



NO STUD FEE REQUIRED

THE **BABY**
PROPOSITION

KIM LORRAINE

THE BABY PROPOSITION

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THE WEDDING DATE PROPOSITION

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MAVERICK

Three months ago

“So, big brother, how do you feel about hockey?” Luke plopped down beside me on the couch in my living room, a thick manila folder in his hands.

I raised one eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You know, ice, skates, pucks, and so on.”

Shrugging, I said, “I guess it’s fine. Fun to watch. Fast-paced. I like the fights.”

“Good. Because according to this, you own a team in Seattle.”

“What?”

He nodded and opened the folder. “Yep, the Seattle Cyclones, to be exact. Dad left each of us something, but the bastard set this shit up like a game. I swear, he’s trying to torture us from beyond the grave.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been a year now, almost to the day, since he died. So of course, the lawyer showed up bright and early with a newly activated stipulation of the will to drop in our laps. For me, it was full ownership of a bed-and-breakfast in California wine country. For you, a hockey team.”

“What did Sutton get?”

Sutton walked through the door. “A fucking casino in Vegas.”

I laughed, thinking about Sutton and Sera’s Vegas wedding two years earlier. “How fitting.”

“Can we sell them? I don’t know anything about owning a hockey team.”

Luke sighed. “Yeah. We have to give it one year before selling, but after that, we’re free to do what we want.”

“He always was a manipulative sonofabitch,” I grumbled. “The information’s all inside?”

“Should be. It was in mine.” Sutton ran a hand across the back of his neck. “Sera thinks it’s hilarious.”

“How did we have so much fucking money without knowing it?”

Luke propped his feet up on the coffee table. “We knew we were well-off.”

“Sure, but not this kind of rich. I mean, a pro sports team? Casinos? A bed-and-breakfast? That’s not just old Hollywood money.”

“According to Dad’s accountant, there’s a lot more where this came from. Granddaddy made a ton of smart investments. We’ve always been set for life. Dad just didn’t raise us knowing it.” Sutton pulled his buzzing phone from his pocket. “Shit, I gotta go. Sera and I have supper tonight at her mama’s.”

I opened the folder and stared down at the information, chest tight. “Well, I guess I’ve got a trip to Seattle in my future. And I should probably learn a little something about hockey if I own a team now. It might only be for a year, but I’ll be damned if I don’t give them all I’ve got in the meantime.”

“Before that, you might want to focus on getting yourself a date for Hunter and Greta’s wedding next week. I heard the church ladies plotting yesterday when I stopped to get Mack some coffee.” Luke snatched my beer off the table, stretched

out, and grinned like an overconfident asshole as he took a long pull.

“Just because you’re old and married now doesn’t mean you get to hold it over me like it’s some kind of prize. I’m not the marrying kind.”

“Tell that to the church ladies. They’re meddling. Mel Langston has already planned on putting you and Maggie together. She even winked at me as she said it.”

“Not that it’s anyone’s business, but I have a date secured already.”

“Who?”

“Clara.”

His eyes widened. “No shit? You and Clara are finally hooking up? That’s great news. Doc McKallister owes me fifty bucks.”

“What? No. We’re not together. She’s my date for this wedding.”

“And what about all the rest of them?”

I went with the first answer that popped into my head. “I guess she’s my date for them all.”

“You guess?”

We hadn’t agreed on anything of the kind, but now I hoped like hell she’d say yes when I talked to her this morning. The last thing I needed was for the mamas and grannies of this town to be trying to marry me off.

Cocking a brow, he gave me a dubious look. “You’re fucking with me, right?”

“No.”

“No offense, Mav, but you’re an idiot.”

“Offense taken.” I snagged my beer out of his hand.

“You two have been dancing around your . . . thing for years. Why don’t you just make it official?”

“You’re as bad as Mel.”

“No. I’m just an old married guy who knows how good it can be when you find the right one.”

“Clara’s not the right one.”

“Are you sure?”

No was the first thing that flashed in my brain. “Yes. The right one doesn’t exist . . . for me.”

“We’ll see.”

An hour later, two cups of coffee in hand, I strolled toward the stables where Clara was set up and ready to administer some pregnancy tests to a few of the mares we were breeding. She smiled at me the second she turned and saw me approaching.

“My hero.”

“How’d you know I was coming?”

“Those spurs are loud, cowboy.”

I smirked and handed her the mug I knew she loved best from my stash. “You love them.”

“I’m haunted by jangling spurs everywhere I go.”

Leaning against the wall, I looked her over, putting on my most charming grin. “You ready to dance the night away with me at this wedding?”

She full on laughed at me. “I think it’s you who needs to be ready for me.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’ve got moves. You just don’t get to see them.”

I took a drink and forced my racing heart to chill the fuck out. “About these weddings.”

“Wedding. Singular.”

“Yeah, sure, this one, but there are a shit ton of them coming up. It seems like every day I get a new invitation.”

She set her mug down on the table nearby and offered me a dubious expression. “And?”

Fuck, why did she make me nervous all of a sudden?
“Well, I was thinkin’ we could make this date a standing one.”

“It’s not a date.”

“I mean wedding date. I don’t want to go to all these things alone, and the idea of taking some new girl who might think it’s more than it is, makes me sweat.”

Her sexy little giggle had me sucking in a sharp breath. “I have a feeling those girls would like to make you sweat.”

“You’re the only one I want to make me...” Jesus. What was wrong with me? “Never mind. What I’m getting at is we should agree to go to all of these...together. Why stop at one?”

Lips twitching into a cute smile, she sighed and leaned back on the wall. “So you want me to be your perma-date with no benefits?”

“Do you want benefits?”

Her cheeks turned pink. “No. No way.”

That took the wind out of my sails a little, but she was right. I couldn’t think about her like that. Clara Barnes was my friend, my colleague, and one-hundred-percent not someone I was going to fuck.

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Clara

“JUST FOR WEDDINGS? WHAT THE HECK IS THAT SUPPOSED TO mean?” Jenna asked, cocking a brow as she stared into the mirror while holding my hair hostage.

She had a chunk of my long honey locks between her fingers, shears waving precariously as she continued. “Are you two going to take advantage of the rest that this arrangement implies? Or is he using you as his...beard is the wrong word for this. Proxy. Yeah, that’s it. Is he using you as a proxy?”

I sighed in relief when she retrained her focus to the ends of my hair she was supposed to be trimming. “If I’m his proxy, he’s mine. I just...neither one of us wants to go alone to the five hundred weddings happening in Sunrise this summer.”

“And whose genius idea was this? You’ve been in love with him since—“

“I am *not* in love with Maverick Wilde.”

“Bullshit. You at least want to bone him.”

My cheeks heated. “Who doesn’t?”

“Fair.”

“But the point is, Mav and I put the lid on any possible romantic entanglement a long time ago. We’re friends and colleagues. That’s it.”

She shook her head and continued trimming my hair while nineties hits blared on her speakers. “It’s a damn shame. He’s hot, you’re a smoke show. You two would light up the sheets together.”

“Jenna, leave it alone.”

“Fine. When’s the first wedding?”

“Today. Why do you think you’re doing my hair right now?”

Assessing me, she smirked. “I figured you finally came to your senses and realized once a year wasn’t frequent enough.”

“I just...”

“You don’t want to look like you don’t care what you look like.” The statement was so frank and so true I had to fight a panicked giggle.

“I don’t want him to *want* to be with anyone else. Even if there’s nothing going on between us. I still want him to be proud to have me on his arm.”

A wicked grin twisted her lips. “Girl, you should have told me from the get-go this was our goal. I’ll take care of you. He won’t know what hit him.”

A little curl of excitement tickled something in my belly but I pushed it down. “Don’t go crazy. I still want to look like me.”

“You will. You’re hot. I don’t know why you can’t see it. Every cowboy you work with has it bad for you. You should see the way they watch you.”

“Trent doesn’t watch me.”

Her cheeks went pink. “Trent Ryker is a player. I figured that out the first time he flashed those baby blues at me.”

“Just like his cousin.”

“Yup. There’s nothing that’ll change them.”

“I don’t know. Tristan is happily married.”

The color drained from her face. “Hazel is lucky. I’ve seen how it can turn out differently. It’s not pretty when the player starts playing his own wife.”

Jenna and I had known each other a long time, but she’d never given me her full story. There was a lot about my past she didn’t know either, but whatever put this look in her eyes seemed big.

“Jen...” I trailed off, not knowing how to continue.

“Okay, enough serious shit. Let’s talk about how you’re not going to bang Maverick tonight.”

As she styled me we talked about our lives, caught up on goals and our favorites from our romance book club. It was good for my soul to spend time with her. We were both busy with our careers. Her with the salon, me with the vet practice. Neither of us wanted more than a night of fun here and there. We both agreed that putting our hearts on the line for men wasn’t appealing. She had her reasons, and I respected them. Our motto was ‘Make the life you want. Don’t wait for a man to give it to you.’ So far, we’d done exactly that.

Three hours later, my brows were waxed, hair styled into long, glossy waves that cascaded down my back, and she’d even done my makeup. I looked really damn good. A far cry from the vet who wears her hair in a ponytail or braid all day, barely puts on anything more than mascara and Chapstick, and exists in jeans and cowboy boots—or pajamas.

“Wow,” she sighed. “You look like a fucking model.”

“I don’t look like myself.”

“Yes you do, girl. You look like Clara Barnes, goddess of Maverick Wilde’s fantasies.”

I swallowed back the nerves that statement set off. “I don’t want to be the goddess of his fantasies.”

She smirked. “Too bad. Besides, you can’t honestly tell me you haven’t fantasized about him. We all have. Those broad shoulders and chiseled jaw. God. And the smolder on that man could set my panties on fire from twenty paces.”

“I’m surprised those Hollywood good looks don’t get him into trouble more often.”

“Seems to me like he doesn’t let them. I wonder why. If I was as good looking as him, I’d have already done all the damage possible in this little one-horse town.”

“You are as good looking as he is, Jenna.”

“Yeah, but I’m not about to let the church ladies slut shame me to the altar. You know they would.”

Chuckling under my breath, I pulled my credit card from my purse, but she shook her head. “Put your money away. I’m just glad I got to bear witness to the beginning of the end of Maverick Wilde.”

“Stop it. I’m not hooking up with him. That doesn’t fit in my plans.”

She rolled her eyes. “Your ‘plans’ are confusing as fuck.”

I’d been toying with the idea of freezing my eggs so when the time was right, I could have a baby. I didn’t want my window to pass. Men were lucky bastards in more ways than one. They could start a family whenever they damn well pleased. I was nearing forty and didn’t have the slightest urge to find myself a husband. Husbands hurt you. I didn’t want that.

“They’re not. I’m going to make the life I want.”

“Don’t throw that back in my face.”

“I’m just looking into my options. I don’t want to wake up one day and regret not having done this.”

“I get it, but it’s hardly like you’re all dried up. People are having kids later and later now.”

“I know. I just like to—“

“Plan ahead.”

“Exactly.”

She fluffed my hair before turning me to look into the mirror one last time. “You’re a bad ass bitch who takes what

she wants. Keep that in mind, in case taking a ride on Maverick Wilde's dick is what you want tonight. I can be your wingwoman."

I laughed.

"And if it is, I need every detail the next day."

"Thank you, Jenna. There will be no dick riding tonight."

"Your loss. I plan to take home a ranch hand."

I hitched my purse over my shoulder and shook my head as I left. "I'll see you at the wedding?"

"You bet your pretty ass you will. Have fun tonight."

Smiling, I left with the thought of what it might be like to take Mav for a ride dancing in the back of my mind. I had to admit, it was appealing.

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MAVERICK

“WOW, YOU...FUCK, CLARA, YOU LOOK REALLY DAMN pretty.” I blurted the words before I could stop myself as she approached my truck.

Her cheeks turned pink. “You’re such a wordsmith, its amazing you haven’t written a book yet.”

I grinned. “Just wait. I’ll write the next great American novel one day and you’ll be eating your words.”

Holding open the door for her, I helped her into the passenger seat before making sure she was safely inside and then heading for my side.

As we drove together toward Whiskey Ranch, she stared at me, her gaze making me nervous. “What? Did I cut myself shaving or something?”

“No. You clean up real nice. I was wondering if you really do want to write a novel.”

I flicked my gaze to her. “Nah. I’m more of a book reader than writer. Besides, between Texas, Sunrise, and now Seattle, I’m not sure I have time for anything else.”

“Seattle?”

Why was my collar suddenly tight and uncomfortable. “Yeah. My dad, even after he died he figured out a way to

control us. I was just told I now have ownership of an NHL team up in Seattle. So I have to figure that shit out.”

“Hockey?”

“Yup.”

“Like with sticks and pucks and ice?”

My laughter filled the cab. “Yes. Sticks, pucks, ice.”

“Do you like hockey?”

“It’s fine. I kind of like the idea of owning a sports team, honestly. It’s cool. As long as I can manage it without living there, I’ll probably keep it.”

She was quiet for a long time. Clara was pensive often, but today she seemed to have a lot on her mind.

“How is your granddad’s place doing?” she finally asked, breaking the silence just when I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I think we’re getting it handled. I’ll have to make a choice though. I can’t keep going back and forth all the time. It look like maybe I’ll go back and stay there. Visit Sunrise every six months or so.”

Sadness crept into her expression as we stopped for an errant heifer who’d decided crossing the goddamned road was a good idea. “Someone should call the Rykers and let them know they’ve got some broken fence.”

“Already on it,” she said, phone to her ear. “Hey, Trent. Aw, I’m doing great, how are you?” The way she toyed with the ends of her hair as she talked to him had a strange curl of jealousy unfurling in my gut. “Heading to Hunter and Greta’s wedding. Oh, you’re coming? Of course I’ll save you a dance.” No she would not. She was *my* date. “No. Well, that’s why I’m calling actually. Mav and I just saw a Ryker Ranch heifer wander across the road. About a mile past marker fifteen. No problem.” She let out a soft laugh and I swear to fucking God, I nearly pulled over and hung up the phone for her. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“All good?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“Yep. They’ve already got ranch hands fixing the fence and rounding up the cows. It’s always something.”

“It sure as shit is.” I gripped the steering wheel hard and focused on the road in front of us. “So, you and Trent, huh?”

“What?” The shock in her voice eased something in me. “No. Definitely not. Why would you even think that?”

“The way you smiled when you talked to him.”

“No. I’m not interested in him. No way. He’s a nice guy, but dating isn’t really part of my plan right now.”

“What if you met the right guy?”

She sighed. “I don’t think that’s real. The *right* one is usually a choice. A lie we tell ourselves.”

“That’s pessimistic.”

“It’s true. I’ve seen it. So have you.”

Well if that wasn’t the most true thing she’d ever said. “Yeah. My dad was a real fuck-up when it came to lots of things. Relationships especially.”

“Exactly. I don’t want that.”

“What happens when you decide you want more from your life? Are you going to be happy just being with yourself? You don’t want kids or anything?”

“Oh, I do. I want a family.”

I laughed. “That’s kind of hard to do without the guy.”

“I have my ways. I can’t count on other people to make my dreams come true. So, I don’t look for my prince charming. He doesn’t exist.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Yep. Makes things a lot simpler. I don’t get hurt because I don’t expect anything other than the occasional night between the sheets.”

Why did I hate that so much?

“You do that a lot?”

“What?”

“Spend the night with someone who doesn’t mean anything to you?”

A blush crept up her neck. “No. I’ve done it a handful of times since college.”

“Have you ever had a real relationship?”

“Yeah. I dated a guy in college. Pretty seriously. It...didn’t work out.”

Instant anger coiled in me. That asshole had hurt her. He’d broken her faith in men. I could see it written all over her as I waited for the gates of Whiskey Ranch to open so we could drive through to the private event.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I learned a lot about myself and what I need. It just reaffirmed my theory that I don’t need a man to make me whole.”

“You’re one hell of a woman, Clara Barnes.”

She grinned at me as I parked. “Don’t go falling in love with me, Maverick Wilde. You won’t recover.”

“I don’t doubt it.” I got out of the truck and opened her door, offering to help her down and laughing when she refused. Stubborn woman. “Come on, let’s go watch our friends get married, then we can have a night of dancing and drinking without worrying about strings.”

“Sounds like a perfect arrangement.”

It would’ve been perfect, if she hadn’t have smelled so damn good and felt fucking perfect in my arms as we danced in the warm light of the wedding venue. I swayed with her held tight to me, just giving myself over to the feel of her as the night wore on.

One dance became two, and before we knew it, the night was nearly over and we were headed home in my truck both of us silent as the rough road jostled us. I pulled up to the clinic,

gaze trained on the stairs that led to her apartment over the office.

“Well, I guess this was a success.”

She smiled. “Total success. No one even talked to us all night.”

“I think Mel Langston was too focused on watching to see if I kissed you to bother talking to us.”

Even in the dimly lit cab I could see the blush creeping up her cheeks. “And Doc was probably taking bets on how long this would last between us.”

A tendril of hair fell into her face and I couldn't help myself, I reached out and tucked it behind her ear. Her eyes caught mine, the little hitch in her breath doing nothing to ease the tension.

“Mav?” she whispered, dragging my focus to her lips.

“You look really pretty tonight, Clara. You know that?”

“You said so earlier.”

“Well,” I licked my lips. “You need to hear it again.”

Leaning forward, I closed the distance between us, knowing I was already fucking everything up, but, dammit, I'd been with her for hours, staring at every perfect feature on her and I needed to know what her mouth felt like against mine.

“Good night, Mav,” she said, backing away before I could make a move.

She was out of the cab and rushing up the stairs so fast I could barely register what was happening. But she'd done the right thing. I was caught up in the moment. We'd pretended so well even I believed we wanted each other.

But my heart was still racing when I got home, and my cock throbbed from being denied what he wanted. And right now, he wanted Clara.

Clara

WE'D BEEN TO SEVEN WEDDINGS IN THE LAST TWO MONTHS, and Maverick had become my favorite part of each week. He was quickly becoming my best friend. The nights after the weddings when we weren't quite ready to stop the party, he'd come home with me and we'd watch a movie, order a late night pizza, laugh over a beer, tell each other our secrets. It was the friendship I never had with another person aside from my sisters, but we rarely spoke anymore. Hadn't in a long time.

This week we were supposed to attend the wedding of Kelsey Turner and David Garrison, in the nearby town of Pleasant Peaks. It was an overnight trip, held at the beautiful Crestview Resort. We had two rooms, thank you very much.

Jenna was incredibly annoyed about that when I told her as we sat across from each other at One Horse Coffee Traders and caught up after a busy week.

"You mean to tell me, you had the opportunity to experience the only one bed trope in real life and you didn't take it?"

"Not everything is a romance novel, Jen."

"This is. God, you two are driving me batty. I thought for sure you'd be fucking by now."

“Who is fucking?” Mackenzie asked, looking from me to Jenna.

“Not this bitch and Maverick.”

Mack laughed out loud before taking a sip of her latte. “If it hasn’t happened by now, it’s not going to.”

“Did you hear that she had the chance at an only one bed situation and this idiot didn’t jump on it?”

Mack’s brows lifted. “You did?”

“We’re going to Kelsey’s wedding this weekend in Pleasant Peaks. We got two rooms and you’d think I shot someone with the way Jenna acted.”

“Mmm, only one bed. That’s how I ended up with Luke.” She got this dreamy look in her eyes, like she was reliving the Hawaiian vacation that started their love affair.

“Hello, earth to Mackenzie, we’re not talking about you.” Jenna tossed a chocolate covered espresso bean at Mack’s forehead.

“Bitch. Don’t throw things at me when I’m remembering sharing a bed with that man. When the air conditioning broke and we—“

“Okay, that’s enough. There are kids at the next table,” I said, stopping her in her tracks. I’d heard the whole story in detail. The things they’d done were hot as hell, and if I wasn’t so jaded, I’d be a little...okay, a lot, jealous.

“The point is, Mav and I are just friends. Besides, I’ve made a decision and getting involved with anyone right now would be a terrible idea.”

Both of them looked at me then, silent and waiting for me to drop my bomb.

“I’m going to get pregnant.”

“Excuse me?” Jenna said, choking on her coffee.

“I’m tired of waiting for the right time.”

“I thought you were just thinking about freezing your eggs.”

“I was. But then I realized that was just another way of sitting on this. I might not want a husband, but I do want to be a mom. I look at the Rykers and their kids, Sera and Sutton...”

“Me and Luke.”

Jenna and I snapped our attention to Mackenzie. “What?” Jenna’s voice was so loud the other patrons in the shop stopped talking.

“I’m eight weeks. It’s a terrible time because school will be starting soon, but Luke is so happy. You should have seen him when I told him. He cried.”

My chest squeezed. “I’m so happy for you, Mack.”

She smiled. “We can be pregnant together.”

“If it works out that way, we totally can.”

“How are you going to do it?” Jenna asked.

“I’ll find an anonymous donor. There’s a clinic about an hour away where I can get the donation.”

“Well, I guess you’re a pro at this stuff. You inseminate horses often enough.”

Mack laughed. “I think it’s a little different when you’re inseminating yourself.”

“You’d be surprised,” I said, taking a bite of the absolutely perfect chocolate cupcake I’d treated myself to.

“Wow.” Jenna sat back in her chair. “When are you doing it?”

“I’ve started reading up on everything involved and think I’ll wait until after the last wedding Mav and I plan to attend. Then, I’ll bust out the turkey baster.”

Jenna shuddered. “Not the visual I was looking for.”

“Did you really want a visual? It’s my uterus.”

“Point taken.”

The door opened and Travis Ryker walked in with his little boy in tow, Hawk Langston and his daughter Carly right behind them.

“Hello there, ladies,” Hawk said, dropping a kiss on his sister’s head. Mack stared at us with a warning in her eyes. So she hadn’t shared the news with her family yet.

“Hey, Hawk. How’s the newlywed life?” Jenna asked.

“Couldn’t ask for anything better.”

Maverick came through the door a moment later, his piercing eyes on me almost as soon as he walked in. God help me, but I sat up a little straighter under the weight of his gaze.

“Oh, yeah, there’s nothing going on there,” Jenna muttered. “That man wants to bend you over a table right now and—“

“Jenna, stop.” My cheeks were on fire. “We’re not like that.”

“You should be.”

Mav approached, a grin on his face. “Hey, darlin’,” he said, but his tone was tight. “Can we talk for a second?”

I nodded and stood, my belly fluttering as I followed him to an empty table in the corner. “What’s up?”

“I can’t make it to the wedding this weekend.”

“What? Why?”

“I have to go to Seattle to deal with some team stuff. I’m so sorry. It’s completely out of my hands.”

“Oh, I see.”

“If you want, I can try to—“

“No. Don’t worry about it. The church ladies won’t be there anyway. I can go it alone, or maybe Trent or Declan will go with me.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’d want that?”

Shrugging, I tried to play it off like I wasn’t crushed he wouldn’t be with me. “Why not? They’re both handsome

cowboys who'll look good on my arm.”

“Oh. Well...all right then. I, uh...I'm glad you can replace me so easily.”

“I'm sure neither one will be as good of a dancing partner as you, Mav. Don't worry. You're not that easy to replace.”

He grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. “We're still on for Brittany and Court's wedding though, right?”

“Wouldn't miss our last date.”

“Me neither. Not for anything, darlin'.”

Something twisted inside me. I was too happy to be with him for my own good. Maybe this break in our schedule was a good thing. I had too much riding on my plan to let him derail me. One more wedding and then everything would change. Getting attached to my wedding date wasn't on the agenda.

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MAVERICK

Weddings seemed to be the name of the game in this fucking town lately. I'd been to no less than seven in the last year, eight if you counted this one. Thank God for Clara. She'd been my saving grace, keeping me occupied and out of the clutches of the meddling church ladies who all seemed to think I was a catch and they needed to matchmake. And here we were again, lined up outside the reception hall as two of our long-time staff members celebrated their wedding. Brittany and Court shocked us all when they announced she was pregnant and they'd been together for the last two years. Honestly, everyone thought Brit was sweet on Luke. Turned out, her eyes were only for Court.

"You ready to spin me around a little, Mav?" Clara said as she came up beside me. She smiled, her amusement and gentle heart making my scowl lessen. Ever since she shut down my almost-kiss in the truck after our first wedding date, the mood between us changed. We were playful but slightly detached. I'd been squarely put in the friend zone. It was the right choice.

"You've gotta have at least a little fun at these things, otherwise you become the broody hero they all want to fix."

"That's why I have you. You come as my date, I get left alone, and we keep each other company. Perfect arrangement."

She grinned, but it didn't reach her eyes this time. Clara had something weighing on her. I knew it as sure as I knew

when there was something off with one of our horses. “And you dance with me. That’s part of the deal.”

I tipped my hat. “Of course, darlin’. I’d never let you down.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t call me that. I’m not one of your buckle bunnies. Darlin’ is reserved for women you’re trying to roll in the hay with, not the woman you’ve stood next to and helped pull a foal from a laboring mare.”

A shocked laugh escaped before I could school myself. “Well, that’s about the least sexy visual you could have given me.”

“Oh, believe me, I have plenty more where that came from. I’m a vet. We have stories.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“How’s the hockey business?”

I shook my head. “Seattle is so different from Sunrise, but in a good way. I gotta admit, I kind of like it there.”

“Yeah?”

“I think you would too.”

“My sisters live there.”

That surprised me. “What? You never mentioned it.”

“Well, to be fair, they live across the water. There’s a little town called Bainbridge Island. They own a bakery together.”

“I’ll have to stop in next time I’m there for team stuff. You could come visit.”

She bit her lip and tensed like she was gonna say something more, but the doors opened, and I offered her my arm as the bridal party walked into the reception hall. The rest of the night went exactly as a typical wedding reception did—dinner, dancing, cake, more dancing. After catching up with my brothers for a bit, I found Clara sipping a glass of water at our table, that faraway look in her eyes again.

Offering her a glass of champagne, I said, “What’s with you?”

She shook her head and placed the drink on the table next to her. “What do you mean? I’m fine.”

“No, you look like you’ve got something serious on your mind. You’re not even drinking. You’re not on call tonight, are you?”

“Nope. I’m just . . . I’m giving up drinking for a while.”

I frowned. “Something going on?”

She bit her lower lip and took a deep breath. “Oh, what the hell,” she muttered.

My heart lurched. Fuck, was she leaving us? We couldn’t do this without her. She was the best equine vet in the state.

“Look, if you need a raise, more equipment, better hours, we’ll take care of it. Give us a chance to counteroffer whoever is taking you from us.”

Her eyes went wide. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re leaving. That’s what this is. I know I can be an overbearing ass, but we need you at the ranch.”

She shook her head. “I’m not leaving. I’m trying to have a baby.”

Relief hit me straight in the gut. “Thank fuck . . .” until the rest of what she said landed. “You’re pregnant?”

She looked around, checking to see if anyone heard. “Not yet. But I’m planning to start trying.”

Who the fuck was she sleeping with? As far as I knew, she spent more time with me at the ranch than anyone else, but maybe that wasn’t true. Did she have a whole boyfriend I didn’t know about? No way. If I was her man, I wouldn’t be okay with her being a cowboy’s date to every wedding this season.

“With who?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

My brows pulled together. “Well, I’m pretty sure that’s an important part of the recipe.”

“I can find a donor. I’m almost forty, single, and ready to start my family. I’m done waiting for the right guy. I don’t need a husband to have a child. I just need his . . . swimmers.”

I took her by the hand and walked her out of the reception like my feet were on fire. “You mean to tell me you’re going to fuck some random guy and let him knock you up without doing his part to take care of you?”

Her voice was low and tight. “Get your head out of your ass, Wilde. No. I’m going to get a donation from a sperm bank and do it myself. I’m not spreading my legs for a rando.”

“So you won’t even know the guy?”

“I think that’s probably less complicated.”

Unreasonable jealousy and a bit of panic trickled into my thoughts. She deserved more than a damn turkey baster and frozen jizz.

“Let me do it.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Let me be your donor. I’m not looking for what my brothers have. I don’t want the wife and kids and picket fence. But I like you and, not to be too cocky, I know I’ve got good genes. Let me knock you up, Clara Barnes. I won’t even charge you a stud fee.”

THE BABY PROPOSITION

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Clara

“What the hell did you just say to me?”

I stared at the man in front of me, my eyes wide enough I was sure people noticed how shocked I was.

“Let me be your baby daddy. I bet I knock you up on the first try.” His smirk. God Maverick Wilde’s smirk was deadly.

Hysterical laughter escaped me before I could stop myself. “Confident, are you?”

The cocky look on his handsome face did things to my heart I tried hard to ignore. “I’ve always been an overachiever. You know me.”

“You can’t be serious. You don’t want this.”

He stared at me—hard—those gorgeous eyes of his boring into mine. “I want you to be happy.”

“How much have you had to drink tonight? Did they give you your own whiskey cask?”

He shook his head and took my hand. “Think about it, okay? I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t serious.”

I couldn’t let him be my donor. The plan had been to find someone anonymous, someone who wouldn’t be around, who I wouldn’t see when I looked at my child. Mav was my friend. My hotter than hell friend, but still.

“Let’s dance, okay? I don’t like seeing you so . . .”

“So what?”

“I don’t know. Not yourself. Not my Clara.”

My gut twisted. I wasn’t *his* Clara. “Okay, Casanova, slow down. I’m thinking you have had more than your share of drinks with the way you’re talking.” I slipped my hand into his blazer pocket, snagging the keys to his shiny black truck before he could stop me. “I’m driving home.”

He laughed and made a grab for the keys, so I shoved them down my cleavage and into the strapless bra I had to wear with this godforsaken dress.

“Oh, you fight dirty. Who’s to say I won’t go for it and dive in? I’m not afraid of a pair of tits.”

“And I’m sure you’ve seen your fair share.”

He looked me straight in the eye and said, “You’d be surprised.”

“Would I? You Wildes are well known for being playboys.”

His jaw tightened, a muscle in his neck tensing as he ground his teeth. “Maybe my dad was, but I don’t use women and throw them away like they’re nothing. Neither do my brothers.”

Now I felt like a total asshole. Reaching out, I put my palm on his forearm. “Hey, I’m sorry. I know you’re not like him. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Sighing, he slipped his hand over mine. “Come on, let’s get out of here, huh?”

I guess that meant he was dropping the whole sperm donor thing. Part of me was glad I didn’t have to have a serious conversation with him about this, because truth be told, he would be a great donor. He was the most handsome man I’d ever met, and he was right—he had great genes. But I wouldn’t get what I wanted if Mav was the guy. There was no way his brothers wouldn’t want to be part of my child’s life. That would complicate everything.

“Can you just take me home?” I asked as he held open the truck door.

His lips pressed tight, and those eyes of his dropped from mine to the ground for just a second. Then he nodded, and I slid into my seat. Tense silence filled the cab.

“Yeah. Sure.”

We stayed silent as he drove, the two of us not looking at each other in the darkened cab of the truck. I hated feeling like this around him. Mav was one of my best friends. He’d proven himself to be one of the few people I trusted. So why couldn’t I accept his offer?

As he pulled around to the back of my vet clinic, he sighed. “I’m sorry if I made things weird. I’m just worried for you. I want you to be taken care of.”

A soft smile tugged at my lips. “You can be real sweet when you want to be, you know that?”

“Don’t let that get around. You’ll ruin my reputation.”

I reached out and took his hand, giving a little squeeze. “I’ll think about it, okay? Your offer.”

He flashed that panty-melting grin and winked. “I’m ready and willing. Just tell me you need me.”

Why did that make my belly flip? I swallowed past the lump in my throat and got out of the truck. He’d learned long ago not to open my door for me unless my hands were full. I didn’t need help. Didn’t want it. Because relying on another person meant I could be disappointed by them.

But he still met me outside and walked me to the stairs that led up to my apartment. “Thank you, Mav. No matter what I decide, it means a lot that you would offer.”

Offering a curt nod, he surprised me by leaning in and brushing his lips over my cheek. “Goodnight, Clara.”

He watched me until I was inside my apartment, safely tucked away, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel the tingle from his lips on my skin for the rest of the night.

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MAVERICK

How could I have been so stupid, offering to knock Clara up? I didn't want to be a dad. I *never* wanted to. But here I was offering up my sperm like she should just fall all over herself and take me up on it. What did I care if she wanted a baby and wanted some other guy to give it to her? Some unknown asshole who probably donated his spunk every month just for the thrill of it.

I watched her vet truck and trailer pull up next to the stables and wanted to kick myself for being a fucking coward who wouldn't even come in from the pastures to see her because I was so damn embarrassed. Hoofbeats drew my attention to my left, where my brother Luke was riding toward me.

He assessed me, a wary expression on his face. "Something going on between you and Clara? You're usually so far up her ass, no one else can get a word in when she's here."

Unease built in my chest. My skin itched at the fact that my brother was able to call me on my bullshit so readily. Usually, I *was* right next to her while she was working with any of our animals. So sue me. I liked to be involved. Our horses were the main source of our income. The amount of money people paid for one of our studs kept us in the black and beyond year after year. I liked to be there when she was working with them, not because I didn't trust her—in fact, she was the only person I trusted with our stock—but because I

was a control freak. It didn't hurt that I liked Clara more than any other woman I'd ever known.

I shrugged it off. "Wanted a ride. This girl hasn't gotten enough exercise lately, and I needed to take her out." I ran a hand across my horse's withers and down to her neck, patting her gently. Tabby was one of my three frequent rides. She was sweet, well-behaved, and she'd borne us a couple of prize winners over the last few years. It was important to keep these mares in tip-top shape.

Luke frowned. "That's not like you. In fact, you haven't been normal the last few weeks."

I growled. "Get off my ass. You aren't my wife. Leave me alone."

He chuckled and shook his head. "God, you're grumpy. You need to get laid already. In case you haven't noticed, your two younger brothers are getting it on the regular, and we're in much better moods than we usually are."

"Yeah, well, I'm not you. So, like I said, get off my ass and go concentrate on keeping your wife happy."

Luke smirked. "Oh, she's plenty happy. There are no complaints from my girl."

I had to tear my focus away from the stable where I knew Clara was working hard examining a couple of our in-season mares we'd just bred. Luke came up right alongside me as I slowly walked my horse along the fence. "Come on," he said. "I'll race ya."

I let myself relax into the saddle and smiled. "You know you're gonna lose."

That low laugh of his reminded me of our dad in a good way. "Don't be too sure. You're getting old. Can't keep up."

I adjusted my hat, then readied myself to take off. "On three?"

He nodded. "One. Two. Three!"

The two of us raced forward, focused on the crest of a hill and the horizon where a tall ancient oak stood proud. The

wind whipped my face, and the only sounds were our breathing and the pounding of hooves. As we bolted across the land our grandfather had so painstakingly cultivated, land that was ours now, land that I had to decide if I wanted to keep, my thoughts drifted to the heavy decision hanging over my head. My brothers didn't know it, but I was seriously considering leaving. Now that my obligations according to Dad's will were met, except for that pesky hockey team, I didn't have anything keeping me here. All I had left was my remaining time as owner of the Seattle Cylcones. But I'd be able to handle that from anywhere as long as I visited and checked in. I could head back down to Texas to help my grandfather, my mama's daddy, keep his ranch going. Not because I had to. But because a big part of me felt like I didn't really fit in here.

Luke and Sutton had spent their lives here. But me? As soon as I could, I got out. I left and didn't want to come back unless I had to. Things had changed in the last year or so, but splitting my time between Texas and Montana wasn't easy.

