



SECOND CHANCE

Dudley^{at} Ranch

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

NIC SPADE

Second Chance at Dudley Ranch

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Chapter 1

Brent

The flames are hot against my skin and smoke fills my lungs, burning me from the inside out. I let out a strangled cough, my panicked eyes darting around every inch of the space, finding solace in the opening that appears behind the black clouds. It will take me a few minutes, but hopefully I can manage to make it out before everything falls.

Where is Nathan?

It was about ten minutes ago when I was jolted awake to the loud crack, then the orange glow of the fire consuming the barn. I didn't waste any time rushing out of the house, slipping clothes on along the way, and hurrying out here to free the horses. Just as I was heading toward the door where I entered, a large slab of wood came down in front of me and blocked my exit.

That's how I find myself in this position — terrified that I'm about to be burned alive if I can't get to the hole in a far corner. I'm not sure how long the hole has been there, but I'm more grateful for it at this moment than I normally would be. The wind blows, sinking through the hole the power line made in the roof and igniting the flames further.

I suck in a breath when the tip of a flame brushes against my wrist, blistering the skin immediately, then shake my head and hurry toward the hole. As soon as I step safely onto the wet grass outside the barn, the entire thing tumbles to the ground behind me and I blow out a breath of relief. Beyond the burning flames are the red lights, along with Nathan rushing

down the hill, his widened gaze finding mine through the smoke and embers.

He hurries around the damage, coming over to my side quickly and pulling me up. When I try to walk with him, I hiss at the pain that ricochets through my leg and I nearly fall to my knees, but Nathan tightens his arms round my shoulders. A paramedic catches the two of us and immediately comes to my aid, helping Nathan lead me over to an ambulance bay that's doors are pulled wide open.

“What's hurt?” he asks, his gaze traveling down my frame as if attempting to see through all the soot covering my clothes.

“Arm,” I grunt, holding it out to him so he can see the blistering. Then I point down to my knee, which managed to be just in line with another piece of wood — it seems as though those things weren't very fond of me tonight. “And leg.”

Speaking this much has my head spinning and just before I can fall to the ground, Nathan and the paramedic place me onto the edge of the ambulance. While the paramedic drops to my feet and pulls my pant leg up, I have to will my stomach to stop rolling before I puke everywhere — that's how terrible the pain is right now. I'm not stupid, I'm pretty sure I shattered my knee and I'll probably be out of commission for the foreseeable future.

“Dad, what happened?”

I shrug at Nathan's question and eye the space where a barn used to sit, hating that it's now a pile of ash as the fire department sprays it with water. If only they had gotten here sooner. “The storm, I think. A power line fell on the roof, caught the place on fire.”

He nods, then narrows his eyes at me. “What were you thinking, going in there like that? You could've been killed!”

“I had to save the horses.” I dart my gaze around the field, trying to find any of the four horses running around, then look at him. “Did they get away? Are any of them hurt?”

Nathan sighs and shakes his head. “No, they didn’t get hurt. I’ve got them loaded into the trailer, planning on taking them to the ranch down the road until we can figure something out for them.”

I grunt in response, then squeeze my eyes shut as the paramedic pulls my pants back up then starts examining my arm. My jaw is clenched so tightly I’m worried he’ll have to examine my teeth next since one is bound to crack.

Nathan’s fingers thread through mine, giving me a tight squeeze to let me know he’s here, and I give him an even tighter squeeze back.

He winces at the action and I flinch back, pulling my hand from his. “Sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it, I’m sure it hurts like a bitch.”

I glare at him. “Language.”

Nathan may be eighteen, but he still knows not to talk like that around me and, more specifically, in front of others. The paramedic puts some ointment on a bandage, then wraps it cautiously over the blisters on my arm — already fire engine red from the assault of the flames.

“We’ll get you loaded up and to the hospital in no time,” he says softly before walking over to an older man talking with the fire department.

The older guy gives the paramedic a nod before saying something to the firefighter, shaking his hand, and walking over to Nathan and me. He gives me a small smile before helping Nathan lift me from my spot on the edge of my transport, then pulls a gurney from the back of the bay.

I shake my head and grunt in response when he places it firmly on the ground. “I’m not getting on that thing.”

The older guy frowns, then nudges his head toward my leg. “If you walk on it any further, you risk more healing time.” He looks over at Nathan and says, “I assume you don’t want that to happen?”

“Maybe direct the question toward me and not my son?” I manage between the small bouts of pain shooting through my leg. I’m not sure I can walk on it even if I wanted to, so instead of arguing over my care, I hop over to the edge of the gurney and perch my ass on top of it. “Is someone going to help me out?”

Nathan quickly comes over and helps me get situated on the gurney, then watches as the older paramedic lifts me into the cab. “I’ll meet you at the hospital after I get these horses somewhere for the rest of the night. We can figure out where to put them when we come back.”

I give him a curt nod, then lie back on the gurney and wait as the doors get closed on me. It doesn’t take long for the ride to come to a stop — thank goodness for that because each bump we went over made my knee throb, and I’m not sure how much more pain I can handle right now.

A young woman rushes out of the sliding emergency room doors as soon as they open, her dark eyes widening at the sight of me. “What happened?”

“Burning building. Got a burn on his arm and I’m pretty sure a shattered knee. You should get an x-ray on it as soon as possible.” The woman nods along with each word the older man speaks, jotting every bit of information down in a notebook, while I get wheeled through the doors.

There’s commotion everywhere, probably having something to do with the storm, but I close my eyes and let it all fade away. The shock of the moment must be wearing away because the pain seems to have gotten ten times worse and I’m struggling to breathe, my head fading slowly into unconsciousness.

Everything is starting to blur as I come to a stop in the middle of a room, the woman coming to stand in front of me with a frown on her face. I watch as her lips move, but can’t make out a single word she’s saying, then my eyes slowly fall shut. I’m pretty sure she calls my name, but that’s the least of my worries right now. All I can seem to care about is that this sleep is giving me the sweetest relief.

No more pain right now. Heavenly.

That heavenly feeling comes rushing right back as I open my eyes, a bright light shining into them and I squint against the intrusion. “Shit,” I mutter, lifting my hands up to block the sun.

When I wake fully, I come to the realization that I’m definitely not outside, but in a white room, and Nathan’s sitting next to me. He comes over to the side of the bed and it doesn’t take long for the lights to dim, eliciting a sigh of relief from myself.

“That better?” Nathan asks, a frown on his face and brows creased together in worry.

I nod, then glance at the door when there’s a soft knock. Jesus, do they have a damn camera in here or something? A nurse walks in with an apologetic smile, then checks my vitals before reaching a hand out to my arm — which has a fresh bandage wrapped around it. “Mind if I get a look at it?”

Instead of answering her, I simply outstretch the arm to her and let her do whatever she needs. It’s when she touches the sensitive flesh that I flinch from her grasp, startling her, and Nathan immediately holds my arm still while she continues her assault.

“Sorry, sir, but this is necessary to make sure it heals properly.” While she inspects the damage, her gaze finds mine and she shakes her head. “You’re lucky, you know?”

I shrug, not really believing it, then look over at Nathan. “What’s the verdict on my knee?”

He sighs, waiting until the nurse finishes up and walks out before answering. “Not too great, Dad. Shattered and you’ll most likely walk with a limp for the rest of your life, but it’s better than not having a leg at all I guess.”

Nathan’s not wrong — things could’ve been a lot worse. Not breathing any longer, for instance, that would really suck. “What did Jankins say about the horses?”

He shrugs. “Not much, just said that we could keep them there as long as we needed to. I’m getting the other barn situated for them though, so they’ll be back in no time.”

I arch a brow. “How long have I been out?”

“A few days. I was starting to worry, but things seem to be perfectly fine and normal.” There’s a machine sitting next to the bed that catches my attention and Nathan clears his throat. “That was for your breathing, there was a lot of smoke in your lungs. They want to monitor you for a few more days, to make sure the effects of the smoke inhalation won’t cause too much damage.”

Great, I’m still stuck in this hell hole. I roll my eyes, but keep my mouth shut. Anything is better than being six feet under right now. I would’ve hated to leave Nathan alone to clean this mess up. “How much you think the rebuild will cost?”

“Why don’t we worry about you getting better first? We have plenty of time to worry about costs.” Judging by the way he darts his gaze away from mine, I’m willing to bet he already figured it out and doesn’t want to tell me.

Even after sleeping the days away, I let out a large yawn that catches Nathan’s attention and he lifts from the bed — seems as though I’m too tired for questioning. “I’ll let you rest. I’m headed back to the house for a shower and some rest of my own.”

Before I can object to him leaving, he walks out the door and nods to the nurse who was in here moments ago, leaving me alone to think about the money we’ll need. Could it really cost so much that it will end up hurting us? The bags under Nathan’s eyes don’t give me much hope.

What the hell am I going to do?

Chapter 2

Sydney

I can't help but roll my eyes at the sight of Heath standing outside my office, a satisfied smirk on his lips as he trails his gaze down my body. I'm not sure what I ever saw in him — thank goodness that's over.

His ego is bigger than most men I've come in contact with, and that's saying a lot in our line of work — real estate. He's got his hair perfectly shaven, the same exact way he's gotten it done for years, and not a speck of hair is framing his face. It's nerve-wracking. Just once I'd like to see what he'd look like not so put together, but in the two years I was with him, I never got the opportunity.

A shame, really.

It wasn't long ago when he would meet me outside this exact office, ready to take me out to dinner before dropping me off at home. At first, the conversations were easy and light, which is what made me agree to more, until things got quieter and quieter the further into our relationship we got.

There was one night, when he was waiting for me and never bothered looking up from his phone to greet me, that I'd decided enough was enough. Instead of leaving with him that night, I told him things weren't working out and went to my house. If he thought I was going to stand around on his arm while barely getting any attention, he thought wrong.

I give him a forced smile and come to a stop, folding my hands in front of me to block his view as much as possible.

“Heath, what can I do for you?” It must be important if he’s bothering me before I’ve even gotten through my door.

He clears his throat and nudges his head down the hall toward his own office — one of the corner offices I dream of having one day. It’s not likely to happen, since he’s the owner’s son and all that, but a woman could dream. Right? “Come to my office?”

I nod, lifting my files into the air. “Let me set these on my desk, then I’ll be there.”

“You still have that emergency bag here with you?” he asks, eyeing my bare floor as I open the office door. This is where our stark differences show.

Instead of things being scattered around my office, like they would be in his, everything has its own place that I can’t help but touch every time I walk through the room. There’s a plant in here that one of my friends gave me when I started this job, which is still going strong on the window sill, the sun shining down perfectly on it. It feels like a good symbol, as I feel like overall, my office just gives more life.

The bookshelf situated along one side of the room was another gift, that way I could house all my favorite books on them — mainly first editions and my most prized books. It seems as though when I have meetings here that’s where most of my clients gravitate, eyeing the perfect spines with awe in their gazes, so I feel empowered to continue adding to the collection.

There are magazines stacked in a pile on the glass coffee table, not a centimeter out of place, and I smile at the sight. I’m not sure what it is, but knowing that it looks perfect makes my heart warm.

Heath’s steps follow me inside as I sit my things down on the desk and spin around, narrowing my eyes at him. “Think you can give me a minute to at least get situated?”

He shakes his head. “This is something that needs to be addressed as soon as possible before we run out of time. I have

a project for you to take on. It requires a little bit of traveling throughout the next year.”

A year? Jesus, what the hell could he possibly need? “Isn’t that a long time to wait for something?”

“According to my father, it’s worth the wait. I’m not going to question him on it, so follow me when you’re ready.”

May as well get this over with if he isn’t going to leave me alone. I grab the small spiral notebook and follow him out the door, giving my assistant a finger wave as we walk by. She rolls her eyes at the sight of Heath, knowing how self-centered he is and I have to hold back a chuckle.

Alicia only started working with me last year, but that’s long enough for her to get the gist of why Heath and I broke up six months ago. At first, he’d still show up outside my office at the end of the day — thinking I couldn’t possibly reject him — until he finally got the hint and stopped.

That’s what I thought at least, which is where my newfound friendship with Alicia came into play. She noticed how stressed I was one day and invited me out to have drinks with her. It didn’t take much for me to spill every single detail about Heath and me to her, rambling on and on about how he wouldn’t leave me alone. She quickly became a confidant and it’s been a weekly thing we do now — go out for drinks and have a good chat.

Heath comes to a stop at his assistant’s desk, barking out orders to her with a frown, before leading me through his open door. It slams shut behind us, his curses echoing through the empty room, and I track my eyes over his space. The way he takes care of it is sad, especially with the amazing view he has behind him.

While I have small windows that look like the ones you’d see in a classroom, he has large ones that span from floor to ceiling. The large businesses surrounding us catch my attention every time and I let a small smile slip from my lips before flattening it — he might get the wrong idea.

“Have a seat, then we can get started,” Heath says as he walks behind his desk, brushing crumbs from his desk and onto the floor. God, it’s taking everything in me not to find a vacuum and run it across the carpet. His chair creaks under his weight as he sits down and he gestures to one of the comfortable leather chairs in front of him, silently telling me to sit down.

Reluctantly, I sink into it and cross one leg over the other. It doesn’t surprise me one bit when Heath’s gaze follows the movement and I clear my throat, forcing his gaze back up to my eyes. “What’s going on?”

He nods and blinks a few times, as if forgetting the reason he brought me in here, then grabs a thin file from the top of a pile of papers. The disorganization is sickening, honestly. “Take a look at this.”

I take the file from his hand and open it, glancing at the few pages situated inside with a brow raised. What could they possibly want with a ranch? “This is the next project?” It doesn’t seem like it needs us to come there, but what do I know after just getting the file?

Heath nods and runs a hand over his face. Doesn’t he hate doing that when there’s nothing there to poke at his hands? A travesty, hair is begging to be grown on that chin of his. “You’ll go there and gather information, giving us the best option for gaining control of the property.”

“What do you need the property for?”

“I didn’t bring you in here to ask questions,” he mutters. “Just do what is asked of you.”

I glare at him and throw the file onto his desk, pointing at it aggressively. “Sure, Heath, but a little insight into the details would be great.” He goes to hand me the file again, but I hold my hand up to halt him. “I don’t mean information on the ranch, I can clearly read that. Knowing more about the project would be beneficial to my research.”

“I’ll do what I can and email you by the end of the day. In the meantime, I’ve got you booked on the property for a week’s

stay. You need to be there in about four hours, so I suggest you get ready.”

“Sure thing,” I mutter before walking out of his office without another glance backward. “Asshole.”

Alicia snorts beside me and says, “Sounds like that went well.”

I growl at her comment, choosing to ignore her and storm into my office. So much more relaxing today. The closet in the corner is where I house my emergency suitcase — for instances such as this, when they need me to leave immediately — and I grab it from the small space with a huff.

My door swings open and Alicia arches a brow. “Going somewhere?”

“Heath didn’t tell you?”

She shakes her head and I roll my eyes. Of course he didn’t, because he expects me to do this part of the job for him. I let out a rough breath and press my lips together in annoyance. “I’ve got a project. Dudley Ranch, have to be there in about four hours.”

The trip alone takes three hours, so I can’t waste too much time right now.

“Anything you need me to do?”

I shake my head and sigh. “Just email me throughout the week if anyone calls for me, redirect them to my cell if it’s important. Otherwise, take a message.”

“At least you’ll be out of this place for a little bit.”

True, got that going for me. She lets me get my things in order and I make sure to leave directions for the plant on my desk. It’s not the first time Alicia has had to take care of it for me, but that woman forgets things insanely fast and I’m not counting on her remembering the steps on her own.

I give her my best smile when I walk out the door, locking it behind me, then make my way over to her desk. “Here’s the keys for my office. I left instructions for the plant on my desk.”

She chuckles with a shake of her head while grabbing the key from my palm and stuffing it into the top drawer of her desk. “You and that damn plant.”

“It’s sacred,” I huff out, then look toward the elevator. “Wish me luck and see you in a week.” Then I give her a small wave before heading into the open elevator.

My eyes latch onto the large white ranch house sitting at the top of a hill as I inch my car up the driveway. The wraparound porch is everything I could ever want in a house and I’m practically vibrating with excitement to walk along it, but that comes to a screeching halt when I catch sight of the two men standing at the end of the drive.

The younger one, whose hair falls loosely over his face, glances over his shoulder at my car before saying something to the older one. Even from feet away, I can tell they’re son and father — the similarities are uncanny. While the son heads in my direction, I quickly step out of the car and head toward the open trunk, grabbing my bag from it easily.

“I can help with that,” he says politely, reaching a hand down and grabbing hold of the bag. “You must be Sydney?”

I nod, giving him a bright smile. “That’s me, and you are?” After reading up on the ranch, I can only assume that the young man standing in front of me is Nathan — but I’d hate to be wrong.

He smirks and holds his other hand out to me. “Nathan, ma’am.” His gaze darts over his shoulder as the older guy comes to a stop at his side and he nudges his head in that direction. “This is my dad, Brent.”

“You have a lovely property here,” I say to his father, but only get a grunt in response before he walks away from us.

Well, that was rude.

Nathan sighs and shakes his head. “Sorry about that. Let me show you to the guest house.” While he leads me in the

direction of where I'll be staying, I can't help but trail my gaze over my shoulder and lock eyes with Brent.

He doesn't hold the gaze very long, but that doesn't do anything to ebb the warmth spreading inside of me. That's a bad idea, he clearly isn't very fond of me.

Chapter 3

Brent

I huff out a sigh as I come to a stop in front of the large slabs of wood sitting on top of a pile of ash. Looking at it only brings back memories of the night and a throbbing starts up in my knee. Out of instinct, I rub at it, but it only angers me further when all I connect with is the cast.

Nathan told me he didn't need my help with cleaning things up, but I couldn't bring myself to sit in the house all day. He's been coming out here every morning to clean things up and it's been a week since the incident. It's about time I start trying to pull my weight around here.

I've rested enough, even if the doctor thinks I should be resting more.

With a deep breath, I place the crutches beneath my arms and start my trek through the field, moving around where the side of the barn would be if it were still standing, and lean down to grab a slab of wood. A few splinters pierce through my skin, but it's nothing compared to my other injuries, and I shake it off as I try to hop my way over to the dumpster Nathan rented out.

When I turn back around, I'm already wiping sweat from my brow, and I've barely done anything. My knee is thumping as I make my way back over to the damage and reach for another wooden beam, but this time I almost fall flat on my face. Luckily I get a crutch out in front of me in enough time to save my fall, but the throat clearing behind me has me stiffening immediately.

“Want some help?” a feminine voice asks. The same one who took residence in the guest house yesterday, and my skin prickles at the idea of her watching me. That quickly goes away though when I realize she watched me just about knock myself out.

Instead of answering her, I simply let the wood I was holding fall to the ground and hobble away from her. She calls my name, trying to gain my attention, but I refuse to give it to her.

God, I can only imagine what she’s thinking right now.

Just looking at the way she was dressed yesterday I can tell she comes from money that I don’t think I’ll ever have. I might own this ranch, but that doesn’t mean money comes easy to us. Her blonde hair is bright against the morning sun when I turn around and her eyes follow my movements as I slowly ascend the steps, then head toward the swing out back and flop onto it.

I glance toward the side door when it bursts open, Nathan giving me a frown as he walks out. “What the hell are you doing?”

“You better watch how you talk to me, I’m still your dad.”

He mutters an apology before sighing in the cool morning, running a hand over his face just the way I do. It’s moments like these, when he’s staring straight ahead rather than at me, that I can see the resemblance between the two of us. I’ve always gotten the comment from people around town, saying how much Nathan looks like me, but I’m rarely able to see it.

He’s got his mother’s almond-shaped eyes, and her bright smile that made any room light up she was in. Unlike my broody personality, Nathan can walk into a room full of strangers and make each and every one feel welcomed — much like his mother was able to do once upon a time.

Renee passed away years ago, something that I’ve since moved on from, but the occasional thought of her manages to push its way through my mind. She used to sit out here with me in the mornings — me with a hot cup of coffee, while she curled into me with a book in her hand. I loved watching her

eyes scan the pages, a smile pulling at her lips when she got to the good parts, and it became our routine.

“You need to take it easy, Dad,” Nathan says, pulling me from thoughts of Renee.

I nod with a sigh. “I know, Nathan, but I can’t sit here and do nothing.”

“Well, if you want the chance of doing anything, then you’ll need to listen to the doctor’s orders.”

He’s right, I know that, but it doesn’t change that I’m getting antsy sitting here. There isn’t much to do when you sit around, watching everyone else work around you. It’s irritating. I’m not even sure how much longer I’ll have the cast on, Nathan has been handling all my appointments, but hopefully, it will be off soon.

I’ve been dying to itch the spaces beneath the thick covering and I’ve only grown more irritated that I can’t reach them. I open my mouth, prepared to say more, but the crunch of gravel beneath footsteps has me snapping my lips together. The blonde hair is hard to miss as our guest makes her way closer to the porch, eyeing the frame appreciatively with a smile.

I growl at her intrusion and she snaps her gaze to me. “Oh, uh, sorry. I just wanted to check the porch out, I didn’t know anyone was back here.”

“This is my home, no one said you could walk around it like it’s your own.”

She fidgets in her spot, face flushing red, and I have to snap my gaze from hers to keep my body from reacting to the sight of it. There’s something oddly satisfying about the way she’s reacting to me that makes my body vibrate with the need to watch it more. “I apologize.”

As soon as she’s out of earshot, Nathan shakes his head at me with a frown. “Come on, Dad, she’s new here. Cut her some slack.”

“Not likely,” I mutter as I stand from my spot on the swing, not wanting to take the chance that she comes back around. I’m sure it’s unlikely, if the way she reacted to me is any

indication, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. "I'm going to rest, since that's the only thing I can seem to do at this point."

Nathan pats my back with a smile and walks with me into the house, watching as I use the crutches to get into the living room. There's a blanket thrown haphazardly over the back of the couch, indicating the place where I've been sleeping since I arrived home, and I groan as I sink into the plush cushions.

At least it's comfortable enough for the time being — at least until the mattress for the floor gets here. Nathan insisted I stay in here, but I told him the only way I'd do that is if I had a bed. It didn't take him long to order one for me with a smile, not realizing that he could've easily carried my own down here for me. Just another chunk of money to spend that we definitely don't have.

"Maybe some sleep will shake you out of the mood," he says roughly, grabbing the keys from the counter and heading toward the front door.

Not likely.

I'm not sure I'll ever be okay, not if my leg will always be an issue for the rest of my life. I wait until he's got the door shut behind him before relaxing into the cushions and closing my eyes. The last thing I'm feeling right now is tired, so the only image I get when they shut is a very vivid one of the woman on her knees in front of me.

I groan at the intrusion, rubbing at my eyes in hopes that it will send the image floating away, but it only seems to make it worse. What is so fascinating about her that I'm conjuring up fantasies of her before me?

The sound of the saw going does the trick and I roll over onto my side, reaching for the remote sitting in a perfect line on the coffee table in front of me. I guess if I'm not going to be able to sleep I can at least manage to see what's good on TV without someone having to help me.

Seems like most of the shows on are reruns, so I click something random and let it play in the background while I look straight up at the ceiling. If Renee were here, she'd

probably sit here with me and play a movie — an annoying chick flick that I'd never be caught dead watching, but I'd watch next to her with a smile on my face. Anything to make her happy.

Could I ever find someone else to make me feel the way she did? It took a while to come to terms with her loss, but I've come to the point in my life where I want something like it again. The love I had for her was like nothing I'd ever experienced before, and although I'm not sure I'd be able to find that again, I'm certain I could find something close to it.

I shake my head and let out a rough breath. I've tried a few times to date, but each of the women ended up only caring about one thing and I only ever made it through the one date. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy sex as much as the next guy, but that's not all I want in a relationship. Which is something Renee always seemed to understand about me.

I'd give anything to have her company right now, but curling up with the blanket she made for me is about the closest I'll ever get to her again. Would she be proud of the way I've raised our son? I'd like to think so, but I never know when it comes to her. She was always a wildcard, a different emotion every day, and you never knew what you got until she unleashed it.

There were days when she would just sit on my lap and cry, letting out all her sadness while I kept my arms wrapped around her. Other days she would be red-faced and angry at the world, screaming at me for doing something as simple as dropping a few grains of sugar onto the counter. Those were the days when I knew to stay out of her way, at least until she came apologizing to me later that night — which never failed to happen.

Before I can get too lost in the thoughts of her again, I lift from my spot on the couch and grab the crutches. I pull open the fridge, eyeing the contents curiously, and grab everything I would need for a decent sandwich. When I look out the window that faces the front of the house, I watch as Sydney throws her head back with a laugh and a warmth spreads through me.

No.

She can't make me feel this way. Nathan smiles effortlessly, then points to the pile of ashes before leading her over to the damage. When Sydney bends over the debris, I pull my gaze away from her and focus on the sandwich I'm making instead. I'm not sure what's coming over me, or that I like it very much.

Chapter 4

Sydney

I get the last of my clothes into the large suitcase and wheel it from the guest house behind me, smiling when I catch sight of Nathan leaning against the driver's door. He gives me a smile in return, opening the door for me as I make my way over, and he grabs the luggage from my hand.

I'm more than aware of his father's presence on the other side of the car, but I try my best to keep my gaze focused on Nathan instead. I've spent most of this week taking notes, while also casting lingering gazes in Brent's direction when he wasn't looking — talk about creepy.

Nathan walks up to me with his hands stuffed in the pocket of his jeans and I give him a quick hug. It's weird, seeing him so carefree and happy, while his dad looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here. "You have me booked three months from now?" As far as Nathan is concerned, I loved this place so much while I was here that I want to come back again.

It's not exactly a lie, but it's not the entire truth either. I truly fell in love with this place while I was here, so I can't imagine how I'd feel when I come back again. Not only the place, but the people are nice here as well. The other day while walking around I met one of the hands, Hector, who's worked at Dudley ranch since Brent's father was here.

Hearing stories about the ranch was a good way to pass time, while also giving me some of the information I need in regard to the project. I've been trying to decide if I should tear all that information out though, considering it was said to me in confidence.

“Everything’s all set, and you’ll be back in the guest house.”

“Three months?” Brent’s voice booms through the air and it sends goosebumps pebbling over my skin. “Why three months?”

I give him a small smile and shrug. “Work gets busy, figured three months is a good time frame to come back here.”

He eyes me curiously before spinning around and heading back toward the house. It seems as though that’s his favorite thing to do when it comes to me and I turn to Nathan with a frown. “He doesn’t seem very fond of me, huh?”

Nathan chuckles. “Don’t let it get to you, he’s been a grouch ever since the barn incident.”

That was a story I didn’t want to hear because ever since then I’ve been wondering if gathering information on their property is the best thing for me to do. They love this place, that much I’ve gathered after being around for a week, and what kind of person would I be if I help take it away from them?

It’s not something I can be concerned about though, not when my job is on the line if I don’t finish this. Well, I would still have my job, but I’d get pushed that much further back from eventually being promoted in the company.

“Well,” I say with a sigh, then slip through the open door and sink into the leather seat in my car. “I should get on the road. I’m sure I’ve got plenty of work waiting for me.”

Fortunately, Alicia only had to direct two calls to my cell, but other than that I was free all week — aside from the note-taking — and it was nice to be able to relax. I got to just enjoy nature a little bit as I walked around the large space.

“Drive safe,” Nathan mutters, his hand resting on the door before he shuts it softly and backs away with a small wave. While he makes his way toward the main house, I peel out of the drive before my eyes can betray me any more than they already have this week. Even though I catch movement from the corner of my eye, I tighten my grip around the steering wheel and keep my gaze locked on the driveway in front of me.

Alicia is already sitting in my office when I walk in, smiling in my direction and walking over to the window sill with a satisfied smile. Her hand gestures to the plant she was in charge of and she says, “Look, you never had to worry about a thing.”

I roll my eyes, but smirk because she knows me entirely too well. “Do you blame me?”

One time is all it took for me to question her on everything. All she had to do while I was on a work trip was make a trip to my house and feed my fish. Next thing I know, I walked through the door and every single one of them was upside down in their tank.

It’s been hell trusting her with anything else since then, and the entire reason I haven’t gotten a dog yet — even though it’s one of the main things I truly want in my house. I think it would be an amazing feeling to walk through the door to a little puppy wagging its tail at me, ready to catch the ball I throw.

She groans. “Are we ever going to let that go?”

“I had to give them a proper funeral, which consisted of flushing a toilet, no we can’t let it go.”

“Whatever,” she mutters before walking over to me with a frown. “These are some of the messages that were left for you. I have them stacked from most important to least important, figured you would appreciate that.”

I nod. “You’re a lifesaver. Think you could head to the cafe across the street and grab me a coffee? All that driving has me exhausted.”

Just as I’m about to sit down, there’s a tap on my door and Heath pokes his head in it. “Hey, you ready to give me an update?” This man never lets me breathe, I swear.

I roll my eyes, but stand from my spot at my desk with a smile and walk over to him. There’s a sense of pride that rolls

through me when I hand over the work and a smile forms on his face, as if I finally did something right, then he heads toward the office door. “Good work, can’t wait to see what you get next time.”

“Hey, Heath, what’s so important about this ranch?”

He shrugs and waves the papers in the air. “Just know that it’s a very good investment for us, at least according to my father.”

“And you’re just trusting his judgment?” I ask, hating how easily Heath is bending at his beck and call — this isn’t what he usually did.

“I have no reason not to.” He shakes the papers and gives me a stern frown, thinking long and hard about my question, then says, “I’ll look over these and have any thoughts together for you by the end of the day.”

Alicia says something to him as he walks out, no doubt telling him how she really feels about him, then winks at me before the door falls shut. I groan in relief as the silence consumes me, begging me to keep it there, but I can never seem to get it to stay long enough.

The knocking on the door has me narrowing my eyes and I stand abruptly, straightening my skirt before walking over to the door and pulling it open.

I’m surprised when one of my oldest friends walks through the door, the bags more than noticeable under her eyes, and I immediately lead her over to my guest chair in concern. “Justine, what’s going on?”

She shakes her head frantically, tears streaming down her face and shoulders shaking with sobs. “I-I need your help.”

I blink a few times, not used to seeing her like this, but eventually bring myself to nod slowly. “Anything, now what?” My hands are sweating profusely while I wait in silence for her answer, but there’s some part of me that already knows what she’s going to say.

“I think he’s seeing someone else.”

“Why are you thinking that?” If there’s anyone in the world who deserves to be looked at as the power couple, it’s Justine and Cyle.

They were the couple in high school that everyone aspired to be like and it still hasn’t changed for me, even all these years later. Justine sighs and straightens her shoulders, trying to get out of her head. “He’s been out late a lot recently, claiming that he’s been working on a story with a new producer.”

After high school, Cyle decided that he wanted to be a news reporter and went to college for broadcasting. It didn’t take him long after he graduated with his degree to get a call to go to New York, work among some of the best.

“Are you sure you aren’t thinking too much?” If there’s anything I know about city life it’s that there’s always something to do — or, in this case, something happening.

She groans. “No, Syd, I’m not sure. If I was sure, I wouldn’t be here right now asking for your advice.”

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“That I’m being stupid,” she mutters, running a hand through her soft red curls. I’ve always admired her hair, preferring her bright fire engine hair over the bleach waves tumbling down my back.

