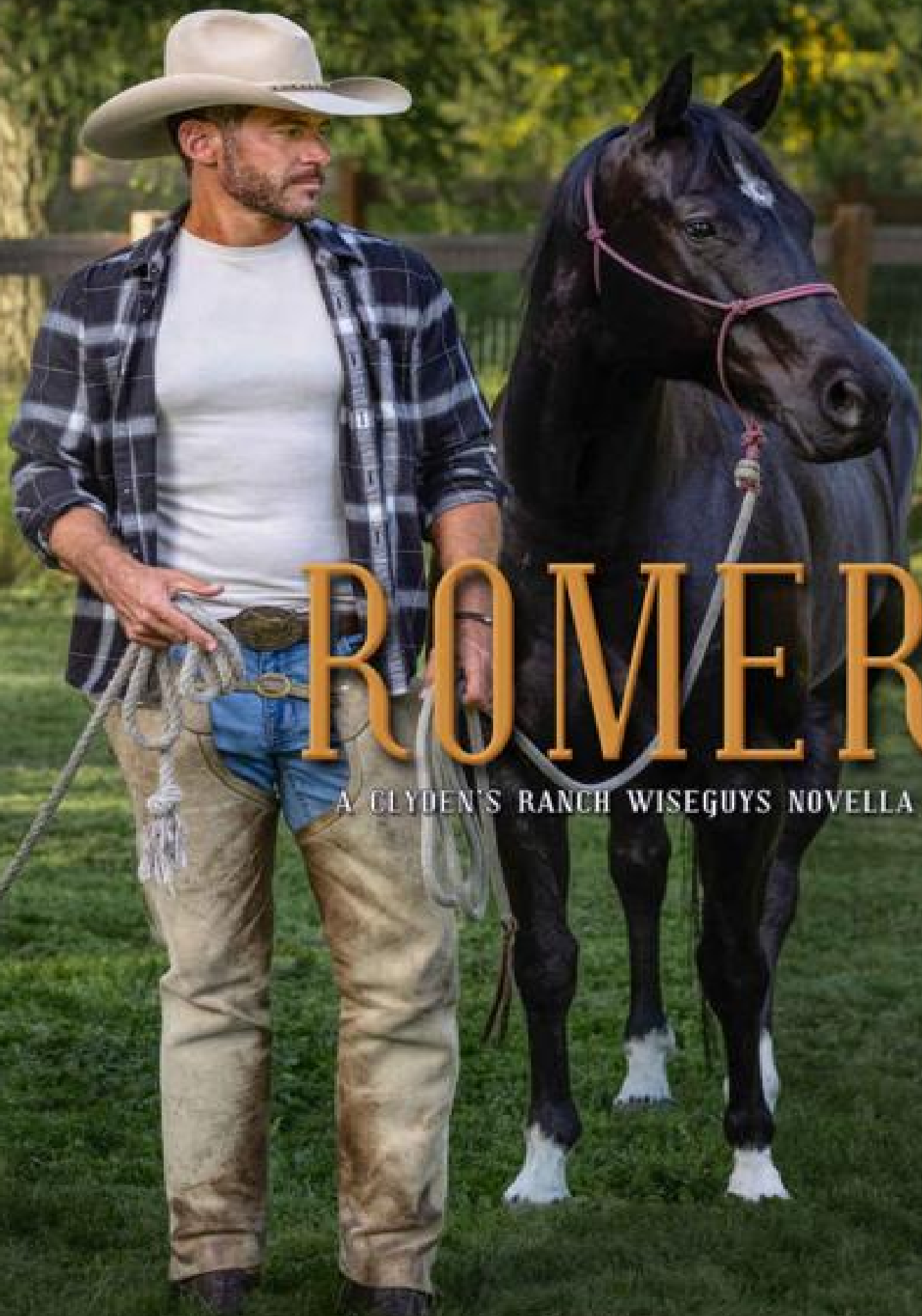


A STANDALONE COWBOY/MAFIA ROMANCE



ROMER

A CLYDEN'S RANCH WISEGUYS NOVELLA

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Romer: A Clyden's Ranch

Wiseguys Novella

By Esther E. Schmidt

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BLURB

The Clyden's ranch. Where horses are bred, whiskey is homemade, and a piece of Italian inheritance is thrown into the mix in the form of great food and wiseguys.

Romer - First, she steals my horse, and then she makes me believe she killed her. Hunting Melora down is easy enough, and falling for the strong—and extremely stubborn—woman is a given. Keeping her safe and alive, though? That's where the real challenge lies.

Melora - The death of my brother throws me into an emotional tailspin. One that triggers the beginning of the end, where the past is rapidly catching up with me. My own actions cause the ruggedly handsome—but annoyingly dominant—cowboy to take control in an effort to save my life.

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CHAPTER ONE

– MELORA –

“Fire, girl,” Malia mutters. “You’re not just playing with it either. All those years you’ve been keeping your distance from the family crime traits and now that they’re dead you choose to revive them. It’s dangerous, Melora, dancing in the fires of hell, the way you’re living these days.”

I keep my eyes on the beautiful Gypsy Cob mare and feel a little thrill of heat and excitement flow through me. “It’s preparation for the inevitable.” I shrug. “What else is there to do? Time is ticking away at rapid speed as it is.”

“Bullshit,” Malia snaps. “Hire bodyguards. Hell, hire a damn army of them. You have your brother’s inheritance. Not to mention, you have loads of money your damn self, woman.”

This time I do drag my eyes away from the gorgeous Gypsy Cob mare I stole. “My days are numbered, Malia. Hollis Grover has wanted me dead ever since I killed his son the day we got engaged five years ago. Now, with my brother’s death, my protection is gone and it’s only a matter of time before I’m staring down the barrel of Grover’s gun.”

Malia can’t hide her wince and I hate the flash of pity in her eyes for a heartbeat or two before it’s gone. No matter how well she tries to hide her reaction, we are both very well aware of the harsh reality of my fucked-up life.

Five years ago, on my sixteenth birthday, my father and Hollis Grover made arrangements for me to marry Ansel.

He was eighteen, I was sixteen, and our fathers were binding mafia families through this arranged marriage.

Contracts were signed, a date was set, and a promise was shoved around my finger when Ansel slipped his shiny ring on me. A chill runs up my spine at the memory of that deadly night, and how I bathed in his blood. I killed him. I didn't have a choice, it was self-defense, but that doesn't make him any less dead.

“Hey,” Malia snaps and tugs on my arm.

I glance down at her fingers wrapped around my wrist and shake my head a bit to clear it from the foggy memory. “What?” I murmur.

“It looked as if you were drifting off the edge of the world there for a minute or two,” she states.

I clear my throat in an effort to shake the reminder of Ansel and what he did—what he forced me to do—and how it all spiraled out of control.

A sad smile tugs my lips when I tell her, “There is no drifting off, or any escape, for that matter. My back is against the wall. I shouldn't have stolen this gorgeous horse, and I shouldn't have shifted my anger to the owner of this mare.”

If only I could have one last discussion with Tito, my brother. Except, death is final and obliterates a second chance of anything when it involves a dead man. Malia leans her forearms on the fence and stares off into the pasture. I release a deep sigh and mimic her stance.

We stay quiet for several heartbeats before Malia whispers, “You and Tito always bumped heads, but deep down

neither of you could live with or without one another. Regrets are like smoke tainting the air; it will suffocate you in the end if you wallow in it.”

I’m tired of pointing out the fact that without my brother’s protection, Grover will come for me.

Turning to face my two horses, I mutter, “Those two look like they want to play with their new friend.”

“Hell yeah.” Malia chuckles and strolls toward the gate between the two pastures.

As soon as my two Quarter horses are able to enter the Gypsy Cob’s space, they run off. Shaking heads, darting around, as if the three mares are kids playing around without a single worry in mind. They sure are a sight to behold.

Boo, a gray Quarter horse, is twenty years old. The other one, Birdie, is nine and black. Boo used to be my mother’s horse, and that right there is the reason for my passion. I love this breed, any animal for that matter.

I work in the movie business and make realistic looking animals for stand-ins. And my love for animals is why I started designing any type of animal as realistic as possible. Growing up it was a hobby, but I’ve managed to make it my profession, and I’m now a prop designer.

There’s a long list of demands, and I’m thankful to be able to work from home so I get to enjoy riding my horses each and every day. Malia was right about my wealth. I’ve not only made my own money by working hard, I also inherited a portion when my parents died, and now with my brother gone, it all adds to it.

Again, money is money. The loss of my brother pains me even if we didn't always get along. For one, he promised me I never had to enter an arranged marriage. That ship sailed a few weeks ago when I discovered by accident how he made a deal that involved me.

I still can't believe how Tito traded me off just so he could marry some woman with a massive bank account. Why would he need the money when he had access to enough himself? I mean, there was a split second I thought he might be bankrupt, but I received all the legal papers of his possessions earlier today.

My brother had close to a million in total. Okay, most was stuck in real-estate, but still. He could have asked me and I would have given him any amount he needed. Nothing makes sense.

And now that he's gone, I will never get answers to all the new questions that pop into my head. All because of Romer Clyden, the owner of the Gypsy Cob I stole. His name was all over the papers when I dug into my brother's case.

Tito was arrested along with four of his men. During transport, their vehicle was hit by a freight train and it instantly killed them, along with two agents. Accident my ass. If my brother wouldn't have been arrested, he would still be alive today.

A childish and twisted thought, I know. Call it temporary insanity when I planned the kidnapping of Romer's horse, and simply looking for someone to blame. Grief, guilt, desperation...emotions were wreaking havoc and I turned to what I knew best. Meaning I kidnapped Romer's Gypsy Cob,

created the perfect fake head, and placed it in his bed. Oh, and I added a load of fake blood for extra shock effect.

Sadly, I didn't stick around to see Romer's face. I'm sure by now the guy knows his horse is still alive and well. I'm also positive he'll find out who pulled the prank on him. Well, maybe not so much a prank since I actually did kidnap his horse.

Yeah, I'm a horse thief and a murderer. My life is fucked-up. Not just because Grover is coming for me, but the fact that Romer Clyden works for the damn government. Another tidbit I found when I hacked into the system to find out who the arresting officer was.

I'm not proud of the things I've done these past couple of days. My brother made me promise not to use my computer skills, and stay under the radar, but his death kinda made the promise we made fall flat.

I shove away from the fence and tell Malia, "I'm turning in for the night."

"All right, girl. See you tomorrow." She waves without taking her eyes off the three horses.

My shoulders slump and I drag my cowboy boots through the dust as I wander back into my house. Malia lives in a small cabin on the other side of my property. She's ten years older than I am and was the ranch help when I bought this property. Malia stayed on to help me with the horses and we've been friends ever since, even if I'm technically her boss.

The door falls shut behind me and the snick of the lock catches me by surprise. There's no time to turn around to see who locked the door when a large hand covers my mouth and what feels like the barrel of a gun is shoved in my gut.

A solid chest is covering my back and the scent of leather, spice, and fresh pine assault my nose. I instantly recognize the scent and know exactly who is holding me. Can't say I didn't expect it either.

I shouldn't have been caught by surprise, though. My brother taught me better than that. I mumble the name of my captor and I feel the vibrations of a chuckle rumble through his chest. His hand leaves my mouth and I'm roughly pushed forward. I spin on my heel and face the man who is now pointing a gun at my face.

"Romer Clyden," I state and release a sigh.

I knew it was coming. Knew it the second I went after his horse that he would find out exactly who took her. The thought of his horse, how sweet and well taken care of she is causes my chest to ache. My horses would be left alone as soon as Grover comes for me.

That thought makes my words tumble from me in defeat. "Before you slap the cuffs on, and drag your horse home, can you do me one favor?"

I don't get to ask him to take my horses with him after he puts me in jail for stealing because the sound of gunshots cracks through the air.

"What did you do?" I growl and direct my gaze out the window where I see Malia stumble back and crumble to the

ground.

My throat instantly hurts when I scream at the top of my lungs, “Nooooooooo.”

I reach for the door. Strong fingers wrap around my wrist and I’m once again yanked against a hard chest.

Romer’s lips are near my ear when he rumbles, “I didn’t do shit. There’s no one here but me.”

“Fuck,” I croak. “It’s Grover.”

My head spins when Romer roughly turns me to face him.

“Who?” he demands.

“Long story.” I glance over my shoulder to watch a man stomp toward Malia with his gun raised. “Please. I need to help her.”

His eyes slide to the window. Romer takes out his phone and thumbs the screen.

“Stay here,” he orders and to my surprise he jogs out of the kitchen instead of taking the door that leads straight to Malia.

I blink a few times and realize I’ve let my emotions override my sanity. Romer is going out the front to make sure he comes up behind the man attacking Malia instead of making himself known beforehand.

“Stupid,” I mutter and kickstart myself into action.

Reaching for the drawer, I take out the small handgun and jump into a run in the direction Romer just disappeared in.

Staying close to the house, I sneak around the corner and hear another gunshot.

My heart is slamming against my ribs. Did Romer get there in time to stop the man? Did the man put another bullet in Malia? Is she still alive? Questions are flooding my brain and I swallow hard before I glance around the corner, preparing myself for what I'm about to see.

There's a body on the ground while Romer is now squatting down next to Malia. Movement catches my attention and I see another guy running toward them with his gun raised.

"Gun," I yell at Romer to warn him while I take aim to take out the man coming for them.

Except, the man instantly turns and is pointing the gun at the sky when he sees me. I barely manage not to pull the trigger to take him out.

Confusion hits me and I keep my gun aimed at the guy when I hear Romer growl, "Put the fucking gun down, woman. Sonny, tell them to send a fucking chopper. We need a medical team here now, dammit."

I flip the safety back on and run in their direction. Romer was clearly lying when he said he was alone; he had backup probably a bit further down the road. The guy, Sonny, is standing next to me and I shove my gun in his hand and drop to my knees beside Malia's head. Tears blur my vision. Her eyes are closed and she's groaning in pain.

Blood. So much blood. Here I was afraid of losing my own life...all while my best friend is now fighting for hers. At

this point, nothing matters anymore. I thought I had nothing left to lose, but I guess there's always more...more pain... more grief...when my best friend's life is slipping away as I hold her in my arms.

CHAPTER TWO

– ROMER –

“No leads at this point,” Coy Maxton, our government contact, informs me.

He’s the one who hands out most of our assignments. Criminal cases to be exact. Either for us to solve, consult, or assist in any way they need. My father is the one who started out with this special line of work and both my brother and I have followed in his footsteps.

Recently we worked a case where Tito Gastone was one of the mafia heads that needed to be brought to justice. We managed to build a case and my brother caught the fucker on record, confessing to crimes.

Tito and a few of his men were arrested on the spot. Sadly, due to a tragic accident, he never made it to prison. Which is why I’m standing here, ‘cause his damn sister retaliated by stealing my horse and made me fucking think she slaughtered it by putting a prop in my bed.

I throw a glance over my shoulder at the woman who is sitting in the waiting room. Melora is covered in dried blood and has been sitting there, waiting to hear about her friend that was shot, for over four hours. Malia is still in surgery and I was just informed that she pulled through.

Rubbing a hand over my face I grumble, “Did you manage to find out anything about the name Grover she mentioned?”

Coy scans our surroundings and whispers, “Only one fucker is using that last name. I’ve stashed all the info I could find in the usual spot.” He steps closer and leans in. “If you do manage to nail that one? You’d be doing the impossible. Watch your ass with that one, but fuck. I’d bet the president himself would swing by to shake your hand if you put Hollis Grover behind bars, or six feet under for that matter.”

“We’ll see,” I mutter and step back. “I’m taking point on this case and will get back to you once I have anything to report.”

“Appreciate it,” Coy rumbles and stalks down the hallway.

I wander back to the waiting room. Melora’s head whips up and her light gray eyes connect with my gaze. Her irises have a dark rim, causing her eyes to fucking pop. Then there’s her long red hair. The pictures I’ve seen of her all show curly hair, but it’s currently pulled back in a long braid.

I had to take a few days to investigate her, to get to know what kind of person I had on my hands before I went in to retrieve my horse. Thank fuck Sonny went with me. Hell, I can’t even imagine what would have happened if I hadn’t come by today at that exact time.

All of it made me return to Melora’s ranch and pack a suitcase for her and Malia. I’ve arranged for my father and brother to swing by and retrieve my horse, making sure they take both of Melora’s horses along as well.

Not the animals, nor those two women, will return to that ranch until I know exactly what the fuck is going on. Coy hasn’t been able to identify the shooter whose body is now at

the morgue. From Coy's reaction I gather this Grover fucker is the biggest lead.

So, I have no fucking clue why he mentioned there aren't any leads. I lift my chin in Sonny's direction. He's been staying with her since I was left for Melora's ranch, and talking to Coy.

