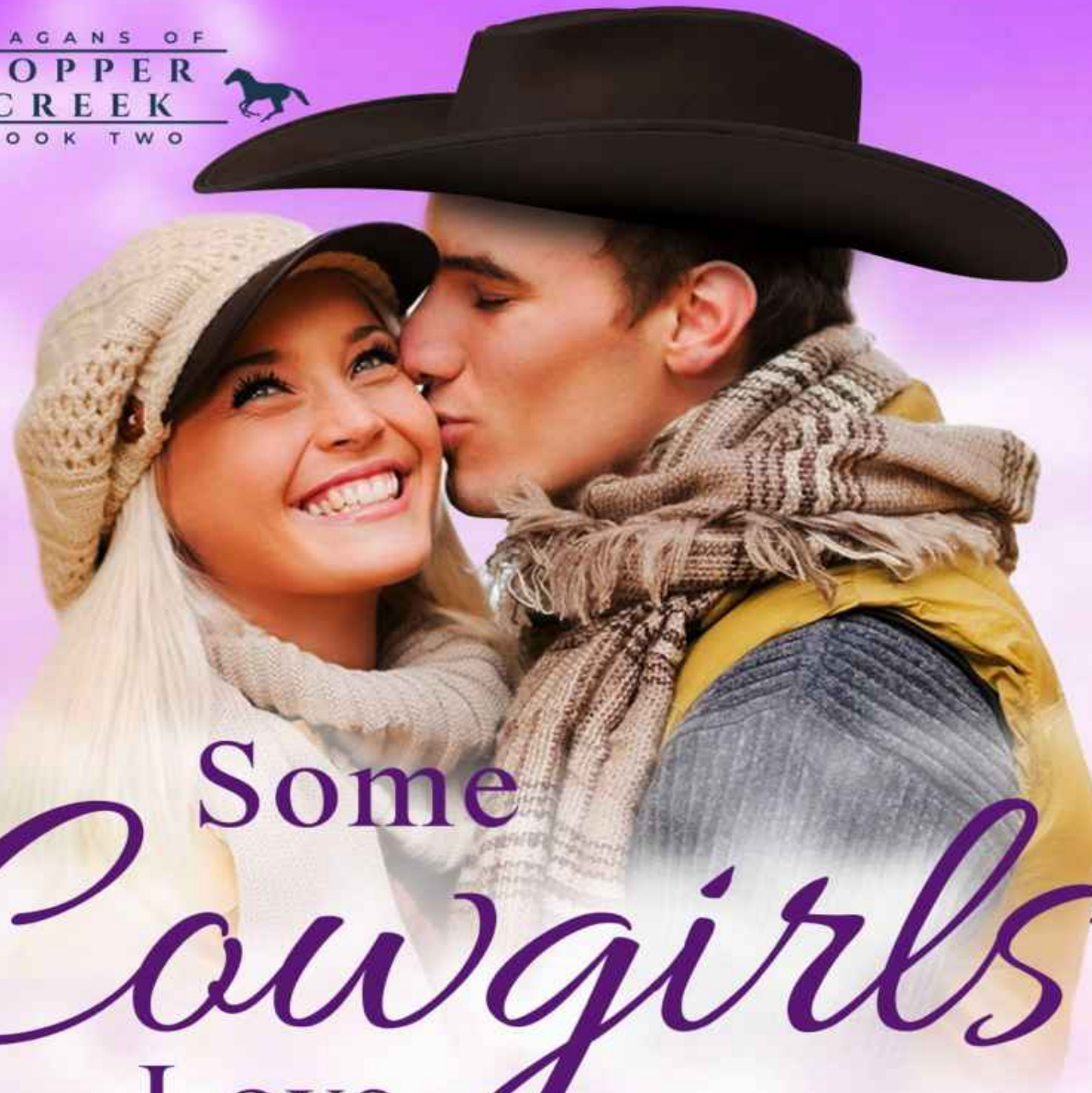


KEAGANS OF  
COPPER  
CREEK  
BOOK TWO



Some  
*Cowgirls*  
Love  
*Single Dads*



NATALIE DEAN

**SOME COWGIRLS LOVE  
SINGLE DADS**

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KEAGANS OF COPPER CREEK BOOK TWO  
NATALIE DEAN



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Cover Design by Deborah Bradseth (who has been amazing to work with! Thank you Deborah!)

## DEDICATION

*I'd like to dedicate this book to YOU! All of my wonderful readers that have been following my stories over the years.*

*We're embarking on another new journey through Copper Creek. I hope you enjoy these stories as much as you've loved the Bakers and Callahans*

*Thank you to my biggest fans.... There's a lot of you! Jess, Bernie, Wren, Judy, Sherry, Vicci, Phyllis, Debbie, Indra, Jennifer, Carol, Jeanette, Margaret, Paul, and I know there's more I didn't list. But thank you all!*

*And I can't leave out my wonderful mother, son, sister, and Auntie. I love you all, and thank you for helping me make this happen.*

*Most of all, I thank God for blessing me on this endeavor.*



*AND... I've got a special team of advance readers who are always so helpful in pointing out any last minute corrections that need to be made. I'm so thankful to those of you who are so helpful!*

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*Annabel*

*H*ow had she ended up here? Again.

Annabel thought she had finally overcome all of the things that made her a terrible person. And yet here she was, standing outside the liquor store, wishing she could go in and get just a small bottle to quell her nerves.

Elijah and Scarlett would be getting married a couple months after the holidays, and she wasn't ready. But their wedding wasn't about her and as hard as she tried, she couldn't explain to others why them finally tying the knot was going to be hard for her—mostly because she couldn't figure it out either.

There had to be something incredibly wrong with her for this to be the place she wanted to draw comfort. An older man exited the building and then paused, holding the door open for her. Annabel took a step, then stopped herself and waved him off. "Thanks, but I'm not going inside."

He gave her a funny look.

Of course he did.

What kind of person stands outside a liquor store and doesn't go in? An alcoholic, that's who. She shook out her hands and glanced up and down the street. This particular location was in the town next to Copper Creek, so no one

would recognize her. She could slip in, then slip out without being caught. Then she could start her sobriety all over again. It had only been two months. That was nothing compared to how long she'd lasted before.

Annabel took another step toward the door just as the door to a feed store a few entrances down on the strip opened. "Annabel? Is that you?"

She froze, blood draining from her face. They weren't talking to her. They couldn't be. She'd never even been to this store before—let alone this town. She stuck with what she knew.

"Annabel Keagan. I thought that was you."

Footsteps shuffled toward her and she glanced up. And once again, her world fell to pieces at her feet. She blinked, tempted to rub her eyes like they did in the movies. But deep down, she knew it wouldn't change anything. Dalton Quaid would still be the man approaching.

He chuckled and pulled her in for a hug. Her body went stiff as a board except for her hands. Why wouldn't they stop shaking? Why did Dalton feel so warm and smell so nice?

"What are you doing out here without a coat?" Dalton pulled back and looked her up and down, his blue eyes sparkling with life. Her mouth went dry, and a tidal wave of memories washed over her, nearly knocking her off her feet. She blinked, realizing he was in the process of removing his coat. "You have to be freezing. It's gotta be fifty degrees right now."

Annabel came to her senses and forced a laugh as she tried to duck out from beneath his coat. "I'm wearing a sweater. I'll be fine." Absently, she wrapped her hand around her wrist and rubbed the interlocking heart tattoo there with her thumb. It was the last thing she'd had of him—that is, until he showed up in Copper Creek again. Now every memory she had of him was hitting her over the head, making her dizzy.

He stood there so awkwardly with the coat still in his hand that she nearly just accepted it so he'd start talking again.

Dalton draped the coat over his arm as if he'd be uncomfortable putting it back on when she wasn't wearing anything. "What are you doing here?" He glanced up at the sign above the liquor store briefly.

She could see it in his eyes. He was probably judging her, wondering why she would want to get a drink so early in the day. She needed to distract him. Rubbing her arms up and down, she shifted to put herself between him and the store. "Dalton? I heard you were back in town. Weren't you living in Idaho for a while?"

He brought his attention back to her and nodded. "Boise."

"Will it be a short visit?"

Dalton adjusted his coat and then shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "We've actually moved back here for the time being. Not sure how long it will last, though. Just playing it by ear. How about you? Still helping your family at the ranch? You were always so responsible, even when we were teenagers, and I was a bad influence on you."

She flushed. Thankfully her high school boyfriend hadn't stuck around long enough to see her hit rock bottom. Praying she was hiding her feelings a lot better than she probably was, Annabel let out a laugh. "You're sweet. Yeah, I'm still living at home with my brothers. Wade got married."

"He did?"

She nodded. Good, she could keep attention off her and her mistakes if she kept talking about her brothers. "Yeah, and Elijah is engaged. He's going to get married right after Christmas. Though, for the life of me, I don't understand why they would want to get married in the middle of winter. It's way too cold for good pictures."

His smile faded, but only just. "Well, Darcy and I were married in the summer and let me tell you, pictures are just as miserable in June."

"Oh." She made a face. "Right. I totally forgot about that. How is she?"

He opened his mouth, but then someone called his name and they both turned to find someone she only vaguely recognized coming toward them. Dalton stepped toward the cowboy and took his hand, pulling him close for one of those “bro” hugs.

Now was her opening. She could slip away and not have to suffer through this conversation with Dalton anymore. It was only a matter of time before he’d ask more about her and find out just how much of a mess she’d become.

Annabel hugged herself tight and slipped away, hurrying toward her brother’s beat-up truck. She’d promised herself and the Lord she wouldn’t drink another drop.

In reality, she should have thanked Dalton for inadvertently stopping her from doing something stupid. What she needed right now was a meeting—or to call her sponsor. Probably both.

Climbing into the truck, she wrapped both hands around the steering wheel and then placed her head on top of them. No one knew about her recent struggles except Scarlett, and even she didn’t know how many times she’d come close to buying a bottle of her own personal kryptonite.

She took a deep breath, then released it. That had been close, but she’d survived.

A rapping sound on her window dragged her to the present. Annabel’s head snapped up and she stifled a yelp before staring at the source of the intrusion. Dalton’s head hung a little lower as he peered into her truck and waved.

Annabel didn’t move. What did he want? Their conversation was over. He was talking to his friend. She should have pulled away when she had the chance. Shoot!

Dalton pointed at the window and then made a rolling motion with his hand.

Still frozen, Annabel considered what he might do if she just backed out of the parking space and drove away. It wasn’t like he could chase her down. And they hadn’t seen each other in nearly a decade, so why would he want to talk to her now?

They were exes, for goodness sakes. Not only that, but she'd been the one to break up with him.

This had to be a ploy of some kind. Part of her was convinced that he was trying to hurt her like she'd hurt him. Dalton gave her a look. She knew that look. He was telling her to stop being so ridiculous and just open the window.

Annabel groaned, hating how hard it was to stand her ground. She blamed those piercing blue eyes. It had always been near impossible to say no when he turned that puppy dog stare on her.

Her hand wrapped around the little knob and cranked it around until the window lowered a few inches. Dalton grinned at her. "Why did you take off?"

She pointed aimlessly in the direction they'd been chatting. "Your friend..."

Dalton shot a look over his shoulder. "Oh. Well, I'd rather catch up with you over Craig any day."

She nearly asked him how Darcy would feel about that sentiment but thought better of it. They weren't going to hang out after this little meeting anyway. Annabel slumped back in her seat and stared at him expectantly. "Did you have anything more to say?"

He chuckled, resting his forearm on the top part of the truck door as he stared down at her. "It was nice to see you again and I thought..." His cheeks puffed up as he blew air out of his pursed lips. "I thought we could catch up when we both have a little more time."

"Why?" she blurted.

His confusion was almost comical. Shouldn't he be wanting to avoid all contact with her? What about his wife? Annabel was certain that she wouldn't be thrilled about Dalton catching up with an ex, no matter how much time had passed. "I just figured it'd be... nice?"

She blinked a couple times. "But... I broke up with you."

He laughed, causing her walls to crumble just a little. “Yeah, I’m fully aware of that.”

Annabel blushed furiously. Of course he knew that. And she wasn’t bringing it up because she thought he’d forgotten. She was bringing it up to make a point. “Don’t you think we should keep things... separate?”

Tilting his head, Dalton studied her. “It’s been a decade, Anna. I think we’re capable of being friends, don’t you?”

*Friends.*

Right.

“I don’t know if that’s a very good idea.” It was the weakest response she could have come up with, but it was all she had. “I’m busy. And I’m sure you’re settling in...”

“We’ve been in town for a few weeks. I assure you, we’re as settled as we can be. Let me take you to coffee. We can reminisce about the old days, and you can tell me how Elijah managed to snag Scarlett. I always thought those two would end up together.”

“You did *not*.”

“Sure, I did. Elijah had the biggest crush on her. It was only a matter of time.”

Her mouth fell open. “You’re kidding. You knew?”

“Of course I knew. I mean, he never said anything, but I could tell. I’m surprised you couldn’t.” Dalton’s crooked grin took her back to a time when life was simpler—when all she had to care about were math assignments and making it to the homecoming game.

Before she knew it, she was answering his question. “Yeah, sure. I could do coffee.”

“Great.” He offered her his phone. “Type in your number and I can pick you up.”

She stared at the device like it was a shark or some other creature with teeth. “How about we just meet up at the coffee shop down the street from that boutique clothing store.”

“The one on Main?”

Annabel nodded, already regretting her decision to agree to their meetup. If anyone saw them chatting in town, would they think she was trying to rekindle something? No, he was a married man, and he said himself, he just wanted to be friends.

With Elijah stealing her best friend, Annabel could use a new friend—but probably not one quite so attractive.

Dalton withdrew his phone and put it in his pocket. “Are you free on Saturday?”

“Saturday? As in two days from now?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m pretty busy these days. My dad hasn’t been feeling all that great. I spend a lot of time working with him. Saturdays, I try to keep open for errands and the like. And Sunday is still the day of the week we try to do as little work as possible.” He grinned again. “You know, because it’s the Sabbath day and all. Mom always liked resting on that day.”

She gasped. “Oh, that’s right. I totally forgot your mother passed away.” Already she could feel the heat from her embarrassment washing all over her. “I was so sorry to hear about it.” And at the same time, she hadn’t gone to the funeral. To be fair, his mother had passed away during one of the lower points of her life and she hadn’t been able to pick herself up off the ground in order to be present.

It had been nice to use the excuse of their shattered relationship to maintain that buffer. Boy, Scarlett had hit the nail on the head when she’d reminded Annabel just how much she pined for this guy. And could her friend blame her?

Out of everyone she’d dated, Dalton seemed to have been the one to turn out somewhat normal.

*Get your head out of the clouds. The guy is married. He’s not asking you out and you wouldn’t be able to say yes anyway because you’re trying to get back on track with your addiction.*

Well, at least there was one small voice in her head that could speak reason.

Annabel reached for the gear shift. “I should probably get going. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

“Let’s say eight?”

“In the *morning*?”

He laughed. “Yes, eight in the morning. I forgot how funny you were. Have a good rest of your day, Anna. See you soon.” Dalton backed away from the truck, finally allowing her to make her escape.

Only now, there was a bigger problem.

She had to see him again.



***Dalton***

**D**alton shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the rack that stood by the front door of his childhood home. He hadn't been able to stop smiling since he'd bumped into Annabel. He'd been back in town for weeks and hadn't had the opportunity to track her down, so it had been a pleasant surprise to see her.

There was something different about her and it wasn't just the fact that they'd both aged a little over a decade. She seemed more tired. And her hair had been bleached blonde. Back when they were in high school, she'd kept her hair a nice, natural chestnut color.

Other than that, she was still the same pretty Annabel that he had remembered.

"Dalton? Is that you?" his father's raspy voice called from farther into the house. Reality brought him to his senses, and he hurried down the hall.

"Yeah, it's me, Dad."

"Did they have the meds at that pharmacy?"

Dalton entered his father's room and dug into his pocket for the pain medication his father's doctor had prescribed. He held it up and then set a stern look on Ned. "The doctor said you needed to take it easy. Get back into bed."

His father groaned as he got to his feet. He winced when he attempted to put weight on his broken leg. “I’ve been through worse than this. It’s in a cast, for Pete’s sake.” He held out his hand for the bottle that Dalton held, but Dalton refused. “Give me my meds, son.”

“Not unless you get back in bed.”

“I’ve been in bed long enough—”

“You’re not as young as you used to be. I’d rather you not accidentally break the other leg because you’re being careless.”

Ned glowered at Dalton. His deep-set eyes were far wearier than Dalton could remember. This was one of the reasons he’d picked up everything and moved his family back to Copper Creek. His father didn’t know when to leave well enough alone.

Dalton pointed at the bed. “Now,” he said.

His father sighed, his fingers reaching for the buttons on his shirt as he began to get out of his nice shirt. “This isn’t going to last forever. I’m going to get back to work one way or another and I’ll not be so easy to boss around.”

Dalton chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He eyed Dalton with suspicion. “You seem to be in a good mood. Did something happen today?”

On the one hand, Dalton could tell his father about running into Annabel. He would then have to sit through a lecture about why it was a bad idea to let her back in his life after the way she’d broken his heart all those years ago. On the other hand, he could fib. It wasn’t like the women who gossiped in town would make house calls to keep Ned informed.

The latter seemed like the better option at the moment. His father had never really liked Annabel, and from what he’d heard, she’d changed since he’d moved away. The ironic thing was that his father didn’t know just how bad Darcy had been. Dalton had shielded his folks from what she was capable of, making them believe she was still in the picture and taking his son for a few months out of the summer.

Thankfully, the summer wasn't coming around for at least six more months. He wouldn't have to tell his dad about it until then. Right now, he'd focus on making good memories for the holidays.

Dalton cleared his throat and helped pull the covers up. "I bumped into a few friends while I was out."

"Oh?"

"Do you remember Craig?"

Ned's brows creased with thought. "No, I can't say that I do."

"Well, he was in town. He's married now and has a little girl Henry's age."

His father smiled softly. "Perhaps the two of you should let your children meet."

"Perhaps." Dalton nearly mentioned Annabel. The temptation was so great, the confession on the tip of his tongue. So, he bit it—quite literally. Drawing blood, Dalton winced.

"You okay, son?"

He nodded. "I'm going to get a few more things done, then I have to pick up Henry from school. Is there anything else you need?"

His father shot him a dark look. "I'm not an invalid. I can handle—"

"Yes, I know, I know. You are more than capable of taking care of yourself. Noted." He tossed his father the pill bottle. "One of those every six hours. Lots of water."

He made it to the doorway before his father's voice stopped him.

"Son?"

Dalton paused, his hand resting on the doorjamb.

"Thank you."

"Of course, Dad."



THE COFFEE SHOP buzzed with the handful of customers who were enjoying their morning cup. Every time the door opened, Dalton got his hopes up. And every time it wasn't Annabel, he started to wonder if she had only agreed to this meeting in order to get rid of him. It had been so long since they'd connected and he really didn't know her all that well.

It had been silly to think that she might want to connect again after so much time had passed. He turned his attention to his cardboard cup, turning it around in his hands. She was only five minutes late. He could wait for five more. If she'd been held up in traffic or something else, that would explain her tardiness.

Then again, she had his phone number. She could message him and let him know they needed a raincheck.

With each passing minute he got a little more frustrated. It wasn't like he'd asked her out on a date. He'd asked her to coffee—to catch up with him. Maybe she'd changed more than he'd thought.

Dalton got to his feet, and at that very moment, the door opened, letting in a breeze along with the one person he'd been hoping to see.

Her eyes locked onto his and she gave him a timid smile. For a brief moment, he was taken back in time to when they had been dating—the whirlwind romance that had made both of them feel like anything was possible.

But back then they were just kids. They had no understanding of how harsh the real world could be.

Dalton gestured to the table where he sat, and she made a few unsure steps toward him and then glanced toward the counter.

“I got you something already,” he offered.

She swung her focus back to him, taking note of the cup that had been placed on the napkin across from where he

stood. Annabel nodded and made her way through the few tables until she was standing in front of him. Dressed in tattered jeans and a sweater that showed about an inch of her midsection, she looked like she belonged in an advertisement for a pumpkin patch. Her bleached hair had been braided and was draped over both shoulders. “Sorry, I’m late,” she mumbled. “I had to convince my brother to let me use his truck. He doesn’t like me driving because...” She flushed, looked away, and pointed to the coffee. “Shall we?”

He could have asked her to explain about the truck, but based on the way she was behaving, he wasn’t certain that would go over very well. This was supposed to be a fun get-together—no stress involved. Dalton took a seat and smiled. “I’m just glad you didn’t leave me hanging. It really is good to see you again.”

Annabel dragged an indifferent hand through the air and looked away. “I don’t know why. The way we left things—”

“We were kids,” Dalton assured her. “We didn’t know any better. Besides, I don’t regret a moment of the time we had together or that it ended. If it hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met Darcy.”

She lifted her eyes to meet his, then dropped them to her cup.

Things had gotten awkward with that statement. He shouldn’t have brought up his ex. He coughed to clear his throat and shifted in his seat. There had been so many ways he had wanted this conversation to go, and this wasn’t one of them. “How are things going for you? You said you were still working at the ranch. What are you doing there?”

“Mostly administrative stuff. Wade runs everything else.” She peeked at him. “I bet you would have never guessed that I could be good with numbers, huh?”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You were the smartest girl I knew in high school.”

That statement seemed to throw her off guard, causing her to stare at him a little longer than was necessary.

He chuckled to ease the tension. “Come on, Anna. How long has it been? Can we just agree to be friends?”

“Friends,” she tried out the word, her eyes narrowing. “I’m sorry, but I really don’t think that’s possible.”

“Why not?” He settled back in his seat. “I’m back in town, but most of my friends have moved away. You’re one of the only ones who I can relate to.”

She snorted. “You expect me to believe that? We couldn’t be more different.”

This time his laugh was spontaneous. “You misunderstand. Yes, I know we’re different. But right now? I’m trying to figure out how to run my father’s ranch while he’s bedridden and the only one I know who might be able to help me is... you.”

Annabel stared at him again. “What?”

“Sure. When we were younger, I was all over the place. I didn’t care about running the ranch and my parents didn’t push me to. I got out of high school, got a degree and moved away. But now I’m back and I can’t help but feel like this might be a good place to settle down and raise my kid.”

“You have a kid,” she said quietly.

“Yeah.” Dalton pulled out his phone and flipped through his pictures until he got to one of Henry. He turned his device around and beamed at Annabel. “He’s gonna be six in a few weeks. Just started kindergarten.”

She scooted closer to the phone but didn’t take it from him. Her eyes flitted up to meet his. “He looks like you.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. “So, you asking me here... you’ve got ulterior motives.”

“What?” he laughed. “Of course not.”

“You said yourself. You want my help with your father’s ranch.”

He straightened. She was right. He had said that but only because he wanted to put her at ease. “Well, I guess that would be a bonus. You guys seem to know what you’re doing. I’ve asked around. People have taken note of how the Keagan farm is starting to make waves in the community.”

This time her smile was far more genuine and confident. “You can blame Wade for that. Oh, and Shane. Without his money, I would bet we would still be barely scraping by.”

“Shane?”

“He owns the country club on the outskirts of town. But it’s more than that. It’s got therapy services and... other stuff.” Annabel looked away again. “Anyway, I think Wade is just trying to make sure we’re all taken care of. Elijah was totally on board, but then he started dating Scarlett and now he’s doing more with her family’s farm. Lucas doesn’t seem to care what happens. And the rest of them are just following Wade’s lead. I guess it’s sorta nice to have the whole family coming together though.”

“Sounds like it.” Dalton watched her closer, noting the way she started picking at her fingernails and fidgeting. Gone was the confidence of her youth. She was struggling with something and part of him wanted to reach out and demand that she tell him.

But he couldn’t do that without making her think that he wanted more. That was how the world worked these days. A guy either wanted to help because he was genuinely the woman’s friend, or he wanted something more.

Seeing as they couldn’t be classified as close friends, she would assume the latter and that simply wasn’t something he was looking for.

He ducked his head, causing her to look up at him. “So, will you do it? My dad is holding out on me. I can feel it. He just keeps giving me chores so that all the moving parts remain in motion, but he won’t let me do much else. He’s really slowed down a lot and I’m beginning to wonder if his mind isn’t going.”

Annabel blinked a few times. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s part of aging. But I really want to help him. I just don’t think I can do it alone. What do you say?”



*Annabel*

*W*as it possible?

Had Annabel gotten Dalton all wrong?

Was Dalton really just asking for her help?

She studied him, not trusting herself at all. This was one of her biggest weaknesses. She allowed herself to morph into whatever someone else wanted. Part of her didn't know if she could handle spending time with him. Already she'd spent too long in the truck psyching herself up to even enter the coffee shop. What if she fell back into old habits? What if she romanticized their past relationship and ended up hurt?

That wasn't something she was willing to do. He was married. Hadn't she told herself and Scarlett that married men just couldn't have female friends? It was true. She'd seen several instances of couples breaking up just because the couple couldn't handle outside friendships, and she refused to become a statistic.

Annabel cleared her throat, dredging up the courage to say just that. "What does Darcy think of this?"

He frowned. "Darcy?"

"Yeah. Is she okay with you asking for my help? Heck, I don't know that I would be okay with you meeting some ex-

girlfriend for coffee. Does she know that you're here with me?"

"No..." he drawled. "It's none of her business who I choose to have coffee with."

She stiffened and her stomach almost wanted to catapult its contents all over the place. "Excuse *me*?" Annabel rose to her feet and placed both palms on the table as she stared down at him. "When you're married, you're supposed to be open and honest with her. There are no excuses for keeping secrets. She's the mother of your child, for heaven's sake—"

His brows lifted and his head swung side to side as he took in the people who were now watching their little scene. "Anna," he whispered, "sit down. You misunderstood."

"I misunderstood nothing. I know people like you think it's okay for you to treat your spouse like they're nothing more than a roommate, but I would never accept that. I'm not on board with anything if it means you're not willing to be one hundred percent transparent with her."

Dalton's hand shot out and grasped hers, tugging her down a little and forcing her to collapse into her seat. Her gaze landed on where he held her, and a shock of electricity rocked through her system.

*Wrong*, the alarm seemed to say. She tried to snatch her hand away from him, but his grasp remained firm.

"Anna, I'm not with Darcy anymore," he muttered in a desperate-sounding hush.

Her eyelashes fluttered and she stared at him in surprise. "You're not?"

"No."

"But the picture of your son. She was holding him."

He looked over to where his phone had been placed on the table. "That picture was taken a year ago. We haven't seen Darcy in over nine months."

"What?"

“I swear I’m telling you the truth. If we were still together, of course I would have told her of our meeting. But she lost the privilege of hearing about my plans the moment she walked out of our lives and didn’t look back.”

Annabel blinked again. Fire bloomed in her cheeks, and this time, when she tugged her hand away, he released her. What she wouldn’t give for a nice, cold drink—something quite a bit stronger than the lukewarm coffee she had in the cup before her. “I’m... so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Clearly.” He glanced around again, offering a strained smile to those who probably overheard her outburst, and her blush deepened.

“Really, Dalton. I wouldn’t have said any of that if I had known.”

“It’s fine,” he chuckled. “Just answer me one thing. Do the women in this town still have the propensity to gossip?”

She covered her face with her hands. “Yeah,” she groaned.

“I see.”

Peeking through her fingers, she let out a shy laugh. “Do you want to get out of here? Go for a walk?”

“That might be for the best.”

Good. She could use the fresh air. The second they stepped outside, it felt like she could breathe again. Funny how being in a coffee shop was enough to cut off the oxygen to her lungs. Or maybe it was the fact that she’d just discovered her high school sweetheart was now single.

They wandered down the sidewalk slowly, neither one speaking. After she had made that scene, she wasn’t even sure he wanted her help anymore.

Why was she suddenly disappointed in that?

Annabel peeked over at Dalton. “I’m so sorry.”

He glanced toward her before taking a sip of his coffee. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure it will blow over. Soon

enough, the ladies in town will find some other poor sap to gossip about.”

“Or maybe someone else will make another terrible mistake.” Like when she got so drunk that she made a scene at the grocery store. She had been spiraling. It wasn’t hard to admit that, at least not to herself. That was the first step, right?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She jumped and had to retrace their conversation to recall what he was asking about. “Oh, nothing. Just the people in town sometimes do things that stir up drama, right? Like a few years ago when there was that shooting at the diner.”

His eyes widened. “*What?*”

Annabel nodded. “Your father didn’t tell you? It was a big deal. Ian was there when it happened. He helped out a waitress and now they’re married.”

“Ian Baker?”

“The very one.”

Dalton shook his head. “I can’t believe my dad wouldn’t say something.”

“Probably because he didn’t want you to worry.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He shot her a half-grin. “What else did I miss?”

“Well, there was an avalanche that shut down things around Christmas. And then we found out that Finn was adopted. Oh, and Shane? He’s got some pretty shady cousins.”

“Honestly, I couldn’t care less about the new guy. I want to know more about the people I grew up with. Got any more stories about them?”

She tilted her head, racking her brain for something he might find interesting, and then her eyes widened. “You’ll never guess what happened to Brielle Callahan.”

“Hey, Dalton! I heard you were in town.”

Annabel and Dalton stopped walking and she searched out the owner of the familiar voice. She froze. Her gaze followed Pastor Dan as he approached, all smiles. His attention landed on her briefly and he nodded.

“Annabel. How are you this morning?”

She held up her coffee cup. “Still waking up.”

He chuckled, but she could feel the judgment pouring from him. Okay, maybe not judgment, but he was the only one aware of every wrong turn she’d taken over the years. He was probably wondering what she was doing with a married man—unless he knew that Dalton wasn’t married anymore.

“Dalton’s divorced,” she blurted, drawing the attention of them both.

Dalton gave her a funny sort of look, then returned his focus to the pastor. “Yeah, I’ve moved back temporarily.” He shrugged. “But it might be more permanent. We’re not really sure right now.”

“I was just telling the missus that I was wondering when we’d see you at church.”

“I’ll do my best to get out there, but right now it’s really busy. We’ve just settled in at my dad’s place and he’s got a lot of work for me to do on the farm.”

“Well, if there’s anything the congregation can do to help, you just let me know.”

“Yes, sir. But for now, I’ve enlisted Anna’s help. She’s going to take a look at our books and make sure we’re all set for the end of the year.”

The pastor turned his kind expression toward her. “That sounds like a great idea.”

“I thought so,” Dalton agreed.

“Well, hopefully I’ll see you at services on Sunday.”

Dalton nodded, and Annabel watched as the pastor slipped away. Neither one of them spoke until he was a safe distance away. Then Dalton burst out laughing.

“Seriously? *He’s divorced?* You’re not going to say that to everyone we come in contact with, are you? I’d rather not have the whole town wondering what went wrong in my marriage.”

“And I’d rather not have the whole town thinking that I’m trying to weasel myself into your life as your mistress.”

He snorted. “I don’t think anyone is going to be making that assumption—especially with the way you just let me have it at that coffee shop.”

She blushed again. “I said I was sorry, okay? In my defense, you never said you were divorced. What was I supposed to think?”

“I guess that’s fair.”

They started walking again. The cool air seeped between the threads of her sweater making her teeth chatter. Great. She’d forgotten it was the middle of November and hadn’t grabbed her coat. As much as she wanted to go back and get one, she didn’t want to cut off their little meeting. There was something about knowing he was divorced that had her looking at him differently.

It was like Elijah had said. She needed to get out there—but as a friend. And with Dalton not being married, there was nothing holding her back from doing just that.

Besides, if she spent more time at his family’s property, she’d spend less time at her own, which meant steering clear of the two people she’d rather avoid. “Okay,” she shivered. “I’ll do it.”

Dalton stopped and faced her. He peered at her, then his eyes narrowed and he frowned. “You’re freezing. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’m... not... cold...” She chattered again. “I’m fine.”

“It might have been over ten years, but I can still tell when you’re lying. At least when it comes to this. You can’t hide the way your body is reacting.” He draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

Immediately, her teeth stopped clacking against each other, and she was able to calm her breathing. “Thanks,” she muttered, “but I didn’t need you to do that.”

He huffed. “I’m not going to let you catch a cold before I can use you.”

She craned her neck around so she could get a good look at his face. “I knew it.”

Dalton beamed down at her, his smile warmer than the sun that was coming out from behind the clouds. If she wasn’t already cold, that smile might have set off a wave of chills.

No. She had to keep her wits about herself. He wanted a friend, a business-savvy helper. He wasn’t looking for love, and neither was she. The last thing she needed was to find another person to latch onto.

There were too many issues for her to resolve and the first one was finding her true self.

“How about you come over Monday night after I put Henry to bed. We can talk about what I need help with and I can make you a late dinner.”

Annabel stopped. She withdrew from him, doing her best to keep her head clear. Her brows pulled together and she frowned before she finally met his gaze. “I need you to understand that my helping you is just that. I’m not interested in anything more.”

“Of course.”

He’d agreed far too quickly. A small part of her had hoped that he would tease her a little, given her a taste of what they used to have. It would have been nice to know he at least wanted her a little.

But then she had to remind herself that it wasn’t healthy. She wasn’t in the right mindset. She needed to reboot.

Annabel nodded firmly. “Then I’ll be there.”

Dalton held up his hand. “Alright! Dalton and Annie back together again like old times.”

She gave him a stern look, and it took a great deal more strength and concentration than she was prepared for. He lowered his hand to his neck and rubbed it before dropping his hand to his side.

“Right. Well, I’m still glad you’re willing to help us out.”

“It’s not a big deal,” she brushed it off and glanced in the direction of her brother’s truck, already itching to escape with all this positive attention he was giving her. When he didn’t respond, she forced herself to bring her eyes back to meet his.

“It is to me,” he murmured. His voice, his whole demeanor had grown serious, and this time she did feel that chill crawling up her spine.