Justine went through most of our friendship changing her hairstyle. One year she opted for a shorter look, cutting it just above her shoulders. Another year she let it grow out before getting it cut into layers and curling it on most days. This is the look I love most though — the bangs that frame her forehead really bring out the shape of her face, and the way her strands fall perfectly against her skin.

There’s a small patch of freckles that dot her nose, one of my favorite parts about her, and I find myself counting them. How do I answer this and help her, when I can barely even help myself? I give her a small smile and rub her thigh. “I can’t tell you that, Justine, you have to figure it out on your own.”

Considering Cyle’s line of work, I’d say she doesn’t have anything to worry about. But what if I end up being wrong and

she blames me for leading her astray? I'd rather not have to deal with the emotions that will ensue. Still, I'm not sure I can see Cyle throwing their relationship away so easily.

Before we can say anything else, there's a loud knock on the door and Heath rushes in, his eyes narrowing at Justine's figure sitting down. "Sydney, there are some issues with the information you sent over. I emailed you, but figured I'd come talk to you about it." He throws another glare at Justine. "No personal visits while you're working."

He slams the files onto my desk before storming out, not bothering to give me or Alicia, her petite frame angled in his direction as he walks past her desk, a glance.

Justine clears her throat and I squeeze her shoulder. "Just try to think long and hard about what you think he'd do, okay?"

She nods and lets me lead her from the office, giving me a small hug before scurrying toward the elevators.

When I get to my desk, I lift the file from it and scan over the words I wrote onto the paper with a frown. He's clearly upset that I wasn't able to get any other information from the place, but he'll just have to understand it's not as easy as it looks. Especially when your heart keeps beating rapidly in one of the owners' presence.

How could someone I've only met once, with very few words, have such a hold on me?

Chapter 5

Brent

After months of dealing with the cast, my leg can finally breathe and I get to start my physical therapy now. I'll go twice a week to my physical therapist, then she'll send me home with a list of things I can do around the ranch to help with it. Nathan's quiet as we pull into the driveway, but perks up after catching sight of something ahead of us.

Or someone.

There she is again.

I groan silently and throw my head back against the seat. What is she doing here again? She told Nathan that she'd be back in a few months, but I didn't believe her for one second. Judging by the bright smile that Nathan gives her I'd say they are closer than I originally thought.

She smiles back at him and gives a small wave, her gaze turning to me. Those blue eyes are the brightest I've ever seen — brighter than the morning sky. I grunt as I walk past the two of them, wanting nothing more than to get into the privacy of my home before I say something stupid.

What is it about this woman that has me all tied up in knots?

While Nathan talks to her animatedly about the guest house, something he's made sure to clean out a little more since he knew she was coming, I carefully make my way up the porch steps. He's grabbing her bags when I spin around to face them, smiling at her as he leads her across the lawn and to the guest house. I'm not sure why she even needs to stay there, I'm sure

one of the smaller houses in the north pasture would be perfectly fine for her.

Her being so close to me, yet so far away, is unnerving. I push through the front door with a shake of my head, hating that I'm thinking about her right now, and head into the kitchen. Maybe if I focus on something else I'll be able to get her out of my head.

I have to admit though, the jeans she's wearing this time really bring out the curves that were hiding during her previous visit. There's a chill in the air that wasn't here last time, but it seems as though she was prepared with the coat she had on.

God, I'm supposed to be getting her out of my head — not thinking about her even more. Just as I'm getting meat out for dinner, Nathan comes barging through the door with a narrowed gaze pointed in my direction. "Would it kill you to be nice?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

The more he pulls actions like that, the more I can't help but see what other people see. I'm so used to his mother's carefree personality that I haven't really bothered to pay attention to his features, choosing instead to bask in the familiarity of Renee. Nathan's definitely got my large frame though, along with the same full lips that I sport.

If I were his age again, I'm sure we'd look like twins. I'm sure I have pictures of me at his age stashed somewhere in this house, especially since my mother was big on keeping things like that. There's a photo for every occasion because she didn't want to go through life not documenting everything that happened.

Our first amusement park trip, birthdays, concerts, and every homecoming that I ever went to. It's all photographed and put up, just waiting for a moment like this when I want to reminisce with Nathan.

I sigh and run a hand over my face. "Yeah, Nathan."

"Did she do something to you that I don't know about?"

Other than make me think about her constantly when no other woman has been able to catch my attention that way? No. It's

infuriating, knowing that she can get under my skin so easily and I've barely spoken a single word to her. There's this confidence about her that calls to me, the way she holds herself as she walks around the property.

"No," I mutter, tearing my gaze away from him before he can dig deep into my mind with his stare. I'd rather not deal with the questions right now. "I'll do better, I'm just cranky."

After a few moments of silence, I glance over my shoulder and find Nathan's eyes on me. His eyebrows are drawn tightly and he's surveying me with a frown, as if he doesn't quite believe what I'm saying to him, but he eventually nods before heading back out of the house. Since I'm able to do smaller things around the ranch, I let the meat sit in the sink and slip my shoes on before following him outside.

He turns around when the door shuts aggressively behind me, waiting for me with his hands in his pockets and a gaze darting around the property on high alert. This is around the time when we get visits from wildlife, wanting to steal some of our animal food, so it's important to make sure we have cameras plastered around the area.

The worst of it is when the snow starts falling and the animals grow more agitated, since most of their food supply dwindles down with the snow. We still have about two more months before we get anything major on the ground, but that doesn't stop the wildlife from starting to mark their territory now.

"What can I do?" I finally manage to ask Nathan, tearing his gaze away from the far pastures. If there's anything out there, he's not going to see it from here, or be able to get to it in time before it wreaks havoc on the land.

"I'll start you out with something smaller for now, maybe stacking firewood that I have cut behind the shed?" He says it as a question, but instead of asking if that's what he wants me to do, I immediately make my way over to the shed. It might not be what I usually would've done around here, but I'm happy that I can at least help him in some way.

When I round the corner of the shed, I jerk in surprise when I catch sight of the blonde hair under a large oak tree. My breath

hitching has her darting her gaze up to mine, only tightening the blanket she has around her shoulders. I try not to spare her another glance as I use the crutches I'm still required to sport and push my way through the shed.

Just like Nathan said, there are a few large piles of wood that need to be taken across the lawn and sent down the shoot that leads to our basement. I'm thankful for the house my parents built together because it doesn't require us to have to purchase oil. There's not only a fire furnace, but we also have a gas one.

The guest house, on the other hand, only has the fireplace, which is in the living room, and it makes me wonder if Sydney has the wood for it. Will she end up being cold while she stays here? My blood boils at the thought of it and instead of carrying the pieces of wood to my house, I turn in the opposite direction and head toward the guest house.

"Hey," Sydney says, her feet crunching against the fallen leaves as she follows after me. "What are you doing?"

I sigh and roll my eyes. "Carrying wood."

Her glare is immediate. "I mean what are you doing with the wood, asshole?"

There's something comforting about her calling me outside of my name, something that no one does often, and I find my lips tipping up into a smirk but I quickly push it away. "Do you want to be cold while you're here? Because I can arrange that." Even though my leg is already starting to kill me, I'd still carry this back to the shed just to prove a point.

My gaze catches onto the movement as she tucks a strand of her beautifully soft hair behind her ear, something that I find myself wishing I could do. I'm itching to reach out, let it fall between my fingers, but I keep my hands clenched at my sides as she follows me into her house.

Before I can do something stupid like slam my lips to hers, since that's all I can think about right now at the sight of her bright pink mouth, I grunt at her and head toward her front door. "Try not to use it all too quickly, the rest goes into my house." I could easily let her have some more, considering

there's nothing but trees surrounding the outskirts of the ranch, but I'd rather not think about that.

She doesn't say anything in response as I hobble out of her house, my skin lighting up at the gaze she has pinned on me. I can think of something else I'd like pinned against me, but I shake that thought away immediately. It would be best if I could get my mind under control, or else I'm in for a very long week.

Nathan walks through the dining room as soon as I've cleared my plate and he sighs in response. "Sorry, was trying to get the horses situated in the other stable and lost track of time." He slips the cowboy hat off his head and hangs it over the chair he pulls out, flopping onto it with exhaustion. "It's been a rough day, but I'm ready to fill myself up."

I lift from my spot at the table and point toward the bowls sitting in the center. "Well, there's plenty left. I'm sure whatever you don't eat will only be tossed out." After resting my leg for a few hours, it's about time for me to head to the gym and get some of my own physical therapy in. "I'll be out in the barn."

He gives me a small nod, frowning, then reaches for different bowls to fill his plate up. I'd love nothing more than to sit with him, enjoy small talk, but if I don't get to my therapy now, I'll never get it done tonight, and I don't want to miss it. I change into a pair of sweatpants and sweatshirt, then grab tennis shoes before pushing out the front door.

After being in the warmth of my house, the chill on my skin as I step out onto the porch feels great. I take in the fresh air and rub my hands together before heading in the direction of the barn.

I come to a halt about ten feet away from the guest house when I catch sight of the bright light shining from under a tree. Sydney is crouched over, writing aggressively into a notebook,

and I casually walk over to her. What could she possibly need to be writing right now?

My eyes glance over her shoulder, trying to take in the words she's writing, but none of it is making sense to me. It looks like there's something about a barn on the page, but under her light, it could be my eyes playing tricks on me. I clear my throat, causing her to yelp in surprise and slam the notebook shut on her lap, then she turns to look at me.

"Jesus," she mutters as she lifts from her spot on the ground. "Can't someone get some privacy?" I watch as she fidgets with the notebook, her eyes darting around the area and trying not to look into mine. What could be making her so nervous right now?

Maybe it's me. I have been rather rude to her since she showed up, but that's only because of the way my heart stutters when she's near. It's not a feeling I'm used to, not since Renee, and I'm not sure how to handle it — so I use my anger as a clutch.

"Maybe if you were inside you would have that," I grind out. Instead of having a stare down with her, which only makes me want to get lost in her eyes, I turn away and head in the direction of the barn.

Chapter 6

Sydney

As soon as Brent's shadowy figure disappears down the hill, I put my notebook in my bag and hurry after him. What could he possibly need to do right now? I don't have anything better to do with my time than try to be nosy, and it could be beneficial to the information I'm required to bring in to Heath. The air is chilly as I follow Brent's path, causing me to tighten the jacket I'm wearing around me further.

Soon enough it's going to be snowing and I'm not entirely sure what I'll be able to do around here once it does. Maybe I'll miss the worst of the snow, if I can time my visits just right. There's a dim light on in the barn a few yards away and the door is wide open, letting me see into the room clearly.

Brent bends down to pick something up, lifting it high into the air before putting it back down and repeating the motion. I take the chance and inch closer to the space and nearly lose my footing when he pulls the sweatshirt he's wearing over his head. There's nothing but muscle, something I was already certain about after seeing him around the ranch, but this is not what I was expecting.

His biceps are large and round, begging me to trail my tongue over the sharp ridges of them, but I stay rooted to my spot. If he catches me out here, I'm not entirely sure how he would react — considering how he's been with me since I got here, I can't imagine it would be good. My gaze follows each of his movements as he maneuvers around the large space, picking up different workout equipment and testing it out.

It isn't until he gets to the leg workouts that his face turns a bright shade of red and he winces at the action. I blow out a rough breath and shake my head — I'm not sure what Heath expected me to find here, but there's nothing valuable here worth writing down. I've made a few notes, mainly having to do with the barn that burned down, but that's about all I've got.

What could Heath possibly need with this place?

Before Brent can catch me ogling him, I carefully retrace my steps back up to the tree and head into the guest house. I may not be standing there watching him anymore, but the image of his body shining with sweat is bound to stay front and center in my mind.

The last thing I need to worry about is some schoolgirl crush though, especially when the guy isn't too fond of me in the first place. I can appreciate an attractive man without jumping him the first chance I get, I'll just have to keep my cool the rest of the time I'm here. If that's even possible.

Now would be a good time to get in touch with Justine, so I grab my phone that I left on the charger and find her contact. It's not too late yet, but the line rings until it goes straight to voicemail. I'm sure she'll call back. Maybe she's been spending more time with Cyle after everything she told me about him, and I'd rather not ruin their alone time.

She hasn't said much else to me since coming to my office a few months ago, but I also haven't had much time to give her a call and check in — which makes me the worst friend in the universe. I type out a quick text, letting her know to call me when she gets the chance, then sit my phone next to me with the volume up. The sound of the wind hitting against the wind chimes outside the house, along with the fuzzy blanket I have draped over myself, has my eyes falling shut slowly.

The blare of my phone has me jolting awake, wiggling my fingers around the bed until I find my phone buried under the blanket, and I catch Justine's name on the screen. I answer breathlessly while wiping the sleep from my eyes — that nap was needed far more than I thought it was.

“Justine,” I rasp out, sleep still evident in my voice.

“Hey, Syd, what’s up?” Her sniffles on the other end wake me up completely and I sit straighter in the bed.

“What’s going on?”

She sighs into the line while a muffled voice speaks in the background. Her words are barely recognizable as she talks to whoever it is, the only indication that she placed her hand over the speaker, and I chew on the inside of my cheek. Are things not going well between her and Cyle like I had thought? I run a hand through my hair, suddenly nervous that she’s been needing me and I haven’t been there.

“Sorry,” she says softly into the line. “What’s up?”

“Is everything okay?”

“As good as it can be, but I’d rather talk more about you. I’m assuming you called for a reason?” There’s an edge to her voice that I’m not used to and it catches me off guard, but maybe she needs the distraction, so I think back to what I called her for.

“Oh, uh, I wanted to check in on you since I haven’t been able to talk much, and needed to vent about something. But, we don’t have to do that right now if you aren’t up for it, you sound tired.” She sounds more upset than tired, like she’s giving up, but I’m not about to say that aloud until Justine tells me herself.

“No,” Justine says quickly into the phone. “Please, talk to me. Give me whatever juicy details you got.”

I chuckle forcefully, not entirely certain she should be worrying about me right now, but give in to it. If this is what she needs, then I’ll give it to her. “I wouldn’t say it’s juicy, but it’s something.”

“Well, spill it.”

“I think I have a crush on the owner of this place,” I whisper into the line, not wanting to take the chance that Brent is still in the barn and hears me.

“Ooh,” she says, no doubt smiling at the idea of me having a new love interest that isn’t Heath — they never were the biggest fans of each other, not that I blame them. Heath always tried to make himself look better when she was around, as if he couldn’t stand the idea of her and I being as close as we were. “Keep talking.”

I sigh into the line and lean back against the headboard, my gaze casting to the window as if I’ll be able to spot Brent outside of it. I’m two stories up, there’s no way I’d be able to see him from this spot no matter how hard I tried. “It’s complicated, Justine. He practically hates me. Probably has a shrine with my face on it that he targets every night before bed just to make himself feel better.”

I’m being dramatic, I know this, but that’s how bad he acts toward me.

Justine snorts and clears her throat. “And why do you think that?”

I roll my eyes. “You should see the way he looks at me when I’m walking around this place, as if he’s waiting for the perfect chance to kick me out. His son is really sweet though.”

“Son? How old is this guy?”

“Not sure, but his son is eighteen, or turning eighteen. One of the two.”

“Huh, that’s interesting,” she mumbles.

“What’s interesting about that?”

“Well, I’ve never seen you interested in anyone who had a kid. It’s like you’ve had this voice in your head telling you that anyone with kids is off-limits.”

She’s not wrong. It seems as though every time I had a date with someone and they had a child, I ran in the opposite direction. There’s no obvious reason as far as I know, but Justine could be onto something even if I don’t realize it myself.

I shake my head and throw my head back, cracking it against the wooden base behind me. “He was working out tonight.”

“Nice, a little bit of action!”

I shake my head. “Not exactly. It was more me watching from a distance and him not realizing I was there.”

“Oh, taking up stalking now?”

“It’s not like that,” I mumble. “Was just curious what he was doing out there, so I followed him. Heath wants me to get this information, but there hasn’t been much else other than what I already gave him. Thought lurking in the shadows would help, but now I’m all hot and bothered.”

Justine giggles. “I’m sure you can figure out a way to not be so hot and bothered anymore, get creative with it if you can.”

I groan loudly. “I’m not going to jump the man, he’s recovering from an accident!” The idea of it doesn’t sound too bad, but I will not let Justine corrupt me. Maybe I can steer the conversation away from me now. “So, how are things going?”

“Guess I should’ve known I wouldn’t be able to keep quiet for long.” There’s shuffling on her end and she sighs into the line. “I’m not even sure where to start. I confronted him about my suspicions and he’s had a short fuse with me ever since. All we’ve done is argue about trust.” Her sniffles come right back as she speaks and my heart breaks for her.

“Are you still thinking he’s cheating on you?”

“I don’t know, Syd, but I’m sick of waiting up for him all the time and he doesn’t get home until I’m already asleep. I’ve been wanting to go out with him, but he claims that work is too busy for him to do anything.”

That’s odd. “Maybe he’s stressed over something else. Have you tried asking him what’s been going on? It’s not like his work is top secret or anything.”

“I’m just worried asking more questions will only make things worse for the two of us. I’ll figure it out,” she says, then yawns loudly into the phone. “I’m heading to bed though. Night, love you.”

“Love you, too. I’ll try to call you soon, or we can plan to meet up when I get back next week.”

“I’ll text you.” The line clicks off after that and I’m left sitting with my phone in my hand, wondering what the hell I’m going to do about the grumpy man across the field.

All my mind can seem to conjure up when it comes to Brent is the sight of the muscles he hid under that shirt. The way they clenched with each rep he did with the weights nearly had me falling to my knees and begging for a taste of him. I can’t imagine that would’ve gone well had I gone through with that, which is why I brought my horny ass right back to this house.

If he hates me without me making a fool of myself, I can’t imagine what he’d think of me if I did. What could I do to make him see a different side of me? I’m sure it’s not easy watching a stranger take residence on your property, no matter how friendly Nathan seems to be about the whole thing. And after an accident like his? It’s probably hard on him and the only way he lets it out is through anger.

As I curl back under the blankets, I have a newfound determination to get Brent to stop scowling at me.

Chapter 7

Brent

I have to smirk as I sit at the edge of my bed, thinking back to the look on Sydney's face as she watched me from a distance. She may have thought I didn't notice her, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't. Who wouldn't notice her? You'd have to be blind not to see the brightness shining from her.

There was nothing but pure heat in her eyes as she stared at me, watching as I did my physical therapy, and something about it made me excited. That excitement doesn't last long though when I realize she's getting into my head, something that's becoming a very big problem where she's concerned.

I'll sleep off the emotions rolling through me and be back to normal tomorrow. At least, that's what I'm hoping for. I lean back onto the pillows behind me, fluffing them just right before getting comfortable, then pull the blanket over me. The chill that flows through the opening of my window provides a calm atmosphere and I sink into the darkness that comes with sleep.

It's later than usual when I finally make it out the front door with my crutches and my eyes widen at the sight of Sydney standing out by the horses. There's a big smile on her face, making her shine brighter than she has been, and I can't help but wish I could see her like this more often.

Her smile doesn't last long when I make my way over to her, stopping just at her side. She takes a deep breath, giving me a forced smile. "Brent, sleep good?" Her eyes fall to my shoulders, lingering there for a minute longer than they should, and my skin heats up at the stare.

I clear my throat, smirking when her gaze darts back up to mine, then nod. "As good as I can with my knee." Being injured means that it doesn't take long for me to get uncomfortable in bed and it only makes me wince from the ache when I toss around. "You?" I'm not about to let her know I caught her snooping on me, even though I'd love to know why she was.

She shrugs. "Yeah, I guess." The way her eyes dart away from mine tells me everything I need to know about her night. What images did she conjure up as she thought about me in that bed? Would I be able to do any of them justice?

"You like horses?" I ask, pointing to the space that had her attention before I interrupted.

"Grew up with them, I'd be stupid not to love them." That admission has my mouth parting and she rolls her eyes at me. "Don't act so surprised."

"Not surprised, just intrigued."

Nathan watches us curiously from inside the fence, his gaze coming to mine with a silent question. I know what he wants me to do and I'm not sure I'll be able to. This is the one thing he has asked of me though, so I may as well get it over with. I clear my throat and glance at her, giving her a friendly smile. "How about you join Nathan and me for dinner tonight?"

She snaps her gaze to mine, studying my face for a few minutes before deciding I'm being honest about my question. "I'd hate to impose."

I shake my head. "Nonsense, there will be plenty to eat. Come enjoy a meal with us, I'm sure you're sick of eating alone when you come here."

"It does sound tempting," she says, rocking on the heels of her feet. "Are you sure it's okay?"

I chuckle, the sound foreign when it comes to being around her. “I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t.”

“Alright, what time should I be there?”

“Dinner is usually ready around five, so you can come around then.” I’m getting nervous as I stand here, so I quickly turn around and hobble back to the main house. When I glance back at her, she’s got her eyes focused on me until Nathan says something and she turns to him instead.

What the hell was I thinking?

I should’ve told Nathan that we don’t allow strangers into our home, no matter if they’ve already been here once before. She’s slowly worming her way into my life and I’m not sure I like that very much. I’ve already invited her over though, so maybe I can force her to leave when dinner comes around.

Nathan would be upset with me though, so maybe I should be polite. The chef is standing at the kitchen counter when I walk in, completely engrossed in whatever recipe he’s picked out for the night, and he jumps when I take a seat on a wooden chair. He places a hand on his chest until his breathing is under control, then he gives me a small smile before turning back around.

“We will be having an extra guest tonight, so please make sure to have enough food for three people,” I say softly.

He nods in response, mumbling a few words to himself as he chops vegetables on a cutting board. Since he’s clearly in the zone, I silently step away from the table and make my way through the large open walkway and into the living room. The fireplace is going, which feels great after standing outside in the cool air, and I throw a blanket over my lap with my eyes closed.

I’ve come to realize that the cold doesn’t quite agree with my knee injury, so it doesn’t usually take long before I’m aching from the wind — that’s why I’m not attempting to do any ranch work this morning. Instead, I’m sitting here with the TV silently playing whatever show is on, while my gaze keeps darting out the front window.

Sydney is still standing by the horses and I watch as she takes hold of Nathan's hand, letting him lead her to one of the tan horses. She gets on effortlessly as if she's done it her entire life and my heart skips a beat at the sight, wondering where the hell she came from and why she's just now coming into my life.

I've never seen her here before, so what made her visit this ranch? There's nothing particularly special about it, so maybe she just needs the time away — horses to interact with every so often.

It's quarter till five when the doorbell chimes through the house, the echo forcing Nathan to lift from the couch and answer it. There's laughter coming from the entryway and my gaze connects with Sydney's as Nathan leads her through the house. She doesn't have a coat on right now and all I can see is the way the dress she's wearing clings to her skin.

I mentally curse at myself, then scowl at her before turning my attention back to the TV. She probably thought that things were getting better between us, if her responses to me were any indication, but she's about to get a wake-up call tonight. I'm not going to let her get into my head like she has been. It's time to put a stop to it.

When she slowly makes her way into the room, my skin pebbles from her closeness and I growl at her proximity. Her eyes dart to me as she pokes her bottom lip out with a frown, my gaze snagging onto it immediately. How would she react if I sank my teeth into the bottom lip?

“Hope you like steak,” I snap. Nathan clears his throat, begging me to calm down, but I'm not letting him dictate my actions tonight. “Are you going to sit, or just stand there and stare?”

She blinks rapidly, but scurries over to the empty chair at the edge of the room. At least she's not as close to me anymore. While I get my breathing under control, Nathan crouches

beside me with a narrowed gaze and says, “Dad, I thought we talked about this? Be nice, okay?”

I grunt in response, not bothering to say anything, then watch as he walks over to Sydney with a warm smile. The apology falls easily from his lips, as if that’s all he’s had to do with her when it comes to me, and it grates on my nerves. “I’m trying to watch TV; if you’re going to talk, take it somewhere else.”

There’s no missing the growl that slips from Nathan’s throat as he storms past me, Sydney following right behind him without meeting my eyes. Before she can round the corner with him, I clear my throat and she glances over her shoulder. “Maybe dress more appropriately for dinner next time.”

Is she about to cry? Her eyes are glassy and cheeks bright red, as if she’s holding in as much of her emotions as possible. My heart cracks slightly at the sight, but I quickly snap my gaze away from hers before I can fall under her spell further. This is what I need to do if I want her to get out of my head, stop controlling my thoughts.

When I look back over at the doorway there’s no sight of her and I blow out a breath of relief. Here’s to hoping she’ll leave earlier tonight. I grab my glass of whiskey sitting on the end table and take a small drink, humming at the burning liquid coursing down my throat. This is the perfect thing to take the edge off and give me the boost I need.

Nathan comes waltzing into the room, a frown on his face as he comes to a stop in front of me, and I glance up at him casually. “Is everything okay?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know, Dad, you tell me. What the hell is wrong with you?”

I glare at him. “Nathan, I’m not going to ask you again to watch your tone with me. I made a mistake by inviting her tonight.”

“So your plan is to scare her away?” He shakes his head and sighs. “Can’t you just put your emotions aside for one night?”

The bell signaling dinner is ready echoes through the living room and I rise slowly, letting Nathan lead us into the dining

room. Sydney is already sitting perfectly straight in a chair, her gaze pointing down toward the table, and I roll my eyes at her. While the chef carries the food inside, Sydney doesn't bother looking up from the table and I smack my hand down aggressively.

When she looks at me, I cock my head to the side and wave a hand out in front of us at the fresh meal. "I'm sure you're capable of getting food, right?"

Her face somehow grows even brighter and she stands abruptly from her spot at the table, throwing the napkin down in front of her. The way her gaze softens as she looks over at Nathan makes me wish that she would look at me like that — am I jealous of them two? How close they've gotten and the easy way they interact with each other? I mentally shake my head. *No, you can't be. What's there to be jealous about?*

"Sorry Nathan, but I'm going to enjoy dinner in private. Thank you for having me." She doesn't spare me a glance as she excuses herself from the table and rushes out, the sound of the door slamming shut the only sound in the room.

This is what I wanted — so why the hell do I feel so terrible about it? My stomach is tight with guilt and I look up, catching the disgust on Nathan's face, before he also stands from the table.

All I had to do was smile and talk politely for one meal, what was so hard about that for me? I scrub a hand over my face and cut through the steak, taking a bite of the tender red meat. It does nothing to ebb the guilt away and I glance toward the exit, itching to follow Sydney outside and apologize.

Chapter 8

Sydney

I was stupid to think that this was Brent extending an olive branch. Nathan gives me a somber smile before I rush out of the dining room and march to the front door, pulling it open with so much force that it ricochets off the wall. It might be dramatic, but the sound of the wood hitting against the frame brings a smile to my face, then I start my trek down the steps.

Every part of me thought this would be a bad idea, but I hoped I could give Brent the benefit of the doubt. I'm certain Nathan had no idea this was the way he would act and that only makes me angrier. My vision is clouding as I take angry steps toward the guest house, more than ready to be in the privacy of it so I can scream.

If Brent wasn't so damn attractive I could've seen this for what it was — a stunt to get me off the ranch. Little does he know I don't scare that easily and I'll only keep coming back with my head held higher. My heel sinks into the wet grass and I nearly fall on my face before pushing my hands in front of me.

I wince at the contact and shake the pain from my wrists, then straighten my spine as if nothing just happened. The front door is only about twenty feet away. Let's hope I can make it there without falling this time. Am I really such a bad person? I've never had such a hard time with someone in my entire life.

The thought has me growling into the empty night and a gust of wind chills my skin. This is what I get for not grabbing my damn coat before walking out — such an idiot. I'm shaking

my head and mumbling to myself as I get closer to my destination, but the sound of footsteps behind me has me halting my movements.

I'm surprised to find Brent limping toward me, but it's quickly replaced by anger. "Isn't your food getting cold?"

He sighs as he gets closer to me, having to stop from the pain in his leg, and that's when I realize he didn't bring his crutches.

I glare at him. "Are you stupid?"

The moon is shining down on the field, but I'm not sure it's bright enough that he can see the expression on my face. He's spent a lot of time trying to heal from his injury, why is he jeopardizing all of that right now? His breaths are ragged as he comes to a stop in front of me, using the tree we're standing beside to put some of his weight on.

When he glances up at me I'm struck by the intensity in his stare. He opens his mouth, then snaps it shut before taking a deep breath, all the anger I saw there once before dissolving in an instant. "Sydney, I'm sorry."

What? "I don't follow."

He sighs and inches closer to me, which only makes my skin prickle with awareness. I try to back away, but his hand wraps around my wrist to keep me in place. "I shouldn't have acted that way and I'm sorry."

He's apologizing?

I've been here twice and I've never heard him talk as much as he has today, and I've definitely never gotten the chance to hear an apology from him. Is this some sort of game? I stare at him for a few minutes, then narrow my eyes. "Is that all?"

Brent blinks, then nods, but his eyes tell a different story. There's more he wants to say and it's like he can't bring himself to do it. A heat I know all too well flares in his eyes as he continues studying my face and he slowly slides his hand down my wrist until his fingers thread through mine.

The action catches me off guard — just not enough to have me moving away from him. How could I when he's looking at me like I'm the most interesting thing in the world? I've seen anger, politeness, but this heat? I've yet to experience that and it has me clenching my thighs together.

As if sensing my desire, his gaze snags onto my exposed skin and I watch as his tongue darts over his bottom lip. What is he thinking right now? I'd do anything to read his mind as he forms a trail over my body with his eyes, stopping at my lips, and I hold my breath in.

He leans closer to me and I keep my eyes wide open, not wanting to miss a single piece of this image. Is he going to kiss me, or is this all part of his plan? I'm not even sure what plan I'm talking about, considering I'm the only one with one of those on the property. I should feel guilty for that, but the only thing I can bring myself to think about is how soft his lips would feel against mine.

My heart stutters as his lips graze mine, feeling as though a ghost is touching them, but it quickly turns into something much more. I gasp at the fierceness of it, immediately opening my lips for him and curling my fists into the fabric of his shirt. He brings his arms around me, pulling me closer to him, and I'm lost.

Lost in what could only be described as a dream. There are fireworks going off, exactly the way they would in the movies, and it's like I'm floating. I've never felt so alive from a single kiss. It's consuming. With each tilt of my head, he's right there with me, molding his lips to mine perfectly.

My pulse thumps erratically and I'm caught by surprise when my back connects with a hard surface. I open my eyes briefly, noting that we are much closer to the guest house than I had anticipated, then I close them again. His tongue pushes through my parted lips and I nearly melt at the feel of it connecting with mine.

It feels as if a million lightning bolts are bursting through my body, electrifying every inch of my being, and I bask in it. I'm not sure anything else could feel this way. Brent's breath is hot

against my skin as he pulls away and moves his lips to my jaw, marking a trail of kisses down the column of my neck until he reaches the neckline of my dress.

I'm not sure why I even put it on, but at this moment, I'm glad I did. I arch my back into him, letting the fire consume me from the inside out as he brushes his tongue over the curve of my breast. It feels like an eternity when a door slams in the distance, causing Brent to flinch away from me.

He doesn't bother looking back as he takes hurried steps toward the noise, leaving me to stare after him breathlessly. When he gets onto the porch and spins around, I'm still standing there like a lovestruck fool with my eyes on him. I jerk out of my daze and quickly push the front door to the guest house open, breathing heavily against the wood as I close it behind me.

