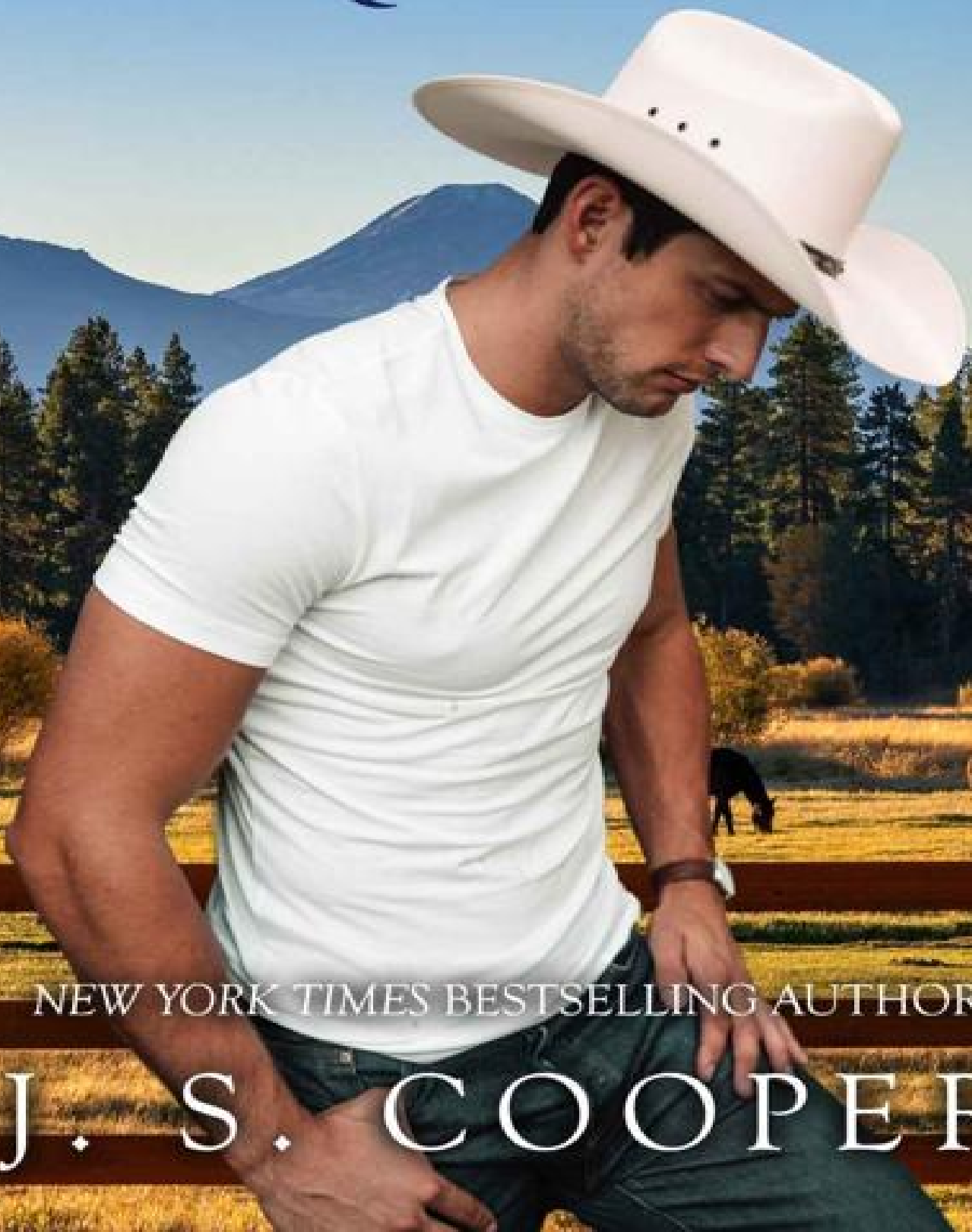


THE BROTHERS AT HORSESHOE RANCH



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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The Brothers at Horseshoe Ranch

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Accidental Mail Order Bride

City girl in Montana looking for her Romeo...

Sounds like the start of a Hallmark movie, right? Well, it would if they had movies about idiot women flying across the country to marry a man they'd never met.

Yup, that's what I did. I responded to an ad in a random newspaper that I found on the train. And now I'm trying to find Horseshoe Ranch so that I can marry some cowboy I've never even seen. And no, this isn't the 1800's. I'm just desperate.

To make matters worse, the cowboy doesn't even know I'm coming. His mom and dad arranged it all. I'm going is because I have \$100 to my name and an old mafia boyfriend after me. I figured life couldn't get any worse in Montana.

I was wrong.

In my excitement, I left the address and phone number for the ranch at home, so now I'm here in Montana and I have no idea where I'm supposed to go. So I rented a car and stopped at a local bar to ask for directions.

And that's when my problems really started.

Chapter One

I'm getting married in three weeks.
To a man I've never met.

In a state I've never been to.

Yeah, my life is absolutely crazy.

It's not that I've never wanted to get married. I've been dreaming about my wedding and honeymoon since I was thirteen—though in my dreams, my wedding was always set in Hawaii, not Montana. But that's where I'm headed. I'm flying into Billings, and then I'm renting a car and driving west to a place called Horseshoe Ranch, which is where I'm going to meet my new husband. I'm hoping he's hot, hunky, and hung. And that he thinks I'm hot and funny as well.

Hopefully, he'll ignore the fact that I wear heels and not boots, Gucci and not Wranglers, and love to put on a full face of makeup every single morning.

So maybe I'm not the best bride for a cowboy, but I'm going to have to do. I hope. This isn't my best idea ever, but it's the only solution I have to my problems right now. Going from heels, short dresses, and designer handbags to overalls and cowboy hats is a big step, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

Where did my life go so wrong, you ask? How about a year ago? I met an Italian guy called Mikey in Queens. And let me tell you, if you meet an Italian guy named Mikey in Queens with sparkling blue eyes, run as fast as you can. Not

only is he bad news, but he's related to the mafia, so once he's got his hooks into you, he's never letting go.

* * *

"Olivia, I just got to Billings, Montana, and you are not going to believe what happened." I was already wondering if I should stay on the plane and fly right back to New York City.

"Actually, I don't believe anything that I'm hearing right now." Even over the phone, I could practically see my best friend rolling her eyes. "When you told me that you were going to move to Montana, I thought you were joking."

"Olivia, you know I had to get out of New York City. Mikey and his goons were after me, and I've got no money and—"

"I could have taken care of Mikey for you."

"No, you couldn't," I snorted. "You don't want to get involved with Mikey and his family."

"Lucy, what's he going to do?"

"Olivia, I told you they're in the Mafia, right?"

"Does the Mafia even really exist?"

"Yes, they do. But enough about them. What am I going to do? This is not what I was expecting. I feel like I'm on another planet."

"So, what's the problem, exactly?"

"Girl, I'm looking out the window, and I'm in the middle of *nowhere*. I'm not seeing any buildings. I'm not seeing anything." I lowered my voice as I stared at the two men walking next to me. "I feel like these people are all country bumpkins."

Olivia burst out laughing. "You do know you just flew to Montana, right, and not Tokyo? Of course they're all country bumpkins—but word to the wise, don't actually say that to any of them."

“Of course, I’m not going to say that,” I whispered. “I’m dumb, but I’m not *that* dumb. I just didn’t expect it to be this country. I feel so out of place.” I looked down at my heels and short skirt. I was dressed completely wrong for my surroundings and I always prided myself on my fashion sense. “I don’t even think anyone here would recognize my Hermes scarf and how much it cost even if they saw it up close.”

“Which is good because you didn’t even have the money to buy it.”

“Don’t remind me of my poor life choices, Oliva.”

“I kinda don’t have to ... The fact that you’re there says it all.” She giggled. “But I bet it’s going to be a lot better than you thought. I thought you told me you loved nature.”

“Yeah, that one time I went to the Hamptons and was hanging out on the beach and saw a dolphin.”

“You saw a dolphin when you were in the Hamptons?”

“Well, maybe it was inflatable ... but it looked real.”

“Girl, you’re a hot mess.” Olivia sighed. “And I say that with a lot of love and respect.”

“Ugh, I *am* a hot mess. Guess what?”

“What?”

“I forgot the address to the ranch, and I don’t have the phone number, either.”

“Oh, Lucy, how could you do that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was just really excited and—”

“Girlfriend, I don’t think this is a good idea. You should fly back to New York City. You can stay with me and we can figure something else out.”

“It’s going to be fine. I think it’s going to be good. You know I’ve always wanted to get married and have kids. And I loved watching *Little House on the Prairie* when I was young.”

“*Little House on the Prairie* is so old school. You were not made to live on a prairie.”

“Well, I’m not going to be living on a prairie. I’m going to be living on a ranch.”

“Girl, you’re not made to be living on a ranch, either. You can’t be going to a ranch in your high heels.”

“What? They’re Louboutins!”

“Even worse. You’re going to step in horse manure and cow shit with your Louboutins on?”

“Well, I also bought some Timberlands.”

“I thought you said you were broke, Lucy.”

“Well, I have a credit card.” I winced a little, even though she couldn’t see me. “I mean, I had to get something to wear.”

“Timberlands for a ranch?” Olivia sounded dubious. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, anyways, I don’t know if it’s like a *farm* farm. I mean, maybe they’re like city people.”

“Didn’t you say that he was a cowboy?”

“I mean, I just assumed he’s a cowboy. I don’t know for sure that he’s a cowboy. I’ve never met him.”

“Which is what I think is even crazier,” she said. “You don’t even know what he looks like!”

“I know, but I’m sure he’s good-looking. His parents said he’s good-looking.”

“Yeah, because parents never say their kids are good-looking.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you ever heard a parent say their kid is ugly?”

“Well, no ...” I mused. I looked out at the expansive cerulean blue sky and took a deep breath. “Oh my gosh, Olivia. I’m really in the country now.”

“What did you expect?”

“I mean, it looks beautiful, but this is so unlike anything I’m used to. I’ve lived in New York City my entire life. I’ve never even been on a farm.”

“Oh, Lucy, what are you doing?”

“I don’t know, Olivia. Maybe you’re right, maybe I should come back.” I paused. “No. I promised them that I’d come and meet their son. I at least owe them that for buying my ticket.”

“Lucy, you promised them you’d *marry* their son.”

“I know. What was I thinking?”

“I have no idea! You have lost your ever-loving mind!” Olivia sighed. “And I wish I could talk to you a little bit longer but my boss is glaring at me. I’m not meant to have my cell phone on the floor.”

“I know.” Olivia worked in an exclusive boutique in Greenwich Village, and she couldn’t afford to get fired because she was as broke as I was.

“I don’t know what to do, though, Olivia. What do I do?”

“Look, Montana can’t be that big, right? How many ranches can there be? Rent a car, drive into town, find a bar, and ask them if they know where the ranch is.”

“You think that’ll work?”

“How many ranches can there be called Horseshoe Ranch?”

“I guess that’s true. Okay, I’ll rent a car. This sucks. I only have \$100 in my bank account.”

“Well, you have a credit card, right?”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “but it’s almost maxed out.”

“Maxed it out on what?”

“Clothes for the trip.” I looked down at my two big Tommy Hilfiger suitcases that were filled with new clothes to wear in the country. “I kind of bought some sexy negligees—”

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to get married,” I said like it was obvious.

Olivia made a strangled sort of noise. “Lucy, are you joking? You are the only woman I know that would buy sexy negligees for a man she’s going to marry that she’s never even met. What if he’s like some old crusty guy? Are you going to want to sleep with him then?”

“I’m praying to God he’s not some old crusty guy. I mean, it’s his parents that contacted me. He can’t be that old.”

“Girl, you don’t even know if it’s his parents that contacted you. These are some random people! You’ve never met them either!”

“I know. Oh, my God, I’m absolutely crazy, aren’t I?”

“Just take a couple of deep breaths. Okay?”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll speak to you later. I’m going to go and rent the car now.”

“Bye. Text me if you need anything.”

“Okay. Bye.” I hung up and looked around the airport. I needed to rent a car and get into town. Hopefully, someone would know where Horseshoe Ranch was, and maybe I could get a quick drink as well. I needed it. I was starting to think I’d made a really bad decision coming to Montana.

What had I been thinking?

Well, I’d hardly been thinking at all, but that was because the last couple of months of my life had been absolutely horrible. I dated this guy who I thought was amazing who turned out to have a lot of money and no real job. And he turned out to be not so amazing. And it turned out that when I broke up with him, he didn’t really like it. I’d been his possession, and when I no longer wanted to be with him, he’d been pissed. He’d made up some lies about me, and then I also lost my job, and because I was a little bit of a spend-a-holic, I didn’t have enough money in the bank to cover me until I got a new job. And now the credit card companies were calling me. And my landlord. I’d felt like I was sinking into a cesspit of manure.

I had no good options, and things around me were falling fast. And then I'd found the newspaper on the train and it seemed like all my prayers were being answered. Just the night before I'd been saying, "I wish I could find a rich husband." And while I didn't know if this guy was rich—technically. I didn't even know if he really existed—I did know it was an opportunity to get out of New York City and start afresh.

And as much as I loved New York City and as much as I loved Olivia, I needed a change. I needed to do something with my life. I was 28 years old, and I was going absolutely nowhere. And that wasn't what I wanted for myself.

I wanted to be married. I wanted to have kids, and I wanted the white picket fence and big house and yard. And, well, it looked like there was plenty of space in Montana, unlike New York City. Maybe this would end up being my place. The home I'd always dreamed of.

I just hoped that I wasn't being taken for a ride by some psychopath. The last thing I needed was to find myself locked in the back of some cabin in the middle of nowhere because I'd been dumb enough to agree to marry the one serial killer in Montana.

Chapter Two

I pulled up to a bar in the middle of nowhere.

I'd grown up watching those horror movies set in some podunk town with a bunch of locals who wanted to do something to you. I didn't want to be the Montana chainsaw king's next victim. I knew I looked cute. If there were some psycho sitting at the bar who wanted to do something to a hottie like me, I would definitely be targeted. I was from out of town and very obviously out of place.

But I was street smart, at least. My mom had prepared me well. Living in New York City, she'd always told me to carry a knife in my purse, and I hadn't taken it out of my handbag when I'd flown here. I'd been a little bit shocked that I'd gotten through TSA with it, but I wasn't about to question the fact that the X-ray hadn't picked it up. Maybe they knew that I was going to need a knife with me once I hit Billings.

If push came to shove and someone tried to bother me, I'd knife them. I mean, I'd never had to knife anyone before, but I was pretty confident that I could do it.

Though as I looked around, it didn't really look like there was much going on here.

I pulled into the parking lot next to a bunch of Ford pickup trucks, turned off the ignition, and got out of the car. I looked around, taking in the mountain range in the distance. I had to admit it was beautiful. I sucked in a couple of gulps of fresh air. My lungs had never felt happier. I looked down at my heels and wished that I had put on something a little bit more

sensible, but I always had to be me, even if “me” was a little too ostentatious for a place like Montana.

I walked towards the bar door and looked up at the sign. 12 POINT BUCK BAR, it read. I had no idea what that meant. I walked in and immediately I could feel eyes upon me. There weren't many people in the bar, and I felt extremely self-conscious.

I looked around to see if there were any women and was happy when I saw a few. Two girls in a booth chatting to themselves, and another girl with a biker dude at the back of the bar. At least I wasn't the open woman there. I headed towards the bartender so that I could order a drink. I moved as if I were a model on the catwalk. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see two guys in a corner booth gaping at me. I couldn't tell if they were impressed or shocked.

“Hey, there,” the bartender said, a wide smile on his face. I was glad to see that he was friendly. The last thing I needed was a grumpy bartender.

“Hi. Can I order a drink, please?”

“Sure. What you be having, miss?”

“What's your specialty?”

“Well, we got lots of beer. You like beer?”

“I'm more of a cocktail girl.”

“We don't really make many cocktails around here, but I could whip you up something.” He looked behind him. “We might have some coconut shavings and pineapple juice and stuff.”

“Um, maybe a rum and Coke, please?” I didn't know if it was smart to have a rum and a Coke now that I was driving, but one drink wasn't going to hurt me.

“Sure, coming right up. So, you new to these parts?” He grabbed a frosted glass from the bar top. I wondered if he was only used to serving beers, but I didn't want to be rude.

“Yeah. You could kind of say that ... very new.”

“Where do you live?” he asked. “I didn’t hear about anyone new moving in around here.”

“Actually, funny you asked that question. I kind of need your help.”

“You need my help finding somewhere to live?”

“Well, no, not somewhere to live, but I’m trying to find the place I’m going to be living.”

“You’re trying to find the place you’re going to be living?” He raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. You got people around here?”

“No, I don’t have any people around here. Well, I mean, kind of. Maybe ... my in-laws.” I almost groaned as I said that word. It felt like a joke.

“Maybe your in-laws?” He stopped then and just stared at me, looking confused. “What does that mean? Hey, Austin, you hear this girl? She thinks that maybe her in-laws live here.” He started laughing. “Who are your in-laws, honey?”

I wished I could take back the words. I looked to my right and saw a man sitting there, staring at me. I hadn’t noticed him before. He was tall with dark hair and laughing green eyes, but his expression was serious. From the look of it, he’d been listening to my entire conversation. Just great.

“Well, not in-laws.” I looked at the bartender and then at the handsome man next to me. I gave him a nervous smile but he didn’t smile back. “I mean, possible in-laws.”

“You know what that means, Austin? Because I sure don’t,” the bartender said. Austin just looked me up and down.

“I’ve got no idea, Chip,” he responded, chugging his beer. Then he looked at me. “Care to let us in on what you mean by that?”

“Well, I am kind of here to get married.” I tried not to wince. I didn’t really want to tell them everything because it was extremely embarrassing and I didn’t know them. But on the other hand, maybe if they kind of knew they could help me

out in some way. Like if they knew the family and the family sucked then they could warn me.

He placed a frosty glass in front of me. “Here’s your drink, ma’am.”

“Thank you. How much would that be?”

“Five bucks.”

“Really?” I looked surprised as I opened my wallet. “Just five?”

“Where are you from? Five is quite a lot, isn’t it?”

“I’m from New York City. I live in Brooklyn, or I guess I lived in Brooklyn. You can’t get a rum and coke for \$5. Maybe \$15, if you’re lucky. And that’s at the ...” I let my voice trail off as I realized the two guys were staring at me. “Well, anyway, good deal.”

“Put your money away.” Austin pulled out his wallet. “I got it.”

“Oh no, you can’t buy my drink.” I shook my head. “You don’t even know me.”

“Well, I’m getting to know you.” He put a twenty-dollar bill on the bar and gave me a wry smile. “So, are you going to tell us more about your in-laws?”

I tried not to stare at him too hard, but he was by far one of the best-looking men I’d ever seen in my life. He had that rugged look that made you think of a real man. I was so used to metrosexual men in New York that I’d almost forgotten how alpha some men could be.

“Well, it’s kind of embarrassing. I haven’t actually met them yet.” I grabbed my glass and ran my finger along the rim nervously before taking a sip.

“Oh, so you’ve come to meet your boyfriend’s parents? Is that it?” The bartender said as he handed me a small bowl of nuts.

“You could say that.”

“So, your boyfriend, he lives in New York, but he’s from Montana. Is that it?”

“Well, no ... He’s from Montana and he’s always lived in Montana.”

“Then how’d you meet him?” Austin leaned towards me.

I paused. I really didn’t want to tell them that I hadn’t met him yet. “Well, you know, online ...” I smiled and fluffed my hair. “But it’s a long story. I’m kind of looking for his parents’ ranch, though. Maybe you guys could help me out?”

“Your boyfriend couldn’t come and pick you up?” Austin said, raising an eyebrow. “What sort of man is that?”

“He was busy working on the ranch today.” I dropped my gaze from his bright green eyes to his juicy lips to his chest, trying to ignore the stirring in my belly as I studied his muscles.

“Okay,” Austin shrugged. “Huh.”

“I mean, it’s not bad. He really loves me and everything, but ...” I paused. I didn’t know why I was lying. “He was busy, and I told him it was okay, but I kind of lost the address, so maybe you guys could help me out?”

“You lost the address to your boyfriend’s ranch?” Austin looked incredulous. “Why don’t you call him and ask him for the address again?”

“Well, I kind of lost his number because ...” I knew I sounded like a hot mess. “He recently changed his phone and I didn’t update the number in my phone, and I actually broke my phone and I had to get a new one, and I lost all the numbers.” I knew I was talking way too much and that it was probably very clear I was lying. “You know how it goes.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a bit of a problem there, miss,” the bartender said. “What was your name?”

“Lucy.” I gave him a bright smile. “So if you could tell me where Horseshoe Ranch is, I’d be much obliged.”

“Horseshoe Ranch?” The bartender started laughing. “Really?” He looked over Austin. “You hear that, Austin?”

She's going to meet her in-laws at Horseshoe Ranch. What did you say the name of your boyfriend was again, ma'am?"

"Yes," Austin said quietly, "what's the name of your boyfriend that lives at Horseshoe Ranch?"

"Oh, do you guys know where it is? Thank God. I was scared that I wasn't going to be able to get there, and well, my boyfriend would be very nervous and worried. He would most likely call the police, and maybe the FBI would get involved. I'd be all over the news, and I'd look like such a fool, you know?"

"Uh-huh," Austin said with a smirk. "And your boyfriend's name is?"

"Well, funny story," I said, not wanting to admit that I had no idea of the name of the man I was going to marry.

His parents hadn't wanted to tell me, and I wasn't sure why. They said everything would be explained once I arrived, and I mean, yes, it had been weird, but it wasn't any weirder than moving to another state to marry a man you'd never met. I'd needed a way out of my life in New York and ... Shit, I'd watched so many movies and read so many books where women had made big moves and found love that I figured what could go wrong? I mean, if I didn't like him and if he didn't like me, I would just go back to Manhattan. The parents seemed nice in the emails.

I chewed on my lower lip. If it had been the parents I'd been speaking to ... I prayed to God I wasn't walking into some sort of situation that would have me on a show like *Criminal Minds* or *Law and Order SVU*. What if I hadn't even been speaking to his parents?

"So, his name?" Austin said, jarring me out of my thoughts.

"Well, Austin, don't you know them people there down at Horseshoe Ranch well?" The bartender interrupted.

I looked at Austin in surprise. Shit, I hoped he didn't know them very well.

“I know them very well.” His green eyes were pinned to me. “I’m curious. I haven’t heard about you. What was your name again?”

“Lucy,” I squeaked. Shit. I didn’t want him to know the family that lived there. I just wanted him to know of the ranch, casually. If he knew the people that lived there, maybe even possibly was friends with them, this just made me look even worse.

“So, Lucy, you have a boyfriend that lives there?”

“Well, I mean, more like my fiancé.”

“You have a fiancé? Interesting. Interesting, indeed.”

“Well, you know,” I laughed self-consciously, “if you could just give me the address, then I’ll be on my way. I don’t want my fiancé to get worried about me.”

“Okay, then. Sure, I can give you the address,” he nodded. “You tell Amelia and Ranger that Austin said hello.”

“Who?” I said blinking. Then I remembered. “Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. The in-laws.” I looked down at my drink. Shit, I sucked at this. “I am old-fashioned, so I call them Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton.”

“You do know Amelia and Ranger, right? Seeing as you’re engaged to their son.”

“Oh yes. I know them very well. They love me. They said I’m like the daughter they’ve never had.” Which was true in a way. They said they’d never had a daughter and they really wanted a daughter-in-law and grandkids. I mean, they didn’t say that I was like the daughter-in-law they’d ever had, but they did want one, that I knew. “But only through phone calls and stuff.”

“Huh, okay.” Austin’s eyes narrowed. “So how often do you communicate with them?”

“Almost daily.”

“Really? Interesting.”

“Well, I don’t know why you find it so interesting. Do you know them or something?”

“Yeah. I know them,” he nodded. He finished his beer and then stood up. “Well, I’ve got to be going. Good luck, Ms. Lucy.”

“Are you not going to give me the address to the ranch?”

“Maybe.” He looked down at me with glittering eyes.

“Maybe?”

“If you do one thing for me?”

“What’s that?” *Please don’t ask me for my boyfriend’s name!*

“How sure are you about marrying that Hamilton boy?” He stared into my eyes and I held my breath.

“Why?”

“Because you’re a very attractive woman.” He grinned and his lips came closer to me. “I’d hate to think that the rest of us will never have a chance with you.”

“Well, you never know ...” I wanted him to kiss me. I knew it was crazy, but I really wanted him to kiss me.

“Oh, yeah?”

It was as if he’d heard my thoughts because suddenly his lips were on mine and he was kissing me. I pressed my lips against his and reached up and ran my hands through his hair. He pulled back a moment later. He pressed his fingers against my lips, his eyes blazing as he stared down at me. “Well good luck with everything, Lucy.” He nodded his head and stepped back. “Enjoy Montana.”

I swallowed hard. “The ... the address?”

“Oh, I think Chip can give you the address. He knows where it is, as well.” He lifted his cowboy hat, gave me a slight nod, and then walked out of the bar.

“Well, he was nice,” I said to Chip, who looked amused. “I hope everyone in Montana is as nice as you guys.”

“Oh, yeah. Austin’s a real good one. I think you’ll find that most everyone here in the Bitterroot Valley is very, very nice. Hold on. I’ll get a pen and paper and I’ll write you down the address.”

“Thank you, Chip. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Ms. Lucy. I have a feeling I’ll be seeing more of you soon. The ranch isn’t that far away.”

“Oh, great. That sounds amazing.”

“And I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d be seeing Austin again soon, too.”

“Oh, yeah? He lives close to here as well?”

“Yeah. We’re the only bar in a hundred-mile radius, so everyone comes here after a long day at work.”

“Wow. I guess this is really small-town living.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s going to be a big change for you, being a city girl and all.”

“Yeah, that is true.”

“So, now that Austin’s gone, I don’t suppose you happen to know which of the Hamilton boys you’ll be marrying?”

“Sorry, what?” I swallowed hard.

“Well, I figured if you know the parents, but you don’t seem to know the boy, you’ve been speaking with just the parents?”

“Uh ...um ...,” I stammered, “kind of? Okay, I didn’t want to say anything with that guy here, but I’m kind of here for an arranged marriage.” How had Chip guessed?

“Oh, yeah?” He started laughing. “Really? Oh boy, Amelia and Ranger are going to get into trouble.”

“Oh, no. What do you mean?”

“Their sons are not going to be happy. You don’t happen to know which son?”

“I guess it’s the oldest son?” I shrugged. “I don’t really know much. It’s kind of a long, complicated story.”

“The oldest one, huh?” He grabbed a bottle from the wall and chugged it. “Yeehaw! This is going to be a fun week! I can just tell.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Oh, yeah! Well, good luck, Lucy. I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

“Well, thank you, Chip.” I wanted to ask more but I was too scared. What did he know about the Hamiltons that I didn’t? At least he was laughing and not warning me away. So presumably they weren’t psychopathic killers.

“Oh, well,” I grabbed the address, “I guess I should be going now. Meet the in-laws and everything.”

“Good luck, girl,” he chuckled. “Good luck.”

Chapter Three

I got into the car and was about to put the address into my GPS when my phone started ringing. I answered it immediately when I saw that it was Olivia.

“Hey, girl.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m worried for you,” she said. There was real concern in her voice and I could tell that she was feeling anxious.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it was funny when you first told me about the idea, and even when you landed at the airport. But I’ve been thinking about it, and I don’t know if this is the safest thing for you to be doing. I think you should come home.”

“What? No, I can’t come home. I just got the address.”

“Girl, but you don’t know who these people are. How are you going to marry some random dude? Look, I don’t have much money either, but we can figure something out. You’ll find another job. You’ll—”

“It’s not even about the job. You know Mikey—”

“What the fuck is Mikey going to do? Girl, he’s not going to do anything to you. I promise.”

“It’s not just Mikey. It’s just everything. I’ve lived in New York my whole life. My mom and I—” I paused. “I just needed a change. You know?”

“I know, Lucy, and I’m sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry about? This isn’t on you.”

“I know that you’ve been hurting since your mom passed away.” Her voice was soft. “I know how hard it’s been on you, and—”

“It’s just, everything reminds me of her, you know? And I don’t know. I’m 28 now, and I have no family and no prospects, and I can’t really afford to be in New York. And yes, I’m a city girl, but maybe I’ll love the country. I mean, I’m here in Montana now, and it’s really quite beautiful.”

“It may be beautiful, but there’s absolutely nothing going on there. I bet they don’t have a Prada store or a Chanel store, or Gucci, or Louis Vuitton, or Kate Spade or—”

“Olivia, you’re funny.” I started laughing. “That was the problem. I was shopping in those stores when I didn’t even have money. Do you know how much I have in my bank account right now?”

“I think you said \$100?”

“More like \$75 now. I had \$100, and I just had to put \$25 worth of gas into the car. Like, I’m absolutely broke. I can’t live that life anymore. I was trying to keep up with everyone and be fashionable and couldn’t afford it. And well, I just need to change.”

“Okay. You need to change, but did you have to move to Montana to marry some man you don’t even know? You don’t even know what he looks like. What if he’s butt-fuck ugly? What if he’s 80 years old? What if—”

“He’s not going to be 80 years old. And if he’s horrible and I don’t like him, I’ll leave. I promise.”

“I’m just worried about you, Lucy.”

“I know. And I know this is absolutely crazy, but crazier things have happened to me, and I’ve survived. And you don’t know, maybe this is the start of an awesome new journey and I’ll absolutely love it.”

“I guess. I mean, it’s not like you’ve ever told me you ever wanted to visit Montana before in your life. You don’t like

country music. You don't like pickup trucks. You don't like cowboys. You don't like riding horses. You don't—"

"Stop telling me all the things I don't like. Maybe I'll love them. I just never had the opportunity."

"Lucy, you're a city girl through and through."

"I know, but I could be a city girl in Montana."

"I guess so." She laughed. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe you're doing this."

"I know. I can't believe it either. But at least the people aren't crazy."

"How do you know they're not crazy?"

"Because I was just in a bar and I got a drink, and the bartender and this dude knew the family and they knew the ranch, and it seems like they're pretty respectable, cool people."

Well, the bartender hadn't said that and neither had the guy, Austin, but I figured if the family wasn't cool, they would've said something to me. I decided not to tell her about the kiss with the hottie because then she would definitely be questioning my life choices. I was kind of questioning them myself.

"Okay. Well, text me the address right now so I know where you're going, and call me when you get there so I know you're safe."

"Okay. I promise."

"I love you, Lucy. I miss you already."

"I love you too, Olivia. And maybe if everything works out, you can come out and visit."

"Well, I'll have to be there for the wedding, won't I? I'm going to be the bridesmaid, right?"

"Well, duh," I laughed. "Okay. Well, I'm going to go now, okay? I'll call you as soon as I get there."

"Okay. Sounds good. And Lucy?"

“Yes, Olivia?”

“Good luck. You got this, okay?”

“Thank you.”

”And if he’s butt-fuck ugly ...”

“Uh-huh?”

“You can always close your eyes and think of Brad Pitt when he’s fucking you.”

“Oh, ew! Really, Olivia?”

“What? You’ve never had to pretend you’re with someone else?”

“No, of course not!”

“Oops. I guess it’s only me, then. Bye, girl!”

I put the phone down and then entered the address into my GPS. Olivia was a good friend to me—more like family, really. And what she’d said was true, I really didn’t know what I was in for, but a part of me didn’t really care. I’d been heartbroken when my mom passed away. She’d only been 58. She was in the prime of her life. She died of heart failure and high blood pressure, and we hadn’t even known that she had a heart issue. It had absolutely devastated me and changed the way that I’d looked at life. If I got married and had kids, they wouldn’t have a grandma. At least, they wouldn’t have my mom as a grandma. My whole life I’d always expected that she’d be at my wedding, that she’d babysit my kids, that she’d be there through every new job and every new boyfriend and every new life experience.

And now she wouldn’t be.

Living in the city wasn’t the same anymore. Nothing was the same anymore. And I needed a change.

I knew I was being reckless. If I were in my right mind, I wouldn’t do anything like this, but my mom’s death had taught me one thing: that you couldn’t just be safe. You had to live life because you never knew when you were going to die. You never knew what could happen.

And this? Well, maybe this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Maybe, just maybe, this guy at Horseshoe Ranch would be the one. And if he wasn't, maybe he'd have a friend or maybe some other dude in Montana would light a fire in me. I didn't know, but it was worth the risk. You have to take risks in life. I knew that now.

My mom and I had planned for so many different things. And now we weren't able to do any of them. If I stayed in New York, I knew I'd be stuck in the same old rut. I loved Olivia and we had so much fun, but I was living a life that I couldn't afford, and ultimately, it wasn't making me happy.

I looked up at the big blue sky and took a deep breath. I'd never imagined living in a place like this, but it was beautiful. I hadn't lied about that. Nature was all around me. And while I was a city girl, there was something to be said about the quiet and stillness of a place that wasn't jam-packed with buildings and people. Maybe I didn't need to be crammed into tiny bars and restaurants, meeting the who's who of New York City. Maybe I would be okay on a little ranch with some cowboys living the Walton Family life.

I'd give it a chance and I'd see. I had absolutely nothing to lose.

Chapter Four

I stared at the large ranch house in shock. It was huge. What was this family? Were they millionaires? Maybe even billionaires? Maybe they were like the Beverly Hillbillies before they moved to Beverly Hills. Maybe they had a bunch of oil. I didn't know, but I was suddenly very intimidated. I hadn't expected the house to look so grand. This was more than just a farm or a small ranch. They must have owned hundreds, if not thousands, of acres. I should have known when I'd seen the sign and driven up the long driveway that the house was going to be grand.

All of a sudden, I wished I'd asked more questions and done more research. I had absolutely no idea who the Hamiltons were and what Horseshoe Ranch was all about. I decided to open my emails and re-read the correspondence with Amelia and Ranger. I quickly grabbed my phone and tried to pull up the emails.

While I waited for them to load, I stared out of the windows. I could see some sort of pasture to the right of the house. There were three chestnut horses grazing. I wondered if they were gentle and calm. I'd never ridden in my life, though I'd always wanted to. I figured I might be a good rider, at least I hoped so. I looked back at my phone and pulled up the chain of emails.

I realized that I could have just emailed Amelia and Ranger for the address, but I had completely forgotten about that in my panic. I'd been so focused on the piece of paper with the address and phone number I'd left on my nightstand.

But maybe this was for the best. I didn't want them to think I was irresponsible.

From: Lucykensington@gmail.com

To: AmeliaandRanger@Horseshoeranch.com

Dear Amelia and Ranger,

I saw your ad in the New York Times, and while it is fairly unusual, I am quite interested in gathering more information. You state that you're looking for a bride for your son? I am 28, live in NYC, and looking to make a change in life. I've never done anything like this before, and so I'm a bit nervous, but curious for more information.

Lucy Kensington

From: AmeliaandRanger@Horseshoeranch.com

To: Lucykensington@gmail.com

Dear Lucy,

Thank you for your response to our ad. I have to admit that this was a crazy idea, and my husband wasn't fully on board, but I figured what did we have to lose? We live on a big ranch in Montana. We want to live long enough to see our grandkids, but none of our sons seem to be in any hurry to get married. While this would be a highly unusual situation, we're looking to see if we can make a love match. Mail order brides were all the rage in the 1800s, so maybe an arranged marriage could work. Could you give us a bit more information about yourself? And why you think this is an arrangement you'd be interested in?

Amelia Hamilton

From: Lucykensington@gmail.com

To: AmeliaandRanger@Horseshoeranch.com

Hi Amelia,

Thanks for your response. Honestly, I emailed you late the other night. I found the newspaper on the train as I was going home and saw the ad. I live by myself in Brooklyn, and when I walked into my empty apartment, I suddenly realized how badly I hated being alone. My mother passed away a year ago, suddenly, and her death shook me to my core. I want to experience something different in my life. I have always lived in New York and I'm ready for a change. I've always loved the country and being in nature, and it has been my dream to get married and have a large family. I haven't met the love of my life the normal way, so maybe this will work?

Lucy

From: AmeliaandRanger@Horseshoeranch.com

To: Lucykensington@gmail.com

My Dearest Lucy,

My husband and I send our condolences for your mother's death. You have my deepest sympathies. I can tell you that it never gets easier, but it will feel less raw. I completely understand why you would want to get away. I can promise

you that there is nowhere like Montana to fill your heart and life with renewed energy. I have lived here my entire life and I have been blessed with a loving husband and wonderful sons.

I want to be upfront about one thing. My son doesn't know we are looking for a wife for him. However, I know him well, and I think he is ready for a wife—though you know how stubborn men can be. If you'd be willing to talk on the phone, please send me your number.

Amelia

From: Lucykensington@gmail.com

To: AmeliaandRanger@Horseshoeranch.com

Amelia,

I would love to chat on the phone. Here is my number: 347-555-1244.

Lucy

We'd talked on the phone a few times and agreed I'd fly to Montana and see if her son and I would have a connection. She'd wanted to come and pick me up at the airport, but I hadn't wanted that. It would have felt too awkward and weird for me—as if this situation wasn't weird enough as it was.

I closed the email and put my phone back into my handbag. I got out of the car and took a deep breath. I was here. Finally. I was about to meet my future husband. How crazy was that? *My future husband*. I, Lucy Kensington, might be married in a few months.

I heard a bird chirping then and looked around. There was a bird sitting on the top of the car staring at me. It looked like an American robin. I felt tears welling up in my eyes. My

mother had loved robins. I stared at its orange-red breast and white-rimmed brown eyes.

“Wish me luck, Mom,” I whispered and then made my way towards the ranch house, stumbling a couple of times in my heels. I’d been an idiot wearing heels, but it was too late to change them now.

I walked up the porch steps and went straight to the front door. I decided to knock instead of ringing the bell, and I held my breath. This was it. This was really it.

The door swung open.

Chapter Five

“**W**hy, hello there.” A handsome older man with silver-grey hair and sparkling blue eyes opened the door. He looked curiously at me. “Can I help you?” He had a slight accent, but I wasn’t sure what it was from. Maybe it was just a Montana accent. It sounded slightly Canadian, but maybe that was because we were so close to the border.

“Hi. Yeah, I’m Lucy. I’m here to see Amelia and Ranger.”

“Well, hello, Lucy,” he nodded and looked a bit confused. “I’m Ranger Hamilton. Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I’m Lucy from New York.” I gave him my biggest and best smile.

“Okay, Lucy from New York. You’re going to have to give me a bit more information than that.” He smiled, polite but quizzical.

My legs were beginning to shake. “I’ve been emailing back and forth with your wife about ...” I suddenly realized that he had no idea who I was or why I was there. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“I’m afraid not,” he shook his head. “I thought you might’ve been here for one of my sons, but you’re here to see my wife?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Is she available?”

“Hold on. Why don’t you come inside, Miss Lucy?” He opened the door wider.

“Um, actually if you don’t mind, I’ll stay here.” My brain was racing. What if there was no Amelia? What if this had been a trick? I could feel myself growing hot. Oh dear God, why had I come here? It was obvious to me that he had no idea who I was. What if I hadn’t even been talking to Amelia and Ranger Hamilton whatsoever? All sorts of thoughts were crossing my mind. “I’m here about marrying one of your sons,” I blurted out.

Something must have clicked. He let out a deep sigh and shook his head. “I told Amelia not to go messing around with other people’s business,” he sighed. “Sorry.” He held out his hand. “I’m Ranger Hamilton, Amelia’s long-suffering husband.” He gave me a wry smile. “I think I know why you’re here now.”

“You do?” I asked hesitantly. Was he a good actor or was he being real?

“Yes. My wife has been wanting our sons to get married for a long time. None of them actually want to get married, and so she had this idea, and I told her not to go through with it. But does she listen to me? Does she ever listen to me? No, she does not.” He paused. “Sorry. I can understand your hesitancy about not wanting to come inside, so let me go and get my wife. I will leave the door open so you can see there’s nothing crazy going on in here. The dogs might come and say hello to you. Don’t mind them, they’re friendly. And you might see one or two of my sons, though I think they’re all out on the ranch right now.”

“Okay. Sure.” I just nodded and stood on the front porch.

“Let me go and get Amelia.” He walked back inside. “Amelia! Amelia!” He was shouting through the house and I peeked inside curiously. There was a spiral staircase to the right of the door and a grand piano to the left. I wondered who played. Maybe it was my new husband. Maybe he’d compose and sing me a song. Now, that would be kind of romantic. I grabbed my phone in my hand and pulled it out of my handbag. I needed it easily accessible so that if I had to call the police or Olivia, I could do it quickly.

My long blonde hair hung down my shoulders. I'd thought about putting it up in a bun, but I had told myself that I wanted to make the best first impression possible and that's why I'd left it down. I squeezed the phone for a couple of seconds wondering what I should do. Maybe I should just leave. I could get a hotel or a motel somewhere and then catch a flight back home. Hopefully, there'd be enough credit on my credit card.

"Oh, Ranger, stop fussing."

I looked and saw a tall, beautiful older woman heading towards me with a wide smile on her face. "Why, you must be Lucy Kensington." She smiled as she looked me up and down. "Well, you're even more beautiful than I thought you would be!"

"Thank you." I smiled back. "I'm guessing you're Amelia Hamilton."

"Yes, I am," she smiled. "Don't mind my husband. He knew that you were coming. I told him."

"You didn't tell me anything, Amelia," Ranger grumbled.

"I've told you several times, Ranger. Why do you think I've been getting the house ready?"

"I don't know. You're always fussing here, there, and everywhere."

"You just don't listen to me, Ranger. That's the problem."

"I'm always listening to you, Amelia. But you've got to stop with these plans. Does the boy even know she's here?"

"Well, of course not. I couldn't tell him!" She looked back at me. "Sorry about that. Once you've been married for 40 years, you'll understand what it means to be going back and forth with your husband. Come in, dear. Come in."

"Thank you."

"Do you not have any suitcases with you?" She looked at my empty hands.

“They’re in my car,” I nodded back toward the car. “I figured I’d just come and meet you guys first.” I hesitated. I didn’t want to say that I didn’t want to take my suitcases out just in case I had to make a quick getaway.

“Totally understandable, dear. Come on, come inside. I’ll make you some sweet tea, or would you like some lemonade?”

“Oh, lemonade would be great. Thanks.”

“I’d like some lemonade too, Amelia.”

“You’re not meant to be on the sugar. You know that, Ranger. But you can have some unsweetened tea.”

“I don’t want any unsweetened tea,” he sighed. “Forget about it.”

“Okay. Now, come on, dear. How was your flight?”

“Oh, it was fine, thank you. It’s quite beautiful here.”

“Isn’t it just?” Amelia said as she looked around. “We’ll have to take you on a tour of the ranch later on this afternoon. Won’t we, Ranger?”

“We’re going to take her or the boy is going to take her?”

“We’re going to take her, Ranger.” Amelia shook her head. “Now, would you like some cookies as well? I’ve got some homemade chocolate chip cookies just out of the oven.”

“Oh, that would be great, thank you.” I followed her into the wide kitchen. It was beautiful. There was a huge island in the middle with a Carrera marble countertop. To the right of that was a French door refrigerator and two gas stove ovens. They definitely had money. I recognized some of the brands of the appliances, and I knew that they didn’t come cheap.

“Have a seat, dear,” Amelia nodded to the bar stools next to the island. “Are you hungry? Would you like something more to eat than just cookies? I can whip you up a sandwich until dinner time.”