Watching the two of them fall in love and marry their girls left me with a lingering suspicion that I wasn't cut out for life the way they saw it. How could I even hope to form any kind of lasting attachment when my relationships had to end before they really got going? Every three months, I left, went down to Texas or came back up to Montana, and then started the cycle all over again. Throw in the occasional trip to Seattle, that was no way to find something lasting.

Lost in my own thoughts. I barely registered that Luke had pulled ahead of me, his horse's tail whipping in the wind. How the hell did he get a full length on me?

"Oh, no you don't," I grumbled, pressing my heels into my horse's side and urging her forward.

She gave a little huff of annoyance, but I knew she'd do what I asked. She was gonna complain about it, but she'd do it. My heart was racing from the thrill. This was as close to flying as I'd ever get. I slowed as we neared the hill, opening my mouth to call out and warn Luke of the slick ground. But without warning, his horse's foot slipped, his leg buckled, and my brother went flying out of the saddle. Turbo came down on

the ground, Luke a few feet in front of him. Neither one of them moving.

“Fuck, Luke!”

I brought my horse to a stop and dismounted as quick as I could before running to my brother. His leg was bent at an unnatural angle, his eyes closed. Carefully, I inspected his head for any kind of wound, but didn't see anything. He was still breathing, thank God. His pulse was strong and steady. Then he coughed, and his brows pulled together as he came to.

“Fuck, what happened?”

“Don't move. I think Turbo might have broken his leg, and you're not in much better shape.”

He didn't listen to me and sat up, his face going white as a sheet as pain careened through him. He didn't even have to tell me. I could see the agony written in every tense muscle.

“Oh my God.”

From where we sat, we could see Turbo. His breathing was labored, his tail and ears flicking in frustration. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and immediately called for Clara. God bless the woman, she answered on the first ring.

“Hey, Mav, what's up?”

“You gotta come. We're at the hill. And . . . I don't know, I think . . . Fuck, I think Turbo broke his leg.” My voice was frantic and harsh as I tried to hold on to some small thread of control. “And someone call Doc because Luke's hurt bad.”

Luke muttered, “I'm fine. I just gotta walk it off.”

The idiot tried to stand up, but I shoved him down and said, “Don't you move a fucking muscle. You are not fine.”

Flashes of the night our dad found Sutton's mama, the night we lost the only woman who really *wanted* to take care of us, came to the forefront of my mind. It's a wonder any of us got back on a horse after she died. And now, seeing my brother flying through the air, laying there, still and unconscious? It brought it all back.

“Okay, I’m coming. Try to keep him down.” Clara was all calm and serious. The port in the storm.

“Okay.”

“Don’t let him get up on that leg.”

“Which one?” I asked about both of them.

“Either of them. I’ll call Doc right now. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Hurry.”

As soon as we hung up, I cut a glance at my brother. “Do you want to call your wife, or should I?”

Luke grimaced. “I can do it.”

Nodding, I sat there, one hand resting gently on Turbo’s neck, petting him, trying to calm him. The other hand shook uncontrollably as I stared down at my blank phone screen. We needed to call Sutton. Let him know what was happening. I couldn’t.

Instead, I sent him a quick text.

Luke and Turbo are down. Luke’s awake. Clara’s coming. So is Doc. We’re out by the old tree on the hill.

I sent the message, then dropped my phone and closed my eyes, letting Luke’s voice fill my head as he spoke to his wife.

“Hey, darlin’, I just needed to let you know I had a bit of an accident. No, I’m okay. I’m a little banged up, and Doc’s coming. No, you don’t need to leave work. It’s all right. The kids need you. How else are they gonna learn biology if you’re not there?”

The pain in his voice was obvious, and I was positive that in the next thirty minutes, we’d have our entire family, including Mackenzie, with us.

“I love you, Mack. Yeah, I’ll see you soon. Don’t worry. Doc’s gonna take good care of me.”

He hung up the phone, and I opened my eyes to see worry lining his features.

“How’s Turbo?” he asked.

He’d had this horse for a long time. They were best friends. If Turbo didn’t make it, I didn’t know what was gonna happen to Luke. The goal is always to get your horse to a ripe old age where they can retire from ranching and grow fat and happy off the grass in the pastures. Not this. Never this.

“He’s doing okay. He’s . . . he’s tough. It might not be a break. It might be a sprain. You never know,” I said, trying to ease some of the tension.

But Luke shook his head, tears in his eyes. “No, a sprain wouldn’t put him down like that. He’s not even trying to get up. It’s bad.”

The fucking fist in my gut kept digging in. “Clara is coming. She’ll do what she can.”

Luke had to clear his throat before he could speak. “I know. She’ll make him comfortable. She’ll take good care of him.”

I didn’t want my brother to lose his horse. A cowboy’s horse was an extension of himself. We spent more time with our animals than we did with people. We trusted each other.

Luke would never get over this. And it was my fault for egging him on and racing. I knew the ground was wet after a heavy thunderstorm. I shouldn’t have been so irresponsible.

Luke’s attention left Turbo and went to the approaching vehicles, along with Sutton on his horse. As I predicted, Mackenzie didn’t stay at work. She jumped out of one of the ranch trucks almost before it came to a stop, our ranch foreman shaking his head as she raced up the hill. She dropped to her knees beside her husband.

“My God, Luke Wilde.” She smacked him on the shoulder gently. “What were you thinking?”

“Not even a kiss first?”

“No, not yet. What were you doing?”

“Racing.”

She sighed. “Racing.”

He looked down at his right leg, just below the knee. I didn’t like the look of the leg of his pants protruding. I didn’t *want* to look at it either. Blood seeped through, dark on the denim.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t fuss over me.” Luke waved her off, but his wife wasn’t having it.

Clara ran up to where I sat with Turbo, her expression serious and focused. Her eyes widened, and sadness flicked across her features the moment she took in the sight of Turbo. “Mav, that’s not good.”

“I know. I know. Can you help him?”

Turbo’s labored breaths were like a pendulum swinging back and forth, letting us know we didn’t have much time. He was in shock.

“I’m not sure.”

“I don’t know what to tell Luke.”

Luke’s groan of pain as Doc and Mackenzie helped him to his feet cut through me. But then he said to Clara, “Make sure he’s not feeling any pain, okay?”

She nodded, tears shining in her eyes. “I promise. I’m going to do what I can to help him.”

Then he looked at me and made a silent but unmistakable request that I stay until the end. If this really was the end. Because he couldn’t. I was glad I didn’t have to say anything. My chest was tight. My throat constricted. I nodded and laid my hand back on Turbo’s neck, gently easing the creature that we all loved.

“I’m gonna run back to the van and get what I need, okay?” Clara said.

“Okay. I’ll stay here.”

“Don’t let him get up until I can really assess him, but I don’t think he’s gonna try.”

I nodded again, hating the tears in my throat. Turbo huffed and shifted, flicking his tail, and by the time Clara came back with her kit, he was restless.

“Well, that’s a good sign. Turbo, are you being dramatic?” The lighter tone in her voice had my heart racing.

Palpating his legs one at a time, she tutted and shook her head. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re just embarrassed that you fell.”

As if in answer, Turbo snorted. Sighing and shaking her head, she nodded at me and said, “Back up a second.”

In under a minute, she had that horse on his feet, favoring his left leg just a little, but standing. “What the hell?” I couldn’t keep the awe from my voice. “He was faking it?”

“Turbo gets embarrassed easily. You weren’t here when he went through a phase of playing dead every single time anyone but Luke tried to ride him.”

I laughed, relief flooding me. “Fuck, I really thought we were gonna lose him.”

“Well, he’s coming with me for a brief stay at the Sunrise Vet Clinic boarding house. He definitely did something to that leg. I’ll know more once I get some imaging on him.”

Leading him slowly down the hill, she murmured softly to the horse. Once he was loaded into the trailer, she waited for me with a sweet smile on her face. “You want to ride back with me? I have room for Tabby in the trailer.”

Honestly, I didn’t want to be alone while the adrenaline of what had just happened raced through my veins. So I secured Tabby in the stall next to Turbo and then got into the passenger seat. We drove over the bumpy pasture on our way to the dirt road, her apologizing quietly to the horses in the back every time the trailer rattled.

“Thank you for being here.”

She gave me a soft little smile. “Of course. It’s my job. It’s the worst part of my job, but at least he’s okay.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been distant these last few weeks.”

“It’s okay. Things got kind of weird. I shouldn’t have told you what was going on.”

“I want you to tell me things. I just want you safe. Taken care of. The idea of some stranger giving you a baby . . . it made me uneasy.”

“I get it. I mean, honestly, it makes me uneasy too.”

I reached over and grabbed her hand, squeezing it. “The offer’s still open, all right? You call the shots. I’ll do it however you need it done. I want you happy, and if I can help you, then I want to. Besides, I’m only here for another three months.”

“How long will you be staying in Texas this time?”

“Not sure. I’ve got some things I got to take care of. And I’ve got some thinking to do about my future, you know?”

“Let me think about it a little bit longer.” She worried her lower lip. “I’ll let you know soon.”

“We’re really lucky to have you here, Clara. All of us are. I hope you know that. You’re family to us. Even if we don’t really understand what family is.”

“You know better than you think you do.”

“Maybe.”

She pulled up to the bunkhouse and killed the engine. “I’ve got to get Turbo to his suite and schedule him an X-ray, and later, I have to stop at Ryker Ranch to do some vaccinations. Maybe we could get dinner tomorrow?”

“Of course. What time?”

“Six-thirty. I’ll meet you at the Silver Spur.”

“It’s a date.”

Her cheeks went just the slightest shade of pink, and I wondered if the word date made her uncomfortable.

“Sure. I’ll see you there.” She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, just the softest brush of her lips. “I’m so sorry about Turbo and Luke getting hurt.”

“Me too.”

“Keep me posted about him. That break looked real bad.”

“I will.”

I got out of the car and watched her as she left, my heart in my throat. Emotions tumbled through me. The chief among them, gratitude. Gratitude that she'd been here, that Turbo hadn't died. It rushed through me, leaving my stomach twisted. When I walked into Sutton's house after putting Tabby away, I found him and his wife Sera sitting together, their expressions sad and tense. I relayed Turbo's condition, and they both visibly relaxed.

“Any word on Luke?” I asked.

“Mackenzie called. Doc took him straight into the hospital. He's got a compound fracture. He's gonna need surgery. He'll be out of work for at least eight weeks, probably longer.”

“Well, it's a good thing I'm here for three more months, then.”

Sutton's eyes locked on mine. “So you decided you're going back to Texas after all?”

I nodded. “For a little while. Yeah.”

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Clara

Thank God I was able to get Turbo off the ground and into the trailer with Mav's help. X-rays showed that while it had looked bad externally, he'd make a full recovery with some rehab and isolation. He was a beautiful horse who still had lots of years of life left in him. I didn't want to see anything happen to him.

Sitting on the couch, mug of tea in hand, I stared down at the multitude of pamphlets my doctor had given me. Artificial insemination was cold and clinical. I knew that. I wasn't under some illusion that we would end up meeting and falling in love. My donor was going to be my donor, and that was it. But right now, the thought of picking someone out of a list of potential baby daddies made my skin crawl.

It hadn't when the idea came to me, not until Mav made his offer. But now, the only person I saw who fit the bill was the one person who shouldn't. Maverick Wilde.

A knock on my front door pulled me from my reading material, and I quickly gathered everything up and set it back on my kitchen counter, where I'd placed it along with all of my mail.

"Just a minute," I called out, wondering who was here. I had to meet Mav at the Silver Spur in just under an hour, and I was excited to deliver the good news about Turbo in person. I didn't have time for a visitor.

I opened the door to find Maverick himself standing on my stoop. Hell, he looked good. He always did. Tonight he was dressed in a tight black T-shirt and well-fitted Wranglers. He'd changed out of his work boots and into a pair of supple leather boots that, while they didn't look new, were reserved for nights on the town. Not for long days ranching.

He took his cream-colored cowboy hat off and held it to his chest.

“Evening, Clara.”

The slight curl of his dark brown hair made my belly flutter. It was just this side of too long, and tempting enough that I had to ball my hands into fists to keep from running my hands through it.

“What are you doing here? We were meeting at the Spur.”

He leaned one muscular arm on the doorframe. “Yes.” He smirked at me. “I thought maybe I'd pick you up this time. Seeing as how we've got some important things to discuss.”

“I guess we could do that. I'm not quite ready, though. You want to come in?”

He nodded and walked inside, setting his hat down on the small side table next to the front door where I kept my keys and a few odds and ends.

“How's Luke?” I asked. “I've been waiting for an update.”

His face darkened. “He's in bad shape. Leg's broke. They did surgery. Had to put a rod in it, and I guess he cracked a couple ribs going down too. He'll be out of commission for quite a while.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. I thought it was pretty bad. Just from my initial assessment.”

“It's a good thing I've got twelve more weeks here. I'll be picking up his slack.”

“And then what?”

“Well, then I'm leaving. Heading back to Texas, and I don't know that I'll come back.”

“You always come back. What changed?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“No.”

“It’s been one thing after the other ever since I started coming to Sunrise. Dad dying. Everything with Killian. I just think maybe I need to go back to where I came from. I’m throwing a wrench into everything.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“It is, though. At least it is for me. I can run the ranch in Texas without getting in anyone’s way. I can handle the Cyclones easy enough too.”

“I guess so. But I think you’re underestimating how much you’d be missed by everybody.”

“Maybe. They didn’t miss me before I came back. And they can come see me in Texas if they need to. If I hadn’t been so reckless, so damn distracted, I would have stopped the race from happening in the first place. I knew it was too wet. It was my responsibility to—”

“Stop. You can’t blame yourself for what happened. It was an accident.”

“Are you kidding? I should know better.”

“So should Luke, but he didn’t think about it. And now he’s got a broken leg.”

“Yeah, and his horse is . . .” His voice was thick with emotion, and it was then I realized the man thought Turbo was seriously injured.

“Turbo is fine.”

“What?”

“He’s fine. He has a bad sprain. No break.”

He let out a little disbelieving laugh. “I thought . . . I thought for sure there wasn’t going to be anything you could do, even though he was walking. Not with the way he favored

that leg after he got up. I've lost horses to breaks even though they were walking on them."

"I was worried too, until I got him in for his x-ray. He's got arthritis and inflammation in his joints. But overall, he's healthy as well, a horse."

The relieved chuckle Mav released lifted something from my chest. "So if you're going to make the decision to leave, don't do it because of what happened yesterday."

"I'm not. I don't really have a place here. I've been coming and going so much, it's hard for me to figure out where I belong."

"And you'd rather not stay here and see if this is where you belong?"

"My brothers have each other. The operation runs smooth without me. My granddad, he needs me to see things through and make sure everything's running. Sure, Wilde Horse Ranch bought him out, but that was only so he didn't have to worry. And I made a promise that I'd keep things going."

"Is he doing okay?"

"Yeah, he's all right. He's getting up in years, though. Sitting in the saddle hurts. His sons don't want anything to do with the ranch. And Lord knows my mama hasn't been back since the year after she brought me down there."

"You're all he has. That's what it sounds like to me."

"Maybe so."

"Well, I guess that makes my decision a little easier, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't have to worry about you falling madly in love with me and deciding you want to be a daddy to my kid. I guess I can take you up on your offer."

"Yeah?"

A little quiver started in my belly that felt more like a warning than excitement at the way his face lit up, pride and anticipation shining in his eyes.

“Thank you for letting me be the one to help you with this.”

“Thank you for wanting to, I guess. You’re right. You do have some really good genes going for you.”

His cheeks went just a little pink. “You like that I’m tall? And have this chiseled jaw?”

“I like . . . I just like you.” Why was I so flustered?

“Do you think you want to make a donation?”

His eyes went wide. “Right here? Right now?”

“No, not right now. But soon, maybe sometime this coming week?”

“Is it already . . . you know . . . time?”

“Pretty close.”

“Well, yeah, whatever you need.”

“Okay. We’ll call down to the clinic and let them know you’ll be coming in, then we can get things going.”

“What are you telling people?”

“I thought maybe I would just keep it on the down low. I don’t really want the church ladies in my business.”

He snorted. “And when you end up pregnant and there’s no daddy around, what are you gonna tell them?”

“Oh, I’ll cross that bridge when I get there. Things are different than they were in their day. A woman getting pregnant out of wedlock isn’t the end of the world. In fact, there are lots of couples that never even marry. And then there are single parents who go after what they want. I mean, nowadays, even single moms and dads are adopting.”

“All right, so we don’t tell anyone what’s happening. And then no one has to know. Unless you want them to.”

“Great. Are you going to be able to keep this from your brothers?”

“Yeah, it’s not gonna be something I want to share anyway, jerking off into a cup. It’s not exactly a conquest or anything.”

I laughed. I had to. Just the thought of Maverick in a sterile clinic orgasming into a cup seemed equal parts wrong and kind of sexy. I wondered what he sounded like, what he would want to look at for stimulation's sake. I had to force those thoughts from my head before they ran away with me.

“Are you ready to go? We can go get some dinner.”

He nodded, then gestured to me. “Just to be clear, you can go dressed however the hell you want. I think you look fantastic. But you did mention you weren't ready yet.”

I looked down my body, and a curl of embarrassment unfurled in my chest. He was right. I was dressed in tight-fitting yoga pants and a slouchy off-the-shoulder top. No bra. “As comfortable as I am, this probably isn't the right outfit to wear to a bar with a bunch of cowboys. They already stare at my tits plenty. I don't need to give them a show.”

As if on cue, his gaze drifted down to where my nipples were poking through the fabric of my shirt. To his credit, he cleared his throat and snapped his gaze back to me.

“I'll just wait here then. Take your time.”

His Texas drawl always gave me a bit of a thrill. There was just something about a Texas man that drew me to him. It's why I stopped going to the rodeo. I was a sucker for a reckless bronc-riding cowboy. And they always left me heartbroken and shattered in their wake.

I knew Mav would be no different. Which was why I never let anything happen between us. I closed my bedroom door behind me, and a flurry of anticipation built in my belly at the thought of what I would wear tonight, what he might like to see me in. But I worked hard to push that away and remind myself there was a reason he offered to be my donor. He wasn't staying around. So there was no use in getting my hopes up. And at this point, with the bargain we'd made, the right choice was to keep everything between us as clinical as possible. No matter how much I liked the sight of him in my house smiling at me like I hung the moon.

MAVERICK

A mixture of terror and excitement twisted in my gut as I stared at the text on my phone.

Clara: It's time. I'm ovulating.

My fucking hands shook.

Me: Now? Shit. I haven't gone to the clinic yet.

Clara: LOL Not right this second, but according to the tests I've been taking, the next three days are prime baby making time.

Me: I'll be right there.

Snagging my hat off the desk, I left the office and strode down the long walkway that separated the stables from the indoor arena. I pulled my keys from my pocket, making a beeline for my truck.

"Where's the fire, Mav?" Sutton asked from where he sat atop his horse.

"Got somewhere to be. You have a problem with that?"

My brother laughed and shook his head. "Not one bit. You gonna be back in time for supper?"

"What?" I had no clue what he was talking about.

Frustration flickered in his eyes. "Look, I know you've already got one foot out the door, but the least you could do is show up for Luke tonight."

Fuck. That was right; tonight was the first time Luke and Mackenzie would be coming over for supper and our weekly poker game since the accident. "I'll be there. I just got . . . a deposit to make."

He stared at me hard enough to make me squirm but released a long breath and nodded. "I hope you know you don't have to leave when your time's up. Just because you have an out doesn't mean you have to take it."

I didn't want to talk about this with him. Our dad had given me no choice but to stay here as an owner, but now that

my year was up, I was making the right choice to go. “Look, I made my choice. You and Luke have this place handled. My granddad doesn’t. They need me in Texas a hell of a lot more than you need me here.”

Sutton sighed. “If that’s how you feel, I don’t know how else to convince you we want you here.”

My phone buzzed in my hand, and Clara’s name flashed on the screen as she sent me another text. “Look, I gotta go. We can talk more about this later, okay?”

He nodded. “See you tonight. Sera’s making her mama’s famous chili and a chocolate cake for dessert.”

I grinned. “If I needed persuading, that’d do it. Mama Ryker’s chocolate cake is the best I’ve ever tasted.”

He chuckled and urged his horse forward. “Don’t let Miss Mel hear you say that. You might start a new feud.”

“What she don’t know won’t hurt her.”

“What who don’t know?” Nash Langston came up behind Sutton on his horse.

“Your grandma. Mav here said Mama Ryker’s cake is better than Grammy Mel’s.”

Nash winced. “Fightin’ words. It’s been nice knowing you, Mav.”

I just sighed and tipped my hat at them both. “See y’all tonight.”

As I got into my truck, I heard Nash ask, “Where’s he going?”

Sutton muttered, “Hell if I know.”

I started the engine and hightailed it straight to Clara’s clinic. Her apartment was above the office, a tidy little two-bedroom, perfect for her.

Parking behind the vet clinic, I had to work to calm my racing thoughts. If we succeeded, I’d have a kid out there in the world. Sure, she wanted me to have nothing to do with them, no say in who they grew up to be, no contact, but that

didn't change the fact that there'd be another human in this world I helped make. I wasn't gonna tell her, but I went to the bank the day after we made our arrangement and set up a trust in her name so this kid would be set up. Even if I wouldn't be in their life, I'd be damned if I'd let them go unsupported.

"You can do this. She deserves to be happy. Give her what she needs and move on."

I took a steadying breath and got out of the truck. Why was I nervous? This wasn't a fucking date. I was gonna go up there, give her my swimmers and then leave. End of story.

The jingle of the bell attached to the vet clinic's door was loud enough to make my heart lurch as I stepped inside. Had it always been this damn loud?

"Oh hey, Mr. Wilde. We're closed unless it's an emergency," Henry Billings said as he popped up from behind the reception desk. He'd outgrown his acne and gangly limbs in favor of a patchy beard and broad shoulders since the last time I saw him.

"Hi, Henry, I'm actually here to see Clara. Is she in her office?"

The kid swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. I . . . uh . . . I was just closing up. I gotta get home and finish cramming for my calculus test. Do you need something, y'know, clinic related?"

Shaking my head, I offered him a look of pure pity. "Nah. This is personal. Get yourself home. It's your senior year, isn't it? Got college applications to worry about?"

He offered me a slight jerk of his head as he grabbed his coat and came around the desk. "Thanks, Mr. Wilde."

"Drive safe, kid."

He was out the door and locking up behind him before I'd even finished talking. I walked down the hall toward Clara's office, my gut twisting with each step. I wasn't nervous. I really wasn't. I was . . . unsure of the situation, that was all.

I raised my hand to knock on her door, but she opened it and stood in front of me. Short, sassy, and cute as hell.

“What are you doing?”

I couldn't keep the sheepish smile off my lips. “You're ovulating.”

“Yeah?”

“I'm here to make my donation.”

“You . . . you want to make a donation, right now? Right here?”

Chuckling, I leaned against the doorframe. “Well, I was thinking you could buy me dinner first, and we could go upstairs.”

She glared at me, then when I burst out laughing, hit me lightly across the chest. “You're teasing me.”

“I am. Well, sort of. I am here to make a donation. I did some research and the less time the . . . “

“Semen,” she finished for me.

“Yeah, that. Anyway, the fresher it is, the fewer swimmers die off. Gives you a better chance at conception.”

Her expression softened. “You did research? I'm actually shocked.”

“It's important to you. And the least I could do.”

Taking her lower lip in between her teeth, she assessed me. “Okay. Come on up, and then you can jerk off in my bathroom, I guess.”

Hearing her say the words was even more surreal than simply getting in there and doing the deed. “Do you have to say it like that?”

She giggled. “Like what?”

“I don't know. Like it's no big deal. Like I'm some hormonal kid who can't keep it in his pants.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I'll clinic it up for you. Mr. Wilde, if you'd like, my restroom is open for your masturbatory needs. Better?”

No. Not even a little.

“Oh, lighten up, Mav. You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. I can order some sperm from a clinic and inseminate myself just as easily.”

“No. No way. I already said I’d do it. I’m a man of my word. Besides, the idea of you having some stranger’s jizz inside you makes me . . . uncomfortable.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “I didn’t take you for the jealous type. Or for the hypocritical type either.”

Her ponytail swished as she turned and strode past me and into the lobby, switching off lights as she did.

“Hypocrite?”

“Yeah, I mean, you Wilde boys aren’t exactly known for turning down a little strange. Or in some cases, a lot of it.”

“It’s been months since I got any. You know that.”

“I know. I’m sorry, this is just—”

She stopped at the door that led upstairs to her apartment.

I knew what she was going to say, but I wasn’t about to speak for her.

“What?”

“It’s weird, right?”

Yeah, it was. Every inch of this situation was unusual. “Yup. If you’ve changed your mind, I can go. The last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable, Clara. I’m just trying to help you get what you want.”

“One friend helping out another friend,” she murmured.

“Exactly.”

Taking a deep breath, she unlocked the door and pushed it open. I’d like to say I was a gentleman who didn’t check out her round ass all the way up the stairs, but I’d be lying. The truth was, Clara Barnes was a gorgeous woman. One I had no designs on, because mixing business with pleasure wasn’t

something I was interested in. But, damn, she took care of herself.

“Did you hear a single thing I said?” she asked as we entered her living room.

The bright space fit her perfectly—cheerful and welcoming, just like her. Clara could make anyone feel at ease. Like they belonged. It was a gift she had. Probably why animals trusted her so easily.

“So,” I said, taking off my hat and hanging it on the rack mounted to the wall. “Do you have a cup or something you want me to um . . . make my deposit into?”

A nervous chuckle escaped her before she stopped herself. “In a hurry?”

“Actually, yeah. I have supper with my family tonight.”

Her face fell, disappointment flickering in her blue eyes.

“You wanna come?” I asked. “We’re playing poker, though, just a warning. Sera’s a shark. Be prepared to lose all your gummy bears.”

The sound of her easy laugh made my heart swell. That was something I wanted to hear more of. “Sure. Sounds fun. I guess I should go change while you . . . make your donation.”

My stomach fluttered with nervous energy. Give me a horse and a ranch to run, and I’m fine. Ask me to jerk off into a cup, and apparently I’m a wreck.

Clara offered me a weak smile and held up a finger. “One sec.” She turned and went into her bedroom, returning in less than a minute with a plastic container that reminded me a lot of the Tupperware we’d had growing up.

She handed it to me and met my gaze, as though daring me to say something.

“So, I just . . .”

“Catch it in that, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“All right. I . . . uh . . . I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

A curt nod was her response as she practically ran to her bedroom. ““Let me know if you need anything,” she called over her shoulder.

“I’ve been doing this a long time, darlin’. I think I got it.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, her cheeks turned bright pink before she shut the door behind her and left me standing in her living room with a jizz cup and a job to do.

Her guest bathroom was neat and clean, just like the rest of her house. A white shower curtain hung from the rod above her tub, and pale seafoam green towels were rolled up and displayed on the shelves over the toilet. It all came together in a seemingly effortless way, from the plants hanging in the corner to the paint choice, which was a slightly off-white shade. But I knew she’d made each of these decisions carefully. She made every decision carefully. It was who she was.

“Fuck, I can’t do this in her bathroom,” I muttered, staring at the container.

I sat on the closed toilet seat and shut my eyes, picturing the smile on her face when she talked about having a baby. I had to do it.

Standing, I set the cup on the bathroom counter and unbuckled my belt. Everything felt too hot, tense, and not in a good way.

My cock was not into this. Not even a little. I needed some kind of stimulation. Something to get my mind off the fact that I was in my best friend’s bathroom, jerking off.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I opened a private browser and planned to do what I did any time I needed a little inspiration. Watch porn.

Don’t judge me.

But my fucking phone went black before an empty battery sign flashed on the screen.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Setting my phone down, I placed my palms on the counter and stared down at my dick, which was not being a team player at all.

“Look, we have a job to get done here. Can you just get with the fucking program?”

Nothing.

I scanned the bathroom, hoping for something that might work to my advantage. My gaze caught on something black and lacy hanging in the shower. My dick liked that. A lot. Panties and a matching bra hung from a line strung across her shower wall.

Clara wore stuff like this under her scrubs? Without warning, the image of her in these sexy as fuck pieces of lingerie came to my mind. I went from half-mast to full steam ahead in seconds. God, I shouldn't be thinking of her like that, but I couldn't deny how appealing the thought of her in lacy black underwear was.

With my right hand, I palmed my hard cock and gave a cursory stroke. Slow and lazy, easing my way into the real thing. Pleasure shot through me, though, my focus on the black lace in front of me.

My breaths came in tight gasps as I reached out with my free hand and grabbed the panties. Her panties. Fuck, what was I doing? I was pretty sure this wasn't part of the plan. But my hand shuttled up and down my cock as the fuse I'd lit burned shorter and shorter.

I gave in and wrapped the lace around my thick length just to feel something of hers on me, and I groaned—loud enough she probably heard me if she was out of the shower.

My dirty fucking mind went straight to her, naked and soapy, full round tits I'd tried so hard not to look at, curvy hips, long hair trailing down her back, and that perfect luscious ass.

“Fuck,” I groaned as my orgasm barreled through me almost without warning. “Oh, shit!” I spared one frantic glance

at the cup on the counter, out of my reach, before I blew my load directly into her sexy as sin black panties.

God, what was wrong with me?

The sharp rap of knuckles on the door had me nearly jumping out of my skin, even as the rush of my orgasm still lingered.

“Mav, are you okay in there?”

I glanced down at my hands, at the underwear covered in my release, and instead of just owning my dirty deed, I balled up the black lace and shoved it into my pocket.

“Yeah, fine. I’m all set.”

I set myself to rights and sighed, staring at my reflection in the mirror as I washed my hands.

When I opened the door, she was casually settled on the couch, watching a cooking show.

“How’d it go?” Her cheeks turned pink, and she bit her lower lip as she waited for me to answer.

“Well, I sorta . . . missed.”

Her brows lifted. “Missed?”

“Yeah. I missed the cup.”

I held my breath, waiting for disappointment to flash in her eyes. Instead, she burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. Mister, *I’ve been doing this a long time, darlin’*. You missed the cup.”

“I was distracted, okay? I’m not used to this kinda pressure.”

She stood and walked toward me. “You sounded like you got a handle on it there at the end.”

“I sure as hell did.”

Blinking those big eyes of hers up at me, she caught me off guard by wrapping her arms around my waist and hugging me

tight. “Thank you for trying. We’ve got time.”

“We can try again after supper.”

“Do you want to?”

“Darlin’, I’d do anything for you.”

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Clara

“You wanna take my truck? I can drop you home after.” Maverick snagged his hat off the rack mounted on my wall and settled the light straw on his head in one smooth motion. God, he looked good doing it.

“Sure. If you don’t mind coming all the way back out here.”

“It’s no trouble, darlin’. I got no better place to be.”

He flashed me that smirk. The one he reserved for the buckle bunnies who hung out near the dance floor or the mechanical bull at the Silver Spur. I knew that smirk. I fantasized about it every once in a while, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

“Okay then. Let’s go, cowboy.”

The drive from the clinic to Wilde Horse Ranch was all of twenty minutes, but something had shifted between us. The weird tension of jumping into this new adventure had evaporated and been replaced with a sort of . . . promise. He was going to have to get himself off again to give me what I needed. I wanted him to. Because hearing him let out that ragged breath right before I knocked on the door was undeniably hot.

“Stardust doing any better?” Mav asked, his hands white-knuckling the steering wheel as he stared straight ahead.

“Oh, yeah. She’ll be ready to ride in a few more days. It’s just an allergic reaction.” I smiled, thinking of the horse that his sister-in-law, Mackenzie, loved like she was her best friend. “Hives aren’t much fun, but now we know that new shampoo was to blame.”

“Good. That’s real good.”

“How’s Luke?” I asked, my heart tight with sadness thinking of the accident.

“He’ll be there tonight . . . I already told you that.”

“Yeah, you did.” I reached out and put a palm on his forearm to ease his embarrassment. “But that’s okay. You know it wasn’t your fault, right? I bet he doesn’t blame you.”

Heaving a sigh, he shook his head. “I should’ve stopped him.”

“Your brother can’t be stopped. He’ll do what he wants. He always has. It was an accident any one of the hands could’ve had.”

“He’ll have a limp the rest of his life.”

“So do most of the rodeo cowboys in Sunrise.”

He smiled a little at that. “True.”

“Stop blaming yourself. I have this thing about sticking up for people I care about. So don’t make me defend you against yourself.”

“That sounds really fucking complicated.”

I grinned. “Exactly. You’re not supposed to complicate my life, Maverick. You’re supposed to make it better.”

“You don’t think having a baby is going to complicate your life?”

“I know it will, but I’m also prepared for it, and I want this.”

His jaw clenched, and from the furrow of his brow, I could tell he was pondering.

“Okay, I promise I won’t blame myself. But you have to promise me you’ll loosen up tonight and have some fun. You’re wound up so tight I’m afraid you’re gonna snap.”

He pulled through the gates of Wilde Horse Ranch and headed down the long dirt road leading to the main house.

“I’m not.”

“Yeah. You are. This baby business has you tense. You need to relax if it’s gonna happen. That’s what all my research says.”

I arched a brow. “Research?”

“Yes, ma’am. You need to relax, make sure you’re exercising and eating right, drinking plenty of fluids, and . . .”

Was that my big strong cowboy blushing? I was pretty sure, even with just the light from the house shining in as he parked, his cheeks were red.

“And?”

“You need to orgasm.”

I laughed. “I do?”

“Yeah. When you make the deposit. Something about it helps with moving things along.”

“Wow, you weren’t kidding. You really did research all this.”

He turned off the engine. “I want to do this right.”

That made me laugh. “Well, missing the cup on your first donation wasn’t the best way to start out.”

“Everyone’s a critic,” he huffed. “C’mon, supper’s waiting, and I’m gonna kick your ass at poker tonight.”

“Only if I let you.”

That damned smirk twisted his lips again, and this time, the flutter in my belly wouldn’t be ignored, so I looked away. “You’ll let me and you’ll like it.”

Shit.

We walked through the massive doors that led into the house. Ostentatious was the word most used to describe Wes Wilde's decor choices, and boy, was it ever appropriate. Whether the decisions were made by his wife at the time or him, the decor screamed of someone who wanted to show off their money. The only thing in the main house I liked was the display honoring Remington Wilde, their grandfather, who famously played an Oscar-winning role as a cowboy outlaw in *Spurred*.

Laughter filtered down the hallway as we strode toward the kitchen, where most of these gatherings were held. Mav's warm palm settled on the small of my back as he guided me gently, and my body lit on fire at the single touch. What the hell was going on with me?

Maybe it was the fact that I knew he was going to knock me up. Sure, he wouldn't be . . . actively trying, but it would still be him who put his baby in me. A shiver raced through my body, and my nipples tightened. Jesus, I was horny for Maverick Wilde. No. I was just horny because I was ovulating. Maverick was providing what I needed. It made sense that my body would react to him with that knowledge in my head.

Right?

We entered the kitchen and found Sutton, Sera, Luke, and Mackenzie seated around the big round table nestled in the breakfast nook. Tristan Ryker stood in the kitchen with a beer in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other while his wife, Hazel, poured a bag of gummy bears into a large bowl. I couldn't help my smile. The room radiated happiness and family.

"Clara!" Hazel said, pure joy in her eyes. "I was so happy when Sutton said you were coming. I haven't seen you in so long."