"She pulled through surgery," I rumble and Melora jumps to her feet.

Both hands press against her heart. "Really?" she croaks.

"They are keeping her for observation, and it will take a while before she's conscious. No visitors," I lie. "Sonny here will stand guard in front of her room to make sure she's safe. He will also keep us updated if anything changes with her condition."

She blinks a few times and then her eyes narrow. "You're seriously going to arrest me. Now? While my friend is in the hospital? You have your horse, I've done nothing but take good care of her. Besides, if it wasn't for you my brother would still be alive." She winces and a sudden change washes over her. Fire lights her eyes when she snaps, "Never mind. Just...take your horse home. Hell, take mine as well and we'll call it even."

I narrow my eyes and the rapid rise and fall of her impressive tits gives me the impression that there's a swirl of emotion coursing through her body. The reminder of our confrontation just before shots rang out at her ranch comes to mind.

“Is that the favor you wanted to ask me when we were standing inside your house earlier?” I guess. “For me to take your horses? What kind of trouble are you in?”

She ignores my questions completely and snaps, “Are you going to drag me into a jail cell? Put me on the tracks the way you did with my brother and wait for the train to come to make it seem like an accident? Then hurry the fuck up because I’m tired of hearing you talk.”

“Motherfucker,” I mutter under my breath and raise my voice a fragment to ask, “Did you always have a temper or is it me that flares it up?”

Her upper lip curls and she sneers, “Always. But, I’m pretty sure you fire it up a few notches.”

“Awesome.” I smirk. “Then we’re going to enjoy creating some fireworks the upcoming days ’cause you’re coming with me for the time being.”

Her eyes widen and she starts to sputter. “What the fuck?”

“The horses are already at the Clyden’s ranch. There’s nothing you can do here. You can hardly stay by yourself when someone we haven’t been able to identify was there to kill you guys.” I take a step closer. “You’re coming with me, and that’s that.”

“That’s that?” she squeaks in outrage.

I jerk my chin down and she glares at me.

“With all due respect, boss,” Sonny rumbles and turns to Melora. “You two need to keep it down.”

Her shoulders sag and she bobs her head. “Sorry.”

“I’ll keep watch and let my boss know if there’s any change with your friend’s situation,” he tells her.

“Thank you.” She swallows hard.

I take a step in the direction of the exit and glance over my shoulder to see Melora dragging her feet as she follows me. I don’t give a fuck what her mood is or where her mind is at. For now, she’s under my protection, whether she likes it or not.

She stays silent the way down to the parking lot and once in my truck as well as we ride to the ranch. I park my truck in the usual spot in front of the main house. Hixon, my father, and Clover—our newly hired ranch hand who is now his woman—live in one part of the house.

My older brother, Shepherd, lives in another part with his wife, Lucina. A recent undercover case had Shepherd thrown into an arranged marriage. One where he basically married the enemy, but as it turned out Lucina was completely innocent and helped us.

It’s a fucked-up reality to know Lucina’s brother actually made a deal with Tito so he could marry her and link their families. Let’s just say everything went to shit except for the part where we were able to close this case while Shepherd and Lucina actually fell in love and are now happily married with a kid on the way.

I shake my head to clear the reminders of what happened these past few weeks and point at the main house. “My family and I live here. Each of us have our own segment

of the house, but we share the kitchen and a large living room.”

Melora keeps her lips sealed as I grab the bag I packed for her from the backseat. I place a hand on her lower back and guide her inside. The house is empty, as expected. Both my father and brother, along with their women, are gone for tonight at my request.

I lead her into my bedroom and can't help but tell her, “No need to show you around 'cause you've already been in here.” I close the door behind her to reveal what's mounted to the wall behind it. “Thanks for the prop.”

She spins around and comes face-to-face with the head of my horse. Laughter rips from her and it makes the corners of my mouth twitch. After the shock of realizing someone stole my horse, finding a bloody head in my bed, and then realizing my horse is safe and sound in the thief's pasture? Yeah, I could respect her lashing out in this unique way.

It's why I didn't throw the prop away, but had it mounted to my bedroom wall instead. She's inventive, and I can respect the way she went about getting revenge. After observing her for a day or two, seeing how well she treated my horse, not getting violent in any way...I decided to confront her and get my horse back instead of arresting her ass.

Well, it's safe to say things worked out a little differently.

Melora's laughter is cut short. “I shouldn't have reacted the way I did.” Her gaze slides to her cowboy boots. “My brother's death...everything...it hit me hard and I needed

to lash out. I targeted you because your name was on the paperwork.”

Shitty apology if you ask me. That last line, though?
“What do you mean my name was on the paperwork?”

Her head comes up and she bites her bottom lip, no words tumble over those pink lush things.

I take a step closer. “How did you know I filled out those papers involving your brother’s arrest?”

She huffs out a frustrated breath. “I might or might not have hacked into—”

“Great,” I growl as I cut her off. “Add other fucking violations to the long list of shit you did.”

She mutters something underneath her breath, and it takes a moment for my brain to process the words she just rattled. *“Yeah, well, it’s not like I have a long life ahead of me anyway now that my brother is gone.”*

“And why is that?” I question, hating the fact that I didn’t take a few minutes to glance through the information Coy gave me. But then again, all it takes is a wild guess.
“Grover.”

Our eyes lock and a muscle jumps in her jaw, as if she’s grinding her teeth. “It’s none of your business. You’ve done enough already.” She winces and closes her eyes for a breath or two and grumbles, “Shit. What I mean is...I’m glad you were there today. I can’t imagine what would have happened if you weren’t...Malia would be dead. I would...I. Yeah. Thanks for coming to retrieve your horse when you did. It slightly makes me happy I did steal her.”

I can't help but snort.

“She's a good horse.”

“That she is,” I agree, knowing she's trying to steer away from explaining what kind of trouble she's in with people trying to kill them and her mentioning the name Grover.

I decide to give her some leeway, for now. Besides, there's information Coy gave me I need to read through before I can ask more direct questions. I have a feeling this woman standing in front of me would rather disappear into quicksand than accept help to keep herself safe.

Jerking my chin in the direction of the bathroom, I tell her, “Why don't you take a shower or a bath? Nothing else to do but wait till we get an update on your friend. You look as if you're dead on your feet with the shit that happened, so some shut-eye to recharge is inevitable.” Holding out the backpack for her to take I add, “I've packed a few things for you.”

Her eyes widen. “You've gone through my things?”

A bone-tired sigh rips from me. Why does every conversation with this woman feel like a collision?

“No,” I snap. “When you were at the hospital I went back to your ranch to make sure everything was locked up and handled. I figured you and your friend needed a change of clothes since you're fucking covered in dried blood.”

I throw the backpack at her feet, spin on my heel, and stomp out of the fucking room, slamming the door shut behind me.

CHAPTER THREE

– MELORA –

The scent of freshly baked bread teases my nose as I slowly wake up. Blinking a few times, I take in my surroundings and the turmoil of events from yesterday come crashing in. I jolt upright and whip my head to the spot next to me on the bed.

The sheets are wrinkled and it looks as if someone slept beside me. I reach out to smooth my hand over the spot and I feel it's cold to the touch. If Romer did sleep in the same bed, it must only have been for a handful of hours.

Last night, after I took a long shower, I found the bedroom empty and felt completely drained. I climbed into bed and instantly crashed into a deep sleep. It boggles my mind how I was able to. Yet, on the other hand, the past few days have been a turmoil of emotions. This was the one time I felt safe enough to close my eyes and sleep without a second thought.

I mean, Grover would be insane to try and get to me here. To say he doesn't like cops is an understatement. Even if I've read about these Clyden guys and how they work undercover. If I hadn't hacked into the system to check the papers on my brother, I never would have known about Romer, his brother, his father, and how they are law enforcement in their own special way.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I get to my feet and stalk into the bathroom to handle my business. Once back in the bedroom, I grab my backpack and take some fresh clothes Romer picked out for me. After pulling on my jeans, along with a white shirt, I put on some socks and my cowboy boots.

I follow the scent of freshly baked bread into the kitchen and find two women softly chatting with each other. They fall silent once they notice me.

“Hey, you must be Melora, Romer’s guest, and the reason why we had to stay out all night,” one of the women says and steps forward to offer her hand. “I’m Clover, this here is Lucina, Shepherd’s wife.”

I shake her hand and nod at Lucina. “Sorry, did you say I’m the reason you guys had to stay out all night? Why?”

Clover shrugs and I notice the corner of her mouth twitch when she says, “I guess the man wanted the house all to himself. At least he made arrangements for a nice stay at the bed and breakfast in town.”

“Yeah,” Lucina agrees. “Except, breakfast sucked so we sneaked out and drove home.”

I can feel my eyes widen a fraction. “You guys left your men at the bed and breakfast?”

They glance at one another and bark out a laugh.

Clover is the one who says, “We made it a good two miles before they chased us down.”

Lucina throws a thumb over her shoulder. “They are out in the stables with Romer, handling the horses.”

“Are you hungry?” Clover questions and starts to pull plates from a cabinet.

I’m unable to answer when my attention is suddenly drawn to a young dog that rushes into the kitchen and is being chased by a kitten. Laughter bubbles free and Lucina chuckles when she scoops up the kitten.

“This one here thinks she’s a dog too.” Lucina nuzzles the kitten. “Don’t you little Fluff?”

“Yes, she named the kitten Fluff.” Clover scratches the white shepherd behind his ear. “And this here is Des.”

“You two both adopted a pet? Together?” I question, seeing how young the animals are, and add, “Smart to get them used to one another when they’re this young.”

“Actually.” Clover grimaces. “Hixon brought Des home after they...handled a situation. Des would have ended up in a shelter otherwise.”

Lucina bobs her head. “Basically, the same way with Fluff, only it was Shepherd who gave Fluff to me.”

“So, what did Romer bring home for his girl?” I have no clue where the question came from or why I even ask if he has a girl.

Just to make sure, I guess. There was no mention of a wife or a girlfriend in the information I found on him. I did sleep in his bed and it would be unlikely for him to offer if he does have a relationship, right?

“Two horses, one is named Boo, the other Birdy,” a voice rumbles through the screen door. “My girl really loves

those two, they're having fun, all three of them racing through the pasture right now."

My head swings in Romer's direction and I narrow my eyes. "Those are my horses."

"That's debatable at this point," he rumbles and strolls to the counter as if he's on top of the world.

Romer snags a freaking bread roll and takes a bite while his eyes never leave mine. There's a load of challenge in his gaze along with a twinkle that clearly says he's enjoying taunting me with what he just said. Even if I was going to ask him to take care of them, he doesn't get to simply claim them while I'm still here to take care of my horses.

It's for this reason I snap, "You only get to own them when I'm dead and gone. That's what happened to the previous owners of Fluff and Des, right? Well, I'm still breathing so they are still fucking mine."

Okay, I was guessing about the previous owners of Des and Fluff being dead, but the way they both wince? Yeah, I guessed right.

"But how long until they will become mine, eh?" Romer challenges. "I mean, this Grover guy is already closing in on you. What does he want from you anyway? Your brother's territory? Are you taking over now that your brother is gone?"

I want to lash out and tell him that my brother isn't simply gone. That he was killed. Yet, deep down I know it was an accident. I mean, what are the odds of the van they were in having an accident with the train?

No other vehicles or people were involved. I've read all the paperwork, and went to the place where it happened. Nothing makes sense other than it being an accident. No car just simply stops on the tracks and creates the perfect timing for a freight train to hit it.

Des plunks down next to me and leans against my leg. His head tips back and it's as if he's feeling my grief, the fear, along with the helplessness coursing through my veins. I lean down to scratch his ear.

"I'm not a part of my brother's world, and I have no clue who is taking over his territory or anything connected to his mafia business." I let my gaze find Romer when I add the truth that's hard to deny, "Grover just wants me dead."

Romer dips his scruffy chin. "I figured as much. Anything I should know as to why he wants you dead?"

Because I killed his son, my mind offers. Yeah, most definitely not something I can voice out loud. Besides, the only one alive who is aware of what I did and why is Grover. I vividly remember how Ansel tried to rape me the night we got engaged.

Some parts I've blocked from my mind, and to this day I still can't remember how the letter opener ended up in my hand, but it did and my body simply reacted by driving the sharp instrument into his chest.

My brother taught me how to fight, though nothing could have prepared me for the way the crimson spread at rapid speed. Nor the scream that ripped from my throat. My father, brother, and Grover rushing into the library... Tito stepping in front of me when Grover pulled his gun.

No matter how many words I rattled, explaining what happened, they all ignored me. Tito dragged me upstairs and forced me to clean up. The only thing my father said about everything was that he had it handled with Grover. No marriage since Ansel was dead, but a new deal was made.

The same deal Tito kept with Grover to keep me safe. To this day I have no clue what arrangements were made, but it's not hard to guess it involved money. With both my father and my brother dead, there's only me...no protection...Grover has free range to have his revenge and end my life.

I'm startled when a callused hand touches my cheek. Blinking, I now notice Romer standing in front of me, a concerned look in his eyes.

“Where did your mind go, mogliettina?” he murmurs.

My heart is slamming against my rib cage. There's a healthy dose of fear, ignited by self-preservation, keeping me from answering his question. I swallow hard when I process the soft endearment he added. Mogliettina; little wife. *Little wife?*

We're not married. We don't even have a freaking relationship. I've never so much as kissed a man, other than Ansel forcing himself on me. I let my gaze drop to his lips and lick my own at the thought of kissing him, wondering how it would feel.

A completely different turmoil of feelings floods my body and I whisper, “Not married.” I clear my throat to add in a firmer tone, “I'm not your wife.”

His thumb slowly slides over my bottom lip, eyes turning to liquid heat; the same intensity flows through my veins.

“Not married,” he muses. “You refuse to marry to hand over your brother’s inheritance, is that why he wants you dead?”

Grover? Marrying me? I snort. That’s as far away from the truth as it can get. I rip my face from his touch and step away from him to create some distance between us. His closeness, his spicy scent, his touch...everything is overwhelming and causing my body to long for all the things he can give me.

Things I’ve never let myself experience with a man. I might not be a complete virgin with all the experimental things I did with myself in bed by using toys, dirty movies, and books to explore my own sexuality. I’ve never given it a second thought to bring a man into my bed...until now.

Trying to get my body under control I repeat the same sentence I gave him before in a snarl, “Grover just wants me dead.”

He pursues his lips and keeps those piercing eyes locked on me when he says, “Fine, don’t give me details. In the end, it won’t change a fucking thing anyway. For the time being you will stay here in my custody.”

Oh, shit. Does he know? Did he somehow find out I killed Grover’s son?

“What?” I squeak and start to sputter, “You...you can’t...you...you can’t do that.”

Romer smirks. “I can do whatever the hell I want. Especially after the stunt you pulled with my horse, and the shooting that happened at your ranch.”

I swing my head in the direction of Clover and Lucina, silently asking for their help. That slight window of opportunity falls flat when their men are standing next to them. When the hell did both Hixon and Shepherd enter the kitchen?

“No need to panic,” Hixon rumbles. “We’re all here to help and keep you safe.”

“Why?” I snap, knowing it’s rude, but I guess it’s my defense mechanism kicking in with the lack of trust I have in men, in people in general.

Except for Malia. Malia, who is in the hospital because of me.

“Why?” Romer echoes with challenge, and my eyes find his. “Because we can.”

He steps closer, entering my personal space.

His voice is a low rumble when he whispers, “Because I fucking want to.”

My mouth goes dry, my heart kicks into overdrive, my belly flops, and my body heats from the intensity of his words.

I feel as if I’m surrendering to my body’s longing instead of counting on my brain to rationalize my thoughts when the word, “Okay,” flows from my lips.

His large hand comes up, calloused fingers wrap around my throat, and he gives a firm squeeze. Not nearly

enough to cut off my air supply, but definitely adequate power to show his dominance.

“Then it’s settled. You’re under my protection now. Which means your ass belongs to me. No escaping, no running, no nothing except following my rules.”

Is it my imagination or is there an underlying sexual promise when he breathes out that last part? Following his rules. What rules? My pussy grows slick as my imagination goes haywire.

At a time like this—with my life hanging in the balance—how can I only focus on having sex with the rugged man in front of me? I must have a death wish. Grover on the one hand, is out to kill me, Romer on the other will throw me in jail when he finds out I killed a man.

Yet, right here, right now, I’m only curious to find out one thing. What it would feel like to freely be with a man like Romer.

CHAPTER FOUR

– ROMER –

Her eyes dilate and the tip of her tongue sneaks out to lick her bottom lip. She's staring at my mouth as if she wants nothing more than to lean in and kiss the fuck out of me. Damn. My cock lengthens inside my jeans and when her eyes flutter close as she rises on her toes to close the distance between us? I swear a spurt of pre cum leaks out.

