little free time, I would imagine,” I replied. “But thank you for coming out here.”

“Thank me more when I nail this sonofabitch to the wall,” she said as her man picked up his case and nodded. “We’ll be going now. Take it easy, Maxwell.”

When she left, I turned to Micah and nodded. “Thanks for being on the ball, Micah.”

“Sure thing, bossman,” he replied.

Turning, I headed to the house, craving a long shower and my bed, but then, I remembered my phone and doubled back to the truck to get it. Sam’s and Harper’s doors were closed, and I headed to my room, resting the cell on a table and stripping as I went to the bathroom.



Under the warm flow, I tilted my head and let the cascade shower over me, reaching my neck and groaning at the tense muscles. God, I wished Rayna was here with me, where I could pin her to the wall and let her body relieve all this stress.

Sighing, I rubbed the stress away—tried anyway—but went to bed clad in my boxers. Exhausted, I reached for my phone to call Rayna but stopped. It was almost midnight—she would be asleep by now.

Settling it aside, I promised to call her the following day.

Moments later, I was dead to the world.

\* \* \*

I hardly had three seconds before a combined eight pounds of weight landed on me. As tired as I was, I grabbed Sam and Harper and launched into a tickle war until the two surrendered with giggles and laugh-snorts.

“Care to tell me why I was ambushed this morning?” I fake-glared at them. “And you two need to work on your sneak strategy. If you keep making obvious moves like this, you won’t survive a day in the wild.”

“Wild?” Harper’s eyes were wide. “What’s that?”

“He means outside in the forest, and we have to find our food ourselves,” Sam replied. “Like fishing with a stick and having a knife to clean it.”

“And one match to make the fire,” I warned.

Harper looked genuinely horrified. “But—but I don’t know how to fish.”

“Sam does,” I grinned evilly. “You’ll be fine.”

“But—but...” Harper looked between us. Her voice was quiet and worried. “...I want waffles.”

Laughing, I said, “You two go downstairs while I wash up, okay?”

“C’mon, pipsqueak,” Sam pinched Harper’s cheek. “Dad’s coming.”

“And no snacks,” I called as they left my room.

I ducked into my bathroom and washed up quickly. I twisted my head and decided to shave later on as the scruff was getting out of hand. “Oh, yeah, I need to call Rayna too.”

When I got to the kitchen, Sam hurriedly grabbed a napkin to wipe off the chocolate all around her mouth, but Harper was too slow. While she was busy chattering her sister’s ear off, I looked at Sam and pointed to Harper, indicating the evidence over her face.

I mouthed. “Busted.”

She laughed sheepishly and took the packet away while I got the waffle ingredients out. While I got breakfast together, I wondered what had happened last night and if Juliann was any closer to finding the culprit.

“Dad,” Sam asked. “Is Miss Rayna goin’ to come over today?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. Why?” I asked.

Samantha blushed. “I like talking to her, that’s all.”

“You said you want to know how to talk to a boy.” Harper blinked innocently. “You said you want to ask Tyler to get ice cream.”

“Oh my God,” Sam blurted, her face redder than a fire engine. “Narc much?”

I kept a smile on my face while I was secretly dying inside. “Sam, you’re not allowed to date until you’re eighteen.”

Her face screwed up. “It’s just ice cream. I’m not dating him. Ugh. You guys are gross.”

I got the waffles done and was finishing up the eggs when Ben came in and smiled. “Hey girls, y’all doing okay?”

“It’s waffle day,” Harper chirped.

“I see, I see,” Ben smiled. “John, I wanted to tell you that the Twisted Twines order is completed. We’ve got the liquid nitro packs all ready to go.”

My stomach swooped. “When I’m done, I’ll call Hunter. Thanks, Ben, and if I’m gone, look out for Detective Juliann, okay.”

“Sure,” Ben replied.

When I finished, we ate before I sent the girls off with Sarah and Ben. I called Hunter about his order before I returned to my room. When he told me to come over as soon as possible, I appraised my pilot of the trip, showered, and shaved before dressing.

Only when we were ready for takeoff did Rayna cross my mind, and I huffed under my breath. “I forgot again.”

Uneasy with how long I would have to wait, I shut the phone off and took out some files to look over in the meantime. I got lost in numbers, charts, and projections that the flight time between San Antonio and Austin disappeared in nothing flat.

Hunter met me at the airport, with his secure vehicle, to unload the canisters and invited me to join him in his car back to his estate.

“So, how are things at home?” Hunter replied, handing me a glass of champagne. “With the miscreant?”

“It’s still an uphill battle,” I replied before telling him about the latest break-in and the clues the detective had gathered. “If there is any luck, it’ll lead back to West to prove how much of a bastard he is. Anyway, enough about me. How are you faring?”

“Me?” Hunter asked. “I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes, and your fingers are twitching as if you’ve drunk a bathtub of coffee,” I replied. “What’s keeping you up?”

Hunter sagged and rubbed his forehead, “My wife. She had a son before she met me, and the little kid has got it hard. Cancer, you know. He had not been feeling well for the past few days, and we had to rush him to the hospital last night when he got a fever.”

“God,” I shook my head. “Seems like it’s trouble season for us.”

“Let’s hope not,” Hunter muttered. “I can’t stand to see Ava worry.”

I shook my head. “It’s not a good feeling, is it, not to be able to step in and take all the problems away. As much as we try, protecting them from everything is impossible, and the pain lingers. When my wife grew sick, I wanted to take her place or rip her illness away...but I couldn’t, and it ripped some of me away.”

“I’m taking it that she passed?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Eight years ago. But I have two daughters who keep a part of her alive for me.”

“I hope Liam pulls through this,” Hunter said.

“You love him.” I surmised.

“Him and his mother,” Hunter grunted. “We’re working on the paperwork for me to adopt him and get his bastard father to give up his rights.”