Annabel smiled. “I guess if the roles were reversed, I would hope you’d do the same for me.” It was the only thing she could think to say. Then she offered him a little wave and marched away. Monday was only a few days away and she needed some time to come to terms with what she’d agreed to do.

This would be great. Everything would be fine.

What could possibly go wrong?



*Dalton*

Smoke billowed up from the frying pan in a large cloud. Dalton muttered a curse, yanking the pan from the stove and waving his hand over the smoke. Unfortunately, he wasn't fast enough.

The smoke alarm screamed to life, flashing and hollering like a banshee. Dalton lunged for the door and pushed it open, then threw up the windows. The apron that had been dangling on the wall was quickly utilized as he waved the offensive air to the exit.

He glanced over his shoulder toward the kitchen door, fully expecting to see his father or his son coming to investigate. He should have known better than to believe he could fix something special. Cooking had been Darcy's thing.

It wasn't that he missed her. Darcy had been a wonderful mother and the wife he'd wanted... until she wasn't.

He forced those thoughts away. While he knew all women weren't like Darcy, he wasn't looking to find anyone to replace her. He and Henry had found a good rhythm. They were finally figuring things out and how to be on their own.

When he'd told Annabel he wanted her help, he'd been honest.

The alarm stopped ringing and he paused to catch his breath. When he returned to the stove to check up on the food, he sighed with dismay. The charred mess of chicken and pasta wasn't going to be edible, and Annabel was expecting to be fed.

He threw open the pantry and glanced around in desperation. Moving a few bottles, all he found was a summer sausage, some herb-seasoned crackers, and some wine. There was some cheddar in the fridge, and he'd planned on serving a salad. While this meal option probably looked more romantic than he'd wanted it to appear, he'd make sure she understood this was his last resort.

Even still, a smile spread across his lips. Back when they were teens, this was exactly the kind of thing he might have made for her. He would have coupled it with a moonlight picnic and impressed her with his flirting.

Nope. He wasn't about to go there either.

Friends.

That was all either one of them wanted. She'd said so herself.

Dalton made quick work of slicing the meat and cheese. He dug out two wine glasses and then he set the table. No candles, no dim lighting. And a whole stack of paperwork.

He'd conveniently avoided discussing his plan with his father, knowing he would have gotten pushback. In this case, it would be better to ask forgiveness rather than permission.

The knock at the door was almost too quiet and he nearly didn't hear it.

Dalton jogged toward the door, grateful that his father and son hadn't actually come out of their rooms. It appeared he'd be able to have this dinner meeting in peace. When he opened the door, she was standing toward the edge of the porch, her back to him. Once again, she wore a sweater, but this time one side of it draped off her shoulder, revealing her pale skin. It was long in the arms and could have been a short dress.

Annabel turned around, her fingers tugging and playing with the edges of the sleeves. She bounced her hands against one another as she peered around him. “How is your dad feeling?”

He leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb and smiled. “If you’re worried about him knowing you’re here, I didn’t tell him.”

She blinked, though there was the faintest amount of relief hidden behind her eyes. “Oh.” She broke eye contact, focusing instead on her hands. “I don’t suppose he’d like it if he knew I was here, huh?”

“Actually, I don’t know if he’d care. It’s been such a long time. I *do* wonder if he would be disappointed in me if he knew I was planning on staying.”

“You are?”

He shrugged. “At first, I was just thinking it would be nice to raise Henry here. But the longer I stay, the more I know this is just where I’m supposed to be, you know? I’m getting back to my roots. But farming wasn’t something my father ever wanted me to do.”

“Really? I thought most fathers wanted their sons to continue the traditions of their families.” She shivered, drawing his attention away from their conversation.

“Do you even own a coat? Every time I see you, you’re not dressed for the weather.”

“I’m wearing a sweater. That’s good enough.”

He reached for her hand and pulled her inside. “No, it’s not.” He didn’t release her until they made it to the kitchen, and at that point, she was the one to pull away. Dalton cleared his throat and forced himself to return to what they’d been talking about. “I don’t know if I ever told you, but my dad grew up in the city. He met my mother at college and when he fell in love with her, he did what he had to in order to win her over. That meant taking over her family’s farm. Honestly, I’m surprised he kept it going after she passed away.”

“Yeah, that’s sorta strange...” she mused. Her gaze flitted through the room. He watched her take in the burnt pan of food and the table set with the charcuterie board, salad, and wine.

He moved in front of her view and let out a laugh. “I promise I’m not trying to date you. I burned the food, and my dad doesn’t keep a lot in the pantry. It was this or frozen dinners.”

She lifted her gaze to him slowly. It was strange, the way she was looking at him. Was she holding something back? Maybe she wanted to leave. He prayed he didn’t offend her with his choice of dinner.

“If you want, we could go out to Sal’s Diner and get something else.”

“No, it’s fine.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes the way it used to when they were younger. “Are those the documents you wanted me to go over?”

“Yeah, they’re the purchasing agreements my father has contracted for the crops he produces here. I wanted to make sure they’re reasonable. And I wanted to see if you could find any discrepancies. I feel like we should have more in the accounts.”

She moved to the table, and he hurried to pull out her chair. Annabel froze and then set her stern gaze on him. “Dalton, you keep saying you don’t want this to be anything romantic, but conveniently, you keep doing stuff that contradicts your statement.”

He stared at her with confusion.

“In other words, don’t pull out my chair.”

“Right.” He stepped back. “I guess it’s been a long time since I’ve had company.” It was a weak excuse for this particular habit. Instead, Dalton reached across and grabbed the bottle of wine. He poured a glass and then picked up the other one.

“Oh, I don’t—” Annabel’s eyes dropped to the glass, and she moistened her lips then nodded. “Never mind.”

He poured the second glass and took a seat across from her. “I know it’s going to be a lot to go over. If you need to take some of those documents, I made copies.”

Annabel stared at the document in her hand, then nodded. “This is all pretty standard based on what we’ve been able to get for our produce. But I can definitely take a deeper look if you’d like me to.”

A few minutes later, she pushed aside the documents, and they started chatting. She ate her salad and then reached for the wine. Swirling the maroon liquid in her glass, she glanced up at him. “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Sure. I’m an open book.”

“You might not feel that way when I ask you.”

He chuckled. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

“What happened with Darcy?”

Dalton could have seen this question coming from a mile away. Who wouldn’t want to know what happened between him and the woman he’d loved enough to put a ring on her finger? “I don’t really know.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

He turned his attention to his own drink, staring into the dark color as if it held the answers. Then he tossed back the full glass and picked up the bottle. “You know? I sometimes wonder if I pushed her away.” When she didn’t respond, he finally met her gaze. “She started drifting when Henry was a little older than one. He started walking and it was like something had changed. She didn’t want to take on the mom role anymore. She didn’t want to be at home.”

“How is that you pushing her away?”

“Well... I didn’t do anything to stop it. I didn’t tell her to see a therapist. I didn’t ask her what might be bothering her.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You don’t honestly believe you’re the reason she walked away, do you?”

He shrugged. “I can’t be one hundred percent positive.”

“Well, I think that’s a load of bull—” She snapped her mouth shut and flushed. “Sorry. But I do think that’s not at all the case. And if you ask me, I think she’s the one who made a dumb choice. People are just...”

“Dumb.”

“Yeah,” she muttered. “Really dumb.”

He chuckled and then motioned to her glass. “You want me to get something else?”

Annabel seemed to consider his offer, then shook her head. “This was a wonderful meal and I’m intent on enjoying it. We should wallow in the stupidity of others. What do you say?” With that, she tossed back her glass and downed the whole thing before holding it up for a refill.

He grinned. “Yeah.”

A couple hours later, they’d moved their wallowing to the living room where Dalton had set up a fire. They sat on the carpet with their backs pressed against the couch, their chatting now hushed whispers. Her head rested against the couch cushion, and she let out a sigh and then turned to face him. “What’s wrong with me?”

He laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re right. It’s dumb.”

Dalton shifted closer, his face mere inches from hers. “No, why did you say that?”

She sighed again. “Watching Scarlett and Elijah...” She made a sour face. “I still can’t believe she picked *him* of all people.”

He chuckled.

“It’s just that... I’ve realized something. Everyone around me, they’re moving on with their lives and I’m just *stuck*.”

“No, you’re not.”

She gave him a pointed look. “You haven’t been here. You don’t know.”

“Then tell me.”

Annabel shook her head. “What I was trying to say was that everyone else has their life put together and I’m sitting here still wondering what I’m going to do with mine.” Her soft voice dripped with disappointment. She was probably a little buzzed, having drunk more of the wine than he had, but that’s when she was the most honest with others. Annabel lost her filter when she drank. It was something he’d figured out the first night Scarlett had convinced her to steal a bottle of beer from the convenience store.

Dalton’s heart ached for her. He reached out and grazed her jawline with his crooked finger. “There’s nothing wrong with you. Just because other people have started on a different path, doesn’t mean you’re broken.”

Her eyes watered and she blinked it away. “You don’t understand,” her voice cracked. “I’m more messed up than you’ll ever know.”

That had to be the wine talking. Or perhaps it was the reality of her best friend moving on to a new experience without her. This wasn’t the Annabel he’d known in high school. This was a shell of the girl he’d come to love.

His eyes swept over her face, noting how much she’d changed over the years, though she was still as beautiful as ever. If only he could show her what he saw. Dalton moved closer, his voice guttural when he murmured her name.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and he could have sworn she leaned slightly toward him.

“Daddy!”

Annabel’s eyes widened and she lurched away from him, sitting up and placing her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

Dalton hesitated. He glanced toward the hall and then back to Annabel. He hadn’t meant for this moment to be so intimate. They’d inadvertently dredged up those past feelings. It wasn’t what he’d wanted to do.

Neither one of them had planned this—neither one of them wanted it.

Dalton got to his feet. “Anna?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled into her hands.

“Don’t leave, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“Where would I go, Dalton?” She lifted her head. “My brother would kill me if I drove home.”

Still, he hesitated. Something told him he shouldn’t leave her alone.

“Daddy!”

“I’ll be right back,” he repeated.



*Annabel*

*H*ow utterly humiliating!

She was a terrible person. It didn't matter what Dalton said about her; she knew the truth. Once again, she'd given in to temptation.

Annabel glanced toward the empty doorway where Dalton had disappeared. She couldn't drive Wade's truck home. She couldn't call him to get her. She couldn't leave it here. She was stuck.

From what she could remember, though her thoughts were hazy, Dalton had only had the one glass. He'd drunk it quickly, but he'd filled her glass before his own... then again, he might have had a second one.

She placed her head in her hands again. Why did she keep doing this to herself? Why was it so hard to just be better—*do* better?

Heat rose from her stomach into her chest and flooded her face. If Dalton knew what he'd contributed to, there was no telling what he might say.

No, she was pretty sure she knew what he would say. He'd be disappointed in her. Clearly, he'd gotten his life all figured out after high school. He was Mr. Perfect. A prince. Annabel groaned.

It was a good thing she'd already told herself nothing romantic could happen between them. Otherwise, she might actually be disappointed they'd been interrupted by his son. Dalton had nearly kissed her, and in her frame of mind, she would have let him and absolutely loved it.

She couldn't do this. She couldn't stay here a minute longer.

Annabel stumbled to her feet and fumbled for her phone. It slipped from her hands and banged against the brick hearth extension at her feet. She let out a sigh as she swiped it from the floor and found the contact she was looking for.

For a brief moment, she faltered. Dalton had asked her to stay so they could talk. He probably only wanted to assure her that their near kiss didn't mean anything. They were both a little drunk. And then she'd have to assure him right back that she didn't think of him that way.

Annabel moved through the house a little louder than she'd intended, and with each sound, she spun to see if Dalton would come looking for her.

Thankfully she got outside and made her phone call.

Brielle answered on the first ring. "Anna? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, making sure to speak clearly enough that she didn't slur her words. "I need your help and you can't tell Wade."

There was a pause, then some shuffling, and finally Brielle whispered. "What's going on?"

"I'm not drunk," Annabel assured her. "Not really. But I shouldn't be driving."

Brielle sighed. "Anna..."

"If you can't keep your promise, then you might as well hang up now. I just need you to get Lucas and come pick me up at the Quaid farm. I can't leave Wade's truck here and..." her voice broke. "I don't want to make any more mistakes." She brushed at a tear right as it started to escape. She was

walking down a darkened path toward the main road, knowing full well that Dalton would come outside to look for her.

As if just the thought of him was enough to summon him, she heard his voice call through the freezing night air. “Anna?”

She flinched. “I’m walking already and it’s freezing. Can you do it or not?”

“I’m leaving now.”

“Thank you.” Annabel hung up the phone and stood still, thankful for the cover of darkness.

“Annabel! Get back here before you get sick! I know you’re out there.”

She stopped to lean up against a tree, then groaned. Why had she allowed herself to give him her number? Because they were going to be working together.

Annabel groaned again. Why couldn’t she just leave well enough alone?

By the time Brielle found her, she was shivering uncontrollably and feeling a great deal more sober. Brielle shot her a death look as they pulled up to Dalton’s home and Lucas hopped out. None of them spoke throughout the exchange, nor the drive home.

And when they got there, not even Lucas seemed interested in discussing Annabel’s poor choices.

None of them had to. They all knew what this meant. Another mishap on the road to fixing herself. Hopefully, Dalton would leave her alone for the next few days while she got this sorted.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE you went and got drunk.” Wade paced in front of her, having cornered her before she had a chance to slip out the following morning. Her head pounded and she would have rather spent the day in bed, but that would have

tipped him off sooner. Currently, her eyes followed him from where she sat on the edge of her bed.

Wade raked his hand through his hair, then stopped and stared at her. “*Why?* What possessed you to do that, Anna?”

“I don’t *know*, okay? Clearly, I’m just not cut out to be as perfect as you.”

He shot her a dark look. “That’s not fair and you know it. Being sober is a lot of work. When was the last time you went to a meeting?”

She rolled her eyes.

“See? That right there tells me everything I need to know. You don’t want to get back on track, do you?”

“Of course I do,” she groaned. “Do you think I like feeling this way? It was only a couple glasses of wine.”

“And that would have led to more. Who were you with? Because I can tell you right now, everyone I know wouldn’t have let you taste even a drop of that stuff.” Wade’s sharp tone made her flinch, and she shrunk back from him. His expression softened. “I’m sorry. No one gets this more than me. Remember when I had my setbacks?”

She huffed. “You maybe had *one*.”

“You’re wrong.”

Annabel glanced up at her older brother.

“Yeah. I had a few. And there are days even now when I want to just let myself go and take one drink. Just one, Anna. But I know that if I do that—if I rationalize that I can handle just one—there would be no stopping it. You and I? We’re prone to addiction. It’s not fair, but that’s how it is.”

She dropped her gaze to her fingernails and started picking at her cuticles, a habit that helped keep her mind off the shame she currently experienced. “I don’t know if I’m ever going to get back to that place.”

He moved toward her and dropped down onto his haunches. He covered her hands with his and let out a sigh.

“You just need a support system.”

“I have one of those. I have you. I have Scarlett.”

“You manipulated Brielle.”

“Well, that didn’t work out too well, did it?” She reminded herself that she should never have called Brielle. While her new sister-in-law wouldn’t judge her due to her own sordid past, she hated lying. “Shoulda’ known she wasn’t going to keep my secret,” she mumbled.

“Actually, it was Lucas who told me.”

Annabel’s head snapped up. She would have never thought Lucas was the snitch. He’d made his own share of bad decisions. Turned out he couldn’t keep a secret either. Next time, she’d consider more fully who she might call.

*No.*

There wasn’t going to be a next time. She wasn’t going to let this happen again.

“Who was it, Anna?”

She shrugged. “Why did it have to be anyone? Maybe I went and picked up a bottle of wine from the grocery store.”

He shook his head. “You know better than that. I’ve told the McDaniels to let me know when you buy alcohol from them.”

It was hard not to react to that statement. Still, her older brother felt the need to babysit her.

“Who did you visit yesterday?” There was an edge to his voice now. If she told him before she had a chance to talk to Dalton, she’d regret it.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not going to happen again, and I shouldn’t be your problem anymore. You have a lot on your plate with running the ranch.”

“I’m always going to worry about you, Anna. You’re my sister.”

Her chest tightened. Whenever he said stuff like that, it only made the guilt worse. She didn't deserve the love of the people she had in her life. And these feelings were all the more reason to hide away from them until she could do better—be better for them.

Annabel pressed her lips together tightly and then let out a heavy breath. “Even still, I want to handle this on my own. They didn't know I was trying to stay sober. That's on me.”

“You know I can just ask Brielle. You might as well tell me.”

She scowled at him. “I mean it, Wade. I need to handle this on my own first. You can ask her all you want, but I need you to stay out of this... for now.”

The look on his face made it clear he wasn't thrilled with that prospect. But he was quickly accepting her terms. “Fine. But one more slipup, and I'm going to have words.”

She hung her head, nodding. “That's fair.”

“Anna?”

Not even the soft, kind tone of his voice was enough to draw her eyes up to meet his. She felt ashamed. More than that, she was mortified that he'd found out and that he had to be the one to pull on the reins and help her get back on track. Wade had more important things to worry about than making sure his sister was following the rules and taking care of herself.

“Hey,” Wade persisted.

Finally, she looked at him. “*What?*”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah,” she muttered.

“We all do.”

“I *know*.” Great, this was all going to turn into him hovering over her. “Look, I get that I did something wrong. But I'm an adult and I don't want you to make it your mission to fix me.”

“I wasn’t trying—”

“Just let me do what I need to do, and if I need help, I’ll come to you, okay?”

He snapped his mouth shut. She wasn’t sure if he was hurt or angry with her statement. But at this point she didn’t care. She needed to do what she had to in order to survive and that meant being honest with Dalton. If she had been brave enough to tell him in the first place, then maybe she wouldn’t have fallen off the wagon.

Things could have been a lot worse last night. Wade had to understand that.

And yet he wasn’t saying a single thing. She’d successfully put an end to whatever intervention this was.

“If that’s all—” she said.

“It’s not.”

She snapped her eyes to his.

“I know that you don’t want me to... what did you call it? Right... *babysit*. I’m not going to do that because you and I both know that it won’t do a lick of good. What I will say is that you need to get on the phone with your sponsor or be more willing to call me when you feel like you need some help. And I think you should go to a meeting with me once a week.”

“Once a week—” she stuttered. “I don’t want—”

“Just think about it, will you? Even if it’s at six in the morning. Even if it’s just the two of us. I know it would do you some good to have some accountability that isn’t your best friend.”

She blew a harsh breath out of her pursed lips. One slipup and this was what she had to look forward to. Her eyes watched him as he waited for her to respond. Well, the joke was on him because she didn’t have anything to say.

Finally, Wade gave a sharp nod and slipped out of her room.

One thing was for certain. She wasn't going to enlist the help of Brielle or Lucas if she ever fell off the wagon again. Seeing their disappointment was nothing compared to disappointing Wade. He was the only person whose opinion mattered to her and only because she really did know that he understood her.

On top of that, he'd finally overcome everything that had held him back from being happy. He'd gotten clean and sober, he'd found a woman who could love him unconditionally, and he was making a turnaround when it came to the ranch. He had it all.

And she wanted the same—not the ranch—but happiness. If she could find someone who loved her like Brielle loved Wade, then she might finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. Life wouldn't be nearly as hard.

Her thoughts drifted toward Dalton.

He was too good for her. To even consider that he would want such a screwup like herself was as crazy as believing that a cow really did jump over the moon in that nursery rhyme.

Even still, that knowledge didn't change the fact that she needed to talk to Dalton. First, she needed to apologize for leaving without saying goodbye. And then she needed to tell him about her problems with sobriety—especially if she was still going to help him out at the farm. Hopefully, he still *wanted* her help. Though, after last night she wouldn't blame him if he didn't.



***Dalton***

**D**alton had probably picked up his phone a thousand times since Annabel had left last night. He'd sent her only one message, anything more than that would have appeared desperate. He wasn't quite sure what had happened. Defenses had come down and they'd nearly made a big mistake.

She didn't want anything to do with him in a romantic sense. She'd made that abundantly clear from the moment they'd bumped into one another. And based on the fact that she'd literally run away last night, he was fairly certain that opinion stood.

The longer he had to wait for her to message him back, the more frustrated he became. He had a hard time focusing on his work, and it showed. He was getting behind, which was something his father had no problem pointing out.

That was why he'd opted to do work far enough away from the house that he couldn't hear his father shouting at him.

After he'd milked the cows, fed the animals, and mucked out the pig's corral, he couldn't take it anymore. He needed her to call him so he knew she was okay. He saw someone come get the truck she'd left behind when she'd run away, so he had to assume that someone had managed to find her.

It wasn't the state of her physical wellbeing that was putting him on edge. It was that they'd nearly kissed.

At least that was what it felt like had been the catalyst for her taking off.

Dalton groaned inwardly. He itched to send off another message or call her. He would have driven out to her house if he thought it would help, but something inside him told him that would only make matters worse—especially if she was trying to put some distance between them like he assumed she was.

He stared at his phone, willing it to light up and notify him that Annabel wanted to finally talk. He even contemplated praying. But ultimately, he just sighed and shoved the phone back into his pocket.

He needed to make the rounds and check the fence line, exercise the horses, and take a look at the tractor to find out why it was acting up. He wasn't a mechanic by any means, but he might be able to tell if it was a small fix or something he'd have to call a professional for.

Sweat beaded on his brow as he pulled one horse from the barn and led it toward the corral. Normally, he would have just hooked it up to the equipment his father owned that would put all the horses into a circle and give them a walk together.

But he needed to expend some energy before he went completely mad.

The horse's hooves clopped along the dirt with an even rhythm as they made their way into the fenced area. He clicked his tongue and led her around the perimeter. After a few rounds, he pushed her to go a little faster. Normally he could let his mind wander as he was doing this kind of work, but that would be dangerous in his current state.

He'd keep working the horse until they were both exhausted if he had to.

That thought only lasted until dirt in the distance got kicked up by a vehicle coming his way. It wasn't a car he recognized, and Dalton glanced over his shoulder with

curiosity, allowing the horse to slow to a trot. Whoever it was, they were coming up to the house quick. They were on a mission.

Dalton couldn't think of any reason why someone might be visiting. His father wasn't in debt to anyone and the folks who worked with him would have called first. Then his father would have notified him that they'd be coming.

His eyes narrowed into slits, but that wasn't enough to see who had arrived. He moved closer to the horse and unclipped the lead rope, then wandered to the edge of the corral.

Immediately, he recognized her. That blonde hair sticking out from her cowboy hat and her skin-tight jeans that accentuated her figure—Annabel had decided to make an appearance.

Torn between fury and relief, Dalton remained frozen where he stood. He watched as she glanced in his direction and offered him a small wave. If she hadn't left him hanging for nearly twelve hours, he might have given her a wave back—or at least a nod. But as it stood, he wasn't sure he wanted to show her he was pleased to see her.

Annabel closed the car door and then walked around it. Her long legs seemed even longer with the cowboy boots she wore. And that same old sweater she apparently liked to wear, showing off some skin depending on how she moved her arms. This was the kind of outfit she would have worn in high school and seeing her dressed like this brought back a wave of memories.

“Hey,” she called as she drew closer.

He grunted, unsure if he would be able to say anything without sounding completely unhinged.

“I wanted to see you... to tell you I was sorry.”

Was that emotion in her voice? She was holding back from him. He could sense it. This timid nature wasn't something he was used to, and he wasn't sure how to respond. His heart was going haywire, wanting him to jump through the fence and

pull her close for a hug for no other reason than he could tell she was struggling with something.

It was as if they were transported back to last night when he just knew something was going on with her, but she wasn't willing to tell him.

Dalton cleared his throat. "You don't have to apologize." It was a lie. He'd been wanting her to do just that this whole morning. Just because she was showing emotion didn't mean his feelings had changed.

"Yes, I do."

He studied her. At least her clear blue eyes were showing some remorse. Wait, had she been crying? Dalton gripped the metal bar of the corral that kept him from her. "Okay. What are you apologizing for?"

She looked down, chewing on the inside of her cheek as she picked at her fingernails. "I shouldn't have left the way I did last night."

"No, you shouldn't have."

Annabel peeked at him.

"I would have been more than happy to let you stay for a little while or I would have called someone to get you—"

"Brielle and Lucas got me. I didn't want you to have to worry about me when you have to take care of your father and your son."

"You're my friend, Anna. I don't mind helping you out when we were spending time together." His stomach swirled with thoughts of last night. Those moments with her had been as intimate as when they'd been dating. Strange how emotions and feelings could rear their ugly heads when he least expected them to.

"Even still, I should have told you what I was going to do instead of just taking off." She looked away. Her walls were up again. He could sense them. There was no way she was going to confide in him if he got upset with her, so he needed

to remain calm. Something told him she needed a friend right now.

“It’s fine, Anna. I could tell you needed a moment.”

This time she didn’t meet his gaze. She twisted the toe of her boot into the dirt. “That’s something else I wanted to talk to you about. I know you noticed something. And I know you’re worried about me.”

He could have denied this all he wanted, but she would have caught him in his lie. So instead, he just let her keep talking.

“Last night... when you brought out the wine... I shouldn’t have...”

“You shouldn’t have what?”

“I’m an alcoholic, Dalton.” Her face flushed bright red, filling her cheeks and flooding to her ears. He could see it in her chest, too.

At first, he was in shock. He’d had friends who were alcoholics, so he knew the struggle. There was this storm inside him that had started out small but quickly grew to something raging and churning until he felt sick to his stomach. “Tell me you’re joking,” he said through gritted teeth. “Please tell me that I didn’t assist you in ruining any progress you were making in getting sober.”

She flinched and the barest hint of guilt washed over him, though it didn’t last long. “I’m not joking,” she said quietly. “And yes, I’m back at square one.”

His hands tightened even more on the bar he held. He wasn’t angry about the fact that she was an alcoholic. Everyone had their own struggles to deal with. But the fury was still there, and it was blinding. “I can’t believe this,” he growled.

Again, she flinched. And that was when he knew he couldn’t stand here talking to her. Not in the state he was in.

Dalton climbed through the fence and charged toward the barn. He needed to clear his head. The heat in his stomach had

overtaken his chest and was now pounding in his head like a hammer going to town on a piece of stone.

He wasn't even upset that Annabel had kept a secret from him. He was infuriated with her because she'd gone along and had the drink. She'd allowed herself to let go of the promises she'd made to herself when she was with him. It was like she'd used their dinner to let go, and something about that fact just rubbed him the wrong way.

Dalton made it to the barn and leaned against a metal support beam. The cool temperature did little to ease the tension. He didn't know why, but he felt responsible for what had happened. If he had known, he would have never pulled the bottle of wine from the shelf. He would have never allowed her more than one glass—heck, he wouldn't have allowed her to have a single glass.

A small part of him insisted that this wasn't his fault and he needed to accept it. Just because she had been his girlfriend once upon a time, just because she was his friend now, didn't mean he was her keeper.

So why did he feel like he'd been betrayed? It didn't make any sense.

“Dalton?” Her quiet voice jolted him from where he stood. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you.”

“Don't be sorry,” he muttered.

“What?”

Dalton spun around and glowered at her. “You don't owe me anything. We aren't dating. We barely just rekindled our friendship. I can't demand to know every secret you have—”

“No, but you're still a friend and I feel like I betrayed your trust somehow. Regardless, I should have refused the wine and requested something else.”

“Yeah, you should have.”

“It's just... been really hard lately.” Her heartbreaking mumble tore at him in a way he hadn't been prepared for. Just like when she'd been standing right outside the corral, he

couldn't help but feel like he needed to do whatever it took to shield her from this.

He hesitated, his eyes sweeping over the woman he'd loved once—the woman he still cared about. She didn't need his judgment. That would only make matters harder.

“Anyway, I wanted to come to tell you that I was sorry and that I'm getting back on the horse, so to speak. I'm going to attend meetings again and do better.” She moved to turn away from him, and just like that, his desperation from the night before reared its ugly head.

Dalton charged forward, blocking her path. They stared at each other. Dalton studied her, looking for any sign she would hate what he wanted to do next. And she watched him with surprised and hesitant eyes.

To heck with it. She needed him.

He pulled her against him, wrapping his arms around her so tight she couldn't squirm to get away from him. Thankfully, she didn't attempt anything of the sort. Her arms came up under his and wrapped around his back. She buried her face in his chest and her body shook while she cried.

His heart broke for her.

For the hardships she'd apparently gone through over the years.

For the broken promises she'd made to herself and others.

She didn't deserve the hardships she'd had to bear alone, and he wished he would have come back to town sooner. Maybe if he had, she wouldn't be in so much pain.

He lost track of time, but at this point he would have gladly taken his father hollering at him as long as he could see evidence that Annabel was going to be okay. When she finally pulled back, her face was a little more puffy than usual. Her eyes darted toward him, then away, and she stepped back with a small laugh.

“I'm sorry, that's embarrassing.”

He wiped at a tear with his thumb. “What’s embarrassing? I didn’t see you do anything embarrassing.”

He couldn’t help but notice the appreciative look she gave him. One that said she was glad to have someone on her side.



*Annabel*

Annabel laughed, hating Dalton for how easy it was for him to make her feel even marginally better. Not even a hug from Scarlett could heal the wounds she was struggling to close up. She rubbed her arms up and down, not wanting to meet his eyes. He was a sweetheart for not forcing her to talk about what just happened.

Even sweeter for not pushing to know more about her struggles with alcohol. She would never be able to repay him for the kindness he was offering her in that moment.

She rubbed at her face and took a few more steps past him so she could look outside when she brought up the next issue that would need resolving. “I didn’t know if this would mean you don’t want my help anymore.”

He scoffed. “Why would you assume that?”

Annabel shrugged. “Because I ran away last night. Because I kept a secret from you. Because I’m a... recovering alcoholic who has to start back at day one?”

Dalton came up behind her. His voice was low, and almost warm. “I’m not going to hold anything against you, Anna. You struggle like the rest of us, just in other ways. I can always use an extra hand.” The timbre of it sent a wave of shivers up and down her spine, making her already colder than she was. Perhaps it *was* time to dig out her winter coat.

She turned to face him and offered him a shy smile. “Good, because I don’t think I can stand the judgmental stares of my family right now. Especially Wade. He’s pretty mad.”

“Is that why you didn’t take his truck?”

All she could do was nod. Of course Dalton would notice what she came here driving. Scarlett still didn’t know about last night, though she would probably need to tell her.

That was just one more truth she had to add to the list of lies that had been building up.

“Scarlett let me borrow it for the morning. She needs it back before four though.”

“We can be done by then. In fact, I have to pick up my kid at school by three, so we’ll wrap up what we can before then. What do you say? Are you available to help me out right now? Or is there somewhere you have to be?”

She lifted her shoulders and dropped them, already feeling ten times better than she had when she arrived. “I’m all yours.”

He gave her a funny look, but it passed too quickly for her to examine what it might have meant. Instead, she motioned toward the horse out in the corral. “You’re exercising right now? Want me to get the next one?”

“Actually, I need some help with the fences. I want to make sure there are no weak spots as it gets colder. The last thing I need is for something to get out when the coyotes are looking for their next easy meal.”

“Good point.” She thumbed over her shoulder. “Any horse in particular you want me to saddle up?”

He grinned at her, and her heart fluttered briefly. Funny how easy it was to feel light and airy when she was around him. He could make her feel valued with just one look.

*Stop it! Didn’t you say that you didn’t want to attach yourself to someone yet? You need to find yourself. You can’t just go along with the first guy who makes you feel important—even if it’s Dalton Quaid.*

Annabel swallowed and looked away.

“Get whoever you want. I haven’t exercised any of them and this ride can take the place of that.”

“On it.” She made to turn and get started, but Dalton’s hand wrapped around her wrist. She stopped and looked at where he held her, not because it was inappropriate, but because of the reaction her body was giving her.

It was like they’d been transported back in time to when they were teenagers. The flutters and shivers were all reminiscent of what it was like to be Dalton’s girlfriend.

That was why it was so easy for her to fall into old patterns. Muscle memory. That’s all it was. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to meet his. “Is there something you need?”

The way he was staring at her made it incredibly hard to rationalize what she’d just realized. What if he still had feelings for her? What if he’d never gotten over her when she’d broken it off?

That sounded more like a romance story than real life. Dalton had gone on to marry and start a family. He wasn’t attracted to her. How could he be when she had just admitted to how big of a mess she really was?

When he didn’t respond right away, she tugged on her hand. “You okay?”

Dalton blinked, then flashed her a smile. “Sorry about that. I got lost for a minute there.” He shook his head as if he needed to clear it. “What I was going to say was that you’re still a wonderful person. I want you to know that. No matter what happens, I will always be here for you.”

She wanted to laugh, to snort and brush him off. But she couldn’t. There was something about the way he was speaking to her that made her wonder once again if he was harboring old feelings for her.

Then she shoved that thought aside.

This was one of her biggest weaknesses. She needed to stop going along with everyone else. She had to find who she

wanted to be without anyone else to support her.

Annabel forced a smile and simply murmured, “Thanks.”

He nodded, then strode immediately out of the barn and toward the horse he’d left in the corral.

She breathed a sigh of relief. That could have gone wrong in so many ways. She’d really figured he would want some space after hearing about last night. As it turned out, Dalton really was as good of a guy as she’d remembered.

They worked side by side in silence as they both saddled their prospective horses. Then they led them from the building and mounted.

Even the first ten minutes of the ride were done in silence. The cold air nipped at her nose and her cheeks, probably turning them bright red. She brought her hands to her lips several times to blow on them for warmth.

At some point, Dalton noticed and he let out a groan. “Of course, you didn’t bring gloves. What is wrong with women and their incessant need to wear the minimum in the dead of winter?” He twisted in his saddle and dug through the saddle bags he’d brought along in case they needed to make repairs. Then he tossed her a pair of old, worn leather gloves.