Motherfucker. Touching her is letting her heat seep into my skin. A spark causing a wildfire inside my veins. I'm automatically drawn to her and it's why I pull her close by the gentle grip I have on her throat to slam my mouth over hers.

The hell with the audience we have with my father, brother, and their women standing in the kitchen along with us. She gasps, allowing me to swoop right in and taste her. Our tongues start a sensual dance and I shove my thigh between her legs to give her the friction she craves.

Melora moans and starts to ride my leg. Somewhere behind me, I hear some murmurs and footsteps fading, but I instantly dismiss it. At this moment nothing's important, because my attention is completely focused on the woman in front of me.

Her hands dig into my biceps, and I tear my mouth from hers to place my lips beside her ear. "That's it, mogliettina, ride yourself to pleasure. Make yourself come and

leave a wet spot all over my thigh. Show me the way you're going to give it to me when my cock enters your tight pussy."

Her breathing becomes erratic, and I pull back just in time to watch her face as she falls apart. Utter pleasure washes over her. Lips swollen and slightly parted, cheeks flushed, eyes wide with a mixture of shock and bliss.

"Fucking gorgeous," I murmur and can't stop staring down at her.

She sags against the wall I pressed her up against, and if she didn't have my thigh between her legs, I'm sure her knees would buckle. It doesn't matter, though. Watching her come sealed the deal for me; there's no damn way I'm going to let her fall. Scratch that; I'm not ever going to let her slip away.

The blissful haze slowly fades and I can see the moment she realizes what the hell just happened.

"Rein it in, darlin'," I rumble. "I can practically hear your brain kickstart into a thunderstorm and it's uncalled for. Now, I'm going to step away and we'll keep this intimate moment we shared pristine and perfect. Okay?"

She grinds her teeth, the muscle in her jaw jumping. Eyes narrowed, face flushed, tits rising and falling to show she's still struggling to catch her damn breath. Fucking hell, this woman is magnificent.

I decide it's better to change the subject and tell her, "Sonny called. Malia woke up during the night and she's doing okay. He texted me this morning with an update. She's now

well-rested and is asking for you. That's why I came back...to wake you so we can go to the hospital if you like."

Melora places a hand on her chest and briefly closes her eyes. "Oh, thank fuck."

The corner of my mouth twitches at the sound of her cursing.

I pull the keys to my truck from my pocket and ask, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. Definitely. Thank you," she murmurs.

Stalking to the front door, I bellow, "Going out, be back later."

From somewhere in the house is a grunt and I hear Melora suck in a sharp breath. I barely keep myself from laughing. Yeah, she now realized what we did in the kitchen started with an audience and she completely forgot we had one. Well, not for long, but the reminder of us hitting off in front of others is there.

I couldn't give two fucks. Hell, my father wouldn't judge since he basically hooked up with the hired help. My brother, on the other hand, jumped into an arranged marriage and they were married within less than an hour of meeting one another.

I'm not saying Melora is it for me, the long-term, marry the girl, and ride off in the sunset shit because it's too soon. Though, it feels good to have her in my arms, coming undone riding my leg, and kissing the fuck out of her.

My cock is still straining against the zipper of my jeans and I can't wrap my brain around the fact that I didn't rip it

free and bury myself to the hilt in her sweet pussy. Doesn't mean I won't. Doesn't mean I will either.

She's skittish, a hellion, and there's a large gap in her background that makes me uneasy. My gut tells me there's more to this woman than being the sister of a mafia boss. From all the intel we've gathered there's no sign she's connected to anything illegal.

Though, why the hell would Grover want her dead if she's not a threat? This is part of the black hole in her background I need to unravel. It's also why I'm trying to keep the flood of lust under control when it comes to Melora, the woman who doesn't seem to trust me to explain the history between her, her brother, and Grover.

Our drive to the hospital is done in comfortable silence. Neither of us has the urge to talk, and I'm guessing Melora has enough on her mind right now. Once I park my truck, I guide her toward the entrance with a hand on the small of her lower back.

A car backfires and she practically crawls inside me; her tiny fists buried into the fabric of my shirt while her face is crushed between us. Anger flares up inside me as I quickly scan our surroundings, making sure everything is fine.

"You're safe," I murmur and squeeze her tight. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you, darlin'."

She shudders in my arms and takes a deep breath before stepping back.

Her eyes are on her cowboy boots when she mutters, "Sorry, normally I'm not so skittish."

I snort. “Woman, any sane person would be skittish after what went down yesterday.”

She falls silent once again until we arrive in front of Malia’s room where Sonny is leaning against the wall. He lifts his chin in acknowledgment, and I wait outside while Melora slips into Malia’s room.

Sonny steps closer as soon as the door closes behind her. “I would like to take Malia home to my cabin to recover for the upcoming few days if that’s okay with you guys.”

A hint of surprise flows through me. “Any reason why you would take it upon yourself to offer your home and help to a total stranger?”

Sonny’s mouth turns into a thin line. “With all due respect, boss...what the fuck in this pot meet kettle situation? The woman you took home yesterday is the one who stole your horse and shocked the fuck out of you when she placed a fake head in your bed. It’s a good thing you don’t scare easily or you could have dropped dead. I mean, it’s rare, but a strong emotional reaction can trigger a heart attack.”

I would like to say he’s exaggerating, yet I know there’s truth in his words.

Deciding to ignore his ramblings, I tell him, “That still doesn’t answer my question.”

He releases a deep sigh. “The woman wanted to discharge herself last night. I caught a hint of her discussion with the doctor and the nurse and ran a background check on her. She doesn’t have the money to hire someone to help out. I’m guessing pride will keep her from asking her friend

Melora. She will need to have help because she twisted her ankle when she took the bullet. Besides, she's a damn spitfire. She had the nerve to tell me to piss off and find a blow-up doll to blow the air in my lungs into because the words I threw at her were a waste of my breath."

My head tips back and a bark of laughter rips from me.

Sonny chuckles and I shake my head to mutter, "No shit?"

"No. Shit," he repeats. "You know how I like to have my hands full. Besides, I can take care of her and keep an eye on the security cams while Farley handles the other tasks. I can be on call if I have her tucked into bed or on the couch."

His reasoning sounds acceptable, not to mention, this will also soothe Melora's mind to know her friend is in good hands and on the same property.

"I'll talk it through with my father. Do you know when she'll be discharged?" I question.

Sonny rubs the back of his head. "Like I said, she wanted to discharge herself last night. They would like to keep her at least another day."

"Okay, tell her we'll cover the medical expenses, that will get her to stay put until you can take her home to recover." The corner of my mouth twitches. "You can even tell her staying with you will cover other costs, so she won't have a choice."

Sonny grins. "That'll work. Besides, it's safer for her to stay on the ranch with us for now. Even if she wasn't a target, it won't be smart to return to Melora's property."

“Agreed.” My gaze slides to the door where both women are staying in the same room. “Though, they might think otherwise.”

“Dunno,” Sonny rumbles. “Getting shot, seeing your friend get shot, neither is something you experience every day and surely gives you a different point of view.”

I grind my teeth, knowing he’s right, but still, “It’s not shocking enough to make Melora talk about shit in her past.”

“Still no clue as to why the shooting happened?” he guesses.

The information Coy sent me yesterday is now all inside my head. I’ve been going over it and trying to make sense of it all. I do have a theory, based on some financial ties between Grover and Melora’s father, ties that were continued by Tito after their father died.

Though, between Melora keeping her lips sealed, and not having the time yet to really question her, there’s no way I can turn my theory into a motive for the shooting. All in good time, I hope. All while time is pressing. The shooter might be dead, but the one who gave the order for the hit is still unclear.

Melora thinks it’s Grover, and there are definitely solid grounds to put all eyes in his direction, but what if there’s the slightest chance it’s someone completely different? Yeah, I need to have a little heart-to-heart with the stubborn woman.

The door opens and Melora steps out. She turns and carefully, not to make a sound, closes the door.

Her voice is a mere whisper when she says, “Malia fell asleep.”

“Not so surprising since she’s been up half the night trying to get discharged because she can’t pay the bill,” Sonny rumbles.

Melora’s eyes widen. “Seriously?” she snaps.

Sonny’s eyes slide to the door and back at her. “Keep your voice down. I just cleared it with my boss. He’s going to pick up the costs and I’m going to take her with me as soon as she’s discharged so I can take care of her. She needs someone to help her.”

Melora doesn’t seem to need any motivation, she’s already bobbing her head. “That sounds good. She wouldn’t let me help if I offered. Dammit, I knew she had medical expenses to catch up on that practically burned through her savings when her father needed treatment a few months ago. So, thanks. I think if you don’t give her a choice, she wouldn’t be able to refuse.”

Sonny shoots me a surprised look. To be honest? I didn’t expect it to go over this easy either.

“You don’t mind Sonny taking your friend home and caring for her without her consent?” I question.

Melora turns to face me and frowns. “It’s not ideal, but it’s reasonable. Besides, he stayed here all night to keep her safe.” She winces. “That and I vividly remember her throwing items at my head the one time I tried to take care of her when she injured her foot last year. I’m just saying...she’s a good friend, but a terrible patient. Any help is appreciated. Especially when this...this...thing isn’t resolved yet.”

I place my hand on her lower back. “Then it’s settled. Sonny will take care of your friend while we work on resolving the shit that happened.”

She freezes under my touch and falls silent. Yeah, that’s not going to work. Every second that goes by without knowing what direction the danger is coming from is a risk of another repeat.

“Let’s go home,” I order and am already guiding her down the hall.

Time to put some pressure on the woman to get some answers.

CHAPTER FIVE

– MELORA –

I feel a smile tug on my lips. The feel of the sun warming my face as I take a deep breath to fill my lungs with fresh air is relaxing. Leaning slightly forward, I let my fingers glide over the thick neck of Willow, Romer's horse, I'm riding. My other hand is resting on the horn of the saddle while I hold the reins.

“Enjoying yourself?” Romer asks.

It's a question, but the husky smile simmering in those words—along with the appreciative look he gives me—clearly gives the impression it's more of an observation.

“So are you,” I reply, jerking my chin at Birdie.

Romer suggested we switch horses and I agreed. How could I not? I've had the privilege of taking care of this gorgeous Gypsy Cob mare for days, but I didn't ride her. She wasn't mine. So, when he offered, I couldn't resist.

“Sure as fuck am.” His voice is filled with satisfaction.

I expect to see him staring at my horse, except his gaze is locked on me. My cheeks heat and I quickly divert my gaze.

“Such a difference riding Willow compared to Birdie,” I muse.

Romer chuckles. “Definitely.”

The pasture on my left draws my attention when a herd of Gypsy Cobs trots in our direction. They are such a sight to

behold with their long hair and strong appearance.

“Are you ready to talk?” Romer quips and my mood instantly sours.

“No.” The two-letter word is dragged out from my freaking toes.

My feelings are torn. On one hand, I want to spill every single thing that bothers me, while on the other, I can't because he's a man of the law.

“Fine, then I'm going to talk,” the man simply states.

I ignore him completely and instead focus on the amazing horse underneath me, the scenery that's captivating, and the serenity of it all wrapping around me like a comforting blanket. It doesn't last long, though.

The next words coming from Romer's mouth are like an ice bucket, ripping the comforting blanket away and leaving me bare.

“From the information I've gathered, I'm thinking this is about Grover's son, the one that was killed around the time you were sixteen, am I correct?”

I bring Willow to a stop and whip my head in Romer's direction. His gaze pins me in place and there's an air to him, one that dares me to lie or rather, come clean and let him handle whatever blows my way.

A sense of despair hits me hard and makes me blurt, “I killed him.”

Romer's head slowly tilts to the left while Birdie impatiently takes a few steps backward. “So, you're telling me

that at the age of sixteen you were able to make a car bomb?”

“What?” I frown, wondering what the hell he’s talking about.

A car bomb? That doesn’t make sense. At. All. Wait... is that how my father and Grover made it seem to explain how he died?

“Tell me what’s going through your mind, Melora.” His voice breaks through my thoughts, but I’m still locked inside my head.

“It wasn’t a car bomb,” I muse. “Grover and my father made a deal for an arranged marriage between me and Ansel. I was sixteen, and Ansel was eighteen. We signed a contract... that day we became engaged. The marriage would have taken place the day I turned eighteen.”

“Okay.” Romer’s voice is soothing. “Then what happened?”

I let my hand glide over Willow’s neck once again to keep the raw memories at bay that are flooding my brain. “Ansel asked to have a private moment with me in the library. My brother refused, but Ansel wanted a few minutes of privacy to give me the engagement ring and get to know one another. My father reluctantly agreed when Grover pushed the issue.”

I let my gaze find Romer’s, hoping his kind face keeps me grounded in the here and now instead of being dragged down in the past.

“As soon as he closed the door behind us, he locked it. Ansel dragged me to my father’s desk in the corner and

shoved me face down. There was no giving me a ring...I was trapped while his hands roughly roamed my body. At first, I was shocked...frozen. No boy, or man, ever touched me, and the way Ansel was tearing—”

I swallow hard and feel the need to escape. Spurring Willow on, she starts to move and I take a deep breath to calm myself. Ansel is gone. He can't hurt me anymore and still, I feel trapped, the reminder of how his hands gripped me hard, fingers shoved roughly inside me.

“He tried to take what wasn't his to take, or mine to give at that age,” I snap. “I acted on instinct. Something my brother taught me.” I give Romer a sad smile and recite the words my brother ingrained inside my head, “Find a weapon, or anything that gets the job done, and protect yourself under any circumstances.”

“Smart,” Romer rumbles. “It could mean the difference between life and death in some situations, especially the one you were in. The way you describe it, he was raping you wasn't he?”

“Yes,” I croak. “Until I saw my father's letter opener and stabbed him with it. He stumbled back, giving me enough space to run from him.”

“So, I'm guessing both fathers made another deal.” His words sound like they are voiced through gritted teeth.

“I don't know,” I admit. “My father made my brother take me to my room. That night I was told I didn't have to marry Ansel because he was dead. We were sworn to secrecy regarding the whole incident and I never heard anything about it again until the day my father died. Then...when Tito died—”

“It reminded you of what happened.”

My head whips Romer’s way and I grumble, “You’re pretty damn good at guessing.”

He gives me a smirk that causes my heart to leap inside my chest. “Part of the job is to find missing puzzle pieces to complete the picture, mogliettina.”

“Stop calling me that.” I glare at the man. “I’m not your little wifey. Hell, I just told you I killed the guy I was supposed to marry. I’m a killer, you work for the damn government, a man of the law. How well do you think that will look, huh? Not pretty, I can tell you that.”

“Consultant is more a term I should use. We’re not exactly agents and there’s a huge gray area when it comes to our job and connection to the government.”

I snort. “Still, we can’t, and won’t get married. My father and brother both vowed I never had to marry.”

A self-assured smile is in place when he nods in understanding, except he adds on a murmur, “We’ll see.”

I narrow my eyes. “No, we won’t. We don’t even know one another so why the hell would you even say such a thing?”

“Says the woman who signed a fucking contract to marry a damn rapist when she was sixteen,” he fires back.

I gasp and when I recover, I snarl, “Asshole! I didn’t even know he was one when I signed. Besides, I was six-freaking-teen, and did what my father expected of me. You wouldn’t understand. How could you when you weren’t raised the way I was?”

Anger overtakes me and it might seem juvenile, but I feel the need to run away. Luckily, I'm on a horse, so I spur Willow on and she instantly responds. Her long mane whips through the air and I feel the tips brush my face.

Wow. Such a huge difference in breeds, and I have to admit, riding Willow is exhilarating. Maybe it's the scenery, the turmoil of emotions wreaking havoc inside my body, or whatever it is that is causing this moment to feel as if I'm freeing a part of my soul. Hell, it could very well be the murder I confessed to.

I feel the wind licking my cheeks and when I brush my fingers along the skin and glance down, I notice they're wet. I didn't even know I was crying and the stunned realization rips me to the here and now where I barely catch a guy on a horse heading straight for me.

Leaning back, I take the reins with me to bring Willow to an abrupt stop. Romer is right next to me a few heartbeats later. Birdie, impatient as ever, keeps moving in one place as the man on the horse reaches us.

"Dude, why aren't you picking up your damn phone?" he asks Romer.

"I put it on silent to spend some time with Melora. You fuckers can handle anything for an hour, but I'm guessing you aren't since you're here," Romer growls. "Tell me why you have your balls in a twist, Farley."

Farley throws me a look I can only describe as pure pity until he focuses back on Romer. "There's been some... activity on Melora's ranch."

Shock flows through me and instantly I'm thankful Romer brought our horses to his ranch, and the fact that Malia is still at the hospital. Anything else is mere things. Non-living things that can be replaced.

"What happened?" Romer grits. "Never mind. We'll follow you."

A few minutes later we're back at the stables where Romer orders Farley to take care of the horses so we can head for the office.