“Bastard, father?” I asked. “What’s the story there?”

“It’s a long one,” Hunter said, rubbing his face. “I’ll tell you sometime, but not today.”

Respecting his wishes, we talked business instead until we got to his home. He took me to his vast state-of-the-art cryogenics deep freezers, and I admired his setup. “I cannot dare put my hand into beef production,” I mentioned. “I’ll stick to my small ranch, thanks. You must have headaches every day.”

“That’s why he has an army of aids and assistants,” a warm female voice said from the doorway.

The look on Hunter’s face when he turned to his wife, reminded me of when I worried for Emily. The pure love and worry stamped on his face made me regret what happened between me and Rayna at the fair. I needed to go back and talk to her, explain my flimsy “explanation,” and own up to my bullshit.

I turned away as they spoke, but I heard her reassure him about her—their kid. “He’s going to be fine. It’s not a relapse.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Hunter sighed. “Are you all right, baby? Go get some rest.”

“Good idea,” she kissed his cheek. “See you later on.”

When she left, I took a last look. “Looks like you have everything handled. I should head out if you don’t mind?”

“Stay for dinner,” Hunter replied. “Please, it’s the least we can do.”

“Well, when you put it that way.” I laughed. “Lead on.”

As we got to his house, I excused myself, “I need to make a call.”

“Sure,” he replied, then headed in.

I stepped onto the long, wraparound porch and finally made the call to Rayna—but she didn’t answer. I tried again and again, but nothing. Maybe she was busy. Deciding to call later, I went to join Hunter.

\* \* \*

That night, after a warm shower in my hotel, I tried to call Rayna again, but it rang out to voicemail. After three more tries and nothing, I was getting worried. This didn’t feel right, and I wondered if I could get home by tonight to check on her.

“It’s already ten o’clock,” I sighed while checking the time. “Bennie is already asleep. I can bloody wait until tomorrow.”

Tossing in bed until well past three, I was thinking of Rayna and what we’d done together. Replaying our first meeting—her tired look at the coffee shop—all the way to her final look at me at the fair was etched in my memory forever; her confused expression was a stake in my heart.

Was I so hard-headed that I could not admit my true feelings?

It was a pitiful sleep, and when I woke, ready to head home, I was met with a storm warning and a tornado watch. Rian was splattering on the windows, and as much as I wanted to leave, I knew I could not. FLA would have grounded every flight by now.

The city would be shut down for the day and probably for the next few days. Damn it to hell. I wouldn’t be getting home. I grabbed my phone and called Ben before my service was cut off.

“Ben,” I said the moment the call connected. “Ben, is it raining there?”

“Like the devil,” he replied. “The storm came from our end, and it’s a bitch.”

“It’s getting here, too,” I replied. “But I need you to go and check on Rayna. My gut is telling me something is not all right.”

“I’d be happy to—” Instead of relieved, my stomach sunk to my feet, “—but the rain is coming, and you know the corner of the barn that keeps getting engulfed in water. No matter how many times we fix that place, that corner is always wet.”

I grimaced. I knew it well; sometimes, the water would creep up the wall and drench the last two stalls inside. That meant wet horses.

“When it rains, it pours,” I ground my teeth. “But when you get a chance, please check on Rayna.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised.

I wasn’t comforted. All I could do was sit out the day and watch the storm grow fiercer as the minutes passed. Even when I had my dinner, it tasted off because my spirit was unsettled. I could not stop worrying about Rayna, and the only thing I could do was go back to bed as the long storm rolled over us.

It didn’t get better the next day. The city was flooded, the roads damaged, and the flights still grounded. I didn’t sleep that night, my gut churning with worry, and even worse, Ben had not called me about finding Rayna, spotty cell service or not.

When I got to the airport, the third day to get the earliest flight out, Ben finally called me and his words made me grab the wall.

“She’s gone, boss,” he said. “Her house is empty, and her boss at the school said she took a leave of absence.”

“To go where?” I demanded.

“She wouldn’t say directly,” Ben replied. “She said Rayna mentioned something about home.”

Home. What had Rayna mentioned about home—*Fredericksburg*? If she had left to go home, the storm would have stopped her, and I wondered if I could catch her. I brought up the lists of airports that she could possibly be in.

“*Waco*.” The very place we had met. I needed to change plans immediately. Calling my pilot, I said, “Bennie, we have a change of plans. How quick can you get the manifesto changed to Waco?”

\* \* \*

It was mid-afternoon when we landed at Waco Airport, and I had no goddamn idea what I was doing; all I knew was that there was no way in hell I was going to let Rayna slip through my fingers.

The airport was as empty as I expected, but I had no idea where the gate to Fredericksburg would be. I stopped to ask an attendant, and he pointed me in the direction—that was directly where the coffee shop was.

Could it be....

I stepped inside, and my heart flew to the next side of my chest. Rayna was there, in the same seat I'd met her, swirling a coffee with little energy. Her shoulders were slumped. She looked defeated, drawn out, balancing on the edge.

Stepping closer, I asked. "Excuse me, ma'am. What's good here?"

Her head snapped up, and her mouth dropped. Her eyes were dulled and red with past shed tears. "J-John?"

I slid into the other seat. "I'm sorry."

She blinked. "For what?"

"For not telling you I'm in love with you, too," I said plainly. "But why did you run?"

"West—"

"That motherfucker is behind this?" I snapped. "I need to get rid of him."

Rayna reached out and rested a hand on mine. "Let me tell you what happened. The night of the fair, he broke into my home and showed me a video he had made of us from that night under the bleachers, but he's manipulated it with actors who look like us, having—having *sex* under the bleachers. He told me that if I stopped any contact with you, he would not release it, which would have shattered your reputation and mine irreparably. He would have released it that night, but I stopped him."



“You agreed with his demands?” I said grimly.