Mackenzie stood and joined us as I left Mav's side and stood next to Hazel. "I've been swamped at work and honestly haven't had any time to myself. So when Mav invited me, I couldn't pass up the chance to hand him his ass."

Sera laughed. “I secretly think these guys like it when we dominate them.”

Sutton sidled up next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Depends on where the dominating is happening. And when. Sometimes I like it when you boss me around.”

The heat in her gaze as she stared at him was hard to miss. Especially when her cheeks turned pink. He pressed a soft kiss into her hair and murmured something I couldn’t hear. Whatever it was made her blush deepen.

“Okay, who’s ready for some cards?” Mav said as he snagged a slice of pizza from the box on the island. He raised one brow and asked me, “You hungry, darlin’?”

I nodded, and he placed a piece on a paper plate for me before handing it over. As we all made our way to the table, Mackenzie nudged me with her shoulder and mouthed, ‘darlin’?’

Shrugging it off as nothing, I just laughed. “He says it to everyone.”

“No, he doesn’t. He says it to women he wants to screw.”

She handed me a wine glass and then poured until I had a nearly full drink in my hand. “Drink, and then you’d better tell me what is happening between you two.”

“There’s nothing going on.”

She snorted. “And a bear doesn’t shit in the woods.”

The rustle of shuffling cards pulled my focus to the table, and I took a long gulp of my wine, forgetting about my reservations about drinking. I wasn’t pregnant; Mav had already shot his load tonight. And with the way Mackenzie was grilling me, I needed to loosen up, or I’d never make it through tonight.

Maverick

I wasn’t sure how I managed to get through the evening with my brothers without them catching on to what I’d done in Clara’s bathroom earlier. It seemed incredibly obvious to me.

Every time I looked at her, my dick got hard. I couldn't control myself around her. And that wasn't like me. It was strange and a little exciting, if I was honest.

It was past midnight. By the time we left, Clara had a bag full of gummy bears—brand new, not the ones we actually put in the pot. Nobody wanted to win a bunch of gummies that people had their fingers all over. She hummed quietly to herself with her head tipped back and her eyes closed as I drove her home.

“You doing all right over there, darlin’?” I asked her, needing to break the silence between us.

I just wanted things to go back to normal, at least as normal as they could. She turned her head toward me and smiled, opening those big eyes that always comforted me. They were gentle, tender, empathetic.

“Yeah, I'm fine, just sleepy. I drank a little too much wine, I think, but it's hard to say no when both Mackenzie and Sera are pushing it on me. It's been so long since I've been able to spend time with any of my girlfriends. Thank you for bringing me.”

Something about her opening up and sharing this part of her with me lightened my chest. “You can come with me whenever you want. We try to get together now at least twice a month, especially since I'm going to be leaving soon.”

A little furrow developed between her eyebrows. “You don't have to leave. I think it's kind of stupid, actually.”

There was just the tiniest slur in her words. That told me she wasn't hammered, but she definitely was a little buzzed, her inhibitions lightened. “Oh, you think it's stupid, do you? I thought you wanted me to go.”

“Why would I want you to go?”

“Because you don't want any contact with your baby daddy. And since that's gonna be me, that means you need me to get out of your hair so you can be the strong independent woman you are and raise your baby all by yourself.”

She let out a small snort, then reached out and smacked my chest, her hand drifting down my torso and resting high up on my thigh. She better not move any farther, or she'd come into contact with the exact tools she needed to get the job done.

“That’s why I was worried about going this route. Losing you so I can have this. I don’t know if it’s worth it.” It took a second for me to make sense of her words, but once I realized she meant she didn’t want to lose me, I smiled.

I pulled up to the clinic and parked around back. “Listen, I was leaving, no matter what. Luke’s accident only solidified it. My time is done here. I’ll come back for visits. But I don’t belong. Texas is my home. It has been for a long time now. And my granddad needs me there.”

“You like to be needed, don’t you?”

A bitter laugh caught in my throat because she was right. In one slightly inebriated question, she got to the root of all of my issues. I did want to be needed. I wanted to be important to somebody, worth something. I had never been that to my dad. Not to my brothers either. They got along just fine without me.

“What’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“Nothing. I understand it. I like to be needed too. But you know what I like more?”

“What’s that, darlin’?”

“I like to be wanted, whether I’m needed or not.”

I took my hand off the steering wheel and placed it on hers, threading our fingers. “Do you feel wanted, Clara?”

She stared at me, her expression dead serious. “I haven’t felt wanted in a very long time.”

“Well, that’s a damn shame. Anybody who’s not giving you attention is a fool.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Fuck yeah. You’re devastating. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve known. Can’t you see that? How beautiful you are? How smart and talented you are? You’ve got your shit

together better than anybody in this damn town. You keep our animals alive. You take care of them when they're hurt. And you do the hard things that need to get done when there's no other choice. And somehow, you make us feel less terrible when that happens. I couldn't think of anybody who'd make a better mother than you."

The fire in her eyes sent shockwaves of arousal through me but quickly dimmed to something more gentle. She tucked a lock of her hair behind one ear and looked away. She so easily shot me right back in the friend zone, but for a minute, I knew I could have had her in my arms, right here in the cab of my truck. I could have pulled her across the bench seat and let her ride me into oblivion. Until that moment when whatever I said struck her and reminded her of who we were to each other.

"Thank you again for tonight, Mav, and for your attempted donation."

"We can try again tomorrow," I said. "I can bring over a donation so I don't have to jerk off in your bedroom—I mean, bathroom."

She bit her lower lip. "Well, you're welcome to come get yourself off in my bathroom whenever you need to. And, yes, tomorrow night. But maybe we should ease into it, instead of you just coming over and running into the bathroom."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know. We're not strangers; we don't have to act like it. So why don't you bring a bottle of wine or some beer, and maybe we can just try to do this like normal people."

My heart damn near beat out of my chest. Was she saying what I thought she was saying? That she wants to fuck me? My dick liked that idea a whole hell of a lot.

"I mean, I guess if that's what you want. We can have ourselves a little date tomorrow night, work our way up to the big moment, I guess. That'd be real nice."

"You don't think it'll be weird?"

"Do *you* think it'll be weird?"

“I just haven’t done it in a long time. Maybe I forgot how.”

I couldn’t fight my smirk. “Oh, darlin’, don’t worry, it’ll come back to you. From my experience, it’s not something you really forget how to do. You just got to go with your instincts. Trust yourself, and do what feels good.”

She smiled and nodded, then surprised me by leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to my cheek before whispering in my ear, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Mav.”

She got out of the truck, and I watched her walk up the stairs, this time noticing every single curve of her body in a very different way. How had I resisted her and this attraction between us for so long? Why had I forced myself not to see her? Because that was precisely what I’d done.

There was no denying it. I wanted her, and I had always wanted her, but she was under some kind of veil of friendship. Something that disguised her so I didn’t cross the line. Not anymore.

When I finally got home, I was dog tired after a long day at work plus the excitement of everything that had happened today and the promise of what would happen tomorrow. I stripped out of my clothes, fishing in my pockets for my phone and the keys to the office I’d forgotten to hang up on the hook in the main house. My fingers brushed up against something lacy, and a fresh wave of arousal rushed over me. I pulled out the black panties I had spilled my come onto. I needed to wash these and somehow get them back to her before she noticed. Maybe tomorrow I could put them back where they’d been, and she wouldn’t be any wiser.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, when I fucked her hard enough to put a baby inside her.

Jesus. Why was that so hot? Why did I like it so much? My cock was a length of steel, but I knew I couldn’t waste a drop of what she needed. So I started a load of laundry, tossing her panties in with my boxers and socks. Then I showered in cold water, trying desperately to get my dick under control

before forcing myself into bed. I tented the sheets as flashes of her taunted me throughout the night. Every time I rolled over and my cock brushed the mattress, sparks of pleasure shot through me.

At this rate, when I finally got inside her tomorrow, I'd last all of two seconds. Oh well, I'd just have to make sure she got off before I let myself fill her up. There was no denying it now. Clara Barnes had been trapped in the friend zone for the last two years. But now, she was so far out of the friend zone I didn't think there'd ever be any going back. I might have to let her go eventually, but until I did, I was going to spend every minute I had giving her exactly what she needed. Me.

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Clara

“Yeah, that hoof needs some work,” I said, gently releasing the heifer’s leg after assessing her sore hoof. “There’s an abscess, and it looks pretty deep.”

Clint Ryker grumbled from his place next to me. “How bad? Are you gonna be able to fix her?”

“I think so. Give me a while, and I’ll let you know when we’re done.” I patted him on the shoulder and offered a sympathetic grin. “Go on. Love on your wife and daughter. I’ve got this.”

He offered me a soft smile and tipped his hat at me. “Thank you, Clara. Mama wanted me to let you know there’s a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen waiting for you when you finish up.”

My heart swelled with the warm comfort of belonging somewhere. Mama Ryker treated everyone like they were part of her family, me included. It was a big part of why Ryker Ranch’s reality show was such a huge success.

“I guess I’d better hurry it up then. There’s nothing like Mama’s chocolate chip cookies.”

Clint left me with a ranch hand for help and a cow who was still in pretty serious pain to tend to. It was sweet how much he worried about his cattle. They weren’t just money makers to him. Just like at Wilde Horse Ranch, their livestock was more important. They cared about them and what their lives were like.

“Okay, girl, let’s get this foot feeling better,” I said, running my hand over her rump. I glanced at the ranch hand, Justin Ross, a frequent flyer in Nell Langston’s bed. “Keep her calm, will you? I have to go grab my stuff from my van.”

He nodded and double-checked the cow’s enclosure before moving to replace me.

When I was finally done, her hoof scraped and treated, then wrapped for healing, I headed for the main house. Mama Ryker sat on the back porch with a mug in her hands and a pair of pink headphones over her ears. Her cheeks were blazing red as she rocked in the rocking chair and listened to whatever was in her ears.

“Mama?” I called, waving my hands to get her attention.

Her eyes went wide, and she fumbled with her phone before turning off whatever she’d been listening to. “Oh, Clara, honey. You all done for the day?”

“Yep. That heifer should be fine. I got the abscess all taken care of. You can tell that son of yours to settle down and stop worrying.”

The smile on her lips made me laugh. She knew as well as I did, as we all did, that Clint was as grumpy and serious as they came. “That’s about as likely to happen as our bull Lucifer is to let anybody ride him.”

Hanging the headphones around her neck, she cocked her head. “You hungry? I’ll make you a sandwich.”

Shaking my head, I grinned. “I’ve got a dinner date tonight.”

Her eyes lit with interest. “Tell me it’s Trent? That boy needs a good woman like you.”

As handsome as her nephew was, Trent Ryker wasn’t my type. A former military man and absolute playboy, he had fuckboy written all over him.

“No. Not Trent.”

She waved me into the kitchen, and I dutifully removed my boots before walking to the sink to wash up. The smell of

melted butter and chocolate overwhelmed me, making my mouth water. I took a deep breath and sighed. This place always brought back memories of my childhood. Of me and my mama baking cookies together, spending time trying out new recipes, before I lost her.

Mama Ryker pushed a plate of fresh cookies toward me. “One for now, and a bunch to take home. Maybe your date would like some for dessert?”

Nodding, I took a treat and bit into it. The groan I let out was borderline obscene. It was still warm and absolutely perfect. “You seriously won’t share that recipe?”

She winked. “Family secret. You become a Ryker, I’ll give you the recipe.”

“Are you trying to bribe me to marry your nephew?”

“If I have to.”

The kitchen door opened, and Tristan, her youngest son, walked through with his little boy on his shoulders. “Mama, can you keep Georgie for a few hours? Hazel has— Oh, hey there, Clara. Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

I waved as Mama snagged the adorably chubby-cheeked blond toddler off his daddy’s shoulders. “Of course I can take my sweet boy. What’s going on with Hazel? Is she feeling better?”

Tristan’s cheeks flushed pink. “Yeah, uh . . . she should be soon. Once the morning sickness dies down.”

“What? Oh my God, she’s pregnant?” The joy in Mama’s voice was impossible to miss.

“Looks like it. I’m taking her to Doc for an ultrasound.”

I felt like I was infringing on a private moment, so I grabbed the box Mama had packed for me and headed for the door. “Thanks, Mama,” I called as she hugged her son and smiled so bright my cheeks hurt in sympathy.

Another Ryker baby. That made, was it five now?

These cowboys were setting up Sunrise for a future generation of heartbreakers.

When I got home, I still had paperwork to do, and I was pretty sure I smelled like manure. Normally, I wouldn't care at all about Maverick Wilde seeing me straight off the ranch with hay in my hair and muck on my boots, but today was different. I wanted to look good. Smell nice. Remind him I was a woman.

“Henry, I've got something going on tonight. You can go ahead and close up. Just forward the phone for emergency calls, and we can finish up the paperwork from today in the morning, okay?”

His brown eyes lit up like I'd just told him it was his birthday. “Really?”

“Yep. I'll see you tomorrow. Tell your mama I said hello.”

He grinned. “Will do. She's gonna send you some cupcakes for this. I can guarantee it.”

“For letting you go home early?”

“Dad's working out of state this week, so this means I can go help her at the cafe before closing.”

Guilt slammed into me. “I didn't know that. I would have let you off early all week. You just have to ask.”

He shrugged. “Then you would've been left on your own. Mama has people working at the cafe. You just have me out front. The vet techs don't know how to handle people.”

Well, that was true. “Thanks. In the future, if you need time off, just ask me.”

He nodded and grabbed his backpack off the hook behind the desk. “Goodnight, Doc.”

I waved at him and followed him to the door, locking it behind him after he left. Now it was time for me to get out of vet mode and into woman mode. A thrill ran through me at the thought. The way Mav had been looking at me yesterday made me feel a lot less like his friend and a lot more like a woman. I just hoped he agreed with my plan. He needed to relax, and so

did I. Dinner, a movie, maybe a little whiskey before he got back into the bathroom and made his donation.

This was the best idea I'd had in a long time. It wasn't like either of us had done this before. Breeding horses was way different. And that's how I approached my situation the first time. Clearly that didn't work for him. I needed to finesse this, seduce him to the point where he was ready to go, then hand him the cup and get what he'd agreed to give me.

Right?

Half an hour later, I stood under the spray of my shower and rinsed the conditioner out of my hair, satisfied that I no longer smelled like livestock. The soft scent of lilac filled the enclosed space. I'd taken my time, exfoliating my face and shaving my legs until they were smooth and silky, making sure I'd be one hundred percent date ready. I liked Mav. More than I liked any guy I'd been out with in a long time. Just because we were friends, that didn't mean he deserved less effort than they did. He probably deserved more because he treated me better.

Shit, why was I so worked up about this? It was just Mav. He was coming to fix the mistake he made yesterday. That was all.

Even though I tried to convince myself tonight was nothing special, I still put on makeup and straightened my hair, forgoing my usual ponytail and letting the thick locks trail down my back.

When he knocked on my door a half hour later, I had to force myself not to run to answer. I was just excited about the prospect of getting pregnant. Not about him being here. Right?

He opened the door before I pulled myself together long enough to answer.

"You all right in here, darlin'?" I saw the brim of his hat first, followed by the rest of him. A tight-fitting button-down shirt in black, dark Wranglers, shiny boots. Fuck, he was dressed up for tonight. For me.

He pulled out a bouquet of peonies from behind his back, and I had to tamp down the rush of butterflies in my belly.

“Flowers?”

He shrugged, looking a little bashful. “Figured you’d like them. They’re your favorite, right?”

I couldn’t hide my smile. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I pay attention. The ones on your kitchen table looked like they were on their last leg.”

He handed me the flowers, his fingers brushing mine and sending sparks shooting through me. “That was . . . really thoughtful.”

The swoony bastard winked at me. “I have my moments.”

“Looks like you do.”

Flashing me that Hollywood smile passed down by his granddad, he stepped a little closer. “So, supper first? Then we’ll get down to business?”

Why was my throat dry? God. He had me nervous as a cat in the bath. As wet, too, if I was being honest. “It’ll take a little while to get supper going. Do you want a drink while I make it?”

“How about you and I cook together and have a drink at the same time?”

I eyed him. “You want to cook?”

“I’m here to spend time with you.” Fingers trailed over my hand and then circled the top of my wrist. What the hell was he doing? “If you’re in the kitchen, I want to be there. I want to help.”

“I’m sorry, who are you, and what have you done with Maverick?”

Amusement lit his eyes as he laughed. “We’ve never been on a date before, darlin’. Until you’re knocked up, you’d better get used to this version of me. You need to be relaxed and open to it if you want me to put a baby in you.”

The way he said that, put a baby in you, sent arousal crashing through me with little warning. It brought to mind skin on skin, lips and tongues, hands everywhere, soft sighs and desperate moans. I had to swallow hard to be able to respond.

“Okay . . . I . . . sure.” My face was on fire. I was so worked up I couldn’t even form a coherent sentence.

That cocky grin never left his face. “It’s okay, darlin’. I’ve got you.”

But was that what I wanted?

Maverick

Why was she being so skittish? This had been her idea. She’d wanted to move this along in a more natural way. I followed her to the kitchen, loving the way her soft floral scent trailed behind her. It was one of my favorite things about her. She smelled good. Aside from right after work, but none of us could say anything different. When you worked with animals, you worked hard.

But right now? Damn, she smelled fantastic, and she looked even better. Clara had changed everything between us last night, and I couldn’t be happier. All this time. All this fucking time, I’d denied her as a possibility. Not anymore.

“What are we makin’?” I asked, leaning against the kitchen counter.

She pulled something wrapped in butcher paper out of her fridge, along with vegetables, and handed me the paper-wrapped package. “Rib eye, salad, and asparagus.”

“Sounds perfect. What do you want me to do?”

Her big blue eyes locked on mine. “Season the steaks? They need to sit for a little while before we sear them.”

“My pleasure, ma’am. You want a drink?”

She bit her lower lip as she stared at me, hunger in her eyes I hadn’t noticed before. “I’ve got wine and whiskey. What’s your pleasure?”

I almost replied, you, but she let out a nervous chuckle, and I stopped myself. “What do you want?”

“This seems like a whiskey kind of night.”

“Worried about inhibitions?”

“A little,” she admitted.

I set aside the steaks, then reached for her. “You don’t have to be worried about this.” Her eyes were wide and searching as I pulled her close. “We’re two consenting adults. Attracted to each other. Making a decision that will get you something you want. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying the process together. You’ll get a baby, and I’ll get a few months of sex with a beautiful woman I care about.”

“Wait, hold on. Sex? Who said anything about sex?” She backed out of my hold and crossed her arms over her chest. “We’re not having sex.”

I laughed. “Yeah, we are. You said so last night.”

“No. I didn’t say that at all.”

“You did.” I dragged a hand over my hair and thought back to the conversation we’d had. Fucking hell, she never actually said sex. “You did not. Jesus, Clara. I’m sorry.”

“You thought I wanted you to fuck me until I got pregnant?”

I was such an asshole. “Well, yeah. Dinner, drinks, a date. I figured we were going to just try to knock you up the old-fashioned way.”

She burst into a fit of laughter, her amusement making me let go of the embarrassment I’d felt and laugh right along with her.

“I mean, we can’t do it that way.” Tears filled her eyes from the giggling she was still working to control. “It’s a terrible idea.”

I should have agreed. But I didn’t. “Is it so terrible?”

Her expression changed to apologetic. “Being with you . . . sleeping with you isn’t a terrible idea. But it’s not the smart

way to do this. I've never been with someone with no feelings being involved."

"I have. That's all I've ever done."

"That's not true. You've been in love, I'm sure of it."

I shook my head. "No. I thought so once, but I look at my brothers, and there's no way I've ever been in love with anyone if that's the way I should be looking at my girl."

"How's that?"

"Like she's the only woman in the fucking world."

She bit her lower lip and stared hard at me. "So you were really ready to fuck me tonight? No feelings? Just sex?"

I smirked, but something stirred in my chest. "If you want me to, I still am. I'll make a direct deposit, so we have no chance of me missing."

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Clara

Was he serious?

Maverick wanted to sleep with me. He wanted to spend the rest of his time in Sunrise in *my* bed.

I wondered if this was really going to remain as uncomplicated as he thought. Probably not. But he was right about one thing—it would be a hell of a lot more fun to try and get pregnant if we were doing this naked.

He turned away from me and began seasoning the steaks while I poured both of us two fingers of whiskey. The music playing on the small speaker on my kitchen counter seemed so loud in the silence between us. How could he be so cavalier about this? So relaxed about the proposition he just made. One that would change everything between us.

I watched as he moved around my kitchen like he owned the place, his hips moving slightly to the beat of the music. You couldn't call it dancing, but you could tell he was enjoying being in the middle of everything.

I downed my whiskey, taking a deep breath as the alcohol burned its way into my belly.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, let's do it.”

His shoulders stiffened, and everything stopped as he turned around to face me. “Are you sure?”

He moved the steaks to a plate before heading to the sink and washing his hands.

“Yeah. What the hell, right? You’re leaving. I want a baby. And there are worse ways to make one than to have a sexy man tangled in the sheets with me.”

Underneath the shadow of his stubble, I saw that dimple from his smirk. He didn’t say anything as he returned to the plate where the meat was sitting. But then he grabbed it and moved toward the refrigerator. Opening my fridge, he slid the plate onto the top shelf and closed the door before turning back to face me.

“Those are supposed to—”

Maverick moved forward, and I backed away until I was pressed against the counter, and his body was flush to mine. His big, rough palm gripped the nape of my neck, forcing me to look at him. I was lost in his deep blue eyes.

“You’re mine now, darlin’. Until this is over. Do you understand?” The hunger in his voice had my thighs clenching tight, and my focus changed from wanting to eat to wanting him.

He leaned close, his lips nearly touching mine, but he bypassed my mouth and put his just barely on my ear lobe.

“I’m gonna make sure I leave a piece of me behind. You’re never gonna forget me.”

How did he think I could? Even before this, Maverick was an important part of my life. There were so many things that always made me think of him. Even the sight of a pair of spurs had my mind going to Maverick. When someone mentioned cowboys? It was him that flashed in my mind before anybody else. I don’t think Maverick truly knew how much I thought of him.

I could feel his breath on my ear, and goosebumps lifted on my skin, making my nipples hard. My pulse raced, and I sucked in a sharp breath when he rocked his hips and the hard length of him dug into my lower belly. He was so much taller than me, so much bigger. His body engulfed mine, and I loved it.

“Do we want to go to the bedroom?” I asked breathlessly.

He let out a soft laugh and backed away, leaning against the counter opposite me before snagging his whiskey.

The way he was looking at me . . . I recognized that look. I'd seen it on his brother's faces when their girls said something naughty. Something that ended up with the two of them sneaking away from whatever gathering we'd all been at. I saw it on Hawk Langston's face at Luke and Mackenzie's wedding. And I'd known then that he and Daisy, the nanny to his daughter, were more than they let on. It was a look from someone desperate to stake their claim.

"Do you want to eat first?" he asked.

I was hungry, but he'd opened Pandora's box. And now, the only thing I wanted was him inside me.

"The food can wait," I said.

"Brace yourself, darlin'." He knocked back his whiskey, then reached for me, pulling me against him and crushing his lips to mine.

There's a moment that I've heard about from my girlfriends, one I've read about in books and seen in movies. The one where time stops and the world is flipped upside down. I didn't believe it was real. But the instant Maverick Wilde finally kissed me, I realized I was so wrong. I also knew I was in serious trouble.

The groan he let out into my mouth as he pressed his tongue between my lips and threaded his fingers in my hair was full of anguish and longing and absolute relief. His other hand trailed down to my ass, where he pulled up the skirt of my dress until he found bare skin and then the lace of my panties.

He backed away just enough to whisper, "Fucking love that you dressed up for me. Also the fact that you wore these sexy little lacy things even though you didn't think we were going to be fucking. Jesus Christ, Clara. Thank God you don't want to wait until after we eat."

I stared at him. "I didn't dress like this for you."

He smirked. "Bullshit."

My cheeks burned. “I just wanted to feel good.”

“Oh.” A wicked glimmer filled his eyes. “Follow me, darlin’. I promise you, you’re gonna feel so fucking good in just a minute.”

He kissed me again, and this time, both hands cupped my ass, and he lifted me off the ground. Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around his waist and threaded my fingers behind his neck. The man didn’t stop kissing me as he carried me into my bedroom, where my outfit choices for the evening were still strewn across the mattress.

“Indecisive?” he asked.

“I don’t get to dress up much, so yeah. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Not a damn thing. I changed my shirt five times before coming over.”

I giggled and popped one of those pearl buttons open, revealing just a hint of one of the whirling tattoos on his chest.

“And yet you went with plain black.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes simple is better.”

“Very true.”

He lay me back on the bed, my whole body trembling slightly with the apprehension of what we were about to do. We couldn’t go back after this. But he wasn’t coming back either. Not really.

He stared down at me, dark heat in his eyes.

“Lift your skirt,” he commanded.

I did as he told me, rucking it up until it was bunched around my waist.

“Jesus. Black lace. You are trying to kill me.”

He dropped to his knees and grabbed me by the calves, gently tugging me until my ankles were on his shoulders.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“I’m making sure you’re ready. You’ve got to be fully prepared for all of what we’re about to do. We want it to work, now, don’t we?”

I worried at my lower lip, fighting the urge to say, *I don’t know, do we?* Because the sooner this worked, the less time I would get with him. Hooking his fingers in the tops of my lacy underwear, he tugged them down my hips and then slowly pulled one leg free, then the other. Then he stared down at the panties in his hand.

“These make me fucking hard.”

“Noted. I have a few more pairs.”

“Good.” He let out a low laugh. “Then you won’t mind if I keep these.”

Before I could protest, he tucked them into the pocket of his Wranglers. And then his lips were trailing up, up, up my inner thigh, one finger gently toying with my sex until he dipped inside.

“Oh God,” I muttered.

I moaned, my hands already fisting the sheets. When his lips wrapped around my clit and he sucked and licked me, it did all kinds of amazing things to me. My control vanished, and my hands, which were wrapped in the covers, somehow found their way into his thick hair. I held on for dear life as he pulled me over the edge.

He backed away as my legs were still trembling, my arousal glistening on his lips.

“That was the best appetizer I could have hoped for.”

He reverently took my legs off his shoulders and stood, his fingers lingering on the tender skin of my knees as he placed each foot on the floor. Opening his shirt, button by button, he stared at me, all serious and filled with need before sliding the fabric off, followed by his jeans.

“Fuck,” he said under his breath.

I sat up on my elbows. “What’s the matter?”

“I forgot to take my damn boots off.” His voice was filled with amusement and embarrassment, endearing him to me even more.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and one boot thumped to the floor, then the next. When he stood, gentle but grumpy Maverick was gone, replaced by a cowboy sex god. “All right, darlin’. It’s time for me to put a baby inside you.”

OKAY, I COULD DO THIS. I COULD LET THE MOST GORGEOUS man I’d ever known kiss his way down my body and take the time to give my lady bits a close inspection with his tongue. Plenty of women had one-night stands with cowboys in Sunrise without giving it a second thought. But most of them weren’t trying to get pregnant. And none of them were with Maverick Wilde right now. That privilege was all mine. So why was I nervous?

“Your heart’s going a mile a minute,” Mav whispered, his lips brushing the curve of my neck. “I can feel it here.” He pressed a kiss to the fluttering pulse point that gave me away.

“I’m just nervous. What if this messes things up between us?”

His soft chuckle sent tingles over my skin. “It’s a little too late to be worried about that now.”

“Why?” His fingertip circled my tender nipple, causing the sensitive bud to tighten.

“Because I’ve seen you naked. I’ve felt your skin on mine. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t forget this.”

He nipped my collarbone with his teeth, then ran his palm down my belly until he rested just below my navel. “Is this okay? Can I touch you?”

What was I so afraid of? Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. “Yes. Tonight, I’m yours. Tomorrow we go back to normal.”

“No, darlin’. You’re mine until that stick says pregnant. Until my baby is growing inside you, I want you in my bed, in my arms, and everything in between. Understand?”

I swallowed through a tight throat. “Yours?”

“Damn right. Mine.”

“It might not happen right away.”

The rough scratch of his stubble as he dragged his mouth down to the swell of my breast at the same time his fingers sank into my slick heat was already overwhelming. I didn’t know how I’d survive him inside me.

“Then we’d better make the most of it. I don’t do things halfway.”

I cried out when he did this come-hither gesture, rubbing the pads of his fingers against a magic spot that sent sparks through me.

“That’s right, darlin’. It’s okay to be loud. It makes me so fucking hard for you when you make those noises.”

Oh my God, was it just me, or had Mav’s voice gotten even sexier?

He pulled my nipple into his mouth as I began riding his hand in search of more friction, of the orgasm just starting to bloom. The hot and heavy length of his cock pressed insistently along my thigh, begging for attention. I reached down and slipped my hand between us, a thrill running through me at the pained guttural moan he let out.

“You’re so fucking wet. Is this all for me?”

“Yes,” I admitted. I hadn’t been this aroused in years. I was too focused on building my life, my career, to take the time for relationships. But Mav had always been the one man to steal my attention in a crowd. The one man to appear in my dreams and make me think, ‘what if?’

I just never let myself believe he was really attainable. But now that he was in my bed, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to accept that he had to leave.

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MAVERICK

Clara laid before me, eyes wide and trusting, her limbs slightly trembling. I understood. I felt the same way. This would change everything between us. But I was okay with it.

“Maybe,” she started, “maybe we should set some ground rules so things don’t get too messy.”

I couldn’t help myself. I smirked. “Oh, darlin, things are about to get real messy.”

She giggled. “Don’t be gross.”

A laugh escaped my chest. “I’m not being gross. I’m just telling the truth. I know what I’m doing, and if you don’t get messy, I’m not doing my job.”

Her eyes darkened with lust at the promise in my words. “Your job?”

“Yes, my job. You made me an offer. I accepted. And now I have a job to do. And I’m not going to stop until you’ve got exactly what you want.” I palmed my aching cock. “My baby inside you.”

She bit her lower lip, then propped herself up on her elbows. “This is weird.”

My chest tightened, my heart sinking. It was weird for her to be with me? Why did that hurt so bad?

“We don’t . . . we don’t talk to each other like this,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Like lovers.” Her cheeks turned pink, and she looked away from me. “I don’t talk to anybody like this. No one ever approaches me or hits on me. I haven’t had sex in so long, I don’t even know if I remember how it feels.”

I sat down next to her as she brought herself up to a seated position. Threading our fingers, I ran my thumb across her knuckles. “Clara, the only reason no one flirts with you is that you work with them all. We’re not supposed to. You don’t dip your pen in company ink, and you are company ink all across Sunrise. You’d be hard-pressed to find a cowboy around these parts who would take the risk of fucking up his ranch and his relationship with the best vet we’ve ever known.”

She nodded. “I know. I know. It’s not fair, though. Clint Ryker married his reality TV show producer. Sam and Tucker are rancher and ranch hand. Why can’t I find something when they did?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you will.” The thought of her with someone else had a twist building in my chest. “We don’t have to do this tonight. If you want to wait and see if maybe”—I had to swallow past the bitterness in my voice— “the right one comes along, I won’t stand in your way.”

She turned to stare at me, blue eyes blazing. “I don’t want to wait for the right one. I want to do this. And I want to do it with you.”

The spark of possibility of something more between us died when she said that. I wasn’t the right one. I was the present one. “All right, but you want to set some rules?”

“Yeah, I do. The kissing. It’s . . .” She hesitated. “It’s too personal, too intense. It crosses a line I don’t think I’m prepared for.”

“All right. We don’t have to do that. I just thought it might set the mood.”

“I understand. I like it; I just think it’s best if we don’t. I don’t know if I can separate the kissing from the sex. Kissing . . . it’s intimate. It’s more vulnerable, I guess.”

I nodded. “Fine. No more kissing.”

“And stop being so . . .”

“What?”

“Stop treating me like someone you’re trying to get into bed.”

It was hard not to chuckle, and I was sure I didn’t keep any of the amusement from my tone. “I *am* trying to get you into bed.”

The pink in her cheeks darkened. “I know, but this is different. Just . . . fuck me and get it over with. Don’t make it a whole thing.”

“I have an idea,” I murmured.

“What’s that?”

“What if you stop focusing on what we shouldn’t do and just let yourself enjoy the process? I’m not talking about falling in love. But I can make this good for you if you’ll let me.”

Her tongue darted across her bottom lip as she let her gaze trail down my body, landing on my crotch, specifically on my cock, which had already flared to life again.

“Touch me, Clara. Feel how much I want you.”

She reached out, and I shivered with anticipation. God, I wanted her hand on me.

“Wow, you’re . . .”

“What, darlin’?” I said around a moan as she stroked me.

She swallowed, gaze never leaving my cock. “Big.”

Pure alpha-male pride washed over me. I’d heard it before. It’s not like I didn’t know I was blessed, but hearing it from her meant more. “I promise you, I’ll make it fit.”

CLARA

Mav's harsh gasps and tight, tense moans told me I was on the right track with my long, slow strokes up his length and back to the root. I was going to get him worked up just like he'd done to me. I'd planned on getting this over with, but the sounds he was making made this way too much fun. Fair was fair, right?

He leaned forward and sucked my nipple into his mouth, the shockwave of pleasure hitting me right where it counted. But all too soon, he released the sensitive bud and glanced up at me, making eye contact and then biting his full lower lip with a spark of mischief in his eyes.

"You better hold on to something, darlin'."

"What? Why?"

He slid down between my legs, hooking my knees over his shoulders before he shoved his face into my pussy. I cried out, closing my eyes, arching my back, my hand immediately finding purchase in his hair as I grabbed the thick, soft strands and held on for dear life. As he licked and sucked at my clit, his fingers sank inside me, working at that special spot, and I cried his name. Writhing, I ground myself into him.

The moans that came out of him against my slick flesh had me desperate and begging for him to let me come. I grabbed his head with both hands, pulling his mouth away because the pleasure was too intense. I couldn't take it.

"I need you."

He smirked. "You have me. My face wasn't buried between your thighs for nothing."

"No, I need more. I need you inside me. Please. I want to feel it."

His expression went serious as he pulled his fingers from deep within me and sat back on his heels. "Don't close your eyes. I want to see the flicker of pleasure when I push into you for the first time, Clara."

I swallowed, my heart in my throat, but I nodded and locked gazes with him. He positioned himself between my thighs, his length pressed against me, nudging my opening.

For the briefest instant, a flicker of panic rushed across his face before he shook his head.

“What was that?” I asked.

If he didn’t want this, we needed to stop. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing with the motion, and let out a shuddering breath. “I just . . . I’m bare. And it feels so good already.”

“Have you ever been with anyone without a condom?”

“No. Never.”

Oh, that was a surprise. I knew he’d had at least one long-term relationship. He didn’t talk much about her. She was back in Texas, but they’d been together for two years. When he came back to Sunrise, things had ended between them.

I couldn’t believe he’d kept it wrapped up all this time. “You were really serious about not wanting to be a dad, weren’t you?”

“Mine was such an ass. I didn’t want to repeat his mistakes. Fuck up my kids like he did us.”

My heart fluttered and my stomach twisted. “You won’t.”

We locked eyes, and the intensity behind his stare sent arousal streaking through me. Okay, this was it. This was the point of no return for both of us. Once we did this, he’d always be a part of me. I knew that deep in my bones.

