



*My Dick*

**SILVER FOX**

**GRUMPY RUGGED RANCHER**

**MICHELLE MARLIN**

# **My Rich Silver Fox Grumpy Rugged Rancher**

*An Age Gap, Enemies to Lovers Contemporary  
Romance*

*By:*

**MICHELLE MARLIN**



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## CHAPTER 1 - TAYLOR

I woke up this morning, headed to work thinking my day would be the same as it's been for the last four and a half years, boy was I wrong.

“Good morning, ladies!” I walked through the door with a dash of sarcasm. “Another thrilling day in paradise.”

Rebecca rushed over, “good morning, Taylor. Obviously, you haven't heard the news yet?”

Lilly chimed in, “she must not have.”

“What news? What in the world are you two talking about?” I responded.

Taking a deep breath, Lilly broke the news. “After you left work yesterday, Phil came in like a tornado and dropped a bombshell. He announced that he's closing the store at the end of the month and moving back to Tennessee. His parents are old and not in the best of health.”

Rebecca added with a sigh, “Yep, he tried to sell the place, but with the economy doing so poorly right now, he couldn't find any buyers. So, he's decided to cut his losses and shut the whole shop down.”

My jaw practically hit the floor. “No way! Are you pulling my leg? I can't believe Phil didn't even have the courtesy to give me a heads up. What on earth are we going to do?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I mean, I've been slaving away in this shop for four and a half years, you have no idea how devastated I am right now. I've got bills to pay! Unlike you two lucky ducks who still live with your parents!”

Lilly nodded in agreement. “This is so heartbreaking, finding someone as awesome as Phil will be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

Rebecca's voice wavered as she admitted, "I can't lie. I cried my eyes out when I got home last night. I wanted to call and let you know, Taylor, but I was too caught up in my own misery."

Lilly agreed; her voice filled with empathy. "Same here, Taylor. We were a mess."

When I left work that evening desperation started seeping through my veins as I tried to figure out what I was going to do. The job market here is bleak, to say the least. So, I dove headfirst into the online job searching mode.

After scanning a few retail listings, I saw an ad that caught my eye. "Personal Assistant/Housekeeper wanted at the Gatlin Ranch." The duties outlined were cooking, cleaning and bookkeeping. Without any hesitation, I hit the "Apply" button. Yes, I had no prior experience in all three, but I figured: How hard can it be?

My townhouse was proof of my cleaning skills, most of the time at least. And I knew how to juggle bills like a circus performer. Cooking was another story as I never paid much attention to mom in the kitchen.

Everyone in town has heard all the rumors about the reclusive Shane Gatlin, the rich rancher who owns one of the largest in Jackson. I've never seen him personally, but I've heard he's a real looker, silver fox rugged type but with quite the grumpy personality.

When I hit that button, I knew I had to put all those rumors aside and at least give him a chance, after all, I didn't have too many options going for me.

Three days passed and I was beginning to panic. On day four, in the middle of my workday my phone rang, I hesitated for a moment before picking it up, not recognizing the number on the caller ID.

"Hello?" I answered, a hint of curiosity in my voice.

“Is this Taylor Langley?” a gruff yet somehow tolerable voice inquired from the other end.

“Yes, it is,” I confirmed, my mind racing to figure out who this person could be.

“Good morning, this is Shane Gatlin,” the voice continued. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Hello Mr. Gatlin! No, not at all,” I assured him, my surprise growing as I realized I was speaking to THE Mr. Gatlin himself.

“I received your resume and wanted to reach out and see if you’re available to come in for an interview tomorrow,” Mr. Gatlin explained. “I’d like to meet with you at the ranch if that would work for you.”

The excitement and disbelief welled up within me as I struggled to compose myself. “I can make myself available. What time would work best for you?” I managed to ask, trying to sound professional despite the bubbling excitement in my voice.

“How about 9:00 am?” Mr. Gatlin proposed.

“Yes, that will work. I’ll see you then. Thank you,” I replied, barely containing my excitement and gratitude for the opportunity he had presented to me.

As I hung up the phone, I couldn’t contain my excitement, so I practically shouted across the store to Lilly and Rebecca, “Guess what, girls? I just scored an interview with the one and only Mr. Gatlin, the legendary owner of the Gatlin Ranch!”

Lilly’s eyes widened like saucers. “No way, Taylor! How’d you manage to snag an interview with the reclusive Mr. Gatlin? Spill the beans, girl!”

Rebecca chimed in, giving me the third degree. “Yeah Taylor, come on, spill it!”

“Well, ladies, when you told me about Phil closing the store, I went home and turned into a job-seeking ninja,

and there it was—a listing for a personal assistant/housekeeper at the Gatlin Ranch.”

“Honestly, I never thought he’d call, considering my resume doesn’t have any of the qualifications outlined in the listing, but I guess he’s willing to take a chance. All I can figure is he’s desperate.”

Lilly raised an eyebrow. “Okay, Taylor, we’ve all heard the rumors about him, are you sure you want to work there? I mean he sounds like a far cry from Phil with what I’ve heard.”

I shrugged, playing along. “Well, yes people do say he’s the Grinch, minus the green fur. But hey, they’re just rumors, right?”

“Maybe he’s actually a real nice guy, besides I don’t know how all those rumors got started in the first place, it’s not like he ever comes into town, so to me it’s just hearsay.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not a bit nervous but in the same breath, I have to eat! I don’t want to mess up this opportunity, but if he turns out to be a tyrant and I survive his reign of terror, it’ll be a great story to tell!”

“Taylor, you’ve got a point.” Rebecca reassured.

“Absolutely!” Lilly chimed in.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a call to make. I need to let mom in on what’s going on.”

As I dialed my mom’s number, I couldn’t help but feel a thrill of anticipation.

“Hey mom, long time no talk! Sorry I’ve been MIA. How are you and dad doing?”

“Hey sweetie, no worries! I know how life gets crazy. Your dad and I are holding the fort down just fine. What’s been happening with you, how’s the job going?”

“Well, funny you should ask. Phil’s closing shop and packing his bags for Tennessee. Can you believe it?”



“No way! What on earth are you going to do now?”

“Actually, that’s why I’m calling, I got an interview tomorrow at the Gatlin ranch. I applied to be his personal assistant and housekeeper! I know it’s a stretch considering I didn’t pay much attention to you in the kitchen but how hard can it be right?”

“Well, if I have to be honest sweetie, that does sound like a bit of a stretch for you, you never were interested in learning to cook.”

“I know mom, I’ll just have to wing it! Besides, since I’ve been living on my own, I’ve gotten better about cooking for myself, and I keep my townhouse pretty clean most of the time.”

“Well then, go in there with confidence and you should do fine. Remember, I’m just a phone call away whenever you need a pep talk or a virtual hug. You’ve got this sweetie!”

“Thanks, mom, you’re the best. I promise to keep you updated, tell dad I said hi. Love you and talk to you soon.”

“Love you too, sweetheart. Now go ace that interview!”

With a mixture of nerves and excitement, I hung up the phone, feeling a surge of confidence fueled by my mom’s heartfelt words of encouragement. Mr. Gatlin might not know what he’s in for, but I’m ready to show him just how capable I am.

I spent most of my time after hanging up with mom trying to decide what to wear for my interview, I settled on a pressed blouse, comfortable pants, and sturdy boots.

It felt like the perfect compromise. With my outfit ready, I mentally prepared myself for the interview. As I laid in bed, I struggled to get to sleep. I worried about what questions he might ask. Finally, after an hour I must have dozed off.

The next morning a wave of self-doubt came over me, so I reached for my phone and dialed Rebecca's number.

"Hey, Rebecca," I said, my voice shaking slightly. "I'm heading out to the ranch, but I'm so nervous. I need this job so badly."

"I understand," she said. "You're feeling anxious because it's so important. Just take deep breaths, you've got this!"

Her words calmed my nerves. "You're right, thanks Rebecca."

"Anytime," she replied warmly. "Good luck, I'm rooting for you!"

I hung up the phone, feeling determined to get this job. I squared my shoulders, ready to face any questions Mr. Gatlin threw at me.

I arrived in the office at the ranch at exactly 8:55. I was only there for a couple of minutes when I heard a voice behind me.

"You must be Taylor," he rumbled in a voice as rough as gravel. When I turned to look at him, he stood there, with a very strange expression on his face, it was almost as if he was trying to place where he had met me before, but that was absurd, after all, everyone knew the reclusive Mr. Gatlin never steps foot in town.

His look was unsettling, making me feel off-balance.

"Yes, I am," I replied, managing a smile as I stood up. I realized I'd been breathing heavily, my heart pounding from a combination of anxiety and anticipation.

As he walked toward me, his weathered hand outstretched, I noticed his eyes. They were a light brown, soulful and filled with a sadness I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I took his hand. It was firm and warm, the calluses on his palm rough against my skin. My hand felt clammy and fragile in comparison.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I managed to say. “Thank you for considering me for the job.” My voice sounded small and pathetic.

“You’re punctual, that’s impressive, given the long drive from town,” he said. “Please, take a seat, and we can chat.” He gestured to the chair across from him.

His manner was stiff, as if he’d rather be anywhere else. It was clear he didn’t usually have to interview people.

I sat down in the chair where I’d been before, and he pulled up a chair to sit across from me.

“So, tell me why you’re looking to work here.”

“My current job at Bear Creek Leather will end in a few weeks, the owner is relocating to Tennessee,” I explained.

“I’m sorry to hear that. We need local businesses like that in town,” he replied. “I’m afraid my housekeeper and personal assistant quit to get married, and things have gotten a bit out of hand. I hope you’re not afraid of a little hard work.”

“No! No”, as I gushed, I realized I sounded overeager, but I didn’t care. “I’m a bit of a perfectionist, and I like to have everything spotless,” I told him, my voice wavering a bit with nervousness.

I began to study the fine details of his face. His hair was a mix of gray and brown, and it shone in the light. His skin was tanned from working the land. There were just a few small wrinkles starting to form but hardly noticeable.

Overall, he looked rugged, handsome and every inch a rancher. His denims well worn and threadbare at the knee. He was wearing a blue plaid shirt open at the neck. He looked to be in his late thirties or maybe even forty from what I could tell.

I looked at his hands, which were big and capable and lacking a ring, a detail that held no true significance

considering the potential dangers that came with working on a ranch. I kicked myself for not having done my research prior to my interview.

I had to pull myself back to concentrate on the conversation at hand.

There was no doubt he was extremely hot. I found myself strangely attracted to him but at the same time, I found his stare unsettling.

“And what about bookkeeping, Taylor, have you any experience with that?”

“No not really but I’m a fast learner, what sort of thing are we talking about?” I felt my confidence waver.

“Well, making sure people pay us on time, ordering things at the best price, that sort of thing. Do you think you could handle that?”

“It sounds like a piece of cake, I don’t want to brag but being on a tight budget since I’ve been on my own has taught me to find everything at the best price, I’m a pro at it,” I laughed.

Suddenly, I felt the blood rush to my face. What the hell am I saying? I know I’m desperate for a job but now I’m flat out lying!

“I like your confidence, Taylor. And I’m sure you’re bright enough to learn the ropes as you go along.”

I nodded slowly, less sure than he was.

“How long have you lived in Jackson, Taylor?”

“My entire life, on my own for four and a half years. Fortunately, my parents live close by, I visit them often.”

“That’s great to hear. Enjoy them while you can, I sure do miss mine. Moving on to the job opportunity, I discussed the working hours, compensation, and vacation policy. Considering all that, would you be interested in starting in two weeks?”

“Sounds great, that would give me time to help Phil get everything settled at the store.” “Thank you, Mr. Gatlin. I appreciate you giving me a chance.”

“Your welcome Taylor, please call me Shane, no need for formalities on the ranch. It was nice meeting you and I’m looking forward to having you work here.” He stood up and led me to the door.

“Ok, Shane it is.” I responded.

I drove back to work with my head in the clouds. “So, how’d it go?” Lilly asked as I stepped inside. “Yes, give us all the details Taylor, don’t leave anything out.” Rebecca followed up excited.

“Well, I got the job, I’m just not too sure I’m going to like it.”

“Why do you say that Taylor, was he as bad as people say?” asked Rebecca.

“No, he wasn’t bad, just a little pre-occupied, he did look at me strangely the entire time I was there, it was kind of creepy, like he was trying to figure out if he had met me before, you know, that kind of look. I ended up telling him my life story, but unfortunately, he didn’t return the favor.”

“What exactly were you trying to find out about him?” Lilly questioned.

“Well since we didn’t actually go to the ranch house, I wanted to know if there was a Mrs. Gatlin or little Gatlins I had to worry about, but I didn’t have the nerve to ask.” “It sounded too intrusive to me.”

“Well, I guess that would be important to find out, you’ll just have to wait and find out on your first day, won’t you?” Lilly responded.

“I guess so.” Putting it out of my mind.

I was happy that a burden was lifted off my shoulders, but I still worried about my new grumpy boss.

But tonight, when I get home from work, I'm going to get some friends together for a little celebration, maybe some dinner, followed by a few drinks. We might even go dancing.

At least I'd landed a job, even if it wasn't my ideal one.

I called my best friends, Darcy, Mags & Liz and we agreed to meet at the local bar.

I walked outside to get in my car when I saw Gus, my neighbor's cat, on the fence. He's there every time I open my door, probably because I started feeding him a while back, convinced he wasn't getting enough to eat. Now he's nice and plump and expects food every time he sees me.

"Sorry, fat boy. Not today," as I tickled him under his chin. He purred, and I kissed the top of his head before heading to my car for a night out with the girls. Gus had jumped down from the fence and had every intention of following me to the car.

"Gus!" my neighbor called out sharply.

"Oh, hey, Sylvia."

"Hello, Taylor." Her tone was cold and unfriendly, and I gathered she must have figured out why Gus was getting so fat. *She would get along well with my new boss*, I thought. She always has a soured look on her face, like she just bit into a lemon.

She's got to be so lonely living by herself, no one comes to visit either. I feel sorry for her.

I'd noticed a male visitor at her house last year, but he didn't last long. Sylvia had probably scared him away. I often wondered if she'd been hurt badly in the past which made her bitter and leery of getting involved with someone else. She should take a chance. I hope I never get like that.

I smiled at her and went on my way. No one was going to spoil my good mood today.

## CHAPTER 2 - SHANE

When I first saw Taylor, it was like a lightning bolt hit me. She looked so much like Sierra; it took my breath away. It caught me off guard. I could tell she noticed I was staring at her strangely, but I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

In those first few seconds, I felt a mix of emotions—surprise, doubt, and a touch of sadness. I couldn't help but wonder if it was some kind of cruel joke or if there was something more going on.

Even the way she smiled reminded me of her. That familiar, warm smile that could light up a room. My heart ached as I thought about how much I miss her.

I hadn't visited her grave in a long time, but now, it felt like the right thing to do. Maybe I could find some comfort in knowing that even though she wasn't here with me, she would always be a part of me.

I rode on horseback to our family plot, where my mom, dad, grandparents, and Sierra are buried. A gentle breeze rustled through the cemetery. It had been five long years since cancer took her away, leaving a big hole in my heart. But today, I felt a strong urge to talk to her, even if she couldn't respond.

"Sierra," I started, my voice low as if sharing a secret. "I miss you, babe. I miss your laugh, your warmth. Life's been tough without you. I'm so damn lonely", I confessed, my words heavy with sadness. "At night the bed feels so empty, and I ache for your touch, your body next to mine. Sometimes it feels like my soul is craving you."

I knelt down, running my fingers over her name on the gravestone, memories flooding back. It almost felt like she was there, listening.



A tear rolled down my cheek, and I quickly wiped it away, trying to hide the intense feelings welling up in me.

“You know I’ll always love you, right? No one can replace you in my heart” I said, hoping she could somehow hear me.

The wind seemed to whisper her name, offering a moment of calm, a reminder of her spirit.

“Sierra, there’s something I need to tell you,” I continued, feeling a tinge of guilt creeping into my voice. “I hired a woman today; her name is Taylor. She reminds me so much of you. I think she can bring some light into my life. I’ve become such a grumpy recluse.”

A gust of wind brushed against my face, as if Sierra’s presence was whispering back.

“Shane,” I imagined her voice saying, “I understand your loneliness, and I want you to be happy. I’ll always love you, but don’t let your sorrow hold you back. It’s okay to move forward, to open your heart again. I’ll always be with you, guiding you.”

As I rode home, I felt a strange kind of comfort in knowing that even though she wasn’t physically with me, she was still with me in spirit. And I knew that even though things would never be the same, I could move forward with her in my heart.

The grief was still there, but it felt more bearable.

## CHAPTER 3 - TAYLOR

Two weeks zipped by in the blink of an eye, and before I knew it, the dreaded moment arrived—the start of my new job. As the morning dawned, the mere thought of breakfast made me ill, so I settled for a strong cup of coffee and a slice of buttered toast.

As I approached the ranch, my heart was doing acrobatics in my chest. Taking a deep breath, I prepared myself for the unknown.

When I walked into the office, Shane was on the phone, and after holding up a hand in greeting, he gestured for me to take a seat.

I noticed that he was staring at me again, and rather than stare back, I began to look around, unsure of what to do. It felt uncomfortable as his gaze weighed on me.

I waited while he took a few more moments to make some notes. Finally, he looked back at me and said. “Sorry about that.”

“That was one of my more important calls. As you get to know the business, you’ll know which clients need special attention. They’re the ones that keep us afloat. Did you have a nice weekend?” he asked.

He gave me a tight smile, and I could see he wasn’t really interested in small talk, but I appreciated his attempt.

“Very good, thank you and you,” I replied.

“Yes, it was quiet around here as usual.” He responded.

“Before I show you around the ranch, I wanted to make sure you understand something, it can feel pretty isolated out here. I’ll be out on the ranch all day, most days. I hope you are okay with that?”

I was beginning to regret my decision to work here, but I smiled back as if the fact that I’d be alone most of the time was perfectly acceptable.

“Um, I’m sure I’ll be fine, I lied. I suppose there’s a lot to keep me busy.”

“I hope so. Now, do you have any questions for me before I show you around?” he asked.

That’s when I opened my big mouth. “Um, is there a Mrs. Gatlin and children I should be aware of?”

*Maybe having other people around would make things more bearable, I thought.*

I instantly regretted asking my question as I saw the annoyance on his face. He said, “There is no Mrs. Gatlin,” his voice stiff. “And no children either.”

I froze, wondering how to recover from this misstep. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be intrusive.” How I wished I’d remained silent.

He stared at me for what seemed like an hour but of course it was only a few seconds.

“Forgive me, Taylor. I’m being rude.” I could see that at least he felt remorse for his outburst.

“No! No, not at all. It was my fault.” *Why was I apologizing for asking a perfectly reasonable question?* I was beginning to see how he’d gotten his reputation.

“No, I’m sorry. It was me. Your question was a reasonable one. It’s just a topic I prefer not to discuss.” He paused. “Thank you. now, any more questions?”

“No.” I answered. Even if I’d had a thousand questions bubbling away for answers, I wouldn’t have dared to say anything else.

“Okay, now. Let’s show you around first. Do you ride?”

“Ride? Horses?” I answered like a simpleton.

“Yes. Of course, horses. It’s the best way to get around this place, we don’t have to stick to the roads.” I felt like he was talking to me as if I was an idiot, however I felt like one at that moment.

“Not since I was a little girl, but I don’t mind trying,” I said hopelessly. I couldn’t believe I’d said that. What if I fall off or make a fool of myself? It was my first day. I had to show I was willing and able to do anything, even though I was a chaotic mess inside my head.

“Okay, we’ll take it slowly then.” He stood up quickly, eager to get the show on the road, but I stood more slowly, gulping deeply as I did.

“Follow me,” he instructed curtly, and I dutifully did so like a child.

It wasn’t far to the stables, and at a quick glance, there appeared to be ten horses. Shane led me to the stall at the end and opened it. Before me stood a huge horse, and my eyes opened in alarm.

*I would need a ladder just to mount that beast! I thought.*

Shane gave a little chuckle when he saw the shock on my face. “Don’t worry, Taylor, that’s mine, I’m going to show you how to saddle up. That’s yours over there.”