“Damn well sold my soul to the devil,” she replied. “So, I had to run. I tried to call you to tell you how he had admitted to me that he had hired someone to sabotage your ranch, but you didn’t pick up.”

“That was my fault,” I replied. “I’d gotten so distracted I forgot to call you back. A deer had jumped into the road, causing me to swerve.”

“I couldn’t dare drive out to you, and I didn’t know what strings West might have gotten to have my phone tapped, so the next morning, I packed up and left.”

Fury was a smoldering volcano in my gut, ready to erupt. “Remind me to rip that bastard’s throat out.”

“But the tape—”

“I don’t give a shit about the tape,” I said harshly. “We’ll figure it out...just come back home, come back with me.”

“I think I—”

“...Should go home?” I asked. “What is in Fredericksburg for you? Family? Friends?”

“Nothing but an old house,” she replied dully. “There is nothing else there but my father’s old house that I was going to use to figure out my next steps. I ran to make sure you would be safe, John, to ensure you and your children were never in trouble. Or live under any scandal.”

“I will not let West bully me into cowering away like a mangy dog,” I said. “We’re going home, and we are not going to let West hold this over my head. Come back with me.”

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

“I know, but nothing will stop me from protecting you,” I said. “Come back home, Rayna, come back to me.”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## Rayna

**A**pprehension was a lead ball in my stomach as John's car wound through the town that night. We'd arrived at Hill Country after a long flight, and all I wanted was to shrink down the seat and hide my face until we got to his house, because I was not sure what tricks West had up his sleeve.

"So, you said the police have new clues?" I asked.

"Yes," John's hand rested on my thigh, and his touch was comforting as he drove. "Blood and skin. Detective Juliann said the cut is deep enough that whoever got it would need medical attention, but there is not much word about that person yet."

I understood his words but was more preoccupied with what we could do to stop West from ruining our names when he realized I was back in town. How much of a window did we have?

"Stop worrying." John's hand tightened on my thigh. "We'll figure it out. West is not going to beat us. Not over my dead body."

I wished he had not said that because I was sure that was what West wanted, John dead. I knew he would try his best to get it, too. "That's what I worry about."

"West would not dare attack me now that everyone knows he is my enemy," John replied. "He would be the first suspicion if I ever get harmed."

"A tree fell on the lane ahead, sir. It's completely unpassable until we get a team from the forestry guys up here. You do know the detour, do you? If you don't, I can—"

"It's all right, officer," John replied. "I know the way."

"Take care now," the officer replied, stepping back.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I’m fine, but that detour takes thirty minutes out of our way,” he grumbled. “And it takes us through a long stretch of forest.”

“We’ll be all right,” I tried to assure him as he headed on the road ahead.

I don’t know why I had to keep reminding myself of that as I settled back into the soft leather seat with a sigh. As we drove, I stared straight ahead at the uneven one-lane road. It was pitch black out here, with a thick forest of dark trees looming over us on both sides of the car, casting even darker shadows over our path. There hadn’t been a streetlight in miles, and because of the trees’ canopies stretching and overlapping overhead, I lost sight of the moon.

As the car went on, I got sleepy and began to list off with my head dropping on the window right as John took a deep turn and stomped on the brakes. Jerked awake by the sudden stop, I turned to him, “What’s going on—”

His face was rigid and stony, his hands white-knuckling the steering wheel. “That *bastard*.”

“What—” I asked before my gaze turned to the windshield and saw the two cars parked parallel to each other, barricading the road—and Maria’s massive jeep was one of them. Dread curled in my stomach as West came from the other car, and both held guns.

John jammed the lock on the car, then flew the car into reverse before looking over his shoulder and began to drive away...but a bullet shot off and shattered one of the headlights, and he had to jerk to a stop.

“Get down,” he roared as I secured the seatbelt and ducked down.

He tried to reverse again, but a car came barreling in the space behind us, and we were trapped. Swearing, John struck the steering wheel again before he reached over, opened the dash, and then handed me a black-handled field knife.

“Don’t be afraid to go for the jugular,” he warned. “They’re not here to play.”

“John—” I grabbed his shirt and dragged him away as a gun butt smashed his window and sent glass flying everywhere.

West reached in, unlocked the door, and pressed a gun to John’s temple. “Get out.”

“No,” John said.

“I’ll kill you right here then,” West snarled. “I am so sick of you and the trouble you’ve caused. My ranch is swarming with police officers, and my office is bombarded with your lawsuit. My investors are dropping away; my name has been ruined since you sent that video. And you—” he pointed the gun at me. “I told you to stay away.”

John smacked his hand away from me. “You don’t get to order her around. And about the investors? Do you think your savage clip didn’t do that to me? Cry me a fucking river, you hypocrite.”

West’s face went contemplative before he reeled back and slammed the butt of the gun into John’s temple. I screamed as John’s forehead slammed on the wheel. West grabbed John’s hair and yanked him out of the car to slam him on the door.

I scrambled out, holding the knife. “Let him go.”

West jerked his head, and someone grabbed me—Maria’s firm grip yanked me away. “You stay out of this. We’ll deal with you later.”

As menacing as she sounded—something was off with her. She didn’t have the same rough bass in her tone as before, and her grip dropped a little while holding me. “And shut it,” she hissed.

John was still reeling from the blow to his head. I could see it. His balance was off. Slumping on the car, John rubbed his temple and pulled his fingers away to see the blood now matting his face.

“You think you can get away with this?” John growled. “You’ll be everyone’s first suspicion if they find me dead.”

“Oh,” West grinned nastily. “It might be that way, but according to my manifesto, I am somewhere in California by now. I’ve taken great pains to make it look like I was never here.”

“How the hell did you know we were coming back tonight?” I shouted.

“I have eyes and ears everywhere,” he slanted a look at me. “And don’t think you’re getting out of here alive either. We’ve got plans for both of you.”