She graciously put them on, already feeling ten times better. With a quick glance in his direction, she desperately filled the void of sound they’d found themselves in. “Is your son excited for the holidays?”

He chuckled. “Is he ever. That kid has already demanded a horse for Christmas.”

She laughed along with him. “What can you expect? He grew up in the city. He has no idea the work it takes to keep one of these alive.” Annabel leaned down and patted her horse on the neck.

“Well, he understands enough to already demand we never leave.”

Her expression must have been something else because he laughed again. “Honestly? I think I’m leaning toward the same

thing. I just don't see what returning to the city would do for us. Being out here in the open air would do him some good. At least then he wouldn't have any excuses for staying inside all summer on a tablet."

"So, are you going to give it to him?"

Confusion filled his eyes.

"A horse," she clarified. "Are you going to get him what he wants for Christmas?"

Dalton's face broke into a serene-looking smile. "I don't know yet. I haven't had much opportunity to put him in the saddle and see if he has the talent for it."

"Talent," she scoffed. "You don't need talent to ride a horse. To train one, maybe. But just to ride? Personally, I would just give him one anyway to teach him responsibility. To put the life of something else into his hands would be something that could do wonders for him."

"Maybe you're right," Dalton mused. "I'll have to take that into consideration."

"And if you do, then tell him he has Aunty Anna to thank."

This time the look he shot in her direction was more guarded. She knew that look. He wasn't sure he wanted her to meet his son. And that she definitely couldn't blame him for. Maybe in a few years when she finally had a handle on things. But right now? Definitely not.

She shifted in her seat uncomfortably. The air between them had officially grown awkward.

"Can I ask you something?"

Annabel wasn't so sure about that. There were several things that she would consider off-limits when it came to baring her soul. But at this point, she wasn't certain she could refuse. So she nodded, her throat thick.

"What would you say to me helping with the alcohol thing?"

She stiffened. If that wasn't proof of what he was worried about, she didn't know what was. First, she'd brought up his son and then he responded with that? Annabel took in a slow breath and held it for a moment, then released it just as slowly. "I don't know."

"It's okay if you're not comfortable with it. I know this sort of thing takes a lot of trust... It just seems like your support system isn't quite working the way it should."

Her eyes cut to meet his. "What do you know about support systems?"

He grinned at her, but it wasn't as genuine as when he was happy. Mostly it looked like he wanted to assure her he was on her side—something she wasn't one hundred percent sure of. "I'm not a hermit, Anna. I have other friends." He leaned toward her a little, something that appeared even funnier seeing as he was on the saddle. "Even those who struggle with alcohol addiction. I'm not going to judge you for your mistakes. I... just want to help."

Annabel pulled her lower lip between her teeth. Why was she hesitating? Didn't she want them to be friends? And what were friends for? They were there to uplift and show support when things got hard.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and the thoughts about being with him romantically returned with a vengeance. Wouldn't it be dangerous for her to be around him that much? What if she couldn't control her feelings and she ended up falling in love with him all over again?

"I really don't think that's a good idea."

"It's not like we'd be doing anything more than we already are. You're going to be hanging out here more often to help out, right? And you're going to head out to meetings on your own. I could just make sure to check in with you more regularly. Think of me as your cheerleader."

"You really don't have to—"

"I know."

Boy, he was making this hard to turn down. Between Wade's judgment and Scarlett's abandonment, it would be nice to have a friend she could vent to. She heaved another heavy breath and her shoulders slouched. "Fine. We can try it out. But if it comes between the friendship we're trying to build—"

"It won't," he assured her.

"But if it does—"

"Annabel, if we get into even one argument over how I'm supporting you, then I'll step back. I don't want you to feel like I'm pushing you too hard, and I don't want you to feel like I'm holding your hand when you're capable of doing great things on your own."

That statement right there made her heart sing. It was nice to hear someone besides her brother tell her that she was capable of more—and to make it come across as uplifting rather than disappointing. His words made her smile widen. "Fine. You've convinced me. You can help me out."

"Excellent."

She laughed quietly to herself. "I don't know why you're so excited. It's really rather boring."

He shrugged. "Maybe I just want an excuse to spend more time with you. Have you ever thought of that?"

Even if Annabel could hide the smile she wore, she wouldn't have. This morning had started out so terrible, and she had thought it would be impossible to bounce back. But one conversation with Dalton and she knew she could charge forward.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Anytime. Now, let's check this fence so we can get back."

***Dalton***

The next couple of weeks went by in a flash. Thanksgiving came and went. Then the town started decorating for the Christmas festivities. He couldn't go anywhere without seeing twinkling lights or hearing Christmas carols.

The day after Thanksgiving, the clouds in the sky saw fit to dump a good two feet of snow on the ground, covering everything from the ground to the trees in powder. Copper Creek became the poster city for a Hallmark Christmas card.

It was different than what he experienced in the city, and he was enjoying sharing it with his son. Henry couldn't wait to run outside every day after school and throw himself into the snow. And every evening, he came inside sopping wet.

One of these days he was going to catch a cold and he'd be miserable.

Annabel continued coming to the ranch to help him work and they successfully avoided discussing anything regarding her sobriety. While he'd gotten her to agree to the arrangement where he would check in on her, he wanted her to get settled before he drilled her with questions or offered to cheer her on.

The amount of weight she carried when it came to being labeled an addict tore at him in more ways than he expected.



So rather than focus on her weaknesses, he focused on everything she could do to help around the farm.

Now that there was snow on the ground, the majority of the work had to do with caring for the animals and keeping the barn clean. There would be no repairing the tractor now that it was covered in snow, and he'd missed his last opportunity to give that one field its final haircut.

On a brisk December morning, Annabel showed up in that sweater she wore the day after their little mishap. There was no way she was warm enough and he was getting more than a little frustrated about how she was dressed for work. "You realize you can wear a coat for work, right?"

She glanced toward him with confusion.

He gestured toward her sweater. "I get that we're technically inside, but it's gotta be freezing."

Annabel made a face. "Well, Mr. 'You need a coat,' I went looking for mine about a week ago and I can't find it. So. I'm stuck with my layers. And I assure you I'm doing just fine."

His eyes narrowed. "No, you're not. Every time you have to head outside, you shiver and shake like there's an earthquake just beneath your feet."

Her laugh was the kind to brush him off, and if it wasn't obvious enough, she waved a dismissive hand through the air. "It's not like I'm a kid who wants to go rolling in the snow or who gets booted outside during recess. I'm fine during the amount of time I'm outside. All I need are these." This time she held up both hands and showed off the gloves she'd never officially given back from that first ride either.

Dalton arched a brow. If she didn't get a coat, then he was going to get one for her. He just couldn't tell her that. So rather than let on to his plans, he turned back to his chore of organizing the tools while she swept up the hay fragments that hadn't made it into the stalls. "What are your plans for Christmas?" He asked it absently enough. At least he thought he had. Christmas was in three weeks, and he hadn't decided if

he was going to head back to the city so his ex had a chance to see Henry.

There was also Henry's other grandparents to consider.

The problem was, he didn't want to go if he could help it. He'd much prefer to stick around here and take Henry to the festival.

"I dunno," Annabel mused. "I don't usually do anything for Christmas."

"Really? Why not?"

She gave him a pointed look. "Seriously? Do I have to spell it out for you?"

His brows furrowed. What was he missing that was so obvious?

Finally, she huffed. "The booze, Dalton. This holiday is notorious for serving it with everything. From eggnog to holiday frou-frou drinks. I can't get away from it."

"Oh," he murmured. "I never thought about that before."

"No, I don't suppose you would."

He paused his work, watching her quietly as her efforts seemed to get more anxious. She swept harder and faster to the point he had to do something about it.

Dalton got to his feet and wandered over to her. He reached out and grasped the broom with his hand, forcing her to stop. She met his gaze, her eyes hard. "What?" she demanded.

"How's it going?"

"Fine... if you would let go of the broom so I can finish my work."

He shifted closer. "No, how's the... you know."

Annabel rolled her eyes. "You mean the sobriety? Fine. I haven't had a drop since..." She flushed. "I'm fine," she repeated.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

“No, there isn’t. This is *my* thing. And I’m doing—”

“Fine. I know.” His lips quirked upward. “You know what I think? I think you and I need to go out.”

Her eyes widened and her brows shot up. “Dalton—”

“Easy. I’m not talking about a date. I’m talking about going out to celebrate all the hard work you’re putting in. I can tell it’s wearing on you.”

She blinked. But even in the way she did that and continued to stare at him, he could see how much she wanted to let him do this.

“What do you say? Can I take you out dancing or to dinner? It’s too cold to do much outside.” His brows lifted and he grinned like a schoolboy. “Or we could go ice skating. I haven’t done that in years.”

She tilted her head, staring at him in disbelief. “I don’t think you can actually ice skate.”

“What? I can ice skate. You must remember how good I was when we were younger.”

“Yeah, good at falling down. And skinning your knee. And I think one time you twisted your ankle.”

“Man, you have a good memory.” He chuckled. “But I seem to recall it was something you enjoyed doing.”

“Because I was good.”

He shook his head. “You really don’t like making this easy on me, do you?”

Her eyes narrowed and a hint of a smile touched her lips. “Would you be paying?”

“Of course I would.”

“And we’d go to the nice one outside one town over? Not the one here that’s inside?”

“Wherever you want to go.”

This time her smile lit her face. She nodded. “Deal. I could use an escape. Would Henry be coming too?”

He contemplated what that might mean. Annabel probably needed some one-on-one time to feel appreciated. And he didn't really want Henry staying up too late. "I think we can hold off on that for a little while."

Something strange and foreign flickered in her eyes, but just as quickly as it had arrived, it disappeared. He wasn't even sure he'd seen it.

Dalton released the broom and pulled out his phone. "How about tomorrow. It's a Friday and I'll have my dad keep an eye on Henry while we're gone. What do you say?"

"Sounds fun."



THE RINK WAS FILLED to almost overflowing. Stars twinkled overhead and even though there wasn't a moon, it felt like they were in a glowing snow globe. Yes, there were lights shining on the ice, but it was more than that. If it had started to snow at that moment, he might have thought they had been transported into a glass ball.

Annabel skated gracefully a few yards ahead of him, her hands in those silly leather gloves and wearing that same sweater. It made him start to wonder if she had anything else to wear in this weather.

He'd rented the skates for two hours, giving him plenty of time to touch base with her and make sure she was doing okay.

She glanced back at him a couple of times and he could almost hear her laughter over the crowd of people literally skating circles around him. Man, he'd forgotten just how hard it was to stay balanced on this ice.

It didn't matter if the ice had been freshly melted by the Zamboni or if the skaters had chopped it up with their sharp skates. Both options left him with arms flailing and feeling like his feet would come out from under him at any given moment.

“Whatcha doing all the way back here?” Annabel came beside him, skating backward.

“Show-off,” he muttered.

She laughed, drawing a grin from him.

“When was the last time you went skating? You clearly have had a great deal more practice than you let on.”

Her grin widened like that of a Grinch. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Well, that’s why I asked,” he teased.

She snickered. “I try to come out once a year at least. But it’s hard depending on how... things are going.” The light left her eyes momentarily, but just as quickly, it returned. “What about you? When was the last time you came out to something like this?”

He grimaced. “You don’t want to know.”

“Really? After all that talk about how good you were? You’re going to tell me that you haven’t been skating since... when? Three years ago?”

Dalton scrunched up his face, feeling the heat rise to his ears. “Actually, I think it’s been longer than that.”

“*Five* years?”

“More.”

She gaped at him, coming to a stop, snow flying from the blades of her skates. “*No*.”

“Yep.”

“You’re not telling me that you haven’t been skating since we were in high school, are you?”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I remembered these moments with far more fondness than I should have.”

Annabel threw back her head and crowed with laughter. “Now, who’s not telling the whole truth?”

If she wasn’t enjoying herself so fully, he might have taken offense at her statement. He was just glad he was able to make

her smile again. It was strange how something as simple as going ice-skating was able to do that for her. She just needed to get out of her own head—maybe out of Copper Creek, even though they were only in the next town over.

“Well, that’s it. We’re not going to leave here until you are capable of keeping up with me.” She reached for his hand, but he jerked it away from her.

“Nah. I’m good.”

Annabel laughed. “You so aren’t. You’re going to take my hand and let me help you around the rink at least a few times before we leave.”

“We only have thirty minutes left on our rental,” he argued.

“Then we better get going and do it fast.”

He didn’t even have a chance to argue with her before she snatched his hand and tugged him forward. His free hand flailed in the air until he caught his balance and then he held onto her hand with a death grip. She shot a smile in his direction and he braced himself for what might happen next.

Funnily enough, Annabel didn’t take advantage of his inability to skate. They took their time, nice and slow, along the outer edges where there were fewer skaters. Her hand slipped from his grasp, but she quickly looped it through his arm and held onto him so they could skate in sync.

“Thank you,” she murmured as she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

He craned his neck around so he could get a better look at her face. “For what?”

“For getting me out—making me have some fun. This has been nice.”

Dalton smiled more to himself than anyone else. If there was one thing that he knew about quitting something, it was that replacing it with distractions in the beginning made the process a little easier. Annabel might not be able to see it yet, but he could.

She'd be fine. She just needed to surround herself with support, and he'd be there as long as she needed him. The way she held his arm triggered some strange sensations. Moments like this one felt almost surreal. It was like he had been transported back to the time when they were dating. For a moment he could forget that she'd broken his heart.

He could forget that there were bigger issues that needed to be dealt with first.

Because in this moment, it was just the two of them against the world.

Annabel gasped, ripping him from the silly fairytale he'd stuck himself in. He stiffened, nearly losing his balance on the ice. Annabel grabbed onto both of his hands, facing him. Her face broke into a wide smile and she tilted her head back.

That's when he realized what she was looking at.

Tiny white flecks of glitter and ice drifted down around them, glinting from the spotlights that illuminated the rink. The flecks swirled and danced, drawing the attention of others on the ice. While Annabel admired the flakes, Dalton admired her.

*Annabel*

*A*nnabel closed her eyes and let the ice-cold specks freckle her cheeks. It had been a long time since she'd been able to just enjoy herself without worrying about what would come next—mostly because she'd been worried about falling off the wagon or disappointing her family.

And herself.

For some strange reason, those fears weren't even registering when she was with Dalton. She'd thought that being around him after he'd found out about her struggles would be awkward. Once people learned about what she was dealing with, they had a tendency to treat her differently.

As she brought her eyes back to meet his, she was surprised to find him staring at her. The world around her had turned into a magical snow globe. Between the snowflakes drifting around them, the other skaters just as entranced, and the music playing over the speakers, Annabel could have assumed she was hallucinating.

If she hadn't been stone-cold sober, she would have thought for sure she wasn't in her right mind. All of that, coupled with the way Dalton gazed at her, made the world turn sideways.

Annabel couldn't move. She was frozen, and it wasn't just because of the temperature of the air around them. She had



been transported back to a time when life was simpler. Just like it was yesterday, she could see a younger version of this man before her. She could remember what it was like to be loved by him.

Well, maybe love was too strong a word.

Either way, these strange feelings were toying with her just as much as they had when she was younger. She could feel her heartbeat in parts of her body it didn't have any right being. Her arms and legs tingled. But it was her breath that affected her the most.

Annabel's lungs failed her, evidenced by her lightheadedness. Her legs grew weak, causing her to hold onto Dalton a little tighter.

All of this felt like it happened over the span of a couple hours when, in reality, it was probably only a couple of seconds. Annabel exhaled just to make sure she was still capable of doing so. "Dalton?"

His face inched closer. "Yeah?" he whispered.

"You... doing okay?" It was all she could think of saying. To draw more attention to the fact that he was still staring at her wouldn't do either of them any good. Hadn't she told him she wasn't ready for anything? Hadn't he said the same?

And yet here he was, acting like he would love nothing more than to kiss her.

That was ridiculous, right? They were just caught up in the moment—the snow.

Annabel drew on a courage she wasn't even sure she possessed and put some distance between them. Then she did so again for good measure. "You look a little..." Was weird the right word? No, that didn't seem to fit. Dazed would be more like it, but perhaps that was just how she was feeling.

She laughed and nodded to the skaters around them who had thinned out somewhat. "I think our time is just about up."

Finally, he tore his gaze away from her and glanced around the rink. "I think you might be right." Dalton shoved his hands

into his pockets and then seemed to immediately regret his decision as he lost his balance.

His skates slipped out from under him, and his backside thumped to the ice.

Annabel gasped, both hands flying to cover her mouth before she released a giggle.

Dalton peered up at her, the displeasure emanating from his face even more comical. "I can't believe you're laughing at me," he muttered.

With hands still over her mouth, she shook her head and giggled again.

"See? You're laughing." Dalton awkwardly shifted until he could get onto his hands and knees. He groaned and grunted, stirring additional sounds of amusement to escape her chest. When he realized that he couldn't get into a standing position without help or a wall to lean on, he crawled over to the rink's edge.

Annabel skated toward him and then leaned against the wall. "I think that was my favorite part of the night."

He rolled his eyes, though she was certain she found a glimmer of amusement hiding just beneath the surface. "Happy to be of service." He grimaced, rubbing the affected area. "I think I bruised my tailbone." Dalton glanced at her sideways, giving her the most adorable look. Then he held out a hand. "Now you get to help me to the exit so that I don't do additional damage. Otherwise, I'm going to be useless to my father and you're going to have to do all the work. I don't think you want that."

She shrugged. "I don't know. Can't be worse than what I have to do around my family's property. Besides, I get to hang out with my favorite person."

His brows lifted and one side of his mouth quirked into a half-grin. "I'm your favorite person?"

"Don't get too big of a head. You're my favorite person for *now*."

Dalton chuckled. “You can’t trick me. I know I’m your favorite. And I know why.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?” She fully expected him to tell her that he had caught her staring in the way he had been. Or he could have told her that the kind of relationship they’d had when they were younger would never die. There were so many scenarios that flitted through her head she would have accepted without much argument, but in the end she was disappointed.

“Because I’m the only one who took you ice-skating in ages.”

His response had been anticlimactic at best.

Was this all part of the issues she was acutely familiar with—her incessant need to fit in with whomever she was dating? Annabel knew she romanticized everything about her life at times. This was probably one of those moments, which was why she felt a little more than disappointed at his response.

*Brush it off. It doesn’t mean anything. Just laugh and go along with what he said.*

Thankfully, this was one of those moments when she took her own down-to-earth thoughts to heart and avoided the impulsive side.

“You got me. Now let’s get you out of here.”



ANNABEL COULD FEEL her resolve slipping. She knew this feeling well. It had made an appearance several times over the course of her life. Only this time, it wasn’t the resolve to stay alcohol-free. This was something new.

And it had everything to do with Dalton.

Her face flushed hot red.

“Annabel, you feeling okay?”

She glanced up at Wade, noting the look of concern that was stretched across his entire face. He was probably still upset about their last little conversation. Who could blame him? He had a lot on his plate as it was.

Eyes shifting to her breakfast plate, she closed them and then nodded. “Just tired. Stayed out pretty late last night.”

Already she could feel every pair of eyes shift toward her. It wasn't often they had a family dinner. And she couldn't remember the last time it had been mandatory. Rather than look up to confirm that her large family was watching her, she took this moment to change the subject. “What is this dinner all about anyway? I thought we weren't going to have another one until Christmas.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Elijah get to his feet. Once everyone had turned their focus on her brother, she finally allowed herself to look up. He stretched his hand out to Scarlett who accepted and rose to her feet as well. “We wanted to let you know we have set a date.”

The sounds in the room were a mixture of pleasure and boredom. But what did she expect? Most of her brothers were just barely reaching their twenties. They had zero interest in a wedding. Those who were most interested were Wade and his wife, Brielle. Also, Charlie and Lucas. The last one was probably only excited for the prospect of meeting some city girls.

Annabel sat quietly, not able to pin down how she felt about this. Scarlett had been so against marriage the last time they'd been close. Now that Scarlett was back in town wanting completely different things, Annabel didn't know where she fit in her friend's life.

She wanted them to be happy—and clearly, they were. Annabel had never seen Elijah smile so much. Scarlett had changed too.

Everyone in her circle of friends from when she was younger had figured everything out. Her older brother, her best friend, Elijah... even Dalton. They were all moving on without her.

“Annabel?”

Her head snapped up so she could locate the person saying her name. Scarlett stared at her with concern. *Shoot*. Had Wade or Brielle tattled on her? Her eyes darted to Wade, who seemed just as concerned. This was just great. She’d gotten so wrapped up in her head that she hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation that was going on around her. Now, if she didn’t answer correctly, then they’d know something was up.

Annabel moistened her lips and then put her fork down. “Yeah?”

“What do you think?”

“What do I think about what?”

Scarlett and Elijah exchanged loving looks again. “We want to get married at the end of the month.”

“The end of the month!” Annabel glanced around the table. “But that’s in three weeks. What about the holidays? You can’t possibly plan something that soon. And who wants to get married in the middle of winter?” All of these thoughts tumbled from her lips, but they didn’t seem to faze her brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law.

“We know it might be difficult to plan, but we decided we didn’t want to wait and we don’t need some big, fancy party. We can use the decorations from Christmas—poinsettias and Christmas lights. There’s enough space in the barn out at my dad’s place to accommodate guests.” Scarlett beamed. “And I want you to be my maid of honor.”

A mixture of shock, excitement, and trepidation wound its way through her body.

Scarlett laughed. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Annabel couldn’t find the words to express her thoughts on the matter. She wanted to be there for her friend. But she also couldn’t shake the thought that this was a very bad idea. Lately, she was hanging on by a thread. Hadn’t Scarlett noticed that Annabel had been absent? With all the help she was giving Dalton, she’d barely had a chance to really connect with her best friend.

Elijah nudged Scarlett with a chuckle. “Perhaps we should give her some time to think about it.” He turned to the rest of their family. “Anyway, this is going to be a lot of work to pull together, and I’ll need some help to keep up on the chores around here.”

“I’m sure we’ll do just fine.” Wade rose and clapped a hand on Elijah’s shoulder. “You just worry about getting everything prepped and ready. Annabel, you’re up to help out, right?”

Finally, she was able to find her voice. “I’m actually helping out at the Quaid farm.”

Wade gave her a sharp look.

“Wait, that’s where you’ve been lately?” Elijah laughed. “I knew you weren’t going to be able to stay away from Dalton Quaid for long.” He nudged Scarlett again. “See? I told you that she wouldn’t be able to stay away.”

“I thought he was married,” Scarlett cut in, eyes wide. “Didn’t you say you weren’t going to be friends with a married guy?”

There was no stopping the blush that filled Annabel’s face after that statement was made. She glanced around the room and then released a huff of frustration. “Turns out he’s not married anymore. He’s been divorced for years.”

That was all it took for Elijah and Scarlett to make this situation ten times worse.

Scarlett gasped and her smile widened. “You should bring him as your plus-one to the wedding!”

“Are you dating? I knew you guys would hit it off,” Elijah joined in.

“I don’t like it. You shouldn’t be spending a lot of time with him,” Wade muttered. At that statement, Scarlett shot a look toward Annabel’s oldest brother. Her confusion wiped away her smile before she swung her focus to Annabel and gave her a look that clearly demanded an explanation.

Annabel shook her head. Then she got to her feet and gathered her dishes. “No, we’re not dating. And I will absolutely not bring him to the wedding. Nothing is happening between us. And nothing will.” With that, she escaped the kitchen to finish her meal in peace.

*Dalton*

*D*alton couldn't stop thinking about the night at the ice rink. Granted, it was only a couple days ago, but still. The memory was etched into his mind like it had been burned there with a laser.

Something strange had happened that he couldn't quite explain to himself. If someone had asked him how he felt about her, he wouldn't be able to give them a straight answer—mostly because he knew he shouldn't go dredging up the past, and at the same time, he really wanted to.

It was Monday, and he hadn't seen Annabel since their outing, mostly because she didn't come on the weekends. It was a stipulation he'd put in place so Henry didn't have to meet her yet.

Though now that he was thinking about it, he didn't know why he'd made that rule, especially since he hadn't been set on dating her.

Now, he was wondering if it was time for her to meet his son.

After he'd dropped off his son at school, he'd come back to the farm to get to work.

But he couldn't focus. Annabel would be showing up any minute, and he had this strange feeling that he needed to talk



to her about what had happened.

Had she noticed that he'd nearly kissed her? She hadn't said as much. Dalton needed to get his head on straight if he planned on making this little arrangement work.

Thankfully, he probably had a good hour before she showed.

Dalton headed toward the barn to get started when a car pulled onto the property. He froze, recognizing one of the few vehicles the Keagan family owned.

His timing guess had been wrong.

There was no time to figure out a plan—to bring up what had almost happened and what he wanted to come from it.

His chest exploded, his nerves fraying at the edges. Dalton slowed and watched as the beat-up truck came to a stop and Annabel all but threw herself from the front seat. She looked exhausted, bedraggled, and not ready for a day of hard labor.

Her eyes met his and she strode toward him. "You're not going to believe what my brother is trying to do."

Dalton waited. She had ten brothers. It could be any of them.

Annabel moved past him and continued her rant. "Get this. They *just* got engaged. Their relationship is practically like a newborn baby. And they want to get married the Saturday after Christmas!"

She must have been talking about Elijah.

He followed her into the barn, watching with both amusement and curiosity as she yanked a shovel from where it hung on the wall. She was adorable when she was flustered, but he'd never tell *her* that. Annabel wasn't the type to want to be called adorable. That much he remembered.

"On top of all that, Scarlett wants me to be her maid of honor! Can you believe that?" She huffed and puffed as she marched into a stall to lean the shovel against the wall before putting a lead rope on the horse inside. "I don't know what's

gotten into them. It's ridiculous. You know what it makes me want to do?"

Dalton waited. He knew before she made the comment, but he wanted her to make the statement first.

"I want to go to the bar just outside of town and get a beer." Annabel stopped suddenly as if she realized what she had just admitted. The horse was halfway out of her stall and the two of them were just standing there. Annabel's eyes locked with his and she flushed.

He stepped forward and grabbed the rope from her. "It's okay."

"No, it's not," she groaned. "I can't even go a few weeks without craving another drink. I don't know how I managed to stay sober for so long. It's like the second Scarlett got back into town, I regressed." She wasn't looking at him anymore. Instead, she focused on her hands.

It was hard watching her work through the emotions that were overwhelming her. All he wanted to do was pull her into a hug and assure her that she would be okay. The hard part would never go away, but she'd get better at dealing with it.

Her eyes bounced up to meet his. Was she expecting him to say something? Did she want his advice? Or would that be pushing the boundaries of what they'd put in place?

Who was he kidding? They'd already crossed a line at the ice rink. At least he felt he'd crossed a line. Then again, she might have read the situation very differently. Dalton cleared his throat, but it didn't budge the lump he could feel there. Words refused to come to him and all he could think of to say as he lifted the lead rope was, "I'll get her a cover and take her out to pasture."

They trudged out to the corral. The sun had come out since the snow had fallen, melting parts of what was on the ground and giving the animals something to nibble on. Once he deposited the animal in her little enclosure, he steeled himself for the conversation he knew he needed to have with her. He was probably getting all worked up for nothing.

Annabel was frustrated with the stuff going on with her brother. She had probably forgotten all about their ice-skating outing. Even still, they probably should confirm they were on the same page.

But were they?

That little question floated in his head as he made his way back to the barn. Did he want to maintain a friendship with her? Or did he want to rekindle what they had? It wasn't fair to ask her to rekindle anything. She was working through too much.

He nodded as if he was answering a question he'd spoken aloud. Annabel needed support. She didn't need someone who was going to try to hit on her or ask more of her than she was willing to give.

Armed with that resolve, Dalton entered the barn. Annabel was still working furiously to clean out the stall she'd started on. She muttered to herself something he couldn't understand. When she caught sight of him, she sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here to unload on you."

"It's fine."

She shook her head. "No, it's not. From the second you came back and we started hanging out, I've been nothing but trouble."

He bit back a smile. "How's that?"

Annabel gave him a blank expression. Or perhaps it was more of a pointed look. Either way, he could tell she wasn't up for playing a game. Proving his point, Annabel crossed her arms and scowled at him. "I know when I'm trouble."

"I think you're too hard on yourself."

"I'm not hard *enough*," she insisted. "Between my issues with alcohol and venting—"

Dalton held up his hands, offering her a small smile. "I'm going to stop you right there, Anna. You're not a problem. And you will never convince me that you are. I refuse to put a

label on you just because you made a few bad decisions. You're trying to change. That's good enough for me."

She stared at him like he'd grown a third arm.

He would have laughed, but he knew better than to put her on the spot for how she was feeling right now. Instead, he moved closer to her. He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. At first she was stiff, only slightly resisting him. Then she relaxed and melted against him. "Okay, so tell me why you're upset about the wedding date."

"Because it's too soon!" She made a move like she was going to pull back, but he held her firm. "They don't know each other well enough to jump into it so fast."

"Scarlett was your childhood best friend, right?"

"Yeah..." she drawled.

"And Elijah knew her back then too, right?"

This time her word was flatter, harder even. "Yeah."

"Well, I'd say it's safe to assume they know each other pretty well. It's not like he met her on the internet a few days ago. This isn't an issue of them not knowing each other well enough—not if you think about it."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" Annabel muttered.

He let her pull back a little but kept his hands resting on her shoulders. "I'm not on anyone's *side*. But I know a thing or two about letting people make their own mistakes."

Her eyes narrowed. "You keep saying stuff like that. How do I even know you're telling the truth?"

This time he did laugh. "I'm not going to lie to you, Anna. But I can tell you're curious. If you want to know, just ask."

She tilted her head and her eyes squinted slightly. She bit down on her lower lip and then glanced down. "I don't want to ask you something you don't want to offer on your own. I've been on the other side of that before."

"I volunteered for a little at a shelter."

Her focus shifted back to his face. She searched his eyes as if looking for any evidence that he wasn't telling the truth. But she must have come to the conclusion that he was, because she blinked a few times and a slow smile spread across her face. "That's amazing."

Dalton shrugged. "Maybe. At first it was just a way to fill spare time when I started having problems with Darcy. But after a while, it was nice to really help the folks work through their problems."

"I'm sure they really appreciated it," Annabel said quietly. The dramatic shift from amazement to solemnness gave him pause.

He frowned as he peered at her a little closer. "What's the matter?"

Immediately, she flushed and then withdrew from him. "Nothing." She said it too quickly, too sharp. There was definitely something up.

Dalton moved closer. "No, there's something going on."

Annabel released a strained laugh. "You're going to think I'm a terrible person."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are, and it's fine. Because I am."

He shook his head. "You aren't a terrible person, Anna. You've had some hardships lately, but—"

She snorted.

"*But*," he continued, "you are trying to be better. What was that look for?"

Her hands flew into the air, and she moved back to the job she was doing as she started to ramble. "Everyone has everything going for them. Scarlett is getting married and starting to work on her father's farm. She knows what she wants and how to get it. You're... *perfect*."

"What?" he huffed.

“You *are*. You moved away, got married, and had a kid. But that’s not all. You served your community. You came home to help your dad. Is there anything that you didn’t do?”

“My marriage failed.”

“Because your wife didn’t want to stick around. You can’t force people to change, Dalton. That wasn’t your fault.” Annabel sighed as she tossed a look at him over her shoulder. “And then there’s me. I don’t know where I’m going. I’ve fallen more than I’ve been able to get up. I can’t seem to catch a break, and the worst part is that I know it’s all my fault.”

Dalton’s heart went out to her. He’d never tell her she made a few good points. But the first part of making a change was realizing one had to be made. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re halfway there.”

She glanced at him.

“I mean it. People don’t get better if they don’t see a problem. You know you want something more. So, let’s get it.”

Again, she stared at him with a funny kind of look. It was as if she were silently judging him.

“What is it this time?”

“How can you do that?” she asked.

“You’re going to have to elaborate on that.” He leaned against the nearest stall door and crossed his arms. Whatever she said next had better not be to tear herself down.

“How can you be so supportive? How can you see everything I’ve done that’s wrong and still want to help?”

“Because you’re my friend.” The second he uttered the words, he regretted them. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to be friends; it was something else.

It was the way she looked that night at the rink.

It was the way he felt when she smiled.

He wanted more, and yet he wasn’t sure it was possible—especially after putting up his own wall between them.

The smile she gave him was faint but finally making an appearance. “I don’t know what I did to be so lucky to have you as my friend.”

“That goes both ways,” he mumbled. It was a clichéd thing to say, but it was the only thing he could think of in the moment. Annabel didn’t need a boyfriend. She needed a friend, and he’d be that for her.

*Annabel*

After Annabel's initial reaction to Scarlett's wedding announcement, she had to admit Dalton had made a good point. She didn't like admitting it, but she was willing to, mostly because she'd been the one to tell Scarlett to go for it.

She couldn't be upset over how everything was working out when she facilitated it.

On top of that logic, she had to do the right thing and be the best maid of honor she could be. That meant planning a bachelorette party.

"I don't even know what I'm going to do." Annabel sat beside Dalton on the porch swing that hung in front of his house. She'd come back after he'd put Henry to bed, because she still didn't want to be at home when Scarlett and Elijah were planning the wedding.

"I thought you had everything figured out. Didn't you say you wanted to rent out the Country Club or something?"

Annabel swung her legs, her hands grasping tighter to the wooden seat. "Scarlett suggested that idea. I don't know if it's the best option."

Dalton continued to be the voice of reason these days. Every time she came to him with a problem, he had the right answer. It both relieved and infuriated her. At every turn, he



continued to show her that he was absolutely perfect in every way—and it wasn't fair.

Part of her wanted to yell at him to prove he had flaws because it was getting hard to be near him. His only saving grace was that he didn't make her feel judged at the same time.