“Bella’s her name. She’s a gentle girl, and the two of you should be just right for each other.” My horse was opposite his, and I walked over to her, trying to tell her telepathically to be nice and not embarrass me.

“Hello, Bella,” I said quietly. “The two of us are going to be friends, aren’t we? I hope that you’re going to be good to me. Please?”

“Watch what I do and copy me. Okay?” I nodded frantically. I watched Shane as he led his horse to the other end of the stables and, lifting a saddle from the wall, threw it over his horse’s back. “You use that one.” He pointed. I did exactly what I’d seen him do.

“Okay, so far, so good.”

Ten minutes later, we were ready to ride.

Shane mounted his horse with ease, and I did my best to follow his example. It took me a few tries, but I eventually got up. I couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

I caught a fleeting smile on Shane's face, which surprised me - I was expecting a look of amusement at my clumsy attempts. My cheeks turned pink.

"Right, watch me and do the same. We'll take it easy to start with."

"To start with?" I echoed in a panic.

"Let's just see how it goes. You're doing good so far. We can't cover the whole ranch. It's too big and would take too long. I just want to give you a feel for the place, we'll find the cattle so you can get an idea of the numbers and how many men work here."

"No women then?"

"Not currently, no. Although we've had some in the past. Why? Are you interested in working the ranch?"

"No! Definitely not! That's not for me."

"You're more of a homebody, are you? Like to keep warm?"

"I guess I must be." There was no shame in it. Everyone was different. But somehow, Shane was making me feel as if I should be ashamed of being such a wimp.

He hadn't been kidding about the size of the place. It stretched on for as far as the eye could see in one direction. In the other, the mountains rose majestically. It really was spectacular, and I could see how someone could fall in love with working the land. Very soon, this place would be covered in snow.

"What are you thinking?" Shane interrupted my thoughts.

“I was just thinking it must be hard to navigate this place when the snow hits.”

“We stable the herd. We’d lose them quickly, left out here to the elements. They’re well looked after.” He was looking at me with that look again, I wish I could read his mind right now. When I nodded, he continued, “How are you finding the ride?”

I hesitated. If I’m being honest, I would have said that it wasn’t for me, but I wanted to show that I was willing on my first day.

“It’s... it’s great,” I answered feebly.

Shane started to laugh. “You don’t have to like it, Taylor. In fact, you’ll probably never have to do this again. I just wanted to show you around to get familiar with the place.”

“Oh, I think I have. Thanks.” I hoped that meant that we could go back now.

“Come on. Let’s go a bit quicker. Liven things up a bit. It means we can get back to the warmth quicker.”

“Oh...” But my words died away as Shane broke into a gallop, and I felt that I had no choice but to join him.

“Okay, Bella. Let’s go. But remember to be kind to me.”

It surprised me how such a small horse could go so fast, and bouncing up and down on her back, I was glad I had only had one piece of toast this morning. I didn’t think that I’d be able to stand up straight ever again. It felt as if my legs would be forever curled into a horse’s shape.

I didn’t know what came over me, but as we galloped along, I began to laugh uncontrollably. My hair, which I’d left down, streamed out behind me, and I felt the cold air rushing to greet and bite my skin.

And then the herd came into sight, and it was just like I’d seen in old cowboy movies.

We slowed to a walk, and I saw that Shane was looking at me strangely AGAIN. He looked sad as if something had upset him deeply.

“Is everything okay? Sorry I laughed like that. I loved it!”

Shane just shook his head. “No. I’m glad you enjoyed it. It’s just that…” His words trailed off, and suddenly without warning, he broke into a trot, leaving me staring after him. He held up his hand without looking back, beckoning me on. We didn’t mention our broken conversation again.

When we drew even with the herd, I noticed that there were several men on horseback tending them. The stench and noise from the cattle were distinctly unique and, although overpowering, was not offensive.

Shane introduced me to a few of the men, but some were in the distance, and he said that I’d have a chance to catch up with them later.

That was fine by me. The sooner we got back to the office, the better, as far as I was concerned.

Finally, we turned and began to head back, for which I was eternally grateful. I couldn’t wait to get my hands around a nice mug of something hot.

It was like seeing the promised land when I spotted the ranch house, and I couldn’t remember being as pleased to see something.

I followed Shane to the stables and felt like I would benefit from a massage and a nap, but I still had the entire day ahead of me to face. Before that, I had to dismount Bella, and do my best to stand up.

As I struggled in the saddle, Shane took hold of Bella’s reins to steady her. “Need a hand to dismount?” he offered chivalrously.

“Um, no. I’m okay, I think,” At that moment, I didn’t want him to be so close to me and I wished that I didn’t

have an audience watching me. However, I couldn't avoid the situation and so I took my right foot out of the stirrup and pushed myself with my left foot.

My first attempt didn't quite work out, I ended up with my face buried deep within Bella's majestic mane, as if I had mistaken her for a pillow in dire need of cuddling. *Smooth move*, I thought.

I sat up as quickly as I could. "Just thanking her for the terrific ride." I smiled.

Shane, seeing the entire spectacle, raised an eyebrow as if to say, "What the hell just happened?"

Clearly, my quick recovery wasn't fooling him one bit. But hey, a little humor in the face of a mildly embarrassing situation can do wonders for morale, right?

I tried again. This time, I had to be sure I got off, and I was past caring if it was a graceful maneuver. I didn't think I'd ever be getting on a horse again.

I felt my right foot slap the ground after throwing it over the horse to dismount. Ah, back on solid ground. But I had been too optimistic.

My foot simply collapsed under me, trapping my left foot in the stirrup and causing me to fall on the ground with an awkward groan escaping from my mouth.

I could hear Shane snickering as I clumsily found myself entangled in the stirrup, however, I must give credit where it's due—despite his laughter, he valiantly rushed to my rescue, eager to liberate my foot from its metallic prison.

My legs felt as if they'd never be the same again, and I tentatively tried to walk as far as Bella's reins, at least the horse would give me support until I got the feeling back in my legs.



“Well done, Taylor. You did well. And you’ll get better the more you do it.”

“Wait. What? I have to do it again?” I asked, horrified.

“Only if you want to. I thought you enjoyed it.”

I couldn’t tell if Shane was playing with me because he managed to keep his face expressionless. But was that a laugh he was struggling to suppress?

“Well, I did. A little bit. But it’s not something I’d really like to repeat.” My voice sounded pitiful, even to me.

Shane couldn’t suppress his laughter any longer, and it burst out of him until he was bent over, clutching his stomach. I watched him, hating being the brunt of the joke. I felt so small and ridiculous.

Eventually, he stopped laughing and turned to look at my face. It must have shown how disgruntled I felt because he said, “Aw, come on, Taylor. Lighten up! That is the best laugh I’ve had in a long time.”

“Well, I’m happy to give you a reason for such joy, I feel like a rodeo clown,” I said, offended.

Still chuckling, he said “Let’s make these two comfortable, and then I’ll show you something much less hazardous. How does that sound? And a nice cup of hot coffee or hot chocolate. Yeah?” He tilted his head and waited for my answer.

I knew that I couldn’t stay feeling affronted even if I felt he was being mean, but I needed to learn how to be less uptight and laugh at myself around him. I wasn’t normally like this.

I couldn’t wait to tell the girls about this though. Although they’d already warned me that I wouldn’t last two minutes here, I was determined to prove them wrong. But I’ll make it sound as if I was having fun instead of the purgatory, I felt I was trapped in.

When we settled the horses, Shane led me into the house. This would be the other half of my duties, keeping the house in order. As he opened the front door to let us in, I knew instantly that this was going to become my favorite place of all, not just on the ranch but in my entire life.

The place was very warm and welcoming and tastefully decorated. *Surely there must have been a woman here at some point, no man decorates like this*, I thought.

“Welcome Taylor, to your home away from home,” Shane said. “Let’s see if we can put you back together again. We’ll have coffee, and then I’ll show you around the house. Because it’s your first day and your legs might be a little wobbly after your ride, you sit, and I’ll make the coffee this time. I can’t risk you handling hot water right now.”

His smile was warm, genuine and unexpected. It was the first real one he’d directed at me. It disarmed me, and I couldn’t help but melt a little towards him.

## CHAPTER 4 – SHANE

Seven years ago, my ranch hosted a horse show. Out of all the participants, I noticed this beautiful woman that was competing in the show jumping competition.

She was riding a chestnut-colored mare and she displayed remarkable skill in the arena, effortlessly navigating the show jumping course with precision and finesse.

Something about her caught my eye, and I couldn't help but smile as I watched her ride.

After she finished, she came over to the stables where I was standing. We looked at each other, and I felt a spark between us.

I instantly felt a strong connection to her, though I didn't understand why. I watched as she walked towards me, and I realized I was holding my breath. When she reached me, we stood there for a moment without saying anything. Finally, she said, "Hi, I'm Sierra. And you?"

"I'm Shane Gatlin," I replied, my voice shaking a little. I cleared my throat, trying to hide my nerves.

She replied, "So, you're the owner of this beautiful ranch. It's nice to meet you, Shane. Thank you for hosting this show, I've had a great time." Her smile made my heart melt.

"Nice to meet you, too," I said, trying to sound smooth, but probably sounding more like a stuttering mess. I cringed internally as the words left my mouth. I couldn't believe how nervous I was. I hadn't felt this awkward around a girl since middle school.

We talked about the show for a while, then suddenly Sierra said she had to go back to the hotel, she was leaving for Florida in the morning and started to turn to leave.

Panic surged through me, and I blurted out, “Wait! Can I ask you something?”

She turned back, looking curious. I stumbled over my words, feeling embarrassed. “Um... would you like to come over to my ranch house for dinner tonight before you leave?”

Sierra’s eyes lit up, and a smile spread across her face. “Your ranch house? That sounds nice, Shane. I’d love to join you for dinner.”

Relief washed over me, and I couldn’t help but grin. “Great! I’ll make it special,” I replied, feeling the excitement building within me. “Should we say 6:30?”

After a moment of thought, Sierra agreed, “Yes, 6:30 works. That should give me enough time to pack when I get back to the hotel.”

“Perfect,” I eagerly responded. “I’ll be waiting for you. It’s the one with the white fence over there.” I pointed in the direction of the ranch house.

Sierra seemed just as excited as I was. “I’ll find it,” she assured me warmly. “I’m really looking forward to it, Shane. Hotel food is dreadful.”

The rest of the day flew by as I prepared for our dinner. With each passing hour, my anticipation grew stronger. When evening finally arrived, I warmly welcomed Sierra into my home, hoping to make it a truly memorable night.

As we sat down to eat, the conversation flowed easily. We laughed and enjoyed each other’s company. Time flew by, and I didn’t want the night to end.

Sierra checked her watch and sighed. “I should get back to the hotel,” she said sadly.

Reluctantly, I nodded, not wanting to say goodbye. “I understand. But I’m grateful for tonight. It’s been wonderful.”

Sierra smiled. "Thank you, Shane. I hope to see you again someday."

"I'd love that," I said.

With a final hug, we said goodbye. As I watched her walk away, I couldn't help but feel a sense of loss, I blurted out; "Would it be possible if we could exchange phone numbers?"

"I travel to Florida on occasion and would love to get together and have dinner with you." I lied, I'd only been to Florida once in my lifetime as a child.

"And remember, we'll be hosting another show next year and you're always welcome at the ranch."

"That would be lovely" she said as she wrote her number down on a piece of paper.

When she left that night, I found myself thinking about her constantly. After a week went by, I made a bold decision and booked a plane ticket to Florida to see her. I didn't know what the future held, but I knew I wanted her in it.

Over the next six months, I traveled four times to see her, and she came to the ranch for the horse show in the spring. We were falling in love, and I was the happiest man on earth. We got married that summer.

## CHAPTER 5 - TAYLOR

I did feel better after a strong coffee, and the feeling began to return to my legs.

“Wow, look at the time. It’s eleven thirty already,” Shane announced. “Time sure does fly by when you’re having fun, eh?” He smiled. For once, he appeared happy, and carefree. I wasn’t confident it would last.

“Do you enjoy riding?” I asked.

It only took him a moment to answer. “I sure do. I feel alive when I’m on my horse. At one with nature. Does that sound corny?”

“No. It doesn’t. It sounds fun. I wish that I felt the same and get the same buzz from it as you do.”

“Give it time, Taylor. It might grow on you.” I gave him a weak smile.

“What do you do for fun? In your spare time?” he asked.

“Um, well I have a busy social life. I meet up with my friends quite often and we go for a meal or a drink, sometimes, even clubbing.” It sounded so weak, and I felt pathetic.

“Oh, I see. What else?” He asked. The truth was that I didn’t really *do* anything else, and I realized how dull and boring I must seem to him.

“Well, when I worked at the store, I didn’t really have much spare time, I do enjoy a good book now and then.”

“Yeah? What are you reading currently?” I began to get flustered. I could never remember the authors’ names, sometimes even the titles of books.

“Nothing you’d be interested in, I’m sure. Do you read?” I said, keen to deflect the attention away from me.

“Yes, I do,” he said. I’m sure that he was waiting for me to ask what he was reading but I passed over the topic

because I was sure I'd have nothing intelligent to say about whatever it was. I was beginning to feel like a total dimwit.

"What else do you like doing? You seem like you have a lot of time to yourself?"

"Oh yes. I get plenty of time to myself, maybe too much." Shane looked wistful and I wondered if I'd stirred some emotional pot. But he continued after a brief pause.

"I like music, quite an eclectic mix, from pop to opera. I love playing tennis. In fact, I've been toying with the idea of getting a tennis court installed. But who would I play with? Do you play, Taylor?" He looked at me hopefully.

"Um, no, sorry. But maybe I could learn," I offered. I hoped that he never followed up on that statement.

If he even saw me take part in a sport, then he'd see how useless I was at that too. I was always the last to be picked to join any team at school. I felt as if I couldn't do anything and the longer the conversation went on, the worse I felt.

Shane must have got fed up with trying to find something I excelled at too because he shrugged slightly and looked a little awkward. I felt so inadequate, but I've always been hard on myself and it's time I stopped.

He finished his coffee and then, turning towards me, said, "Come on. I'll show you the rest of the house. You've already seen the kitchen." He opened his arms, palms up to highlight the space.

"Of course, it's part of your duties to cook lunch and dinner as we discussed in the interview. Just for me. The men take care of themselves. Some of them stay over in the bunkhouse, and some stay in town where they live."

"Okay. And what do you like to eat? Let's start with lunch," I ventured. I was no Gordon Ramsey and hadn't professed to be. But I could at the very least fry an egg.

“I like omelets. Normally, I just have a sandwich or maybe some soup and nice bread. You can make soup, I assume.”

I nodded, although I’d never actually *made* any, but I could open up a can. It couldn’t be that hard. Thank God for the internet.

“Dinner, normally a steak or a casserole with fries and some vegetables. I love fish and pasta and I love vegetables but not overcooked. Are you a good cook?”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up.” I laughed nervously.

“Oh. I see.” His words were punctuated. It was pointless to let him believe that I would be serving anything but the most basic meals.

“And I like my steaks medium rare, more on the rare side.” He continued.

“Doesn’t it bother you to eat one of your own animals?” I asked. Even though there were hundreds, I didn’t know if I could raise them from babies only to have them end up on my plate.

“Bother me?” He seemed very amused about this. “Why should it? We raise the best beef in the state, if not the country. Wait until you taste it. Of course, you won’t be here for dinner, but I don’t mind you taking some home with you.”

“Oh, um, thanks.”

He walked over to a cupboard and opened the door.

“Here’s the cleaning stuff. I have to admit that I haven’t been too picky since Ginny left. Everything just worked like clockwork when she was in charge. But hey, she got married and moved to new pastures. I can’t blame her.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. No doubt Ginny was made of stronger stuff than me and Shane hadn’t irritated her as much as he has me.

“Do you think you’re going to like it here, Taylor?”



“I hope so. I don’t see any reason why not,” I lied, I could think of a hundred. I just hope that you’ll be happy with my services.”

“I’m sure we’ll get along just fine. Come on.” He led me into a huge room with windows all along one wall.

“This is the sitting room. I love it in here. It’s so peaceful, and it gets the evening sun. I sit here a lot and listen to music or read.”

We exited through a door on the opposite side and came to a solid oak staircase. It was carpeted down the middle, making it appear exceedingly grand. It took my breath when I saw it.

“Oh, this is beautiful. How long have you lived here, Shane?”

“It belonged to my grandfather, then my father, and it was passed to me when my father died 10 years ago.”

“I see. Do you have any other family around?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m all alone in the world. Other than your mom and dad, do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I have a sister who lives on the west coast. We only see her at Thanksgiving. Which is fine by me.”

He laughed lightly. “Families, eh? I must say, I miss mine. Listen to me...I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. What about you? Have you met the love of your life yet?”

I recognized the attempt to draw the attention away from himself and wanted to oblige. “I hope not. The guys I’ve known so far have all been such a waste of space. I’m still waiting for Mr. Right.” I smiled.

“Don’t wait too long, eh?”

There were six bedrooms, and he showed me around all of them. The sixth was his and the biggest of the bunch.

It had a huge wooden bed and a sitting room which lead to the grand bathroom. “This is the only bedroom I’d like you to clean regularly. You know, make the bed, clean the bathroom, the normal sort of things. I like my sheets changed regularly.”

What’s you’re ironing like, by the way?”

“My ironing?” I asked, shocked. I’d never ironed anything in my life. I normally just smoothed things out with a flat hand and hung them to dry. “I’m not sure. I’m sure I’ll be okay.” I gave an awkward grin.

Shane began to look a little bit more unsure with every question he asked me. I was sure he was wondering if he’d made a huge mistake by hiring me.

“I like my clothes to look perfect. I know that nobody sees me out here, but I see me. Do you get that?”

“Yeah, sure.” I remembered the first day I met him, with his thread worn jeans and wrinkled shirt, *hardly perfect* I thought.

“I usually get my provisions delivered. Means I don’t have to go out shopping. I hate shopping, especially for food.”

“Oh, I love shopping, even groceries.”

*Well, that explains why no one sees him in town, he never goes out,* I thought.

At last, Shane looked hopeful. He must have had to fight the impulse to say, “Finally, something you can do.”

“Okay, that’s about it. The other rooms never get used. Just make sure that they don’t get too dusty. It shouldn’t take up much of your time.”

Next, he took me back down to the office and showed me how to invoice customers, how to place orders, the filing system, a list of customers, and their details. “I better leave it there. Don’t want to overload you. Now, you can start by making us both lunch.”

“Oh. Do you want anything special?”

“Nope. Surprise me.” Just then, Shane got a text from Chase that he needed his help. “Just text me when lunch is ready.” He said as he walked out the door.

I found my way back to the kitchen and started exploring the contents of the cupboards and fridge. Shane had said that he liked soups, sandwiches, and omelets.

I wanted to impress him with the first thing I made, and after consulting the internet, I decided I was going to try my hand at making soup. I found some vegetables and cheese, and after only twenty minutes, I proudly spooned some into dishes accompanied with some cut bread and a slab of butter. Once everything was ready, I texted Shane on my cell phone.

*Lunch is served.*

*On my way.*

I'd put water in a jug. This was the first formal meal I'd served up to anyone. At home, I rarely cooked for myself, only when money was tight. I normally just emptied something out of a can or packet or, better yet, ordered in.

“Hey, that looks good, Taylor. What kind of soup is it?”

“Um, it's curried onion and cheese.”

The recipe online called for the usual soup type of vegetable, but Shane didn't have any of them but an onion, I figured that an onion would give it a nice kick to go with the other ingredients which were cumin, chili and coriander.

Although the color, a sad gray, didn't do much to whet the appetite, I was so proud of it.

“Please take a seat.” I ordered.

Shane stood behind his chair, looking almost afraid to sit. I couldn't really blame him. It did look disgusting,

but the proof was in the pudding. I sat down and raised a loaded spoonful to my lips. I hadn't tried it previously. I'd wanted us both to try it together.

Shane's chair scraped along the slate floor, and he sat down beside me reluctantly.

I lowered my spoon again, suddenly nervous about his reaction.

"You try it first, Shane."

He pressed his lips together as if subconsciously trying to stop it from entering his mouth. Hesitatingly, he put the first spoonful in his mouth, and I watched as his face contorted, making me wonder if I'd poisoned him.