“And what would those be?” John asked.

“You two took a romantic canoe on the river, missy there fell into the water. You went to save her but couldn’t,” West said nastily.

“And how do you fake a drowning without leaving a scratch on us?” John asked right before launching himself at West, and the two went down in a grappling wrestling match. “Because I won’t go down without a fight, rich boy.”

Fists flew, and John knocked the gun out of West’s hand. It went skittering away, and Maria lurched to grab it, but I spun and rammed a knee into her belly. She staggered away but recovered quickly and spun to me, angry.

She spun on her heel and shot a kick at me, and I dodged before she aimed a punch and grazed my chin. I realized I’d dropped the knife and spotted it a few feet away. I grabbed it while Maria snatched the gun from the floor.

“Give up!” West shouted.

“Never,” John yelled while he kneed West in his gut.

The two sprung apart while Maria aimed the gun at me. “You’ll die.”

“You wish,” I said before jumping to the side. The gun went off, a horrible crack in the dark night, and someone cried

out.

John.

I spun to rush to him just before West delivered a few punches into John's jaw and gut, sending him sprawling. A patch of red began blooming on John's thigh, and I scrambled to him, only to feel Maria grab my hair. "Where do you think you're going?"

She sounded winded, more winded than I thought she would be.

I twisted out of her hold before Maria staggered back...for no reason. She grabbed at the nearby tree but missed, her free hand flailing while the gun tumbled from her hand. What was going on?

"Bran—" she cried out, but it was choked, "Brandon. I-I—"

She collapsed, but I grabbed her before she fell flat on her face. Maria looked sickly white, and her blouse was wet...with blood. I inched the blouse and saw a bandage wrapped around her middle that went right up her right side. Her blood was seeping out.

"John! *John!*" I screamed. "West! Maria needs a hospital! Stop fighting, for God's sake. She's going to *die!*"

My scream jolted the two, and West rushed to us, grabbed her from my arms, and pulled the blouse up. "No, no, no. This wasn't supposed to happen."

"What wasn't—" John limped closer. "—Jesus, West, she's going to bleed out. You need to get her to a hospital."

"I-I can't," he shook his head, "She's—"

"I don't care," John snarled. "Even if she's a cutthroat killer, she needs medical attention."

"You too. Get in. I'll have to drive you," I said while I ran to John's car. They hesitated. I screamed. "What are you waiting for!? Get in! If she dies, it's on you!"

\* \* \*

I felt like I was in a dream.

Driving at breakneck speed to the nearest hospital with my enemies in the backseat. West was in the backseat, holding Maria and whispering something to her that I couldn't pay attention to if I wanted to get us there alive.

As we took the highway like lightning, John was putting pressure on his wound. "Hold on, okay."

"I'll be fine," he said. "Believe me."

"This feels...wrong," I whispered.

His laugh was dark and wry. "Believe me, the irony isn't lost on me."

We got to the hospital twelve agonizing minutes later, and Maria was rushed to the emergency room while a nurse took care of John's gunshot scrape. Seated in the waiting room, I called Detective Juliann, told her the whole story from the fair to video to the ambush, and she said she would be there before the two got out of emergency services.

My body felt like lead as I looked at the knife on my lap. The adrenaline swooped out of my body in waves, and I only wanted to sleep. From the moment John had found me to now, it made the day feel so long, like three days had been crammed into one.

I dropped my elbows unto my thighs and cradled my head. "Jesus."

A warm hand dropped on my shoulder, and I saw Juliann there. "I've got some...relieving news. Well relatively. We won't have to worry about who had broken into Maxwell's place because the wound on Maria's chest tells us she did it."

"What's the bad news?" I asked.



“She’s got sepsis,” Juliann replied. “She opted to treat the wound at home, not realizing the infection would set into a lesion that deep. The doctors are going to help her, though.”

“She won’t die?”

“Not if the professionals can help it,” she said. “And John’s going to be fine too. He’s got a few battle scars, but he’ll be fine with some painkillers and antibiotics.”

“What about the other crimes?” I said, “Killing the calves, blackmailing me, making that video, the ambush, and attempted murder?”

“We’ll be compiling the crimes, but with money like his family has, the best thing I can see is him getting off some technicality and moving to Costa Rica while everything is kept hush-hush,” Detective Juliann replied. “I know, but just wait for the result, okay? But be assured; he will never be releasing that video.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I know.”

“I’ve got to check on something,” Juliann said. “Just be glad it all worked out.”

“I am, believe me, I am.”

Five minutes, ten...fifteen, maybe. I was not sure how much time had passed. I was past the point of exhaustion and started considering how to use three chairs as a bed when John came walking out, his lower half clad in scrubs instead of his suit pants, and sat next to me.

Wrapping an arm around my middle, he tugged me into his side. “You doing okay, baby?”

“I want to go home,” I replied, tucking my head under his chin.

“I know,” he nosed my ear. “But we need to stay here a little longer.”

“I heard Maria has sepsis,” I replied.

“Me too,” John shook his head. “Even with all the bad blood, I hope she makes it.”

Relief washed through me as the nurse came to us with the papers to sign, and we got back into John’s truck under the starry sky. I grasped the truck handle. “It’s over?”

“It’s over,” John replied before holding my face and kissing me warmly. “And now, we’re going home, for good.”

# Epilogue

## John

### *Three Months Later*

I stepped into my foyer, happy for the blast of cool air, before hanging my hat on the hooks near the door. Beelining for the kitchen, I took a cool water bottle from the fridge and popped the cap off before guzzling half of it.

My eyes flickered up to where Rayna was, and I wondered what she might be doing. The day had been hard, and as exhausted as I was, a sense of relief washed over me, knowing the day had gone well.

We'd harvested another large order for Hunter's business, and it was set to be sent off the next day with me, Rayna, Sam, and Harper joining him and Ava for Thanksgiving.