We stayed silent, watching each other as he slowly pushed his way inside, his eyes flashing with barely restrained intensity. I could tell he wanted more than this. He wanted to slam home and ruin me. That primal urge to mate and breed was something even humans couldn’t avoid. No matter how much we tried, most of us couldn’t ignore our biological imperative.

Hormones and pheromones and everything else got all jumbled up and took over. I should know—my body was begging for what he could give me.

“More,” I whispered, reaching for his hips and digging my fingers into the flesh of his ass. God, he was all rock-hard

muscle, chiseled and perfect.

“Jesus, God, Clara, you feel so fucking good.”

“So do you. Don’t stop.”

“I don’t plan to. Not until the job is done.”

That one word, *job*. He kept mentioning it. Kept bringing up that this was a job. And I knew it was important, that I needed him to remind me during this moment that he was doing a job for me. But something about that word felt . . . wrong. Like whatever happened between Mav and me, it should be the furthest thing from a job.

My eyelids fluttered close as he moved in another inch, and he growled, “Eyes on me, darlin’. I told you, I want to see it.”

My nipples pebbled, a fresh wave of arousal layering itself on top of the first one. I nodded, returning my gaze to his, and that was when he sank all the way in, bottoming out on a ragged moan. I kept my fingers clenched into the globes of his ass, unable to risk trailing my hands over the rest of his body, cupping his jaw, caressing him, even though everything in me wanted to. I wanted to feel every ridge of his tight abdomen, to trace the tattoo across his shoulder and his pectoral. God, I wanted to do it with my tongue.

He held on to my hips, thrusting deep and hard and fast, bringing back the orgasm I hadn’t quite found earlier with a vengeance.

“Touch yourself. Make yourself come while I’m inside you. I want to feel it around me. I want you to milk my cock for everything it’s worth.”

I shivered, and he moaned in response. But I slid one hand off him and down my front as he lifted my hips and continued his slow thrusts.

His gaze traveled down my body, stopping where my fingers were stroking my clit, my pussy on full display. The sight of his cock moving in and out of me made me pant, sending tingles exploding from my clit. He adjusted his angle so he was thrusting upward, then he pulled back down. That lit

something up inside me. My pace sped as his also did, like he was watching me and timing his thrusts with each roll of my fingers. I felt him get thicker, harder—if that was possible—and he grunted out my name, followed by a warning.

“I need you to come, darlin’. I need you to come so I can. Please. God.”

I took a shaky breath at the thought of what he was doing to me.

And then, he whispered, “Come, so I can fill you with my baby.”

That unlocked something deep inside me, and I was lost. The pleasure ricocheted through every nerve ending I possessed, curling my toes, making me clamp down on him as I cried out his name. I dropped my hand, pulling it away from my oversensitive clit so I could grip his thighs and ride him through my release.

He moaned long and loud, and his cock jerked inside me, spilling everything he had deep into me. Just like we were made to do.

Mav and me.

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I knew I was already starting to hope for when we could do it again. To think about how it might not be so bad if Maverick Wilde fucked me into oblivion every night for the next few months. How maybe not getting pregnant right away wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

And as he pulled out of me and grabbed a pillow to prop under my ass, I stared at the man who swore he wasn’t the marrying kind. Who promised he wouldn’t want to stay and be a daddy. But who seemed to me like the only man I might ever consider having either of those things with.

It was just my luck that the man I’d had in front of me for the last two years turned out to be the one who could give me everything I wanted. But instead, he’d leave and take everything I didn’t know I needed with him.

MAVERICK

I lay on the bed, panting and still coming down from my orgasm, my cock softening, the smell of hot and dirty sex filling the room. I had just fucked Clara Barnes like she was the only woman on earth I wanted. And honestly, that was true. Being inside her was like nothing I'd ever experienced. And maybe that was because I'd been bare, but part of me worried it was more.

I'd had my reservations, but I pushed them aside and didn't listen to them.

The truth was, I was a man. I was horny. And Clara was hot as hell.

But now, I was already in too deep. At least I ran the risk of digging myself too deep. I thought of what my brothers had found with their wives and wondered if maybe everything I was afraid of was for the wrong reasons.

Maybe I needed to give this thing I was feeling for Clara a chance to take root and grow. Maybe we could be something.

The possibility of more with her flickered to life from somewhere deep inside me. And I decided right then and there that *that* was what I wanted. I wanted a chance to be the man she deserved, to give her more than what she asked for. I was gonna be there. Take care of her when she was pregnant. Get her to fall in love with me, so I could keep her. Because I was stupid if I thought that the feeling I just had—the complete out

of body, tingling everywhere, heart racing yearning for this to never end—was something that happened every day.

Clara Barnes was a lightning strike on a cloudless day. She was a wild force of nature that came out of nowhere. It was a one in a million chance to feel like this, and I had it right here with her.

I just needed to make it obvious that I wasn't going to abandon her. I was going to give her everything I had.

I rolled over and nuzzled her neck, murmuring softly, "You all right, darlin'?"

She sighed and didn't answer. Instead, she sat up and got off the bed.

"Wait. Aren't you supposed to stay in that position for like half an hour? Make sure everything, you know, stays where it belongs?"

She didn't meet my eyes when she said, "I'm sure whatever is gonna stay is already there. I need to take a shower. You can let yourself out. Just lock the door behind you."

A pit formed in my stomach. What the fuck? "Are you sure you don't want me to stay? We could go for round two."

She cast me a cold glance—detached. So unlike her, I wondered if I misinterpreted the look on her face. "No, we can try again tomorrow. Today was enough. Too many times, and it's not as effective."

"Are you sure?" I asked, uneasiness building in my chest brick by brick.

"Yes, I'm sure. Have a good night, Maverick."

She left the room, naked as the day she was born. That perfect round ass of hers jiggled enticingly as she headed into the bathroom, closed the door, and locked it behind her.

"Well," I grumbled to myself. "I guess I've been told."

I stood up, grabbed my clothes, and pulled them on. On reflex, I glanced around for a condom wrapper to pick up and

throw away, but with a jolt, I remembered that this had been for a purpose. I just mounted and bred her like a prized stallion, and now she had no use for me.

Fuck, that hurt. Why did it feel that way? Why did it make my chest burn? My throat tightened. She just expected me to bang her and leave. No fucking way.

Instead of heading home, I went into her kitchen and checked the time, which read 10:45pm. Clara needed me to show her I was in this. That I wasn't just gonna cut and run. So I got out some milk and a bag of chocolate chips from the pantry. Then I turned on some music, low and soft, and set the scene.

I poured the milk into a saucepan and turned on the burner, my gaze catching on the glow of the flame, blue and orange twisted together. As the music filled the room, I began singing along when I knew the words, moving my hips and letting myself relax into the plan forming in my brain.

There was no fucking way Clara could deny what had happened between us. She felt it too. I knew it as clear as I knew my own name. I saw it in her eyes—the future we could have, the love we already did have, even if it started as friends.

I just had to make her see. Make her realize that being vulnerable with me didn't mean losing everything. It meant gaining so much more. Of course there was always the chance that she would completely reject me and leave me gutted. But the risk was worth it. I had to take it.

I wouldn't be my father. The man who never took a risk. The man who never ever let his guard down or put his heart on the line. Not after Sandy Ryker had crushed him. I recognized myself repeating his mistakes, my own heart still caged in the hurt doled out by my ex. An ex I never talked about, but she'd done me dirty, and I hadn't been the same since. Until now. Until Clara.

“I thought I told you you could leave,” Clara said as she came into the kitchen, wrapped in a robe with her hair on top of her head in a towel.

She was fresh and clean, her cheeks still pink from the heat of the water.

“Well, it’s late, and I thought maybe you’d like to have some hot cocoa and watch a movie.”

She pursed her lips, smirking slightly. “Oh, did you?”

“Yeah, that’s what we usually do.”

Taking a breath, she opened her mouth as though she was going to protest and instead said, “That smells good.”

“Do you want marshmallow fluff or whipped cream?” I smiled. “I think I’ll go with some whipped cream. How about you?”

“Fluff. It’s always the fluff for me.”

“All right, you want to grab it?”

“Sure.”

She snagged what we needed as I kept stirring until the mixture of chocolate and milk and a little bit of vanilla all came together into a perfect, delicious, creamy concoction.

“Mav, I just want to say, I don’t think that we should let things get so intense next time.”

“Intense?” I asked, playing dumb because fuck, it had been intense.

“It was earth-shatteringly intense with the eye contact and shared orgasms and *so* much touching.” I loved the way her voice went all breathy and tight. Like even talking about it, she was getting turned on.

“Oh, you don’t like orgasms?”

Her cheeks went even more pink. “I do like orgasms. I just think that if we’re going to keep this friendly, we probably need to stop pretending it’s more than it is.”

“Are you pretending?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Not that it wasn’t something special. It was real and fucking amazing.”

“Yeah, I mean, it was . . . it was . . . wow. But it just—it’ll make things so much more complicated.” The way her hands worried at the sash of her robe proved to me how hard she was trying to stick to her guns, even though they were aimed in the completely wrong direction.

I stepped closer to her. Her eyes locked on mine, and fuck me, she bit that lower lip. I was so tempted to just lean down and kiss her.

“You’re so goddamn pretty.” It was the barest whisper as I forced my body to stay in control.

How was it I had gone two years with her near me almost every single day and not let myself *see* her? Not really.

Oh, I *noticed* her. The first day I met her, I knew she was beautiful. But when she was introduced as our veterinarian, I backed away and walled my heart up. I said no thank you and categorized her as off-limits.

But what if all this time we were friends, I was falling in love with her, and I didn’t even know it?

I wished I had someone I could talk to about this. I wished my mama was around and not off gallivanting with some guy she barely knew. Or I at least had a dad who was knowledgeable about shit like this, who wasn’t fucking dead.

I didn’t have any of that. I could call my granddad. But honestly, all that would serve to do is make me feel guilty that I wasn’t there to help.

“Hey,” she whispered, reaching up and brushing her thumb over my cheekbone before cupping my face. “Are you okay? You look lost.”

I am fucking lost, I wanted to say. I’m gone. I don’t know where I am, and it’s all because of you.

Instead, I took a deep breath that I tried to keep from shuddering through me. Because this woman had just reduced me to a bag of bones and emotion. “I just . . . there’s a lot to think about.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But maybe we did what we were supposed to do the first time, and we don’t have to do it again, and the lines won’t have to blur anymore. We can go back to being us.”

Fucking hell, I wanted to tell her that we were us, no matter what. She was mine. She was my friend. She was my everything now. God, I had fucked this up. The first go-round, and I was already fucking up everything.

“You know what?” I asked. “I think you’re wrong.”

“What?”

I reached past her and opened the cupboard, pulling out two mugs for each of us. And then I leaned forward and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead.

“I said I think you’re wrong. No matter how hard we try to convince ourselves that we can do it, we won’t be able to go back from this. Not now that I know what your pussy tastes like. Now that I know what your moans sound like when you come, or what your nipples feel like under my hands, in my mouth. I won’t be able to go back.”

“But we agreed.”

“Fuck that. It’s a stupid arrangement when the two of us feel the way we do.”

I knew I was getting too intense. I was pushing the issue, but this was my only chance to make this ship sail right. I had to lay it out for her here and now. Make sure she knew I wanted a chance.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I don’t want to stop this. I don’t want to change the way it’s going. I want to keep on having you in your bed, in mine, fuck, on the couch, on the counter, on the fucking table, in the shower. I want you. Whether we’re trying to get you pregnant or not. I want you.”

“You don’t want a baby,” she said.

“I could.”

Fear hit me hard right in my chest. Because until that moment, I *didn't* want a baby. I wanted to give *her* a baby. I wanted to fuck her until she was carrying my child, and I was giving her everything she wanted in this world. But I didn't want it to be mine until right now.

"I could want a baby with you. Fuck. Clara, I could want fucking everything with you. I mean it. Late-night feedings, diaper changes, a teething baby up all night, spit-up. All of that shit. Because there would also be you and me and this family we made. That's so different from just knocking some girl up. Being forced into it."

"Maverick. This is not my plan." There were tears in her voice.

I was fucking making her cry. God, I was an asshole. I was a selfish fucking asshole, and I couldn't stop myself.

"I know it's not the plan. And honestly, I shouldn't have agreed to do this. I shouldn't have offered, but so much of me wanted to be the one for you." I raked a hand through my hair, frustration at my own bullheadedness making me sigh. "I didn't even see it. I didn't see how much I needed you in my life and how I need to be in yours."

"You never said anything to me about this."

"I know. I know. I fucking had my chance that day we first met, when you knocked me on my ass, literally and figuratively."

I handed her the mug of hot cocoa with a dollop of marshmallow fluff right in the center.

"I didn't mean to."

"No, you didn't, darlin'. But you did."

I thought back to the first day. I had come home to Wilde Horse Ranch from Texas so full of piss and vinegar, so bitter about having to be back. Having to see my dad changed my whole life, all because he crooked his finger. I walked into that stable only to get hit right in the face by a horse being led out of a stall. I'd fallen hard on my ass. It hurt like hell, my

tailbone rattling, the jolt of the hard concrete running up my spine making tingles shoot through me in a less than fun way.

And there she was. Her hair pulled up high on her head. Gloves up to her elbows and her eyes wide.

She looked at me, smiled, and said, “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I was distracted. I just got done knocking this girl up.”

I laughed and got to my feet, brushing myself off and saying, “Oh yeah? Who was the stud?”

When she named *my* horse, there was this weird sense of pride that ran through me. She called him the prized stallion, and from then on, I had been enchanted by Clara Barnes.

“I’m just so confused, I guess.” Her voice broke through the memories where I’d been lost. “Because you had your chance. You’ve had chances over the years. I’ve given you opportunities. Why do you think I agreed for you to be my date for all these weddings?”

“Why? I thought you wanted to keep the other guys away.”

“No, you idiot. I wanted to spend time with you. Sure, I hate it when the drunk cowboys start circling. They only ever circle when they’re drunk. But I’m the vet, and they don’t fuck with that. I could have just not gone. I could have gone with a girlfriend. Jenna would have come with me. She would have been my wingwoman.”

“That’s not how you use that term. A wingwoman doesn’t keep people away. She brings—”

“Not the point, Mav. The point is, I gave you every opportunity, and you didn’t take it.”

“I was stupid.”

“I’m not going to argue with you there. Now, I made a choice to do this on my own. You’re leaving. You said you’re moving away. You’re going to Texas. You’ve got a hockey team in Seattle, a ranch in Texas, and you’re never coming back.”

That took the wind right out of my sails. “I can change my plans.”

“Not for me. Don’t change your entire life because you had sex with me. I’ve seen what that does to people. I saw what it did to my parents. And then they ended up gone forever because they were trying so hard to fix what was broken.”

“I think I need you to explain that a bit.”

She sighed. “Come sit down. That’s a long story, and it’s one I don’t tell very often.”

“All right. You can tell me anything. I want to know everything about you. I’m in—”

She cut me off, stopping me from admitting the truth of how I really felt about her. The new realization chased through my body uncontrolled.

“Don’t say that. Please, not yet. Not while I’m still trying to wrap my brain around the fact that the man I wanted more than anything has now decided he wants to throw his hat in the ring.”

That gave me a little hope. She wanted me.

“All right. I won’t say it. I’ll hold on to it. That doesn’t make it any less true.”

She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Okay. Let’s go sit down. We’ll drink hot chocolate, and I’ll tell you the story of how my parents’ marriage drove them to early graves. But it’s not pretty.”

I followed her to the couch. “I’m pretty used to hearing ugly stories, darlin’. You knew my daddy. Everything about him was ugly.”

“Everything except you and your brothers.”

“That remains to be seen,” I said, a little laugh escaping me.

“No, Mav. I see it. You’re not ugly. No part of you.”

Fuck. Clara Barnes had me roped and wrangled. But was she going to pull me in, or cut me loose?

Clara

My stomach churned as we sat together on my tiny couch, Mav a respectful distance away from me, giving me space even though I hadn't actually asked for it. I didn't mind, though.

He scared me. All the possibilities he was presenting terrified me. Because what if I trusted him and let him in, and then he broke my heart? What if he resented me for saddling him with a baby he didn't want? A future he hadn't planned on? I didn't want to be that to him. I didn't want to be what my mom, my sisters, and I were to my dad.

The heat from the mug seeped into my palms as I held it, but I didn't drink. I just sat there and watched the marshmallow cream melt into the hot chocolate, bubbles forming around the outside edges of the sweet candy topping.

"I'm ready when you are," he said, his deep voice rumbling in my ear.

I took a deep breath, knowing I needed to tell someone the whole story. But it was such a terrible story, and I hadn't said a word about my past to anyone. Not to Jenna or Mackenzie, both of whom I considered very close friends. I didn't want the pity that I knew I would see in their eyes, because that's always what happened when you said you didn't have parents. That you were left alone to raise your siblings.

"I was seventeen when my parents died. I had already graduated high school, and I was in my first year of college. I

was an advanced student. I always had been. I worked hard and I graduated early. My parents were on this *fix your marriage* retreat with the church they had gotten involved with. It was one of those things that was advertised as the perfect way to reconnect with your spouse.”

Mav nodded, his expression grim. “I’m familiar. My dad went on one of those with Sutton’s mama before we lost her. Do you think it helped?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. They died before they got there. It probably wouldn’t have made a difference because by the time they got to the point of getting help, they hated each other. They resented each other completely. And they probably resented me, if I’m being honest.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because they didn’t want me in the first place. I wasn’t planned. I was this happy accident, my mom always said. They met one night at a bar. My dad had just finished basic training, and he found her. They had a passionate night together, and then she found out I was coming. So, he ‘did the right thing’ and married her. They stayed together for seventeen years, and from what my mom said, only one of them was good. The rest were very hard.”

“They must just have not been right for each other.”

“Sure, you could say that. They had chemistry. They would fight, and then they would make up, and then they would fight some more. It was always this explosive thing between them. They’d be fiercely in love for two weeks, my dad doting on my mom, my mom happy and singing and loving her life. And then everything would change. They had two more kids, and then, inevitably, something would happen. Some bill would be more than they could pay, or one of us needed braces or new clothes for school, and it was too expensive and . . . life happened to them. They weren’t strong enough to deal with it. Their marriage wasn’t strong enough. They almost got divorced twice before I was twelve. They weren’t right for each other, but they felt like they had to be together because they had me and my sisters. We were the glue

that held them together, instead of just letting them go be on their own and be happy.”

I sighed heavily, fighting back the welling anxiety in my chest.

“I was the reason everything fell apart. And I was the reason they were trying to fix their marriage, and instead they ended up in a car accident on their way to the airport. It was my fault. And I don’t want you to feel like you have to do this with me when it isn’t even close to something you wanted, just because I might end up pregnant. I don’t want anyone to feel obligated to be with me because of a child, because I have been the child who felt that. I was the kid they didn’t want. I was the kid that made them miserable because they chose to be together for me and then my sisters. I don’t want to do that to a baby. I don’t want to do that to you or me. So it’s simpler if we just stick with the plan. If you fuck me and then go away so I can do this on my own.”

I hated the thickness in my throat. The fact that tears were pooling in my eyes that I was fighting so hard to keep from falling. And then the man—that sweet, perfect asshole—he scooted closer and pulled me against his chest, pressing a kiss to my temple and rubbing my back.

“I can’t believe you’ve never told me that story before.”

“It’s not something I’m very proud of,” I admitted.

“It’s not something you should be ashamed of. You didn’t kill your parents. A car accident did. And whatever decisions they made, they’re not your fault. You need to understand that, because if I let my parents’ failed marriage rule my decisions, I sure as shit wouldn’t be here right now. Wouldn’t be with you. And I wouldn’t be trying to take this step with you. Okay?”

“I don’t know what the right choice is right now.”

He cupped my chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned my face toward him. “Look at me. Let’s take it one day at a time, okay? I know you’re scared. So am I. Everything has changed. And I didn’t plan on it, but my gut says that this is

the right thing. That you and me are the right thing. And darlin', my gut is never wrong." His eyes searched mine. "If I had listened to my gut two years ago, I would have broken things off with Mallory instead of putting my heart on the line with her."

"Tell me more about her," I asked. "I told you my dark story. I think I need to know yours."

He clenched his jaw and pressed his lips together, taking a long breath through his nose. His shoulders relaxed and he started talking. "I met Mallory during a rodeo down in Texas. She was a rodeo princess. Sparkly, shiny, and she charmed every person she met, including me. Apparently, she had her sights set on finding herself a cattleman. And that so happened to be me. I think she put it together that I was Remington Wilde's oldest grandson, even though I didn't work on the Wilde Horse Ranch."

"But your grandfather's place . . ."

"I know you've never seen it, but Quinn Ranch is small. It's a family-owned operation. We work hard and do our very best to provide Texas with some of the best beef in the state. My granddaddy doesn't want it to become a big corporate operation. The cattle ranch has been in the Quinn family for five generations, and it's never left the family."

"So, she figured out you were Remington Wilde's grandson, and then she what, seduced you?"

He shook his head. "Well, I didn't know that at the time. But, yeah, she dazzled me. And she made me feel like I was the most important person in her whole world. I think they call it a love bombing, maybe? She just . . . smothered me with praise and love and affection and made me think that there was nothing more in this world that she wanted but me." Sighing, I could see him force some dark feelings aside. "I believed her. And until my dad called me up to come to the ranch and I told her I wanted nothing to do with the Wilde family, we were happy. The moment she found out I had turned down every single dollar my dad had offered me, everything changed. She didn't like that I had no plan to take any of it—ever. I wanted

to live my life on Quinn Ranch and take care of it. I never wanted to acknowledge what we had in Sunrise because I was happy in Texas with her.”

“How’d that go over?”

Sadness flickered in his eyes. “Not great. She was so angry that I didn’t want to take anything from my grandfather’s legacy, that I wouldn’t take advantage of the offers coming in for reality shows. With the success of *Saddle Up*, the Ryker’s brought Sunrise into the TVs of millions of Americans. She couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t want to capitalize on my name.”

I slid my palm over his knee, giving him the reassurance that he was safe here as he told me his story.

“The whole reason she was with me was so she could get her pretty little ass on a reality show and in front of a camera. She’d been communicating with one of the producers of *Saddle Up* and promising them she would get a Wilde on their show. I was done. I was broken. And I realized that my gut had been telling me all along not to trust her. I knew there was something about her that wasn’t right. So I broke it off, I moved up to Sunrise, and instead of letting it all go, I ended up more entrenched in it than I’ve ever been. And now I’m close with my brothers again and trying to figure it all out.”

“But you’re still thinking you want to leave?”

“I’m thinking I don’t know what I should do. I’m thinking I’ve got to figure out what I’m going to tell my granddad. Because I don’t want to leave you. My brothers would be fine without me. I could come visit. They were fine when I was living in Texas. But I don’t know if I’ll be fine without you, Clara. That’s what my gut’s telling me.”

I swallowed, my hands shaking, my heart fluttering. “And your gut is telling you it’s me you should stay with?”

“You. Yes, you and the baby we make.”

“Really? I don’t want to make it seem like I don’t trust you, but—”

“You don’t trust me. I haven’t given you a reason to trust me. All I’ve done is live up to our reputation as cowboys here.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, at least I thought so. But I think maybe the perception of the Wilde boys in Sunrise is wrong. You’re not a player. You’re just a really good man. And you’ve had a tough time.”

“And you’re the only one who sees me for who I am. Don’t cut me loose. Please give me a chance.”

“What if it doesn’t work out?”

“God, Clara, I want it to.”

My chest fluttered with the promise of hope. “Okay,” I whispered. “Let’s try it. Let’s see how it goes. But I want us to keep it quiet. I don’t want the whole town knowing. The church ladies alone will be exhausting.” I bit my lip, indecision flitting through me. “I think it’s easier if, when I do get pregnant, we don’t tell them it’s yours.”

Something dimmed in his eyes, but he nodded.

“So, we don’t say we’re together. We just figure each other out first.”

“Right.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“And it won’t be weird for them to see us together because we’re friends and we already spend a lot of time together. I think that’s the right way to do it. I feel like if we make a public show of being a couple, all we’re going to get is interference.”

“If Mama Langston gets wind of it, she will become part of our daily life. If she knows, she’ll have us married in two months.”

“Exactly. We need room to breathe so we can figure each other out, don’t you think?”

“Sure. So, it’s a yes, then. We’re going to do this.” There was an edge of excitement in his voice.

It was so sweet, making my heart squeeze.

“Yeah. Let’s try.”

“Does that mean I can kiss you on the lips?”

I took a long breath, then let it out. I wanted him to kiss me. God, I wanted him to kiss me everywhere. “Yes, it does. Kiss me on the lips, Maverick Wilde. Make me yours.” *At least for a little while.*

“My pleasure, darlin’.”

He cupped my face and leaned forward, pressing his mouth to mine. From one beat to the next, his kiss went from soft to passionate. His tongue parted my lips with a gentle nudge before delving inside, dancing with mine.

He had me under him in one fluid motion. His hands pulled the towel out of my hair and let it fall to the floor, the damp strands brushing my cheeks. But I didn’t care. And then he parted my robe and kissed his way down my body, finding me wet and ready for him.

“Did you still want to wait until tomorrow?”

I laughed. Nerves still jangling inside me at the risk I was taking with my fragile heart. “I don’t think so.”

“Good. If I have to wait another minute for you, I’m going to lose my mind.”

That smirk on his lips almost did me in as he unbuttoned his pants before unzipping them and shoving them down his thighs. The movement revealed him, hard and ready for me. And for a moment, I really believed him when he said he wanted all of it with me. I’d let myself enjoy him and the time we had together before he realized the truth. Because no one stayed forever.

The two of us made love on my couch, slow and deep and beautiful. And this time, there wasn’t any hesitation. There were drugging kisses and soft whispered words. A teasing promise of what we could have. The hint of a deep love that could grow from this friendship, of the foundation we’d

already laid, of the possibilities for happiness for years to come.

Later, when we were both sated, we lay together on the couch watching something mindless on TV. His fingers trailed through my hair, his other hand on my hip. And all I could do was hope I wouldn't end up like my mother—in a relationship full of resentment and sadness.

When I looked up at the man who was cradling me in his lap, my head resting on strong thighs, all I saw was the man I wanted to keep way longer than it was going to take to knock me up.

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Clara

The next morning, I woke up with a strong arm draped across my waist and the delicious scent of Maverick in my bed. I shifted, and he pulled me closer, nuzzling his face into the back of my neck. He feathered light kisses at my nape.

“Mornin’, darlin’.”

“Morning, Maverick.”

“I like this kind of sleepover,” he said. “This is much more comfortable than sleeping on your couch.”

I giggled, thinking of the numerous times he’d fallen asleep on my couch. His big frame sprawled out, long legs draping over the arm because he was too big to really fit.

“If I’d have known you were so cuddly, I would have asked you to come sleep in my bed sooner.”

His low, rumbled laugh had me scooting back closer to him, my ass pressing against the very obvious erection he was sporting.

“Oh,” I said. “Good morning.”

He bit down on the flesh between my neck and shoulder. A little warning bite. “That’s what happens in the morning, especially when there’s a gorgeous woman right next to me.”

My cheeks burned. He thought I was gorgeous. “So, are you planning on just moving in or something?”

His palms slid up my rib cage until he cupped one of my breasts. “No, but we’ve got a three-day window, right?”

“Yeah. These are my prime days for fertility.”

“And I fucked up the first one. So, I figured I better be here to make sure we take advantage of this last day. Is that all right with you?”

That was more than all right with me after our conversation and his confession.

“When would you like to take care of that?” I asked.

He continued to massage my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers and making me moan softly as I waited for him to respond.

“I think I’d rather show you.”

I shuddered and had to bite my lip to keep from crying out as his hand descended and found its way under the waistband of my pajama pants. His fingers delved into my slick heat with no resistance.

“Fuck, Clara. Look how much you want me.” Then he grabbed my hand and pulled my arm back until my palm rested on his cock, long and thick. “Look how much you make me want you,” he said, and I moaned again, my fingers circling his length, stroking clumsily from the strange angle. And then tore my pants down my legs, positioning himself at my entrance and sliding home before I could even register what was really happening. We groaned together. Our connection was something no one else could understand.

He came hard and fast. Then he made sure I finished by using his fingers until I was shuddering with pleasure. Then, as if on cue, he grabbed the pillow and held it out to me expectantly. So, I assumed the position. I lifted my hips until he put the pillow underneath them, and he pressed a tender kiss to each of my knees.

“You stay right there. I’m going to make some breakfast. Okay?”

“No one ever makes me breakfast.”

“Well, you deserve somebody to make you breakfast, and I’m glad it gets to be me.”

“Me too,” I admitted, letting myself fall into the fantasy of what we’d be like together. I had to admit, Maverick Wilde first thing in the morning was exactly what I needed. And it seemed like he knew it.

MAVERICK

I left her lying in bed, thoroughly fucked and satisfied, and I couldn’t be prouder of myself. It was clear this woman had gone without someone taking care of her needs for a very long time. If her surprise at me being able to make her come so hard was any indication, her previous partners hadn’t known how to please a woman. Well, that wasn’t going to happen with me. I was gonna ruin her for any other man. And I had no problem admitting it.

I strode into the kitchen, naked and unashamed, and snagged a navy blue and white striped apron off the hook on the wall next to the fridge. It was that or pink with polka dots, and I had to draw the line somewhere.

I tied it around my waist to cover the important bits and set about making fresh coffee before pulling out all the fixings for pancakes. Turning on the music, I decided I was going to make her understand what it would be like to be with me. And that meant breakfast and coffee every day before work. It meant dancing in the kitchen. It meant mornings just like this.

It also meant long, hard days of work for both of us. But the coming home, the being together, would be worth it.

I pulled out a carton of eggs and smiled when I saw the uneven writing with backward letters. I knew where these came from. Winston Farms. Carlene and Judson Winston had eight kids. The oldest was my age, but their youngest was only five. She’d been a surprise. And she was one of our town’s little darlings. Everybody loved her.

The note on the eggs said, *To Miss Clara, Thank you for making our chickens better. Enjoy some eggs. Everly’s E* was

backward. I opened the carton to find she still had eight eggs in the container, which meant I'd have enough for pancake batter and some fried eggs. Protein was important, especially after the exertion the both of us had experienced last night and this morning . . . and if I had anything to say about it, tonight too.

I started dancing around the kitchen, unable to stop myself. I couldn't help it. Music made me move. Especially when I was happy. I hadn't been happy like this in the last two years. I hadn't had a reason to dance, to smile, to look forward to much, except for Clara. Thinking back, she was the only reason I did smile most of the time. Seeing her parked outside our stable made me smile. Locking eyes with her no matter what she was doing, I'd smile. Picking her up to take her to every single wedding in Sunrise, I sure as shit smiled.

Every moment I spent with her now all seemed to be leading up to this revelation. She was my reason. Goddammit.

"So, what's for breakfast?" she asked, sliding up behind me and running her hand along my waist before curling her arms up and around so she held me tight.

My back to her front, she rested her cheek between my shoulder blades. From the feel of the fabric on my skin, I could tell that she was, unfortunately, not naked.

"Naked breakfast. That's what's up."

"Naked breakfast? I guess I didn't get the memo."

"That's all right. We can take care of that before we sit down to eat."

She didn't release her hold on me. Instead, she moved with me as I swayed to the music and began to mix the pancake batter.

"You know," I said. "We seem to have this habit of not actually cooking the food when we're in this kitchen together. I spied a couple of perfectly seasoned steaks we left in the fridge last night."

"Funny, I don't even feel hungry."

“Oh yeah? I find that hard to believe.”

Her stomach growled so fiercely, I felt it rumble against my back.

“Your stomach says otherwise.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Okay, so naked breakfast first. And then, well . . . I think then we need to try again.”

“Oh my God, I have created a monster.” Her teasing tone made my chest swell . . . and other parts.

“Hey, we have a limited window of time. I want to make sure that we do our very best to knock you up. I’m doing this for you. It’s always for you, Clara.” I turned around, glad I was wearing that apron because it did at least a little bit to hide my already hard cock. “I’m sorry I wasted all this time, thinking you were off-limits.”

“I’m sorry. I thought I was off-limits too.”

Shaking my head, I took a deep breath. “I should have made a move. I want you to know I understand that this is my fault. I should have told you. I should have tried from the moment I met you, but instead, I sat around with my thumb up my ass.”

She laughed hard then. “What a visual.”

“You know what I mean. I hesitated until the moment was gone, and then I lost sight of the truth. I’m not gonna do that anymore. Not with you.”

“Okay. One step at a time.”

I leaned in, then cupped her face and brought my forehead down to hers, staring deep into her eyes.

“One.” I kissed her. “Step.” I kissed her again. “At a time.”

She moaned in my mouth, and I kissed her deep this time. Gripping the edges of her robe, I slid it off her body, letting it fall to the kitchen floor.

She whispered against my lips, “What about breakfast?”

“The batter needs to wait five minutes to be ready. That’s plenty of time for me to make you come.”

Her shiver of longing sent a throb straight between my legs. I wanted nothing more than to sink inside her, but this wasn’t about me. This was about her knowing that she could feel good, that it was okay to want to feel good, to be a little selfish. I picked her up and set her on the edge of the island.

“It’s gonna be cold, baby.”

She bit her lip, and that look in her eyes had me stopping.

“What was that about?”

“You’ve never called me baby before.”

“I know, it just kind of came out.”

“I like it.”

“You don’t like it when I call you darlin’?”

“I like that too, but baby, I don’t know, it’s something more intimate. Darlin’ is something you use when you want to show a person you like them. Or maybe you more than like them, but baby . . .” She grinned. “Nobody’s ever called me baby before.”

“Do other people call you darlin’?”

“Sometimes. You know, like the cowboys who use it as sort of everyday endearment.”

“Well, I want to be the only man who calls you baby.”

“Good. That’s what I was getting at.”

“All right then. Lay back, and I’m gonna show you exactly why I’m the only one that gets to call you baby.”

Her nipples were rock hard, pink and enticing. But again, that was not what I was after. She lay on the marble top, letting out a little squeak of protest as soon as her skin hit the cold stone.

“Don’t worry. We’ll heat it up real soon.”

Then I spread her thighs, and I had my dessert before breakfast. I had her moaning and writhing, her legs over my

shoulders, my thighs burning from the position I was staying in until I made her come. And when she did, I had to hold her steady so she didn't fall off.

I backed away, helping her up with one hand as I used the back of my other to wipe her arousal off my mouth.

“See, naked breakfast is always the way to go.”

She gave me a coy smile and batted her lashes. “It seems I've been missing out.”

“Not anymore.”

I helped her hop down from the counter, and I grinned when her legs were just a little bit wobbly. She tried to regain her balance.

“Do you need help with breakfast?” she asked.

“No, I think if you're in here any longer, we aren't going to eat.”

“I could take care of *you* while you take care of cooking.”

As enticing as that was, I didn't want to risk hurting her. “If I wasn't going to be working with hot ingredients, maybe. But around you, my control is nonexistent. I don't want you to get hurt.”

“Well, I guess I'll just go relax. I've never done that before. I'm always the only one here. If I don't make breakfast, I don't eat.”

“Things are about to change. Just you wait and see.”

She poured both of us a cup of coffee, doctored hers up as she liked, and then did the same to mine, surprising me because she knew exactly what I would want. Just a little sugar, no cream.

“There you go. I'll be right over there on the couch.”

“Naked?”

“Yes, naked. I'm a rule follower, and you said these are the rules.”