“No, no, that’s fine, thanks. I can wait till dinner time.”

“So ... this is all a little bit different, isn’t it?” Amelia said as she handed me a glass.

“Yeah, you can say that again,” I laughed self-consciously. “I feel a little bit overwhelmed, to be honest.”

“Don’t be overwhelmed, dear. You’ll be fine,” she nodded. “Don’t you think so, Ranger?”

“I don’t know what the boys are going to say, Amelia.”

“You keep saying that, Ranger. What do you think the boys are going to say? They love their mama. They respect me. They won’t say anything.”

“They love you very dearly, but you’ve never done anything this crazy before.” He shook his head. “And Lucy, you are mighty pretty, I will admit that. But I don’t know that my boys want an arranged marriage. This is not the 1700s, Amelia. We’re not back in the Gold Rush days, you know that?”

“The Gold Rush was in the 1800s, honey.” Amelia shrugged. “I’m sure the boys will be happy.”

“Well, which boy is she for?”

“Which boy do you think, Ranger?”

“Oh gosh. You’re not saying Beau?”

So that was my future husband’s name, Beau. Interesting. I’d never imagined myself dating a guy called Beau. I didn’t even know how you would spell it. Was it B-O? Was it B-E-A-U? Was how he spelled his name really the most important thing I could be thinking about right now?

I giggled slightly to myself and then looked up as I saw Amelia and Ranger were both staring at me.

“What are you laughing at, honey?” Amelia said. “Don’t mind me and Ranger. We go back and forth all day. We squabble like newlyweds.”

“Oh no. I was just thinking to myself that I’ve never met a Beau before.”

“Oh, well I think you’ll like Beau. He’s our oldest.”

“Will I get to meet him soon?” I paused. “Exactly how are we going to handle this?” I looked down at my glass. If they

hadn't told their son that they had sent for me, how exactly was this going to go down?

"Well, I have a plan, you see." Amelia's eyes were twinkling. I noticed that her eyes were bright green. She was beautiful even though she was older. I could tell that she had been the belle of the ball in her days. And as I looked over at Ranger, I could tell that he was very handsome as well. If their sons had got any of their looks, then I was going to be one lucky woman. I really hoped that Beau took after his dad because that would mean he would grow into a very distinguished-looking man.

"They're all out on the ranch right now if that's what you're wondering," Ranger said, looking at me.

"Oh no, I just mean ..." I paused. "You know, how is this going to work?"

"I wish I knew, but I guess Amelia's got that all figured out. Don't you, my love?" He kissed her on the cheek and she pushed him away.

"Ranger, do not patronize me. As it happens, I do have a plan." She looked towards me. "Now, you know this is a highly unusual situation. And I know you're a good sport, Amelia. And I hate to bring you into a complicated situation, but I think it will be best to just introduce you as a family friend at dinner, and then we'll get into the arrangements."

"Okay," I said, sipping on the drink. "So, Beau is not going to have any idea that I'm here to marry him? Is that what you're saying?"

"Well, he'll have an idea because we'll sit you next to him and we'll have him take you into town later to get you any things that you need."

"Oh, I don't need anything, thank you." I thought about my dwindling bank account. I was not about to go shopping even if it would help me get closer to Beau.

"Well, maybe you don't need to go shopping then. Maybe you'll get some ice cream." Amelia smiled to herself. "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. They can get some ice cream."

“Amelia, that’s not a good idea. All the boys are going to want to go for ice cream then. I thought you wanted Beau and Lucy to be together alone so that they can get to know each other better and see if there’s any chemistry.”

“Why, Ranger, of course there’s going to be chemistry. Look at her, she’s beautiful. Beau’s never seen a girl like this before.”

“She is mighty fine, but you know our son.”

“I know.” She sighed as she looked at me. “You’ll see, Lucy, that all of our boys are very attractive. So, in case you’re worried that that’s the reason why they haven’t found wives, you don’t have to worry. They’re very good-looking. I think you’ll find that Beau is a mighty handsome young man. But they just don’t want to seem to settle down. They’ve had girlfriends and they’ve brought women home, here and there, you know? But nobody stuck.”

Ranger’s eyes narrowed. “Amelia, they’ve never brought any girlfriends home.”

“Yes, they have. Didn’t Wyatt bring that one girl home?”

“Amelia, are you talking about Sadie Johnson?”

“Yeah, he brings Sadie Johnson over all the time.”

“That’s because Sadie Johnson is his best friend, and they’ve been best friends since kindergarten.”

“Well, I know they’ve been best friends since kindergarten, Ranger. But are you blind?”

“What do you mean, am I blind? Blind to what?”

“Those two are surely in love. She should be his girlfriend, but he’s too blind to see it.”

“Now, Amelia, don’t you go messing with their friendship.”

“I’m not messing with their friendship, Ranger. I’m just telling you they should have been married a long time ago. But you know what? Wyatt’s going to mess up and she’s going to

find someone else, and then he's going to realize he loved her all along."

"Oh, Amelia." Ranger raised his eyes to the ceiling as if praying for patience and looked back at me. "Sorry. Wyatt's our youngest son. Him and his best friend Sadie have been like this for a long time." He held his two fingers together and up in the air. "And me and Amelia been wondering when they're going to get together, and they just don't seem to. I guess they'll just be friends forever."

"They're not going to be friends forever, Ranger." Amelia pouted. "You know that Sadie Johnson, she's going to find herself a man and Wyatt's going to be heartbroken."

I watched the two as they went back and forth and withheld a smile. I felt like I was in the middle of some country-western TV show. It felt kind of nice. And even though I had no idea who Wyatt or Sadie was, it seemed cute. I would have loved to have had a best guy friend since kindergarten was my soulmate. It felt like it would have been a movie or something. But at least I had Olivia. She and I had been best friends forever. And even though I didn't swing that way, I knew she'd always be there for me. And well, I guess I didn't really need a best friend to become a lover because now I had Beau ... Sort of, even though I didn't know what he looked like.

"So how many sons do you guys have?" I spoke up. "I didn't realize you had such a large family."

"We got seven boys," Ranger said with a laugh.

"Yes," Amelia said, sighing. "So now you know why I'm so happy to have another woman in the house."

"Seven boys! That's a lot." I grinned. "Good for you."

"Oh yeah. Good for us indeed," Ranger laughed. "I would have said no after the first two if we didn't live on a ranch. But hey, free ranch hands," he chuckled and Amelia just shook her head at him.

"Oh, I hear the horses," Amelia said as she walked over to the window over the sink towards the back of the kitchen.

“Oh, some of the boys are coming. I guess they’re hungry.”

“Oh boy, Amelia. Here we go,” Ranger shook his head and looked back at me. “Well, good luck, Lucy. You’re about to meet some of our sons. Don’t let any of them overwhelm you, you hear?”

“I’ll try not to. Thank you.” Silently, I was praying that Beau would be the first one I’d get to meet. I was curious to see what he looked like and to find out if we would like each other.

Ever since my mom had passed, I had been feeling so lonely, and it was nice to think about being part of such a large family. It was nice to be with people who clearly loved and adored each other. And even though Amelia had certainly overstepped her boundaries when it came to hooking her sons up, I didn’t care. I just wanted to be around people. I just wanted to feel like I was part of a family that really was there for each other. I only hoped that when I met Beau, it would be love at first sight. I hoped that when our eyes met, I’d feel that chemistry, and we could build from there. And obviously, I hoped he felt the same way about me.

I took a deep breath as I heard the sound of men talking from the back of the house. I heard some horses neighing, and I squeezed my glass. This was it. I was about to meet some of the Hamilton sons.

Chapter Six

“Well, I told you to round up the cattle because—” a tall blonde guy was talking to a younger guy with darker blonde hair as they walked into the kitchen. He paused when he saw me. “Hello.”

Both of them were extremely handsome, and I smiled, feeling excited.

“Why Beau, Wyatt, there you are.” Amelia gave me a huge smile. “Come, come, boys, I want you to meet someone.”

“Who’s this, Mom?” The younger of the two brothers spoke up, eyeing me up and down. “Hi. Nice to meet you, I’m Wyatt Hamilton.”

“Hi, I’m Lucy Kensington.” I reached for his hand. I expected him to shake it, but he kissed it.

In the background, Ranger chuckled. “He’s the flirt of the family. Lucy, don’t mind him.”

“Dad!” Wyatt just shook his head as he looked back at me. “I’m sorry, but I haven’t seen as fine a woman as you in a long time around these parts.”

“What about Sadie?” His older brother looked at him.

“What about Sadie? She’s not hot.” Wyatt just rolled his eyes. “I’m thirsty. I’m going to have a beer. You want anything, Beau?”

“No, I’m good for now.”

I stared at Beau, my future husband, happy with what I saw. He had to be at least 6' 2". Tall, strong, stocky, with big blue eyes and dark blonde hair. He had a pleasant smile on his face. And while I didn't feel an immediate sexual attraction for him, I did find him to be quite personable.

"I'm Beau, Beau Hamilton, oldest of the Hamilton boys." He grinned at me. "Nice to meet you, Lucy."

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you too."

"So, how'd you know my parents? Or are you lost or something?"

"No, not lost. I—"

"She's come to stay with us for a while," Amelia cut me off and walked over to her son. "So be nice to her, boys."

"What do you mean she's come to stay with us, Ma?" Wyatt opened a Bud Light and looked at it his mother, "Like living in the house with us?" He looked at me, "What're you, here to learn how to ride horses or something?" He looked me up and down, his gaze landing on my shoes. "Cause I'm gonna tell you right now, those heels ain't gonna do. You need yourself a good pair of riding boots."

"Oh, I know. I just wore these because I was leaving New York, and in New York, it's all about fashion and you have to wear heels. I mean, you don't *have* to wear heels, but—" I stopped and realized I was rambling. "But yeah, I'm gonna get some riding boots. I've never ridden before, but I feel like I would be pretty good because I really love—" I paused, "Well, I really love horse movies."

I could see Beau, Wyatt, and Ranger all staring at me as if they weren't sure what planet I had to come from. Amelia just beamed at me with a pleasant expression on her face.

"I guess you've had a long day and you're slightly overwhelmed with my big crazy family, Lucy. Don't mind them. Wyatt, don't you think it's a bit early to be drinking beer?"

"Mama, I have had a long day on the ranch. I need this beer."

“Boy, go call Sadie and see if she wants to come to dinner.”

“Yes, Mama.” He shook his head. “I’ll call her. Beau, you got anyone you going to call?” Wyatt said with a laugh.

“No, there’s no one for me,” Beau said. “And, Mom, don’t even try and bring up the fact that you want me to get married.” He looked at me. “Sorry, family drama. My mom’s been on at this church where she’s trying to hook up me and my brothers with every single woman going.” He shook his head. “Next thing you’re telling me is that you were just at the grocery store and you met my mom and she might have invited you over to marry one of her sons or something.” He started laughing, but I just gave him an awkward smile. Oh, shit. Beau really didn’t seem like he was going to be up for the arranged marriage. Ranger cleared his throat and Beau’s eyes narrowed and he looked back at his parents. “You didn’t just meet Lucy at the grocery store, right, Mom?”

“Of course not. I’ve been home all day. You know that, Beau.”

“Okay. I’m just checking because you know what I told you, don’t be going messing’ in my—” He stopped himself. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my voice at my mama in front of you. She can just frustrate me sometimes, but it’s very nice to meet you, Lucy Kensington. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go and wash up.” He looked at his mom and his dad. “I’ll be down for dinner. Okay?”

“Okay.” As soon as Beau left the room, Ranger turned on his wife.

“I told you this was not going to be a good idea, Amelia. Now we got poor Lucy here and—”

“He’ll be fine. It’ll be fine. You saw the way he was looking at her. He was definitely attracted.”

While Beau had given me a pleasant smile, I hadn’t actually felt any real attraction from him. He’d just been friendly, and not even a flirtatious friendly like Wyatt. I mean, I know I’m an attractive woman and most men find me pretty

good looking, but not every man, and it seemed like maybe Wyatt was more interested in me than Beau. And if Wyatt already had a girl, then what was I doing here? I bit my lower lip, thinking about the possibility that Beau was not going to be interested in me, and I might have to leave Horseshoe Ranch sooner than I'd thought.

"Don't worry, dear." Ranger looked over at me and I guess he could sense that I was nervous. "Even if it doesn't work out with Beau, you're more than welcome to stay here for a little bit." He looked over at his wife. "Now you don't be pushing anything, Amelia. They either get on or they don't get on."

"Well, honey, we have to push things a little bit because you know all boys and you know Beau, in particular. If he is not pushed, he ain't never going to find anyone."

"That is not up to us to—" Ranger started then he stopped. "Well, I'm going outside for a ride, okay? You and Lucy can have a chat. I don't think I need to be part of it." He walked over to me and gave me a hug. "It's nice having you here, Lucy. And no matter what happens, if you need someone to talk to, you can always come to me. My wife's driving you crazy, you come to me. And if you want to leave at any time because you don't feel comfortable in this crazy situation, you let me know. We've got a couple of cabins here on the ranch, I'll put you in a cabin, I'll take you to a hotel, or we'll get you a flight back to New York City."

"Ranger!" Amelia frowned at him. "What are you trying to say? Do you think I wouldn't do those things for this nice young girl, as well?"

"I'm sure you would, my love, but I know how badly you want to see one of your boys get married, and I know how badly you want Beau and this young lady to—"

Amelia cut him off with a shake of her head. "Well, you go on now, Ranger. You go and ride. I'm going to treat Miss Lucy to some stories about the family. I'll see you at dinner." Ranger left the room.

I sat there wondering what to say. Amelia strode over and stood next to me. "Now, Lucy, I'm going to speak to you as a

mama bear right now because I know you just lost your mama,” she put a gentle hand on my shoulder, “And I’m very sorry about that.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said with a small smile. “It’s definitely been hard.”

“Now. I know the situation is crazy, and if I was your mama, I would have told you don’t go to Montana. You don’t know those people and they could be crazy, but you’re here, and I’m glad you’re here because I think we’re going to get on like a house on fire. And yes, I would love for you and my son Beau to make a match. But if it doesn’t work out, do not worry about it. I’m not going to push it. I know my husband Ranger thinks I’m going to push it, but I’m not going to push it. There’s no match, there’s no match. And anytime you want to go back to New York City, you just tell me and I’ll put you on the first flight, first-class, you hear?

“But I’m so glad you’re here. And I just hope that I can teach you how to ride and I can show you Montana, my beautiful big sky state. And I hope you’ll fall in love with it here, as well as falling in love with my son.” She smiled warmly. “I know you’d be needing a mama, and I know I’m not an actual substitute for your mama. No one can ever replace our mamas, but maybe I’ll be like your step-mama, or your big sister, or whatever you need. You ever need anything, you come to me, dear. You can talk to me about anything. Even my son, Beau. I promise you that. I am here for you.”

She paused. “I know that your life probably feels like it’s going in all sorts of directions right now. I know that you most probably feel like you don’t know what you’re doing, and this whole situation has probably got your head spinning, but don’t mind me and Ranger. We love each other. And don’t mind my sons. They don’t know what they want, but I’ll let you in on a little secret: no man knows what he wants. Even my dear Ranger didn’t know what he wanted.” She laughed. “So just believe you me, if it’s meant to be between you and Beau, I think it will be. I just had this good feeling that first time that you emailed me, I had this feeling that you were going to be in my family. I don’t know why, I just knew it. So, Lucy ...”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Now that I’ve gone talking, is there anything that you want to ask about?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“So, how’s about I go and I’ll show you to your room, and then we’ll have one of the boys go and get your suitcases and bring them up. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah, that sounds really nice. Thank you.”

“And then I’m sure you must have some friends or family that’d be waiting to hear from you. I’ll give you a bit of time and space so you can call them, okay?”

“Thank you, Amelia. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, don’t be thanking me, dear. You don’t know what a breath of fresh air it is to have a pretty young thing like you here. I’ve been wanting some female company in this house for over 30 years and now I finally have it.” She nodded and smiled to herself. “Believe you me, I think this is going to be the start of something absolutely wonderful.”

“Well, I sure hope so,” I said. “Thanks, Amelia.”

“Don’t be thanking me, dear. I’ll be thanking you.”

Chapter Seven

The cerulean sky filled the expansive horizon. The Montana Rockies and Bitterroot River provided a majestic backdrop to an environment I'd never seen before. As I stood on the back porch of the house studying at the map Amelia had given me, I wondered how big the ranch was. This was the first time since my mother had died that I'd felt truly at peace. A bald eagle soared overhead, and several elk and bison made their way through the valley to the left of the property.

I had changed and was now wearing a pair of blue jeans with a grey sweatshirt and some sneakers. I felt much more comfortable. My hair was up in a ponytail and I felt like I fit in so much more already. I walked back to the rocking chair and sat down. I hadn't seen any of the brothers since I'd met Beau and Wyatt in the kitchen and was excited for dinner. I'd tried calling Olivia but she'd texted to say her boss had her eye on her and that she'd call me back later. I rocked back and forth, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. I wanted to call my mom to tell her all about my adventure. My mom would be nervous and worried, but she'd want to hear every single detail. She had loved her life and lived it on her own terms. She'd taught me to be independent and to march to the beat of my own drum. I missed her.

I grabbed my phone and played one of her old voicemails just so I could hear her voice. I could feel my eyes welling up at the message, "Hey Lucy, it's Mom. I just found an old diamond ring that I think you'll love and bought it for you. Can't wait for you to see it. Call me back." I was about to play

it again when I heard footsteps. I looked up and saw Beau standing there, a glass in his hand.

“Hi, sorry, I’m not interrupting you, am I?”

“No, not at all.” I put my phone back into my handbag and forced a smile on my face as he walked towards me. I’d been so close to tears that I hoped my mascara wasn’t smudged.

“My mom thought you might want another drink.” He held the glass out towards me.

“Oh, thank you, that was so thoughtful.”

“Yeah, she’s a keeper.” He nodded, his blue eyes shining.

I took the glass gratefully and took a sip of the iced tea. Trying not to be too obvious, I studied him. His hair was still wet from the shower and it looked darker now. His blue eyes were almost the same color as the sky and his face was a deep tan. He was wearing a navy shirt and long shorts and I couldn’t help noticing his muscular legs. Beau Hamilton was definitely in shape.

Beau sat down on the chair next to me and looked at me. “So, Lucy Kensington, what are you doing here in Montana?”

I gave him a small smile, not really sure what to say. He obviously wasn’t going to let it go. “You remember my full name?”

“Well, of course,” he laughed. “Who would forget your name? You’re beautiful.”

“Wow, thank you.” I was surprised at the compliment.

“I’m sure you know you’re beautiful, especially if you’re from New York City.”

“Well, why do you say that?”

“I just mean that even in a city as big as New York City, I’m sure you’re considered beautiful. What brought you out here to Montana?” he asked again.

“Wow, you really want to know badly.”

“I guess we just don’t get many visitors, and I’ve never heard of you before.” He shrugged. “I’m just curious.”

“I’m an old friend of your mom’s,” I didn’t like lying, but I couldn’t really say, *I’m actually here to marry you. How’d you feel about that?*

“Oh, I thought I knew all my mom’s friends.” He looked surprised. “How do you guys know each other?”

“Oh, well we go way back.” And if “way back” meant one month, then so be it.

“Way back, huh? Don’t tell me you’re my mom’s age, and you just had really good plastic surgery or something?”

“Well, hey, I didn’t want to say.” I laughed. “So, you think I look young, huh?”

“Well, you certainly don’t look my mom’s age.”

“No, I’m not your mom’s age, obviously. I’m just a younger friend of hers.”

“Hmm, do you have friends who are younger?”

“Do I have friends that are younger than me? Yeah.”

“When I say they’re younger than you, I mean, by a couple of years, not by a couple of decades.”

“Well, I don’t like to be ageist or anything.”

“What’s your story, Lucy Kensington?”

“I don’t have a story. I don’t even know what you mean.”

“You’re giving me that innocent little face, aren’t you?” He shook his head. “I’m going to get the story out of you one way or another. I know, there’s more to this than you’re letting on.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I mean, I’m just ...” And then I paused because I heard more voices and they didn’t sound familiar. “Oh, I think maybe some of your other brothers are home now.”

“Probably. You know, there are seven of us, right?”

“Of course, Amelia told me.” *Five minutes ago*, I was thinking in my head.

“So what did she tell you about us?”

“Well, I know you’re the oldest, Beau, and I know that you’re single and ...”

“Did she tell you that? I like to mingle.” He wiggled his eyebrows, and I laughed.

“No, she didn’t tell me that.”

“Oh yeah. I’m single and I like to mingle. What about you?”

“Oh well, I’m single too, and I can ... mingle if I have to.” I silently groaned at myself. My flirting was atrocious.

“So, you were in New York City?”

“Brooklyn, actually. Born and bred. My mom’s family moved there when she was young, and it’s the only place I’ve ever lived.”

“And yet you find yourself now in Montana?” He raised an eyebrow. “Big change.” He really wanted answers. I wasn’t sure why he was pushing it so much.

“It certainly is a big change,” I agreed, “but it’s beautiful here. I was just looking at the mountains and the river. Is this all family property?”

“Well, it’s my parents’ property, but I guess it is a family ranch.” He looked out into the distance. “I’ll take over it one day. And then my sons after that and their sons after that.” He shrugged. “Family legacy and all that. It’s been in our family for four generations.”

“Wow ...” I wondered if it would be my sons that took over this ranch.

I certainly wasn’t going to say that in front of him because I didn’t want him to think I was absolutely crazy.

And then I heard a deep familiar voice, and I froze as two men walked onto the patio. I recognized both of them. To the

left was Wyatt, who was looking at me with a saucy smile on his face.

To the right was Austin.

Had he come to tell the brothers what I'd said? Maybe he'd come to warn them. Shit, why hadn't I kept my big mouth shut? Maybe he was best friends with Beau or something. Oh man, this was my worst nightmare.

"Hey, Wyatt. Hey, Austin." Beau nodded. "This is mom's new friend."

"Hi," I said weakly.

"You've met Wyatt. This is my other brother, Austin".

Brother? They were brothers?

My gaze locked on Austin, who had a wide smirk on his face. His eyes were laughing at me, and I could feel the blood draining from my face.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!

What in the hell was I gonna do now?

Chapter Eight

“Well, who do we have here?” Austin spoke up as he walked right over to me. “Why I do believe that you’re Lucy, aren’t you?”

Beau looked at me and then looked at his brother. “Oh, you know Lucy?”

“Mom’s friend, huh?” Austin looked like he was fighting a smile.

“Yeah, this is Mom’s friend,” Beau looked at his brother. “Why are you looking like an idiot right now, Austin?”

“I don’t look like an idiot, and I don’t really know Lucy. I just had the pleasure of meeting her.”

“Oh, where did you guys meet? Didn’t you just come back?”

“Well, you know I went to the bar for lunch.”

“Yes, I know. And Mom was upset. You know she likes you having lunch at home.”

“I can’t have lunch at home every single day.” Austin rolled his eyes. “But I saw Lucy at the bar.”

“Oh, okay.”

Austin looked at me. “Is that how you know Mom then? You met her at the bar?”

“Does Mom ever go to bars?” Wyatt spoke up.

“You know she’ll go with Dad,” Beau answered.

My heart was pounding uncomfortably. Austin hadn't taken his eyes off me. I prayed to God that he didn't bring up anything that I'd said in the bar.

"Well, I have some information that I think you guys will want to know," Austin said.

I glared at him. "Well, no, I don't think so. I—"

"Did you know that Mom is Lucy's mother-in-law?"

"What?" Wyatt's eyebrows wrinkled. "What are you talking about?"

Beau coughed for a couple of seconds. "Huh? What do you mean Lucy is Mom's mother-in-law?"

"I didn't say Lucy is Mom's mother-in-law. I said Mom is Lucy's mother-in-law." Austin's smile got a little wider as he stared at me. "Isn't that right?"

"I didn't say she *was* my mother-in-law." I shot him a dirty look. "I was just saying that—"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. You were just saying that she was going to be your mother-in-law, right?"

"... Yes." I swallowed hard. Oh God, please don't continue.

"So wait, you're dating one of my brothers?" Wyatt had a big smile on his face. "How comes I've never heard about this before?"

"That's exactly the same thing I was thinking," Austin said. "Have you heard anything about it, Beau?"

"How would I have heard anything about it?" Beau looked pissed off. "I seem to be the last one to know anything in this family. So, Lucy," he glanced at me, "exactly who are you dating?" And then he frowned. "And how did you meet him? Didn't you say you came from New York?"

"Yeah, I did just fly in from New York," I said, not sure what to say.

"Is it Chet?" Wyatt asked.

“Uh, no.”

“Flint?” Beau asked.

“No.” I shook my head, swallowing hard.

“Don’t tell me it’s Huck,” Wyatt started laughing. “Did Huck go and get himself an internet girlfriend?”

“No, it’s not Huck.” I bit down on my lower lip.

“Then it’s Knox?” Beau’s jaw dropped. “I never would have guessed that Knox would have a girl coming and that he would have introduced her to Mom and Dad before anyone else. That’s crazy.”

“Ha,” I kind of laugh-cried and they all looked at me.

“So, Lucy,” Austin said loudly.

“Yes, Austin?” I replied through gritted teeth.

“You’re dating Knox? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“But there are no other brothers,” Wyatt said, a perplexed look on his face. “There’s Beau. There’s Austin. There’s me. Then we got Chet, Flint, Huck, and Knox. If you’re not dating any of us, who are you dating?”

“Oh my God, don’t tell me Mom and Dad have an arrangement.” Beau looked horrified.

Austin started laughing. “Do you really think that Dad has another woman and that Mom would let that happen?”

“No,” Beau looked relieved. “But then who else could it be? Lucy, please let us in on it.”

“Well, um, I haven’t technically started dating him yet.”

“What?” Wyatt looked confused. “What do you mean you haven’t technically started dating him yet?” He started laughing. “I have no idea what is going on here. Are we on some sort of TV show?”

“That’s what I was wondering,” Austin laughed. “Did Mom sign us up for *The Bachelor in Montana* or something?”

Beau shook his head. “Come on, let’s go to the kitchen.”

The three brothers looked at me and I nodded in agreement. I would rather Amelia tell them what was going on than me having to explain.

We made our way to the kitchen where Amelia and Ranger looked like they were having an intense conversation. Ranger looked up as we walked in and groaned at the sight of his sons. Amelia smiled beatifically.

“Oh, there you are, children. Have a seat. Wyatt, you go and set the table.”

“Why do I always have to be the one to set the table?” He sounded like a little kid.

“Wyatt, please go and set the table.”

“Yes, Mom.” He rolled his eyes.

“So, Mom, I just met Lucy.” Austin walked over to his mom and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Oh, glad to hear that, Austin.”

“And the funny thing is ...”

“Yes, son?”

“I met her earlier at the bar.”

“Oh, you did?” She just nodded pleasantly. I wondered if her heart was racing as fast as mine. If it was, she was hiding it well.

“And you know what? She said the funniest thing to me at the bar, didn’t you, Lucy?”

“Um, I didn’t really think I was that funny.” I shook my head, trying to make eye contact with Amelia, but she was too busy looking at her son.

“Oh, that’s interesting, dear. I’m making barbecue ribs tonight, your favorite.”

“Nice. Thanks,” he nodded. “Well, do you want to know what Lucy was telling me, guys?”

“What’s that?”

“She told me that she was in town because she was meeting her in-laws.”

“Oh, boy.” Ranger stood up and shook his head. “I told you this was not a good idea, Amelia.”

“Nonsense, Ranger, you don’t know that—”

“Mom, what’s going on?” Beau spoke up. “I’m really confused. She said she is here to meet her in-laws, who we’re assuming means you and Dad, but she doesn’t actually seem to be dating any of us. Is there another brother that we don’t know about or something? What’s going on?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m curious about. Although ...” Austin paused and walked over to me, “didn’t you tell me, Lucy, that you were engaged to the oldest son? So that would seem to indicate that you’re engaged to Beau.”

Beau looked at me, confused. Oh shit, I had no idea what to say. “Well, no. I mean, I didn’t mean it like that. I—”

“And didn’t you say that he loved you very much?” Austin continued, a wide grin on his face. “So, Beau, have you been keeping this a secret? Why didn’t you tell me? I thought I was your favorite brother.”

“Austin, I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about. I’ve never seen this woman before in my life.” He looked at me. “Is this true, Lucy? Did you tell Austin that we were dating?”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t give Austin any names.” I shot Austin a dirty look. “How could you?”

“How could I what?” he laughed.

“You know.”

“I know what?”

“Amelia!” I looked pleadingly at their mother, and she sighed.

“Okay, fine, children. Fine. Lucy is here as a mail order bride.”

Austin started laughing, and Beau just groaned.

Ranger stood up. “I’m going to go and check on the—”

“You’re not going anywhere, Ranger. Sit back down,” Amelia said.

“Fine,” he huffed. “I told your mother it wasn’t a good idea, but she insisted because she wants to have grandkids before she’s 80. And I too would like to have grandkids before I’m 80, but I said that you’d figure it out. But your mom—”

“Mom, what is going on here?” Beau walked over to his mother. “Please do not tell me that you signed me up for some sort of mail order bride.” He looked back at me. “And honestly, I can’t believe that you responded. Are you crazy?”

“I think she might be,” Austin said with a laugh. “I really think she might be.”

“I’m not crazy,” I interrupted. “And you just shut up!” I poked Austin in the arm. “Why did you have to go and spill everything? Couldn’t you keep your mouth shut?”

“Couldn’t I keep my mouth shut?” He looked at me like I was crazy. “You’re the one that showed up at a local bar asking for the address to my home because you said your boyfriend lived there who was soon to be your fiancé and you were meeting your in-laws, and I’d never heard about you before in my life. And this is a small town, so now everyone knows that someone at Horseshoe Ranch is about to get married. And you’re asking why I let everybody know?” He turned to his mother. “And Mom, this was a ridiculous idea. How could you do that to Beau?”

“I just wanted the best for him,” she said softly. “You know I’m getting older.” Her voice was feeble now and I wondered if she was putting it on. “Forgive your mother. Sometimes I don’t think through everything.”

“Mom, quit acting.” Beau frowned at her then looked at me. “This is absolutely ridiculous. I’m guessing that’s why you didn’t want to tell me how you knew my mom?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“So you just decided to fly to Montana from New York City to marry me even though you don’t know me?” He

looked me up and down. “Are you a psychopath? Are you on the run from the law or what?”

“Or what,” I muttered, not even sure how to explain why I’d accepted such a ridiculous idea.

“You look pretty normal,” Austin chuckled. “I guess it’s the normal-looking, beautiful ones you have to worry about.”

For a moment, my heart soared at the fact that he’d called me beautiful, then I remembered that wasn’t enough to make up for ratting me out to his brothers. And kissing me. He’d kissed me thinking I was betrothed to his brother! Okay, so I wasn’t exactly *betrothed* because his brother didn’t even know who I was. But if I was to have any chance with Beau, how would he feel if he knew that I’d already kissed his brother?

“Look, I know it’s really hard for you guys to understand why I would fly here, but your mom seemed really cool and really nice. And I was kind of at my wits end in New York, and I figured that—”

“Stop, Lucy. You don’t have to answer them,” Amelia interrupted.

“No, it’s fine.” I looked at Beau and then I looked at Austin. I took a deep breath. They deserved an explanation, plus I didn’t want them to think I was crazy. “I can tell you guys why I’m here,” I said quietly.

Beau held his hand up. “Actually, can you maybe wait till dinner? That’s when the brothers get back and we all have dinner together. It’d most probably be easier if you explain it to everyone at the same time because I know everyone else is going to want to hear.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to go to my room now.”

“Of course.” Amelia walked over to me and gave me a big hug. “I’m sorry about this, Lucy. I didn’t expect my sons to be so rude and unwelcoming to a guest in our house.”

“But she’s not a guest,” Austin interrupted with a grin. “She’s family.”

Amelia fixed a stern look on him. “Austin, I am not going to tell you again to have some manners. Now, show Amelia to her room just in case she can’t find it and then come back here. I have some chores for you.”

“Mom!”

She frowned at him. “Don’t Mom me.”

“Fine,” he said. “Come on, Lucy.” He jerked his head toward the doorway and I took a step toward him.

“Hey, Lucy?” Beau said.

“Yeah?” I turned and looked back at him.

“For what it’s worth ...”

“Yeah?” I said.

“I still think you’re pretty hot.” He grinned at me.

“Thank you,” I said with a small laugh and then turned back to leave.

Austin was scowling as we made our way down the corridor back towards my room. “What’s your game plan here, Lucy?” he asked as we stopped outside my bedroom door.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s your plan?”

“I don’t quite understand your question.”

“You came here as a mail order bride, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn’t know the name of the man you were supposed to marry?”

“No.”

“You didn’t know what he looked like?”

“No.”

“And you’re serious about wanting to get married to him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So you’re serious about wanting to get married to Beau?”

“Well, I figured if we have a connection and we find each other attractive ...” I shrugged.

“So you want to marry him?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you find him attractive?”

“Yes, I do.”

He glared at my answer. “Yet, you were kissing me at the bar not even a couple of hours ago?”

“I wasn’t kissing you. You kissed me—”

“You didn’t stop me. I’m pretty confident that you kissed me back.”

“Well, you didn’t really give me a chance to stop anything. I—”

“Don’t you think I’m attractive?”

“I mean ... you’re okay.”

“Do you think I’m more attractive than Beau?”

“I don’t know.” I did not want to be having this conversation. The last thing I needed was for everyone to find out that I had also kissed Austin.

“So you’re determined to see if it’s going to work with Beau?”

“I mean, I don’t know. We’ve hardly spoken.”

“So if I were to kiss you again, you’d say no?”

“Of course.”

“Really?” He leaned in towards me and my legs suddenly felt weak. Austin had a sexual magnetism that most men didn’t, or at least not that I felt. He took a step closer to me, and I swallowed hard.

“So, Lucy,” he said, his eyes staring into mine. They were twinkling and daring me to resist him. “Lucy, I said your name,” he said again.

“I’m waiting to hear what you have to say.”

“I’m going to kiss you again.” His lips moved closer to mine. “Unless you say no.”

I opened my mouth to say no but no words would come out.

“I’m nearly there, Lucy,” he said, his lips a mere inch away from mine. “This is your last chance.”

I tried to say no again, but I couldn’t. And then his lips were on mine, pressing gently at first and then more forcefully. His tongue slipped into my mouth and I groaned against him as he wrapped his arms around my waist. We kissed for a long, languorous moment, my body melting into his.

And then he broke the spell by pulling back. “So I’m going to ask you once again, Lucy Kensington.”

“Yes?” I squeaked out.

“Do you really plan on marrying my brother?”

Chapter Nine

Austin burst into laughter. I turned and went into the bedroom, closing the door firmly behind me.

Heart still racing, from the kiss and from the surge of annoyance at the way he laughed at me, I walked over to the bed, sat down, and took out my phone. I almost started crying when I saw that Olivia had texted me that she was now available to talk. I called her quickly. I needed to hear my best friend's voice.

"Oh my gosh, Lucy, I was just about to call the police!" Olivia said as she answered the phone.

"Why?"

"Because I texted you 20 minutes ago and you haven't responded."

"Oh, sorry. I have been through so much in the last hour. You will not even believe it."

"So tell me everything, girl. I am absolutely dying to hear."

"Well, I'm at the house in my room."

"Ooh, you've got your own room. Girl, this ranch is like a McMansion, a mansion ranch, if there's such a thing."

That made me smile a little. "It's so big and so beautiful," I said as I looked around my room. "I have my own queen-sized bed, and I've got a rocking chair in the corner and a TV, and when I look outside my window, I have a view of the mountains. The actual mountains."

“Wow, that sounds absolutely amazing.” Olivia sounded impressed. “I mean, it’s not New York City, but it still sounds pretty cool.”

“You have to come and visit me ... Well, at least if I’m still here.”

“So, tell me everything. Have you met your guy?”

“Oh, my gosh,” I groaned. “You don’t even want to know the half of it.”

“I do, Lucy. Now tell me everything!”

“Well, so I get here, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I told you I went to the bar, right?”

“Yeah, you got the address at the bar.”

“Yeah. The part I didn’t tell you is about one of the guys at the bar.”

“Oh, boy ...”

“What’d you mean, *oh, boy*?”

“I mean, why are you telling me about some random guy that you met at the bar?”

“Well, he kind of kissed me.”

“You kissed some random guy at the bar?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh please, God, don’t tell me that’s the dad? Please tell me you did not make out with the dad. Oh my gosh, this sounds like a telenovela.”

That got a laugh out of me. “No, Olivia, I didn’t make out with the dad. But it’s kind of almost as bad.”

“Oh gosh, don’t tell me you made out with the granddad?”

“Ew, no, of course I didn’t make out with the granddad. Who do you take me for?”

“I take you for a woman that left the city to go to Montana to marry a man she’s never met before in her life.”

“That’s cold, Olivia.”

“Just a little bit,” she giggled. “Now tell me more. I’m dying here.”

“So I met this guy, and in fact, he was actually very good looking—though, I would never say that to his face because he’s an asshole.”

“Whoa, sounds like there’s feelings there already.”

“Oh *hell* no, girl! There are definitely no feelings there. But let’s just say he gave me a quick kiss and I maybe kissed him back for like two seconds, that’s it. I didn’t think I’d ever see him again.”

“Okay, but I’m guessing there’s a twist to this story.”

“Of course there is, Olivia. Of course there is.”

“Well, get on with it, Lucy!”

“Fine. So anyways, I drive to the house and I go up to the ranch.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And the dad answers.”

“Oh my God, and it was the guy that you kissed?”

“I already told you I didn’t kiss the guy. I mean, I didn’t kiss the dad. Don’t get it twisted, Olivia.”

“Don’t talk to me about twisted. You’re the one that’s kissing random guys in bars before driving up to meet your fiancé.”

“He’s not exactly my fiancé. Do you see a ring?”

“No, I don’t see a ring, but maybe you’ll be getting one soon.”

“Trust me, I don’t think so,” I laughed. “Anyway, I get there and the dad, Ranger, really nice guy, has no idea who I am.”

“Oh, no way. Are you joking?”

“No, I’m not joking. He has no clue who I am, and I’m just standing there on the doorstep like a fool and I’m thinking, okay, do I have enough money to get a flight to go back to New York City?”

“Okay, and I’m guessing the answer was no because you’re still there?”

“No, I have enough on my credit cards, but then I kind of said, ‘Look, I was speaking to your wife, Amelia, about coming to get married.’ And there was this strange look on his face and he suddenly remembered, I guess. His wife had some crazy idea a couple of months ago.”

“Oh man, this is juicy. So she never told her husband?”

“I guess not, I don’t know. She said she told him, and he said he didn’t remember, but you know how guys are.”

“Oh yeah,” Olivia groaned. “Trust me, do you know how many stories I’ve told my dad and my brothers and boyfriends and they don’t remember a word?”

“I know, I guess guys just do not listen. It’s a universal thing.”

“I think so,” Olivia said. “So tell me more.”

“He gets Amelia, who is the mom, the lady I was emailing with, and she greets me and she’s so sweet and so nice. I just think you’d absolutely love her.”

“Well, I don’t really need to love her, but as long as you like her.”

“Yeah, she was cool. So anyway, I come inside and I have some lemonade and some cookies.”

“Lucky. I want lemonade and cookies.”

“Olivia, stop interrupting me. Do you want to hear the rest of the story or not?”

“Well, of course I do. That’s why I’m on the phone.”

“So listen to me.”

“Fine.”

“So then anyways, two of the sons show up.”

“Ooh, they have two sons, huh?”

“Girl, they have *seven* sons.”

“Seven sons, no way! Well, hook a sister up.”

I started laughing. “Sure, I mean, none of them have girlfriends. Well, maybe Wyatt.”

“Who’s Wyatt?”

“Wyatt’s the youngest son, and supposedly he has some best friend called Sadie that is maybe the love of his life, but he doesn’t realize it.”

“That sounds like drama.”

“Yeah, but aside from him, it seems like the others are completely single.”

“Then hook me up, girl!”

“I’m trying to look myself up first.”

“So did you meet the guy yet?”

“Yes. So anyway, the two sons show up, Beau and Wyatt.”

“Okay, so Wyatt’s the one that you just said was kind of dating his best friend or something?”

“Yeah, I don’t know exactly what’s going on there, but he was really cute and really friendly. He actually kissed my hand.”

“Oh, wow, he sounds like a real southern gentleman.”

“Well, they’re not southern, remember? I’m in Montana. We’re close to the Canadian border.”

“Oh, yeah ... For some reason I always felt men from Montana were southern.”

“They’re not southern just because they’re cowboys.”

“Yeah, okay. So tell me more.”

“So Beau is the eldest, and he’s the one that I’m supposed to marry.

“So you met him? Is he really cute? Tell me what he looks like!”

“Well, he’s tall. He’s got this dark blonde hair and big blue eyes. He’s very striking, very handsome, and—”

“Ooh, he sounds dishy. Just my type.”

“Yeah, I think you would really like him. He’s definitely very handsome. But then—”

“Oh gosh, of course there’s a but then.”

“I’m sitting outside, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And guess who shows up?”

“I have no idea.”

“The guy from the bar.”

“Oh shit, don’t tell me that the guy from the bar is Beau’s secret gay lover.”

“What?” I asked her in astonishment. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“Like maybe there’s some Brokeback Mountain going on up there?”

“Oh my God, Olivia. Can you hear yourself?”

“What? I don’t care what they’re doing, but that would be kind of crazy.”

“That’s not what happened,” I laughed. “The guy showed up, Austin—”

“Ooh, Austin. Sexy name.”

“Yeah, it’s quite nice, but it was the guy from the bar.”

“You just told me that.”

“And he’s Beau’s brother.”

“Oh snap!” Olivia screamed. “You kissed your fiancé’s brother!” She giggled. “You are such a slut.”

“Well, he’s not my fiancé. I mean, we’re not technically engaged. We never even met before like an hour ago. And yeah, I know it’s absolutely crazy, isn’t it?”

“This sounds better than a daytime drama.”

“It is not better than a daytime drama because that guy, Austin, is such a trouble-maker. He basically let Beau know that I was there to marry him, and Beau had absolutely no idea.”

“Well, you already knew that the guy didn’t have any clue, right?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect him to find out this way.”

“How did this Austin guy find out anyway?”

“Because when I was at the bar, I kind of let it slip that I was going to meet my boyfriend’s parents.”

“Oh shit, you told Beau’s brother that you were going to meet the parents and Beau had never even heard of you, huh?”

“Exactly,” I groaned. “No one had heard of me, and there I was blabbing my mouth at the bar.”

“So what’s going on now?”

“I don’t know. I’m in my room. It seemed like it was all going down in the kitchen, but we’re going to have dinner later and everyone wants to find out why I came.”

“Well, what are you going to say?”

“I mean, I’m going to tell them the truth, that I felt like I didn’t have many options, and about my mom.”

“Are you going to tell them about Mikey?”

“I don’t know. What would I say?”

“Tell them that you got a crazy ex-boyfriend that’s harassing you and that’s another reason why he wanted to get out of the city.”

“Yeah, but will anyone believe that I have a crazy ex that’s in the mafia?”

“Girl, you’ll be okay. Just tell them, you might as well.”