My hand comes up to my lips instinctively, gently brushing along the space where he was, and it's as if he's still there. I groan loudly, flinging my head against the surface behind me, and close my eyes. What would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted? My center aches with the need to find out, but I know that's not going to happen.

Judging by his reaction, I'm not sure Brent even realized what he was doing. I sigh into the empty house and make my way into the kitchen, hoping I can find something to eat since I didn't get the chance to do that at the main house. While I heat something quick up in the microwave, I can't stop my mind from running back to the moment outside.

I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forget it, which is why I immediately rip my phone from my bag on the counter and find Justine's number.

"Syd, what's up?" Justine says after the second ring, sounding a little more like herself this time.

"God, I'm an idiot, that's what," I mutter while pulling my food from the microwave and sliding it onto the counter.

"You're going to have to be more specific than that, babe."

I groan into the line and run a hand through my waves, which I chose to do special for tonight. What the hell did I think this was, a damn date? “He asked me to come over to his house for dinner tonight with him and his son.”

“Uh huh, and?”

“I don’t know what I thought it meant, but I was definitely wrong about it.”

She clicks her tongue to the roof of her mouth, the sound grating against my ear and I pull the phone away briefly before putting it back. “Got all dressed up, huh?”

“That’s an understatement,” I mutter in response.

“How dressed up are we talking? Level one to ten.”

I glance at my attire and thread my fingers through my hair, then bring my hands to my lips which are no doubt smeared from that kiss. “Uh, seven?”

“Jesus, what happened?”

“Well, he was rude, so I ended up storming out of his house before I could even eat — which I’m really upset about because it smelled delicious — and he followed me outside.” I pause, hoping she’ll take that as enough of an answer.

She gasps. “There’s more, spill it.”

I’m not sure why I ever think I can keep something from her, even when we are miles and miles away from each other. “We... kissed?”

“*What?*” She takes a few deep breaths and I roll my eyes — she’s always been the one for dramatics. “And, how was it? Don’t leave me hanging!”

“It was good.” It was better than that, but I’d like to keep that to myself for right now. “He walked away without a single word and went back home. What the hell does silence mean after kissing someone?”

We go back and forth about what it could all mean before my stomach rumbles and I look down at my food, which is most likely cold by now, and sigh. “I’m getting off to eat. Love

you.” I stab the Mac and cheese with my fork, groaning at the coldness when it hits my tongue, then toss the food in the trash.

As I peel my dress off my hands come up to my chest, wondering if this is what Brent would’ve done if he’d never gotten distracted from the moment. The idea of his hands touching me has me closing my eyes as I explore myself, imagining they’re his hands instead of my own.

My body reacts immediately to the thought and I gasp at the arousal. If this is the reaction I have without him here, what would it be like if he were? I’d be under his complete control. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him if he were standing here right now, begging to brush a finger over my breasts and ignite that spark I desperately need.

Is he in his room right now, imagining me there with him? Just the idea has a wave of pleasure flowing through me, but I snap my eyes open and shake the thought away. I need to get my head back in the game, no matter how wrong it feels now — I came here with a job to do, and I intend to do it.

Unless I don’t?

Chapter 9

Brent

I come to a halt inside the entryway when I find Nathan standing at the window in the living room, arms crossed over his chest. “Son, I thought you went upstairs.”

He glances at me briefly, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and shakes his head. “Figured being mad at you isn’t a reason for me to miss out on a meal.” His mouth twitches with a smirk as he walks past me and heads into the dining room, where his plate still sits untouched. “You coming, old man?”

It’s weird that he’s making jokes now, no hint of anger in his eyes anymore like there was only moments ago. My gaze falls onto the front door, wanting desperately to run back to Sydney, but I follow Nathan into the dining room instead and take a seat.

The silence in the room as we eat gives my head the chance to conjure an image of Sydney and how she immediately reacted to me. I’m not sure what came over me tonight, but standing in front of her and staring at her in that dress— I couldn’t control myself. Her lips were as silky smooth as I imagined they would be and the lipstick she wore tasted like cherries.

I’ve never been fond of cherries, but after that kiss? They might be my new favorite fruit.

Nathan clears his throat from the other side of me, his eyes glistening mischievously. “Everything okay, Dad?”

I nod and take a large bite of my steak, choosing to stay silent. Does Nathan know something, is that why he’s acting weird now? If he was the one who interrupted that kiss, there’s a

high chance he saw everything out there. My hand itches to touch my lips, which still tingle from the kiss, but I force it to stay on the table.

Nathan might be curious, but there's a chance he has no idea what's going on and I need to keep it that way. The moment I touch my lips is the moment he knows what's going on and I'll never hear the end of it. He studies my movements for a few minutes before looking down at his plate, eating the last few bites on it, then he stands up with a yawn.

"I'm going to head to bed. Night."

I've still got my steak, so I continue slicing through it until it's all gone. My eyes snag on the plate of food that should've been Sydney's and my heart runs cold at the sight of it. Couldn't I have let her enjoy a meal before forcing her out of here? What if she doesn't have anything decent to eat in the guest house?

I could take her plate over to her, even though it's cold now, but that would require me communicating with her after that soul-consuming kiss. It was like I was being lifted high into the air with each brush of her lips against mine — nothing like I had ever experienced before.

There's a weight sitting on my shoulders, knowing I'm having these feelings towards Sydney that I never felt with Renee. I loved Renee, there was never any doubt about that, but there's something about Sydney that I never experienced with Renee. Sex has never been on my mind all the time, but that's all I could think about as I breathed in Sydney's scent.

Her body molded into mine perfectly, making me think about what it would feel like if it were bare beneath me. If it weren't for the interruption, I'm certain I would've pulled her into the guest house and stripped her out of that dress. The way she looked tonight was a stark contrast to the way she's looked walking around the ranch and nothing could've stopped me from making a move.

Even though Renee would want me to be happy, I can't help but get furious with myself for giving in to someone so easily.

I chew a piece of steak aggressively out of anger, clamping down on my tongue in the process, and I wince at the contact.

This is what I get for being in my head. Instead of finishing my food, I push the plate away and stand from my chair with a sigh before reaching for my crutches.

The smartest thing to do would be to head upstairs to bed, but I find myself heading back out onto the porch. I can't help but look out at the guest house, noting the light that's shining in the living room, and study it through the curtains. Sydney's shadow forms just outside of it as she comes to a stop. Is she looking at me like I am her?

What did she do once she got inside?

With the way she pushed herself into me during that kiss, I have no doubt that she felt the same exact things as I did. Maybe the pleasure was too much to handle and she went inside to take care of it. The thought has the front of my pants tightening and I have to adjust myself.

She's getting into my head again, just as she has been, and I'm not sure how much longer I can fight it — not when I have the image in my head of how she would pleasure herself without me there. The way she'd sound with my name spilling from those plump lips as she brought herself to release. I'm sure it would be music to my ears, if the soft and angelic voice she has is any indication.

My fingers twitch at my side, remembering what her creamy skin felt like under their touch, and I growl in frustration. This isn't what I'm supposed to be doing, not by a long shot, but I can't stop. She's embedded her way into every inch of my headspace and it's nerve-wracking.

Before I can storm over to the guest house like an idiot, I make my way back into the house and head to my room. It seems as though my go-to response is sleeping off whatever this feeling is that's coursing through my system. Is this how it will always be when she's here?

Her stay went by a lot faster than I had thought it would and now I'm watching as she slips into the front seat of her car, smiling politely up at Nathan as he helps with her things. I've made it my mission to avoid her ever since the kiss we shared, but all I feel is regret for that when she looks over at me and the smile drops from her face. I can't imagine what she thinks about me now after the stunt I pulled.

She nods at something Nathan says, then shuts her door, the sound echoing through the air and causing my spine to stiffen. It wouldn't take much to walk over, say my goodbye, but I keep my feet glued in place — she could get the wrong idea. As she pulls away from the house, I keep my gaze locked on her car until it disappears over the hill, then I let out a loud groan.

Nathan's footsteps have me snapping my gaze over to him and I glare at the smirk he's sporting. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He shrugs, the smirk getting bigger with each passing minute. "No reason. Think you can help me out today? There's a few more small things to get done before the space is clean for the rebuild."

And there's that — I haven't had the heart to tell him I'm not sure if we have the money for a rebuild. I know I'll have to spit it out eventually, but he's been pretty excited about getting it started, and did all the clean-up. I hate letting my boy down. He might be eighteen now, but that doesn't mean he'll be less upset just because he's older.

"Yeah, I'll meet you down there in a minute," I mutter, then turn to the house and head inside.

I'm not sure why, but I felt the need to dress a little more appropriately for Sydney's departure and now the polo I slipped on is making my neck itch. After I scratch the spot, I bring my hand over my chin and test out my facial hair — a clean shave might be a good idea.

God, she has me worrying about what I look like now. Any other time I'd never worry about how often I shave, or the kind of clothes I wear, but some weird part of me wants her to

be impressed. As if I would ever have a chance with someone like her in the first place.

After I slip on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, which feels much better than the khakis and polo I had on, I head down to where the barn used to stand and get to work with Nathan. He wasn't wrong, it's mainly small things that need to be done, so it doesn't take us very long — maybe an hour or two — to get it all cleaned up. I'm sweating bullets by the end though and I have to catch my breath as I sink to the ground.

Nathan comes next to me and places a hand on my elbow, helping me so I don't fall down, then looks at me with concern shining in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

I nod while taking a long swig of the water I carried out with me. "I'm good, just a little more than I've been doing around here lately. I'm out of practice."

He chuckles and slaps me on the back. "I'm sure you'll be up for it in no time. Just focus on getting better."

As he walks away my gaze finds its way to the guest house, wishing that Sydney would've stayed so I could watch her from a distance. I may have been trying to avoid her ever since the kiss, but I never said I stopped watching her. I've been pleasantly surprised by the small smiles I've let loose throughout the last week, watching as she got chased by a group of geese close to the lake.

Or how gently she cares for the horses when I catch her around them — as if they are her own. It makes me especially happy that she's already gotten so close with Nathan, something that I've always wanted to see in a woman. If a woman can't be close to my son, I don't ever give them the time of day — and knowing she does is another issue in and of itself.

While Nathan carries the rest of the trash from the ash pile over to the cliff at the edge of the property, I stand on shaky legs and head back into the house. Elevating my leg for a little while would probably do me some good after all we did just now. It never would've been too much for me before, but after months of not having to worry about it, I'm a little rusty.

I'll get back on track eventually, I just have to be patient with my progress. Nathan brings the wheelbarrow back to the empty space, sitting it along the fence, then follows me into the house. He's right by my side as he helps me over to the couch, grabbing a pillow for me and putting it under my leg. I watch him carefully, seeing the look of concentration on his face as he tries his best to make me feel comfortable and nothing but love burns through my heart.

He's the most caring kid I've ever known and I'm proud to have raised him.

Nathan clears his throat and nods toward the guest house. "So, you like her, huh?"

His question stuns me speechless — how could he have possibly known? I'm not hiding anything as well as I thought I was, which means it's only a matter of time before Sydney figures out where my head has been too.

Chapter 10

Sydney

I'm a mess of nerves as I make my way through the office, done with yet another week on the Dudley ranch. It's been days since Brent kissed me hungrily outside the guest house, yet no amount of scrubbing my lips can take the ghost of his away from them. I give Alicia a small wave when I pass her desk, then make a beeline for Heath's office before he can bother me in mine.

I knock on the door loudly, only shoving through it when he grants me access, and come to a stop in front of his desk. The cologne he's wearing nearly chokes me and it takes all my willpower not to gag, but I manage to conceal my reaction. He stares at me intently and I fidget in my spot — there's no way he can tell what I've been up to this week, right?

"Anything new this time?" he asks, holding a hand out for my usual notes. I place the spiral notebook in his hand with a sigh and shake my head, eliciting a frown from him. If he doesn't learn to smile more, those wrinkles on his forehead are only going to get worse. "Sydney, this is unacceptable. Do I need to send someone else there to finish this?"

I'm shaking my head frantically and he glares at me, forcing me to slow it down and take a deep breath. Shit.

I give him a small smile and clear my throat. "Uh, no, Heath, that won't be necessary. I'll have more next time." With winter being here next time I visit, I'm not sure what I could do on the ranch, but I guess I'll have to figure it out. There's no way I'm letting anyone else take this project, especially if it means not going back to see Brent.

His lips tip up briefly before falling just as quickly, making it feel as though I imagined it, and he nods curtly. “One more chance, or you’re being taken off this project.”

I’m silent as he waves me out, holding my head high as I make my way through the long hallway filled with other workers, until I get into my office.

As soon as I have the large door shut behind me, I walk over to the couch and put a throw pillow against my face, screaming into it until my lungs burn. With a deep breath in and out, I place it carefully back on the couch and turn toward the wax burner sitting on the end table next to it. If there’s one thing I love most it’s fall, which is why fall decorations adorn my space.

I flip the burner on with a smile, then slowly make my way over to my desk as if I didn’t just let out all my frustration a minute ago. There are a few important emails waiting for me and I get through them quickly before pulling my phone out. After having three hours of a drive to think about things, I’m not sure what I should do anymore for the Dudley Ranch.

Justine wanted to get together when I got back, so maybe she’ll be up for lunch today at the diner across the street. The ping on my phone alerts me to the meeting I have in an hour, so I push my phone aside and gather everything I need for it. When I steal another glance at the device thirty minutes later, Justine still hasn’t responded, so I chime for Alicia.

Her smile is bright when she walks in, like her hot pink outfit she has on that reminds me of Barbie, and she asks, “What’s up?”

“I have a meeting in thirty and I’m trying to get a hold of Justine. Could you call her while I’m out and see if she can have lunch with me this afternoon?” This isn’t the usual kind of thing I’d have Alicia do, schedule outings with my friends, but I need advice as soon as possible, and desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Of course. Is there anything else you need?”

I shake my head with a smile. “Not that I can think of. If anything else comes to mind, I’ll let you know on my way out.”

When Alicia lets the door fall shut behind her, I lean back into the chair and breathe in the pumpkin scent wafting through the air. It takes me back to the ranch and how it looked with all the trees changing color — bright yellows, reds, oranges. A myriad of colors that took every breath away as I strolled through the fields. The crunching of leaves under my boots has always been one of my favorite sounds in the fall, reminding me of my younger days when I would put them into a pile and jump into it.

My phone ringing on the desk snaps me out of my daydream and I snatch the device up, smiling when I see Justine’s name. “Justine, hey! I was just going to see if you wanted to grab lunch with me today?”

“Yes, I’m in desperate need of girl time for even one meal.” There’s a hint of sadness in her voice, but I’ll question her on that later on. “What time?”

If the meeting lasts as long as I’m thinking, I should be able to make it to the diner around one. “An hour? I have a meeting right now, but as soon as I get out of it I’ll meet you there.”

“Sounds good. See you soon. Love you!”

I reach into my purse and pull my tube of lipstick out, the exact one I put on the night Brent and I kissed, and paint a new coating onto my lips. This flavor is Cherry Berry, a new one that I couldn’t miss grabbing when I was out shopping one day, and I haven’t been able to wear another color since that kiss. It’s taken over my entire life at this point, and that only makes my dilemma that much worse — I can’t wait for that lunch.

Heath’s waiting outside the conference room when my meeting ends, leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets and a smirk aimed my way. “Sydney, I thought we could grab something to eat today, talk some more about the ranch project.”

“I would, but I already have plans with Justine for lunch. Can we take a rain check for tomorrow?” I’d also love nothing more than to delay that conversation as long as possible, so I’m grateful Justine’s already waiting for me. I glance at the time on my Apple Watch and frown. “I’m already late; set something up with Alicia for tomorrow and I’ll be there.”

Before he can try to worm his way into my lunch plans, I scurry down the hall and push through the elevator doors. When I spin around, Heath’s eyes are narrowed on me and I dart my gaze away from him. He’s always had this annoying way of getting under my skin, and not in a comfortable way. I wrap a scarf around my neck as I strut through the lobby, then walk through the revolving doors and get hit in the face with a blast of cold air.

Nothing like the fall weather.

My boots click against the pavement as I walk through the crowd surrounding me, everyone else probably doing the same thing as I am, and I hurry across the street before the light turns green. The diner sits at the corner, looking every bit authentic as always, and I smile as I pull the entrance open. Apple pie is the first thing you smell every time you walk in here, so I take a moment to enjoy the scent before casting my gaze around the diner for Justine.

I smile brightly when Justine waves at me from the far corner booth, standing at attention with her own smile, and I quickly make my way over to her. The waitress who usually works when I come here is already standing at the table, pen poised just above her notebook as if she ever needs it for me, and she smiles. “What can I get for you today, Sydney?”

“The usual,” I say, then turn my attention to Justine who rattles off her order. As soon as the waitress is out of earshot, I lean forward with a sigh. “I’m in need of your advice.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s about the project I’m doing for work,” I mutter, fiddling with the straw that’s sitting on the table.

“The one with the hot cowboy on it?”

I roll my eyes, trying to play along, but the idea of her calling him hot has my blood burning with jealousy. “Yeah, sure, we’ll go with that.”

“Well, what do you need advice on?” She smirks mischievously and I push her shoulder playfully, knowing exactly where her mind has gone. “What? I didn’t even say anything!”

“You don’t have to. I’ve known you long enough that I can hear your brain all the way over here, so get it out of the gutter.” I groan and rest my chin on my hand, not bothering to glance at the waitress as she sets our drinks down on the table. “It’s about what Heath has me doing. I need you to tell me I should keep doing it.”

“Is there a reason you wouldn’t?” Justine asks, taking a large sip of her milkshake.

“There’s just something about it that feels wrong, like I’m betraying Brent and Nathan. I’m not sure I want to keep gathering information, but if I don’t, Heath will put someone else on the project and kick me off — which means I won’t see them again.”

She nods slowly in understanding, then shrugs. “So, act like you’re going to get the information and don’t. I’m sure you could think of something in the gorgeous head of yours to throw Heath off your ass.”

“He wants to have lunch tomorrow to talk about the project. I’m not so sure I’ll be able to act my way through anything at the rate he’s going.” I’ve never seen Heath so invested in a project, especially needing a lunch to go over it. Is there another reason why he wants to go to lunch? He has to know I’d never take him back, but men are stupid like that and he’s got this giant ego that makes him think everyone wants him.

“I mean, you gathered information this time, right?”

“I mean, yeah, but I wasn’t able to gather much.”

Justine shrugs and thanks the waitress for our food with a smile before turning back to me. “So, go to lunch and talk

about the project. There's nothing for him to suspect right now. You did your job this time."

"So, you think I should stop gathering the information and enjoy my time there?"

"If that kiss was as magical as you told me, then I say do whatever you need to make sure it happens again. If putting that notebook away and forgetting about it will do that for you, then yes, I think you should stop."

We spend the rest of lunch going back and forth — her talking about Cyle while I tell her what the ranch has been like, even suggesting that she come stay with me during one of those weeks I'm there. It seems as though she needs a break from everything around here, and what better way to get her mind off it than going to a ranch where only nature resides?

There's a newfound smile on my face as Justine and I make our way out of the diner, enjoying the new plans that are running rampant through my head. Things are about to take a different turn. I'm just hoping it's the right one at the end of the day.

Chapter II

Brent

I t's been weeks since Sydney pulled away from the ranch and I haven't been able to stop thinking about her, wondering when she will come back again. If her last visit is any indication, I'm assuming she'll be back in a couple more months, and that has my chest growing heavy. I've had plenty of time to think about the night we kissed, the feelings I had when we did, and I decided to give her a better chance next time.

Instead of being grumpy and treating her like garbage, I'm going to make sure she sees the side of me she should've been seeing all along. I'm rocking back and forth on the swing hanging from the front porch when the floorboards creak under Nathan's weight.

Nathan sits next to me slowly, letting out a long sigh, then leans back into the white wood. He glances at me briefly before turning his attention toward the guest house, the one that still has remnants of Sydney in it since she said that she'd be back — no point in taking all of her things with her if she plans to come back.

“Want to talk about it?”

I cock my head to the side and turn toward him. “About what?”

“You can stop pretending with me, Dad.” He nudges his head toward the empty house and asks, “Do you have feelings for her? Because it's okay if you do, you know.”

This isn't what I expected our conversation to be. I thought he was suspicious, but I never thought he'd try talking to me about it. "What about you, son, any girlfriends I don't know about?"

He smirks knowingly, then shakes his head. "No, Dad, no girlfriends. I'm not sure anyone ever really looks at me that way, so don't count on me having one anytime soon."

I frown at his words. "What do you mean by that?" In all the years I've raised him, he's never come home to tell me about bullying. I thought things were going well for him in school, but could I have been wrong?

"Nothing, just that I keep to myself for the most part and it would be hard for me to catch anyone's attention that way."

I study his face, trying to determine if he's lying or not, then nod in response. It doesn't seem as though he's lying, but I'm sure he'll tell me more about it another time. He's never been one to keep to himself, even with strangers, so hearing that he's like that at school has me worrying.

"I know this conversation is long overdue, but do you have any plans for college?" I've been keeping this conversation inside, not wanting to hear that he wants to move across the country for school and leave me here alone, but if this gets him off my back for a moment, I'll deal with it.

"Uh, actually, Dad, I was thinking of doing something a little different." The way he runs a hand through his hair nervously sets me on edge and I straighten my spine, waiting with bated breath for him to continue. "I want to compete in the derbies."

That's not what I expected him to say, not at all. derbies? He could get seriously injured, and what would I do then?

I shake my head and frown. "No, Nathan."

He groans loudly. "Come on, Dad, I'm eighteen, and this is what I want to do with my life. Can't you support me?"

Doesn't he get it? I already lost his mother, does he think I'd ever take the risk of losing him next? "What's wrong with college?"

“I don’t want to go to college. Not yet, anyway. This is the life I want,” he says, waving a hand out in front of the ranch and dropping it at his side. “Are you able to support that?”

I stand from the swing with a frown and shake my head. “You’re going to need to give me time, okay?” This isn’t a conversation I want to have with him right now, no matter how much I thought it was. I would’ve preferred talking about Sydney over finding out what he wants to do for his future.

What would make him want to do something like that? He’s always loved horses and riding on them, ever since he was a little boy, but he never made it known that he wanted to go into derbies with them. My leg aches as I limp into the kitchen, searching for something to eat while my mind races with thoughts of Nathan getting hurt.

This is what he wants to do though. What kind of parent would I be if I kept him from doing it? The back door flies open and Nathan comes inside, my crutches in his hands, and he holds them out to me. “You forgot these.”

He backs up a few inches after I grab them from him and his shoulders slump in defeat. “I didn’t mean to make you upset, and I was waiting for the right time to tell you, but this is what I want to do, Dad.”

“You just-” I start and take in a shaky breath. “You need to give me some time to think about it. It’s a dangerous sport to get into and I’d hate for anything bad to happen to you, especially under my watch.”

He nods in understanding and backs out of the kitchen slowly, then walks carefully upstairs and into his room.

What would Renee say if she were here? Would she let him risk his health for something like this, or would she try to convince him to think of a different future? I’d like to think she’d be on the same page as me, but I know her too well for that. She would be the one in the stands cheering him on at each and every derby along the way, smiling proudly at our son.

She would never force him to do something different, especially if he was so hellbent on doing it. If I told him he couldn't, would he still find a way to do it anyway? I'd rather him do it with me knowing about it, than going behind my back and I never know he gets hurt. The idea of police cars pulling into the driveway one day to let me know he's been airlifted to the hospital has a wave of panic fluttering in my chest.

Could I really let him do it?

There's no letting him, if I'm honest — he's eighteen, if it's what he really wants to do, he will end up doing it regardless of what I say. So, it's either I accept the path he's chosen to go on, or I don't support him in it. Something tells me that Renee would be screaming at me to support him. Hell, I'm sure she's already screaming at me now, trying her hardest to make her voice heard.

I close my eyes, trying to imagine what she would look like standing in front of me, and I'm caught off guard when she's not the one I see. Sydney's standing in front of me instead, encouraging me to let Nathan do it and learn from mistakes along the way. He'll either end up as one of the best, or he'll get injured badly enough that he'll see the danger of it and change course.

Is this Renee's way of approving? Can she sense the feelings I'm having for Sydney and is trying to let me know that it's okay? It's something that she would do, for sure, but I'm not sure I can bring myself to accept the feelings. Not when I felt so strongly for Renee and I never thought I'd be able to find something like that again. This thing with Sydney feels different though, adventurous, and thrilling.

Nathan's door is partly open when I walk upstairs, the light shining through the small crack, and I knock lightly to catch his attention. He's sitting at his desk when I push the door open, headphones hanging from his ears as he drums his pencil along to whatever song is playing. I inch closer to him and place my hand on his shoulder, my heart falling to my ass when he jerks around out of instinct.

“Jesus, Dad,” he says breathlessly. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

I clear my throat and give him an apologetic smile. “Sorry. Think we could talk for a minute?”

He nods and closes whatever book had his attention moments ago, then comes over to his bed and sits with me on the edge of it. “What’s up?”

“Is this really what you want to do?” I ask, wanting to make sure he’s thought long and hard about it.

“It is.” It’s a quick response, no amount of hesitation, and it has my heart thumping wildly in my chest.

“If it’s what you want to do, you have my full support. Under one condition though, Nathan.” I look at him, hoping he sees the concern and fear in my gaze, and say, “If you get injured too badly, I want you to promise me you won’t go back to it.”

“I can do that,” he says, although there’s a sadness seeping into his gaze at the words and it tugs at my heart. I can manage to let him do this, but I can’t let all of my fears go like this. If he wants to be able to live with this future, he also has to be willing to make compromises for me.

“Okay, glad we could work that out. I’m heading to bed early tonight, if you get hungry just put something into the oven because I sent the chef home early today.”

He nods in response, then pushes the buds back into his ears and nods his head along to the song crooning through the tiny speakers.

I give him one last lingering look, wondering where the hell my little boy has gone, then shut the door behind me. It seems like it was only yesterday that he was rushing out onto the field outside, wanting to throw a baseball around the yard, or learn the ropes of the ranch. He’s grown quickly and it’s hard to believe that eighteen years have come and gone as fast as they did.

This seven-pound baby that loved falling asleep on my chest has turned into a fine young man, even without a mother to be here for him, and it hurts to know he doesn’t need me like that

anymore. He's an adult now, ready to take on a world of his own, and I need to be by his side through all of that.

There's a heaviness lingering in the air as I push my way into the bedroom and strip out of my clothes. I breathe a sigh of relief when I curl under the blankets, closing my eyes as the exhaustion takes over, and my mind conjures up images of Sydney. She's been here twice now, soon to be three times, and I know nothing about her.

Maybe it's about time that changes.

I'm going to make it my mission when she gets here again in a couple of months to spend time with her, show her around the property since no one has done that for her yet. The snow should be starting soon, maybe she'll get here in enough time to go ice skating on the small lake.

Who am I kidding? After the way I treated her, there's no way she'll give me the time of day.

There's only one way to find out, Brent. You've got to try.

Chapter 12

Sydney

The leaves are long gone from all the trees as I make my way up the long driveway leading to the ranch and it saddens me to know how fast fall came and went. When I get to the top of the hill, coming to a stop in front of the main house, I'm surprised to find Brent sitting on the front steps.

His head snaps up as my tires crunch over the gravel, the intensity from his eyes making my heart beat frantically in my chest. I cut the engine, jumping when I catch sight of Nathan standing next to the car, and I give him a smile as he walks to the trunk for my bags.

This time I only brought a small duffel bag, since most of my stuff is still here from last time. I figured it would be pointless to move a suitcase to and from the guest house if I had plans on coming back, but I knew I still needed clothes to match the weather.

When I step out of the car, I lift my hand in a small wave at Brent, then give Nathan a quick hug. "Long time no see," I say with a smirk.

He smiles, then rushes away from me like I'm on fire and I watch his movements curiously. A throat clears behind me, causing me to spin around in surprise, and Brent nods at me. "Safe drive?"

The snow hasn't come down full force yet, but the weather is calling for a small storm while I'm here for the week — here's to hoping I can get stuck up here because the last place I want to be is back home right now. Not when this man devours

every inch of me with his eyes slowly, clear from my head to my toes.

“It was decent,” I manage to whisper.

He waves a hand in front of me with a smile, one that mimics Nathan’s, and I strut ahead of him. The jeans I’m wearing were picked with him in mind, hoping that he would admire the way they cling to my curves. I have to smirk when I cast a discreet glance over my shoulder and find his eyes on my ass, watching each sway of my hips intently as if he’ll miss something crucial if he looks away.

When we come to a stop outside the guest house, he finally darts his gaze up to mine and I have to hold in a giggle when his cheeks flare up. It could easily be from the cold, but I have a feeling he wasn’t expecting to get caught staring at me and it sends a wave of warmth flowing through me. The wind picks up, forcing me to tug the coat I’m wearing tighter around my waist, and he pushes the door open with a frown.

“Sorry, no need to have you freeze to death out there.” He waits for me to get inside before following me, hands tucked into his pockets, and that’s when I finally notice that he doesn’t have the crutches anymore.

“No crutches? That’s great!”

He nods. “Yep, although my leg still hurts every now and then, my PT is going great and they say it’s healing up nicely. Better than expected.”

“Wow, that must be exciting news for you.” There’s a feeling gnawing at my insides as he looks around the space that I’ve come to make as my own. I’ll have to switch out the fall decorations for winter ones, but that can come at a later time. If I’m going to be coming here often, the least I can do is make it feel more like home to me. “I can take the decorations out if you don’t want them here.” There were never any rules for me when I first got here, so I didn’t think it would be a bad thing if I spruced the place up a bit.

Brent shakes his head and smiles appreciatively at me. “No, that’s not necessary. My late wife, Renee, used to love

decorating for the holidays.”

That explains his reactions to me. “What was her favorite holiday?”

“Christmas. It was the only one we ever went all out for, but it hasn’t been the same since she passed away. Like there’s something crucial missing. I can’t even remember the last time I decorated for anything.”

The idea that he can’t bring himself to celebrate in the way Renee did has a hole forming in my heart. You can tell he’s still hurting from her death and maybe that’s a good reason for me to back off from him, instead of trying to gain his attention. “She sounds like my kind of woman.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I have a feeling she would’ve loved you.”

“Maybe you can tell me more about her another day.”

“I’d actually really like that. I always get nervous when talking about her too much with Nathan, not wanting to upset him or anything. It would be nice to talk about her.” He darts his gaze away from mine while running a hand through his hair, then sighs. “Speaking of which, I wanted to offer a tour of the ranch while you’re here this time. Think you’d be up for it?”

That doesn’t sound so bad. Nathan tried showing me the property a few times, but duty always called and we never got very far with it. I’ve been nervous to go out on my own, for fear that I would get lost, so knowing I’ll have Brent at my side is nice.

“Absolutely, I’ve been wanting to see the rest of this place. Tomorrow? I’d like to take today to relax after my drive.”

He nods. “Of course, and you’re welcome to join us for dinner tonight if you’d like. I promise to be on my best behavior this time.” Before he walks out of the house, he turns to me with a frown and says, “I’m sorry, by the way, for the way I’ve been acting with you. There’s no excuse for it, but I’m going to do better now.”

His words have my mind racing and I take a few deep breaths when the door shuts behind him. Looks like I’m going to need

to find a comfortable outfit for tomorrow if he plans on hiking me around this place.

