



Secret

COWBOY

STORM ◀ CANYON ▶ COWBOYS

RILEY ASH

SECRET COWBOY

STORM CANYON COWBOYS

RILE ASH





Copyright © 2023 by Riley Ash

Cover Design: Last Chapter Press LLC

Editing: Last Chapter Press LLC

Last Chapter Press LLC

6311 Ames Ave

Omaha NE 68104

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This material may be protected by copyright.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contact Last Chapter Press at info@lastchapterpress.com for permission.

CONTENTS

Prologue

1

2

3

4

5

6

Epilogue

SECRET COWBOY INFO

Zane

I was told my father was a rich and powerful man, but he wanted nothing to do with me or my mother and he paid her to stay quiet. But now I'm in Storm Canyon to find out who he is and what happened between him and my mother.

When my ex decides to have one of her disappear-for-days episodes, I bring my son James with me. In my quest to find out who I am, I meet Renee, mother to Sam. Our kids are the same age and as much as they get along, I find myself getting along even better with Renee. She's been through a lot. We have that in common. I see a strength in her that inspires me to confront my father and what I find out is that my father isn't the man I thought he was.

When my world comes crumbling down around me, and Renee is there to help put the pieces back together.

Will Storm Canyon end up my home or will I be chased from town by a truth I never saw coming and lose a love I won't forget?

One feud. Two families- the Briggs' and the Winchesters. And everything standing in the way of love.

Welcome to Storm Canyon, Colorado. It's ranch country in the Rocky Mountains, but in these parts the only thing that's more important than family is who owns what and how much. A small town home to the Briggs brothers, Colt, Wyatt, and Beau...and maybe a secret.

Their only tasks in life are to protect the family name and fortune, and to make sure the Winchesters don't get ahead, but that means ignoring their own needs. When the right woman comes into view, they'll have to decide if loyalty or love will win?

PROLOGUE

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

Connie

I stare at the paper in front of me. A single sheet with a single message. One that will change lives and make it clear what's happening.

I read it once more.

Dear Jameson,

You've left me no choice but to write to you. There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just write it. I'm pregnant with your child.

I will raise our child, but I'll need financial assistance. I will refrain from hiring a lawyer if I receive \$2000 on the first of the month in cash.

If I don't receive payment next month, I'll be on your doorstep in Storm Canyon and Hazel will learn what you've been doing for the last five years when you come to Denver for those "important meetings".

Every single thing, Jameson.

I'd like you to know your child and I won't lie to them about who their father is, so be prepared when they turn eighteen, the secret will be out.

It was fun while it lasted.

Forever my heart's desire,

Connie

I look at the paper and consider throwing it away. I can do this on my own but letting him get away with this would feel like I was telling him that breaking my heart is okay. It's not. It wasn't. It never will be. And now I'll have a reminder for the rest of my life of our tryst.

Six years isn't a tryst. It's a betrayal.

I remember the single time I visited Storm Canyon. I was having a cup of coffee in the café, one of the many businesses that have the Briggs name on it. I watched his wife, Hazel Briggs, come through the front door. I had found a picture in his wallet of her, and she was one-of-a-kind gorgeous. The man has a heart, even if it's buried under leather and money.

She was so beautiful and happy. I almost hated myself for what I'd done.

I didn't set out to fall for a married man. I didn't set out to become the "other woman." I only wanted a few minutes of connection with someone.

I only wanted to feel seen.

And he saw me.

Jameson Briggs, patriarch to the Briggs legacy, treated me like someone when I'd been no one for so long.

A girl from the side of the tracks that no one looked at twice. No father to give me a good male role model. A mother who had to work three jobs to support me and my two brothers. And a life that I wanted to run away from daily.

But I romanticized him. I put Jameson Briggs on a pedestal. I treated him like the king he wants to be.

And now I know that he'll want nothing to do with me.

But I'll have someone else. I won't be alone ever again.

I rub my stomach. Zane, named after my father, if it's a boy and Constance if it's a girl, named after my grandmother, my namesake.

I'll be okay.

I'm going to be okay.

Someday...

ZANE

Storm Canyon. It's my fourth trip back and I still don't know if it feels right to be here. I've tried to do the right thing, but the problem is, I don't know what the right thing is. Stay or go. Keep the secret or let it out. Make myself known to those who might not want to know, or retreat to Denver and go back to the only woman I've ever loved... my mother.

A small hand grabs mine and tugs me forward through the Friday evening farmers market of mostly vegetable and fruit vendors, a couple food trucks, and a couple booths with clothes or handmade items.

"Over here, Dad! Look at these!" His exuberance comes from his mother.

I'm way too chill for the energy that this five-year-old little body brings.

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

He points to a long wooden train.

A woman pipes up, "Those are made by a local craftsman and sold by us. We're The Roses, three sisters. We're a local artisan website who want to bring the best of mountain crafting to... well..." she bubbles with happiness that seems to have been inspired by my son, "Everyone!"

I can't help but smile, something that's not normal for me and I think I get that from my father.

My father.

Those words are hard to say. I knew from a young age that my father wouldn't be in my life. My mother says that I met him when I was four, but I don't remember him. Then after that something happened, and he cut off all contact with her.

Everything but the monthly payment to keep her mouth shut.

As a married man and the high-powered man in the Storm Canyon —and Colorado— community, he couldn't take the chance of anyone finding out.

About me.

The pain is palpable still. It's being rejected and being silenced at the same time. And that's why I'm here in Storm Canyon...

I'm not going to be silent anymore.

I've made attempts to talk to Jameson Briggs, but at every turn, he's evaded me. And in more than one instance, I've lost my nerve. But now I think his eldest, Colt Briggs, knows something. When he looks at me, his gaze is long and questioning. Of course, as the town sheriff, it might be that he doesn't like newcomers, but on the other hand, my eyes are his eyes.

"The Briggs's hazel eyes" as my mother called them. All the Briggs' men have them.

And I'm a Briggs, even if my last name says Smith.

"Can I have it? Can I, Daddy?"

Amazing how he can kick into calling me daddy and batting those big hazel eyes. That dominant gene permeated even into my lineage.

"Not today, Buddy." I've called him "buddy, slugger, bud, little man, lil dude, and others to keep from saying his real name.

Someone is going to figure it out if I say his name. James Connor Smith. An homage to the man who brought me into this world.

“Let’s go get some breakfast.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I tip my black hat at her.

“You remind me of someone.” Her brow furrows. “Wait. No. Are you related to the—”

“Let’s go kiddo!” I say over the woman’s words. Guiding him to move, I get us away from the woman.

He wouldn’t be here if his mother hadn’t gone a drug and alcohol bender and done a magical disappearing act, again.

It’s not as magical as she thinks it is.

Probably for the best. He’s always sullen when he comes back from her. I think he has to take care of himself too much when he’s with her. And probably has to take care of her.