Well, she didn't feel judged by *him*. Deep down, she did all the judging.

When he didn't respond to her statement, she glanced at him. "What do you think?"

"Why does what I think matter?"

"Because."

"That's not an answer."

Annabel snickered. "Yes, it is. You've been right about a lot of things. I feel like I can count on you to tell me the truth whenever I ask." Nothing could be truer than that statement. Dalton was smart, put together, and so much more. If she wasn't feeling so down about her own issues, she could have easily seen herself falling for him again. It was only her worries that she wasn't good enough for him and that she'd try to be exactly what he wanted that held her back.

And that she'd broken his heart before—she couldn't forget that.

He shrugged. "I think a party at the club sounds fun. I haven't been out that way since I've been back, but I keep hearing good things about it."

She sighed. "I thought you might say that."

Dalton chuckled. "Then why don't you want to go?"

Annabel gave him a pointed look.

"It's been a full month since you had your last drink."

"Twenty-two days."

"Close enough."

She rolled her eyes. "No, it's not close enough. And while I've been so worried about the holidays and the social drinking

that entails, it's only gotten worse now that I have to worry about the wedding."

"Have you talked to Scarlett about this?"

"Of course not. I'm not going to make her wedding planning harder than it already is." A stiff breeze picked up and she shivered.

"We should probably go inside. I can start up a fire."

She shook her head. "I'd rather just hang out here."

"Annabel," he murmured in a way that caught her attention. "I'm not going to let you freeze. You keep coming out here with just that sweater. Do you even own a coat?"

"It's somewhere. I'm sure it's just thrown into the back of my closet." The truth was she'd looked for it several times by now and couldn't find it. And with the changes made at the ranch along with the wedding getting planned, she didn't feel she could splurge on a coat until she knew for certain hers was gone.

The worst part was she couldn't be sure if she'd done something with it when she'd been inebriated, and she didn't want to have to admit that to her brothers.

"Well, you can't go around the whole winter without one. The ones you borrow when you're out here aren't going to cut it."

She gave him a wry smile. "You forget I went most of my childhood wearing hand-me-down coats from my brother. They were usually too big anyway. I'll be fine." Both of them grew quiet. Annabel didn't bring up her childhood very much. The memories of living hand-to-mouth weren't the best ones to relive.

The more she dwelled on that fact, the harder it got to be there with Dalton. He'd had a loving family with plenty of food to go around. She'd pulled the short stick—her whole family had. She shifted to get ready to go, but Dalton stopped her.

“I’m thinking of making some sugar cookies with Henry tomorrow after lunch. I was wondering if you wanted to join us.”

She didn’t dare move. His request struck her as strange—this coming from the man who had maintained a healthy distance between her and his son. It wasn’t hard to assume he wanted to keep his son safe from her when she wasn’t exactly stable.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want...”

This time Annabel glanced at him. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

She scooted to the edge of the chair before turning to face him. “I think that’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?” She couldn’t bear to wait for him to voice what she knew they were both thinking about. “I’m not the best... role model.” As she uttered the words, her face burst into flames. She wouldn’t have been surprised if it glowed. She needed to get out of there before she made a bigger fool of herself. But before she could slip away from him, he grasped her hand.

“I think it will be just fine. There won’t be any liquor on the premises. And Henry doesn’t know about your history. I can’t imagine how it would even come up.”

Dalton made a good point. Such a good one, that she couldn’t find another reason to tell him no. It wasn’t like they were getting serious. They were both choosing to stay away from relationships. Or at least she was; she couldn’t recall exactly if he’d mentioned he was steering clear of relationships in general or her specifically. Either way, Henry wouldn’t be getting attached to someone who would fill a role that he needed to stay filled. Then another thought popped into her head. “What if I’m bad at it?”

“Bad at what?” His incredulous voice made it clear he wasn’t going to like this excuse either.

“What if I’m bad at hanging out with a kid? I haven’t had to do that since Charlie was younger, and even then, I was

more focused on putting food on the table than playing with her.”

“Annabel,” he murmured, “you’ll be fine.”

“But what if—”

“No what-ifs. Henry is easy. Tell him a joke. Make him laugh. Then you’ll be golden.”

She wanted to argue. She wanted to tell him he was wrong, that this was a bad idea. But she couldn’t.

“Does that mean you’ll consider it?”

Annabel stared at him hard. “Sugar cookies, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m horrible at baking and I thought you could lend a hand.”

She laughed. “Do you remember my attempts at cooking in home economics? I was terrible.”

“I have vague memories of you burning a Monte Cristo sandwich.”

Annabel pushed his shoulder playfully with her free hand. “See? You *do* remember.”

He laughed along with her, and not for the first time she noticed how easy it was for him to knock down her walls. Dalton could do that, and she loved it about him. “Sure, why not? I could come burn a few cookies with you.”

There was something about the way he grinned at her. For a moment she caught something in his eyes that seemed strange. When she took a second look, it was gone. There would be no determining what she saw because she wasn’t even sure she’d seen it.

Her eyes dropped down to where he still held onto her. She couldn’t force herself to turn her gaze to Dalton because his touch was causing a warmth to spread from his hand, rising increasingly until it started her pulse racing.

Annabel yanked her hand away from him and scrambled to her feet. When she finally brought her focus back to Dalton, she found him staring up at her with surprise. He blinked a few

times, his eyes void of amusement. She let out a strained laugh. “What time are you making cookies?”

“How about two?”

She nodded. “I’ll be here.” With that, she took off. Her whole body was flushed to the point that she couldn’t feel the cold seeping through her sweater. When she climbed into the truck she’d arrived in, she didn’t even bother turning up the heat.

Annabel could still see Dalton on the porch, standing under the light and staring out at where her truck was located. The lights shined on him, and logically, she knew he couldn’t see her seated in the dark. But something about the way his eyes seemed to have found hers was unnerving.

Whatever this reaction was that her body felt like it had the right to betray her with, had better be gone by tomorrow because she wanted nothing to do with it. Dalton was her friend. He made her feel welcome and appreciated. She didn’t need any confusing emotions going haywire within her.

Especially right now.



ANNABEL ARRIVED at Dalton’s house and hesitated as she stood on his front porch. She had expected to crave a drink the night before after leaving, but surprisingly, she’d been too overwhelmed with thoughts of “what if.”

What if she was wrong about her reasons for steering clear of relationships?

Okay, she knew she wasn’t wrong about trying to maintain who she was inherently. But what if she was wrong about Dalton?

From the moment they had bumped into each other, she couldn’t stop thinking about how great he was. The way he made her feel was like nothing she’d experienced before. Annabel didn’t have to hide who she was, or the mistakes

she'd made. And Dalton didn't seem to be scared about her past—just helping her realize how to better her future.

That funny warmth started again, flooding her stomach and making her wish she could get back in the truck and tell Dalton she wasn't feeling well. If she entered his house, spent more time with him, these feelings were bound to continue growing.

Annabel took a step back, allowing her lack of confidence to pull her toward her escape, but then the door opened. “Annabel! Dalton said you'd be stopping by to make cookies.” Dalton's father thumbed over his shoulder. “You're welcome to head inside. I was just going out to the barn to check on a few things.”

She remained frozen to her spot. Dalton's father had always been nice to her. Even after they'd broken up. However, she'd always had the feeling that he was judging her. She could never prove it, but that feeling always hovered in the back of her mind.

For some reason, she hadn't thought about the fact that Ned would be present—which was ridiculous because he lived here. But with him on the premises along with Dalton and his son, she was feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

“Well? Don't stand out in the cold. Head on inside.” Ned's tone grew a degree sharper and he motioned her past him once more.

Annabel didn't have any other choice. To leave now would definitely be asking for more of Ned's judgment. She swallowed, nodded, then ducked her head as she passed him and went inside. The front door shut behind her, leaving her alone.

Though she'd been in the house recently, she was just now noticing that it hadn't changed much since she'd been in it as a child. The décor was mostly the same save for a new sofa she didn't recognize. Memories flooded her thoughts, reminding her about the night when she'd managed to get her hands on a cigar. It was the first and last experience she had with one, and it hadn't turned out well at all. She stared at that new leather

couch, which was so different from the dark navy canvas-covered one from her teen years, and couldn't help but wonder if it had been purchased because of what had happened.

“It's not the same, is it?”

She jumped and spun around to find Dalton standing behind her looking at the front room. His eyes bounced to meet hers and that devilish grin touched his lips. “I miss it, too. But the second my mom found that burn mark, she refused to keep it—said it would make people talk and she wasn't going to have that.”

“I don't remember it getting replaced when we were together.”

His focus drifted toward the couch again. “That's because she didn't notice the burn until right before I left for college. I told her to let me take the old one with me. You should have seen the way her face changed colors.” Dalton chuckled. “But you know my mom. She was always worried about what other people thought.”

“I think your dad is, too...” Annabel mumbled more to herself than anything. Thankfully, Dalton didn't seem to hear her and instead of asking her about it, he gestured in the direction of the kitchen.

“We're all set up.”

That was when she could smell the faint scent of baking cookies. Her mouth watered and her heart fluttered—but it wasn't because of the way Dalton's eyes locked with hers.

At least that was what she'd continue to tell herself until she believed it.

***Dalton***

**D**alton had prepared his son for Annabel's arrival in the only way he felt was necessary. What more did a five-year-old have to know than his father had a friend who wanted to help them make sugar cookies?

Henry seemed to accept it easier than his grandfather had. While Ned hadn't said anything outright when Dalton had told him Annabel would be stopping by, he could see that it bothered his father at least a little bit.

While he didn't think his father held a grudge, he still didn't seem to like Annabel's family, and if it came to sitting next to them at a town picnic or wrestling a runaway hog to the ground, Dalton's father would pick the latter.

That fact alone was Dalton's reason for not commenting when Annabel mentioned Ned not liking her. She had more important things to worry about than whether or not his father liked her.

He led the way into the kitchen, hyper-aware of her and every movement she made. Annabel had shown up in that ridiculous sweater again. She wore her run-down cowboy boots, and she was clad in a pair of jeans riddled with holes.

And she was still the most beautiful woman he could think of. Between the way his ears picked up on the cadence of her



walk and his nose chasing after her scent, Dalton was more than distracted.

Henry glanced up when they entered, and his attention immediately homed in on Annabel with veiled curiosity. The stool he knelt on wobbled precariously, though the boy didn't seem bothered by it. He shifted, causing the legs to jolt and Annabel to suck in sharply from where she hovered behind him.

Dalton stepped to the side and back just enough he could place his hand on the small of Annabel's back. "This is my friend, the one I told you about."

Henry's focus never wavered. He peered at Annabel with more confidence than a five-year-old should be allowed to have. "You're helping my dad with my papa's farm."

Annabel glanced toward Dalton, and after he gave her a reassuring nod, she moved forward a small step. "Hey, there, buddy. I heard you want to decorate some cookies today." Her voice was soft, almost timid. This wasn't the Annabel he knew. This side of her was adorable.

Inch by inch she continued getting closer to Henry until she was beside him. Then she crouched down, so he had to drop his gaze to watch her. "Are you good at making cookies?" he asked.

Annabel craned her head around so she could get a good look at Dalton, and she made a face. "Actually, I'm not that great at baking. I'm better with horses."

Henry frowned. "Then why are you here?"

"Henry!" Dalton laughed, hurrying forward. "You can't ask her that." How embarrassing! Of all the things his son could have said first, this was not the one Dalton was expecting. He'd hoped that Henry would be just as shy as he'd been when they arrived on his first day at his new school.

Unfortunately, that school had taught him that coming out of his shell was a good thing.

Annabel was surprised for only a moment, and then she laughed, too. "I'm here because I like hanging out with your

dad. He and I were good friends when we were younger. Do you have any friends at your school yet?"

That was exactly the right question to ask. Henry's face broke into a wide grin. "Yeah. His name is Chase, and he has pet chickens. He said I could come over and pet them."

Annabel chuckled. "But you have chickens here. What makes his chickens so special?"

Henry wrinkled his nose. "Our chickens are loud and mean. They chased me when Dad said to feed them."

She turned wide eyes on Dalton and he held up his hands. "Hey, don't blame me. I had chicken duty when I was his age. He just needs to show them who's boss."

Annabel swung her gaze back to Henry. "Don't listen to him. Chickens *are* mean. I've always hated having to take care of them, too. Maybe the two of us should go on strike."

Dalton glanced toward Henry. Her statement had gone completely over his head. The kid was bright, but he was still just starting school and likely didn't know what that even meant. Based on the scrunched-up nose and the slight tilt of his head, Dalton could tell his son was confused.

He wasn't sure if he should be grateful that Annabel wasn't fazed by this little setback or if he should have just believed her when she said she wasn't good with kids. Before he could step in and clear it up, Annabel charged forward.

"Your dad says you like jokes. Is that true?"

Henry glanced up at his father. Nodding, Dalton offered him a reassuring smile. Henry nodded. "Yeah. I like jokes."

"Good. Okay, so why did the farmer order a chicken and an egg online?"

Henry shrugged.

Annabel shot Dalton a pleased look. "To see which would come first."

His son stared blankly at Annabel. This was getting painful to watch. They probably should have just started making

cookies right away. Henry didn't laugh, but he did glance at his father. "Can we make cookies now?"

Annabel's face flushed and she mouthed the words, "told you."

All Dalton could do was change the subject like Henry had requested. He motioned toward the supplies he'd set out on the counter. "Of course. Let's start making cookies."

The whole time, Annabel remained quiet. Henry talked about school, his teacher, his homework, and anything else that came to his mind, while Dalton kept sneaking glances at Annabel while she cut out little star-shaped cookies.

Once in a while she would catch him watching her and she'd give him a smile. Maybe she was right. Maybe he shouldn't have insisted that she come over. What was he thinking? When Henry requested to run to the bathroom, Dalton pulled Annabel aside. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine." She smiled, but it wasn't as bright as he'd seen it recently. "I said I wasn't sure I'd be able to connect with him. I'm just not great with kids. That's all there is to it."

"Or maybe I didn't realize Henry wasn't ready to meet anyone here. He's still struggling with his mom leaving and us moving away from home. I guess I wanted to believe he was hanging in there."

Annabel touched his arm, drawing warmth from places unknown. "You're doing great. He's adjusting pretty well if you ask me. It might take a little time for him to warm up to me, but that's fine. I'll be hanging around with all the stuff you want help with."

Dalton continued to stare at the spot where she touched him, only looking up when she uttered his name. He shook off the odd sensation that had thrown him off guard and flashed a smile. "For what it's worth, I think that joke was great."

She rolled her eyes. "It was the only thing I could think of. I told you that I'm just not good with—"

"You need to stop putting yourself down so much. You're doing great. And I appreciate your help. It's nice to have

someone to talk to when it comes to how Henry is adapting to being here.”

“Of course. I’ll support you as much as I can. That’s what friends are for.”

*Friends.* A word that was quickly putting a sour taste in his mouth. He swallowed it anyway, refusing to tell her just how quickly his feelings for her were returning. She’d only tell him she wasn’t interested anyway.

Henry returned, skipping into the kitchen. “Are the cookies done? Can we start frosting them?” He skidded to a stop in front of the oven. “Are those the last ones?”

Dalton crouched down beside him. “Yep. Those are the last ones. The ones we baked before Annabel got here are cool now. So we can put the frosting on them and add the sprinkles.”

Annabel got down on Henry’s other side. “I have another joke for you.”

Before Dalton could stop her from making a fool of herself again, she continued, her smile wide.

“Two cookies are in an oven. One turns to the other and says, ‘Phew! It’s getting hot in here.’” Annabel gave Henry a side-eyed glance. “The other looks back and says, ‘Ack! A talking cookie!’”

For a brief moment Henry seemed to contemplate the joke, then his lips quirked up and he giggled. “I like that one.”

Annabel exchanged a look with Dalton. There it was. She’d found an in with his son. She hadn’t given up. If anything told him she was already on an upward trajectory, this was it. From what he could tell, Annabel had been knocked down more times than he could count, but she picked herself up each and every time.

It didn’t matter how big or small an obstacle it was, she was right there doing her best.

His eyes remained locked on hers until Henry ripped his focus away. “Dad! Come on. I want to decorate the cookies.”

He grimaced comically. “Okay, okay. Let’s get those stars decorated so we can hand them out to the neighbors.” Dalton shot one more fleeting look at Annabel. “And maybe Annabel would like to take some home to her family. Did you know she has eleven siblings?”

Henry turned wide eyes on Annabel. “*Eleven?*”

She laughed. “Yep. And most of them are brothers.”

“How many?” Henry pressed.

“I have ten brothers and one sister.”

“Wow,” he murmured. Then he turned to his father. “I want a brother.”

Dalton didn’t know why, but at that moment, he glanced toward Annabel. Initially he wasn’t thinking about her. But the longer they stared at each other, the more he started to wonder. What if she had come back into his life at this time and vice versa so they could rekindle what they had?

Annabel looked away first. She smiled as she gazed down at Henry. “Well, one day I’m sure your dad will find someone who will make him really happy and they might be able to give you a little brother or sister.”

Henry frowned. “I don’t want a sister. Just a brother.”

This time Dalton was the one to laugh. “You can’t guarantee what you get, buddy. God makes that decision. Do you think Annabel wanted so many brothers? I would wager she would have loved to have more sisters so she didn’t have to be bossed around by so many guys.” He winked at Annabel, who scoffed.

She folded her arms and gave Henry a pointed look. “There your dad goes again. He keeps getting it all wrong. I assure you, I was the one who bossed my brothers around.”

Henry scrunched his nose, clearly not believing her. “I don’t know...”

Dalton laughed at Annabel’s gaping mouth.

Then Annabel joined him in his laughter. “Well, if you met my brothers, you’d see that I’m telling the truth. Maybe one day you can come to my ranch and see what I’m talking about.”

Henry’s eyes brightened. “Do you have horses too?”

“Sure do. Lots of them.”

He grinned and turned to his father. “Can we take them cookies today?”

Dalton could sense more than see Annabel stiffen at that request. He didn’t have to look at her to confirm that she wasn’t ready for this sort of step. “I don’t think we’ll be able to visit today, buddy. But maybe when it gets closer to Christmas, we can take them a tin of sweets. We just have to find some good recipes.”

His son nodded with excitement. “Then I can meet Annabel’s horses, too.”

He chuckled, looking over his son at Annabel. “I think eventually we might be able to do just that.”

*Annabel*

Cookie decorating turned out to be not as bad as Annabel had thought it would be. A bumpy start had quickly turned into smooth sailing. Annabel picked up another cookie and spread some yellow frosting on it.

“How many horses do you have? We only have three.”

Annabel glanced down at Henry, amused that he was still firing questions at her. “I think we have twelve right now. But my older brother wants to get a couple more.”

“Why?”

She laughed. “Well, we were doing some farming with our land, but now I think my brother wants to get into riding lessons, too. We’re doing everything we can to make sure my family is provided for.” She winked at him. “And since there’s so many of us, that’s gonna take a lot.”

“Yeah, it is,” Henry agreed, drawing another laugh from her lips.

“What do you want to do when you grow up?” She’d gotten so wrapped up in her conversation with Henry that she didn’t notice Dalton watching her until that moment. She’d glanced up to find him staring at her, and her breath caught in her throat.

This wasn't the same kind of look he'd been giving her lately. Those looks were kind and... platonic. This one was thoughtful, serious even. It resembled the kinds of looks he gave her when they were dating so many years ago.

"...but now I want to be a cowboy."

Annabel dropped her gaze to Henry. "A cowboy, huh?"

He nodded with a matter-of-fact expression. "Yeah. My dad was a cowboy when he was little. He told me. But then he moved away, and he sold cars. Now he's a cowboy again."

She brought her eyes back to Dalton. "He sold cars? That doesn't sound very much like a cowboy kind of job."

"Nope. That's why we came here. He said he was tired of lying."

"Henry," Dalton jumped in with an embarrassed laugh. "I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did. You told Mom that working for Tony made you feel like you were lying."

Dalton laughed again, his eyes finding Annabel's. "He's taking it out of context. I said Tony was pushing me to do something I didn't feel was honest. It's all part of the games he played."

"See? Honest means telling the truth. And you weren't doing that." Henry studied a cookie he had in his hand. Then, with an unceremonious flair, he bit off the top third of it. "Can I go play now? I'm bored."

"Yes, please," Dalton muttered. "I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do after what you just told Annabel."

"You want to play with me, Annabel?" Henry peered up at her with the biggest blue eyes she'd ever seen. They looked just like his father's. And if she wasn't incredibly curious about what Dalton had to say, she might have taken him up on his offer.

"Thanks for the invite, buddy. But I think your dad would be a little lonely if I left him. Don't you think?"



Henry sent one fleeting glance toward his father, then shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Gee, thanks, kid.”

They both watched Henry wander off toward presumably where his room was located. When he was just out of earshot, Dalton let out a laugh and leaned toward her. “I can’t believe he outed me like that!”

She grinned, picked up a cookie with far too many sprinkles and took a small bite.

“Seriously, I never lied at my job. I got the results Tony wanted without succumbing to some of the stuff he wanted me to do in order to hit our monthly quota.”

“Sounds like a toxic work environment,” Annabel mused. “Are you sure you didn’t do anything wrong? Kids pick up on everything.”

His mouth fell open and she laughed again.

“I’m kidding. Clearly. I don’t think I’ve met anyone who is more honest than you are. But I can’t help wondering what it must have been like to bump into you at a car dealership.”

Dalton turned, leaning his elbow on the edge of the counter and one side of his mouth lifted playfully. “Oh, you wouldn’t have been able to resist my charms.”

“Yeah?” Annabel kept her tone light, loving this side of him. “Prove it.”

He blinked and his smile faded, but then it returned with a vengeance. “Do you want to reconsider your request? Because once I release them, there’s no putting them back.”

She bit back a laugh. Boy, Dalton was acting far more cocky than she’d seen him even when they’d been dating. “Oh, I’m sure.” Her eyes searched the countertop until they landed on a container of sprinkles that was half-empty. Annabel swiped it up and handed it to him. “Sell me this.”

He stared at the object and one brow lifted. “*What?*”

“Sell it to me. If you can, then...” She searched for something she could bribe him with. “Then I’ll do whatever you want.”

This time both brows lifted. “What?” he repeated.

She flushed. “*Within reason*. You want me to muck stalls until the new year? You want me to come out here before the sunrise and take care of the horses? Whatever you want, I’ll do it.”

Now his smile had returned. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted, and for the first time, she wondered if she’d made a mistake.

Dalton’s fingers wrapped around the bottle of sprinkles, and he plucked it from her grasp. His skin grazed against hers, sending new goosebumps along her arms and legs despite how warm the kitchen was after the oven had been running for a couple hours. “Deal.”

“Wait—”

“Nope. You made your deal. Now you get to pay up.”

Annabel placed her hands on her hips. “Not so fast. You haven’t made me want to buy those used sprinkles.” She glanced around the counter where all their materials were sprawled out. “I already own this one, and it’s never been opened.” She wiggled the bottle in front of his face. “Why on earth would I want the ones you have?”

She wasn’t worried about her deal, until his mouth curled into a smile much like she would have imagined the Grinch doing. He glanced briefly at the full bottle, then slowly moved around the island and approached her. “You mean why would you want those sprinkles when you could have these?” He showcased the sprinkles she’d given him first. “Let me tell you something about these sprinkles.” His voice lowered, becoming more gravely. “These sprinkles are better in every way. They might be used, but that’s the good thing about them.”

Annabel did her best not to pull away from him. Dalton’s presence was so close and when he was speaking with that

voice, he was nearly irresistible. If she hadn't been as prepared as she was, she might have just taken them from him to get him to stop giving her chills. Her mouth went dry faster than a drought in the desert. "Prove it," she whispered.

He glanced at the sprinkles in his hand. "What if I told you that the sprinkles you have are known to have issues. They bleed color when you put them on frosting. Sometimes they have a bitter aftertaste."

"But they're new. We don't know if they have those issues."

"Exactly. And if you drive off the lot with those sprinkles, they're yours whether you like it or not. What are you going to do if you find your sprinkles aren't exactly what you wanted? You can't just return them."

"No," Annabel hedged, "but I could sell it back."

He chuckled. "A car's value rarely appreciates." His eyes widened and he cleared his throat. "I mean, sprinkles."

She snickered despite herself. "Okay, so why are yours better than mine? I get more if I keep these ones. Yours might have the same issue."

Dalton shook the sprinkles. "Here's the thing. They're used, yes. But you can see that they weren't used only briefly. They were given a life. Someone used these longer and more regularly. You know they're not going to have the same issues."

The smile dissipated from her lips. Dang it, Dalton had a good point—at least when it came to the sprinkles. All those statements might not hold true with vehicles, but if he used the same strategy as he did with the sprinkles, she could see him making a killing if he were selling used cars.

His grin widened. "There it is. You can't deny my logic. You're looking at your container and you're not sure you want them anymore. I put that little bit of doubt in your head, didn't I?"

Annabel lifted her bottle and examined them. They'd lost their luster. Only, she didn't want to admit it to him. Dalton

could ask her to do anything at this point and she'd have to accept it with grace. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, finally accepting she'd lost.

A sigh burst from her lips as she placed the unopened bottle on the counter. "Fine. I get it. You could probably sell water to the ocean." She peeked at him. "Do I even want to know what you're going to ask me to do?"

He cocked his head, his eyes growing serious like they had earlier. "I haven't come up with anything yet."

She rolled her eyes. "You can't just leave me hanging. I deserve to know what you're going to make me do."

Dalton returned his sprinkles to the counter and retrieved a cookie of his own. He took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. "I can't be expected to tell you if I don't have any ideas. That's hardly fair."

Antsy didn't begin to describe the way she felt in that moment. It was like her skin crawled with the anticipation of it all. She really shouldn't have allowed herself to fall into this trap. "You must have been really good at your job."

"I guess so," he murmured.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "I guess I didn't think you'd find it interesting."

"Why not? You're really good. I bet if you applied that sort of enthusiasm to anything in your life, you'd beat out all the competition."

The faint smile that toyed with his lips started those strange reactions again. Annabel folded her arms tightly across her chest. It had been a way for her to feel more secure while still standing so close to him, but Dalton seemed to have read it differently.

"Are you cold?"

"What? No, I'm—"

Dalton sighed heavily, shaking his head. “I knew you didn’t have a coat. When you didn’t show up with one today, I knew that you weren’t being entirely honest.”

Her eyes widened, ready to argue with him over something he had no knowledge of. But he pulled away from her and disappeared down the hall.

When he returned, he held a plastic bag in his hands. There was nothing to distinguish where the bag had come from except that it wasn’t something she would see at the grocery store. This bag was made with a thicker plastic and was large enough to carry a pillow. He thrust the bag in her direction. “Try this on.”

Annabel barely caught the bag before it fell to the ground. She gawked at Dalton. “What’s this?”

“Open it. Then try it on.”

She shook her head, hesitating. “What did you do, Dalton? This better not be what I think it is.”

“Will you just open the bag already?”

Annabel scowled at him until he gestured with his finger at the bag. At least this time he wasn’t bossing her around. She held the bag in her fists and then opened it with force. It was brown with tan stitching, and soft. The collar, cuffs, and hem were a contrasting color and fluffy. The second her fingers brushed against the fabric, she knew what it was. Her head snapped up and she stared, stunned, at Dalton. “Is this sheepskin?”

He shrugged.

“*Dalton!*”

“Yeah. That means it’s gonna last you a real long time.”

“Dalton!” she said again, this time louder as she swiftly shoved it at him. “I can’t take this.”

He pushed it back. “Yes, you can and you will. You need a coat. It’s the dead of winter and the only thing I’ve seen you wear is that sweater.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that before.”

“Well, now I’m not going to let it continue. You can’t be out here working in the freezing temperatures. You’re gonna get sick. Then where does that put us?”

*Us? There was no “us”*—unless he meant the little agreement where she helped him out around his father’s farm. She held the coat in her hands, focusing on it instead of Dalton and her frustration that he would just go out and buy her an expensive piece of clothing without consulting her.

It was something the old Dalton would have done. He’d showered her with gifts when they were together once.

Did this mean they were shifting into something more?

***Dalton***

“*F*or heaven’s sake, Anna. Just put on the coat so I can see if the sales lady got it right. I had to guess on your size, and I really don’t want to take it back to exchange it.”

After she’d grown quiet, he wasn’t sure how this conversation was going to go. Annabel had already refused his gift, however practical it was. He had expected that. In fact, he’d predicted so much more than her simply rejecting it. He’d figured she would throw it in his face and yell at him for being presumptive.

When they’d started dating, she’d done the same. Annabel Keagan was just like her brothers in that respect. They were all as stubborn as mules. He hadn’t gotten a chance to get to know all of them, seeing as Annabel’s age was so far from her youngest siblings, but he’d learned enough about their family to get the gist.

Dalton crossed his arms, waiting for her to explode with indignant rage.

But it never came. She glanced up at him, her hand trailing across the sheepskin. “Why did you get this for me?” she asked quietly.

So many possible reactions, and this was the one he hadn’t planned for. “You needed a coat,” he said simply.

“I know you, Dalton. I know that you don’t just do things like this for anybody. When we were younger, you always used to buy me stuff, too.” She sniffed and brushed at her nose with the back of her hand. “Tell me the truth.”

His whole body went still. He wouldn’t have been able to come up with an answer if he’d tried. Dalton hadn’t thought he’d had ulterior motives. He’d been walking through a store and saw the coat and immediately thought about Annabel.

Granted, he’d planned on giving it to her as a gift for Christmas, but he couldn’t stand seeing her without decent winterwear.

Was his subconscious trying to tell him something he hadn’t figured out yet? His once folded arms dropped to his sides listlessly. “I just wanted you to be taken care of. That’s the truth.”

Annabel’s frown deepened.

“And...” The word slipped from his lips before he could hold it back. Dang it!

“And?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Nothing.” He couldn’t believe he’d nearly confessed that he still had feelings for her. Dalton should have known that with all the time he’d been spending with her, his feelings would resurface.

Annabel nodded, but it wasn’t the kind that indicated she understood. It was more that she wasn’t happy with his answer. She adjusted the coat until she found the size. Then she lifted it. “It’s my size. And it’s *beautiful*. I’m... going to go.” She didn’t meet his gaze as she moved past, taking enough care that she didn’t come in contact with him.

Without realizing what he was about to do, Dalton spun around and took her hand. Like all the times before, he grasped it tight enough to prevent her from getting too far. She stopped, her eyes lifting to meet his expectantly.

“Maybe there’s something more.”



“Maybe...?” Annabel shook her head. “Dalton, I told you that I just can’t—”

“You said that you were trying to be better. From what I can tell, you’re doing that. And I’m willing to support you every step of the way.”

“Dalton—”

He hated when she said his name like that. The disappointment and warning all wrapped into one was worse than her telling him flat-out that she hated him. “No. Don’t tell me it’s not a good idea, or that it’s not possible. Don’t tell me that we couldn’t work.”

She pursed her lips together. There wasn’t even a hint of promise in those blue eyes of hers. He looked down at where he held her hand and suddenly remembered something that felt like a lifetime ago. Carefully, he turned her hand over. There on the inside of her wrist was the interlocking heart tattoo she’d gotten when they’d celebrated dating for a year.

Dalton rubbed his thumb over the tattoo. “I can’t believe you still have this.”

She let out a soft huff of laughter. “Why would I get rid of it? Those were some of the best memories I had with you.” Her voice was so soft that he could barely understand her.

Dalton leaned closer to her. “Mine, too.”

Annabel’s blue eyes searched his. “What is this all about, Dalton?” she whispered again. “All this... you bumping into me, asking me to help you, inviting me over...” She pressed her lips between her teeth, then took a deep breath and exhaled. “Now, getting me a coat. Have you been planning this from the beginning?”

“Planning what?” He wasn’t sure what she was getting at.

“Trying to win me over even though I told you I wasn’t interested in dating.”

He stiffened. “No. I wasn’t trying to manipulate you if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

“Then what’s happening?”

“I still have feelings for you,” Dalton blurted. “I thought that was all behind us. I didn’t expect there to be anything residual from when we were kids because... well, because you were the one who broke *my* heart.”

She grimaced and then looked down.

Dalton gently lifted her chin to look him in the eye. “But it turns out I was wrong—and my heart was ready to fall again.”

Annabel shook her head vehemently. “I *can*’t, Dalton. Not right now. I’m dealing with so much right now.”

“And I can help,” he insisted. “I know what it takes. I swear I will be here for you every step of the way.”

Still, she didn’t seem convinced.

“Give me until the end of the month. Let me show you that we’ve both changed. I would wager now that we’re more mature and know what we want, it’s going to be easier. We’re not kids anymore, Anna.”

Annabel adjusted the coat she held in her other hand. She let her cheek rub against the lining as she closed her eyes.

“You can’t tell me that things haven’t been just a little bit better since we’ve been spending time together... well, except for that first night.” He gave her a wry smile when she opened her eyes. “One month. Let’s get through the holidays. If we can do that, then we can handle anything.”

“You’re forgetting something.”

He frowned. He hadn’t thought he’d been forgetting anything. He truly wanted to help her work through everything she had struggled with over the years. And most couples knew whether or not they could make a relationship work if they could survive Christmas.

“The wedding.”

Understanding dawned on him. “Well, you’re going to need someone to vent to when it comes to that stuff and...” He lifted a shoulder. “I’m here for that, too. Who better than to be the voice of reason? I got you through that already, right?”

She relaxed, even if it was only a little. He thought he could see a hint of a smile touch her lips, too. Annabel was softening to him.

Dalton reached up and grazed her jawline with his thumb. “We were good together once. I think we’d be good together again.”

She shuddered from his touch. Her soft exhale was reminiscent of how she’d behaved as a teenager. Then she pulled away from him. “I have to think about it.”