“Oh, the things I'm gonna be able to do with that.”

“Good things, I hope.”

“Great things.”

She made her way to the couch, draping herself across it like a work of fucking art, her full, lush curves on display. There was just something about a woman with a figure like hers. Everything was soft. Everything was luscious. But the big thing about Clara was she radiated confidence.

Maybe it was because she'd had to prove herself when she came to town because she'd had to be on her own from the time she was so young. She was thrown into adulthood without the support of her parents. This woman had forged her own way. She hadn't let anything stop her, and she'd made something of herself. The fact that she was my wet dream come to life also didn't hurt, but it was that self-assuredness that she had in everything that really called me to her.

After I made the pancakes and fried up some eggs, I put everything on plates and took them over to the small dining room table. Setting them in the center, I finally let myself look at the gorgeous creature on the couch. Mistake. Big mistake.

“Darlin’, where’s your syrup?” I averted my gaze and distracted myself by looking in all the cupboards. “I can’t find it anywhere.”

“Oh, it’s actually in the fridge. I use real maple syrup. I’m a bit of a syrup snob.”

“There ain’t nothing wrong with using real maple syrup. I’m just so used to grabbing whatever I see first at the grocery.”

“I have some amazing syrup that one of my friends sends me from Vermont. His family lives there. He’s a vet too. We met in school.”

“Oh really, what’s his name?” It wasn’t easy to keep my tone light and free of jealousy.

“Ben. Bennett Carlisle.”

“Bennett Carlisle.” I rolled the name over on my tongue. “That is quite a name.”

“Of the Vermont Carlises,” she said with pretend airs.

“Are you kidding? Please say you’re kidding.”

She laughed. “I’m kidding. It just seems like something you would say when introducing yourself if you were from a fancy family in Vermont.”

“Maybe. So, this Ben guy—” I didn’t finish that sentence. I was too focused on her as she got up and came to the fridge.

Her tits swayed with her movements, begging me to touch them as she opened the door and pulled out a bottle of maple syrup. She breezed past me and poured it into a container before popping it into the microwave. Then, capping the bottle and putting it back in the fridge first, she turned to face me.

“It has to be refrigerated.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t ask a question. You just trailed off mysteriously.”

“Did you and Ben have a thing?”

“What? No, no thing. There’s no *thing* between Ben and me.” Her eyes didn’t meet mine. “Well, one time. He kissed me once, but we realized very quickly that we were just friends. It was like kissing my brother.”

It was a weird mixture of jealousy and relief that rolled through me all at the same time, tearing me up a little bit.

“All right.”

“Why? Are you jealous?”

“Maybe. Well, I hate to break it to you, but other men have seen me naked. You know that, right? I wasn’t a virgin.”

“I know. I just can’t help how I feel. I don’t like it. There’s nothing to be done about it, but I don’t like it.”

“Okay. Well, if it helps, you’re the only one I’ve seen for the last two years.”

“What do you mean seen?”

“Noticed. Thought about. Fantasized about. It’s only you.”

“You fantasized about me?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you fantasize about me frequently?”

“Yes.” Her cheeks turned pink, and I fucking loved it.

“When did you fantasize about me?”

“Anytime I’d read a romance novel. It was you in place of the hero.”

My gaze flicked to the bookshelf against one wall next to a cozy tufted chair. Her reading corner, as she called it. She’d made it perfect; I’d helped. A little table with a tiny lamp, the perfect spot to put your drink and curl up with a good book. She even had a cozy weighted blanket that I had gotten her for her birthday last year thrown over the arm of the couch. It made me feel good knowing that she had something to remind her of me while she read, while she was in her happy place.

“That shelf is pretty packed with steamy romance novels.”

“Yes, it is.”

“And you said every hero was me?”

“Yes. Every time, it was you.” Her gaze was hot on mine. “You like that a little too much.”

“You’re right. I do. I like it a whole hell of a lot.”

“I have a secret to tell you.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

The microwave dinged, and she tore her gaze from me before reaching up, opening the door, and carefully removing the hot syrup.

“Come on, darlin’. Tell me your secrets.”

“The heroes. You outdid them all in real life.”

Hot male pride rolled through me like a steamroller. Fuck yes. “I guess I better make sure I keep up the good work then. I don’t want to be outdone by a fictional book boyfriend.”

“That’s true. You know, if you want, you could read one. Maybe do a little research.”

“I don’t know; that might mess with my game.”

“Maybe. I hear Buck Ryker likes romance novels. They don’t seem to have hurt him very much.”

“Well, he’s a Ryker. He needed all the help he could get.”

She laughed. “You and that stupid feud. Are you still holding on to that?”

“Well, now we do it just because it’s fun. We like them a lot. Call it a friendly rivalry rather than a feud.”

“I see.” Her stomach rumbled again.

“Come on. Have a seat. Eat up. You’re gonna need your energy for all the romance novel worthy moments I’m about to give you.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Clara, you should know by now that I keep every promise I make.”

“Do you?”

I pinned her with my stare. “Every. Single. One.”

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Clara

Naked breakfast, morning sex, evening sex, in between sex, all of it was like some kind of fantasy bubble we'd created. Maverick was using this weekend together to his advantage; I was absolutely certain of it. He made every moment with him worth the wait. If this was all we had together, it was clear Maverick Wilde didn't want me to forget a single second of it.

"Are you sure you're ready to go back to the real world now, baby?" Mav asked, leaning against the bathroom door, his body covered only by a towel secured around his hips.

We'd already 'tried' well beyond the window of opportunity for conception, and I didn't want to muddy things between us even more by letting him into my life so quickly.

"We should take a step back."

Something flashed in his eyes, a little pang of hurt, maybe? I hated that. I didn't want to hurt him, but I also needed to protect myself. He might think he wants more right now, but this was new and impulsive, and I couldn't jump in with both feet when I was already diving headfirst into the future by making a baby.

"All right. If that's still what you want."

"It's what I need right now. This whole weekend was so wonderful. The best few days I've had in years. But we need to slow down. I can't go from being your friend to being your forever in the blink of an eye."

“Don’t you think forever starts with friendship?”

God, why did that bring tears to my eyes? “Yes, I absolutely think it should. But I also know you, and you’re resolute in your decisions, Mav. You were determined that this wasn’t the life you wanted. You don’t change at the drop of a hat or a pair of panties. And I know myself. I’m saying I need this to slow down, for my heart’s sake.”

His eyes narrowed. “The difference between you and me is that while I might be resolute, I’m also not blind because I’m afraid. We can slow this down, but I’m not going to stop wanting you to be mine, Clara Barnes.”

“I know. I don’t want you to stop, but we need to put some space between us, go back to our lives before we forget what those look like. Okay?”

He gave me a lazy smirk. “I don’t think you realized how much of my life involves you. But sure. Let’s slow down. That just means I get a chance to do some good old-fashioned wooing.”

A little thrill ran through me. What would that look like? Flowers and surprise visits? Dates? In public?

“Wooing in secret, though, right?”

“If I have to.”

I felt like an asshole, but I also had solid reasons for what I needed to do. “I’m just trying to keep us off the town’s radar. They’ll never forgive me if they think I’m keeping your baby away from you or running you out of town.”

He crossed the floor and stood right in front of me. “I know. And I agree. But if things were different, would you still want to be so secretive? If we weren’t trying to get you pregnant?”

I let that question sink in for a bit, mulling it over. “No. If things were different, I’d be different too.”

That sexy smile of his had my heart melting. “Good. That’s all I needed to hear. I’m gonna secretly woo the hell out

of you, baby. Until you can't resist me and fall so hard you realize you can't live without me."

My belly flipped. "Bring it on."

"Oh, I will."

He dropped the towel and headed to the bench under the window where his clothes were cleaned and waiting for him. I'm not ashamed to admit I watched him dress and filed that memory away for future reference. Glancing at the clock on my bedside table, he said, "You'd better get ready. Doesn't the clinic open in ten minutes?"

My chest lurched. "What? How did it get so late?"

He smirked. "You were distracted by the handsome man in your bed, I guess. It's okay. It happens to the best of them."

I rolled my eyes. "Ah, now he's cocky. Just what I need. A cocky cowboy."

He finished buttoning his shirt, then slipped on his boots before coming closer to me, grabbing me by the waist, and bringing me right up against him. "I'm exactly what you need."

Then he kissed me hard before releasing me and sauntering out of my bedroom.

"You have a good day, darlin'. I'll be thinkin' of you."

I stood there, breathless, aroused, and already missing him as he left the house by the back stairs so no one would see him.

"What have I gotten myself into?" I whispered to the empty room.

Sitting on the bed, I inhaled the scent of him that still lingered. I knew it was stupid to believe I'd be able to control my feelings for him, but I still tried to convince myself it was possible. Because giving him my heart when I wasn't sure he'd take care of it was too terrifying to think of.

THE NEXT DAY I WENT TO WORK LIKE NORMAL. SAW PLENTY of cowboys, but not the one I needed. It was strange how I was so accustomed to seeing Maverick most days that the one day I didn't turned out to be the one I wanted him most.

I hadn't wanted him to leave, but the real world wasn't something either of us could avoid. Even if a Maverick Wilde sex bubble was much more appealing than vaccinating livestock. But there was a strange sense of relief in being without him, back to normal. Because I think a big part of me thought this couldn't be real. If I didn't let him be important, I couldn't get hurt when he left.

My phone buzzed in my pocket as I loaded up the last of the tools I'd needed for all the vaccines I'd been doling out over at Ryker Ranch. I had to force myself not to stop what I was doing and pull my phone out to check the message.

Giddy excitement bubbled up inside me like a kid with a crush. I hadn't felt this way in a really long time. It was nearly painful to keep myself from checking the message until I'd closed my truck's door and could finally take a minute to see who it was from. Sure enough, it was from him. Exactly the man I wanted to hear from.

Maverick: What's going on tonight, baby?

I bit my lower lip and leaned against the back of my truck as I typed a response.

Me: I'm heading to the Spur for girls' night.

Maverick: Oh, are you?

Me: Yes. Do you have a problem with that?

My phone rang immediately.

"You never call me. What's going on?"

"Do you really think you should go out to the Spur and drink with your girlfriends? You could be pregnant with my baby right now. I don't know; that might not be very safe."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to drink. I’m just going as moral support.”

“Oh, you’re going as a wingwoman then?”

“Yes, a wingwoman. Jenna needs to find herself someone worth her time.”

He laughed. “She’s not going to find him at the Spur.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really. Cowboys going out to that bar are not looking for anything more than someone who’s willing to let them put their boots under her bed for the night.”

“Who says Jenna wants more than that?”

“Doesn’t she?”

“No, she doesn’t. She’s not ready to settle down.”

“I see. All right. Well, I guess the Spur is the perfect place for her.”

“And you can wipe that judgey smirk right off your face.”

“What? I am not judgey.”

“Oh, you’re so judging. I can hear it in your voice. Jen is a grown woman. If she wants to spend the night with a handsome cowboy, there’s nothing wrong with that.” Protectiveness for my friend reared its head. No matter how magic his dick was, Mav wasn’t going to get away with slut-shaming.

“You’re right. I didn’t say there was something wrong with it.”

“It was implied in your tone.”

He laughed. “My tone?”

“Yes, your tone. The tone that says women shouldn’t go after what they want and try to get laid. Only men can do that.”

“Oh boy. Somebody is feisty today.”

“Yes, I am feisty. I guess you just bring that out in me.”

“Well, you’re welcome. I just so happen to have a thing for feisty women.”

“Thank you.”

I couldn’t stop grinning at the amusement in his voice. I loved that I could make him smile and that he wanted to keep me safe.

“So, you’re going out tonight?” he asked.

“Yes. I said that already.”

“And where are you sleeping tonight?”

I rolled my eyes. “I happen to have my very own home. Where I sleep.”

“Do you?”

“I do.”

“That’s a pity.”

“Oh, is it?”

“Yeah, I was really hoping maybe you could sleep with me tonight.”

“With you?”

“Yeah. You see, when two people are trying to make a baby together, there’s this special thing they have to do. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard about it.”

I loved it when he teased me. “Really? Tell me more about this special thing.”

“I really need to just show you. It’s very important and takes a lot of time and patience and preparation.”

“How much preparation?”

“Well, that depends on you.”

“I see. And to do this, we have to sleep over?”

“We don’t have to sleep over, but it definitely is going to tire you out. It’s only fair for you to have a place where you can safely sleep once you’re done.”

“And you think that place should be your bed.”

“I do.”

“Why not mine?”

“You coming out to Wilde Horse Ranch is much less likely to cause gossip than for me to be sneaking out of your house at all hours of the night, even worse, first thing in the morning.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Mav’s property was huge, and while his two brothers also lived on the ranch, their houses were spaced out with acres between them. And there would be no reason for anyone to come looking for me at his place.

“I guess I’ll see what time we finish up at the Spur.”

“And then?”

I couldn’t stop the grin on my lips. “If I’m feeling lonesome, I might stop by.”

“I’ll leave a light on for you.”

“What are *you* doing tonight?”

“Other than you?”

“Yes, other than me.”

“I am doing a whole lot of nothing. Just watching some old hockey games, trying to learn a little. Maybe relax. We had a long day today.”

“Did you? Do you want to tell me about it?”

“I guess it really has to do with picking up the slack for Luke. The asshole keeps trying to come in and work even though he’s laid up. So we’ve had to manage him and delegate all his duties. I’ve taken on what I can and then put some other ranch hands on his jobs, but I think managing him is the hard part. He’s real stubborn.”

“How’s he healing up?”

“Pretty good, actually. Doc says it’ll be a couple more weeks, and then he should be good as new.”

“Good. I’ll be out there tomorrow to check on Turbo.”

“Oh, I know you will, because you’ll be in my kitchen in the morning, and I’ll be making you breakfast.”

I had to admit that sounded wonderful. I wanted to spend so much time with him. More than ever.

“Maybe I could cancel girls’ night.”

He shook his head. “No, baby, don’t you do that. You go spend time with your girls. I’m sure things are gonna change a whole lot for you soon. You should enjoy everything, soak it all up, so when life changes, you can look back and not feel like you missed anything.”

That caused a twinge in my chest. “All right. Do you want me to bring anything when I come over?”

“You will be just fine. Maybe you could wear another pair of those sexy lacy panties too.”

“Sure, I can do that for you. But you have to promise that you won’t keep them because I am going to run out, and they aren’t cheap.”

“No promises. I am not to be held responsible for what I do to your undergarments.”

I sighed. “Then you have to buy me some new ones to replace the pairs you’ve stolen. Yes, I know you took the other pair. The one that was hanging in my bathroom.”

He cleared his throat. “You can’t blame me. Lace is my weakness.”

“I didn’t say I blamed you. But I did say that you have to replace what you’ve taken. I don’t even need to know what you do with them.”

His soft sexy laugh tightened things low in my belly. “All right, darlin’. I can’t wait for tonight.”

“Neither can I.”

We hung up, and I tucked the phone into my back pocket. He didn’t even know he’d left me smiling and sighing. My head was still in the clouds when Sandy Ryker walked up to

me, a twinkle in her bright blue eyes. “Clara Barnes, are you sweet on someone?”

“No,” I said, a bit too quickly.

“I do not for one second believe it when you tell me that. I have seen that look on each of my children’s faces. Love has a look to it.”

“I am not in love.”

“Sure. Who are you just hanging up with then? Because I know it wasn’t a business call, not with the face you were making.”

“It’s no one. It’s not important.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay, you keep your secrets. Whoever he is, he’s making you happy. That was the face of someone talking to a person they wanted to hear from. I know love when I see it.”

I didn’t know what to say to her, so I just nodded. She patted me on the hand and grinned before leaving me to my thoughts. Love? That was a word I didn’t like to use. So why did it feel right?

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Clara

“There she is. I haven’t seen you in so long, I thought maybe you had gotten lost in one of those mares that you’re always sticking your arms up inside,” Jenna said as I approached the table she’d snagged for us at the Silver Spur.

She grinned at me and raised her hand to flag down a waitress, who came over with a smile on her face. “New uniforms, Josie?” I asked, eyeing her black T-shirt. It was tied on one side, and a horseshoe surrounded a boot with a spur on the front of the shirt which said, *use your spurs* across the chest.

She smiled and glanced over at the new bartender, a tall, broad-shouldered man with sandy blond hair and a killer smile. He wore a shirt that matched hers. “Yeah, Frankie brought them in. Since there are so many tourists coming to visit, she thought maybe we needed to spruce up the place a bit.”

Jenna pouted. “Boo. I don’t like that. The Spur is a dive. It’s always been a dive, and it always will be a dive. That’s why it’s so charming. Now you guys are ruining it.”

Josie laughed too. “Take it up with Frankie.” She looked at me. “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll just take club soda with a twist of lime, please.”

“Sure. Are you the designated driver tonight?”

I shrugged. “I guess so. Thanks, Josie.”

She turned on her heels and sauntered back to where the bartender stood.

Jenna stared at me, tapping her finger on the rim of her beer bottle. “What the hell is going on with you? Why aren’t you drinking?”

I looked at her and saw understanding dawn immediately. I didn’t even get a word out before she gasped.

“Oh my God. Not you too.”

“Not me too what?”

“Mackenzie isn’t coming because she’s been puking for the last three days because she’s pregnant. Sera’s pregnant again. And now you.” She smacked her palm on the table.

“I’m not pregnant,” I said. “Yet.”

Her eyes went wide. “Wait, are you serious? You’re really doing it? Getting a donor?”

I bit my lower lip. It was hard not telling her the entire truth. But it was also for the best. “I got a donor. I made my first deposit, and now I’m waiting to see what happens.”

“That’s really exciting. And scary as hell. What does this mean for girls’ night?”

I laughed. “We can do girls’ night at my house or at Mack’s place. It doesn’t always have to be out here. Really, we don’t have to be around cowboys to make it a fun night.”

“That’s true,” she agreed. “Usually the cowboys are only good for a little bit of fun. And some are really hard to get out of your house.” She stared me down, but her gaze flicked past me, and those perfect brows of hers rose. “Are you gonna explain why Maverick Wilde is here and looking at you like he wants to have you for dinner?”

I turned my head, and sure enough, Mav stood in the doorway with Trent Ryker, gaze leveled on me, a smirk on his lips.

What was he doing here? Checking up on me? Making sure I was okay? Making sure I stayed out of trouble? He

knew this was where I was going to be. The cocky bastard winked as he approached our table, and I could practically feel the questions building in Jenna.

“Hi there, ladies. I hope you don’t mind us interrupting your girls’ night,” Trent said, his eyes on the woman at my side.

Gaze trained on Trent, she shrugged and pretended she was unaffected. “I think we’ll manage. At least now there are some gentlemen here who can push us around the dance floor, right, Trent?”

Trent took his hat off and put it on his chest, offering her a slight nod of his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Then, like a good boy, he held out a hand and waited for her to take it so he could lead her out onto the dance floor.

“What are you doing here? I thought you had hockey games to watch,” I asked.

“Nothing. Going out for a beer with my buddy. You know, wingman stuff.”

“You are so transparent.”

“Oh really? Am I?”

“Yes, you came out here to check on me. Admit it.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared down at his boots. Then, he deliberately dragged his gaze all the way up my body before stopping on my eyes. “So maybe I wanted to see you. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“You can see me, but you shouldn’t be looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re picturing me with no clothes on.”

“Well, what if I am?”

A shiver ran through me. What if he was? What was I going to do about that?

“I just think if we’re going to keep this quiet, then you can’t look at me like that.”

“I see. Do you want me to look at someone else like that?”

“No.” My response was so fast, I didn’t think he would even register that I’d spoken. But he did. Clearly. Because he started chuckling.

“Come on. Let me push you around the dance floor.”

“No.”

“Baby, we do this all the time. People see us out at weddings. They see us here. They see us dance, talk, play, and be friends. So if you’re telling me that this arrangement we’ve got means I can’t be your friend in public, we’re going to have to rework things.”

I sighed and nodded before standing and taking his hand. “Okay, you’re right. And I do love this song. Seems a shame to sit it out.”

“Exactly.” He took my hand in his and led me out onto the sawdust-covered dance floor.

Amidst the other couples, we two-stepped our way around, him spinning me out then pulling me back in. Dipping me, making me laugh. The smile on his face reached his eyes and made his entire expression more youthful and light. Like he was genuinely enjoying this, enjoying being with me and having me in his arms. The song changed to a slow, romantic ballad, as they always seemed to do when the dance floor was full of happy couples. Instead of releasing me like he normally would, he pulled me tight and held me close.

“Don’t go away just yet, darlin’. I’m not done with you.”

I couldn’t bring myself to force the issue, because truth be told, I enjoyed being in his arms. Way too much. I glanced around to see if any of the other people at the bar noticed us. They weren’t focused on me; they were paying attention to the people with them.

The only person who paid me any mind was Jenna. She and Trent had left the dance floor as soon as the song changed.

Now they were sitting across from each other and having a conversation they both seemed very interested in. That was good. Jenna needed to know good guys existed. And Trent Ryker was as good as they came.

“It seems like you’re down a person tonight, maybe two. Where are Sera and Mackenzie?”

“They’re both pregnant and sick. Mackenzie says she can barely stand up without getting nauseous, and Sera is feeling extra exhausted this time around. Don’t tell her, but I think it’s twins.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. It’s just an instinct. Poor Sutton. He had a hard enough time with the first one. What’s he gonna do with two?”

“He was pretty good. I think he’ll be just fine. Those two might have fallen into a marriage, but they make a really solid team.”

“Yeah, they do. You’re right. And he puts her first when she really needs it. That’s important for a marriage to really work—for any relationship to really work. You have to communicate. And you have to put the other person first when they need you the most. Not always, but when they really need you. You have to be there. No questions asked.”

He took a deep breath and held me just a little tighter. “Do you want to get out of here now? Because I’ve been thinking about you all day. Thinking about when you’re gonna come over. When I get to see you . . . taste you.”

My nipples tightened. God, he was so good at derailing the subject and making me horny. “I don’t want to leave Jenna by herself.”

“Right, right. I just got carried away with all the possibilities. Especially having you so close, moving with me, and you smell so good.”

“We’ve only been here a little while. I can’t leave yet. How about I spend some time with her, and you go be the wingman you were born to be for Trent? We’ll see where the night takes us, okay?”

“The night is taking us home to my bed.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. All right, baby, but I’ll have you know, you’d better not expect to get much sleep tonight.”

“I don’t. Not at all.”

“Good.” He leaned in and whispered into my ear, “I want to kiss you so fucking bad right now. But I can’t, and somehow that makes it even hotter.”

Yeah, it did. It really did. We were playing a dangerous game. And both of us knew it. Because one of us was going to break. And it might be me.

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Clara

Mav smiled at me, his tender and genuine expression making my heart flutter.

“Maybe I could convince her to call it a night,” I said, but he shook his head.

“No, you’re right. This is your night out, and I crashed it like an asshole. I’m going to snag Trent, and the two of us are going to find somewhere else in this bar to spend our evening so the two of you can have a good time without a grumpy cowboy watching your every move.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re going to be watching my every move whether you’re next to me or not.”

“True, but at least I won’t be calling attention to myself while I’m doing it.”

Jenna bounded up to where we were, and she gave Mav a considering look. “Does he know?”

“Does he know what?” Mav asked.

Jenna gave me a sidelong glance, and I sighed. “Yes, he knows.”

“Good. I don’t like to keep secrets. So, Mav, that means you can help me convince Clara to get her butt up on that bull tonight. It might end up being the last time she gets to do it. Pregnancy and mechanical bulls don’t go hand in hand.”

I laughed. “Why would I get on the bull? You know I’m not good at it.”

Mav strode over to the table, and we followed. He grabbed his beer and took a long pull before handing me my club soda. “She’s right, you know. You won’t be able to do it once you’re knocked up. Wouldn’t be good for the baby.”

“It’s not good for me right now.”

“Yes, it is. This will be your last hurrah, one wild night at the Spur.”

I chuckled. “I don’t see you in line to ride it, Maverick Wilde.”

“Oh, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t.”

Trent raised his finger, calling our attention to where he was sitting at the table. “I might have put all of us down for a ride.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

“The winner gets a free night of drinks for their party.”

“Our party is only two.” My protest had Jenna rolling her eyes.

“Not anymore. Mav and Trent have joined us. All you can drink all night. And with Maverick on our team, we’re a shoo-in to win.”

“I’m not even drinking alcohol.”

“Exactly. You can be our designated driver, and we can get hammered.”

I shook my head. “I foresee a lot of designated driver duties once I can’t drink.”

Jenna leaned in and brushed a kiss on my cheek. “You’re not wrong. Not by a long shot.”

Maverick brought his face closer to me and whispered in my ear, “Show me how you ride the bull so later, you can do it again, but with me.”

That made tingles race straight between my thighs. “Okay, sure. Let’s do it. What the hell?”

“That’s my girl,” Jenna said.

We watched as the bull rides started, people staying on for five seconds. Three, even seven. But nobody seemed to be able to best it, which made sense because the thing was turned up high and on the hardest possible level. This was rodeo style. This was the kind of bull riding Sam Ryker did professionally. Only he was on the back of a real animal.

I watched cowboy after cowboy tumble off the back of that bull, lucky they were landing on soft padded mats and not hard concrete. Jenna was called up, and I didn’t miss the way Trent’s eyes watched her as she sashayed her way to the pen. She hopped up on the back, and the bull started, going slow at first, giving her a false sense of security. She laughed and kept one hand raised in the air like she was supposed to, looking back behind her. And then the bull jerked and spun 180 degrees before sending her flying. She landed in a heap in the corner, and before anybody else could react, Trent hopped over the railing and was helping her to her feet.

“Looks like I don’t need to be a wingman anymore,” Mav murmured.

“Jenna will chew him up and spit him out. You know that, right?”

“Jenna can certainly hold her own. But so can Trent. Just because he’s a gentleman doesn’t mean he’s a pushover.”

My name rang out over the PA system, and Mav jutted his chin toward the bull. “You’re up, darlin’. Show me what you got. Show me what I’m looking forward to. Just remember, you got to roll your hips with every motion. Don’t fight it.”

“I know. I’ve done this before. You act like I’m not from around here.”

“Technically, you’re not.”

“So? I can do this.”

“Let’s see.”

Mav helped me over the railing, and I climbed up on the back of that bull. The music started, and I did exactly what he told me. I rolled my hips forward and backward. I clenched my thighs around the sides. I held on and leaned back when the bull pitched forward, draped across the thing like it was a bed. And when I locked eyes with Maverick, I knew no matter what we'd agreed to, there was no way I'd be staying at the Spur after this.

He looked at me like he was going to devour me. And I had no problem with that. Before I knew it, the song was over, and I had not fallen off. But I was so focused on the man's burning gaze, I hadn't even realized what was happening. I could've been about to fall off a cliff, and I wouldn't have noticed anything but him.

The crowd was cheering, and Mav, who had been the last one in the competition, forfeited his turn. I got off and joined Jenna back at our table, where she immediately high-fived me and told me how fucking awesome I was. She headed to the bar to get a fresh round of drinks for everyone, leaving me alone with my cowboy until Trent took a seat at the table.

"I need to talk to you outside," Mav said, his voice low and tight.

"Everything okay?"

"No, but I know exactly how to fix it."

"Do you?"

The heat in his gaze had me wondering what exactly he had planned. He glanced at Trent, who gave the man a questioning look. "We'll be right back. Keep Jenna occupied, will ya?"

Trent smirked. "My pleasure."

And then Mav had me by the hand, and he tugged me out the front door.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he pulled me around to the back of the building. "Mav, what are we doing?"

“This,” he said as he cupped my face with both hands and shoved me against the wall in the dark, quiet night.

His kiss was rough and hungry. Everything I wanted from him right now. I moaned into his mouth as he threaded his fingers through my hair and gripped hard, pulling the long strands, my body going lax as he fitted me against him.

“Fuck,” he murmured against my mouth. “I’ve been dying to taste your lips. I don’t think you know how hard it was for me.”

“I think you made it pretty clear,” I whispered.

“Now that I’ve had you, I want you all the time.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Good. You should have seen the way every guy in that place was looking at you while you rode that bull. They looked at you like they wanted you to be theirs.”

“But I’m not theirs.”

“No, you’re fucking not. You’re mine.”

Heat curled in my belly, the spark of need growing rapidly. “This is turning out to be a very interesting girls’ night,” I said, hitching my leg over his hip and grinding against the hard bulge between his legs.

“It certainly is. Why did we wait so long to do this?”

“Because we’re stupid.”

He laughed softly. “That’s probably exactly right. I think we’re both a little afraid too.”

“Fear makes people do dumb things.”

“Absolutely. Are you ready to go home with me now?” He kissed me again. This time, adding his tongue into the mix. Wickedly talented and promising so much more than just a kiss when we were in private.

“Yes. Let’s go home.”

I didn’t let go of him. I continued grinding against him, kissing him, feeling him. My hands gripped his waist. Fingers

dug into the small of his back, feeling the hard lines of muscle he'd earned from hard work.

“Baby, if you don't stop, I'm gonna be fucking you against the wall of the Silver Spur. You gotta tell me to stop.”

His hands left my hair and trailed down my body until they cupped my ass, and he lifted me so my legs were wrapped around his waist. His hips pressed perfectly between my thighs. We were both wearing jeans and cowboy boots, not clothes that were easy access for a position like this. In that moment, I cursed myself for not wearing a dress.

The wind whipped my hair into my face, the air charged with the promise of a storm. But it was nothing compared to the feelings Mav sent roiling through me. I was a tempest of need, desperate for him to release all the energy building inside me.

“You need to stop,” I said, hating the words as they came out of my mouth. “Just until we get back to your house.”

He sighed and put me back on my feet, nodding because he knew I was right. “All right. Go tell Jenna you're ready to go. Meet me at my house.”

“What about Trent?”

“We brought our own trucks. He wasn't planning on getting drunk, and neither was I.”

“All right, I guess I'll see you in a bit.”

“I'll be waiting and ready for you.”

“You'd better.” He grinned, then pressed one more kiss to my lips before taking my hand and walking me back to the entrance to the bar. He didn't come in. Instead, he tipped his hat to me and headed for his truck. As I went inside to face Jenna, I hoped to God I didn't look like I'd just been making out with Maverick Wilde because I'd have some serious questions to answer if I did.

Clara

My heart was racing as I pulled down the long road that bisected Wilde Horse Ranch and led toward the main house. Why? Because I was worried Sutton or Luke might spot me? Did it matter if they did? They knew Maverick and I were friends. Besides, they were both so caught up in their own lives, they likely didn't care one bit what I did or with whom. But still, my chest tightened and my belly fluttered when I took the sharp right turn just before the enormous main house no one lived in anymore and headed toward the secluded spot where Mav's place was.

I'd always loved this house. Small compared to the mansion where his father Wes had lived, this home still had three large bedrooms, three bathrooms, and plenty of space for a family. My favorite part was how it butted up right next to a pond where the melodic croaking of frogs filled the air on warm summer nights.

Two tall trees stood on either side of the house, offering shade, and an old tire swing was attached to a strong branch on one of them. I remember Mav telling me that before he moved in, their former ranch foreman and his family had lived here. Sutton's mama had been instrumental in building the home for him.

After I parked, I headed toward the house, my whole body lit up with anticipation and nervous energy. I'd never wanted to see him like I wanted to tonight.

“Where’s the fire, darlin’?” His voice came from near the pond, making me jump as he stepped out of the shadow cast by the large tree.

“Holy God, Maverick. You scared me.”

His laughter made me smile. “Sorry. I was just out here doing some thinking, then you showed up.”

“Thinking about what?”

“About whether you’d show. And what I was gonna do with you if you did.”

He strode toward me, wearing only a tight white t-shirt, Wranglers, and boots. His hair was thick and wavy, mussed and begging me to run my fingers through the strands.

“What are you gonna do? I’m here.”

“I know what I want to do,” he murmured as he captured my wrist and ran the pad of his thumb gently over the sensitive skin on the underside of my wrist. “But only if you want me to.”

My breath caught in my throat. The air around us was thick with electricity, searching for something to ground it. The breeze, which had been light only moments ago, was picking up speed, and the bite of rain in the atmosphere was sharp in my nose. Thunder rolled overhead, the sky lighting up in the distance as a bolt of lightning arced through the clouds.

“We’d better get inside.” Mav’s voice was low and tight.

“Not yet. Not until it gets closer.”

My nipples were hard points, my breasts heavy and full, and my skin felt like a live wire, ready to spark at a single touch. I wanted him to touch me. He stared at me, those eyes of his searching mine for what he needed. Trust. Maybe love, I wasn’t sure. But I thought that even if Maverick Wilde thought he wasn’t deserving of love, he wanted it.

Another bolt of lightning filled the sky, this one striking the ground somewhere on the horizon. The two of us waited for the rumble sure to follow. Moments later, a clap of thunder, closer this time, had me tensing.

Fat drops of warm rain fell from the sky, dotting his shirt rapidly until the white fabric was nearly transparent. I was in the same state, my top clinging to my skin.

Closing my eyes, I tilted my head back and held out my arms before spinning around like a kid, letting the rain soak me.

Mav caught me in his arms, his laughter deep and warm. Then his lips were on mine. We danced together in the storm, our kiss deepening as thunder rumbled.

“C’mon, darlin’, we need to get inside. I only just got you; I’m not giving you up to a strike of lightning.”

I swallowed past the tightening in my throat and nodded, letting out a squeak of surprise when he scooped me into his arms and carried me up the few stairs to the front porch, then kicked open the door and continued on all the way down the hall to his bedroom.

“You left your door open,” I said through a laugh.

“I don’t fucking care.”

“What if someone comes in?”

“Then they’ll get a lesson on exactly how to love a woman because that’s what I intend to do.”

Arousal careened through me, hitting me straight between my thighs. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thoroughly. By the time I’m done with you, you won’t be able to walk and there’s no way you won’t be pregnant.”

My chest lurched. “I—I’m not ovulating right now.”

“Do I look like I care?”

Relief spread from the center of my chest to every nerve ending I possessed. Why did I care that he mentioned getting me pregnant? That was the goal, after all. But it was also a stark reminder that I had to let him go once I got what I wanted. Didn’t I? I’d convinced myself all his pretty words about wanting more were simply him talking without thinking.

But even though I'd tried to brush it off, they'd had an effect. They'd planted the seed of possibility in my heart. That damn thing had grown roots without me even knowing.

“Let me love you tonight, Clara. Let me love you like I should've been loving you the last two years.”

Well, when he talked like that, how could I resist him? I wasn't immune to his charms, never had been. Could I really have more with Maverick? Was everything he promised really up for grabs? Because a life with him, like this, was worth putting my heart on the line for.

I didn't say anything. I just looked into his eyes and nodded.

Maverick

Clara shivered in her wet clothes. The thin cotton top she wore was see-through, revealing a hot pink bra underneath. Had she worn that for me? The thought did things to me. Serious things.

“You cold, baby?”

“Yes? No? I'm not sure. I think I'm a little . . .”

“Nervous?”

Her gaze flitted down to the floor. “I don't know why. I shouldn't be. It's not like you haven't had me under you before.”

“You know what I haven't had?”

I slipped my fingers under the hem of her shirt, running them along the skin of her soft belly. “What's that?”

“You on top of me.”

She bit her lower lip. “That sounds like a challenge, Wilde.”

My fingers gripped her waist, tugging her against me hard. “Oh, it absolutely is, darlin'. One hundred percent. I saw you ride that mechanical bull. I want a turn.”