I thought Lauren was pure sunshine when I met her. Then I realized that she was only a storm with a colorful rainbow on her body in the form of ink. She was colorful because of the substances she ingested, smoked, and inhaled. When they wore off, she was sad and mad and often abusive. To me. Never to our son.

But even with her being an okay mom to our son, I’ve contacted a lawyer to start proceedings to have full custody. She’s too undependable. She’s flighty and I’m afraid of what that might mean in an emergency.

We grab a couple donuts from the local bakery, Dark Chocolate & Sprinkles, a husband and wife duo who look at my son and they know. My ex, Monica, is Black and I’m not. Our son is the best of both of us and he looks more like her with darker skin and kinky dark hair. They smile big and I return the offer, lifting the plate from their hands and James grabs the two containers of freshly squeezed orange juice. This town is idyllic in an uncomfortable way. It’s like there are things unspoken in the dirt and hills. The mountains hold a secret that the town keeps at bay. My mother said that it made her uncomfortable to be here, the one time she dared show her face. But that could be because she was the other woman, and

she ran into my father's wife. The story made my skin crawl and her reasoning for coming here did, too.

She wondered if Jameson Briggs was one man with her and another with his wife. Turns out he wasn't. He was as loving to her as he was to my mother, Connie. Maybe he had more love to give, but I don't think so. I think he believed he deserved more than his fair share of love. He believed his kingdom needed to expand and maybe he meant to create me.

We take a seat at a picnic table under a tree and James digs into his donut. I'm not much of a sweets person, but damn, that's a tasty chocolate donut with sprinkles and the fresh citrus washes it down like sunshine to my stomach.

But like the Devil appears when called, I catch Jameson and Colt Briggs talking across the street. Far enough away that I don't think they'll...

Nope, Colt's head spins to me and his eyes narrow in. My suspicions that he knows are so close to confirmed that my skin wants to crawl off my body and back to Denver, but my gut says stay. Stay and find out the truth.

I'd like to think I wasn't an accident. Wasn't unwanted by him. But he's seen me from afar and his jaw tightens every time. It's like I'm a part of his past he wants to forget.

"Hi, I'm Sam. You wanna play?"

The boy, about James's age, clutches a Transformer with a cowboy hat glued on his head in his hand and the other holding out another Transformer missing an arm.

"Sam!" a woman calls out.

I stand and wave to her. My six-four height allowing her to see my motions. She shakes her curly head of brown hair, huffing as she beelines toward us.

"Dang," the young boy, now known as Sam, kicks the dirt with his scuffed brown boots and mumbles when he sees her.

"You scared me, Sam." She pulls him close. "Please don't run away like that." She turns to me. "He's so wild and

honestly, I'm not opposed to it, just want him to understand safety a little better."

I chuckle. I remember those days. My mother said the same thing.

"My mother said the same thing about me, and I think I turned out okay." I give her a wink and she rolls her eyes. "I'm sure Sam's going to be just fine. I'm Zane. Zane Smith." I reach for her hand, and she clasps my hand softly with a firm shake.

"Renee Krousey and that's Sam."

My gaze catches on movement behind her. "Shit."

The man with a badge is on his way toward us.

Renee turns around. "Sheriff Briggs? Everything okay?"

"Hi Renee. It's fine." He's short but pleasant, his eyes on me the whole time.

"How's Aria doing?" she asks.

"Sorry, Renee, I'm here on business. Sir, could I speak to you?"

I nod over my shoulder. "I'm here with my kid and don't have anyone to watch—"

A warm hand lands on my forearm and I'm instantly quieted.

Renee gives a squeeze. "I'd be glad to watch your son. What's his name?"

I look to Colt. His eyes are my eyes. This is going to cement the deal in his head.

"It's James."

"James? What a great name." Renee introduces herself to James and it's like he's known her his whole life. Sam and my son start comparing notes on how their action figures move and I have to smile. He looks genuinely happy.

A body brushes against mine, "Now..." is all Colt says and a shiver snakes my spine.

This guy is my brother, but I wonder if I'm going to be run out of town.

"I'll be right back."

"No worries. Take your time, Zane." She's so genuine and calm.

Two things my ex isn't and could never be.

Time to face the mountain music.

We walk far enough away that Renee can't hear us, but not so far that I can't see Sam. Colt seems to understand. I see a woman join Renee, Sam, and James.

Colt clears his throat and a hand lands on his holster. "That's Renee's mom, Patty. She's the cook and housekeeper at my father's home."

"Oh." I really don't know what to say. I grew up eating boxed mac and cheese. I can't imagine having a housekeeper and house cook. These people have lived a really different life than I have.

"I know who you are."

No beating around the bush with this man. I'm sure this is something instilled in him from his father. Be in control and don't back down. I've watched Jameson from afar and the man doesn't ever stutter-step. He doesn't say more words than needed and the less the better. He looks a man in the eyes and that man will know if he's going to take him down.

"Okay. Who do you think I am?" I'm not ready to say it out loud.

"Zane Smith. You are my father's son."

My heart pounds like a racehorse is driving toward the finish line in my chest.

Colt continues as I adjust to a new normal in my life that feels so weird. "And I'd like you to come to family dinner on

Monday night. It's time to get this out in the open."

"Does your father know I'm... his son?"

"If he does, he's not showing it. I haven't presented him with the information I know."

"And how do you know?"

His jaw tightens. "It doesn't matter."

"What time?"

"What?" It's like he was stuck somewhere else.

"For dinner, the time?"

"Seven, sharp. He'll walk in at five after seven expecting all of us there."

"I'll find a sitter for James."

"Thanks. Jameson barely tolerated us as children. You don't want James exposed to that vitriol."

I can hear some pain in his voice. "I'll be there. I'm ready to find out who I am."

He reaches out his hand. "It's time."

Yeah, it's definitely time.

RENEE

My job as a home healthcare aid has prepared me for lots of things, but it never prepared me to meet a man I can't stop thinking about. It's just not the right time for me to be thinking about what I'm thinking about.

Sex.

It's been a while and Zane, well... he's got this look. Like a GQ cowboy model, strong jawline, muscles from the gods, and God! My mother came up at the Farmer's Market and asked me if I was feeling okay. She even tried to feel my head. Apparently, I was flushed. Well, hell yeah. I just met a man who turned my lady parts into a fiery inferno.

Those eyes. Hazel like a kaleidoscope. Every color just melting together.

Looking into them I saw something. Fear? Hope? Passion?

All three?

But doesn't matter. I barely know him.

Maybe tonight I'll find someone to scratch this vibrating itch.

"What are you thinkin' about, girlie?" Mrs. Grady says with raised eyebrows.

"Nothin'." I adjust the pillow behind her back.

Mrs. Grady, my friend Caitlin's mom, sits on the front porch of her two-bedroom home and this is a huge

improvement. Her skin is a rosy pink, unlike how sallow and pale it's been in the past. Modern medicine can perform miracles, but I like to think my care had something to do with it, too.