I've just gotten my boots tied when there's a soft knock on the door. I swing it open breathlessly, running further behind than I had planned — that's what happens when you can't stop thinking about the man across the lawn at night and you can't sleep. He thrusts a cup at me, the steam billowing out from the top, and I inhale the chocolatey flavor. What is this?

"Hot chocolate," he says, as if reading my mind.

"Mm, my favorite. Marshmallows?"

"How could anyone ever forget the marshmallows? There's also whipped cream on top."

God, is he trying to win my heart over or something? I take a cautious sip, not wanting to burn my mouth, and step into the cold morning. He told me to dress warm for the day, so I have on three layers of clothes and my knee-high boots — there's no way I'll be getting cold today. The scarf I have wrapped around my neck comes over my mouth, but I have it down for now until I finish off my hot chocolate.

"Who made it?"

"Uh, me?"

"Brent, is there a hidden chef in there somewhere?"

He snorts. "Not by a long shot. The last time I tried making food was before Renee died and I nearly burned the house down. She made me swear that I would never touch the kitchen again, so I've tried to keep away from it." Brent points to the mug with a smile. "That's about the only thing she allowed me to make. Made her one every morning during the winter."

That's sweet and I can totally see Brent being attentive like that. "Don't worry," I say with a smile. "I'm not too great at

cooking either. If it can't go in the microwave, you don't want me touching it."

"So, what do you do for a living? With how often you come out here, I'm assuming your job must be stressful for you."

My feet stumble at his question, but I play it off as a branch getting in my way. "Oh, uh, yeah. I guess it can get pretty stressful. I'm a manager at a firm. It can be grueling work sometimes." He doesn't have to know what kind of firm I work at — but I'm sure his head will immediately go to a law firm, rather than a real estate firm, and that's exactly what I want right now.

Even though I talked to Justine about it, I still haven't figured out what I'm going to do. This project could make or break my career, put me on top or ruin me, so I'm not sure I want to risk it. On the other hand, this place is so beautiful that I'm not sure I ever want to leave again. Each time I've been here the weight has been heavier and heavier on my chest when it's time to go.

"Do you have anyone special back home?"

The question holds a weight to it that I wasn't expecting. I could go on and on about how much of a douche Heath was in our relationship, but I'm not sure Brent wants to hear about all that right now. "Nope, it's just me, myself, and I at the moment."

"Are you one of those women who don't believe in love?" he asks with a smirk aimed at me.

"Not at all, but I do believe that I'll know it's love when I find the right person." I'm not about to tell him that the way I come alive when he's near, or how his image is constantly in my head, is leading me to believe he might be just that for me. I'd rather him not think I'm a lunatic when we're just getting on a better foot with each other.

He comes to a stop at the top of a hill and waves his hands out in front of him. "This is one of my favorite spots on the ranch, a great place to ice skate when the weather is cold enough for it."

“Does it freeze over every year?” I ask as I look out at the water in front of us.

He shakes his head. “Not every year, but most of the time. Last year was a pretty mild winter, so Nathan and I never got the chance to come out here, but I’m hoping this year will be different.”

“Did you come out here with Renee?”

“Oh yeah, but she chose to stay on the sidelines after she nearly crashed into that tree over there.” He chuckles at the memory. “She kept telling me that she couldn’t skate and I didn’t want to believe her, then we came out here one day and I realized how wrong I was. It was brutal to watch as she tried to gain her balance. I thought if I helped her she would get the hang of it, but I ended up going too fast and she went sailing toward the tree.”

I throw my head back with a laugh at the story and nudge him with my shoulder. “I bet she never let you live that moment down, huh?”

“Not at all.”

It’s as we stand in front of the lake, him sharing stories about Renee, that I find my feelings growing deeper and deeper for him. The attraction was one thing, but to feel this need to be beside him all the time? That’s another. I’ve never wanted to know everything about someone before and I wonder if he feels the same way — is that why he started asking me questions about myself and my love life?

The idea of him asking me out on a date has my lips tipping up into a smirk and I take a sip of my hot chocolate to hide it from him.

Chapter 13

Brent

Her laugh is loud as we make our way back to the houses and I can't help but admire the way she looks as she throws her head back. I find myself wanting to see her like this more often as long as I can help it.

"She sounds great, Brent, really," Sydney says after getting her emotions under control.

It's been nice, being able to talk about Renee in a way that I haven't in a long time. I've missed talking about the good memories, rather than always thinking about the night Nathan and I lost her. Her accident is the entire reason this idea of Nathan competing in the derby scares me so much and after talking to him more, the fear has only gotten worse.

There's one stallion on the ranch that no one can manage — no one other than Nathan, at least — and it's the one he wants to compete with. It seems to do well with him, but what if he becomes unpredictable like he is with everyone else on the ranch? I'm not sure what I'd do if anything were to happen to him and I could've stopped it.

"Brent?" Sydney says, snapping my attention back to her. "Seems like I lost you for a minute, everything okay?"

Maybe Sydney could give me some perspective on the situation. "It's Nathan. He told me he wants to compete in the derby with Storm." Considering she's been here more than most people, I'm assuming she knows the horse by name, but judging by the confusion on her face I guess not. I sigh and

rub a hand over my face. “Storm is one of our stallions. The most unpredictable one we’ve got.”

She nods in understanding, but doesn’t say anything.

“I’m not sure how to handle it. Storm could either do well with him, or he could end up getting Nathan severely hurt.”

“That’s understandable, but does he trust Storm?”

“I mean, I guess so if he wants to ride him for it, but that doesn’t make the fear go away.”

“No, it doesn’t, but maybe try having an open mind about it?” She chuckles at the look I give her and throws her hands up in the air. “Hey, I’m just here for a week and I’ve got no kids. My opinion doesn’t matter as much as others, but that’s the best advice I can give you.”

We come to a stop between the houses and she turns to me, her breath popping from her mouth in a cloud in front of her. “It might not mean much coming from me, but I think if you dig deep into your heart or mind that you’d find the answer you’re looking for. After all the conversations I’ve had with him, I wouldn’t worry too much, but that’s not my decision to make.”

“You’re right. I told him that I’d stand by his side with it, but that was before I knew which horse he wanted to use.”

She smiles and places her hand over mine, the touch igniting my skin even with the gloves we’ve got on. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. Maybe try to think about what Renee would do in a situation like this. Would she keep him from doing what he wants out of fear? Everything in this world has a chance of hurting us. I wouldn’t let fear of this one thing keep him from a dream.”

When she puts it like that, how could I possibly keep Nathan from doing anything in this life? I’m trying to hold him back out of fear, but Sydney is right — this isn’t the only thing that could harm him in life. “Thanks, I really needed to hear something like that.”

She nudges my shoulder playfully and nods. “No problem, guess it doesn’t hurt to be nice to the new girl, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m still sorry about that,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair. I’m not sure if I’ve been imagining this connection we seem to have, but it’s about time I try to figure out if I am. “Uh, I actually wanted to ask you something.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Would you, uh, would you want to have dinner with me before you leave again?”

Her lips part in surprise, then she smiles. “I think that would be really nice, preferably somewhere warmer next time.” She wraps her arms around herself, trying to keep the warmth in, and I take a tentative step toward her. As soon as I circle my arms around her and close the distance between us, her body practically melts into mine in the most beautiful way.

I pull away from her slightly, grabbing the tip of her chin and lifting her face up to mine, then softly brush my lips against hers. There’s still a hint of chocolate coating her tongue and I groan as it floods my mouth. She tightens her arms around me, clinging to me as if I’m her lifeline at this moment, and it warms something deep inside of me.

Is this what I’ve been missing out on?

She deepens the kiss, but it doesn’t last long when we hear a branch crack in the distance. We step away from each other, our cheeks red either from the cold or the moment, and stare.

“I was starting to wonder if I should send a search party for you two,” Nathan says as he walks up to us, coming to a stop beside me. “Everything okay?”

I clear my throat and nod, not wanting to tell him anything right now. Not until I even know what this thing is. “Yeah, everything’s great.”

“I’m just heading inside,” Sydney says with a smile. There’s a light in her eyes when she speaks to Nathan that only makes the connection I feel with her grow that much stronger. “Maybe I’ll be able to see more another time, but this cold is not for me.” Her chuckle vibrates through my entire being and I’m left staring after her as she heads into the guest house.

“So, I’m guessing that walk was good?” he asks, cutting the silence.

I grunt in response and make my way to the house. The last thing I want is to talk to my son about the way I’m feeling towards this woman, especially when I’m not quite sure what I’m feeling myself.

“Okay, I take it we aren’t going to talk about what I saw then?”

“Nope,” I mumble, continuing my trek ahead of him and into the house. I’m not the least bit surprised when he follows me inside, shutting the door behind him. “Don’t have work to do around the ranch?”

He chuckles and shakes his head, taking residence on an empty chair in the living room. “It can wait a few more minutes. I’d like to talk about Sydney first though.”

“And I don’t.”

“She’s pretty, right?” God, does he ever let things go? Of course not, he’s exactly like his mother. I can’t even count the number of times she and I fought because she couldn’t stand not getting to the bottom of things. All I’d ask is for some alone time, but she’d follow me into another room more than ready to say her piece, and it always led to another fight.

“Nathan, I really don’t want to have this conversation.”

He sighs and stands from his seat, smirking at me. “Alright, can you at least tell me if there’s a chance or not?”

Is that what he wants to hear, or would he be upset about it? I shrug in response. “I don’t know, son, I really don’t know.”

“Mom would want us to be happy.” Those words surprise me and he smiles. “You’ve spent a lot of time alone, afraid of getting close to anyone else, but that’s not what she would want for you. If Sydney is the first one you’ve felt anything for, I say go for it. She’s cool.”

Hearing him say that has my eyes stinging with tears and I nod in response, not trusting myself to speak at the moment. He pats my back on his way out of the living room, then walks out

the front door as if he didn't say everything I needed to hear. Have I been too soft on him?

I forget that he's not a scared little boy anymore sometimes. Maybe he wants to talk about Renee more but is worried how it will affect me just as I'm doing for him. Nathan isn't aware, but I did go for it with Sydney and now I have a date to plan that will hopefully solidify whatever these feelings are.

The only thing I'm not sure of is where I can take her for a first date since there's not much going for us around here. I could take her a little ways out of the town, head into the city about thirty miles away, but I'm not sure if that would be too presumptuous.

This is new territory for me. The last date I can remember being on is with Renee. We went to a Broadway show that she had been dying to go to and that was a few months before she died. I'm not even sure what Sydney likes, other than horses. If it weren't so cold out, I'd suggest going horseback riding, but she already said that she wanted to do something warmer.

My mind lights up with an idea and I grab a piece of paper to write everything down. I could take her to this place in the city that has fire pits and a romantic atmosphere, or we could go eat at the local bar and grill, then come back and enjoy a movie by the fireplace here.

I wrack my brain, trying to figure out what it seems like Sydney would enjoy, and scribble everything down. If I don't write out the details for the night, I might mess something up and I don't want to do that. I'd need to figure out what kind of movies she likes to watch, which could clue her into the plans for the night, but I want this to go perfectly.

Is this too much? Maybe this is too much.

She's got me doing things I wouldn't normally do, not for anyone but Renee anyway. I walk over to the cabinet next to the flat screen and pull it open, roaming my eyes over the many titles we have. If Renee wasn't sitting down reading a book, she was sitting on the sofa with a movie on — most of them were movies she had seen a million times before.

I smile, thinking about how she never failed to get me to sit down and watch them with her. It didn't matter if it was a movie we watched a week, day, or months before, I'd sit my happy ass down beside her. I'm not sure if she ever realized, but I could never quite keep my attention on the movie when it came to her.

Maybe this will be too intimate for Sydney. For me.

Sydney should be leaving in six more days, which gives me at least a few to get the date planned out. Would it hurt to get Nathan's opinion on things? He already gave me his approval to take her out, so maybe I could see what he thinks we should do on our date.

This is going to be a disaster before it's even started. I throw the pen I'm holding onto the counter with the piece of paper, then head to the large window overlooking the front yard where Sydney and I were kissing moments ago. After everything I've put her through, she deserves the best night, and that's exactly what I'm going to give her.

Chapter 14

Sydney

My phone rings just as I finish slipping the sweater dress over my head, the material clinging to my body like a second skin. I walk over to the nightstand where I sat it and smile at Justine's name on the screen.

"Hey," I say while looking in the mirror and fluffing my hair. The waves are flowing naturally down my back, just the way I like and that I hope Brent will appreciate. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to check in, see what you planned to do about the ranch."

It wasn't too hard of a decision once Brent kissed me again the other day outside our houses. As soon as I got back into the guest house I grabbed the notebook where I was keeping everything and stashed it under the mattress. I haven't grabbed it since and instead have chosen to make the most of my time here.

"I guess Heath is just going to have to understand that there isn't much to find out about this place. I'm still not even sure what they want with it, just that it's important to them."

"So, what does this mean for you and the cowboy?" she asks in amusement.

I sigh and run my hands over the soft material of the dress I'm wearing paired with fleece black leggings and knee-high leather boots. "Well, about that, I'm kind of going on a date with him tonight."

"Shut up! And you're just now telling me this?"

“I’ve been a little occupied.” Ever since he asked me out, he’s been at my door each morning and has taken me for a ride through the property, showing me different areas that he promises to walk me to when the weather is better. Unfortunately, the snow hasn’t hit this area yet, and I’ll most likely be gone before it does. “He’s much different than when I first got here. It’s been nice.”

“Awe, you like him. Do you think this could be the one?”

She knows how I am when it comes to guys. I’m not one to just date anyone — choosing only to date men I see a bigger future with — so knowing that I’m going out on this date raises questions from her. I expected it, which is why I hadn’t planned on calling her until tomorrow.

I’m still not sure what we are doing tonight, but I know it has something to do with a movie because he asked me what kind I like to watch yesterday. “I don’t know, Justine, this is our first date.” I have a good feeling about it, but I don’t want to jinx anything right now.

“This is exciting. What are you wearing?”

“That sweater dress you got me last year for Christmas.”

“Ooh, that’s a good choice. Jewelry?”

I grab my bag and sift through it, but come up empty. “I didn’t bring any with me, didn’t exactly plan on anything happening while I was here.”

“But you packed that dress?” she asks with a snort. “I’m not buying it.”

She’s not entirely wrong, I had high hopes for when I came back this time, especially after the kiss we shared before, but I didn’t want to be too presumptuous and decided to leave the jewelry at home. “I didn’t want to seem desperate.” ,

“No worries, I’m sure you look hot without the bling. What time are you guys leaving?”

I glance at the clock and groan. “An hour.” It’s like time is purposely going slow to torture me. I’ve been a giddy mess all morning and now that the sun is going down, I’m a nervous

mess. What if he realizes I'm not what he thought I would be and doesn't like it?

I've had such a hard time when it comes to guys, and after everything that happened with Heath, it's become harder for me to trust men. Brent doesn't seem like the type that would betray me, but I didn't think Heath would do it either and he proved me wrong.

"Don't go there," Justine mutters over the line. "Not all men are going to be like him, Syd, give the guy a chance to show you that."

"I don't have the best track record, you know this."

She groans. "We've been over this before. It's not your fault that men are slimy dicks. That doesn't mean you need to put the dating world behind you and protect yourself. You might be surprised at what you find when you open yourself up."

"I know, you're right."

"What are you guys doing?"

"He won't tell me, wants it to be a surprise I guess."

She scoffs. "Does he not know you aren't a fan of surprises?"

"We didn't exactly get that far into things and I didn't want to let him know too much about me. It wouldn't really help things if he figured out the original reason I came here in the first place."

"I guess that makes sense, but that doesn't mean he can't know anything about you at all. Give the guy some information, that way he isn't doing something as stupid as surprising you with a date."

I was fine with surprises before Heath and I got together, then he decided to ruin all that during Halloween one year. He told me that we were going to some restaurant that had just opened up outside the city and we ended up at a haunted house full of clowns. Apparently, he couldn't remember that I'm deathly terrified of clowns — he ended up having to drag me out while I was hyperventilating and close to passing out.

He apologized profusely for the night, but I've been a nervous wreck about surprises ever since. That's one thing he had going for him — he never did surprise me with a date again after that. We broke up not long after, when I got a different kind of surprise in the form of his coworker bent over his desk.

"I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt for now." The shake in my voice is unmistakable and no doubt Justine can hear it. If I want this date to go well, I've got to learn to get over my fears and trust in others. Justine's right, Brent isn't Heath and I need to remember that if I want to make it through this night.

"I'll let you go so you can finish getting ready. Knowing you, you'll spend thirty minutes alone trying to get your makeup just right. Call me tomorrow and give me all the dirty details. Love you."

"Love you, talk to you tomorrow."

I throw my phone down on the bed and hurry into the bathroom since I don't have much time to spare for my makeup. Last time I was here I left my makeup in a drawer since I have plenty back home, so all I have to do is open it and figure out what to go with for tonight.

He seemed to like the lipstick I wore before, so I'm thinking I should go with that and maybe a dark eyeshadow to bring out my eyes. There's a knock on my door just as I finish with my eyeliner and I smile at myself appreciatively in the mirror before hurrying down the hall.

I'm stunned speechless when I open the door and find Brent standing outside with a pair of dark jeans hanging low on his hips and a light blue button-up. Curls hang in front of his face and I bring my hand up, pushing them back with a smile. "You clean up nice," I say to break the silence.

He blinks, his gaze traveling down the length of my body with nothing but heat flaring in it. "Yeah, you too." Judging by the pained expression on his face, that's not the compliment he was trying to go with.

"Smooth, Dad," Nathan says from behind Brent. "You look nice, Sydney." He points to the truck and winks at his dad

before putting the keys in his hand. “She’s nice and shiny for you. Have a good time.”

Brent groans as Nathan struts away, then clears his throat and holds an arm out to me. “You look beautiful.” His limb is shaking as he holds it out, but it seems to disappear as soon as I wrap my hand around it. “You’re ready to go?”

Do I look like I’m not? God, do I look like a mess? I dart my gaze around nervously, not wanting to look at him, but he tips my face toward him. “That wasn’t supposed to come out that way, just wanted to make sure you were good to go. I got here a little early.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I’m ready.” Could I be any more obvious with my nerves? “So, do I get to know where we are going yet?”

He chuckles as he leads us in the direction of the blacked-out truck parked in the driveway. “Not yet, is that okay?”

I should tell him no, that I want to know where we are going, but I take a deep breath and smile. “Yeah, that’s fine. I trust you.” And the weird part is, I do. It’s not like he can take me to a haunted house during this time of year anyway, so I don’t have to worry much about that.

“Good, I wouldn’t do anything you won’t like.”

The words have an entirely different meaning as he opens the passenger door for me and there’s no mistaking the arousal I feel from them. “Such a gentleman,” I say with a smirk, trying to lighten up the tension.

“I try my best,” he says with a smile as he helps me into the truck and shuts the door softly once I’m situated in the seat. The truck is already warm and I stick my cold hands in front of the heat as he opens the driver’s side door and climbs in with a grunt.

“You okay?”

He nods, rubbing at his leg. “Yeah, the cold makes the pain flare up a bit, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Is it going to stay like that forever?”

“I’m not sure. Hopefully not, but I guess a little bit of pain is better than being six feet in the ground.”

I lean back into the leather seat as he backs out of the drive and heads away from the ranch, my nerves taking over inside of me. He leans over, turning the volume up on the radio, and hums along to the country song playing. When the song is over another one starts immediately and I close my eyes as Brent continues to hum, the sound soothing the nerves wracking through my body.

When I open my eyes, he turns onto the highway and I lean up a little trying to figure out where we are going. There’s no way he’d go into the city, right? It’s a three-hour drive. This is why I try to steer clear of surprises, so things like this don’t happen. He could figure everything out and whatever this is will be ruined.

There’s an exit for a city I’ve never heard of and he turns onto it, causing me to let out a breath of relief. He chuckles and places a hand gently on my leg. “What, worried I’m going to take you somewhere no one can hear you?”

Or that you’ll take me somewhere everyone knows me — mostly everyone, at least. I let out a nervous chuckle, then turn my attention toward the window as he makes a right turn into a city. My body sags into the seat as he pulls into a packed parking lot and cuts the engine.

This isn’t so bad.

Chapter 15

Brent

My breath hisses at the pain in my leg as I step out of my car, and I take a deep breath before walking around the truck. I was trying my hardest to keep my attention on the road rather than on the way Sydney looks in that dress throughout the drive. The moment I open her door and she steps down, however, my eyes lock onto the curves I was missing out on.

“This place looks nice,” she says as her eyes survey the building we’re standing in front of. “What made you pick it?”

I shrug. “You said you wanted to do something warmer, so that’s what I did. They have fire pits located outside and I’ve heard good things about the food here, so I thought it would be a good place to start.”

She smirks. “Oh, you think you’ll be getting another one out of me already? What if I don’t like the way you eat?”

“I’m hopeful.”

And that’s the truth. I’m hoping this night goes exactly the way I want it to and she sees that I’m not the guy I first showed her. I made the mistake of treating her poorly in the beginning, but that’s not who I am and she deserves to see that. Like Nathan said, Renee would want me to be happy, and I’m going to prove that I can be.

A young woman is standing behind a counter when we walk inside and I give her a polite smile. “Hi, I should have a reservation under Dudley.” While she looks for the

reservation, Sydney moves closer to my side and I wrap an arm around her waist.

“Ah, yes, right this way, Mr. Dudley,” the woman says as she starts walking ahead of us, leading us to our table. She smiles politely at each table we pass where people are sitting, then pushes through the back door that leads to the patio where the fire pits are. “Here you go. Can I start the two of you off with some wine?”

I look over at Sydney, then back at her, and smile. “That would be nice, thank you. Bring us your best.”

“Of course. Would you like glasses or a bottle?”

“Bottle is fine, ma’am.”

When she walks away, I move over to an empty chair and pull it out for Sydney with a smile. “For you.” Once she’s seated, I push the chair in and walk around to the other side of the fire pit.

I’ve never been here before, but I have to admit it’s a little more romantic than I thought it would be. Does Sydney think I’m trying too hard? There’s a switch on the side of the table and I flip it, watching in fascination as the flames appear in the center of the table.

“This is nice, thank you,” Sydney says softly as she brings her hands close to the flames. “Did you ever bring Renee somewhere like this?”

I shake my head. “She was more into art and history. But, I don’t want to talk about her tonight. As much as I love doing so, this is a date, and I’d rather we get to know each other better.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“Are you close with any of your family?”

She scoffs. “You aren’t holding back, are you? To answer your question, not really. My parents live a few states away. I never really get to see them.”

“They don’t come visit with you?”

“And risk a car accident? No. My mother is deathly terrified of driving far distances. If I want to see them, I need to make the trip to them, but work is too busy for me to go.”

“What got you into law?”

She freezes, then shakes her head. “Nothing special, just something I always seemed to have a knack for, and it ended up paying off. I’m this close to getting a big promotion at the firm I’m at, but they have me working on a project that is a little too much for me.”

That must be why she needs to get away — to have a fresh mind for when she gets back to work. I admire the way she seems to focus on herself, while still being able to do what she’s supposed to.

“And what about you?” she asks just as the hostess comes back with a bucket of ice and the bottle of wine. Sydney reaches for her wine as soon as it’s poured, mouthing a thank you to the hostess, before taking a long sip. It must be the nerves. “What made you get into ranching?”

“It’s always been part of the family, grew up on the very one I’m in control of today.”

“You see yourself doing it long-term?”

I chuckle at her question. “I’m not sure how much longer you want than this. But, yes, I plan to give it all to Nathan when I die, and hopefully, he’ll do the same with his kids.”

“That’s sweet. Is that what he wants to do?”

“As far as I know, but that could always change, and I’ll be okay with it if he doesn’t want to. My father was a little harder on me about keeping it in the family, but I’m not wanting to project that onto Nathan.”

The rest of the night goes just as smoothly with small talk and getting to know each other, until silence ensues as we get back into the truck. It isn’t until we pull into the ranch that Sydney sighs and breaks the silence. “Thank you for dinner. It was really nice and not what I expected.”

I smirk at her. “Oh, you think that’s the end of our night?”

She cocks her head to the side but stays silent as I hop out of the truck, ignoring the pain in my leg, and pull open her door with a smile. “What else do you have planned?”

“Guess you’ll have to see. Follow me.” I lead the way up the front porch of my house, then open the door and let her walk in ahead of me. Hopefully Nathan did everything exactly as I told him to. “We’ll be going into the living room.”

She slips her boots off, which are wet from the slush, then heads through the doorway that leads to the living room. Her gasp is enough to let me know that Nathan managed to pull it off before we got back. When I step into the room, she spins around and throws her arms around me with a smile. “You did all this?”

“Well, I had some help getting it set up.”

“No one has ever done anything like this for me before. It’s sweet.” She says it as if it’s surprising, which I wouldn’t blame after everything I’ve put her through here. I walk further into the room and sink onto the makeshift bed that I had Nathan build on the floor, then grab the remote for the TV and bring the movie we’re watching up.

“I hope this move is okay for you.”

My body tenses as she sinks beside me, her arm brushing against mine in a way that has me itching to pull her closer to me. “It’s great, thank you.” I press play on the movie and watch as the characters come onto the screen, but the only thing I can seem to focus on is how close Sydney is sitting next to me.

As the minutes pass by, her body only seems to get closer and closer until I’m barely breathing. Her hand comes up to my thigh, resting there and teasing me in the worst way, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from making a move on her that she may not want. I’d hate to do anything to upset her.

By the time the movie ends, I’m damn near shaking with the need to touch her and feel her body against mine. The credits roll on the screen and neither of us make a move to get up,

instead she angles herself toward me, her breasts brushing against me in the most tantalizing way. Does she even know what she's doing to me?

"Brent," Sydney whispers as she brings her hand to my face, her thumb brushing lightly over my bottom lip. "Please kiss me."

That's all I needed to hear before I'm reaching around and pulling her onto my lap, my lips slamming down to hers hungrily. A groan escapes my throat as she rocks her hips against me, no doubt feeling my hard length trying to escape my jeans, and she dives her tongue through my parted lips.

My hands come to her hips, gripping them tightly as she rocks over me, her breaths ragged from the pleasure it brings. This isn't where I thought our night would end up, but I can't deny the heat coursing through my body at the sight of her on top of me.

I wince as she shifts herself, her leg pushing into my knee, and she flinches away. "Sorry," she says breathlessly, her lips immediately coming back down to mine.

It could be a level ten pain and I don't think I'd have the heart to stop her. Every nerve in my body is coming alive as she continues her assault on my lips and I slowly lift one of my hands, bringing it to the neckline of her dress and slowly trailing a finger down her skin. She shivers at the contact while arching herself into me, granting me the access I crave.

"So soft and beautiful," I whisper against her lips as I rub a finger over a perked nipple.

She moans at the action, her head falling back as she parts her lips, and I'm mesmerized by the sight of it. The way her waves hang low, or the red of her lips that would look great wrapped around my length. Her movements become more erratic, chest rising and falling rapidly with each ragged breath she takes, and I know that she's close to the edge.

I shift myself beneath her, rocking right along with her, and she brings her head down to mine to look me in the eyes. The moment her eyes dilate, she gasps loudly before my name

spills from her pouty lips, the sweetest sound I've ever heard, and she sags against me breathlessly.

"That wasn't what I planned tonight, I swear," I say with a chuckle as an attempt to lighten the mood a bit.

She leans back, a smile on her face, and gives me a tender kiss. "That wasn't a bad way to end it though. You're making it very hard to leave in two days, Mr. Dudley."

Why the hell does her calling me that only make me harder beneath her? "So, don't." It comes out before I've even had time to think and I sigh. "Sorry, that came out wrong, please don't answer that." I'm not sure what she's doing to me, but I need a moment to think about everything that's transpired tonight.

As if sensing my impending anxiety, she lifts from my lap and gives me the sweetest smile. "That's okay. It's about time I head back to the guest house."

"Let me walk you."

She stops me before I can get up and says, "No, your leg has been acting up all night. I'm fine to walk across the yard. Rest, I'm sure your leg will thank you come morning if you do."

As I watch her walk out the front door, I wonder what the hell I'm going to do. This night was nothing like I thought it would be — it was much more, and now I'm conflicted. She has a job, a life that isn't here. Would it even be right if I asked her to give all that up to come here?

Chapter 16

Sydney

It didn't take long after getting into the guest house for me to fall asleep, which also didn't give me much time to dwell on the words Brent uttered last night. He told me not to leave, as if it's as simple as that, and part of me wanted to scream yes. If he wants me to stay here with him and his son, I'd gladly do it — except that's not what I'm supposed to be here for.

This isn't how my time here was supposed to go. My notebook is still tucked safely away when I should be writing every bit of information I find in it, then handing it off to Heath back at the office. The thought of bringing it back out and writing things down leaves a nasty taste in my mouth, so I'm going to have to figure out the best excuse for Heath when I get back home in a few days.

I smile when I glance out the window, loving the way the snow from the dusting we got last night sparkles under the bit of sun shining on it, then I head into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. There's nothing like a hot drink during the winter months. While my coffee brews, I head into the bedroom and throw on a few layers of clothing before slipping into my winter boots.

The steam is rolling through the air when I get into the kitchen, the scent of coffee calming me, and I get into the fridge for my favorite creamer — which is almost out — and fix my coffee just the way I like it. That first sip in the morning always brings a smile to my face, but it falls when I

realize I can't remember the last time I smiled like this back home.

It's not time to dwell on that now though. It would be best if I ignore it completely. I'm sure it's the small vacation I get every time I come here and has nothing to do with the two men who've wormed their way into my heart. I walk over to the front door and sit my thermos on the bench before grabbing my hat and gloves sitting beside it, slipping them on quickly.

When I step outside, the chill immediately hits my skin even though I have three different layers of clothes underneath, and I exhale a shaky breath that turns into a small cloud as it mixes with the low temperature. I glance around the property, surprised to find Brent leaning against one of the trees with his gaze on me, and I head in his direction with a small smile.

"Coffee?" I ask, holding my thermos out to him.

He takes the cup with a smirk and steals a sip, his nose wrinkling at the taste before handing it back to me. "What the hell did you put in that?"

I chuckle and take a larger sip of my own, closing my eyes as the warmth from it seeps into my bloodstream. "Creamer."

"That explains it." His gaze doesn't stay on me for long when a few curses come from the direction of the fences. I follow his gaze, finding Nathan standing in the middle of the fenced area with a frown as he watches the erratic horse take off in a circle around him.

"What's going on?"

Brent sighs. "That's the horse Nathan wants to put in the derby."

I hum in response and watch Nathan as he slowly walks toward the horse. He's saying something as he walks, his voice is too low for me to hear whatever it is, but it seems to help calm the horse down. My eyebrows jump up in surprise and I glance over at Brent, noting the surprise that's evident on his face as well.

“How have you been doing with his decision?” I ask as a way to break the silence.

“Not great, especially watching how the horse is doing right now. My anxiety only seems to be getting worse, but I’m trying to remember that he’s an adult now and can make his own choices. I’m trying to be the support I know he needs, even if I hate what he wants to do.”

My heart melts at the fatherly side of him and I smile. “That’s the most you can do, or else he’s just going to run off on his own and do it anyway. At least this way you can still be by his side, helping him through this life he chose.”

Brent nods, then he rubs the back of his neck. “About last night —”

“No need,” I say, cutting him off. “We can forget about it.”

“Right.”