“You know we shouldn’t be doing this. It’s not part of the plan.”

Her and her goddamned plan. “Fuck. The. Plan.”

I kissed her hard, walking her backward and into the bathroom. I helped her out of her shirt first, tossing the fabric onto the tile floor with a wet smack. Then I peeled her jeans down her hips, both of us laughing when I reached her boots and had to stop so we could work together to take them off her. But then she stood before me, in nothing but hot pink panties and a matching bra.

“Fuck, darlin’, I love you in lace.”

“Why are we in your bathroom and not your bed?”

I jutted my chin toward the large egg-shaped tub. “I’m keeping you with me all damn night. This is me wooing you. So get naked, and we’re gonna do some romance novel shit.”

She laughed. “The way I see it, you’re the one who needs to get naked. I’m already almost there.”

I tore my shirt off, dropping it to the tile as I slipped my boots from my feet and then removed my pants. I stood in front of her, baring my body and my soul in the bright light that surrounded us. She reached behind her and unclasped her bra before letting the lace fall to the floor. Fuck, she was . . . Clara Barnes was everything I wanted.

“You’re so fucking pretty, baby.”

She reached out and trailed her fingertips over the designs etched into my chest and shoulder. “So are you. A work of art. How bad did this hurt?”

“It wasn’t so bad,” I said, grasping her hand and directing her touch to the spot on the underside of my bicep. “Until we got here. That hurt like a sonofabitch. It had me shaking and sweating.”

Her gaze was trained on the intricate ink pattern, fingers following the lines and curves, up and over my shoulder, back to where the tattoo covered my pec. Then she circled my nipple and grinned. “I really like it.”

“My tattoo?”

“Yes. It’s sexy.”

I reached out and grabbed her by the nape. “I really like this.”

My lips found hers, and soon we were a blend of harsh gasps as desire took the reins. Thunder damn near shook the house, but we didn’t care. We had each other to ride out the storm with.

I broke away from her so I could start the bath and grinned at the candles positioned strategically around the tub. I had never used anything other than the shower in this bathroom. Once upon a time, a decorator had come in to make it a home rather than a show house for a real estate agent. At the time, I’d thought it was ridiculous, but now I was thanking my lucky stars for every little touch.

Pouring a liberal amount of bubble bath in the water, I took a deep breath, loving the scent of lavender and vanilla that wafted in a warm cloud of steam.

“A bath?” she asked, eyebrows raised as she assessed me. “Really?”

“Aren’t you cold?”

“Are you getting in with me?”

Shrugging, I threaded our fingers and pulled her toward the filling tub. “I’m naked, aren’t I?”

“It sure looks like it to me.” She ran her palm down my abs, stopping when she reached the trail of hair leading from my belly button to my straining cock. “I am a doctor, you know. Maybe I need to examine you.”

“I saw this in a porn once. Maybe twice.”

Her soft giggle was so fucking sexy. “Only once or twice?”

“Maybe more. I don’t keep count. God, keep doing that,” I murmured, the last leaving me on a groan because she’d taken my length into her hand and stroked slowly.

“This?” she asked, all innocence and sweetness. Then with her other hand, she massaged my balls, gripping me and sending sparks shooting through me. “Mr. Wilde, I think I need to give you a more thorough exam.”

“By all means, doctor.”

She slid to her knees, the sight of her at my feet waking up every primal instinct I had. Then the woman licked my crown as she gazed up at me. Fucking hell, I was so glad we weren't trying for a baby right now because I wouldn't last more than a few seconds once she wrapped those full lips around me.

“Clara,” I warned. “Don't tease me, darlin'.”

Her light laugh filled the air around us as she opened her mouth and took me in, the wet heat of her intense and perfect. The only place I belonged was inside her. Her mouth, her pussy, her ass. Wherever she wanted me.

“Fuuuck me,” I groaned.

She hummed in response, small vibrations only adding to the desperate need for release I was fighting. I reached down and threaded my fingers in her hair, forcing myself not to thrust and accidentally choke her on my cock. Her eyes watered as she rolled her tongue against my tip, her palm shuttling up and down in time with the bobs of her head. She didn't want to miss any of what she couldn't take into her mouth.

I was close. Really fucking close. She trailed her fingers along the crack of my ass, the sensation foreign and ridiculously hot. I bucked, thrusting without realizing it, but she didn't flinch. She doubled down, sucking me until I shook, until my orgasm hit me with the force of a freight train. White-hot pleasure curled my toes, and I held her head as I came down her throat.

“Take it. Swallow. Fuck, baby. That's hot as hell.”

She pulled off my cock and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then grinned. “My God, you're bossy in the bedroom.”

“And you’re damn good with your mouth. And those fingers.”

She bent over the tub, the angle giving me a view of her slick pink pussy from between her thighs. The bathtub was full, bubbles nearly overflowing. Without looking back at me, she stepped into the water.

I had to swallow past the lump in my throat. She was just so damn beautiful sitting there in the water, the bubbles hiding her body, her cheeks pink from the heat.

“You, uh . . . you want a drink?” I croaked out.

She shook her head. “I’m good.”

I was stalling. Nervous about doing something so intimate, but I’d been the one with this idea. How could I be nervous about it? Because she’d agreed to give us a chance, that was why. This was the moment we went from friends who fucked to a couple. This was a relationship. Something I hadn’t had in years.

I moved toward the tub, ready to get in with her when the room went dark, the sound of rain and wind and the roll of thunder reminding me of the reason we’d come inside in the first place.

Clara squeaked out a little cry of surprise, the water splashing as she moved.

“Sit tight. I’ll light some candles.”

“Okay. Hurry. It’s really dark in here.”

I fumbled my way out to the kitchen and pulled a lighter from my junk drawer, then made a beeline back to where my girl was waiting for me, smacking my shin on the edge of the coffee table in the process.

“Motherfucker,” I hissed as sharp pain radiated through my leg, followed by a deep ache.

“You okay?” Her voice carried through the house, amusement coloring her tone.

I limped into the bathroom, thankful as fuck for the ridiculous amount of candles decorating the space. “Yeah, just hit my shin on the table.”

“Aw, poor baby.”

She was teasing, but I couldn’t lie, I liked it.

I lit the three candles on the vanity, the glow of their flames reflecting in the mirror and casting the room in shadows and warm light. Clara, bathed in a golden glow, naked in my bathtub, took away the pain in my shin. It was instant. There wasn’t a better distraction than her.

After lighting the remaining candles around the tub, I dropped the lighter on the floor and stepped into the hot water, nearly overflowing the bath as I did.

We were soft laughs and then sighs of pleasure as I pulled her against my chest. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I couldn’t resist pressing a soft kiss to her hair.

“Never in my life did I think I’d be here,” she murmured as I held her.

“Where?”

“Taking a bubble bath with you. Falling for you. Needing you. Take your pick.”

“I’m so glad you are, darlin’. So fucking glad.”

We stayed there until the water got cold, loving on each other in the flickering candlelight, sharing a moment I never wanted to forget.

When she shivered in my arms, I let out a low laugh. “Come on, baby, let’s get out. We can keep this going in bed.”

She stood before stepping out, and I followed, grabbing a towel and handing it to her. I snagged the remaining towel and wrapped up in it as I extinguished the candles around the tub. Clara was holding one candle but had blown out the others on the vanity, and the look in her eyes said we were gonna do anything but sleep when we hit that mattress.

“I don’t want to keep it going,” she whispered.

My body reacted instantly to the husky tone. “Oh yeah? What do you want to do then?”

“I want you to make me yours in your bed. Make sure I never forget where I belong.”

Pure masculine pride built in my chest. “Oh, darlin’, I’m happy to oblige.” I took the candle from her, and as we walked into the bedroom, I set it on my dresser in front of the mirror. “Drop the fucking towel and get your ass in my bed. I’m gonna ruin you.”

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Clara

“We have to stop doing that,” I whispered, laying exhausted, sweaty, and completely satisfied next to him in his bed.

The sheets smelled even more like him than mine had after he went home. I wanted to burrow under them and stay. Never leave. But I had to keep my wits about me. I had to keep it together because I was not going to fall in love with Maverick, even if he wanted me to.

I knew how this would end. With me heartbroken and mourning something I shouldn't have ever wanted.

“I don't think we should stop. I think we should keep going.” Each word was like a kiss layered onto my heart.

“Of course you do. It means you get laid.” I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, and something tightened in my chest at the hurt look on his face.

“That's not why.” He pulled me against him until my only choice was to lay my head on his chest and wrap my arm around his torso.

“Are you really serious?” I asked.

“Yeah, I'm dead serious about us. I want more with you than I've ever wanted with anyone.”

“And what if it doesn't work?”

“Isn't that a risk for everyone?”

“What if—”

“What if there’s an earthquake, and Yellowstone explodes? What if an asteroid hits, and we all die like the dinosaurs?”

I tilted up my chin and raised my face so I could look at him. “That’s a kind of dark, don’t you think?”

“No darker than you thinking we aren’t going to work out.”

“I just—”

“I know.” He clenched his teeth as he worked to control his emotions, a muscle ticking in his jaw giving him away. “I know you haven’t had good examples of positive relationships. Neither have I. Not really. Not until I saw my brothers fall in love with their wives. Yes, it’s a risk, but it’s one worth taking with you. At least I think so. But if you really don’t want to take it, I get it. I’ll stop pushing, and I’ll leave you alone.”

My chest tightened, and I wondered if I was just being ridiculous. Was I just as bad as the women in the books I read? They made me angry as hell when they couldn’t see the man in front of them was perfect for them. Was I a romance novel heroine stereotype? He trailed his fingers over my arm, gently running them back and forth, the sensation soothing and not sexual in any way.

What was I so afraid of? This was Mav. The man who was the only constant in my life. Even before all this began, he was there. He came when I called. Every time. What reason did I have not to trust him? None.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, we can do it. Give it a try.”

“Yeah?” The excitement in his voice pushed away some of the fear in my heart.

“Let’s do it. Let’s really do it. You and me. Together.”

I sat up and stared at him, really taking the time to lock eyes with him and let myself search for what I knew I’d find. He was one hundred percent genuine. Mav wanted me. And

maybe that was part of why I couldn't believe it. Because the man who made my belly flutter actually wanted me too.

"How exactly do we do this?" I asked, feeling like an idiot because I didn't know how to be in a relationship. "I haven't done it in so long."

"Well, I think the first step is, you kiss me."

"I can do that. What's the second step?"

"I said it earlier. You gotta let me love you, darlin'."

"What if I'm bad at it?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance."

I smiled, letting my guard down, giving myself over to the possibility of love with Maverick Wilde. I had to admit, the thought of being his was enticing.

"You still want to keep it under wraps, though?"

"Yeah, I think until we settle in and, you know, really get to know what it's like to be together, I'd rather not have interference from anybody else."

"I agree," he said.

That surprised me. "You do?"

"Yeah. New things like this, baby, they need time to develop on their own. We don't need our families or friends intervening, putting in their two cents. Not until—"

"Not until we're sure," I finished for him.

"Well, I'm sure. I've never been so sure in my entire life."

I wanted to say the same, but I couldn't. Not yet.

He stopped me with a gentle finger against my lips. "It's okay, darlin'. I know you're not sure. I haven't given you a reason to be, but I will. I'm gonna prove to you that I am the right man for you."

I nodded.

"Now let's go to sleep. Maybe when we wake up, the power will be back on, and I can cook you some breakfast."

“I do love to watch you in the kitchen.”

He laughed. “And I love it when you watch me.”

“You do?”

“You get this hungry look in your eyes, and I know it’s not just because of the food.”

“It isn’t.”

“There, isn’t it nice you can admit you want me?”

“Yes. Very nice. Do you know what’s even nicer?”

“What?”

“That you can have me whenever your heart desires.”

“That is nice. Now, get over here. I’m cold. I need my girl to warm me up.” He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close.

I sighed as happiness flowed through me. His girl. It was kind of surreal, but I liked it a lot. Being Maverick Wilde’s girl was going to turn out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. I just had to let myself believe in him. In us.

But could I?

The next morning I woke up to a lightly snoring cowboy wrapped around me and still no sign of the power returning. The low hum of a generator in the distance told me that things were up and running on the ranch. Nothing was going to stop Wilde Horse Ranch from getting the job done. These cowboys worked like no one else. All the ranchers did.

I wanted nothing more than to snuggle closer to Mav and fall back to sleep in his arms, but that storm had come in fast and pretty much without warning. There might be things I needed to attend to this morning. Horses that spooked and got hurt. Structures that fell and injured animals.

Maverick groaned and wrapped his arms tighter around me as I shifted.

“What time is it?” he murmured.

“I don’t know; the power is still out. Sun’s up now. I should get going.”

“I told you I was going to make you breakfast.”

“I know, but I think I’ll have to take a rain check. The fact that the power is still out has me worried.”

I snagged my phone off the bedside table, thankful I still had five percent battery life left. Sure enough, I had voicemails and missed calls from just about every ranch in the area.

“Everything okay?”

“No, it’s gonna be a hectic day.”

“Do you need help?”

“No. Actually, I don’t think I mentioned this to you, but do you remember my friend from school?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s coming in today, and he’ll be joining the practice for a while.”

“Oh, he will?”

“Definitely. I figured when I get pregnant, I’ll need some help. So he’ll be moving to Sunrise and joining the team.”

“Does he know about your plan?”

“Yes, I told him.”

“Does he know about me? About us?”

“Well, until yesterday, there was no us.”

“Darlin’, there’s always been an us. We were just too blind to see it.”

“True, but no, I didn’t tell him I have a non-boyfriend boyfriend.”

“Non-boyfriend? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know. Listen, it’s all just . . . it’s really new to me.”

“Okay, I get it. It’s fine.”

Someone started hammering on the door, pulling both of us from bed and scaring the life out of me. “Oh God,” I murmured.

“Hey, Mav?” Sutton’s voice filtered through as the door opened. “Mav? Maverick, you got to get up. We got a situation.”

“Oh my God, he’s gonna see me.”

“Go on to the bathroom. I’ll take care of him,” Mav said.

I did as he told me, heading to the big bathroom where we’d done so many dirty things to each other. Once I was dressed and did *not* look freshly screwed, I walked out into the living room. Sutton stared at me, mouth agape, eyes wide.

“Clara?” he asked. “What’s going on here?”

I opened my mouth, trying to come up with the excuse I’d built in my mind while I was getting ready. But Mav stopped me.

“Storm was real bad last night, and she came over to make sure Turbo was doing okay. Once the thunder and lightning started, and all that wind, I made her come inside.”

Sutton’s expression said he didn’t believe the line we were selling him one bit.

But Mav continued. “I slept on the couch. She took my bed.”

I wasn’t sure Sutton bought it from the look in his on his handsome face. “Really?”

I looked at him dead on and nodded. “He insisted. You know your brother.”

“I do. Well, I’m glad you’re okay. It was probably smart since that tornado took out half of Ryker Ranch. Could have easily hit us instead.”

My stomach felt like a rock had settled inside. “Tornado?”

“Yeah, a big one. They lost a lot.”

“What? Oh my God. Was anyone hurt?”

“No, thank God. They’re all fine. But the main house is a wreck, and the stable is gone.”

“What about the horses?”

“They let them run free. We’re heading out to help find them and bring them back.”

“And the cattle?”

“Not sure yet. We think it’s pretty likely some of them are gone, but everyone’s headed down there, Winston, Langston, us . . . everybody who can spare a hand.”

“Okay. I’ll head home, get my kit, and load up. I’ll meet you there.”

“All right.” Mav flicked a worried glance to me. “You want me to come with you?”

“No, I’m fine. I just need to get things settled and . . . oh God, Ben. He’s coming in today. I have to pick him up.”

I didn’t miss the slight twitch in Mav’s jaw when I mentioned Ben. But he hid it well enough it escaped Sutton’s notice. “Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

“Mav, if somebody is hurt . . .”

I could tell from the look in his eyes he knew the somebody I was talking about was not a human.

“They’ll be fine. But I get it. If you want, we can send a ranch hand to meet Ben.”

“I might need to do that.”

“Why don’t we meet at Ryker Ranch and get a feel for the situation first? Then we’ll figure out what we need to do.”

“Okay, great. Let’s do that.” I nearly leaned in to kiss him in front of his brother like an idiot, but I stopped myself.

When a warning flashed in his eyes, daring me to go there, I said, “Thanks for letting me stay last night.”

“I’m real glad I did. I wouldn’t want you out there in weather like that. Would have been worried sick.”

Sutton flicked another glance between the two of us, but he didn't say anything. I grabbed my bag off the side table where I dropped it. That had happened when Mav carried me inside and kissed me until I couldn't breathe.

I didn't look back as I left the house, but I wanted to. I wanted him to go with me. It was comforting to know the two of us would be together today, in some sense. We'd be working on the same task, trying to help the Rykers.

As I started my truck, I took a deep breath and finally let hope for the future trickle in. If I'd let him, Maverick Wilde was going to be my forever.

MAVERICK

Ryker Ranch was a fucking mess. Tore-up fence, a nearly flattened main house, and a stable half gone was only part of the damage. It looked like a war zone. They were going to be repairing and rebuilding for a long while before things were back to normal around here.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath as I pulled up to where the bunkhouse used to be.

All that was left was the south wall and a toilet. Everything else was strewn across the property in a mess of siding and insulation. Parking my truck, I got out and simply got to work, offering my help wherever I could. Hands from every ranch in the area were here, helping with the cleanup.

"Hey, Mav, thanks for coming out." Clint Ryker's deep rumble had me turning around to face him.

He stood with Tucker Westin, their ranch foreman and his brother-in-law. Both of them looked like they'd had little sleep. Dark circles ringed their eyes, and their jeans were streaked with dirt and muck.

"Of course. We're sending all our available hands out too. Sutton should be here soon, and Clara is on the way."

He nodded. "It was the damndest thing. No warning. We're lucky Buck had to take Peanut outside and saw it. He called,

and we were all able to get to shelter.”

Buck lived on the outskirts of the property with his wife. They rehabilitated abused horses in addition to working the ranch. His wife Penny was a damn fine massage therapist.

“It’s a miracle no one was hurt.”

“Yeah. Miracle is the right word for it.”

“How many head of cattle do you have missing?”

Tucker glanced out at the pasture. “We’re still trying to get a count, but from the look of things, not too many. I’m mostly concerned about the fence. The cows know how to get away, but the fence keeps them out of the road.”

I knew that, but I didn’t point out the obvious. “You got a spare horse I can ride?”

Tucker nodded. “Appreciate it, man.”

A few hours later, after repairing a long stretch of fence with Buck, Tristan, and Sutton at my side, we rode back toward the remnants of the house. Mama Ryker sat on the back porch, her eyes haunted, but a smile on her face.

“Hey, Mama,” I said. “You doing okay?”

Her clear blue eyes stared into mine. “This was all I had left of George.”

“That’s not true.” Clint sat next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “You’ve got all of us, your grandbabies, and three more on the way.”

She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “You’re right.” Then she locked gazes with her son. “Did you just say three more on the way? Sera and Hazel makes only two.”

Clint offered her a sheepish grin. “Yeah.”

Pure joy filled her face. “Oh, honey, I’m so happy for you. When did you find out?”

“Ever took the test last night before the storm hit.”

She hugged him tight and pressed a kiss to his bearded jaw. “Thank you for telling me. This is a bright spot in a

terrible day.”

“Mama, you’re welcome to come stay on Wilde Horse Ranch if you want. We have a whole house, room for anyone who needs to stay,” I offered.

She released her grip on Clint and stood, walking across the debris-strewn ground until she stood in front of me. Her head only came up to my shoulder, but she was still intimidating as fuck. The woman was a force of nature.

“Maverick Wilde,” she said, reaching up and placing a gentle palm on my cheek. “How you and your brothers ended up such good and kind men, I’ll never know. I appreciate the offer, but I wouldn’t feel right staying in Wes Wilde’s house. Not after everything that happened.”

“That was so long ago. Besides, he’s not around to cause any trouble. I don’t want y’all living in hotels when we have a perfectly good house sitting empty.”

“I’m all set, sweetheart. Buck and Penny have a spare room. But you might want to talk to Tristan and Hazel. They got hit pretty hard too.”

I flicked a glance at Clint, who nodded silently. “All right. I’ll talk to him shortly. Is there anything y’all need? I can call in some favors.”

She hugged me hard. “No. I’m pretty sure the entire town is here to help us. Honestly, I’m overwhelmed with the outpouring of support in such a short time.”

“Y’all are an institution in this town. *Saddle Up* revived Sunrise.”

Releasing me, she stepped back and smiled.

Buck strode up to where we were all standing. “You ready to go, Mama? Penny is here with the truck. I can load up your suitcases.”

I don’t know why relief hit me so hard. Of course her kids would take care of her, but I’d been ready to offer her full use of my dad’s empty house.

As Buck and I hefted Mama's suitcases into the back of his truck, the Langston crew pulled up. Every single one of them. Gram, as I'd been instructed to call their grandma, got out and immediately began barking orders, getting each and every one of her grandchildren on a task.

Sawyer carried a load of baked goods, Nash grabbed a tool belt from the back of the truck and secured it around his waist, and Hawk headed straight for the main house with work gloves on.

All this was followed by Clara, her expression serious as she parked, ready to handle the worst if needed.

This was what the people of Sunrise did for one another. They took care of each other.

But all I could think about was the woman I loved and how I could look after her.

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Clara

My period was late. Three days late, to be exact. I couldn't help the flutter of excitement in my belly at the prospect of being pregnant. It could be nothing, stress, or just a fluke in my cycle. Except for the fact that Maverick had fucked me six ways from Sunday *while* I was ovulating. It was highly likely we'd been successful.

He'd been gone the last three days, visiting Seattle so he could learn the ins and outs of owning an NHL team. I'd wanted to go with him, but there was way too much going on at the clinic and with my practice, especially after we'd worked for two days straight helping the Rykers get their livestock accounted for and treated. Damn, I missed him.

When he'd returned late last night, we hadn't had a chance to talk about the fact that I was overdue to start my cycle. We were too busy getting . . . reacquainted.

He was sleeping soundly in my bed now, one leg thrown out from under the covers, perfect chest on full display. God, his abs had abs. I'd missed him more in this short time frame than I had when he'd leave for months at a time to go to Texas. I didn't want him to leave ever again.

What would he say if I wasn't knocked up yet? My heart squeezed. What would he say if I was?

"Mmm. You look real nice standing there in nothing but those hot pink panties, baby."

I bit my lower lip, forcing myself not to smile at his flirty morning tone. “I was thinking the same about you in my bed.”

“Well, maybe you should come over here and keep me company.”

I swallowed hard and shook my head. “I just . . . give me a minute?”

He sat up, his expression serious. “What’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I’m uh . . . late.”

His eyes widened. “Late? Like, late, late?”

The pure excitement in his voice had me smiling. “Three days.”

“Are you gonna take a test?”

“I already did.” I glanced back into the bathroom through the open door.

“Well, what did it say?”

My hands shook as I reached for the plastic test I’d put facedown on the counter. I swallowed. “I don’t know if I can look.”

Maverick’s gaze held a teasing glint, but there was fear there too. “Afraid?”

“Not afraid, just nervous. This changes everything, you know.”

He nodded, his eyes going hard. “Yes, I know. But, darlin’, we’ve already changed everything. What’s one more adjustment?”

“A baby’s a lot more than an adjustment.”

“Is it? As far as I see it, our baby adds a little more love in a world that’s already hard as fuck.”

“Sure.”

“Our priorities might change, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but mine have already shifted.”

“Have they?”

“Yeah. I never thought you were a possibility. Now, it seems more and more like you and me were inevitable. So flip over the goddamn test, and let’s find out if we’re about to have a celebration or if we’re gonna start trying again.”

My heart fluttered, and I took a long breath before reaching for the test and flipping it over.

And there it was. In absolutely undeniable pink.

Two lines.

Holy shit. I was pregnant.

I laughed, letting out the tension I had been carrying in my shoulders. “We did it.”

I flicked my gaze to him, terrified I was going to see regret in his eyes. Instead, what I found there had me falling a little deeper. Excitement and pride glowed in his expression, and his smile was genuine and honest.

“Fuck yeah, we did it. I told you I’d knock you up on the first try. That’s why I always wrapped it up with every other girl.”

A little spike of jealousy stabbed through me, but I quickly pushed it aside. I’d been with other men in my life. It wasn’t like I expected him to save himself for me. But now that Maverick was mine, I realized I didn’t like thinking that someone else had gotten to love him. He reached for me, pulling me into his arms and pressing a gentle kiss to the top of my head.

“How are you feeling? Are you nervous?”

“Yeah, I’m definitely nervous. This is crazy. I mean, I wanted it. This was my goal, and it’s already here.” I dropped my focus from his handsome face to the floor.

“And I got you in the process. It’s more than I could have hoped for.”

He pulled back just enough that I could stare into his beautiful eyes. Eyes that saw deep into my soul. “Darlin’, I

need to tell you something. Can you let me tell you now?"

My belly fluttered. I knew what he was going to say, and I was ready for it. Because I felt exactly the same way. "Tell me, Maverick."

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. Then his gaze locked on mine. "I spent years avoiding this exact thing, afraid that if I gave my love to somebody, they'd throw it back in my face, or I'd be as bad as my dad and put love into the wrong things." I reached up and cupped his jaw. "Clara Barnes, I am so damn in love with you I can barely see straight. I need you to know it because you've changed my entire life. Not only with this." He reached down and placed a gentle palm over my lower belly. That small action spoke volumes because he didn't even try to disguise that his hand was trembling as he touched me. "It's more than the fact that we're gonna have a baby. I want every night with you and every morning. I want to fight with you and make up in our bed. I want to take the kids to school and let you sleep in."

I laughed. "There's no sleeping in. Kids or no kids, there'd be no sleeping in for me."

"You know what I mean. I want all the things I said I never ever wanted to have. I want them with you. It's because of you I feel safe and ready to give this my all. And if you'll let me, I will give you everything I have."

Tears pricked in my eyes, stinging as emotion welled inside me as he continued. "Please say you want me too."

"Mav, I already said—"

"I need you to say it again. I need you to tell me I'm the only one for you. And that when you're ready, you'll wear my ring and take my name, and we'll build a family."

"Are you proposing?" I couldn't keep the fear out of my voice. I wasn't ready for that, and neither was he.

"No." He was quick to respond, almost defensive. "I'm not proposing. But I am telling you right here and now that's where this is headed."

"All right."

“We are on a path toward forever. And for me, forever means you in a white dress and me uncomfortable as fuck in a tuxedo as we stand before our friends and family and tell them we love each other.”

I bit my lower lip, my heart racing. “You really want to marry me?”

“Yeah, I do. Not today. But eventually. We can wait till after the baby’s born. Once we settle in. But I don’t want to let you go.”

I reached up and ran my fingers across his cheek, my heart aching for this man who just laid himself so bare in front of me. “I love you too, Maverick. I really, truly do.”

His smile made my chest ache. Then he dragged a hand across the back of his neck and let out a long, slow breath. “I haven’t said that to someone in so long.”

“If it helps, I haven’t either.”

“You know, it does help. And now you don’t have to say that to anyone ever again for the first time. Now we get to collect every I love you for the rest of our lives. And it’ll just mean more every time we say it.”

God, he was gonna make me cry. “I think I heard something about celebrating?” I asked, a hint of teasing in my tone. “Don’t tell me you’re already breaking your promises.”

A low growl left him as he leaned in and nuzzled my neck, his stubble brushing sensitive skin and making me moan.

“Darlin’, I will never lie to you. I will never break a promise. I will always be true to you.”

“You’d better start being true right now. Did you know pregnant women are easily aroused?”

He laughed. “You know, I did hear something about that. In my research.”

“Research?”

“Yeah, I like to be prepared for any possibility.”

“Well, I’m not going to complain about that.”

“You want to show me exactly how much these hormones are affecting your libido?”

I grinned and bit my lower lip, already aroused just from the low rumble of his words. “Yeah, I think I do.”

He scooped me into his arms, kissing me hard as he did. “Come on. We’ve got some celebrating to do.” He carried me over the threshold into the bedroom, and then we celebrated . . . all morning long.

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Clara

There wasn't a moment in my day when I was not on the verge of vomiting for the next week. I wasn't going to be able to do this if things didn't calm down because being a vet meant dealing with lots of . . . smells. And being a vet who worked on ranches? Multiply lots by a thousand—a million maybe.

Barnyard animals and livestock never smelled good. I'd gotten used to it, come to expect it as part of the job, but pregnancy changed everything. The only person I'd told was Mav, but Ben figured it out within the first hour of working with me.

My bouts of morning sickness hit at the worst possible time, and I was so glad he came in when he did. Because in addition to handling half of my already completely full workload, he took the most challenging appointments because he knew I wouldn't make it through without having to run for the bathroom.

I sat at my desk, looking over lab work results and breathing slowly through my nose, when a soft knock on my door brought my attention from my computer.

“Hey,” Ben said, leaning against the open doorway. He had two paper cups from One Horse Coffee Traders in his hands. “I thought you might like some ginger tea. It'll settle your stomach.”

I offered him a grateful smile and waved a hand to invite him to sit with me. He placed my tea in front of me on the desk, then took the offered chair.

“So I guess I got a crash course on the animals of Sunrise this week?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I wasn’t planning on this happening so quickly. I really thought it would take more effort.”

“Really? Well, it seems like I came at the right time. I hope me being here helps you and your . . . partner?” He said that with a question mark at the end, as though he was fishing for information.

“I . . . um . . . he . . .” I stumbled over my words because we hadn’t really talked about when to tell everyone. The last thing we’d said was we’re going to keep it quiet. I shook my head. “It’s just—it’s just me.”

“Okay. I’m here if you need me.”

“If I could just stop throwing up, I’d be great.”

He laughed softly and pushed the tea toward me. “Don’t worry, it eventually dies down.”

“I know. It’s just a lot right now.”

“You need to start every morning with something in your stomach. Some crackers by your bed. A little bit of ginger ale or some kind of fizzy soda. Trust me.”

I took a sip of the tea and let the spicy ginger flavor wash over my tastebuds. “How many sisters did you say you have?”

“Five. And they’ve each had a baby or two. Did you know I even delivered one of them?”

“What?”

“Yep. My sister and I decided we were going to drive to her husband’s away game. He’s a pro hockey player for the Seattle Cyclones.”

My brows shot into my hairline. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Big hockey fan?”

“Not really. But my . . . Mav, my friend, he sort of owns that team.”

“No shit?”

“It’s complicated, but yeah. He inherited it.”

Ben’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “That’s wild.”

“Continue your story. I’m sorry, I interrupted, and it was just getting good.”

His boyish grin had me smiling in return. “So, we get in the car—she’s thirty-six weeks pregnant, by the way.” He shook his head and chuckled under his breath. “Awful decision making there. So we’re crossing the mountain passes coming from Eastern Washington to Seattle. We hit seriously dicey conditions and decide to stop for the night, and of course, she goes into labor. There’s not a hospital nearby. The baby is early, and I have to deliver him.”

“Oh my God. Please tell me this has a happy ending.”

“It does. He came out eight and a half pounds, screaming like an opera singer. Totally fine. Needless to say, we did not make it to the game.”

“I guess not.”

The bell over the door jangled, followed by voices from our front desk. The possibility of a walk-in called our attention away from the conversation. Ben raised his cup of coffee to me.

“I’m serious, Clara. You need anything, just let me know. Happy to help.”

“I’m fine.”

“You say that now, but—”

“She’s just fine, fella. If she needs anything from anyone, it’ll be me.” A tall, strapping cowboy stood behind him, eyes burning like coal as he stared Ben down.

“Oh, I’m not moving in on your girl or anything, man . . . I’m just her—”

“Business partner. Sure. She already told you she’s just fine.” Maverick’s voice held no playfulness. There wasn’t any room for friendly discourse. The man came in and basically pissed all over me, marking his territory.

“Maverick Wilde, this is Bennet Carlisle. You remember, you two met last week.”

Mav tipped his hat at Ben, who, to his credit, didn’t back down. Even though my cowboy had about five inches of height on him and a lot more grit.

“Good to see you again. Clara tells me you own the Seattle Cyclones. That’s cool.”

Mav’s jaw clenched. It was a source of frustration for him, that NHL team. “Not for much longer. Know anyone in the market?”

Ben let out a nervous laugh. “That’s a little out of my tax bracket.”

An awkward silence settled between us as Mav’s gaze trailed from Ben to me, then to the matching coffee cups we were both holding. “I brought you lunch, darlin’.”

My stomach rolled. “Thanks.”

Ben, to his credit, backed away quietly, leaving us together. Maverick came in, closed the door behind him, and then took the seat where Ben had been. He settled a takeout bag on the desk.

“You’ve got to eat something. You’ve been sick as a dog every single day. I’m worried about you.”

“I’ll be okay. I promise. It’s just my body getting used to all the hormones.”

“I know. But I don’t like you not feeling well.”

“So what are you gonna do about it?”

“I’m gonna hold your hair back if you have to puke and rub your back until you feel better.”

“Romantic,” I teased.

“I think so.”

“What did you bring me?”

“Well, I ran into Mama Ryker while I was at the grocery.”

“You didn’t tell her, did you? We agreed not to tell people yet. What if something goes wrong?”

“Don’t talk like that. We’re going to be just fine. I feel it in my bones.”

I swallowed down a sudden wave of emotion.

“I didn’t tell her. I did tell her that Mack is dealing with some morning sickness, and I wanted to get her something to help with that.” He reached into the bag and pulled out a packet of ginger candies, a box of peppermint tea, plain saltine crackers, and . . .

“A protein shake?”

He sat back smiled at me. “Yes, a protein shake. Since you can’t keep anything down, this will help a little. She swears by the ginger things. She’s done this a few times, so I trust her.”

“Thank you.”

He winked. “I gotta take care of my baby mama.”

My cheeks burned. I liked the way he said that a little too much.

“I’m sorry, your baby mama’s a little bit boring lately.”

“Boring? You don’t feel good. There’s a difference.”

I hadn’t been in the mood for anything other than being horizontal for the last few nights. “I’m just not . . . I don’t feel like doing more than just lying on the couch. Things have changed a lot in a short period. We went from hot and heavy to me sleeping all the time.”

“I don’t know what you think I expect from you. I like to be with you. I *like* to lay on the couch and watch a TV show. There’s more to me than my cock.”

The cloud of doubt disappeared with his words. “I have to admit, the ginger is working. At least right now. That’s promising.”

“Oh, sugar. It is, but I don’t think we should test its effectiveness.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone.”

He smirked. “As tempting as you are, let’s save that for after business hours.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “I do have a professional reputation to maintain.”

“I do need one thing, darlin’.”

“What’s that?”

“I was kidding myself when I said I didn’t mind keeping things quiet.”

“I still think we probably should. Just until we know for sure.”

“Clara, darlin’, I know.”

“How can you be so sure? You’ve been so gun-shy ever since I met you. I need to get used to this newfound outlook you have.”

“Because it’s you.” He said it as though us being together was the most natural thing in the world.

I stood, heart in my throat as I walked up to him. “I’ve never been so sure of something in my entire life. So I’ll tell anybody anything you want. You want to keep it a secret? I understand that. Those church ladies already have us walking down the aisle eventually. If they find out we’re having a baby, eventually will change to within the next two weeks. But is that so bad?”

“I thought you didn’t want marriage right away.”