“Oh sweetie, I know that look. Your head is somewhere else. And by that blush, I'd say it's thinking about someone special.” She yawns. Her conditions making her tire easily.

“You ready to go back inside?”

“Yeah, I think I've had enough of the bright yellow ball in the sky.”

Lifting her gently, I keep her close and we make our way inside where she lowers to her rocker-recliner. I start tidying up.

“Caitlin's coming over later, I'll have her help me clean up.”

“I don't mind. It keeps my mind occupied.”

“So you were thinking about someone...” She grins and grabs her crocheting project. Her body may not be sharp, but her mind is.

I walk the room. Often talking with my clients is just as soothing and energizing to them than any treatment I help to give them. I stop a picture on the wall.

“Is this you?”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “It is.”

Three young women, probably just crossing their early twenties, have their arms wrapped around each other and by their open mouths and thrown back heads of two of them, the laughter is palpable.

“Looks like you were having fun.”

“Oh, the three of us always had fun. That's Izzy Winchester, Hazel Briggs, and myself on the end.”

“Wow, Hazel was—”

“Beautiful,” we say together.

“Yeah, she had every guy at Storm Canyon High racing after her, but she chose the one who we didn’t approve of.”

The hair on my neck springs to life. I’m not into gossip, but this is the first that Mrs. Grady has ever let out a sour word about anyone or anything.

“Jameson Briggs?”

“We warned her. We told her that he might be gorgeous — still is— and he might be charming, but he’s got evil in his soul.” She shivers and I lift a granny square blanket from the back of the couch. She waves it away. “I’m not cold.”

Was it the words she said?

“And then...” she sighs and sets her crocheting down. “And then he did the one thing that we knew would break her heart. Her daddy was a cheater, and she was clear with Jameson that she wouldn’t stand for it.”

“Jameson Briggs cheated on his wife?”

Her gaze slides to me. There’s sadness behind the cloudy blue. One simple nod is all that is needed to tell me everything.

“A woman in Denver, and it wasn’t a one-time thing. Years. She found out when she found letters and some paperwork. Jameson and this woman —never found out her name or I might have driven to Denver to give her a piece of my mind— had a child together.”

My stomach roils.

His eyes. His hazel eyes. Zane?

“Do you know if they had a girl or boy?” I ask wondering if it’s too circumstantial and my brain is making things up.

“As much as I remember, the baby was a boy. He’d probably be...” she takes a moment to think, “Twenty-four or five? Beau was about seven when she found out. Can’t believe she’s been gone for twenty years now. Seems impossible. I miss her as much today as the day after her accident.”

“Accident?” I guess I assumed she died of medical reasons. My mother never said otherwise, but my mother works for the Briggs family, and she barely says anything about them.

“She was driving away from the Briggs home... and not that monstrosity they live in now, but their original home, the one Wyatt lives in. A lovely four-bedroom home that her father purchased for them after their wedding, much to Jameson’s damaged pride. He screamed for weeks that he would provide for her, but I think Hazel’s father was making a statement that Jameson needed to come down off his Briggs high horse. Didn’t work.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, she was going too fast.” Her words slow. “She took a curve too fast and lost control and then she went over the edge and her car wasn’t found for two days. They say she might have lived if Jameson had reported her missing sooner.”

My blood chills inside of me.

Her jaw tightens and I slide onto the couch beside her, my knees weak. “The bastard claimed that she told him she was going to meet us girls in Vale for a getaway. But... there was no luggage in the car and no reservations at any lodge under her name.”

“He lied,” I whisper not believing what I’m hearing. I knew that he’s completely sick, I have more than enough evidence of that and that he doesn’t care about anyone, I’ve felt that personally. It’s clear he isn’t well in lots of ways, and people talk about him like he’s evil incarnate, but this is a hundred miles past unbelievable and into revolting and appalling.

What kind of man does that to his wife?

She almost cackles. “The man is cheat. Lying isn’t a major offense to him. The sheriff told him that his story didn’t add up, but Jameson just paid for someone else to win the next election, someone he trusted, and that was the end of it. And now Colt’s in there and I imagine a lot of Jameson’s transgressions are looked over.”

“I don’t know about that. With him marrying Aria Fairchild, a lawyer, he seems to be taking his duties seriously.”

“That’s good to hear.”

But the whole story still sits inside of me like bad corn pudding. I wonder if the feeling will ever pass.

And I’m wondering if Mrs. Grady still feels this.

“She was lucky to have such caring friends,” I offer, patting her hand.

“Oh, I know. I just wonder what would’ve happened if she were still here. She was such an open soul. Had this VW bus that she worked on. Jameson said it was ‘men’s work,’ so she recruited her son Beau to help and taught him how to do almost everything. I think he still has it.”

I pull out my phone and hold it up. “I took this yesterday at the farmers market. Was it this one?”

She raises a hand to her mouth. “Oh Hazel.” Her eyes water and her pain is palpable.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause you more—”

“No, honey, you didn’t. This is hope on four wheels. She’s getting to go places. I know her spirit is with that vehicle.”

“Mrs. Grady,” I start but the door opens like a hurricane arrived. And in walks her daughter, Caitlin.

“Momma!” she calls out not even looking at us sitting ten feet away.

“Caitlin, we’re right here. Stop your hollering. Can’t imagine Wyatt likes that.”

“Wyatt likes a lot of things I do and is willing to forgive the things he doesn’t like because I do them.” She rocks her eyebrows.

“Daughter, wash your mouth out!”

I chuckle internally. Caitlin is still the spitfire she always was, but now she’s sporting a big baby bump and it’s probably getting close to time for that baby to come out. “Hi, Caitlin.”

She waddles to me, and I meet her for a hug. She gives the hugs where your whole body and soul feel it. The best. Well, second to my momma. Kissing her mother on the cheek, she plops into the other recliner and flicks the footrest out, sighing and forming to the chair.

“For May in the mountain it’s too hot out there.”

“You’re an oven for another human. You’re going to feel warm,” her mother says with a chuckle.

“What were you two talking about? Seemed a little tense when I came in.”

“You didn’t even look at us.”

“I can feel these things,” she pulls a biscuit out of her pocket and starts taking massive bites. “One of Patty’s. They’re so good.”

My momma’s cooking is a cross between southern and northern, but don’t tell the senior Briggs that.

“So dish!” she says.

Mrs. Grady looks to me. “Ms. Renee seems to have her eye on a new beau.”

“Not Beau Briggs, right?” Crumbs fall from her mouth as it gapes open.

“No. Not that ‘beau’,” I say and roll my eyes.

“So there is someone,” Mrs. Grady says with a twinkle in her eyes.

Damn. Foiled by an Irish woman.

“And that’s my cue to go. Do you need anything else?” I ask as I hand her a glass of water.

“Nope, my daughter’s here, I’m good.”