Those six words were enough to drag him back to reality. How could he have been so stupid to assume she’d just allow herself to fall for him when she was so set against what he was proposing. Her body was giving him signs, but her words contradicted them.

And he had to respect what she wanted.

Dalton stepped back and nodded. “Of course. Take all the time you need.”

She smiled softly. “Thanks.”

“Let me walk you to your truck.”

Annabel nodded. He didn’t release her hand as they slipped out the front door. Once they were outside, he took the coat from her hands and draped it around her shoulders. She rolled her eyes but allowed it. He could almost imagine her telling him she was on board.

But she didn’t.

One thing they’d have to discuss was how they would shift everything now that Henry had met her. Depending on how Annabel wanted to move forward would dictate what they told him and how much time he spent with her.

But he was getting ahead of himself.

They made it to the truck, and he pulled open the door for her. Resting his forearm on the edge of the truck overhead, he grinned at her. “Just do me a favor and really give it some thought. Don’t brush it off because you’re scared.”

“Scared? What would I be scared of?” she said under her breath.

“That we’d totally kill it.”

That got a smile out of her.

Before either of them knew what was going to happen, he leaned down and brushed a whispery kiss against her forehead. She blinked a few times but didn’t object.

“See you Monday,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” she whispered back.

Dalton pushed the door shut and watched her pull away. That wasn’t expected. What was he thinking? He had to be completely crazy. What if she’d slapped him? She could have refused to help him anymore. Or she could have ghosted him completely. There were so many negative outcomes and his heart had been willing to risk them all just because he was feeling... what? Nostalgic?

He dragged a hand down his face and headed inside. He needed to get his head on straight if he had any hope of getting her to see things his way. He was willing to give her space, but for how long?

Logically, he knew he needed to have patience.

There was only one problem.

He’d never really been blessed with that. Every relationship he’d been in, he’d gotten to a point where he wanted to just move to the next step because he was ready. He’d always blamed that part of his personality on why Annabel had broken up with him before.

This time he’d be more careful.

Dalton shut the door behind him, but then it opened as soon as he took a few steps away. He jumped, spinning around and expecting to see Annabel.

Instead, it was his father.

“Have you been outside this whole time?” he demanded. Had his father seen him walk Annabel to her truck? Had he

seen the kiss? His father wouldn't like that.

Ned pulled his hat from his head and hung it on a nearby hook. "Yeah, I wanted to check on a few things in the barn."

"Dad," Dalton sighed. "I told you I have everything under control."

"I know," he muttered. "But you haven't been around for a few years. I wanted to make sure you were still capable—"

"And? Did you find everything in order?"

His dad gave him a pointed look. "Well, there are a few things out of place."

Dalton stifled a groan.

"But it's fine."

That was probably the highest compliment that his dad could have given Dalton at this point. He was one of the pickiest people Dalton knew. That was one thing Ned had shared with his late wife, and it suited them both.

"Good," Dalton mumbled. "Now will you trust me enough to let me handle things until you're out of that cast?"

His dad gave him a dark look. "I'm not going to be holed up that long. I refuse to let that doctor tell me what I can and can't do," he said gruffly. Then he lifted his nose appreciatively. "Smells like you got done with your little project. Are there any cookies left after little Henry got through with them?"

Dalton chuckled. "Of course there are."

"And you and this Miss Keagan... are you going to tell me about that?"

He sighed. "You'll be the first to know."

"Looked to me like something was already brewing."

"I get that you didn't approve of her when we were younger—"

"I never said any such thing."

“Well, Mom did and you were always on her side. Either way, *if* something happens between us, I’ll let you know. For now, she’s just helping out.”

His dad gave him a disbelieving look, then brushed past him, mumbling something about cowboys having no control over their hearts.

*Annabel*

*A*nnabel sat in her brother's truck, staring at her house. Time lost all meaning as she obsessed over everything that had just happened at Dalton's place. Henry was a sweetheart. He was smart, observant, and everything Dalton had described him to be.

Dalton, on the other hand, had gone completely against what they'd agreed on. They didn't need relationships. That was the smart decision.

Friends.

Even now that word felt different.

Dalton wanted more.

After everything she'd put him through—after everything she was—he wanted *her*.

She couldn't remember the last time a guy didn't run long and far after finding out about the load of baggage she carted around with her. Even recently she'd gone on a few dates with that guy she met at the country club, and that had fizzled out faster than it had begun.

Annabel settled back against her seat and released a breath, then a short laugh. Dalton wasn't scared to venture into something deeper with her. And just the thought of having

someone like him interested made the world around her just that much brighter.

Pressing her lips together as tight as she could to fight the silly grin that threatened to fill her face, Annabel allowed her gaze to dart from the house to the barn. No one had discovered her sitting here yet. If she didn't want anyone to start asking questions, she needed to get out and act like nothing had changed.

Her shoulder collided with the door as she shoved it open. With quick, sure steps, she headed for the house so she could put the keys where they belonged. Dalton had asked her to think about it—to think about *them*.

All she'd needed was the short ride home to realize just how much she wanted this. She *needed* it. She needed *him*.

There was something about being with Dalton that had her feeling lighter and more confident in herself. This newfound happiness wasn't something she'd experienced for a long time. One afternoon with him had her believing she could do anything.

She released a quiet giggle, unable to think of one thing that could go wrong when it came to being with Dalton, and she looked forward to seeing him on Monday to tell him just that.



ANNABEL SHOWED up early at the Quaid farm and headed straight for the barn. All weekend Dalton had stayed radio silent. He probably wanted to give her some space to think about them. While she'd appreciated it, she found herself missing him even more than she'd expected.

Every few hours she'd picked up her phone, itching to call or text him, but she refrained. Monday would be soon enough for them to talk. Besides, the weekends were reserved for Dalton to spend time with his family and she didn't want to intrude.



It was quiet on his property. Even the horses seemed to still be waking up. She used to hate getting up early in the mornings to do the work necessary to keep her ranch running. Back before they'd finally gotten on their feet, she'd been exhausted every single morning—there hadn't been any light at the end of the tunnel.

It was funny how working alongside Dalton had changed her perspective. This was his father's farm, and yet she could find joy in helping out. Maybe she was capable of change.

She rested her folded arms over the stall door as she peered into the one containing Dalton's favorite horse. There was once a time when she would have gazed at this animal and wished she could trade places. There was so much she hated about the life she led here in Copper Creek. There was too much heartache, so many struggles to keep her head above water. And then there was the addiction she couldn't seem to kick.

Those thoughts were quickly becoming something of the past. She could see her future now. Dalton had helped her see that she was capable of anything.

She heaved a contented sigh.

The hairs on the back of her neck lifted and goosebumps rose along her arms. It wasn't the cold—she'd made sure to wear the coat Dalton had given her. Annabel could sense him before he even uttered a single word. She couldn't gather the strength to turn to face him. Instead, she waited for him to make the first move. Thankfully, she didn't have to wait long.

“You're early.”

His low, warm voice started fresh chills to ripple through her body.

“I wasn't expecting you to be here until at least nine.”

She rested her chin on her folded arms, a smile touching her lips. “Maybe I had ulterior motives.”

This time his voice was closer, just an inch shy of her ears. “Oh?”

Annabel shivered and glanced over her shoulder toward him. “Yeah.”

“What might those be?”

Turning to face him fully, she gazed into his eyes. Her decision couldn’t have been more right. “I’ve tried to come up with any reason why dating you would be a bad idea.”

He grimaced, causing her to laugh.

“Okay, maybe I didn’t try that hard. But I did think about what it might mean for me—for us—if we were to take this path again. And honestly, I can’t think of a single bad thing. We already know each other better than anyone else. We’ve grown since we dated last. I mean, if anyone is going to have a harder time, it’s gonna be you.”

The funny look in Dalton’s eyes gave her pause. He inched closer to her. His fingertips grazed hers, and then he grasped her hand firmly. “I have to disagree on that last bit. Dating you isn’t hard, Anna. It’s being away from you that is.”

“And saying stuff like that is going to get you in trouble.”

His lips quirked upward. “Yeah?” he whispered.

Annabel nodded. “You might find this hard to believe, but there haven’t been very many men in my life since I was in high school. I’ve dated a handful, but none of them were marriage material.”

“Why’s that?”

She shrugged and then made a face. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear about this. We’re supposed to be talking about what we’re going to be doing next. What is it you want out of this relationship?”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “That’s easy.”

Annabel held her breath, regretting asking the question. It had come naturally, but the second she’d spoken it aloud, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. Even though her best friend had been ready to find love and a future with someone, Annabel wasn’t so certain she was ready for that kind of commitment.

What if Dalton was?

She didn't want this small bit of sunshine ripped from her grasp just because he was more ready than she was. Before he could clarify what he wanted, she held up her free hand. "Never mind."

Dalton chuckled. "Never mind?"

She nodded, swallowing hard. "I don't want to know what you have planned for next. I just want to be here with you and enjoy it for what it is."

He tilted his head. His eyes swept across her face, searching hers. She couldn't tell if he was disappointed by her comment or if he was just happy that she'd agreed to see where this might go next.

Finally, he reached out and brushed the back of his hand along the sheepskin coat. "You're wearing it."

"Of course I am. It's beautiful. And so warm."

"It suits you," Dalton murmured. "You deserve to have everything you could possibly want."

Her heart battered against her ribs wildly. It might have been the way his husky voice had uttered those words, or it could be his proximity. Heck, it might have been the fact that she hadn't been this enamored by someone in such a long time and her body wasn't prepared in the slightest. Regardless, when his hand lifted to caress her cheek, she knew she was done for.

She might as well hand over the key to her heart because Dalton had already stolen it. Annabel leaned into his touch and closed her eyes briefly. "I can't believe we're actually going to give this another try."

"Me neither," he whispered.

"What did you tell him about us?"

"Not much, but I don't think he's thrilled about it."

Her eyes flew wide, and she stepped backward. "Wait, really? Then why—"

Dalton stilled, his confusion apparent. “You said you already knew he wasn’t your biggest fan. I don’t know why that would be a surprise to you.”

“But we were getting along so well on Saturday. I thought you said if I could make him laugh, then I was golden.”

That’s when the relief and understanding flooded his features. “Oh. I haven’t talked to my son about us. Is that who you’re talking about?”

“Of course, it is.” Annabel’s heart sank, realization hitting her hard in the chest. “And you’re talking about your father.” She shouldn’t be disappointed. It was like Dalton had said; she knew he wasn’t a fan. He and his wife had never approved of her dating their only son. Why would it change now that Dalton was a grown man with a son?

“Hey,” Dalton whispered, closing in on her again. “It’s gonna be just fine. The only people who should have a say in our relationship is you and me.”

“And your son.”

Dalton chuckled. “While I appreciate your sentiment... no. Henry doesn’t get a say in who I date. Yes, he is my top priority and if I felt you weren’t good for him, then I’d have to reconsider if our relationship was appropriate. But I can tell that you care. And that’s all that little boy needs in his life right now. His absent mother does less with him than you did on Saturday, and to me, that is enough.”

The niggling thought of their future together ate at her. While she could see a future with him, the thought currently terrified her. And at the same time, she couldn’t bring herself to talk about it. Not yet.

Their relationship was new. Dalton was a smart man. He’d understand that they needed to take it slow—well, as slow as they could, given the circumstances.

“So, you haven’t told your son about us. But you told your father?”

He tugged on her hand, pulling her against him before slipping both hands around her back. “I didn’t have to.

Apparently, I'm easy to read. My dad saw us on Saturday when he was coming back from the barn. He thought we were already dating."

She snorted. "I suppose that makes sense. We haven't exactly been giving off friendship vibes, have we?"

"No, I don't suppose we have." Dalton chuckled again. "Henry isn't aware of my feelings for you, and for now, I'm happy to keep him in the dark. I don't want you to feel like we're moving too fast."

That was all it took for her to lose control over the situation. Annabel stood up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. It was hesitant at first. She wasn't sure he was ready for such a display of affection. However, the second he showed even a degree of interest, she deepened their kiss. Her hands shoved into his hair, toying with the short length and knocking his hat to the ground. Leaning into him, she gave everything she had.

Had they not had a past, had she not been through the thick of it, perhaps this moment would have been different. Right now, her only description for it was that her heart was finally allowing her to let go and bare all.

Dalton was her safe place. He knew her inside and out. There was no threat of her becoming something she wasn't, because he already knew everything about her.

As Annabel clung to him, she allowed herself to open up completely. Dalton wouldn't hurt her, he wouldn't judge her, and he wanted her for who she was. How could she not want this?

Their kiss lasted longer than it probably should have, but neither one of them seemed to care. When they finally pulled apart, Annabel had a hard time looking him in the eye. Without another word, they got to work.

Every so often, she'd glance in his direction and catch him staring at her. The flutters in her stomach burst with energy like she'd just downed an entire cup of coffee. Scarlett was going to have a heyday with this one. Annabel could see it

now. Her best friend would tell her she knew all along that Annabel was ready to find love; she'd just needed to find the right guy.

And maybe she was right—though Annabel would never in a million years admit it.

When their morning chores were completed, before they moved on to what needed to be accomplished after lunch, Dalton stopped her.

Annabel's arms were filled with various tools for her to put away as she made her way back to the wall where they'd be placed. Dalton stood in her path, his mouth forming a crooked smile. "Go out with me tonight."

She let out a laugh. "It's Monday night."

"I'm aware."

"Aren't dates reserved for weekends?"

"We don't have much time before the holidays, and I thought we could go to town to find some gifts for my family. I'd love it if you kept me company."

She gnawed on her lower lip. That sounded an awful lot like a date for people well into their relationship. But there was no denying his simple request. Especially when he looked at her with those puppy dog eyes. "Sure, why not?"

"I'll pick you up at seven."

***Dalton***

**D**alton rapped his knuckles on his father's office door and poked his head inside. Ned sat at his desk looking over some paperwork. The small glasses he wore were perched on his nose and the greys in his hair seemed all the more prominent.

Ned glanced up over the rims of those glasses as he'd done a thousand times before when Dalton was younger. He didn't move, though Dalton could already see the judgment pouring off of him.

"I'm heading out. Henry is in his bed with a book. If you could check on him in an hour and make sure he's put it away for the night, that would be great."

His father's judgmental stare pinned Dalton into place. He'd seen that look before, more recently than he'd liked to admit.

"Is there anything else you need from me?" Dalton sighed. "You have my number and we're not going far."

Ned placed the paperwork on the desk. "You're going out with Annabel, aren't you?"

"We went over this. Yes, I'm going on a date."

"I thought you said there was nothing between you two."

Dalton heaved an irritated sigh. “That was Saturday. I wasn’t sure if there was anything between us, but this morning we decided to give it a chance.”

“How do you think Darcy is going to feel about this?”

He bristled. “Darcy doesn’t get a say.”

“She’s that boy’s mother. I’d say she gets to be involved in the decision of who you bring into that child’s life.”

“Darcy forfeited that right when she decided to leave us high and dry. She hasn’t seen Henry since last Christmas. Do you honestly think she would care who I decide to date?”

His father’s hard stare was making it difficult to enjoy what this evening was supposed to be about. Dalton wanted to be able to spend time with Annabel to get a feel for where they might take things. He’d been looking forward to this little outing more than he would have admitted to his father, and yet he was still standing here in his father’s office feeling smaller than he could ever remember.

“I don’t understand what it is you have against Annabel,” Dalton said.

“I don’t have anything against her,” he muttered gruffly, retrieving his paperwork again. “I simply think that you’re jumping into this relationship without getting to know her better.”

“I’ve known her since we were children, Dad. I know who she is. I know her past. I know all of it.”

“Then I suppose the only thing to say is have fun.” He turned his gaze to the document, indicating the conversation was over—at least for him.

Dalton wanted to stick around, to demand that his father explain what it was about Annabel that rubbed him the wrong way, but if he did, then he’d be late picking her up. The last thing he wanted to do was make her feel like he wasn’t invested in this relationship. Annabel already had a lot of insecurities. He didn’t need to add to those by making her worry that something was wrong.



He hurried to his truck, muttering a curse under his breath when he noticed the thin layer of ice covering the windshield. He really should have just taken off when he'd had the chance. Now he was really going to be late, and it was all because of the weather. Hopefully the roads would be clear of ice and he'd be able to make it to her place without incident.



“I’M SORRY I WAS LATE,” Dalton said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye as they drove along the familiar road to town. “I guess it’s been a while since I had to worry about ice on my windshield.”

Annabel continued to look out her window into the darkness. She’d said it was fine when he pulled up, but she’d been pacing the porch upon his arrival. He didn’t think she realized he’d noticed, but since she’d been bathed in the porch lights, it wasn’t hard to miss.

“I should have called.”

She shook her head, tossing him a small smile. “It’s totally fine. I figured there was a good reason that was keeping you.” Once again, she turned her attention to the window.

Christmas music played on the radio but beyond the quiet melody filling the cab of the truck, there weren’t any other sounds to break up the tension between them. He knew better than to let his doubts sink in. It wasn’t his father’s opinion that had him concerned. Dalton knew enough about Annabel to believe she wasn’t a danger to either himself or his son. It was the fact that she’d been the one to break things off the first time.

They had changed. She’d said so herself. If she was ready for a relationship, then he needed to trust her that she was telling the truth.

Dalton reached for her hand and took it within his own. That brought her eyes around to stare at him. “I heard something interesting today,” he said.

“What is that?” she asked softly.

“That Shane guy... the one who owns the country club?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s going to do sleigh rides this year.”

Annabel gaped at him. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “I’m serious. He wants to do them around the club for the next two weeks and then around town the week of Christmas. He’s got the sleigh and everything. Granted, from what I heard, it’s not really a sleigh because it’s got wheels.”

“Ah, so he’s got a carriage.”

Dalton nodded. “But the tourists are going crazy over the idea. And his wife is insisting they go caroling once a week.”

Annabel rolled her eyes. “Of course, Eloise would want him to do something like that. She’s such a hopeless romantic.”

He snickered, drawing one of those sharp looks Annabel was known for. “What?” she said.

“Oh, nothing.”

“You can’t laugh at me and tell me it’s nothing.”

“Sure, I can. Being your boyfriend gives me certain unalienable rights.”

“Oh, so now you’re my boyfriend? I wasn’t aware we’d settled on a label just yet.”

This time his eyes landed on her with such a serious look, the amusement left her face. He squeezed her hand, hoping she’d sense the reassurance he wanted to offer. “I’m not interested in dating anyone else, Anna. You’re it. I know we never came to a conclusion specifically, but I’m willing to lay it all out right now. I want you to be my girlfriend. I want to be there for you when you’re going through the thick of it. I want us to have what we had back in high school.”

She chuckled—a reaction he hadn’t been prepared for.

“What?” he said.

“It’s just that I wanted to leave that side of me in the past. I definitely don’t want what we had in high school.”

Dalton hated the way his heart twisted at that sentiment, but it was short-lived.

“That isn’t to say that I don’t want to be... your girlfriend.” She dropped her gaze to her lap and her smile widened slightly. “Honestly, I’m scared out of my mind that this thing between us—the shine will wear off and we’ll go our separate ways.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Anna.”

She glanced at him again. “I was scared you’d say that, too.”

What was he supposed to say then? She didn’t want to date him but she did? How did that make any sense?

“I know it sounds nuts. I want you to know that I’m aware of that. But it’s like you said earlier today. You’re willing to take it slow—to take it one day at a time. As long as we can do that, then I think we’ll be fine.”

“We’ll be more than fine,” he murmured softly. “Because I know we both want the same things.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

And that was all he’d needed to feel at ease once more. He wasn’t going to let his father’s words bring doubt into this budding relationship. Annabel was the strongest person he knew. She probably didn’t even realize just how strong she was. It wasn’t she who needed him; it could very well be the other way around.

Because whenever he was with her, he felt like he could do anything.



“OOH! YOU SHOULD GET HIM THIS.”

Dalton turned around to find Annabel holding up a horse figurine. He scrunched up his face as he took the figure from her hands and examined it. “My kid wasn’t raised here. He’d probably take one look at this and say that it belongs with the Barbie dream house.”

Annabel huffed, taking the horse from him and trailing a gentle finger along its neck. “I think you underestimate your son. This isn’t some plastic horse that Barbie can ride. This is a steed that can help bring in the cattle at the end of a long day. It’s a horse that can protect the yearlings from coyotes that threaten the herd. It could also be a good reminder of what he wants to be when he grows up... or have you forgotten that he wants to be a cowboy now?”

“If you like it so much, you get it for him.”

“Fine! I will.” With that, Annabel strode away, leaving Dalton staring after her with a smile of disbelief.

This was just one more of the reasons he liked her so much. She had a way of seeing the world that was different than his own. She could turn something so simple as a horse figurine into a story. And the best part was that after her little speech, he had to admit she was probably right.

Henry was going to love that horse. He’d probably want to collect more to go with it. Dalton moved through the toy section, not sure of what he was looking for. Ever since moving here and starting work on the farm, Henry had taken a vested interest in the animals. He’d even offered to do some of the early morning chores before heading off to school.

Perhaps a toy for Christmas wasn’t going to be the best fit for his son.

It was possible that his son needed something a little more grown-up.

A cowboy hat.

A pair of boots.

Or even an animal to care for all on his own.

Dalton's gaze landed on Annabel where she stood at the checkout counter. She glanced over her shoulder toward him and the smile she offered made his night. Here was his high school sweetheart, who was starting to fill a role in his life that had remained vacant for so long.

Just another reason on the long list of reasons that proved Dalton was on the right track.

Annabel grabbed her bag from the cashier, and they headed out into the night.

"Oh! We have to go to Sweet Everything before they close." Annabel took his hand in hers and charged down the street toward the bakery.

"Don't they close at nine? We have plenty of time."

"On the weekends. Tonight, they close in ten minutes."

He glanced at his watch. It was seven-fifty. They'd already spent nearly an hour together and the time had flown by. They'd arrived at the shop but before he allowed her to drag him inside, he pulled her close. His lips captured hers. He wasn't sure if it was instinct, a need, or something else.

When she pulled back with confusion and perhaps a little concern, he chuckled. "You're probably wondering why I kissed you just then."

"A little."

"Maybe one day I'll tell you."

He could see it in her eyes, the way she battled with the desire to force him to answer her question. Dalton wasn't about to let her win this one, so he pulled open the door and practically shoved her inside before following her.

Annabel went immediately toward the counter where the chocolate truffles were sold. She crouched down and then glanced upward at him. "What's your dad's favorite?"

He stared at her, unmoving. "You want to get my father some chocolates?"

"Sure. Everyone loves chocolate."

“But—”

“Look, I know he doesn’t really like me. I get that tolerating me on his property can be... difficult.”

Dalton pulled her to her feet. “That doesn’t mean that you have to get him something. It’s his problem, not yours.”

She shook her head. “I don’t mind. I want to get him something, even if he doesn’t love having me around.”

He wanted to tell her not to bother, but seeing how important this was to her, he simply nodded. “He likes caramel and toffee. Anything with those two would be good.”

“Great.” Annabel turned to the woman behind the counter. “I’d like three of each, please.”

*Annabel*

Annabel wasn't sure what her plan was when she'd purchased the chocolate for Dalton's father. It had been an impulse—something she probably should add to her growing list of things to work on.

There had just been something about the way Dalton had mentioned his father not being thrilled about their budding relationship that had her irritated beyond anything she'd experienced before—which was ridiculous in its own right. Why should she care what Ned thought about her? Stuff like that had never mattered before.

But it did now.

And the second Dalton left after dropping her off at her place, Annabel went straight for the kitchen. She tossed her goodies on the table before making her way to the pantry. There she stood, staring with disdain at the assortment of snacks available.

The junk food they had—or lack thereof—left much to be desired. What she wouldn't give for some Oreos or a big bowl of potato chips—anything to get her mind off heading out to what used to be her favorite bar.

She shook out her hands and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Going to the grocery store would be better

than heading to the bar, and yet the temptation to do just that weighed on her. Why was she feeling so triggered?

“You gonna get something or just block the door so the rest of us can’t?”

Annabel jumped. She didn’t bother turning around, knowing exactly who was standing behind her. Out of all her brothers, Daniel was the one who could eat twenty-four-seven and still be hungry. She continued to survey her options, ignoring his comment when he let out a groan.

“Come on, Anna, I’m starving.”

She snorted. “I saw what you piled away at dinner. Just walk away. You don’t want to have to deal with me today.”

Daniel didn’t seem to hear the threat in her voice because he picked her up and placed her to the side. He was five years younger than her, but he didn’t look it. All that food had to go somewhere, and Daniel was probably the tallest Keagan there was.

It had taken very little effort to get past her and she didn’t know why she even bothered to tell him to leave. He filled his arms with a box of uncooked pasta, a jar of tomato sauce, and a loaf of bread.

Annabel eyed what he held with veiled disgust. “You really shouldn’t be eating another meal this late.”

He gave her one look, up and down from head to toe. “You want some?”

One glance at the counter confirmed he had a plan in place. Between the butter, garlic, and cheese he’d gotten from the fridge, he was definitely making a full meal.

She rolled her eyes and stomped after him to the counter. “Fine, but only because I need to get my mind off something.”

Daniel glanced at her but didn’t say anything.

Smart move.

He worked in silence, cooking the pasta and preparing the sauce. Then much to her bewilderment, he put together a



grilled cheese sandwich with a layer of pasta inside. Annabel gaped at the monstrosity he placed in front of her. “You’re kidding me, right?”

Daniel shook his head, a smile stealing away on his face. “Don’t knock it ’til you try it.”

She picked up the sandwich and took a hesitant bite. Surprisingly, it wasn’t as bad as she’d expected it to be, so she took another bite and another.

“You gonna tell me why you need to get your mind off something?” Daniel finally muttered after they were nearly halfway through their meal. Apparently, he wasn’t as smart as she gave him credit for.

“No.”

“You going to your meetings?”

She shot him a sharp look. Of course, he knew. They all knew. There were no secrets in this family, no matter how much she wished there could be.

Daniel didn’t seem fazed by her expression. Instead, he took another bite and chewed thoughtfully. When he’d swallowed, he nodded to the bag she’d left on the table. “Does it have to do with what you were up to tonight? You left with that Quaid guy, right?”

Still, she scowled at him. “It’s none of your business.”

He chuckled. “Ah, you know that’s not how it works around here. You can’t just tell us to butt out and then go off the deep end.”

“Just leave me alone.”

Daniel shook his head. “Nope. Not gonna happen. We only made it this long because we look out for each other.”

Annabel put her half-eaten sandwich on her plate and brushed off the crumbs. “But I don’t have to air all my dirty laundry to you.”

“So, there’s dirty laundry?”

She groaned. “It’s none of your business. But if you must know, Dalton and I are seeing each other. It’s new and probably not anything you’re interested in.”

“Probably not.”

“So why are you even asking?”

He shrugged. “Probably because you’re not going to meetings and that’s the first thing that happens when you fall off the wagon.”

“You don’t know if I’m not going to meetings. I went to one last week.”

“One?”

“Stop *judging* me, will you? I’m in a good place.”

Daniel gave her a stern look, one that made her feel like he had her pinned against the wall and he wasn’t going to let her leave without explaining herself. “I might not know everything when it comes to AA, but I know enough to know you shouldn’t be jumping into a relationship if you’re not doing everything you should be. Isn’t there some unspoken rule about that kind of thing?”

He was right. It wasn’t the best idea if she wasn’t in a good place to begin with. But as far as rules were concerned? Technically, just because she was attending meetings didn’t mean they could dictate what she chose to do with her life.

And everything with Dalton was going well. It was his father that was causing the problems.

“My relationship with Dalton is the thing helping me hang on,” she muttered. If she gave in to this conversation, then maybe he would finally leave her alone. “But I don’t think his father likes me all that much.”

Daniel’s brows furrowed. “That’s what this is about? You don’t like that Mr. Quaid isn’t on board? Well, sheesh, Anna. Who cares?”

“I do!”

“Why?” He took his final bite and swallowed. “You’re not dating him. You’re dating Dalton. If he wants to dislike you, let him.”

If only it was that easy. She stewed with that thought for what felt like a full minute until Daniel spoke up again.

“And if you can’t, then confront him.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I mean, don’t like get mad and start throwing stuff. But ask him why he doesn’t like you and convince him that he’s wrong.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Well, how do you know if you haven’t tried?”

She swallowed down the lump of annoyance that had formed in her throat. While she didn’t believe it could be that easy, Daniel was right. She wasn’t going to get anywhere with Ned if she didn’t talk to him about it. And Dalton was too important for her to give up. She wasn’t going to be triggered by something that really shouldn’t be a big deal.

Daniel motioned to the rest of her sandwich. “You gonna eat that?”

Annabel shook her head, pushing the plate toward him. Glancing up at her brother as he grabbed her plate, she mumbled, “Thanks... for the talk.”

“Don’t mention it.” He turned for a moment, then faced her. “And Anna? Maybe you should start going to meetings again.”

She’d promised to do just that when Bo had caught on to her slip-up. And while she’d gone to a couple, she hadn’t stuck with it. All she could do was nod.



IT HAD TAKEN JUST over a week for Annabel to get up the nerve to see Ned in person. She’d planned on giving him the

chocolates on Tuesday, but she'd chickened out when she'd realized she wouldn't be able to hand them over without having that *talk*.

Part of her wondered if what Dalton had said was even true. Wasn't it possible? Dalton might have misinterpreted something his father had said. She was probably making a mountain out of a mole hill. Things were good with Dalton. It didn't matter that they'd only been official for a week; they'd managed to fall into a good routine, and she could really see herself settling down. Was this what Scarlett had found with Elijah?

Whatever it was, she didn't want to lose it, which meant confronting Ned even though she was completely sick to her stomach over it.

So, when she arrived on Thursday morning, rather than head to the barn where she knew Dalton would be, she went straight for the house. She hovered by the front door, hating how her hands and legs trembled with what she was about to do.

This was important. She needed to feel she had the support of Dalton's family in order to feel like she had a shot at happiness with the guy from her childhood. Just as she was about to knock on the door, it swung inward.

Ned wasn't a tall man. There were far more intimidating cowboys in Copper Creek. The fact that he was the father of the guy she wanted to be with was the only reason she was practically quaking in her boots—and only because the dynamic between herself and his son had changed so quickly.

“Miss Keagan? Is there something I can do for you?”

Her lips were pressed tightly together, and she nodded, but her voice didn't seem to want to work at the moment.

“Well, what is it?”

She shoved the chocolate bag at him. “I got you these in town.”

He took the bag a great deal slower than she would have liked. When he opened it, his brows lifted but he didn't ask her

anything like she'd expected.

What was she thinking? She couldn't do what she'd rehearsed. To ask him why he didn't like her sounded like something a child would do. She gave him a sharp nod and spun on her heel in order to escape.

"Miss Keagan?"

She'd gotten to the bottom step and now she wished she had just taken off the second he'd accepted the bag. Glancing over her shoulder, she braced herself for the worst.

"A bag of chocolates doesn't make up for the past."

"I know," she wheezed.

Still he studied her. "You hurt my son. On top of that, I don't feel you'd be a very good role model for my grandson."

"That's fair." Her face blushed hot despite the frigid air and she wished she'd done this after night had fallen rather than when he could see every emotion flicker across her face.

"That being said, there's one thing I have noticed."

She didn't dare breathe, nor utter a single word.

"You make my son happy."

The heat in her face intensified.

"While I don't approve of this relationship, I'm not of the mind to stand in his way. I only hope that you two know what you're doing."

She wanted to argue, to hurl insults into his face so he knew just how hurtful his words were. Dalton was an adult. He could make his own choices. And she was doing her best. That should have been all that mattered.

But she didn't.

Annabel simply nodded before sprinting away like her life depended on it. That had to have been the most terrifying experience she'd had in a long time and all she wanted right now was to be held, to be rocked, and be told that everything would be okay.

That wasn't what a woman in control of her faculties would be thinking at this given moment. It was like what Daniel had said. She shouldn't care. Her relationship with Dalton had nothing to do with his father.

It wasn't like she was the one who left him with a child to raise on his own.

At least she wasn't Darcy.

Annabel barreled into the barn and nearly knocked Dalton off his feet. He chuckled, his eyes brightening just from meeting her gaze. That look—the one so utterly filled with adoration—was all it took for her to feel better. Dalton was her rock. He was the one who would be able to drag her from the depths of her spiraling behavior and help her see that things weren't as bad as she thought they might be.

His gaze grew concerned. “Is everything okay?”

Annabel nodded. “Of course.”

He didn't seem convinced, but it appeared he knew better than to interrogate her. “Great. Because I wanted to show you something.”

*Dalton*

Dalton continued darting glances toward Annabel as they headed around the back of the barn to where he had a UTV waiting. He motioned for her to get on and she hesitated. “It’s fine. I got it running again and it’s not going to leave us stranded.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” Annabel shot an uncertain look toward the house and then the barn. “Don’t we have a lot to do? I’m sure your father wouldn’t approve of us going off together.”

“As long as my work gets done, he’s happy. Honestly, I don’t even know what his issue was in the first place. He didn’t want me here to begin with, but now that I’ve been running the place, he doesn’t seem to want me to leave.”

Still, she looked unconvinced. “Won’t it be really cold to drive that thing in this temperature?”

“I’ll keep you warm,” Dalton teased, watching her for a reaction.

He’d never brought up the fact that it was a possibility he would leave one day. He’d planned on coming to Copper Creek just to help out while his father was in his cast, but now that everything had changed with Annabel, he knew he couldn’t just walk away.

The more he thought about returning to the city, the more he knew it wasn't the right choice.

This was his home, and it wasn't just because he'd grown up here or that his son was doing so well in his new school. Heck, his reasons didn't even fully depend on the budding relationship he had with Annabel.

All of it.