“You keep asking me this question, and I keep telling you that was before for you.”

I wrapped my arms around my waist and breathed in slowly as an unexpected wave of nausea curled in my stomach. I lurched, covered my mouth, and ran toward the garbage can before losing everything in my stomach. A warm hand rubbed my back as Maverick held my hair out of my face.

“You’re okay. I’ve got you. It’s gonna be over soon.”

When I finally got up on shaky legs, he ran his thumb over my cheek and smiled. “Take the day off, darlin’. Take care of yourself. Let me take care of you.”

I sighed and nodded. “Okay.” He wrapped me in his arms. “I love you, Mav.”

“I know you do, baby. I’ll wait for you to be ready for the rest, but for now, you can be mine in secret, as long as you know where you belong.”

“With you. I belong with you.”

“Fuck yes, you do.”

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MAVERICK

The weeks went on, and I spent more time with Clara than I did with my family. I'd like to say they noticed this, but I don't think they did. They were all so wrapped up in their own shit. Luke was nearing full recovery, and he and Mackenzie were expecting their own little one. The focus wasn't on me. It never was, but I didn't mind. I wanted more than anything for them to be happy.

So when my phone rang and Killian's name appeared on the screen, I had to admit I was more than a little shocked.

"What do you need from me, Kill?" I muttered, staring down at the screen as I walked toward the stable doors after putting my horse away for the night.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mav. It's Killian."

"Yeah, I know. What's going on?"

"I seem to have found myself in a bit of a bind."

"Oh, have you?"

"I wouldn't have called if I didn't need help." He sounded dejected and frustrated at the same time.

"Go ahead. Tell me what's going on."

"I'm in jail."

Fuck. Jail? “Are you serious? Why are you calling me? Don’t you have an agent or manager or someone who can come get you?”

“I’m in Sunrise.”

“You’re in jail in Sunrise?” I asked.

“Yeah. I got into it with a couple of assholes at the Silver Spur this evening.”

“You’re in Sunrise, and you didn’t tell us,” I muttered. Hell, it wasn’t even seven pm and he’d already gotten into a bar fight?

I could practically feel him rubbing his hand over his jaw. “I was just passing through on my way to meet the band in Wyoming.”

“What do you mean you were just passing through? You don’t travel with your band?”

“Look, I don’t have time to talk about this. Sheriff Barker said I could make one phone call. And you were the first one I thought of.”

“Why?”

“You’re not gonna judge me.”

“I’m gonna judge you. Shit, I’ll judge the hell out of you.”

“Fine. Judge me after you pick me up, please.”

“You need bail money?”

“Hey, Paul? Do I need bail money?” he called. I heard Paul’s unintelligible voice roll over the line. “Paul says no. I just need to be not driving and not assaulting any other citizens of this great township.”

I couldn’t keep the laugh from escaping. “Oh, man. You really pissed in his Cheerios, huh?”

“I guess. Can you just come get me?”

“Yes, I can come get you.”

I hung up the phone and shoved it in my back pocket before striding out of the stable just as Clara’s truck pulled up.

She got out, her smile bright, skin practically glowing, and just the barest swell under her shirt. I was pretty sure I was still the only one who knew, the only one who could see it, but I loved knowing she and I shared this secret.

Ben got out right after her, his friendly smile having a much less powerful effect on me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Sutton called me. One of the studs got kicked about an hour ago. Think it’s just stitches, but Ben here needs to learn the ropes if he’s going to be working on Wilde Horse Ranch.”

“Who says he’s going to be working on our ranch?”

“You’re not serious. There’s gonna come a day when I won’t be so readily available, and it’ll be nice if Ben can come and take care of your horses for you.”

Unreasonable jealousy coursed through me. I didn’t want anybody touching my horses except for her. But I caught myself before I lashed out. “I guess you know what you’re doing.”

I tipped my hat at Ben before Clara said, “Ben, I’ll be right behind you.” When Ben was out of earshot, Clara stared me down.

“At first, the jealous caveman thing was cute, but not anymore. Why are you so mean to him?”

“I am not.”

“Yes, you are. You’re being ridiculous and grumpy.”

I sighed. “I’m being the way I am to pretty much everybody.”

“You’re not that way with me.”

“You’re different. I don’t love them. I love you.”

The grin she gave me before her exasperated sigh had me fighting the urge to smirk. “He’s a nice guy. He’s very good at his job, and in case you forgot, I’m going to be going on maternity leave. Someone has to take over for me for the weeks I’m gone.”

“Fuck, yeah, you’re right. I just don’t like the way he puts himself in your way all the time.”

“What do you mean puts himself in my way?”

“You know, like wherever you are, he’s there too. Every fucking time at your clinic.”

“He’s *working*. Of course he’s there.”

“He’s working, sure, but unless he gives everyone the same level of special attention he gives you, there’s more to his—”

“Stop right there, Wilde. You’re jealous. I can see it rolling off you. Now, where are you off to? You want to get some dinner after this?”

I couldn’t stop my laugh. She knew me too well. “As tempting as that sounds, I gotta go pick up my wayward little brother from jail.”

“Jail? Sera is not going to be happy about that.”

I shook my head. “The other little brother.”

“How did Luke end up in jail? He’s still in a cast, isn’t he?”

“No.” What had been a frustrating situation turned amusing. “Killian. The other *other* little brother. The secret one.”

Not too long ago, we found out that Killian Winter, country music star, wasn’t our cousin as we’d grown up believing and was, in fact, Killian Wilde, our brother. It was a shock for everyone. When his label found out the truth behind his parentage, they jumped on the goldmine that being a Western movie legend’s grandson was. They rebranded everything, changed his name to Killian Wilde, and shifted him from front man of a band to solo artist. And it worked. He was tearing up the charts.

So I didn’t understand why in God’s name my brother found himself in jail in the middle of nowhere without telling us he was going to be here.

“Is he okay?” Clara asked.

“I think so. He sounded a little drunk, but other than that, I think he’s fine. I have to go get him, though.”

“Guess I’ll see you later.”

“You’ll see me tomorrow morning. Tonight, if I can make it. All right?”

“Okay.”

I didn’t kiss her, even though I wanted to. There were too many eyes around. Too many nosy people who worked on this ranch. One day, I’d be able to pull Clara Barnes into my office and kiss the hell out of her in front of whoever was watching. She left me with a little wave, and I got into my truck, started the engine, and drove the nearly half hour it took to get to the county jail.

When I walked inside, the first thing I saw was Sheriff Paul Barker, his feet kicked up on the top of his desk, hat pulled down over his eyes. I slammed my hand down on the bell, jolting him awake with a snort.

“Jesus Christ, Maverick. Give me a heart attack, and this town’s gonna go the way of the Wild West.”

“Lord knows we wouldn’t make it without you, Paul.” The sarcasm in my voice was impossible to hide. I didn’t want to either. “I’m here for my brother. You gonna let him go?”

“Yes. You want to take the other one too?”

“The other one? What are you talking about?”

“Tucker Weston.”

My eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah. They’re both pretty banged up.”

Tucker wasn’t a fighting kind of guy, not after he and Sam had finally gotten together. “That doesn’t make sense.”

Paul shrugged. “I don’t know. Killian’s got a pretty smart mouth on him.”

“You call Sam?”

He shook his head. “Tucker said no. There wasn’t any need for Sam to know any detail of this.”

I sighed and pulled my phone from my pocket, dialing Sam Ryker’s number.

He answered after three rings, confusion clear in his tone. “Mav? Why’re you calling me? I didn’t even know you had my number.”

“Your sister and my brother are hitched. Of course I’ve got your number.” Didn’t we all have everyone else’s numbers? “Anyway, I’m calling because your husband is in jail. Did you know that?”

“What?”

“I guess he was in a fight with Killian.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea, but he’s refused to call you. I thought I would do you a favor and let you know before I pick Kill up. Thought you might want to get what’s yours.”

“Yeah, shit . . . thank you. I’ll be right there.”

I hung up and waited as Paul collected my asshole brother. As Killian sauntered out in front of the sheriff, I rolled my eyes. “You look ridiculous.”

He smirked and stared down his body for a moment. Black leather pants fit him low on the hips, and his matching black shirt was unbuttoned all the way down to the middle of his chest, showcasing a physique earned by hours in the gym rather than hours on horseback. It was the polished black cowboy boots that sealed the deal, though. I swear to God Johnny Cash rolled over in his grave. I scoffed low and without thinking.

A smirk twisted Killian’s lips, the split on the right side looking painful. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“So is a drugged-out impersonation of Johnny Cash the look that we’re going with now? Are you wearing eyeliner?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s just different from the way you used to dress.”

“Yeah, well. This is who Killian Wilde is now.”

There was so much anger and bitterness in his words. He was using alcohol and God knew what else to cope with whatever was going on with him. I could smell the whiskey and see the strung-out look in his eyes. “Come on, *Killian Wilde*. Let’s go.”

“Just need to get to my car.”

“No, you’re not driving.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“You sure?”

Paul shook his head. “He passed the breathalyzer. But he’s definitely been smoking, at least some weed.”

“Fucking fine. Come on, Kill, you can sleep it off at my house, and we’ll have a talk about what got you into this mess.”

I walked out to my truck, and thank God he got inside because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get him to go with me willingly if he didn’t want. He was a big guy. Tall, rock solid like me. As we drove home in the quiet car, I waited for him to give me some kind of answer to my unasked question. When he didn’t, I spoke.

“You got into a fight with Tucker Weston. That’s not like him. He’s not a fighter.”

“Not until I came in.”

“Why?”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Think I need you to explain. Because I’ve got you in my car, and I *do* want to talk about it. So spill, little brother.”

“I may have told him about the night I spent with Sam.”

“Excuse me? What night you spent with Sam? You didn’t spend a night with Sam Ryker.”

“Yeah, I did. A few years ago.”

“Okay. Did you make him think you fucked Sam Ryker?”

“Maybe.”

“Jesus Christ, Killian, what is wrong with you?”

“I was in a shitty mood, and I wanted to make somebody else feel shitty too.”

“That’s not a good idea. Especially not here.” I frowned at him, frustrated beyond belief. Something had fucked him up enough that he wanted to hurt. But going looking for trouble with a group of ranch hands? Fuck, he was lucky to be standing. “I called Sam. He’s coming to pick up Tucker.”

“Fuck, I’m an asshole. I did spend the night with Sam Ryker, but we didn’t do anything. We hung out after a festival show the band played years ago. He and I got a drink afterward, went back to my room . . . and nothing fucking happened.”

“So why’d you make it seem like something did? Why do that to Tucker? We just fixed things with the Rykers, and here you go torpedoing everything. What’s going on with you?”

“Like you fucking care.”

“Killian, I picked you up, didn’t I?”

“Sure. You picked me up. You don’t care. You’re gonna bring me home, sober me up, and then get rid of me. Just like you did last time.”

“Last time, our dad died, and we all had a bunch of shit to deal with.”

“Our dad died and ruined my fucking life. Everything changed for me. Now I’ve got to live in our family’s shadow, and because it came out that I’m the secret Wes Wilde kept for years, I have to be reminded every single time I go on stage that he didn’t even acknowledge me until it was too late.”

I pulled through the gates of Wilde Horse Ranch and drove back to my house. “Kill, it shook us all when Dad died. It changed everything for everybody. You think I like going back and forth here to Texas over and over, not knowing where to land? Not to mention now I’ve added Seattle to the mix. You

think Luke likes having to share the responsibility of the ranch? He was running this all on his own, and now he's got to deal with all of us. He can't wipe his own ass without making sure we're okay with it first. And Sutton, he had a whole other life planned, a career running his mama's charity. Now he's entrenched here. But it turned out to be the best thing for both of them."

"Yeah? You think this is the best thing for me? So far, being a Wilde has only sent my life into a tailspin."

"What are you talking about? Your band is tearing up the charts. You're all over the place, touring, recording, doing all the things you want to do."

"No, I'm not. The band doesn't even exist anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're gone. All the guys. They left. Big Sky doesn't exist. It's just Killian Wilde and some band they hired. Some guys I don't even know."

"Are you serious? I knew they were branding you as a solo act, but the guys have all still been there in your publicity stuff." Killian had been with his band since high school.

"Yeah, I'm serious. They didn't like the direction my name and our producer were taking us. The label was just fine with letting them go. They didn't even ask me."

"So you just headed for Sunrise?"

"Yeah. I was gonna just show up on the ranch and ask for a job. Instead, I stopped at the Silver Spur, had a drink, smoked a blunt, smoked another, and I got into a fight with Tucker."

"You can stay here as long as you need to."

Relief flooded his features as I parked and shut off the engine. "Thank you. I just need some time to work out what I'm gonna do."

"It's fine. No problem. We'll put you to work. It's been a long time, though. You haven't been on a horse in years. It's gonna be rough."

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten how to ride. I’ll get back in the saddle again, just you wait.”

The two of us got out of the truck and walked toward the front door. I didn’t miss the way he favored his ribs or the slight limp as he walked up the few stairs to the porch. Tucker had gotten him good after all. There was no way I’d be leaving him alone tonight, no matter how much I wanted to see my girl.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and sent Clara a short, direct text.

Me: Gotta do family stuff. See you tomorrow at the appointment.

She texted back almost immediately.

Clara: Everything okay?

Me: Yeah, I just have to take care of my brother.

Clara: I’ll be waiting.

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Clara

I sat in my car, staring down at the blurry little image in my hand. Just a tiny slip of flimsy paper, black and white, grainy, and it meant everything to me. Absolutely everything.

A tear slid down my cheek as I looked at the first picture of my baby. The heartbeat had been strong and powerful. Just right for twelve weeks, Doc had said. So why the hell was I so sad?

“Get it together, Clara,” I whispered, swiping at the stupid trail of tears now running down my cheeks.

Maverick hadn't shown up. He'd texted me saying he was caught up with something Killian was dealing with and couldn't get away. I was so mad. Hurt. And most of all, resigned. I don't know what I'd expected from him, though. He'd told me from the time we first met he didn't want to fall in love. He wasn't a family man. He didn't want to be a dad. I should've believed him and not gotten caught up in the magic of the two of us being together. But fuck if the man wasn't convincing. He made me think he'd changed.

People don't change, Clara. My sister's voice ran through my mind, taking me back to a time in our lives best left forgotten. The last time we saw our parents.

But people grew. That was something I'd witnessed with my own eyes. The Rykers were a perfect example. Tristan settled down, fell in love, found the family he needed. Sam

came into his own and became the man he'd been destined to be. Why couldn't Mav change if he wanted to?

But did he want to?

When I pulled up to the clinic and parked around back, there he was, sitting on the steps, hat in his hands, guilt written on his face.

"Is everything okay? You didn't text me back . . . I . . . fuck, Clara. Is the baby okay?" The wobble in his voice nearly did me in.

I pasted a smile on my lips and nodded. "Heartbeat is strong; everything looks good. But you'd know that if you'd shown up."

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry I let you down. Killian is going through something I wasn't prepared to deal with right now. He's at my house, eating my food, drinking every last drop of liquor I have, and it's all I can do to keep him from going off the deep end and getting himself thrown in jail again."

"I'd say I'm surprised, but that would be a lie. Your rock star brother is living up to every cliché in the book."

The minute Killian showed up in Sunrise, I knew there wasn't anything good on the horizon. That man had baggage enough for a family of ten, thanks to his dad. And Wes Wilde wasn't even alive to see the damage he'd done to his boys.

Taking a deep breath, I held out a hand and waited for Mav to accept. "You coming in?"

The look of pure relief on his face had me warming to him instantly. "If you'll have me."

"Of course I will." His fingers laced with mine, and he tugged my hand to his lips.

We stayed silent as we went inside, my heart fluttering with nervous energy as the tension between us built the longer we stood together in the quiet.

"How are you feeling? Were you sick this morning?"

“No. I made it all day without puking.”

He grinned. “That’s a good sign.”

“I’m happy about it.”

Taking my hand, he ran his thumb across my knuckles and stared into my eyes. “I’m not gonna let you down, Clara. I’m gonna be the best dad there ever was. I swear. Please don’t let this shake your faith in me.”

“You could have called.”

“I should have. I see that now. I just . . . I don’t have an excuse that’s going to make it any better. All I can say is, this won’t happen again. Every appointment, I am there. I *want* to be there.”

I bit my lower lip and blinked back the stupid hormonal tears that filled my eyes. “I want you there.”

“Can I see it?”

“See what?”

“The baby. Don’t they give you something to take home? A picture to put on the fridge?”

Smiling, I reached into my purse and pulled out the printout. “There.”

His eyes widened, and he traced the tiny black and white figure. “That’s her?”

“Her?”

“We’re having a girl.”

“What makes you so sure?”

He stared intently as he traced the little figure in the photo. “I just feel it.”

“Want to hear the heartbeat? I recorded it on my phone for you.”

Pressing his lips together, he inhaled sharply and nodded. “Yeah. I’d love it. C’mon, darlin’, let’s get you off your feet first.”

“I’m pregnant, not infirm.”

“Humor me, okay? I’m about to fall over, my knees are shaking so bad. This is fucking surreal.”

My heart clenched as I stared at him. He was so serious about this. So determined to be the father he never had. “Mav, you’re the only man I’d choose to be my baby’s daddy.”

We sat together, and he reached out with his free hand to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. “Not true. You had a whole book of them at the ready.”

“To be my donor, sure. But none of those guys were going to get to be her daddy. You’re different. Even if I had gone through with the donor, I think you would still fill that role in her life.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t. And you’re right. I would have been there for her whether we shared the same blood or not. I’m just so glad you picked me.”

Pulling out my phone, I opened the voice note I’d saved and pressed play. Rapidly thrumming whooshes filled the air, and his hand immediately palmed my lower belly. “That’s her?”

“Yeah. Strong. Steady.”

“Perfect,” he whispered. “Just like her mama.”

Maverick

Twelve weeks later

“Teach me how to be a dad,” I blurted as I sat on the tailgate of Travis Ryker’s truck and watched his cousin Tristan wrangle a towheaded toddler.

We’d been working on rebuilding the outdoor arena at Ryker Ranch all day, and now the three of us were watching the sunset while enjoying a hard-earned beer.

“Excuse me?”

“I need to know, and I can’t tell you why.”

Clara was halfway through her pregnancy now, and I didn't feel any closer to being ready for this than I had the day she'd taken that test. I needed to know how to do the dad stuff.

His brows rose. "That's . . . weird."

"Yeah, I know. But I really need this. I can't ask my brother. He's too close to the situation."

"What situatio—never mind. What do you want to know?"

"All of it. Diapers, feeding, how to keep them from hating you when they grow up."

He chuckled under his breath. "Well, that is something I don't know if I've been successful at just yet. Once they're older, I'll tell you."

"I'm serious."

Nodding, he shoved off the fence where he'd been leaning and jerked his head toward me. "Come on. I'll need reinforcements for this."

Two hours later, I stood in Travis's living room with Hawk Langston along with Buck, Tristan, and Clint Ryker. Hawk and Tristan had their babies strapped to their chests in baby carriers while Travis held his youngest like a football.

"Okay, Daddy boot camp day one starts now," Travis said. "It's gonna get messy, smelly, and you might go home with spit-up on your clothes, but by the time we're done today, you'll know how to keep a kid alive."

Hawk removed his little boy from the carrier and handed him to me. I'm ashamed to say I held that baby like he was an explosive, arms stiff and straight out, keeping him as far away from me as possible. But when he started crying, his little face scrunching up and going red with anger, on instinct, I brought him close to my chest and began bouncing softly just like Tristan did with his daughter.

"We're off to a good start," Travis murmured.

Then the baby ripped an almighty fart in my arms, the force of which vibrated up my forearm.

“Shit,” I said, laughing.

“Shit is right. Looks like it’s diaper changing time.” Hawk laughed as my expression turned horrified.

“He just took a dump while I was holding him?”

“Babies do that. Prepare yourself. It’s amazing what those little bodies can produce.”

Tristan laughed. “Any bets on how many wipes he uses?”

“This one sounded like at least five.” Hawk assessed his son.

Shaking his head, Tristan continued swaying while bouncing to keep his baby happy. “I bet Mav uses a whole package.”

He wasn’t kidding. I used an entire package of wipes. How the fuck had this kid managed to get shit all the way up to his shoulders?

The fun didn’t stop there. They put me through my paces. I changed diapers, fed and burped three different babies, and managed not to puke when Hawk’s little one spit up all down my back. By the time we finished for the day, I was equal parts exhausted, traumatized, and excited to tell Clara how ready I was to be a dad.

“Good job today,” Travis said. “Whoever you’re having a kid with is lucky. Most guys don’t want to think about this kind of stuff.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t fucking lie to me. It’s Clara, isn’t it?”

I didn’t answer.

“How far along is she?”

“Twenty-four weeks.”

He grinned. “You feel the baby kick yet?”

I shook my head. The two of us stared in silence at the dark sky for the longest time before he spoke up.

“Come back next week.”

“There’s more?”

“Fuck yes. I’ll show you how to make a bottle while handling a wily toddler.”

“Are toddlers harder?”

“Toddlers are another breed, man. It’s amazing they survive to adulthood.” He glanced back in the house at the guys who were all holding their babies as they sat around talking. “Also, go get yourself a car seat, and I’ll help you install it. Your life’s about to change in a big way.”

“How do I know if I’m ready?”

Shaking his head and sighing he said, “It’s kinda like riding a bucking bronc. You’re never ready. You just hold on for dear life and hope you make it through.”

“You’re not instilling a whole hell of a lot of confidence in me.”

“The fact that you even want to learn how to do this means you’re ready. It’s a wild ride, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.” He smiled and looked down at his left hand before twisting his wedding ring on his finger. “And, Mav, I know you didn’t ask for this advice, but I’m your friend and I’m gonna give it to you straight. If you love her, don’t let her go. You’ll never forgive yourself if you lose her.”

His words resonated all the way home. I wouldn’t lose her. Clara and me, we were forever. And I was gonna do everything in my power to ensure it stayed that way.

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MAVERICK

I stood outside the clinic with my heart in my throat as I stared down at the two unanswered messages on my screen. She wasn't home. The clinic was closed. And I had no fucking clue where Clara had gone. This wasn't like her. She never ignored me or left me hanging. She responded and was there every time I needed her. I'd been the only one in our relationship who'd left her in limbo. The one who needed to prove himself, to make the grand gesture, to leap.

The ring box in my pocket damn near burned a hole through the denim as I frowned. We were so close to forever I could taste it in the air. The baby in her belly growing strong, the future within reach. I just had to take this step and make her mine.

"Mr. Wilde?" Henry's voice cracked as he stepped out from around back and locked the door behind him. "You need something?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for Clara. You know where she is? Is she okay? Nothing happened with the baby, did it?"

He shook his head. "Nah, she's fine. She and Doc Carlisle went to dinner about ten minutes ago."

What the fuck?

"Oh, yeah?" I tried really fucking hard to keep the jealousy from my voice. "Where?"

Swallowing thickly, he averted his gaze as though he thought he shouldn't tell me.

“Henry . . .”

“Dominic's. She said she was craving pasta.”

If she was craving pasta, why hadn't she asked me to get it for her? I was her man. Not Bennet Carlisle of the Vermont-fucking-Carlisles. “Thanks, buddy. Drive safe tonight.”

His breath fogged in the cold winter air as he gave me a sharp nod and headed for his car.

“Dominic's,” I grumbled, glancing down at my phone, which had one text notification.

Clara: Sorry, got caught up with something at work. I'll be free in a few hours if you want to come by then.

Now she was lying to me?

My stomach churned.

Getting into my truck, I tossed my phone on the passenger seat and had to grit my teeth when I caught sight of the newly installed infant car seat in the back of the king cab. I planned to surprise her and show her just how ready for this baby I was.

I was halfway home when my heart got the better of me, and with one sharp jerk of the steering wheel, I turned my truck around and headed in the direction of Dominic's. I wasn't going to let Clara Barnes go without a fight. She wanted me to show her I was the right one? Fine. I'd fucking show her.

Her car was nowhere in sight when I pulled into the parking lot, and for a moment, I let that familiar flash of panic take hold as all the terrible things that could've happened raced through me. But I saw them a minute later, both of them getting out of their cars, Ben walking her inside with his hand on the small of her back like it belonged there.

“Oh no, you don't, motherfucker. That's my girl.” I had to restrain myself, desperate to get him away from her but

needing to find out if she was stepping out on me. Had she been playing me all this time? Was she just like my ex?

A few minutes later, I went inside, heading for the bar rather than a table. I needed to see how this was all going to shake out. I hated that I suspected her of anything less than truth, but she'd already lied once today. What else was going on?

So I nursed a glass of Langston whiskey as I watched the two of them. One glass became two, then three as I tortured myself. She talked to him, *really* talked, and it hit me like a ton of bricks as I sat there watching her with Ben. They were smiling and laughing as they ate supper together, her eyes bright and filled with happiness. It had me sure of one thing. Clara was better off with someone like him. Not a jealous prick who didn't know love until it was gone. Maybe I could turn into the right guy for her, but at this moment, all I saw when I looked in the mirror was Wes Wilde's spitting image.

"They're so sweet together, aren't they?" Mabel Rooks murmured, leaning in close as she took the seat next to me at the bar.

"Who?"

"You know who, Maverick Wilde. Don't act dumb. I'm glad she's found someone. She deserves to be happy after all she's been through. The father of her baby just abandoning her like that."

"Who told you he abandoned her?"

"Well, she did. She said he wasn't in the picture."

Fuck, why did that hurt so much?

"If you ask me, it's a blessing. Look at how her face lights up when she talks to him. I bet there's a wedding in under six months."

I pounded my whiskey, asking for another with my eyes, and the bartender, God bless her, poured me a double.

"Maybe he's the daddy. You think?"

“I wouldn’t know,” I lied before knocking back the alcohol.

“I thought you and Clara were friends. Honestly, most of us assumed you’d finally come to your senses and tossed your boots under her bed.”

“Are you done yet?”

Her affronted gasp should have had me apologizing, but I was three drinks deep and running on no food.

“Maverick, I’m surprised at you.”

“Why? Because I’m tired of listening to you cluck away at me? I. Don’t. Give. A. Damn. Clara can fuck whoever she wants. She can fall in love with Ben the vet. She sure as hell shouldn’t fall in love with me.”

People around us started looking. Mabel narrowed her eyes.

“My, my, you are your father’s son, aren’t you? I knew one of you would turn out just as ugly as him.”

I growled in frustration. “Don’t talk about him.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself, Maverick. Go home. Get a cab. Sleep it off.”

She stood and strode away from me, joining two of her friends who’d just been seated in the main restaurant area.

I sat there and stewed, drinking way too much but needing something to numb the pain of my reality. She’d been right. Clara was too good for me. Fuck, she hadn’t even wanted anyone to know about us or our kid. I’d been so caught up in the possibilities, I hadn’t stopped to think about the dangerous ones too.

Clara stood, and fucking Ben offered her his arm, and he put his goddamned hands over her belly. He touched her like they were a couple. Like she was his.

“Excuse me,” I said to the bartender, dropping more than enough cash on the bar to cover my drinks.

“Want me to call you a cab?” she asked.

“No. I’m—” I stumbled. “I’m good.”

“I don’t think you are.”

A big burly guy came over, grabbing me by the elbow. “Mr. Wilde, why don’t we get you out of here? We’ll call someone for you and make sure you get home safe.”

I shrugged out of his grip and growled, “Get your hands off me. I said I’m good.”

My damned feet didn’t want to cooperate with my brain as I missed the step down into the dining area and collided with a waiter. People gasped, staring in shock, and a couple sat back and chuckled. But the worst of all was the look on Clara’s face. Disappointment.

“Okay, cowboy?” Ben asked, coming close.

“Don’t fucking talk to me. You’ve been all over her, pissing a circle around her to make sure we all know your sights are set on her.”

“Look, man, I don’t know what is going on right now, but we were just having a business dinner.”

I snorted. “Business? Yeah, right. I saw the way you looked at her.”

“Are you sure you’re not talking about yourself?”

“Of course I look at her. She’s the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever known.”

“Then why don’t you take a step back and look at what you’re doing to her right now. Everyone’s watching.”

“Are you trying to get in her panties, Benny boy? Those are mine. Even if she doesn’t tell people,” I slurred.

“Mav. Stop it.” Clara’s words were small and wobbly, the sound tearing my hazy focus from her . . . *date*, to those perfect lips of hers.

“Stop what? Staking my claim? I’m sick of this, Clara. Sick of being the secret just so you can play house with this chump. What does he have that I don’t have? Is his dick bigger?”

The hushed murmurs coming from the crowd around us coalesced and became a roar in my ears. What the fuck was I saying? I needed to stop myself. But then that prick put an arm around her shoulders and leaned in, whispering in her ear.

“Get your hands off her,” I snarled, lurching forward and grabbing him by the bicep.

I yanked him away from her as I brought my free arm back and then threw a punch straight into his jaw. Unfortunately, I also threw my whole body forward, and while I connected with his face, I also fell into the table behind him. Glasses and plates crashed to the floor, people shouted, and before I knew it, Sheriff Paul Barker was there with disapproval written across his face.

“It’s always a Wilde or Ryker. Every single time.”

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Clara

Maverick hadn't reached out to me. We hadn't spoken. Not since that awful night when I'd gone to dinner with Ben two weeks ago. The worst thing about it all was that we'd been talking about *him*. About how happy I was and how I wanted to take a chance with Mav and make something real. Part of that decision hinged on whether or not I'd be able to get Ben to stay at the clinic for longer than the one year we'd agreed to. He was good, and I knew he fit in with everyone who worked with my clients.

Instead of ending the night with a plan, Mav had lost his ever-loving mind, got drunk as a skunk, and assaulted him.

He'd been upset, jealous, and he clearly thought something was going on between us. But if he didn't trust me, what did we have? A whole lot of nothing.

We had an arrangement that wasn't working for either of us. I pulled out the agreement I'd had drawn up for us when he initially agreed to a no-contact, no claim donation and stared down at the paper, wondering how I'd gotten myself into this mess. I'd done everything right when I first asked. Hell, I hadn't even asked; *he* had offered.

So I guessed in hindsight, I did everything fucking wrong. I let him convince me this would be a good idea. I let him sway me with his pretty words and his handsome face and sexy as sin body. Add to that the way he called me baby and

how he touched me, and it was no wonder I'd been put under his spell.

And now I was going to be not only a single mother but a heartbroken one. That was so much different from what I had planned on, from a life lived on my own terms as a strong, independent single woman raising her child. Now I had to deal with the fallout of losing him and my heart, all in one fell swoop. And it hurt.

My phone buzzed from where it sat on the charger, and I saw his name on the screen. For the first time ever, I didn't answer. I let it go because I couldn't face him. I didn't want to. I wanted nothing to do with Maverick Wilde until I'd calmed down and given my heart time to rest. Time to recover from the painful ache currently ravaging it.

The baby in my belly fluttered. Just a gentle kick to let me know she was there. I'd planned on telling him that I could feel the baby that night after my dinner with Ben. When Mav was supposed to come over. After all, I had some good news to share about our future and the plans I wanted to make with him. My plans for us to go public, showing the world we were together and having a baby, and we were in love. Because I wasn't ashamed of being with Maverick. I was one hundred percent on board and in love with him.

I was an idiot if I thought he wasn't the same guy he'd always said he was. He told me. I could hear his voice in my head.

'I'm not a good guy, not the one you settle down with. I'm just like my dad. You just can't see it'.

My phone rang again, my sister's face flashing on the screen. I sighed and answered the video call. It had been months since we last talked. I couldn't ignore her now.

"What the heck happened to you?" Becca asked, her brow wrinkling as she took me in.

I caught sight of myself in the small video window, and damn, she was right. I looked like hell. "It's a long story."

"I have time."

So, taking a deep breath, I let it all out. I told her everything I'd been keeping to myself. About the baby, Mav, my absolutely heartbreaking evening. About the two weeks of radio silence between us.

“Did he give you any indication he was going to backslide?”

“No. But it was there in all our conversations up until the baby. He always told me he was like his dad. Every time he said it, I'd tell him that he needed to give himself more credit. He'd scoff, look at me, and smile before he'd tell me how glad he was I thought that about him because nobody else did.”

“He loves you. Anyone can see it. I'm not even there, and I can see it in the way you talk about him.”

She was right. Even now, after he embarrassed me, embarrassed us, I still wanted to believe that was true. But jealousy could do a lot to a person. And I knew that look in his eyes. I recognized it from a mile away because I've worn it on my own face. Any time I'd seen him dancing with another girl. When he let her touch him. When he gave her the attention he hadn't given me. It was hard to watch that. It hurt, and I had no claim to him back then.

“Are you going to give him another chance? Give him the benefit of the doubt? I mean, keeping your relationship under wraps had to be hard for him if he was this jealous about Ben.”

“I want to. I just . . . need a little space. I have to think about what our future looks like because he pretty much closed the door on us in front of the whole town.”

“Why do they always have to go and fuck things up?”

My lower lip trembled. “I don't know. I think maybe I'm the one who fucked up this time.”

Her mouth pressed into a thin line. “Don't you dare say that. You were trying to set things up for your future. A future that hopefully includes visits to your sisters in Seattle since your cowboy owns the Cyclones. You two need to talk. That's all. Don't give up on your baby daddy. He's a little broken, but so are you.”

“Thanks, Becs. I’m sorry it’s been so long since we talked.”

She shrugged. “We’re notoriously bad communicators in the Barnes family.”

“Case in point.”

“Just don’t forget I’m here, okay? So is Scarlett. You can reach out whenever you want. One of us will be there to hold your hand.”

“Thank you.”

“Love you, C.”

“You too, B.”

After hanging up, I stared at the voicemail looming in my notifications but avoided it. I wasn’t ready to hear Mav’s voice. Not yet. Instead, I grabbed a paperback from the bookshelf. A comfort read, one of my favorite books that I reread yearly, and I started on a journey outside of my own world. I needed an escape to somewhere magic and mysteries took over. I didn’t want to think about anything else.

Tomorrow, I would talk to Maverick. We’d work things out, and I’d explain to him exactly what had been happening. That I hadn’t been trying to hurt him, and I’d been thinking about our future.

I didn’t get two pages in before I fell asleep in the chair, fitful dreams of Mav walking in and the two of us falling into bed together taking over. I woke up at two in the morning, a crick in my neck and needing to pee. That was one thing pregnancy blogs did not lie about. I had to pee all the time. I was also surprisingly horny, which was something Mav really enjoyed.

My heart lurched as I thought of him . . . again, and this time, I didn’t push aside the blinking on my phone that alerted me to the waiting voicemail. Guilt hit me hard because I had ignored him, and he left me a message anyway. I didn’t let myself read the transcript of the voicemail. Something in me just couldn’t wait until morning.

His rich, warm voice was everything I needed, and it made my belly flip as my lips twitched into a grin. I always smiled when it was Mav simply because he made me happy.

God, what was wrong with me? Why was I fighting something so incredibly good? Because there was no denying what Mav and I had was so, *so* good. But then he began speaking, and the absolute ache in his voice had my breath catching in my throat.

“Hey, Clara . . . I was hoping to catch you. I’m sorry I’ve been so quiet. I had a lot of thinking to do after...everything. Sutton picked me up from the Sheriff’s office that night and believe me, I will never hear the end of it. I’m”—he paused to swallow— “I’m leaving. As soon as possible. Heading back to Texas. This isn’t gonna work. I’m not good for you, not cut out for a life like this. I can’t be a dad. I don’t know what I was thinking, I’m a fucking disaster, and you and that kid deserve something better. You deserve a guy like Ben. Because that guy, he’ll stick around. He won’t go apeshit when things go south. He won’t end up in jail with a drunk and disorderly charge hanging over his head.”