Closing the door slowly, I lean back against it.

Zane... what were you and Colt talking about? And do I want to be within five miles of this shitshow?

ZANE

The local BBQ restaurant, The Whole Hog, is hopping when James and I get there. We're seated in a booth and from my vantage point, I can see the dance floor. The music starts up, a line dance that Mom taught me, and I hear a couple of hoots and hollers from the bar. A familiar face spins her seat. How I'd love to twirl Renee around the dance floor. I was so out of it on Saturday after Colt asked me to dinner that I grabbed James and went back to the motel.

But right now, I'd love to have her spinning and laughing as her perfume saturates the air around us.

I don't wish that James wasn't with me. I wish my ex was clean and took responsibility. I wish I had family here. My mother warned me that this could happen. She said that Storm Canyon created women and men who enchanted outsiders. And I believe her.

I've thought about Renee morning, noon, and night. She's effortlessly taken up space in my head. And I want to get to know her.

Tomorrow is Sunday and I wonder if she has to work.

"Sam!" James calls out and starts scrambling from the booth.

They crash into each other in an awkward hug.

"Hi Zane." Patty, Renee's mother steps into view. "Sorry about that. We just came here to grab some dinner."

“Would you like to join us?” I ask, my gaze still on Renee.

“Nah, but... would you be okay if James comes over to play with Sam.” She leans in close. “There’s only so many Legos I can play. Plus, maybe you want to... enjoy your evening?” Her head tips with a soft smile. She reminds me a lot of my own mother.

“I really...” I look to James and he’s already half-way out the door. “That would be great. Thanks, Patty.”

“Did you two hear that? You get to have a sleepover at Grandma Patty’s house!”

They both start jumping. James’s food comes and I get it boxed up to go with him, but if he eats one chicken finger, I’ll be surprised. He’s going to be exhausted.

“Are you sure a sleepover?” I ask.

“Gimme your phone.” She puts her phone number in there under Patty- Renee’s mom. “You want to come pick him up, just text me and I’ll have him waiting for you, but if it’s tomorrow morning,” she raises and lowers her shoulders, “Then so be it.”

I almost feel like I’ve been given permission to get it on with her daughter or at least to have a night to myself. Something that doesn’t happen ever.

I squat to James. “You listen to Grandma Patty and be nice to Sam and share and...”

“I promise that he’ll be okay.” Patty pats my shoulder.

I stand and add his meal to the stack of containers in her hands. “Thank you, Patty. I really appreciate this.”

She leans in. “She loves this song.”

I can’t help but watch her walk to the bar, her friend leaning into her and laughing. “Noted.” I take a swig of my beer bottle and set it back on the table. My food shows up and I carry it with me to the bar.

“This seat taken,” I whisper into her ear and her head spins, our faces only inches apart.

“Definitely not. Sit.” She glances around. “Not that I’m questioning your fathering, but... where’s James?”

“Your mom showed up and she took him to have a... sleepover with Sam.”

“God, Sam hasn’t stopped talking about James and how he wants to see him again. I’m sure he’s just ear-to-ear smiles.”

“So was James.”

“Kinda cool how they get along.”

I slip onto the chair. “Maybe they’re not the only ones who could get along.”

A dimple darts into her cheek as she smirks. “Maybe.”

“I hear this is one of your favorite songs... wanna dance?”

“Sure.”

The line dance is a quick one with some fancy footwork that keeps us moving. Occasionally I grab her hand and spin her, until finally the DJ decides a slower song. She starts to pull toward the bar, and I tug her back to me until she crashes into me.

“Let’s stay.” Moving my hips, I sway our bodies as one.

“You have some nice moves.”

“Thanks.”

“Umm... I don’t know how to ask this so I’m just going to ask it.”

“Shoot,” I can only say one word answers as my body pulls all the blood to one concentrated area. Her soft body melds to mine.

“Are you Jameson Briggs’s son?”

I stop and the blood rushes away from my groin and into my chest, making my heart clip-clop like a Clydesdale in my chest.

I open and close my mouth like five times before I catch my breath. “Yes. My mother had a long affair with him and I’m the product of that relationship.”

She stills. “And you’re here to...”

“Tell Jameson who I am and maybe find the family I never had.”

“There are things you don’t know about the Briggs family. It’s not going to be easy, Zane.”

“It’s time that I know who I am.”

“That’s really inspiring to me. Sam’s dad abandoned us when he found out I was pregnant.”

My jaw clenches. “That asshole.”

“I always wonder if he’ll go looking in the future.” She looks up. “Yeah. But I think someone needs to warn you that what you’re walking into isn’t going to be easy. Jameson Briggs isn’t a normal person.”

I laugh. “I’m sorry. Not normal. Who says there’s normal?”

She rolls her eyes. “He’s not nice. And he can be really mean.” She stills. “I... I know something you might want to know.”

I step back. “Why does this feel like something I don’t want to learn on the dance floor?”

“Cause it’s not.”

Might be easier to just go back to Denver and forget this place exists. But when I look into her eyes, I’m positive that I’ll never be able to do that.

Bewitched.

RENEE

I saw the look in his eye, but I couldn't totally read it. Maybe disbelief. Maybe irritation. And maybe resignation that this place isn't for him.

And when he dropped his arms from me, I felt something. I missed them. I'm a tall and curvy gal and when I'm in his arms I feel, well, precious and safe. Those are two things I've never felt before. I've always had to fight for my safety. I've always been wary, but there's a vulnerability to Zane that I've never felt in any man.

And that's why I'm worried about him doing anything with the Briggs family. The father's the worst, but the brothers... they've been just as bad in my experience. I've had my share of run-ins with Wyatt when my rent was past due. If they didn't own every damn rental in this town, I'd steer clear of them. But they do.

And Sheriff Colt and his annoyingly present deputies seem to think that five miles per hour over the speed limit deserves a ticket. I've given enough fines that I drive five *under* now.

And Beau, the youngest... well, he and I had an ill-timed and short-lived fling back in high school and I'd be lying if I didn't say he broke my heart a little. Just like a thousand other women. He's part wild child and part saint. Thankfully the saint part has decided to dominate, and I hear he's a father to a child who isn't biologically his. Now that's a change I like to hear of.

But Jameson. Jameson Briggs is a walking, talking demon, and if I had to bet, I'd say he's the Devil's right-hand man. He's kicked people out of their homes when they were dying. He's claimed the right to other people's land when deeds told a different story, but the courts were bought off to give him what he wanted. He's not just horrible, he's insidious and cruel.

And now we're in Zane's motel room. And I'm pretty sure what I'm going to tell him isn't foreplay for either of us. Talking about Jameson Briggs is like the biggest cock and clit-block ever.

He pulls a beer out the fridge and motions it to me.

"No, thanks." I wave it off. I'd like to take it but this needs clear minds.

He puts it back. "Probably best to be sober to hear this."

Definitely.