“I don’t know. I already feel like the situation is out of hand. I don’t want them to think I’m a complete and utter psychopath.”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t want that. So do you think you’re going to go through with the wedding?”

“I don’t really think that’s up to me.”

“It’s a *little bit* up to you,” she pointed out with a laugh. “Are you attracted to this Beau?”

“I mean, he’s definitely very attractive.”

“Who’s better looking, Beau or Austin?”

“You can’t ask me a question like that. I mean, they’re brothers, they—”

“Tell me the truth. Who do you think is better looking?”

“I don’t know,” I whined. “I can’t answer that.”

But as I lay on the bed, eyes closed, it was Austin’s face I saw in my mind. Beau was definitely very attractive, maybe even more classically handsome than Austin. But there was something about Austin that I found so sexy—his dark hair, his twinkling mischievous green eyes. The way that he smiled at me, the way that he glared, the way that he kissed me. I could still feel the pressure of his lips against mine.

I had a little bit of a crush on Austin.

What a mess this was.

“Sounds to me like you don’t like the answer,” Olivia said softly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It sounds like you kissed one brother, but you’re engaged to the other.”

“Stop saying I’m engaged. I’m not engaged to anyone. I don’t even know if Beau thinks I am attractive.”

“Girl, you know he thinks you’re attractive. You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you, Olivia. But I’m sure there are plenty of beautiful women here in Montana.”

Yeah, but not with your sass and vitality.”

“Oh my god, Olivia,” I started laughing. “Do not crack me up.”

“I just hope you’re okay,” she said. “You can call me at any time of the day and night, and I will do my best to pick up. You know that, right?”

“I miss you so much. I wish we could go for drinks or something.”

“I know, I miss you too. And Lucy?”

“Yeah, Olivia?”

“Just follow your heart. Do what you want to do.”

“I’ll try, I guess. It’s been so great speaking to you. You always make me feel better.”

“No worries, love. But,” she started yawning, “I should get to bed. It’s late here and I’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I guess I should start getting ready for dinner. I don’t know that I can wear jeans and a sweatshirt.”

“Yeah, girl, go to that dinner looking hot, hot, hot, hot. You want every single brother at that table to be like, ‘I wish Mom had hooked *me* up with her.’”

“I don’t think so,” I laughed. “I think they’re all going to be staring at me like I’m some sort of loser.”

“There’s no way, Lucy. Trust me on that. There’s no way.”

Chapter Ten

I opened my suitcase and looked at the different dresses I had brought with me. Some of them didn't really seem appropriate for a family dinner. I had known when I was leaving New York that some of them might not be appropriate for Montana, but I wasn't sure exactly how country it was going to be.

Some were far too sexy. There was no way I was going down to the kitchen wearing what basically looked like a negligee. I didn't want Amelia to think she'd sent for a prostitute to come to Montana to marry her son. I wanted to look fashionable and attractive, but not at the cost of being mistaken for a streetwalker. Finally, I settled on a flowery dress that I'd gotten at Banana Republic. It was cute and relatively modest, but it was still flattering to my figure.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. My hair was still slightly damp. I wanted to blow dry it out, but I didn't want to look like I was trying too hard. I applied some light foundation, a little bit of blush, a lot of mascara and eyeliner, and some lipstick. I smiled at my reflection in the mirror. I looked pretty, some might even have said beautiful.

And I needed to feel pretty to be able to deal with the brothers and tell them everything that had gone on in my life before I'd arrived here.

I understood why they were suspicious of me. Not many people would just up and leave their home and fly to another state to meet some random man. But it wasn't because I couldn't get anyone else. It wasn't because I had no life. It was

because I was ready for a change, and Amelia had been so sweet and comforting when I'd spoken to her on the phone. She was almost like a surrogate mother. Part of me knew that one of the reasons I had come was just to be closer to her, to have that familial love that I missed from my own wonderful mother.

Tears started welling up again and I straightened my shoulders. I could not afford to cry right now. I had to be strong. There was no place in my life for being weak right now. I had to take care of myself. No one else was going to do it for me.

Well, there was Olivia. That was different, though. The comfort of a best friend was very different from a mom or dad. I didn't even think twice about my dad, though. He was an asshole. Always had been, never really been in my life. I had no relationship with him. I didn't even know if he was still alive.

I hated to think about my dad, about how he'd broken my mother's heart. She'd loved him. She'd wanted to marry him. She had hoped when she'd gotten pregnant that he would make an honest woman out of her, but he hadn't. He'd gone and married someone else, and I knew it had broken my mother's heart. There'd been many nights when I was young that I could remember her just lying there crying, staring at his photograph. It's weird the things you remember from your childhood. I couldn't remember many things, but that memory was always fresh in my mind.

I let out a deep sigh and shook my hands and my arms around so that I could try and get out some of my anxiety before I left the room. I then walked down to the kitchen, trying to breathe in and out like I'd been taught in yoga class. My heart was racing and my palms felt clammy, but I was filled with energy and hope for the night. I was enjoying being on the ranch. It was unfamiliar, but it already felt homey—maybe because the Hamiltons were so close-knit. Their obvious love filled the air and put me at ease.

“Hi, Amelia. Is there anything I can do to help?” I said as I entered the spacious kitchen. I'd die for a kitchen like this.

“Oh, Lucy, thank you for asking,” Amelia looked at me with a smile, her long white-blonde hair up in a bun, “but it’s okay. The boys have set the table and dinner’s nearly ready. Would you like something to drink, dear?”

“Oh, sure. I’ll have another lemonade, please.”

“Oh, it’s dinner time. How about something a bit stronger? Do you like wine?” She winked at me conspiratorially.

I laughed. “I love wine.”

“Shall we have some red or some white?”

“Oh, whatever you’re having. I’m easy.” I inhaled the delicious aroma filling the room. I was hungry and looking forward to some home-cooked food.

“Are you now?” a deep voice said from behind me. I turned around as Austin walked into the kitchen. I kept a pleasant smile on my face even though I wasn’t that happy to see him.

“Am I what?”

“Easy.” He grinned, a wicked smile in his eyes as he looked me up and down.

“Austin, go and get us a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon from the wine cellar please,” his mother looked at him, her lips pressed together. “Lucy and I are going to have a drink.”

“You sure that’s wise?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Excuse me, Austin.” She put her hands on her hips. “Who do you think you’re talking to, son?”

“I’m just joking, Mom.” He held his hands up. “I’m just joking. Don’t shoot.” He started laughing as he made his way to the doorway. “I’ll head down to the cellar now.”

“Don’t mind him,” Amelia said with an exasperated smile. “He’s my most incorrigible son.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, sometimes I don’t think he’ll ever get married.” She rolled her eyes. “I think that he’s going to be living at

home for the rest of his life.”

“Lifetime bachelor, huh?”

“I think so,” she nodded, a twinkle in her eye. “Sometimes I think he wouldn’t know love if it hit him in the head. And don’t let me even think of making a suggestion to him. He’d run so fast in the opposite direction.”

“What’s that, my dear?” Ranger entered the room. He looked like he had also recently showered. He had on a clean shirt and a pair of jeans. He walked over to his wife and kissed her on the cheek. She beamed at him and then kissed him back. He looked like a gruff old-school cowboy, but I could tell he had a heart of gold.

“Oh, nothing, dear. I was just telling Lucy that she should ignore Austin if he ever says anything rude or mean to her.”

“Oh, yes,” Ranger agreed. “Don’t mind Austin. In fact, don’t mind any of my sons. They’re all a little bit rough around the edges. No manners, not a one of them.”

“I tried my best, you know?” Amelia interjected, her blue-green eyes laughing. “But what can you do when you’re a mom with seven boys,” she sighed. “And when you live on a ranch. My sons are all headstrong. They’re like bulls, longhorn bulls.”

“What’s that, Mom?” Beau entered the room now. His gaze flew to me and he looked me up and down. “Why, hello there, Lucy.”

“Hi,” I said with a shy smile. There was a twinkle in his blue eyes that reminded me of his dad. He stood with such confidence, that it was easy to tell that he was the oldest of the brothers.

“Settling in okay?” he asked, walking over to me with a cowboy swagger I’d only seen in Western movies. He reminded me of a young Clint Eastwood. He was cool and sexy at the same time.

“Yes, thank you,” I nodded.

“Would you like a beer or something?” He headed towards the fridge and I was about to tell him no when Austin came back into the kitchen with a bottle of wine.

“She’s drinking wine tonight with Mom,” he said. “Which I don’t think is a good idea, do you?”

“Why not?” Beau asked.

“Mom and Lucy drinking wine?” Austin sounded disapproving.

“And me too, please,” another female voice said.

A young woman with long blonde hair and big blue eyes entered the room. “Hi, I’m Sadie.” She walked over to me and gave me a big hug. “I’m Wyatt’s best friend. Have you heard about me yet?” She laughed. “Actually, scratch that, I’m sure you’ve heard about me.”

“As a matter of fact, I have. Nice to meet you, Sadie.”

“Glad you could join us for dinner, Sadie,” Amelia said with a warm smile. “Where’s Wyatt?”

“Oh, he’s just parking. He picked me up, so I can drink tonight.” She grinned. She looked at me. “I don’t live that far away, but my parents hate it if I drink and drive, even though there’s literally nothing I could hit while driving home. Maybe a cow, and even that’s unlikely.”

“You know it’s much better to have someone drive you home,” Ranger said. “We want you to be safe, Sadie.”

“I know.” Sadie rolled her eyes as she grinned at me. “Ranger’s my second dad.”

“And I’m your second mom.” Amelia laughed. “Now, Austin, open that bottle of wine,” she ordered her son. “We haven’t got all day.”

“Yes, Mom.” He walked over to the side of the kitchen and opened a drawer. He pulled out a wine opener and then unscrewed the cork from the bottle. “So just the three of you women having wine?”

“I think that’s best, don’t you, son?” Amelia said with a grin. “You can just have beer. Or water, seeing as you don’t like alcohol.”

“Who said I don’t like alcohol?” Austin shook his head. “I love me some alcohol.”

“We know, dear.” Amelia laughed. “Okay, I’ve got a big tray of lasagna coming out and a nice Italian salad and some garlic bread. I hope everyone is hungry.”

“Mm, I love your lasagna, Mom,” Beau said. “Where’s Chet?”

“I think he’s getting ready. He should be here in a little bit. Anyone else joining us for dinner?” Austin looked back at his parents.

“No, Chet isn’t joining us tonight. I think your other brothers are still out.” Amelia looked at me. “I like to have family dinners every night, but the whole family doesn’t have to be here. Only on Sundays. And that’s for a big lunch.”

“Oh, that sounds really nice,” I said. “Really, really nice. I think it’s so nice when families can eat together.”

“I’m glad you think so, dear. It’s a family tradition that I intend to keep for a very long time.”

“Yes, Mom, we know,” Beau groaned. “God forbid anyone not make it.”

“So, Lucy,” Sadie said as it went quiet in the room.

“Yes, Sadie?” I looked at her curiously. She was a pretty girl with a very open and honest face. I could see Wyatt watching her every move with an affectionate expression.

She started giggling. “I hear you’re here to marry Beau.”

Beau groaned. “Oh, Sadie, not now. Please, can we give it a little bit of a break?”

“What? I just got here. Wyatt didn’t seem to know anything, and I’m trying to catch up, thank you very much, Beau.” She grinned at me. “So, you’re really a mail order bride?”

“Well, I guess kind of,” I laughed. “I’ll be telling the whole story at dinner. So don’t worry, you haven’t missed much.”

“Oh, goodie. Because this I got to hear!” She clapped her hands with excitement. “And I hate to say it, Lucy, but you’re an absolute stunner. I’m surprised you moved all the way from New York City to be with Beau. I mean, what photos did Amelia send you of him? He must’ve been looking really good. Were they shirtless?”

“Really, Sadie?” It was Wyatt’s turn to look annoyed.

“What?” She looked at Wyatt innocently. “I’m just saying, it’s obvious that Beau has a great chest. I wanna see the photos.”

“Sadie,” Wyatt’s eyes narrowed, “stop hitting on my brother.”

“I’m not hitting on your brother. I’m just saying I—”

“Come on, Sadie. Let me show you to the fire pit.” Wyatt made a face at her.

“Don’t go out just now,” Amelia said. “We’re about to eat dinner.”

“But I want to show her the new fire pit I put in.”

“Show her after dinner.”

“Yeah, show me after dinner, Wyatt.” She looked at me. “I swear to God, sometimes these Hamilton men, they really, really like to boss you around. So listen to me now,” she grinned. “I’m going to give you a little bit of advice.”

“Sure, I’d love some advice,” I laughed.

“Just because they’re bossy and just because they always think they’re right, it doesn’t mean that they are.”

“Okay, I’ll remember that.”

“Yeah, you do that,” she grinned. “Trust me. And I’ll give you my phone number before I leave. If you ever want to go for lunch or want someone to talk to or give you any dirt on the family, I’m the girl to call.”

“Um, you know we’re all here right now, Sadie?” Wyatt said, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, Sadie,” Beau shook his head. “What dirt are you going to offer up on my family?”

“I don’t know.” She looked over at Amelia. “It’s really up to your mom and dad.”

“What do you mean it’s up to Mom and Dad?” Austin said dryly. “You’re the one that’s dishing the tea.”

“But I wouldn’t say anything they didn’t give me permission to say. I do respect my elders.” She smiled impishly. “Now, I’m hungry, Amelia. Are we going to get that lasagna soon?”

“Yes, Sadie. Go on, everyone,” Amelia said. “Ranger, Austin, and Beau, you help me bring out the dishes. Everyone else can go and sit down.”

“Yes, Mom,” the boys chorused. I looked at them with a smile on my face.

This was the sort of family dinner I’d always imagined big families had. Funny and quirky and warm and loving. I was so happy to be here even if it wasn’t the most auspicious of circumstances. I wasn’t even sure how long I’d actually get to stay. Yes, Beau was attractive, and he seemed to find me attractive. But now that he knew I was here to marry him, would he even give me a chance? And even more importantly, did I want him to?

As I left the kitchen, I glanced over at Austin only to find him staring intently at me. I turned my face away quickly and hurried out to the dining room. This was turning out to be a lot more complicated than I could have imagined.

Chapter Eleven

“So, I really want to hear what brought you here,” Sadie asked me with wide eyes. “I hope I’m not being too forward, am I?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m pretty sure everyone at this table wants to know what got me here, aside from Amelia, of course.”

“Oh, so you were speaking with Amelia before you came?” Sadie asked.

“Sadie, let the girl speak,” Wyatt cut her off. “Please.”

“Excuse me, I’m just asking questions. You want to know the answers as much as I do.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a nosy parker like you. I’ll wait until she volunteers some information.”

“You’ll be waiting all your life,” Amelia muttered.

“What, Mom?” Wyatt looked at her.

“Nothing, son, nothing.” Amelia looked at me with a soft smile. “Lucy, don’t feel pressured to have to say anything. Obviously, my children want to know what’s going on, but you only have to speak when you’re good and ready.”

“No, it’s fine.” I took a deep breath as looked around at everyone at the table. “I’m sure that you all want to know why I came here from New York City to marry Beau, even though Beau and I had never met and we didn’t even know what each other looked like.”

“So you never even saw Beau before you decided to come?” Sadie’s eyes widened even more. “Wow. I don’t think I could ever do that.”

“But you don’t have to worry about that, Sadie.” Wyatt interrupted. “Because there’s no guy out there that wants to marry you.”

“That’s not true, actually.” Sadie looked prim. “In fact, I was asked out just last night.”

“Asked out by who?” Wyatt’s eyes narrowed.

“Guys!” Beau spoke up. “This is not your moment. Lucy said she wanted to tell us some stuff. And I, for one, I’m very interested to find out exactly what’s going on.”

“Sorry,” Sadie said, shooting a sideways glance at Wyatt. “But I do have a date, so there.”

“Who do you have a date with? The postman?” He rolled his eyes.

“You wish! I have a date with—”

“Guys!” It was Austin’s turn to interrupt them. “If you guys want to continue having this conversation, take it outside.”

“We’ll talk later,” Wyatt said with a glare.

He was obviously annoyed, and I looked at the affectionate looks on both Sadie’s and Wyatt’s faces and smiled to myself. It was obvious to me that they should be together, just as it was obvious to Amelia and Ranger. I could tell though, that Wyatt and Sadie had absolutely no clue that they were made for each other.

I wondered what it must feel like to be best friends with someone and be so comfortable with them but not realize that there was actually more there. I’d never had that sort of relationship with any man. It would be nice to have a male best friend. Even though I loved Olivia, and no one could ever take her place.

“So ...” I cleared my throat. “As most of you know, I came from New York ...”

Austin rolled his eyes. “Tell us something we don’t know.”

“Austin!” Amelia said, chiding him. “Don’t be rude to our guest.”

“Yes, Ma.” He sat back and pressed his lips together.

“So, I actually was born and raised in Brooklyn in the Prospect Park area. I don’t know if any of you guys know it.” They all stared at me blankly. “Well, it’s kind of a nice area now. It wasn’t really that great when I was growing up. My mom’s family lived there. Um, my grandparents passed away a while ago.” I bit my lip. “I didn’t really know my dad. He was my mom’s boyfriend. But when she told him she was pregnant, he took off.”

“Oh, that’s horrible!” Sadie said. “I can’t stand men like that.”

“Yeah, it was very unfortunate. But my mom was the best. She took care of me and she loved me and ...”

“She sounds amazing,” Sadie said. “Is she going to come and visit as well?”

“No,” I said softly. I could feel myself becoming overwhelmed with emotion. “My mom actually passed away about a year ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Sadie put her arm around my shoulder. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay.” I looked across the table and I could see Beau and Austin, both staring at me. I couldn’t tell what they were thinking from the expression on their faces, but they didn’t look like they hated me, which was good. “So, when my mom passed away, it was very sudden. We didn’t know she was sick, and I felt kind of lost. I was dating this guy at the time as well.”

“Oh, so you have a boyfriend.” Austin rolled his eyes. “Really?”

“No,” I said. “At the time, I was dating someone. I’m no longer dating him.” I sighed. “And he was a mistake in the

first place. His name was Mikey. And I found out that he had ties to the Mafia.”

“No way!” Sadie said. “Like the Godfather or Goodfellas?”

“Well, not exactly.” I grimaced. “I mean, I didn’t really know his family that well, so maybe? We weren’t in a very serious relationship, and I didn’t really find out until I was getting ready to break up with him. And he was like, ‘You can’t break up with me.’ And I was like, ‘Well, I am breaking up with you.’ And he’s like, ‘Once you date me, you can never leave.’ And I was like, ‘What are you talking about?’ And he’s like, ‘I’ll have my people get you.’” I stopped

Sadie’s mouth was hanging open and everyone else was looking at me in shock.

“Basically, he told me that he didn’t want to let me go, and that no woman could ever leave him,” I added. “And he’s sort of been harassing me ever since.”

“What do you mean by harassing you?” Beau sounded angry. “Is this something you want us to help take care of? Is that why you’re really here? Because you’re scared of this guy?”

“I think it’s a lot of different things,” Amelia said. “She’s missing her mom, and she wants something new in her life.”

“So did you, or did you not, come here to marry Beau?” Austin said. “Because I very clearly remember you in the bar going on about your in-laws and your boyfriend that was in love with you.”

“I mean, obviously I was embarrassed to tell the truth in the bar to two strangers!” I snapped at Austin. He was really starting to get on my last nerve. “Of course, Beau doesn’t love me. He’s never met me before, but—”

“But are you interested in seeing if you and Beau could have some sort of relationship?” Austin said again. And I swallowed hard, I looked over at Beau’s face and I could tell that he was wondering the same thing.

“Don’t get me wrong, Lucy.” Beau gave me an awkward smile. “I do think you’re very beautiful, but I’m really not in any position to get married anytime soon. And that’s sort of just a lot of pressure, you know?”

“I understand that. I mean, I don’t really know the plan.” I looked at Amelia for help. “It was your mom that invited me here.”

All eyes turned to Amelia, who just smiled.

“Well, you all know that I wanted you boys to settle down. I want at least one or two or all of you to get married, you know. I want grandkids, and your father and I—”

“Don’t bring me into this, Amelia!” Ranger interrupted. “This was not my idea.”

“I wasn’t going to say it was your idea, honey. I was just going to say we had been talking about different ways to try and get you boys to get married.”

“And when you brought up the idea of a mail-order bride, I said no,” Ranger said firmly.

“Yes, honey, you said no, but it was worth a try.” She shrugged. “I put a small advertisement in a couple of papers and corresponded with people who responded.”

“You mean, more than one person responded?” Sadie said, looking surprised.

“In fact, I had over a hundred responses.” Amelia nodded. “It seems like there are a lot of women that would love to come to Montana and marry a cowboy.” She smiled at me. “But I knew immediately from talking with Lucy that she was the only one who would do for my boy.”

“So, you think she’s a perfect match for Beau?” Austin raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

Amelia just looked at him. “Austin, why do you always have to argue? Why is it that you’re my most argumentative son?”

“I’m not argumentative, Mom.” Austin’s voice rose. “I’m just—”

Beau patted him on the shoulder. "It's okay, dude. You don't have to fight my battles for me. It's cool. I know Mom's wanted one of us to get married for a long time. And I'm the oldest." He shrugged. "This is not exactly what I had in mind or what I was looking for. But I mean, it does make things easy on me." He looked over at me. "I mean, I guess we could go on a date or something."

"You're really going to go on a date? Really?" Austin spoke up, sounding annoyed. "This is really not cool!"

"What is your problem, dude?" Wyatt said. "If I didn't know any better, I'd—" Amelia cut him off.

"Enough! Everyone, we've had enough about talking about this. Let's all enjoy our dinner, and then after dinner, we can play some games. I'm sure Lucy doesn't want to continue talking about this the entire dinner. Let's give her some time to enjoy and relax."

"Yes, Mom." Wyatt rolled his eyes. Austin shook his head and Beau just nodded. I sat there feeling very uncomfortable.

Sadie leaned in close to me. "It's okay," she whispered. "They're always like this. Even when it's not mail order brides." She giggled. "You'll get used to it. It's the Hamilton way."

"Oh, thanks," I said, grateful for her encouragement. "I don't want to be the one that was causing trouble in the house."

"Oh, trust me, girl. Just wait until the other brothers get here." She started laughing. "This is an absolute madhouse, but I'm glad you're here. It'd be nice to have another woman aside from Amelia in the house with me."

"You really spend a lot of time here, huh?" I asked her.

"Oh, yeah. Wyatt and I have been best friends for years and years and years. This is like my second home."

"Oh, that's awesome! Um, you guys don't date, or you've never dated?"

“Oh, no way!” She shook her head. “I could never date Wyatt.” She looked over at him but there was something in her eyes that made me wonder if that was the truth.

Chapter Twelve

“Thank you for an absolutely delicious and wonderful dinner, Amelia. I really appreciate it. You’re a great cook.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, my dear. I’m so glad you enjoyed my cooking. Do you enjoy spending time in the kitchen as well?”

“To be honest, I do, though I’m not that great. I only know about four or five different recipes,” I admitted. “Maybe you’ll teach me some of your recipes one day.”

“Oh, I’d love to do that, dear.”

“I want to be there as well,” Sadie interjected as she walked into the kitchen. “I would love some of your delicious recipes, Amelia.”

“Of course, Sadie. But I didn’t know that you were interested in learning how to cook.”

“What? I’ve been asking for your lasagna recipe for years,” she laughed. “Just ask Wyatt.”

“Well, now I’m sure Wyatt doesn’t want to learn how to cook.”

“Did you say my name, Mom?” Wyatt walked into the kitchen. “What are you telling my mom about me, Sadie?”

“I’m not telling her anything that she doesn’t already know,” Sadie replied.

“Uh-huh.” He looked from to his mom. “So, Mom?”

“Yes, Wyatt?”

“I think I’m going to be going out of town next week. Is that okay?”

“Where are you going?” Amelia and Sadie asked at the same time.

“Whoa. What are you guys? My wardens?” He shook his head. “Do I have to tell you where I’m going? I’m an adult now.”

“I was just curious, dear,” Amelia shrugged.

“Me too,” Sadie chimed in. “I’m your best friend, so you kind of have to tell me.”

“Best friends don’t have to tell best friends everything.”

“Fine.” Sadie smirked. “I guess I won’t tell you more about my date tomorrow.”

“What do you mean about your date tomorrow? I thought you said someone asked you out. You didn’t say you were actually going on the date.”

“Well, maybe I am. Maybe I’m not.” Sadie looked at her watch. “Oops, is that the time? I’ve got to go. I’ve got a very important phone call later on tonight.” She turned to me and gave me a quick hug. “It was so nice meeting you, Lucy. I hope to see you again.” Then she walked over to Amelia. “A pleasure as always, Amelia.”

“Oh, I love seeing you, Sadie. Give your parents my regards.”

“Will do.” She turned around and stuck her tongue out at Wyatt. “Bye, loser.”

“Whatever, loser. See ya.”

And with that, Sadie left the house.

“I swear, you guys are so immature,” Amelia shook her head. “And that’s no way to be talking to your best friend.”

“What? That’s how we always talk to each other,” Wyatt rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I’m going upstairs. I’ll be in my

room.”

“Okay.”

He left the kitchen just as Austin and Beau walked in with Ranger not far behind. “Lovely dinner, Amelia.” Ranger walked over and kissed his wife.

I loved the way that he always found a way to touch her, and she always beamed at him with love and adoration. They were so very much in love. It was very obvious even after being together so long, even after having seven kids.

“So, Beau ...” Amelia looked at her eldest son.

“Yes, Mama?”

“I was thinking that maybe you could take Lucy into town to get some ice cream for dessert.”

“Oh.” He looked at me and then he looked at his mom. “I’m not sure that’s going to be possible, actually.”

“That’s fine,” I said quickly, wondering if he just didn’t want to be with me one-on-one.

“Oh no, not anything to do with you, Lucy. Just me and Dad, we had some business to go over tonight that’s important because we’re meeting with the bank tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, yes.” Amelia nodded. “I quite forgot about that. Too bad. It would have been nice for Lucy to taste the local ice cream. It’s freshly made, you know? And they have lots of delicious flavors.”

Austin held his hand up. “I can take her,” he said with a sigh.

“Well, don’t sound so enthusiastic about it,” I blurted out before I could stop myself. And then I changed my tone. “But I mean, if you don’t mind.” I looked over at Amelia who was looking at me with a curious expression on her face. *Be cool, Lucy, be cool. You do not want this lovely family to think that you’re a hot mess ...* which perhaps I was, but they didn’t need to know that about me just yet.

“Oh, well that would be lovely, Austin. Are you sure you don’t mind?” Amelia beamed at her son.

“I don’t mind.” He shrugged. “You ready?” He looked at me.

“Well, I guess. I was going to put some lip gloss—”

“You don’t need to put any lip gloss on,” he cut me off. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, and Lucy?” Ranger said as we were walking out of the kitchen.

“Yes, Mr. Hamilton?”

“Get the lemon chiffon ice cream. It’s absolutely delicious.”

“Okay,” I laughed. “I’ll get that.” I followed Austin out of the kitchen and then out of the front door. We walked towards an old Chevy pickup truck.

Austin opened his door as I opened mine. “Well, I guess chivalry is dead in Montana.”

“Excuse me?” he looked at me as he turned the keys in the ignition.

“I was just saying that we’re in the country, and I thought you guys are meant to be very chivalrous. I guess that’s not true.”

“Chivalry is certainly not dead just because I didn’t open the car door for you.”

“Well, I mean, if you were a gentleman, you would have opened the car door for me.”

“Well, if you were a lady, you wouldn’t have been in the bar earlier this afternoon talking about meeting your in-laws of the boyfriend that loved you very much.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re a liar.”

“I’m not a liar. I was uncomfortable telling the truth to two strangers in the bar.”

“Obviously,” he nodded. “What else have you lied about, Lucy?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, what else have you lied about?”

“I haven’t lied about anything else. I was very honest about why I came.”

“So you, a beautiful young lady, just decides to leave New York City, the big city, and head to Montana to marry a guy she’s never seen, she’s never talked to, she’s never met just because you spoke to some random lady?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s not like that. I answered the ad, and I guess I was just at a lonely point in my life. I didn’t really think anything would come of it. And then I spoke to your mom on the phone and she was so sweet and nice, and I figured I had nothing left to lose, you know? It was nice to speak to someone who cared. Even though she didn’t know me, she’d ask me about my day. She’d inquire about my life.” I took a deep breath. “Anyway, you wouldn’t understand. You’re lucky.”

“What do you mean I’m lucky? Because I live on a big ranch? Do you think I’ve got a lot of money, is that it?”

“Did I even mention money? It has nothing to do with money,” I snapped at him as he drove down the long country road.

“So then why am I so lucky?”

“You’re lucky because you have a big loving family. Do you know how many people would kill for something like that? You know what I’d do to have such a loving family, to have brothers that love me, parents that cared about me? You just don’t appreciate it.”

“I appreciate it,” he said quietly. “I know that I’m lucky. My mom and dad are amazing. They’re still married and they’re still in love, which I know is not the norm. Trust me, I have plenty of friends whose parents are divorced, and it hasn’t been amicable.” He shrugged, “But that doesn’t mean

that we don't have our own problems as well. And it doesn't mean that you weren't a fool to come here."

"Thank you. Now you're calling me a fool?"

"You know you're a fool. How unsafe is that?"

"What?"

He glanced over at me. "A beautiful young woman like you should not be traveling to another state to meet some random person. That's so dumb. I'm mad at you."

"You're mad at me?"

"Yeah, I'm mad at you. You came here to marry my brother, knowing absolutely nothing about my family. You got lucky because we're cool. And you got lucky because my brother is easy-going, but ..." He stopped. "Anyway, let's not talk about this."

"No. What were you going to say?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, what were you going to say," I insisted.

"I was going to say that I don't know what you're expecting to get from Beau."

"What does that mean?"

"Do you think he's going to marry you?"

"I don't know. We don't even really know each other yet."

"So you're still holding on to the possibility that he might marry you?"

"I don't know!" I exclaimed. "Why are you questioning me like this? It's between me and Beau. I'm not the one that sent for me. Your mom was, so obviously she knows more than you do and she knows more than I do. And I'm just going to trust in the whole thing. I don't even know what I'm saying anymore. Just shut up."

"What did you just say to me?"

"I said just shut up. Like, let me just be, okay?"

“You told me to shut up?”

“Yeah, I told you to shut up. If that’s all you’re going to talk about, then I don’t want to talk. Let’s just go and drive and get the ice cream and then we can go back home.”

He looked at me and I could see that his lips were twitching. “You got a temper on you, huh, Lucy?”

“I don’t have a temper on me. I just don’t like being bullied.”

“Honey, I’m not bullying you.”

“Well, maybe you’re not bullying me, but it sure feels like it.” I turned away from him and pressed my lips together and looked out at the window. There was absolutely nothing at the side of the road except for green pastures and crops. There weren’t even any buildings, let alone skyscrapers. “I’m really not in Kansas anymore, am I?” I murmured.

“No, you’re not, Dorothy,” he replied softly. I looked over at him and he gave me a warm smile. “Peace treaty?” he said. “At least for the rest of the evening?”

“Fine,” I agreed. “Peace treaty.”

We arrived at a little town about 15 minutes later. It was a cute little main street, and I thought to myself how quaint it all looked. It reminded me of what a town would have looked like back in the 1800s. I felt like I’d gone back in time.

“So, do you need to do any shopping or do you want to go directly to get the ice cream?” Austin asked.

“I don’t need to do any shopping,” I said, not wanting to admit that while I did want to do some shopping to get some better clothes, I knew my bank account and my credit cards would thank me for not doing any.

“Okay, then. Let’s get some ice cream.”

We stood in line and waited. I read the different options on the menu and wondered what to get. His dad had said to get lemon chiffon, but they also had mint chocolate chip, which was my favorite.

“You know what you want to get?” Austin asked.

“I think so ...?”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too decisive,” he said.

“Well, your dad recommended lemon chiffon, but ... “

“But what?”

“I don’t know, I kind of wanted to try another flavor.”

“You know you can get two scoops?”

“I know, but I don’t want to be greedy. Plus, your mom’s dinner was delicious and it was really filling, and I’m not sure that I could have two scoops.”

“Well, I’m getting mint choc chip.”

“Oh, you are!” I exclaimed happily. “If I could get a couple of licks of that, that would be amazing. Then I could get the lemon chiffon as well.” I paused as I realized what I was saying. “But obviously, you don’t have to let me have any of your mint choc chip. That’s weird. Sorry. You don’t even know me. You don’t even know if I have germs or—”

“It’s okay,” he laughed. “I’ve kissed you, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” I blushed, looking away.

“So you can have more than one lick of my mint choc chip ice cream,” he grinned. “You can have more than one lick of something else as well.”

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“Nothing.” He winked at me.

My skin and my entire body felt hot. He was flirting with me. He was definitely flirting with me ... and I liked it. His sparkling green eyes laughed at me as we stood there, and I wondered what I would have done if he had been the man I was here to marry. I would have been happy and angry at the same time. Happy because he was absolutely gorgeous, even more gorgeous than Beau, though I wouldn’t admit that to a soul other than Olivia. But angry because his personality was so jarring and he was so annoying and antagonistic.

I had a feeling he didn't really like me much, and maybe that was my fault for lying to him in the beginning. But it wasn't my fault that his mom had put an ad in the newspaper and I'd responded.

"So have you been listening to anything I've been saying, Lucy?" he said, and I looked up at him realizing I hadn't heard a word he'd said.

"Uh, yeah, let's do that," I said.

"Let's do what?" his brows furrowed as he gazed at me.

"Um, you get the mint choc chip and I get the lemon chiffon."

"Okay. That wasn't the question I'd asked you, though."

"Oh, what was the question?"

"I asked you if you had clothes to go riding tomorrow."

"Oh," I said, feeling like an idiot yet again. "Um, I'm sure I can figure something out."

"Are you a good rider? Do you like riding?"

"Oh, I absolutely love it. When I was younger, I used to participate in riding competitions," I lied, remembering the horse books I'd read as a young girl.

"Really?" he looked at me in surprise. "I didn't take you for a horsewoman."

"Well, you know me, I'm one with nature and all that."

"You're one with nature." He raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes, really. That's why I'd be the perfect bride for Beau."

His eyes narrowed. "You think you'd be the perfect bride for my brother?"

"Yes, I do," I beamed at him. "I think he and I are a match made in heaven."

"Really?" He took a step closer to me. "Because I kind of have a different opinion."

“Oh?” I said softly, swallowing hard as his lips came towards mine.

“Yeah, I do.” He kissed my lips, gently at first and then a little bit more firmly before pulling away. I stared at him stunned, not believing that he’d done that right here in the ice cream shop in front of everyone.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“What do you mean what am I doing? I’m doing what you like.”

“I never said I like it. I—”

“Are you telling me that you don’t like it when I kiss you, Lucy?”

“I didn’t—”

“Think very carefully before you answer that,” he grinned. “You don’t want me to think you’re just a big, bad liar, do you?”

Chapter Thirteen

The sunlight poured through my window as I woke up and stretched, grateful to be in such a luxurious, soft bed. It'd been a long time since I'd slept in a queen-sized bed. In fact, I'd never had a queen-sized bed myself and only had slept in one when I'd been dating Mikey.

I groaned as I thought about my ex-boyfriend. I should have known from the moment that I had met him that he was going to be trouble. But he was a good-looking guy and I'd been flattered by the attention, and I'd overlooked all the signs. I shook my head as I got out of bed. The last thing I wanted to do right now was think about Mikey. I had bigger things to worry about.

I debated going to the kitchen to get a coffee. I didn't really want to venture out through the house in just shorts and a t-shirt, but I knew that it might look kind of weird if I showered and got dressed before I even went to the kitchen. I prayed that no one would be in the kitchen as I made my way along the corridor. I paused outside the door as I listened to Amelia singing.

"Early one morning, just as the sun was rising."

"I love that song," I said as I walked into the kitchen. Amelia paused from flipping eggs on the stove and turned round to look at me.

"Good morning, Lucy. I hope you slept well."

"I did, thank you. The bed was very comfortable."

"I'm glad to hear that," said a smooth voice to the left.

Of course. Austin was already up and in the kitchen. I almost groaned out loud but forced a smile instead. “Yeah, it was great. And thanks again for taking me for ice cream last night,” I said, hoping that he wouldn’t bring up the kiss in front of his mother.

“You’re welcome. We’ll have to go again.”

“Well, maybe Beau will take me.” I looked away from him.

“That would be nice, dear, wouldn’t it?” Amelia said as if she could sense the tension. “You know, I do think that you should go on a tour of the ranch today. Maybe Beau will be able to show you around.”

“I’m sure Beau will be too busy,” Austin said dryly.

“Well, I can wait until he is ready,” I said quickly, hoping that Amelia wasn’t going to ask Austin to show me around. The last thing I needed was for him to try something when we were in the stables or something because I knew I wouldn’t be able to resist him and I felt guilty about it. I was brought here to be Beau’s wife, not to flirt with his brother.

“Oh, and you’re going to get to meet Chet today,” Amelia said with a wide smile. “He’s going to be here for lunch.”

“Oh, awesome. I can’t wait to meet more of your sons.”

“Yeah. Maybe you’ll fall in love with him too,” Austin said. I just rolled my eyes.

“Now, now,” Amelia chided him. “Be nice to Lucy. I’m not going to tell you again.”

“I am nice, Mother.”

“Don’t mother me, Austin Hamilton.” She shook her head. “Now Lucy, I’m making eggs. What would you like?”

“Oh, whatever’s easiest.”

“Whatever you want, my dear. I can do fried, over medium, over easy, over hard. I can do scrambled. I can do boiled. I can do poached. I can do an omelet.”

“My mom’s the egg queen,” Austin chuckled. “Really, she’s happy to make you whatever you want.”

“Oh, you really don’t have to do that. I don’t normally have much for breakfast. Just some coffee.”

“Oh, you have to have more than coffee, dear. A young girl like you. Especially being on the ranch, you got to keep up your strength. Coffee’s not going to keep up your strength.”

“When I’m in New York, I normally just have coffee. And then for lunch, I’ll have something more substantial.”

“Well, you’re not in New York anymore,” Austin reminded me. “You’re in Montana now. You’re a country girl.”

“Well, I don’t know that I’d go that far just yet,” I said. “I’m more like a city girl in the country.”

“That sounds like one of those Hallmark movies, doesn’t it?” Amelia said with a laugh.

“Oh yeah. I guess it kind of does.” I looked over at Austin.

“Don’t look at me. I have no idea what you’re talking about. I thought Hallmark made Christmas cards.”

“Oh, Austin. What do I ask you to watch with me every Christmas?”

“Crappy romance movies?”

“They’re not crappy,” I spoke up. “They’re amazing. I love Hallmark movies. I always wished my life would be like a Hallmark movie.”

“Well, it kind of is,” Amelia said with a small smile. “Just think. If your life was a Hallmark movie right now, what do you think it would be called?”

“I don’t know,” I laughed. “Crazy girl in Montana?”

“You’re not crazy, dear. No one searching for love is crazy.” She paused. “Let me think. If I was a director at Hallmark, I think I’d call your movie City Girl Looking for Romance in Montana. No, no.” She paused. “I don’t like that. Let’s see. City Girl Looking for Montana Romeo. Yes. That’s great.”

“Oh, I like it!” I laughed. “Yes, I would love to meet my Romeo.”

“Did someone say my name?” Beau walked into the kitchen with a big smile.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Good morning to you too, beautiful.” My cheeks grew hot as he gave me an appreciative once-over. “Sleep well?”

“Yes. Thank you. You?”

“Of course.” He looked over at Austin. “Hey, bro.”

“Hello,” Austin said stiffly.

“So sorry I couldn’t take you for ice cream yesterday,” Beau continued. “But maybe later this week.”

“Oh, that would be great. I’d love that very much.”

“I feel like you say that to all the men,” Austin muttered.

“Austin,” Amelia glared at him. “Enough.”

“What, Mom? I’m just joking. If she’s going to be my sister-in-law, she’s going to have to be able to take a joke. She is going to have six Hamilton brothers. She’s going to have to take far more than a weak little joke like that.”

“Yes, dear. But if she becomes a Hamilton—” Amelia paused, “Actually, *when* she becomes a Hamilton, then she’ll deal with it. Not any time before then.”

“Well, don’t go jumping the gun, Mom,” Beau said and gave me an awkward little smile. “We haven’t even been on our first date yet.”

“Yes, Amelia. I mean, your family is wonderful, and I would definitely love to be a part of it. But let’s see if there are any connections to be made.”

“Oh, I think there’s a connection to be made, all right,” Austin said as he looked at me, at my lips. “I think there’s a very deep connection to be made.”

“Well, you would know, Austin,” I said. “Seeing as you’re, what? Some sort of genius?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said seeing as you’re some sort of genius. You seem to know everything, right?”

“Uh-huh,” he drawled, his eyes staring into mine. “You don’t want to play these games with me, Lucy,” he said, so softly that only I could hear him.

“So, did you decide what you wanted to eat yet?” Amelia asked me. I was grateful for her interruption.

“Maybe a cheese omelet, if you don’t mind.”

“That sounds pretty yummy. With some toast?”

“Hmm, that does sound good,” Beau nodded. “I’ll go halves with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Perfect.”

“Just cheese, dear? Nothing else? No mushrooms, peppers, bacon, ham, onions?”

“Oh no. I ...” I paused and then looked over at Beau. “Well, what would you like?”

“Well, I would absolutely love cheese, mushrooms, and sausage, if you don’t mind.”

I paused. I didn’t like mushrooms at all and I certainly didn’t want them in an omelet, but I didn’t want to say that to him.

“Gross,” Austin said. “Mushrooms in an omelet. Yuck.”

I looked over at him in surprise. That must’ve been the only thing we have in common.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he said.

“Just I’ve never met anyone else that didn’t like mushrooms as much as me,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t like mushrooms?”

“No, I can’t stand them.” I looked at Beau and then Amelia. “Maybe you could do half the omelet with mushrooms and the other half not?”

“Sure, dear. Why don’t you guys have a seat? Oh, and Beau?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“I was thinking you could show Lucy around the ranch today. Get her acquainted with how everything works so she can see the property.”

“Sure, Mom. Definitely.” He looked over at me. “You excited?”

“Of course. Maybe I should go and shower now and get ready. And then after breakfast, we can go?”

“Oh, you don’t have to shower now,” Austin said. “You can wait to shower until after you shoveled the horse manure.”

“What?” I said, my eyes widening.

“You do know you’re on a ranch, right?” He looked at me and started laughing. “You’re going to see horse manure, cow pat, deer shit, dog shit.”

“Enough,” Amelia scolded. “This is the kitchen. This is not talk for the kitchen.”

“Mom, since when have you cared what we talk about in the kitchen?” Austin rolled his eyes.

“Now that we have a female guest in the house.”

“It’s okay. You guys can talk about whatever you want to talk about,” I said quickly. “Don’t mind me. Pretend I’m not even here.”

“How could we do that?” Beau said with a small smile. “Someone as beautiful as you, we couldn’t forget that you’re here.”

“Well, that’s mighty nice of you. I wouldn’t say that I am beautiful.”

“Really?” Austin said with a smirk. “What would you say then?”

“I’d say that I’m pretty. That I’m average. That I’m okay.”