Every single instance was culminating to make this place his forever home. The fact that he wanted to share it with one person more than anyone else only made his decision that much easier.

"Come on, don't make me beg."

She snickered at that. "Maybe that's the exact thing I need you to do. Have you considered that?"

He made a move to get on his knees and her eyes widened as she darted toward him.

"Don't you dare!"

Dalton chuckled, motioning toward the vehicle again. "It's not that far."

Annabel made a big show of rolling her eyes before she climbed in. Dalton grabbed a blanket from a storage bag and draped it over her legs, drawing a laugh from her lips. "You planned this."

"I did." He climbed in beside her, started it up, then slipped his arm around her shoulders. They drove along a trail and through some trees until a small cottage came into view. Normally the place would look abandoned. His father hadn't had a foreman working the ranch for years, and it had showed.

Today, there were tire tracks and footprints in the snow. Smoke billowed from the chimney, and there were even a few lights on.

Annabel's eyes cut to meet his. "I didn't know there was another house on this property."



“Yeah, my dad wanted to make sure the foremen working for him over the years wouldn’t feel like they were living at work. There’s even a small road that leads here behind the house from the main one.”

“Your dad has a foreman?”

“He used to.” Dalton climbed out of the UTV and helped her out of her side. “This place was built a few years after I was born. Back then when my dad ran the farm, he didn’t have a lot of the more modern equipment to make working the fields easy. Most jobs required at least two people. So, he hired a couple guys and one of them got to stay here as part of his pay.”

She shook her head. “That’s crazy.”

“What is?”

“That there was this house just sitting here. Do you know how nice it would be if we had something like this at our place? We have twelve people living in our house. *Twelve.*”

He laughed. “I’m aware.”

“Twelve,” she repeated again.

“Well, maybe we can pool some help from the neighbors and start building something one of these summers.”

The sharp way her head turned so she could stare at him gave him pause. He wasn’t sure if she liked the idea or if she simply thought it was impossible. Either way, he filed that thought aside for the time being. One day he’d make sure to help her family out like she’d helped him out when he’d gotten back to town.

Dalton reached for her hand and led her along the beaten snow path toward the cabin. “It’s small. There are only two bedrooms, but when it was built, my father didn’t expect that a foreman would be married when he hired him. Most of the guys my dad hired were younger and just starting out.”

“Makes sense,” Annabel said.

He pushed open the door and gestured for her to enter.

She stepped inside but didn't move farther into the house. Her eyes swept over the dated décor, the old sofa, the beige refrigerator, and he half-expected her to laugh. Instead, she glanced toward him. "Why exactly did you want to bring me here? Because I don't have any experience with interior design if that's what you're needing. Brielle might be able to help with that, though. She's managed to really fix up our place—"

Dalton shut the door behind him and leaned against it. He'd tried to come up with the words he wanted to use when he brought her here—words that would express how much she meant to him but wouldn't scare her off.

If there was one fear he had, it was that Annabel would turn tail and run as fast as her legs could carry her.

She'd never been the type to settle down. He knew that. Since they'd known each other as teens, she'd always said she didn't understand why anyone would want to settle down. But now, something seemed different about her. It was like she'd figured out what she wanted, and part of him thought there might be a chance he was included in that.

Annabel faced him fully, a ghost of a smile on her lips as she crossed her arms. "You know I have ten brothers. You can't just lock me away in here and expect to get away with it."

He moved closer to her. "While that thought is tantalizing in and of itself, I'll admit that I have no intention of locking you away from the world." He motioned to the space. "I'm moving here."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're what?"

"Here. This is going to be mine. I'm going to have to fix it up a little, update it, but... yeah. I'm moving back. Permanently."

Her slitted eyes remained. "But you live in the main house. Why would you move out here?"

Dalton chuckled, prying her hands out of the crossed hold she had them in. "I moved back to help my dad. I didn't know

how long I was going to stay, so we set up temporarily at his place. But it's still *his* place."

That's when he could see the understanding dawn in her eyes. She finally grasped that he had been planning on leaving this whole time. Something akin to desperation flickered behind her gaze, but just as quickly as it had arrived, it disappeared. "You're staying," she said with measure.

"I'm staying," he repeated. "And I'm moving here with Henry so we can officially have our own place. No more of this feeling like we aren't putting down roots."

Once again, her eyes said more than her words ever could, only this time he was thrilled to see that she didn't look the least bit upset. "Really?" Annabel pulled away from him and turned to face the cottage once more. "That's amazing."

"I thought you'd like it."

"*Like* it? I'm so happy for you." Her voice shook slightly.

"You didn't realize I wasn't planning on staying, did you?"

She lifted a shoulder and he realized just how much he hated when she went quiet.

"Well, the good news is that I'm staying." He closed the distance between them and slipped his arms around her waist. "Just in time for the holidays."

Annabel leaned into him. "What does Henry think?"

"Oh, he's ecstatic—insisting that I have to get him a horse all his own now."

He didn't know how he knew, but he could sense her smile. "You better get on that."

Dalton rested his chin on her shoulder. "Yeah, I suppose I should."

"And you really should get a decorator in here." Annabel's tone was lighter this time, holding notes of teasing. "Because I refuse to sit on that couch. I'm positive it's got something living inside it."

Now was his moment—his chance to tell her exactly how he felt. His whole body felt taut, the risk pulling at every single muscle inside him. There was a part of him that screamed it was too soon to even be considering what he was about to do.

And yet he pushed against that thought and leaped.

“I’m in love with you, Anna.”

He wasn’t sure how he knew exactly that she’d tensed—when she still leaned against him like she’d been doing. She was still breathing regularly. He even got the feeling her heart was beating at the same steady pace.

Only, he knew deep down that she was taken off guard by his statement. It was in the absence of reacting that he knew.

Dalton didn’t think it was possible, but his chest constricted even more. He didn’t dare move for fear that she would pull away from him and accuse him of dragging her out here to manipulate her into confessing she had feelings for him too.

So, they stood like that. Seconds stretched out before them like a highway without an end. While it felt like an eternity had passed, in all likelihood, it had only been a moment.

Annabel turned to face him, still locked within his arms. “You are?”

“I wouldn’t have said so if I wasn’t,” he whispered.

“How do you know?”

He gave her a funny look. “What kind of question is that?”

She shut her eyes tight, murmuring with difficulty, “Just answer it.”

Dalton waited for her to open her eyes. “I know because of how I feel when I’m around you. It’s like...” He searched for the words that wouldn’t sound corny. “It’s like when I’m not with you, I feel like a piece of me is missing.”

He mentally kicked himself; that definitely sounded corny. Based on the way the small smile materialized on her face, she

thought it was, too.

“I have everything I could want. I have a kid, a place to call home, more than enough to take care of us... but there was one thing missing and I think I finally just had to accept that my life was never the same after we broke it off.”

Her lashes fluttered and she pulled away slightly. “I’m not the same person I was when we were younger.”

“I know.”

“I have so much baggage—people are going to tell you you’re making a mistake in being with me.”

“Let them.” The words came easily to him, but he could see that she struggled with the concept. “Besides, every single day you’re getting better. You’ve been through it, and you’ve come back to tell the tale.”

She shook her head. “I will never be back fully. That’s what addiction is. All it would take is one trigger to knock me off that pedestal you want to put me on.”

He cupped her cheek in his palm, wishing he could show her what he saw in her. She would never believe him until she could see it for herself. Lucky for her, he was stubborn and he knew that he wanted her in his life. “Whatever you need, I’m here for you. I can be the one to lift you up and keep you going.”

“That shouldn’t be something you need to concern yourself with,” she continued to argue.

“Trust me,” he whispered. “When you come out on the other side of the holidays and the wedding without one issue, you’ll see that I’m right. We’re good together.”

Annabel leaned into him, blocking his view of her eyes. She wrapped her arms around him, and he pressed a kiss to the crown of her blonde hair.

As terrified as he was that she’d get scared and run, he knew if he could just get her through the next few weeks, they’d be stronger than ever.

“I love you too Dalton,” she murmured against his shoulder.

*Annabel*

Christmas was in two weeks. The wedding was in three. And Annabel was avoiding spending any of her spare time with her family.

It wasn't that she was scared she'd relapse *because* of them; it was that Dalton had a way of making her feel grounded that no one else could replicate. He was her rock.

That was the biggest reason she didn't tell him about her conversation with his father.

She had a feeling he'd only get upset. The last thing she wanted was to destroy the relationship he had with Ned.

He spent the last few days getting the cottage move-in ready and once he was settled, she made it a point to have a little housewarming party.

Granted, it was just for the three of them, but it was a party, nevertheless.

Annabel pulled the bag of microwave popcorn out and tossed the steaming bag onto the table. On the other side of the room, Dalton was putting the faux Christmas tree together. Henry sat on his knees at the small kitchen table, his excited expression locked on the popcorn.

“Are we going to eat it?”

She chuckled, “Not yet.”

He frowned. “But I thought you said we were going to have a party. Doesn’t that mean we get snacks?”

“Sure, it does.” She glanced over at Dalton, who caught her eye, and they smiled. A warm rush of butterflies filled her body, and she pulled out her chair in an attempt to fight them off. “But you’re going to be spending Christmas in this house.”

Henry hung on her every word. He glanced around the small entertaining area. “Yeah, so?”

She scrunched up her face with exaggeration and gestured around them. “Doesn’t quite look like Christmas, does it?”

He shrugged.

“In my house growing up, we made sure to decorate every year. We didn’t have a lot of money, so we found other ways to make it look ready for the holidays.”

Henry eyed the popcorn bag. “You want to decorate it with popcorn?”

She leaned forward and whispered as if they were conspiring. “It’s a lot better than mistletoe. If you used mistletoe, then there would be a lot more kissing.”

He made a face. “Yuck!”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know. I think this place could use a little more mistletoe.” Dalton had made it across the room and stood beside her. Henry glanced from his father to Annabel and back. It wasn’t until Dalton reached for his son and placed an exaggeratedly loud kiss on his forehead that Henry let out a laugh.

Annabel watched the exchange until Dalton’s knowing gaze found hers. She wouldn’t have argued against mistletoe either. Neither one of them had told Henry the full extent of where they were romantically. Dalton wanted to hold off until after the holidays so his son could get to know Annabel without that knowledge hanging over his head.



His reasoning only made her like him more.

Dalton ruffled his son's hair, then leaned over and grabbed a piece of popcorn that had come free from the bag. He tossed it in his mouth, much to her feigned displeasure.

“Hey! We needed that.”

He chuckled. “How exactly are we going to use this popcorn?”

She gave him a look, then picked up the small case of needles and the fishing line she'd found in the barn. “We're going to make a garland to wrap around the tree. Trust me. It's going to be beautiful.”

Dalton nabbed another piece of popcorn, successfully avoiding her swatting at him. Henry laughed again and Annabel heaved a sigh. “The more you eat, the less we have to decorate the tree.”

He held up both hands like the criminal he was. “Okay, okay. I'll be good. No more.”

Annabel didn't miss the wink he gave his son, and try as she might, she couldn't fight her own smile.

This was the kind of family she'd always wanted when she was a kid—parents who loved her, activities to do as a family. It wasn't that she didn't love the one she had. She was very close to most of her siblings, but she'd taken on the mothering role. Maybe that was why it was so easy to step into a similar one with Henry.

With each passing day, she could see herself being part of *this* family—a fact that truly scared her when she started to think about the possibility of a relapse.

She shoved that thought aside. It was just her lack of self-confidence that was tearing her down. With Dalton by her side, she'd be able to handle anything.

They worked for the next couple of hours creating garlands and other paper ornaments for the Christmas tree. At some point Dalton broke his promise and swiped a handful of the popcorn from the table, calling it a heavy-lifting tax.

Annabel stood back with pride and stared at their newly decorated tree. She nudged Henry with a little laugh. “What do you think?”

The young boy crossed his arms and put all his weight on one foot. “It’s not what I thought it would be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t Christmas trees need more? Like a star or something?”

She glanced upward to the top of the tree. “I suppose you’re right. Should we make one?”

Henry shook his head. “I saw one at the store I liked.” He turned to his father. “Could we get that one? It was silver and gold and had lights flashing on it.”

Dalton ruffled the boy’s hair and chuckled. “I think we can manage something like that.” His eyes found Annabel’s, locking with hers. “But it’s getting late and I think it’s time to get you ready for bed.”

Henry frowned. “I don’t want to go to bed. We don’t have school tomorrow. Can I stay up late?”

Dalton placed his hands on Henry’s shoulders and guided him toward the hallway. “It’s already past your bedtime, buddy. We can take a trip to town tomorrow.”

His son resisted, tossing a glance over his shoulder toward Annabel. In a swift movement, he ducked down and darted toward her.

She wasn’t expecting him to hit her with such strength and she had to reach out and steady herself with a nearby chair to prevent both of them from tumbling to the ground. Henry’s arms wrapped around her waist and he gave her the tightest hug she’d ever received.

His cherubic face tilted upward and he smiled at her. “Will you come with us?”

Annabel glanced up at Dalton, finding only adoration.

Her heart hammered. This was what she wanted, right? This was what Scarlett had said was so great—to be a part of something bigger and better. Her nerves were excited ones. They had to be.

There was just one thing she couldn't get past. If she was so excited, why was she suddenly craving another drink? She never had problems when she was happy. These cravings usually came hand in hand with feelings of inadequacy.

And just like that, a light came on.

She wasn't good enough to be this kid's role model. She wasn't good enough to be with Dalton. But he loved her, and she loved him. She needed to push past these feelings of inadequacy because he loved her for who she was.

Annabel forced a smile, but she was sure Dalton could see right through it. Avoiding Dalton's gaze, she dropped down so she was at eye-level with Henry. "I'm not sure what my schedule is like tomorrow, but your dad can call me and we can figure it out. How does that sound?"

Henry nodded. His smile was definitely more genuine than her own, which made her heart tighten ever so slightly. He was getting attached. And if something happened between herself and Dalton, where would that leave him?

Dalton pulled Henry away from her, whispering, "I'll be right back. Just need to read him a bedtime story."

She nodded and turned back to the tree. This was the symbol of everything people said she should want. A home to call her own. A family to care for. This was *normal*. She'd never been normal. From her bottle-blond hair to the mask she wore in order to fit in with the folks around here, she'd never felt like she belonged. Maybe that was why she'd always tried to emulate whomever she was dating.

Annabel rubbed her arms up and down, but it didn't get rid of the goosebumps that had appeared. She felt colder than usual and it wasn't because snow was on the ground. Geez, she was standing by a fire right now, and she couldn't seem to warm up.

Her thoughts went haywire as she considered what Dalton meant to her.

Stability. Normalcy. A future.

But what if he'd been someone who rode a motorcycle, dressed in black leather, and spent his nights at the bar? If she felt like she belonged when she was with him, would she go against her own creed to stay sober?

She didn't know.

Her heart continued to pound erratically as if it wasn't happy that she'd come to this point. Hadn't she sworn off dating because she needed to find herself first?

It had been too easy for Dalton to sweep her into this life of make-believe. Her breathing became shorter and sharper. She needed to leave—to gather her wits and figure out if this was what she really wanted. Logically, she should be all in. But realistically? There were far too many hurdles for her to leap over to make this life work.

Annabel had just come to this conclusion and spun around to find the coat Dalton had gotten for her when he appeared in the hallway. He had the most endearing grin on his face as he sauntered toward her, completely unaware of the turmoil roiling inside her.

Dalton reached out and took both of her hands in his. "I can't believe how good you are with him."

"I guess I'm better than I thought I would be with him. Probably because I have little brothers and sisters."

He shook his head. "No, this is different and you know it. Henry has no need to like you and yet he's sitting in there talking about you like you're his best friend. I don't think I've seen him take to anyone nearly as well as he's taken to you."

Her insides continued to churn and she looked away. "I'm glad he likes me." At least that statement was honest. She really did like the kid, and she would be heartbroken if he didn't feel the same. But that didn't mean she was ready to step into his life and fill a role that was never hers to begin with.

These intrusive thoughts continued to plague her no matter how hard she tried to push them out. She couldn't even focus on what Dalton was saying as he pulled her in for a hug and just held her. His chin rested on her head as they stood there.

To anyone observing from the outside, this looked like a sweet moment between two people who were madly in love with each other.

Unfortunately, Annabel was wracked with guilt.

Guilt over Dalton's father.

Guilt over her current feelings.

Guilt over her past.

She shifted in his arms in an attempt to pull away from him so she could get going, but his hold on her didn't budge.

"I'm so proud of you."

That caught her attention, and she twisted her face around so she could get a better look at him.

"You've had a tough life, Anna. Anyone can see your family has been through the wringer. If anyone has an excuse to be a little messed up, it would be you."

Conflicting thoughts roared within her. He thought she was messed up? But wait, he was accepting her, shouldn't she be thrilled?

Dalton lifted her chin with the crook of his finger and his voice softened. "You've done so much—overcome so much. I'm proud that you took the right path to become someone better than you were."

Her stomach fell to her knees. He wasn't accepting her. He was accepting the person she was still fighting tooth and nail to become. Annabel knew better than to believe she was even close to obtaining that sort of accomplishment. Did Dalton actually think that she was fixed? Sure, she hadn't needed any intervention since that one night, but there were going to be setbacks. At some point, she was going to fall again. That was just a fact of life.

What would he do when that happened?

Would he leave her?

Annabel pulled away faster than he probably expected her to. She did her best to distract him from her strange behavior and hurried to get her coat. “I just realized I need to get going. I’ll call you when I’m home safe, okay?”

“Are you sure—”

“Yep. Thanks for tonight.” She moved toward him, giving him a gentle kiss. Their eyes locked, lingering for a moment too long. Annabel blinked and glanced away, then hurried toward the door.

“See you tomorrow?” he said.

She shot one more look in his direction. “I’ll let you know in the morning.” Annabel slipped out the door and hurried toward her truck. Everything inside her told her that fleeing was for the best.

Everything except her heart.

*Dalton*

Maybe he was moving too fast. Annabel hadn't been in a committed relationship for longer than even she could remember. Dalton could understand her apprehension up to a certain point, but she was also the person doing most of the propelling.

He'd thought Annabel wanted to keep moving forward, but last night she wasn't showing it. Now he was second-guessing what he was doing, and it was affecting his work. Henry was inside waiting for Dalton to finish up his work for the morning.

They hadn't heard back from Annabel whether she was up for their trip to town, making Dalton wonder if he needed to stop by later and have a heart-to-heart with her. All morning, he went over what had happened yesterday, and he couldn't come up with a single reason why she might have gotten spooked.

To top it off, the farm had chosen today as the day for everything to go wrong. A stretch of fence that ran between the Quaid property and the one next door was broken, and now a few of the neighbor's cows had gotten into one of his pastures.

One of the pigs had gotten out of its pen and into some feed, making a terrible mess in the barn. But the worst part

was a section of the barn roof had collapsed from the snow. It wasn't bad enough to need immediate fixing, but if Dalton left it too long, it would continue to cause more issues. All he could do for the time being was get up on the roof and sweep the snow that had accumulated up there.

By the time he entered his father's home and removed his work boots, he was more than a little frazzled. As much as he wanted to take everything out on his father and his mismanagement of the property, he knew better.

None of what happened was his father's fault. These were just things that happened as part of running a farm. Instead of tracking him down, Dalton found his way into the living room where his son was playing with a wooden train set.

Dalton collapsed on the couch and watched Henry with the toy that had once belonged to him. For a few moments his son didn't even notice that he was present. In a day and age where electronics ruled children's free time, Dalton had half expected his son to be seated in front of the television.

"There's nothing like a traditional toy, don't you think?" His father's voice drew his attention and Dalton glanced up toward the door. "He's been playing with that for nearly an hour." Ned's brows creased. "What took you so long this morning? Usually, you're done with the morning work by eight."

Dalton scowled. He refused to get in a fight with his father over this issue. He was just dealing with a lot right now. As soon as things got cleared up with Annabel, he'd talk to his dad about developing a maintenance plan. "You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do. This is still my farm."

Dalton shot out of his seat. "Then treat it like one."

*Shoot.*

What had gotten into him that he was so quick to toss insults? He needed to cool off, or call Annabel, or do *anything* else before speaking to his father. Dalton attempted to move



past him but his father stepped in his path. “We need to have a discussion.”

Dalton glanced back toward his son, relieved he wasn't paying attention. “About Henry?”

His father shook his head. “No.”

“Okay, then what is this about?” If his father was going to give Dalton a speech regarding the state of the farm, there was no way Dalton could guarantee he would keep his cool.

Ned jerked his head toward the hallway. “Not in here.”

“Why not?”

One look in his son's direction and Dalton knew exactly why. This would be a talk that Henry didn't need to have any part of. Dalton heaved a sigh and followed his father into the hall, putting enough distance between them and his son to ensure there would be no eavesdropping.

Crossing his arms tight, Dalton leveled his father with a stare. “What is this about?”

Ned didn't waste any time. “I got a visit from Annabel.”

Dalton lifted his brows. She hadn't said anything to him about her paying his father a visit. His thoughts immediately went to the strange way she'd been acting. Immediately, his defenses went up. Had his father been the reason she left so suddenly last night? Was he scaring her off?

“She brought me chocolates.”

Allowing himself to relax, Dalton released a breath and gave his dad a small smile. “Oh. Right. She wanted to get you something. Nice, huh?”

“I've never said she wasn't *nice*, son.” There was a strange sort of weight to his words. “Clearly, she's someone people like. But I'm concerned.”

“You're concerned...” Dalton said with a measured voice. “What are you concerned about, exactly?” He let out a frustrated sigh. “You said you didn't *not* like her. In fact, all I got from that conversation was that you were okay with me

dating her and mom was the one who would have been against it.”

Ned pressed his lips together. His stare didn't waver. “Did you know she's in AA?”

Fury boiled within him. “AA is supposed to be anonymous, Dad. I don't know how you would even know that she was in—”

“Because your mother was in AA.”

Dalton's mouth fell open.

“It's a long, hard road for those who have to take it, and your mother was one of them. There were reasons she didn't like Annabel, and while it might not seem fair, one of those had to do with Annabel's past.”

“So, you're allowed to date someone who had to work on herself, but I can't?”

“I never said that. Once your mother got involved with AA, she never looked back. I'm not saying she didn't have her struggles, but she stuck with it. She attended meetings religiously.”

A vague memory knocked him sideways. He searched the ground, as if it would clear his head. “I thought that was book club.”

Ned didn't respond, but the look in his eyes made it clear that was exactly the lie his mother had told him when he was young.

“This whole time and you guys didn't tell me?”

“It wasn't my secret to tell.”

Dalton huffed. “I can't believe this. You're such a hypocrite. Both of you. Annabel is doing great. She hasn't had any recent issues. You should give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“Really? Is that what you call it? Didn't the two of you share a bottle of wine a month or so ago?”

Dalton's face flushed red. His father had known. He'd known and he hadn't said a single word. Hands balling into fists, Dalton focused on the pain of his fingernails digging into his palms. Right now was not the time to argue with his father.

"Now you understand my concerns. It's not anyone's job but hers to make sure she follows the AA guidelines. And if she couldn't come forward that night when she's not struggling, what happens when she has a bad day?"

"That's none of your business," Dalton snapped. "And neither is my relationship with her." He got the distinct impression that his father was one of the big reasons for Annabel's behavior the other night but until he spoke to her, he wouldn't be able to prove it. "I need you to watch Henry for a couple hours." Dalton grabbed for his coat hanging near the door.

"Where are you going?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You're going to see her, aren't you?"

He didn't bother giving his father a response. Everything had been smooth sailing for so long that he should have known something would happen to mess it up. He just didn't think his father would be one of those things.

Dalton charged toward his truck and started it, only to have to wait for the defroster to clear his window. He rubbed his hands together and blew warm air into them as he waited, getting more antsy by the moment.

Annabel hadn't spoken to him since last night when she called to assure him she'd gotten home safe on the icy roads. Now he knew why. And he wasn't about to let her just walk away. She needed to confront these feelings she was having.

Torn between his fury with his father, his frustration over Annabel's inability to communicate, and his own heart for insisting he be the fixer all the time, Dalton let out a growl. It wasn't often he lost his temper. He'd had to learn a long time ago that nothing good ever came from being angry.

Anger didn't stop Darcy from leaving. And it wouldn't stop Annabel from doing the same. He could already feel her slipping away from him. That had to be the root cause of the tumultuous state of his insides.

The sooner he helped her understand where his father was coming from, the sooner everything would resolve, and they could get back on track.

Dalton made it to the Keagan ranch and took a moment to settle his breathing. His eyes swept among the buildings and corrals near the house. There were a few young men wandering around doing whatever work they had, but no sign of Annabel.

He nearly called her to tell her he was here and they needed to talk when he noticed a horse coming in from a nearby trail.

Annabel's form was unmistakable. For some reason, knowing she'd gone for a ride eased his mind slightly. She wasn't out doing something stupid, and she wasn't holed up in her room letting her thoughts drag her down.

His father had been an idiot and so was he for listening to him. Dalton's doubt vanished and he climbed out of his truck.

Taking long strides, Dalton hurried toward the barn and reached it shortly after she'd disappeared inside. When he reached the stall where she was busy removing the saddle and the reins, he allowed himself to catch his breath.

Annabel glanced up, then did a double take. "Dalton? What are you doing here? I didn't call you... is Henry—"

"He's with my father." Dalton opened the stall door and slipped inside, making sure to close the door behind him. "We need to talk."

And right then he saw it. The deer-in-the-headlights look that Annabel got whenever she felt cornered.

Dalton held up both hands and offered her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. It's nothing bad. I... I wanted to let you know I understand what's going on."

“You... do?”

He nodded, moving forward to take her hand in his. “I know you’re a little apprehensive about our relationship because of my dad.”

“Well, that’s part of it... but—”

“You don’t have to be.”

She clamped her mouth shut, staring at him with surprise.

“He knows you’re an alcoholic.”

This time she paled, her lashes fluttering as she blinked several times. “He does?”

“It’s fine. I want you to know that even if he doesn’t think this is a good idea, it doesn’t matter.”

Annabel shut her eyes, shaking her head. “Dalton—”

“I told him you were doing great, and you were back on track. But most of all, I wanted him to know that it was none of his business. I’m going to spend my life with someone I love, and he doesn’t get a say.”

Her eyes snapped open and she stared at him. “You said that?”

“Of course I did.” Dalton hesitated for the first time since seeing her. She didn’t appear at all pleased with what he was saying. “I’m not going to let anyone pull us apart. They don’t know you like I do.”

“But that’s just it. *You* don’t know me either.” She yanked her hand away from him. “I’m in my thirties and *I* don’t even know who I am.” Annabel took a step back. “Your father—”

“My father doesn’t matter.”

“Except he does. I don’t think I would be one hundred percent comfortable being part of a family who would never be able to accept me.”

“Then grow up.”

She stared at him, blinking a few more times.

Shoot. That had just slipped out. He hadn't meant to say it like that, but there was no taking it back. He softened his voice and moved toward her, but she held up her hands to stop him. "Annabel—"

"Don't."

*Annabel*

*W*hat was he even doing here? On her property?  
Without calling?

*He's your boyfriend, duh.*

Annabel had to collect her thoughts. She hadn't slept all night and it was because she couldn't get ahold of herself. It wasn't fair that she could spiral so easily. Why did this always happen when she was doing well? Why couldn't she just let herself be happy without sabotaging herself?

She pressed her fingers to her temples. "I wasn't ready for you to come over yet."

"What?"

Annabel shot him a dark look. "What is this, Dalton?"

His head reared back.

"You come here to *my* home, tell me your father doesn't approve, then demand that I *grow up*? Is this some weird obsession you have? Are you one of those people who isn't happy unless you have a project?"

"What are you talking about?" His voice lowered and he took a step toward her, but she made sure to maintain the distance between them. "I came here to tell you that everything is going to be okay."

“You don’t know that,” she accused. “You have no idea what’s going to happen and when it’s going to happen. I could go on a bender one day and die in a car crash.”

His eyes hardened. “That wouldn’t happen.”

“Wouldn’t it? How many people mess up on a daily basis and make stupid mistakes, killing themselves or others? How many of them go out for a beer and then never come back.”

Dalton’s brows lifted. “Is that what this is about? You think you’ll turn into your parents?”

She flushed hot. “I’m talking about *me*, Dalton. Just because I mention something doesn’t mean it has to have some deep significance. I was doing great for several years, and then in the course of a few months, I made mistake after mistake. Have you ever thought that maybe the reason I never settled down is that somewhere deep inside me, I know that I would make a terrible wife—an even worse mother?”

“Now look who’s making assumptions.”

She huffed and turned away from him, opting to stand on the other side of the horse. “These aren’t assumptions. They’re more probable than your optimistic outlook. You haven’t had to deal with the demons I’ve had. You don’t know how hard it is to go through a triggering event and feel like your throat is burning.”

“You’re right. I don’t know. But I’ve helped people through it.”

“Of course you have. Because you’re perfect. Sheesh, Dalton. Not everyone can be as perfect as you or your family. You can’t fix everyone.”

“I’m not trying to.”

The more they continued with this back and forth, the louder her voice became. Her head pounded and her pulse throbbed. She wanted to get out of there, to escape, but she was trapped. Dalton was blocking her only way out.

She let out a sad, heavy sigh. “What do you want me to say? That if I just try a little harder our life will be all



butterflies and rainbows? Your father is proof that's not an option for us. He's never going to accept me."

This time instead of arguing with her, he looked away. She had made her point and he was finally accepting it. She couldn't tell if the ache in her chest was relief from the tight bands that had constricted her or from the disappointment that she really was right.

Annabel folded her arms atop the saddle and placed her head there. "I didn't want to get wrapped up in a relationship. I knew I wasn't ready. And you pushed me into it."

"You made your own choices. You can't put this on me."

She lifted her head, resting her chin on her arm. "You're right. I did make a choice. But it was one I didn't want to make. This just furthers my point. I can't trust myself to be the person I know I'm capable of being when it's so easy to wander down the wrong path."

The way he looked at her sliced through her heart with a hot blade. She'd never seen a man cry before, but if anyone could, it would have been Dalton in this very moment. "So now I'm the wrong path? A life with me... with Henry... that's a decision you would regret?"

She shut her eyes to prevent the tears from escaping. "I didn't mean it like that."

"But that's how it is, right? You want to step back because you think I'm trying to fix you, is that it?"

Annabel opened her eyes to peek at him.

His chin lifted slightly, and then he nodded. "I thought so. I guess that's my fault then—for making you believe that I would only love the most perfect version of you." He worked his jaw and took a step back. "I guess it's better that we've come to this crossroads now, before we really made a mess of things."

She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek to keep quiet. She could already sense what was coming next. He was going to cut things off with her. As much as she didn't want that to

happen—as much as she wanted everything to remain the same—she knew it couldn't.

“Henry shouldn't have to suffer because of our mistakes. He's already growing attached to you. I'm going to ask that you stay away from him for the indeterminate future. Seeing you is only going to cause confusion.” He worked his jaw and his eyes clouded further. “He doesn't need another motherly figure in his life to abandon him.”

His words sliced deeper than she thought possible. The worst part was that he was completely right.

Annabel wanted to collapse right there, to crumple into a heap on the floor. This was the right thing to do. She wasn't the best version of herself. She'd purposefully missed meetings and avoided taking the steps she knew would work to get her back on track. If she even had a prayer of mending her friendship with him, she needed to change all of that.

Dalton shot her one more disappointed look, knocked his knuckles against the wooden panels of the stall, then slipped out.

His boots echoed with each step he took between the stalls. With him went the last bit of warmth. Annabel shivered, backing against the wall of the stall. She slid down until she sat in the straw. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she placed her face onto her knees.

She'd been right all along. Dalton didn't want her for who she was. He wanted the good without taking into account all the bad.



“I'LL TAKE the inhouse brew, please.” Annabel shifted on her stool and glanced around the bar. Several years ago, this was her go-to place to get a drink. It was the place where everyone minded their own business and didn't tell her she should be going to a meeting.

The bartender always served her even when her brother would come in here and threaten to get him shut down if he served anyone in his family.

That had to count for something.

Annabel gave the woman a smile when she brought her glass and placed it on a tiny napkin.

Staring into the amber liquid, Annabel reached for the glass and let her fingers graze the cool, smooth surface. Her mouth watered and the back of her throat burned. The temptation continued to prick her like a thousand needles.

She could have a small taste—take the edge off. It wouldn't be much, and she wouldn't even get drunk.

Head pounding, hand shaking, Annabel went over every excuse she could think up in her head but not one of them seemed good enough to destroy the progress she'd made.

And she really did want to be better. Not for Dalton. Not for her family. She wanted to do it for herself.

Annabel pulled away from the glass a little too quickly and ended up bumping her elbow with the person beside her. His drink sloshed on the counter. Annabel gasped and reached for the stack of napkins on her other side.

"I'm so sorry." Her eyes met a familiar set of dark eyes. She blinked several times and her face flushed. "Dax? What are you doing here?" She shot a look down at the spilled beverage, realizing just now that it couldn't be anything but ice water.

"I could ask you the same thing." His eyes shifted to her drink.

The heat in her face intensified. What was a guy who had been sober for over five years doing in a bar? She'd met him in AA a few years ago, and if she hadn't said his name maybe he would have forgotten who she was.

Dax leaned against the counter, resting his arm where the beverage had just been cleaned up. "What are you doing here,

Ann? This place isn't the best environment for someone in your situation."

She turned away from him, tempted to just grab her drink and move to a booth in the corner. Once upon a time she'd asked him if he'd be her sponsor. While he'd declined, he still attended a few of the meetings she'd gone to when she'd been on top of her sobriety.

"Ann," he repeated, "would you like to come to a meeting with me?"

Annabel shut her eyes tight. "What are you even doing in here?" she snapped. "Clearly you shouldn't be here either."