He grabs a chair from the desk. The motel just recently went through a renovation. Of course, the Briggs family owns it—the Starlight Motel. It's less magical than the name would indicate, but they have done some major improvements and this bed seems to be pretty damn comfy, or at least my ass thinks so.

I lean forward and grab his hand. "Here's the thing. I don't know what you expect, but when it comes to being welcomed with open arms, I'd probably think twice about that. The Briggs barely tolerate each other."

"Yeah, my mom warned me that was the case." He leans over and rubs the back of his neck with his other hand. The stress of not knowing half of who he is has to be a weight on him.

"Does Colt know?"

He looks up with only his gaze. "Yeah. I think he found something."

"You have their eyes," I whisper.

He tips his head. "My mom said that, too."

“They’re beautiful, by the way.”

“Oh, yeah?” He leans closer, sliding to the end of his chair. “Yours aren’t too bad, either.”

“And your mouth...” I bite the side of my bottom lip and his eyes drop to the move.

“You’re good at that.”

I laugh. “I’m not sure that’s a skill I should put on my resume.”

His lips slip across mine and a lightning bolt shoots through my core. His hands are in my hair in the next swipe of his mouth. The world starts to spin like a top. I’ve never felt this before. It’s magnetic. It’s like being lifted into the air and floating off on the best spring breeze. But then it’s hot like lava is inside of me. Flowing freely and singing my nerves from the inside out.

His tongue tickles the split of my lips.

“Zane...” I breathe out his name and pull away.

He pulls away and stands, moving to the other side of the room. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m normally not like that. I’m just...” He runs a hand through his hair.

“Are you scared?”

He spins to me and swallows deeply. “I’m terrified.”

“I can imagine.”

“But I don’t want to use you as a distraction, Renee. That’s not fair to you.”

Says you!

But I get what he’s saying and it’s fucking refreshing. Most of the men in Storm Canyon just take what they want and leave. At least that’s my experience.

He’s so different. And that makes me even more concerned for him. The Briggs family will eat him up, devour his soul, and spit him out like a cherry pit when they’ve sucked the life from him.

I push off the bed and meet him as he paces back and forth. He's like a caged animal and a little part of me is scared to touch him.

“Zane, I understand. Being told you're not good enough or being dismissed will hurt, but if this is something you need to do, then you should do it.”

“You understand things that I don't. I am scared. I don't want to be told I can't be part of a family that I've always wanted. I could have brothers. I could have a father.”

“You could, but will it change anything?”

He stills. “No. I'll still be me. I'll still be a dad to James. And I'll still be trying to do my best to be a good person.”

“Exactly.”

His hands slide along my cheeks and into my hair. “I want you.”

“God, yes!”

Chuckling as his lips slide down my neck, I give him all the room he wants. He slides my small shoulder strap off and his lips continue to down until he's biting at my hardened nipple through my bra.

I reach back and flick the clasp to discard the unwanted piece of fabric. “Better?”

He looks at my chest with such admiration that it feels like worship. That's what I need tonight. To be the only thing he's thinking about. To be the one thing on his mind. And for him to see me as I am.

Because I see you, Zane.

Things move so fast that I can't imagine how we'd ever stop. Even a freight train coming through the room would only cause a brief pause. His lips travel over my body as he removes clothing piece by piece all while staying clothed. And once I'm naked he stands up and slowly does a strip tease for me.

“You are way too good at that,” I comment as his hips gyrate round and round. My mind wandering to dangerous places of hedonistic delight.

“I’d tell you how I paid for college, but I’ll just let my body do the talking.”

I pause. “Wait, you were a dancer, not a gigolo, right?”

His laugh tells me the truth. “The first. And my ex has been my only partner, tested clean after her and no one since.”

My mouth drops open. “You’re kidding right?”

“Nope. I kinda lost interest in sex after what I went through with her. The hot and cold emotionally, in and out of the relationship, and the time that it took for it to finally implode and end, it just left a bad taste in my mouth. But I want to taste something new.”

In the time he talked his clothes were shed and I didn’t even realize it.

And then his head disappears between my legs and my body starts vibrating from the moment that his tongue touches me. He’s got a way of showing me how he feels.

It gives me a strange feeling...

No, I can’t fall.

My body climbs. Higher. Higher. To the highest peak and I fall over, releasing my past with him.

Shit. I’ve fallen.

This woman. Gigolo? She’s funny. And she’s sensitive to what I’m feeling. I didn’t even know I was scared. Realizing my feelings is something I need to work on. My ex might be right there. But there’s no thinking of anyone but Renee.

And when she releases, she probably thinks that she’s reached the ultimate pleasure, but she hasn’t... I have. This is the woman I need.

I slide up her body and kiss her, sharing the delicious taste of her body. She's sweet like cherries. But I'm thinking she's not a virgin so there's no popping going to happen.

"I'm clean and covered," she says softly.

"You're sure?"

I never trusted my ex. She'd do anything for a hit of... anything to chase her demons away. I'm done cleaning things up for her. This is my time.

Her hands cup my face. "I'm positive. I see you Zane. You're special. You're a great dad. You're trying to find out who you are. I'm positive that I'm falling for you... that I've fallen."

"Well then..." I push into her body and the unity is like every firework in the world all at once.

I drive the rhythm slowly, showing what those dance moves can really do and when her back arches, I keep the tempo pounding. I won't go off until she's there. I will also wait for her. Only her.

Her eyes open and her mouth drops to a perfect tiny "O" and then she screams out my name. Her pussy clenching around my cock. As her body quakes, I drive faster, the pace bringing me to my own release and my seed coats her walls.

I still and look into her eyes. "I didn't know I was going to find love in Storm Canyon. I love you, Renee."

ZANE

Last night still stays with me as I prepare for tonight's dinner. I know where to go. Who will be there. But it's all about what will happen that is driving me to think of backing out.

Renee's right. I don't need someone to validate who I am. I know who I am. And a last name doesn't make a man as much as Jameson Briggs might think so.

Sam and James are playing in Renee's back yard. She's volunteered to keep James while I go to dinner.

"Maybe I shouldn't do this..." I say, watching Sam pretending to be a superhero and jumping off a pile of bricks in the corner of the yard.

I can really make a nice fire pit with those bricks.

Her hand slips into mine. "You don't have to. I won't think anything different of you if you don't go to this dinner. You have nothing to prove to me."

"But I do have something to prove to me. I need to understand why Jameson abandoned us. I need to know who made me."

"Then sounds like the way to do it is to go to this dinner."

"Wish you could come with me." I spin her to me and lay a long kiss on her.

The boys stop playing and the silence in the backyard is clear.

“Ewwww,” Sam’s first to break the silence.

“Yeah, Dad, ewww! Gross.” James hops on the “girls have cooties” bandwagon.