Taking the bottle with me, I headed up to the rooms above my office, where Rayna sometimes liked to stay. When I entered, she was at the window seat, with a newspaper in her hand, and splashed across the headline were the words, "Wild West Ranch closed."

My lips pressed tight. Two months, three weeks, and six days ago, mayhem had descended on the town when news had gotten out that Brandon had not only used his lady to kill my calves but that he'd gotten Maria to scare Rayna, try to kill the rest of my herd away and even that he had blackmailed Rayna.

As predicted, West had lawyered up pretty quickly and had all but disappeared from local life, his rich daddy coming out on TV emphatically denying the accusations, but it hadn't helped. When the police had raided the ranch, they'd found the same chemicals hidden in an underground cellar.

We'd turned in the tapes, witness statements, and even that screenshot Rayna had not told me about; the case had grown stronger.

To cap it off, when Maria had come out of critical care, she had folded like a napkin and told the cops all the things Brandon had asked her to do, but she had freely admitted that she had not gone to the hospital after breaking in the last time for fear of being caught.

“Hey, sweetheart,” I said while coming closer to kiss her cheek. “Any new news?”

“Just that West is closing his ranch,” she replied. “He is still staunchly refusing the charges, though.”

“As expected.” I shook my head, grimacing at the wet sweat cloaking my scalp. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Ooh,” Rayna grinned. “Can I join you?”

“When have I ever said no to that, darlin’?” I grinned.

I headed to my room with Rayna hot on my trail before we slipped into the bathroom and began to shuck clothes left and right. Stepping into the large, glass-enclosed shower, I was more than grateful for the enormous space and got the water going as soon as Rayna stepped in.

I turned and stepped fully under one of the showerheads, pushing my hair back from my face, and felt relief when the cool water sluiced the sweat and dirt from my body. I smiled even more when Rayna ran a cloth over my back before her lips coasted over my nape.

“We’re having a quiet dinner tonight,” Rayna said. “The girls are having their sleepovers.”

“Ah, right,” I replied, turning around to pull her into a kiss.

We cleaned ourselves, touching each other gently, sharing kisses, and whispered endearment. I was rinsing the conditioner from my hair when I felt Rayna’s fingers coast over my lower belly and the tops of my hips before she grabbed my hands and walked backward to the bench, sitting.

She smoothed her hair from her face, winked, and ran her eyes down my body before settling on my jutting cock and

licking her lips. As she sucked my length into her mouth, I tangled my fingers in her hair and gave myself up to her.

Rayna ran her tongue down the side before she sucked the head back into her mouth. With pressure on my shaft, her tongue danced along the veined length, dipping the tip into my slit and humming.

I groaned as Rayna pulled back slowly, sucking hard. When the head was still in her mouth, Rayna rubbed her tongue on the underside, and a breath punched itself out of my lungs. I watched her as she moved over me, ensuring she wasn't going too fast or deep, but Rayna kept moaning.

She explored the smooth skin under my balls with her fingers, and my shaft lengthened another inch. "Baby, I'm close. Keep doing that, and I'll lose it."

A devilish look came to her eye as she doubled her effort to make me spin out of my skin. I held her jaw. "You minx. I want a better way to come this evening."

Easing myself out of her mouth, I reversed our positions and had her up against the wall before kissing my way across her shoulder to her neck, up the slender column, and then brushed my nose over the wet hair at her temple.

I pressed my hard naked body against hers and claimed a deep, scintillating kiss while one hand dropped to fondle and tweak her full breasts and the other held her hip on mine so she could feel my arousal. Rayna looped her hands around my neck, tickling the wet, sensitive skin on my nape while rocking into me.

Reaching for a condom in a nook behind the shower head, I slid it on before lifting her legs and wrapping them around my waist. Gripping her knees, I found her mouth before thrusting, and the water made our movements even more erotic as we slipped and slid against each other. My hands slipped from her knees to her slim hips, and I lifted her nearly off my cock before slamming her down again. Her tight sheath

rippled around me, the pleasure racing up my spine, tingling at my scalp.

Rayna gasped when I slid my fingers between us, through the dark curls on her mound, and sought out her clit, pinching the sweet button between my thumb and index finger.

“Oh God!” she groaned.

“Just me, sweetheart,” I grinned. “But thanks for the compliment.”

Her fingers speared into my hair, and she yanked my head down to her, kissing me this way, kissing me that way as she took me deep inside. Spurred by passion, I drove in deeper and deeper still, yearning to be as close in body as we were in mind and soul.

I felt my nostrils flare as my hips sped up, as plowing into her was too much to bear because in a second, she gave a breathless cry, her pussy going vice-tight, gushing around my turgid member. Her climax summoned mine, and I shouted as I blew my seed inside the condom in a stream of hot, endless pleasure.

When it waned, I buried my face in her fragrant curls, trying to catch my breath. “God, I love you.”

Rayna kissed under my chin. “Me too.”

Pulling away, I disposed of the condom, and we rinsed again before toweling off and getting to our bedroom.

Inside, she dressed in a sleep camisole and shorts while I dragged on boxers and sleep pants before going to the tiny table on our balcony with dinner already laid out on warmer mats. We uncovered the plates and began eating.

“So, we have another ice cream non-date with Tyler tomorrow,” Rayna mentioned, and I growled.

“Do you have to remind me that my kid is interested in boys?” I grumbled. “Please, let me not get sick while I’m eating.”

She giggled. “Don’t worry. Nothing is going on. Samantha and Tyler are only chatting about their classes and their sports teams. They both have a mutual hatred for fractions.”