Once inside Romer says, "When I went back to grab some of your stuff while you were at the hospital waiting for news about Malia's surgery, I ordered Farley to install some security cameras."

I mindlessly nod when he rounds a desk and fires up a laptop. Moving to stand behind him, I wait until he has a security feed filling the screen.

"Your father is taking care of the horses," Farley states when he enters the office and points at the laptop. "Check the camera feed of the backdoor." He checks his watch. "Half an hour ago."

A few clicks later I stare at a view of my stables and a small part of the back porch.

"Wait for it," Farley murmurs. "There."

Two men come into view. One of them takes the lead and when his head turns toward the camera I feel as if all the air is sucked from my lungs, causing the world to tilt along with it.

“Hey, Melora, are you okay?” Romer’s face is close to mine, his voice filled with concern.

I have to blink a few times to clear my head.

Warm hands are cupping my face. “Focus on me, darlin’,” Romer murmurs. “That’s it. Are you okay?”

Am I okay? “No,” I croak. “I’m not okay.”

My eyes drift back to the laptop. Romer’s hands fall away from my face and I swallow hard at the sight of the man’s face on the screen of the laptop.

“Impossible,” I whisper.

“What’s impossible?” Farley questions. “Do you recognize him? If so, give us a name so we can run a check on the fucker.”

Farley unfreezes the image and the video plays. The two men look at one another and then another man walks into view with a gun raised right at them. There’s no sound, but it’s clear there’s shooting back and forth.

Fire. My freaking stables are on fire. “Oh. My. Gosh. No.”

I cannot believe this is happening. The fire is one thing, but I can’t get over the fact that the man I thought was dead is actually still fucking breathing. Anger flares up and I grit my teeth.

Romer rubs my back. “Sorry, darlin’.”

“I can’t believe it,” I grit. “I’m going to kill him. And this time, he needs to stay dead.”

“Who are you talking about?” Farley questions.

I hit pause on the screen and point at the man who is running off. “My fucking not-so-dead fiancé.”

“Motherfucker,” Romer growls.

CHAPTER SIX

– ROMER –

Melora's whole body is locked tight. The shocked expression on her face, overcome with a load of anger, shows how much this affects her. Fucking hell, I can't even begin to understand how shocking this might be for her.

I mean, living with the fact that you were forced to protect yourself at the age of sixteen, killing the fucker who wanted to rape you? Yeah, not something you easily forget and move on from. I've seen the quarterly payments her father made since the incident, and her brother taking over the money drop when her father died.

A fucking setup from the start with Ansel still alive. Not something her family was aware of, or maybe they were, who knows? I have no damn clue. One thing's for sure, though. Melora clearly didn't know. There's no faking her expression and her hatred at seeing Ansel.

In an effort to lighten the mood, I tell her, "Ansel might not be dead, but the engagement is definitely off. Hey, with you not being a killer, I guess we can get married now, huh?"

Her head whips my way, eyes wide, lips slowly parting. "You didn't just say that."

"Sure did." Pointing at the laptop screen I add, "Clearly, you didn't kill anyone, and that was the main reason you threw at my head for us never getting married." I shrug, not needing to repeat myself about us getting hitched.

She blinks a few times. Her hands come up and she lets her fingers dig into her hair while she mumbles, “I’ve landed my ass in the freaking twilight zone.” There’s a small smile on her face, though.

I connect my gaze with Farley. “Can you go get my father? Shepherd too. We need to discuss this shit.”

“On it,” Farley quips and rushes out of the office.

I turn to face Melora, but before I can say one damn word she growls, “Do not bring up marriage again.” Pointing at the laptop she snaps, “Because this might clear me of murder, but I want nothing more than to kill the fucker with my bare hands.”

Slowly shaking my head, I tell her, “There’s no need to get your hands dirty. I’m going to handle everything.”

“Handle what?” my father questions as he stalks into the room, my brother and Farley right behind him.

I turn the laptop to face them. “Grover’s son isn’t dead.”

“Interesting,” Shepherd murmurs and steps closer.

My father places his hands on his hips and directs his attention to Melora. “You’re the one who identified him?”

“Yes,” she says with determination.

“And you’re sure it’s Ansel?” he questions.

She mimics his stance as she defensively puts her hands on her hips. “I am very sure this is the guy I stabbed with a letter opener when he tried to rape me. There’s no way I would ever forget the face of that asshole, even if he’s older.”

I can feel the anger wafting off her and there's an overwhelming need to soothe her flows through me. Without thinking I sneak my arm around her waist and pull her against my body. My father raises one of his eyebrows while my brother grins like a fucking loon. Melora's body is stiff for only a heartbeat or two before she melts against me.

My father gives the both of us a nod as if he approves. "Sorry about the fire, and for asking if you're sure, but it's necessary for the investigation. Farley alerted us when the notification came in due to activities at your place traced by the cameras we installed. I ordered him to go after you two when Romer here didn't pick up his damn phone." He firms his tone. "Coy is at the scene. You might want to take her, but he can also handle it on his own."

"We'll go," I grunt, knowing she would like to check out her place herself.

"Good," Shepherd says and pulls his phone from his pocket. "I'll text Coy to let him know you're on your way. Dad and I will dig a little more into Grover to see if there's any trace or link to Ansel, or a new identity he might have picked up right after he faked his death."

"Maybe Grover didn't know he wasn't dead," Melora whispers.

We fall silent and I stare down at her, letting the suggestion roam around in my head. Would it be possible?

"Definitely something we'll look into," my father states.

I realize one crucial detail. “If Grover wasn’t aware his son was still alive, then why did the quarterly payments from Melora’s family flow into an old, offshore account that I linked to Grover?”

“Vital point.” My brother crosses his arms over his chest. “Hey, you’re the computer expert here. Dig into it some more, check who uses it, track IP addresses or whatever you do to turn that shit inside out.”

“Which I will do once we’re back.” I give Melora a tiny squeeze. “First we’ll head over to her ranch to assess the damage with our own eyes.”

“Check the feed one more time,” my father orders. “Let me know if there are details we might have missed when you get on the scene.”

I’m bobbing my head and turning the laptop to face us to go through the handful of minutes of feed that covers the crucial things. Fifteen minutes later we’re in my truck, heading for Melora’s ranch.

She stays silent as she stares out the window. I can only imagine what hoops her mind is jumping through. My chest tightens to see how torn she looks. Reaching out, I take her hand, lace our fingers and place our joined hands on my thigh.

I have to keep my eyes on the road. “It’s going to be okay. You’re strong. You’re going to get through this, rebuild after we’ve handled the danger thrown your way.”

“I know there’s truth to your words...but right now I’m not feeling it.” Her voice sounds tired.

Dragging my eyes off the road for a breath or two, I risk a glance her way, and tell her, “You don’t have to. I fucking feel it and will make sure you will once you’re able to catch your damn breath.”

I give our joined hands another squeeze and I hear her say, “Now that, I did feel.”

We arrive at her ranch and the stench of burned shit instantly assaults my nose. Anger rises inside me when I turn to face Melora. The devastating look in her eyes, tears threatening to spill over; I fucking hate seeing her in distress.

With all the information I went through, there’s one thing I know for a fact. “You will rebuild when everything is handled. The insurance will cover it.”

She bobs her head, but I’m not sure my words are breaking through her thoughts by the way she keeps staring at the stables. The fire department is still working with a handful of firemen to make sure the fire is completely handled. Well, that’s what it looks like because I can still see parts smoldering and smoke billowing up.

“Romer,” Coy rumbles as he steps up in front of us.

“Any developments?” I question.

He glances at Melora for a heartbeat, but I slightly jerk my chin down to let him know it’s okay.

Coy places his hands on his hips and releases a deep sigh. “We were able to identify the dead body. Beau Grover, barely nineteen years old, man.”

“Beau?” Melora whispers. “Oh no.”

That doesn't make sense. "You're telling me that the dead body, the one that was lying near the stables, and was shot by Ansel Grover, is Beau Grover? Hollis Grover's other son?"

"Correct. We also found some blood near the backdoor and took some samples. Did you make a positive ID on the man's face in the video? You're sure it's Ansel Grover?"

"Yeah, Coy, we have a positive ID." I jerk my head Melora's way. "She was supposed to enter an arranged marriage with the fucker. There's no doubt it's him."

"Okay," Coy rumbles. "Well, I guess the blood sample will also confirm the guy undead if that's the case. Hell, the official papers say he died in a car bomb. They only found a pinky, but it was enough DNA I guess. Though, now it sounds like it was planted."

"With Ansel turning up, killing his half-brother." I turn to Melora. "Beau didn't have the same mother as Ansel, right?"

"No." Melora grimaces. "From what my brother told me, Hollis found out he had a son the day the daughter of the maid died in the hospital giving birth to Ansel. The girl was only sixteen-years-old, and kept the pregnancy from everyone."

Coy stares at me and I gather he's thinking the same thing I am, so I voice it out loud, just to be sure. "Ansel was expendable. Hollis might have wanted him gone 'cause Ansel was a fuck-up."

“Definitely. I’ve seen the complaint filed against him. Two days before the car accident. The incident with Melora might have been the clean cut Hollis wanted,” Coy agrees.

“Right,” I grunt. “Adding rape, fucking up a deal between mafia bosses, and the fiancé being innocent adds to the disgrace Ansel put Hollis in. Hollis saw a way to cut ties with his own blood without killing him.”

“Sidelining him is more like it,” Coy muses.

“So, what?” Melora chimes in. “Hollis faked his own son’s death? Ship him off somewhere on a deserted island far, far away? Now he’s back to...what? Kill me because I’m the one who started his departure or something?”

I place my hand on her hip. “To be honest? I have no fucking clue how you fit into all of this. Though, we do have one lead I will dive in as soon as we’re home.”

“And that would be?” she asks with a tired and small voice.

“Follow the money,” I simply tell her. “Guys showed up at your place, shooting before asking questions. Now Ansel returns here? Both Hollis’s sons? Yeah, something is going down. We might not know exactly what the fuck is going on, but we will find all the pieces of the damn puzzle, okay?”

Her eyes fill up and she’s barely able to nod. My chest constricts and I pull her flush against my body. One hand on the back of her head to keep her close.

“Need me for anything else here?” I ask Coy.

He shakes his head. “Nah, I got this. I’m going to oversee everything and make sure no one misses a thing. I’ll

put a rush on the blood. We need to have it in black and white that Ansel isn't a dead man."

"Thanks." I glance down at Melora. "Do you need anything from the house? Some extra things for Malia?"

She blinks up and me. "No. I don't think so. You've packed some stuff for me and Malia. Sonny is bringing her to his cabin when she's discharged from the hospital. From what I've heard she's not allowed to walk around anyway so she wouldn't need much. As for me? I'm sure Clover and Lucina would have something if I've forgotten anything."

I gently stroke her hair. "That's right. We're all here for you."

Glancing around, I let my gaze find Coy. "I'm going to take her back to the ranch. I don't like her being out in the open. Twice now fuckers have come to her ranch and started shooting. Until we know what the fuck is going on, she's going to be on lockdown."

"Couldn't agree more." Coy holds out his hand. "Ma'am, nice meeting you. I'll swing by the Clyden's ranch as soon as I've handled it here."

"Thank you," Melora murmurs.

The defeat in her voice is killing me. Though, it's understandable with all the shit that went down. At this point nothing makes sense. In a short time, she's lost her brother, her best friend is still in the hospital, they burned down parts of her ranch, and they might still come for her as well.

I try to guide her back to my truck, but her arms are suddenly wrapped tight around my waist, preventing me from

moving a damn inch. I take her into my embrace and that's when the dam breaks. Sobs rip from her body and I'm holding a strong woman whose breaking point in life hit her like a damn wrecking ball.

All I can do is hold her, and I do. Because there's no way I'm going to let her face this shit by herself. She has me, whether she wants it or not. Though, her turning to me for support while she pours her heart out makes me aware she's finally acknowledging this little fact to herself as well.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two weeks later

– MELORA –

“You look comfortable enough.” There’s a smile in my voice, even if I still wish things were different.

Malia huffs and fusses with the blanket she has draped over her legs. “It might seem that way, but I’m going out of my mind with boredom.”

“Really?” I question and reach for the book she quickly stuffed behind a pillow when I walked into Sonny’s cabin a few minutes ago. “Reality might have you stuck in place, but at least fiction takes you on a wild ride.”

She snatches the book away from me as soon as my fingers touch the paper.

“Keep your damn voice down.” She glares at me and there’s a hint of worry on her face when she glances over my shoulder.

I jerk my chin in Sonny’s direction. “It might be a good thing if he overhears because your reaction tells me you’re definitely interested in making fiction reality with him. It might give him the little nudge he needs to jump into action... jump you now that you’re healing and all.”

There’s a low growl coming from her. “You breathe one word in his direction and I’ll grab my phone and text Romer to let him know he can jump you anytime.”

My dirty mind hits me with the reminder of when I shamelessly rode his thigh to a hot and blissful orgasm, but quickly shove it back down. We glare at one another and after a few heartbeats, laughter bubbles out of me. Malia laughs and soon enough we're both cracking up. I let myself drop onto the couch beside her and bump her shoulder.

“We're such a pair, aren't we,” I groan.

The past two weeks have gone by in the blink of an eye. Ever since I ended up sobbing in Romer's arms after seeing the after-effects of the fire—the visit of my not-so-dead ex-fiancé—I've done nothing else but ignore everything.

Well, maybe not everything; mostly the things that involve the danger I'm wrapped in and all the things connected to it. I only focus on visiting Malia regularly, taking care of my horses, and spending time with Clover and Lucina.

Okay, Romer is a huge part of all of it as well. I asked him not to share details of the case he's working on. I don't want to know. With all the twists and turns I saw and heard on one single day, I wanted to keep things simple. Starting with enjoying the little things.

“At least Romer isn't hiding.” Malia bites her bottom lip. “You know...when I was lying in the dirt, realizing I was shot and that I might die? All I wanted was a little more time. Time to have fun, sip coffee on the porch, watch the sunrise, the sunset with a glass of wine in my hand, ride horses, hell... I'd even go for dusting my own damn room. A flow of regrets hit me harder than that bullet.” She pats my thigh. “Yet, here we are, not going for the things we want. Stupid, huh?”

Stupid enough to knock the wind out of me. I stay silent, not really knowing what to say to that. One thing I do know for sure, and that's the fact that her words have a ring of truth in them.

Taking a deep breath, I muse, "So, basically, what you're saying is that we both shouldn't hide? Take a page from Romer's book and—"

"I have a book?" Romer's voice coming from right behind me scares the piss out of me in the form of a high-pitched screech.

I jump up from the couch and smack his chest. "What the hell are you thinking? Creeping up on us like that?"

Romer shrugs. "Sonny was pacing up and down the porch, thought I'd come in here and break up girl time so he could get back to taking care of his girl."

"His girl, huh?" I glance at Malia whose head is slowly turning the color of a tomato.

Feeling the need to step up to create the happiness Malia deserves—and clearly wants—I raise my voice and yell, "Hey, Sonny."

The guy comes rushing in as if he was hiding around the corner. "What's wrong?" His eyes instantly land on Malia.

"Wrong? Not so much. Well, maybe a bit. My friend here isn't having as much fun as she would have if you were here soooo, yeah. Your presence is needed."

"Melora," Malia growls under her breath.

“I’m going, I’m going.” Pointing a finger in her direction I firmly tell her, “But remember, go for the things you want.” Before she opens her mouth, I add, “I’m done hiding and will follow your advice, so you damn well do it too.”

Romer and Sonny share a look, and both appear confused.

Grinning, I grab a fistful of Romer’s shirt. “Come on, these two need some alone time, and I have to talk to you.”

As soon as the door of Sonny’s cabin slams shut behind us Romer asks, “What do we have to talk about?”

Shit. It kinda was spur of the moment to take the next step for Malia’s happiness. I wasn’t really going to follow her advice.

There’s only one reasonable explanation for talking, and I hate bringing it up, but there isn’t another option. Well, there is one, except I’m not ready to come out of hiding. Romer might not hide his feelings about wanting me, and deep down I potentially feel the same way, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to put myself out there.

Especially when nothing has changed. For years I thought I killed a man, turns out he’s still very much alive. Alive and involved in almost burning down my whole damn ranch. Oh, and killing his half-brother. On. My. Property.

Romer is still staring at me and I realize I have to say something. “Have you killed Ansel yet? Still working on details or are you any closer to throwing him and his father in jail?”

He keeps staring at me and I get the impression the questions I threw at him weren't what he expected. I grab my finger with my other hand and start to rub and turn, feeling scrutinized by his gaze.

"Well?" I press while I throw my arms away from my body.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "Well, what? Why would I answer those questions when you told me two weeks ago that you didn't want to know anything and would rather focus on positive things."