I dip Renee deeply and put a long kiss on the woman who has raised me to the highest heights. I’ve looked at a couple of places to stay permanently and my boss at the mechanic shop that I’ve been temporarily working at while here has offered me full-time employment with benefits. Something that we’ve never had and that would be a step in the right direction.

James is prone to being a little boy and we’ve already had a broken bone in his hand from a bizarre barrier-free merry-go-round incident that still makes my stomach rock into my throat. It was scary and the bill that came with it... even scarier.

“Okay, I’m going to go. Apparently, my father doesn’t like tardiness.”

“Eh. I think either way Jameson is going to not like what’s coming, but that’s not a reason to not go.”

“Exactly. His bullshit is his own.”

“Wow, I like this guy. He’s got moves in and out of bed.”

I chuckle and kiss her cheek. “Maybe later I can show you more of those moves.”

“Promise?” she licks her lips in this way that I know it’s just going to happen.

But first... dinner.

And then I’ll really eat.

“Go!” she shoves me toward the back door to go through the house. A nice little two-bedroom cottage that could be added on to.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

Sampson?

My lawyer usually calls me with bad news, so I'm waiting for the worst and since I haven't heard from my ex in two weeks, it could be really bad.

"Hi Sampson."

"Hey, Zane. Just wanted to let you know that we located Monica. She's in treatment. She signed the custody paperwork."

"Really? Was she sober and of sound mind?"

We'd been down this road before. She would do things in the heat of the moment while high or drunk and then claim she didn't remember doing them and that they never existed, or someone tricked her.

"Yeah, the treatment coordinator was right there with her, and she wants to work on herself. She said in the future she may come to you to ask for some arrangements, but she knows that this is what's best for James."

I hope that she gets the help she needs.

"Thanks Sampson."

"I'll file the paperwork this week and we should have a court date next month."

"Wow, that's quick."

"Uncontested goes quicker. I'm happy for you, Zane. You're a great dad."

"Thanks again. I guess I'll be hearing from you."

"You bet. Have a good one."

Now that was unexpected.

This is gonna be a good night. I can just feel it.

The door opens before I ring the bell. The man standing there has a smile, but for some reason I don't feel comforted by the gesture.

“Hey, bro.”

The blood drains from my face.

“Beau! Stop fucking with him.” Colt pushes him out of the way.

“Hey, Zane. Come on in.” He turns to Beau and does introductions. “This is Zane Smith. Zane this is Beau, he’s the youngest brother.”

“Not anymore,” Beau adds, and I cringe. Acceptance doesn’t feel quite there, but I’m not worried yet.

We shake hands and another man in a black hat, probably ten years older than me comes into the entry with a beautiful redhead on his arm, eating a cookie in two bites, but by the bump in front of her, I’m understanding why.

“Zane, this is the middle of us three, Wyatt. He’s our ringleader for the businesses and well... Beau.”

“Hey!” Beau punches Colt in the arm. “I’m not that bad... anymore.”

“Hey, I could arrest you for that.” Colt puts his sheriff hat back on and I chuckle at their antics.

“Nice to meet all of you. I know that this isn’t going to be comfortable for any of us, but I really appreciate the invitation and I’m not going to expect anything from anyone.”

“Oh, it’s going to be a royal shitshow when the king sees you,” Beau says, walking backwards and nodding for me to follow.

Great.

The dining table is massive and I’m not sure where to sit. I start to pull out one of the chairs on the side and Colt’s hand stops me.

“We’d like you to sit opposite Father.”

I look at the throne that sits at the head of the table and ten feet opposite, the smaller throne. “I... I don’t know, won’t that piss him off?”

Colt chuckles. “Guaranteed, but it’s time that Jameson Briggs comes clean and gets some shit clear. Zane, us three brothers have talked and we’re all in on welcoming you into the family.”

A blonde woman joins us in the room, wrapping her arm around the pregnant redhead. “And we’re all in, too. I’m Aria, Colt’s better half, and this is Caitlin, Wyatt’s wife.”

Beau clears his throat, “And my wife Sutton is here, feeding our baby. She’s on the same page as all of us.”

“But none of you know me.” I regret saying it. It’s like I’m pushing them away.

“We’re not saying that things are going to be easy or they’re going to fall into place immediately, but if you’re willing to be honest and put in the time, we’ll do the same.”

My heart beats sure and strong for the first time in a long time. I was always living on the edge. Always thinking that they would hate me.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Wyatt starts directing people into seats and we all sit there in silence.

Waiting.

For the King.

And right on schedule he enters the room. His gaze seems to breeze right over me, but I clock the tick in his jawline. And in some ways, it makes me happy to know that I affected him a little.

“Good evening, Father,” Wyatt offers and Jameson glares at him.

“Evenin’,” is all he says back.

Renee’s mom comes from the kitchen followed by a brunette that I’m assuming is Sutton, Beau’s wife since he stands and kisses her, pulling her chair out. I can see the admiration between them and I wonder what kinds of things Beau did previously to get so much shit from his brothers.

The silence is even more quiet than when I was kissing Renee in the backyard with the boys.

I lift my spoon and then catch Beau's eye and he shakes his head, motioning toward Jameson.

Oh, we wait for his signal. This is fuckin' weird.

As soon as Jameson lifts his spoon for the soup, we all can do the same. The tension is like Jell-O and I'm trying to see through it to how we can make this work and it seems unlikely.

Kaitlyn clears her throat, "Well, this is uncomfortable."

I hear a thud under the table and realize that Wyatt has bumped her leg with his.

"I mean, isn't this soup delicious?"

I haven't lifted my spoon to my mouth yet, but when I do, I know why James said that Grandma Patty makes the best grilled cheese and chocolate chip cookies. I'm pretty sure anything she cooks is amazing.

I devour the soup and the next plate is placed in front of me. I'm seeing a steak the size of Texas. No one seems to think that this isn't normal. It's a side of damn beef on a plate, surrounded by a baked potato and a smaller side of broccoli.

Wyatt drops his fork and knife after a few bites. "Father, this is—"

"I know who he is." He doesn't raise his gaze.

Don't I deserve the decency of respect? Not like you gave it to my mother. Shoulda expected it.

Wyatt looks to his right to Jameson. "You owe us the truth, Father."

Jameson chew slowly, not looking up. I glance to Caitlin, and she rolls her eyes while shoving baked potato into her mouth. I can tell that she is a hundred percent spitfire and Wyatt has his hands full.

Father takes a long drink of his beer and then sets it down.

The man enjoys making people wait for effect is all I can think. It's like a slow walk to death row or the last minutes of a plane when the occupants know they're going to crash. It's nothing short of torture.

"Ms. Sutton, the baby is wanting to be fed."

"Thank God!" Sutton stands quickly and grabs her meal, hightailing it into the kitchen, like her ass is on fire. She had a parachute.

I have no parachute.

Jameson stands, looming over all of us and I know where I get my height from. "I owe you... nothing." His hands slam to the table as he leans toward Wyatt on his left, but slowly his head turns to me. "And you... you are not my blood."