“It’s not their ice cream non-dates that bother me; it’s when they get to sixteen or eighteen, or, God forbid, twenty-something and want to take their non-dates as something else. I’ll wake up to see them going out to ten o’clock, or midnight, or not coming home at all. Then it’ll be boyfriends and engagements, and I’ll be paying for a wedding and paying down on a house halfway across the country and—”

Rayna shoved a bite of food into my mouth to shut me up. “John, sweetheart, you’re catastrophizing. Stop jumping ten or fifteen years into the future. Who knows what will happen between Sam and Tyler. Take it from me; first loves never last. Give them a break for now.”

I grunted. “Can we please not talk about them? It...bothers me.”

“Sure,” she replied. “So, Thanksgiving at the Twisting Twines Ranch, then. If we spend this holiday with them, we should have them over for Christmas.”

While chatting, we finished dinner, sent the plates down, and went to bed. Something I had been thinking about all day resurfaced as I held Rayna in my arms. “Do you ever think you’d want to have kids someday?”

Her brows ticked up. “Well, yes. Why do you ask?”

“With me?”

Her full lips quirked. “I don’t see anyone else here. Yes, John, I would love to have children with you.”

I rubbed my face. “I got it all mixed up. Perhaps I should have started with—” I reached over to the bedside table and took out the ring box I’d purchased a week ago in New York. “—Will you marry me?”

Rayna sat up, her mouth opened before she giggled. “You’re serious?”



“Like a heart attack.”

“Then yes,” Rayna replied. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

My brow quirked. “Are you going to look at the ring?”

“Oh!” She opened the box to find a ruby and diamond engagement ring inside. Eyes glistening with tears, she allowed me to slide it on her finger. “It’s beautiful.”

“Like you are,” I replied while tugging her for a kiss. “So, how about we get to that baby-making tonight.”

Rayna slapped my cheek lightly. “Hold your horses, cowboy. Let me enjoy being engaged for a while longer.”

### *Ten Years Later*

I stood by as Sam pulled my office door and stepped in. At twenty, Sam had grown up as the woman I was proud of; she was still a tomboy, but her body wasn’t boyish anymore. My baby girl had the body of a busty model even though she still rode circles around the men in her class at Texas A&M University.

“Dad?” she asked, tucking a now blond tendril behind her ear, and I studiously ignored the engagement ring on her finger. “I need to tell you something, and I need you not to freak out, okay?”

“What is it?” I asked, squinting, “If you lost your credit card again—”

“No, it’s not that,” she rolled her eyes. “Just promise me not to blow your top.”

This time I narrowed my eyes till they were slits. “If you’re telling me you’re pregnant—”

“Oh my God, no,” Sam huffed. “Just keep calm, okay? It’s about Harper.”

“What about her?” I asked, “Did I make a mistake by making her stay with you and whatshisface in Houston?”

“All these years, three break ups, two make-ups, and a few meltdowns, and you still can’t call my fiancé by his name? It’s Tyler, Dad. You’re hopeless. Anyway, I wanted to tell you Harper is dating Liam.”

The pencil in my hand snapped in two. “Liam, as in Liam *Portman*? That Liam is defiling my baby girl?”

Sam’s hand shot up in the same manner I’d used to calm down a fidgety filly. “Whoa, whoa, *whoa*. Who said anything about *that*? There is no defiling going on. And come on, Dad. Hunter is like your best friend. We go to his house almost every summer or Thanksgiving; he comes here whenever he’s in the city. Liam is a good guy, Dad. He’s strong and decent, you know.”

“Knowing that and seeing it are two different things,” I grumbled. “Does your mom know about this?”

“I’m pretty sure she set them up,” Sam grinned. “Do you remember Halloween last year when we had the big blowout party, and Mom made them coordinate it all?”

“Deception under my own roof.” I huffed. “Where does this conspiracy end?”

“Well, erm, I’m pretty sure even Jackson knows,” Sam said, blushing.

“Your brother too?” I gaped.

“Yep,” Sam replied.

Unduly bothered, I went to get Rayna and my eight-year-old son and had all of them back in my study. Giving all three a steely eye, I asked, “So you all knew about Harper and Liam?”

To confirm my suspicion, they all shared a look. “Well, yeah,” Jackson shrugged.

My wife came around the table and tried to console me. “I know you’re protective, sweetheart, but in the back of your mind, you know something like this would happen. Harper is a smart girl, and John, Liam has nothing but respect for her. Besides, she’s eighteen, and he is her first boyfriend. Of all the time she stuck her nose into a book, this is good for her.”

“And when was I going to know about this?” I groused. “When she starts walking down the aisle?”

“No, love,” Rayna shook her head. “Sam, take Jackson to the kitchen and let me and your dad talk a little.”

“You finished dinner?” Jackson asked, his big eyes wide.

“Yes,” she replied. “But you can’t touch it yet. Now, go on.”

When our kids left, I sank into my desk chair and rubbed my face. “I’m too old for this.”

She sat on my lap. “You’re forty-four, not toeing death’s door, love. I know you’re upset. I can see it. You’re afraid Sam or Harper would find themselves in your position when you were their age. The fear is so strong that it keeps you in the past, but I need you to get out of there and into the present. The girls know how you feel and are smart enough not to make that fear a reality. I need you to trust them, John. Their wings work.”

A part of my belly sunk a little more, but she was right. I didn’t want my girls to experience what I went through, and even though they had inheritance and trust funds as big as Antarctica, so they wouldn’t have to worry about anything, I felt afraid for them.

“I know,” I replied. “It’s just, they’re our girls.”

“They’re smart girls,” Rayna replied, her smile ticking up. “And I know I’ve scared them straight by showing them pictures of disease-ridden genitals...*twice*.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “You’re something else.”

“I know.” She grinned. “Now, come on, let’s have dinner and listen to Jackson talk Ben’s ear off.”

Some things never changed, did they? Running my hand up her back, I smiled. “I love you.”

“And I love you too, all of you...” She pressed her forehead to mine. “Forever.”