"You killing Ansel is a positive thing," I grumble.

Romer chuckles. "Melora, you're hiding."

My eyes widen due to his choice of words.

"Wh..wha...what?"

Now he's freaking smirking. There's only one logical explanation.

I gasp and place my hands on my hips. "Oh, you sneaky asshole. How long were you standing behind us, eavesdropping?"

"Not eavesdropping, paying attention. Something you clearly weren't doing otherwise you would have noticed me when I stepped into the room."

My eyes freaking widen even more. He did not just give me that lousy excuse. A growl rips from me and I'm completely stunned and prevented from saying anything when Romer places his index finger against my lips.

“You’re adorable when you get all angry and agitated, did you know that? Well, I think you’re stunning any time of day, especially in the morning when you do that messy hair-up thing on your head and head into the stable to take care of the horses. Not just yours, nope, all of them if you beat everyone else to it.”

His fingers skim my jaw and end up covering my neck to pull me close. I go willingly as I stare into his eyes.

“You’re not going to hide now, are you?” he murmurs. “Because I fucking see you, Melora.”

This time I’m prevented from speaking due to his lips covering mine. Warmth instantly heats my body. His fingers tighten in my hair, taking control of my head to slightly tilt, allowing him to kiss me deeper.

My belly flops, tingles spreading in my center. There’s a thriving need to pull him close. I dig my fists into his dark blue flannel shirt. Our tongues collide, swirl, and dance. There’s a new kind of energy lighting up my body. The feeling is addictive and I want more. I want him. Especially with the reminder of how good the orgasm was when he had me ride his thigh.

I moan into his mouth and start to tug at his shirt. I want to feel his skin, not the fabric of his clothes.

“You kids do know there’s such a thing as privacy, right?”

I gasp, rip my mouth from Romer’s, and bury my head into the crook of his neck. I’m mortified by the words his brother just threw our way. No, maybe not just by Shepherd’s

words. I completely forgot everything around me. Hell, I wasn't even thinking.

Romer's kiss was overwhelming and completely dominated my mind, my body...my whole being. Holy shit and that was just a kiss. Makes me wonder what kind of fireworks would happen if we actually do have sex.

Romer makes a low rumble deep in his throat, vibrating through his chest and making my nipples pebble. Shit. I've kept my distance from him these past few weeks for a reason. When I let myself go and sobbed in his arms, he felt way too good. Comforting, safe, welcoming...I felt adored. Now? Desired. Alive.

Malia was right to take a page from Romer's book because this is living. Not dwelling on fear of the danger I'm in or what happened in the past. It's about standing firmly in the dirt, taking what you want, following your gut, doing what feels right.

Empowered, I lift my head from Romer's neck and turn to face Shepherd. "Oh, we're very aware. So, run along and actually give us some privacy, huh?"

Shepherd smirks. "Finally gave in to my little brother? Careful, Melora. Though, it's probably too late to warn you of the fact that us Clyden men don't let our women go once we lay claim."

I roll my eyes. "Fruitless warning. Besides, you guys don't let go before you lay claim either."

Both brothers chuckle.

Hixon appears from behind Shepherd. “Any reason why you’re just standing around talking with your brother when I specifically ordered you to get him?”

“Hey.” Shepherd throws his hands up in surrender. “They were finally playing tongue-tag. For two weeks they’ve been dancing on opposite sides of the dance floor so to say, it felt weird to break up their private party.”

“And yet you did,” Romer grumbles.

Hixon releases a deep breath and I swear the man mutters, “Fucking kids,” under his breath.

“I need the three of you in my office. Now.” Hixon spins around and stomps back in the direction of the main house.

“What’s going on?” I question, not really understanding why he needs me to come along as well.

“Now she wants to know,” Shepherd says in fake exasperation and shoots me a grin while we stalk after Hixon. “Would you like the honors of telling her, little brother, or shall I?”

“Tell me what?” I turn to face Romer.

Romer glares over my shoulder at Shepherd before his eyes soften and land on me. “You didn’t want all the details and I would have liked to keep this part off your radar.”

“Off my radar,” I muse while confusion hits me. “Why?”

He releases a deep sigh. “Remember the part where we’re not so much agents, but work in the law enforcement

business, consultants, not everything by the book and all?”

“Yesssss,” I drag the word out to urge him to continue.

“So. Uhm. We, um—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, brother. She acted on instinct and thought she killed a man at sixteen, she’s not going to break,” Shepherd huffs.

“Shut the hell up, Shepherd,” Romer snarls and huffs out a breath when he faces me. “I guess there’s no other way to say this. We’ve been tracking Grover, his house, his business, and his men, and this morning we were able to capture one of his men. Keats, his right-hand man.”

“Capture,” I echo. The name of the man they took sounds slightly familiar. “That’s good, right? Like arrest him and offer him a deal to give up his boss? Wait. That’s too easy. Mafia men are loyal. None of my brother’s men would betray him. If they so much as had doubts they—” I bite my bottom lip to prevent spilling words and details I shouldn’t. Until I realize something. “You’re not going to put Keats in jail are you?”

“Nope. My little brother is going to torture the fuck out of him until Keats has spilled every single detail. Then we might give him a break and throw his ass in jail.” Shepherd snaps his fingers. “And hey, how many mafia details do you know?”

“Nothing,” I huff. “It’s more of a global, mafia romance books, TV series, details I was going for. My brother, nor my father, ever told me anything.”

“Romance books, eh?” Shepherd grins. “You should bring that shit up with Clover and my woman, they like to read

those books as well. They will have some for you to read.”

A genuine and warm smile slides across my face. “I know, I’m actually reading one Lucina gave me the other day.”

“In my office, now kids,” Hixon snaps from the backdoor.

I take a deep breath and feel Romer’s warm hand on the small of my back. Remembering how good his lips felt on mine, and the decision I made right after, I lean into him and accept his support.

Hopefully, there will be more to accept from Romer than his support. That kiss felt like a promise, a promise to remind myself I’m done hiding.

CHAPTER EIGHT

– ROMER –

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” I wince at the sound of my own damn words. “Listen, it’s not because I think you can’t handle it.”

“You’re digging the hole deeper,” Shepherd whispers in a fucking sing-song voice.

As if I don’t know I’m fucking this up.

“Then why can’t I watch? I’d like to hear what he has to say.” Melora’s fists are perched on her hips. “I’ll stay back, I promise. It’s just that...his name sounded familiar, okay? It’s been a while since I’ve seen or heard my father or my brother do business. I’m curious.” She shakes her head. “That’s not the right word...I...I just want to know. Forget I asked you to leave me out of the details. Clearly, it didn’t help shit when you did. I have to see this through. Together.”

Fuck. Out of all the things she could have said, she chooses the words that hit me square in the chest.

“Fine,” I grumble. “Just stay in the shadows. I don’t want the fucker to so much as catch a hint of you.”

She jumps up and gives me a quick kiss on the damn cheek. “Thank you.”

“Smooth,” Shepherd mutters. “The whole ‘not happening’ lasted all of about two minutes. Great way to put your foot down. Hey, can you still walk correctly?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I growl.

My brother grins and points at my groin. “The way she has your balls in a vice one would think walking would be kinda hard.”

“Fucking teenagers,” our father grumbles. “Focus on your damn jobs and torment that fucker for some answers instead of giving me a damn headache.”

I reach out to take Melora’s hand and lace her fingers with mine. We follow my father to the small shed behind the stables.

“I didn’t know this was here,” Melora murmurs.

“We only recently added it. After we accepted the undercover case and my father became a mob boss and all, we thought it was a good thing to add a tiny shed for when we need to get our hands dirty,” I state with a grin on my face.

A hint of satisfaction flows through my veins. Maybe today we can move forward with some actual details. Till now it’s just some pieces of a puzzle we’ve gathered through information, but it still leaves us lacking when it comes to the big picture.

I might call it a tiny shed, but it has enough room to have someone hanging from a large beam in the middle of it. A load of different tools and shit are sitting on three shelves mounted to the left wall, and three chairs are placed against the opposite wall.

The door has barely fallen shut behind us when Melora snaps, “You.”

All our eyes bounce between Melora and Keats.

“I’m sorry,” Keats mumbles.

“Sorry?” Melora snarls. “There is no apologizing or coming back from betrayal, Bobby.”

I whip my head in the direction of my father and brother. Both of them shrug, also not knowing what the fuck this is about. Melora takes advantage of the small window where my attention was diverted because the next sound we hear is Keats screaming.

Rushing forward, I come to a stop next to her and take in the sight before me.

“Holy fuck,” Shepherd murmurs.

“Yeah,” my father grunts. “I’m thinking she might not be as oblivious to her brother’s technique as we thought.”

Melora’s hand stays in place. She’s holding what looks like her keys. There’s a small device on it attached to an alligator clamp and she’s clearly pressing a button that’s letting an electrical current flow through it. Need I mention, that she attached the fucking clamp on Keats’s eyelid?

Damn. We are going to torture the fucker a bit to get the information out of him, but this definitely wasn’t the plan. Hell, I can’t wrap my mind around this shit, let alone think or suggest for Melora to jump in and join the action.

“What did you do?” Melora growls in a menacing tone.

“I had to. I didn’t have a choice. The short window of opportunity...I didn’t want to, I swear, Melora. I owed him my life...I...please.”

Melora releases the crocodile clamp and steps back. “You do owe him your life and you repaid him by taking his.” Her gaze lands on me. “I was wrong to blame you for my brother’s death and kidnapping Willow. Though, I don’t regret it because it’s led me to where I am now.” She faces Keats. “Standing face-to-face with my brother’s murderer. I should have known because you’ve done it before. Perfect timing, huh? Remotely stopping the engine, locking all doors to keep them trapped on the tracks, the train unable to stop.”

Her voice cracks on the end and I automatically move forward to take her into my arms.

“Motherfucker,” my father grumbles. “So much for ruling the incident as an accident. This makes much more sense.”

Melora raises her head from my chest and glances at my father. “Bobby probably knew about Ansel being alive. He might be working for both Ansel and Hollis because he’s good at two-timing mafia bosses, aren’t you?” She tears herself from my embrace to punch Keats in the gut and adds with a sneer, “You love to bite the hand that feeds you, don’t you, asshole?”

Keats closes his eyes and hangs his head. Not good enough. I reach for one of the shelves and grab a small dagger. His eyes fly up and finally, the panic settles in.

“Answer the lady or I’ll carve the answer into your skin ’cause right now it’s not hard to guess what your involvement was in all of this,” I rumble in a low and menacing tone.

“Yes,” the weasel croaks. “Yes, I knew. Ansel was the one who wanted your brother dead so he could force you into marrying him. It was the easiest way to take over Tito’s territory and overthrow his father to become the largest territory. He has the support of a cartel once he’s taken out his father.”

His words process inside my head, but the way Melora called him a two-timer stands out.

“You’ve been feeding information to both sides,” I state. “That’s why Hollis sent men to Melora’s ranch to take her out so Ansel couldn’t force her into marriage.”

“That makes sense,” Shepherd growls. “Now that’s a sick game, a conniving one. Letting dogs fight for a bone and then taking over yourself when the dust has settled.”

“A game you guys need to bring to a stop,” Melora says and lets her gaze slide from me to my father and brother. “If anyone keeps standing or the cartel so much as sees a chance to—”

My father holds his hand palm up to cut her off. “We won’t allow the cartel to move in, and we will take out both Hollis and Ansel.”

“Easy to say,” Melora murmurs. “Ansel has managed to keep away from the public eye for years.”

Shepherd points at Keats. “I’m fairly sure this fucker knows where we can find him. Though, I sure hope he puts up a good fight and lets me torture him for a bit. The way he easily answered the questions you two asked was boring as fuck.”

I shoot a glare at the idiot and drag a hiss out of Keats when I press the dagger deeper into the skin of his neck. Blood trickles down and is causing crimson stains to land on his crispy white shirt.

“Oh, come on,” Shepherd groans. “Don’t slice his neck. He’s a cop killer. Two agents died in that train wreck he caused. He’s not going to last the trip to prison once we debrief Coy about the accident not being an accident after all.”

Keats’s eyes go wide. “What? Prison? What is he talking about?”

Melora plasters a huge smile on her face, sneaks an arm around my waist to lean in close, and fake whispers, “He doesn’t know.” She turns back to face the fucker and adds, “There isn’t even the tiniest of gap for you to slither through and make a deal to turn yet again to another side to suit your benefit, Keats. These guys are the end of the line. Hell, above the line if you’re talking about owning every cop, district attorney, or any other law enforcement in this state.”

Full-blown panic finally settles onto Keats’s face.

“Ah, yes,” I croon and brush my lips against the crown of her head. “My woman is right. No deal for you.”

I remove the dagger and hold it out to Shepherd.

Shepherd greedily takes it and grins like a damn loon. “Let me guess, you’re gonna take *your woman* somewhere private.”

“Today, I’d rather use my hands to bring pleasure.” I pull Melora closer and place a kiss against her temple.

“Tomorrow, though? I’m counting on hearing the extra

information you've managed to squeeze out of this fucker so I can make sure my woman's former fiancé stays dead this time."

"We got this," my father states. "Tomorrow morning we'll discuss shit at the breakfast table."

I lift my chin in silent thanks and turn to Melora. "Ready to get out of here? Or did you want to join in or watch? I'm fine either way, but--"

She places the tips of her fingers gently against my lips. "You had me at the 'rather use my hands to bring pleasure' statement. Now, can we get out of here so you can get to work?"

The challenge she throws at me with the slight raise of her eyebrow is causing my heart to leap inside my chest. Fuck. The need to have this woman underneath me is overwhelming. I've made myself clear more than a few times that I want her. Today she finally took a step toward me instead of slowly backing away.

I couldn't give a fuck about giving her a little nudge in the right direction, thanks to eavesdropping when she was talking to Malia. Well, it's actually thanks to Malia who brought my name up in their discussion.

Finally, I get to guide her to my room with one shared thought in mind; shoving my cock deep inside her tight pussy. Her pace quickens, letting me know she's just as eager as I am. I'm on her as soon as the door slams shut behind us.

Lips crash, tongues battle, and hands roam. Heaven. Fucking ecstasy where each piece of my body lights up where

our bodies connect. I tug at the fabric of her shirt. With a frustrated groan I pull back to create some distance.

“Clothes. Off,” I growl and shrug off my flannel shirt.

The tank is next to hit the floor and as I’m toeing off my boots while my hands are working on my belt, I notice Melora is frozen in place, still fully clothed.

“Sweetheart, I told you to get naked.” The tone of my voice mirrors the load of lust coercing through my veins.

She bites her bottom lip and it makes my cock twitch painfully behind the zipper. Her pupils are dilated, but there’s a hint of vulnerability in her demeanor. The way she’s playing with the top button of her blouse for one, as if she wants to undress and yet there’s something occupying her brain to freeze the moment.

I let my belt slide to the floor and kick my boots aside. Standing barefoot in just my jeans in front of her, I pinch her chin to let our gaze collide.

“What’s wrong, mogliettina?” I murmur. “If this is going too fast, all you have to do is say the word and the pants stay on.”

Her bottom lip is getting a workout with her teeth sinking into it and I gently pop it free with my thumb.

A huff of frustration spills from her. “Not too fast,” she says somewhat agitated. “It’s just that...I never actually had a real-life...you know. It’s not like I’m still...I’m not. I just. Vibrators. That’s. Shit. Inexperienced, that’s the word for it I guess.”

I have to blink a few times to process what she just told me but then it hits. Hard. Shockingly hard.

“Fuck, I’m an idiot,” I grumble and step back to jerk my hand through my hair.

The shit that happened to her when she was sixteen. Ansel. Fucking Ansel trying to rape her and then she had to kill him. Now the confirmation he’s still alive and all the years in between with such a bad experience, it makes perfect sense.

It’s fucked-up for sure, but I can’t help the smirk sliding across my face. “So, you’re telling me you’re not just mine, but all mine? As in no one else has ever been inside you? Your pussy will only know what it feels like to take my cock, the first, and no other from here on out.”

She rolls her eyes, and I love the move, clearly, my little statement relieved a hint of pressure she might have felt.

“I should have expected the caveman reaction, but no. I did take a cock—”

“Latex, glass, plastic, steel, none of those count, darlin’,” I murmur and step closer. “I’m talking flesh and blood here, two bodies filled with the shared desire to intimately connect.”

A chuckle slips free when she whispers under her breath, “Dammit, toys should count.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I tell her and kiss a path up her neck to croon beside her ear, “Soon enough you will want nothing other than a piece of me inside you. Especially once I’m done eating you out.”

She inhales sharply. Her arms fly up to my face and she pulls me down for a scorching kiss, putting us right back where we left off; devouring one another with our mouths.