Colt stands and goes chest to chest with him. "Did our mother die because she found out?"

Jameson's jawline tightens like a bow being pulled. "Your mother died because she went snooping where she didn't belong and then decided not to listen to me that I'd taken care of it."

It? Is that what he thinks of me?

Beau stands and Wyatt stops him on the way to Jameson. "Not worth it. You know it and I know it."

"I remember that day! I remember her running out the door crying. You told me I was crazy, but I remember, Father!" Beau's eyes glaze over and Sutton comes rushing from the kitchen, pulling him to the side, wrapping her arms around him.

The pain in this family is a mountain that's taller than Storm Canyon Mountain. It's deeper than the oceans and now I'm not sure I need to be a part of it.

I push to stand. "I never wanted to cause a rift and make waves."

"Then leave and don't come back," Jameson growls my way.

I start to round the table and Jameson meets me. Colt right next to him, his hand on his service weapon and I don't know if it's for me or for Jameson.

"This is not your family," is all he says and as much as I want to think that I could be part of this, it's clear I'm reaching for a star that I can't touch. The heavens were never meant to be reached.

Every bite of dinner starts to rebel and my stomach rises to my throat. "At least I don't abandon my family and children. You aren't the man I thought you were."

I turn toward the door and start taking long strides to the door, but I hear multiple sets of boots clicking behind me.

I open the door and a hand grabs the edge to hold it open. Out in the driveway, I turn around and there are six people — Colt and Aria, Wyatt and Caitlin, Beau and Sutton with a baby in her arms— well, seven with the baby, and they're not mad.

"I'm so—"

"We told you that we're not him. That his view will never be our view. We all saw the DNA test results that were in the paperwork that was part of the investigation of our mother's death. She found out and she took the paperwork with her to go talk to her girlfriends, but she never made it there. We mountain back roads, our father's poor decisions, and probably distraction killed our mother." Colt grabs my shoulder. "*We* don't abandon family. The three of us boys... we know that we want you to be our brother."

"I... I always wanted to be a part of a big family."

"Mr. Wyatt! Mr. Wyatt!" Patty's voice screams from the doorway. "Your father! Mr. Briggs needs an ambulance!"

RENEE

I meet my mother at the hospital, and she takes the boys and Beau and Sutton's baby home so I can stay with Zane and all the Briggs boys can be together. I can't imagine what he's feeling, but I'm hoping he doesn't think that this is his fault.

I know things about Jameson. I've had to do things in my occupation that I can't tell others about and due to laws and non-disclosure sheets I've signed. And as much as I know Jameson Briggs isn't a healthy man on the outside... he's doubly unhealthy on the inside.

When I say he's a sick man. I don't mean just horrible and spiteful, but truly ill and unable to admit his impending demise.

And I couldn't tell Zane.

I make it to the emergency department just to have Dr. Travis moving toward the family. He gives me raised brows. He and I have been in contact regarding Jameson's progress and lack of concern for his health. I slip in beside Zane and clasp his hand. He squeezes back.

"Thank you for coming," he whispers in my ear before kissing the round of my cheek. "It means a lot to me."

"How are you?"

"He looked so bad being loaded into the ambulance. I think it's bad, like bad-bad."

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry."

“He told me to get out and go home, but... I think I *am* home, Renee.”

“Of course you are. You’re a Briggs. You have Storm Canyon Mountain stream blood running in your veins.”

I wrap my arm around his side and pull him close. What he’s about to hear isn’t going to be easy.

I inhale a shaky breath. “Zane, I need to tell you something—.”

“Hello folks. I wish I had better news.” Dr. Travis steps to the group as the men pull their women closer for support. “Jameson is a fighter, but I think with his conditions, the fight is coming to a close.”

“Wait! Back up...” Colt says shaking his head. “Wha—What conditions?”

Dr. Travis looks to me. “They don’t know.”

Zane’s arm drops from behind me and I close my eyes, shaking my head. “HIPAA, Zane. I couldn’t tell you. It’s against the law.”

“What’s wrong with him, Doc?”

He sighs. “I think there’s a shorter list of what’s not.”

The women all purse their lips and their hands dig into their sides as the men gather around the doctor.

Dr. Travis opens the file. “Your father has congestive heart failure. He’s in Stage D and a heart transplant, ventricular assist devices or surgery options aren’t advisable at this age. This little angel over here has been giving him twice-weekly infusions of intravenous inotropic drugs, but now... I’m sorry, but end-of-life care is probably all we can do. I’m sorry that I don’t have better hope for you, but I think you should say your goodbyes because I think he’ll go quickly.”

My knees weaken as Zane turns to me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t. Medical information is protected information.”

“How can I trust you?”

Wyatt steps up and his hand lands on Zane's shoulder. "This isn't her fault, Zane."

"But if I'd know, I could've kept him calm. I would've walked out sooner. What if the stress of tonight is the end of a man I never got to know?"

Colt sighs and joins Wyatt. "Jameson Briggs dug an early grave by his actions, his words, and his misdeeds. It's him alone who is to blame for his pride getting in the way of showing that he's human. He could've come to us and changed to live a happy life until the end. But he doesn't want to be happy. Ever since our mother died, he's been punishing himself, I just didn't realize it until now. He's had a broken heart. Literally and probably figuratively. And this façade was a way to protect him from getting close to anyone else. He wasn't always this stoic and hard. This is self-protection from getting hurt. Guilt has eaten him from the inside out. It's sad, but it's his way."

Wyatt shakes his head in disbelief. "That's why he's been going into Denver."

The doctor nods. "Specialists, but they all said the same thing. It's too late."

Beau pipes up, "I just hope he doesn't end up with our mother. He doesn't deserve her."

"Oh, he's not going where she is," Wyatt says with a cracking voice. "They'd never let that monster through the pearly gates."

Caitlin's arms wrap her husband up and for the first time I see the fissures of the past. The cracks that Jameson Briggs has put into this family that need to be mended and his death won't do that, only time, change, and love will.

"I'm gonna go," I say feeling like I'm not welcome anymore. Zane's hardly looked at me and I can't take the silence. I walk toward the ER doors and a hand catches mine as the doors separate.

"I'm sorry," is all I hear. "I want you here. I can't do this without you. I need you, Renee."

Spinning to him, I step close. “Are you sure? I can handle it if it’s not going to happen between us.” *Liar*. “I need to know that you understand why I couldn’t tell you.”

He nods. “Yeah, I just wanted someone to blame other than myself and Jameson that I’ll never get to know the man who gave me life.”

“I can understand that. I’ll be here for you and for James. Now and forever, Zane.”

“Guys we’re going to go in as a family to say goodbye,” Aria says softly.

Zane’s hand cups mine and he brings it to his lips, brushing over my knuckles. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Aria smiles. “Welcome to the family Zane and Renee. You’re gonna love these guys as much as we do.”