My eyes bulged in disbelief at his reaction. "Shane? Are you alright? It can't be that bad. Are you joking?"

"Try it," he sputtered, grasping for air and raising the jug of water to his mouth. Unceremoniously pouring it in so fast that the water splashed everywhere.

Determined to prove him wrong, I spooned the first taste into my mouth—and spat it out right away. "Water! Water!" I reached for my full glass and then greedily finished his off, too, straight after my own. We were both coughing and sputtering. What had I done?

"How many chilies did you put in there?" Shane asked hoarsely.

"Five of the red ones. They looked like they were about to go bad, so I thought I might as well use them."

"Are you trying to kill us both, Taylor? Perhaps we should stick to sandwiches until you've practiced a bit more. Can you manage a sandwich?"

"Of course, I can. And it's not my fault that the chilies were so hot, is it?" I questioned doubtfully.

He didn't answer, but he didn't need to.

“I think that there’s some nice cold sliced beef in the fridge. Let’s have that instead, huh?”

“Yes. Coming right up.” I stood up, still stinging from my own disastrous attempt at making soup.

I’d wanted so badly to impress him. “I’m sorry, Shane. I will get better, I promise.”

“You wouldn’t have to try very hard to be better than that soup, Taylor. I can honestly say that’s the worst thing I’ve ever tasted.” He looked at me, and for a split second, I thought that I might burst into tears.

How humiliating. He’d already seen me swinging from a horse by the ankle and now this. He must be so full of doubt right now that he hired me.

“Hey, don’t take it so hard. It was your first attempt. You’ll get better, I’m sure,” he reassured me. “At least, I hope so, or I might be dead by the end of the year.”

The laughter started in my chest, and I began to chuckle and was joined very shortly afterward by Shane.

“I’ll say this for you, Taylor. Whether you intend to or not, you make me laugh so much. It’s worth being offered hazardous substances just for the belly-aching laugh it gives me.”

“You are good to have around. And we’ll find your forte yet, I’m sure. You must be good at something. Any idea what it might be?”

“Aw, now you’re just being mean, Shane. Give me a chance. I’ll show you. It must be first-day nerves. That’s all.”

I made us both a beef sandwich. He was right. The meat was divine, and I could see why he was so proud of the cattle he raised. I’d even dressed it up with a few salad leaves and put some chips on the plate so that, in the end, it almost looked appetizing.

I couldn't take too much credit. I hadn't cooked the beef. I'd noticed it was still pink in the middle, and I had always thought that meant it was raw. But Shane talked on and on about how medium rare was the perfect way to eat beef.

How naïve and uneducated was I. But I decided right then and there that was going to change. I was going to become the best cook in the state of Wyoming.

I knew that this was going to be a steep learning curve, but instead of sending me on a downward trajectory, I felt uplifted.

This wasn't just a glorified cooking and cleaning job. I had a lot to learn, and I was looking forward to it. And Shane might not be as bad as all the rumors I've heard about him.

I began to imagine what life would be like here with Shane. I'd cook him the perfect meal, and we'd have friends over for dinner. Every surface would be glistening, every cushion plumped. I'd go riding in the afternoon after packing suitcases in preparation for our annual vacation.

"Taylor! Taylor! Are you still in there?" I came back to planet Earth and saw that Shane was looking at me as if I'd gone crazy.

"Why do you have that silly, weird look on your face? What are you thinking of? I don't like the look of it. It's making me nervous."

He fell silent as if he was really expecting an answer, and I stuttered something unintelligible.

"What? Oh, forget it, could you clear all this stuff away and load the dishwasher? After you've done that, come through to the office, and I'll get you started on the filing. I think even you couldn't screw it up." He chuckled.

He stood up and, just before leaving the room, said, "Thanks for lunch. Things can only get better. Don't lose

heart. Not yet anyway.” He left the room, closing the door behind him, which was when I burst into tears.

I hadn’t expected his voice to be so harsh sounding. Was my mood always going to swing in harmony with his?

## CHAPTER 6 - SHANE

After Taylor left for the day, I rode out to the barn.

Chase, my top herder and best friend was still working so I recounted the day's events to him.

"Well, I finally found a replacement for Ginny. Her name is Taylor."

"Nice, how's she working out?" Chase asked, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"Not entirely sure yet. Her first day has been quite a ride, I tell you," I replied. "She had some trouble getting on and off of Bella, and to top it off, she got her foot caught in the stirrup!"

Chase let out a hearty laugh. "No way! Did she take a tumble?"

"Thankfully, no but I had to steady Bella to keep her from trotting away and dragging her along," I explained, chuckling at the memory. "I'm afraid I might've ticked her off when I couldn't stop myself from laughing. But she seemed to have a good sense of humor about it, even called herself a rodeo clown."

"Wow, I'm glad she didn't get hurt." Chase replied.

"Oh wait, that's only the morning adventure, there's more; I asked her to make lunch and she nearly killed us both with her so-called onion curry soup. Man, that stuff was hotter than the sun! I swear, it could've taken down an elephant!"

Chase burst into laughter. "Are you serious? Sounds like this Taylor girl unleashed her kitchen warfare on you?"

"Oh yeah, she did," I replied, shaking my head. "I took one spoonful, and it was like my taste buds were dancing in a volcano. I thought my tongue was going to catch on fire!"



Chase let out a hearty laugh, his eyes shining with humor. “You’ve heard the saying, right? ‘If you can’t handle the heat, get out of Taylor’s kitchen.’”

I playfully gave him a little nudge. “That’s pretty clever. But seriously, one bite of that dish, and I thought I might need a firefighter on standby.”

Chase’s mischievous grin grew wider, and he leaned in, “Taylor’s got some kind of secret weapon in there, I’m telling you. Watch out, my friend, she could take over the cooking world with her spicy masterpieces.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You might be right, some do like it pretty spicy.”

Chase nodded, “Definitely. Taylor’s cooking sounds like her riding, dangerous for everyone around.”

I couldn’t help but grin at the mental image of Taylor both in the kitchen and on Bella today.

Chase burst into laughter, his whole face lighting up. “Well, I’m sure it was quite the first day for both of you, hopefully she will get better at both.” Chase raised his imaginary glass with a grin. “Here’s to Taylor – the ultimate chef and cowgirl!”

I joined in the pretend toast, “To Taylor!”

We both laughed, but as Chase and I exchanged jokes, memories of Sierra flooded my mind. I couldn’t keep it to myself any longer. “Chase, Taylor reminds me so much of Sierra. It hit me hard when I first saw her. Even her smile and laughter, it’s like *déjà vu*, you know?”

Chase gave me a sympathetic nod. “Yeah, man, I get it. You must really miss her. Sierra had an amazing soul. Even though she’s gone, her spirit lives on, and maybe, just maybe, Taylor carries a piece of that.”

“Maybe, just maybe she does”, I replied hopeful.

## CHAPTER 7 - TAYLOR

As I drove home at the end of my first day, my emotions were in turmoil, and I was beginning to wonder if I was up for the job. Was I just being too sensitive? I knew that I should give myself time to settle in a bit and get used to my new boss. Just as he had to get used to me.

I poured myself some juice and went to sit on the sofa, preparing to call Rebecca and Lilly to tell them about my disastrous first day. But instead of dialing their numbers, I recalled the earlier conversation I had with Shane and his response: "It's just a topic I prefer not to discuss."

I found myself on my phone playing Sherlock Holmes trying to find out all I could about Shane Gatlin.

It didn't take long before a dozen or so hits came up, but what caught my attention instantly was a photo of a stunning blonde standing next to him.

I discovered Shane had been married! Her name was Sierra, and she'd died of pancreatic cancer at the age of thirty-four.

The resemblance between me and Sierra shocked me. We both had long wavy blonde hair, blue eyes, and our face shape was the same. She was stunning. I knew that I wasn't. This woman was head-turning, breathtakingly gorgeous.

I was no competition.

Was that why he was looking at me so strangely when we first met? Was that why I'd gotten the job, because I reminded him of his dead wife? So many questions were running through my mind. I shuddered involuntarily, and without warning, my eyes filled with tears.

"Pull yourself together, Taylor! What on earth are you blubbering about?" I criticized myself out loud.

There was a photo of them together. Shane looked so happy and so handsome.

There was another photo, obviously taken at her funeral, of Shane looking completely devastated. My heart went out to him, and I wanted to run back to the ranch and throw my arms around him to comfort him, tell him that now I knew why he was so grumpy and sad.

I had no idea what it felt like to lose the love of your life, and I didn't know if I was grateful or sorry that I'd never had a love like that to lose.

She had been an expert equestrian, even winning prizes for showjumping. I couldn't even dismount Bella without falling on my face, now I know why Shane was so amused.

I closed the browser, wishing that I hadn't looked.

I didn't think that I'd ever be able to forget that image of Shane looking so lost, as if his life would never be worth living again. No wonder he'd snapped at me. It must have felt to him that I was prodding at an open wound.

As I sat there feeling as if I'd pried into Shane's personal life, my phone rang in my purse, and, taking it out, I saw that it was my mom.

"Hey, mom."

"Hey, you. How did it go today? Tell me everything. Is he as grumpy as everyone says?"

I hesitated. I had to be careful what I told her. One wrong word, and she'd never be off my back. My mom worries about me constantly. I was one of the main focuses of her life since my sister moved away.

Deciding that I had been too sensitive earlier, I told her that I thought I was going to enjoy it and that Shane was misunderstood. He was a nice guy. Underneath his gruff exterior.

"So, he does have a gruff exterior?"

Whoops, that was all she needed.

“No, mom! He’s nice. He was so patient with me.”

“What do you mean? Patient?”

“Well, I made a few mistakes, but it was my first day after all.”

“What kind of mistakes?” Mom asked suspiciously.

“Well, I cooked soup for lunch, but it was inedible.”

“Soup! How could you go wrong with soup? What kind of soup did you make?”

“It was onion and cheese. And I added a few spices.”

“Oh, Taylor. That sounds awful. You should come over on your day off, and I’ll show you a few simple, basic recipes. I hope you regret not doing more around the kitchen with me when you had a chance.”

“I do, mom. I do. But I’ll improve. Look, I have to go. I haven’t eaten yet myself and—”

“Okay, okay. As long as you’re okay. Call me soon and let me know how it’s going.”

“I will. I’ll talk to you later, tell dad I said hi. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

After eating the pizza I’d ordered for dinner, I took a nice long bath to try and relax. Would I improve? It couldn’t get any worse, could it?

*Be positive, Taylor! You can do it,* I told myself.

I had a couple more calls from friends asking me for the lowdown on Shane, and we ended up having a good laugh about my first attempts at impressing him with my culinary skills and horse-riding antics. It made me feel better as if it wasn’t quite the end of the world yet.

I tried to put Sierra Gatlin from my mind. I was exhausted and fell asleep right away, only to start dreaming about him.

*Shane and I had a picnic at the ranch as the sun went down. The sky turned pink, and a gentle breeze blew through the trees. We chatted and laughed, feeling happy and relaxed. It was like we were in our own little world, forgetting everything else.*

*Then something special happened. Shane looked at me, and his eyes were warm and kind. I felt drawn to him, like a magnet pulling me closer. Our breaths mixed in the air, and time felt slower.*

*And then, it happened. Shane tilted my chin up with his fingers. I could feel a tingle as his touch sent a shock through me. My heart raced as our lips met. It was gentle at first, like a light touch, but then it got more intense and passionate.*

*The world around us seemed to disappear. I could only feel his lips on mine, and it felt amazing. It was like time stood still, and the kiss was full of feelings and promises.*

*When we finally stopped kissing, we both felt really happy. We looked at each other and smiled, knowing that the kiss meant something special. It was a moment we would remember, a silent way of saying how much we cared.*

Suddenly I woke up and shook my head, surprised I had dreamt about Shane in such a way. It was difficult to get back to sleep after that.

The next morning, I was rudely awoken by the alarm and groaned in exhaustion. I could see through the gap in the curtains that it was just starting to snow. It wasn't too bad yet, and heavy snow hadn't been forecasted, but it did make me wonder how I was going to cope on the ranch when it was deep.

I'd think about that when I had to, I decided.

As I drove through the ranch gates, elaborate metal ones with a bull on each one, the vastness of the ranch left me

in awe just as much as it had the first time.

I felt nervous about seeing Shane again and I hoped that I'd fare better today than yesterday.

"Hey, morning Taylor," Shane greeted me breezily.

He was casual, which made me realize that I had been too touchy yesterday, probably because I was a bag of nerves.

"Hey, Shane. It's freezing out there. What do you want me to do today? No more horse riding, I hope." I grinned at him sheepishly.

"Ha! No. Not until you're ready, I think."

"Which might be never." I warned.

He outlined some tasks he wanted me to do in the office and then said, "I'm heading out to check on the guys and the herd. It might be time to bring them in. I'll ride over there and see how it feels. I can normally tell if there's a bad snowstorm brewing."

"It's cold enough. Will you be back for lunch?" I tried to keep my face expressionless, but he looked at me in mock horror, his eyes as wide as they'd go.

"I promise not to try to poison you again."

"What culinary delight are you experimenting on me today, do you think?"

"Well, I thought that I might try soup again. It's a surprise, but I promise to stick to the traditional recipes and not be too inventive."

"Yes, Taylor. Don't be at all inventive. That would be good. Maybe you could make me steak and fries for dinner?"

"Sure. And I haven't forgotten. You like it rare to medium rare. Right?"

“You got it.” I watched as he put on his Stetson and pulled on his jacket, lifting his collar to keep out the cold. He looked so strong and capable, and I imagined myself in his arms and his lips on my neck.

*Taylor!* Oh, I was doing it again. Going off into my own little world. My attraction to Shane had come as quite a surprise to me.

“When you’ve finished up in here, could you give the house a bit of a tidy-up, especially downstairs and my bedroom?”

“Sure thing.” I was sure I’d be able to manage that without any problems.

I stood up to watch him leave and ride off into the distance, standing back and making sure that I wasn’t spotted. My attention was drawn by the phone ringing, and for the next hour or so, I didn’t have time to daydream.

The morning was almost gone, but I felt that I’d accomplished quite a lot, speaking to several customers. I felt as if I’d made the right impression upon them and managed to get three out of the four to pay the money, they owed us. Shane would be happy.

In the kitchen, I looked around, refusing to allow myself to feel daunted. I’d been researching desperately online for easy soup recipes and found one that I thought that I could manage easily.

I knew that we had broccoli and cheese. Ideally, I needed blue cheese, but any cheese would do, I supposed. I also needed a potato and an onion and some stock and seasoning.

I’d been close yesterday, only missing out on a potato and stock and vegetables and seasoning. Well, maybe not so close. This time, it would be just right.

I gathered everything together first, as the recipe had advised, and when everything had finished boiling away,

I blended it. It was superb, even though I may have been biased.

I couldn't wait for Shane to try it. I looked at the clock, and it was still only noon. I had time to bake some simple cookies.

The recipe had said that cookies were a good first recipe for a child. So, I figured I should be able to manage making them.

Again, I got all the ingredients out and weighed them out, ready for use. I was beginning to enjoy myself. Maybe I could become an expert at this. I mixed it up and got it in the oven. They only took around ten minutes, so I had time to clean up while they were baking.

I found everything I needed under the sink. I would start on the cupboards. Maybe empty them all out and sort them properly. As I'd expected, they were jammed full of old jars and cans, and as I went through them, I found that more than half were past the stated expiration date.

There was an old bottle of oil at the back of the cupboard. It was greasy, and as I grabbed it, it slipped from my grasp.

I watched in slow motion as it crashed onto the slate floor, the oil spilling everywhere. I reached for the paper towel roll, but my foot slipped from beneath me, and everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, Shane was staring down at me. He looked terrified.

The room was filled with smoke. What had happened?

"No, Taylor, just stay put for a minute or two. You're surrounded by oil, and you're likely to slip again."

"My cookies," I cried out pitifully.

"I'm sure they would have been delicious, but they were cremated when the oil kicked your ass. It's not your fault.



I can see that you were sorting through years of outdated food stuff.”

I wasn't sure where the horrendous wail was coming from and then realized that it was me. “Oh, no! Another mess that I've made. I'm so sorry, Shane. I'm just so useless. I understand if you don't want me to come back.”

“Hey, come on. It's just some burnt cookies and a bottle of spilled oil. It could have happened to anyone. Well, probably not, but at least the house is still standing, which is something.”

He was trying his best to make light of the situation.

“But it happened to me,” I said mournfully. I looked at Shane, expecting some snippy little response but to my surprise he didn't say anything.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

“I'm not mad at you, but I can't say I'm pleased. I'm going to be afraid to come home soon. I'm not sure if I've hired one of the three stooges. If I don't laugh, I might cry.”

Those characters brought an image to me that I couldn't help but laugh at.

“Are you hurt?” Shane asked, softening when he heard me laugh, and his voice seemed genuinely concerned.

“Only my pride. I've cooked you some lovely soup, though.”

“Yeah? That's, um, great. I can't wait to try it. Now, just stay there for a moment until I make it safe for you to stand. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said feebly. I watched him as he set about clearing up the mess, and I sat up in anticipation of being able to stand. Finally, he reached for me and pulled me to my feet.

“Oh, you’re covered in oil. I think you better take a shower and put your clothes in the washing machine. Use the bathroom at the top of the stairs. There should be clean towels in there and a robe you can use.”

“Oh, Okay, thanks.” I didn’t see an alternative. It wasn’t as if I had a change of clothes with me. I skulked away, head bowed, and shoulders stooped.

“I’ll warm your lovely soup up for you to come down to. But take as long as you want.”

The shower felt heavenly as it cascaded over me, washing away the grime and grease from the accident. As I lathered my hair, the smell of the shampoo made me pause. It was so sweet and floral, and definitely a scent more associated with a woman rather than a man.

My panic returned as I used the floral-scented shower gel. I hoped I wasn’t making another blunder. Once I was clean, I dried off with the soft towel that smelled like flowers. It was so luxurious, unlike my own utilitarian towel at home.

I found the robe hanging behind the door and put it on. But there was no hairdryer, so I just had to let my hair air-dry, hoping I wouldn’t look like a drowned rat.

I picked up my things from the floor to take them to the washer in the utility room next to the kitchen. I’d have to come back and clean the bathroom later.

As I entered the kitchen, Shane was at the cooker with his back to me. His shoulders looked so strong and muscular, and I had an overwhelming desire to rest my head on his back and put my arms around his waist. It would make me feel safe forever, I knew.

He must have sensed that I’d entered the room because he turned, and I saw that he was stirring the soup.

“Ah, there you are. I’ll serve this up then. Did you find everything?”

“Yes, I did, thanks. I’ll just put my things in for a wash, and I’ll be with you. By the way, I used some toiletries. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course, it is. Ginny must have left them here. She sometimes showered here if she was going straight out from work.”

“This soup is rather delicious, Taylor. Ten out of ten from me.” He smiled at me, and I felt it was genuine.

“It is, isn’t it? See, I told you I’d improve. How is the weather, by the way? Do you think I need to set off for home early, or is it not that bad?”

“Bad enough to bring in the herd. I think that we might be getting our first serious snowfall.”

“But it’s only September. I swear it comes earlier every year.”

He stood up and walked to the window to inspect it. “Oh, wow! Come and see this.”

The snow must have been falling non-stop since Shane had gotten back, and it was around a foot deep already.

“No! I had better get ready and head home.”

“Ready in what? Although you’re welcome to borrow some of my clothes, if you want. But I honestly don’t think that it’s safe for you to chance it, Taylor. I’d be afraid that you’d get caught up in it. Especially in your little rust bucket.”

“Hey!” I sniped, but I wasn’t really offended, it truly was a rust bucket, 2001 Ford focus with more miles on it than I care to admit. At this rate, I doubted whether I could get onto the main highway, let alone all the way home.

“You’re welcome to stay until it clears up a bit. It is a bit early in the year for it to settle in for the rest of the winter. I’m sure it won’t last long with the sun tomorrow.”

I looked at him, biting my lip and assessing my options. “Okay, thanks. If you’re sure that it’s okay.”