CHAPTER NINE

– MELORA –

The insecurity along with the vulnerability melts away when Romer gently places his forehead against mine to stare openly into my eyes. The desire flaming hot is directed at me while his hands slowly strip every piece of fabric from my body.

My breath hitches when he scoops up my naked body and places me in the middle of his bed. He shoves his jeans down before he places a knee on the bed to crawl between my legs. I only catch a glimpse of his cock and what I saw ignites a flutter of tingles spreading warmth low in my belly.

Romer slides his arms under my legs and places his hands on my waist as if he's grounding himself with the help of my body.

His hot breath scorches my private parts when he says, "With my cock being the first flesh and blood entering this sweet spot I gather you're clean, like me. I've been tested and haven't been with anyone in a long damn time. I'd never put you at risk and want to take you bare, but if you'd rather use condoms, say the word and I'll grab some."

He places a kiss on my freaking clit and all rational thoughts evaporate. My hands fly out to his head, fingers dig into his hair and I pull his face flush against my heated flesh.

"I want you. I want you now," I whimper.

A growl rumbles from him, the vibrations causing a flood of tingles against my pussy. I moan and gasp when I feel his hot, probing tongue slide through my folds. I'm torn between staring at the man devouring my private place with his mouth and simply closing my eyes to throw myself into the bliss he's creating.

If I would have known how damn amazing it feels to let a man go down on you I would have gone out and...no. I'm pretty sure the experience is exquisite because it's Romer between my legs. He allows me to feel protected and adored instead of fearful.

Ever since the day Ansel forced himself on me, there hasn't been a moment I've felt completely at ease with a man. The air rushes out of my lungs when a burst of pleasure spreads from my clit up my belly and throughout my whole body.

The roughness of his scruff, his teeth grazing my bundle of nerves, tongue probing and licking, every sensation is a new flow of pleasure. A slow ride where I take in every detail, outlining the perfection while the complete trip is starting to settle in and you know your destination is coming up.

The place you want to go, need to, want to...oh fuck. I throw my head back and dig my nails into his scalp to scream out, "Rooomerrrr, aaaaah....yes!"

Pleasure washes over me in waves, and tingles of electricity set my veins on fire, completely disconnecting me from this world and throwing me into a place where there's only bliss. Nothing on this earth has ever created a place

where life itself is put on pause. A gift given by Romer, drawn from my own body.

My racing heart and heaving breath are causing a struggle to get the words out, but I manage. “That...was...incredible.”

“You’re incredible,” Romer growls with a load of lust in his voice and gaze as he crawls up my body.

His scruff and lips are glistening with the reminder of the pleasure he gave me. Now my heart races for a different reason as he closes the distance between our mouths. There’s a twinkle in his eyes and a smile twitching on his lips right before he kisses me.

I don’t even care that I can taste myself on his tongue, and maybe it’s because the man assaults my senses from every corner of my body. My mouth is occupied with his, one of his hands is cupping my breast, tweaking my nipple while I feel the tip of his heated cock brush my entrance.

Shamelessly I lift my hips, seeking his hard length to fill me up. I might not have felt a real flesh and blood hard on inside me before, but I have used a load of different toys. I know what it feels like to be filled—

“Romer! Ahhhhh,” I groan, overwhelmed by the way he fills me completely in one hard thrust.

“Fuuuuuuck, you feel good.” Romer buries his head in the crook of my neck and bites down hard.

The walls of my pussy grip his cock hard, loving the sweet balance of pain and pleasure he’s giving me.

“Dammit, keep squeezing and there won’t be any fucking, sweetheart. I’ll paint the inside of your pussy with so much cum it’ll brand you inside and out.” There’s an edge to his voice that gives his words a loaded promise.

His teeth nip the skin of my neck and I can’t help but squeeze his cock once more.

“Fuck it,” he growls and surges up to grab my waist to stare down at me. “I was trying to go slow, but you already had me burying myself to the hilt in one stroke. Then you fit my cock like a damn mold made for me, those muscles imprinting? Yeah, you’re asking to be fucked. So, tell me you can take whatever I’m gonna give or I’ll pull out now and fist myself to come all over you instead of deep inside like I want to.”

My heart skips over his dirty words, loving them and the feel of my pussy softening with slickness because of it.

“I might be inexperienced when it comes to this.” I motion my hand between us. “But I’ve played with myself using different toys. So...don’t hold back, Romer. Give me everything you’ve got.”

A challenging chuckle rumbles through him. “Careful, darlin’. You don’t know what your words just unleashed.”

I’m about to throw out a sassy comment, but I need my next breath to moan in pleasure when he pulls out and roughly shoves back in. One of his hands keeps a tight grip on my hip while the other possessively takes a place where my shoulder meets my neck.

My heartbeat and breath are right under his thumb. The gentle pressure adds to the feeling of domination he's radiating with his body on top of mine. I'm completely consumed by this man and love everything he gives me.

The slapping of flesh against flesh, our ragged breaths, the grip of his fingers pressing into my skin, the heated gaze burning with desire and adoration is all-consuming. My next orgasm crashes through me without warning.

I can't scream, can't do anything other than to ride the bliss spreading my body like wildfire. Somewhere in the foggy bliss, I'm slightly aware of an animalistic growl above me. Romer's length thickens inside me as he pumps a few more times. A pulse of warmth flows from him into me, the experience unique and highly erotic.

Romer collapses and gives me his full weight. A grunt rips from me and I wrap my arms around his body to keep our bodies plastered against one another. Holy fuck, I had no idea sex could be this consuming.

His lips brush the skin of my neck where he starts to lazily nip and suck. My pussy clenches at the soft reminder of the sex we just had, causing his dick to slip free along with a rush of liquid. The feel of his cum causes a tiny alarm bell to go off inside my head.

Though, I quickly mute the panic of pregnancy risk. If anything I would welcome new life. With no family left, there's nothing I want more than to embrace the thought of becoming pregnant.

Except, I'm not alone in this. Even if Romer called me his little wife, we didn't discuss kids. He did mention

condoms, so I guess he was aware, wasn't he?

"You're thinking too much," he rumbles and pulls back to stare at me.

"How do you know?" I wonder out loud.

A sexy smirk overtakes his lips and I can't help but remember how good his mouth felt between my legs.

"Slight tension," Romer murmurs. "While you're softening underneath me now so I guess you're back in the bed with me instead of being inside your mind."

I reach out to cup his face and let my thumb slide over his bottom lip. "I was thinking about your cum sliding out of me and how I'm not on birth control."

He catches my thumb between his teeth and gently bites down before letting go. "It didn't slip my mind, it's why I brought up condoms as a reminder. You had my interest the second you put that stuffed horse head in my bed and everything I've learned about you since has only hooked me deeper. I want you. Now, tomorrow, next week, and the upcoming years for however long this fucked-up life keeps us alive. Starting a family together doesn't scare the shit out of me. I welcome every first I can share with you."

"Okay," I whisper with a relieved breath, happy with his response.

Romer wraps his arms around me and takes me with him as he turns and drops down on the mattress. He moves my body so I'm draped over him. One hand possessively grips my ass while the other is making sure I'm kept tight against him.

“There.” A deep breath flows from him. “We’re gonna stay like this and then we’ll shower and go for round two. If you’re not too sore that is.”

The thought of putting what we just did on repeat is lighting up my body. “Not too sore,” I instantly state.

“Thank fuck,” he rumbles and I feel his lips brush the top of my head.

A content smile tugs my lips as I close my eyes, suddenly feeling drained. The warmth of his body, the possessive grip he has on me, all of it allows me to drift off into a peaceful sleep.

When I slowly awake for the second time, I catch Romer moving around the room. The first time during the night I woke when he carried me into the bathroom. He took the time to soap up my body, cleaning me completely before doing very dirty things between my legs. Now I’m definitely sore, but I crave him nonetheless. Except, Romer is fully dressed instead of naked.

“Where are you going?” I croak, my voice still thick with sleep. I glance to my left where the bedside table with my phone is. “What time is it?”

I feel the bed dip and my attention is drawn to the strong man staring down at me with a mixture of adoration and desire. “I’m heading into a meeting and then we’re going out.”

Grabbing the sheets, I’m about to throw them away from my body but Romer stops me. “I need you to stay here with Clover and Lucina. Sonny is going to bring Malia here too in about an hour and will stay with you guys.”

Fear settles in my gut. I know exactly what he's not telling me.

“What I need is to come with you,” I snap with determination.

He slowly shakes his head. “While I know you can handle yourself.” The corner of his mouth twitches when he adds, “Yesterday proved as much with you electrocuting a man's eyeball without so much as blinking yourself. Hell, none of us knew you were doing it until you had already done it.”

A sigh rips from him and he reaches for me. His hand finds the back of my neck to pull me close and the kiss he gives me is filled with passion. I surrender to him and relish the feel of his tongue swirling against mine. Lust clouds my brain and it's then I pull back to glare at him.

“None of that,” he murmurs and places a strong, callused hand over my naked belly. “I can't have the fear of you getting hurt distracting me. Knowing you are safe will allow me to come back to you sooner and put this mess behind me so we can all move forward. The promise we gave one another yesterday... a starting point... gives me all the reasons to fight. Even you for that matter. We might have something brewing in here and even if there isn't yet? We both want to start a new family. Together. Let me do my job and come back to you.”

I swallow hard and deep down I know what he's talking about because I feel the same fear of the thought of him getting hurt.

“You damn well have to come back to me,” I whisper hiss, letting all my anger and frustration seep into my words.

Losing him is a thought I can't bear. Not when we barely started. Though, we both know we are unable to start if the past is a dark cloud hanging over our heads.

He brushes his lips against mine one more time. “I promise.”

I can't help but wince at those words. The last promise was given to me by my brother the day he died. And that's just it...a promise doesn't mean shit when we aren't alive to keep it.

CHAPTER TEN

– ROMER –

“We could still do this one at a time,” Shepherd states as he checks his weapon.

I strap the knife to my leg and am already shaking my head. “Dad can take out Hollis with his team while we focus on Ansel. He’s the slippery fucker among those two. You were the one who suggested it after giving me the information you squeezed out of Keats.”

Information containing Hollis’s health. The man has a terminal illness and probably won’t make it another month. It’s why he made Keats his right hand after his oldest son killed his youngest, leaving him without an heir ’cause he hates Ansel’s guts.

“Hey, I’m just making a suggestion. I’m ready when you are.” He grins while strapping on his helmet.

I pat my Kevlar vest and jerk my chin down. “Let’s fucking do this.”

“Which one of you fuckers is going to take point?” Coy questions and signals for the swat team to gather around.

Shepherd points at me. “He is.”

Coy nods and all eyes land on me. Clearing my throat, I start to divide the men into two teams. Coy is going to stay with the vehicles to oversee this mission. Normally I’m the one inside one of them with my computer.

This time my motivation has shifted. The need to see this through with my own eyes instead of seeing shit happen through a screen is a burning necessity. This case has become personal. There's always the dedication to do the best we can to close a case, but now it involves the woman who has managed to crawl under my skin.

I've barely gotten a taste of how a life with her can be and it's enough to fuel me to end her past once and for all. It's why I've asked her to stay at home where I know she'll be safe. Sonny is inside with her and the rest of the women while there are two other men standing guard.

Earlier this morning we put people in place to stake out the two houses to make sure both Ansel and Hollis are where they should be. We had visual confirmation an hour ago and it's why we've decided to gear up and bring them in.

Bringing them in is priority number one, though I wouldn't mind dragging Ansel's dead body behind me when I do. Fuck throwing him in jail. The fucker faked his own death, he deserves to have fiction flip to reality.

"Three men inside are confirmed." My eyes find my brother's. "Let's get this done, fast and safely."

My finger is alongside the trigger as I take the first step in the direction of the house before us. There are no security cameras outside, but it's clear we've lost the element of surprise when the door flies open as bullets start to fly.

I grunt when one of those fuckers hits my vest and I fire off a single round, taking the guy out with a bullet to the head. Catch and detain is the goal, fucking with our lives makes it a whole different ballgame.

“One down,” I voice out loud, letting the rest of the team know.

“Entering through the back,” I hear the other team state.

With the door open it’s easier to enter and keep a visual of our surroundings. We move as a united front and clear the hallway and living room when we hear a soft pop.

“Number two down,” I hear through my earpiece. “No visual of Ansel.”

Fuck. Ansel is still in the house. The only one left according to the information of the man we had on stakeout duty.

“Heading for the basement,” I whisper.

“10-4, going upstairs,” the voice in my earpiece informs me.

Shepherd is right behind me as I slowly open the door to the basement. I throw a quick glance his way when I’m facing another door. He frowns and I know he’s thinking the same thing I am; why the hell is there a reinforced door?

I try the handle and it easily opens, spiking my curiosity as to why one would have a reinforced door but have it unlocked. Until the sound of someone fucking enters my ears, along with cries, and not the kind laced with pleasure.

Adrenaline pumps through my body as I slowly descend the stairs. The room is dimly lit. Thick black carpet covers the floor while the walls are covered with what also seems to be black carpet. Someone spent a nice amount of cash on this part of the house to make it soundproof.

“Please. No. It hurts.” The voice is female, a mere whisper, but the terror and pain is loud.

Anger hits hard when a bed comes into view. A naked ass is the first thing I see. That’s more than I’ve ever wanted to see of Ansel, and when my gaze slightly shifts I notice the small female he’s fucking.

No. Scratch that. He’s raping her. The terror and pain I heard in her voice is plainly written on her face. Arms and legs bound to the bed; there’s no escaping her predator. For fuck’s sake, the girl looks like a kid. I highly doubt she’s a day older than sixteen.

A croaked “No” comes from my left. Strapped to some device that has her forced to her knees is a naked woman three times as old as the woman in front of Ansel. There’s terror in her eyes as she fights the restraints.

Ansel’s shoulders stiffen and in one smooth move, he’s pointing a gun at the girl’s head while glancing over his shoulder at us. “I don’t know who the fuck let you into my house, but you’re clearly trespassing. Get the hell out. Now.”

“Put the gun down, Ansel Grover,” I growl and keep my aim on his torso.

I can take him out with one bullet straight to the heart. The only thing preventing me is the innocent girl he’s still buried in. He has a gun aimed at her head and his finger can still pull the trigger if I shoot him.

“You idiots need to put your fucking guns down, threatening a man in his own home. Especially when you fuckers have the wrong man. I’m Len Pate.”

Shepherd snorts beside me. “Please tell me you started believin’ your own lies. One DNA check will prove exactly who the fuck you are, asshole.”

“I’m not agreeing to any DNA shit. Get the hell out of my house or I’ll kill her,” Ansel snarls.

My patience is running very fucking thin, mostly because, “Could you stop raping the damn girl?”

There’s a gleam in the pervert’s eye and when he tears his gaze a heartbeat or two away from us to watch his cock? That’s when I act on gut instinct and take advantage of the blind spot he gave me. It’s a risk—a life and death one—I’m taking, but when the bullet tears through his head it proves to be the right choice.

The girl screams when Ansel’s body covers hers, his gun falls from his hand and to the floor. I move forward with Shepherd right next to me. Shepherd pulls the dead body off the girl and it’s then I notice the striking similarities between this young girl and Melora when she was this age.

“Motherfucker,” I mutter.

Shepherd’s gaze bounces from me to the girl and back. “Yeah, I see it too.”

“I wonder how long this has been going on.” I reach for a blanket beside the bed and cover the girl’s naked body.

She fights the restraints and my brother and I work in a team to remove the straps from her arms and legs. I remove my helmet and gently murmur comforting words to the girl to let her know it’s over.

“Ansel’s dead,” I rumble through my earpiece. “We need two ambulances.”

“Copy that,” Coy replies.

I throw a glance over my shoulder at the older, naked woman who is still bound in a kneeling position. She’s fighting her restraints as well. Ravi, one of Coy’s men, rushes over and starts to remove her bindings.

“Wait,” Shepherd snaps.

Confusion hits as to why he doesn’t want her freed from the uncomfortable position.

“Not sure, gut instinct. Her face seems familiar but I can’t place it right now,” Shepherd says, voice low enough for only my ears.

“Ravi, stop what you’re doing and come help with this one,” I order.

Shepherd and I have learned to trust our gut. Something our father taught us since we were little. Ravi moves to my side to help the girl off the bed. She wraps the blanket tighter around her.

“Bring her upstairs. An ambulance is on its way,” I order.

Ravi murmurs something to the girl before he swoops her into his arms to carry her up the stairs.

“Ma’am, care to tell us your name?” Shepherd questions as he rounds the bed.

Her gaze is unsure, bouncing between me and my brother as if she’s evaluating the situation. Something is

definitely weird about her reaction. Suddenly she doesn't seem like a victim.

What the hell is this older woman doing here? Twice Ansel's age at least. Naked. Bound. Facing Ansel who was fucking an underage girl in front of her eyes? Yeah, shit doesn't add up.