“Sweetheart.” He kisses the top of my forehead. “Life’s too short.”

Zane used to be a secret. He used to be scared. But not anymore. Now he’s mine and we’re going to be a part of this family.

And the only secret we’ll have is my mother’s chocolate chip cookie recipe.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Zane

Jameson fought until the very end. He passed eleven days after the doctor told us he would. He just couldn't fight anymore, and I think that's probably a good thing for him. The pain he was in saturated the room and although he told me he never wanted to see me again after that first time. I returned daily to say another goodbye and finally he said that he wished he'd done some things differently. Not necessarily an admission of wrongdoing, but it felt close enough.

And when he passed, I felt relief on his behalf. I was sad. Don't get me wrong, but I was thankful that his pain was over, and I had family I could lean on to hold me up when I was hurting.

"Hey, Sammy, come here! You, too, James!" I call them both from the backyard. They're playing in the snow. They've built a fort and a snowball fight arena, complete with slingshots for bomb attacks from above, not just straight on fire. I might have joined in a few times and I even took on Beau. Which wasn't a good thing.

And Sam and James are brothers. No doubt about it. They argue. They fight. And they make-up for the only reason that they love each other. Same goes for the Briggs brothers and me. We've had a few tiffs, including one where Beau almost punched me— but we've worked on his anger issues and my

need to know things —*all the things*— and come to an agreement that I won't "ask so many fuckin' questions" as he puts it, and he won't get the sheriff called on him in the Thunder Café again for threatening me for asking one too many questions.

Everyone's met my mother, Connie. It was slow going and she was probably the most nervous, but she won them over. And her and Patty are besties now. Apparently, something that Patty's been missing in her life. Mom will move here next spring to retire and be near her grandsons.

"Come... sit." I point to the benches I built around the firepit, using those unused bricks from the back of the yard. "Sam, I wanna talk to you, man to man."

He puffs up his chest. He's about eight months older than James, but he loves to think he's the "big" brother. Of course, James towers over him by inches, but that's not "bigger" that's just DNA. Sam said that once and I had to stifle a laugh.

"What is it, Zane?"

We've decided that the boys get to choose when and if they'll call is Dad and Mom. It's not our decision to force on them.

I pull a box out of my pocket. "What do you think is in here?"

"A dead bug?" he asks, and I chuckle. "A pickle?"

James pipes up, "No! It's a ring box!"

Sam stills. "A ring?"

"Sam, I want to ask your permission to marry your mom, Renee. I love her more than I thought I could any woman and I'm ready to make it official."

"Are you going to leave?"

I freeze. I remember her saying that her ex couldn't stomach the thought of kids and I'm sure he's overheard some of our conversations. I should've known to have those when we're truly alone and Grandma Patty has the boys.

“No. I won’t leave. I’m here for good. Storm Canyon is my home. This house is my home. And you, Sam... you are my son.”

He bites his lip, just like his mother, but in a very different way. It’s innocent. Renee is anything but that.

Damn that woman gets me revved up.

“So... you’ll be my dad?”

My heart leaps into my throat. I didn’t even consider that’s what he’s been waiting for.

I lift him onto my lap. “Buddy, I already feel like your dad. And you can call me that, if you ever feel like it, but you’re still welcome to call me Zane. I just want you to know that I love you no matter what and I love your mother no matter what.”

“I love you, too... Dad,” he says quietly, and James rolls his eyes. He’s called Renee “Mom” a couple of times.

“I love you, too, James,” I say, pulling him onto my other leg. “So, Sam. Can I marry your mom?”

“If she’ll have you. You snore! We can hear you through the walls!”

I laugh. “I’ll try to snore less.”

“Okay. Then yes. You and her are happy and I like that.”

“Are you happy?”

He giggles. “So will James be my *real* brother?”

“You know, I have brothers I didn’t grow up with and they’re my real brothers. I think if James wants to be your real brother, then you’re real brothers, but it’s always up to the other person to accept you for who you are.”

“James, are you my real brother?”

James kicks his legs happily. “I think so!”

They both catapult off my lap and run around the yard screaming. “Real brothers! Real brothers!”

I think that’s a yes.

I walk inside and Patty's taking off her sweater.

"Hey there, I'm all ready."

She already knows that tonight's the night. Clasp my face, she shakes my head a little and smiles. "Welcome to the family, Zane."

When I moved to Storm Canyon, I didn't realize how many families I would be getting. There's the community family of townspeople. There's my boss Dean's family who has helped us out in many ways. There's the Briggs family who have made me into a brother and brother-in-law and uncle times over now. And there's the family that's mine. Two little boys who mean the world to me.

Renee comes from the bedroom. She's wearing a form fitting green velvet dress and her brown hair trails down her back. And those heels...

Fuck me.

That's it. She's a complete siren. Some sort of mountain nymph that has lured me into her tangled web, but I don't want out. I only want in deeper.

"You are gorgeous." I kiss her lips softly.

"You're not too bad yourself." I went into Denver and got some black dress pants, a grey shirt, and a nice black leather jacket.

The backdoor slams and the boys kick off their snow boots, rounding into the living room.

"Thanks." I stare into her eyes. That summer blue piercing into me. "Renee, these last six months have been everything for me. You are everything to me."

"It has been pretty magical, right?"

"Completely." I start to go down on one knee. "I want us all to be a family, and I really want you to say you'll marry me and make the happiest man on the earth."

She smiles and I know. I just fucking know. "Yes!"

Patty and the boy cheer and I slip the diamond on her finger. Aria, Caitlin, and Sutton helped me pick it out and it's a perfect fit.

"I love it." She holds it up for her mother to see and Patty's eyes get big.

"I love you, sweetheart." I pull her close.

In her heels she's only about two inches shorter than me so she goes to her tiptoes and kisses my lips softly, hanging there for seconds. "It's no secret, I love you, too."

There's more to come from Storm Canyon. Those three Rose Sisters—the Roses—must get their happily ever afters, and so do those darn Winchesters. There's still three of them. And guess what, Riley's partnering the Roses up with the Winchesters in 2024. Look for preorders of those books soon!

Until then, be sure to check out Black Timber Peak Mountain Men! [Black Timber Peak Mountain Men](#)

This is the bearded, rugged, growly alpha mountain man series you've been looking for!

Come to Black Timber Peak where these alphas have been secluded for way too long. These men have escaped their pasts to find solace and solitude in the shadows of giant trees, fast moving rivers, and skies that darken to onyx at night. Their patience is short, their demeanor is possessive, and when a curvy woman comes in their sights, they're going to fall hard and fast. She's meant to be theirs. They're strong enough to survive alone, but it's time to make the ultimate sacrifice to have everything they want in life when her life is on the line.

Come experience suspense, thrills, heat and heart like you never have before!

Take a trip with these six authors to Black Timber Peak and find your next book boyfriend mountain man.