“Yes, it’s fine. You can join me for dinner. It will be nice to have a dinner companion for a change.” He smiled and held up his glass of water to toast me.

After lunch, Shane stood up abruptly. I wondered if he was regretting his offer for me to stay the night. He really didn’t have much choice unless he wanted me to be left stranded in the snow and feel responsible for me.

“I’d better go and help the guys. I’m sure that they can manage without me, but in times like this, it’s all hands-on deck. Are you going to be okay, Taylor? No more accidents. At least, not today. I don’t think my heart can stand it. I thought you were dead when I found you on the floor. It was a relief to find that you were only out stone cold.”

“Oh. Well, thanks, I think. I’ll try and stay safe.” I rolled my eyes at him and felt like a sullen teenager. “Take as long as you like.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, looking puzzled.

I realized how nasty my suggestion might have come across, “oh, sorry. I didn’t mean for you to be so long that you were in danger. I just meant that you don’t have to hurry back on my account. I know I’ve had a few mishaps, but really, I’m sure that I’ll be okay.”

“Taylor, it’s fine. I know what you mean.” He winked, and that only served to make me feel even more foolish.

When he left, I went to collect my clothes from the dryer. Oh, no! No, no, no. I couldn’t believe it. My sweater looked as if it belonged to a doll. Please, please, don’t let this be happening to me right now. Why did I have to cram all the stupid mistakes I was ever going to make in my life into my first week here? Now what?

I pulled on my underwear and jeans, covering my top with the robe. Then I went upstairs to find something I

could borrow for decency and warmth. Where should I look first?

I decided to start in one of the bedrooms and work through the drawers and closets. There must be something I could wear - something a guest or the old housekeeper had left behind.

I passed through the kitchen and glanced at the table, still cluttered with lunch plates. In the first bedroom, nothing caught my eye, nor the second or third. But in the fourth, I found what I needed.

There were some clothes hanging in the closet, and among them was a pale blue mohair sweater. I pulled it on. It fit perfectly.

I wondered if it belonged to the Ginny. It was highly unlikely that it belonged to Sierra. Why would her things be hanging in a separate bedroom instead of the one they shared? I decided to chance it.

I looked around me and saw that the surfaces needed dusting. Maybe if I dusted and vacuumed the carpets, I'd feel as if I'd accomplished something. Shane's bedroom would take longer, of course.

It took me two hours to do the spare bedrooms, and I chose the room I wanted to sleep in. It was a feminine room with a pretty view. I'd enjoy sleeping there.

Now I needed to call mom and tell her what was happening. If I didn't call her today, she'd worry.

The sweater felt soft on my skin, and I kept catching a faint whiff of perfume I couldn't identify. It was floral and light, and I loved it. If I'd known the scent, I would have bought some.

I took a deep breath, wanting to inhale it fully. As I did so, I caught myself in the mirror, swooning like an infatuated teenager. I thought the sweater suited me well.

I turned, checking myself out from all sides.

“Mm, nice, Taylor.” I smiled at myself in the mirror.  
“Okay, let’s get busy.” I went along the hall and let myself into Shane’s room. As I entered, I caught the smell of him. It was a mixture of his cologne and shampoo.

The room was brightened up by the snow outside, which glimmered under a fall sun through the two large windows. It felt warm and cozy, and I imagined him lying in the bed, which was still unmade, the pillow crushed where Shane’s head had been, and the duvet draped haphazardly across the bed.

I walked over to it, picking up one of the pillows and holding it to my face. The smell of him was concentrated on it, and I laid my cheek where I thought his head laid. I replaced it before he came back and caught me, smoothing it down along with the sheet and then the duvet cover.

I opened the window slightly to let some fresh air in.

After dusting and vacuuming, I took his laundry downstairs and put it in the washer, being extra careful with the colors and settings I used. I didn’t want to end up shrinking his clothes too.

“What the hell are you wearing?”

It was Shane. He’d just come in as I re-entered the kitchen from the utility room.

“Um, it’s a sweater. I found it upstairs,” I said pointlessly. Obviously, he could see that. “I hate to admit this, but mine shrunk in the dryer, and I didn’t have anything else. I found this in the closet in a spare room. I’d hoped you wouldn’t mind. I’m sorry.” I just stood there, looking ashamed, like a child, not daring to look him in the eye. I heard him sigh deeply.

“Why am I not surprised?”

He sucked his teeth, and I stole a glimpse at him and saw that he was shaking his head in disbelief. And then the reason for his bad humor hit me like a sledgehammer. It must have belonged to Sierra. How stupid was I? But how was I supposed to have known and what choice did I have?

“I’m sorry, Shane. Again. But what was I supposed to do?” I pleaded.

“Where do I start?” He walked past me, and I heard him going upstairs, his tread heavy and angry on each step and then a door crashed closed.

I racked my brain for some kind of compensatory action I might take, but I couldn’t think of anything. To take my mind off it, I decided to clean the grease off the floor instead. Shane might have cleaned it, but it still had the sheen of grease on it.

I ran some hot water into a bucket and put some dish soap in. I managed to find some rubber gloves and a scrubbing brush and got down to give the area a good scrub. It was good to release all the pent-up negative energy, and before I knew it, I’d covered the whole floor. Afterward, I felt like taking a nap, so after I emptied the water out in the utility room, I made myself a coffee.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for my drink to cool, when Shane came back.

“I’m sorry, Taylor,” he said.

I looked up at him. I wasn’t prepared to forgive him so easily. Not yet, anyhow. I stayed quiet. I wouldn’t tell him that everything was all right. Because it wasn’t. Yes, I’d made a few mistakes. But didn’t everyone? Especially at a new job. How else was I supposed to learn? And I was beginning to feel like his human punchbag. Best to nip that in the bud.

“Taylor? Please don’t sulk. I’m sorry. What else can I say?”

He continued. "It's just when I saw you in that sweater... it was my wife Sierra's, she passed away from cancer five years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry Shane, I had no idea." I lied.

"I'm sorry I got so angry when I saw you in it. Let me make it up to you by cooking you dinner tonight?"

"I know why you're saying that. It's because you don't like my cooking, isn't it?"

"No! Of course not! I loved the soup you made for lunch. And I'm sure that your cookies would have been super too. If you hadn't tried to burn the house down with them." He joked.

"I knew it! I knew you were thinking that!" He didn't reply, and my mouth twitched into a smile without authorization from my conscious brain.

"The floor looks great, by the way. But you're all wet again. I'll get you some pajamas, and you might as well put the robe back on until your jeans are dry again. Um, please don't wash the sweater. I mean, just don't put it in the dryer."

"Okay. You just can't drop it, can you? Do you think I'd make the same mistake twice?"

He didn't reply, just looked away so that he didn't have to meet my eye. After a few minutes he left and told me he needed to see if there was anything else he needed to do before dinner.



## CHAPTER 8 – SHANE

I know I shouldn't have been so harsh with Taylor, it's just that when I saw her in Sierra's sweater, I felt an incredible urge to hold her in my arms and kiss her. I was feeling guilty because of those thoughts. Was I dreaming of kissing Sierra or Taylor?

I knew Chase would still be working so I headed back to the barn. When I saw him, I had to tell him about it.

"Can you believe it, Chase? Taylor was wearing that sweater, the blue one that Sierra loved. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it on her."

Chase looked surprised. "Really? Why was she wearing it in the first place?"

Shane shook his head. "In Taylor fashion, she shrunk her own in the dryer and went rooting around the house to find something to wear and came across it by accident."

I continued. "She had no idea it was Sierra's because I never told her about her. I must admit I was rude to her which I regret. But seeing her in it brought back so many memories. I felt like I was caught between the past and the present."

Chase nodded, understanding the mix of emotions he must have been going through. "It must have been tough, man. Sierra meant a lot to you and seeing Taylor in her sweater probably brought back a flood of memories."

"It certainly did," Shane replied, a hint of nostalgia in his voice. "But you know what surprised me? Taylor's reaction when I told her. She was so understanding, I can't hold it against her, she didn't even know about Sierra. She did apologize a few times."

Chase gave me a little smile. "Well, that shows she cares about your feelings. Seems like she handled it well."

“Yeah, she did,” I said, feeling relieved. “It made me realize how much I enjoy being around her.”

Chase patted me on the back. “Sounds like you found someone special, Shane.”

I nodded. “I did, Chase. Sierra will always have a place in my heart, but it’s time to stop living in the past and start looking ahead.”

Chase grinned. “That’s the way to go, buddy. Embrace what you have now and treasure the memories. Life’s too short to dwell on the past.”

I returned the smile. In that moment, I appreciated his advice. I headed back to the house to prepare dinner and dessert.

## CHAPTER 9 – TAYLOR

I did as Shane suggested and took another quick shower in the same bathroom, putting the robe back on. When I opened the bathroom door, I saw that he'd put one of his t-shirts out for me, and going back into the bathroom, I slipped it on over my bra and replaced my robe on top of it.

In no way did I look attractive with my big wooly socks and big black boots, but it was preferable to being barefoot and freezing, I decided Shane's footwear would have to do.

When I rejoined him, he was busy making dessert. "What are you making? Anything I can do?"

"It's your night off." I'm making tiramisu. And no, there's nothing I need you to do." He flashed his white teeth at me in a sweet smile.

"So soon? I just started, and I get time off already? Come on. There must be something I can help you do. You're making me feel bad. Are you making tiramisu from scratch? That's very impressive."

His eyes narrowed as he considered whether I could be trusted or not. "Well, if you really need something to do, why don't you make a salad? Or you could peel some potatoes to make fries."

"I can peel potatoes. That, I can manage with my hands tied behind my back."

"Oh, please don't, Taylor. No more accidents, huh?"

I gave him a tight-lipped smile. "There you go again, patronizing me."

"I don't mean to, honestly. I guess I'm just too used to my own company." While he was talking, he was getting out the potatoes and a cutting board and knife for me.

“Yeah, I get that. I guess it’s a good thing I came along when I did, otherwise you might have been completely insufferable.

I continued, “Do you have any friends? Or a social life? Do you ever go out?”

He stopped whipping the cream and began to stare into it as if he was searching for an answer. I have Chase who I consider to be my closest friend, I rely on him a lot, but to the other two questions, no, not really.”

My heart went out to him. I could see that he’d made himself a prisoner in his own personal enclave. “It’s not healthy, Shane. You need to get out and mix with other people.”

“Do I? Why’s that, then? Do you have it all?”

“Yes, I think I do.”

“So, look at you. You’re perfectly balanced then?”

My head swung so quickly to look at him that I thought I might have pulled a muscle in my neck.

“Yes, I am well-balanced. I do have friends, friends who care about me, about what happens to me, if I’m happy or not, who are there to pick up the pieces when I’m hurting. Do you have that?”

He turned to look straight into my eyes, and I saw that the sadness had returned.

I instantly felt cruel beyond words. “No Taylor, I lost all those things when I lost Sierra. I was lucky to have her in my life. We wanted children, but she got sick so that never happened.”

“I’m sorry.” Again, I was back to that same word. But this time, it was appropriate.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I miss Sierra every single day, after five years the pain is still there.”

“When I saw you in her sweater, his voice drifted away, I do apologize for how I acted. I’ll be back to finish up in a few minutes. I need to wash my face.” He disappeared from the room.

God, this was like a crash course in getting to know him. It felt like a big roller coaster ride, and my emotions were up and down uncontrollably.

And yet, despite myself, I was already developing feelings for him. I wanted to take his pain away.

When Shane came back into the room, he acted as if nothing had happened. The less said, the better in this instance, I guess.

I’d made some headway with the potatoes and had sliced them up thinly and put them in a bowl of cold water. I’d also fished the salad ingredients out of the fridge and was in the middle of putting it together.

“Great, you’re getting along well? Are you hungry? It’s not 6:00 yet, but we could have this ready by 6:30. How does that sound to you?”

“Sounds great to me,” I agreed.

“I’ll finish up the tiramisu, and then we’ll be ready to go. Here, I’ll open the wine. I’d like to see if it suits your taste.”

“Oh, isn’t it a bit early for wine? Shouldn’t we wait for dinner?”

“You can if you want, but I’m going to have a glass now.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I’d be rude not to have a drink with you,” I said playfully, a smile spreading across my face.

I couldn’t help but laugh. I felt silly, but it was worth it to see him smile back.

“The workday is over. We might as well relax,” Shane suggested.

“I’m game for that, it’s been a rough day.” I watched as he pulled out the cork expertly and poured the wine into our glasses.

“Smell the aroma first and swirl it around your glass like this.” He illustrated what I should do. I’d seen people do it on television, but I’d always thought it looked pretentious.

Could they really smell and taste the fruit separately? I’d always thought not. After doing as he’d instructed, I took my first sip.

“Do this too,” Shane said and pushed it through his teeth and back a few times. I did as he’d said.

I really did begin to taste it and the fruit that had gone into it. “Wow! It’s superb. Who would have thought that gargling with it would make such a difference?”

“Taylor,” he said, laughing at me again. “It is good, though, isn’t it?”

I took another sip, quickly followed by another. It was already beginning to make me feel warm, and I went into autopilot.

I knew that a glass—or two—of this would make me feel more relaxed. It would be an excellent way to get to know each other.

I watched his back as he finished the dessert and put it into the fridge. “Taylor, do you mind setting the table while I finish here?”

“Of course not.” I said.

“And we’ll have a tablecloth and candles. Make it special, huh? I hope you’ll agree that this steak is better than any you’ve ever tasted,” Shane said, confident in his own stock.

“I’m sure that it will be. Without a doubt.” It felt good, felt so right to be here together, getting ready to have dinner.

I felt happy and safe. I took another sip of wine. “This is good. And you’re right. It’s so much better than the swill I’m used to.”

“I never said that, Taylor. Why do you always put yourself down?”

“Do I?” Deep down he was right, I do put myself down, I took another sip of wine.

“I’ll get a pitcher of water too.”

“Is that to dilute the wine?” I asked with a lopsided grin.

“There’s nothing wrong with that. You don’t want to wake up feeling like roadkill, do you?”

I thought of all the hangovers I’d had after nights out with the girls, how awful I’d felt the next day, swearing never to do it again.

“No, I don’t. You’re right.”

I heard the fries hit the hot oil and sputter. The meat was already on the griddle, sizzling away, and my mouth began to water. “I’m looking forward to this, Shane. This is nice, isn’t it? I usually eat alone too, so it’s nice sharing a meal with someone.”

“It is, isn’t it?” The realization must have surprised him because he lightly shook his head as if to ask himself why it hadn’t occurred to him before.

While the meat and fries cooked, Shane whipped up a dressing and poured it over the salad, placing it on the table. I saw him lift the steaks from the griddle and put them on a hotplate to rest while he finished off the fries.

It was like watching a seasoned chef. He knew exactly what he was doing. No wonder he had been appalled by my effort yesterday. I blushed at the thought of it.

Ten minutes later, we were sitting around the dining table, ready to dig into our food. I couldn’t wait. “Dig in,” he said, and we raised and clinked our glasses.

The knife sliced through the tender beef like butter, and I savored every bite I took. “Oh, that is delicious, Shane. This is the best steak—the best food—I have ever tasted. It’s a shame I didn’t make my special onion soup to go with it.”

Shane looked at me, alarm all over his face.

“Joke. But let me know if you’d like me to make it again, okay? It wouldn’t be any trouble.”

By the time we’d finished the first course, we’d gotten to the bottom of the wine bottle.

“I’m going to open another bottle, this time from Spain.”

“Oh, I’m getting a real education tonight, aren’t I?” As he pulled out the cork, I raised my glass.

“No, I’ll get you a fresh glass. You don’t want to confuse your palate.”

“Oh, heaven forbid.” It felt just a little bit pompous, but I could go along with it very easily.

“This is Rioja,” Shane announced. Again, we had to repeat the whole ceremony, but I completed it quickly so that I could get on with the sampling properly.

“Muy delicioso, señor.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.”

“All the time. Fluently.” I took another drink.

“So, Taylor. There’s obviously much I don’t know about you, tell me about yourself.”

“What do you want to know? There really isn’t much.”

“Do you want to get married? Have children?”

I was shocked he went there. “I know that I want children. Not so sure about the marriage bit, but I suppose it would be ideal for a child to grow up in a family.”

“Who am I to say?” Shane said dolefully.



“Why...” I let my question trail off. I was about to ask him if he ever wanted children, but he’d already told me, hadn’t he?

“Yes, I really wanted children, at least one child. But then Sierra got sick. I do wish I had someone to take over this ranch but that’s never going to happen now.”

“You don’t know that for sure, maybe if the right person came along...” I suggested hopefully.

“The right person did come along. And then she went away forever. I don’t think anyone is lucky enough to get a love like that twice.”

“It might be something different but just as good in its own way. Maybe.”

“You think so? Ha! Then, why haven’t you settled down yet? Your biological clock must be ticking away.”

“It’s at the back of my mind, yeah. I figure I’m only 29 so I have a few years left. Also, the right person hasn’t come along. I’ll know it when he does.”

*I didn’t have to look far. He was sitting right across from me. I just had to convince him. I thought.*

“What do you—*did* you look for in a woman?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I guess, everything that Sierra offered. She was kind, gentle, funny, clever, and so beautiful. The full package, really.”

“Wow! Those are some big shoes to fill,” I said, feeling him slip further away instead of closer.

“It was perfect. While it lasted, she was everything I needed.”

“That’s some ghost for someone else to live up to don’t you think? I mean, it’s hard to compete with that.”

“I wouldn’t ask anyone to.” He took a sip of his wine. He’d drunk much less than me, and I was feeling tipsy.

“What about you? What do you look for in a man?” he asked.

“I’d like someone to make me feel desired and wanted, appreciated and safe. I’d want him to laugh at my jokes and comfort me when I’m sad, and I want to think he’s the sexiest thing on two legs.”

“That’s quite a shopping list.”

“I think that’s the minimum.”

“Time for dessert.” He deflected. He brought it to the table and served some up for both of us. Again, it was delicious.

“You are setting the bar very high for me to reach. How am I ever going to be able to match this?” I asked gloomily.

“It’s not rocket science, Taylor. Nothing that can’t be achieved, it’s all about practice and research. I could teach you if you’d like. But if you really don’t want to cook dinner for me, then you don’t have to. I don’t mind cooking for myself. I’ve gotten used to it these past 3 weeks since Ginny left.”

“And it might be a lot safer,” I joked. “But I do. I want to cook for you and make your life easier. I know that you work extremely hard, and you’ve had a rough time, it makes my heart ache thinking about how much you’re hurting.”

I continued. “I’d like to try and make that a little better if I could.” The wine was obviously making my tongue loose but at the time the statement felt perfectly reasonable. I noticed from Shane’s face that he might not agree with me.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking panicked.

I blushed. “No, Shane. I’m not hitting on you. But I do like you. I care about you. You’ve been kind to me since I started here. And I appreciate that.”

“I’ve been a disaster, but I am trying my best. You know that don’t you?” I had begun to feel more relaxed and wondered if that’s because we were both settling into the relationship. Or could it be the wine? Probably a combination.

“Yes, I know that Taylor. And while we’re giving out compliments, I’ve said it before, and I meant it. It’s been good having you around. You make me laugh. I woke up this morning looking forward to seeing you. And no, I’m not hitting on you either.”

My heart took a leap. Obviously, he likes me too. *Oh boy do I feel like a teenager back at school*, I thought.

“Shall we take our drinks through to the sitting room? Watch a movie? Are you up for that?” Shane asked me.

“Sure, I’m up for that. I’ll just clear these things away. I don’t want to come back to them tonight, and I don’t want to get up to them tomorrow morning either.” I gave a little chuckle.

“Wow, it sounds funny saying that. As if I live here.”

“You know, it might make sense if you did.” He was watching me rinse the cutlery and load them into the dishwasher beside the sink. “Do you rent or own your own place?”

“I rent. I’m just a poor girl from the wrong side of town, remember?” I said it lightly, but really that’s how I felt. He had money, property, and looks. He was intelligent, educated, and cultured. What did I bring to the table? I couldn’t even make soup.

“You’re funny, Taylor,” Shane said as if I’d spoken out loud.

“What?” I asked, perplexed.

“You make me laugh. And that’s worth so much. It’s sweet.”

“Okay. I’m done. What movie are you in the mood for?” I walked through to the room.