My gut churned at the long ragged breath he took before continuing.

“I want to love you, but I can’t, because I don’t think I know how. And you deserve more than somebody who *wants* to love you. You deserve somebody who *will*, and try as I fuckin might, that is not me. I know myself. I’ll leave you one day. Even though I say I won’t abandon you and the baby. And then you’ll hate me forever. And you need someone stronger than me, someone less selfish.”

The tremor in his words had hot tears burning my eyes.

“I’m so fucking sorry, because I know that this message . . . It’s gonna hurt. And I know I convinced you to give us a chance when your instinct said not to. Just know I’m never gonna forgive myself for doing this to you, and that not a goddamn day is gonna go by where I don’t think about what I let myself lose by walking away from you. Because that’s

exactly what's happening. I'm walking away, and you're gonna go on and live your life like you should."

He let out a shaky breath and cursed quietly.

"Take care of yourself and the baby we made. She's gonna be so pretty. Just like her mama and so fucking smart. I hope she gets everything good from you. Because, darlin', you've got so much good to give. Goodbye."

By the time the message ended, uncontrollable tears rolled down my cheeks. The pain in my heart was overwhelming. I let his words wash over me, panic clutching at me, terrifying and strong. Then I made a decision.

I would not let him ruin everything we had because he made one mistake. Maverick was a runner, but only as a result of everything he never learned about love.

Shivering in the cold weather, I went outside in my yoga pants and baggy shirt, a heavy jacket in one hand and my keys in the other. The ground was already covered in a thin layer of ice from the freezing temperatures, but I didn't care. I had to get to him before he left, regardless of what time it was. I had to get to him and make him see he was making the biggest mistake of his entire life by running from us, by making a decision *for* me instead of with me.

My vision was blurry with tears as I drove down the long road that led to Wilde Horse Ranch property. More than once on the drive, I thanked my lucky stars Mav insisted I get new snow tires. I don't know if I would have been able to navigate the slippery roads without them.

There was light on in his house, his truck still in the driveway. I wasn't too late. When I got out, I took a long, steadying breath. I had no idea what I was going to say to this man other than 'Stop being a fucking idiot.' Heart pounding, I knocked on the door and when nobody answered, I rang the bell over and over until finally, the sound of footsteps on the stairs hit my ears. The door swung open, and I started in on him instantly.

“You don’t just get to leave me. Not after you made me fall in love with you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t accept.”

His face was filled with pain and sadness as I shivered, standing there with my heart in my hands, begging him not to reject me.

“Darlin’—”

“Would you please just let me in the fucking house so we can talk about this before I freeze my tits off?”

A little quirk of his lips on one side gave me hope. “Wouldn’t want you to lose those. They are some of my favorites.”

“Your only favorites.”

“Correct.”

“Just like *I* am your only favorite.”

He let me inside, helping me with my coat but not touching me. He was being so cautious. Fuck that.

“So I see you got my message,” he stated, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes.

“Yeah. You mean your breakup voicemail? The one where you abandoned me because you can’t deal with the fact that you were jealous and made a stupid decision?”

He swallowed. “I’m not a good—”

“You are. You are the best man. I know your dad was a real asshole, okay? We all know it. Everyone in Sunrise is surprised that his sons turned out to be such great guys. That doesn’t make you any less worthy of love.”

“Fuck, Clara,” he said, his voice shaking, his eyes shining with tears. “He thought he was a good man too. He thought he loved my mama. He thought he loved each of his wives. And instead, what did he do? He cheated on them. Rather than abandon them, he ruined their lives.”

“The difference is, he *thought* he loved them and never once stopped to consider his actions. You *know* you love me, which is why you stopped. Why you freaked out and want to run. Because you won’t let yourself be him. You won’t even give yourself a chance to be you.”

“Clara . . . I don’t want to hurt you. I ended up in jail.”

“Yeah. Was it the first time?”

“No.”

“Is it going to be the last time?”

“Fuck yes.”

“Ben’s fine, by the way.”

“Don’t talk to me about Ben,” he grumbled.

“Why?”

“I’m fucking jealous. You were with him, and you didn’t even tell me. And then the goddamn church lady and her goddamn assumptions about how you and Ben made a great goddamn couple, telling me you two should be together. Poor Clara doesn’t have a man, and I’m sitting right fucking there. It hurt. It doesn’t excuse my actions, but seeing you with him, happy and smiling . . . It broke something inside me. But then to have her out there telling me what you needed when I was giving it all to you already. I couldn’t deal with it. I didn’t want to deal with it. I just wanted to numb the pain and leave.” His jaw clenched as he stared past me, gathering his thoughts, maybe. “He touched you, and you smiled, and you looked so happy. You looked like he had just given you the entire world. And I’ve never doubted how you felt about me until just then. Even when you didn’t want to tell people. I was fine because I knew I had you.”

My heart cracked at the pain in his voice. “I’m so sorry I made you feel that way.”

“You didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. It was me. It was me wanting to keep this a secret. It was me not telling you I was going to be talking with him. If we’d been up front, told people we were having a baby,

you would never have felt like I didn't want you or I was ashamed. The truth is, I asked Ben to go to dinner because I want to make some changes."

"What kind of changes?"

"Well, first of all, I don't want to live at the vet clinic anymore."

"You don't?"

"No. All those stairs just to get into the house? I'm gonna be carting around a baby, baby carrier, all kinds of things. And you know sometimes it's real noisy when we've got animals staying overnight. People stop by for emergencies and wake me up. It's not a good place to be raising a family."

He finally touched me then, his palm gliding along the small of my back. "So, what was your plan?"

"I asked Ben if he wanted to stay for good. And he accepted."

"I don't see how that changes your situation."

"He's gonna live in the apartment."

"Not with you."

"No, not with me. What do you think this is, college?"

"So he's staying?"

"Yes. And he's taking over fifty percent ownership of the practice so I can work less."

"Where are you gonna live?"

Nervous energy unfurled in my belly. "I hoped I could stay with you."

"You want to move in?"

"Yeah, I do. You offered. Remember?"

He grinned, but his eyes were still hesitant and worried. "What if . . . what if I fuck up again? What if I do something wrong and mess up our kid's life? I don't want to leave her feeling the way my dad left me, Luke, Sutton. Fuck, Killian's a disaster."

“You’re not going to. I don’t know why you can’t see what an amazing dad you’re going to be. I’ve seen you with your nephew. I’ve seen you with all the Ryker kids. Don’t think I didn’t know about that little daddy boot camp you’ve been doing with Tristan, Clint, Travis, and Buck.”

“Yeah, I was trying to keep that a secret.”

“You failed. Carly Langston ratted you out the other day at the bakery. She seemed to already know you’re my baby daddy, by the way.”

“What? How’d she know? She’s five.”

“Five-year-olds are very intuitive. Something you will have to keep in mind when you have your very own.”

“Do you think . . . Can you forgive me for flying off the handle and embarrassing you in front of everybody?”

“Maverick, I was never mad at you, not about that. Now, about the breakup voicemail and two weeks of silence. . . I’m still upset about that.”

“I couldn’t look at you and see the shame in your eyes. I just knew if I didn’t do it over voicemail, I wouldn’t have the guts to get it out.”

“Did you ever stop to think that was your intuition telling you it was the wrong decision? Your gut knows better than your head sometimes.”

“Following my gut has gotten me in trouble more times than I can count.”

“Well, I didn’t say your gut was always right, but when it’s about us, what has your gut been telling you all along?”

“Darlin’, my gut’s been telling me to kiss you and make you mine since the first day we met.”

“And look at all the time you’ve wasted ignoring it. We could have been living our happily ever after for two years already.”

“You really want this? Me? Even though I’m a shit show?”

“You’re not a shit show. And yes, I do. I want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

“I love you, Clara Barnes. Thank you for not letting me give up on us.”

“I love you too.”

“And I love this baby we made. And I love the life we’re gonna live together. But you’ve got to promise me something.”

“Anything. You name it. You got it.”

“I need you to promise me that if you ever have doubts, you’ll talk to me about them first before you let your worries run away with you. I’m new at this too. I’ve never had a relationship that lasted longer than a few months. I’ve certainly never had anyone I wanted to live out my forever with. So I need you to tell me, okay?”

“Okay.” I let out a huge yawn, the adrenaline from the day finally wearing off. “Only if you do the same for me.”

“I promise.” He pulled me into his arms and kissed me. His lips were soft and tender, his touch gentle. “I made you cry.”

“Well, to be fair, I am pregnant, and everything makes me cry these days.”

“Not me. I don’t make you cry. I should never make you cry. I should only make you happy.”

“You do make me happy. You made me so happy.” He wrapped me tight, holding me as he continued layering soft kisses along my neck.

“So, hey,” he whispered. “Do you want to have a sleepover?”

I grinned. “I was hoping you’d ask. Yes, I do.”

“I should warn you, though. We have company.”

“Killian?” I asked.

He nodded. “I’ll have to keep my naked strolls under control.”

“I guess that means no naked breakfast.” I pouted.

“Unfortunately, yes, it does.”

“All right. We can rain check on that.”

He smirked. It was good to see that amusement reaching his eyes. “Definitely.”

The sound of heavy footfalls coming from the stairs stopped me and had me glancing over at Killian, who stood there, sleep-rumpled and wearing a confused expression.

“Did somebody say naked breakfast?”

I laughed. “Busted.”

I wrapped my arms around Maverick and nuzzled into his chest, happiness warming me from the inside out. Maverick looked at his brother, a sour expression on his face.

“Go put a goddamn shirt on. There’s a lady in this house.”

Killian’s eyes widened, but a grin rapidly replaced his shock. “So she didn’t give you the boot after all,” he said. “Lucky bastard.”

Maverick let out a low chuckle. “Don’t I know it.”

Killian offered me a cocky wink before sauntering back upstairs.

“Come on, darlin’. It’s almost three in the morning. Let’s get you to bed.”

“You’re coming with me, though, right?”

“Always. If I can help it, I’m never spending another night away from you again.”

“I’m not complaining. There’s something to be said for having the cowboy of my dreams all to myself whenever I want him.”

“God, I hope you want him all the fucking time.”

“I can confidently say I will. In fact, I really want him right now.”

He growled low in his throat, and the sound sent tingles all through my body. Then he scooped me up into his arms, pulling a little squeal of surprise from me before cradling me and carrying me up the stairs. When we entered the bedroom that we would soon be sharing together, he whispered, “Let’s go for a ride, cowgirl.”

“I’m ready.”

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MAVERICK

I stared at the bag I had packed and ready to go. The old leather was cracked and worn in places, but it had been the one thing my granddad had left for me before he died. Remington Wilde may have been a celebrity, a Hollywood cowboy with something to prove, but he loved his ranch and his family. Even after the world chewed him up and spit him out.

He'd stayed loyal to his family.

Clara was my family. She and this baby. But also, I realized after Sutton picked me up from the county jail that we needed each other, all of us. They needed me too. So I had planned to leave, to tie up loose ends, and be there for my family whenever they called. But I'd do it from a distance. I'd live in Texas while I figured out how to be the kind of man Clara deserved. Even if I had to lose her in the process, because I'd thought I was doing what was right for her.

"Hey, what's on your mind there, cowboy? You're looking awful broody."

Clara's sweet voice in the dark room pulled my focus from the future I'd planned on running to and turned me back to the future right in front of me.

"Just thinking about what family means. How important you are to me."

She was bathed in moonlight, her blonde hair glowing like a halo. God, she was perfect. The soft swell of her belly as she

strode across the room toward me in nothing but her bra and panties was noticeable now. A real bump, she said.

Her eyes widened, and she stopped in her tracks. “Oh. Come here.”

Panic clutched at me, making my heart hammer in fear. “What’s wrong? Is it the baby?”

She smiled, then reached out and took my hand, pressing my palm to the side of her belly.

“Wait. Just . . . hold it there.”

Her skin was warm and soft, smooth like . . . holy fuck, what the hell was that?

“Did she just kick me?” I couldn’t keep the elation from my voice even if I wanted to.

“Yeah. I’ve been feeling her for a long time, but these last few weeks she’s gotten strong enough to be felt from the outside.”

That little thump came again, and I laughed, eyes tearing up as I stared at this woman I never wanted to lose.

“I love you so much, Clara. I hope you know that. I only want the best for you two.”

She cupped my unshaven jaw and met my gaze with pure and open understanding. “I know. But Mav, it’s you that’s best for us. I have no doubts.”

Dipping my head, I kissed her, my tongue begging entrance to her mouth as my palm slid off her belly and around to the small of her back, where I pulled her closer. Her soft little moan of pleasure was all the encouragement I needed to deepen our kiss and set our tongues dancing together.

“I want you, darlin’.”

“You have me. I’m in your house, in your room, knocked up with your baby. I don’t know how much more you could possibly want.”

“I wanna give you my name. Make sure everyone who knows us knows you’re mine and I’m yours.”

She giggled as her fingers toyed with the waistband of my sweats.

“We could do what Sutton and Sera did, tattoos on our ring fingers.”

I shook my head and slipped my fingers under the back of her bra, unclasping it slowly before sliding the fabric off her body and dropping it to the floor.

“Or I could just give you a real ring.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a tornado in a trailer park. I want forever with you, and I know you like to plan, so I’m letting you know my intentions. Being mine means knowing that one day soon, I’m gonna ask you to marry me. If you have a problem with it, we should talk now.”

She moaned when my palms cupped her heavy, swollen breasts.

“I don’t have a problem with it if the man asking is you.”

“Good. Because if there’s one thing I’ve realized, it’s that you and me, we aren’t the same people our parents were. We can’t be them. It’ll break us.”

“No more living in their shadows.”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“And when we fight, we make sure to sit down and talk it through.”

“We’re definitely going to fight. You don’t put up with my shit.”

She grinned and looked up at me. “I don’t. But the make-up sex should be really good.”

“You know,” I started. “We kind of fought earlier. We probably need to make up.”

“Do we?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Licking her lower lip, she blinked at me before dropping to her knees in front of me.

“Fuck, baby, you look so hot like that.”

She gripped my sweatpants and tugged them down until they sat around my ankles, and my hard cock was jutting toward her.

I nearly came when she wrapped one palm around the base of my shaft and used her tongue to taste the drop of pre-cum on the tip. Her mouth was a gift from God himself.

“Jesus, fuck, Clara.” The words were long, drawn-out moans, and I wondered if she could even understand them. But then I was lost to the waves of sensation cresting and backing away over and over as she began sucking me between those perfect lips. I’d fantasized about her mouth and what it would look like wrapped around my cock. Apparently, my imagination was garbage because this was . . . fuck, I didn’t have words to describe it.

“I’m gonna come if you don’t stop.” I tried to back away after warning her, but she just continued working me. My hand tangled in her hair, and she groaned as I tugged gently. The vibration shot pleasure through me, and I couldn’t stop myself. I came with a guttural moan of her name, and she swallowed me down like I was the best damn thing she’d ever tasted.

“Is this how it’s going to be? I could get used to having you at my disposal whenever I need you,” she whispered, her voice a sexy rasp.

“Darlin’, I am yours. One hundred percent yours.”

“I love you.” She ran her palm up my thigh, then stared up at me, a helpless expression on her face. “Um . . .”

“What?”

“Can you help me up? My center of gravity is not what it used to be.”

My laugh escaped before I could stop it, and I reached down, taking her by the arms before lifting her to her feet. “Your turn, baby. Let me make you feel good.”

“You do. You always do.”

Pride rolled through me. “I know that’s right. I’m the one who makes you wet right here,” I whispered, trailing my fingers over her belly and between her legs. “The one who makes you come so hard you drip down your thighs when you think about it the next day.” My thumb rolled her clit as two of my fingers sank into her. The whimpered cry of pleasure she rewarded me with made me desperate to kiss her and claim her all over again.

“Mav, I need you. Please.”

I smirked. “I’d never deny you when you ask so sweet.”

Snagging a pillow off my bed, I placed it on the mattress.

“What’s that for?”

“To protect the baby. Things are about to get wild.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

I groaned as she wriggled her hips. “And I promise, I’ll deliver.”

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EPILOGUE

MAVERICK

I shook my head, laughing as Clara got out of the truck, refusing my help even though she was nine months pregnant and everything was a chore. My poor girl couldn't even reach down to tie her shoes or pull on a pair of boots.

"Baby, let me help you."

"No, Mav. I am a grown-ass woman. I can get out of my truck."

She stared down at the ground with a dubious expression on her face.

"You sure about that?"

"No?" The bewilderment in her voice had me grinning even wider.

"Don't you dare laugh at me, Maverick Wilde. You've been in Seattle a week, met my sisters without me because I can't fly since I am a million months pregnant with your child. The least you could do would be to just force your help on me without making a big deal about it."

My laughter had her smiling despite herself. "Noted. They say hello, by the way and can't wait for us to come see them. Now give me your hand, you stubborn woman. Not taking no for an answer."

She slipped her hand into mine, and I guided her safely to the ground, our eyes locking as I did. She didn't know it, but this was the moment everything between us was going to be

pulled tighter, locked in, glued together. I wanted her to be mine before our baby came into the world. For her to know forever started right the fuck now.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” The laughter in her voice had me tugging her closer.

“Because I’m gonna make you mine, Clara Barnes.”

“I already am.”

“I know, but I mean permanently.”

Her brows drew together, and she whispered, “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

A low groan left her and her face twisted into a pained expression. “No, I mean, oh, as in, oh, that hurt.”

I cupped her swollen belly and locked eyes with her. Terror, excitement, and anxiety flickered in her gaze.

“Are you okay, darlin’?”

She bit her lip and took a deep breath. “Yeah, I think so. I’ve been having contractions all day, but that one hurt worse than the others.”

“All day? How long do you mean?”

My hands shook as I opened the front door and caught sight of the rose petals lining the entryway and hall. Killian had set it up for me, including the soft music playing in the background and the glow of flameless candles lining the stairs.

“Since I woke up.” The woman waved it off as though she hadn’t been in labor all damn day.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah . . .” Her eyes closed as she breathed long and slow, fingers wrapping around my forearm, grip tight. “Ow, ow, ow.”

“Clara, you’re in labor. That wasn’t even five minutes.” I cupped her face, hoping my words sank in. “It’s time.”

She shook her head, but as she stepped toward the front door, a little gasp left her, followed by a groan of pain. “Shit.”

Glancing down along with her, I repeated the sentiment. Her pants were soaked, and even under her shirt, I could see the tightness of her belly as she rode out another contraction.

“I’ll get the bag.”

Gritting her teeth, she nodded. “Don’t think we’re not having a talk with Killian about using our place as his own personal social media photo studio.” She gestured to the hall. “I just . . . need to go have a baby first.”

Eight hours later, I watched my daughter come into the world, red-faced and screaming, mad as a wet cat, and absolutely perfect. I wasn’t prepared for the swell of emotion that hit me like a tidal wave as I watched her be placed on Clara’s chest, my beautiful Clara. She traced the baby’s lips tenderly before kissing her and telling her how loved she was.

“Come over here and meet your daughter, cowboy.”

My throat was so tight I had to swallow twice to clear the lump. “Clara, she’s so pretty. Just like her mama.”

I reached out and put my finger on her little bitty hand, my heart bursting when she closed her fingers around mine. Tears spilled down my cheeks, hot and steady. There was nothing like this moment. A seven-pound miracle had just brought me to my knees, and I was a better man for it.

“What name did you settle on?” Clara asked, her gaze soft on mine.

“Quinn.”

“That wasn’t on our list.”

I took our little one from her mama’s arms and cradled her gently, my whole body tight, but everything was right in my world. “I know. It just . . . suits her.”

“It does. Okay, Quinn. Welcome to Sunrise.”

“Quinn Barnes Wilde, you’re the best thing I ever did,” I whispered. “I love you and your mama so much.”

“We love you too.” Clara reached out and clasped my forearm where I was cradling Quinn.

“Now if only I could get Mommy to marry me, we’d be complete.”

Clara’s little gasp of surprise had me grinning, but before we could continue our conversation, the door opened, and Sutton, Sera, Luke, Mack, and Killian all burst inside, followed by Mama Ryker.

“Look at that, my big brother is crying over his baby,” Sutton said, a wide smile on his face.

“Of course he is,” Mama Ryker said. “That baby is so beautiful.”

“Her name is Quinn.” I stared down at her angelic little face, pride bursting in my chest.

“Quinn. How sweet.” Sera sighed as she held on to Sutton’s arm.

“You need to hurry up and marry this woman, Mav. Quinn wants it. I can tell.” Sutton grinned like an idiot.

“Yeah, what’s the holdup?” Luke asked. “You two have been dancing around this for too long.”

I sighed and handed Quinn to Killian because he was the closest to me. He backed away, and his eyes widened as I settled the baby in his hold, but he didn’t protest. Then I grumbled, “I was in the middle of it, but all of you burst in on us. There’s a two-person limit, by the way.”

“The charge nurse is a friend of mine. She doesn’t mind,” Mama said.

Of course. “Well, I guess we’re doing this with an audience.” I dragged a hand through my hair, then reached into my pocket and sat on the bed next to the woman I loved, the mother of my child, the person who’d changed my life irrevocably. “Clara, I told you I was gonna do this one day. I had this whole thing planned, candles and flowers, music, the kind of romance you read about. But Quinn decided she’d rather make her entrance instead. So here we are, a family already. The only thing missing is my ring on your finger.”

Her eyes swam with tears, and, fuck, so did mine. “Will you be mine forever, Clara? Be my wife. My partner. My love. For all the days we have left.”

A bright smile spread across her face, and she nodded as those tears spilled. “Damn you for making me cry, Maverick Wilde.”

I slid the ring on her finger and kissed her while our audience clapped and cheered. The thready cry Quinn let out had everyone quieting down as Killian carefully handed her back to Clara.

“We’ll leave you guys to celebrate. Welcome to the family, Clara,” Luke said.

They filed out, and I joined my girls on the bed. We lay there together as Clara fed Quinn, and I stared in wonder at the baby we’d made.

“Miss Barnes, I do believe you owe me a stud fee.”

She laughed and cocked a brow. “That wasn’t part of the deal, Wilde.”

“Wasn’t it?”

Shaking her head, she smiled down at Quinn. “Nope. But I’m happy to oblige if I can give you a lifetime of love as payment.”

I kissed her then, tender and honest, full of nearly painful love. “You’ve got a deal.”

**Interested in meeting the men of the Seattle Cylcones?
Keep reading for a sample of sexy British hockey player,
Ethan Byrne’s story, [Big Deck Energy](#).**

***BIG* DECK
ENERGY**

KIM LORAINÉ

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CHAPTER ONE

ELYSE

“It’s official. I hate all men.” I plopped down in the chair and sighed as my friend Becca Barnes slid her untouched martini across the table to me.

“Take that. I’ll get another one.”

Snagging the drink, I took a gulp, grimacing at the overly salty olive flavor. “Ugh, I know you like them dirty, but I think that one has the whole jar of olive juice in it.”

She ignored my complaint and had a server flagged down within seconds. Becca was charming and sweet, perfectly innocent on the outside. Like a Disney princess. Men flocked to her as though she was a damsel in distress. I knew the truth. She could destroy them with one well-timed sentence.

He returned with another drink for her and a second martini for me in less than five minutes.

“How do you do that?” I asked. “Are you a witch? A superhero?”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Fine.”

“So, back to the matter at hand. You hate all men. Why?”

Rolling my eyes, I fought back the wave of complete embarrassment coursing through me. “Josh stood me up. I’m sure it was because I told him I didn’t want to hook up yet.”

“Josh from work?”

“Yes.”

“What a douche.”

“Exactly. But he also filed a complaint with HR. He said I was harassing him.”

Her eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“I wasn’t. We kissed. One time. And we weren’t even at work.” I let out a bitter laugh. “He’s mad that I shut him down when he tried to take me home.”

“He’s not just a douche. He’s the king of them. What’s going to happen at work?”

“I had a meeting with Trudy. They’re requiring me to take a training course on appropriate work behavior. Whatever. It’s fine. At least they didn’t fire me.”

“They’d be stupid to do that. You didn’t do anything wrong *and* you’re the best designer they have on the team.”

My friend’s unwavering faith in me was something I valued. “I can’t believe I was such an idiot.”

“Hey, don’t talk about my friend like that.”

I gave her a sad smile. “What’s funny is, I thought maybe we had something. A spark, you know?”

“He’s an asshole.” Her brows lifted. “You know what? Give me your phone.”

“Becca...”

“Just trust me, okay?”

I handed her my cell and she immediately began tapping and swiping the screen before holding the camera up and taking a photo. In a moment, she handed it back to me with a huge smile. “Here you go. Try this.”

I stared down at the app she’d left open. *Meet-Cupid*.

“A dating app?”

“Yeah. This way you can weed out the DBs *before* you meet them in real life.”

I’d been firmly against digital dating in the past. My philosophy had always been that we didn’t need to be online to make a connection, just look at my parents. They met in college, glancing across the study tables in the library. Love at

first sight. How can you have love at first sight on a dating app?

“I don’t know, Becs.”

“Just try it. It won’t kill you.”

“*Elles Belles?*” I asked as I read the profile name she’d chosen for me. I had to admit, the photo she’d taken was good. My dark hair fell in waves over my shoulders, brows—my one God-given perfect feature—on point, and my red stained lips were striking. I didn’t want my photo out there for anyone to focus on though. I’d much rather make a connection first. So, I cropped the photo to contain only my crimson lips.

“You’re the creative. I’m the baker. What do you want from me?”

I scrolled through the men looking for dates on the app, overwhelmed nearly immediately. “How am I supposed to choose?”

“Hand it to me. Let me look through here,” Becca said.

She snatched my phone from my hand and began swiping through all of the options on offer by this dating app she insisted I use.

“No. No. Ugh, definitely not.” She cocked her head to one side. “Hmm, if those abs are really his, he has potential.”

Intrigued, I took the phone back from her and inspected the photo she was looking at. All I saw was abs, tanned skin, strong pecs, and just a sprinkling of golden-brown hair trailing down to a neat path that led straight to the waistband of his pants.

“Wow, they make guys who look like this?”

Becca giggled, and then took another drink of her cocktail. “Oh yes, you should see my brother-in-law. He’s a different breed. Grown in Montana, raised on the back of a horse.” She shivered and sighed longingly. “Cowboys.”

“This guy doesn’t seem like a cowboy. Wouldn’t he post some sort of picture of him with a hat on or some spurs or something?”

She laughed. “Probably.”

I stared at the man’s name, fighting the laughter that bubbled up. “Big Deck Energy? Is that seriously his handle?”

“I didn’t even catch that. I was too busy looking at that washboard on display.”

“I think we found the king of the douchebags.”

Her eyes twinkled with mischief. “King? I think you’re looking at the emperor.”

I turned off my screen and put my phone back in my bag, determined to have a good time with my friend, not think about Josh, or the smudge on my record that he’d caused at work. I would not let him get me down.

Two hours later, and about three too many martinis, I stumbled through my front door. My apartment was small, but that was to be expected when you lived in the city. That didn’t mean I was without style. I was a designer after all. This place was created for comfort. Everything handpicked by me to suit my tastes. I loved every inch of the small space. Except that the floor seemed to be tilting and suddenly I had ten fingers on one hand.

“Oh, martinis, how you betrayed me.”

I balanced myself on the small kitchen table before heading into the kitchen and getting a large glass of water and making myself a piece of toast. “Soak up the alcohol, that’s what they say.”

My cat, Snickers, wove his way between my feet and I stared down at him. “Don’t you dare try to kill me, Snickers. I’ve had enough of douchebags today.”

Even I could hear how slurred my words were. I was going to feel like absolute garbage in the morning. Snickers meowed at me then hopped up on the counter before nudging me with his head. I smiled.

“At least you love me. You’re my good boy.”

I munched on my toast then drank down the entire glass of water, got myself another, and refused to let myself go to sleep

until at least the room stopped slanting.

After scrolling through Netflix and finding that I had watched the entire contents of their library at least once, I pulled my phone out of my purse, which I had forgotten to remove from my body, and proceeded to open up *Meet-Cupid*.

“Okay, Big Deck, let’s see what you have for me.” I scrolled until I found him; Mr. Abdominals with the perfect chest and cocky handle. How dare he have the audacity to look so good and not show us his face. What was he hiding? He was everything that was wrong with men; overconfident, and...and...something else I couldn’t think of at the time because my brain was too addled.

Snickers jumped into my lap and curled up on my belly, purring almost instantly. I scratched between his ears then muttered, “Stupid emperor douchebag. I wonder how you’d feel if somebody called you on your bullshit.”

Chuckling to myself I began typing.

Elles_Belles: Big deck energy? That’s what you’re going with? I bet that photo isn’t even you. You probably got it from some stock website. Believe me, I know all about them. My friend is a romance author, I have to help her look at man chest photos all day. Unless you exist only on a diet of chicken and broccoli, I doubt those are real abs.

You would think I would stop there, but you would be wrong. **Elles_Belles: And another thing. If you really look that good, then why are you on a dating app trolling for women? Can’t you find a date on your own? I would think that someone as confident as you seem to be wouldn’t have any trouble finding a partner. Not like me. I seem to scare away every man I talk to. Probably because I talk to them like this. And I ramble. And maybe I’m a frigid bitch. I hope I’m not a frigid bitch.**

But anyway, that’s beside the point. I’m here to tell you emperor of douchebags, that women deserve more than abs. We put ourselves out there for you to judge. Even though we don’t want the judgment. Everything I’ve

experienced so far on this app in the five minutes I've been here, is ridiculous. Stuff like no fatties. Single moms need not apply. What is even that about? What is wrong with men? What is wrong with you?

I stared down at my screen, the first message already having been sent and the second one sitting there looking at me with a disapproving expression. I couldn't send that to him. Some strange man on the internet. But, fate was a real bitch, and Snickers used that moment to nudge my hand, which in turn nudged my phone forward.

Just as my thumb hit Send, Big Deck's icon turned from away to available.

AS I PREDICTED, I WOKE UP WITH THE HANGOVER FROM HELL. My head throbbed and there was a distinct taste of olives and gin lingering in my mouth. "Hashtag never again."

Fumbling for my phone, I blinked through sticky gunky eyes. Why did everything feel so covered in a layer of grime? I groaned. I wasn't in bed. I was on my couch, halfway on my couch. Still wearing last night's clothes. Snickers happily asleep on my chest. Or was he trying to murder me? You never knew with cats. Strange notifications kept alarming on my phone. It wasn't a text. I knew what that sounded like. It was a soft little hark noise. It reminded of angels. What the hell?

I reached for the coffee table in search of my phone and finally found it. The thing had been going off over and over for quite a long time if my dreams were any indication. Sitting up, I fought the wave of nausea that accompanied the motion then pulled the phone close so I could try to read it through my dry contact lenses.

Four new messages from Big_Deck_Energy

Oh, shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. What had I done? Had I matched with this guy? No. No, I definitely did not match with him. Right?

Clicking on the little bubble that held the notification, I swallowed hard and waited for the screen to pop up. I reread the note I sent him. The *two* notes I'd sent him.

“Oh, God. I should not be allowed to social media and drink at the same time.” Snickers stretched, turned around, and curled back up into a ball on the couch. “You’re a lot of help.”

Big_Deck_Energy: I beg your pardon?

Big_Deck_Energy: What have I done to deserve this bloody great tirade?

Big_Deck_Energy: I’m going to take your silence as someone just taking the piss out of me.

Big_Deck_Energy: It’s not very funny.

I winced. After rereading my drunken rambles, I deserved his annoyance, or maybe worse. I called him the emperor of the douchebags. I don’t even know the guy. Just because he has a hot body, doesn’t mean he deserves to be treated badly. Wasn’t that what I was so fed up with from men?

Elles_Belles: I don’t know what to say.

I stood and wandered my way into my bathroom where I took out my contacts, and my eyes cried in relief, then brushed my teeth, washed my face, and grabbed my black rimmed glasses from their case in the medicine cabinet. Thank God today was Saturday. My phone did that tinkling hark sound again, sending my heart racing. I hadn’t expected him to respond. Rushing back to the living room, I grabbed my phone and held it with two hands as I stared down at the message.

Big_Deck_Energy: I think you said plenty last night.

Elles_Belles: I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me. Well, actually, I do. Many martinis.

Big_Deck_Energy: Do I know you? Did I, somehow slight you, you don’t look familiar.

Elles_Belles: No. You were just the unfortunate victim of my man-hating breakdown. I’m sorry. You’re innocent in all this. Unless ...

Big_Deck_Energy: Unless ... I am a great bloody wanker, king of the douchebags, everything that's wrong with men?

Elles_Belles: Emperor. If you're going to quote me at least quote me correctly.

Big_Deck_Energy: LOL

Elles_Belles: Are you laughing at me?

Big_Deck_Energy: Well, it's not like you can call me much worse than you already have. So where's the harm in a little laughter?

Elles_Belles: I'll have you know, I had it coming. So I accept your amusement gratefully, and will now crawl back into my bed and sleep off this hangover. Again, I'm sorry.

Big_Deck_Energy: So who was he?

Elles_Belles: Excuse me?

Big_Deck_Energy: This knobhead who broke your heart or whatever?

I bit my lower lip and had to fight the grin that was threatening to take over. I didn't know this guy. And then it hit me, I didn't know this guy. I could tell him anything. He didn't know me, he wouldn't share my information, because all he had was a picture that he couldn't even verify was the real me.

Elles_Belles: He wanted to move things a little faster than I was ready for and when I said no, he retaliated and reported me to HR.

Big_Deck_Energy: Are you having me on?

Elles_Belles: Unfortunately, no.

Big_Deck_Energy: So you're saying this twat got mad that you wouldn't shag him so he went and tattled on you, threatened your job?

Elles_Belles: Ding ding. We have a winner.

Big_Deck_Energy: I understand your all men are garbage attitude now. No wonder. I still don't think I deserve your wrath, but, I will accept it on behalf of my kind.

Elles_Belles: How noble.

Big_Deck_Energy: Winky face.

Did this guy just send me a winky face emoji? And why did I like it? I needed to stop flirting with Big Deck Energy, and get myself out of this rut. I had work to do. What kind of work I wasn't sure, but I had plenty to take care of around my apartment. And ... I had a hangover to nurse. My phone chimed again.

Big_Deck_Energy: I'm sorry that happened to you. For what it's worth, I'd be disappointed if you didn't want to shag me, but I'd never report you to HR.

Elles_Belles: Well aren't you glad you'll never find yourself in that situation?

Big_Deck_Energy: Trust me, it's never been an issue before.

Okay, now I needed to stop this conversation. I was pretty sure he was British. My kryptonite. And if those abs were real, he was dangerous. I closed the app and decided it was time for me to get myself together. A walk in the park, maybe I'd take myself to a movie, or spend my quality time at a bookstore. Not thinking about Josh. Or big decks. Or abs.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim writes steamy contemporary and sexy paranormal romance. **You'll find her paranormal romances written under the name K. Loraine and her contemporaries as Kim Loraine.** Don't worry, you'll get the same level of swoon-worthy heroes, sassy heroines, and an eventual HEA.

When not writing, she's busy herding cats (raising kids), trying to keep her house sort of clean, and dreaming up ways for fictional couples to meet.

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