Amelia laugh. “Oh my, dear, no. You’re gorgeous. You have to know that.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. I never really considered myself gorgeous. I mean, I knew I wasn’t unattractive. But when you lived in New York City and you were surrounded by models and actresses and socialites, you never really felt like you were good enough, especially if you were just a regular person. And that’s just who I was. Regular.

Beau walked over to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I reiterate what my mother said, Lucy. You’re beautiful. And any man would be very lucky to have you.”

“I’m guessing you’re not going to be that man,” Austin muttered.

“Excuse me?” Beau turned to his brother. “What is your problem, Austin? Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning or something?”

“Or something,” Austin said and shook his head. “Look, I’m not actually hungry. I think I’m going to go get ready. I need to go to the lodge later, and I think I’m going to do some hunting and some fishing. Bye, guys.” And with that, he left the kitchen. I looked at Beau and then at Amelia. Amelia was muttering something under her breath and I couldn’t quite tell what she was saying. Beau just shook his head.

“Don’t mind my brother. He’s moody. In fact, most of my brothers are moody. You’ll get used to it.”

“It’s okay. I have friends that are moody too.” I tried to laugh it off, but I couldn’t help but wonder if Austin was going to act like this the entire time I was here. And if things did work out with Beau, would Austin tell his brother about the kisses? Would Austin try and stop the wedding?

That would be my absolute worst nightmare. If somehow Beau did propose to me and we went to a church. And then the priest asked if there was anyone that had any reason for us not to be married. And then Austin spoke up and told everyone in his entire family that we kissed. Not once, not twice, but three times. Shame flooded my body, not just because we kissed but

because I wanted to do it again ... and again. What was wrong with me?

“Oh, I think I’m going to go and shower now. Okay?”

I hurried back to my bedroom. I opened the door and flung myself on the bed. This was such a mess. I’d never expected anything like this to happen.

If I hadn’t left the address at home and if I hadn’t gone to the bar, then none of this would’ve happened. I never would have met Austin. I never would’ve kissed him in the bar. I never would have lied. He never would have judged me. I would have just come directly to the ranch and been introduced to Beau and everything would have been as it should have been. It wouldn’t be complicated like this. It would have been okay.

There was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” I called out.

“It’s me. Austin.”

“What do you want?”

“Can I come in?”

“No.”

“Do you really want me to shout so everyone in the house could hear what I have to say?”

“No.” I jumped off of the bed quickly and ran to the door and opened it. “What do you want, Austin?”

“Let me come inside.”

“No, you can’t.”

“I can.”

“Austin, why are you doing this?”

“Lucy, why are you doing this?”

“Fine. Come in.” I looked over his shoulder to make sure that no one was watching us. I let him come in and then I closed the door behind him. I folded my arms across my chest and frowned. “What do you want Austin?”

“I wanted to say good morning properly.”

“We said good morning in the kitchen.”

“It wasn’t the best good morning, though, was it?”

“What do you mean it wasn’t the best good morning?”

“It wasn’t the good morning that I wanted.”

“What was the good morning that you wanted?”

“Well,” he grinned and took a step towards me.

“No,” I stepped back quickly, flustered. “You’re not going to kiss me again.”

“You don’t want me to kiss you again?”

“I ... No, I don’t,” I said quickly, staring at his luscious lips. My heart was racing. I could feel my legs quivering. Why? Why, why, why did I have to be in this position?

“I just wanted to see how you slept.”

“I already told you I slept fine.”

“Did you dream about me?”

“What do you mean, did I dream about you?”

“It’s a pretty simple question, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I guess so.”

“So what’s the answer?”

“No, of course I didn’t dream about you,” I lied. He had entered my mind for a few, brief seconds when I’d fallen asleep and when I’d woken up.

“You’re such a liar, Lucy. You know that, right?”

“I’m not a liar. I—”

Suddenly, his lips were pressed against mine and his arms were around my waist, bringing me towards him. I unfolded my arms and wrapped them around his neck without thinking and kissed him back passionately, hating that I enjoyed it so much. His tongue slipped into my mouth and I moaned against

his lip as I felt his hands running up under my t-shirt and massaging the skin on my back.

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” I moaned and pushed him away, but he chuckled as he kissed the side of my neck.

“Don’t make me give you a hickey, Lucy. Don’t make me show everyone that you’ve got someone else.”

“I don’t have anyone else. I don’t ...”

“Shh,” he said and he pressed his lips against mine again. His eyes were laughing into mine as he kissed me.

I tugged on his silky hair.

“Ouch!” he pulled back.

“I told you.”

“You don’t want me to kiss you. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes. You can’t do this. We can’t do this. I came to be with your brother.”

“You didn’t even know my brother, Lucy.”

“That doesn’t matter. Your mom invited me here because she thought I was a perfect match for him.”

“Do you think you’re a perfect match for my brother?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mushrooms and all?”

“Mushrooms, it’s just a small thing. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Okay,” he said, but his lips never left the side of my face and he kissed me one more time. I felt his fingers on the small of my back. Moving up, up, up.

“What are you doing?” I gasped as he ran the palm of his hand across my breast.

“What do you think I’m doing, Lucy?”

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” I moaned, closing my eyes as I felt his fingers on my nipple. “Austin.”

“Yes, Lucy?”

“We can’t.”

“You don’t like me touching you?”

“I do, but ...” I shook my head. “We can’t do this.”

“We can do anything we want to do. You’re not promised to anyone else.”

“I might not technically be promised to anyone else, but ...”

“But what?” He nuzzled my throat. “Don’t tell me you’re actually falling for my brother?”

“I didn’t say that. I just ...”

He stepped back, his expression suddenly closed off. “Whatever. You get dressed, Lucy, and have a good day.”

“Wait, what?” I blinked at him, confused. He was being so cold and distant now. He had literally just been touching me and kissing me, and now he was acting like I was his enemy.

“Have a good day, Lucy,” he said. And with that, he turned around and left the room.

I stood there, my entire body on fire, my panties wet, and groaned with frustration. Why was Austin Hamilton so sexy? And why did Amelia think I was perfect for Beau? I didn’t want Beau. Not in the way that I wanted Austin, but I couldn’t tell her that. I couldn’t break her heart.

She obviously knew her sons better than I did, and I just had to see what would happen. Because even though I was more attracted to Austin, Beau seemed like he was the friendlier, nicer guy. He definitely seemed like the sort that would be more open to getting married. And as crazy as it sounded, that’s what I wanted. I wanted to be a bride. I wanted to be a part of this family.

I only hoped that true love would find me because I wanted it so very, very badly.

Chapter Fourteen

“Good morning, Lucy.” Beau beamed at me as I entered the kitchen. He looked over my outfit which must’ve been satisfactory to him because he nodded. “Ready to check out the stables and the horses?”

“Oh, yes. I am very excited.” I nodded enthusiastically and then looked around to see if Austin was there to mock me. I was surprisingly disappointed that he wasn’t in the kitchen and wasn’t going to join us, but I didn’t want to think about that too much.

“How many hands was the last mare that you rode?” Beau inquired as we exited the kitchen via the French doors and walked down the back porch.

“Sorry, how many what?”

“How many hands?” he said with a small smile. “What size horse do you normally ride?”

“The regular size?” I shrugged.

“Has it been a while since you’ve competed then?”

“I, uh ...” I paused and then groaned. “To be honest, I never really competed. I just enjoyed reading horse books when I was growing up,” I admitted, feeling like a huge liar.

“Oh.” He was silent for a moment then started laughing. “I was wondering how a city girl entered so many horse shows.”

“Do you hate me?” Was he going to send me packing to New York City?

“Of course not,” he shook his head, his smile genuine. “I couldn’t hate you for that.”

“You must find this entire situation so weird, huh?” I looked at him, searching his eyes.

“Honestly, not as weird as you’d think,” he chuckled as we made our way into the stables. “You forget my mom has been my mom my entire life and I’ve always lived in Montana. A lot of crazy things that go on here.”

“As crazy as your mom sending for a mail order bride for you?”

“Well, I don’t consider you a mail order bride as much as this seems like some sort of arranged marriage.” He made a face.

“Mail order bride is a weird term, isn’t it?” I looked at the different horses in the stable and spied one horse in the far left that was taking a keen interest in me. “I always thought that it seemed kind of sketchy to be a mail order bride.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “I don’t know that that’s the best term. But my parents are old,” he laughed. He noticed that I was staring at the horse in one of the stalls. “That’s Sally, by the way. She’s an American Quarter Horse.”

“She’s beautiful.” I made my way to her stall. “Can I pet her?”

“Of course.” Beau walked next to me and reached into his pocket and pulled out some carrots. “Here, feed her these. She’ll love you.” I took the piece of carrot and held it in the palm of my hand and looked into her big brown eyes. Sally was a tan brown with blondish-brown mane and white features along her forehead going down to her nose. She took the carrots from my palm eagerly and chewed on them. “She’s a show horse,” Beau patted her on the head. “She loves going out on the trail as well if you want to ride her.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I felt slightly nervous. She looked like a beautiful horse, but I was pretty sure even a beautiful horse could throw me off.

“Oh, don’t worry. She’s great with beginners.” He smiled warmly. “She’s pretty new to the family, actually. Austin bought her about six months ago.”

“Cool.” I looked around the stalls and studied the other horses and then said casually, “Will Austin be joining us?” I hoped there wasn’t too much hope in my voice.

“Unlikely,” he shook his head. “I think he was heading into town for a lunch date today or something,” he shrugged.

“Oh.” A surge of disappointment filled me and I couldn’t stop myself from asking the next question. “So he has a girlfriend?”

“A girlfriend?” Beau laughed uproariously. “Austin doesn’t do girlfriends. He’s the consummate bachelor of the family. And that’s saying a lot seeing as we’re all single.”

“Oh. Okay.” I wanted to ask more questions, but I didn’t want Beau wondering why I cared so much about his brother.

My phone started ringing and I looked down to see that Olivia was calling me. “Oh, sorry. It’s my best friend.”

“Feel free to answer. I’ll go and grab some saddles.”

“Okay, thanks.” I answered the phone. “Hey, Olivia. How’s it going?”

“Hey, Lucy. I want to know what’s going on. How’s Beau? How’s Austin? How’s everything?”

“Oh, well, I’m in the stables right now with Beau and we’re about to go riding.”

“Put me on FaceTime, girl. I want to see what he looks like.”

“I can’t video chat,” I whispered just as Beau came back.

“You can video chat if you want,” he said, acknowledging that he’d heard what I said.

“Oh, well, I mean, I know we were about to go riding. I can always call her back.”

“No,” she whined in my ear loudly. “Put me on video chat.”

“You can put her on video chat,” he chuckled. “It seems like she really wants to see where you are and make sure you’re safe. Sounds like she’s a good friend.”

“Yeah, Olivia is my best friend. Okay, hold on, Olivia. I’m going to request a FaceTime with you.” I pulled my phone down and then pressed the button to call her on FaceTime. A second later, I was looking at her. “Hey, you.”

“Hey there, country mama,” she said with a laugh. “How’s it going?”

“Good. But you’re on speaker right now and I’m with Beau so he can hear everything that you’re saying,” I warned her just in case she wanted to ask me something crazy.

“Well, let me see him!”

“Olivia,” I glared at her.

“What?” she chuckled. “I want to see what this guy looks like.”

“It’s okay.” Beau stood next to me and then looked at the phone. “Hi,” he gave a huge wave. “I’m Beau Hamilton. Nice to meet you. You must be Olivia. Lucy’s said so much about you.”

Olivia’s jaw dropped as she stared at him. “Well, hi there, Beau. You’re a good-looking guy, aren’t you?”

He chuckled, and I tried not to cringe. This was so embarrassing.

“Well, you’re very beautiful yourself, Olivia.” He smiled at the phone. “I’m not sure anyone has ever been so forthright with me before.”

“What can I say?” she shrugged. “When I see a good-looking guy, I can’t help but tell him.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Well, you’re absolutely gorgeous. Lucy?”

“Yes, Olivia.”

“You need to marry that man as soon as possible,” she giggled. I groaned out loud then, and then Beau just shook his head.

“So, are you going to come out to Montana to visit anytime soon?” Beau asked.

“I hope so,” Olivia nodded enthusiastically. “I really hope so.”

“Well, we’re about to go riding now,” I chimed in.

“Let me see the horses!” Olivia’s voice was excited. “I’ve never seen horses in real life.”

“Oh my gosh, don’t exaggerate. You’ve seen horses before.”

“Nuh-uh. Only when I watched *Black Beauty* and that was an old ass movie, so I don’t even know if they really look like that.”

“Really, Olivia?”

“You can show her the horses. That’s okay. We’ve got time,” Beau said. “Why don’t you show her Sally?”

“Ooh, who’s Sally?” Olivia said.

“Sally’s this horse that’s taken a liking to Lucy,” Beau continued the conversation with her and I almost felt like a third wheel.

“Oh, let me see Sally, Lucy.”

“Okay, hold on.” I flipped the camera around and pointed it at the horse to the right.

“Wow, she’s beautiful,” Olivia sighed. “Man, you’re so lucky, Lucy.”

“What do you mean?” I flipped the phone back to look at her.

“You’re having this awesome experience in this new place and I’m just stuck here in the city, working at this horrible

store and ...” She paused. “Anyway, I’m not going to complain. My life’s okay.”

“You can come visit anytime. You know that, right?” Beau spoke up. “Honestly, we’ve got more than enough room.”

“Yeah, Olivia. You should come if you really want to.” And I meant it. I would have loved having my best friend here. As much as I loved the Hamiltons and was excited to get to know Beau better, everything was so complicated. It would be amazing to have a friend here to discuss everything with.

“Well, I’ll see if I can get some time off and stuff. That would be cool, though. I’ll speak to you later?”

“Okay. I’ll speak to you later. Bye, girl. Let me know.” I hung up the phone and then put it back into my handbag. “Sorry about that. Olivia can be a little over the top.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “She looks really nice.” He paused. “So, is she single too, or ...?”

“Yeah, we’re both single.”

“She’s very beautiful.”

“Yeah. I think she could have been a model if she really wanted to, but she’s not into that sort of stuff.”

“Oh, no? What she into?” Beau paused. “Well, listen to me. I’m being all nosy. You don’t have to answer that.”

“No, it’s okay. I like that you’re interested in my friends.” I was about to tell him more about her when I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rising. I had a feeling that Austin was somewhere nearby.

“Howdy, y’all,” a deep, smooth voice said, and I turned around. It was uncanny how I’d known he was about to enter the stables.

“Hi,” I said somewhat coldly, not wanting him to know how happy I was to see him.

“Hey, what’s going on, brother?” Beau nodded.

“Dad needs you inside. He’s got a call with the developers in about an hour, and he said you guys need to go over some

numbers.”

“Dang it.” Beau looked at me and then looked at Austin. “I completely forgot about that. I just promised Lucy that I’d take her on a ride. She’s taken a liking to Sally, and Sally has taken a liking to her.”

“I guess I could take you if you really want to go,” Austin said somewhat unenthusiastically.

“That’s fine. We can go another time, Beau, when you have time.”

“No. Austin can take you,” Beau nodded. “He knows Sally far better than me, and he’s actually more of a horse guy than I am. He can take you on one of the trails and show you around the rest of the ranch.”

“I mean, I don’t want to put you out.” I looked at Austin and tried not to roll my eyes.

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want to put me out?”

“No. I mean, if you have other things to do.”

“Well, I can spare some time. That’s why I offered.”

I knew that we could go back and forth for the next hour and I didn’t want Beau to be suspicious, so I just nodded and offered Austin my sweetest smile. “Well, thank you very much, Austin. I really appreciate that. Though I thought you had a lunch date or something.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“I thought you were going to meet up with the Hawkins girl,” Beau said.

“What?” Austin looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Where did you get that from?”

“Mom made a comment to me or something.”

“Well, Mom was wrong. There’s no way I’d be going to meet up with her.”

“Okay. Well, I’m going to go and chat with Dad. You guys have fun, okay?”

And with that, Beau left the stables, and Austin and I were left standing there staring at each other.

“So you’ve taken a liking to Sally, huh?”

“Yeah. She seems like she would be a fun ride.”

“Oh, are you going to show us some tricks?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you looking to gallop? Because if you’re looking to gallop, we have a stallion and actually I have an Arabian. He cost me a lot of money, but—”

“No, I’m not looking to gallop.”

“Oh, so you just want to canter?”

“No, I’m not looking to canter. I’m just looking to ... go slowly. Trot, maybe.”

“But I would’ve thought someone with all your skills—”

“I don’t have any skills, Austin, okay? I was lying.”

“Yet another lie, Lucy.” He shook his head. “Do you ever tell the truth about anything?”

“Are you ever nice?” I retorted. “I just wanted to try and fit in, and yes, that was a mistake. I shouldn’t have lied, but—”

“But you couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just like you couldn’t help yourself from kissing me?”

“I didn’t kiss you. You kissed me.”

“Oh, yeah?” He took a step closer to me. “But you enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t.” I was about to poke him in the chest when my phone started ringing ago. I grabbed it gratefully and answered. “Hi, this is Lucy. Who’s this?”

“Lucy. It’s Mikey. We need to talk.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face at the sound of my ex-boyfriend's voice. I wanted to talk to him even less than I wanted to talk to Austin.

“What do you want, Mikey?” I said.

“Where are you?” His voice was loud, and I was pretty sure that Austin could hear it him as well.

“That's none of your business.”

“Yeah, it's my business. Where are you?”

“It's over. I already told you that, Mikey.”

“You don't end things with me. I end things with you. Once you're my girl, you're always my girl until I say it's over.”

“Well, I told you it's over, and it's over.”

“You can't run from me. You know that, right, Lucy?”

“You don't intimidate me, Mikey. Just because you're in the mob, just because—”

“Oh, yeah? You think I don't know how to—” He started shouting.

Austin snatched the phone from my hand. “Hello. Is this Mikey?”

“Yeah. Who the fuck is this?” I could hear Mikey's voice change as Austin spoke into the phone.

“This is Austin Hamilton, and I am Lucy's new boyfriend. So you leave her the fuck alone or I will take care of you, you hear me?”

“What do you mean you're Lucy's new boyfriend?”

“Exactly what I said. I'm Lucy's new man, and I have got rifles and shotguns for days. And if you ever call her number again, I'll be making sure that I have enough bullets to shut your mouth forever.”

My jaw dropped at his words, and I could hear Mikey coughing. “Who the fuck do you think you're talking—”

As Mikey was talking, Austin hung up the phone and handed it to me. “So, you really dated some winners, huh?”

“You could say that again.” I rolled my eyes.

“I thought you would have blocked him.”

“I did block him. I guess he called from another number that I didn’t have in my phone.”

“So that’s one of the reasons you came to Montana, huh? Running away from him?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I just really needed a change. My mom passed and then that asshole ... I just wanted a fresh beginning.”

“Makes sense,” he said. “Makes a lot of sense.”

“What makes a lot of sense?”

“That you would find yourself having to run away from a crazy situation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It just means that you seem like the sort of girl that likes to get herself into trouble.”

“Excuse me? What sort of trouble do I like to get myself into?”

“This sort of trouble.”

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me. Instinctively, I wrapped my hands around his neck and kissed him back, pressing myself into his body. I gasped as I felt his hands running down my ass and squeezing. “You’re going to get us both into so much trouble. You know that, right, Lucy?”

“No, I’m not,” I said as I shook my head.

But even I didn’t believe that.

Chapter Fifteen

“I came here to ride.” I finally pushed Austin away from me, even though my body wanted me to hold him close.

“You can ride.” He winked one of the sexiest winks and looked meaningfully down at his crotch.

“You’re disgusting!” I rolled my eyes at him.

“I bet I’m still better than a psycho ex with ties to the mafia.”

“A gorilla is better than my ex.”

“And I’m better than a gorilla or ...?” He gave me a half smile.

“You need to stop flirting with me, Austin.” I crossed my arms. “It’s so inappropriate.”

“Who said I’m flirting with you?” He had a blank expression on his face now.

“You can’t just go around kissing me every time you see me.”

“I don’t go around kissing you every time I see you.”

“Do you go around kissing every woman when you see them?”

“No. Only special ones.” He said “special” in a weird tone, and I poked him in the chest. “You sure love touching me, don’t you, Lucy?” he grinned.

“No.” I press my lips together to stop myself from saying anything else. He started laughing at me. “Are we going to go riding or not?”

“Well, what’s the other option?”

“Huh?”

“What’s my other option? You said, ‘Are we going to go riding or not?’

“Austin Hamilton, I swear—”

“You sound just like my mom.” He laughed as he cut me off. “Come on. Let’s saddle up.”

“Okay.”

He walked to a stall at the end of the stable and grabbed some items. I had no idea what he was doing. “Do you have a riding helmet?” he asked.

“No,” I shook my head.

“Okay. You’ll need one just in case.”

“Okay.” I didn’t ask him just in case what. I wasn’t that dumb. He was worried I’d fall off the horse.

“We’ll have you use a Western bridal as well and an English saddle.”

“Um, okay.” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“You’ve never been on a horse at all, have you?”

“No,” I looked down feeling super embarrassed. “Though I once rode a donkey at a Christmas nativity fair. I played the Virgin Mary.”

“Did you really?” His lips twitched and I knew he wanted to say something else, which would have served me right. I’d walked right into a rude comment with that tidbit of information.

“We’ll ride down to the log cabin. It’s an easy ride and a great view,” he said. I guess he didn’t want to make me feel any more uncomfortable than I already did.

“Awesome. I didn’t know you guys have a log cabin.”

“We have a lot of different buildings on site, actually. We have 7,000 acres here. That’s kind of why dad and Beau are so busy right now.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Some developers want to buy some of our land.” He frowned. “We won’t sell, but we are thinking about developing part of the land for a weekend spa or something like that.”

“Cool. You don’t seem happy about that, though.”

“It is what it is.” He shrugged. “We need more yearly revenue, but I like this being a private oasis for the family.” He looked me up and down. “And our guests, of course.”

“Do you consider me a guest or an interloper?” I half-joked.

“I don’t know yet.” His eyes bore into mine. He looked like he was thinking. “I haven’t made up my mind about you yet, Lucy.” He smiled. “Aside from the fact that you’re definitely a good kisser.”

“How do you think Beau would feel if he knew we’d kissed?” I glared at him.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged and his eyes searched mine. “I guess the bigger question is, do you want him to find out?”

I stared at him, not knowing what to say. Of course I didn’t want Beau to find out ... but maybe I did. I didn’t even know.

“Let’s just go riding, Austin,” I said finally.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said in a no-nonsense voice, which made me laugh. “How does it feel?” Austin looked back at me as Sally and I followed behind him on the dirt trail.

“It’s pretty cool.” I couldn’t keep the enthusiasm from pouring out of my voice. I was really enjoying riding. It was a lot easier than I thought it would be. “It’s so beautiful here,” I said as I looked around at the green pastures and trees.

“Yeah. That’s the Hamilton Forest to the right. It was named after my great-grandfather.”

“Wow, that’s so cool. Your family must’ve been here for years. The trees are so old and tall.”

“Yeah. They’re firs and pines. Once you’re a better rider, we can go ride through the forest. I’ll take you to Honka Waterfall.”

“That would be cool. I’d love to go and see a waterfall in all its natural glory. The only waterfall I’ve ever seen was Niagara Falls, and that was when I was in high school.”

“Oh, well then, yeah, we’ll definitely have to go,” he said and smiled before facing the front again.

I patted Sally’s neck as I bounced up and down in the saddle, following behind. The ride was gentle, but I had a feeling my thighs would be aching in the morning.

“We’re a few miles from the cabin,” Austin called back. “Why don’t you tell me more about yourself?”

“Like what?”

“Like what makes you tick? Did you have a job before he came here? How’d you end up with someone like Mikey?”

“That’s a lot of questions,” I laughed. “Will you tell me more about you if I tell you about me?”

“Of course,” he said. “That’s only fair.”

“Well, I did have a job, but it wasn’t anything fancy. I worked in a boutique with my best friend, Olivia.”

“Oh, okay. Selling stuff?”

“Yeah. It was a retail job. I mean, that’s not what I wanted to do with my life, but it paid the bills. Kinda.”

“I’m guessing it didn’t pay that well?”

“No, not really.”

“What is it you really wanted to do?”

“Honestly? I always dreamed about being a photographer.”

“A photographer, wow.” He actually looked a little impressed. “Did you bring your camera with you?”

“I did actually.” I didn’t know what else to say. I was kind of embarrassed talking about my photography. I was very much an amateur, but it’s always been my dream to be a professional, though I wasn’t sure how I’d make a living from it.

“Do you do nature, people, weddings, what?”

“To be honest, I’ve not really done much photography, nothing professional, you know? Just a couple of friends, christenings, one wedding. I like to go in the city and take photographs of the different buildings.”

“Well, we don’t have many buildings here, but we do have plenty of nature and landscape and animals.”

“Yeah. I’d love to see some bison and some elk and maybe even some bears.”

“I don’t know that you want to see a bear up close.” He laughed.

“No, I don’t need to see it up close. I have a telephoto lens.”

“Then maybe one day we’ll go out and we’ll take some photos.”

“That would be cool. If you have time, of course.”

“Yeah, I have time. In fact, I like to do a little bit of photography myself.”

“Really?” I was surprised and glad that he couldn’t see my face.

“Yeah. You didn’t expect a cowboy to be into photography?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t really know what to think about cowboys.”

“You’re really new to this life, aren’t you? You had no idea what Montana would be like.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“What made you come here, Lucy?”

“I told you why I came.”

“No, but what really made you come? I mean, I understand you being upset about your mom and the whole Mikey thing, but this is such a big move. There must’ve been something that pushed you.”

“You’re going to laugh at me if I tell you.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will. I’d laugh at me.”

“Try me. I promise I won’t laugh.”

“I watched this TV show called *Yellowstone*. Have you heard of it?”

“Who hasn’t heard of it?” he laughed. “Kevin Costner put Montana on the map with that one.”

“Well, I watched the show and it made me think maybe it wouldn’t be so bad going to Montana.”

“Really?” He sounded surprised. “You watched *Yellowstone* and you thought, ‘Wow, I’d love to go and be among all that craziness’?”

“It wasn’t just about the drama and the craziness. It was just seeing the space, you know? I’m from the city, and I love the city and I love being around people and I love the hustle and bustle, but I just needed space. I needed space to think, I needed space to be ... I just needed space to understand myself.”

“I can understand that,” he said softly, so softly that I could barely hear him. “You know, when I need to think, I just go for a ride down to the log cabin, down to the river, and I’m just here. And for thousands of acres, I’m by myself, aside from the birds and the bees and the bison and the elk and the owls, and I feel that I’m one with God, you know?”

“That’s an amazing feeling.”

“Yeah. Sometimes I need it. I love my family, but they sure are a lot.”

“It must be nice to have a big family, though.”

“I can’t lie. It’s amazing. We’ve all been here for so long now, but sometimes you just need time to breathe ... I can understand why you came here to just think.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t know if Beau is going to be the answer to your prayers, but I guess it’s worth a try, eh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“And then if it doesn’t work out, you’ve always got me to kiss.” He smiled.

“Well, thank you, Austin. Thank you so much.”

Chapter Sixteen

“So, tell me more about your mom. What sort of lady was she?” Austin spoke quietly, and I could tell from the look on his face that he was unsure if I would be willing to answer his questions. “I mean, if you feel comfortable, of course.” There was a look of genuine concern on his face. “I know it must be hard to talk about your mom.”

“It’s not as hard as you would think.” I gave him a soft smile. “My mom was amazing. She really lived and enjoyed her life and I love talking about her. She actually was the one that got me into photography. She was a brilliant photographer. She would go all over the city and she’d take photographs of buildings, and everyone would wonder if she’d been to a foreign country because she knew how to capture light and small little details that everyone else missed.”

“Do you have any of her photographs?”

“I have some on my phone.”

“I’d love to see them.”

“Sure.”

“So what else was she into?”

“She liked to make handbags, really fashionable designs out of snakeskin and leathers and suede. She would go to antique markets and buy like the oddest items and she’d use pieces of them in her designs.”

“That sounds really cool.”

“Yeah, she was a true artist.” I thought about my mom and her skills and I tried to not let the sadness fill me. “And she was a really wonderful mom, you know?”

“I can tell by the way you talk about her that you loved her very much. And she wasn’t with your dad, right?”

“No.” My voice went slightly colder. “My dad was an asshole, a true narcissist. All he cared about was getting laid.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault. Unfortunately, I think there are a lot of men like that.”

“I’m not like that.”

“Well, I don’t know you well enough to know if you are or not.”

“True, you don’t. But I’m not like that and neither is Beau. Neither is Wyatt. None of the Hamilton men are like that. Our parents raised us with good values.”

“Well, it sounds like you’re all a catch, then. Perhaps.”

“We are,” he grinned. “The only thing is, do any of us want to get caught?”

“Sounds like you already know the answer to that one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It just means that I don’t think you want to get married, do you?”

“Most probably not.” He shrugged. “I’d love to live in this log cabin with just me and my dog.”

“No woman?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind a woman visiting every now and again.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t. It’s so beautiful here. So calm and peaceful.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “You really feel like you’re one with nature when you’re here. I couldn’t imagine living in a big city.”

“Yeah, I guess it would be hard to leave this to go to a big city.”

“Do you miss New York?”

I thought about it. “Sometimes. It’s so vibrant, you know? The foods, the people, the music. Everything is this microcosm of beautiful diversity, and I just feel like I’m in a melting pot of the whole world.”

“I guess there’s not really much diversity here in Montana,” he replied. “But there’s some.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have guessed,” I laughed.

“Don’t let appearances deceive you, Lucy. Everything isn’t what you first think.”

“You should remember that as well,” I told him.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, you think I’m like some bimbo liar because when you met me in the bar, I was kind of out of it, but—”

“I never said that. I never said that I think you’re a bimbo liar.”

“You didn’t have to say it. I can tell.”

“That’s not what I first thought about you when I met you at the bar.”

“It’s not?”

“No, it’s not.”

“What did you think?”

“I thought to myself, who is this stunning blonde and what is she doing in this bar and why have I never met her before?”

“You did not think that.”

“Scout’s honor.” He held three fingers up. “I surely did.”

“That must’ve been before I started talking, then,” I laughed.

“Maybe.”

“So when I started talking, what did you think?”

“At first?” he paused. “I thought, is this one of my brothers’ secret girlfriends?”

“Do your brothers have a lot of secret girlfriends?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know because they would be a secret,” he laughed.

“Okay. But then when I said I was going to meet my in-laws and that I was engaged to be married, what did you think?”

“I thought that you might’ve been ...” He scratched his neck.

“What? You can say.”

“I thought that perhaps you might’ve been with the developers.”

“With the developers. What?”

“I thought perhaps it was like some sort of con to get into the house.”

“Really?”

“I mean, I soon realized that it wasn’t.”

“Why did you think that?”

“Because you didn’t even know the address,” he laughed. “I don’t think an actress who was being paid by would have been in a bar asking for the address to get to the ranch.”

“So you just thought I was some random girl showing up at your house?”

“I knew there had to be a story behind it, and I was pretty sure it involved my mom because, well, my mom has been going on about us getting married for years. And she’s the sort of mom that likes to take action.”

“Your mom’s amazing, though.”

“Yeah, she is. I love her very much. But that doesn’t mean she’s not a little bit of a busybody.”

“But the best kind of busybody.”

“Yeah, she really is,” he admitted. “If I were to have kids, they’d be lucky to have a grandma like that.”

“Yeah,” I said wistfully. “I’d love my kids to have a grandma like that.”

“So are you planning on having kids with Beau, and does he know?” Austin said in a slightly changed tone.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I just ...” I sighed. “You took that the wrong way. I didn’t mean that I’m going to have kids with Beau and that we’re going to get married. I was just saying that your mom is pretty awesome and that anyone would be lucky and happy to have her in their lives. Any kids would be blessed to have her as a grandma.”

“Okay. Okay. No need to get so defensive.”

“I’m not being defensive.”

“Let’s change the subject. Do you like to watch movies?”

“I love movies. What about you?”

“Yeah, I love them too. What are some of your favorites?”

“Well, I really like psychological thrillers. I loved *The Usual Suspects*, *Seven*, *Shutter Island*.”

“Oh my God. I love *Shutter Island*!” His voice was suddenly eager. “Like, was Leonardo DiCaprio out of his mind, or was he just really in tune and playing everyone?”

“I know!” I agreed. “I have no idea. I’ve watched that movie so many times and I still can’t tell.”

“Me either. It’s like with *Inception*,” he grinned, “when they’re spinning the little wheel at the end.”

“I know. That movie was a mindfuck.”

“Yeah, it was. Have you seen *Gone Girl*?”

“Yeah, that was really cool. I was surprised that Ben Affleck could do that role so well.”

“Me too.” He was silent for a moment. “I guess we enjoy the same sort of movies.”

“I guess we do.”

“What about music?” he asked me. “Who do you listen to?”

“This is going to sound really ironic and I swear I’m not lying, but I love country music.”

“You love country music, really?”

“I know. I mean, it’s not the only music that I like, but I really enjoy it. Like, I love Johnny Cash.”

“Yeah. Well, he’s a classic.”

“Yeah, he really is.”

“What’s your favorite Johnny Cash song?”

“Are you testing me?”

“I’m not testing you. Why would you think that?”

“Well, okay. I really like ...” I paused, trying to think.

“Don’t say ‘Walk the Line,’” he said with a grin.

“What do you have against ‘Walk the Line’?”

“Because I’m going to think that you really don’t know Johnny Cash if you say ‘Walk the Line’ because everyone knows ‘Walk the Line.’”

“Well, I really love ‘Walk the Line,’ but no, it’s not my favorite.”

“So what’s your favorite?”

“I Got You Babe.”

“I Got You Babe?”

“I got you babe,” I started singing.

“Is that Johnny Cash?”

“Yeah, he sings it with his wife, June Carter Cash.”

“You know she was his second wife, right?”

“Yeah, I did. I watched the movie,” I laughed.

“Yeah, that was a good movie with Reese Witherspoon.”

“You know a lot about movies.”

“Why does that shock you?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think that guys really watched that many movies. Well, movies like that, anyway.”

“What, you thought we just watched action movies like *Fast and the Furious* and *Terminator*?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “That’s what Mikey watched.”

“Oh, the infamous Mikey.”

“I wouldn’t say infamous,” I rolled my eyes.

“So how did you meet him?”

“At a bar.”

“At a bar, okay. And you guys dated for how long?”

“Not very long. Like a year.”

“Okay. And was it serious?”

“Not at all,” I shook my head. “Honestly, I think he stuck around for so long because he was trying to get me into bed.”

“Okay, then.”

“Yeah, guys love the chase. And when I wouldn’t sleep with him, I think that just made me even more attractive to him.”

“Why wouldn’t you sleep with him? Are you like a born-again Christian or something?”

“No, but I’m not going to sleep with someone unless I really feel like I have feelings for them and there is some sort of relationship.”

“Okay, I can respect that.”

“Well, thank you. I’m glad you can respect that, Austin.”

“Are you being sarcastic with me, Lucy?”

“Who me? Would I ever be sarcastic with you?”

“Okay, so you’re definitely being sarcastic with me.”

“I’m just saying that I don’t care if you respect it or not. It’s really not up to you.”

“Whoa. Hold up, girlfriend. I’m not saying anything about it. I was being sincere. I can respect that you have boundaries when it comes to sex. Some women do and some women don’t, and that’s their choice if they want to or not. I’m not judging you, and I’m not judging anyone else. Hey, I’m not this evil bastard that you think I am.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m just used to so many guys who want to express an opinion on women’s sexuality, but they don’t have any opinion on how many women men are sleeping around with. I hate the double standard.”

“I can understand that,” he nodded. “Guys can suck sometimes.”

I burst out laughing. “How are you so cool?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m just surprised at how open-minded you are for a man that’s grown up on a ranch with six brothers and no sisters.”

“My mom has been a pretty strong influence in our lives, and believe it or not, so is Sadie. She’s been like a little sister to all of us.”

“So ... what’s up with Sadie and Wyatt?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, they’re best friends, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And they’ve never dated?”

“No, they haven’t.”

“Do you think they’re in love?”

“Well, we all love her.”

“I mean, do you think they’re in *love* love?”

“I don’t like to get involved in anyone else’s love life but my own.” He shook his head.

I grinned at his evasiveness. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t answer the question.”

“Okay. Well, what’s your question?”

“I was just curious if you thought they were like ... soulmates or something.”

He laughed. “I don’t know that I believe in soulmates if I’m honest.”

“You don’t believe in soulmates?”

“Don’t tell me you do?”

“I kind of do.”

“Do you believe that Beau is your soulmate?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Anyway, stop asking me about Beau. I asked you a question about Sadie and Wyatt.”

“Okay. Do I think that they’re made for each other? Yes. Do I think that they are secretly in love? I don’t know.”

“You don’t know or you won’t say?”

He groaned. “Fine. I think that they should be together. But will they ever get together? Who knows. Wyatt’s stubborn and Sadie is clueless.”

“You don’t think either one of them knows?”

“I’m pretty sure neither one of them knows,” he chuckled. “Trust me.”

“Oh, that’s so sad. You guys don’t want to help him figure it out?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “One thing you never do is interfere with someone else’s love life. It never goes well.”

“Okay. I will take your word for it.”

“Trust me. It never goes well.”

“Okay.”

“Hold on,” he said as his phone started ringing. “It’s my mom.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, Mom. What’s going on? I’m going to put you on speakerphone, okay?”

“Okay,” I heard Amelia’s voice as he put it on speakerphone.

“Lucy and I are just here at the cabin.”

“I was wondering where you were. You’ve been so long. You guys need to get back. Beau wants to take Lucy on a picnic for lunch.”

“Oh,” Austin’s lips thinned, and he looked over at me. I dropped my gaze, not knowing what to say.

“Yeah, so could you ride her down to the river? He wants to do a picnic by the river and then maybe they’ll go kayaking.”

“You want me to take Lucy down to the river so that she and Beau can have a picnic? Am I invited?”

“Austin, seriously?” Amelia laughed. “Of course you’re not invited. This is a romantic lunch between your brother and his possible bride.”

“Really, Mom? You don’t think you’ve meddled enough?”

“Austin, don’t use that tone with me.”

“Fine. I’ll ride her over now. Bye.” And he hung up. He looked at me and he said, “Looks like you’ve been summoned to the river for a picnic.”

“Wow. Okay. Sounds fun.”

“Really?” he raised an eyebrow.

“What? Why are you angry at me?”

“I’m not angry at you. This is just absolutely ridiculous. Come on, let’s go,” he said and marched past me out of the door. He jumped onto his horse and then looked back at me. “You think you can get up by herself or you’re going to need help?”

“Well, I can try,” I said uncertainly, not sure why his attitude had completely changed. We’d just been having a really fun, engaging, interesting conversation, and now he was acting like I was some sort of enemy.

“Fine, I’ll help.” He jumped back off of the horse and then came towards me. “Grab onto the horse and I’ll give you a boost up,” he said.

I grabbed the saddle, put one foot in the stirrup, then looked at him over my shoulder and our eyes met. There was an emotion in there that I didn’t recognize, an emotion that I thought was strange. I didn’t know what to say or what to do.

“Let’s go, Lucy. My brother is waiting on you.”

“I just don’t know what your problem is.”

“There’s no problem here, Lucy. I’m just not your Prince Charming. I’m not your knight in shining armor.”

“Okay, then.”

“But don’t worry, you’ve got Beau for that. I’m sure he’ll treat you like a princess. What with your picnic by the river. Maybe he’ll feed you strawberries and you can drink champagne together.”

“Maybe he will,” I said finally. “And maybe he’ll have chocolate and we’ll lick it off each other’s bodies.”

His eyes narrowed and for a moment I wondered if he was going to kiss me again. Then he grabbed me big the hips and pushed me up and suddenly I was on the horse.

“Giddy-up,” I said loudly and kicked Sally in the side. She seemed to know exactly what that meant because off she went running with me holding on for dear life.

* * *

“Well, bye, Austin,” Beau said sarcastically as his brother went galloping away from us. “Glad to see he’s back to his usual cheerful self.” He rolled his eyes at me. “Sorry I had to leave you with him earlier.”

“Oh no, it was fine. He showed me the log cabin and it was really beautiful.” I could feel my face flushing because vivid memories of my dirty thoughts when I’d seen the bed were flashing in my mind. I really didn’t want Beau to ask me too many questions about my time with his brother. “So, this is really beautiful.”

“Yeah.” He smiled at the view. “This here is the Bitterroot River. It runs all the way through the property.” Beau nodded towards the water. “We like to go kayaking here, and a little further down you can go whitewater rafting. We have some class 4 and 5 rapids, actually.”

“Oh, I don’t really know what that means,” I said apologetically.

“Oh, just that they’re really exciting. I’m a bit of an adrenaline junkie.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said.

“Yeah. I love skydiving, hang gliding, roller coasters, that sort of thing.” He sounded really enthusiastic.

“Oh, wow.” My legs trembled at the thought of doing any of those activities. There is no way I would ever go skydiving.

“Maybe you and I, we can go bungee jumping sometime?” Beau suggested. “There’s this place—”

“Maybe,” I cut him off quickly. I really wanted to say *Hell no!* but I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t open to any of the activities that he enjoyed, even though I really wasn’t. “So, those mountains look amazing.”

“Yeah, those are the Montana Rockies. We’re actually quite close to Yellowstone and Glacier National Park. I’ll have to take you there sometime.”

“That would be really cool.” Just then, my stomach rumbled audibly. “Oh, I guess I’m hungrier than I thought.”

“Perfect!” He lifted up the little picnic basket. “I brought some sandwiches and some stuffed mushrooms.”

“Oh. Thanks,” I said feebly. Had he forgotten that I didn’t like mushrooms?

“Are you super hungry or do you want to swim first?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t have a bathing suit with me.”

“Do you really need one?” He laughed and I couldn’t tell if he was flirting with me or not. I just stared at him, trying to figure out if he was trying to get me to go skinny dipping, and he seemed to realize that that was something that was not going to happen.

“So, Lucy, who’d you like for the playoffs this year?”

“Um, what?”

“You into baseball?” He cocked his head to the side and stared at me. “I was a pitcher in high school and college.”

“Oh, no. I don’t really know much about baseball. Sorry.”

“Oh, okay.” He handed me a sandwich and then bit into his own. “So did my mom show you my grandma’s ring yet?”

“Um, no.” I looked down at the sandwich, thankful that it was just plain ham, cheese, and lettuce. I didn’t really know what to respond to his question about his grandma’s ring. Why was he even asking me that?

“It goes to the first woman to marry into the Hamilton family,” he said as if he had read my mind.

“Oh, how nice.” Was this his way of flirting with me? Was this his way of saying that he wanted to marry me?

“So, Lucy, are you into ice hockey? Any kind of sports?”

“I’m not really. My friend, Olivia, is much more into sports than me.” I didn’t want to add that I was bored as hell whenever I had to watch or hear about sports. “Do you enjoy watching movies?” I asked hopefully.

“Not really.” He shook his head. “I’m all about being active and outdoors and working out and stuff.”

“Okay.” I took a bite into my sandwich and munched on it.

Beau was a handsome, friendly man, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that he wasn’t an ideal match for me.

And I wasn't sure what I should do with that information. I didn't want to have to leave and go back to New York right away, but I didn't think a marriage between Beau and me would ever work, no matter how much I loved his family.