There’s a frown on his face, but he doesn’t say anything else as he leans back against the tree. While he watches his son, I make my trek through the snow until I reach the space where their barn used to be. The area is coming along nicely and I’m sure it would look a lot better if the snow wasn’t covering most of it right now.

I jump at the snow crunching under another pair of feet and spin around, my gaze clashing with Brent’s. He sighs next to me, fear making his brows crease as he looks at the empty spot. “The doctors said it was a miracle I made it out that night.”

“It was a storm, right?”

This is probably the time that I’d make sure to catch any important information and write it down for Heath, but the only thing I can think about is getting to know Brent. There’s something about him being vulnerable at this moment that has me inching closer to him and wrapping an arm around his waist.

He nods. “Yeah, a power line fell on top of the barn and caught it on fire. We had horses in here, so I came out and freed them before it could cause them any harm.” His chuckle

seems odd considering the story, but I'm not here to judge. "So worried about them being harmed that I didn't bother worrying about myself."

I'm not sure if it's just me, but the idea of him risking his life to save the things that are important to him only makes the attraction that much more palpable. Instead of answering him, I thread my gloved hand through his and give him a gentle squeeze — my way of letting him know I'm here for him.

"At least everything's cleared up. Are you planning on building another one in the same spot?"

He shrugs. "I'm not sure. Money is a little too tight right now to do much of anything."

Is this why Heath wanted me to come here and spy on the family?

Maybe he saw this as an opportunity to gain something from him while he's down, not wanting to take the chance that he could get back on his feet, and that realization only makes me angry.

As if sensing my boiling blood, Brent turns to me with a frown and cocks his head to the side. "You okay, Sydney?"

I clear my throat and give him a small smile, hoping it will chase away any concerns he has. "Of course, how's your leg today?"

"It's a little stiff, but I'm pretty sure it's more from the cold than anything else." And by anything else, he's probably talking about the moment we shared last night, which heats my blood in a different way. Luckily, the cold could explain my flushed cheeks.

There's a gust of wind that has my body shaking and he pulls me closer to him, the action chasing away the chill in my body and replacing it with fire. When I look at him, our lips are only inches away from each other, and my gaze darts from his lips up to his eyes. Our breaths are ragged, coming out in small puffs, and I sigh before pushing away from him.

"Winter has never been my favorite season," I mutter while wrapping my arms around myself. "I think I'm going to head

inside, spend the day under a warm blanket and maybe have some hot chocolate.”

He smiles. “That doesn’t sound too bad. Want some company?”

As much as I’d love to tell him yes, I’m not sure spending more time with him is a good idea. I’m already further into this than I should be, completely disregarding the job I was sent out here to do, and getting closer to him won’t help anything — especially when he doesn’t know the real reason I keep showing up.

Well, the real reason before I fell in love with his ranch.

What would he think if he knew that I’m supposed to be digging up information on his property and handing it over to someone else? I’m not sure he’d still be looking at me with that smirk. It would be more like disgust and betrayal.

I sigh and shake my head, causing his smirk to fall. “I’m thinking some alone time would be best for me right now, but maybe later?”

That has his lip twitching slightly and he nods. “Sure thing. Let me walk you back to the guest house at least since I didn’t get to do that last night.”

This time I don’t argue with him, considering he has to walk that way as well to get to his own house. There’s an awkward silence floating through the air, the only noise coming from the snow crunching beneath our feet, and we come to a stop in front of the guest house door. “Well, this is me.”

God, could I be any more pathetic?

Brent chuckles. “It seems so.” My body stiffens when he leans closer to me, but instead of his lips connecting with mine, they press gently against my cheek before he pulls away with a smile. “I’ll see you later. Hopefully you’ll come by for dinner?”

The idea of food has my stomach rumbling loud enough that Brent’s mouth widens into a full-blown smile, nearly knocking me off my feet. “Guess you got your answer,” I say with a

chuckle. Before I can get any more embarrassed, I give him a small wave and disappear through the house.

I'm an embarrassment.

I rush over to the large window that faces his house, watching as he makes his way through the snow and onto the front porch. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I'm stupid if I try to deny that he's pulling me further and further into his orbit. He had told me not to leave, which means he's getting just as attached to me being here, and that's more of a reason to leave and not look back.

Heath did a number on me, making me question every other man who would come after him, and it would do me good to remember that even though you hope they won't — men will hurt you as if you mean nothing to them. How am I supposed to know for sure that Brent won't be the exact same way?

I hate comparing him to my ex, he doesn't deserve that, but I can't help the underlying fear that I'm going to end up hurt. Maybe it would be best if I don't show up for dinner later, and keep my distance as much as possible.

Is it possible to do that though?

The pull to Brent is too strong to ignore on most days, so what makes me think that I'd be able to keep my distance from him? I shake my head and walk over to the couch, sinking into the plush cushions while pulling the fuzzy throw blanket over my lap, then find a movie on the TV with a frown.

As the characters move around on the screen, I realize that it's not going to be as easy as I'd hoped to get Brent out of my head.

Chapter 17

Brent

I've been so focused on Sydney being here that I haven't worried once about how much it would take to fix the barn. I may have told Sydney that money was tight when she asked about rebuilding it, but I wasn't being entirely truthful. The truth is, I have no clue what money is like because I can't remember the last time I was in the office.

She's been so heavily on my mind that I've been neglecting the one thing that will seal my son's future, which means I'm going to have to spend the rest of my day getting things situated. Instead of sitting on the couch, worrying about the fact that Sydney didn't want to spend time with me today, I make my way down the long hallway and step into my home office.

Judging by the tidiness of my desk, I'm going to assume Nathan has been in here and that has me blowing out a breath of relief. At least if he's been in here, then that means someone around this place is on top of things — but I should be the one who knows what's going on, not Nathan. I drop onto the office chair and scan the papers sitting on my desk before throwing them into the trash.

I grab the framed photograph of Nathan sitting on my desk and pop the back out, grabbing the key for my drawer from it before putting it back in its place. The large black book sitting on top of paper stacks calls to me and I pull it out with a sigh. Even though I haven't been looking at the numbers, I'm not stupid enough to think they are good enough to rebuild the barn — so, I wasn't exactly lying when I gave the answer to

Sydney — and that only gets proven as my eyes zero in on the information in front of me.

I'm not sure how long I sit here, looking over everything, but there's a soft knock on the door that gains my attention and Sydney pokes her head through the crack in the door. "Hey, everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah, why wouldn't it be?" Does she know things aren't as good as I'd like them to be?

She cocks her head to the side. "We were supposed to have a late lunch today, at least that's what you said yesterday."

Shit, I forgot about that. I go to close the book and slip it back into my desk, but halt my movements with a frown. "Rain check," I snap and the harshness of my tone surprises me, so I keep my gaze pinned on the papers in front of me. If I look up at her and find sadness in her gaze, there's no way I'll be able to stay in this spot and figure things out.

Without another word, the door to my office clicks shut and I lean back in my chair with a sigh. The only thing I can think to do is get a loan for the rebuild, but I know the bank won't give another loan — considering that's what they said the last time I got a loan — so what other option do I have? The other stables aren't large enough for all the horses and I'm sure we will be getting new ones soon. Nathan usually travels a couple states over for auctions during the spring.

Will he even be doing that anymore once the derby starts?

I've always had his help around here, but if being in the derby is something he really wants to do, then I guess I'm going to have to learn how to handle things on my own. Which means not saying anything to him about problems on the ranch. He needs to focus on getting his horse ready to compete — not making sure the barn gets rebuilt.

I'm sure there are other things that we could do to get money for everything, I just have to let creativity run through my mind rather than the anxiety that's currently going to town in it. What if I lose everything I've worked so hard for? This was

supposed to be something I could pass down to my son, but it's looking like that might not end up happening.

Would he be disappointed in me for letting it get as bad as it is?

I growl to myself. If it wasn't for Sydney coming here, I could've had things figured out already, but I've been so preoccupied with the way she's made me feel that I neglected things on the ranch. This isn't the way I want things to be, which is why I need to keep my distance from her — she's entrenching herself into my mind far too easily.

With that part of my life figured out, I grab a notebook sitting on the edge of my desk and turn to a blank page. With a pen poised above the lines, I wrack my brain for different ways to gather the money, and write them down eagerly. One of these has to work, right? I blink through a headache that's forming, not wanting to pull away from my work, and power through the pain.

My gaze darts to the office door for the first time since I sat down behind my desk and I frown at it, wondering if I was harsher with Sydney than I needed to be. Is it really her fault that she's caught my attention? The headache I'm getting pounds for a few seconds, making me squeeze my eyes shut from the pain, so I lift from my seat and head to the bathroom for some Tylenol.

Who am I kidding? Of course it's not her fault that I'm transfixed by her, it's not like she came here with intentions of getting under my skin. She came here to get away from her work, that much I know, and she just happened to catch my attention. That's no one's fault but my own and at least it's something I can try to fix before it becomes too much.

Is there even such a thing as too much when it comes to her though?

And more importantly — will I be able to fix anything involving her?

I sink into the office chair and lean back, letting my eyes fall shut for a moment while I wait for the Tylenol to kick in. As if

it wasn't enough that she takes over my thoughts when they are opened, the moment I close my eyes her image pops up as if she's standing right in front of me. Once upon a time, it was Renee I would picture in the back of my mind, but now all I can see are Sydney's wide blue eyes shining back at me.

The image of her standing in front of me only has me thinking of one thing — what would Sydney look like, bent beautifully over my desk? The cherry wood would make her creamy skin stand out and that only makes me want to find her, then bring her up here to see if the image I'm conjuring up is true. Her blonde hair splayed over the papers on my desk is a vision I can't seem to lose focus of and it has me growling in irritation.

When I open my eyes, the pounding in the back of my skull isn't as prominent as it was before so I scoot the chair closer to the desk. My eyes scan the pages of the book in front of me, but I'm not processing a damn thing I'm reading no matter how much I wish I was. I'm hard as a rock and sexually frustrated, which isn't a good combination for me, and it seems as though my body only wants one person to satisfy the hunger burning within me.

I could easily lift from the chair and chase Sydney down, beg her to come back up here with me and let me have my way with her. But, I could also stay in place and hope that the images shake from my head soon before they become too much for me. I'd hate to make a rash decision because I'm thinking with the wrong head — Sydney leaves tomorrow morning, just as she does every three months. Getting too attached to her would be a terrible idea.

Except I'm already attached to her and the easy way she interacts with Nathan, treating him as an adult instead of a little kid — like I have been. I groan loudly and drop my face into my hands, willing the thoughts of her to go away so I can get my work done. It's useless though, the rest of my work will have to be done when she leaves and I can be free of her presence for a little while.

Will that be enough though, her being however many miles away from here?

I'm sure she'll still manage to interrupt my work while she's gone and she probably doesn't even realize the effect she has on me. There's a certain aura about her, one that's confident, while also oblivious, to the things around her and it only makes me wish she never came here in the first place.

Is that true though?

It might be irritating that she's taking up so much headspace, but should it be a reason to wish she never showed up? Nathan seems to like her easily enough, I should be happy that he enjoys another woman's company like he does hers. If Renee were still here I'm sure she and Sydney would get along wonderfully, spending some nights with glasses of wine in their hands while they gossiped about anything and everything. But is Sydney the kind of woman Renee would like to see me with?

I wish I could say I know it is, but Renee and I never had a conversation about something like that. We never talked about what the other would do if one of us left too soon, so there's a chance this is the exact opposite of what Renee imagined for me. Then again, maybe Renee is the one that brought Sydney to me and I'm just an idiot too worried about my heart to see it.

All the numbers on the page in front of me are blurring the longer I stare at them, which is enough to let me know that I need to take a break and come back to it with fresh eyes. Perfect timing, I guess, since I wasn't really paying attention to any of it in the first place. My headache is long gone as I lift from the chair and move toward the window, eyeing the blanket of snow covering the ground and remembering the days when Nathan and I would build snowmen.

Snowboarding and ice skating were our favorite pastimes during the winter months though, but I guess I'm going to have to sit out this winter since my leg is useless for anything other than walking at the moment. I shake my head and limp toward the small sofa sitting against the wall, then fall onto my back while squeezing a pillow to my chest.

There were plenty of times that I'd lay on this sofa while Renee was still here and taking care of Nathan downstairs, and I'd always end up falling asleep. I still remember how angry she was one time when she stormed inside and instead of finding me at my desk, hard at work, I was lying down snoring away. Considering she was the homemaker in the family, it made sense that she may want to take a nap after having to deal with Nathan all the time, so I understood her anger when she saw me sleeping.

It's things like that I miss about having Renee here — there was never a dull moment with her — and I'm starting to see the same thing in Sydney.

Chapter 18

Sydney

Instead of making his mood worse, I did the best thing for both of us and headed outside without another word. I've been sitting out on his front porch for a few minutes now, not knowing what I should do since the plans I did have aren't happening any longer. Nathan's frame pops out from the stables down the hill and I perk up.

Maybe it would be best if I at least let Nathan know something is going on with his dad. If anyone can get through to him and figure out what's going on it would be Nathan. I walk slowly in the direction of the stables, the chill seeping into my clothes — what's the point of the extra layers if they do nothing to chase away the cold?

Nathan is bent over, fussing with some hay when I step inside the stables and I nearly groan at the central heat that hits me in the face. I clear my throat, which makes Nathan jump slightly, and he glares at me over his shoulder. If I didn't know the kid well enough, I'd think he was pissed at me, but he loves messing around with me more than anything.

I brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear, thanks to the rough winds, and give him a small smile. "Hey, Nate, I think you should go check on your dad."

His spine straightens and he frowns. "Is he okay? What's wrong?" Before he can barge in there like a madman, I clutch his elbow, pulling him to a stop.

"Nothing bad. He just seems a little agitated today. I thought maybe you could figure out what's going on."

“Where is he at?”

“His office, unless he left once he kicked me out.”

Nathan lets out a string of curses, clearly understanding where Brent’s irritation is coming from without even asking, then he finishes up with the hay and rushes out of the stables. I glance through each of the stalls, eyeing the horses lying around, and smile at them.

Although the cold irritates me, I wrap my coat around myself tighter and follow Nathan’s trail out of the stables with a small wave to the horses. My teeth chatter against each other with each step I take through the field, but I won’t let that deter me. Brent and I went to the lake yesterday, I’m thinking I can explore a different area of the property today by myself.

My phone blares from my pocket and I roll my eyes at Heath’s name on the screen when I pull it out. Instead of answering like I should, I let the call go to voicemail before switching my phone to silent and shoving my hands into my coat pocket. Unfortunately, I made the stupid decision of rushing out of the guest house and forgot to grab my hat and gloves by the door.

The better decision would be to go back into my house and grab the things I need, but I know as soon as I feel the warmth of the guest house I’ll want to stay there. That’s not an option right now though, since I leave tomorrow morning and I can’t promise that I’ll be allowed to come back. Hell, there’s a high chance that when I get back to the office Heath will fire me on the spot for not having any more information for him.

Do I care at this point?

I’d love to say I do, but ever since I started coming here, it’s felt like there’s something missing when I get back home. I’m not sure if it’s the two men I’ve grown accustomed to, or the silence that comes with living on a large property like this, but it’s something. Every few minutes there are horns honking outside my house back in the city, but here? Here I can sit down and watch TV without the outside world distracting me.

There are no bright lights shining through my windows here, and it’s calming to be able to walk around like this without

running into some grouchy businessmen. I smirk at the thought, knowing that not too long ago Brent was the grouchy rancher I kept running into. Something changed with him though.

This was supposed to be easy — come to the ranch every few months and gather information, make sure nobody finds out about the work I'm doing, and report everything back to Heath — and it's anything but that now. My heart aches thinking about driving away from here in the morning, even though I know I don't have much of a choice, and I take a deep breath.

I come to a stop outside two separate trails, one of which is still covered in white, while another has tire marks running through it. I'm sure it would be stupid to walk along the one that no one has been through since the snow fell, so I march to the right and follow the one with the tire tracks. The next time I plan to come here, spring will be starting and I'm excited to see all the flowers bloom around here.

My breath catches when I come to a clearing that stands high on a hill, overlooking other trees and a few houses. It's beautiful up here. I'm caught off guard when snow crunches behind me and I spin around to see who's sneaking up on me, only to smile when a deer snaps its gaze to me.

We stand there for a few minutes staring at each other, neither of us knowing who should make the first move, but the twig breaking under my foot has the doe scurrying back through the trees. I close my eyes as I spin around, taking in the fresh air, then take one more glance around the space before heading back down the trail.

There's no sign of Nathan still when I come back down, so I make my way into the guest house and slip my wet boots off at the door. Each layer I have on comes off as I inch down the long hallway, pushing open the bathroom door when I slip the last article of clothing off. Nothing is better than a warm bath after being outside in the cold.

The steam coming off the water feels glorious on my face and I lean my head back, sighing at the heat chasing away the cold. Is this what heaven feels like? No, I'm pretty sure heaven is

sitting on Brent's lap while he helps me chase my release — but this is a close second, that's for sure.

How is it that even when I'm not around the man I still can't help but think about him, even though I know I shouldn't be? I'm here to spy on him, which means I shouldn't be getting all hot and bothered in his presence — or lack thereof, considering.

Before I can get too far into my head, I step into the warm water and lean back against the cool porcelain. My body immediately relaxes, giving in to the pull of the warmth, and I sigh contently into the empty room. After a few minutes, when I know my body is warmed up, I lift myself from the tub and wrap a fuzzy robe around my waist before heading into the kitchen.

There's nothing like hot chocolate to end the day.

I glance at the time, noting that it's already coming up on five and Brent's probably waiting for me to come join them at the kitchen table. I'm sure he and Nathan will be fine without me. Brent's probably still in the office stressing over whatever got him in a twist earlier. Considering the way he snapped at me, I have a feeling it's best that I don't show up tonight.

My phone rings again from the kitchen counter and I groan at Heath's name — does he realize he has me working a job here? What could he possibly need right now that can't wait until tomorrow?

It's the last thing I want to do right now, but I reluctantly accept the call and bring the phone to my ear. I keep my eye on the milk that I'm heating up on the stove, making sure I don't burn it, and say, "Heath, hi, did you need something?"

He scoffs. "Yes, Sydney, I do — I need you to answer my calls when I make them, think you could manage that?"

I roll my eyes. "I was just doing the job you sent me out here to do, so what do you want that can't wait?"

"Always an attitude, Syd. I was just calling to check in, see if you have anything new for me when you make it back tomorrow."

“There’s nothing more than what I’ve already given you, Heath.” It’s not a complete lie because even if I was still taking notes, there isn’t anything going on around here that would be worth telling Heath. Nothing that pertains to the job, at least. I highly doubt he wants me to write a note stating that I’ve got the hots for the guy he wants to throw to the wolves — at least, that’s what I’m assuming is happening since that’s what he and his father specialize in.

Heath growls through the other line. “Syd, this is becoming increasingly difficult. Do I need to send someone else there to get the job done for you?”

“I’m not sure what you want me to do. There’s nothing worth mentioning in my notes.”

“Well, find something, dammit.”

Before I can respond, the call blinks away and I turn the heat off for the milk. There’s a mug sitting on the counter that I rinse out quickly, then get a ladle and scoop some of the milk into the cup. The rich scent of chocolate fills the air as I mix everything together and I moan, then carry the cup into the living room and curl up on the couch.

If Heath wanted to find out information on Brent’s ranch so badly, maybe he should’ve come out here and done it himself. Maybe then he would see for himself that there isn’t much more information to give him than what I already did and I highly doubt anyone else coming here would change that. He just has to come to terms with the idea that a property he was interested in isn’t as interesting as he thought it was.

I click through the movies on Netflix, trying to find one that I haven’t seen yet, but it’s pointless. Most of my time spent here at night is watching movies, so all the ones I’d be interested in are pretty much already watched. Instead of going with something I haven’t seen, I find a TV show I’ve watched a million times and play it from the beginning — again.

Part of me feels bad for staying in tonight when I told Brent I’d come there for dinner with him and Nathan, but I don’t want to get any closer to the two of them than I already have. It’s already hurting more and more each time I leave, it will

only get worse if I keep getting closer to them. Heath sends me a colorful text about how terrible of an employee I am, but I only flip my phone over and turn my attention to Meredith Grey — a badass from Grey's Anatomy.

If Heath has anything he wants to say, he can wait until I get there tomorrow morning and say it to me. I'm not going to take his shit when he can't even have the courage to say it all to my face, it's pathetic.

Instead of worrying about what Heath could do to me when I get into the city tomorrow, my mind turns to Brent and Nathan as I wonder what they could be eating tonight.

I'm stupid if I think I'll be able to turn my back on this place so easily.

Chapter 19

Brent

The pounding on my office door has me straightening in my chair and I mumble for whoever it is to come inside, praying that it's not Sydney after the way I snapped at her the first time. Nathan slips through the crack in the door and takes a seat on the sofa with me, his gaze darting toward my desk where the book sits open on it. He runs a hand down his face, guilt shining in his eyes as he looks over at me.

"You knew," I mutter matter-of-factly.

He nods slowly, then leans back into the cushions. "I'm not sure what we can do to help with the repairs. I even tried buttering up the lady at the bank a few weeks back after I got the area cleaned up all the way and it didn't work."

"Yeah, they already told me the last time I took out a loan that they wouldn't be able to give me any more for a while." I'm not a banker, so I have no clue what a while means and I didn't bother asking. At the time, I didn't think I'd need another loan for a while. "I've got a few ideas written down over there, but I'm not sure they can give us everything we need for the repair."

Nathan lifts from the couch and walks over to the desk, grabbing the notebook paper lying on top and scanning the paper with creased brows. He sighs and lets the sheet of paper fall back onto the surface. "It will help a little bit, but not as much as we might hope it will."

There's a conflicting look in his eyes that has me leaning up and studying him. "What is it?" If he has any other ideas that

will generate more money than the ones I came up with, I'm all ears at this point.

He clears his throat and shakes his head. "I'm not sure you'll agree with where my head's at, Dad."

I sigh. "Try me, son, because we have to do something about this. I'm all out of better ideas."

"There's a derby —"

"No," I snap, cutting him off completely.

Don't get me wrong, I was going to give him the chance to figure out his career, but I wasn't prepared for it to happen this quickly. I need time to process what he's wanting to do with his life and this isn't going to give me that.

Nathan frowns and throws his hands up in the air. "Well, Dad, I'm not sure what else we can do at this point. We have to weigh all our options, and this could be one of them. I could win it for us, Dad, you've just got to trust me."

"I do trust you," I say, my gaze softening when I look up at him. "It's not about not trusting you. I just don't want to lose you in some horrific accident like I did your mother."

Nathan gives me a sad smile and walks over to me slowly. "That's the thing, Dad, you can't keep pushing me back from the life I want because *you* are scared. I used to be terrified of something happening to me, but I've gotten over that fear and I'm not scared anymore."

Hearing how strong he's gotten since his mother's accident makes the tears sting at the back of my eyelids and I have to blink in hopes of keeping them away. The last thing I need is for Nathan to watch me cry over how grown-up he's getting.

I shake my head and mumble, "Just, not yet, Nathan, that's all I'm asking."

He grunts in response and before I can stop him he's storming out of the office with the door slamming shut behind him. As soon as he disappears though, I let the tears fall until there's no more left to wipe away. After mentioning Renee I need a moment to breathe in our favorite spot, so I slip the books

back into the drawer and lock it up before heading out of the office.

I slip my arms through my coat as I make my way to the back door, not bothering to see if Nathan is still inside, then step out onto the porch and make a beeline for the swing. When I glance over at the guest house, Sydney is stepping outside with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, and I straighten my spine at attention.

The best decision would probably be to stay put and let her do whatever she's doing, but my stress levels are high and seeing her is enough to have me standing up. She's looking in the opposite direction of me and doesn't notice when I come up to her until my hand lands on her shoulder.

She jumps and spins around, her hand resting on her chest as she breathes rapidly. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Sorry," I mumble, then run a hand through my hair and glance around the area. Part of me wants to find Nathan and apologize, but the biggest part of me wants to feel Sydney's legs wrapped around me and her lips molded to mine. "Rough night."

Sydney nods slowly. "Seemed that way earlier. Everything okay?"

I shrug. "Not sure just yet, trying to figure it out. That's nothing for you to worry about though." My gaze tracks the length of her body slowly, concentrating on how tightly the coat is clinging to her body and showcasing the curves she's hiding underneath.

"Did you need me for something?"

Instead of answering her, I step closer to her and wrap an arm around her waist while pushing her until she's flat against the side of the house. Her chest is rising and falling with each deep breath she takes, while her gaze is darting from my eyes to my mouth. "I need to be inside of you."

My admission has her breath hitching in the most beautiful way and she leans her forehead against mine before turning the knob to the front door and pulling me inside with her.

The lights are out inside, but I've been in here enough times to know my way around the place and I easily lead us into the bedroom without tripping over anything. It's like something snaps as soon as we get through the door, both of us start pulling at each other's clothes while smashing our lips together.

Every inch of my body is flaring up and it only gets hotter when her hand skates across my now bare chest. I'm so consumed in everything that I didn't even notice the shirt came off. When I glance down, the only thing I can see is the outline of Sydney's breasts popping out of the blue lace bra she's wearing.

God, can she get any more perfect?

I bring my hand up to her chest, trailing my finger along her creamy skin and smirk when she sucks in a breath at the touch. "For some reason, I can't get enough of you."

She hums in response to my words, agreeing with me, and it only makes me more feral for her. How can I crave someone so helplessly? I thought this part of my life was over, but there's something about Sydney I can't seem to shake and I know I should back away because she's always going to leave.

Instead of doing that though, I bring my hands to her thigh and lift her leg, then do the same to the other one, and groan at the feel of her wrapped around me. With our lips still fused together, I walk her over to the queen-sized bed and lie her down on it. I hover over her as I crawl up after her. The jeans I have on are only getting tighter in the front as she rocks her hips against me, chasing the friction she desperately needs.

"What do you want, Sydney?"

"*More,*" she moans. She sinks her teeth into my bottom lip gently before sucking it into her mouth.

Ravenous.

Addicted.

Obsessed.

These are all the words that describe the way I'm feeling about her right now. I lean back and hook my fingers into the loops of her pants, tugging the fabric down right along with her panties. Her arousal shines brightly, letting me know just how much she wants me right now and it only makes me more eager to get inside of her. This is what I need right now and even though this is going to change everything for the two of us, there's no way I'm stopping right now.

She's looking at me as if I can make all the pleasure go away and that only makes me want her more. When was the last time someone looked at me with so much heat in their gaze? I'd say Renee, but even she never gave me the kind of look Sydney is giving me right now.

The desire that dances in her blue eyes is enough to drive any man wild, but I'm the one staring at her right now. Although, that does nothing to stop me from getting overly jealous about all the other men she was with before. As if I have any right considering I have a walking and breathing reminder that I was with someone else before her, but that doesn't chase away my boiling blood.

As if sensing that my thoughts are being placed elsewhere, Sydney wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me down to her. I groan against her lips when they connect with mine, bringing my finger beneath the strap of her bra and pulling it down slowly. It only takes a few tugs before her breasts pop out, spilling over the cups of her bra, and I grip them gently before running a finger over her nipple.

She arches her back into me, begging for me, and I swirl my tongue around the same nipple, sucking it gently while listening to her breaths get more ragged. Her legs instinctively wrap around my waist, her slick center rubbing all over the front of my jeans, and I growl at the contact.

I'm not sure how much longer I can take not being inside her, especially when her sweet scent is wafting through the air. Her lips are a beautiful pink and swollen when I pull away and I can't help but run my thumb over her bottom lip, which she takes as an invitation to sink her teeth into it.

Nothing but pure heat travels through my system and I close my eyes briefly, basking in the feeling, before stepping off the bed and pulling my pants down. Her eyes dilate as she watches my length bob in front of her and she darts her tongue out, scooting to the edge of the bed. She wraps her hand around my length and I hiss at the contact, then shake my head and pull her away. “Not tonight, baby.”

I lift her up and lead us to the other end of the bed, watching as her long waves tumble over the edge like a waterfall. Within seconds I’m situated between her legs, her heated gaze on me as she wraps her legs back around my waist, and it’s the best image I could’ve ever hoped for.

I’m not sure what I did in life to deserve this moment, but I’ll spend the rest of my life thanking God that it happened. Her skin is soft and silky as I graze my finger down her chest and over her stomach, only stopping just above her sweet spot, then I lean down and press my lips aggressively against hers.

Chapter 20

Sydney

This part of my time here only gets harder and harder. My eyes are stinging with tears as Brent leans against the driver's side of my car, a frown on his face as if it's hurting him just as much. Even with a coat on, I can still see the outline of his muscles through the fabric and my mind conjures up an image of our night together last night — not doing anything to ebb the sadness away.

Nathan walks up to the car with a smile and gives me a small wave before patting his dad on the back. "Drive safe, you hear?"

I nod, hating that I'm even driving away from this place. There's no denying how much I've fallen in love with everything about it, and it only sucks more because I'm supposed to be helping Heath do whatever it is he's doing. "I will."

My gaze darts to Brent, his eyes pinned on mine, and he pushes away from the car with a sigh. "I gave you my number, text me when you get back home." He doesn't spend another minute by the car, choosing to walk away with his hands in his pockets and I bite my bottom lip to keep me from crying.

Nathan clears his throat and leans against the car just as his dad was just doing, then glances over his shoulder at his dad. "Don't worry about him, it's nothing new that he's grumpy, but I have a feeling that's not going to last long." He winks at me before pushing away from the car, then heads in the direction Brent went and sits beside him on the front porch.

It takes everything in me not to turn the car off and run to the two of them, but it's not something I have the luxury of doing. With reluctance, I put the car into drive and inch slowly down the driveway without glancing back through the rearview mirror. If I get even a glimpse of the two of them watching me I'm not sure I'll be able to leave.

Is it normal to have such overwhelming feelings for two people you barely know? I've only been around them a handful of times, but it feels as if they've been part of my life for forever and it's not something I'm used to. A tear slips down my cheek when I reach the end of the drive and I quickly swipe it away before making a right, my heart aching as I get further and further away from the ranch.

The thought of Heath taking me off this job only has the tears falling faster. What will I do if I never see them again? There's a chance this was the last time I would see either one of them, and I didn't even say goodbye. They will probably expect me to show up in a few months, and what happens if I don't? Will they think I intentionally stayed away from them?

God, I hope not.

To calm the emotions rolling through, I connect my phone to the Bluetooth and let my music flow throughout the car. It helps some of the anxiety and sadness running rampant in my mind, but not enough that the tears stop. Maybe it would be best if Heath took me off the job, especially if this reaction will only get worse each time I come out here.

It's late afternoon when I finally hit the city, my body already tensing at the idea of being in the thick of traffic. I already miss the privacy the ranch brought for me and I'm mentally counting the days until I go back — if I even get to go back. Heath is probably expecting me to make it to the office this afternoon, but I'm beat and need to rest. Brent kept me up most of the night last night, his hands always finding their way along my body, and I couldn't deny him even if I tried.

A car horn jolts me from my thoughts and I realize the light in front me has turned green and I'm just sitting in the middle of the road like an idiot. A few pedestrians rush across the road, clearly taking my short attention span as their chance to cross, then I inch forward as quickly as I can. The car who honked at me jerks into the lane next to me, stopping just outside my window to flip me off, and I shake my head with a frown.