*Sweet? Really? I hate being described as sweet. Was that how he saw me?* I pondered.

“You choose,” he said in a diplomatic way. “I’m easy.”

“I’m sure that you aren’t, Shane. I bet if I chose a movie, you wouldn’t want to watch it.”

“Does that mean we’re not compatible?” Was he joking?

“Compatible? In what way? Now I’m confused, Shane. Stop playing with me.”

“What do you mean? Playing with you?” We’d reached the couch now, and I put down my glass and flopped down. He placed the bottle and his own glass beside it and turned to look at me.

“I mean that you know I like you.” I said.

“And I like you too, Taylor. You’re funny and witty and pretty. How could I not?”

“But is it just as friends?” I said without realizing how bad that sounded. I wanted to tease my own truth from him. I wanted this guy to want me more than anyone I’d ever wanted.

“I admit that I’m attracted to you, if that’s what you mean. But it isn’t fair to you to have a relationship.”

“Why not?” I asked, becoming aware that my voice was disappearing in my throat. I was breathless as his face got closer to mine.

“I’d hate to hurt you. And that’s what would end up happening. I’m totally screwed up since Sierra’s death, I know that and don’t want to bring anyone into my despair.

He continued, “you’re far too nice to tell you anything but the truth. I like you a lot, and yes, I’d thought about

getting you into bed. But you're too good for that. Don't give yourself away too easily, Taylor."

"But what if it hurts me more not to have a relationship than it ever possibly could not to?"

*What did I just say? That sentence doesn't even make any sense at all, it's the wine!* I thought.

"You've had too much to drink Taylor, you're making no sense at all." Shane said while taking my glass away.

"But I know exactly what I want. I don't want to wait. Why wait?"

The logs in the fireplace were blazing, casting flickering shadows across the room. The soft light from the lamps made everything feel cozy and safe. The wine had made us both a little more open and relaxed.

I looked at Shane, feeling suddenly brave. "Maybe we could make something good together," I said quietly, my heart beating a little faster. His face was so close to mine, and I was conscious of only having my underwear on under the robe. I could feel his wine-scented breath on my face, and my eyes couldn't leave his lips. He put his hand under my chin and looked into my eyes.

And then, suddenly, as if he'd been bitten by a snake, without warning he stood up. "What the hell are we doing? Are we both mad? No, this is not what I wanted. Remember, you're my employee. I should remember it too. Thank God I did before it's too late."

He stormed out of the room and went upstairs to his room, leaving me open-mouthed, shocked and hurt. He couldn't have hurt me more if he'd slapped me right in the face.

I sobered up quickly.

## CHAPTER 10 – SHANE

I could have kicked myself for how I acted. How am I going to face Taylor tomorrow. I have to apologize to her again for my actions. As I climbed into bed, I knew sleep wasn't going to come easy. I had so many things on my mind.

After an hour, I must have dozed off and started dreaming of our evening, with a very different outcome.

*Taylor and I sat close to each other, laughter filling the air. Her eyes sparkled with joy and mischief, and I couldn't take my gaze off her. The connection between us felt magical, drawing us together like two stars in the night sky.*

*As the night went on, time seemed to slow down, and we grew even closer. The laughter turned into meaningful glances, and the silence was filled with unspoken words. The chemistry between us was undeniable, and my heart pounded with excitement.*

*Taylor's hand found mine, and a jolt of electricity surged through me. I looked into her eyes, and in that moment, everything else faded away. It was just her and me, our souls entwined in this dreamlike world.*

*I leaned in and kissed her, her soft lips pressing against mine. It was a perfect moment in time, we reveled in the closeness, feeling the warmth of our emotions igniting like the fire in the hearth.*

*I realized that I was falling in love with Taylor. It was both exhilarating and terrifying, as love always is. I felt alive, happy, and complete.*

*As the night unfolded, the soft light, the crackling fire, and the depth of our connection painted a picture of a love I longed to experience again in reality.*

When I woke up the next morning, I couldn't help but smile. The memory of my dream lingered, leaving a glow

of hope and possibilities. Maybe one day, my dream will come true, and I will experience a night like that for real, full of love and wonder.

It was a beautiful thought, and it warmed my heart.

I got up, as I looked out the window, I saw that the snow was still there but not deep enough to stop me from riding out to the barn in my four-by-four.

I knew Chase would be there. I really needed to talk to him, I had to tell him about the intense night I spent with Taylor.

“You won’t believe what happened, man. Taylor and I had a crazy night. She said we could be good for each other, that we should give it a shot, you know? I couldn’t do it, Chase. It just didn’t feel right.”

Chase looked intrigued. “Why not, Shane? She seems into you, and you’re definitely into her too, right?”

I sighed, feeling torn. “Yeah, I am. But she was tipsy, and I didn’t want to take advantage of that. Besides, it’s only been two days and I felt like I’d be cheating on Sierra, you know? I mean, it was so tempting, and her words were pulling me in, but I couldn’t let myself go there.”

Chase leaned forward, a concerned look on his face. “I get where you’re coming from, man. You don’t want things to get messy or hurt anyone in the process.”

“That’s exactly it,” I said, nodding. “I don’t want to rush into something and then regret it later. And, honestly, it felt like Sierra was right there with us, reminding me of our love and commitment.”

Chase gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “You’re doing the right thing, Shane. You can’t replace what you had with Sierra, but maybe you and Taylor can be there for each other in a different way.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I replied, feeling a mix of emotions. “We just need to take it slow and see where things lead.”

No need to rush into anything.”

I realized sometimes, in the midst of confusion and temptation, a good friend is all you need to find your way.

I rode back to the house to make Taylor some breakfast, I needed to apologize for the way I acted last night.



## CHAPTER 11 - TAYLOR

I woke up feeling like a Mac truck hit me. My mouth was dry, and my head ached. How much wine did I drink last night? What did I say? Did I make a total fool of myself? I remembered quietly crying myself to sleep, humiliated and feeling ridiculous. And then it all began to flood back. How could I possibly face him this morning?

The smell of bacon hit me from downstairs, and it was enough to make me climb out of my sanctuary. After putting on the robe, I went down to investigate.

“Good morning,” I greeted Shane in a quiet voice. I couldn’t look at him and I knew that my eyes were puffy from crying and too much wine.

“Morning, Taylor,” he replied without looking at me. His voice sounded uplifted. It had a different edge to it. Maybe it was because he was concentrating on the food, I tried to kid myself.

“There’s coffee and juice on the table. Take a seat and help yourself.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, taking a seat and pouring myself a cup of coffee. I waited for him to join me, the silence lingering between us. He seemed intent on avoiding eye contact, making me uneasy.

“Look at me, please,” I pleaded, my voice tinged with fear. “What happens now? Are we just going to pretend nothing happened last night? Should I continue working for you? What’s going on in your head? I was so happy, and now I feel miserable.”

He took a bite of his sandwich, focusing all his attention on it. I couldn’t bring myself to eat mine. Finally, he looked at me, and his words hit me like a punch. “I think we made a mistake, Taylor. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? I don’t get it. Why are you sorry? We were having a great time last night. I hadn’t felt that happy in

ages. And now you suddenly find me repulsive? Why are you ruining everything now?"

He turned to face me, as if my words had wounded him. "I don't find you repulsive. Don't be ridiculous. Grow up!" "You were feeling no pain last night Taylor and the last thing I wanted to do was take advantage of you."

"Oh, I see," I snapped, standing up abruptly and knocking my chair over in the process. Shane quickly rose from his seat, mirroring my reaction. I didn't know where that outburst came from. Maybe it had been brewing inside me since the moment I laid eyes on him.

"Please, let me explain. Let's talk it out. We can't leave things like this. Shane said clumsy. It's probably my fault," he pleaded, trying to diffuse the tension.

"Probably?!" I retorted, my frustration boiling over."

The room fell silent once more, the weight of our unspoken words hanging heavily between us. It seemed that the happiness we had shared had suddenly shattered, leaving behind a mess of confusion and regret.

I couldn't bear to face him any longer, the hurt too fresh, so I turned and walked away, leaving him behind to contemplate the mess we had created.

"I see the snow cleared miraculously. What a shame that didn't happen last night, eh? Then, you wouldn't have the inconvenience of dealing with me this morning and I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself." I felt tears stinging my eyes and couldn't wait to escape his presence.

Looking away, I asked, "Do I still have a job? I think I need to take a few days off and then come back when we've both had time to let this cool down?"

"You don't have to do that, Taylor. Please stay. I won't mention last night again, I'd rather just forget it ever happened."

“How good of you. I’d feel better taking a few days off.”

God! I hated him! How could I ever have been taken in by him? He was so insensitive; I was shaking with rage.

He nodded solemnly. “If that’s what you want.”

I went to collect my jeans from the utility room and went upstairs to get ready. I could hardly go home wearing a bathrobe. I heard him putting the sandwiches in the trashcan and loading the dishwasher.

A few minutes later, I heard the front door slam, and when I looked out of the window, I saw him climbing into his four-by-four and driving off. That’s when my tears erupted. What was happening? How could I ever recover from this?

Driving back in my own little car was uneventful since the weather had cleared. We had so much snow yesterday. It was unbelievable that it could be this fine and sunny just twelve hours later. A bit like my mood in reverse.

Thirty minutes later, I found myself outside my childhood home. I knocked on the door, and mom appeared.

“Taylor, what a lovely surprise. But what are you doing here? Why aren’t you at work? Oh, did he fire you?”

“Oh, mom.”

She opened her arms, and I walked into them, enjoying her comforting embrace. She let me sob for a few minutes and then, putting her arm around my shoulders, led me into the house.

“Come on, let’s make you a nice hot drink, and you can tell me all about it.” She said that I should go into the living room while she made drinks for us in the kitchen.

On the mantel were a display of photographs of me and my sister at every age. There I was without my front teeth at the age of seven or eight. Sitting on a swing in

the yard. So carefree. I hadn't had any idea of what life held for me.

I knew that I wasn't the only woman to be disappointed by a man, and I hadn't even known Shane for that long, but this pain stung like needles in my heart. How could I have been such a fool?

It was good being home. Even the ticking of the old grandfather's clock was reassuring. I'd so often found it irritating. I remembered that it used to drive me crazy and steal the focus from anything I was doing.

The door opened, and Mom came in carrying a tray with two steaming cups and some cookies. "I just baked these this morning."

That was enough to set me off, and I burst into a loud wail. Mom had been baking since I was a little girl. Coming home after school and smelling it was like a warm hug, and I still loved the smell wherever I was.

Apart from the disastrous outcome of the cookies I'd made at the ranch. I'd so wanted to please and impress Shane. Shane!

When I looked at Mom, she was looking at me, full of concern. "Take your time, Taylor. I've got all the time in the world."

"I've been such a fool, Mom. He rejected me."

She grimaced, looking like she'd smelled something extremely distasteful. "Rejected you? What do you mean? For sex?"

I nodded.

"But how did you get into that position, Taylor? Have you no self-respect?"

"Because I thought he liked me. I like him. A lot. He's so sad. I just read him wrong. He wanted me to be like his wife, and I can't be. No one can, so no one will ever be

good enough for him. He just treated me like a fool. And why shouldn't he? I am a fool."

"Is that what he told you? That's ridiculous. And you're not a fool! He's the fool. Not grabbing a good thing when he sees it. Erm, I mean you, not the sex part," she said, clearly embarrassed.

"No. He didn't say so exactly. But I just know, Mom. I said that to him, and you should've seen his face. He didn't deny it. He's still hung up on her. She died five years ago. Five! And he's still totally screwed up."

"But he didn't say this to you. So how do you know?"

"Well, he was so quiet. Said last night had been a mistake and that he was no good for me. I feel like such an idiot."

"You're not an idiot nor a fool, honey. It sounds to me like he doesn't know what he wants. Men! You're better off out of there. They all have a lot of growing up to do. So, how did you leave things? Are you still supposed to be working there?"

"Yeah. I said I wanted to take a few days off and then see how we feel. See if we can work together at least and put last night behind us. As if it never happened. And I need the job, don't I?" The thought of that made me cry again. "The trouble is that I think I love him." My bottom lip trembled.

"No. You don't love someone after two days of knowing them, Taylor. You might have a crush on him, but it takes longer to love someone, I mean it's only been two days for goodness' sake.

"He just made you feel good for a little while. I think you made the right call staying away for a few days. Do you think it might be better to look for another job? It doesn't sound like you're a perfect fit for it anyway. Do you need that job that badly? I think you could do better."

"Oh, thanks mom. I was only there for two days. I was just beginning to learn the ropes. I will get better. I know

that I will. It just takes time. I was good in the office and got it all up to par. My cleaning isn't so bad. It was just the cooking part, really."

"I didn't think I would like the job at first, but I can see how I could really make it into something special. It's a challenge and I'm not used to that."

"I'm not going to let that one mistake ruin everything for me. I could really make something of this. It's an excellent experience for me."

"Are you sure that it's not the rancher that's keeping you there, not the job?"

I looked at mom. Her face was so earnest, and I knew that she had no ax to grind. She had my best interest at heart. She raised her eyebrows.

"I don't know. It doesn't help that he's so perfect."

"Perfect? Bah! No one's perfect, Taylor."

"But he's handsome in a rugged kind of way. He's strong, clever, and kind."

"You still think he's kind? After how he's made you feel?"

"He's like a wounded animal, mom."

"Who took his pain out on you. You need to get some self-respect, Taylor. Don't be such a doormat. Where's your pride?"

"I'm not sure I have any left, mom," I said in a pitiful whiny voice.

"Well, find some. Now! Or you're going to keep getting hurt over and over. Now, eat your cookies. They're your favorite."

Even I didn't know what my favorite cookie was, so I doubted that my mom did. But I picked one up and bit into it dutifully. The crumbs tasted like sawdust, and I regretted it at once. I put the rest down on the plate.

“Oh, come on, Taylor. You’re not even going to eat? You need some meat on those bones. You’re getting too thin. I know that you’re not eating properly. Always going through the drive-thru, I bet. It’s about time you started taking better care of yourself.”

“I know, mom. Would it be okay for me to stay over tonight? What time does Dad get home?”

“Of course, it would. That would be lovely. Stay for as long as you like. I don’t know why you ever moved out, really. Dad should be home pretty soon.”

“Because I’m nearly thirty years old, mom. Too old to be living with my parents.”

“You’re never too old to be loved by your parents, Taylor. Did you have breakfast?”

“No. I couldn’t eat it. Thanks though.”

I looked at my purse. My cellphone was in there, and I was willing it to ring. I wanted Shane to call me and tell me that he’d made a huge mistake. That he loved me and wanted to be with me forever.

In other words, I was living in a dream.

Had I put it on silent by mistake? I fished in my purse to retrieve it. No, it wasn’t on silent. I hadn’t missed any calls.

A new surge of despair swept over me. I just wanted to sleep for a week, forget all about these last few days, and pretend that I’d never met Shane Gatlin.

Could I even go back there? Was mom right? Would I be better off getting another job?

The store was okay, but I was bored every day. At least at the ranch, every day was different. I was my own boss when Shane wasn’t around.

Although I was bound to get lonely spending every day alone, wasn’t I? Especially if he was as unfriendly

towards me as he had been today.

“Sleep on it, Taylor. See how you feel tomorrow, eh?” Mom suggested. “Come on. Come and help me get dinner ready for tonight. I’ll show you how to bake a cake. It’s best to stay busy when you’re feeling like you are now.”

“Okay.” We stood up together, but my legs were like lead, and I had to push myself to move.

But she was right. I enjoyed being domestic. It was good for the soul. We decided on a chocolate cake, dad’s favorite. He was a bit of a chocoholic and always had to have some close to him, a proper sweet tooth. I’d been lucky enough to escape it.

That would have caused me just one more problem to deal with—weight watching. It had never seemed worth the guilt to me.

Mom let me take charge, just telling me what to do. So, when it was complete, the cake truly felt as if I’d made it myself.

For a pinprick in time, I forgot how things were with Shane and wanted to send him a photo of it. And then, the reality of our situation hit me like a ton of bricks and sent my mood spiraling down again. I sighed heavily.

Just as I did so, my phone beeped with a message alert. It made me jump, and I stared at it as if it might be a bomb. When I picked it up, I saw that the message was from Shane.

*Can we talk, please? Please come back. S*

My heart began to beat rapidly, and I was biting my bottom lip so hard that it was close to bleeding.

“Is it him?” Mom asked, although there was really no need to ask because I’m sure my face had turned ashen.

I nodded.



“What did he say?”

“He’s asking if we can talk. Can I go back?”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I’m not sure, mom. I want to talk to him, but I’m scared too.”

“Scared? Of what, you’re not frightened of him, are you, Taylor?” She was ready right then and there to jump into her car and beat him upside the head with her purse.

“No! Of course not. I’m scared of what he’s going to say. I don’t want him to say that it would be better if I left the ranch. I don’t want to.” Suddenly, I wanted more than anything to go back and try again, put last night behind us like Shane had suggested.

“But if it’s going to be awkward for you both, maybe that would be for the best. Don’t you think so?”

“No, I don’t. And why should he get to call all the shots? God! I’m angry. How dare he treat me like this?” But my anger was more of a show for mom more than anything else. I wasn’t angry with Shane at all.

How could I be? I was the one that had made a complete fool of myself, I had to at least admit to it.

“That’s my girl. You get good and angry. At least give him a piece of your mind. He shouldn’t get away with this free of blame. And you need to tell him so. You’re worth so much more than that.”

“You’re right! And I’m going to. Who does he think he is? Treating people like that. He’s not the only person who gets to have hurt feelings. Mine are bad at the moment too. And that’s because of him. Just you wait, Shane Gatlin!”

“Um, can I suggest you go home first and change?”

“You bet I will. I am going to look so unattainable that he’ll bite his own tongue off for saying those things to

me.” We grinned at each other and hugged before I left for home. I couldn’t wait to get back to the ranch.

## CHAPTER 12 – SHANE

I sat there, alone in my sitting room, wrestling with my thoughts. *Shane, you have to face this*, I muttered to myself, trying to muster up some courage. *It's time to figure out what to do about Taylor and my feelings towards her.*"

I had just sent a text asking her to come back so we could talk about what happened. I didn't want to lose her, and I felt she was slipping away from me.

With all the emotions that were going through my mind, exhaustion finally took over, I fell into a deep sleep, and I found myself dreaming and having a conversation with Sierra.

*Sierra stood before me, looking as beautiful as ever, her eyes filled with love and understanding. The guilt and fear of moving on weighed heavy on my chest, and I poured out my heart to her.*

*"I miss you, Sierra," I whispered, tears welling up. "I don't want to betray our love by moving on, but I think I'm falling in love with Taylor."*

*Sierra gave me a gentle smile and spoke in a soothing voice, as if to calm my troubled mind. "Shane, you can't hold yourself back forever. Our love will always be a part of you, but life is meant for new experiences and connections. You deserve to find happiness again."*

*Her words struck a chord deep within me, reminding me of the depth of our love. Sierra's presence felt like a warm embrace, giving me permission to seek happiness with Taylor.*

*With a mix of gratitude and sadness, I looked into Sierra's eyes. "But how can I let go? How can I move forward without feeling like I'm leaving you behind?"*

*Sierra's voice filled the air, assuring me with warmth. "Shane, our love goes beyond time and space. I'll always*

*have a special place in your heart. Hold onto our memories, but don't let them imprison you. Open your heart to Taylor and let love guide you."*

As I opened my eyes and the dream faded away, a deep sense of calm settled over me. It was as if Sierra's words had filled the room, wrapping me in their comforting embrace. I lay there for a moment, letting the peace wash over me, before I finally got up from my chair.

As I did, it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"Thank you, Sierra," I said aloud, my voice shaking slightly. "

I stood there, my body feeling light and free, and I noticed the sunlight streaming in through the window. It had a soft, warm glow, and it made the room seem so peaceful. I breathed in deeply, the air smelling fresh and clean.

I felt awake and refreshed, like a whole new world was opening up before me.

I couldn't wait to see Taylor. I hoped she got my message and was willing to hear what I had to say.

## CHAPTER 13 - TAYLOR

Taking my time in the shower and carefully blow-drying my hair, I felt eager to return to the ranch.