Chapter Seventeen

“Olivia! Oh my gosh, I had the weirdest day. I just got back from riding.”

“Oh, are you back from the stables with Mr. McHottie now?”

Olivia’s voice sounded weird, and I wasn’t sure she was being sarcastic or serious. “Yeah, it was a really fun day, but I’m so confused.”

“Oh, why?”

“So, Beau had to go and do some work earlier and so Austin took me riding. We went to this cool log cabin that they have, and . . . he kind of kissed me again.”

“Oh my God. Again?” Olivia gasped. “Lucy, what is going on here?”

“I wish I knew,” I sighed.

“You don’t think they’re some sort of freaky-deaky cowboys, and they’re trying to share you or something, right?”

“Ew, no!” I laughed. “That’s gross.”

“It happens, Lucy. You know that.”

“Well, I don’t know that personally, but sure, it happens in New York, not here in Montana. Definitely not here in Horseshoe Ranch. There’s just no way.”

“You’re really drinking the Kool-Aid, aren’t you, Lucy? You barely just got there.”

“What does that mean?”

Olivia, let out a deep sigh. “Don’t mind me, I guess I’m just a little bit jealous. Here I am sitting in New York while you’re carrying on a love affair with not one but two hunky cowboys.”

“Olivia!” I snorted. “I’m not carrying on a love affair with either of them.”

“You know what I find weird, Lucy?”

“This entire debacle?” I asked her.

“No,” she laughed. “The fact that Beau is just going along with it. Like, if your parents sent off for a mail order bride and never told you, would you be showing her around your ranch all happily?”

“Yeah, I guess not.” I chewed on my lower lip. “I guess I didn’t really think about that.”

“And didn’t you say that the reason why his mom even created the ad was because all of her sons were confirmed bachelors and she was worried that none of them would ever get married and have kids?”

“Yeah. That’s what Amelia said.”

“Yet, Beau, who is super-hot by the way, didn’t even tell his mom off. Right?”

“Well, not in front of me he didn’t.”

“That doesn’t strike you as odd, Lucy?”

“I mean, I guess so. I didn’t really think about it like that, but the more that I am thinking about it, yeah, it’s weird.”

“Like, do you think he’s seriously entertaining the idea of marrying you?”

“I don’t know.” I let out a deep sigh. “I mean ... Part of me thinks that we’re trying to get to know each other, yeah. But the more we get to know each other, the more I feel like he’s not the one for me.”

“Why do you say that? He’s absolutely gorgeous.”

“Yeah. He’s definitely cute, but I don’t have the same attraction to him as I do ...” I let my voice trail off.

“You really have the hots for that Austin, huh?”

“I hate to say it, but yeah. We just have this chemistry. We vibe and we just seem to have so much more in common. Oh, why is this so complicated?”

“Don’t you think you should let Beau know?”

“What am I going to say? Hey, Beau, I came here to marry you even though I’ve never seen you before, but now I’ve seen you and I’ve seen your brother, I want him instead. And oh, by the way, we’ve kissed a couple of times and I like it and I want to bang him?”

“You did not just say you want to bang him!” Olivia started giggling.

“I know, but hey, you’re my best friend. I can be honest with you. He’s totally gorgeous. He’s tall and handsome, and he just has a body to die for. I totally, totally ...” I paused. “Anyways, I’m not going to finish that sentence in case it incriminates me.”

“Oh girl, you’ve already incriminated yourself,” she laughed. “And I can’t imagine that he’s better looking than Beau.”

“You really think Beau is hot, huh?”

“Not going to lie, when you put me on FaceTime and I saw him, my heart stopped beating for a second.”

“Oh, Olivia. You’re so dramatic.”

“I know,” she laughed. “By the way, I checked my finances, and I asked at work and they said I can take some time off, but of course it won’t be paid.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with doing that?”

“Yeah. I want to come out there and make sure everything’s okay. I can come as soon as you want me to.”

“Girl, I want you to come right away.”

“Are you sure it’ll be okay?”

“I think so. I should ask Amelia, though, to make sure.”

“Will you go and ask her now? I’ll wait.”

“Sure.”

With Olivia still on the line, I went to the kitchen to find Amelia. That was where she normally seemed to be. She seemed to spend her days cooking up delicious delights for her family. She absolutely loved cooking and she was really good at it as well, so her family was doubly lucky.

Sure enough, there she was.

“Hi, Amelia. Hi, Ranger.”

“Hey, Lucy.” Amelia beamed at me. “How was riding?”

“Oh, it was absolutely great. Thank you. Austin showed me the log cabin and wow, it’s just amazing.”

“Yeah. He wants to live there. Did you know that he and his father built it themselves?” Amelia looked over at Ranger, pride in her expression.

“No way. Really?”

“Yeah,” Ranger said gruffly. “Austin’s the handy one around here. He did most of the work.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize he was so handy.”

“Austin is not the sort of guy he appears to be on the surface,” Amelia said. “So how can I help you, dear?”

“Oh, my best friend Olivia is on the phone.” I held the phone in my hand up. “And she got a couple of days off work, and she was wondering if perhaps she could come and visit the ranch? I’ve been telling her about how amazing it is. I mean, if it will be too crowded here, then definitely it’s okay if she—”

“Oh, of course. I would love for your friend to come,” Amelia beamed. “That would be absolutely lovely. When can she fly in? We can pick her up at the airport.”

“Oh, you don’t have to go out of your way.”

“Like I said to you before, my darling Lucy, it won’t be out of the way. Ranger and I can drive you to the airport to pick up your friend. Just give us the flight information and I’ll make sure we’re there on time.”

“Thank you. That’s awesome.”

“So you and Austin had a fun time at the cabin?”

“Yeah, it was great. An absolutely beautiful day.”

“Didn’t you go on a picnic with Beau?” Ranger looked confused. “I thought you spent the day with Beau?”

“Oh, yes,” I said quickly. “I did get to hang out with Beau as well, and the picnic was really good. Thank you so much for the food, Amelia.”

“No worries, dear,” Amelia smiled. “Was there anything else?”

“Oh yeah. Beau said that there was a ring that your grandma or his grandma had, and that I should ask to see it or something. I don’t know.” I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable and not really knowing why I brought it up.

Well, I knew why I brought it up. I brought it up because I’d sounded so much more enthusiastic about hanging out with Austin than I had about hanging out with Beau, and I didn’t want his parents to get suspicious.

“Oh yes. The old ruby ring,” Amelia smiled. “Beau told you about it?”

“Yeah. He said I should just have a look. Not that he’s going to give it to me or anything,” I said quickly.

“Oh, sure. Hold on, dear. Let me go and get it. Do you want to tell your friend that you’ll call her back?”

“Sure. Hey, Olivia,” I put the phone to my ear.

“Yeah.”

“So Amelia and Ranger said it’s okay for you to come, and we can pick you up at the airport as well.”

“Oh, I don’t want them to go out of their way. That seems too much.”

“No, it will be fine. We’ll pick you up.”

“Well, if you’re sure it’s okay.”

“Yeah, come whenever.”

“Okay. Well, I’m going to look for a flight. Maybe I can get there in a couple of days.”

“That would be amazing.”

“And what was that thing about a ring you were saying?” Olivia’s voice sounded a little bit dry.

“Oh, Beau had asked me to ask his mom to show me some family heirloom, some ring that I guess whoever marries into the family first will get it.”

“Oh, so you are serious about marrying Beau, even though you’re hooking up with his brother?”

“I’m not hooking up with his brother,” I whispered into the phone. “It was a couple of kisses.”

“Okay. But you said you wanted to bang him.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I—” I glanced over at Ranger, and I couldn’t tell if he was trying to listen to my conversation. “Anyway, I’ll call you later. Okay?”

“Okay. Well, I’ll check out flights now.”

“Bye.”

I hung up quickly and just stood there slightly awkwardly. I didn’t really know what to say to Ranger. He was a nice man, but he was very quiet. And while he hadn’t said anything that made me feel uncomfortable, I did wonder if he wasn’t judging me in some way. Some flighty, random girl had shown up on his ranch to marry one of his sons—what could he really think about me?

Amelia walked back into the kitchen then, a piece of jewelry in her hand. She showed it to me and I could see that it was a beautiful gold and ruby ring with diamonds around it.

“That’s absolutely beautiful,” I said, letting her put it in my hand.

“Isn’t it just?” Amelia said. “In fact, it’s promised to the ___”

At that moment, Austin walked into the kitchen. “Well, what’s going on here?” He looked at me and then he looked at his mother. Then he looked back at me and the ring in my hand. “You’ve got the ruby ring?” His eyes narrowed. “Why do you have my Grandma’s ruby ring in your hand?”

“Your Mom was just showing it to me. I—”

“Yeah, I was just showing it to her. She asked to see it and ___”

“You asked to see it. Why?”

“Well, Beau had mentioned it to me and—”

“Oh my God, you’re nothing but a gold-digger aren’t you?” Austin exclaimed, and the room went quiet.

“Austin Hamilton, you apologize to Lucy right now!” Ranger snapped. I looked at him in surprise.

“Dad. I—”

“Austin!” Ranger’s voice was deep and angry.

I looked at Amelia who was glaring at her son. “That is absolutely unacceptable. You do not speak to our guests like that Austin. I’m ashamed of you.”

“Mom, let’s be real. She just got here from New York. Now she’s already looking at Grandma’s ring and she wants to marry Beau. Like, you don’t even know Beau.” He stared at me. “You really want to marry him? How far are you going to take this, Lucy?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just—”

“You know what? Forget about it. You do whatever you want to do. If you want to marry my brother, go right ahead. I just don’t even care anymore.” And then he left the kitchen in a huff.

I handed Amelia back the ring. “Sorry, I wasn’t saying that I wanted the ring. I just wanted to look at it. I mean, Beau had mentioned it to me and—”

“Oh, my darling, do not worry about Austin. He is a moody, moody man,” Amelia apologized to me. “He has no idea what he’s talking about. He wouldn’t know love if it hit him in the face.” She shook her head. “Sometimes I really wonder about that boy.”

“I’ve never known him to be like this before,” Ranger said. “He’s not normally rude like this to women. I just wonder what’s going on. Maybe he’s jealous. Maybe he—” Amelia shot him a look, and his eyes narrowed. “Is there something I need to know, Amelia?”

“Not right now, dear. Not right now. Now, Lucy, you go ahead and get ready for dinner, and I’ll make sure that Austin apologizes to you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I mean, if he doesn’t like me, it’s fine. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that the problem is quite the opposite, my dear,” Amelia said with a small smile. “Now run along and get ready. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Chapter Eighteen

I stared at my suitcase and clothes and debated whether to pack up my belongings and leave. Austin's words had hit me to my core. My soul was aching, and all the self-doubt I'd been fighting was threatening to bubble over the surface. I wasn't a gold digger, but I knew that the mere fact that I was here looked questionable. I had my reasons for being here, of course, and they were good reasons, but they were hard to understand and hard to explain.

Knock, knock. I ignored the fact that someone was loudly banging on my door. I didn't want to speak to or see anyone.

"Lucy, can I come in?" said Austin's deep voice. I didn't respond.

Knock, knock. The banging was loud now. "Lucy, I know you're in there! Can I please enter?" he shouted.

"No!" I shouted back, not leaving the bed.

"Please? I have a cup of tea for you. Please let me come in."

"I don't want any tea. Just leave."

"It's good tea, I promise. I added lemon and honey."

"Go away." I glared at the door, even though I knew he couldn't see my face. I had absolutely no interest in talking to him. He had really hurt my feelings.

"Lucy, please." The door creaked as he opened it slowly. He poked his head inside and smiled at me. "Can we talk? Please?" he said.

His eyes pleaded with me, but I just turned my face away. I wasn't going to let his handsome face and puppy dog eyes convince me to let him in and to talk to me. I was done with him. I never wanted to speak to him again, and I certainly was never going to kiss him again.

"I said no, I don't want to talk. I'm not interested in what you have to say. Go away, Austin."

"I'm sorry, Lucy. I—"

"I don't care!" I turned back to look at him. "You said what you said and that's that."

"I don't really think you're a gold digger, Lucy," he said.

"And I don't really think you're a nice guy, Austin."

"That's not what you said when you kissed me." His green studied my face as he held the cup out toward me.

"I don't want any tea, and I don't want you. Get out."

"I made it especially for you." He gave me a soft, sweet smile.

I gave him a hard look. "You made it for me, or your mom did?"

"I did," he insisted. "Well, my mom suggested it when I told her I was going to apologize to you properly, but I made it."

"Austin, did you really think a cup of tea would make up for calling me a gold digger?"

"No, but I hoped it would give me an entryway into talking to you."

"Well, it doesn't. I'm fed up with men like you." I pointed at him.

"Men like me?" He looked affronted.

"Yeah, men that think that they can just do and say whatever they want to a woman and then give some sort of sweet apologetic smile and think it will all be okay."

“I take it that it’s not okay, then?” He frowned and his face looked so sad and sexy that I could feel my anger melting away like snow on a warm day.

“No, it’s not okay,” I mumbled. “You definitely understand that, right?”

“So you don’t want the tea?” He held the cup out. I shook my head. He sipped it and moaned. “Mmm, you’re missing out, Lucy. It tastes really good, if I do say so myself.”

“Well, enjoy it and get out.”

“I don’t want to get out, and I’m not enjoying it.” He sighed. “Don’t be mad at me, Lucy, please.”

All of a sudden I was taken back to the past. I’d been in my apartment in New York with my mom, and I’d been telling her off because she told me to give Mikey another chance. She liked the fact that he had money and he could take care of me. I’d shouted at her and told her that I wish she could understand that I could take care of myself and that he was bad news. She’d started crying and begged me not to be mad at her, just like Austin was now, and I’d just shaken my head.

“I’ll think about it,” I’d said to her on that day. And then she’d gone to the restroom, and twenty minutes later, I’d heard her fall. She was gone within two hours. The doctors had told me that she’d had a heart attack. She’d had undiagnosed high blood pressure and her heart had failed. I felt like I’d broken her heart and then she died. Her face flashed in my mind. I could see it so clearly, the pain in her eyes, the bleakness, the love. I felt myself breaking down then. I couldn’t stop the tears. I was in over my head. I was an emotional wreck.

“Lucy,” Austin’s eyes widened in fear. “Oh God, I’m so sorry. I really didn’t mean it. I promise. I guess I was just taken aback when I saw you with the ring. I promise I didn’t really think you were a gold digger.”

I started laughing then because my tears had nothing to do with him. He looked so panicked and worried. I could see the concern in his eyes.

“Lucy, please don’t cry. I’m so sorry.” He gently wiped some of my tears away. “I guess I was just jealous,” he said, as if it had just occurred to him.

“It’s not you.” I made a noise halfway between a sob and hiccup. I probably looked ugly, crying as I was, but I didn’t care. “I was just thinking about my mom. When she died, I’d been so angry with her and we’d been arguing.” I was crying uncontrollably now. “She was just trying to spend time with me, but I was mad at her.” I looked away from him, the sadness and guilt tearing me up inside. “She died at my apartment, you know?” I sucked in a shaky breath. “One moment we were talking in the living room, and hours later she was dead.”

“Oh, Lucy,” his voice was soft. “It wasn’t your fault, I promise you.”

“I think about that day all the time,” I looked back at him, “and I wonder, what if I hadn’t yelled? What if I hadn’t been upset? What if ...” I couldn’t talk anymore. Austin wrapped his arms around me and held me close.

“You didn’t kill your mother, Lucy,” he whispered against my hair as I cried into his shoulders. “You’re not responsible for anyone else’s health, and believe it or not, you’re not responsible for whether they live or die either.”

“I just miss her so much. She was my best friend.” I looked into his eyes, willing him to understand. “She was my whole world and I was hers, and I’ve just been so lost since she’s been gone.”

“You needed to get away,” he said softly. I could see the understanding in his eyes.

“Yes,” I nodded. “It’s not my home without her there.” I said the words that had been in my heart, the words I hadn’t been able to tell anyone, not even Olivia. “There are so many memories in New York, so many missed opportunities, plans we made to go to places that we can never go to now.” My voice trailed off. “She would have liked it here in Montana. I wish she could have seen it.”

“She’s with you, Lucy.” He kissed my forehead. “She sees everything you see. She obviously loved you very much. I know she wants you to be happy.”

“She did,” I nodded. “I just wish she was still here.”

“So do I,” his fingers traced my lips. There was an intensity in his voice that made me shiver. “I would have liked to have met her.”

“She would have thought you were handsome,” I smiled, gazing at his face.

“I hope so,” he grinned. “Do you think I’m handsome?”

“Maybe,” I sniffled. “But you’re also rude.”

“I was only rude because I was out of my mind,” he admitted sheepishly. “Forgive me? Please?”

“Maybe.” My heart was racing now. We were still so close together and I could feel the warmth of his body against mine.

“I’m so sorry about your mom, Lucy,” he said gently. “I know how hard it must’ve been to have been there. I’m sorry you had to see that, but at least you were with her in her final hours.”

“I know. I’m glad of that,” I sighed.

“And Lucy, know that this is your home for as long as you want it to be. I won’t even be an asshole if you do decide you want to be with Beau.” He made a face, and I laughed. “I’ll always be here for you, girl. Any time of the night or day, any time you want to talk or anything, I’m here.” He looked so sincere, and I knew that he meant every single word. “Remember, Lucy, the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. I believe in you. I am here for you. Whatever you want to do, the world is your oyster. Montana could be your new home.”

He paused then, and we just stared at each other. It was hard to explain the feelings that passed between us, but there was definitely something there, a depth and intensity that I’d never felt with anyone else before in my life, and I couldn’t stop myself.

I pressed my lips against his and kissed him.

And he kissed me back. We fell back onto the bed, our bodies intertwined, and for a few minutes, I felt like I was floating in heaven. His hands slid down the side of my body, then up my t-shirt and up under my bra, pinching my nipples.

I moaned against his lips and pressed myself into him, my hand reaching down and grazing his hardness through his pants. He stiffened suddenly and smiled as we just lay there, touching each other, exploring each other's bodies. He pulled away slightly and ran his hands through my hair. Kissing my forehead, and then my cheeks, my nose, my lips, grabbing my hands and kissing them too.

“You're beautiful, Lucy. And I know I haven't said this before, but I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you came to Horseshoe Ranch. I don't know that my life will ever be the same again after this.”

And I knew I felt the same way. My life would never be the same again, no matter what happened from here on out.

Chapter Nineteen

“So all you guys did was kiss?” Olivia asked me. “Are you sure nothing else happened?”

“Nothing else happened,” I whispered into the phone. “He just held me, and yeah, we kind of touched each other.”

“What do you mean you kind of touched each other? Over clothes or under clothes?”

“Well, he kind of touched me under clothes, and I touched him over clothes.”

“Did he go down on you?”

“No, Olivia. Just some breast action. He didn’t do anything crazy, and I just rubbed him a little bit and maybe we bumped and grinded.”

“What do you mean you bumped and grinded?”

“I mean dry humped,” I laughed. “Sorry. I used the wrong word.”

“Oh, you’re killing me here, Lucy.”

“You’re not the only one I’m killing.” I let out a deep sigh. “I was too embarrassed to even go to dinner tonight. His mom sent up a plate, and I had a sandwich in the room.”

“Oh, girl, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe he called you a gold digger.”

“Well, he apologized, and I think I get it. I guess he’s confused about everything. Which so am I, but just I didn’t appreciate him using those words, you know?”

“He had no right to!”

“No, and you know Mikey called me that in the past.”

“That Mikey sucks,” she grumbled.

“I know, girl. I cannot stand him or anything that reminds me of him.”

“Does Austin remind you of Mikey?”

“No, not at all!”

Her voice got quiet. “So you told them about your mom, and you being there when she passed away?”

“Yeah, I told him that New York doesn’t feel like home anymore. I have so many memories with my mom there, and yeah, it hurts to see those places.”

“I get it,” Olivia said. “I understand. I miss you, and I’ll miss you if you don’t ever come back. But I understand that it hurts.”

“Oh, Olivia, I miss you so much. You’re my best friend, and I want to be able to hang out with you every day and to see you, but ...”

“So you’re loving it there still?”

“Yeah, I am. I really think I’m starting to like Austin.”

“But what about Beau?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like this is overly complicated. I love Amelia and I love Ranger. Beau’s a really nice guy, and he’s handsome. But Austin and I, we just have a connection.”

“But isn’t Austin the one they said is never going to get married?”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “Oh, I don’t know what to do, Olivia.”

“I know, but I’m sure whatever is meant to be will be.”

“I sure hope so. I can’t wait until you get here.”

“Me too. Well, sweet dreams, okay? You sound really tired, Lucy.”

“I think it’s from all the crying,” I yawned. “But yeah, I am tired, I’ll speak to you later. Night, Olivia.”

“Night.”

I walked into the kitchen at eight o’clock in the morning, and Amelia beamed at me.

“Slept well?”

“Yes, thank you, and thanks for the sandwich. I just didn’t feel like coming to dinner last night.”

“Understandable,” she nodded. “I’m so sorry about Austin. He just really doesn’t think,” she shook her head. “Sometimes I wonder about that boy.”

“It’s okay. He came to apologize, and he brought me some tea and, well, I forgave him.”

“Well, that’s good. Would you like to go into the yard with me today? I was going to go to do some gardening. I’d love to show you the different fruits and vegetables and herbs and spices that we have.”

“Oh, that sounds like it would be really cool, thank you.”

“And maybe we’ll do some weeding as well. How are you with weeding?”

“Honestly, I’ve never really done it, but I’m always open to trying.”

“That’s my girl.” She looked at me warmly. “So, you have some breakfast and then we’ll go into the yard.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed.

“What would you like, an omelet?”

“Just some cereal would be great, actually. Do you have any?”

“Do we have any?” She laughed. “I have seven sons, Lucy. I have more boxes of cereal than the grocery store.” She walked me over to the pantry. “Have at it. Choose whichever ones you want.”

“Okay, thank you.” When I walked inside and looked at the top shelf, I gasped. She hadn’t been lying; there were at least 25 different boxes of cereal there. I’d never seen so many boxes of cereal before in my life. In fact, as I looked around the pantry, I’d never seen so much food in someone’s house before, but I guess I’d never known anyone with such a big family before.

I was still there trying to figure out which box of cereal I wanted when Austin walked into the pantry.

“Hey, good morning,” he said to me.

“Hi,” I said, a little shyly.

“How are you feeling today?”

There was a look of care and concern on his face that melted my heart. “I’m okay, thanks.”

“I didn’t want to leave your room yesterday, you know?”

Heat crept along my cheeks. “What do you mean?”

He flashed me a wicked smile. “What do you think I meant?”

“Austin, really?”

“What? I’m just being honest.”

“Just being honest about what?” Beau said as he walked into the pantry.

Austin chuckled. “Oh, I was just telling Lucy that my favorite cereal is Frosted Flakes, and she doesn’t believe me.”

“I, uh, thought he was more a shredded wheat sort of guy,” I said, going along with it.

Beau started to laugh. “Oh no, he loves Frosted Flakes. Me, I’m a Rice Krispies man myself.”

“Really?” I looked at him in surprise.

“What? You don’t believe me.”

“I just never heard of a guy loving Rice Krispies.”

“Really?”

“Well, at least no guy I’ve ever known has told me that he liked Rice Krispies,” I said.

“Huh, interesting.” He grinned as he grabbed the box of Rice Krispies. “Did you sleep well last night? I’m sorry you missed dinner.”

“Oh yeah. I slept well, thanks. I was just feeling a little bit under the weather.”

“Because of my idiot brother here, huh?”

He nodded towards Austin, and I froze. Oh shit, what did he know? “What ... what do you mean?” I asked.

“I heard he called you a gold digger because you asked to see grandma’s ring.” He glared at Austin. “I’m the one that told her to ask Mom to see the ring. I wanted to see if she liked it.”

“Why would you care if she liked it?” Austin snapped.

“What do you mean, why would I care if she liked it? Everyone knows that grandma’s ring goes to the first woman that marries into the Hamilton family.”

“And why would Lucy need to see the ring?” Austin growled.

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“You haven’t even gone on a date with her.”

“We went on a picnic yesterday.”

“You haven’t even kissed her,” Austin scoffed. “I hardly think you guys are close to getting married.”

“What’s it to you?” Beau’s eyes narrowed as he stared at his brother. “Do you have someone you want to marry and give the ring to? Because if you do, just let me know. She can see the ring, too. I don’t care.”

“No, I don’t,” Austin huffed. “You know what? Forget it.”

He stormed out of the pantry leaving me standing there awkwardly. Beau shook his head. “I have no idea what his

problem is. If he was a woman, I'd say it was PMS, but..." He shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Maybe he got up on the wrong side of the bed," I mumbled.

"Yeah, maybe."

"I think I'm going to have some Frosted Flakes myself," I said, grabbing the cereal box quickly.

"Sounds good to me," Beau said with a smile as I walked past him out of the pantry.

I grabbed a bowl and poured some cereal into it before heading to the fridge for milk. I was about to go into the dining room to sit down when Austin grabbed my arm.

"What is going on?" he hissed in a low voice.

"What do you mean what is going on?"

"I can't do this anymore. This whole thing with Beau, it's just ridiculous. We're going to have to ..."

"We're going to have to what?" I prompted.

"I don't know." He sounded frustrated. "This is really annoying."

"What is annoying? I don't even know what you're talking about. I literally went into the pantry to get some cereal and I thought you did as well, and it seemed like that was what Beau was in there doing."

"Well, I don't like what he's insinuating."

"What do you mean, what he's insinuating? What's he insinuating?"

"That he's going to marry you."

"Well, like you said, he and I haven't even really been on a date."

"Do you want to go on a date with him?"

"What do you mean?"

“Do you want to go on a date with my brother?” His voice rose.

“Austin, keep your voice down, please. You know why I’m here. You know why your mom sent for me. She thinks that Beau and I would make a good match.”

“And do you want Beau to be your match?”

“I don’t know. I mean ...”

But even as I spoke the words I knew they weren’t true. I did know what I wanted, and it wasn’t Beau; it was Austin. But Austin was promising me nothing. He’d literally told me he wanted to live in a log cabin by himself with a dog. He’d said he never wanted to get married. Where did that leave me? Amelia and Ranger were amazing, but I couldn’t just stay here rent-free forever.

“Austin, this is just so complicated. I ...”

“What’s complicated?” he growled. “Come with me.”

“What are you—” I stopped as he led me down the hallway, we walked down another hallway that I hadn’t been down before and stopped outside a room. “Where are we?”

“This is my room.” He pushed open the door. I followed him inside to his bedroom and then he closed it and locked it shut. “Oh, so you get a lock?”

“You could get a lock too if you really wanted one.” He grinned.

“Well, I do want one. I—”

“Shh, now’s not the time.” He grabbed the bowl of cereal that was still in my hands and placed it on a side table and then pulled me into his arms. “I’ve been wanting to do this ever since I saw you this morning.”

“Austin, I’m meant to be out in the yard, helping your mom.”

“Shh. Don’t you want breakfast?”

“Well, my cereal is on that table over there.”

“You want cereal for breakfast or do you want me?”

“What are you saying?” I blinked at him, shocked.

“I’m not saying have sex with me right now.” He chuckled. “I’m just saying, let me kiss you ... and devour you.”

His lips pressed against mine and I melted against him, unable to resist as he pressed my body against him. I ran my hands up and down his back, then grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and pulled it over his head. His bare skin felt warm and silky and smooth against my fingers.

“Austin ...” I moaned.

“Shh.”

He led me towards the bed. He pulled me down next to him then he lifted my t-shirt off before quickly undoing my bra. I lay back against the pillows in only my shorts, waiting to see what he was going to do next.

“You’re so beautiful, Lucy. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Now that’s a lie,” I laughed. But before I could say anything else, his lips were pressing against mine and his fingers were playing with my breasts. His fingertips squeezed my nipples and I moaned as he pinched just that little bit too hard so that it was sexual and ached all at the same time. I could feel a tingling between my legs. My stomach quivered as he ran his hand over it, tickling and teasing. He groaned as I pressed myself against him ran my fingernails down his chest.

“You’re so damn sexy,” he said hoarsely.

His fingers slipped into my shorts and I gasped as he ran his fingers across the fabric of my panties and slipped them between my legs. He rubbed on my clit through my panties and my body froze as my legs widened involuntarily for him. I felt his fingers slipping under my panties and rubbing my bud, skin against skin, and he growled as he felt how wet I was.

“Oh, Lucy, you don’t know how badly I want in.”

“Austin,” I moaned as he rubbed me faster and faster, and I could feel myself becoming hornier and hornier. I gasped as he slipped a finger inside of me and my eyes widened as he stared down at me, lust filling his eyes. He kissed my lips, more urgently this time, as another finger slipped inside of me. I stared at him, my body’s shaking as I pulled him down on top of me, wanting to feel his hard body against mine as he touched me so intimately. He groaned as my body trembled and I felt myself coming. He pulled his fingers out of me and rubbed them dry against my panties before kissing down my neck and my chest and sucking on my nipple. He then kissed down to my belly button and licked a trail back all the way up to my lips.

“I want to do so much to you right now Lucy,” he groaned. “But we can’t. Not now. My mom will be wondering where you are. And I don’t need her to be mad at me, not after yesterday. She still hasn’t forgiven me for what I said.”

I barely remembered where I was, let alone what I was supposed to be doing. I dragged my attention back to reality. “Well, I’ve barely forgiven you myself,” I whispered with a small smile.

“Oh yeah?” He kissed the tip of my nose. “What do I have to do for you to forgive me 100%?”

“I don’t know,” I said seductively. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“You do that, Lucy.” He chuckled. “You think about what you want me to do and I’ll do it.”

“Are you going to be my genie in the bottle?”

“Well, rub me and then you’ll find out.” He winked, and we both started laughing.

Chapter Twenty

“Oh, everything smells delicious, Amelia,” I said as I entered the kitchen for dinner. “Are you sure I can’t help you with anything?”

“You’re such a sweetheart, Lucy, but no, I’ve got everything handled.”

Ranger chuckled from the side of the kitchen and I looked over at him. I smiled curiously, wanting him to explain why he was laughing.

“Oh, Lucy, you’ll soon learn that Amelia doesn’t like help in the kitchen. She loves to do it all herself. She might seem easygoing in many ways, but not when it comes to her food.”

“Now, now, Ranger,” she chided him. “You don’t want to scare Lucy off.”

“I’m not scared,” I laughed. “I think that’s amazing. If I had something that I did really well, I wouldn’t want someone who wasn’t half as good as me to be doing it either.”

“You see, she gets you, dear.” Ranger walked over and rubbed her on the shoulder. “Now, may I please have one of those croissants?”

“I told you no, Ranger. If you have croissants now, you’re going to ruin your appetite for dinner.”

“I always have a huge appetite, my love. I can always eat your food.”

“Yes, you can, but I want to make sure that it remains that way, and it’s not going to remain that way if I let you have

croissants before dinner.”

I started laughing. “Oh, you two are funny.”

“I guess that’s what happens when you’ve been married for a long time,” Amelia said, her eyes twinkling. “Now, I was going to make an apple pie for dessert, but I also have some fresh blackberries. Which would you prefer, blackberries or apples?”

“Oh, either one. I don’t mind,” I said. “What do the others prefer?”

“Well, you’re our guest,” she said cheerfully. “It’s really up to you.”

“Oh, well, I love apple pie, but blackberries are in season, right? And they’re always so delicious, so maybe let’s try that.”

“Oh, Austin’s going to be upset.” Ranger laughed.

“Oh, why?” I said. “Does he prefer apple pie?”

“No, he loves blackberry pie,” Ranger chuckled.

“So then why would he be upset?” I was confused.

“Oh, maybe he didn’t tell you, dear. Austin’s gone to the log cabin, so he won’t be joining us for dinner.” Amelia studied my face. “He said he needed to get some stuff done further out on the ranch, and that he needed some space.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize ...”

I didn’t know what to say. I was sad, which was weird because I shouldn’t be sad. It wasn’t like I was here to be with Austin, and he didn’t owe me anything. But why hadn’t he told me that he was going to go away? Why hadn’t he told me that he was feeling overwhelmed? Was it because of me he was feeling overwhelmed? Was he over everything? Was he over me?

I looked up to see Amelia and Ranger staring at me. “Well, I’m sure he’ll have an amazing time. The log cabin did seem really cool.”

“Yes, it’s a very nice cabin,” Ranger nodded. “Though not a place where you would raise a family.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t look like Austin’s raising a family anytime soon, does it?” I realized I might’ve sounded bitter. “But good for him. I’m glad he really enjoys it.”

“Yes, he does,” Amelia said with a small smile. “We’ll miss him, but he’ll be home soon.”

All of a sudden, I felt deflated. I couldn’t believe how low I was suddenly feeling just because I knew I wouldn’t be seeing Austin for a while.

“Hey, Lucy.” Beau walked into the kitchen with a huge grin on his face. “What smells so good?”

“I’m making pot roast with mashed potatoes and steamed vegetables.” Amelia beamed. “Maybe you can take Lucy into town this evening after dinner, show her that there’s actually stuff going on in this town so she doesn’t want to leave?”

“Sure. Want to go to the bar?” Beau grinned. “I’m always down for the bar, and maybe Austin and Wyatt can join us?”

“Join you with what?” Wyatt walked into the kitchen, looking suspicious.

“The bar.” Beau turned to his brother and slapped him on the back. “I know you love going.”

“Oh, sure, I’m down. I’ll see if Sadie is free.” He pulled out his phone.

“I thought she had a date tonight?” I asked.

Wyatt frowned. “I have no idea what she’s playing at,” he grumbled.

“What she’s playing at?” Amelia raised an eyebrow. “She’s not allowed to date?”

“Whatever,” Wyatt shrugged. “When’s dinner going to be ready? I’m hungry.”

“In about 30 minutes,” Amelia replied. “And Beau, Austin rode off to the log in a huff, so he won’t be joining you guys tonight.”

“What bee got into his bonnet?” Wyatt looked around the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” I asked, wondering at his choice of words.

“Austin goes to the cabin when he wants to think.” Wyatt did air quotes as he said “think.” “What does he have to think about so much, anyway?”

“I’m sure he has a lot on his mind.” Amelia looked at Beau and then at me, and I blushed. What did she know? Why was she looking at us? Was that just a coincidence?

“Come on, Lucy. Let’s go and sit by the fire pit,” Beau nodded at me. “It’s a nice night tonight, Ma. Maybe we can eat outside?”

“Perfect idea.” Amelia nodded in agreement. “You and your brothers set up the picnic table, and Ranger, you get the fire going, okay, dear?”

“Yes, my love.” He grinned at her.

I envied their easygoing relationship. I would love to meet a man that looked at me the way that Ranger looked at Amelia. He was such a tall, gruff guy. People that didn’t know him would never guess he was a soft, loving teddy bear of a man.

I looked around at the Hamilton family members in the kitchen, and I almost choked on how deep the love was. This was a family that cared and whose bonds were stronger than I’d ever seen before, and I was both jealous and happy. Jealous because I wanted to be a part of this crazy clan, and happy because I was here and being embraced without them even knowing me that well.

“Can I take some pictures of you guys tonight?” I asked, wanting to capture their essence in photographs. “Just some casual shots,” I said quickly.

“That would be lovely, dear,” Amelia nodded. “It’s a pity Austin and the other boys aren’t here as well.”

“I know, I can’t wait to meet your other sons. I’m sure they must be amazing as Austin, Beau, and Wyatt.” I noted that I

mentioned Austin's name first and I hoped no one else noticed.

“What the hell?” Wyatt exclaimed and I looked at him in surprise. Was he really that taken aback? “Sorry, not you, Lucy. I just called Sadie to ask if she wanted to come over for dinner and then go to the bar later, and she sent me to voicemail.”

Amelia smiled blandly at her son. “Seems like she's busy, dear. You will have to get used to that. She will soon find a husband and then you will find she will have even less time for you, and then once she has kids ...” Her words trailed off.

Wyatt frowned. “She's not ready for that life. We're too young for marriage and kids.”

“Well, you might be too young,” Beau chuckled, “but obviously she's not.”

“So annoying,” Wyatt slammed his phone down on the countertop. “Frigging voicemail again.”

“Why don't we go outside?” I suggested. “And maybe you can text her about coming to the bar later. Maybe she'll be free then.”

“Maybe.” Wyatt was definitely in my grumpy mood now.

“So, Lucy,” Beau linked arms with me as we walked outside, changing the subject. “Did I ever tell you about my mushroom foraging hobby? We should totally go some time.”

Had he forgotten again that I didn't like mushrooms?

“Um, yeah, that might be nice,” I mumbled, trying to ignore the feelings of self-recrimination as I talked to him. I had no interest in Beau, absolutely no interest at all. All I could think about was Austin, and all I wanted was to be at the log cabin with him right now.

Chapter Twenty-One

“I’m so sorry we didn’t get to go to the bar last night,” Beau told me after breakfast. “I really didn’t anticipate that we’d have to work after dinner.” He shook his head. “It’s just a really crazy time for us right now.”

“Yeah, Austin was telling me something about you speaking to developers?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “We don’t really want to sell any of the land, so we’re coming up with an idea where we might open like, a dude ranch for tourism, but we’re having a hard time figuring out exactly what we want to do.” He sighed. “I guess that’s what comes when you have a lot of land.”

“I guess you don’t make that much money from ranching?”

“Not anymore, unfortunately. Times are changing, and it’s really hard to get good help around here ...But enough about the family business. I was thinking maybe we could go to the bar tonight?”

“That would be fun. If you’re sure?”

“Yeah, definitely, and I spoke to Wyatt, and he said that he finally got a hold of Sadie.” He chuckled. “And I guess she’s down to join us as well.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

“Let’s eat dinner there, give you a change from Mom’s cooking.”

“Oh, your mom’s an amazing cook. I don’t mind staying here for dinner.”

“Oh, I know, but sometimes you need a break.” He grinned. “Or, I should say sometimes *I* need a break.”

“Oh yeah?” I looked at him in surprise. I would have loved to have had a homemade meal for dinner every night.

“I love my mom and I love my family, but sometimes I just need a break, you know?” He gave me an awkward look. “I mean, I’m really glad that you’re here and I hope you’re having a fun time, but you have to admit, it’s kind of awkward.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I guess I knew what I was getting into. You didn’t even know that I was coming.”

“It’s not even that,” he said. “It’s just ...” He sighed. “Anyway, what do you think of Wyatt and Sadie?”

“Oh, I think they’re great.”

“And what’d you think about Austin?” he said, as if he didn’t really care.

“Oh, he’s really nice too. I really enjoyed meeting your family.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait for you to meet my other brothers. I am the oldest, but we’ve all got our own idiosyncrasies, you know?”

“Oh, I bet. Who is your mom’s favorite? Or does she not have a favorite?”

“If she does, she hasn’t told us.” He gave me a wink. “Though I’m pretty sure it’s me.”

I smiled. “Oh, why do you say that?”

“Oh, just because.” He grinned and shook his head. “Okay, I’m not being honest. I doubt that I’m my mom’s favorite. I’m pretty sure that’s Wyatt.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because he’s the baby, and aren’t babies always the favorite?”

“I guess so. I’m an only child, so I wouldn’t really know.”

“Oh yeah, you are, aren’t you? Your parents passed away recently, huh?”

“Kind of. My mom passed away. I don’t know where my dad is.”

“Oh, that sucks. Deadbeat, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Ah, parents,” he shook his head. “So, I was thinking that maybe we could go out around six o’clock?”

“Oh, okay.” I was slightly taken aback that he didn’t ask me more about my mom’s passing, but maybe he didn’t want to pry.

“So, we can eat at the bar. It’s just regular bar food, or we can go somewhere else to eat and then go to the bar for drinks?”

“It’s up to you. I don’t really mind.”

“Yeah, maybe we’ll just go to the bar for everything. I like bar food sometimes.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Okay then, so I’m going to go to work and be ready for six.”

“Okay. Bye, Beau.” I gave him a little wave and then walked back to my bedroom. I saw that I had a missed call from Olivia, so I called her back quickly.

“Hey, Lucy,” she answered the phone after two rings. “Guess what? I booked my ticket!”

“No way, already?”

“Yeah. I figured why let you have all the fun?” She laughed. “I’m going to be coming in a couple of days.”

“Oh, awesome! Just text me your flight information, and I’ll give it to Amelia, and Ranger will come and pick you up at

the airport.”

“Sounds good. I’m really excited. So how’s it going with you and Austin?”

“Well, I thought it was going kind of well, but who knows? He actually went to the log cabin.”

“What do you mean he went to the log cabin?”

“I mean he left and he went to the log cabin to live because he needed to think.”

“Think about what?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even know he was going. He didn’t even tell me.”

“Oh, snap. And what did Beau say?”

“He didn’t really seem to say anything,” I sighed. “Olivia, I’m really not feeling it with Beau, you know? I just don’t feel like there’s any real interest there on either of our sides. Like we’re doing what we should be doing, but I don’t think we’re doing it because we’re trying to get to know each other, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he invited me to go to the bar tonight, and we’re going to go, but it doesn’t feel like a date, even though technically I suppose it is a date.”

“Why is he going along with it, then?”

“I think honestly he just really loves and respects his mom, and I think he’s trying to honor her by at least take me on some dates to show that he tried, even though I don’t really think he’s interested at all.”

“Oh man, do you think he’s gay?”

“No, I don’t think he’s gay. Why would you say that?”

“I mean, because he’s a really good-looking guy, and you’re quite beautiful. So if he’s not interested in you then—”

“Not every guy is interested in me. You know that.”

“Well, I know you say every guy isn’t interested in you, but pretty much every guy I’ve met that has met you has wanted to be with you.”

“Olivia, you’re far too kind, but that’s totally untrue. There are more guys that don’t want to be with me that do.”

“Maybe.” Olivia didn’t sound convinced.

“And anyway, what are you talking about? You’re absolutely gorgeous yourself. You have men fawning over you everywhere you go.”

“That’s not exactly true,” she snorted. “But thank you for the compliment.”

“What? I mean it.”

“And that’s why I love you. I’m so excited to see you.”

“I’m so excited to see you as well. I can’t believe you’re coming to Montana.”

“I can’t believe that you’re already in Montana. We’re crazy.”

“No, we’re not crazy. And who knows, the other brothers will be coming home. Maybe one of them will catch your eye and you’ll fall for him.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I mean, if they all look like Beau, I’m not going to say no.”

“You really think Beau is cute, huh?”

“He’s *gorgeous*, Lucy. What are you even talking about?”

“I don’t know. I’m just surprised that you think he’s gorgeous.” I paused. I hadn’t heard Olivia use those words to describe a man in a really long time. Was she interested in Beau? Was that why she was coming? Obviously, Olivia didn’t even know Beau, so she couldn’t be that interested in him.

Or could she?

I thought back to the day she’d seen him on video chat. Was that when she had said she was going to come to visit me, or had she said she was going to come to visit me beforehand?

I couldn't remember, but now I felt even more anxious. Because if Olivia was interested in Beau—like seriously interested—then what was I doing here?

“Hey, I have a question for you, Olivia,” I said, thinking out loud.

“Yeah?”

“If I were to tell you that Beau was going to arrange a day for us to go mushroom foraging, would you be down?”

“Oh my God, of course. You know I would. I love mushrooms. Would we be able to eat the mushrooms that we found?” she said excitedly. “Like, could we cook some dishes? That would be so cool.”

“Yeah, I'm not sure, but maybe.”