Would it kill anyone to be nicer?

My phone ringing causes my music to stop playing and I glance at the touch screen, groaning when I see Heath's name. It's like he knows exactly when I get into the city. I should answer the call, but I'm not feeling up to it right now — not when my heart is still hurting from leaving the men who are slowly worming their way into my heart. The best thing for everyone is if I take a minute to breathe and let everything sink in.

The call goes to voicemail and the music picks up right where it left off and I hum along to the lyrics, hoping that it will ease my mind a bit. I pull into the parking garage that connects to my apartment, then quickly exit the car and head toward the elevator. My phone rings again, echoing through the empty space, and I growl in frustration.

I don't even look at who's calling before I accept it and say, "I'll be in tomorrow, now leave me alone. I just drove three damn hours, give me a break!" As soon as the words are out, I slap a hand to my lips and silently pray that he missed everything I said.

"Wow, who pissed in your Cheerios this morning?" Justine says from the other end with a chuckle.

"Thank God," I mutter, then continue my trek to the elevator.

"I would love to see his face if you managed to say all that to him though — priceless!"

I roll my eyes and take a deep breath. "What's up?" My voice carries a bit of an edge, but I can't bring myself to care right now. Not when I'm heading up toward my floor, when there's

a perfectly beautiful home sitting on a ranch that I could be sitting in right now.

“Just wanted to see how everything went this week, that’s all. Everything okay?”

“Everything’s great,” I choke out while slipping my key into the lock, then pushing my front door open.

“You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

“What?” I ask, my spine straightening at her observation even though she hasn’t seen me yet. “No, that’s ridiculous.”

She hums in response, not bothering to let me know she’s onto my bullshit. “Anyway, wanted to see if there’s a day we can get together. Maybe a girl’s night?”

“God, yes, please.” Nothing would help me more than a good dose of alcohol and some time with my favorite girl. “Would be a great time to tell you what else happened this week.”

“I love your life,” she mumbles over a bite of food. “Next weekend work for you?”

“I’ll make sure to clear my schedule, I really don’t care what Heath wants me to do at this point. I’m most likely losing my job anyway when I make it into the office tomorrow, especially since I’m not going by today like he’s expecting.”

My phone pings and I groan. Speak of the devil, there’s a long text waiting for me from him that I’d rather not read, but that’s what happens when your ex happens to be your boss.

Justine hisses. “Yeah, good luck with that. We’ll catch up next weekend, love you!”

I take a moment to glance at the message waiting for me from Heath, then throw my phone down on the couch. Do I even care about this damn job anymore? Any other time I’d be bending over backwards to show that I can handle anything, but I’m not so sure that’s the case anymore. I always thought I’d end up being promoted and even now that’s looking more and more bleak — I’m starting to wonder if I ever had a chance at all to make it higher in the company.

Since I didn't make it into the office yesterday and instead drowned my weight in ice cream and sit-com reruns, I'm up bright and early today. Heath left me a very nice voicemail around four in the afternoon when I ignored his call for the sixth time, and it's only solidifying how much I hate this job. I've barely made it five steps out of the elevator before I'm being gripped and pulled in the opposite direction of my office.

My face immediately flushes red with anger and I try to yank my arm from Heath's grip, but the action is futile when he's got such a strong hold on me. I huff in annoyance, then wince as his grip only seems to get tighter and it doesn't look as though he's going to loosen it anytime soon.

As soon as we are in his office, he shuts the door aggressively behind him and pulls me over to a chair sitting in front of his desk. He doesn't round the large piece of furniture like I expected him to, choosing instead to lean against it with his arms crossed over his chest. There's nothing but storm clouds brewing in his gaze and the idea of him being this angry has me sinking into the chair, wishing I could disappear.

"What the fuck, Syd?" he spits out. "You were supposed to come to the office as soon as you got back into the city, not the next day. I hope you came back with good news."

I scoff. "I'm not sure what you want me to tell you, Heath. There's nothing else to give you."

His spine straightens and he glares at me, the action making my skin crawl. How have I never realized he got angry so easily? Is this really so important that it deserves this reaction?

"You had one job, Sydney, and you couldn't even do that? Yet, you expect to make it to the top at this company." He curls his lip in disgust and shakes his head. "It's pathetic, really, that you ever thought you'd have a higher place here."

I'm trying not to let his words hurt me, but this is what I have been spending the majority of my time working towards. I

wanted to prove to everyone around me I could do anything, be better than they believed me to be, but Heath just shot all my hopes down the drain. For what, some lousy notes that I didn't get?

I'm bouncing my leg up and down frantically, silently forcing myself not to open my big mouth, while he continues to go on and on about how terrible I am at this job. All his words are going through one ear and out the other, because I'm sure after he's had a moment to cool down he'll come waltzing back into my office and apologize for his reaction.

"You're dismissed," he snaps, then rounds the desk and flops dramatically into his chair. You'd think he's a teenager with the way he's acting over the entire situation, and luckily for me, I manage to keep my mouth shut the entire way to my office.

Is being around Heath twenty-four-seven worth it?

I'm not sure it is anymore. I thought working at his company was the smart move for my career, but I'm starting to wonder if I'm better off doing something else with my life. The fact that the ranch pops into my mind after the thought only reminds me that I'm more attached to the place than I had intended to be — here's to hoping Heath will let me go back, even if it's only one more time.

Chapter 21

Brent

As much as I'm trying to understand that Nathan is an adult and can make his own choices in life, that doesn't stop my heart from nearly falling out of my chest every time he takes his horse around the small track we have outside. Each time the horse becomes agitated, my heart comes to a complete stop, only to beat once Nathan seems to calm him down.

After much thought after our fight, I knew I needed to let him do this — he feels responsible for the barn being destroyed, since he never woke up that night — and I'm slowly getting better about it. Last week I nearly collapsed from worry, but now it's only making me lose my breath and feel like I'm having a damn heart attack.

But the smile on his face as he hops off the horse is what really calms down my nerves. I may hate this life for him, but if it's something that makes him this happy, I'm not going to stand in his way. It's not right that I've been projecting my own fears onto him, especially when it pertains to his future, and I'm going to stand by his side through it all.

He walks over to me, beaming from ear to ear, then takes a seat next to me on the grass. "You see that?"

I give him a small smile and nod. "I did, you're definitely getting better. You think you'll be ready for the derby?"

"As long as I keep working at it every day it should all come together nicely." He glances around the area and frowns at the guest house, just like the two of us have been doing since

Sydney left — again — and I sigh to myself. It's been a couple months since she pulled away from the ranch and things haven't been the same since.

I knew before it even happened that sharing a heated night with her would change everything, so it wasn't much of a surprise that I was grumpier than normal right after she left. Nathan set me straight though, telling me that I needed to man up and realize that she has another life, but that she'll come back like she always does.

Except, there's this sinking feeling in my stomach that won't seem to go away. Like everything around us is going to come crashing down and ruin whatever it is that's going on between Sydney and me. I'm not sure where it's coming from, but I've chosen to ignore it instead of dwelling on it — I have much more pressing matters to worry about, like figuring out how to gather the money for this rebuild.

“I know it took a minute, and I'm still getting used to it, but I just wanted to say I'm proud of you.”

Nathan smiles brightly at my praise, then averts his gaze and looks back toward the guest house. “You miss her?”

I sigh. “I do and I'm not sure what that means.”

“Dad, I've watched you with her. Even when she's not paying attention, your eyes are always on her, and there's this look in them I can only describe as love.” He clears his throat and cocks his head to the side. “Do you love her, Dad?”

Is it possible to love someone when you've only been around them a handful of times? His question has me thinking too much right now, so instead of answering him, I lift from my spot on the steps and blow out a rough breath. “I'll get back to you on that one.” Before he can question me any further, I push through the front door and head into the kitchen to see what we can have to eat today.

Will things be different when Sydney comes next month?

That sinking feeling I was getting earlier comes back full force and I have to take a seat on the couch with a deep breath. If she comes back, I'm not sure it will be for anything good and

that has me worrying. I've grown attached to having her here even though I knew eventually she would stop coming around, but it never quite sank in until now.

Nathan walks through the front door and stops in front of me. "Want me to make dinner tonight?"

I shake my head and sigh. "Nah, I'll handle it." The least I can do is try to occupy my mind and get it off Sydney, even though I've been dreaming of the way her blonde hair fell over my chest our last night together.

It doesn't matter that she's miles away from me, I can still hear the moans as I brought her to release and I've never craved a sound so much in my life. I'd give anything to have her here in front of me, begging me to give her more, but unfortunately, that's not how this life works.

Watching her drive away two months ago left me feeling empty in a way I haven't felt for a really long time and it took every ounce of energy not to chase her car down and beg her to stay.

Would she if I had asked her to?

I'm not even sure if she feels the same connection as I do. Even if she's given in to the sexual tension, that doesn't mean there's anything more there for her, and that only makes a frown deepen on my face. Is it possible that I'm not feeling anything and only hoping that it's there?

No.

I'd know if what I was feeling was simple attraction, and that's not what this is. I've spent many days since she's been gone wondering what it would be like to have her here constantly, imagining what it would look like if she were standing in my kitchen every morning drinking a cup of coffee while enjoying the view. Would we have the same kind of routine that Renee and I had?

No one could ever replace the love that Renee and I had for each other, but the idea of another routine with someone else sends a wave of warmth flowing through me — I miss having

someone else keeping me company, and all it took was a few interactions with Sydney to get me there.

It's late when I walk through my room, eyes roaming over the empty bed just like they do every night. What would Sydney be wearing if she were here right now? I imagine it would be something silky, maybe a dark blue to bring out the color of her eyes, and it would barely cover her frame.

How would it feel to be able to turn in the middle of the night and wrap my arm around her, pulling her snug against my chest? We'd wake up early in the morning, legs tangled together like a pretzel, and we'd start our day off in the most glorious way. I'd sink into her delicious heat, listening to her intake of breath and laugh when she tried to move her face away from mine because of her morning breath — little does she know, I wouldn't care one bit about it.

Everything about her is beautiful.

The way she smiles at Nathan when talking to him, befriending him so easily when most people would be against someone with a child. When I first saw Sydney, I didn't strike her as someone who would have relations with a single dad. At first, I assumed she was one of those snotty city girls who think she's better than everyone around her, but I couldn't have been further from the truth.

It wasn't my plan to get to know her and crave to be around her, not in the least, and that's exactly what happened. I loved Renee with everything I had, more than I ever did anyone else, and I never thought I'd be able to love another woman the way I did her — until Sydney showed up and blew up my life. My mind replays the question Nathan asked me, the one I didn't want to answer at first, but now I can't deny the answer.

Love is something I thought only happened once in a lifetime and that's what I had with Renee, no doubt about that, but it's clear that a second love is out there. Renee would want me to be happy and I think she'd approve of Sydney bringing back that happiness. It's crazy to think that my feelings have grown this much with only being around her a few times in almost a year, but isn't that what love is?

It's consuming and it forces you to act out, be someone you never thought you would be. When I was with Renee, I went from being this party guy to someone who would rather sit inside on a weekend night and enjoy the outdoors or watch a movie. But with Sydney, I'm turning possessive and it's something I've never really felt before.

I knew Renee was with other men when we met, but it never made me jealous that other men's hands were on her. Even when only thinking about it in relation to Sydney, my blood boils with unwanted jealousy and I want to make sure every guy that looks her way knows she's mine. That's the thing about this newfound relationship she and I seem to have though — she's not mine, not really, and maybe she doesn't want to be in the first place.

What if I'm the only one feeling my heart crack every time she pulls away from my house?

I'm sure there's attraction there, considering our times together, but what if it's nothing more than a way for her to pass the time while she's coming here? She's here to get a break from work, what better way to do that than getting under someone? Jesus, I sound like an ass judging her, but I'm going to go insane thinking about what's running through her head.

What if Nathan and I aren't enough, or too much for her? Maybe she's fine being around Nathan for a little while, but doesn't want the responsibility that comes with being in a relationship with me. Nathan might be eighteen, but that doesn't mean he's done being part of my life just because he's old enough to move out. He'll grow up to have kids that will always have a second home here. Is that what Sydney sees for her future?

The idea of her walking around, tending to grandkids as they run around the house, brings a smile to my face I wasn't prepared for. I let it drop immediately — I'd rather not get this insane idea in my head when I don't know where hers is in the matter.

But, why does she keep coming back?

I'd understand if maybe she wanted to take a week during summer to enjoy herself, let loose a bit, but why has she come here every three months like clockwork? That sinking feeling in my gut comes back and this time it's not something I can ignore. If there's anyone that understands what the ranch lacks during each season, it's me, and there's nothing special about it during the winter.

Unless Sydney sees something I don't, there's only one thing that would make coming here during the snowfall worth it, and that's the lake when it freezes over. That didn't happen while she was here, yet she stayed the entire week.

I want to believe that she stayed because of me, but what if it's something else entirely? She said she worked at a firm, but didn't get into any other details besides that, and now I'm wondering if she even told me the truth.

Chapter 22

Sydney

I t's been two months since Heath freaked out on me about not having any new information on Brent's ranch and I haven't heard anything about getting sent back. He should've come to me by now and let me know when I'll be departing for the ranch next, but it's making me increasingly nervous that he hasn't yet. That's how I find myself walking slowly down the long hallway that leads me to his office, which sits in the corner to the left of his father's office.

His muffled voice filters through the walls and I take a deep breath before tapping my knuckle on it lightly. I'm not sure he'll appreciate being bothered at this time, much less being bothered while in the middle of a call, so light and sweet is what we are going with this morning. The blinds are pulled down, shielding me from seeing him, but his shadow still moves along them and I straighten my spine as he walks toward the door.

I cower back slightly when I see the glare on his face, but he only shakes his head in irritation before pointing me to the empty chair in front of his desk. He makes his way around his desk, eyes focused on me even though he's still in the middle of a conversation, and it reminds me of what it used to be like when we were together. There was never a time when he *wouldn't* be on the phone, not even when we made plans for a nice dinner, and it only goes to show me the difference between him and Brent.

I've been wondering how it was so easy to get as close as I did to Brent, but seeing the way Heath has been toward me since I

got back has shown me the truth. Sure, Brent might be a little grumpy depending on the day, but he's still got a big heart that Heath will never have. I take a moment to glance around the office while he talks to whoever's on the other end, my gaze zeroing in on the frames sitting along the window sill.

That should've been another clue that we were doomed from the start. There are photos of him with friends from college, even a few that include his dad, but he never once added me to the mix. As if he was ashamed to let people know I was the one under his arm. As much as the moment had hurt me, I guess it's a blessing that he cheated on me when he did — who knows how long I would've let our relationship continue if he didn't ruin it first.

Heath clears his throat, forcing my attention back on him, and he narrows his eyes. “What could be so important that you thought you'd show up unannounced?”

I manage to keep my face straight, even though I'm itching to roll my eyes at him. He's not even the most important man in the building, yet he acts as if he is — it's ridiculous. “I was wondering why I haven't heard anything about leaving for the week next month.”

He chuckles. “Oh, you thought you were still working on that?”

That makes my heart drop to my stomach, but I school my features before he can begin to question them. “Are you saying I'm no longer going there?”

“I thought it would be best if we sent someone else out there, to finish what you started since you can't seem to do that for us.”

My hand twitches on my lap and I thread my fingers together, holding them tightly so as not to showcase my growing anxiety. I had worried that I'd be fired altogether, but instead, I'm not allowed to go back there at all. What the hell do I do? I give him a small smile and take a deep breath. “Is it possible to give me one more chance? I really think we could get somewhere with one more trip, especially since I've gotten close to the owner's son.”

Heath's jaw clenches, his face turning red, and he scoffs. "Why doesn't that statement surprise me?" Before I can make some backhanded comment about his jab, he leans on his desk with a grin that doesn't sit right with me. "Fine, I'll give you one more shot, but that's it. If you come back empty-handed, someone else will be taking over and I'll make sure they get the work done."

I nod frantically, letting the breath I was holding slowly fall out. "Thank you, Heath, you won't regret it."

When I don't move from the chair, he arches a brow at me in question. "Is there something else you need?"

"No."

"Then you can leave. Make sure to shut the door behind you and remind my assistant not to send anyone back without an appointment." Judging by the stern frown on his face, I'm going to take a guess that his assistant is about to be in serious trouble — oops.

"Thank you again, Heath. I'm devoted to this project and appreciate the chance to see it through all the way." It's nothing but a lie coming out of my mouth, I'd love nothing more than to watch whatever he's trying to do crash and burn, but that's not something he needs to know or else I'll never step foot on the ranch again.

As I'm pushing the office door open, I swear I hear him mutter something about not thanking him yet, but I choose to ignore it since I got what I wanted anyway. I catch the glare his assistant is giving me as I rush past her desk and avert my gaze from hers, knowing that she probably figured out the emergency I called about was a fluke once she reached her destination.

It doesn't take long for Heath to call her name with annoyance and she jerks from her spot at the desk, pulling her tight skirt down along the way. I roll my eyes when I notice Heath's gaze traveling down her legs — something tells me this won't be the kind of ass-chewing I had in mind — and judging by the smirk she gives me over her shoulder, she knows it too.

Does she think I give a shit what she does with him? I chuckle to myself because she probably thinks she's the only one he's doing it with, but she'll find out the hard way. It's crazy to think I was her at one point, feeling like it was the most amazing thing that I grabbed his attention, only to realize how many other women caught it as well.

Silly me.

It's late when I finally step onto the perfectly paved sidewalk outside, the bright squares a stark contrast to the darker ones only a few feet away — everything at this place has me in pristine condition, it's disgusting. What did I ever see in working somewhere like this again?

I shake my head and head down the sidewalk, choosing to walk instead of catching a cab since it's a nice night out right now. It's not often that I'll walk around at night, especially during the colder months, but something about the chill it brings takes me back to the ranch and I can't seem to bring myself to chase the cold away. This also isn't the first night I've decided to walk home.

My feet are killing me by the time I make it to the cobblestone path that leads to the front entrance of my apartment complex. There are a few people standing outside enjoying a cigarette while talking amongst themselves about whatever bullshit they heard on the news — every so often one of them will stop me and tell me what they heard, but thankfully tonight isn't one of those nights. I give them each a small smile as I walk by, trying not to shiver under their lingering gazes, and quickly push through the glass doors.

Ernest, who I call Ernie, is sitting at his usual spot behind the front desk with a crossword book folded back in his hands. "What do you got for me tonight, Ernie?"

He glances up with a smirk, then darts his gaze back to the puzzle he's working on and taps his chin in thought. This is something we've started doing every night — I'll come in

from work and he'll read off one of the definitions for me, then I'll head into the elevator — and it's become one of my favorite parts of the day.

Ernie is an older man, who loves talking about his grandkids to anyone who will listen, and enjoys a good hoagie. I happen to know all of this because I've let him talk my ear off about his granddaughters while sharing a hoagie from around the corner with him.

Ernie clears his throat and says, "Right-hand man for a man with no right hand. Four letters."

It takes a few minutes, but thank goodness I spent most of my childhood watching Disney movies or else he would've gotten me this time. I smile brightly at him and his shoulders slump in defeat when I say, "Smee."

He shakes his head and lets out a sigh. "I'm going to stump you one of these times, Miss Whitlock."

I chuckle. "Whatever you say, Ernie, have a good night!"

The elevator doors burst open when I walk up to them and as soon as they shut in front of me the men that were standing outside all walk through the lobby together, their eyes falling right on me. It's not the first time they've looked at me this way, but it's starting to get uncomfortable — nothing like it was when I was staying in the guest house at Brent's.

I'm digging into my purse for my keys and sigh in relief when I have them clutched in my hand, but my steps come to a sudden halt when I look up and find Heath standing outside my front door. "H-Heath, what are you doing here?"

He smirks at me, bringing a hand out to touch me, but I flinch away from it. "Syd, I was waiting up for you, thought we could have a chat. Mind if I come inside?"

If I could, I'd send him away, but if this is about the ranch project then I need to act as calm and collected as possible about it. I nod, then wait for him to move out of my way so I can unlock the door and hold it open for him. Like usual, he walks in without so much as offering to let me go first — ever

the gentlemen — and his gaze studies my apartment with a frown.

“What’s up?” I ask after throwing my purse onto the counter.

“I was wondering what’s been going on at the ranch,” he says casually. “You said that there wasn’t anything worth writing down, but that must mean there’s something you’ve gotten while there.”

My hands get damp at his questioning and I shrug my shoulders. “Nothing out of the ordinary. The owner’s son, Nathan, took me for a tour around the property. The most I saw while there was a lake that he and his dad like to skate on during the winter months.”

“Anyone ever talked about their horses?”

“Not that I can recall, other than seeing if I wanted to go for a ride on one.” When I turn around and lean against the counter, drink in hand, Heath is looking at me with an accusatory frown. I roll my eyes. “Calm down, it was the son’s way of welcoming me onto the property.”

“And that’s all?”

I’m not sure if anything in my eyes is giving me away, but I’m praying to hell it’s not at this point. I nod my head. “Yes, Heath. You do realize I know how to do my job, right? The only information worth giving you was that they were cleaning up from a barn accident, which has since been finished, but that’s all.”

He hums in response and moves to the front door. “I expect more information when you come back next. Something tells me it’s going to be much different than the other times you went down there.” Then he shuts the door softly behind him.

Why does that sound so ominous?

Chapter 23

Brent

There are roughly two more weeks before I get to see Sydney again and I'm going crazy with making sure everything is in order for her. I've had Nathan go into the guest house and clean it out more than once, even though no one else has been in there since her, and I'm almost certain he's about to cuss me out over it. I pull the truck up to the mailbox and grab the small stack of envelopes inside, noticing that one looks a little fancier than I'm used to seeing.

Nathan is sitting on the couch when I walk through the door, standing up as if prepared for me to ask him to clean the guest house again, but I only shake my head at him while pulling the fancy card stock paper from between what I'm sure are bills. I frown at the cursive written along the thick paper — an event that I've been invited to taking place in New York City, some kind of charity event.

Something akin to hope blossoms inside of me. Maybe this is Sydney's way of telling me that we are more than just a fling or a way for her to pass time, and my frown turns into a grin.

"What's got you smiling like that?" Nathan asks from beside me. I toss the invitation on his lap and lean against the cushions, already trying to plan what I could wear. This seems like a fancy gala, but I'm not sure I have anything that would be appropriate for an event like that. Nathan hums beside me and hands it back over. "You going to go?"

I shrug. "Maybe, but I don't know if I have anything to wear." With money being a little tight right now I highly doubt I'd be able to get anything too expensive even if I could go. Is the

humiliation worth it to see Sydney again, sooner than I've been used to seeing her?

It would be nice to see her in a setting that's more in her wheelhouse, watching as she rocks the shit out of the rich pricks looking to blow their money as a form of publicity.

"I think it could be good for you."

"What if Sydney's there?"

"What about it?"

I sigh. "I'd hate for her to realize she was slumming it with the wrong guy when she could have any of those money-hungry men out there."

Nathan growls, something I've never heard him do before when it comes to me, and he places a hand on my shoulder. "Are you fucking kidding me? And don't say a single word about you still being my dad," he says with an arched brow, knowing those words were going to pop out. "You are the best guy, and Dad, I know and you've done well for someone who has been doing it all on their own. If she can't see that simply because of the way you dress, then she doesn't deserve to be with you."

In all the years I've been raising this child, he's never gone off like that with me. Granted, he's never had to since I've always been a grouchy asshole that didn't care about being with women all like that — but still.

I nod at his words. "I hear you, son." I glance at the invitation still clutched in my hand and look back at him. "You really think I should go?"

"Seems like a good way to get away from all the stress we've been dealing with," he mutters. Each day that he practices on the horse my anxiety lessens a little more, which is a relief for both of us, and the derby is only getting closer. "Plus, it will get you off my ass for a while. I'm worried Sydney will get lightheaded just by breathing in that damn place."

I chuckle. "Yeah, sorry, I guess it should be clean enough, right?"

He scoffs. “You think? That place could go a year without being cleaned and still be spotless at this point.”

“Okay, I get it,” I mumble. “I’m going overboard.”

“Yeah, you are, but I don’t mind. I haven’t seen you this way for a really long time.” There’s a hint of sadness in his voice, but instead of elaborating on it, he leans up with a sigh before standing. “I’m going to check on the horses, I’ll see you for dinner in a little while.” Then he’s taking long strides out the door.

As much as he wants to see me happy, I’m sure it hurts him a little bit to know that I’ve found someone else to fill the space that his mother used to take up. No one could ever replace the light she brought into my life, but I know that neither she nor Nathan would want me to stay in the darkness forever. Which is exactly why I add a number one for the RSVP, then slip it into the envelope that accompanied it.

I’m not sure what will happen when I go to this thing, but here’s to hoping it will only make things stronger with me and Sydney. Maybe it will prove that we can handle the distance between us if she won’t stay at the ranch with Nathan and me.

Or she’ll see you and wish you never showed your face.

I don’t wear suits that often, so there are only a few hanging in my closet when I pull it open and I glance at each one before deciding on the navy blue one I bought a couple years ago — the newest one I have in my collection. It will need to be dry-cleaned before I go anywhere, but at least I have until the end of the week to get it done. There’s no doubt that everyone will be able to tell it’s some knock-off version of an Armani, but it’s the best I’ve got to make it to the event at all.



After a three-hour drive I finally make it into the city and all the traffic spilling on either side of me is a reminder of why I hated coming here with my parents. There’s nothing calming about the bright lights that nearly blind you while you’re driving, or the constant sound of a horn being blown because

of antsy drivers. I love being able to coast along the road at my own pace with no worries of someone getting pissed off that I'm going five miles under the speed limit.

Just as it stated on the invite, I opened my email two days ago to find one waiting for me with my itinerary. Apparently, they paid for an entire block of hotel rooms that I've been graced with staying in and I'm nervous to see where it is I'll be staying — hopefully better than the shithole I had plans of booking before I remembered the note that came with the invite.

My breath gets caught in my throat when I pull up to the address for the hotel and I stare at the tall building before jumping out of my truck. There's a man standing right outside my door, a smile on his face and a suit tight against his body, and he holds a hand out to me. "Uh, nice to meet you," I say, shoving my hand into his grip.

He blinks in confusion, but shakes my hand anyway, then he pulls away and points to the truck. "Keys?"

What the hell is he talking about? My confusion must be obvious because he sighs and points to the sign next to him that mentions a valet.

"Oh, uh, yeah, here," I say with a nervous chuckle. "Just let me grab my bag."

As soon as the bag is on the ground at my feet, the valet pulls away in my truck and disappears around a corner, and I take a moment to peek inside the hotel. There's a crowd of people gathered, patiently waiting their turn to check into their room, but my gaze darts to the walls that have large paintings hanging from them.

I've never been one for art, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate a good painting when I see one. I finally manage to get my feet to move and walk through the revolving door and come to a stop at the back of the line. The ceiling is high with large chandeliers hanging throughout to bring the room together.

And I was about to book a stay at some rat-infested motel that was a few miles away from the city, just so I could afford the trip out here without putting us deeper in the hole at the ranch. Once another staff member comes from the back room the line starts moving a lot quicker until it's finally my turn. "Uh, the room should be under Dudley."

The woman glances at me with a frown, probably confused as to what someone like me is doing in their establishment, then darts her gaze across the screen before blinking back in surprise. "Here you go, Mr. Dudley, please enjoy your stay." There's an underlying statement she isn't making known, but I know it's moving around in her head — she's already making assumptions that I'm going to steal something from here before I leave.

The stereotypes only seem to get worse.

A few of the guests who came in before me are lounging on the chairs in the lobby, talking back and forth with each other, and I quickly make my way to the elevators. I've always prided myself on being a polite person, but that's all going to go out the window if any of these people say something sideways to me. It doesn't help that my mood only gets worse the longer I'm away from Sydney and now I'm about to see her in her element — which means my stress levels are abnormally higher than they probably should be.

I thought the lobby was the best part of the place, but the moment I step foot into my room for the weekend I'm blown away. It's nothing like the hotel rooms I'm used to staying in — there's a large kitchen that connects to the sitting area, and when I get down the hallway there's a large bedroom to my right. Who the hell had the money to book hotels for the weekend, and is this how everyone's looks?

I'm in over my head here and I can feel the sweat sticking to my shirt as my nerves increase. Was this a bad idea? I nearly rip my shirt off, my skin heating up the longer I have it on, and I throw it onto the floor before running my hands through my hair. It was a bad idea to come alone. I should've added a plus one to the invite and brought Nathan with me.

My phone rings from my pocket, but I can't move my arms to answer the call as I stride through each space of the room. The countertops are marble and the red sofa in the sitting room looks like it was made with the richest velvet and I'm scared to sit on it. When I bring my hand down onto the island centered in the kitchen it pushes a button on the remote and a whirring sound catches my attention — should I really be surprised that the TV pops out of a stand connected to the wall?

This is the life Sydney probably lives every day and here I am surprised by all of it — now that sinking feeling is understandable, she's going to realize how much better she can do than someone like me.

Chapter 24

Sydney

The charity gala only started thirty minutes ago and I already can't wait to get out of this tight dress and into something looser. Heath insisted that I wear something that would catch the guests' attention, so he thought he should come with me to try on dresses and this is the one he picked. I'm not sure what his plans are, only that he's been adamant about me staying throughout the entirety of the event because he has a big announcement to make.

It shouldn't have anything to do with the ranch, considering I haven't had a chance to make it out there again to gain information for him. At least, that's what he thought I was going to do — I was more than prepared to come back empty-handed with my two-week notice. I've had a couple extra weeks to think about what it is I truly want in life and it isn't what I'm living now. Justine helped me come to terms with things and it has everything to do with the two men that live three hours away.

I plaster a fake smile on my face as the businessmen walk over to me and shake my hand — apparently, I'm the one greeting all the guests — before walking toward the open bar. Why doesn't it surprise me that the men are the ones with alcohol in their hands while their wives sip glasses of water? A travesty really, but it's not my business to worry about.

I'm struck speechless when a familiar frame walks through the entrance, his gaze surveying the large space as he fidgets in his tux. It doesn't take more than a glance for the rest of the guests to realize how out of place Brent is with his cheap suit, but the

moment his eyes find mine there's a blinding smile on his face. I'd love nothing more than to show him how happy I am to see him here, but instead, I avert my gaze from his and find Heath watching us from across the room.

The smirk that lifts at the corners of his mouth has my stomach rolling with anxiety — he knows everything that I've been up to. I'm not sure how he managed to find out, but there's nothing I know more than the look in his eyes when he's about to get revenge on someone. Tonight, that someone just happens to be me, and I have a sinking suspicion that it also involves the man standing in front of me.

There's no reason that Brent should be here unless Heath wanted him to be, and the only reason Heath would want him here is if he's on to our growing relationship. My spine stiffens when Brent's arm comes around my waist and I glance at him, noting the frown on his face.

“Brent,” I whisper as people push past the two of us without a second glance. “What are you doing here?”

He blinks a few times. “You didn't know I'd be coming? I thought you were the one who sent the invitation.”

“No, why would I do that?” My nerves are taking over so badly that the question comes out wrong and Brent flinches from the question. I take a deep breath and smile at him, trying my best to make it look polite rather than overly excited. “Sorry, that didn't come out right, I've had my boss on my ass all day and the stress is getting to me.”