"No, I shouldn't. I saw you come inside, and I figured you could use some help." He gestured toward her untouched drink. "I'm not sure, but it sure looks like you've realized you don't want to drink that."

"I wasn't planning on it," she muttered. "I just... I don't know... I needed something familiar."

"And a meeting wasn't good enough because..."

"Will you stop judging me? I didn't ask you to follow me in here, and I didn't call my sponsor for a reason. I'm trying to figure things out on my own."

Dax didn't make another sound, but he did climb up onto the stool beside her.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I'm taking a seat."

She let out a groan. "If you think watching me is going to stop me from taking a drink, you're wrong."

He pursed his lips and shifted on his stool. "I don't think anything. I just know that getting five years sober doesn't happen overnight."

Annabel snorted. "Yeah, it takes five years." She wasn't looking at him, but she could tell he was smiling. For the most part, Dax was a stranger to her. The longest conversation they'd had was the first day they'd met. Since then, it had been

smiles in passing. It had been so long since she'd been to a meeting, he really should have forgotten all about her.

Against her better judgment, she peeked at him out of the corner of her eye.

“So, what brought you here?” he asked.

“I don't think that's any of your business.”

He shrugged. “Probably not. What I do know is that when someone needs help, I'm going to do what I can. So, if you don't want to talk about what you're struggling with, that's fine. I'll stay here as long as it takes until you're ready to go.”

“And what if I plan on staying here for the next five hours?”

He pulled up his wrist and glanced at his watch. “Then I guess I'll have to call my wife and let her know I'll be home late.”

Annabel's jaw tightened. She had come here to be alone. She'd wanted to work through the frustration she had over losing herself. Most of all she wanted to get to a place where she felt she had control over her own life.

Her shoulders slumped and she heaved a sigh. “Fine. Whatever. I'll leave.”

“There's a meeting over at the church that starts in about ten minutes.”

Annabel scowled at him, but it didn't last long. She'd never been one to say fate played a role in anything regarding her life. If that were true, then she would have to accept that being abandoned by her parents was also meant to be.

But sitting here next to the one person who seemed to actually care about her—scars and all—definitely felt like destiny. A tear slipped from her eye and dragged down her cheek. Annabel brushed at it with her knuckle, then gathered her things.

Dax held up a finger to wave over the bartender. He picked up the receipt she brought over, then tossed down a ten. When

Annabel glanced toward him again, he nodded toward the door. "Come on. I'll drive."

*Dalton*

Everything was colder now. No matter how hard Dalton tried, he couldn't warm up. He blamed it on the weather because dwelling on what Annabel had said wasn't a good enough reason for him to mope.

He refused to accept that anything she'd said was correct. He wasn't trying to fix her. Everything he'd done, he'd done to help her. Why couldn't she see that? Right now, he was too upset to hunt her down and force her to accept that he was just trying to love her.

Annabel needed her space. After a few weeks, maybe he'd be able to apologize for his outburst. Once she found herself, he'd get her forgiveness and they could move forward.

For now, he'd get through the holidays the same way he always did—by keeping busy. This year would be a bit different than others, though. He didn't have to deal with Darcy's shenanigans, he had a job that required more of his attention, and he had to care not for one person but for two.

All of that should help him get to a point where he could forget about Annabel and his bad decision to let her back into his life.

What was he thinking? He didn't let her in his life. He practically dragged her back into it. The position he was in was all his fault. At this point in time, he almost wished he

could just give this all up and head back to the city. It would be better than the frequent reminders of Annabel everywhere he looked.

Even now on the farm, he couldn't do one chore where he didn't feel her presence. She'd helped out so much over the past few months and he had taken that for granted.

Dalton needed to clear his head. He needed to get some closure from this breakup and the only way he could think of to do that was to head out on a ride.

The temperatures had dropped into the low thirties. Every time he breathed in, the hairs on his face and in his nose stiffened. The frigid air slapped at his face as he pushed his horse faster little by little. The sky was overcast, but it had been that way since the beginning of the week. There was a threat of snow but so far not one single flake had drifted to the ground. All the snow they currently had was dumped earlier in the month.

Winter used to be his favorite time of year despite how cold it got. There was just something about living in the middle of Colorado when it was covered in a layer of snow—like the area was wiped clean once a year. That clean slate feeling was definitely something he could appreciate—especially after helping so many people better themselves over the years.

Annabel needed it too.

For Pete's sake.

Why did every thought he had always come back to Annabel? Wasn't his life interesting enough that he could avoid thinking about her for even one day? The scenery around him could be admired. The callouses in his hands could draw his focus. Even the mundane work of shoveling out the stalls would be better than dwelling on what he'd lost.

And yet, she was *still* there.

Losing Darcy hadn't even hit him as hard as this breakup. If he could have gotten away with it, he might have locked



himself up in his home, pulled down all the blinds, and wallowed.

After about twenty minutes of riding, his body ached, and his skin was chapped. The glistening snow, the partially covered pines, even the evidence of winter wildlife wasn't enough to put him in a better mood. Dalton just had to accept the fact that his life was going to change in a way he didn't want it to.

He spent the next hour caring for the horse and making sure she was cleaned up after their run. Then he straightened up the barn that was already in pretty good shape. The one thing he didn't want to do was go inside where his father was.

Dalton knew that if he had to confront his father, then everything would come to a head. He was angry with Ned for doing what he had—for inserting himself into Dalton's life and messing everything up.

None of this would have happened if it weren't for his father.

The problem was, Dalton couldn't hide away forever in the barn. His son was out of school for the week and Henry was likely wondering what had happened. There had been no questions regarding Annabel or why they hadn't gone to town to pick out that star yet. Something told Dalton that his son was simply too intuitive. Despite his young age, he was very capable of picking up on issues like this one.

Dalton stood at the base of the porch and stared up at the house. The last conversation he'd had with his father had been an argument. Dalton had tried to set his father straight when it came to how he felt about Annabel, and it had ended poorly.

More than poorly, it had ended so that he had refused to speak to him since. And now that Annabel was out of the picture, he could see only one outcome.

His father was going to rub it in his face.

Dalton heaved a sigh and trudged up the three steps, then entered the house. He could hear the radio playing Christmas music, and somewhere in the house a candle must have been

burning because it smelled like cinnamon and vanilla, but he knew his father wasn't going to be cooking anything that would smell like that.

It would be supper time soon and seeing as his father was only a master at freezer meals, Dalton had to pull something together. He moved through the house silently and headed straight for the kitchen.

Thankfully it was empty—much like the way his life felt at the moment.

The Christmas music was quieter back here, muffled and almost soothing. Dalton pulled open the fridge to go hunting through it, only to find that there wasn't much he could put together without heading to the store. Just as he'd expected, he found some TV dinners in the freezer.

Dalton sighed, his frustration growing.

Why was it when he felt like he'd been knocked down, stuff continued to beat into him? He'd thought coming to Copper Creek would have been all he needed to feel like his life was coming together.

Well, he couldn't be more wrong.

"You should probably shut that freezer before the contents defrost."

Dalton's eyes returned to focus as he realized he was still standing in front of an open refrigerator. He scowled, letting the freezer door shut. "I don't think there's much we can eat for dinner. I'm going to have to head out and pick something up."

"What are you talking about?" his father argued. "There's plenty to eat. Didn't you see how full the freezer is?"

"I'm not feeding Henry any of that stuff."

His dad chuckled. "That kid would eat anything you put in front of him. He's a Quaid, isn't he?"

Dalton shook his head. "That stuff might be fine when we're in a hurry or we don't have other options, but the stores

are still open, and I'd prefer him to eat something not filled with preservatives.”

“Oh, relax. When did you get to be such a health nut? It's fine. Just pull out three of them TV trays and we can watch a show.”

Normally, this conversation wouldn't bother Dalton. It was the way he'd grown up, especially after his mother passed. But there was something that seemed to grate against him when he thought about letting Henry fall into the same patterns.

When Darcy was home, they had meals at the table as a family. When he let Annabel come over, they shared their meals there, too.

Somehow it didn't feel right to sit on a couch and watch a football game with flash frozen meals.

“He's my son and I'm going to raise him better.”

That got his father's attention. Ned's easy-going stance stiffened, and Dalton could have sworn he rose a full two inches. “Excuse me?”

“I'm not going to let Henry think that a family is only a few people staying in the same house together. A family is where people support each other. They lift each other up. They want what's best for one another no matter how much they might disagree with their decisions.” There was a bite to Dalton's tone now, and he could tell his father noticed.

Ned stared at him, not moving except for the slight narrowing of his eyes. “I raised you right, son.”

“I didn't say otherwise.”

“I did my best. And if you don't like how I live my life right now, then you can leave. I don't need you.”

“I'm not talking about that,” Dalton growled. “I'm talking about Annabel. Guess what? She broke up with me. I don't know how you did it, or what you said, but it made an impact. I hope you're happy now. I hope you realize what you've done to me... to your grandson. We loved her.”

Dalton hated the way his voice broke on that last sentence. He hated how vulnerable he felt, standing in front of his dad telling him what had occurred. But most of all, he hated that he felt he didn't have any control over the situation.

Ned's brows lifted, then his eyes darkened, and he took a limping step forward. "I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did. You practically told her you don't approve of us being together."

"I don't trust her. It's different. I'm sure she's capable of change. Your mother was. All I was trying to do was keep you safe."

"Well, you're not doing such a great job of it anymore. She was the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, and you scared her away."

His father shook his head. "There's nothing I could have done to keep you two together or tear you two apart. If you didn't work out, it was due to your own lack of commitment. If I had to make a guess, I would probably say Annabel simply wasn't ready for the relationship you two had. Let me tell you something, son. Folks who get married don't stay together because they love each other."

"That's the stupidest thing I have ever heard."

"I'm not finished."

Dalton snapped his mouth shut.

"They don't stick it out because of love. How many times do people get divorced while admitting they still love the other person? I'd wager a good high percentage. If love was enough to keep a marriage going, then the rate of divorce would be lower than it is. People stay married because they're not afraid of the work it takes. They know that love is *hard*. It's harder than going to a nine-to-five job. It's harder than committing to a workout regimen or a diet. Loving a person takes so much out of you that you feel like you could turn into a shell of yourself if you're not careful. Annabel probably realized that she wasn't cut out to be in a relationship. That doesn't mean she won't be ready one day. That just means she needs to get

her priorities straight and if that means going to her AA meetings without anyone cheering her on, then so be it. You can't change her. You never could."

"I wasn't trying to change her," he stammered.

Ned held up a hand. "You were holding her hand so she couldn't find her way on her own. Eventually she has to decide what she wants and what she's willing to do to get it. I think her breaking up with you has got to be the bravest thing she's done so far."

"Yeah?" Dalton spat. "Why's that? Because you didn't want us to be together?"

"No. Because you two were clearly head over heels for each other."

Dalton stiffened. His heart constricted in his already tight chest. "Then shouldn't we have tried harder to stay together?"

"Haven't you been listening to me? Let her find her own courage and her own strength so she has something to bring to the table. If she uses you as a crutch, she's going to have a harder time standing on her own. Give her the chance to do that."

For the first time in a long time, Dalton was speechless. His father had never been one to give speeches, just make silent judgments. And here he was, putting everything into perspective.

Dalton didn't have the words or thoughts to do anything but stare at his father. They stood like that for what felt like an eternity before Ned motioned to the freezer. "Get us a few meals and tomorrow we can go to the store for something *real*. It's like I said. Sometimes we need an easy night."

*Annabel*

“*A*re you sure?”

Annabel looked up into Dove’s concerned blue eyes and nodded.

“It’s just that I can’t remember the last time you were a brunette.”

Annabel let out a nervous laugh and glanced at herself in the mirror. She had been coming to Shear Genius Salon since she was a teenager. The second she’d gotten enough money to bleach her hair, she jumped for it and never went back. “That’s because I’ve hated my brown hair since I was a teenager.”

“I know.” Dove lifted some of her blonde locks in between her fingers. “I’ve been dying your hair for the last ten years. Do you remember when I tried to convince you to dye it back to your original color four years ago?”

Annabel grimaced. “Yeah?”

“And what did you tell me?”

She looked away. “I said I would rather *not* look like a scruffy stray that was abandoned behind the dumpster out back of Sal’s Diner.”

Dove snorted. “Exactly. So, I’m going to ask you again. Are you sure you want me to dye it back to your natural color?”

It's gonna take a lot of work to get it just right and it will take even more time to get it blonde again if you decide you hate it."

Annabel stared at her reflection once more. The blonde was synonymous with the life she'd led that she abhorred. She'd made so many mistakes over the years with that blonde hair, and now she could only see those blunders when she looked at her reflection.

She glanced down at the tattoo on her wrist—the one she and Dalton had gotten together when they dated in high school. That seemed so long ago. At least she didn't regret this symbol. It was the one thing she was happy to keep from her past.

Nodding resolutely, she let her eyes flit up to meet Dove's in the mirror. "I don't want to be this girl anymore. I'm turning over a new leaf. New me, new hair, new everything."

Dove leaned down until her chin was nearly resting on Annabel's shoulders. "I want you to know that I love you just the way you are."

Those words hit harder today, and Annabel knew immediately why. She nodded and looked away. "I know."

"But I can also understand why you want to change your hair. There's something freeing about doing something drastic like this. Would you like me to cut off a few inches?"

Annabel shook her head. "No. I would like to keep as much of the length as I can. But maybe we could do some bangs?"

Dove wrinkled her nose, causing Annabel to laugh. "Okay, no bangs."

"How about something long that you can sweep to the side?" Dove tilted her head, a small smile touching her lips as she studied Annabel for a moment longer. "Yes, that would look great with the darker hair, I think."

"Then let's do it."

Hours in a chair at the salon, followed by a quick stop at the boutique clothing store, and Annabel was already feeling a little better. Her heart still burned with the pain of losing Dalton and the future she might have had with him, but she knew better than to stick around when it was only going to prevent her growth.

If her run-in with Dax had taught her anything, it's that she needed to stop leaning so heavily on others. They were there to support, not to drag her to where she wanted to be. She had to do the work first.

She adjusted the bag in her hand as she headed down the sidewalk toward the coffee shop. Scarlett had all but pleaded with her to get a coffee after her hair appointment so they could finalize a few things for the wedding—mostly maid of honor stuff.

There was a bachelorette party to plan, a rehearsal dinner, and the wedding itself. Annabel's dress hadn't arrived yet and Scarlett was worried it wouldn't fit.

While seeing Scarlett was the last thing Annabel wanted to do—especially since she still didn't love the idea of her brother getting married to her best friend—Annabel had conceded. She hadn't been a good friend lately. This was one more issue she was going to fix on her way to becoming a better person.

Annabel arrived at the coffee shop a little early and Scarlett hadn't shown up yet. There was no telling how Scarlett would react to the changes Annabel had made, a fact that only added to Annabel's nerves.

She took a seat at a table, having already ordered a drink for each of them, then she sat back and waited—though she didn't have to wait very long. Within about five minutes of being seated, the door opened and a frazzled-looking Scarlett burst in. Her eyes swept through the small shop until they rested on Annabel. Shock registered first, then a wide smile split her face and she hurried forward.

“What did you do to your hair?” Scarlett reached out and picked up a brown curl that rested on Annabel's shoulder.



“This is your natural color, right?”

Annabel nodded.

“What? Why?” She laughed. “I really like it!”

Annabel nudged Scarlett’s coffee cup forward. “Here. I got this for you.”

Scarlett tore her eyes from Annabel to the cup and then her focus bounced back to Annabel. “I feel like it’s been forever since we’ve hung out. Everything has been so crazy lately.”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry! It’s totally fine. You look... good. Dalton must be just what you needed in your life.”

Annabel flushed, her eyes dropping to her own cup.

“Didn’t I tell you that we had it all wrong? We needed to accept that being lonely is no way to live.” Scarlett grew quiet, then leaned forward and took Annabel’s hand in hers. “What’s the matter?”

Shaking her head, Annabel swallowed back a sob that threatened to escape. Scarlett was right. Being alone was no way to live, but Annabel wasn’t prepared to take that relationship step and the realization of that fact was more devastating than she’d been prepared to admit.

“Annabel, what is it? Did something happen?” Scarlett’s voice lowered. “Did you relapse again?”

Her head snapped up and she stared at her friend. Her eyes burned but no tears had been shed yet. “Actually, no. Not that I wasn’t tempted. But I’ve actually been doing better lately.”

“Is Dalton helping you?”

Annabel’s stomach roiled. “We’ve broken up.”

Scarlett’s eyes drilled into Annabel’s, and she sucked in a sharp breath. “But I thought you were doing so well together. I thought—”

“There are a lot of reasons, and they’re probably all ridiculous—”

“You don’t have to make any excuses. I get it.”

Annabel must have given her one of those looks she gave when she didn’t believe a thing the person was saying. She hadn’t meant to, but sometimes her inner nature shined through.

Scarlett gave her a chagrined look before breaking eye contact. “Okay, I don’t understand everything you’ve had to go through. But I’m your friend and I’m here for you no matter what.”

“Thank you.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Annabel hesitated. She wanted to tell Scarlett everything, but there was a small part of her that was absolutely terrified her friend would end up judging her anyway. She might not say anything, but Annabel would be able to tell.

She took a deep breath and then released it as she reminded herself that Scarlett was still her friend. Getting better meant being honest with those who could support her and weeding out those who couldn’t. Annabel nodded, then settled back in her seat.

“I guess Dalton’s father doesn’t have the highest opinion of me.”

Scarlett huffed. “Well, it’s a good thing you weren’t dating him, right? What did Dalton think about that?”

“I guess he did everything right. He told Ned that he needed to butt out of our relationship.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? We’re supposed to cleave unto our spouses, right? Leave our parents out of our relationships?” Scarlett scooted closer and her voice lowered. “Besides, as much as I love my dad, I sorta like the fact that I don’t have to deal with your folks.” She blushed. “I hope that doesn’t sound terrible.”

Annabel waved off her concern. “I don’t think I would want to deal with my folks either. It’s been so long, I don’t

think I would even recognize them if they showed up here anyway.”

“So then you’re good. As long as Dalton supports you, then you would have been fine. What other issues made you think you couldn’t work it out?”

This was the hard part. Somehow, she knew Scarlett would disagree with Annabel’s decision to break it off because she was also a support to Annabel.

When Scarlett’s pointed gaze didn’t leave Annabel’s face, Annabel knew she’d have to tell her friend. They were mending bridges, after all. “He was treating me like a project.”

Scarlett frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Everything he said to me had to do with how well I was doing. That I wasn’t backtracking. And that he was *proud* of me.” Annabel wrinkled her nose. “Can you believe that? Proud. That’s something you tell a child, not the person you are in love with.” Annabel glanced over in Scarlett’s direction, and her stomach dropped.

Scarlett’s eyes were more *sad* than anything else. Her lips were pulled to the side, pursed in thought.

“What?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s kinda sweet. He was encouraging you, showing you that he noticed your efforts. You can’t expect him to know how to phrase that, or how to give you the kind of praise you need. I mean, I know you would rather go out celebrating—or even ignore it altogether, but Dalton just recently came back into your life.”

“You don’t understand. It’s more than that. He wasn’t just praising me. Did you know he used to work with people in my position? He’d help them through their addictions too. And that was what he was doing with me. He didn’t see me as the woman of his dreams. He saw me as someone who needed to be fixed and I just couldn’t look at him every day and feel like he was just expecting me to mess up.” She was breathing rapidly now. All of this pent-up frustration was breaking loose

and all Annabel wanted was for her friend to validate how she was feeling.

Scarlett reached forward and squeezed her hand again. “I can understand that. Really.”

Annabel’s heart slowed slightly.

“You wanted to be seen as someone strong and someone who was deserving of his love.”

“*Exactly*,” she huffed.

“And instead, you felt judged.”

“*Exactly*,” she said softer this time.

“Seems to me, you needed to clear your head a bit—to find a way for you to be happy with who you were before you could find happiness with someone else.”

“Yeah,” Annabel whispered.

“And it looks like you’re doing it.”

Annabel blinked. “Yeah, I am.” She smiled for the first time since she sat down with Scarlett. “I really am.”

Scarlett squeezed her hand again. “I promise I won’t tell you I’m proud of you.”

Annabel laughed. While it felt somewhat strained, it did relieve a lot of the pent-up stress she’d been holding onto.

“And maybe you can tell me what else you’re doing to find yourself again.”

“Deal.”

“Then after that, we can talk about the wedding.”

Annabel grimaced and then peeked at her friend through one eye. “I’m really sorry I’ve been MIA lately. I could give you a thousand excuses, but I’m trying to be better.”

“You don’t have to explain anything. I’m just glad that you’re still going to be there for me on my special day. Besides, I haven’t really been all that present either.”

“You’ve been planning a wedding! No one expected you to be checking in on me.” Annabel offered her friend a small smile. “But maybe we can both promise to check in a little more often. I’m guessing you’re going to need me a lot over the next few months as you get used to living with Elijah.” She made a face. “I love him, but even I have to admit there are things about him that could drive Gandhi insane.”

Scarlett’s laugh drew the curious looks from several guests enjoying their coffee nearby. She ducked her head and laughed again. “You really know how to give a girl doubts before the big day, don’t you?”

Annabel snickered. “Don’t tell me I didn’t warn you.” Then she grew serious. “But really, I think you two will be great together. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so head-over-heels in love before.”

Scarlett grinned. “I’m a pretty lucky girl.”

*Dalton*

“*W*hen are we going to see Annabel again? She hasn’t been here for a long time.”

While in the process of putting a mug into the cupboard, Dalton’s hand paused. He’d been expecting this to happen. Henry hadn’t asked about Annabel since after they were supposed to go to town together. He’d expected his son to be more curious.

“Dad?”

Unsettled, Dalton put the mug on the shelf before turning around. “I don’t think we’ll be seeing much of Annabel anymore.”

His son frowned. “Why not?”

“Because she’s busy. Now that we’ve got a good handle on things here, Annabel is going to focus on the work she can do with her family.”

Henry continued to scowl. “But I miss her. She can still come to visit sometimes, can’t she?”

His heart twisted. As much as he knew they needed to have this conversation, Dalton wasn’t ready for it. “I don’t think so, buddy. I would guess she’s going to just get busier and busier with her brother’s wedding and the holidays coming up.”

His son straightened in his seat. “Do you think we can see her on Christmas Eve? Or Christmas?”

Dalton shook his head. “I don’t—”

“I want to get her a present.”

“What?”

“I want to get Annabel a present. Can you help me?”

What was he supposed to say to that? His son wanted to do something kind and thoughtful. To stand in his son’s way felt wrong—even if the kind act was for someone he wasn’t sure he could see face to face.

“Dad?”

He focused on his son again. “You want to get her a present?”

“A Christmas present,” Henry confirmed. “Something really good.”

Dalton groaned inwardly. “What did you have in mind?”

“I dunno. What do you think would be a good idea?”

This was exactly why Dalton didn’t want to get into this. To come up with a gift idea for Annabel would be painful—he’d have to start thinking about her again. In doing so, all the pain and frustration would return to the surface. He’d start missing her again. He’d want to see her. Shoot, he’d probably get it in his head that he had to do something to win her back.

“I think maybe we should give her some space,” he finally said.

Henry scrunched up his face in the way he did when he couldn’t figure out how to do a certain math problem. He tilted his head and climbed down from the stool behind the kitchen counter. “Why does she need some space? I thought we spend time with the people we care about at Christmas.”

“We spend time with family and friends, buddy.” Dalton wanted to turn away from his son, focus on the dishes in front of him. He didn’t want to have to explain to his son what had happened between himself and Annabel. Nothing could have

been worse than doing that in this exact moment. How could he help his son understand when Dalton hadn't come to grips with it himself?

"But Annabel is our friend, isn't she?"

He flinched. "Yes," he mumbled, "she's a friend."

"Then we should be able to spend time with her and give her a Christmas present. Right?"

"We should," Dalton responded, not meeting his son's inquisitive gaze. "I mean, we could. But sometimes when friends don't want to spend time with you, that's when you let them have some space."

"Annabel doesn't want to spend time with me?" Henry frowned. "Why? Doesn't she still like us?"

Dalton sighed. This was backfiring even worse than he thought it would. "I'm sure she still likes us just fine."

"Then why would she need a break? Did you make her mad?" His eyes rounded. "Did she make *you* mad?"

"You know what? Fine. We can go to town and find a Christmas present for you to give her." Dalton hated to give in, but it was the only way to distract his son from asking all the hard questions.

Thankfully, his idea worked like a charm. Henry's smile returned as if they hadn't had the conversation about Annabel needing space in the first place. He hurried over to his stool and climbed back into his seat to continue with his coloring. "I think she'd like some new boots."

Dalton spun around to face his son, once again thrown off by what he was saying. "Why do you say that?"

"Because."

"Did she say she wanted new boots?"

Henry shook his head. "No, but I saw them. They're old and dirty. And you got her that nice new coat. I bet her feet are cold, too." He glanced up from his paper. "Can we get her some new boots?"



“I...” Dalton pushed his back against the refrigerator. “I don’t know her shoe size.”

“I bet we could figure it out.”

No one would understand just how much Dalton wanted to convince his son that this was a bad idea. But looking into his kid’s eyes, he knew better. Henry had made up his mind. He pulled the hand towel from his shoulder and tossed it onto the counter. “Okay, then let’s do it. Get your shoes. I’ll see who we can call to get that information, and worst case, we’ll save the receipt.”

Henry beamed. “Right now? We get to go to the store right now?”

“What did you think I meant when I told you to get your shoes?”

He jumped down from the stool and took off through the house toward his room, leaving Dalton to go over his life choices. This wasn’t one he’d think of fondly. In fact, it would probably top the charts for one he’d regret. The pain of losing Annabel was still too fresh. But part of being a good dad was making sure to do right by his son no matter how much it hurt.

After a couple calls, he was able to track down Scarlett’s number. Henry sat in the back seat of his truck as they waited outside the store where they could pick out a good pair of boots, and Dalton stared at the number on his phone.

He hadn’t really been in close contact with Scarlett. He had no idea what Annabel might have told her about their relationship. And he wasn’t sure she would be thrilled to hear from him. If Annabel had said anything bad about their breakup, he might be in for a lecture or worse.

Dalton glanced in the rearview mirror at his son who squirmed in his seat. Their eyes met and Henry grinned. “When are you gonna call her?”

“Right now, kiddo.”

“What’s taking so long?”

Henry was right. He just needed to get it done and over with so he could move on from this point in his life. Dalton took a deep breath and then tapped the contact number before placing his phone to his ear.

The phone rang, then rang some more. Maybe she wouldn't pick up. Then he could tell Henry to come up with a backup plan. They could figure out something else and call it good. Like a scarf, or a new hat.

"Hello?"

"Scarlett?" he rasped.

"Yes?" There was a pause. "Dalton? Is that you?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat some more. "It's me."

"What are you—is everything okay?" Scarlett's confusion was understandable. She probably wouldn't have expected a call from him even if he was still dating Annabel. And now that they had broken up, there was no reason for him to reach out.

"Everything is fine," he insisted, his gaze darting once more to his happy son. "I—actually, it's my son Henry who's needing a little help..."

"What do you need help with?"

"I—we—*he* wanted to get Annabel something for Christmas."

Another pause that lasted far too long for comfort.

"They got kinda close over the last couple weeks. And he really wants to get her some new boots."

"Ah, that's so sweet. How old is he now?"

"He's six."

"Ah," she murmured again. "So why did you need to call me?"

"You..." One more look at his son. This was for him, not for Annabel. Though he wasn't against doing something nice for her. He still loved her. And a part of him would always

love her. His chest tightened and his breathing accelerated. “You know her shoe size. That’s why we called.”

“Oh! Of course. She’s a size eight. But if it runs small, you’ll want to go up a size.”

He swallowed down the emotion that had come with the confirmation of his feelings for Annabel. “Thanks, Scarlett. We really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

Dalton nearly hung up, but then he stopped himself. “Scarlett?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you... not mention this to Annabel? Henry wants it to be a surprise.”

In the back seat, Henry nodded vigorously.

“You can tell that cutie that I’ll keep your secret.”

“It’s not my—”

“*Dalton.*” She waited for a moment. “We both know you’re not being entirely honest about that.”

“No—”

“It’s okay.”

He clamped his mouth shut.

Scarlett was quiet again for so long that Dalton thought she might have hung up. Then she spoke softly. “Just give her some time, okay? She’ll...” Scarlett sighed. “Just give her some time.”

“Yeah, okay,” he murmured. “Thanks, Scarlett.”

After picking out a pair of boots that Dalton had approved, they headed back home. It was dark by the time they got back, and Dalton had to carry Henry to his bed. The moment his son was tucked in, there was a knock at the door.

Dalton poked his head into the hall. Had he imagined it?

Another knock.

Dalton hurried toward the front door and quickly pulled it open.

His breath caught and he froze in his place. Never in a million years would he have ever predicted this moment to happen. Covered in a dusting of snow from the light snowfall behind her, stood his ex-wife.

“Darcy,” he mumbled, “what are you doing here?”

“Hi, Dalton.” Darcy offered him a small smile. “Sorry to pop in on you like this, but I wanted to see you—and Henry.” She peeked around him. “Is he still awake?”

Dalton shifted to block her from entering. “He just went to bed.” Dalton frowned, folding his arms. “What are you doing here?” he asked again. “We haven’t seen you in—”

“It’s been a long time, I know,” Darcy whispered. “But I wanted...” She looked away and then rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“So talk.” His defenses had shot up faster than they ever had. There was no reason why Darcy should be standing on his doorstep. He wasn’t even sure how she’d found out where he was staying.

She fidgeted. “Can I come in?” She took a step toward him, but again he blocked her. Darcy blinked a few times. “I wanted to apologize—for everything. I...” She swallowed hard. “I was hoping you’d give me another chance.”

Her words were like a slap in the face. How could she come here unannounced, asking him to give her a second chance? Couldn’t she see all the pain and suffering she’d caused him—and Henry, for that matter? His whole body tensed. On the other hand, what she was asking—it *could* be great. Not for him, but for Henry.

The longer he stared at her, the more he already knew the answer. As much as he wanted his son to have both his mother and father in the same home, he couldn’t do that. Dalton wouldn’t be happy. And there was no guarantee that Darcy wouldn’t just revert back to the person they had both known a few years ago.

Dalton shook his head. "I can't do that."

"What do you mean you can't?" There was some bite to her voice. "Is there someone else?"

Annabel's face flashed in the back of his mind. She was the one he loved. She was the one he wanted to be with for the rest of his life, no matter how long it took.

Time. That's what Scarlett had told him. He just needed to give Annabel some time.

Dalton nodded. "Actually, there is."

Darcy scowled. "Who is she?"

"I don't think that matters," Dalton sighed wearily. "You lost the right to know who I spend my time with when you left our family."

"I'm still Henry's mother and I should know who he's spending time with."

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, you relinquished that right when you signed away custody."

"That doesn't mean I can't get it back."

He knew her too well. That was just an empty threat. By the time she found out how much work it would take to get partial custody, she'd lose interest. He almost pitied her. A mother should want to spend time with her son because of love, not because she wanted to manipulate his father. "Do what you want, Darcy. You're not staying here. There are some good places in town, and if you'd like to rekindle your relationship with your son, I won't stand in your way."

She stomped her foot. "You're being unreasonable."

"Maybe. But maybe I've learned to see through the mask you wear. It's getting late and I'm going to head to bed. I'm not going to tell Henry you're here. I don't want him to be disappointed if you don't show up. So, do me a favor and message me or call before you stop by. Then I can let him know you're coming over."

Dalton stepped back into the house and pushed the door closed. He locked it for good measure, then leaned against it and forced his breathing to slow. Darcy's visit had only done one thing. It had solidified just how much he wanted Annabel in his life. He'd give her some space, then he'd try again.

He didn't want to live without her.

*Annabel*

*A*nnabel ducked into the shadows and stared at who could only be Darcy Quaid. What on earth was she doing, standing on Dalton's front porch? It was entirely possible that Dalton had called her to come visit for the holidays, and Annabel had no right to be jealous. Darcy was Henry's mother, after all. And her visit didn't mean Dalton wanted to get back together with her.

Not to mention, Annabel had only slipped over to the Quaid farm so she could drop off her gifts without being noticed. That was the reason for parking on the road. She hadn't wanted Dalton to catch her and ask her what her ulterior motives were.

She didn't have ulterior motives, but she wouldn't have put it past Dalton to suggest it. Her heart shattered and she closed her eyes. If Dalton wanted to see Darcy, then that meant one of two things. Annabel had hurt him enough to make him go running back to his ex, or he hadn't been as in love with her as he'd thought.

Her chest hurt. It wasn't the kind of ache from lack of oxygen; this was different. On top of feeling like the wind had been knocked out of her, it also felt like someone had reached their fist into her chest and yanked her heart from its cavity.

She clutched the two wrapped gifts and forced herself to gulp in several deep breaths. She couldn't stay or she might get caught.

Annabel hurried back the way she'd come, then stopped when she'd nearly made it to the truck. The gifts in her hands weighed heavily. She'd promised herself she'd drop them off. She'd told Scarlett she would build up the confidence to get them at least to the door.

Heaving a sigh, she spun around and headed for the house. Snow still fell around her. It was light and airy, and all she could think about was the time she'd gone skating with Dalton. Their little outing had felt like a lifetime ago.

And look at her now.

She was tromping through the snow, dropping off gifts for a person who probably wanted her to stay far, far away. Even though she knew she should be brushing it off, there was just something about seeing Darcy that made this whole experience sour.

Darcy wasn't on the front porch. She had probably been let in. What was Annabel thinking? Of course she was inside. Dalton wouldn't make her stay out in the cold.

Annabel was tempted to stomp up the steps and leave the gifts in a huff but thought better of it. She was on the right path, finally figuring out who she was and what she wanted to be. And throwing a temper tantrum wasn't it.