“But you hate mushrooms, Lucy. Why would you want to go mushroom foraging?”

“Oh, I was just thinking maybe it would be interesting.”

“I guess. I mean, if you're down to do it, I would definitely go. It sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, it does. Well, I'm going to call you later. Okay? Text me over the details, and I'll give them to Amelia and Ranger.”

“Okay. Thanks, Lucy. Tell them I said thank you so much. Also, what should I bring them to thank them?”

“Oh, you don't have to bring them anything.”

“I do. I mean, it's one thing for you to be there because you were invited. I'm kind of just showing up as your friend, and I don't want them to think that I'm just some sort of grifter, you know?”

“Oh, they won't think you're a grifter, I promise.”

“But I'd like to.”

“Well, I'll ask Beau and see what he thinks. Okay?”

“Thanks, girl. Okay, speak to you later. Bye.”

I hung up the phone and stared out of the window at the Montana Rockies in the distance. Such a majestic beautiful sight, so different from New York City. I wondered what Olivia would think when she got here. Would she fall in love with it as I had? Would she fall in love with one of the brothers? I sighed and stood up and headed to the kitchen as I heard my phone beep with the airplane details.

“Hey, Amelia.”

“Hi there,” she said from the sink. She was scrubbing the dishes to put into the dishwasher.

“So, my best friend, Olivia, actually got a ticket already. I hope that’s okay?”

“Oh, of course, dear. The more the merrier. When will she be here?”

“In a couple of days. If you can’t go to the airport, I can just get a taxi and pick her up. Oh, I still have my rental car.” I slapped my hand to my mouth as I remembered. “Oh gosh, I need to return that. They’re charging me per day, and I haven’t even been using it.”

“So here’s what we’ll do, dear,” she said. “I’ll have Ranger drive me in one car, and then I’ll have Beau drive your rental back to the airport, and then we’ll drop off your rental, and then all of us can drive back in the Escalade.”

“Are you sure? And I don’t want to put Beau out. I don’t even know if he knows that Olivia is coming.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be fine, dear. I’m very excited to meet your friend.”

“Thanks, Amelia.” I smiled at her warmly. “You’re amazing. I really don’t know how to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Oh, my darling, I’ve done nothing for you. You have just done so much for me.”

I started to feel guilty then because, well, I hadn’t actually done anything, and it didn’t look like she was going to her

dreams coming true. I wasn't interested in being with Beau, and I didn't think Beau was interested in being with me either.

"Amelia, I know you sent for me because you hoped that Beau and I would make a connection, but," I paused, looking for the words, "I—"

"Oh, give it time, dear. You two have just met. It's overwhelming. I know my sons and ... Well, let's just say that I know that you're made for one of them. I can already see you as a part of the family, my dear Lucy."

"Oh, well thank you, Amelia, but Beau and I—"

"Don't worry about Beau, my dear. Whatever's to be will be. True love will find its way in the end." She turned back around and smiled, her eyes twinkling. "Now, you want to go down to the stables and feed the horses?"

"Um, I can. I don't really know how."

"There're some ranch hands down there. They'll show you the way."

"Okay, sounds good."

"Have a great day, Lucy, and I'll see you for lunch."

"Okay. Bye, Amelia. Thanks again."

I walked towards the stables. I was actually excited to do more on the ranch. I was excited to learn the ropes, and as I saw two of the ranch hands shoveling manure, I knew that I didn't have to be an expert to get my hands dirty. I could shovel. I could feed horses. That was easy.

I thought about Amelia's words, that true love would find its way. I felt like she was really, really hopeful that Beau and I were going to get together. But I just wasn't interested in him in that way. He was a nice guy. He'd be a good friend, but romantically? I didn't want to kiss him. I didn't want to touch him, and I'd already kissed his brother. Shit, I'd fallen for his brother before I'd even reached the ranch. I knew that sounded crazy, but it was kind of true. That kiss in the bar had knocked me off my feet, and now I found myself in a very complicated situation.

* * *

As we pulled up to the bar, I realized that it was the same bar I'd gone to the first day I'd arrived. I only hoped that Chip wasn't there. I really didn't want him making any comments about me and Austin. As soon as Beau parked, Sadie and Wyatt jumped out of an old Chevy pickup truck parked nearby and headed towards us.

"Hey, Lucy. So good to see you," Sadie said with a huge smile as she walked up to me.

"Hi, good to see you, as well."

"I'm so excited to show you to the bar. It's so cool here."

"I've actually been here before," I told her, hoping she didn't ask me too much information.

"Oh, really? When? I didn't know you guys had gone to the bar." She looked back at Wyatt. "Wyatt, why didn't you tell me you guys headed to the bar?"

"We didn't head to the bar. At least she didn't head with me." He looked at Beau, "Did you guys go to the bar?"

"No, we didn't. You stopped by here on your first day, right?" Beau looked at me.

"Yeah. I came because ... this is so embarrassing ... but I lost the address, and I was hoping that someone at the bar would know where Horseshoe Ranch was."

Sadie burst out laughing. "This is totally a 'Tell me you live in a small city without telling me you live in a small city' sort of thing."

"What are you talking about?" Wyatt asked, with confusion in his eyes.

"Haven't you ever seen any of those Tik Tok videos?" She looked at him. "People are always saying, 'Tell me your man is cheap without telling me your man is cheap' or 'Tell me your daughter is messy without telling me your daughter is messy.'"

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Wyatt just shook his head.

“Okay, well, whatever.”

“So, ready for a drink?” Sadie asked me with a bright smile.

I noticed the way that Wyatt was looking at her. He was smitten, even if he didn’t realize it. I would love for a man to look at me the way that Wyatt looked at Sadie, and to think they didn’t even realize that they were made for each other. How crazy was that? “I am absolutely dying for a drink. Thank you very much.” I looked back at Beau. “What about you, Beau?”

“Of course, I’m always up for a beer,” he chuckled.

I saw Chip behind the counter soon as soon we entered, and I stifled a groan as we walked up to a table. Hopefully, he wouldn’t notice me, or at least not say anything if he did.

“Hey there, Beau. Hey, Wyatt,” Chip shouted from the bar. And then his gaze landed on me and his face split into a grin. “So, I see you found Horseshoe Ranch then?”

“Yes, I did. Thank you.”

“Hey, Sadie,” Chip went on. “Surprised to see you here again so soon.”

“Hah, hah, me too,” she laughed.

“What’s he talking about?” Wyatt frowned.

“I came here on my date, remember?”

“You came to the bar on a date?” Wyatt sounded kind of pissed.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Why would you go to the bar on a date? You could get drunk and a guy could end up taking advantage of you.”

“You’re not my big brother or my dad, Wyatt. Chill. I was fine. I had a glass of wine and that was it.”

“Uh huh.” Wyatt just shook his head. “Beau, tell Sadie don’t do anything so stupid next time she goes on a date.”

“Sadie, don’t do anything so stupid next time you go on a date,” Beau said with a grin. Okay. Let me head up to the bar and speak to Chip and order us some drinks. What do you guys want?”

“I’ll take a Heineken,” Wyatt said.

Sadie looked at me. “You want to share a bottle of wine, Lucy?”

“I wouldn’t say no,” I nodded.

“What’s your favorite?” she asked me.

“I’m pretty flex. I can do white or red or rosé.”

“Let’s do a Malbec,” she said to Beau. “Two glasses, and let’s get some tater tots, as well.” She looked over at Wyatt and poked him. “You want some tater tots, Wyatt?”

“I ate already.”

“So, you’re saying no, you don’t want any?”

“I mean, I could always have tater tots, you know that,” he chuckled. “Fine. Let’s get some tater tots.”

“Sounds good to me.” I watched as Beau walked up to the bar. “So, this is a really cool place. I guess this is you guys’s local?”

“Yeah,” Sadie nodded. “We’ve been coming here since we were 19.”

“Really?”

“Well, we weren’t drinking or anything. Chip wouldn’t serve us alcohol,” she sighed. “But he would serve us Cokes and bar food, and, you know, we’d play darts. They’ve got a mechanical bull at the back, as well, that’s fun to ride on. You should go on it sometime.”

“Oh, yeah. That sounds like it would be really fun.” I thought about Austin and wished he was here with us. I’d love to see him on the mechanical bull.

“Oh, yeah, and they also have line dancing here.”

“Do you guys line dance a lot?” I asked her.

“Oh, yeah. I love to,” Sadie said. “Wyatt, not so much. Can you two-step, Lucy?”

“I think so.”

“I really love line dancing,” Sadie said.

“What are your favorite songs to line dance to?”

“Well, if I’m honest, I really love Achy Breaky Heart by Billy Ray Cyrus.”

“I remember that song. That was a good one.”

“And then do you know Boot Scootin’ Boogie?”

“I’m not sure if I do.”

“It’s by Brooks and Dunn. You have to know it.”

“Not really.”

Wyatt then interjected into the conversation. “Sadie also loves to dance to What the Cowgirls Do.”

“Yeah, I do,” she laughed. “You know that one?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I shook my head.

“It’s by Vince Gill. You have to know Vince Gill. Can you do the Cowgirl Twist?”

“Honestly, I’ve never heard of it.”

Sadie started laughing. “Sorry. I forget you’re from New York City. I guess there’s not a lot of country dancing going on in New York City?”

“Not really,” I laughed. “I like to dance, though, so I’d be open to going out and doing some dancing, maybe if they have like a beginners’ night?”

“Oh, every Thursday night is line dancing night, and there’s always someone willing to teach. Heck, I’d teach you. You want to go next Thursday?”

“Yeah, that would be great. My friend Olivia will be here by then. She can come as well.”

“Oh. Three hot single girls on the prowl,” Sadie wiggled her eyebrows.

“Excuse me,” Wyatt frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean, ‘You don’t think so?’”

“It’s not just going to be three single girls on the prowl. I’m going to be coming, and I’m sure Beau will want to come, as well.”

“What? You never like to go line dancing.” Sadie looked at him. “What is your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem, Sadie. What? You don’t want me to go line dancing with you now, just so you can pick up some men.”

“I’m not trying to pick up any men, Wyatt. I’m just—”

I decided it was time to change the subject before things got heated. “Well, guys, while I don’t mean to interrupt, but I was wondering if you could, perhaps, tell me more about, um ...”

“About what?” Wyatt looked relieved.

“The cabin where Austin is.”

“The cabin?” Wyatt looked surprised now. “Austin? I thought you were going to ask us questions about Beau, seeing as he’s at the bar right now.”

“Oh, well ... I was going to ask you questions about Beau later.”

“Huh,” Sadie said, looking at me through narrowed eyes. “So you want to know about Austin and the log cabin, huh?”

“Well, just more about the ranch and everything. I mean, I don’t really care about Austin, in particular.” I paused, feeling the weight of Sadie’s gaze on me. I had a feeling she could tell that I was more interested in Austin than Beau, but if she was going to be my friend, maybe it would be good to have her as

an ally so that I could get more information about the family out of her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Lucy, oh, wow. You look beautiful!” Olivia ran towards me with a squeal, her long brown hair flying behind her. My heart leaped when I saw her, and I could feel tears of happiness welling up in my eyes. Olivia felt like home. She felt like a piece of my heart. And I realized how much I missed seeing her every day. While being in the city without my mother made me sad, I had a lot of fond memories as well. There were so many places that Olivia and my mom and I had all gone together.

“Oh, Olivia, I’ve missed you so much.” I hugged her close and then held her face in my hands and studied her eyes. “You okay?” I asked her softly. There was a tinge of sadness there. I hadn’t noticed it before.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I’ve just missed you. It’s been really lonely in the city without you, Lucy.”

“I know.” It suddenly struck me how selfish I’d been. I was Olivia’s best friend. We’d done everything together and I just left the city without even thinking about her. “I’m sorry,” I whispered “I—”

“So you must be the infamous Olivia!” Beau interrupted. “Nice to meet you.” He gave her a warm smile and I stepped back so he could shake her hand. I noticed Olivia’s face brightening as she studied him.

“Hi, you must be Lucy’s fiancé.” Olivia giggled, and I glared at her. “Sorry. I couldn’t stop myself.” She shot me an apologetic look.

“No worries.” Beau chuckled. “I’m still single, to be honest.” Beau was studying her face and looking her up and down. “How about you?”

“I’m single.” She blushed and looked away. There was an awkward silence for a moment. And then she cleared her throat. “I just brought one suitcase with me, Lucy. I hope I have enough stuff.”

“You don’t need many clothes on the ranch.” Beau grabbed her suitcase. “Let’s head out. My parents have the car outside, so they’ll give us a ride home. My brother Wyatt and his best friend stayed here at the ranch, getting a barbecue ready. My mom wanted you to feel at home when you got to Horseshoe Ranch.”

“That sounds really amazing.” Olivia beamed. “That was so nice of your parents.”

“Oh, they’re happy to put you up and treat you like family,” Beau said with a smile and started walking a few steps in front of us. Olivia pointed at his back before whispering to me.

“Oh my gosh, Lucy. He’s *gorgeous*. How do you keep your hands off of him?”

I made a face and laughed. “He’s definitely handsome,” I whispered back.

“So how’s it going between you guys?” She was speaking too nonchalantly, and it made me wonder exactly what she was thinking about him.

“You mean, is it still weird and awkward?” I replied. “Yes. It’s still weird. Though we have good banter. I think we would get on. And his family is absolutely lovely.”

“And what about Austin?” she asked, still keeping her voice low.

“He’s been at the log cabin.” I shrugged looking away. “I haven’t seen him in days.”

I tried to pretend that it didn’t matter. I tried to pretend that I didn’t care. That I hadn’t been counting the hours since he’d

been gone. I missed him. I missed chatting with him. I missed arguing with him. I missed just being around him, and I missed kissing him more than anything. Not that I would tell anyone that.

“He’s still at the log cabin?”

“Yeah. I think he knows his mom thinks that Beau and I are a perfect fit. And that she knows best. And so, he’s gone to give his brother and me time to get to know each other better.”

“But don’t you like Austin?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled and then pressed my lips together. I didn’t know how to tell Olivia just how close we’d become. How much he meant to me. “Oh, look, that’s Amelia and Ranger.” I pointed out their SUV. “That’s Austin and Beau’s parents.” I waved at Amelia who was waving and smiling at us. “Let’s finish this conversation later, okay?”

“Okay.” Olivia gave me a curious look and I knew she was going to have a lot of questions later that night.

“Hi, you must be Olivia.” Amelia jumped out of the car and walked over to Olivia. “It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Amelia Hamilton, and that’s my husband, Ranger, in the driver’s seat.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you.” Olivia smiled at her and waved at Ranger. “Thank you so much for picking me up and thank you so much for letting me stay. I know it’s a bit of an inconvenience, but—”

“Oh, of course not, dear.” Amelia shook her head as she studied Olivia’s face. “It’s not an inconvenience at all.”

“Well, thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“My mom loves having company. The more, the merrier,” Beau chuckled as he stared at Olivia. And for a moment, I saw something in his face that made me think that perhaps he was attracted to her as well. I noticed that Amelia was also staring at her son before looking at Olivia and then issuing them both a sort of sweet, private smile. She then looked back at me and grabbed my hand.

“Come on, Lucy. Let’s go back home. I’m sure you must be starving.”

“I am. I’m really excited for the barbecue. I can’t wait.”

“Then come on, folks. Don’t want to keep anyone waiting for food. You know, that’s not how we do it in the Hamilton family.”

“We know, Mom,” Beau groaned, and opened the car door for Olivia. Olivia thanked him, and I saw him smiling as she got into the car. He kept the door open and then paused as he looked at me and then at the middle seat.

“I can sit bench if you want.” He looked at Olivia and then he looked at me again. “I mean, unless you want to sit next to Olivia.”

“It’s okay. You can go in the middle.” I said, studying his face thoughtfully. Well, this was interesting, if Beau was interested in Olivia and Olivia was interested in Beau, where did that leave me? And would Amelia want me to leave if it turned out that Olivia was a better match for Beau than I was?

* * *

“Welcome to Horseshoe Ranch, Olivia.” Amelia looked back from the front seat and interrupted Olivia and Beau’s conversation. They’d spent the entire ride discussing Olympian swimmers and arguing over the best countries represented at the Olympics. I listened to the conversation, but I didn’t have anything to contribute as I knew nothing about sports.

“Wow, it’s humongous!” Olivia gasped as we drove up the long driveway to the main ranch.

“That’s exactly how I felt when I arrived as well,” I laughed. “It’s overwhelming, isn’t it?”

“It really is,” Olivia nodded. “I have to call my parents real quick when we get out of the car. I’m sure they want to hear that I’ve landed safe and sound.”

“Oh, of course,” Amelia nodded.

“Where are your parents located?” Beau asked her, and I was surprised because he hadn’t really asked me anything about my mom. We hadn’t had any real in-depth conversations, not like Austin and I had. I didn’t think Beau was the sort of person to ask questions, but I guess I’d been wrong.

“They’re in Florida,” Olivia made a face. “Sarasota. Not much going on there, but they love it.”

“Oh, cool,” Beau nodded.

“You’ve never heard of it, have you?” she grinned.

“No,” he chuckled. “I only know Orlando because Mom and Dad took us all to Disney once.”

“Just once?” Olivia grinned. “I would’ve thought you guys would have gone more than once.”

“You try going with seven sons. Right, Mom?” Beau glanced at his mother. “I don’t think they wanted to take us again after the first experience.”

“It was definitely challenging,” Amelia laughed.

“You can say that again,” Ranger groaned, and I laughed at the sound he’d made.

“It must’ve been really wild raising seven sons.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” Amelia smiled. “I loved having kids in the house, and I’m really excited for grandkids now.

“Hopefully, we’ll get some girls,” Ranger chortled. “We need some estrogen in the house.”

“What you complaining about, Dad?” Beau laughed and then looked at me and then Olivia. “That’s my parents’ way of hinting that they want us to get married and have kids.”

“A personal ad in the paper for a mail-order bride seems like a little bit more than a hint.” Olivia wiggled her eyebrows.

“What would you have done?” Beau looked at her with a curious expression.

“What do you mean?” Olivia was confused. “Do you mean would I have put an ad in the paper if I wanted grandkids?”

“No,” he shook his head. “If you’d seen the ad in the newspaper that my mom placed, would you have responded?”

“Oh, hell no,” Olivia burst out laughing immediately. “Sorry, Lucy. No offense.” She gave me a wry grin.

“No offense taken,” I laughed.

“What if Beau’s photo had been in the ad?” Amelia asked slyly, and Olivia blushed as she looked him over.

“Well, then maybe,” she admitted.

“Now, that’s what I like to hear,” Beau grinned, looking very pleased with himself.

And I had the weirdest feeling in my stomach. Did Beau and Amelia prefer Olivia over me? My best friend was gorgeous, sassy, funny, and intelligent. She also wasn’t coming off as totally desperate, like me. Maybe Amelia was starting to think she’d made a mistake by sending for me. Maybe she didn’t want me as a daughter-in-law after all.

But I didn’t have time to feel too sorry for myself because I suddenly saw Austin standing on the front porch. He was back. I almost jumped out of the car before it stopped completely. And I had to ensure that I didn’t go running to the front porch like an excited little kid. I didn’t want everyone questioning what was going on.

“Austin’s back,” I stated the obvious as he stepped off the porch and walked towards us. He was wearing a white cowboy hat and a pair of snug jeans, and I swallowed hard as I took in his handsome appearance. He was so sexy and gorgeous.

“Wow,” Olivia looked impressed. “He’s quite the snack.”

I shot her a dark look then noticed that Amelia was watching me closely. Oops, she was going to wonder why I was looking so pissed off at Olivia’s comments.

“He’s single as well,” I said painfully, willing Olivia to back off.

“Hey, guys.” Austin walked over to the group and spoke generally, but his eyes were on me.

“Hi. You’re back?” I said hopefully.

“I am,” he nodded and then handed me some wildflowers. “I saw these in the field as I rode back. I thought you might like them.”

I looked at the blue and yellow petals and grinned. “They’re beautiful. Thank you. I’m really touched.”

“They’re called forget-me-nots,” he said softly.

“Could I ever?” I almost whispered, not believing we were having a moment here in front of everyone.

“Come on, children. Let’s go and wash up and then eat.” Amelia took Ranger’s hand as they walked past us towards the house. “Beau, you show Olivia her room,” Amelia said.

“Sure, Mom,” he nodded. He and Olivia exchanged a smile and walked into the house behind Amelia and Ranger.

Austin and I looked at each other for a moment and then followed. “I’ll see you later,” Austin said with a small smile, and I nodded, sad that we had to hide our feelings for each other.

As I made my way to my room, I realized that I was thirsty and wanted a drink. I decided to go to the kitchen to get some water but stopped in the doorway as I realized Amelia and Ranger were in there having a private conversation.

“It is quite obvious to me that they are falling in love,” Amelia sounded excited. “I see a wedding in the near future.”

“Now, now, Amelia. Don’t rush things,” Ranger answered. “We can’t force anything.”

“I’m not forcing anything,” Amelia sounded annoyed. “I knew they were perfect for you each other, and I was right. I can’t wait to welcome Lucy to the family officially.”

I walked back to my room without a drink. I felt so guilty because I wasn’t into Beau at all. He was a nice guy, but there was no chemistry there, no real attraction. I didn’t know what

to do, but I knew it was going to kill me having to break Amelia's heart when she realized that Beau and I would never be getting married.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I felt full and happy as I brushed my teeth and got ready for bed. It had been an amazing evening. We'd had barbecue rings and flank steak with potato salad and coleslaw, garlic bread, apple pie, ice cream, and there had been laughter and joy filling the yard. Amelia and Ranger had been the perfect hosts, and Beau, Austin, and Wyatt had kept us all entertained. Sadie, Olivia, and I had laughed and sung and danced the night away, and I'd really felt like I was part of a family.

It was weird thinking that I hadn't known any of these people, aside from Olivia, just a couple of weeks ago. They felt like they'd always been a part of my life. They were the part that had been missing, and yet, as I put my toothbrush down, I felt sad because my mom would never get to meet them in person and I knew my mom would have loved the family. She would have been the first one dancing along, doing the two-step in the backyard, laughing, drinking, and being merry. I felt sad, but then I took a deep breath.

I could feel my mom's presence and spirit around me. She wanted me to be happy. She wanted me to live my life. A part of me had been worried about leaving New York. A part of me had thought that I wouldn't remember her if I wasn't in the city that we'd always lived in together, but I'd been wrong to worry because I felt more alive and happy in Montana than I'd ever felt anywhere else in my life.

I love the city. I loved going shopping. I love putting on makeup. I love doing my hair, but it didn't matter here. I still liked to look good, but I didn't have to wear the latest fashions

and buy the coolest handbags and shoes. I didn't have to keep up with people who had far more money than me. People who would judge me if I didn't have the right reservations for the right restaurants. It didn't matter here. There was one bar in town, and everyone went there and no one cared if you were rich or poor. There were hard-working people, and that was what life was all about. It was about enjoying being with the ones that you loved.

I walked over to the bed and sat down. All of a sudden, an urge to say a prayer came to me. I hadn't said a prayer in years. Not since I was a child when my mother and I would kneel by the side of my bed and thank God for keeping us both happy and healthy. It wasn't that I no longer believed in God. It was just that I'd fallen out of the habit of saying prayers. I've fallen out of the habit of being thankful, but I was thankful.

I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I didn't know where my life was going. I didn't even know how long I'd get to stay in Montana, but I did know that I was going to enjoy every second of it, and when I had to leave, if I had to leave, I would just be grateful to have met this loving family. I loved Amelia and Ranger as if they were my own parents, and Austin, well, he took my breath away. Beau was funny and charming, and Wyatt was a hoot, and Sadie, even though she and Wyatt weren't together yet, I knew she'd make the perfect sister-in-law.

I was about to get on my knees and say the Lord's prayer when I heard a knock on the door. Thinking it was Olivia, I got up and opened it with a wide smile on my face. "Hey, I was just about to—" I stopped.

It wasn't Olivia there, but shirtless Austin. I swallowed hard.

"Can I come in?" His voice was husky.

"Okay." I nodded, opened the door wider and he walked in. He looked me over in my short shorts and t-shirt and grinned.

"You look cute."

“You too.” I tried not to stare at his Batman boxer shorts as they were going to make me laugh. Instead, I kept my gaze pinned to his muscular chest. He had a six-pack and I just wanted to run my hands down it. He was ripped. I guess that’s what came from working on the farm.

“So, did you miss me?” he asked.

“What do you mean, did I miss you?”

“When I was gone? Did you miss me?”

“You weren’t even gone for very long,” I said, “Why would I miss you?”

“You didn’t think about me?”

“I did wonder why you left without telling me. I mean, one night you were in my room, and we were talking, and the next morning, I wake up and you’re gone. You didn’t even tell me.”

“Did that upset you?”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to get from me, Austin.”

“I’m trying to figure out if you like me,” he said, a goofy expression on his face.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m trying to figure out if you like me as much as I like you.”

“You like me?”

“What do you think, Lucy? You’re driving me crazy. Of course I like you. Would I be kissing you and sneaking into your room if I didn’t like you?”

“I don’t know. I thought you were just testing me or just doing something weird.”

“You thought I was testing you by sneaking into your room and kissing you?”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“I like you, Lucy. I think you’re beautiful. I think I’ve told you that before. I think you’re funny. I think ...” He paused. “Well, I don’t want to give all my secrets away.”

“You think I’m beautiful, huh?”

“You know that. You’re the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“I’m not the most beautiful woman in the world, but thank you.”

“In my eyes, you are.”

“You don’t have to be so sweet, Austin. I’m not used to this.”

“I’m not used to being sweet, either.” He made a face. “When you grow up with six brothers, you’re not really dispositioned to be sweet.”

“I guess you get it from your mama.”

“Maybe,” he laughed. “So, we should talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“Well, you obviously can’t be with Beau.”

“Oh,” I swallowed, “I don’t know. I mean, I don’t want to disappoint your mom, and maybe I haven’t given Beau enough of a chance.”

His face darkened. “Are you joking, Lucy? You don’t feel anything for Beau.”

“I mean, I like you, but your mom really thinks that Beau and I have a connection. I overheard her telling your dad that she actually thinks we’re falling in love and that there’s going to be a wedding between me and Beau, and I love your mom already. I know that sounds really weird because I’m new to your family and I don’t really know you guys that well, but I’d hate to break her heart.”

“But you’d be okay breaking my heart?”

“Breaking your heart? Really?” My eyes narrowed as I stared at him. Was he telling me that he loved me?

“I’m just saying,” he shrugged and turned towards the door. “But hey, if that’s your decision.”

“Wait.” I placed my hand on his shoulder and I turned him around. “Look at me, Austin.”

“What?”

“Do you love me?” I asked quietly, staring into his big green eyes. He grabbed my hand and placed it over his heart.

“Can you feel my heartbeat?” he whispered.

“Yeah.” His heart was racing faster than I’d ever felt a heart racing before. “Are you okay? Should it be beating that fast?”

“It beats that fast for you, Lucy Kensington.”

And I knew then the answer to my question. He didn’t even have to say the words. I pressed my lips close to his and we kissed. His hands ran through my hair and I pressed my body against his, loving the warm hardness of him. He wrapped his arms around me and held me even closer, and I felt comforted and protected the way I’d always wanted to feel in a man’s arms, yet had never felt in my life before. His hand slipped down to my ass and squeezed and I moaned as he pushed his hard cock against my stomach.

“I want you, Lucy,” he groaned.

I stared into his eyes and ran my hands down his back, loving the feel of his silky skin. “Oh, Austin. I want you too, but ...”

“But what?”

Without waiting for a reply, he led me to the bed and pulled me down next to him. He pulled my t-shirt off and before I knew it, my bra was off as well. I flicked my fingertips lightly against his nipples, relishing the way he groaned in response. His lips moved down along my collarbone as his tongue traced a line along my hot skin. His mouth found my nipples and he sucked. I moaned as his finger slipped inside my panties and he started rubbing my clit. He grunted as he felt my wetness and slipped a finger inside of me. My body quivered with need.

I wanted this man so badly. How could I even pretend to anyone that he wasn't the one that I wanted? How could I even pretend for a second that Austin Hamilton wasn't the one that I needed to be with? I was going to have to tell Amelia that she'd gotten it wrong. I was going to have to tell her that Beau wasn't the one for me and that in fact, I felt that maybe Beau and Olivia had a connection.

How crazy was that? Here was Amelia thinking that Beau and I were about to get married, but instead I was with Austin, wanting nothing more than to feel him inside of me and wanting to hook up my best friend with Beau. It was twisted. It was weird, but it was what it was.

"I think Olivia likes Beau," I whispered.

Austin looked down at me. "What?"

"I said, I think Olivia might like Beau."

"You're joking, right?" He pulled my shorts down and my panties.

"No, I'm not joking. I really do think so."

"So then why are you saying that you still think you should be with him?"

"I'm not saying that I think I should be with him. I just ..."

I gasped as I felt his lips on my stomach, moving down. He spread my legs apart and traced the edges of my pussy with his tongue. Then his hot mouth covered my clit and sucked. Heat curled and build in my belly. "Oh, Austin," I groaned as I reached down and squeezed his shoulder.

"So, what were you saying about Beau?"

His eyes looked up at me with a wink, and I just shook my head. I couldn't talk. I didn't have time to say anything. My brain couldn't process. He just chuckled and I felt his tongue sliding inside of me. I placed my heels on his shoulders and he fucked me with his tongue so good and so hard that my entire body trembled. I was here for this. I needed this, and if I'd even doubted for a second that Austin was the one that I wanted, all those doubts were gone as he made love to me with his tongue. I'd never felt anything as passionate and as sweet

as this. I'd never felt my body on fire like this. I didn't care what happened next. I needed Austin. I needed him more than I'd ever needed anyone in the world.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Hey, Olivia and Lucy, you guys want to go to the crick later?” Beau asked me as Olivia and I walked back from the stables.

“The crick?” Olivia raised an eyebrow. “What the hell is that?”

“He means the creek,” I laughed. “That’s country talk.”

“You guys don’t call it the crick?” Beau made a face.

“No, we don’t. Do you want to go?” She turned to me, a hopeful smile on her face.

“Sure. Is it just going to be us three?” I looked away. I didn’t want to bring up Austin’s name. “Are Wyatt and Sadie going to be joining us?” I said quickly.

“I’m not sure about Wyatt and Sadie, but Austin is going to come. I hope that’s okay.”

“Oh, yeah. I mean, it will be good fun for all of us to go together.” I was really messing up, but I didn’t want to come out as liking Austin in front of everyone until I’d had a conversation with Beau. Not that I thought Beau was into me, but, technically, I had come to the ranch to be his mail order bride and nothing even close to an engagement was going to happen between the two of us.

“Hey, Austin!” Beau shouted behind him, “Olivia and Lucy are down. We’re going to go to the crick and then we’ll go kayaking down the river. Do you girls kayak?”

“I love kayaking!” Olivia beamed at him. “That sounds amazing.”

“I’ve been once and it was okay.” I made a face. I was a little bit nervous. I wasn’t the best swimmer and well, if I fell in, I didn’t want to look like an absolute idiot.

“We have tandem kayaks, and we have single kayaks. What do you guys want? We’ll put them in the back of the truck now.”

“Um, I don’t mind. What are you guys doing?”

“Single, of course,” Austin walked up behind his brother-in-law. “But if you want to go tandem, I could go in a kayak with you, show you the ropes.”

“It’s okay. I can go in a single kayak.” I looked away blushing. All I could think about was him bringing me to an orgasm with his tongue the night before. I shivered at the memory. He’d left before we could make love. And that had been the gentlemanly thing for him to do because I was seconds away from ripping his boxer shorts off and screaming out his name so that the entire house could hear how much pleasure he was bringing me.

“And you, Olivia?” Beau asked. “If you want a tandem, I can go in a kayak with you.”

“Oh, I’d love to be in a single kayak unless you prefer to do tandem.”

“We can do singles. It’ll be fun. We can bring some fishing poles as well.”

Austin looked excited. “You ever been fishing, Lucy?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.”

“You’re really a city girl, aren’t you? There’s no country in you at all.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. I mean,” I paused and I laughed. “Okay. Who am I kidding? There’s no country in me at all. At least there hasn’t been. I feel like I’m becoming a little bit country now.”

“Well, we got to get you a cowboy hat and some cowboy boots first,” Austin said, “Would you like that?”

“Yeah, that would be really cool.” And then I looked at Beau. “I mean, what do you think, Beau?”

“Yeah, yeah. If you want to get some, sounds good to me.”

“I’d like to get a cowboy hat,” Olivia said. “I’m totally not a cowgirl, but I think I would look amazing in a cowgirl hat.”

“I think you would as well,” Beau said. And then he looked at me. “You too, Lucy.”

“Well, that’s settled. We’ll go into town maybe tomorrow,” Austin said. “If you girls are up for it.”

“Yeah. I’m definitely up for it.”

“How long will you be in town, Olivia?” Austin asked my friend.

“I’m not sure yet. I got an open-ended ticket so I can decide later.” She looked down at the ground.

“Hey, everything okay?”

“I think I’m going to lose my job, though. Nancy was not too happy when I told her I was taking a vacation out of the city.”

“What?”

“Yeah, even though I had vacation time due to me, she said that she wanted me to work this weekend because it was going to be really busy, and I said, ‘I don’t think that’s going to be possible, because I’m going to be in Montana,’ and she got all pissy and said, ‘Well, if you’re not going to work this weekend, then don’t bother coming back,’ and well, you know.” She shrugged. “I have a feeling I lost my job.”

“Oh, no, Olivia!” I tried to read her expression. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Well, I have a little bit of savings in my account, and when I say a little bit, I mean \$2,000. That will last me one month, so I’m going to have to figure out a way to make

money soon. So I might have to go back sooner than I would want.”

“You can make money here,” Beau said quickly. “We can hire you on the ranch.”

“Um, there’s not really much I can do on the ranch, but thank you,” Olivia said. “That’s really kind of you.”

“Well, we might be expanding and starting a resort, so perhaps some of your skills would be helpful there?”

“You’re going to start a resort here?” She looked around. “I’m surprised. It’s so peaceful, and—”

“Let’s not talk about it now,” Austin made a face. “It’s kind of a touchy subject around here right now.” He looked at me. “So, Lucy.”

“Yes, Austin?”

“I was thinking—”

“Wow. For once in your life.”

“Very funny. Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?”

“Of course I’d like to hear what you have to say, Austin. What do you have to say?”

“I really, really like your green dress.”

“Well, thank you.”

“But I’m not sure that it’s appropriate for kayaking.”

“And why not?”

“I mean, if you fall in or you get wet ...” He shrugged. “But you can wear it if you want to.”

“I will wear it. Thank you. I love it.” And even though I did want to go and change because I didn’t think a dress was the most appropriate thing to wear kayaking, I didn’t want him to feel like he could just tell me what I could and couldn’t wear. I was obstinate that way.

“Okay. We’re going to go and get the kayaks and the paddles and the fishing rods and the bait and tackle, and you

girls meet us at the front in about 10 minutes?" Beau said, interrupting my conversation with Austin.

"Sounds good to me." Olivia nodded. "Right, Lucy?"

"Yeah, sure." We watched as the two men walked back into the house and then Olivia grabbed my hand.

"What is going on, Lucy?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you and Austin. Be honest." She folded her arms and stared at me. "I can see the way that he looks at you."

"What do you mean?" Heat crept into my cheeks.

"He really likes you. Like he really, *really* likes you."

"No, he doesn't. He just flirts and is being a nice guy."

"Are you crazy? The way that he looks at you ..." She touched the side of my face and grinned. "I think he's in love with you, girl."

"No, he's not!" I bit my lip. "Do you really think so?"

"Yeah, I really do. I haven't seen a man look at a woman like that in real life. Wow. Never. He loves you."

"Well, I don't know if he loves me, but this is so complicated."

"You really like him too, I can tell. You really, really like him."

"I do," I admitted with a sigh. "I really, really do. He makes me want to sing when there's no sound in the room, he makes me want to run along the side of the road and do cartwheels and backflips."

"But you can't do backflips."

"I know I can't do backflips, Olivia, but if I could do backflips, I would want to do them."

"I know. I'm just joking."

"He makes me want to play with the butterflies and fly through the air. He makes me want to swing from trees and

jump from cliffs and just scream about how happy I am. It's crazy because I don't even know him, but I just feel it, you know?"

"I know," she nodded. "When did you realize?"

"I know this is going to sound really crazy, but you know how some people say when they meet someone, they just know that that person is going to be someone important in their life?"

"Uh-huh."

"I think I knew it from the very first time I saw him sitting in the bar, even though I didn't even know that he lived at Horseshoe Ranch, even though I didn't even know that he was a Hamilton, a part of me just knew that he was someone important and that he would play an important role in my life."

"You didn't even know you'd see him again."

"I didn't. And when I did, oh, Olivia, I tell you my heart stopped." I sighed. "He's amazing."

"So what's the problem? You like him, and he likes you."

"Yeah, but Amelia."

"What about Amelia?"

"She really wants me to be with Beau. She even told Ranger that she thinks we're made for each other, and I don't want to break her heart. She's the one that brought me here. She's the—"

"She's not going to be mad at you! Are you silly?"

"I'm not silly, and I know that you might not understand, but I feel like I'm letting her down. I feel like—"

"Oh, Lucy, you just need to tell her how you feel."

"I mean, I guess that's true. Maybe I'll tell her later."

"I think you should. You and Austin need to have a serious talk, and—"

I put my hand up and stopped her. "Can I ask you something, Olivia?"

“Sure.”

“Do you like Beau?”

Her face immediately went red. “What?”

“Do you like Beau?”

“I mean, he’s attractive, of course. I agree that he’s a nice guy—”

“I mean, do you *like* him like him? Because I’ve noticed ever since we picked you up at the airport, you have spent more time with him than I have, and he’s flirting with you and asks you questions and showing interest, and he never did that with me.”

“What? What are you talking about? Of course he does. He asks you questions.”

“He asks me random questions, but he doesn’t even really listen. Not like he listens to you. And then I know this sounds crazy, but do you want to try and see if you could date him?”

“Who, Beau?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t be interested in me. He’s probably only trying to win me over because I’m your best friend, and how better to get to know someone than being really good friends with the best friend?”

“I don’t think so. He’s not even trying to get to know me that well.”

“You really think he might think I’m cute?” There was a note of hopefulness in her voice.

“He probably thinks you’re gorgeous because you are.”

“It’s crazy, us, huh? Both being here in Montana, falling for two brothers.”

“I know. Who would have thought us, two hot city girls, would even get to Montana, let alone think about staying. I never would’ve pictured us as country Western girls.”

“Me either,” she shook her head. “But maybe that’s why it’s so wonderful, because it’s something we never would have planned.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said. “You excited to go kayaking and fishing?”

“I really am.” Olivia nodded, her eyes big and beautiful. She had a happy smile on her face, and I recognized the calm in her because it was the same calmness I felt in myself.

“This is a beautiful place, isn’t it, Olivia?”

“Yeah, it is. And you know what, Lucy?”

“What?”

“No matter what happens with you and Austin or me and Beau or with us in Montana, let’s just enjoy our time here. And if we have to go back to New York, then so be it. But at least we know there’s something better out there waiting for us.”

“You’re absolutely correct, Olivia.” I gave her a quick hug. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Oh, Lucy, any time.” She pulled back and stared into my eyes. “I know you miss your mom. I miss her too. She was a beautiful, kind soul. I was just as shocked as you when she passed, and I know that perhaps you weren’t happy in the city anymore with all those memories, and I understand that. I understand that you’ve been hurting, girl, and I know I can’t take the pain away, and I know that I don’t fully understand what it is to lose someone that close in my life, but I’m always here for you through everything. You are my sister, Lucy, okay? You are my best friend and my sister, and I will always be here for you.”

“I love you, Olivia. And I want to let you know that no matter what you’re going through, even if you think it’s not a big deal compared to my mom dying, remember that whatever you’re going through is important as well. And I’m here for you as well, okay?”

“Okay,” she said softly. “Now we better head to the front, so we don’t keep those guys waiting.”

“Let’s do it.” I grabbed her hand and we walked around to the front of the house.

As we walked past the porch, I saw Amelia staring out the window. She grinned as she saw us and gave us a little wave, and my heart filled with love for her, for this woman who had invited a stranger into her home and welcomed her with open arms. She was a beautiful, wonderful human being, and I hated the fact that I was going to have to break her heart when I told her that Beau and I were not meant to be together, but I knew she would understand because she was just that sort of person. I knew that no matter what happened, she would forgive me. And that was all that mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Kayaking was so much fun.” I looked in awe at Austin, as we made our way to the large cloth he put down on the grass. Beau was unpacking a hamper that Amelia had made for our lunch, and Olivia was helping him by unpacking paper plates and plastic forks and knives.

“You had fun, huh?” Austin said as he stroked my hair.

“I had a lot of fun.” I nodded. “Thanks for bringing me.”

“Well, it wasn’t really my idea. It was Beau’s.” He laughed.

“You shouldn’t be playing with my hair, though. What if Beau sees?”

“So what?” Austin shrugged. “I hate to break it to you, Lucy, but he seems more interested in your friend.”

“Oh no,” I pouted. “What am I going to do?”

“You don’t care, do you?” He looked worried and nervous.

“What do you mean, ‘do I care’?”

“I mean, are you upset that Beau’s not interested in you?”

“Why would I be upset?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because—”

“Austin, I like you. You have to know that, after everything that we’ve done.”

“I wasn’t sure, maybe, if you wanted me and my brother or ___”

“I just want you, Austin, but I think we should talk to your mom. We have to let her know that Beau and I don’t have feelings for each other like that, and that you and I do.” I paused. “I mean, if you do, of course.”

“I know you’re not seriously asking me if I have feelings for you.”

“I am asking because—”

“Lucy Kensington, I adore you.”

Without any warning, he picked me up, threw me over his shoulder, and began running back to the picnic.

“What are you doing? Austin!” I giggled as I swatted him on the shoulders. “Put me down!”

“No, I won’t,” he huffed, not slowing down.

“I’m heavy, you can’t keep running with me. We’re both going to fall.”

“You’re as light as a feather, Lucy, my love.”

He eventually reached the other two and Beau and Olivia looked at me in surprise. Beau blinked as Austin putting me down.

“What’s going on, guys?”

“Nothing much,” Austin said. “I was just telling Lucy how much I like her.

“What?” Beau looked at me and then his brother. “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” Austin raised his eyebrows at his brother, then pulled me into his arms and kissed me hard. I kissed him back and then pulled away, flustered. I looked at Beau and Olivia. Olivia was grinning at me, but Beau just looked confused.

“This wasn’t exactly how I’d planned on telling you, Beau,” I said, “but Austin and I kind of have a connection, and —”

“I see.” Beau blinked, looking like he didn’t know what to say. Austin cleared his throat.

“Look, brother, I’m pretty sure you know this, but Lucy is not a good match for you. And you should be thanking me because you guys would not have been the perfect couple. Lucy is perfect for me in every way. And so, she’s mine and that’s all there is to it.

“Okay, then.” Beau nodded slowly. “So, you guys are together or what?”

“Isn’t it clear?” Austin said. “Yes. We’re dating.”

“And Mom knows?” Beau asked.

“We’re going to tell her later.”

“Okay, I think you better tell her soon,” Beau grinned, “Because Mom pulled out her wedding dress this morning. And I heard her telling Dad that she thinks it’s going to fit Lucy perfectly.”