THE END

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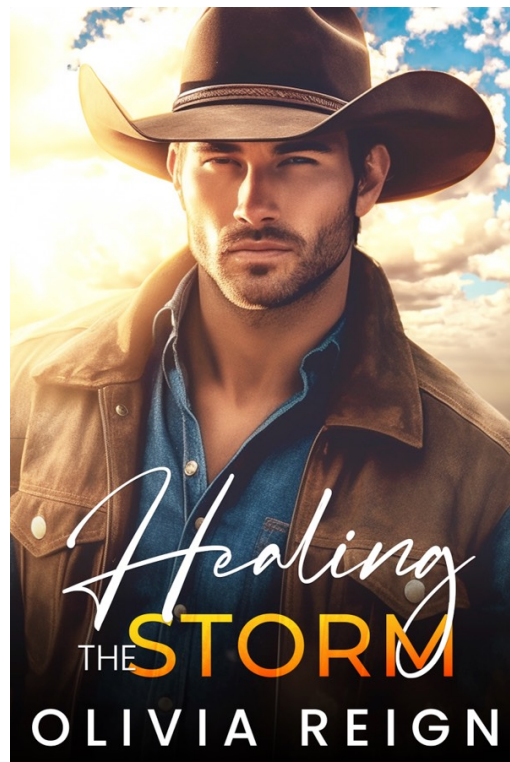
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# Healing the Storm - Sneak Peek



## *Cheyenne*

**N**o, no, no...

My heart sunk in my chest as the smoke poured out from under the hood of my old 70s Volkswagen van. The dark gray hue matched the storm clouds rolling in from the southwest, and it only made me feel that much worse about being stuck on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, Texas.

Takoda perked his ears up at me as I killed the engine, and the little black and white border collie mix stretched in the passenger seat. He was probably thinking he was going to get a chance to run around, but there was no way that was happening on the side of the highway.

“Hopefully, the radiator just needs more coolant.” I gave his head a soft pat, before pulling the hair tie off my wrist and pulling my coal black hair out of my face. I’d never been to Texas, and the humidity that slammed into me as I pushed the door open and popped the hood was nearly suffocating.

*Broken down in hell.*

I walked around to the back of the van and opened the back faded mint doors. I let out a sigh, seeing that I was low on coolant. “Stupid leaky radiator.” A rumble of thunder in the background startled me. I turned toward the storm just as a heavy breeze roared around me.

*What kind of storm is this?*

We had nasty thunderstorms in South Dakota, but the sound—something like a train—caught me off guard. I squinted off toward the darkening horizon. It didn’t look like there was anything more than maybe a wall cloud. Anxiety made my hands shake a little, but I ignored it.

I just needed to keep heading toward Arizona.



Carrying what little I had left of the coolant, I headed back around to the front of the van. I set the jug on the ground, pushing the hood to the air. The smoke was worse than the humidity, and I let out a violent cough, trying to clear the air with a wave of my hand. Thunder cracked in the distance, and I shuddered at the sound.

*I need to hurry.*

But the longer I stared at the engine in front of me, the more dread filled my chest. It wasn't smoking in the usual place. In fact, it was coming from somewhere totally foreign to me. I ran my hands over my face, frustration and defeat replacing every single bit of anxiety in my chest.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” I groaned, my shoulders dropping. I had consulted the only mechanic I knew on the reservation before I headed out, and he had assured me that as long as I kept coolant on hand, I would make it just fine...

But here I was with some unidentifiable problem.

*Stranded.*

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, my gaze shifted back to the storm, which was getting closer and closer. My heart began to thud in my chest as the train-like roar returned. I slammed the hood shut, my eyes catching sight of Takoda, who was now nervously panting in the front seat.

*I guess we'll just have to ride it out here.*

I headed back to the door, my jeans already sticky with sweat. As I reached for the door handle, the wail of a siren poured through the atmosphere, its volume only challenged by the thunder now rumbling around me. I might not be from tornado alley...

But I knew that siren when I heard it.

Whipping my head around, I was met with the sight of a nearly black funnel, ripping up the trees around it as it barreled forward...

Right towards me.

Pure panic ripped through my body, and I whipped my head around, looking for *anywhere* for us to go off the side of the road. I didn't have long before it would be right on top of us, and I knew my van didn't stand a chance.

And then I heard it.

A horn blared behind me, and I spun around to see a massive red one-ton ranch truck pulling in behind me. I froze, unsure how to react to the sight, or if they were even there to help at all. The truck's door swung open, and my mouth went dry as a handsome, six-foot cowboy stepped out.

"Can that thing run?" he called out to me, pointing to the van.

I shook my head. "I don't know what's wrong with it."

"Then get in," he said, gesturing back to his truck.

"Uh..." my voice trailed off, all the red flags about strangers going off in my head. "I don't know."

"Are you serious right now?" He threw up his hands before motioning to the ever-growing funnel. "There's a fucking *tornado* coming right for us."

I looked back at it before nodding. I slung the van door open, and Takoda jumped into my arms. Trembling with fear, I ran toward the truck's passenger side, where the stranger opened the door for me, hoisting me up into the lifted truck.

"Thanks," I mumbled as he slammed the door, sprinting around to the driver's side. He wasted no time flooring it. The tires threw dirt and grass from the ditch as it jumped forward. The sky opened up around us, a violent downpour causing Takoda to shake in my arms.

"There's a hunting cabin just up here," the cowboy said, taking a hard left—right in the direction of the tornado.

"It's really close."

“I know that,” he snapped, stomping the gas again as we drifted down the gravel road. “But it’s our only option where I can say for sure there’s a cellar.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. I held Takoda, my heart thumping as the winds shook the truck. I glanced at the stranger driving the truck, his jaw tense beneath the chocolate-colored stubble. He was *very* handsome with a strong nose and defined brow line beneath his tan Stetson cowboy hat.