I chose my clothes with care, selecting an outfit that was professional yet alluring. I didn't want to appear too eager, but I couldn't help but put extra effort into looking my best.

I had been full of confidence at Mom's, but as I drove along to the ranch—and Shane—that began to dissipate quickly. I had to do my best not to cry, no matter what the outcome.

I hadn't thought about how I expected this to pan out, but now, alone, my mind turned to Shane and how I wanted things to be.

There was no excuse for the way he'd treated me. He'd used and abused me and left me feeling small and ugly. I had a right to rage at him.

That's how I should have felt. But I didn't. He'd done nothing to make me think that. That had all been down to me, in my own twisted thoughts. I couldn't believe I'd been too drunk to know what I was doing.

I had believed that I wasn't, that I was completely sober, but I had more wine than he had. I'd let myself get carried away.

I'd wanted to blame Shane because things didn't work out the way I wanted them to. But that wasn't his fault. Not at all. It was mine.

As I pulled into the service road, I wondered if I should go to the office or the house first. I wandered over to the office, but he wasn't there, so I headed toward the front door. Should I knock or just go in?

It was still my place of work. It was odd knocking on the door when I worked there. I knocked and walked straight

in. There was no one in the kitchen.

“Hello!” My voice echoed around the place. Well, I had no intention of going looking for him around the ranch. I’d message him.

*I’m here now. In the kitchen. T*

I was so deep in thought that I didn’t hear him come in from the sitting room.

“Oh, hey, Taylor. I didn’t know you were here.”

I almost jumped out of my skin.,

“Woah, it’s only me. Sorry if I scared you.”

“You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that, Shane. If I had a weak heart, that could have been fatal.”

“Um, sorry. I am just coming into my kitchen in my own house. I don’t know how else to do that.”

“Oh. Yes, I guess so. I overreacted; I suppose.” I looked down. “Maybe we’re getting off on the wrong foot again. Let’s backtrack, huh? Start again. This meeting, that is.”

“Sounds good to me. How are you feeling? Ready to talk?”

“I’ve always been ready to talk.” I could see he was straining at the reins, but he swallowed down whatever it was he was going to say.

“Shall we go to the sitting room? It’s more comfortable. Have you eaten?”

“Yes, I have, thanks. And I made a—” I was about to get my phone out and show him the photos I’d taken of the cake but stopped myself, feeling like a schoolgirl.

“Made a what?” he asked, his interest spiked.

“Err, nothing. Nothing. Yes, let’s go to the sitting room.” I followed him in. As I entered, memories of last night flooded my head and made me feel sad. How I wished

things could have worked out. I sat on the chair, so I wasn't too close to him.

"Thanks for coming, Taylor. I'm sorry about the way it turned out. I should have been more, um, I don't know, more self-aware."

"Self-aware? Yes, that's a good word, isn't it? It would have saved a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of messiness, wouldn't it?"

"It would, yes. And if I could change things and go back in time, I would. I like you, Taylor, and I hate thinking that I might have hurt you. It was unintentional. I thought that I'd moved on. Left the pain behind. I thought that I was ready to try again."

"That's what I thought last night, Shane. That's what you made me believe."

"I know. I know that I'm to blame for the whole mess. And when I told you that it had been a mistake, I almost choked on the words."

He continued. "I don't think that it was a mistake. But what I do think is that we moved too quickly. I think we should just forget what happened and continue with a professional working relationship. Do you agree?"

His words were like arrows. Of course, I didn't agree. I should just get up and leave now but if he could play this game, then so could I. I'd show him!

"Taylor? Please say something."

"Okay. I meant what I said to you. I do like you Shane, a lot. I wish that I didn't. Because so far, it's hurting me more than making me happy. But I'm willing to try it your way. We probably did move too quickly. Let's draw a line under that. Let's take a few steps back and start again."

"Thank heavens for that, Shane said. I feel like hugging and kissing you, but I think, under the circumstances,

that might be a mistake. Let things go slowly without using alcohol as fuel to drive us. Big mistake. However nice it was at the time. And I'm sorry if I hurt you. Truly I am."

"Okay. Okay. Enough. I wasn't entirely blameless, I know. I got carried away because of all the wine."

"You're looking good by the way." I remained silent. Was he trying to butter me up with compliments now?

"What did you make? What were you going to show me earlier?"

"What? Oh, I made a cake. Look, I took some pictures. It's my first one." I took out my phone and pulled up the photos. The cake looked as superb as it had in real life."

"And you didn't bring me a piece? Did you really bake that yourself?"

"With a little bit of help from my mom. But she didn't do much, just told me what to do."

"You went to your mom's, huh? I see. Did you tell her what a horrible man I am?"

"Yes, I did."

"Oh, great, I look forward to meeting her one day, he joked. "But I can't blame you. What did she tell you to do?"

"To give you a piece of my mind. When I was driving over here, I was ready to let you have it, both barrels. I'm worth more than the way you made me feel, Shane. Maybe I'm too good for you. I'm not Sierra, and I don't want to be. It's time for you to move on. Get better, not bitter."

"Wow. Did you just make that up?"

"Do you not think that I'm capable of coherent thought, Shane?"



“Of course, I do. You’re very impressive. And I consider myself to be firmly put in my place.”

“Good. And I went a lot gentler than I’d intended, believe me. I know you’re hurting Shane, but it’s been five years now. It’s time to leave the past behind you.”

“I know. I know. I suppose I’ve let myself wallow in my misery. I know it. And I don’t want you to be Sierra, either. I hope you’ll forgive me for my boorish behavior.”

*Why was he being so nice. It was like being with Jekyll and Hyde.* I thought.

“I do forgive you. But I won’t again. Think about what you’re doing because I can’t go through that again. My mood was on a pendulum.”

“Duly noted.”

We sat looking at each other, and it felt as if we should hug or kiss to make up, but instead, Shane stood up and held out his hand. I stood up myself and shook it, and we laughed at each other.

“Friends?” he said.

“Friends.” But inside, I was hoping that our relationship didn’t stay that way. It was good to have broken the ice at least, and it didn’t feel awkward—yet. But I didn’t want our relationship to just fizzle out and not give ourselves a chance.

I got to thinking, how would I feel if he brought another woman home, for instance? I’d hate it. And would he be jealous if I was seeing another man?

“Now, could you please go and bake me a cake? Or am I asking for domestic trouble?”

“No, you’re making a perfectly reasonable request. And if you have the right ingredients, I will make you a cake before I leave tonight.”

“I remember that I asked you to move in last night. Also, a bit premature. But it might be a good idea if you brought some clothes that you could leave here just in case you’re stranded here in a snowstorm again.”

“Now that’s not a bad idea. Did you not like the robe and boots look?”

“I don’t think that’s your best look, no.”

“Let’s do this,” I prompted and walked towards the kitchen to show off my newfound skill.

The cake didn’t turn out quite the way I’d expected, but it was still better than Shane had thought it would be. “And what would you like for dinner? I’ll prepare it before I leave.”

“Hmm, surprise me.”

As I searched through the fridge and cupboards, I could feel Shane’s eyes on me. I tried to move as sexily as I could. *Was that even possible while cooking dinner?* I thought.

Mom would never believe that I’d been so easy to persuade to forgive and forget. When I’d left her, she had thought that I was on the warpath. I knew that she worried about me and would like to see me settle down.

But that couldn’t be with just anyone. I’d have to make up some story to pacify her, make it sound as if Shane had begged me to stay and had been full of remorse.

Guys I’d dated in the past had never been quite right, and somehow, I’d always known that right from the very start. With Shane, it was different, and I felt exactly the opposite. I knew that he was the one.

We’d almost screwed it up between us. But we’d managed to pull things back so that we could give it another chance, and somehow, it felt as if we were now on firmer ground and had a stronger foundation to build on.

*Can I really be in love with him in such a short time?* I asked myself.

“Okay, I’m going to cook you something that’s going to knock your socks off.”

“Oh, please don’t,” Shane said in a pathetic voice.

I looked at him to see if he was joking, and he gave me a smile. “You’ve got some chops here. I’m going to cook those with some mashed potatoes and vegetables. Very healthy option, don’t you think?”

“Why don’t you stay and have dinner with me? It seems a bit silly for you to cook twice, doesn’t it?”

I considered his invitation. Was that moving thing along too quickly? Was it too intimate? But what was our relationship now? I searched his face to see if he meant it to be a romantic relationship, but his facial expression gave nothing away.

“Just as friends?” I confirmed.

“Of course. That’s what we’ve just agreed to, isn’t it?”

“Don’t you have something to be getting on with? You’re unnerving me just sitting there, watching my every move.”

“No, I don’t as a matter of fact.” I could feel his eyes on me, and it sent shivers down my spine. So, it was just friendship that Shane wanted.

Now I knew that wasn’t what I wanted but I was going to try and live with it. I’d become fond of Shane very quickly. I kept saying to myself that it couldn’t be love so soon, just infatuation. I didn’t even know the man but now that he’d shown me his more human side, I could see how that could develop.

Could I do this? Just be friends with him? Wouldn’t it be torture seeing him every day, having him so close to me that I constantly longed for him to touch me? Perhaps it would just fizzle out over time, and I’d realize one day

that my attraction to him had disappeared. Could I do that? Of course, I think.

## CHAPTER 14 – SHANE

I've been busy these past two weeks with getting the ranch prepared for the winter. Taylor has settled into her own routine and is quite good at getting people to pay us on time. Her cooking has improved greatly and there hasn't been any awkward moments between us.

We've kept our promise of just being friends, however I'm falling in love with her more and more as each day passes.

Chase and I were fixing some broken fences when I decided to confess my feeling for Taylor. "Chase, I need to talk to you about Taylor." He looked at me seriously, giving me that curious look.

"You know you can talk to me about anything. What's up," he said reassuringly.

I took a deep breath and started, "Well... I think I might be falling in love with her."

"What?!" Chase's eyes widened in surprise. "Whoa, that's a big deal, buddy, did something happen between you two, or did it just sneak up on you?"

I looked down at my hands, my heart racing. "It's been a slow realization, I guess. But once it hit me, I can't think of anything else," I admitted, looking back at Chase to see his reaction to the news.

He leaned back, taking it all in. "Wow, that's fantastic."

I continued. "It's been building up over time. I noticed myself looking forward to spending time with her, enjoying her company more. And then, the more I thought about it, the more I realized she makes me feel happy and alive in a way I haven't felt in five years."

Chase nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense. Sometimes those feelings creep up on you, and suddenly,

you can't ignore them anymore. Have you talked to Taylor about this? Does she feel the same way?"

I sighed, shaking my head. "No, I haven't said anything to her. I'm not even sure if she feels the same after our decision about just being friends."

Chase put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "I get that man, but you won't know until you ask her, right?"

"Yeah, you're probably right," I agreed, feeling grateful for Chase's advice. "I don't know how I'm going to approach her, but I'll find a way."

Chase grinned. "Perfect. And hey, if it's meant to be, things will fall into place. Just take it one step at a time and trust your gut."

I nodded, feeling a bit more at ease. "Thanks for listening to me."

"Anytime, man," he said with a smile. "That's what friends are for. Now, let's get back to work. We've got fences to fix!"

## CHAPTER 15 - TAYLOR

The next few weeks were proof that there had been no need to worry that things might be awkward between us after what had happened.

The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. If anything, things were easier between us than they had been previously.

But I still couldn't shake the giddiness I felt when he came near me or ignore the electric shock that traveled up my entire body if we happened to brush against each other by accident.

I hoped that would settle down because it was almost painful dreaming what could be between us, given half a chance and I'd sink into a depression.

We became good friends, and his bad moods were less frequent. Sure, he still had his grumpiness, but don't we all?

He laughed with me when I messed up things and I no longer felt offended. We'd learned things about each other and became closer as the days turned into weeks.

I took some time out to research some simple recipes, and because I oversaw ordering the provisions, I knew that I'd have everything I needed. I even started to enjoy cooking and was impressed with my efforts, as was Shane.

Stews were simple enough to make, and with a dollop of red wine and a French name attached, I'd moved up a few ranks.

I'd gotten the office working like clockwork and spent most mornings in it. Sometimes, Shane was there, but often, I was alone.

I began to build up good relationships with customers, always finding time to chat and shoot the breeze with

them. Shane and I were friends, which was fine by me. Or at least I'd learned to pretend it was.

There was still a palpable tension between us, and when we accidentally touched, I still wished for more. But I kept to the agreement and took things slowly. It just meant that when we were together again, it would be all the better for anticipating it. I lived in hope of that day.

"Alright, Shane, I'm wrapping up for the day. Is there anything else you need me to do before I head out?"

"No, Taylor, I think I'm good for today, thanks and enjoy your evening."

"Thanks, by the way, what are your plans for later? Anything exciting?" I asked.

"Actually, yes. I'm going out with a friend tonight. We're planning to grab dinner and catch up. It should be a nice change of pace." He responded.

"Good, I hope you have a great evening. See you on Monday."

"Thanks, we haven't seen each other in a while, so it'll be nice to reconnect. Take care on your way home and have a great weekend."

It seemed like ages since I last saw the girls, Darcy, Mags & Liz. At first, I was simply too tired and then I seemed to get out of the habit. I knew that I had to make more of an effort to reconnect.

I had to get on with my life and not keep waiting around for Shane to make a move. Perhaps he never would, which was a hard pill to swallow.

I didn't take as much time getting ready for the night out. It wasn't as important now since all I could think about was Shane and being with him.

As much as I tried to push him to the back of my mind, he kept creeping in, and I would see him in my mind's eye, smiling at me.



I'd feel a tingle of desire, and everything else faded into the background. But I had to try to exist in a world where Shane wasn't in every corner. I could exist without validation from him. Couldn't I?

The girls and I had arranged to meet for drinks before getting dinner. Tonight, we were going for Mexican food, not my favorite, but I didn't hate it.

I was first in the restaurant, and I decided to treat myself and order an Espresso Martini. It arrived, and I took a sip, feeling very sophisticated.

I waited at the bar sitting on a stool. I didn't need to keep looking around because there was a huge mirror behind the bar, and I could see everyone who came in.

But the next person to enter the restaurant was someone whom I'd least expected to be here. I almost choked on my drink when I saw Shane coming in.

He wasn't alone. As he held the door open, I saw that it was to let a redhead in. She looked stunning in an emerald woolen high-necked dress and seemed to have legs up to her armpits.

I felt as if someone had punched me right in the stomach.

So that's the friend he was meeting. I hadn't asked for details because I thought he'd tell me what he wanted me to know. Anything else might be considered as prying on my part.

Now, I wished that I had interrogated him.

Then, I wouldn't be sitting here, feeling like a fool again, trying to think of a way I could escape without him seeing me. Tears were imminent, but so was rage.

It was like waiting for an ax to fall as I watched him approach the bar with the redhead, and he came to stand right beside me.

Our eyes met in the mirror, and he turned to me, obviously as shocked as I'd been. "Taylor! What are you doing here?"

"Meeting my friends for drinks and dinner. You?" I couldn't help but look at his companion. Up close, she was even more beautiful.

"Are you not going to introduce us?" I smiled, but I could feel it straining not to show what I was feeling, pure rage, and knew it probably looked more like a sneer.

"Um, yes, of course. Marley, this is Taylor, Taylor, this is Marley."

We nodded at each other. I wanted to know exactly what she was doing here.

"How do you two know each other?" I asked, still feigning polite interest.

"Oh, we go way back, don't we, Shane?" Marley whimpered, looking at him adoringly and linking her arm through his possessively.

I wanted to physically attack him or run from this place and pretend I'd never met him.

"We do. We've known each other since school," he said, refusing to look at me.

"And how do you two know each other?" Marley asked.

"Um "Taylor works for me. As my housekeeper and personal assistant. I don't know what I'd do without her. She's become indispensable."

He smiled at me, and I seethed but still managed to make an insincere gesture of politeness.

Fortunately, any violence was averted when Darcy appeared. "Hey, Taylor. Sorry I'm late." She kissed me on both cheeks and then noticed Shane and Marley. "Um, hey guys." She looked at me quizzically.

"Oh, this is Shane, my boss, and his friend, Marley."

“Oh, great to meet you, Shane. Are you coming out with us?”

“No, it’s just a coincidence. I had no idea that Taylor would be here. I don’t want her to think I’m stalking her!” He gave a false smile at Darcy, and it lingered for my benefit.

“Anyway, you girls have a great night.” He turned to Marley. “Do you mind if we eat somewhere else, Marley? I don’t want to put a damper on Taylor’s night.”

“And I wouldn’t want to ruin yours,” I offered tersely, imagining how I could ruin it perfectly. Didn’t this man have any conception of pain and what he was doing to me? I’d been sure he knew how I felt and that he was just biding his time.

Had I mentioned to him that I was eating Mexican tonight? I couldn’t remember. I usually volunteered more information than he’d requested or needed.

Marley looked perplexed and couldn’t work out what was going on. Even Darcy looked a bit confused.

“Well, I guess so. That’s fine with me. It was nice to meet you, Taylor, Darcy.” She turned to leave.

“Sorry about this,” Shane said and gave an awkward smile which was crossed with a grimace.

Well, that had ruined my night, actually my whole weekend. How could I have been so gullible? Shane obviously thought he could charm the birds off the trees. Well, he wasn’t about to do it to me again.

As I watched them leave, Darcy ordered herself a drink and then, when she saw the door close on them, turned to me. “What’s going on? That was awkward, to say the least. Have you and Shane got something going on?”

“No. I thought we did, though, but I’m just stupid.”

“What do you mean? You thought you did? Did something happen to make you think that?”

I looked at my friend, one side of my mouth up at the corner. “We almost slept together a few weeks back. But right at the last moment, he told me that he wanted us just to be friends.”

“This was only after two days of working for him. I feel like such an idiot, Darcy.”

“What? That was quick, especially for you, Taylor. That’s not like you at all. What the hell happened?”

“It was when we were snowed in. I got a little tipsy, and one thing led to another.”

“Woah. That’s heavy. And then what? Now he doesn’t want to know you. That must be difficult.”

“It is. The next morning, he was acting as if it was all just a big mistake. Thank goodness the snow had melted quickly because I left and ended up at mom’s house. I had no intention of ever going back. But then he called me and asked me to go over so that we could talk things through.”

“I must say,” Darcy said, “He’s a hunk. I don’t blame you for falling for him so quickly.”

“Darcy! You make it sound so cheap. I really like him. Like, really like him. I even think that I might love him.”

“Wow, so now you’re back working with him, even though he said sleeping together would be a big mistake. You’re braver than I am, Taylor. I would have just walked away and never looked back. Now you’ve just opened yourself up to more hurt.”

“It sure feels like that. Oh, Darcy, I’ve made such a fool of myself.”

“Nothing that most of us haven’t done. But walk away now. Don’t go back there and let him rub salt in the wound. How did he convince you to go back anyway?”

“He said that he’d taken things too quickly. He’s a widower. His wife died five years ago.”

“Five years ago! That’s a long time. I think he’s just spinning you a yarn.”

“Me too.” I felt a single tear trickle down my face.

“Hey, don’t cry, girlfriend.” Darcy put her arm around me, kissing my temple. “We’ll fix you up. I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. Tonight, we’re going to have lots of cocktails, and then we’ll have dinner and go dancing.

Darcy continued. “By tomorrow morning, that man will just be a bad memory, and you can start looking for a new job first thing Monday.”

I looked at her. She made it sound so easy.

“Is that a good plan, Taylor?” She brushed the hair out of my face and wiped my tears away.

“Hey, you two! How many have you had?” It was the other two girls who made up our group, Mags and Liz.

I quickly wiped my face.

“Just starting early,” Darcy said. I pulled my mouth into a shush shape, and Darcy nodded almost invisibly. She wasn’t going to share what we’d just discussed with the other two, and for now, it was a no-go area.

Of course, they asked me how my job was going, and I said that it wasn’t quite what I’d hoped it would be. I had them in hysterics, telling them about my exploits, how I got my foot stuck in the stirrup, how I’d knocked myself out by slipping on cooking oil and burned the cookies, and my lovely onion soup.

By the end, they could easily understand why the job wasn’t for me.