“Oh, my gosh!” My face felt like it was on fire. “Oh no, this is a hot mess. I feel horrible. How am I going to tell her that it didn’t work out? She really, really wanted us to get married.” Beau looked away from me. “You’re not hurt, are you Beau? Or upset?” He turned to face me, then shook his head.

“I’m not upset at all. You’re a beautiful lady, Lucy, but we didn’t have that spark.” A wide smile crossed his face. “And now I know why. I guess you had it with my little brother.”

“Yeah, she does,” Austin said. “So don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried about it. I think you guys should just tell Mom when we get back because I have a feeling that she’s going to have a lot to say.”

“Well, she can say whatever she wants.” Austin shrugged. “I mean, I know she has the best intentions for all of us, and I know she wanted you two to be together, but does it really matter if Lucy is with you or if she’s with me?” He grimaced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that how it came out.”

“No, it’s okay. I understand what you mean.” I rubbed his shoulder.

“I’m just so glad that we can be open and honest with everyone now. I’m sorry, Beau. It’s just that Austin and I, we’ve had a connection from the very first time we met.”

“Yep. Lucy fell for me as soon as she saw my big, gorgeous green eyes.”

“Whatever, Austin,” I laughed. “You’re so full of yourself.”

“Maybe,” he leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. And then he whispered in my ear, “But I’d like you to be full of me more than that.”

I blushed and shook my head. “You’re absolutely crazy.”

“What? You know I want you.”

“I know you want me, but your brother is right there. And so is Olivia.”

“What are you guys whispering about?” Beau said, chuckling. “I can’t hear a word you’re saying.”

“I don’t think Lucy would want you to hear what I was saying,” Austin said with a laugh. “Would you, Lucy?”

“No, I would not. Now shall we eat, guys? I think we’re all hungry.”

“Well, I’m definitely hungry,” Olivia spoke up. She was grinning from ear to ear.

“Okay. Well, we’ll be there in a second.” Austin said, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the side.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he walked me over to another field.

“I just wanted to gather some more flowers for you.”

“Oh?” I looked in surprise.

“I bet you didn’t know we had a sunflower field here.”

“Wow, they’re beautiful,” I said, staring out at the field of tall, beautiful golden sunflowers.

“I remember you told me that your mom really loved them, right?”

“Yeah. They were her favorite flower.”

“So let’s pick some,” he said, “To remember your mom.”

“You’re so sweet, Austin.” I stared at him in surprise. “When I met you that first time, I never would have guessed.”

“What? That I had a heart of gold?”

“Yeah. I never would have guessed you have a heart of gold.”

“And you know what else I have, Lucy?”

“No, what?”

“I have a cock of rock.”

I groaned. “Really, Austin? Are you going to ruin this beautiful moment with that?”

“With what? A cock of rock? You don’t think that’s amazing? You don’t think that’s the most brilliant thing you’ve ever heard in your life?”

“No, I don’t.” I laughed. And then, because I couldn’t stop myself, I reached over and grabbed his hard cock through his jeans. He froze as my fingers pressed through the material and squeeze what was definitely a very large cock.

“What are you doing, Lucy?”

“Well, I wanted to see just how rock-like it felt.”

“You can’t just—”

“I can’t just what?” I interrupted him, as I undid his belt buckle and popped open the top of his jeans.

“Lucy, what are you doing?” His eyes were wide now.

“What do you think?” I said as I unzipped his pants and then I slipped my hand down the front of his jeans through his boxers and squeezed his cock, skin to skin.

“Oh, Lucy ...” he moaned. “That feels amazing.”

“Good.” I stroked him for a few more seconds then I pulled my hand out. “Okay, I’m done. Let’s pick the sunflowers now.”

He groaned. “What do you mean you’re done? Are you joking?” He looked at me. “I want you so badly right now. I just want to lay down in the fields and—”

“Oh, Austin, do you really think I’m going to sleep with you for the first time in a field of sunflowers with your brother and my best friend literally a hundred yards away?”

“I was hoping so.”

“Not going to happen.” I zipped his jeans back up, buckled his belt, and then stepped back. “Now, come on. Let’s pick some sunflowers, and then go and eat. I’m very, very hungry.”

“Well, I’m hungry too. And it’s not for the food on that table, believe you me.”

He looked me up and down, and I just smiled at him sweetly. I loved that I turned him on and I loved that he wanted me so badly, but this was not where we were going to make love for the first time. No matter how badly I also wanted him as well.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Hey, Mom!” Austin called out as we entered the kitchen.

“Yes, son?”

“Lucy and I would like to talk to you if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, I was just getting dinner ready. Can it wait until after dinner?”

“Actually, no.” Austin shook his head emphatically.

I looked at him in surprise. “It can wait till after dinner, Austin.”

“No, it can’t because we won’t be here for dinner.”

“We won’t?”

“You won’t?” Amelia said, her eyes curious as she gazed at us.

“No, we won’t. I have something planned.”

“You never told me that.”

“Well, it was a surprise,” he said with a grin. “Mom, please, can we speak to you? It’s important.”

“Well, okay,” she nodded. “I guess everything can wait for a few moments. Shall we go in the study?”

“Yes, please. You can tell Dad to come as well if he’s not busy.”

“Of course. It sounds serious.”

“It’s not serious. It’s just important.”

“Do you want Beau and Olivia to come? What about Wyatt or—”

“No, just the four of us,” Austin said. “That’s okay, right, Lucy?”

“Yes,” I said with a small nod, unable to look Amelia in the eyes.

“Okay, let me go and get Ranger. We’ll meet you in the study,” Amelia said as she walked off.

Austin turned to me and squeezed my hand. “It’s okay. Okay? I’m just going to explain to them that we have feelings for each other and even though it didn’t work out as my mom had wanted and even though she’s got the wedding dress and all that already out of the closet, it doesn’t mean anything. I mean, I’m grateful that my mom put the ad in the newspaper so that you could come here to marry Beau, but Beau is not the man for you.” He kissed me on the nose. “You’re mine, Lucy. And I’m not going to play games anymore. That’s why I went to the log cabin.”

“What do you mean?”

“I went to think. I went to think about what I thought was the right thing to do. And I had to do that without being around you. I needed to think, and well, I came to my decision.”

“And what was your decision?”

“My decision was I didn’t give a fuck what my parents or Beau thought.” He lowered his voice. “Not that I would say that in front of my mom,” he laughed. “But you’re important to me, and what we have is special, and I’m not just going to walk away from that, especially because I know that you feel the same way.”

“Well, you don’t—”

“Yes, Lucy. I’ve always known.” He grinned. “Maybe that’s narcissistic of me, or maybe I’m just too confident, but I

know that you feel the same way. And I know what we have is special.”

“I know,” I admitted. “It’s just scary to feel this way about someone you haven’t known that long.”

“I know.” He kissed me on the lips this time. “But that doesn’t mean that it’s any less real or any less intense. Now, come on.”

He took my hand and led me into the study where we sat down on one of the leather couches. I looked around the room at the buck heads on the wall and the leather-bound books on the shelves. If I’d ever thought about what a study on a ranch should look like, it would have been this.

“Do you like it?” Austin asked. “It’s not too much with the stag heads?”

“No, it fits. I’m not really into hunting or anything, but I don’t mind it.”

“Maybe you’ll be into hunting someday. I’d love to take you.”

“I’d be willing to try. I might be scared, but I’d be willing to try.”

“That’s all I ask of you, sweetheart. I’m not going to push you out of your comfort zone. I know you weren’t brought up in this world. I know that you’re not a cowgirl at heart. But whatever you’re comfortable with, whatever you want to do, I support you, okay?”

“Thank you, Austin,” I whispered.

Then Amelia and Ranger walked into the room. Ranger shut the door behind him, and they sat on the couch opposite us.

“So what’s this, your mom says you want to talk to us?” He frowned as he stared at Austin.

“Yeah, Dad, Mom. I need to talk to you about something serious.”

“Okay. I hope nothing’s wrong.” He looked concerned.
“What’s going on?”

“Well, Mom ...”

“Yes, dear?” Amelia looked worried, too, now.

“I know when you wrote that ad for the newspaper, you were looking for a wife for Beau because you wanted grandkids and he’s your oldest.”

“Yes ...”

“And Lucy responded to the ad and you liked her and you thought she’d be a good match for Beau.”

“That’s right.”

“And so you sent for her, and she came.”

“Yes, dear.”

“And you hoped that she would marry Beau and have a wonderful life together and lots of kids, and well, I’m just letting you know that’s not going to happen.”

“What do you mean?” Amelia looked at me. “I thought you were enjoying your time here.”

“Oh, I love it, Amelia. And I’m so grateful for you having me come and stay and—”

“Mom, Lucy and I are together.”

“What?” Amelia looked shocked and then her face broke into a smile. She looked over at her husband and gave him a knowing look. “You two are together?”

“Yes, Mom. I know you sent for Lucy so that she could be with Beau, but she and I have the connection, and we’re together, and you need to stop trying to push her and Beau together. You didn’t make a match for them, okay? I know you think that Lucy and Beau are falling in love and that they’re going to give you grandkids and all this stuff, but I’m telling you that there is no Lucy and Beau. And you’re just going to have to deal with it because she’s with me. I like her, she likes me, and—”

Ranger started laughing then, and then Austin frowned. “Dad, are you okay?”

“Oh, Amelia. I doubted you, but you were right,” Ranger chuckled.

“What?” Austin looked as confused as I felt. “What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, I’m confused as well,” I chimed in.

Amelia just sat there beaming. “Oh, my dear,” she grinned at Austin and then at me. “I am the best matchmaker in the world, aren’t I?” She looked at Ranger. “Didn’t I tell you that I knew what I was doing?”

“I guess you did, my love,” he said.

“What is going on here, Mom and Dad? Please tell me.” Austin shook his head, “I’m really confused.”

“Amelia, do you want to tell them?” Ranger said.

“I think I should,” she laughed. “So as you know, I want grandkids.”

“We all know that, Mom,” Austin nodded. “Now, hurry up with the story, please?”

“Austin, don’t talk to your mom that way!” I frowned at him.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“That’s okay. And thank you, Lucy,” she grinned at me. “I appreciate you speaking up for me.”

“No worries, Amelia. I know how Austin can be.”

“Oh, yes, dear. You know. Well, as I was saying, I wanted grandkids in the house, and I have seven tall, strapping sons, and I just need at least one of them to get married.”

“Yes, Mom,” Austin said as he rolled his eyes. “Let’s hurry it up, please.”

“Oh, Austin, you have so little patience. He’s got such a hard head, you know?” she looked at me. “And that’s why I did it.”

“Did what?”

“Put the ad in the newspaper,” she replied. “But I wasn’t looking necessarily for Beau. I was just looking for a match for one of my sons.”

“Okay, and?”

“And Lucy responded. And well, she was a breath of fresh air. She sent me such beautiful emails, and then we spoke on the phone, and I realized that she was a perfect match.”

“She’s not a perfect match. I already told you that, Mom,” Austin cleared his throat. “She and Beau are not—”

“I never said for Beau, dear,” she said. “Beau was never the one I had in mind for Lucy.”

“You what?” Austin’s eyes narrowed. “I’m confused.”

“I knew all along that Lucy was perfect for you, son.” She looked at her husband. “Didn’t I tell you that, Ranger? Didn’t I say I’m talking to a woman that I think would be absolutely perfect for Austin?”

“Yes, you did, my dear. Yes, you did.”

“You knew that Austin and I would be a great match?” I said in surprise. “Seriously?”

“But I know my hard-headed, stubborn son. If I were to tell him that I had sent for a bride from New York to marry him, he would have said, hell no! And no matter how much he was attracted to you or how much he would have wanted to be with you, he would have said no because that’s just his personality. He’s obstinate and hard-headed and—”

“We get it, Mom. You think I’m hard-headed.” Austin chuckled. “So you thought Lucy and I would get along?”

“Yes. But I knew that if you thought she was here for you, then it would never work. So we told everyone that she was here for Beau.”

“Wait, what? You lied to me? Does Beau know?”

“Of course he knows. I couldn’t have Beau falling in love with Lucy as well.”

I was in shock. “So you actually thought that Austin and I would get on?”

“Yes. I knew it. A match made in heaven.” She looked over at Ranger, “And I told Ranger. I said, I have the perfect woman for Austin. And Ranger said, Austin will never accept you messing around in his love life. And I said, well, Austin will not know. And here we are.”

“So you planned for Lucy and me to get together, but you didn’t want me to know that Lucy and I were meant to be together.”

“Yep,” she grinned. “I may be your mother, but I do have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“So then you’re not mad?” I said happily.

“Mad about what, dear?”

“I thought you’d be upset that Beau and I aren’t together.”

“Of course not I’m not mad. I never thought you and Beau were made for each other.”

“But I overheard you in the kitchen saying that you thought we were falling in love and that—”

She laughed. “I was talking about you and Austin. Not you and Beau.” She paused. “Though, I do think that your friend Olivia might be the one for him.”

“Mom, you’re not going to matchmake. Oh my God,” Austin shook his head. “Really?”

“I don’t have to matchmake, dear. I let fate take care of the matching. Don’t I, Ranger?”

“Yes, my dear.” He kissed her on the cheek and took her hand. “Though, I think fate had a little help from you.”

“So you’re okay with us being together?” I said. I knew she was but I just wanted the reassurance.

“Oh, I’m more than okay. I’m absolutely ecstatic. You two are the perfect couple, and I’m so glad that finally you admitted it to each other and come and admitted it to us. We’ll have to celebrate at dinner.”

“I already told you, Mom, we have plans.”

“What are these plans?” Amelia frowned.

“It’s a surprise for Lucy, Mom. And I’m not going to ruin the surprise by telling you.”

“Fine,” she said. “I hope it’s something romantic?”

“Yes. At least I think so.” He looked at me. “I hope you enjoy the evening, Lucy.”

“I’m pretty sure I will. I enjoy everything with you.”

“Oh, aren’t they such a wonderful couple?” Amelia beamed. “You two make my heart so happy.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, Mom,” Austin looked like he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to cry, shout, scream, or laugh. He looked at me. “My mom is a mastermind, and I know I should be mad, but I can’t be. Not when I have you, my beautiful, beautiful Lucy.”

“Well, obviously, I’m not mad at all because you’re wonderful, and I’m so happy to be here.”

“Well, isn’t this just great?” Amelia beamed as she stood up and walked over to me and gave me a big hug. “Welcome to the family, Lucy. I’m so happy that you and Austin have found each other, and I’m so happy that I could be a catalyst to your love.”

“Mom, really?” Austin rolled his eyes.

“What, Austin? If it wasn’t for me—”

“I know. I know. I never would’ve met her. Thank you, Mom. Thank you, Dad.”

“Well, don’t thank me.” Ranger shook his head. “I thought it was a very bad idea, but obviously your mom knew better than me.”

“I certainly did.” Amelia looked smug. “Please remember that.”

“I will,” he groaned. He then walked over to me and gave me a hug as well, his blue eyes sparkling. “Welcome to the

family, Lucy. It's a pleasure to have you. And I know that you and Austin are a perfect match." He choked up.

I gave him a tight hug in response. "Thank you," I said. "I'm so, so happy to be here."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“**Y**ou’re taking me to the log cabin?” I asked as we made our way down a dirt path in Austin’s Ford pickup truck.

“Not yet, but later.” Austin glanced over at me and squeezed my knee.

“Where are we going? I’m so curious.”

“You’ll see. I want it to be a surprise.”

“I’m definitely going to be surprised because I don’t really know your ranch that well, and I do really want to know.”

He laughed. “Have some patience, Lucy.”

“I will,” I said. “Can you believe your mom, though?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Actually, yes. She’s smart. Smarter than all of us combined.”

“Are you mad at her?”

“Never. She brought you into my life. How could I be mad at her for that?”

“Yeah, I’m so happy. I was so worried that she’d be so upset that I didn’t like Beau and that Beau didn’t like me, and she didn’t even care because she already knew that Beau and I weren’t for each other. She’s amazing. I love her.”

“I’m glad.”

I wanted to say that I thought she’d make a great grandmother, but even though Austin and I were feeling each

other, I didn't want to push things. I knew that guys got scared easily.

All of a sudden, Austin stopped the truck. "What's going on? What are we doing?" I looked around. We were just in the middle of a field.

"You'll see," he said. "Stay in the cab until I tell you to get out."

"I'm so confused, Austin."

"You'll see. Now close your eyes," he ordered.

"Close my eyes?"

"Yes. Close your eyes and no peeking."

"Okay." I closed my eyes and I listened to him clunking around. I had absolutely no idea what he was doing.

"Okay. Open your eyes," he said a few minutes later.

I opened my eyes. He was holding the passenger door open for me.

"Come on, get out."

"Where are we going? Are we going on a walk or something?"

"Or something." He took my hand and led me around the back of the truck and then stopped.

"I'm so confused, Austin. You're not about to kill me or anything, are you?"

"Of course not. Look." And then he pointed towards the flatbed of the pickup truck and I gasped. There was a blanket laid out on the floor of the cab. And on there was a bottle of champagne, some strawberries, and some sandwiches.

"I made a picnic for you in the back of the truck."

"No way!" I put my hands over my heart. "That is so sweet."

"Come." He lifted me up onto the back of the truck and then jumped up beside me. We walked towards the little

cushions that he'd put in the back and sat down. "Look." He pointed ahead of him to the Montana Rockies in the distance.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Really beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you." He grinned. "You know, you inspired me, Lucy."

"Oh, in what way?"

"I wrote a song for you.

"You did?"

"Yeah." He nodded at an acoustic guitar in the corner. "Can I play it for you?"

"I would love you to play it for me."

"Okay." He grabbed his guitar and strummed through a few notes and then started singing the sweetest song I'd ever heard in my life.

He stopped strumming. I waited for the last notes to completely fade away before I spoke. "That was absolutely amazing. You wrote that for me?"

"That and several more." He laughed. "I guess I'm just a big old, romantic at heart."

"Oh, Austin." I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I felt it was too soon. He took my hands in his and kissed me on the lips.

"Lucy Kensington, I love you. I know it might be soon. And I know that you might be overwhelmed and—"

"No, I love you too, Austin Hamilton," I said, my voice breaking with happiness. "I love you so much. I never thought that a love like this was possible. I never thought—"

"Oh, Lucy, you make me the happiest man in the world. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. You know that, right?"

"I love you, Austin." I pushed him back and I straddled him, then leaned down to kiss him.

He groaned as I rubbed against him and slid his hands up and down my thighs. I tugged his shirt off then kissed down

his chest and sucked on his nipple as he pulled my dress off. He lay me flat on my back and undid my bra and pulled off my panties, staring into my eyes the whole time. The way he looked at me made me feel like a million dollars.

“You’re so beautiful, Lucy,” he murmured between kisses.

I undid his belt and belt buckle, and he pulled off his pants. “Take off your boxers as well,” I ordered, tugging them down.

“I hope this isn’t going to be too uncomfortable. I know you—”

“I don’t care,” I whispered. “I want this.”

I pulled him down on top of me and kissed him hard on the lips. I ran my fingernails down his back and he groaned as he kissed me back, his tongue sliding into my mouth. His fingers played with my hair and then ran down the side of my body, teasing me and making me shiver.

“I want you, Lucy,” he groaned. “I want you so badly.”

“And I want you too, Austin.”

“What about the food?”

“We can eat afterwards.” I laughed and wrapped my legs around his waist and he groaned as the tip of his cock grazed my pussy. I was wet and I knew he could feel it. He rubbed back and forth against me. And I felt his chest pressing into my breasts. I squeezed his shoulders and pulled his hair. “Take me, Austin, please.”

“Your wish is my command.”

He positioned himself between my legs, and I felt him at my core sliding into me slowly but surely. I gasped as he thrust into me. He was thick and hard, and our bodies felt like they were made for each other. He moved his hips back and forth slowly at first until I told him to go faster. And then he increased his pace, hitting me in just the right spot. I knew that we’d be bruised and tired the next day, but I didn’t care.

“Oh, Austin, faster!” I gasped as he plunged into me.

He rolled onto his back, pulling me on top of him, and I looked down at him, running my fingers across his chest,

“Ride me, cowgirl.” He grinned. I just laughed as my long blonde hair shielded the side of my face. I moved up and down on his cock, shifting forward slightly.

“Don’t stop,” he grunted. He grabbed my hips and guided me up and down faster, bring me closer and closer to the edge. “Oh, don’t stop Lucy, please!”

He reached up to fondle my breasts, pinching my nipples between his fingers. Then I could feel his finger rubbing my clit. I moved faster and faster, shouting out as the pleasure overtook me and I came on top of him.

He groaned and then pulled me off of him quickly. His body shuddered as he came onto the side of the blanket.

“Whoops,” he said with a laugh, kissing me and pulling me to him. He held me close to his body and I kissed his chest. “That was amazing,” he gasped. “I’m sorry. Our first time was in the back of a truck.”

“It’s okay. I guess this city girl is a little bit country after all,” I said with a laugh.

“Well, I might be a country boy, but I do know how to show you some comfort,” he said. “I don’t want you to be all achy breaky in the morning.”

“That’s okay,” I murmured. “As long as it’s not my heart that’s achy breaky, I don’t mind my body being tired. Not when it gets to be with someone like you.”

“You’re amazing. You know that right, Lucy?”

“I know.” I gave him a cheeky grin.

“I love you, you know.”

“I love you too, Austin.”

“You know, you’re going to be my wife one day.”

“I know.” I kissed him on the cheek, happiness soaring through me.

“It will be funny when we tell our kids how we met.”

“What you mean?”

“I mean, it will be funny when we have to tell them that their mother was an accidental mail-order bride.”

“We can’t tell them that.”

“But it’s true.”

“It’s not true. I’m not a mail-order bride.”

“Well, you weren’t *my* mail order bride, but you ended up being my bride after all.”

“Are you asking me to marry you, Austin?” I gasped. It felt so right, but I knew it was too soon.

“This isn’t the official proposal,” he said. “But you’re mine, Lucy Kensington, forever. And we’ll have kids, and we’ll get married, and I’ll build you your own house on the property. We’ll have our own place close enough that we can come to dinner with my parents, but far enough away that we have our own space. Would you like that?”

“I’d love it,” I said. “I’d absolutely love it. And, Austin?”

“Yes, Lucy?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. But I need about 10 minutes.”

“For what?” I looked at him, confused.

“Oh, I thought you were going to ask me if we could go again.”

“No.” I hit him lightly on the chest. “That’s not what I’m asking.”

“Oh.” He said his eyes twinkling. “What were you asking?”

“Will you help me with something?”

“With what?” He ran his fingers across my breasts.

“With Olivia and Beau?”

“Oh, no,” he groaned. “What do you want?”

“Let’s set them up. I think they’re made for each other. Just the way that we’re made for each other.”

“I don’t know that we should get involved with that. My brother is—”

“Austin, please.”

“Fine. We’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you.” I kissed him on the lips. “And Austin ...”

“Yes, my dear?”

“You think he can be ready in five minutes?” I said with a giggle as he pulled me on top of him and kissed me hard. He grunted and growled as I ran my fingers along his cock.

“I think I can do that for you, my darling Lucy. I think I can get hard for you whenever you want.” He kissed me on the forehead and stared deeply into my eyes. “I am here to do whatever you want for the rest of your life.”

“You’re amazing, you know that, right?”

“You make me a better man, Lucy. I’m trying my best to be the man of your dreams.” He grinned, sincerity shining through his eyes. “I love you, my beautiful sunflower, and I will always be here to make you feel at home.”

Thank you for reading *Accidental Mail Order Bride*. To read a bonus chapter from the book, [click here!](#)

Most Eligible Cowboy

He's a hot handsome cowboy, but can he let down his guard and let love in?

Beau Hamilton is the biggest catch in Montana. He's handsome, funny, and rich. As the oldest son and heir to one of the largest ranches in the state, he's one of the most eligible bachelors around. And he knows it. His brother is marrying my best friend, and we're both happy they've found love. I thought he was a perfect gentleman, until the night he took me to his favorite spot on the ranch. We did things that nobody should ever know about. Not even my best friend.

Beau's made it clear that while he's an eligible bachelor, he has no plans on ever getting married. Which doesn't bother me in the least, because the more time I spend with him, the more he annoys me. He's a bossy, grumpy, demanding cowboy who thinks it's his way or the highway, and I'm looking forward to showing him that this is one woman who doesn't want him in the least. Well, maybe just a little bit. He thinks he's carrying the world on his shoulders, but I wish he would just let me in.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

B eau

“Mom, you know I love you—”

“Beau, I know what you’re going to say, so I’m going to stop you right there.” My mom gave me an innocent smile, her light blue eyes laughing at me.

I pursed my lips. I knew better than to be fooled by her sweet older-lady look. My mom, Amelia Hamilton, was as cunning as she was beautiful. My dad may have been the one to run the ranch, but she was the one that ran the family.

“Mom, just in case we’re not on the same page”—I folded my arms over my chest and tried to look stern—“do not place an ad on the internet looking for a mail-order bride for me.” I pressed my lips together and rounded my shoulders. My mother was a true romantic, but the last thing I wanted or needed was her butting into my love life, even if I didn’t exactly have a love life at the moment. There was a time and a place for everything, and this wasn’t the time for me.

“I didn’t put an ad on the internet looking for—” She stopped as my dad, Ranger Hamilton, the patriarch of our family, raised his eyebrows at her. “You know my intention is for all of my sons to be happy.” She looked over at me dad, who was watching her with adoration in his eyes. It was nauseating how in love they still were.

“And I *am* happy.”

“But you’re not married and you . . .” Her voice trailed off again and she sighed. “Fine, let your brother Austin be the only smart son I raised. I give up.”

“Why do I not believe that, Mom?” I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, I’m going to watch some TV.” I didn’t even bother addressing her other comment. My brother Austin was the only one of her seven sons to be in a relationship and on his way to marriage, much to the chagrin of my mother. She was determined to fill the house with wives for all of us and lots of kids, but I certainly wasn’t interested in that. I had so many more things to think about.

“Yes, son. Enjoy yourself. Much better than having a family of your own to entertain.” She started rolling dough on the countertop in front of her. That was her way of dismissing me from the kitchen.

“Humph,” I grunted as I left the kitchen. I knew my mom wouldn’t stop, but at least she was on notice that I wasn’t interested.

I was thankful no one was in the living room. I loved my family and I loved being around my family, but sometimes I just needed peace and quiet. I sat on the old brown leather living room couch, staring at the TV, though I wasn’t really paying attention. I didn’t even know what show I was watching. I had so many different things on my mind, but I didn’t want to think about any of them.

I was about to get up and go riding when my brother Austin walked into the room, a secretive smile on his face as he took a seat next to me on the couch. Ever since he’d met his now-fiancée, Lucy, he looked like the cat who got the cream. I was happy for him, but I had to admit, he and Lucy were annoying me with all their lovey-dovey crap.

“How’s it going, bro?” His gaze moved to the TV, then back to me, an obnoxious look on his face. “Why are you watching *The Bachelorette*?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I’m not watching *The Bachelorette*.” I knew I sounded more defensive than I should, but for some reason, I was feeling annoyed. Well, I

knew the reason. My mom riding my ass about getting married was getting old.

“Well, it looks like *The Bachelorette* to me.” Austin looked back toward the TV, and my eyes focused as I stared at the screen. Sure enough, the bottom of the screen read *The Bachelorette*, and there were five different guys standing around a pretty brunette.

“I wasn’t watching that. It was just on. I guess Olivia or Lucy or someone must’ve been watching it.” I groaned inwardly. This was what happened when you had women in the house. Lucy’s best friend, Olivia, had come to visit her from New York, and even though she’d only been here a few days, she was getting under my skin.

“Sure, bro. It looks to me like you’re getting soft.” Austin chuckled. If he wasn’t my brother, and I weren’t a gentleman, I’d want to hit him. Not hard enough to give him a black eye or anything, but just enough to get him to back off.

“Trust me, I am the last one that’s getting soft.” I gave him a knowing look. “If anyone’s getting soft in this family, it’s you.”

“Why am I getting soft?” He grinned. “Just because I fell in love?”

“You fell in love with a woman that *Mom* sent for you.”

“What does that mean?” Austin said, giving me a pointed look. “You don’t think Lucy is good enough for me?”

Looked like I wasn’t the only one close to drawing fists. I stared at his handsome, familiar face, and I could have laughed at how alike we were. Anyone in the State of Montana could tell we were Hamilton men.

“I think Lucy is amazing. She’s beautiful.” I was in a bad mood, but I didn’t want Austin to think I had anything against her. She was a wonderful woman, and I was happy for him. She was the sort of woman that brought sunshine into your life. I was used to women that brought along thunderstorms, and I was fed up of thunder and lightning. Good sex wasn’t worth the possibility of getting electrocuted.

“Hey, hey, hey. Don’t be talking about my fiancée like that.”

“Oh my God, Austin. Really?” I shook my head. I’d never seen my brother like this before. It would be funny if it weren’t so sad. Austin was the first of my six brothers to settle down, and now our mom was more intent than ever on getting us all married off as soon as possible.

“What? I don’t want you calling my fiancée beautiful.”

“It’s not like I want her, dude.” I wanted to add, *Because if I did want her, she would be mine*, but I knew better than to antagonize my brother. He was really protective of Lucy, and I knew even the thought of me pretending to go after her would get his alpha instincts on high alert.

“Well, even if you did, you couldn’t have her.”

“You want to bet?” I said to him, laughing as his eyes narrowed at me. “I’m joking. What is it, bro? What do you want?”

“I came to ask you if you would be my best man for the wedding,” Austin said, “but now I’m starting to wonder if that was a good idea.”

“Why? Are you scared the best man is going to run off with the bride?”

“Not at all.” Austin shook his head. But even though his face looked stern, I could see that his eyes were laughing. He knew I was teasing. He knew I thought he and Lucy made the perfect couple. In fact, I’d known about our mother’s plan to bring Lucy from New York City to Montana so that they could fall in love. They’d both initially thought that Lucy had been sent for me, but that hadn’t been the real plan.

“I think Olivia’s going to be the maid of honor,” Austin said a little too casually.

My ears perked up at the sound of her name, but I didn’t let on. “Okay. And?”

“And she’s very pretty as well, isn’t she?”

“Is she?” She was fucking gorgeous.

Of course, I'd noticed Olivia was beautiful—and sexy, the sort of woman you wanted to do very dirty things to. But she was my brother's fiancée's best friend, and that was that. She was off-limits. There was no way I could bed her and not hear about it from my parents.

“What? You don't think she's cute?” Austin's knowing smile was starting to grate on me.

“She's okay. I mean, if you like that type.”

“If you like what type? Gorgeous and nice?”

“Am I going to have to tell Lucy that you're talking about her best friend in that way?”

“Well, I'm just saying that you guys are probably going to be paired up for a lot of the events because you're both single . . .”

“You're not trying to set me up with this girl, are you? You know I'm not interested in getting married. I'm not even interested in having a girlfriend right now. You know there's far too much going on at the ranch.”

“I know. You've got far too many cowgirls out there who want to date you. But who said anything about getting married?” Austin raised an eyebrow. “Methinks the cowboy doth protest too much.”

“I don't have any cowgirls out there who want to date me. I just—”

“Dude, whatever. You're the most eligible cowboy in all of Montana right now.”

“No, I'm not.” I growled.

“Yeah, you are. You're the heir to a billion-dollar ranch.”

“You know Mom and Dad are going to split it amongst all of us. And trust me when I say that Horseshoe Ranch is not worth billions.”

“You're the firstborn, and you know how it goes in the Hamilton family. The ranch always gets passed down to the

firstborn. Well, the first-born son.” He smiled. “Poor Auntie Louise.”

“Poor Auntie Louise what?” I rolled my eyes. “Dad gave her a substantial amount of money. That’s part of the reason we’re in this situation in the first place.”

“Oh, we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, not if we have to break up the ranch. We’ve got to ___”

“Let’s not talk about business now, Beau.” Austin sighed. “I wanted to have a beer and just chillax tonight.”

“Aren’t you taking Lucy to the log cabin?” I just wanted my space, which was far too hard to get in a family of nine. Even though we lived on a massive ranch.

“Yeah, exactly. So I don’t want to get all stressed out when I’m trying to plan a romantic evening with my girl.”

“Oh my God, Austin. Really?” I stared at him as if he were a stranger. “I have never seen this side of you before in my life.” I made a face. “Are we in the ’50s?”

“Huh?”

“Who refers to their girlfriend as *my girl*?”

“Don’t be a hater.”

“I’m not hating. You just sound like an alien has invaded your body!” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“That’s because I’ve never been in love before.”

“Oh, kill me now. Go grab my Colt 45 and just shoot me.”

“Do you really want me to do that?” Austin laughed. “Because then *I* would be the heir of the entire estate, and *I* would be the richest man in Montana.”

“Dude, neither one of us would be the richest man in Montana. We’re very far from being the richest anything in Montana.”

“I know. I’m just kidding with you.” He slapped me on the shoulder and stood up. “Anyway, I better go check on Lucy to

make sure she's not still packing. You'd think we were going away for a month and not just two days."

I chuckled. "You know women."

"Not as well as you, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you must know all about them from watching *The Bachelorette* and all."

"Ha ha, very funny. And sure, I'll do it."

"You'll do what?"

"I'll be your best man."

"Oh, I didn't know it was a question. I was telling you."

I stood up and gave him a big hug. "I'm proud of you."

"I know." He grinned. "And seriously, I understand that you're not ready, especially after Brittany. And I understand that you feel like the weight of the Hamilton family is on your shoulders."

"Horseshoe Ranch is in trouble, you know that. Mom and Dad . . . I don't know why they're downplaying it. We're in serious trouble."

"I know," Austin said softly. "I'm working to take care of it, okay? There are seven of us Hamilton boys—we're going to take care of it. We have the capital, but I know long-term everything isn't sustainable."

"I know we will, but I just feel a lot of pressure. I don't have time to think about relationships or anything like that right now."

"Okay, if you say so, brother." Austin stared at me for a few seconds. I could tell he wanted to add something, but I didn't want to hear it. We weren't into that kumbaya moments.

"I do say so, thank you very much."

"You do say what?" Lucy asked as she walked into the living room, Olivia behind her.

My eyes caught Olivia's, and we stared at each other for a few seconds. She had big, beautiful brown eyes and long dark brown hair. She looked a little bit like an Italian goddess, with curves in all the right places. I could feel myself warming; she had a radiance that filled every room she entered. I wasn't a corny guy, but she made the air around her seem sweeter.

"Hi, guys." Olivia gave us a small smile and a wave. I noticed that her nails were painted a soft pink. She was so girly and dainty; not the right fit for a ranch at all.

"Hi, how's it going?" I tried to act cool and failed miserably. I was a grown man, but I felt like a gawky fourteen-year-old around her. She took my breath away every time I saw her. I hadn't even known for her very long. But the first time I'd seen her on video chat when Lucy was talking to her, I was blown away by her beauty and vivacious smile. And now here she was in the flesh, living in my house, sleeping in one of the bedrooms in my house. All I could think about at night was sneaking into that bedroom and seeing what she wore to bed, because she'd been on my mind every single night since she'd been there.

Not that I would ever act on that urge. I didn't need the drama that would ensue if I slept with Olivia. I'd be in big trouble—with Lucy, with Austin, and with my Mom and Dad.

I had bigger fish to fry, and dating wasn't in the cards right now.

"Well, I'll see you guys later. I have some work to do in the stables." I gave Olivia a polite smile and tried to ignore the grin on Austin's face as I walked out of the room. I knew I was being a little rude, but I always felt discombobulated when I was around Olivia, and I didn't need Austin teasing me in front of her. Maybe I should have waited for her to answer my question, but I didn't like the way Austin was looking at me. As if he knew my deep, dark secret. Yes, Olivia was sexy and yes, she took my breath away. But even if she begged me to sleep with her, I'd have to say no. Though every part of my body would want to say yes.

The simple fact of the matter was that I was in no position to get involved with anyone, let alone someone like Olivia.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

O livia

“Lucy Kensington, you’re crazy, and now you’ve made me crazy,” I mumbled under my breath. My best friend wasn’t there to hear me complaining as I gazed out of the window at the expansive mountain range in the distance. The evening sky was a vibrant dark blue with purple undertones, and I had to admit that it was gorgeous. Not that I’d like to be out there by myself. The trees in the distance made me think of all the hidden wildlife that lurked in their midst. I wouldn’t be caught dead venturing outside at night by myself. I continued to brush my hair, even though my hand was now aching from gripping the rubber brush so tightly. I backed away from the window and headed toward the mirror.

“Ninety-nine, one hundred.” I brushed my hair in front of the mirror and stared at my reflection. My face looked unrecognizable without all the makeup I usually wore. Even my clothes seemed odd. I was wearing a navy blue T-shirt with the words “Big Sky State” in large white font and a pair of faded blue jeans. I hadn’t even known that Montana was known as the Big Sky State until a week ago, when I’d arrived to visit Lucy.

And now here I was, on a ranch in the middle of nowhere Montana, waiting to go to dinner with a family I’d just met. The Hamiltons were a large and friendly crowd, but this was going to be my first meal with them by myself, and I felt awkward. Like standing in the middle of the grocery store with

your pants falling down awkward. In front of your minister or high school principal.

I knew I shouldn't feel self-conscious, but I did. I didn't know these people, and they didn't know me. The entire situation was ridiculous. Lucy had come for a visit, thinking she was going to marry the eldest Hamilton brother, Beau, but had fallen in love with his brother Austin instead. It had all been a part of the plan of the matriarch of the family, Amelia Hamilton, because she wanted grandkids.

But I had never been a part of the plan.

I sighed and put the hairbrush down as the grandfather clock chimed through the house. It was seven o'clock. Time to go down to dinner. Time to make small talk and try to avoid any and all awkward questions. I grabbed my phone and texted Lucy quickly.

“How could you leave me here by myself?”

“It'll be fine. They're lovely,” she responded immediately.

“But they don't even know me.”

“Just smile and flirt and you'll be fine.”

“Flirt with who?”

“You know who!”

“Lucy, I'm not flirting with Beau with his parents there.”

“Try it. It might be fun. :)”

“Also he left the room yesterday as soon as we entered. He obviously thinks I'm a freak.”

“He had to go to the stables. Trust me, he wants you. Just flirt a little.”

“Humph.” I put the phone back down on the cherrywood nightstand and stood up. I made my way to the bedroom door and walked as casually as I could down the corridor to the dining room.

“Olivia, there you are.” Sadie beamed at me as I entered the dining room. Sadie was Wyatt’s gorgeous blonde best friend, and she always seemed to be at the house. Wyatt was the youngest of the Hamilton brothers. He was as handsome as his brothers, and unlike Beau, he was affectionate and friendly. Sadie stood next to the large cherrywood dining room table. The room was informal and cozy. There were family photos all over the walls, along with paintings of horses and other farm animals.

“Hiya, Sadie.” I grinned, grateful to have made a new friend at the ranch.

“You’re going to have to tell me all about New York City.” She sounded wistful. “I’ve always wanted to visit.”

“Since when?” Wyatt raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you say you never wanted to visit a big city like New York City?”

“No, I *never* said that.” She shook her head before rolling her eyes at me. “Men!”

I laughed. “I feel ya there. So is it just going to be us tonight?” I was slightly disappointed. I’d hoped to see Beau at dinner. Though I’d pretended to be annoyed with Lucy’s comment about flirting with Beau, I thought he was hot. Like, *really* hot—a mix of Brad Pitt and Henry Cavill, only ten times sexier. And he was single. Though from what I could tell, he wasn’t really looking to mingle. Not that I needed to mingle with him—for more than one night, anyway. A long-term relationship would never work between us.

Not that he was asking for one, but even if he was interested, it couldn’t work. He lived in Montana and was the heir to the family ranch, and I lived in Manhattan and was the heir to a storage unit in Queens and a \$100 MTA MetroCard that my grandma had found on the F train one night and given to me. We led two very different lives, and even though Lucy and Austin had fallen for each other, this just wasn’t the lifestyle I could see for myself. Montana was as different from New York as it could get. Even if it was beautiful.

Not that I wasn’t a little jealous of Lucy. Austin loved her so much. I wanted to meet a man who looked at me the way

Austin looked at Lucy—like he couldn't live another day of his life without her.

“So I'm pretty sure you know this, but Lucy and Austin went to the cabin. I guess he's really stepped up his romantic game.” Sadie started laughing. “I never thought I'd see the day when a Hamilton man was more than just a Don Juan.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Wyatt raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms. “You don't think I'm romantic?”

Sadie laughed even harder. “I've known you too long to think you could ever be romantic, Wyatt. Lucy got lucky. So Olivia, do you have a lucky boyfriend back home?”

“No, I'm single.” I tried not to sound too sad about it. I loved being independent and having the freedom to do whatever I wanted to, but there were some nights when I wished I was in bed with a gorgeous man and he was kissing me and hugging me and holding me tight. I missed the warmth of another body beside me, even if I didn't miss the arguments that always seemed to occur when I was in a relationship. I was headstrong, and a lot of men seemed to prefer weak women. That was part of why I was so happy that Lucy had found Austin. She was headstrong like me, but he clearly loved that about her. It gave me faith that perhaps there was a man out there for me as well. One who wouldn't feel intimidated by my strength, and who'd understand that I need comfort and protection just like any other woman. Someone who would see past the walls I put up.

“It's so lovely to have you here for dinner, Olivia.” Amelia Hamilton walked into the room, holding a pot of something. She placed it on the table and looked at me, sincerity in her eyes, and beamed.

“Thanks so much for having me.” I smiled back a little shyly. “I'm so grateful for your hospitality.”

“Any friend of Lucy's is a friend of ours. And seeing as Lucy is as good as family, you're family too.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Amelia Hamilton was such a warm, loving woman. The Hamilton boys were lucky to have her as a mom.

“Let’s all have a seat,” she said and nodded toward the antique wooden chairs next to the table. I grabbed a chair and pulled it out, then took a seat before opening up the white linen napkin and placing it on my lap.

We were interrupted by the clunky footsteps of cowboy boots. I knew it was Beau; I had already memorized the gait of his steps. I forced myself not to turn around eagerly at the sound.

“Well, look who’s joining us for dinner.” Amelia smiled, and I finally turned to see Beau sliding into the empty seat next to me.

“Good evening, Mama.” He grinned back at her. “I’m hungry. You know I’m not going to miss dinner.”

“And neither am I,” another male voice said. His voice was unfamiliar to me, and I glanced over to check who it belonged to.

My eyes widened at the hunk in front of me, and I couldn’t stop myself from staring at him. He was better looking than Beau, Austin, and Wyatt combined, and they were all gorgeous.

“Hi, Mama.” The hunky man walked over to Amelia and kissed her on the cheek. What a gentleman! “Hi, Pops.” He waved at Ranger, who I hadn’t even noticed, and then took a seat next to Wyatt.

“Chet, I haven’t seen you in weeks. Are you back home?”

“For now.” He grinned. “Miss me?”

“No, she didn’t.” Wyatt rolled his eyes, and I stifled a smile. Lucy had told me that everyone in the family thought Sadie and Wyatt were secretly in love but didn’t yet know themselves. The more time I spent around them, the more I tended to agree.

“And who do we have here?” Chet looked directly at me with his twinkling light blue eyes. His crisp, short dark hair

accentuated his tan face and perfect features. I swallowed hard. “Don’t tell me you’re Lucy, Austin’s bride-to-be?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m Olivia, her best friend.”