The woman's feet are unbound, and one of her hands as well. She reaches out to work on the latch of the final strap that bound her to the kneeling position and slowly rises, uncaring of her naked form.

"You killed him." Her voice shakes as she glances at Ansel's dead body.

I want to snort and snarl at the bitch, "Fuck, yes we killed the rapist of underage girls," but I refrain from saying anything.

"Ma'am, what's your name?" This time I'm asking the question instead of my brother.

Her angry eyes land on me. "You," she growls. "Are you happy now? You killed him to get revenge for her, didn't you? Did she find out she didn't manage to kill him and wanted him dead?"

My hand slowly slides in the direction of the gun I tucked away when we secured the room and it was safe enough to focus on the woman in distress. Clearly, the danger isn't over yet because this woman seems fucking crazy.

"Sorry, ma'am." I'm not fucking sorry, but I gotta start a conversation somewhere. "But Ansel faked his own death

right after he almost raped a sixteen-year-old who defended herself—”

“That bitch wanted to be fucked. She didn’t deserve him, she never did. They shouldn’t have been promised to each other, it was an obligation due to family business.” The woman places her hands on her hips as if she isn’t butt-fucking-naked. “And Ansel didn’t fake his own death, his father did. The old fart always wanted to cut ties with him and greedily took this as a reason to do so. Ansel had to fight for his life for months in a hospital in Mexico. If it wasn’t for me, he would still be rotting in a coma.”

Rotting in a coma? Is she for real? From the corner of my eye, I notice Shepherd standing next to me, frowning like I am. Neither of us interrupts the woman who is turning out to be a fountain of information. Though, now all she does is glare at us.

“So instead of being dead, Hollis put him in a hospital in Mexico to recover from the injury Melora gave him?” my brother questions.

“Yes,” the woman hisses. “That bitch hurt him badly. I almost lost him that day.”

“You two were—” Shepherd leaves the rest of his sentence hanging as he probes for the answer I’m curious about as well.

The woman sticks her nose into the air as if she’s too classy for what she’s about to say. “I used to be his father’s housekeeper.”

My mouth gets the better of me when I automatically fill in the blanks. “Who was fucking the boss’s son.”

“We were in love,” she screeches. “For years.”

I wince. Not only due to the volume of her voice but also, “For years makes Ansel underage at that time.”

If it would be possible there would be fire shooting from her eyes. “You don’t understand. No one does,” she screeches...again, and this time she dives right at me.

I expect the collision but she slightly shifts right before impact. The fragment of a second it takes me to realize what she’s going for makes my action delayed, giving her the opportunity to grab the gun that fell from Ansel’s hand when I killed him.

The gun goes off, pain erupts, and the sensation of something warm and wet starts to slide over my cheeks.

“Romer,” Shepherd bellows from somewhere in the distance.

I want to tell him I’m fine but either my mouth is not working or my ears ’cause I don’t hear my own voice. I did hear my brother, didn’t I? My chest feels heavy, making it hard to breathe. I close my eyes for a very brief moment. That’s all I need ’cause I’m not giving up. There’s too much to live for.

Wetness slips into my eyes, turning my vision blurry. The ringing in my ears becomes louder. Fuck, maybe I need another moment...or two.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

– MELORA –

“How can you guys stand it?” I mutter in frustration while I pace the room.

Clover gets to her feet and leaves Lucina sitting on the couch as she wanders to the minibar in the corner of the living room. Malia is sitting in a chair, staring out the window where Sonny is talking to the two men standing guard outside.

Grabbing a bottle she says, “It’s a good thing our men own another business that involves whiskey.”

“Getting drunk is the answer?” A snort rips from me and I plunk my ass into one of the chairs. “I might as well because I feel like I’m going out of my mind with worry.”

“Understandable,” Lucina says and softly bobs her head. “We’ve all been in stressful situations where either our own lives or those of our men hang in the balance.”

“Or all of our lives for that matter,” Clover states and places two glasses on the table. “Sorry, Lucina, you’re not getting any alcohol with the little bun in the oven and all. You can’t either, Malia, painkillers...well, medicine and alcohol don’t mix. Not that you are asking with your attention fixed on the man outside.”

I jump to my feet and stare at the booze in horror. “Maybe this isn’t a good idea.”

Malia's head whips my way. "Why are you this jumpy?"

"Whoa, Romer works even faster than his brother and father," Clover mutters and her voice is firmer when she says, "Are you pregnant? You've been here what? A little over two weeks? That's not possible, is it?"

"Oh. My. Gosh, you work faster than me," Malia snaps. "You had sex, didn't you? Ugh, why did I have to get shot and hurt my ankle? Sonny doesn't want to have sex until he's sure I'm not hurting and I can't have alcohol due to the medicine I'm still taking. This sucks. I'm happy for you, but this fucking...wait. Why is your face all twisted up? You did have sex, right?"

Letting myself drop back into the chair, I wince and grumble, "We didn't use a condom yesterday, last night...more like early morning. We didn't more than once."

"Wait. You did or you didn't?" Clover's eyebrows furrow right before she barks out a laugh. "Oh, now I get it. You guys had sex more than once since yesterday, but didn't use a condom."

I rub my temples and close my eyes, feeling a headache coming on. "Why couldn't I have said that?"

"Don't worry about it, sweetie." Lucina pats my hand. "Surely you can take a drink or two, or three, the same amount of times you had sex...so you can lose count and it wouldn't make a damn difference since it's all good and tasteful, pleasurable, whatever."

We stare at one another for a few breaths before we all laugh.

I brush a happy tear from my eye and say between chuckles, “I needed the laugh more than I realized. Thanks, girls. For taking my mind off of things, lowering my stress level, for getting things off my chest, and most of all, for being here with me.”

“We’re friends,” Clover simply states.

“Family,” Lucina adds.

“Family doesn’t necessarily mean blood that connects. Friendship creates a bond.” Malia shrugs. “You’ve been my employer ever since I met you and over time we became friends first. I couldn’t imagine not having you in my life. For the both of us to fall for men also connected through work is unimaginable and yet here we are.”

“Here we are,” I muse.

“I’m just happy the number of girls here at the farm skyrocketed and that babies will be guaranteed.” Clover grins. “I don’t have any baby ambitions due to a medical condition. Believe me when I say I’ve made my peace with this knowledge and now that I have Hixon...let’s just say I’m looking forward to becoming a grandmother.”

“This little bun in the oven would be proud of a grandma like you,” Lucina says with a load of emotion in her voice.

“Thanks,” Clover croaks.

“Just don’t expect to overbook her agenda,” I tell Lucina with a stern voice. “You know, in case Romer and I do

succeed to give her a grandchild as well. If we all rush into this pregnancy thing head over heels, we definitely need Grandma to babysit while we can get to know our men.”

I slightly cringe, though I do realize Clover, Lucina, and I are all born as mafia princesses who were raised to ultimately be tied into an arranged marriage. No love or lust driving our choice in men. Though, Lucina did start with Shepherd in an arranged marriage. The huge difference is the fact that the sparks hit them as hard as they did when it comes to me and Romer and Clover and Hixon.

“You guys,” Clover chokes on a sob.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Hixon growls and stomps into the room to head straight for Clover and takes her into his arms. In a gentle, soothing, and slightly worried tone, he asks, “Why are you crying, Wifey?”

“Happy tears,” Malia huffs. “She’s crying happy tears because those two have the option to book her future time with babysitting duties. Well, I guess Lucina already has one bun in the oven, and with Melora here mentioning Romer is using live rounds while having sex...yeah, the possibilities are endless, babies are endless, happiness is...yeah, you get the idea. Hence the happy tears.”

There’s a smile tugging my lips and a hint of envy hits me with the realization that I long for the same thing. Strange, because when I think of Romer I’m honest enough to admit I want a strong bond with him.

The restlessness I’ve been feeling ever since he left is also a confirmation of how the man has rapidly nestled himself under my skin. We barely started to form a bond while the

thought of Romer getting hurt, and losing him, is already unbearable.

Hixon's reaction to Clover's tears, the instant flare to protect what's his, the murderous look indicating he would kill anyone who has wronged her in any way is something that's also rooted in Romer's DNA.

Looking back, I now recognize his actions for what they are since the moment we met. We might have only fully connected and started a relationship last night, but he's been fully aware of what he's wanted from the start. All the while waiting for me to catch up to him.

Well, I'm more than caught up now. I'm fully in. Going insane with worry to not know how he's doing. Wait. Hixon is here. Clover mentioned they split up into two teams to take down Hollis and Ansel at the same time.

"Where's Romer?" I question.

A blank look slides across his face. Gone is the concern for his woman's feelings. Suddenly he's all business and it creeps me the fuck out.

"Shepherd will let me know once—"

Anger and concern force me to interrupt him. "I didn't ask about Shepherd."

A muscle jumps in his jaw and suddenly his face softens a bit as he takes a step in my direction. The anger and concern flip to worry and doom, instinctively knowing something is wrong.

"Don't," I croak. "Don't you dare tell me everything will be fine when something clearly happened."

Hixon's demeanor slightly shifts and he gives me a firm nod. "Okay."

He opens his mouth but I hold my finger up to stop him. "Hold that thought."

I stalk to the table and grab the bottle of whiskey, barely catching a hint of the label that mentions something about pineapple cinnamon. I splash some of it in a glass and throw it back in one gulp, closing my eyes at the burn tearing through my throat.

Slamming the glass on the table I croak, "Tell me."

The sound of footsteps causes me to turn and face the doorway. Shepherd steps inside, blood showing...everywhere. His clothes have dark stains, his face, and his hands. My heart slams against my ribs making it harder to breathe.

"No," I whisper, my voice breaking with the emotions running hot through my veins.

I can't lose the one man I've freely given myself to. Who has crawled deep under my skin, whom I actually adore every aspect of life with. The love for horses, the ranch life, who frustrates me, pleasures me, understands me.

Tears blur my vision until I catch a glimpse of the man who rooted himself deep into my life. My feet move automatically and I launch myself at him. Our bodies collide with force and he stumbles back with a loud groan.

"You're here," I mumble against the crook of his neck.

Romer's strong arms surround me and I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with his scent, instantly relieved to have him here, safe and sound.

“Missed me, huh?” he rumbles with a load of satisfaction.

“I was extremely worried,” I confess.

His lips brush my temple. “Living goes hand-in-hand with danger, sweetness, as does pleasure and pain.”

He shifts my body against his and when I pull back to stare at his face, I can feel my eyes widen from shock.

Grasping his head I gasp, “You’re hurt.”

There’s a long gash alongside his cheek that slides up into his hair. There are a few stitches in the middle. Someone cleaned his face of all the blood, but some dried up spots along his neck are still visible and sticking his hair together.

“What happened?” I demand.

“Come on, let’s sit down and I’ll talk you through everything, okay?” His voice is soft and soothing.

His eyes, though? They are telling me what I’m about to hear isn’t going to be pretty. The tiredness, worry, and a hint of pain in those brown eyes are easy to see. I let him guide me to the chair I was sitting in earlier and he sits down at the edge of the wooden table in front of me.

“The most important thing is the fact that you’re safe. Hollis is gone.” Romer throws a brief glance at his father before he focuses back on me. “When my Dad’s team breached Hollis’s home, Hollis had a heart attack. EMTs were waiting outside ’cause we knew about his medical condition. They tried to keep him alive, but his body was too weak.”

I mindlessly nod, not caring a damn bit about Hollis, even if Romer told me he was the one who sent people to kill me at my ranch, hurting Malia instead of me.

“Ansel didn’t make it either, he’s dead,” he quickly states.

Too freaking quickly, jumping over any details, especially the ones that caused the wound on his cheek.

I narrow my eyes and he releases a deep sigh. “Do you really want to know all the damn details?”

“Duh,” is at the tip of my tongue, but I refrain from saying it and instead tell him, “I need to know to put everything behind me. If I don’t it’ll keep gnawing inside of my brain, a festering wound and I want to slam the door to the past once and for all. It’s the only way to allow me to focus on the future. Our future.”

Understanding dawns and he gives me a slight nod. “I might as well start at the very beginning. The man who forced himself upon you when you were sixteen was seduced by the maid years before. The woman, at least twenty years older than him, claimed they were in love. She was the one who took care of him while you thought he was dead. They faked a car bomb while Hollis transported him to a hospital in Mexico. As far as we know Hollis was led to believe Ansel never recovered from the medically induced coma they put him in. The woman was put in charge of his money, the bank account your father and brother put the cash in when they struck a deal to cover up the clearly fake murder your family didn’t know about.”

My fingers curl into fists, anger flows through my veins. I recently became aware he wasn't dead, but to hear the details of how he managed to...escape...cheating all of us, forcing my family to pay for his...his...vacation time?

Romer continues to give me the details. "We traced the new identity he was using and noticed he entered the country the day after your brother was murdered."

Murdered. Not an accident the way everyone thought. Motherfucker. Most of the details in my past consist of facts turning into lies, revealing a completely new truth.

"We've also managed to track girls around the age of sixteen going missing. The cartel he was working with dabbles in human trafficking. We've handed over the details to another team who will work with the FBI and Interpol on this. But, Melora? The basement in Ansel's home was soundproof. He was raping a young girl when we entered his house."

"Is she...is she still alive?" I question.

Shepherd clears his throat, drawing my attention. "She is. Coy has contacted her parents. She's been missing for three weeks."

I swallow hard and bob my head while anger makes me snap, "I hope you took your time killing him."

Romer winces. "He had a gun pointed at the girl's head. When his attention shifted for a second, I took the opportunity to take him out with a single bullet to save the girl."

Every single muscle in my body relaxes. I might have wanted extreme pain for the man who ruined my life while, on

the other hand, keeping the innocent ones in all of this safe is the first priority. End of the line everyone is safe.

Which makes me realize, “What happened to the woman you mentioned? The one who was at the hospital in Mexico? The maid.”

“Dead,” Romer grimly states and points at the wound on his face. “She managed to catch me slightly off guard and grabbed a gun. The bullet tore through the skin, no other damage, but it will leave a scar. The bullet I fired, though? It instantly killed her.”

“Good. The bitch deserved it,” I snap.

“More than you think,” Shepherd states with a load of disgust.

Curiosity makes my lips part to form a question, but he shakes his head. “Seriously, you don’t want to know.”

I focus back on Romer. “It’s over,” I firmly tell him.

“Yes.” He grins.

I jump to my feet and grab his hand to pull him with me.

“Where are we going?” he questions as he lets me guide us out of the room.

“I gave Clover a promise, something that involves the both of us and live rounds.” I shoot a grin over my shoulder and am met with a confused look from Romer while the rest of the girls in the room burst out in laughter.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three months later

– ROMER –

With a rope in each hand, I guide Melora's horses through the pasture. I'm on my way to the stables to put the both of them into their stalls for the night. Willow is already settled in her own stall and as soon as I have both Birdie, and Boo settled as well, I will head home to Melora.

Normally we would do this together, but the past few days she's been feeling a bit under the weather. She went into the bedroom to take a nap a few hours ago. I have my suspicions as to why she might feel off. Except, there is so much going on these days that it could be anything.

With the insurance finally coming through, the rebuilding of her ranch nearly done, the grief of losing her brother, processing everything from his death being an accident to plain murder, her dead fiancé coming back to life, her own fucking life at risk. Yeah, neither of us has enough fingers to point at all the fucked-up shit she had thrown at her feet.

The rope in my right hand pulls tight and I notice Boo has come to a stop and is lazily grazing away.

With a smile in my voice, I mutter, "Spending the whole day in the pasture wasn't enough, huh, girl?"

Birdie's head whips to the left and I follow her line of sight. Her nostrils flare and she neighs in recognition. I can

feel the same joy flowing through me. Melora is standing behind the fence, wearing cowboy boots and a cream summer dress.

“I know, Birdie. She’s my owner too.” I chuckle and grin when Melora opens the gate and strolls our way.

“Hey,” she quips.

I’d like to say it’s directed at me, but the darn woman goes straight for Birdie who is the first one to feel her touch gliding over her head. Her eyes, though? Fully locked on mine.

I place both ropes in one hand and reach out with the other to cup the side of her face. “Are you feeling better?”

She leans into my touch. “I am. And I also found out why I’ve been feeling...off, well...tired mostly. As if I’m completely drained while the work around the ranch is lighter than any work I did when I was working on my own ranch. At first, I thought it might also be everything that was going on, but...it’s not...it’s us. We did this.”

“We?” I frown at the rambling of words that came in a waterfall from her lips.

“Oh, yeah.” She chuckles and takes Boo’s lead.

We stroll side by side with the horses trailing slightly behind us. She doesn’t say a word. The glances she throws my way are heated and I quicken my step to put the horses in their stalls.

At this moment, I want nothing more than to sneak my arm around my woman to pull her close and kiss the fuck out

of her. That's exactly what I do as soon as the horses are locked safely in their stalls.