While Brent glances around the large space, watching as the staff members take the women's coats, I take a moment to appreciate the way his suit looks on him. It might not be as expensive as the rest of the suits in this place, but that's what makes it completely him. He's not wearing an Armani suit to make himself look just like everyone else and that brings a big smile to my face.

“Where are you sitting?” Brent asks, nudging his head toward the round tables placed two feet apart from each other.

I clear my throat and shrug. “Honestly? I haven’t had time to worry about that.” My gaze darts over his shoulder and I breathe out a sigh of relief when I don’t see Heath standing there anymore. “But, it doesn’t hurt to figure that out now. Come with me?”

A couple women sitting close to the doors, eyeing the men who walk in, look Brent up and down before giggling. I narrow my eyes at them while dragging Brent along the floor, hoping to find an empty table somewhere in the back — if I have to see anyone else look at Brent the wrong way, I’m going to go off, and I don’t think that would be a good look for Heath right now.

“Why are we all the way back here?”

I dart my gaze away from him, hating how easily his presence heats my skin up, and say, “The lights give me a headache, figured we could stay where it’s a little darker. Is that okay?”

He frowns, but nods. “Uh, yeah, sure.” There’s a stiffness in his shoulders as he sits down that I’m not sure I like, but acting too comfortable with him would set off alarm bells. If there’s a chance Heath doesn’t know about Brent and I, then I can save my ass by acting as casually as possible with him. “I’ve missed you.”

His words immediately calm the nerves and I place my hand on top of his, momentarily forgetting about the distance I’m supposed to be putting between us until someone walks by. I pull my hand from his and place it back on my lap, frowning at myself for acting this way. I’m not sure what the hell is going on, but I’m only upset with myself for never coming clean to Brent sooner.

I had everything I was going to say to him rehearsed, not wanting to leave a single detail out, and there’s a chance all of that hard work is going to shit tonight. I’ve spent almost a year lying to not only Brent, but to Nathan as well, and I’ve never felt more horrible about myself than I do at this moment. Heath isn’t one to let things go easily, which means if he knows about this thing with Brent, then he’s not going to back down from a fight.

“Uh, Sydney?” Brent’s loud voice knocks me from my thoughts and I shake my head before glancing up at him. He’s got his head cocked to the side, then the music changes to something slower and he stands from his seat with a hand out. “Would you like to dance?”

There’s nothing I would like more.

I should’ve thought the decision through a little more before giving him my hand, but he’s already pulling me onto the dance floor just as I see Heath’s tall frame watching us from across the room. While Brent mumbles things into my ear, my gaze stays focused on the man who ruined my life in more ways than one, and I can’t concentrate on anything Brent’s saying.

This should be a happy moment for me, since I’ve been missing Brent more and more every day, but it’s only sadness I feel. I know this moment isn’t going to last forever, no matter how much I wish it would, and that makes it hard to listen to Brent’s voice right now. I go to bed dreaming of hearing it every day, rather than one week every few months, and now he’s standing in front of me with his arms wrapped around my waist.

As soon as the song ends, another starts, and Brent’s body only seems to get closer to mine. I should move away from him, put some distance between our bodies before everything becomes more obvious, but I can’t bring myself to do that. I’ve been craving his touch ever since I left, wishing I could feel him sink into me over and over again, and now that I’ve got his hands on me I can’t move.

All I can do is enjoy the time that I’m getting with him before everything I’ve built with him is destroyed. Looking at Heath over Brent’s shoulder, there’s only one thought running through my mind — *how can someone be so cruel?* It’s like Heath can’t stand when someone else is better than him, so he has to make sure to knock them down a few pegs, and I hate knowing he’s probably getting a kick out of this.

Men are curling their lips in disgust at Brent, while women are continuously giggling before whispering something to each

other, and it's nerve-wracking. Is the way someone dresses that important to people? Their reaction is enough to make me want to get into my car and grab the tight black dress I wore to the club with Justine, see how nice they think I look with that on.

When I glance up at Brent, praying that I don't see sadness in his eyes from everyone's reaction to him, there's a smile on his face as he stares right at me. It's like he's oblivious to the people around him and the only person who matters is me. His forehead comes down to mine and he moves his lips in time with the song, silently singing it to me, and I bask in him for a minute before pulling away hesitantly.

"I think it's time for a drink. Would you like one?"

Brent shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair, making it fall in front of his eyes briefly before he pushes it back. "I can go get it for you though, go sit back down." His lips connect with the top of my head and I feel a jolt of electricity shoot through me from the action.

As I head back to the table, I run a hand through my hair and mumble to myself about the night going terrible. Someone comes onto the microphone, letting all of the guests know dinner is about to be served, and I shake my head before sinking into my chair. Brent looks breathtaking as he makes his way down the carpeted floor, his smile doing nothing to chase away the desire I have for him, and he hands me a small glass of champagne.

Our entire table is filled with random guests that don't know how to shut up and I'm starting to sense Brent's comfort dwindling, judging by the way he keeps fidgeting in his seat every time someone looks at him. I excuse myself from the table for a minute, wanting to collect myself before I strangle someone in the middle of a damn charity event, and walk over to a dark corner away from the other tables.

"You can get through this, Syd," I mutter to myself. "It's only a few more hours, then you can go home and drink the pain away. You don't have to deal with everyone's stares for much longer." When I turn around to head back to the table, a yelp

pops out of my throat as I bump into Brent's chest. "Shit, I didn't see you standing there."

Brent growls. "I think it's best if I leave, that way the stares can stop." His anger is evident and I open my mouth to say something, but Heath's voice rings throughout the speakers surrounding us. Apparently, the announcement is about to take place and he would like everyone to take a seat, which only has Brent grunting in response and storming away from me.

Something feels incredibly wrong and I don't have a choice but to find out why that is.

Chapter 25

Brent

I knew this would happen the moment I stepped foot in this place. Even though I don't wear Armani or Ralph Lauren, it doesn't mean I don't know their stuff when I see it — and that's all I can see as I glance around the venue space. It shouldn't surprise me much that Sydney has been waiting for the night to be over with me so she couldn't be embarrassed any longer, but I didn't think she'd end up being like them.

All pairs of eyes at our table turn to me when I smack my chair against the surface, nearly knocking drinks off the edge, but I don't bother muttering an apology. Am I really sorry, considering no one can keep their eyes to themselves? I tried being someone I'm not just by stepping foot in here, but that's not what I'm going to do any longer and I was always told to treat people the same as they treat you.

There's a charge in the air as Sydney takes a seat at the table, but I force my gaze to stay down on my lap. It's ridiculous that she could hurt me in the worst way, yet I'm still itching to look at her and touch her. No matter how angry I am with her right now, it doesn't change how stunning she looks in the blue dress she's wearing. It's tight against her body, but has a train that flows elegantly behind her.

The rhinestones along the bodice only bring everything together.

She's got her hair curled tightly, much different than I've seen it look around the ranch, and makeup that looks like it won't come off for years. Her steps as she moved back and forth

with me were a little shaky at first, but she started getting more into it once her attention fell back on me.

I've never felt my hope crash as quickly as it did when I heard the things she was mumbling to herself — how could I have been so stupid to think that I would be enough for her? This is what I get for trusting someone and loving them after years of not being able to feel anything but anger. Sydney was supposed to walk happily into my arms tonight, but instead, she's managed to keep her distance other than that small moment out on the dance floor — and another at the table when we were sitting alone.

Was it all in my head?

If Nathan were here he'd tell me that I'm thinking too much, but I'm not so sure I am anymore. Sydney can barely look at me as I glance across the table and watch her as she darts her gaze from the stage to her hands. It looks like she's talking to herself and I wonder if she's saying anything else about me that I should know — I guess the bright side is that I know how she really feels about me and it's better that I found out now than years down the road.

Years?

Look at me, I'm pathetic.

While the guy who got onto the speaker waits for everyone around us to take their seats, I try to use this moment as a way to sneak out, but his voice booms throughout the space again. My gaze catches onto him from my seat and I shake my head at his fake smile, not at all surprised by how much he's hating this event. A rich guy like him doesn't feel the need to help the sick or poor, he's more worried about using his money on himself.

I'm willing to bet there's not a single check written out from him that can go towards a charity.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for taking the time to come out to such a special event. I'd also love to thank all of the wonderful staff who have taken care of you guys tonight, it wouldn't be running as smoothly without them.” He

glances at our table, winking at someone sitting around me, then clears his throat. “Speaking of things running smoothly, I’d love to invite one of my most promising employees up on the stage with me for a moment of appreciation.”

My gaze snaps to Sydney’s when she sucks in a breath, the sound conjuring an image of her making the same exact one as I sunk myself deep inside of her, then I quickly avert my eyes.

“Sydney Whitlock, will you please come up here with me?” the guy says, a hand sticking out as he keeps his gaze pinned to our table. I swear there’s a brief moment when he darts his gaze over to me and his lip twitches with a smile, but I ignore it and wait for Sydney to get up. “Don’t get shy now,” he grinds out when Sydney still doesn’t move.

She’s got this deer in headlights look in her eyes and her spine is stiffer than I’ve ever seen it before, her eyes only blinking once before staying wide open for a few more minutes. What the hell is her problem?

“Sydney?” I ask quietly, her attention being knocked back to the present.

“Since Sydney has a little stage fright, I’d like to take a moment to speak on the amazing work she’s currently doing for me that I can’t wait to dig into. Thanks to Sydney and her amazing work, I’m going to acquire a property that’s certain to bring in a generous income.”

My blood runs cold before he even mentions what property he’s talking about. Judging by the tremble of Sydney’s bottom lip, everything he just said has to do with me and my ranch. It feels like every piece of my heart is crashing to the floor, the sound of it echoing in my head but not catching the attention of the people surrounding me, and when the guy mentions my ranch, I sit frozen in place.

Now would be the best time to move and get away from Sydney before she can hurt me any further than she’s already done, but there’s something holding me back. She’s blinking away tears as if this is truly hurting her and there’s no stopping the chuckles that come out of my mouth — is she really going to act like these words mean anything to her?

It sickens me that I had planned on admitting my feelings to her over this weekend before asking her to come closer to the ranch, find a job out by Nathan and me, but thank goodness I never got that far. The guy standing on stage smiles brightly at Sydney before winking at me, then waving to the large crowd and stepping off the stage. He doesn't even look in her direction as he struts through the space between tables, only nodding at the businessmen and women who move their mouths in greeting.

Or praise.

Either way, it seems as though it only fuels his ego even more as he takes up residence just outside the exit. It's like he wants me to come by him, but I'm not that much of an idiot — he wants to make me look like a fool and that's not going to happen. I tap my finger along the flat surface in front of me, replaying the song in my head that Sydney and I danced to a little bit ago, and I aggressively move it away.

She doesn't deserve to be part of my thoughts, not anymore.

As if it's that easy to push her away from them.

"Brent —" Sydney starts, but I hold a hand up quickly to shut her up.

"No," I growl out, making the rest of the table flee away from the two of us. "You don't get to explain a damn thing to me, you already had plenty of chances to do just that. What kind of shit did you tell him? How well-fucked you were when you got back, or how about the way your body reacted to me each and every time I touched you?"

She curls her lip. "No, asshole."

I'm the asshole? As if the entire damn room didn't hear what she's been doing on my ranch. Everything makes more sense now — she wasn't someone Renee sent to me, but instead someone who was sent by her own boss to take everything away from me. That's enough to tell me that this was never going to work and it's best that I figured it out now rather than later.

I scoff at her name-calling and say, “Bullshit!” I’m not excited about the turn of events, basking in the way her gaze burns with fear, but it’s also being replaced with desire. “You had to tell him something and I want to know what it was.”

Sydney sighs and leans against a wall. “I’m not telling you that right now, especially after the way you reacted.”

I darken my gaze and copy her movements, not caring how anything looks to others right now. “Seriously?” I ask incredulously. “You can’t even give me something as simple as a day to be honest with me?”

If I’m being honest, I don’t give a shit what she does, I just need to know what it will do to us if it goes through. Even without saying it aloud, I know that statement is a load of crap because I do care about what she does, more than I should care after the announcement.

Her bottom lip trembles again under my stare and she shakes her head. “Please don’t make me tell you anything right now, I need to handle this.”

“Handle what? Destroying my life?”

She flinches at my tone, then I’m storming away from her with my vision turning red. I don’t bother with manners as I push through the crowd of people, making sure to knock over anyone in my way, and it’s her boss’s smug face that has me lifting my fist. There’s a strong set of arms pulling me back before I can even land a punch in, as if the bastard already knew I was going to be coming for him.

Fucking great.

I shake from their grip and shove the doors ahead of me open, not turning my gaze back when Sydney starts hollering for me. Her pleas are quickly silenced as the door slams shut and I roughly drag a hand through my hair, hoping above everything else that this is all some weird nightmare that I can escape from come morning.

Within minutes I’m relaying everything that happened over to Nathan on the phone, while jerking in and out of traffic, and it makes me feel better to know that someone else is on my side

with things. It's hard to tell how long that will last, since I know he's gotten closer to Sydney, but at least I know I can count on him for now.

Let's hope it won't come to an ultimatum.

How could I have let someone like her so easily into my heart? This had to have been her plan from the jump — get close to me and make me tell her everything she needed to know, then drive back with all the information. I'm sure she and the attractive douchebag have had loads of fun laughing about everything that's happened between the two of us and it nearly has me puking on the floor.

Is this feeling going to last forever?

There's a slight chill on my face as I strut down the sidewalk, making my way toward the hotel where I'm staying before handing the keys to the valet. While he pulls my car around, I walk into the receptionists and let them know I'm checking out in the morning. It would be best if I get as far away from here as possible.

Chapter 26

Sydney

What did I think he would do after the stunt Heath pulled, sit down and have a nice little chat with me about everything? As far as he knows, I betrayed him in the worst way and there's nothing I can do to fix it. There are still a couple more hours left of the gala, but it's mainly people trying to get their last bit of donations in before leaving for the night, and I'm not feeling it anymore.

I rush through the guests gathered around, not bothering to apologize as I knock into people along the way, and come to a halt when someone's hand wraps around my arm. When I push through the exit, my gaze darts up and down the lobby in hopes that I caught Brent in time before he left, but there's no sign of him.

It's no use, if I were him I'd be driving as far away from here as humanly possible without looking back. A throat clears behind me and I turn to find Heath leaning against a wall, the light shining on him as he walks towards me with a smile. "Looking for someone?" His chuckle makes me want to punch him in the face, but I'm not sure how easily that would go since he's the big guy here and all. "Pretty sure I watched him rush out of here already, you might be able to catch up to him."

I glare at him. "What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem? Nothing. You see, while you've been having fun with the owner and his son, playing house and doing whatever the hell you wanted, I had someone else on the inside getting me all the information I needed."

“W-what?”

His smile is malicious as he steps towards me. “It seems as though once you show someone exactly what their future will look like, they are willing to help no matter what that entails.” He frowns. “Imagine my surprise, when my new little spy came back and told me you were getting lovey-dovey with the owner. Pathetic really, you could have anyone you want and that’s the kind of person you go for?”

“Better than you’ll ever be,” I snap.

That remark turns his face red and he opens his mouth, probably to spew some other bullshit about me, but it snaps shut when a few people filter out of the ballroom. Before he can manage to take up any more of my time, I hurry through the lobby and out the front door without looking back. Even though I already knew I’d be too late, I can’t help but let the tears fall as I look everywhere around the sidewalk and come up empty.

I quickly dial his number into my phone, listening as it rings over and over before being sent to voicemail, and growl into the night. My gaze falls to the doors behind me as if I’ll see Heath standing there, but I know he won’t leave a party he’s expected to attend — he’s a good little soldier for his dad after all.

Five more tries with Brent’s cell and instead of ringing it instantly clicks to voicemail, where I leave yet another message begging for him to hear me out. When those continue to go unanswered, I do the next best thing and try the number Nathan gave to me. I shouldn’t be surprised when he goes straight to voicemail, as if the first thing he did when hearing about tonight was block my number, and I let the tears fall helplessly down my cheeks.

If only I had been truthful from the start, maybe things could’ve ended up differently tonight. Everything was supposed to fall into place two weeks from now — I was going to make it to the ranch, tell Brent and Nathan about everything, then admit the love I have for not only Brent but Nathan too. I had never expected that they would welcome me

with open arms still after that, but I imagine things would've been a lot easier to get through had the truth come from my lips and not someone else's.

And who could Heath have possibly hired to give information on the ranch that could help him?

I'm walking along the sidewalk, my heels hanging from my fingertips, when the phone in my clutch blares loudly through the emptiness. It could be Nathan or Brent, so I stop in the middle of the sidewalk and yank my phone from the small purse. The tears that I managed to stop come right back to the surface when I see Justine's name on the screen and I accept the call reluctantly.

"Justine, hey, what's up?" I try to gather my emotions before she catches on, but the sobs wrack through me at the most unnecessary time.

"Syd, what's going on?" she asks immediately. "Where are you?"

"Not really sure," I mutter, glancing at the street signs that look like they've been tattooed with graffiti. "Started walking and didn't bother stopping, that's about all I know." Maybe it would be best if I kept walking until I got where I wanted to go, which is in front of Brent's house.

Would he forgive me if I got down on my hands and knees, begging loudly for it, or would he ignore every single one of my pleas and shut me out once and for all? I'm not sure my heart could handle being shoved away by him.

"Just send me a pin with your location, Syd, I'll come get you." Justine is breathless as she shuffles through her house, the jingle of her keys echoing through the line.

It's the last thing I want, but if I don't send her the location she's going to drive through the city all night until she finds me and I'd rather not deal with her moodiness from lack of sleep. I manage to drop a pin to my location through the tears that blur my vision, then bring the phone back to my ear. Justine sighs loudly in relief as she slams her car door shut. "I'll be there soon. Stay on the phone with me, okay?"

I nod while sobbing into the phone, not able to do much else. Is this what falling in love feels like when you lose it? It's like every piece of me is missing, scattered in the wind and following Brent wherever he's going — to the ranch — and I'm left with an empty shell of myself. Should it have been so easy for him to walk away from me? I don't know.

I don't know much of anything anymore.

Headlights blind me as a car inches closer and pulls to a stop in front of me, then Justine hops out of the car. I'm sitting on the ground, no doubt getting my dress messier than it should be considering the price, and Justine helps lift me from it with a strong grip. "As soon as we get to my house, you're telling me what the hell happened."

I'm numb to everything as she helps me in the car and buckles me in. I can't think straight, even as we coast down roads I've been down most of my life, and it's irritating. How could I have put this much trust in a man again, only to be shown that they will always hurt you?

Is that really his fault though, Sydney?

It's annoying when my head knows all the right questions to ask that make me feel like shit even more. What right do I have to sit here and judge Brent, he never once did anything to make me think that he was lying to me. He showed up at an event that he knew wouldn't fit his life and for what? To see me again?

The idea of him expecting the most of me at the gala only has me throwing my head back against the passenger seat and more tears falling down my cheeks. I've never cried so much in my life. I didn't think it was possible for someone to hold so many tears. Justine pulls to a stop outside her small house, her gaze falling to the front door where her boyfriend is standing, and she sighs. "Give me a minute."

What, does she think I'm in a position to waltz out of here?

I watch as the two of them argue and I immediately regret answering her phone call. It's not enough that I ruined everything good that could've happened with Brent and me,

but I had to go and make things worse for Justine? Best friend of the year award goes to... not me!

She quickly comes back down the sidewalk with a small smile, while the other car in her driveway pulls out and guns it away from the house. "I can go home," I mutter before letting her pull me out.

Justine scoffs. "As if I'd ever let you go home alone while you're like this, come on." She wraps me in her arm, providing a small cocoon of warmth but not nearly as much as Brent's touch would.

Will I ever be able to feel his touch again?

Now that tears have stopped falling, my head pounds relentlessly as it begs for a relief, and I groan while rubbing at my temple. "Got something for a headache?"

Justine leads me into the living room and waits until I'm leaning back against the couch before hurrying into the kitchen, then coming back in with a glass of water and Tylenol. "You going to tell me what happened?"

"Heath," I growl. "He set the entire thing up — invited Brent, aired everything out in front of everyone, and now he won't answer me."

"Who won't answer you?"

"Brent."

Justine nods and shrugs her shoulders. "Do you really blame him? The guy you've fallen for, who has likely fallen hard and fast for you, just found out everything was a lie."

"But it wasn't," I snap.

Her gaze softens and she brings a hand to my thigh, squeezing gently as a reminder that she's here for me. "That's not what it looks like to him though, Syd. He doesn't think you were honest with him about the way you acted, probably thinks you were using him for the information Heath wanted — and you can't blame him for that."

I groan loudly. "I know, Justine, I know. What the hell do I do, just let him go?"

She scoffs. “Hell no, we’re going to come up with a way for you to win his ass back and get the life you deserve. I’ve watched you with guys, Syd, and I’ve never seen you this broken over someone. I won’t let you lose him so easily.”

Knowing I have one person on my side seems to be enough for the pain to fade away slightly, along with the idea that I’ll be able to get the love I lost back. I never even got the chance to tell him how I really feel, the length I was willing to go for him and Nathan, and now I just need the chance to do exactly that.

While Justine and I go over every possible way I can prove my true feelings to Brent, there’s another way that I never thought of and I smile at the idea. There’s a chance that if this goes the way I want it to I could have everything I’ve ever wanted, with a guy who deserves more than what I’ve given him — but I’m vowing now to make up for everything I’ve put him through tonight and the long nights after.

First things first though, I have a job to quit and now seems like the perfect time to do it. The next part of my plan is finding a new job and getting everything in order with it. It’s time to get out of the city and go where my heart truly belongs — the ranch, or at least close enough to it.

Can he still deny me after all this? I guess I’ll find out.

Chapter 27

Brent

All I see is red when I finally pull in front of the main house, my gaze immediately falling onto the guest house that is probably filled with things that would remind me of Sydney. Nathan is tapping his foot frantically against the steps and his gaze darts to mine when I finally step up to him. “What happened?”

I shake my head, not wanting to cry in front of my son, and chuckle. “She was playing me all along, Nate. Everything that I thought we had was nothing but a lie.”

His brows crease and he sighs. “Dad, are you sure?”

“Does it look like I’m not?”

He throws his hands up in the air with a frown. “I’m not saying she didn’t hurt you, but are you sure everything was a lie?”

“Whose side are you on, Nate?”

“Don’t try to make me feel bad, Dad. I barely understood what you said over the phone, but I understood enough to know that you ran as soon as things got bad. You didn’t give her a chance to talk, maybe explain herself to you.”

She doesn’t deserve to have that chance. I went somewhere I knew would make me uncomfortable just so I could see her earlier than planned, but it seems as though she wasn’t the only one who got a surprise. How could I have been so blind? I was never the reason she kept coming around like I had

hoped, it was only to get me talking about the ranch so she could go back to her prissy job with the information.

How much did she tell him anyway?

I grunt before stomping past Nathan and shoving my front door open, the sound of the handle cracking against the wall echoing through the room. That's not a problem worth caring about right now though, not when my heart still aches as bad as it did the night I found out Renee had died.

Haven't I been through enough? Why must I keep getting destroyed over and over again? There's something heating in the oven as I walk into the kitchen and Nathan's footsteps are rough behind me, but I ignore him. He comes to a stop behind me, patiently waiting as I grab a bottle of whiskey and pour myself a healthy glass before downing it in one drink.

I'm not even sure if the alcohol will drown out any of the pain, but it's worth a try.

"Dad, stop," Nathan snaps. "Is this really what you want to turn into? It's not going to help anything, trust me."

My eyes snap to him and he frowns. "What, you think I didn't try to drown out the hurt of not having my mother around?" He shakes his head and points to the bottle on the counter. "That's not the answer to your problems, no matter how much you think it will be."

I scoff. "I guess I'll be the judge of that." Before the alcohol can completely take over, I nudge my head in the direction of the guest house and curl my lip in disgust. "Get her shit out of that house and throw it all away, or make sure it gets to her somehow. I don't want it here though."

Nathan nods slowly, a resigned look in his eyes that only worsens my mood, then he slowly heads out of the house without saying anything to me. So Nathan doesn't have to watch me have my own pity party, I grab the bottle of whiskey and head upstairs to my room. As much as I want to say that after everything Sydney did, my mind is done thinking about her, that's not the case at all.

Just as I've done night after night when she left the last time, I picture her lying on the mattress and it nearly makes me sick. How could I still think about her like this after everything she's put me through? Instead of lying in the comfort of my room, I take a few steps backward until I'm back in the hall and head in the direction of a guest room.

This isn't somewhere that's tainted with her image, so I curl into a ball under the blankets and let the anger inside me take control. I holler into the empty room until my voice is hoarse, throat aching for reprieve, but I just keep going. The door bursts open for a minute, but it's soon followed by it clicking shut — I guess even my own son doesn't want to deal with me right now.

Is he right, should I have given Sydney the chance to explain things to me?

I shake my head.

What could she possibly say that would make any of this okay? She would have to do a lot more than explain things to me, her words mean nothing to me anymore. Which leads me to another question: What could she do to make me forgive the reason she came here in the first place?

Nathan is leaning against the counter when I get downstairs the next morning, a glass of water and Tylenol already waiting for me in his hands. After I swallow the pills, he pulls out a chair for me and crosses his arms over his chest. "I think there's something you should see."

He reaches behind his back and pulls out a notebook, then tosses it in front of me. My eyes immediately fall onto Sydney's handwriting, the words written on the front making my blood boil — *Dudley Ranch Project* — there are even hearts written around the words.

"Just look at it, Dad," Nathan mutters.

I glance through the pages until I get to a blank one and look up at him. "I'm not sure what you're trying to get at, Nate."

He shakes his head and flips through the pages, pointing to the top where she has the dates written. "If she was lying to you, why would she stop after the first or second time of being here?"

Even Nathan can't keep track of how many times she was here. There's hope shining in his eyes as he looks at me, something I can't bear to see right now so I dart my gaze away from his. "Maybe she lost this one and bought a new one." I'm not willing to believe that I rushed away from everything, just for her to have been telling me the truth.

Would I be able to forgive her if she was?

She may have ended up with feelings for me, but does that change the fact that she originally came here to ruin the one thing I've got for Nathan? I've tried my hardest to make sure this place was running smoothly enough for my own child to take over one day, and she was going to waltz right in here and destroy it.

My parents worked their asses off to make this place what it is today, so how is it so easy for Nathan to be on Sydney's side through all this?

Nathan sighs. "I'm not saying I forgive her, but maybe there's more to this than either of us know, and the only way to find that out is if you call her. Talk to her. Let her get a few words out."

I shake my head. "I'll pass. If talking to me is important enough to her she'll show up." Before he can try changing my mind any further, I walk out the back door and flop into the porch swing. Right now, I'd give anything to have Renee here to tell me what to do.

Would she tell me the same thing Nathan is? That I need to give Sydney an opportunity to explain herself without jumping down her throat? Knowing the kind of person she was, most likely, which is probably where Nathan got it from in the first

place. I wish that I could be as forgiving as the two of them are, but that's not how I was built.

Nathan doesn't say anything as he takes a seat next to me, choosing instead to stay silent while I let my mind work through everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours.

When I showed up at the venue where the gala was being held, Sydney looked genuinely surprised to see me and couldn't stop looking over her shoulder every few minutes. I never bothered to figure out what, or who, she kept looking at because the only thing I could see was her.

What if she wasn't the one who sent me the invite like I had hoped she would? She was too jumpy to have known that I would be there, and at times looked angry that I was. Then I remember the way that guy looked at her as he talked through the mic, even the little smirk he gave me at one point, and it all sends a wave of guilt running through me.

Was this all a setup?

It could've been the guy's way of putting her in her place — if Nathan's findings are true — and I was just caught in the crosshairs. He seemed to enjoy the moment a little too much for it to not be part of his own plan to bring her down, but what did she do after that?

I want to believe that she would've stuck up for me and the ranch, especially Nathan, but there's a large part of me that can't trust she did the right thing. There's not much I can trust at all when it comes to her and I know it would be best if I try to let the love I feel for her go.

"I don't know what to do," I say softly to Nathan.

He sighs. "I'm not sure what you should do either, Dad, but it's something you need to figure out on your own."

As much as I wish he wasn't, I know he's right. This is my problem to figure out and he can't be here to tell me what to do all the time. The guest house catches my attention and I imagine Sydney standing outside of it like she was the last time she was here, the way I devoured her lips when she

pulled me inside of it and fell deeper into her orbit with one simple thrust.

Nothing is simple when it comes to her.

And even though my heart is screaming for me to call her, get her side of things, my head is overpowering it and telling me to move on. How am I supposed to ignore that?

Maybe I should worry about the barn that needs to be redone, then focus on everything with Sydney afterward. Nathan has the derby coming up soon and I'd hate not giving him my full attention when he deserves it. I've watched him work his ass off nonstop to get himself ready for it and I'm not going to turn my back on him now.

Sydney can wait — whether it's only for a little while or forever, that's still unknown.

I'm not sure what I would do if she showed up here right now, following me home to give me a piece of her mind. I have a feeling she could crawl up to me, begging for me to hear her out, but I'd still walk away — at least, that's what I want to tell myself, but nothing is ever as easy as it might seem.

The days are only going to get longer and longer without her by my side like I had hoped she would be, and I'm not in the mood to deal with the emotions that thought brings.

Will I ever be though?

Chapter 28

Sydney

“Justine, I feel ridiculous,” I mutter into the phone as I step out of my car, shutting it loudly behind me.

She chuckles. “I’m sure you do. When was the last time you were able to let loose so freely?”

I roll my eyes and fix the flannel I have tied around my waist. “I feel like a hooker cowgirl. Maybe I should change my clothes.”

“Don’t you dare, I spent a lot of time making you look that good. You didn’t drive three hours to back down now.”

I know she’s right, but what if this does nothing to change Brent’s mind about me? I’ll feel even more ridiculous than I look. A few guys whistle at me as they walk by, their gazes dropping down the length of my body, and I nearly gag from their perusal. “This was definitely a mistake.”

“Own it, babe,” Justine says.

“Says the girl who’s happily sitting on her couch, probably watching reruns of a show she’s seen a thousand times.”

“Hey, don’t hate on my routine.”

I strut along the gravel leading to the entrance and stop when I reach the back of the line, which seems to be moving pretty quickly, and I groan into the phone. “You better hope this plan of yours works. I’m about to head in, talk to you in a little while.”

“Here’s to hoping you’re too occupied to call me! Love you, and go get him, babe!”

I shove my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, the new addition only making them feel tighter against my ass. I'm close to the front when someone bumps into me, nearly sending me face-planting to the ground, and it makes me angrier when they laugh about it before going back to whatever conversation they were having with their friend.

And here I thought I got away from the rude assholes in the city. When I reach the security, I pull up the online ticket I received and wait until they give me the go-ahead before walking through the stadium. There are plenty of women walking through the aisles, wearing almost the exact same thing I am, so I guess it isn't too bad that I don't look like an idiot alone.

The new cowgirl boots Justine convinced me to buy are digging into the back of my foot and I want to cry out from the pain. There's nothing I hate more than getting a new pair of shoes and wearing them before they are properly broken in. To keep my mind off the pain, I dart my gaze along the stadium in hopes of finding Brent's wide frame since I don't want him to see me just yet.

I find an empty seat towards the far end and as soon as I sit down, I find Brent leaning against the fence with his eyes focused on a space in the distance. That must be where Nathan is and it has me wishing I could be next to him, washing all his worries away.