So, she slipped up the steps and placed the gifts in front of the door. Darcy would probably want to know who they were from, and Dalton would likely tell her even though Annabel hadn't left her name on them. Dalton had been present when she'd purchased the horse figurine. He'd know right away who had left it and that was enough for her.

She stood back, staring at the wrapped packages, a strange sort of feeling coming over her. She still loved Dalton. She always would. But she also knew that he needed someone in his life who could be his person. If Darcy was here, there was a good chance he'd found it.



It broke her heart, knowing she wasn't the one for him, but she could live with it. One day she'd find her own happily ever after.

The path back to the truck seemed harder to get through. Annabel didn't know what it was, but she felt like her feet dragged just a little slower. Every few minutes, she glanced back toward the house, even when it had disappeared from view.

Dalton was going to love finding those gifts.

She stopped.

But what if he didn't?

He wouldn't keep Henry's horse from him. She knew that much. But he might also not find her gift of ice-skating lessons as amusing as she had when she'd purchased them.

A smile touched her lips despite the cloud of disappointment that hung over her head. One day they'd be able to look past this moment in time and accept that they simply didn't work together. Timing had never been right. Something along those lines.

And one day she'd understand why.

Annabel climbed into the truck and immediately called Scarlett. Sitting in the frozen cold of the truck, she shivered as the phone rang. Small puffs of white came from her lips and when Scarlett answered, she didn't bother with formalities.

"She's back," Annabel barked, putting her phone on speaker and tossing it to the seat beside her.

"Who's back?" Scarlett demanded.

"Darcy."

"Who's Darcy?"

"You know, Darcy. Dalton's ex-wife."

Scarlett gasped. "You're kidding."

"I'm definitely not kidding." Annabel let her head bounce back against the headrest. "It was Darcy."

“How do you know?” Scarlett’s voice grew louder as if in solidarity. Scarlett might have been distracted lately, but she was still Annabel’s best friend.

“Because I saw her plain as day. She was standing on Dalton’s front porch talking to him. They seemed to be getting into a deep conversation.”

“Maybe she’s here to visit Henry.”

“Or maybe she’s here to beg Dalton to take her back.”

Scarlett sighed. “There’s no point in getting upset about it until you know for certain.”

Annabel groaned. “I’m not upset,” she insisted. “I just know what’s going on because if I were Darcy, that’s what I would do. I’d come crawling back after realizing just how hard it is in the dating world right now. There is a very short supply of good men out there.”

“Believe me, I know,” Scarlett murmured. “I count myself lucky every day that Elijah gets to hold me close.”

Annabel wrinkled her nose. “Ew, gross. No more of that, okay? He’s my brother.”

“Sorry.” Scarlett went quiet on her end.

“What do I do?” Annabel whispered.

“What do you want to do?”

She knew what she wanted, but she also knew it was impossible.

“Anna? What do you want to do?”

“I want to march right up to his house and tell him to wait for me. I want to tell him that I still love him and that I want us to be together. I just need to get a few more ducks in a row.”

“Then do it.”

Annabel snorted.

“I mean it. Go tell him how you feel.”

She shook her head even though Scarlett couldn’t see it. “I can’t break up a family. I refuse to be the person responsible

for making Henry not have his mother.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” The subtle bite in Scarlett’s voice returned. “That home was already broken.”

“That doesn’t mean I can go break it even more.” Annabel reached out and gripped the steering wheel hard. “I won’t do it.”

“I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, but you weren’t responsible for any of that. Darcy was the one who did all the damage. She can’t just walk away from her family and expect them to take her back after being gone for several years. I highly doubt that Dalton is willing to even consider that.”

“You don’t know how much he loves his son.”

“I can guess,” Scarlett argued. “But I also know how much he loves you.”

Annabel’s body flushed hot. “You don’t know that,” she muttered.

“Sure, I do. A guy like Dalton wears his heart on his sleeve and every time I saw you two together, I could tell.”

A shiver exploded down her spine.

“He needs to know how you feel, Annabel. It’s the only way to remedy this. And you might be surprised. What if Dalton hears you out and tells you he’s willing to wait? Wouldn’t that make you happy?”

“Of course it would. But that’s not the point.”

Her friend sighed. “Then what’s the point? May I remind you that you called me. You’re the one who wanted to talk about this. But everything I’ve said, you’ve shot down. So, I’ll ask you again. What do you want?”

The cold crept in on Annabel as each second ticked by. There were two sides of her that warred on this subject. The selfish side wanted to be with him no matter the cost. She wanted to tell him that Darcy didn’t deserve his affection or his forgiveness. She wanted to go steal his heart, no matter the consequences.

But those feelings didn't belong to the person who wanted to change for the better. The woman she was now wasn't the woman who had broken things off with him recently. She'd started attending meetings again, and she hadn't been tempted to go into a bar or a liquor store. And she was finding her way through the fog of self-worth and identity.

The new Annabel wanted one thing above all else. She wanted more than just to make herself happy.

Annabel 2.0 was better, more thoughtful, and selfless.

"I want Dalton and Henry to be happy."

"Then go to him. You make them happy. Bam, you have your answer."

She shook her head again. "You misunderstand, Scarlett. I'm not the best fit right now and I might not ever be such a thing. If Dalton is seeing Darcy again, there's a reason. And if I have to finally let go and step back so she can take that place in his life, then I have to do it. My life isn't and should have never been dependent on him or anyone else."

Scarlett had grown quiet. Annabel almost thought she'd fallen asleep, but then she heard a snuffle. "I can't believe how much you've grown since I've come back."

Annabel rolled her eyes. "Please don't get sappy on me. I'm not trying to become a saint, you know. I'm just trying to be the best version of myself."

"And don't you think that Dalton deserves to know what he would be missing out on if he didn't pick you?"

"Scarlett," Annabel warned, "I'm not going to have this argument with you. I've dropped off the presents like I promised you I would. They will get them by morning and then I won't have to worry about seeing them again until after the holidays—hopefully."

"While I can admire you for what you've said, I don't agree with it."

Annabel sighed, fighting off a smile. "You're sweet, but thankfully you and I are different people. We don't have to

agree on everything.”

“Will you just promise—”

“Nope. I’m not gonna promise anything anymore. At least I’m not promising anything to anyone else but myself... and maybe my future husband. I’m finally in a decent place. And I want to keep improving.”

“Fine.”

“Fine?” Annabel finally laughed. “What do you mean, fine?”

“Fine I won’t sabotage what you’re trying to accomplish. I can appreciate what you’re trying to do, what you don’t want to have happen, and leave you be.”

“Are you sure?”

“Promise.” There was a smile behind Scarlett’s words. Once again, Annabel felt a small degree of peace. These flickering moments helped her know she was on track. She’d made another good decision. And she was going to be rewarded because of it.

They weren’t obvious rewards. It wasn’t like God was placing gifts at her feet.

Nope, these rewards were smaller and more meaningful. They were the quiet moments when she might have normally had a craving for a drink, but it wasn’t hard to tell herself no. Or they were evenings when she was tired and would have usually made an excuse not to have to attend a meeting, but something would prod her to go. She had an attendance streak going and she found she was actually enjoying the meetings now.

Annabel grabbed her phone. “Thank you, Scarlett. I really appreciate how you’re willing to listen to me even though you don’t agree with my opinions.”

“What are friends for? I will always be here for you. Always.”

“I know. Goodnight.”

“Night.”

*Dalton*

Dalton poured his morning coffee. The mug and steam warmed him, but it didn't fix the hole in his heart. The only one who could do that was himself. He needed to extend an olive branch if he wanted Annabel to know he was still interested.

He just didn't know how to do it.

To show up at her house with a present on Christmas and tell her that both he and Henry wanted to spend more time with her didn't seem like it would cut it. He needed something more.

Of course, he would apologize for saying what he'd said, and he'd promise to do better, but words didn't mean as much as action.

The kitchen walls were closing in on him, making him feel locked up. Outside, the snow continued to fall, but it was so light that only a couple inches had been added to the ground. Dalton headed toward the front door and stepped out onto the front porch. His foot collided with a small box, and he looked down to find it haphazardly wrapped with red and white paper. There was a card on top with his name on it.

Dalton scooped up the card and found Henry's name scrawled across the top of the gift, right on the wrapping paper. His gaze swept through the barely lit property, along the

trees, but didn't see anyone. There were no tire tracks, no footprints in the snow, absolutely no sign that someone had brought these gifts.

The card was cold enough to tell him it'd been out here all night, but he knew Darcy all too well to believe that she would be responsible for these gifts. She would have wanted the credit, to show off just how thoughtful she was—especially since she was asking for a second chance. This was definitely not from her.

Which made him believe there was only one plausible explanation.

Annabel.

His heart jumped and his eyes darted about again, praying that he might see evidence of her this morning. If his assumptions were correct, then she might have bumped into Darcy last night. He could only pray that wasn't the case. He needed to talk to Annabel about Darcy before she found out that Darcy was in town.

That wasn't even the biggest problem.

If Darcy did some digging, she was bound to find out who he was interested in. And if she learned about Annabel, there was no telling how she'd treat her. To her, Annabel was the only one who stood in the way of getting what she wanted.

Dalton crouched down and picked up the present, balancing it in his free hand while still holding his coffee in the other. He brought it inside and placed it beneath the Christmas tree with the other gifts. It wasn't likely that Henry would notice the new addition, which was a good thing considering that he would want to open it right away and he'd prefer to have his talk with Annabel before that happened. Somehow it seemed like it would be beneficial for Dalton to have a talk with Annabel about their future so he knew what he could say to his son.

Would they be giving Annabel some time? Or would they ease back into spending time with her again? Regardless of how much time Annabel needed, they would wait.





ONE DAY and an awkward visit from Darcy later, Dalton was itching to track Annabel down. He'd opted to keep his distance, doing exactly what Scarlett had suggested. But he couldn't stay away forever. Scarlett had invited him and Henry to a Christmas Eve party tonight.

Annabel was going to be there. He didn't have a single doubt about that.

Thankfully, Darcy wouldn't be invited to that event. If he could get Annabel alone for even a minute, he might have a chance to clear the air. First thing he'd do was tell her he was sorry. Then he'd beg her to give him another chance.

No, he wouldn't beg. He'd tell her that he wasn't going anywhere, and he would let her take the lead.

Bolstered by this frame of thinking, Dalton got Henry dressed and ready for the Christmas party. He wasn't entirely sure if Annabel knew that he would be there and he hoped she wouldn't make a scene.

Henry hugged the gift to his chest as he sat in the back seat of the truck. The grin that spread across his face was next level. The light in his eyes could only come from a kid who still had his innocence.

And the light was contagious.

Dalton could feel the excitement for the evening rush through him. It wasn't the Christmas music that played on the radio, or the snow that lined the streets. It wasn't the anticipation of presents that would be opened the following morning, or the traditional food he looked forward to every single year.

No, this particular brand of excitement could be completely contributed to seeing Annabel again. The anticipation was almost painful.

"Do you think she'll like them?"

He shot a quick look over his shoulder. “Yes, I think she’ll love them.”

“Really?” Henry squirmed in his seat. “Maybe I should have picked something else.”

Dalton chuckled. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Do you think she’d like a toy?”

He laughed again. “I don’t know. Maybe she would.”

Henry frowned. “Can we go to the store?”

“I’m sorry, buddy, we’re on our way to the party already. Maybe we can ask Annabel about it when we get there.”

Henry nodded, his smile slowly returning. “Okay.”

The rest of the drive to Scarlett’s farm, Dalton went over his plan in his head. This felt like his one shot to fix things. He refused to let what he had with Annabel slip through his fingers.

Trucks and cars filled every available space on the Perez property. Dalton pulled his truck to a stop and let his surprised gaze drift over the scene. He didn’t know how on earth Scarlett would manage to accommodate everyone who was here, but when he leaned to the side in his truck, he could see the party wasn’t located in the house. One of the barns had been decorated with Christmas lights on the outside. Light spilled from the interior, and music filtered from the building.

Henry unbuckled his seatbelt and peered out the window. “Is that where the party is?”

“I think so.”

“Where are we going to park?”

“You know what? I have no idea.”

Henry pointed to a truck that had pulled onto the property in front of them. “They parked in front of the house on the lawn.”

Dalton grimaced. “I don’t think they would want us to park there.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” He sighed, watching as another vehicle that came from behind them chose to do the same. “How about we find a place on the road, and we can walk. You wore your boots, right?”

“Yep.”

He pulled around, found a place to park, and then helped Henry out of the truck. Together they marched through the snow until they got to the shoveled path.

“Wow,” Henry exclaimed. “Do they throw this party every year?”

Dalton wouldn't have thought so. From what he remembered, Scarlett had been out of the country up until recently. “I'm not sure.”

His son skipped a few steps. “Do you think they'll do this every year?”

“Probably.”

This time Henry pulled against Dalton's hand, causing him to stop. “Can we come?”

Dalton glanced down at the hopeful expression on his son's face. “I think we could manage that.”

“Does that mean we get to stay?”

He scrutinized the boy this time. “Is that what you're worried about? That we're going to move?”

Henry lifted a shoulder. “We moved here. We might move again, right?”

Dalton crouched down in front of Henry, taking one hand in both of his. “I have no plans to move.”

“Not even if Annabel stays mad at you?” Henry's words were harder to swallow than Dalton anticipated. Henry was far more intuitive than Dalton had given him credit for.

“Even if Annabel stays mad,” Dalton confirmed.

“Okay.” Henry gave him a short nod.

“Okay,” Dalton murmured. He groaned as he got to his feet and stared off at the lit barn. “Okay,” he repeated. Hopefully speaking with Annabel would be as easy as his conversation with Henry.

They entered the barn and hovered near the door. At Dalton’s side, Henry drank everything in with wide eyes. His mouth hung open as he stared at the lights strung up on all sides of the barn. This barn wasn’t the one that held the animals. It was more of a storage space with a lot of available space to move around.

In one corner of the room was a Christmas tree that stretched high overhead. There were tables covered with deep green, satin tablecloths and poinsettias. A large, overstuffed chair near the Christmas tree had a sign nearby that said Santa would be visiting. From the smell of peppermint to the punch bowl filled with what could only be eggnog, the whole place looked like it had been pulled out of a Christmas book.

Several children were seated at a table doing crafts while their parents mingled together. Henry tugged on his coat sleeve, causing him to look down at him.

He shoved the present into Dalton’s hands. “Can I go play with them?”

Dalton nodded numbly. Being surrounded by the folks from the town where he’d grown up, he should have felt at home here. But the truth was he felt very much like an outsider. He really needed to jump into the community more.

Someone nudged him in the side, and he jumped.

Scarlett chuckled. “Didn’t mean to startle you.” She was hugging herself, watching the crowd of people she’d invited. “It’s crazy, huh?”

“What is?”

She gestured toward the crowd. “That these people are all so connected... and we’re...”

“Not?”

Scarlett shrugged. “I guess that’s our fault though. I’m really trying to get back to my roots. It’s harder than I thought it would be, but it helps that I’m doing stuff like this.” She turned to face him. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me too.” He itched to ask her where Annabel was but opted against it.

“At the house.”

“Hmm?”

“Annabel.” Scarlett smiled. “She’s refilling a few platters at the main house. If you go out back, you can track her down.”

“I wasn’t...”

Scarlett gave him a pointed look. “Just go talk to her, okay?” She gave him a little push in that direction. “This will all still be here when you get back.”

“Right,” he mumbled. Dalton only shot one final look over his shoulder toward the kid table before he slipped out the back door. The path had been cleared, making the walk a nice reprieve from the party going on in the barn.

The only problem was that the walk wasn’t nearly long enough.

He got to the door, left ajar and took a moment to breathe. Then he pushed it open all the way and stepped inside.

Annabel was the only one in the kitchen. Food covered the counters and platters were in the process of being filled. She worked quickly and efficiently. Just seeing her made his heart tremble.

“I’m not even close to being done. You said you’d give me twenty minutes.” She glanced over her shoulder and then froze. “Dalton.”

“Hi, Annabel.”

Her eyes darted to the exit, then swung back to meet his face. “What—”

He held up a hand. “I have something to say, and I need you to hear me out—let me say my piece and then you can do whatever you need to. You can tell me to leave and never speak to you again, that’s fine. But I warn you that it won’t change any of it.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

Dalton took a deep breath and then exhaled. He moved closer, slowly, until he was about three feet from her. “I love you.”

She didn’t move. Her eyes searched his and her cheeks got the barest hint of color in them.

“First of all, I need you to know that. I need you to accept it so that when I say the rest, you’ll remember it.”

She nodded.

He nodded too. “Okay. I want to apologize. I should have never snapped at you. Your feelings are valid—they always have been, and they always will be. I should have let you tell me how you felt and done something to make you feel heard. Like giving you time when you said you weren’t ready to be in a relationship. That being said, I know that you might falter in your goals, but I will always be here no matter what.” He took another step toward her. “Because I’m head over heels in love with you.”

*Annabel*

The only thing Annabel could think about was how much she wanted to believe what Dalton had said. After she'd caught him talking to his ex on his porch, her regrets had exploded.

Annabel didn't regret the decision she'd made to really find herself, but she'd regretted walking away from Dalton the way she had. A part of her heart had insisted that she'd gone about it all wrong. Couldn't she maintain her friendship with him *and* find her center?

It had only taken a few days without him in her life for her to realize just how wonderful her relationship with him had been. Having Dalton in her life was the best thing she'd ever had.

The worst part about the way things had ended was that she knew she'd overreacted. She'd planned on waiting until after Christmas to track him down and tell him that she just needed time to get her life more under control. Not that she wanted to completely have him out of her life. Now that they were standing in front of each other, her timeline had been moved up.

Annabel pressed her back against the counter where she'd been working and gripped the edge with her hands. She

worried her lower lip, racking her brain for how she could bring up the biggest concern she had.

“Annabel,” Dalton whispered, causing her head to whip up so she would meet his gaze. “You can say something now.” He inched closer still. “Please.”

Under one arm was a wrapped gift—something she only just noticed. Her eyes darted to it and lingered.

He continued as she stayed silent. “I know I said some hurtful things in the past, but I’m hoping you will look beyond that. I want to be with you no matter how long it takes.”

Her eyes darted upward to his face and she said, “Darcy.”

Dalton’s brows furrowed. “What?”

“I saw her. She’s back in town, huh?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Are you two...”

He stumbled forward, so fast she attempted to move away but the counter dug into her back. “I don’t know what she told you. Heck, I don’t know how she found out about us, but—”

“Wait a minute. She didn’t say anything,” Annabel cut in. “I saw you two together.” She blushed hot. “I... I guess I wanted to know that I wasn’t stepping into—” She shut her eyes tight. “I don’t want to get into the middle of you and Darcy if you two plan on reconciling.”

“Absolutely *not*.”

Her eyes widened slightly.

Dalton placed the gift on the counter and then tugged at her hands. He rubbed his thumbs over the backs of her hands and his voice softened. “Darcy showed up without warning. She didn’t call, and she didn’t ask if I wanted her to come. She just... appeared.”

Annabel watched him as he worked things over in his head. His jaw tightened, ticking side to side before he lifted his gaze to meet hers.



“I told her I wasn’t interested. Plain and simple. If she wants to spend time with Henry, I’m not going to stand in her way. But our relationship—she’s burned all the bridges for that one.”

“Are you sure?”

“I haven’t been more sure of anything in my whole life,” Dalton confirmed. “And I am willing to prove it to you every day from now until the end of time.”

She snorted. “Now you just sound sappy.”

Dalton brought her hands around the back of his neck, then slipped his arms around her waist. “Maybe I just know what I want.”

Annabel smiled. “I’m beginning to understand that.”

“Beginning?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Does this mean that we can... go back to where we were?”

Annabel pulled her pursed lips to the side. “I think that we can proceed with caution.”

He threw his head back and groaned. “Okay, I’ll take it.”

The laugh that spilled from her throat was just what she needed to feel the weight lift from her shoulders. “Good.”

“Does this mean that you’ll come over tomorrow morning? Henry has been asking about you. He got you something.” Dalton motioned to the gift.

“Did he, now?” Annabel lifted a brow.

“Don’t ask. He insisted on picking it out. I’m sure he would love to watch you open it, but I would understand if you can’t—”

“I’d love to.”

A slow smile tugged at his lips. “Really?”

“*Really.*” She placed a hand to his cheek. “I would love to spend Christmas with you,” she repeated. “Besides, I sorta

wanted to see his reaction to the gift I got him. He hasn't opened it yet, has he?"

"I knew that present was from you," Dalton said, dipping his face closer to hers. "And no, he hasn't opened it yet." His face was inches from her own. "I would really like to kiss you now."

She shook her head.

He stared at her with confusion, nearly drawing another laugh from her.

"Something's missing."

"Something's... missing?" he asked.

Annabel nodded, then pointed upward. "No mistletoe."

Dalton chuckled. He turned away from her, grabbed a sprig of spring lettuce and held it over his head. "How's this." He wiggled it for good measure.

She tossed back her head and laughed.

"Well?"

"You're ridiculous." She turned away from him but he grasped her wrist and spun her back toward him.

"I'm ridiculously in love with you."

"Fine." She laughed again. "Kiss me already."

Dalton tossed the lettuce aside and pulled her close against him. He brushed her hair from her face, then gently grazed his lips against hers. It was a whisper of a kiss at first, but then it quickly deepened, filled with every ounce of passion she was capable of. Dalton was the one who knew her better than she knew herself. He was the one who she couldn't stop thinking about.

But most of all, she wanted to be the best version of herself when she was near him.

She'd continue making the most of the second chance she'd been given. And what better time to start than Christmas Eve?



ANNABEL SAT CURLED up on the couch with a mug of coffee in her hands. She leaned into Dalton's warm form and let out a contented sigh. This was heaven and she'd finally found a way to fully appreciate it. Henry was on the floor, pulling out present after present from the tree.

Dalton's father sat in a rocking chair with his own coffee. Every so often he'd glance in her direction, but his expression seemed a little softer than it had been the last time she'd seen him. He appraised her with those eyes, as if he were looking for something specific. Well, he was going to be disappointed if he was expecting her to mess up so soon.

Annabel had never been in a better place. She attended meetings before she started feeling the stress weigh on her. The temptation to partake in alcohol had been nearly nonexistent. She couldn't definitively attribute those facts to the time she took for herself, but she liked to think that clearing her head had done wonders for finding herself.

She rested her cheek against Dalton's shoulder, letting herself get swept up in the Christmas cheer. Music played in the background and the left-over scents from their breakfast hung in the air. Henry picked up the box she'd wrapped and shook it.

Annabel smiled. "That one's from me." She turned her head slightly and whispered to Dalton, "Just watch. I'm gonna be right."

"About the Barbie thing?" he chuckled. "I doubt it."

"You know, once upon a time I had wanted that version."

"What version?"

She turned entirely to him. "I didn't have much growing up. We didn't get the big Christmases, or birthdays. Wade and I did our best to make sure the kids got at least one toy, but mostly we went digging in the dumpster for things the second-hand shops didn't want to sell. You know—stuff people

donated that might have had stains on it or puzzles that had missing pieces.” She flushed when a look of pity crossed his face. “It wasn’t all bad, you know. By the time Charlie got to be old enough to expect gifts from Santa, we’d gotten really good at it.”

“But you never got to have the Christmas you wanted.”

She turned her focus to Henry, who had just torn the last bit of paper from the box. “No, I didn’t get to have the Christmas most kids got. No Barbie dream house, no Corvette, no—”

“Horse!” Henry held the horse above his head. “It’s a horse, Dad! It looks so real.”

Annabel beamed at Dalton, her eyes saying, “I told you so,” but her smile proof that she was happy she’d gotten the right thing.

Dalton lifted his arm up and draped it around Annabel’s shoulder, pulling her close then pressing a kiss to her temple. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.” She sighed, her eyes drifting to Ned.

He gazed at her with an unreadable expression. He could be thinking anything at this moment. She wouldn’t even be surprised if he was judging her for the gift she’d picked out, though she couldn’t think of any reason why he might be upset about it. Then, out of nowhere, he gave her a short nod and a grim smile.

It was a start if she ever saw one. Ned might not like her, but he seemed to be accepting that she was here to stay. But in the grand scheme of things, none of that really mattered.

The only people who mattered right now were the ones she’d be sharing her future with.

Dalton and Henry.

The little boy bounced the horse along the carpet, making all kinds of horse noises. Then he stopped and stared up at her. “You haven’t opened my present yet.”

She pulled away from Dalton to place her mug on the coffee table. “You’re right. How about you hand it to me.”

Henry retrieved a box covered with festive Christmas trees and snowmen. He hurried toward her, nearly tripping over an empty cardboard box. Placing the gift in her lap, he hopped backward and then danced from foot to foot. “Are you gonna open it?”

She laughed. “Of course I am.” Her eyes darted back to meet Dalton’s and he smiled. Warmth started in her midsection and then spread to the rest of her body. She could feel the tingling sensation all the way to the top of her head. “Did you know that this is the first time someone has gotten me a Christmas present?”

Henry’s mouth fell open. “Really?”

“That can’t possibly be true.” Dalton shifted forward on the couch cushion.

She shook her head. “Like I told you. Wade and I—we were the ones who provided for my family. When everything was all said and done, there wasn’t much money left over for groceries, let alone a Christmas present.” Upon seeing their crestfallen faces, she had to force a laugh. “It’s okay. Really. Now I get to enjoy my presents even more.” She lifted the box that Henry had given her. “Like this one.”

Without further ado, she tore at the paper and then opened the shoe box, expecting to see a knickknack of some kind.

But she was wrong.

Inside the box were the prettiest boots she’d ever laid her eyes on. They were practical, of course, but the material they were made from was exquisite. Annabel traced her fingers along the stitching in awe for a moment before lifting her tear-brimmed eyes to Henry. “Your dad said you picked these out,” she whispered.

Henry looked more concerned than ever. “You don’t like them?”

“Oh no! I love them,” she assured him, reaching out to touch his arm. “They’re beautiful.”

“Then why are you crying?”

She let out a watery laugh and glanced once toward Dalton. “Because when a girl likes something very much, sometimes they can’t contain just how happy they are, and a little bit of that happiness spills out all over the place.”

He didn’t appear convinced.

Annabel reached out and pulled him in for a hug. “They’re the best present I could have asked for. Thank you so much.” After a hug that probably lasted a little too long, Henry extricated himself and hurried back to his spot in front of the tree to pass out the rest of the presents.

Dalton reached out and took her hand in his. He squeezed it gently, drawing her focus. Then he mouthed the words, “I love you,” before accepting the card that Henry was handing him.

“I love you, too,” she whispered. Her focus shifted to the card and she released another watery laugh, much to Dalton’s confusion. “Just open it,” she insisted.

When he did, he joined in on her laughter. Holding the card up, he showed his father and his son. “Looks like I have the next few months to take ice-skating lessons. *Someone* thinks I need a little more practice.” He turned his gaze on Annabel again, pulling her close in order to steal a kiss.

“Ew, gross,” Henry muttered, but when Annabel and Dalton broke apart, she noticed the small smile the boy wore.

“Better get used to it, kid,” Dalton murmured, pressing another kiss to Annabel’s cheek. “Because it’s gonna happen a lot more often.”

Henry glanced from Dalton to Annabel. “Does that mean you’re gonna be my new mom?”

Annabel stiffened, but surprisingly, Med was quickest to answer. “Maybe one day, kiddo. For now, she’s just going to be part of the family.”

She couldn’t ask for a better Christmas gift.

## EPILOGUE

*Dalton*

*Valentine's Day*

“*I*t’s the middle of February. Why are you putting up a Christmas tree?”

Dalton glanced over to where Lucas and Elijah were helping him set up. Lucas had been the one to ask the question, and he appeared less than thrilled to be roped into this little project.

“And since when do we even decorate for the holidays? It’s a Friday night. I should be hitting on chicks at the country club, not here making it look like it’s Christmas all over again.”

Elijah groaned, his eyes darting from his brother to Dalton and then back. “Will you stop your griping? This isn’t about you. It’s about Annabel and what she deserves.”

“What exactly does she deserve? You still haven’t told me what we’re doing.”

“That’s because you can’t keep a secret.”

“Yes, I can!” Lucas insisted. “I’m actually much better at it than you are. That’s for sure.”

Elijah rolled his eyes and Dalton bit back a smile. He'd enlisted Elijah's help and at some point, the older brother had roped his younger brother into it. The bickering alone was almost worth getting this set up at the Keagan residence rather than his own farm.

"You still owe me for volunteering my help out at the Perez farm."

Lucas groaned exaggeratedly. "Come on, that turned out better than you could have dreamed. Admit it, you got the better end of the deal anyway."

Dalton chuckled to himself as he tightened the last little bolt on the wooden dollhouse he'd built. Then he returned to his truck, letting the two brothers continue with their argument. It might not officially be Christmas, but it had taken him a couple months to get his idea put together.

It wasn't just a Barbie dream house he'd built. He'd built her a barn and gotten her a car and a horse. This whole idea was going to go off wonderfully, or Annabel was going to break up with him on principle.

When he returned to the porch, he started setting up the gifts, placing large bows on the objects he couldn't wrap and arranging everything so Annabel would see the setup the moment she got back from her meeting in...

"Hey, guys, you about done?" Dalton tore his eyes from his phone and stared at Elijah. "Her meeting is going to be done in about ten minutes. We're running out of time."

"We're all set," Elijah confirmed. "And Scarlett's keeping watch outside of the building so she can let us know when Annabel's on her way." Suddenly he stilled and pulled his phone from his pocket. "Shoot! They got out early. Time to get this extra stuff out of here." He shoved an armful of lights at his brother. "Put these in the barn. We need to make ourselves scarce."

"You still haven't told me—"

"He's gonna propose, you idiot. Why else would a guy go through all this trouble?"



Lucas froze. Then he turned wide eyes on Dalton before he let out a boisterous laugh. “Oh, man! Good luck, Quaid. You’re gonna need it.” He headed down the porch steps and followed Elijah to the barn, where both of them disappeared.

By the time Annabel pulled into the driveway, Dalton was standing in front of the house with the weight of a thousand worlds in his pocket. The ring felt cold and heavy, and he wasn’t sure he had the guts to ask her so soon after their talk at Christmas. He could only hope that she had decided she was in a good place.

Annabel got out of her truck but remained behind the door, staring at him. “Dalton, what is this? We already said we weren’t going to do anything special for Valentine’s Day.”

“It’s not Valentine’s Day,” Dalton insisted. “It’s Christmas.”

As if on cue, the song *All I Want for Christmas is You* blasted through the air from the barn nearby. Annabel jumped and glanced in that direction before returning a baffled look to Dalton. “You’re crazy.”

“No, I’m in love.”

She laughed, shutting the truck door and coming toward him. Her eyes took in the lights, the small, fake Christmas tree, and all the gifts he’d gotten for her. Then she laughed again. “Maybe you’re both.”

“I can accept that,” he said, closing the distance between them. “You’re my light. You’re the one I can see myself spending the rest of my life with. You’re so good with Henry, and even though I know you might not agree, you’re an amazing person—”

She held a finger up to his lips, cutting him off. “And you’re rambling.” Her eyes shot over his shoulder. “Is that a Barbie house?”

He nodded.

Annabel gasped. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” he whispered. “I want you to have everything you could ever want. If that means a Barbie *city*, I’m willing to give it to you.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, presumably to stifle the laugh that threatened to escape.

Dalton buried his hand into his pocket and fisted the ring. “But a Barbie dream house is nothing without someone to share it with.”

Her eyes cut to meet his.

“I’ve made a home here again in Copper Creek, and I can think of no one better to share it with than you.” He pulled the ring from his pocket and then opened his hand to reveal it on his palm. Slowly, he dropped to one knee, the snow soaking into the fabric of his pants. “Will you marry me?”

She stared at him for what felt like an eternity. Then she nodded, a whimper slipping between her fingers. Shutting her eyes tight, tears slipped down her cheeks.

Dalton launched to his feet and took her left hand in his, slipping the ring onto her finger. Annabel’s eyes opened and she glanced down at the band. When she lifted her gaze, she spoke in a whisper.

“It’s absolutely perfect.”

“Actually, it’s not.”

She blinked, then peered down at the ring.

He pointed to it. “Diamonds aren’t perfect. They’re flawed just like me. Just like you. But that’s okay, because it makes them unique, and even more valuable. This ring is a symbol for how I feel about you. Every single day I’m in awe of you, Annabel. None of us is perfect, but you continue to shine despite it all.”

Annabel cupped his cheek with her right hand. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Not today.”

“Then let’s fix that.”

“But first...”

She stopped herself and stared at him with confusion.

Dalton pointed upward, drawing her attention to the mistletoe he'd hung overhead.

“Is that mistletoe?” she asked incredulously.

“You have no idea how hard it was to find in February.”

She laughed. “Well then, I suppose I have no choice. I'm going to have to kiss you.”

“Fine.” He used her words from their kiss on Christmas Eve. “Kiss me already.”

And she did.

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## ABOUT AUTHOR - NATALIE DEAN

Born and raised in a small coastal town in the south I realized at a young age that I was more adventurous than my conservative friends and family. I loved to travel. My passion for travel opened up a whole new world and new cultures to me that I will always be grateful for.

I was raised to treasure family. I always knew that at some point in my life I would leave my storybook life behind and become someone's mother, someone's aunt and hopefully someone's grandmother. Little did I know that the birth of my son later in life would make me the happiest I've ever been. He will always be my biggest achievement. The strong desire to be a work-from-home mom is what led me down this path of publishing books.

While I have always loved reading I never realized how much I would love writing until I started. I feel like each one of my books have been influenced by someone or something I've experienced in my life. To be able to share this gift has become a dream come true.

I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have enjoyed creating them. I truly hope to develop an ongoing relationship with all of my readers that lasts into my last days :)

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