I didn’t have any more cocktails. I didn’t feel like drinking after that. It had been alcohol that had gotten me into this mess in the first place. I didn’t taste the food, and I tried to put some enthusiasm into dancing, but my legs felt wooden, as did my face. I wanted to go home and howl.

I said goodnight to the girls around eleven, and Darcy gestured for me to call her. I nodded and went out to grab a cab to take me home. It wasn't far, but too far and too cold to walk.

As I climbed out of the cab, I saw Gus, the cat. He seemed to have a girlfriend with him, and they sat side by side, watching me. He didn't make his normal fuss. He was obviously preoccupied with his girlfriend. Like someone else I knew.

I felt humiliated and stupid. I would never talk to Shane again. He wouldn't be getting another chance. That ship had sailed. As I climbed into bed, I put my phone to charge, and just as I did, it started to ring. Shane! How dare he?

I rejected the call, and it happened again twice before buzzing to announce a message. I wanted so much to read it but convinced myself that I had to be strong and deleted it without looking.

I didn't cry. I couldn't. Instead, I carried the pain inside like a brick. Maybe it was just because I'd made a fool of myself, I felt so bad. If I had nothing more to do with Shane, then he'd just sink into the background, and I wouldn't have to think about him anymore.

I knew that there'd be a day that hopefully wasn't too far away when I woke up, and my first thought wasn't of Shane Gatlin. It was just a crush. I'd fallen in love with the idea of being lady of the manor.

Sleep was hard to find. I tried meditation, reading, counting backward from a hundred. But I was more awake than ever.

At six forty-three, I got out of bed. I'd put my phone on silent, and when I looked at it, I saw that there were seven missed calls from Shane and three messages. I deleted them all without looking.

I made myself a coffee, and the caffeine gave me an instant buzz, which I knew wouldn't last. But either way, it didn't matter. If I fell asleep, that was good too.

I pulled up the job website that had become so familiar to me. I was still registered with them, but I hadn't looked at the listings since I'd got the job with Shane. There were a couple that were worth pursuing.

Time to go back to retail, where I didn't feel like a fish out of water. I sent my application to both and didn't bother adding the paltry three months when I'd worked for Shane.

What a joke. I hoped that there'd be a time when I could laugh about this disastrous time of my life.

My eyes began to feel heavy. Should I try to return to bed and have a nap? I was trying to decide when I was startled by a knock at the door. I stood up quietly and peered out through the window. I could see Shane's car there.

No! I couldn't face him yet. I slunk back against the wall and then edged my way out of the room, sinking down low so that he couldn't see me if he looked in.

What nerve this guy had! He wasn't going to give up easily. I couldn't even relax at home. Well, I'm sure he'd get fed up if he didn't get a response from me.

I'd have to be always on my guard. I didn't want another nasty surprise like the one I'd had in the restaurant.

I wished that Shane was on social media so I could gather clues about who Marley was exactly. How long had they been seeing each other? How much had Shane lied to me? But did it matter?

The fact was that he'd lied to me, and once was enough; twice was just plain stupid on my part. I'd already passed that signpost. He wasn't about to get another shot.

“Taylor! Please! Open the door! I can explain everything. You’ve got it all wrong. Don’t be too hasty. Taylor? I know that you’re in there. Your car’s here. There’s a cat out here who wants to come in.”

My next move sealed my fate. I opened the door and almost swooned at the sight of him.

“May I come in please? It’s freezing out here.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“I just wanted to make sure that I hadn’t upset you. When you didn’t pick up, I began to think I had. We’re just friends, Taylor.

He reached towards me to put a hand on my shoulder and as his hand met the bare skin of my neck, I still sizzled and hated myself for it. I didn’t know whether to shrug it off or sink myself against it.

“Taylor? Are you okay? Please tell me you are.” I nodded, still unable to speak.

“Hey, aren’t you going to offer me coffee or something?” Gus let out a loud meow.

“Hey Gus, Sylvia will be after me. What are you doing here?” I bent down to pick him up, an excuse to escape Shane’s penetrating stare. I hoped that he hadn’t felt me shiver when he’d touched me. I opened the door and put Gus out despite his protests.

I turned and as I did, I came up against Shane’s body.

He put his arms around me. “Let’s hug to make sure huh?”

“Stop that, Shane! What do you think you’re doing? That’s far too personal for an employer and employee. Remember, I work for you!”

“Okay! I get it,” he said, holding up both his palms to me. “I don’t want to lose you either. You’re good at what you



do, Taylor. And there's a sentence I didn't think I'd ever be saying those first few days."

"I thought you'd end up burning the place down. And of course, you're right. Hands off from now on. But give us one more try, and I promise to be good."

"Why aren't you always this nice, Shane?"

"Am I not?"

"What do you think? Sometimes you can be a real beast."

"I promise to be on my best behavior. But I don't understand why you're upset. Will you tell me?"

"No. I won't."

"So, you'll be there Monday? Yes?"

"I guess."

"Do you want me to take some things back to the ranch like we talked about?"

"No, I can't be bothered sorting anything now. But I will. Now, I've got things to do, Shane."

"Oh, right. Well, I'll go. See you Monday. Bye then." He hesitated before turning and leaving.

What the hell had I done now? I'm a glutton for punishment. But if I didn't go then what would he think of me? And why did I even care?

## CHAPTER 16 - SHANE

Damn I can't believe Taylor was at the same restaurant I took Marley to, such an awkward encounter, I knew she was pissed so I had to let Marley know how much I cared for Taylor and our somewhat complicated relationship. I had made too much headway to ruin everything now.

Besides Marley was a friend, nothing more in my eyes, although I know she always wanted more and ever since Sierra's death she's made periodic appearances in my life.

When I dropped her off at her place, I started the conversation.

"Hey, Marley, can we talk about what happened at the restaurant?"

"Sure, what's on your mind?" she said with a curious look on her face.

"Well, you know, I didn't expect to run into Taylor there. It was kind of awkward, and I think she got the wrong idea about us."

"Oh, really? What do you mean?"

I continued. "I just want to make sure you understand. You and I, we've been friends for a long time, and I value that, but, you know, I don't have those kinds of feelings for you. I care about you deeply, but it's just not like that."

Marley looked surprised, "oh... I see. I didn't realize you felt that way, Shane."

"Yeah, I mean, you've always been there for me, especially after Sierra's passing, and I appreciate that more than I can say. But I can't pretend to feel something that I don't. You're a dear friend, and I want to be honest with you."

I could see Marley was trying to stay composed. “I appreciate your honesty, Shane. It’s just... it’s hard to hear, you know?”

“I know, and I’m sorry if it hurts. But I can’t lead you on or give you false hope. I need to be true to myself and my own feelings, and right now, those feelings are directed towards Taylor.” I said.

“I understand. I guess I’ve always hoped for more, but I can’t force you to feel something you don’t.”

“Exactly. And it’s not that you’re not an amazing person, because you are. I just need you to know that I cherish our friendship and value what we have, but I don’t see us being anything more than friends.” I said honestly.

Marley was trying to put on a brave face. “Okay, I get it. It’s just a lot to process, you know?”

Nodding I continued. “I know it is, and I’m here for you if you want to talk about it. I don’t want this to change our friendship. I still want you in my life, Marley.”

“Thanks, Shane. I do value our friendship too, even if it’s not what I hoped for. I’ll be okay, really.” Marley replied smiling softly.

Relieved, I continued “I’m glad to hear that. And I’ll do my best to make sure things aren’t awkward or weird between us. We can still hang out and be there for each other.”

Marley looked at me with grateful eyes. “That means a lot, Shane. Thank you for being honest with me.”

“Always, Marley. and if anything changes, you’ll be the first to know, I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Shane. And I hope you find the happiness you deserve, whether it’s with Taylor or someone else.”

“Thanks, Marley. I really appreciate your understanding.”



## CHAPTER 17 - TAYLOR

Of course, I went back to the ranch. It was like I was being pulled there with a magnet and I had no will of my own to fight it. And my heart still flipped when I saw him. I tried to forget that we were anything but boss and employee.

We were adults, weren't we? A few more weeks went by without mishap, and we settled back into the friendship I thought we might have thrown away. Things were cozy between us.

I never admitted that I'd been blind with jealousy when I'd seen him with the redhead. I couldn't go there and make myself vulnerable again.

I'd been working there five and a half months when I was snowed in for the second time at the ranch. This time, I would make sure that I was fully dressed, and I stayed sober. There was no way I was going to open my heart again to him.

"I'm going to have to go out and help get the herd in," Shane said, when the snow started to accumulate. "I suggest you stay here for the night."

"I think you're right. I don't want to risk getting stuck in that. It looks like it might be impassable anyway."

Shane had been gone for a couple of hours. I'd been upstairs cleaning his bedroom and as I looked out of the window, I saw him coming back. Time to start dinner.

I headed off downstairs. I hadn't seen that the rug on the carpet had come loose and before I knew it, I was tumbling down the steps.

I groaned in pain, clutching my ankle. "Ouch," I cried out, tears forming in my eyes. Just then Shane came in and saw me laying at the bottom of the stairs.

He rushed over, “are you okay?” he asked, his face full of concern.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. I twisted my ankle,” I replied, feeling embarrassed for my clumsiness. Shane knelt beside me and gently examined my ankle. “It looks like it’s swelling up. We should get some ice on it.”

I winced as he helped me up and guided me to the sitting room. “Thanks,” I said, leaning on him for support.

As we sat down on the couch, Shane propped up my injured foot on a pillow and placed a bag of ice on it. “How does it feel now?” he asked, his eyes fixed on me. “A little better,” I replied, feeling grateful for his care and attention.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

Shane smiled softly. “Of course. You’re like family to me. I couldn’t just leave you lying there.” I looked up at him, feeling a rush of affection for him.

“I’m lucky to have you in my life,” I said, feeling a surge of warmth in my chest.

Shane’s eyes met mine, and my heart skipped a beat. “You know I’d do anything for you, don’t you?” he said, his voice low. I smiled, taking his hand. “I do,” I said, “and I appreciate it more than you know.”

“Taylor, I have to admit there’s a connection between us, one that I’ve been trying to deny for some time. Being here with you now has made me realize how much I appreciate your presence and how much I enjoy your company.”

“It’s funny how unexpected situations can bring out different sides of ourselves. I’ve come to appreciate your company in a whole new light as well, Shane. You’re not just my employer, but someone I genuinely enjoy being around and care deeply for.” I said, smiling shyly.

His face was so close to mine, I could feel his breath. He was looking into my eyes and I was hoping and praying that he would just kiss me already.

He drew closer to me, I closed my eyes.

Had I knocked myself unconscious again? Was I imagining this? I moaned as his lips met mine and shivered at his touch. I had waited for this moment for so long.

He picked me up as if I was as light as a feather and carried me up the stairs to his room.

This time nothing was going to stop us, not even a swollen ankle. The night was everything I'd hoped for. Our bodies moved together flawlessly, and I wished it could go on forever.

He was so tender and attentive, and every time his fingers touched my skin, I felt a tingling sensation that sent shivers down my spine. His touch was electrifying, stirring a potent mix of desire, comfort, and a deep connection that words could hardly capture.

Each gentle caress conveyed a language of its own, speaking volumes of affection and an unspoken lust that enveloped us in an intoxicating embrace.

The next morning, our relationship was different, and rightfully so. I felt closer to him than I'd ever felt with anyone before. The memory of his closeness and tender presence lingered within me, a vivid recollection of how it felt to have him by my side, enveloped in his warmth.

It felt like making love for the first time in my life. I was truly in seventh heaven.

We had just finished breakfast and was sitting across from each other. "The snow is still pretty deep out there, are you going to check on the herd Shane?"

"No, the men can handle that, let's go upstairs, shall we?" He was looking at me with pure lust in his eyes and I

melted once again. We couldn't get enough of one another that weekend.

As Shane and I continued to work and enjoy each other together we became closer and closer, and we were really becoming a couple.

We were no longer employer/employee, just partners working side by side. We had become a cohesive team that supported each other throughout the day.

I admired Shane's easy-going nature and the way he managed the horses and the herd. He had a natural gift for working with both, the way he spoke to them all in a calm, reassuring tone.

It was clear he had a deep understanding and respect for the animals on the ranch.

Our daily routine had become second nature to us, and we were able to predict each other's needs without needing to speak.

The sense of camaraderie we shared had made the work feel less like a chore and more like a shared passion.

Shane was a hard worker who didn't shy away from a challenge, I was constantly learning from him.

Overall, our partnership on the ranch had grown into something special, and I was excited to see where it would take us.

It was time to go out with the girls again, so I arranged to go out with them on Friday evening.

When I got to the bar, I asked for a dry white wine. But as I lifted the first glass to my lips, I felt overpoweringly nauseous and lowered it back to the table.

Did I eat something bad? I tried to remember exactly what I'd eaten. Just the usual.

I picked up the glass and tried again, and I knew that I couldn't drink it. "I don't think I'm in the mood for



drinking today". I'd not been drinking much recently. I didn't have the stomach or appetite for it.

"What's wrong with you, Taylor?" Darcy asked. "Is there something wrong with the wine?"

"I don't think so. I feel sick, but I'm not sure why."

"I'll get you something else, and I'll have the wine. What would you like?"

"Could you just get me a coffee, please? I'm not in the mood for drinking. Not like me at all." I grinned.

"Coming right up!" Darcy stood up, went to the bar and came back with a cup of coffee and some cold milk.

Its aroma was overpowering, and once again, the nausea overtook me. "What is wrong with me? I must be coming down with something. I've never felt like this before."

"You're not pregnant, are you?" Darcy joked.

I laughed along, but then the realization hit me. I *was* pregnant. I sat in silence while I tried to work out how I could be pregnant when I methodically took my pill at eight every morning.

I remembered I hadn't taken them that weekend of the snowstorm after we'd had sex numerous times, and I'd noticed that the days were out of sync on the pack.

What were the chances of getting pregnant after missing only two days?

We did make love those two days a lot.

"Oh, I am so stupid!" I grasped my face in shock, trying to push back the panic.

"What are you saying? That you are pregnant? I didn't know you were even seeing anyone."

"Well, that's because I haven't told anyone that Shane and I have been involved for a few weeks now. It all happened so fast.

We never went out anywhere, so we weren't likely to be seen by anyone.

"Oh, I see. Like that, is it?"

What was the point of explaining to her?

"I'm going home. See you tomorrow, everyone." I got up and didn't wait for any replies from anyone.

My mind was racing. I couldn't think straight. How in the world am I going to tell him? I wanted to, but what if he thought that I'd gotten pregnant on purpose?

He's always known that I wanted to be a permanent fixture in his life. And I do. But not under these circumstances.

I touched my belly. Already, I felt a deep affection for this child. I might not have conceived consciously, but I would love this child just as if I'd planned it for a long time. I began to wonder how Shane would take the news that I was having his baby.

But wait! I was getting ahead of myself. I hadn't even taken a pregnancy test. But my period was late, and this sickness was unique. I already knew that I was pregnant.

I passed by the 24-hour drugstore and bought a pregnancy test. I'd do it as soon as I got home. What would mom and dad say? Life was going to be so different.

The test was the first thing I did as soon as I walked through the door. Straight to the bathroom, coat flung over a chair. I sat down and peed on it, and then waited for the required time.

I knew that it was early to test. It hadn't even been a full month yet. But my body was telling me loud and clear that I was.

I waited for the test to develop. Minutes seemed like hours, and finally, I allowed myself to look at it. There was the clear blue line. Positive. I checked the

instructions to make sure that was what one line meant, but I didn't really need to. I'd known it would be positive.

I sat there with my thoughts like a mixed-up jigsaw puzzle. Was I happy about this baby? Giddiness was beginning to bubble within me. Yes, I was. I was nearly thirty years old, and mom was always nagging me about giving her a grandchild.

Of course, it wasn't a perfect situation, but was there ever a perfect time?

I decided I would tell my parents first as I was still struggling with how I was going to tell Shane. Perhaps it would be easier telling him after I told my parents I reasoned.

I wondered how he would take the news. I knew I couldn't wait too long; we were making love on a regular basis, so he was bound to see my body changing.

I waited another week before I told my parents. I arranged to come over for dinner so dad could be there and hear the news at the same time. I had taken another test which confirmed the positive result of the first one. I was bursting to tell someone the news, before I approached Shane.

Mom cooked her specialty, roast chicken and potatoes with lots of vegetables, even if they were boiled to an inch of their edibility. The house smelled marvelous as I went in.

"Hello, mom! It's me. I'm not late, am I?" I found her in the kitchen, everything boiling merrily away on the stove, the windows steamed up against the cold outside.

Snow was threatened again, but that was nothing unusual this time of year.

"Hey, lovely to see you, Taylor." She walked over to me and gave me a big hug. "How are you? Settling into your routine at the ranch?"

“Yes, it’s going great, thanks.”

Just then we heard the door close, and dad came in. His face lit up when he saw me. “Taylor! I’ve been looking forward to seeing you all week. Come here and give me a hug.”

I was more than happy to run into his big bear arms and have them wrap around me. I kissed him on the cheek. “Hello dad! How are you?”

“I’m good. More importantly, how are you? You look well. Fresh as a daisy.”

“Mm, I don’t know about that, but thanks.”

“So, what’s the news? Mom told me that you had something to tell us. What is it?”

I looked over at mom, who was suddenly all ears and attention. “It can wait until we sit down for dinner.”

I was still processing in my mind how I was going to break the news to them.

“Okay, I’m just about to plate up now.”

As we sat down for dinner, I could feel their anticipation in the air. I knew what I had to tell my parents wasn’t going to be easy, but I also knew it was something I needed to do.

Taking a deep breath, I looked at my parents and began, “Mom, dad, there’s something I need to tell you.”

They both looked up from their plates, their expressions serious. “What is it, Taylor?” my dad asked.

“I’m pregnant,” I said, the words tumbling out of my mouth before I could even think.

There was a long silence as my parents absorbed what I had just said. Finally, my mom spoke. “Are you sure, Taylor? Have you seen a doctor?”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m sure. I haven’t seen a doctor yet; however, I’ve taken two pregnancy tests to make sure.”

My dad sighed heavily. “Well, we’re here for you, Taylor. Whatever you need, we’ll help you through this.”

“Thank you, dad,” I said gratefully. “There’s something else I need to tell you, though. It’s about Shane.”

My parents both looked at me expectantly. “What about Shane?” my mom asked.

Taking a deep breath, I continued, “Shane and I are together. We’ve been seeing each other for about a month now, and I’m in love with him.”

There was a long pause as once again, my parents had to absorb what I said. Finally, my mom spoke up. “Well, that’s certainly a lot to take in. Are you sure about this sweetie?”

I nodded. “Yes, mom. I love him, and I think he loves me. We’re happy together.”

My dad looked at me sternly. “You know that having a baby and being in a relationship with someone are two very serious things, Taylor. Are you ready for all of this?”

I looked at my dad, my eyes pleading. “I know it’s a lot to take on, dad. But I’m ready. I just hope Shane is, I haven’t told him yet.”

My dad leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “Really? Well, you better tell him soon. He has a right to know that he’s going to be a father.”

“I know, dad. I will,” feeling slightly defensive. “I just wanted to talk to you guys first.”

My mom spoke up, her voice softening the tension. “Taylor, honey, your dad is just worried. He cares about you and wants to make sure that everything is going to be okay.”

I nodded, understanding where my dad was coming from. “I know, mom. And I appreciate that. But I need to figure out how to tell Shane first. I don’t want to just drop this bomb on him.”

My dad nodded in agreement. “You’re right. You should talk to him and figure out how he feels about it.”

“I know it’s a lot to take in, but I hope he’ll be excited. I know deep down we can make this work.”

My mom gave me a reassuring smile. “You’re strong, Taylor. And we’re here for you no matter what.”

My dad chimed in. “And we’ll be here for Shane too. He’s going to need all the support he can get.”

I smiled, feeling grateful for my parents’ support. “Thank you, guys. I really appreciate it.”

We continued our dinner, the conversation shifting to other topics, but my mind kept drifting back to the upcoming conversation with Shane.

I knew it was going to be a difficult one, but I also knew that I needed to tell him. No matter what happened.

I had my family behind me, and that gave me the strength to face whatever comes next.