My heart cracks just a little when I notice a tall brunette stop next to him, her smile bright even from all the way over here, and it doesn't help when Brent smiles right back at her. She brings her hand to his bicep, making me itch to stomp over there and move it the hell off him, then he pulls away slightly and eases any jealousy — for the most part, at least.

While different contestants take their turn, my gaze doesn't waver from Brent's, until they finally call Nathan's name. An image of Nathan pops up on the large screen to my right as he waves at the crowd surrounding him, smiling brightly for everyone to see, and fall in love with, no doubt, and I scream until my lungs can't take it anymore.

This is an important moment — not only for Nathan, but this is the start of Brent letting Nathan do what he wants even if he's terrified of the outcome — and it wasn't one I wanted to miss. When I mentioned the event to Justine, she thought this would be the best time to prove myself to Brent after I got all my other shit in order.

It took me a while, but I finally found a job that I'm starting in two weeks, and it's only the next town over from Brent and Nathan. I've already got a new house lined up that I'm renting out, just in case things go my way tonight, and I'm excited to see where this new adventure will take me. I'd love nothing more than to have Brent and Nathan with me for the ride, but I also know there's a chance that won't happen, and for the most part, I'm okay with that.

My heart might not ever repair itself, but at least I'll know I tried.

When it comes time for the winners to be announced, I stand in my seat, not bothering to listen to the people cursing behind me about being in their way. I don't care whose vision I need to block to watch Nathan win this thing — which is exactly what happens. I've never seen someone smile as brightly as Nathan does the moment his name is called out as the winner and the crowd surrounding him goes wild.

Seems as though he already has fans and that warms every inch of my heart, just not enough to mend it. The only thing that can mend the shattered pieces is the man standing proudly at the fence, a smile just as bright as Nathan's aimed at his son, and I sigh before finally sitting down. Everyone files away from the bleachers as the reporters barge into the middle of the stadium, more than ready to aim questions at the new winner tonight, and Nathan takes them all with ease.

I don't know how long I sit there and watch him go back and forth with the camera people, but it's enough to have me looking around and not see a soul standing around me. My attention darts to Brent, worry gnawing at me when I don't see him anywhere, and I quickly hurry through the empty space as fast as I can before one of them notices me.

According to Justine, this won't work if they know I'm here, so I have to be invisible to the two of them. A small bit of the crowd is sitting on the tailgates of their truck when I walk by, drinking the last of their beer before pulling away. My car is a little further away, but that's not where I'm going — it's time to search for a truck that no one could possibly miss.

There's a smaller parking lot separated from the large one and I smile when the truck comes into view. I'm not sure how much longer they'll be inside, but that's the least of my worries — if I have to wait here all night, that's exactly what I'll do. Like Justine said, I didn't drive three hours to turn back on everything we planned.

It was a rough drive, especially since Justine insisted on helping me get ready before I left as if I don't know how to do everything myself, but I managed to pull through. I'm not sure anything would've stopped me from making it here, not even if I didn't get any sleep the night before.

I've done nothing but repeat every word I'm going to say in my head, although I'm pretty certain it will all go blank once I see Brent walking up to me, and I'm anxious to know what he's going to do. It could go one of two ways — he'll either forgive me, or he'll tell me to get lost — and I'm banking on the latter, which I've already prepared myself for.

After sitting around, waiting for Brent to call me back and give me the time of day, I knew it was time to stop wallowing around and do something more about the situation. It isn't only words that Brent needs from me. He needs actions as well since he can't believe anything I say to him, and that's exactly what I'm going to give him. Not only will I voice the feelings I've had for him, but I'll show him exactly where my heart lies when he finally listens to me.

I've given him the space he might need to cool down after everything, but now it's time for me to get my thoughts and feelings out. It might not be something I deserve, but I at least need him to know that everything he may have been feeling wasn't one-sided.

My body seizes at the sound of footsteps crunching through the gravel and I blow out a breath of relief when two strange men come strutting into the lot. They don't bother looking over at me as they make their way to their respective vehicles and I fall back against the truck's body with a deep breath.

What will they think when they see me standing out here?

My calls still aren't going through with Nathan's number and Brent hasn't blocked me yet — the only thing giving me a small amount of hope about this encounter — so I'm not sure how they'll react to me. I'd like to imagine them being happy to see me and wrapping me up in their long arms, but that's just wishful thinking on my part.

I have a feeling it will go the exact opposite.

My phone pings in my pocket and I pull it out with a notification from Justine. I chuckle at the plethora of question marks filling my screen, then quickly text her back letting her know that I haven't seen them yet. While I wait for her response, my mind falls back to the brunette that approached Brent and I get sick thinking that he may have run off with her after Nathan's interviews.

Is it too late?

The thought has my heart beating wildly and it doesn't get any better when I hear two sets of footsteps echoing through the night. Nathan's laugh fills the space and I smile at the sound of it, loving that he's enjoying his moment even if it's about to end at the sight of me standing here.

Their footsteps stop for a moment and Brent's voice is far away as he says something to his son that I can't quite catch, then their trek starts up once again. I've got about five minutes before they make it to me and I'm already blanking on everything I was going to say — so much for having to look him in the eye for it to go scurrying out of my head.

I take a few deep breaths, then quickly turn my volume off on my phone before Justine gives me away, and I stand straighter against the truck. I've never been one to chase someone

before, so this moment is foreign to me, but it's something I'm willing to try if it keeps these two men in my life.

Love doesn't come easy to me, and the kind I'm feeling now? It's all consuming and worth every ounce of heartache that may come with their reactions. I square my shoulders as their footsteps draw closer and close my eyes, sending up a silent prayer that everything will go the way I want it to, before plastering a smile on my face.

Maybe I shouldn't smile. That could set Brent off and that's the last thing I want. I let the smile fall, only for it to pop back up again and I mentally curse at myself for acting like an idiot. Before I can figure out what the hell I'm doing, their frames come into view and the sight of Brent up close leaves me speechless.

Say something, Sydney, what the hell is wrong with you?

Chapter 29

Brent

I've never felt prouder than I do at this moment, but that all falls down the drain when Nathan and I come to a sudden stop in the parking lot. Her blonde hair looks even better than I remembered it, even if it's only been a few months, and the way those jeans are hugging her hips isn't helping. She's breathtaking, just like she's always been, but that doesn't change anything that's happened — and I wasn't prepared to see her tonight.

I narrow my eyes at her. "I'm not interested."

Nathan nudges his shoulder into me and arches a brow, clearly trying to get me to hear her out, but that wasn't part of the plan tonight. We were supposed to head out to a local restaurant, enjoy a meal after his big win, and celebrate getting the money we need for the ranch. This isn't the kind of celebration I had in mind.

Sydney's eyes are focused on me, traveling down the length of my body, and as much as I want to say there's no reaction to it — I'd be lying through my teeth. There's nothing but heat flowing through my body as she checks me out, and I clear my throat, hoping to get her to pay attention.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest. My voice is more forceful than necessary, but this is the best Nathan will get out of me if he wants me to listen to her.

She pushes away from the truck, the same smile she was sporting moments ago back on her face. Did she think either of us would be happy to see her here? I glance at Nathan for a

second, noticing the tick in his jaw as she gets closer to us, and turn my attention back to her.

“I, uh, first want to say congrats on the win. That was amazing and you did good out there.” She fidgets when Nathan doesn’t respond, only giving her a curt nod. “God, I planned this out so much better in my head and now I’ve got nothing.”

“Well, if that’s all then, we’ll be going now.” I push past her, irritation starting to make its way to the surface, and Nathan follows suit.

“No, wait!” Sydney says quickly. “Goddamn it. Just stop.”

“Why should I, Sydney?” I throw my arms out to the side and huff. “What do you think you could possibly say to change anything?”

“I don’t know, okay?” she says. “I don’t know what to say, or what to do, but that doesn’t mean I won’t try to fight for what I know we had, or still have. I’ve spent months trying to figure out how I could prove everything to you. *Months*. So the least you could do is give me a minute to get my thoughts in order after seeing you for the first time since everything blew up in my face!”

I lean against the side of the truck and glance at my watch. “You’ve got five minutes to figure it out, then I’m leaving and I want you to leave me the hell alone.”

She nods and I hate that my body reacts to her trembling lips without her even saying anything.

Nathan looks at me for a minute and walks around to the other side of the truck once I give him a nod — this conversation is best had alone. My gaze latches onto Sydney’s as she stares at me, until she closes them for a few seconds and opens them again.

“Three minutes,” I mutter, wondering if this is a waste of my goddamn time.

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing she says while looking at me. “I know what I did was wrong and that’s exactly why I stopped doing it. The only thing I ever told Heath about the ranch was the fire at the barn, which wasn’t really confidential since it

was on the news — I'm assuming that's how he determined sending me after you was a good idea."

Well, at least Nathan was right about one thing. "Okay?"

"I, uh, I figured out who it was that gave him the information I wouldn't," she says softly, almost a whisper, but I still manage to hear her clearly.

"What do you mean?"

She sighs. "I ran after you that night, wanted to explain everything, but you were long gone and Heath was waiting for me out in the lobby. He told me that he had someone on the inside, spying on you guys and me as well because he thought it was weird that I didn't have any new information for him."

"Someone else was giving him information?"

"Y-yes, do you want me to tell you who it was?"

As much as I'd hate to find out someone I trusted went behind my back, it's something I need to know, so I nod in response. She walks closer to me, a small stack of images clutched in her hand, and holds them out. "I'd rather show you the proof, so just look at these. They're images of someone from your ranch meeting with Heath in odd places around the city, places that most people wouldn't go."

My eyes widen at the person sitting with Heath, the guy who ruined everything for me, and I snap my gaze up to Sydney. "These images aren't altered?"

She shakes her head while bringing her phone out, tapping incessantly on the screen before putting it away, then my phone pings from my pocket. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to bring myself to block her number even if she called five hundred times in one day trying to get ahold of me.

I glance at the message she sent me, which contains the email thread between her and a PI, and find the file with the images I'm holding in my hand. Out of all the people to have betrayed me, I never thought it would be him — he's worked for me and my family for years. I shove the image of Hector sitting with Heath back into my pocket and go back to the problem at hand.

“Okay, now what?”

She sighs. “Again, I don’t know, Brent.”

“Alright, well, I’m tired and this conversation is past the five-minute mark.” Just as my hand reaches the handle of the door, she mutters something under her breath that makes me stop and spin around to face her. “What did you say?”

“I love you, okay?” she says, waving her hands over the outfit she’s wearing that makes me want to fall to my knees at her feet. “I drove three hours, went through two hours of Justine talking incessantly about what to do and not to do when I see you, and I even got my damn nails done!”

Her hand comes into view, but with the streetlight barely glowing I can’t see a damn thing about them, although I’m not sure she actually cares if I can see them or not. I don’t say anything as she paces in front of me, her new nails going right in her mouth to chew on them, and I smirk at her nervousness.

“I quit my job, you know? The very same night you walked away from me. I didn’t even do it in person, I sent an email like a goddamn dick and told him I was done. An email, Brent! I’m so fucking in love with you that I didn’t even quit my job right, the only job that I ever really had long enough to put on my resume. You make me lose control of myself, that’s how much of a hold you have over me.”

She scoffs. “Do you remember when you snuck up on me in the gala and got angry with me?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak at the moment.

“I was one thin line away from reaching my arms over the table and strangling everyone who was sitting with us, simply because of the way they were looking at you. That’s not me, Brent, I don’t stick up for anyone but myself anymore, but that’s not the case when it comes to you because I’m head over heels in love with you.”

“Stop talking,” I mutter, but it’s no use because she keeps going.

“And the most insane part? I moved to be closer to you and Nathan. Without even knowing that I’d have your forgiveness,

I drove three hours away from the city I've lived in all my life, and changed my entire life. Because I love you. I love the way you worry entirely too much over your son and how stubborn you are, even though it can be annoying as well. I love the way you can simply touch me and everything inside me calms."

I'm already standing right in front of her when she finally manages to take a deep breath and growl when she opens her mouth, then slam my lips to hers in a passionate kiss. When I pull away I let out a soft chuckle. "Sydney, for the life of me, stop talking."

Even in the darkness, I can see her cheeks flush and I run my finger over them gently. She sighs. "Sorry, got carried away there."

"I love you, too, Sydney, even if I tried my hardest not to these last few months. Seeing you again only brought everything I pushed away right back to the surface. There's no escaping you, not even if I try."

She pushes up onto her tiptoes, her lips pressing softly against mine, and I hum in approval against them. The door for the truck opens and closes, then footsteps sound beside us. "Yeah, as much as I loved that speech, I'm starving over here. Think the winner could get something to eat?"

Sydney chuckles as she pulls away, then stands straighter in front of me. "I'll leave you two to celebrate."

She tries to walk away, but I grab hold of her hand and stop her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Uh, letting you go eat?"

I shake my head with a smile. "This is a celebration that involves you too, baby, hop in."

Nathan throws me a smile as he pulls open the back door and climbs inside. I glance at Sydney as she lifts herself into the passenger seat and I smile at the image, happy that my heart won out over my head. She looks at me for a minute and Nathan groans in the back, enough to tell me that I'm taking too long to get out of the parking lot, and I quickly back out with my hand on Sydney's thigh.

I'm not sure anything could be better than this moment. Nathan won his first derby and the woman I have been waiting for confessed the love she has for me — which reminds me. “You moved, huh?”

She snorts. “And got a new job, something that won't put you in harm's way this time.”

Why does it feel so much better knowing I didn't have to beg her to do any of those things, that she went and did them on her own? She didn't know where we would end up, but that didn't stop her from choosing to be close to us in case we found our way back to each other.

Somehow, I know the peace that washes over me as we head down the darkened highway is Renee's way of telling me she's happy for me and it makes everything better.

I've got something I never thought I'd get again, and I'm more than ready to make the most of it with my two favorite people by my side.

Chapter 30

Brent

Two Years Later

Is it normal to be this nervous? I've done this before and don't remember feeling like this when I did. Nathan is smirking at me as he sips a cup of coffee, waiting for me to tell him what he needs to do, but I'm overthinking everything at the moment. The ring has been burning a hole in my pockets for the last three months, but now I'm finally ready to do something with it — I think.

It's not that I'm having second thoughts, not at all. I love Sydney more than anything and no one could ever tell me different, but what if I do everything wrong and screw it up? I'm not sure I could forgive myself, even though I'm fairly certain she'd love it either way.

She's been getting the guest house cleaned out after the last couple who stayed in it left for their honeymoon and I finally have a moment to think about how I want to pop the question.

"Dad, calm down," Nathan mutters, and I glare at him. He chuckles and throws his hands up in the air, then leans over and whispers something into my granddaughter's ear.

Her giggles make every ounce of nerves fly somewhere far away as I watch the two of them together. I have to admit, when Nathan showed up on my doorstep a few months ago with a tight grip on a car seat, I was worried what this would do to him. Being a parent isn't all it's cracked up to be, but

he's doing an amazing job and I couldn't be more proud of him.

The last thing I wanted was for my son to become a dad at such a young age, especially when his career is just starting out, but we agreed on a schedule that would still let him chase his dreams. I'm also convinced that Sydney would've followed Nathan everywhere around the country until he handed this little girl over, the two of them are like peas in a pod.

To prove my point, my granddaughter's gaze finds Sydney's as soon as she walks through the back door, and a toothless grin takes over her entire face. Sydney smiles brightly at her, not even bothering to pay me any attention as she strolls through the kitchen and lifts Tatum from her seat. Tatum pushes her lips out and shoves her face into Sydney's, only to make the woman I'm madly in love with giggle uncontrollably, and I smile at their interaction.

"Love you, Tater Tot," Sydney says before placing her back in her seat, then she walks over to me with the same smile. "And I love you," she says before placing her lips softly against my cheek. "I'm beat after cleaning up this time, think you could handle dinner tonight?"

"I can do it," Nathan says loudly from the other side of the room. He gives a look as if I'm an idiot and I nod in response. "It will just be me and Tatum tonight anyway, you and Dad are going to have a nice night out together."

Sydney jumps up in surprise, excitement shining in her eyes. "Are you sure? You know we don't mind staying here and helping you out." What she really means is that she can't stand being away from Tatum for more than five minutes, but that's the last thing she'll admit in front of us.

Nathan chuckles. "I think I can handle taking care of my daughter, Syd."

If Sydney is upset that Nathan never seemed to get into the habit of calling her mom, she never lets it show and I appreciate that more than anything else. "Well, I guess I'm

going to get all dolled up for you. Prepare to be wowed, honey.”

As soon as she disappears upstairs, I turn my attention to Nathan with a raised brow. “What the hell are you doing? I’m not ready.”

“Yes, you are,” he says with a smile. “If you keep waiting, you’ll never be ready. I’m going to make you guys a nice meal, then set up the barn and bring everything out to you.”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t take her to a restaurant?”

He shakes his head. “Trust me, okay?”

I’m not sure how much I can trust him when it comes to anything involving relationships, considering the only form of one he has at the moment is with someone who wanted nothing to do with her child. How could someone drop off this adorable, dark-haired, blue-eyed baby and not feel an ounce of remorse while doing it? It’s beyond me, but I’ll never get over being able to love on her all the time.

Ever since Nathan started his career he’s purchased extra land for the ranch and built a house of his own on the property, placing the house right outside the lake where we used to ice skate. It’s going to be fun trying to teach Tatum how to skate in the future.

I nod anyway, trying not to let my mind get off track. Tonight is the night — that’s all I need to keep telling myself. “Okay, yeah, sure.” What do we do though? Do I put her in the truck and just drive around until Nathan gives me the okay to come back to the house?

As if sensing the burning question, Nathan pats my shoulder and lifts Tatum from her seat. “Don’t worry, just take Sydney out and act like you’re going somewhere neither of you have been yet. You’ll know when to come back.” He heads out the front door and leaves me standing in the middle of the kitchen alone, wondering what the hell I’m getting myself into trusting him with this.

“Are we lost?” Sydney asks after thirty minutes of driving around, with not a damn clue where I’m going.

I shake my head and give her the best smile I can manage, even though my nerves are through the roof right now. “Of course, baby, we’ll be there soon.” I’m not sure how much time Nathan needs, but I’m starting to worry this plan is going to fall through and I don’t even know what the plan is in the first place.

A text message from Nathan lights up on the touch screen and Sydney gasps next to me. “Turn around and go back to the ranch, now.” I take a moment to look at the text, making sure to dart my eyes back and forth from the road to the screen, then I groan loudly.

This was his bright idea?

Sydney is fidgeting in her seat as I make a U-turn in the middle of the road, trying my best to act like this is an actual emergency like my son is making it seem. Why did he think telling me something is wrong with Tatum would be the best way to get us back to the house? He could’ve easily texted me and said that my wallet was on the counter, which would require me to turn around.

I swear I’m not sure who the hell raised him sometimes.

When we pull up to the house Sydney doesn’t even wait for the car to be at a complete stop before jumping out and heading straight for the house, but Nathan meets her on the front porch with a smile and points down at the barn. The lights are on, which is unusual since they usually stay off until the next wedding.

In the two years that we’ve been together, Sydney and I have added onto the stables to fit all the horses comfortably, then we rebuilt the barn and made it into a wedding venue. It took a lot of convincing, but she made her case and it’s turned into a pretty good investment.

She comes up to the driver's side door and pulls it open with a frown. "Apparently we need to go to the barn."

I hop out of the truck and thread my fingers through hers, leading her to the large white barn that I'll never stop being in love with, and take a deep breath before pulling the doors open. A smile immediately takes over Sydney's face as she looks around at the candles lit around the room, a table sitting front and center with a single rose sitting in a vase, and I nod in approval.

Maybe I doubted him too quickly, but this doesn't look so bad for a romantic dinner — now I just need to hope the food tastes good enough. I walk over to the table and pull a chair out for Sydney with a smile, then walk around to my side. She's staring at me curiously when I sit and asks, "What's all this for?"

I shrug. "I'm not able to do something nice for you? You deserve it, baby." And she does, even if two years ago I never thought I'd forgive her for the things she did. It didn't take much for me to give in to her and we've been stronger ever since. My love for her has only grown with each and every day that passes, which is why it's time for me to ask her now.

She smiles at my response, then turns her attention to Nathan as he walks inside carrying two plates. "For the lovebirds," he says, winking at the two of us. "Enjoy."

While Sydney and I enjoy our meal, which tastes amazing, I find that my nerves are slowly beginning to ease away. Each smile she sends my way only makes the moment tonight that much more right and I take a deep breath when Nathan walks in holding the dessert.

This is it.

I told him before that I wanted to do it right when the dessert was served, something cliché from romance movies that I thought Renee would appreciate. As much as I love Sydney, there's still a part of me that will always have love for Renee, and it's something that Sydney has gladly accepted — encouraged even.

While Sydney digs into the dessert on the table, I stand from my place at the table and run my hands down the suit before reaching into the inside pocket for the ring. She still hasn't looked up from the dessert when I get down on my knee, which isn't all that surprising, and I have to clear my throat to gain her attention.

This woman, I swear.

She blinks at me in confusion, then her eyes settle on the velvet box in my hand and she gasps. Nathan is holding Tatum on his hip while standing a few feet away, a big smile on his face while giving me a thumbs up, and I roll my eyes at him before giving Sydney my best smile.

“Sydney Whitlock, we may not have started out the way we hoped, but I'll never regret those moments that made us the people we are tonight. I've watched you love my son as if he's your own, only to give your love to me as well, and now you are loving a little girl who adores the shit out of you. I never told you this, but I had a dream not long after we mended things, and Renee was in it. She told me that everything was exactly as it should be and she placed a ring in my hand, and then I woke up.”

I open the box and let out a deep breath, blinking back the tears that are threatening to take over. “I never forgot what the ring looked like and knew this was what Renee had in mind for you, her way of coming to me and telling me it was all okay, that she approved of the love we have for one another.” Sydney gasps, tears falling down her face like a waterfall, as I slowly open the box. “There's not another woman I want to give this ring to and I couldn't imagine living the rest of this life without you by my side. Will you marry me?”

Sydney nods, her hand popping out immediately and I slip the ring onto her finger with a bright smile. A tear falls down my cheek and Sydney wipes it away. “Things always happen in the most unexpected ways, and I'll never regret the way my trip turned out all those years ago. I gained a family I never knew I wanted or needed, and I'll forever be grateful that you brought me into it. I love you, Brent, more than anything.”

A soft breeze flows through the room and I smile, knowing it's Renee being here for this moment like I always knew she would be, then pull Sydney into the middle of the floor to spin her around.

The End.

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Blake has built a reputation as the best bull rider around. After his divorce, he needed someone to watch over his daughter as he prepared for the rodeo circuit.

We vowed to keep our relationship professional, but my feelings for Blake only grew.

I can't escape that first night and how his aggressive moves made me quiver from head to toe. I wanted that feeling again.

My world shatters after witnessing a sultry kiss with his ex-wife.

Every ounce of my being says to run away again.

But I can't ignore the little baby bump I'm starting to show.

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Sneak Peek - Chapter One

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Chapter One

Wrenly

Maybe I shouldn't have run away.

Now that I'm standing in this packed bar, filled with men in cowboy boots and hats, that's all I can think. Each one that walks by me has a wide frame, towers over me by a foot, and looks me up and down as if I'm the most interesting thing they've ever seen.

I don't doubt that I am. All they see every day is a bunch of farm animals, I'm sure — I'm the most action they'll get all night.

Considering I have an interview set up for Monday morning already, I should lift my head up high and deal with my surroundings. There are a few guys laughing around the pool table, and one with blonde hair looks up at me, winks, then pushes his gaze back down to the game. There's nervous energy running through my body — what are the chances that my ex will find me here?

I made it a point to pick the best location to hide in, hoping that he wouldn't find me, but what if I made a mistake? My phone vibrates in my pocket, which only has me huffing in annoyance and ripping it from the back pocket of my skinny jeans. It doesn't surprise me one bit to see a string of text messages a mile long from my ex, waiting to be answered.

Instead of answering them like I'm sure he's hoping, I take a deep breath and push through the crowd while mumbling *excuse me*. A few of the women eye me curiously before curling their lips in disgust, as if I'm not worth breathing the same beer-scented air as they are. I flash them my best smile — my nanny always told me to kill people with kindness, so that's what I live by.

Try to at least.

Most of the time.

I sink into one of the barstools, watching as happy patrons walk up and wave hello to the bartender. There's easy laughter and smiles, as if these people have all known each other for most of their lives, and it has uneasy feelings settling in my chest. I've always felt a little left out of things back home and the only person who ever treated me as something more is the one woman I wish never had to leave me so soon.

God, this is depressing.

There's a live country band stationed on a platform at the front of the room, howling out lyrics about beers and friends, and I roll my eyes before turning back around to wave the bartender down. An older man walks slowly over to me, a frown on his face as he steps in front of me, and I tap my chin.

"You new here?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

I glance around. "Fairly, yes." If fairly means I just got in a few hours ago.

I'm sure this will end up being a major mistake, but I can't back down now. The older man nods slowly, then extends a hand out with a polite smile. "I'm Willie, the owner of this place."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Wrenly, make me your favorite drink."

He scoffs. "Sweetie, I'm not sure you want me to do that."

I arch a brow and smirk at him. "Now I really need you to." There's a part of me that loves a good challenge, and this is definitely one of those. I'll handle whatever he has for me.

Just as I'm about to take a sip of the drink, my eyes lock on a lone figure sitting at the other end of the bar with his head bowed down to the table. There's no light shining on his face, so he's not playing on his phone, he just really finds the countertop delightful to stare at.

His body stiffens when a woman walks up to him, her hand brushing over his arm with a smile on her face. She says something to him that has his head lifting up, and he shakes it

briefly before putting it back down. The woman stalks away with a pout on her face. I chuckle to myself, *so dramatic*.

My body seems to have a mind of its own because before I can talk myself out of it, I'm lifting from my spot at the bar and inching closer to the stranger ahead of me. He still hasn't caught onto my presence yet, not until I sit down in the seat to his left and I watch his frame go rigid. His heavy breathing is making my skin heat up, wondering what it would sound like if he was wishing for release with each one he took.

A release that only I could give him.

This wouldn't be such a bad idea. With the stress of an interview this week, plus everything that happened with my ex, it would be a great time to shack up with a stranger for a night. Somehow, this man sitting alone at the bar is the answer to all my prayers.

He doesn't say anything to me, only keeps his head down and posture stiff under my gaze. I lean back against the countertop, resting my arms over it to gain his attention, but he still doesn't budge. My sigh is loud between the two of us, which has him looking up at me.

I have to suck in a breath of air as his stormy blue eyes look directly into mine, narrowed on me. Narrowed or not, the blue swirling throughout his irises is beautiful. He's wearing what most of the cowboys are in this place — jeans, a t-shirt with a flannel over top, plus the boots and hat — but I still find him to be the most attractive one in here. Judging by the muscles trying to pop out his sleeves, I'd say he's got a great physique, and that has my center *very* aware.

The hard lines of his jaw are so sharp that I could easily lean over and lick the edges of it until he gives in to the pull of whatever the hell this is, but I refrain from doing that. This man has never met me before; I'm a complete stranger and it would be highly inappropriate to jump him like that.

He clears his throat, gaining the attention of my wandering eyes, and there's no hint of amusement in his gaze. No hint of any emotion at all. "Can I help you?" he grinds out, his hand wrapped tightly around the glass of soda he's drinking.

I shake my head with a small smile and shrug. “Not really, just new and thought I’d say hi.”

My skin flushes when he gives me a curt nod, then turns his attention back to the top of the table. I nudge him and point to the space he’s been staring at since I saw him. “Something fascinating there?”

He growls, stepping up to his feet suddenly and gaining a few head turns from people close by. “I didn’t ask for company.”

I cross my arms over my chest, face heating at the anger rising through me at the audacity of this man to talk to me like that. “You seemed a little lonely to me, thought you could use a friend.” *Or more than friends*, I’d love to say, but that would only make things worse than they already are.

“Well, I’m doing perfectly fine on my own.”

My gaze cuts to the middle of the room, where a large group of men and women are line dancing, and I smile at the stranger. “Dance?”

“Pass,” he mutters, taking a long swig of his soda. “But, you can go out there on your own, I won’t stop you.”

I sigh, poking my bottom lip out and fluttering my eyelashes at him in the best way I can. “Please.”

He rolls his eyes. “Will you leave me alone if I do?”

“We’ll see, depends how good you dance,” I say, giving him a wink. There’s something about this broody asshole that has me not giving anyone else a second look.

He holds a hand out for me to take, then leads me out onto the floor where eyes bug out at the image before them. Apparently, this is an uncommon occurrence for him.

“Think I could get your name?” I ask.

“Blake,” he snaps, letting my hand go as we get in line with all the others and follow the dance movements.

Hours have gone by and my body is no doubt glistening with so much sweat I'm sure my clothes are soaked with it, but I can't bring myself to stop. Somehow, I've managed to not only get Blake to dance this entire time, but to also smile once or twice. I've caught his stare on my ass and hips multiple times throughout the dances, and I'm fairly confident about where the night will go for us.

Or at least, I have hope for where it will end. My attention has been solely focused on the way his jeans hug his ass and thighs, and imagining what they would look like without any clothes on them. I'm more than determined to figure that out, especially when he decides in the middle of dancing that he's too hot and takes the flannel off.

My breath hitches at the sight of his tan arms and the muscles trying to rip through the fabric of his shirt, and I sink my teeth into my lower lip. When I glance back up into his eyes, he's staring right at me with a narrowed gaze and walks closer to me.

"You don't want to look at me like that, sweetheart," he rasps out, gaze darting to my lips before coming back up to my eyes.

For a torturous few minutes neither of us makes a move, only darting our gazes to each other's lips, until one of us goes for it. Or maybe both of us. I don't know. All I know is one second I was wishing I knew what his lips felt like on mine, then the next I'm being consumed by him.

Soft, plump, silky, and smooth. That's what his lips feel like, and I can't help but deepen the kiss, even with all these people standing around us no doubt getting in our business. I pull away, panting and smirking at him. "You leaving with me?"

He groans. "I shouldn't." Then he pulls me out of the bar without a backward glance, waiting until we are out on the sidewalk to push me up against the brick wall. "But you've been driving me wild all night, and I don't think I could walk away even if I tried." Before I can respond, he's got his lips back on me and a fire settling deep in my veins.

“Well,” he whispers between kisses, “lead the way then.” I’m gripping the hem of his t-shirt, more than ready to pull it off him, and nod against his lips.

He pushes off the wall slowly while shutting his eyes and breathing deeply, as if it physically pains him to pull away from me, and I lead him across the street. Luckily, the place I’m staying is two minutes from where we are, or else I’d be stripping him right here in the middle of the sidewalk.

It only takes a couple extra minutes until I unlock my room, and seconds after we walk in for Blake to spin me around and lift me up. My legs instinctively wrap around his waist, hips grinding against him as I devour his mouth, half-convinced my soul is leaving my body in the process.

My hands run down his clothed chest until I reach the hem of his shirt and tug it up. He lifts his arms after pressing my body between him and the wall, helping me get it over his head.

I’m panting, watching as he gives me a devilish grin before leaning down and placing chaste kisses against the curve of my breasts. With no bra on, I have no doubt he can feel my nipples poking through the thin fabric of my shirt.

The only thought I have is that this man has ruined me for anyone else.

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