*And those biceps.*

His muscles jutting out from his white short-sleeve t-shirt made it more than apparent that he put his cowboy look to use, probably working on a ranch somewhere—a very nice one considering the expensive, limited edition truck I was sitting in.

The sound of the train-like wind brought me out of my much-needed state of distraction, and the truck bounced over a cattleguard in the ground. I could hardly see through the windshield, but I could see just enough to make out a small old cabin in front of us.

“Let’s go,” he barked at me, having to physically push with both hands to get the door open. “And *hurry*.”

Nodding, I pulled the lever on the door, only to have the opposite problem that he did. The door ripped right out of my grip, nearly throwing Takoda and I onto the ground. I let out a startled scream as my pup slid from my arms, landing on the ground. The cowboy ran around, scooping up my dog, and using his shoulder and my help, we shut the truck door.

He grabbed ahold of my elbow, the whir of the wind picking up as the tree branches crackled above my head. He guided me across the overgrown yard, heavy rains shifting to dime-sized hail as we ran.

“Here.” He handed Takoda back to me when we reached a large silver door protruding out of the ground, surrounded by concrete. He pulled the door open, urging me inside. Soaked and shivering, I navigated my way down the steep steps,

relieved by the musty, stale stench in the old cellar. I saw a string hanging down from the ceiling, and I pulled it, a single bulb illuminated the darkness as the cowboy fastened the door above us.

“Made it,” he said, letting out a heavy sigh. His white shirt was soaked, clinging to his washboard abs beneath it. I took in the sight of him, feeling the warmth of something deep in my core. He was *hot*.

I forced my eyes away from him as the wind howled around us, though, choosing to sit on the hard metal bench in the corner, setting Takoda down. I turned to the cowboy, who was still standing in the corner of the cellar, his eyes focused on the door. “Thanks for helping me. I’d hate to think what it would’ve been like having to ride this out in the van.”

He whipped his head around to me, his gray eyes breathtaking. “Uh, yeah, no problem. It’s not right to leave someone stranded on the side of the highway when there’s plenty of room in the cellar.” His voice was gruff and not necessarily all that friendly, but the Texas drawl was charming.

“Do you live here?” I asked, catching Takoda as he hopped back into my lap at the sound of hail pummeling the cellar door.

He laughed, shaking his head. “Nah, absolutely not. I don’t even know if there’s running water in the cabin.”

I furrowed my brow, surprised by the reaction. “A lot of people live without running water. I don’t think that really means anything.”

“Right,” he grunted, rolling his eyes at me. “You must be one of those hippy women who talk to the trees and shit.”

*Maybe he’s not so charming.*

“I am *not* one of those hippy women, though I do believe that nature speaks to us in one way or another.” My knee bounced at the sound of the hail, all my anxiety returning.

He chuckled, though the tone was more condescending than humorous. “So what do you think that tornado out there is saying to us then, oh wise woman?”

“Well, if all the people in Texas are about as welcoming as you, I can’t say that I would blame her,” I snapped, looking away from him and into the darkness of the cellar. It wasn’t nearly as dingey as I had initially thought, though it did still smell a little musty. There were a few flashlights and lawn chairs in the corner, but beyond that and the bench I was sitting on...

It was just a concrete box below the ground.

And I was stuck in it with a strange asshole.

“Where are you from?” the guy asked, his voice shifting with more curiosity than animosity. “I didn’t pay any attention to the license plate on your van.”

“South Dakota.” I looked back at him, studying the lines on his face. He was a clean cut kind of cowboy, not ragged and rough around the edges like a lot of the guys I knew back home. In fact, my guess was that he was probably some kind of boss or manager—not the guy who was making minimum wage feeding cattle.

“What the hell are you doing in Texas then? You’re a long way from home.”

I nodded, cuddling Takoda in my arms. “I’m on my way to Arizona to see my sister.”

“And someone let you take off across country in that old piece of shit van you were in?” His eyes widened in disbelief. “That seems like a ballsy thing to do for a little woman like yourself. It could be dangerous.”

I snorted, shaking my head at his old school thinking. “A little woman like myself? Thanks, but I have *no* problem taking care of myself. I’ve been doing it my whole life. I don’t need anyone’s help.”

“Until a massive tornado rolls through while you’re stranded on the side of the highway.” He raised an eyebrow at me.

I was just about to shoot a snide remark back at him, when the sound of the wind swirling outside picked up, and the cellar door began to rattle. It sounded as though we were in the middle of a war zone, and my entire body began to tremble, unable to hear my own thoughts.

“*Shit*,” he shouted before heading toward where I was sitting. “That latch is old—I don’t know if it’ll hold!”

Fear thrummed through my body as I watched his concerns become a reality. The cellar door came unhinged, and not only did it tear open...

It ripped right off the hinges. A scream erupted from my throat, and as the hail and rain poured into the cellar, he swooped me up into his arms, taking me and Takoda to the far back corner. Standing over us as a shield, he wrapped his body around us. The scent of leather and bergamot filled my nostrils as I caught myself leaning into his chest.

“It’ll pass over,” he said, his voice gruff.

But as the wind roared into the cellar, chilling my already soaked body, I wasn’t so sure I could trust him...

Or if either of us was getting out alive.

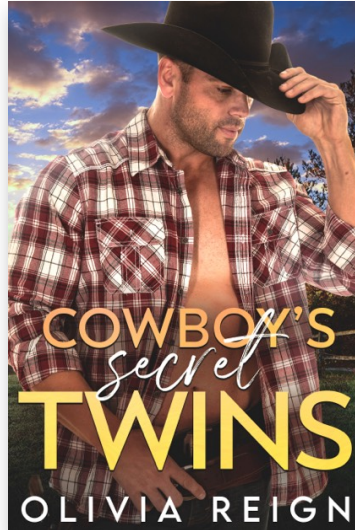
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