Her arms slide around my neck and I easily lift her up, allowing her to wrap her legs around my waist. There's no way I can wait. The few minutes it would take to walk into our home and to our bedroom is too fucking long.

The back of the stable is dimly lit and when I step around the corner we're out of reach of the prying eyes of whoever strolls in. It's a small blind spot of the camera and it comes in very handy right now as I press Melora against the wall.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," I rumble against her mouth.

My hand slides over her thigh, slowly disappearing under her dress, and up toward her ass. Kneading, I groan at the way she grinds her center right against my hard length.

"I need you inside me. Now," she demands with a load of lust drenching her voice.

I guide my hand in between our bodies to work on my belt and zipper. "Music to my ears, darlin'. 'Cause I'm pretty damn sure I won't survive another damn second without your tight pussy wrapped around my cock."

She wants to say something, but I steal her next breath by shoving myself balls deep in one hard thrust.

"Fuuuuuck, this is where I belong," I groan. "We both fucking need this. Would have been a damn waste if I came in my damn pants with you grinding down on me."

“Definitely, though you already knocked me up,” she huskily whispers on a hot breath, making me fucking shudder when she squeezes my cock with her inner muscles.

I pull out, almost all the way, and slide right back in. I latch onto her skin in the crook of her neck and knead her fine ass in my hands. Consumed with pleasure I lazily fuck her when suddenly her words settle, making my body freeze mid-thrust.

Melora tips her head back and grabs mine with both hands to make our gaze collide. “Romer? Are you okay?”

I swallow at the dryness of my throat. My heart is beating fast, thrilled by the realization that hit me a mere moment ago.

“I’m going to be a dad?” I croak.

She brushes her nose against mine. “Yes.”

“We’re...pregnant?” I ask as a double confirmation, still not quite believing something we’ve hoped for, but never fucking expecting it to hit so damn fast.

“Uh huh. Now, can you move so we can get back to pleasure...oh. Yes,” she moans when my hips fall back into rhythm.

I place my forehead against hers and keep pumping my cock inside her as our gaze stays connected. The intimate moment is heightened by the news she just shared. Knowing my seed has already taken root inside her womb, new life created by the two of us, is an added aphrodisiac.

This woman. She entered my life by scaring the ever-loving shit out of me. Cruel and without remorse. The

whirlwind of danger taking us for a spin and yet here we stand, united in many ways and settling for a future where we share the same mindset.

The ranch life, breeding horses, riding them; sharing all the things we both love and enjoy. Starting a family allows us to raise our kids and heighten the very moments we cherish, respect, and honor.

With our gazes locked, our breaths mingling, and our hearts beating as one it all becomes an overwhelming bliss. Her orgasm hits and the feel of her pussy rippling around me as I pump in and out of her tight warmth demands my balls to surrender.

Pleasure hits, and hits damn hard. A guttural growl rips from my throat with the same force as the cum spurting from my cock and into my woman's pussy, branding her once more as mine. Hell, the baby growing inside her body forever brands her as mine.

My lips brush against hers and I let my tongue slip into her mouth to taste her. I will never get enough of her. In all the years I've spent on this earth, and all the women I've met, there hasn't been a single person who triggered multiple emotions inside me the way Melora does.

Deep down I knew she was it and each day spent together is one forged with memories of making the right choice. She enriches my life in ways I couldn't have imagined or thought I craved.

Slowly pulling back I blurt without a second thought, "Marry me."

She blinks up at me, lips parted and swollen from the kiss I just gave her. “I...I swore I’d never marry...my father...my brother...they made sure.” Her throat bobs as she swallows hard. “They aren’t here so I can tell them that I found the one man whose ring I will accept.”

Now I’m the one blinking, knowing how loaded the moment is. I didn’t think this through. Dammit, I don’t even have a damn ring. My cock is still inside her for fuck’s sake. Yet, she gave me an answer.

“Yes?” I croak.

“Yes, Romer.” Her voice is like sunshine hitting a diamond with many rays of color to express the beauty of her happiness.

My mouth crashes against hers while my cock slips from her pussy. We both groan and Melora ends the kiss with a soft giggle.

“I need a shower,” she mutters and I slowly put her back on her feet.

I watch how she brushes her dress back in place and I tuck my cock back into my jeans and zip back up. “I’ll join you.”

Holding my hand out for her to take, we lace our fingers and check one more time on the horses before leaving the stable. The sun is slowly kissing the horizon, giving the pastures the nice pending nighttime glow. One of my favorite moments of the day.

Melora digs her heels into the dirt and I gladly come to a stop beside her as we both take in the stunning view.

“I’m going to sell my ranch,” she suddenly states.

“What? Are you sure?” I question in a bare whisper, ’cause sounding too happy about her giving up her home is damn insensitive.

Her smile is stunning when she turns to face me. “Yeah. I figured with the whiskey and the ranch being the family business, you’d rather stay here than come live with me.”

I wrap my arm around her waist and cup the back of her head with my free hand. “I go where you go, but us living here does give options to divide tasks better. Babysitter duty as well. Besides, we have our own section of the house and can add to it if we need more space.”

“We’ve already been living here for the past few months and I can’t imagine moving back. I’ve also talked things through with Malia.”

This also soothes my mind to know it’s not a spur-of-the-moment decision. “And?”

“She didn’t want to return either and loves it here.” She clears her throat. “She loves Sonny.”

The corner of my mouth twitches. “That’s stating the obvious. Those two have been inseparable since the day her ass landed in the hospital.”

Melora grins up at me. “One big happy family.”

“Hmmm. I think we need to find Farley a girl if we consider Sonny and Malia family.”

She playfully smacks my chest as she stalks in the direction of the house.

Throwing a glance over her shoulder she says, “What about the girl who assisted the vet last week? They were staring at one another as if there weren’t any other people, or a horse for that matter, in the same space.”

“Noticed that, huh?” I chuckle as I fall in step behind her.

“Hard not to.” She smirks.

I reach for the door but instead of opening it I take advantage of her frozen in place and lean in to murmur right beside her ear, “You set the world right with the way you make my body hum, and my heart beating faster. I love you and can’t wait for you to be fully mine, mogliettina.”

Her breath catches. Both her hands are gripping the fabric of my shirt and she practically climbs my body to give me a hard kiss.

Pulling back, she fiercely tells me, “You’re already mine, Romer. I’m not letting you go. You’re stuck with me either way.”

I raise my eyebrow, keeping my lips sealed because even if I don’t need to hear the words back—because loving someone rings clear in their actions so I damn well know she does—I did however expect her to fucking tell me.

Melora rolls her eyes. “Yes, Romer. My body still hums from the way you make my heart beat faster, and especially from the love you wrap me in each and every day. Loving you is natural when you treat me as if I’m the only

woman made for you. And to be honest? There's only one man made for me."

"Now that's the fucking truth," I rumble and give her one more kiss before guiding her into the house so we can shower and enjoy our bodies, the night, and the rest of our lives.

EPILOGUE

Fifteen years later

– MELORA –

“Marshmallow-flavored whiskey,” Hixon rumbles and is trying really hard to keep a straight face as he stares down Emberly, our youngest daughter.

“Yes.” Emberly bobs her head. “I’m sure it’ll be a huge success.”

Hixon gives her a firm nod. “I know because it already exists.”

“Shoot.” Emberly stomps her foot. “Maybe a marshmallow chocolate twist?”

“Already out there as well.”

“A dash of brownie combination?” Emberly tries once more.

Hixon places his hands on the desk in front of him and gets to his feet. “Why don’t you throw ideas around with your father and uncle?”

Her shoulders sag. “Because they told me to go to you.”

“Figures,” Hixon mutters under his breath and his eyes land on me.

His lips barely move but I know what he’s asking without using his voice. We’ve been in this situation two other

times already.

“She became aware of the fact that Peanut is reaching the age where he’s ready to be sold,” I tell him while I can feel my eleven-year-old daughter shoot me a glare to make Hixon aware of this little fact because she was hoping it would go unnoticed.

“Grandpa, please, we have to keep him,” Emberly pleads.

A sigh rips from Hixon. “This is the real reason your father and uncle sent you to me, isn’t it?”

Emberly bobs her head, tears filling her eyes.

Hixon rubs a hand over his face. “We can’t keep every horse we breed. It’s like keeping the whiskey stocked in our own barn and not selling it.”

“Whiskey and horses are different, Grandpa,” Emberly whispers with a grumble.

He gives her a stern look, or at least tries to because his grandkids are the only ones who can make him putty in their hands. “Yet you come into my office with a plan to sell whiskey in an effort to keep the horse.”

Emberly bites her bottom lip. “I can take care of Peanut, groom him, ride him, and I have—”

“You’d better ride your own horses because my back and ass are too damn old to ride all the horses,” he grumbles, already referring to Peanut as her horse.

Emberly’s head quickly bobs in agreement. “I always help Daddy and Uncle Shepherd ride and groom all the horses,

including my own.”

“You do,” Hixon agrees. “But schoolwork is also important.”

Emberly beams. “My grades are—”

Hixon holds his hand up to stop her. “I know, I know, flawless. It’s why this is the very last time I will agree to keep Peanut.”

Her eyes light up and surprise hits me. I wasn’t expecting Hixon to give in. Romer and I knew Peanut’s stay would be up for discussion, and we were preparing to console a very sad girl if the choice was to sell.

Hixon crosses his arms in front of his broad chest. “I will however draw up a contract.”

I take a step closer, curious what this contract will entail, and at the same time Emberly asks, “A contract?”

“Yes. You will agree to take full responsibility for Peanut and will make sure there’s a solid future for the both of you. Peanut has potential, he’s—”

This time Emberly cuts off her grandfather with her hand raised, exactly how he stopped her a mere moment ago and pulls a piece of paper from her pocket.

Handing it over, Hixon unfolds it while my smart daughter explains, “I’ve already been saving up every penny I earn with chores, and will continue to do so. By the time Peanut is the right age to breed I will hopefully have enough to buy a mare with this bloodline.”

Surprise hits Hixon and he grunts, “Where did you get the information about this bloodline?”

I narrow my eyes at the harsh tone he’s using, but my daughter is unphased and proudly says, “I’ve researched Peanut’s bloodlines and from everything you and Daddy taught me I went looking for the perfect match. If we go back to his lineage and that of the mare I picked because of the way they perfectly match, we will have the amazing promise of potential training and personality that brings out the best of the Gypsy Cob breed.”

Hixon looks stunned as he spins around to stomp toward his desk. He lets himself drop into the chair and balls up the piece of paper, throwing it into the trash with a wide bow. He leans his elbows on his knees and takes his face in his hands. My chest tightens to see my daughter’s face fall due to his weird reaction.

I have no clue what to do or how to react but suddenly Hixon drops his hands, showing open emotions written all over his face. Tears are brimming his eyes while his mouth is pulled in a huge smile.

He swallows hard and reaches for the drawer to pull out a thick file. “Come here, Emberly.”

We both step closer, but Emberly rounds the desk and takes the file from her grandfather. She places it on the desk and opens it. A gasp flows from her as she thumbs through the pictures and notes.

With a combination of confusion, surprise, and a load of awe she turns to her grandfather and asks, “We had the

same combination in mind. Only...this is about their earlier bloodlines. How is this possible?"

"It's possible because my father started breeding Gypsy Cobs when he bought a stallion along with two mares. He never stopped thinking ahead and he was working on this file, this future combination, right before he died. I had no idea about any of these combinations until I found the files after the funeral. I've always kept it locked away and planned to eventually make this happen."

Emberly places her fists on her hips. "You were never going to sell Peanut, were you?"

Hixon grins. "Nope."

She huffs and stomps her foot. "Then why did you make me think you would and draw up a contract?"

"Because your emotions are still weighing heavy when it comes to business, but this?" He points at her note that's in the trash can. "This right here shows me the potential of you taking over this ranch one day. The way I continued with my father's dream and my sons after me. To see your mind jump to the same thoughts and dreams my father had makes me so damn proud, Emberly."

He reaches out and hugs her tightly.

When he pulls back, he asks, "Want to see more of the files I found of your great-grandfather?"

"Yes," she practically squeals and reaches for a chair to pull beside Hixon's.

I smile at the both of them and mutter a goodbye, but they are consumed with talking and the information lying in

front of them. Slinking away into the hallway, I stroll out of the house and find Romer leaning against the fence once I step out onto the porch.

His eyes are focused on his phone and it gives me time to take in his appearance. After all these years together, the ups and downs of life, raising our kids, experiencing growth personal and business-wise, our love has only grown solid and warmer with each day passing.

The once sand-colored leather chaps he's wearing are stained and well-worn from years of use. Underneath a hint of blue jeans show though with a buckle I gave him a decade ago. It holds an image of Boo who we had to let go earlier that week.

Our love for horses isn't tied to one breed. The Clyden's ranch might breed Gypsy Cobs, but we also own a few Quarter horses, exactly how it was once Romer stepped up and brought me and my two horses to his ranch.

"Hey," Romer quips and pushes away from the fence. "How did it go?"

"Surprisingly well. Did you know she had a breeding plan all drawn up?" I question.

His head slightly rears back. "No. I thought she just wanted Peanut 'cause she was there the day he was born and wanted a stallion. She's growing impatient with Dancer being a twenty-year-old do-gooder and all."

I chuckle, knowing exactly what he means. Our daughter wants fire in the horses she rides while we prefer she rides Dancer, a soft character and older horse. She's very

capable of riding any horse for that matter since she's been on the back of one since she practically took her first step.

“Did she manage to persuade my father with this so-called breeding plan?” He grins and sneaks an arm around my waist to pull me close.

“I think it's safe to say she knocked the wind out of him and made sure Peanut will be hers, and I'm also fairly sure he will buy the mare she had in mind to breed with.”

Pride hits him and I feel it hit me again as well.

“Yeah?”

“Apparently, she picked the same bloodlines your grandfather had something similar in mind for future breeding. They are going over notes and photographs your father found after your grandfather died.”

“Fucking hell,” Romer murmurs. “How did we end up with such great kids?”

Our gaze is drawn to where Sylvester is strolling out of the distillery along with Shepherd, Sonny, and Lainie, Shepherd's daughter. They are deep in conversation. Sylvester is only fourteen and already his passion is the whiskey business to gain every piece of information there is to perfect the brewing part of our company. Just like Lainie who is already studying business administration.

“Because they experience the passion and love we have for what we do each and every day of our lives,” I croak.

Romer's arms tighten around me and I feel the rumble of his words through his chest when he says, “So very true.”

He turns to face me and lets his lips find mine. I surrender to his kiss, feeling my body instantly react to the flow of tingles this man always ignites inside me.

“Get a room,” Shepherd bellows.

I feel one of Romer’s arms leave me and I glance up to see him give his brother the middle finger.

“Nice example for our kids and all,” Shepherd says, laughter tainting his voice.

Romer rolls his eyes. “They’re like us, the good, the bad, the worse, the perfectly imperfect, and the fucked-up shit. And we for sure as shit won’t have it any other damn way.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.” Shepherd proudly grins.

I would say, “Watch your language,” but even that’s futile.

“Clover prepared lunch, catch you later,” Shepherd rumbles as they all pass us and head inside.

Romer glances down. “Are we heading inside as well?”

I risk a look over my shoulder before facing him and keep my voice to a mere whisper. “If everyone’s inside...how about we sneak into the stables? I know a spot that’s safe from prying eyes and gives us more privacy than the thin walls of our room.”

A smirk slides across his face and lust freely blazes in his eyes. “I fucking love you, woman.”

There’s no chance to give those words back to him when a squeal rips from my throat because he easily lifts me

and throws me over his shoulder. His palm hits my ass and I giggle right after a moan slips free when I feel his hand travel up my inner thigh.

The fire between us is still as hot as ever, no matter how busy our lives are or what we face as a united front. There will always be time for everything, especially when it comes to enjoying one another's bodies.

Mixing business with pleasure are words we surely live by. Always and forever, making sure to push it forward into the family legacy that will continue in a wide and open future.

Thank you for reading Romer's story.

*Here's the link to all the information about the
standalone Clyden's Ranch series:*

<https://books2read.com/rl/ClydensRanchWiseguys>

If you love to read other Cowboy stories by me...I
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Special Thanks:

My beta team; Lynne, Wendy,
my pimp team, and to you, as my reader...

Thanks so much! You guys rock!

**Did you know I also co-write with my hubby as Addy
Archer?**

Addy Archer is the pseudonym of a contemporary and romantic suspense writing team (*USA Today* bestselling author *Esther E. Schmidt and her husband*) who love to write about rough bikers twisted with a hint of romance and sassy women. When they aren't working on their next book, they enjoy long walks with their two hairless dogs.

For more information on Addy's books, go to:

<https://books2read.com/rl/AddyArcher>

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