## CHAPTER 18 – SHANE

When I saw Taylor on the floor in pain, I was overwhelmed with feelings I hadn't felt in years.

I knew at that moment I loved her and wanted to keep her safe. I could no longer deny my feeling for her.

“Chase, I can't even describe to you what it felt like when I saw Taylor on the floor, clearly in pain.”

I began, my voice low and intense. “It was like something inside me shifted, and I knew, without a doubt, that I loved her. It was like a lightbulb went off inside my head, and everything became clear.”

“Up until that moment, I had been denying my feelings for her. I had been pushing them down, pretending they weren't real. But that moment was like a breaking point for me.”

I continued. “I couldn't deny them any longer. Suddenly, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be with her, in every way possible.”

As I spoke, I could feel my face flush, and I had to stop for a moment to take a breath. “This is so hard to explain, but I hope you're getting what I'm trying to say.”

“Shane, I'm glad you're finally admitting to yourself your feelings for Taylor. I could see how much she meant to you when you first hired her, just by the way you talked about her.”

Chase continued. “I knew it from day one you had a thing for her, you just had to accept it. I'm glad you finally did.”

“Thanks, Chase,” I said, my voice wavering a little as I took a deep breath. “I really appreciate that.”

“I just need to get this off my chest, you know?” I shifted in my chair as if looking for the right words. “It's like...I feel like I've been living half a life since Sierra passed

away. And now, with Taylor, I feel like I've woken up.  
Like I'm alive again."

"It must feel great to realize that you're still capable of loving someone, even after everything you've been through."

"It's hard to explain, it's like she understands me. Like she sees the real me, beneath all the walls I've built up over the years."

"She makes me feel like it's okay to be vulnerable, to be honest with myself and others about what I'm feeling. And she accepts me just the way I am, without judgment or expectations. As I'm speaking, I realize my eyes are wet with tears."

Chase gave me a reassuring pat on my back. ". "That's beautiful, Shane. It sounds like Taylor has been a real gift in your life, and I'm so glad you've found someone who can help you let down your guard, it's clear how much you love her."

A smile spread across my face, and I nodded in agreement. "She really is a gift." After a moment, he added, "Thanks for listening, Chase.

"Anytime, my friend, anytime."



## CHAPTER 19 -TAYLOR

The morning sickness had well and truly kicked in now, and I couldn't keep much down in the mornings apart from a bit of toast. I hadn't believed that I could feel so bad, but the first trimester was taking its toll on me.

It made me late for work several times and Shane had given me a questioning look. I still hadn't told him, but I knew I needed to soon before I began to show.

I wondered if the baby would look like its dad. If it did, then it would certainly have the looks.

"You're glowing," he told me one morning.

"Erm, thanks. It must be the cold air on my face."

"By the way, I've booked a table at Rico's. Are you okay with that? I thought it was time we ventured out in public more as a couple," he informed me, which was a shock, but a pleasant one.

"Rico's? Never heard of it but it sounds great! I'm up for venturing out as a couple. It's a nice surprise."

"I hope you enjoy it."

"I'm sure I will."

That evening as we set off for the restaurant, he glanced at me while he was driving and pulled into a parking spot along the sidewalk.

"We're here."

I decided I would tell him after dinner, I wasn't sure how he was going to take the news, why spoil a nice dinner out I thought.

I smiled at him as we made our way into the restaurant. The warm ambience and the aroma of delicious food filled the air, creating an inviting atmosphere.

As we approached the hostess stand, I noticed Shane's hand slightly trembling. It was endearing to see his

nervousness, as it mirrored my own feelings.

The hostess greeted us with a friendly smile and confirmed our reservation. She led us to a cozy corner booth, softly lit by a candle flickering on the table.

As we settled into our seats, I looked at Shane, his eyes shining with anticipation. “I hope you like Italian food,” he said, his voice filled with a mixture of hope and apprehension. “I thought Rico’s would be the perfect place for us to enjoy a romantic dinner together.”

I nodded, grateful for his thoughtfulness. “Italian is one of my favorite cuisines,” I replied. “The aroma alone had already won me over. And with such a lovely setting, I have no doubt this will be a wonderful evening.”

We looked over the menu, our conversation flowing effortlessly as we discussed our preferences. The laughter and warmth between us created an undeniable connection, intensifying the joy I was feeling about this baby and our relationship.

As we placed our orders, I couldn’t help but marvel at the serendipity that had brought Shane into my life. He had become someone special, someone with whom I felt comfortable and cherished. The decision to venture out as a couple was a testament to the trust we had built.

We ordered our drinks and Shane gave me a strange look when I declined the wine. When the waiter came back with our drinks we clinked our glasses together, the sound resonating through the air. I was so happy to be with him out in public.

“I love this place, Shane, this carbonara is incredible! The flavors are just bursting in my mouth.” “You look like you’re enjoying it. It does look delicious. I’m tempted to steal a bite from your plate.” Shane teased.

“This lasagna is amazing too. “Oh, Shane, you know how much I love food. I’d be willing to trade you a taste of my carbonara if you let me have a bite of that lasagna.”

“That’s sounds like a fair trade, here you go.”

We finished dinner and Shane was calling over the waiter for the check. I couldn’t delay telling him any longer. He did deserve to know, just like my dad had said. “Before we leave, Shane, I want to tell you something.”

He looked to me, intrigued. His face had a puzzled expression. “What is it?”

I took a deep breath and gathered the courage to tell Shane the news. “Shane, I’m pregnant,” a moment of dead silence but his eyes widened in complete surprise.

I could see a range of emotions on his face. “Are you serious?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m serious,” I replied, smiling nervously.

“That weekend we were snowed in I didn’t have my pills with me, so I missed two days of taking them. I should’ve taken two when I got home but it completely slipped my mind.”

“How long have you known?”

“For a while now, I had to gather the courage to tell you.” I still didn’t know how he felt. “I don’t blame you if you’re shocked. I was too. I’ve had time to get used to the idea now.”

“And how do you feel about it?” He asked.

“I’m happy about it. It wasn’t what I’d planned for myself, but now I feel happy. Very happy. I know it’s a lot to process but I would love to know what you are thinking right now.”

“Yes, it’s a shock for sure, I didn’t see this coming, but I won’t run away from it either. He leaned over and touched my belly and said “Taylor you know I will always help you. And, of course, I will support the baby. I’d love to be part of his or her life.”

“I’m scared, but I’m also excited. Becoming a parent is a big step, and it’s going to change our lives forever. But I believe we can handle it. We’ve been there for each other, and I think we will make great parents, wow that sounds weird.”

“You’re right, Taylor. We’ve been through a lot together, and this is just another challenge we’ll face together.”

“I’m glad you said that. It means a lot to me. We’ll figure things out together.”

For the rest of the evening, Shane treated me like a queen. I felt pampered and loved. As he dropped me off at home, he leaned in for a goodnight kiss. “I know you’ll think I’m just saying this because of the baby, but I’ve fallen in love with you and I think you love me too.”

He smiled at me provocatively and kissed me, and I felt my insides melting and my knees turning to jelly.

## CHAPTER 20 - SHANE

I am convinced that God brought Taylor into my life to show me that I could love again. I see now that I wasn't really living before, I was merely going through the motions of life.

It was such a shock to hear of Taylor's pregnancy and that I'm going to be a father, something that I thought I would never experience.

My heart is so full right now I feel it will explode at any moment. I had to share the news with Chase.

"Hey Chase, a bombshell was dropped on me last night, it's like my world was turned upside down but in the best way possible." I said excitedly.

Curious, Chase said. "Yeah, what is it, I'm all ears, what's going on?"

"I realized something amazing about Taylor," I said, she was the missing piece, the answer to a question I hadn't even known I was asking. I know it might sound crazy, but it's like she was sent by God, or fate, or something else...to help me heal and find myself again."

"I'm really happy for you. It's been a while since I've seen you this happy." Chase said.

"Yeah, it's like I was just going through the motions before, and now everything's different. Taylor's been a blessing, and I feel like I'm truly living again."

Listening intently, Chase responded. "That's amazing, Shane. I'm glad you found someone who brings out the best in you. It's a beautiful thing to witness."

"Chase, Taylor told me that she's pregnant. I'm going to be a dad, I never thought that would be a reality for me, I've wanted a child for so long."

Chase's jaw dropped open, "whoa, wait a second. Are you serious? That's incredible news, Shane! I never thought

I'd hear you say that.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, I replied “I know, right? It caught me off guard too, but in a good way. My heart's so full right now, it's hard to believe.”

“Man, this is huge! You're going to be a great dad, and Taylor's going to be a fantastic mom. It's like your life is taking a whole new turn, and I couldn't be happier for both of you.”

“Thanks, buddy, ever since I found out I've been busting to tell you. You're like a brother to me. It's just so crazy, you know? I never thought I'd experience something like this after everything that happened.

“Shane, life's full of surprises, my friend. And it's clear that Taylor and this baby are bringing so much joy into your life. Embrace it, man. You deserve every bit of it.”

“Thanks, Chase. I'm so ready to start this new chapter of my life.”

## CHAPTER 21 – TAYLOR

I slept soundly and unsurprisingly; I woke up with a smile on my face. My phone buzzed. It was a message from Shane.

*Hey, why don't you move into my place? It's plenty big enough for the two of us, the three of us. xx S*

It did make sense; I realized that. No more trudging through the snow or getting caught in a snowdrift. I wouldn't have rent on this place and all the bills to pay, although, of course, I did intend to pay for my keep at Shane's. But I'd be working for him, so that was taken care of.

It would be strange being paid to be his housekeeper if I am sharing his bed. I'm sure will work something out.

*It didn't have to be complicated unless we made it that way, right?* I thought.

How had things turned around so quickly? I was still in shock because of the speed with which things had happened. When I thought about that first night, I decided it was a good thing that we hadn't slept together. It had only been two days when I decided that I loved this man. I did love him, had always loved him, and I always knew that he was the one for me.

I texted back, *that sounds good to me. I've already lost my virtue, haven't I? I'll bring some things over later. xx T*

I realized that I had a silly grin on my face again. I'd have to stop walking around like this, or people would think I was a nut. But what was strange about being happy?

I should make the most of it. It wasn't just happy; I was euphoric.

I called mom and dad. Mom answered straight away. She must have been sitting holding her phone, willing it to

ring. “Taylor! Are you alright?” she said anxiously.

“Of course, I am, mom. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Um, no reason,” she answered cagily. “Any news?”

“News about what?” I continued to tease her.

“Anything really.”

“About Shane, you mean?”

“Well, yes. Have you told him yet?”

“Yes, I have, mom.”

“And how did he take it? Look Taylor, you and the baby will be more than welcome here. We’ll look after you. And I’ll look after the baby if you want to work. Although Shane should help you out financially too. He can afford it.”

“Well, I don’t have to worry about that, mom. Because I’m moving in with him.”

“Moving in with him? What do you mean? As a girlfriend or an employee?”

“Both. Mom, Shane said he loves me, and I love him too.”

“Are you getting married?” Mom asked. I imagined that she was already planning her outfit. This was the day—or one of the days—she had been waiting for since my teens.

“I don’t know. It’s still early. No need to rush into that.”

“Oh,” she said, obviously disappointed.

“We’ll just have to see how things work out. But I love him enough to give it a try. I’m optimistic, let’s say.” The grin came back.

“Well, that’s something, I suppose. It’s good to hear how happy you sound. Your dad will be pleased. We’ve been so worried about you, Taylor. Are we going to meet him soon?”



“Time will tell, won’t it? Anyway, I’m going to take some of my stuff over there, so I better start packing. I’ll come over and see you soon. But we’ll invite you to dinner very soon.”

“Oh, that would be lovely. And we get to see the ranch where you and the baby will be living. It would be nice to get to know him better too. Does he have family?”

“No, no, he doesn’t. He inherited the ranch when his dad died, and his mom was already gone. No siblings. You can mother him as much as he’ll let you. He might even like it. Bye, mom, love you.”

As she reciprocated the good feelings, I hung up, feeling sentimental and lucky that I had such great parents. I hoped that I could be just like her to my own child.

It was still early, and I started on my packing. I emailed a letter to my landlord giving a month’s notice on the townhouse. This was really happening, and it was beginning to feel real. It didn’t take long to pack.

Fortunately, I still had some boxes, and six of them covered it, along with three crammed suitcases. What I hadn’t thought about was lifting them. They wouldn’t budge, and I wondered if any human would be able to.

My phone buzzed. It was Shane, texting, *what are you doing?*

*Packing. But now I can’t lift them! Help!*

I realized that I probably shouldn’t be trying when I was pregnant. Nothing could go wrong with this baby.

*Stay right there. I’m coming right over.*

Thirty minutes later, Shane pulled up in his four-by-four with a trailer attached. “Hey, I don’t have that many bags,” I protested.

“Well, too much space is better than too little.” He took me in his arms. “Taylor, I realized just how much I love

you. When you aren't there, its like the sun and moon are blocked out and there's no light in my life."

"Oh. How poetic," I said, not sure how to respond.

"There were times when we first met, when I wondered if I could stay at the ranch. You were such a nightmare, so grumpy and mean all the time."

"I was not! I've always been the gentleman. Kind and considerate." We looked at each other and laughed.

"I know it all happened very quickly. It's just the way things have turned out. But I say we take what's there and run with it. I can't remember when I last felt this happy."

I'm sure that we were both thinking of Sierra. But Sierra had never been pregnant. As if he could read my thoughts, Shane continued.

"Of course, I loved Sierra. And I would never deny that love. It was pure, and it broke my heart so that I thought it would never mend when she died."

"But then you came along, out of the blue, you made me laugh and breathed life back into me. I want to be with you always."

He kissed me again, but this time, it felt different, tender as if he was conveying how he felt in it.

I touched his face. This was the face I wanted to grow old with. We smiled at each other.

"I called mom. She wants to meet you. I've told her that we'll have them over for dinner. You'll be like the son she never had. How do you feel about that?"

"I think I'm going to like it. They sound lovely, your folks. It's going to be good to be part of a family again. Right, let's get this stuff loaded. Don't you try to lift anything. We have to take care of that little lady or fella, don't we?" He touched my belly again, and a dreamy look hit his face.

It didn't take Shane long to load up my meager belongings, and he told me to follow him in my car.

As I locked up for the last time and went to get into the car, Sylvia came out. "So, you're off then. Going to live with the big guy."

"I am Sylvia. Hope you get someone nice to live here. I'm going to miss Gus."

"He's going to miss you too. But at least he'll be thinner."

"Why are you so mean, Sylvia? We could have been friends. Do you want to spend the rest of your life alone? Are you happy? You don't look happy."

She gave me a killer look and went in, slamming her door behind her.

I wished I hadn't said anything. I should have just let it flick off my back. Why should I care if she was unhappy.

Now I felt bad, leaving things like this. It was like having a nasty taste in my mouth. I went to knock on her door to apologize.

She must have checked who it was through her spyhole. "Go away! And good riddance!"

"I'm sorry Sylvia. I'm sorry for being so blunt. I shouldn't have said that." There was no reply and I got into my car with a heavy heart.

But on the way back, I kept bursting into corny songs and singing them at the top of my lungs. I got a few strange looks from people passing by, but I didn't care.

I wanted the world to know how happy I was. Thoughts of Sylvia were fleeting.

Back at the ranch, stepping into the kitchen, it felt like my home. All doubt had disappeared. It felt so right. It felt as if my life had been leading me to this point.

Over the next few months, my morning sickness went away, thank goodness, and I managed to live a normal

life. My cooking improved considerably, and Shane was even beginning to enjoy it and compliment me often. My cakes were usually more of an adventure, and no one knew what was going to come out of the oven.

There were a few mishaps with the laundry, and Shane really wasn't too happy when I shrunk his favorite sweater to a children's size. We decided to keep it until the baby was big enough to fit it.

We talked about marriage, and I protested at going through with a ceremony while I was still pregnant.

I began to show quickly after I'd moved in, so we planned to do it when the baby was three months old, and I had lost my baby weight. I'd never wanted the whole white wedding show, so we planned a simple civil ceremony.

The girls were shocked but happy for me. Mostly, they were shocked at the speed the whole relationship had galloped along. And in their places, I would have been too. But I was secure enough in Shane's love to know that we were doing exactly the right thing.

If it didn't work out, then the speed wouldn't have much to do with it, I thought. It felt as if I could see through to the core of the man as if I had absorbed the essence of who he was. I had no qualms.

I had an easy labor that only lasted four and a half hours. At four forty-four on June seventeenth, Joseph Michael Gatlin was born.

He had the most incredible head of black hair, and his blue eyes sparkled knowingly as soon as they met mine. His eyes did darken to brown like his dad's later, and he was every bit as handsome.

I'd taken Shane to Mom and Dad's a few times, and I'd been right in thinking that they were going to love him just as much as I did.

Mom was like a mother hen fussing over him, and I had to tell her to stop trying to force feed him. She'd always

been an excellent cook. I wasn't sure how the skill escaped me, but I was learning.

The wedding was an understated affair performed on the ranch itself. We opted for an August wedding so we could be sure that we wouldn't get snow.

I wore blue, and Shane wore a light grey suit which brought out the silver streaks in his hair, he looked like the most handsome man in the world.

The girls were there, and two of them brought their new boyfriends. But I was sure that none of them would have a relationship like Shane's and mine.

No one had thought it would last. And it was still just beginning.

After we'd eaten came the speeches. Dads was sentimental and mushy but perfect and had everyone crying.

Shane's sense of humor shone through as he entertained everyone with amusing anecdotes from the early days of our acquaintance, playfully noting that, thankfully, my culinary skills had improved since those times, so he no longer feared me burning down the house.

He went on to joke about my horse-riding mishap that left me hanging by my ankle. Everyone was laughing and enjoying his stories, but what came after the speeches I could never have expected.

The herders had all been invited, and they treated us to a synchronized dance they must have practiced for ages.

Chase, who had been Shane's best man, was leading them, and he seemed to have his eye set firm on Liz. Looking at her, I could see that his attention would not go unrewarded.

Her face looked coy, and she was grinning. I knew that feeling.

The dance looked highly professional, and at the end, Shane joined them, which thrilled me.

The music changed and then slowed down, and Shane made a beeline for me, and we had our first dance.

I felt like a princess and caught mom's eye, which was already wet with tears. She was holding Joseph. It was hard to part those two these days, and now she had moved onto asking when he was going to get a sibling.

I didn't tell her we were already talking about giving Joseph a brother or sister.

We'd had a turbulent beginning to our relationship. But looking back, it might have taught us something fundamental that would help us through the rest of our lives together.

Never take anything for granted.

Life was so fragile that you had to treasure every bit of happiness that comes along.

We could so easily have thrown away what we had because convention told us that everything was moving too fast, that we couldn't know what we were doing.

But fate took things out of our hands.

It could have been disastrous. Joseph hadn't been conceived in the ideal circumstances, but something had been set in motion that was too strong to break. I had the feeling that this was forever.

The start hadn't been ideal, but we were both going to make sure that it had the happiest ending we could hope to achieve.

Shane couldn't wait to get Joseph on the back of a horse. He hoped that he'd follow the family tradition and take the ranch over. Of course, it was too soon to tell, but I could think of worse things for him to do.

Things could have turned out so differently. Had I chosen not to forgive him for the rejection that left me feeling foolish or, had I stubbornly clung to my pride when I saw him with Marley, or if I simply quit my job and didn't tell him I was pregnant.

Lord knows what my life would look like had I not made the choices I did.

I feel grateful for the path I took, even though it wasn't easy.

If I hadn't swallowed my pride and taken a chance on love, I could have ended up like Sylvia. I wish that everyone could feel like I do now, even people like Sylvia. You just have to be open to opportunity when it knocks, sometimes, three times.

*The End*

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It seemed like a dream come true: a fresh start, a chance to begin a career in Alaska. But then I met Luke Davenport: my rich grumpy boss, hot but cold, with a side to him that no one else saw.

It was more than just his good looks that drew me in. It was the forbidden nature of it all. I knew it was dangerous to get involved with my boss, but something kept pulling me towards him.

And the more I got to know him, the more complicated things became.

I knew I could be heading down a path of disaster, knowing it could all go so wrong.

I had to make a choice: follow my head or follow my heart.