“Well, thank goodness for that.” He leaned forward flirtatiously. “I was about to say that you’re far too pretty for my brother.” He chuckled. “And not the sort of woman I would have thought would be answering an online personal ad.”

“Lucy is gorgeous as well.” I laughed. “And who knows, maybe I would have answered the ad as well if I’d seen it first.”

“Then you’d be marrying Beau,” Sadie giggled and then paused. “Well, Austin, I guess, because Amelia knew that Lucy and Austin would be a perfect match. You’re like a mage, Amelia.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Amelia said, but she beamed at the compliment. “Though I do think Austin and Lucy are perfect for each other. I just wish my other sons would be open to love as well.”

“Not now, Mama. Dad, please stop her.”

“I may run the ranch, but I don’t run your mama,” Ranger replied and everyone laughed. “What’s this that I hear? Everyone will be at lunch on Sunday?” He turned to his wife, a pleased expression on his face.

“Yes.” Amelia nodded. “We’ll all be together.”

I looked toward Sadie, who was grinning at me. “You know there are seven brothers, right?”

“I think Lucy might have mentioned it.”

“There’s Beau, Austin, and Wyatt, of course. Chet here, and then Flint, Huck, and Knox. Wow, that was a mouthful. The Hamilton men are definitely a force to be reckoned with.”

“You’ll love my brothers,” Wyatt added. “We’re all a lot of fun.”

“But I’m the most fun.” Chet grinned at me, and I grinned back at him. I could feel Beau’s eyes on me, and I turned to look at him. He raised an eyebrow, nodded his head, and then picked up the glass in front of him. I had no idea what the gesture meant or what he was thinking, but I had a feeling he was going to equal trouble in my life. It had been a long time since so many good-looking men had surrounded me.

Chapter Thirty

B eau

“So that Olivia. She’s a looker, isn’t she?” Chet chugged his beer as we sat out on the back porch. I didn’t answer him and instead took a swig of my own beer.

“I think she’s single,” Wyatt decided to point out.

I glared at him in the dark. “No shit, cowboy. What gave that away?”

“What’s got you so pissy?” Chet got up and walked over to the firepit. He threw some more logs onto it, and the flames leapt up.

“Nothing,” I snapped. “Do you know when the others are going to be back? We need to have a serious family conversation about the ranch.”

“Oh, boy.” Chet looked back at me. “That bad?”

“Worse.” I sighed. It sucked being the bearer of bad news, but we were in serious trouble. “I’m going to talk to Dad tomorrow. I think he’s in denial, but we can’t continue as we are.”

“The new development won’t help?” Wyatt asked. I could hear the worry in his voice. He was the youngest brother, but sometimes I felt like he was the most serious of all of us. He put up a good front. If you didn’t know him, you’d think he was all fun and games, but he spent far too many nights pondering things he shouldn’t have to.

“The corporation I’ve been talking to, they want to build condos.” I bit down on my lower lip, wondering how much to tell them.

“I thought it was going to be a wellness resort?” Chet crossed his arms. “I thought it was for rich bankers and shit to come for a retreat.”

“That was the initial idea.” I nodded. “They see more money in development.”

“Dad will never go for that,” Wyatt said what we all knew.

“I would never go for that either.” Even though it was dark out, we still had a 360-degree view of the land around us. We were one of the last frontiers of vast land and space. And I wouldn’t ruin that with ugly condos.

“So what are we going to do?” Wyatt made a face as he scratched his leg.

“We’re not going to do the deal with that corporation anymore. We’ll have to build ourselves. Austin is going to have to come out of his honeymoon phase and back down to earth.” I jumped up, my mind racing too much to stay still. “You guys want to go for a ride?” I loved to ride at night. It was a totally different experience to riding in the day. It made me feel one with nature and with my horse. The cool night air on my face made me feel alive.

Wyatt shook his head. “I told Sadie I would call her. She wants my help with some film project.”

“She literally just left an hour ago.” I frowned at him. “Can’t she figure it out herself?”

“I guess not.” He shrugged and moved toward the house.

“You guys really need to just fuck and get it over with.” I rolled my eyes. I knew I was being crude, but I didn’t care. Was Wyatt really this dense?

“Dude”—Wyatt looked shocked—“she’s my best friend. Don’t take out your frustration on me.”

“Would you mind if I asked her out, then?” I was deliberately trying to provoke him now. I had no interest in

Sadie, but I had a feeling it would irritate him. “She’s still a virgin, right? Maybe I can teach—”

“Do you want me to kill you?” Wyatt headed back toward me, and his hands were at my neck in seconds, pulling on the collar of my shirt. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Whoa.” I pushed him off me and glared at him. “You’re going to fight me over *this*?”

“Sadie isn’t interested in the likes of you.” He let go of my collar, but his fists were still clenched, and I half wondered if he would actually hit me.

“What’s going on, boys?” Dad stepped onto the back porch and surveyed the scene. “Everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” I took another chug of my beer, then looked up at Dad.

He was the patriarch of the family—a cowboy and a cattleman who had gone through a lot in life. He was also the sweetest man I’d ever met, and the toughest. I’d seen him put down horses he loved, help birth cows, argue with slick city folk, and slow dance with my mom in the fields on a moonlit night. If it weren’t for his doctor recommending he step down due to a bad heart, he’d still be running the ranch. Horseshoe Ranch was his family legacy and his first love. When I was younger, I’d thought he loved the ranch more than he loved his family, but that was because I hadn’t understood that, to him, it was all the same. He was taking care of the ranch for us.

Now that I was in charge, I understood how all-encompassing it was. It was our connection to nature and the land. It was our inheritance. And it was our duty to protect the sacred land. It wasn’t our land, even though we legally owned it. My father had ancestors who were part of the Crow Tribe, and while we were not officially a part of the Indian nation, we still had a spiritual attachment to the land. It was important to my father and to my brothers and me that we preserved the land and did as little damage as possible.

“Your mother has gone to bed,” Dad said. “She’s excited about Austin and Lucy’s wedding.”

“I don’t really understand why they are rushing to get married.” I shook my head. “They barely know each other.”

“They’re in love.” My dad grinned. “That’s enough for them. When you know, you know.”

“I guess.” I took another chug of my beer. All I knew was that I wanted to get drunk tonight and then head to bed. I was not going to allow myself to fantasize about taking Olivia in the stables.

Chapter Thirty-One

O livia

The day had passed uneventfully, and I decided to spend the afternoon in the hot tub. I'd hoped Sadie would show up, but she was nowhere to be seen. It was hard not to feel alone as I sat in the hot tub by myself. I'd expected to spend more time with Lucy on this trip, but she and Austin and run off to some cabin together almost as soon as I'd arrived.

Amelia was in the kitchen cooking up a storm with Ranger, and Beau was somewhere on the ranch with his other brothers. I knew I could call Sadie and see if she wanted to hang out, but I didn't know her that well, and I didn't want her to think I was the sort of person that always needed to be with someone. I wasn't. Usually, I enjoyed being alone, but thinking about the fact that Lucy was never coming back to New York made me sad.

She was my best friend, always had been, and now she was gone. Of course, I was happy for her. In fact, I was so excited for her wedding that I could barely contain myself. When I told other friends in New York where I was, they were completely flabbergasted to hear that I was in Montana, let alone that Lucy was staying here.

I tried to tell them how beautiful it was, but they didn't want to hear about the majesty of the mountains. I guess I understood. If you'd asked me even a couple of months ago, I

would have scoffed at the thought of visiting Montana. But I liked being here. I liked these people. I liked the serenity of nature. And if I was honest with myself, I liked Beau, even though he was one of the most annoying, arrogant, and frustrating men I'd ever met in my life. And that was putting it lightly.

Of course, because I was thinking about him, he would show up; that was just my luck.

"Hey, there," he said in his deep drawl as he walked out onto the deck.

I popped my head high. "Hi," I said simply, because I didn't want him to hear my voice trembling as my heart raced.

He was absolutely gorgeous. If he'd wanted to be a model or an actor or even president of the United States, he could have been. With a smile and eyes like that, he could have anything he wanted, including me. Not that I would let him know that.

"So, you're just chillaxing in the hot tub?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I was hoping to go clean out the stables, but I said to myself, 'Why don't I let Beau clean out the stables, and I'll just chillax in the hot tub instead.'"

"I mean, if you want to help me in the stables, I'm not going to say no." He grinned, his eyes sparkling. "I was actually thinking about you in the stables as well . . ."

I grinned back. "I'm sure you wouldn't mind my help. And what were you thinking?"

He chuckled slightly at my question and looked me up and down.

"You like horses?" He took a seat on the edge of the hot tub as he changed the subject.

I felt slightly self-conscious as he looked down at me. I wasn't wearing a provocative swimsuit, but I was still showing a lot of skin. "I do like horses," I said, which was true. I loved

watching movies about horses. I'd never really had much interaction with them myself.

"So, you want to go riding after dinner?" he asked.

I was about to say, "Yes, I'd love to show you just how fast I can ride." But as soon as I got on a horse, he'd realize I was lying. "So . . . I don't actually know how to ride." I gave him my most beguiling look. "But I wouldn't mind learning."

"You don't know how to ride?" He frowned. "You came on a vacation to Montana, and you don't know how to ride?"

"Well, I didn't come on a vacation. My best friend is getting married to your brother. That's why I'm here."

"But they're not getting married yet."

"But they are getting married soon, and she wanted me to visit."

"It's fine. It's fine. I'm just surprised, is all."

"Are you willing to teach me?"

"Are you a fast learner?"

"Well, I don't know if I'm going to be a fast learner because I haven't gotten on a horse yet." I shook my head. "Forget it. If you don't want to teach me, then—"

"No, it's fine. I'll teach you," he interrupted me. "I'm just saying."

"You're just saying what?" I rolled my eyes. "It's a good thing you guys don't run a resort here because I don't know how many people would want to take lessons from you."

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not going to be the instructor at the resort we're building on the property."

"You're building a resort on the property?"

"Yeah. Why do you look so surprised?"

"I don't know. I guess I just wouldn't have thought it would be your kind of thing."

"Why not?"

“Because you guys have such a close-knit family. I guess I just assumed you’d want to keep everything in the family, but you do have a lot of land.” I could tell from the expression on his face that he didn’t like what I was saying.

“Yeah. We have a lot of land. But what’s that got to do with anything?” He leaned down and looked into my eyes. “You don’t happen to work for the corporation that we’ve—”

“Seriously, Beau?” I cut him off this time. “Do you really think I work for any company that’s interested in buying this land? You know that I’m Lucy’s best friend, and I came here from New York.”

“Fine, fine, fine. Maybe you’re not. Maybe this isn’t a long con.”

“It’s no con, dude.” I stood up and made to get out of the hot tub.

“Where are you going?” he said.

“The water’s not very hot, and I think I’m going to get a shower. I want to get ready for our ride.”

“What ride?”

“You just told me that you’re going to teach me how to ride.”

“I said after dinner.”

“Okay. So I’ll get ready for after dinner, then.”

“You are a strange one, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I think you’re the strange one.”

“Could be.” He shrugged. “Could be.” He looked me up and down, his eyes twinkling. “So.” He licked his lips.

“Yes?” I answered him, wondering if he was going to pull me into his arms and kiss me. It would be a bad idea, of course, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t be tempted if the situation arose.

“Are you okay?” His voice interrupted my crazy thoughts.

I felt my face grow warm. “Yeah. Why do you ask that?”

“You looked like you were a million miles away.”

“No, I was just thinking about what sort of job I’m going to apply for when I get back home.”

“Okay then,” he said. “Well, I’ll let you think about that. I’m going to go into the kitchen and get myself a snack.”

“Is your mom going to like that?”

“She’s not the boss of me,” he said with a laugh. We both knew full well that his mom was the boss of everyone in the family. “You want anything?” he asked.

“No, I’m okay. I’ll see you at dinner.”

He nodded and walked away.

I wrapped myself in a towel and gazed at the sky, wondering what I’d gotten myself into. What was this whole thing between us? We weren’t exactly flirting, but we were more than just being friendly. There was an underlying tension between us that I hadn’t felt with a man in a long time. And I liked it. I enjoyed the banter. I enjoyed being around him. I wanted to touch him. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted so many things, and yet it seemed like such dangerous territory. He was the last person I should be flirting with. The very last person.

I knew Lucy would understand. But I also knew that it could complicate things for our whole dynamic. If he and I hooked up or had a fling and then fell out, what would that mean for the future? Would Lucy have to choose a side? If it came down to it, I was sure that he would win. Not because she liked him more, but because he was in Montana, and I’d be in New York. She’d be around him constantly. How could I ask her to choose her best friend over her husband’s brother?

No, I’d have to keep my distance. Be sweet but firm. And no flirting, no matter how badly I wanted to.

Chapter Thirty-Two

B eau

Olivia was going to be trouble. I watched as she walked into the kitchen in her oversized-shirt nightgown, which did nothing to hide her long, shapely legs. She hadn't seen me yet as I was standing to the right of the door, hidden by the shadows. She walked to the fridge and stood there without opening the door.

"Whatcha looking for?" I stepped out of the shadows. She jumped as she looked behind her.

"Oh, it's you." She blushed slightly as she took in my naked chest. "You scared me."

"You're still in your body, so it wasn't that bad." I grinned at her. She looked confused for a few seconds, and then a small smile made her lips twitch.

"Very funny."

"You hungry?" I asked, opening the fridge. "You want me to make you something?"

"Oh no." She shook her head quickly. "I was just thinking of making some hot chocolate or something."

"That sounds good." I looked down into her dark brown eyes. This woman was absolutely stunning. If I were smart, I'd leave immediately. The last thing I needed right now was a distraction. Especially with a city chick from New York. *Especially* when said chick was my brother's fiancée's best

friend. That was just asking for trouble. You don't shit where you eat. Even dogs knew that. "You want to go riding in the morning?" The words slipped out as if someone else had taken over my body.

"Um." She pressed her lips together. "Sure? I mean you asked me to go after dinner and nothing happened, so are you sure?"

"I'll make the hot chocolate now and maybe some s'mores, and then we can go riding tomorrow."

"Sure, okay. I'm not sure how the two fit together, but that sounds good."

"How are you liking Montana so far?" I asked her as I grabbed a jug of milk. "Will you grab two mugs from that cupboard?" I pointed to a cupboard next to the stovetop. "You drink regular whole milk, right?"

"Yes." She nodded as she grabbed two mugs. "Though I'd much prefer a mix of almond and oat milk, please."

I raised my eyebrows at her request.

"Got ya!" She threw her head back as she laughed.

My gaze wandered down the long expanse of her neck and stopped at her breasts, which pressed against the thin fabric of her shirt. Was she wearing a bra?

I blinked twice, and suddenly she was directly next to me. Her body was so close that I could feel the warmth of her skin against the hairs on mine. My body hardened as I breathed in her scent of fresh lilies. Shit, I was in big, big trouble.

I cleared my throat. "So, Olivia, you grew up in New York City?"

"I did."

"Have you ever lived anywhere else?"

"No." She shook her head with a smile. "It never even crossed my mind to live anywhere else."

"You love it that much, huh?"

“There’s a vibrance to New York City,” she said, her eyes shining. “There’s life in every dark alley and corner.”

“Police as well, right?”

“What?” She frowned. “There’s more to New York than crime.”

“Could have fooled me.” I stared at her, wanting to see a fire in her eyes.

“You watch too much TV.” She gave me a lazy smile and yawned slightly. I watched as her long dark hair moved across her face. Her brown eyes were laughing at me.

“It’s nothing like Montana,” I said.

“You can say that again.”

“There’s nowhere like Horseshoe Ranch,” I said softly. “If you’ve ever questioned anything in your life, you can find the answers on this ranch.”

“All the answers?”

“Nothing but the answers.” I suddenly had an idea. “You want to go outside with me? I want to show you something.”

“Now?” She shook her head. “I’m not even dressed.”

“Just put on some boots.” I was feeling excited suddenly. “Are you here for an adventure or what?”

“I’m here for my best friend’s wedding,” she pointed out. “But I suppose I can’t really say no to an adventure. Who are we, the Goonies?”

“I didn’t say we were looking for one-eyed Willie’s gold.” I laughed. “I loved that movie, by the way.” We watched a lot of movies as kids, and that was one of my favorites.

“Me too.” She smiled. “Goonies never say—”

“Die,” I finished her sentence, and we both laughed. There was a feeling of anticipation in the air between us.

“So if I go put on some shoes, will you put the hot cocoa in a flask or something? For us to take with us.”

“I can do that.” I nodded. “I suppose I should grab a shirt or something.”

“You don’t have to.” She grinned and then looked down as if she were embarrassed, but when she looked up again, her eyes were twinkling. “I mean, if you think you’ll get cold.”

“We’re in Montana; the nights are often cold.” It was official, we were flirting, and I wanted to invite her to my bedroom so that we could keep each other warm.

Only, when you lived in your parents’ house, that wasn’t really an option. I could only imagine how my mother would react if she walked into a naked Olivia in my room. I needed to build my own ranch on the property. I’d owned a house a few miles away, but I’d sold it when I became the head cattleman at the ranch. Dad hadn’t exactly retired, but he didn’t have the same energy he used to. Now I was in charge, and I needed to be on hand. Living at home had been enjoyable, but it kinda interfered with my personal life. Though, in this case, maybe that was a good thing.

“Fine. I’ll meet you back here in five minutes?” she said.

I could tell that she wasn’t sure if this was a smart idea. I wasn’t sure myself. I was asking for trouble going out with her in the middle of the night, but tonight, I didn’t care. Tonight, I would be carefree. I’d let tomorrow worry about itself.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Olivia

“This is a bad idea, Olivia,” I grumbled to myself as I pulled on my sweatpants. I grabbed a sweater and my Timberland boots and put them on quickly. Never in my life had I wished I had cowboy boots to put on—before now.

I hurried back to the kitchen and smiled nervously when I saw that Beau was standing there waiting for me. He was such a hunky, tall man, the epitome of a cowboy. It was funny because I’d never met any real cowboys before. It wasn’t like there were a lot of them in New York City. In fact, the only one I could think of was the Naked Cowboy who hung out in Times Square, and I didn’t even know if he was a real cowboy.

“You made it back.” Beau’s face lit up when I walked into the kitchen.

“I did.”

“And you put on some clothes.” He chuckled. “Darn it.”

“You did too.” I looked at him in his dark gray sweatshirt. It was too bad that he’d covered up, but it was most probably for the best. His chest looked like it had been chiseled by one of the finest sculptors in Italy. He was gorgeous and way too tempting.

“I guess we both decided it was safer to put on some more clothes,” he said.

“Safer?” I asked him, a little smile on my face. Was he teasing me? Was he flirting with me?

“You know what I mean.”

“Perhaps I do.” I wasn’t the sort of girl to play games, even though this was very dangerous territory we found ourselves in. “So, where are we going?” I asked him before he said something that would have us going back to one of our bedrooms as opposed to outside.

“Well, it’s a beautiful balmy night here in Montana. And I thought, why not show you some of my favorite night spots?”

“Some of your favorite nightspots, huh? I suppose there are many?”

“Not many, but I want you to see this beautiful state through the eyes of someone who loves it.”

“You really do,” I said. “I’m not saying that it’s not beautiful or that New York City is better; it’s just very different.”

“It’s different, yeah. But I *am* saying that Montana is better than New York City. Much better.”

“Oh, really? And I suppose you can back that up?”

His blue eyes gazed into mine. “That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Okay, cowboy. Let’s go outside, and you can show me.”

“Okay then.” He brushed past me. “I got hot chocolate in a flask and”—he held up another bottle—“some whiskey in case we want to tease ourselves.”

“Tease ourselves?” I laughed. “What does that mean?”

“I mean, just enough whiskey to make us happy. Not enough whiskey to make us drunk.”

“Oh, you’re scared to get drunk with me?”

“Yes, I am, ma’am.” He grinned. “Yes, I am.”

I didn’t ask him what he meant by that; I wasn’t a dumbass. But he was smart, because if he’d brought more

whiskey, I had a feeling that neither of us would be able to keep our hands off each other. And while I knew that Lucy wouldn't care if I hooked up with Beau, it would just make everything far too complicated.

“So, are you going to tell me where we're going?”

“We're going to see nature in all its glory,” he said as we walked out through the French doors at the back of the kitchen.

It sounded like a tall order, but as we stepped out of the house, I looked up at the night sky. It was dark, but I could see hundreds, maybe thousands, of stars. It was beautiful. I've never seen so many stars in the night sky. I truly felt like I was in nature, which was something I never really cared about. I was used to the lights and sounds of a bustling city, homeless people on the corners, and gunshots in the distance.

“What are you thinking about, Olivia? I asked if you saw that constellation.”

“Sorry, I was just thinking about the city. While I love it, there's a lot of crime there.” I made a face. “I mean, not to prove you right or anything, but it certainly doesn't have this serene, tranquil feeling.”

“Of course not,” he agreed. “This is Montana.”

“Yes, it is.” I laughed.

“Come. I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“A stream.”

“I've seen streams before, you know.”

“Not like this.”

“Okay.”

“So”—he turned to me—“we have several options.”

“Oh?”

“We can ride there,” he suggested, and my eyes widened. “Okay, maybe that's not a good idea, seeing that you've never

really ridden before. You could ride on the same horse as me.”

“I don’t think so.” I shook my head. “I mean, it’s not like I’m some princess in a movie and you’re rescuing me.”

“I could rescue you if you wanted.”

“Well, what are our other options?”

“We could walk, but it’s late, and I think you’d be too tired to walk back if we did that. How about we camp out?”

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” The thought made me a little nervous. I’d never been camping before, and I wasn’t sure I was quite ready for my first experience.

“Then we’ll take one of the trucks.”

I nodded, relieved. “I guess that’s a good compromise.”

“I think so too.” He stared at me for a moment without saying anything.

“What are you thinking?” I asked him.

“I was thinking that you’re beautiful,” he said, a twinkle in his eye. My heart raced, and I just wanted to grab him and kiss him. I wondered if a cowboy would kiss better than a city boy.

“Thank you.” I grinned at him, pleased.

“I was also thinking that I can’t believe you’ve never been to Montana before.”

“Lots of people haven’t been to Montana before.”

“And they’re missing out,” he said. “I haven’t been out here at night in a long time.”

“Oh, really?” I was surprised. “If you love it so much—”

“I do love it. But sometimes other things in life take over, you know? You forget to enjoy the beauty of the small things.”

“I definitely understand that. It can be hard to appreciate the smaller things in life when you’re stressed out.”

“Are you stressed out, Olivia?” he asked me softly as we walked to the side of the house to where the trucks were.

“A little bit,” I admitted. I wasn’t normally this open with people I didn’t know well, but something about Beau made me feel safe.

“What are you stressed out about?”

“I’m a little sad that Lucy’s moving here. She’s been my best friend for years, and I’m going to miss her.”

“That’s understandable.”

“And I guess my job as well. I don’t know what exactly will be waiting for me when I get back.”

“What is it you do again?”

“I work in a little boutique in the city. We sell clothes, and pay is based on commission. I don’t make that much money. I make enough to live, but barely.” I sighed. “Not that I’m complaining or anything,” I said quickly, not wanting him to think I was asking for a handout or something.

“No, I get it. Money is a huge stressor.”

“Not that you have anything to worry about, right?”

“Me?” He chuckled softly. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, aren’t you like the richest cowboy in Montana?”

“No, not really. Our family—yeah, we have some of the most prime real estate in the state, that’s true, and it is very valuable. We have some cash flow issues, though, if I’m completely honest.” He glanced at me. “I can’t believe I just told you that.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve told no one outside of the family that, and I don’t even know if the family understands just how critical things are right now.”

“Is it really bad?” I said, worried and nervous for him but also for Lucy. What was she getting herself into?

“I mean, we’re not going to be out in the streets or anything,” he assured me quickly. “We’re not in dire straits,

but I have a lot of important decisions to make that could affect this ranch for generations to come, you know?”

“I understand.”

Though I didn't really. I certainly didn't have generational wealth in my family, and I didn't know anyone else that did. I hadn't grown up with people who had trust funds and were born with silver spoons in their mouths. My parents were like me, living from paycheck to paycheck. I was positive that the constant stress of “Do I pay the electricity bill or the water bill this month? How many days can I push it before something gets shut off?” was going to shorten all our lives.

It was a lot, but I guess it would be a lot if I had the futures of everyone in my family to worry about as well, as it sounded like Beau did.

“Does your dad still help with the ranch?” I asked.

“Not the business side of things. My dad, he was a great cattleman—business savvy and very by the book. Maybe too by the book.” He shrugged. “I don't know. We lost a lot of money with a lot of the practices that he continued. He wanted to make sure that we hired real men to do a lot of work that machinery could do, you know? A lot of people in town, they rely on their jobs here at Horseshoe Ranch. People are important, but I don't know if . . .” He paused. “Sorry, I don't want to bore you. That's not why we came out here.”

“You're not boring me,” I told him. “I understand. I guess it's like tech jobs, right? And jobs that machines and robots can take over. A lot of companies are hiring machines as opposed to people, and that's something that's always struck me as sad and scary for mankind.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “At some point, we can't rely completely on machines, but people want to pay the bare minimum for products and food and just about everything. And when you pay the bare minimum, you can't expect that the workmanship is the same.” He sounded glum. “It's just not possible.”

I was surprised at how serious the conversation had become. We stopped next to an old Chevy truck and he grinned. “Okay, I promise I’m going to stop. I’m going to take you down to the stream. Well, creek.” He laughed. “I call it a stream because when I was young, I always used to say, ‘I want to swim in the stream. I want to swim in the stream,’ and even though I know it’s a creek now, of course, I still call it a stream.”

“Oh, I see. So we’re going to a creek?”

“Yeah. I know you’re thinking to yourself, ‘Why is a strange man complaining and driving me to a creek in the middle of the night?’ but I promise, you won’t regret it.”

“I already don’t.” I jumped into the passenger seat of the pickup truck. “I’m glad we’ve had this conversation. You’re different from what I expected.”

“You thought I’d just be some cowboy hick?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said quickly.

“It’s okay. It doesn’t offend me. I *am* just a cowboy, but I’m a cowboy with a lot of layers and a lot of things to think about. I’m also a cowboy that loves this state and loves the land, and any opportunity I have to share that with someone else, well, I’ll take it, especially when it’s a beautiful woman like you.”

He started the ignition, and I sat back, my heart thumping. I looked out the window as we pulled out of the driveway and to the back of the property down a dirt road. I could see nothing except for the dirt road ahead of us lit by his headlights. We were in the middle of nowhere. I should have been scared, but I felt excited. I felt like I was going on a real adventure. I felt like I was in an Indiana Jones movie—which told you how sad my life was, because Indiana Jones had been in the Middle East and Africa, and here I was in the middle of Montana, excited to be going into the forest to see a creek.

I was glad I’d come to visit, and I was even a little glad that Lucy wasn’t here tonight. If she was, maybe I wouldn’t be on this adventure with Beau, experiencing what I was

experiencing right now. Happiness. Lightness. Excitement. I didn't know how long the feeling would last, but I was glad for it. I wanted to see Montana in all its glory. And maybe, just maybe, he could make a convert out of me. Maybe, just maybe, I was someone who would really appreciate nature.

Maybe I wouldn't want to go back to the city after all.

Chapter Thirty-Four

B eau

We rode in companionable silence as we made our way to Rock Creek. I glanced to the side to ensure that Olivia wasn't sleeping and caught her checking me out. She turned her face away quickly, and I grinned as I leaned forward to turn on the radio. An old Patsy Cline song poured through the speakers, and I sang along. I could see Olivia nodding her head to the beat and it made me smile.

"So, Olivia, what is it you think you'd rather be doing in life?" I said, trying to think of a conversation topic as I made my way down the dirt road.

She looked over at me. "What, you don't think I want to work in a boutique for the rest of my life?"

"Well, do you?" I glanced at her, then pulled my eyes back on the road. I should really concentrate a little bit better. You never knew when the elk or deer or even cattle would be moving across the road, and in the dark, it was hard to see them until you were up close.

"No, I don't want to work in a boutique forever. I'd like to be an interior decorator, I think."

"You think, or you know?"

"I know," she admitted. "But even saying that seems almost impossible."

"Why?"

“I didn’t go to school for it. I don’t have an education. I don’t have much of a background in it, aside from decorating my own little place and helping friends pick out pieces.”

“And that’s not enough to be an interior decorator?”

“Not in New York City, it isn’t.”

“Maybe in Montana,” I said softly, not even sure why I said it. She wouldn’t want to live in Montana—she’d made that perfectly clear—and I could see why. I loved my state and I loved my home, but then I hadn’t grown up in a big city. I couldn’t even imagine it. It made me feel claustrophobic just thinking about it.

“Yeah, I guess. Not many people in Montana probably need an interior decorator, though.”

“You never know.”

“You know, once when I was out of my mind . . .”

“What do you mean, out of your mind? Drunk?” I raised an eyebrow as I glanced at her and waited for her answer. I wondered what she was like with alcohol. I bet she was a cute drunk.

She giggled and nodded slightly. “Okay. One time when I was drunk, I had a thought that perhaps I would move to Florida or Indiana or somewhere and become a house flipper.”

“A house flipper?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d buy quaint little old houses and then renovate them and sell them.” She started laughing loudly.

“And what’s so funny?” I didn’t get the joke.

“I know absolutely nothing about home renovation or flipping.” She wrinkled her nose. “It was a stupid idea.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid to me, if that’s really what you want to do.”

“Not the flipping part so much, but I’d love to decorate houses. There’s just something about finding the right piece of furniture for rooms and picking the right color and the right

light fixtures to just—” She shook her head. “Sorry, I must be boring you.”

“Not at all. Sometimes we need to talk about our dreams. No matter how unrealistic we think they are.”

“Yeah. Well, they’re very unrealistic. Even if I wanted to flip houses, it’s not like I have the money.”

“So you *do* want to flip houses?”

“I don’t. I was just saying that—it doesn’t matter.”

“It does. You know . . . I might have a little project for you if you’re willing.”

“What’s the project?”

“So I’m planning on building a ranch here.”

“Oh, like Lucy and Austin?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “All of us brothers really need our own space. Mom and Dad love to have us at the main house, but after a certain point in life, you don’t really want to live with your parents anymore.”

“I can understand that. So how can I help you?”

“Maybe you could help me decorate my home.”

“Is it nearly done?”

“No, I haven’t even started. Sorry. I wasn’t even thinking, but you’d be long gone by then.”

“Yeah.” She sounded wistful. “But maybe I could come back and help you.”

“Sure. That seems like a good idea. Who knows, the way Lucy and Austin are going, they might be pregnant within a few months, and you’ll be back for the baby shower.”

“That would be kind of cool and kind of crazy.”

“Do you like kids?” I asked her, not really sure why I was going down this road, but I was curious. She looked like she would be a good mother.

“I do.” She nodded. “I love them. I hope to have a big family one day.”

“As big as mine?”

“Maybe not that big. I don’t know how your parents handled seven boys. It must have driven your mom absolutely crazy.”

“I think it must have. And my dad too.” I chuckled as I turned down a side road. We were getting closer to Rock Creek. Now I was excited to see what she would think of my favorite spot on the ranch. For some reason, I really wanted her to like it, to see the beauty in it. I knew that it looked different at night than it did during the day. My other brothers would have taken her during the daytime, I knew, to fully and truly appreciate the beauty—the mountains in the background, the sun, the birds flying. But I liked it at night. There was a stillness, a quiet. A peace that didn’t exist in the day.

It was otherworldly. Sometimes when I was there at night and I lay back and looked at the stars, I almost felt like I was in a different universe. I didn’t tell my brothers that, because obviously I wasn’t, and I didn’t want them to think that I wasn’t happy with my life or with them. I loved my family. But being the eldest brother of seven was a lot to live up to. I was the one they emulated. I was the one my parents expected to set an example. I had to be the perfect brother. I had to look after the family ranch. I had to make sure we were profitable—that everyone could eat. It all fell on me.

“Hey, Beau?” Olivia’s gentle voice interrupted my thoughts. I felt her hand on my shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah, sorry. Completely spaced out just then.”

“You were mumbling something.”

“Oh, what was I mumbling?”

“You were saying, you’re doing your best. What were you talking about?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about what it’s like to be the eldest brother in a large family.”

“I guess that’s a lot of responsibility, huh?”

“It is.” I looked over at her. She looked sympathetic and sexy. Her lips were beckoning to me; I wanted to taste them. It was a bad idea, but I knew before the night was done, I was going to kiss her. I didn’t care what anyone else had to say or think or how they’d react. And I could tell by the way her lips were trembling and how she was playing with her hair that she wanted me to kiss her too.

She licked her lips nervously, and it was all I could do not to pull over and stop the truck right then and there. But I wanted our first kiss to be magical. I wanted it to be under the moonlight right next to the Creek, where we could see our reflections in the water. I wanted her to remember tonight for the rest of her life. I didn’t know why or how or what that meant, and I didn’t care. For once in my life, I was just going with it. I wasn’t going to overthink it or overanalyze.

I was just going to let the chips fall where they may.

Chapter Thirty-Five

O livia

“Have you ever heard that song, ‘Moon River’?” I asked Beau as we got out of the truck and walked toward the water. It was every bit as beautiful as he’d led me to believe. The full moon in the night sky reflected proudly off the shimmering water. The trees in the background were also illuminated, and I felt like I was in a magical land. One could believe in God in a place like this.

“*Moon River*? Hmm.” He appeared to be thinking as we stood side by side. “You mean the Audrey Hepburn song?”

“Yes.” I turned to him, happy that he knew it. “She sang it in—”

“*Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.” He grinned. “I know.”

“You’ve seen it?” I couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice.

“Of course. It’s a classic.” He started humming; he had a nice, husky voice. “She sat in her window, strumming, wearing her jeans with a towel in her hair, and George Peppard was looking down at her.”

“You’ve really seen it.”

“I love classic movies.” He gave me a sideways smile. “What? You didn’t think a cowboy would enjoy watching movies?”

“I mean, *Spiderman*, *Batman*; hero movies, sure. But Audrey Hepburn?”

“I wanted to be a filmmaker,” he said softly. “And my mama, she loved to watch the classics. I guess her and her sister used to act in plays they wrote when they were kids. I think she wanted to be an actress when she was younger, but then she met my pops.”

“Oh, wow.”

“She could have made it as well. She was beautiful.”

“She still is,” I said truthfully, thinking of Amelia’s silky white-blond hair and sparkling blue-green eyes. I could only imagine how gorgeous she must have been when she was younger.

“We used to watch movies together every Saturday night as a family and then again on Sunday afternoons. At least until we all got really into sports and helping out on the ranch. I had my own little video camera. I used to shoot short films, with my brothers as the actors. Sadie always played the love interest and damsel in distress.” He started laughing. “She was the only girl that was always around.”

“She’s like your sister, huh?”

“It’s weird, but yes.”

“Why is that weird?” I frowned. “I think that’s wonderful.”

“Oh, I mean it’s weird because all of us are waiting for the day when Sadie and Wyatt get it together and realize they’re in love. And so obviously, they’re not brother and sister.”

“Do you think that’s something they want or something the family wants?”

“Honestly”—he paused for a few seconds—“I think my mama has been planning on them falling in love since they were still in diapers. And when I was younger, I would have said there was no way; she was just Sadie. But now, well . . . I think they’re meant to be together.” He made a little huffing noise. “I guess sometimes mothers do know best.”

“I guess so,” I agreed. “So you made films and wanted to be a filmmaker. What made you change your mind?”

“This.” He waved around and took a step back. “This ranch has been in our family for generations, and as the oldest, it’s my responsibility to ensure it survives for many more generations. I didn’t mind, you know, giving up my dream.” He smiled a brilliant smile, but I didn’t believe him.

“I think you did,” I said quietly. “If you didn’t mind, you wouldn’t have called it giving up your dream. Anytime you have to give up a dream, there’s some regret and pain involved.”

“True. I guess you saw through my bullshit.” He took a step toward me, and I swallowed hard as I looked up into his handsome face. His blonde hair looked dark in the night, and his blue eyes were asking me questions I didn’t know the answer to.

“It’s beautiful here,” I told him. “I see why you love it.”

“You’re beautiful.” He came a little closer.

“What are you doing?” I licked my lips nervously. “Do you have the, uh, hot chocolate?” I looked around, trying to pretend it was the hot chocolate I was interested in.

“I’m going to kiss you, Olivia.”

“Oh, but we shouldn’t.” I pressed my hands against his chest, intending to push him back, but the feel of his warm, hard muscles beneath my fingers made me pause. Would it really be so bad to let him kiss me? What was one kiss? It was nothing. Even high school girls didn’t care about one kiss, and if they didn’t, then who was I to complain? I was a twenty-eight-year-old woman. I was independent. I was modern. And if I wanted to kiss this hunk of a man, I was going to do it.

Before I was completely aware of what I was doing, I stood on my tiptoes and tilted my face up to meet his. He wrapped his arms around my waist as he lowered his head and his lips touched mine. The sensation made me tingle in places that hadn’t tingled in months. I gasped as his fingers pressed into my back and pulled me even closer to him. I could feel his

warm, hard body pressed against me as his tongue slipped into my mouth. I'd never been more turned on in my life.

I kissed him back passionately, running my hands into his hair, then down his back and up under his shirt. The feel of his skin against my fingers made me gasp. I could feel his heart racing, and I moaned slightly as his lips left mine and pressed against the side of my neck. He stepped back long enough to tug my sweater off. I was sure he could tell that I didn't have a bra on under my nightshirt, but I didn't care. I wasn't a prude, even if I did feel slightly self-conscious as his fingers ran over the sides of my breasts.

"I swear I didn't bring you here for this," he whispered into my ear, his voice husky. The feel of his fingers on my naked skin made me tremble with longing. I wanted him to touch me in even more intimate places.

"Liar." I giggled as my fingers ran across his nipples.

He groaned. "Totally not lying. Cowboy's honor." His fingertips lightly grazed my nipples. I felt myself growing wet, and I had to take a step back.

"I've never heard of cowboy's honor before."

In one swift movement, he pulled off my nightgown and threw it onto the ground. I gasped as the cool air hit my bare skin. "It's going to get dirty," I whispered as it hit the grass.

"You're going to get dirty." His lips came down to my right breast, and I almost came as he sucked on my nipple. This man knew exactly how to work me.

"Beau," I moaned as my fingers tangled in his hair. "I thought you wanted to show me the beauty of nature at night." I was barely able to get my words out as his mouth moved to my other breast.

"What's more beautiful than this?" He grinned as he looked up at me. A hand slipped into my sweatpants and cupped my ass. I tugged on his shirt, indicating that I wanted him to take it off. He seemed to understand because he pulled his shirt off and stood there in just his jeans. I stared at his chest, slightly embarrassed as he gazed at my naked breasts

with lust in his eyes. Suddenly, he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the water.

“What are you doing?”

“Let’s go for a swim.”

“But I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“You don’t need one.” He winked and pulled down his pants. He was standing there in a pair of boxer shorts, and I swallowed hard. I wanted to see him naked. “Your turn.” He nodded toward my legs, and I just stared at him for a few seconds. “Or you could swim in your sweatpants if you want.”

“You’re just trying to get me naked.”

“But you won’t be naked. Unless you want to be, of course.”

I pulled my pants off slowly. I was now standing there in just my bikini panties.

I smiled at him and stretched, loving the way his eyes moved over my breasts as they bounced in the night air. “Let’s go swim.” I ran toward the water. I could hear him running behind me, and I laughed as he caught up to me and pulled me into his arms.

“I think you’re a country girl after all.”

My breasts crushed into his chest as his lips found mine, and I moaned as I felt the hard length of his cock pressed into me. “Just because I’m a city girl, it doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate nature.” I laughed and pulled away from him. We were standing right next to the creek now, and I looked over at him. “So do we just jump in or what?”

“Come with me.” He grabbed my hand, and we made our way down the creek bed to a large boulder. “We’ll jump off here. It’s not so rocky or shallow at this part.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He looked back at me. “Ready?” He squeezed my hand, and I nodded back at him as I stood aside him on the rock. “One, two, three, jump!”

We jumped. I let go of his hand as I plunged into the freezing water. My nerves screamed, my lungs contracted, and I swam back and forth to try to make myself warmer. I felt colder than I could ever remember, and yet I'd never felt more alive. Beau swam over to me, drops of water rolling from his hair down his face.

He grinned as he looked at me. "How do you feel?"

"Freezing!" I gasped. "Adventurous, but absolutely freezing!"

"Lie back with me." He moved onto his back and floated. I followed suit and looked up at the sky. It was beautiful. I'd never seen so many stars before in my life.

"Moon river," Beau started singing the famous song, and I joined him. He then moved on to some country songs I didn't know, but I listened, loving the timbre of his voice. In a different life, he could have been a singer.

"Are you still cold?" Beau's shoulder rubbed against mine. I was, but I didn't want to admit it; I didn't want to leave the water. It was like when you're relaxing in the bath and the tub water gets cool. You're torn between wanting to stay and wanting to get out.

"Yes and no," I admitted, but neither one of us moved. "It's so wondrous looking at the stars. I've never seen anything like this before. I'm cold, but I don't want to go in yet."

"I can warm you up." Water splashed against me as he pulled me into his arms.

Our bodies were still submerged in the water, but I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. "Thanks for bringing me here. This is a place one could fall in love with."

"This is a place where one could fall in love." He passionately kissed me again.

I wrapped my legs around his waist. His hands were now on my ass, holding me up. I felt the goose pimples on his skin as I ran my hands over his shoulders.

“Let’s get out of the water.” I pulled away from him, and we swam back to the creek bank.

We made our way out of the water, shivering in the cool breeze. Beau pulled me toward him, running his hands up and down my body, back and front. At first, it felt like he really was just warming me up, but then his fingers began giving my breasts more and more attention and gradually moved down toward my panties.

“Can’t have you wearing wet clothes now, can we?” He winked at me as I stepped out of my panties. I was now standing completely naked in front of him.

“Well, shouldn’t you take your clothes off as well?” I asked.

“Willingly.” He eagerly pulled his boxer shorts off.

I gasped when I saw his bare cock. It wasn’t completely hard, as we’d just been in the water, but it was growing as we stood there, admiring each other’s bodies. He took a step toward me and ran his index finger across my lips before kissing me again. I melted against him, my body now hot against his, and closed my eyes as I circled my arms around his neck.

His right hand slipped between my legs, and his fingers rubbed me gently. I trembled as he rubbed my clit and played with my wetness. I reached down and grabbed his cock, and he stilled as I ran my fingers up and down his shaft. I kissed down his chest and abdomen and fell to my knees, looking up into his eyes to see him staring hungrily at me. I grinned up at him before I leaned forward and took him into my mouth. His cock was still wet and tasted salty. He reached down and grabbed my hair as I licked his shaft and deep-throated him. I could feel his cock growing harder and harder as I sucked. The feel and taste of him had me wildly turned on. Suddenly, I felt his hands on my shoulders, pulling me back up.

“What are you doing?” I blinked at him, distracted and confused. I missed the taste of him.

He kissed me. “I was about to come.”

“I don’t mind.” I was about to drop to my knees again.

He shook his head as he slipped his fingers between my legs. “I want to see your face the first time I come for you.”

I groaned. “You’re a tease.” He blew into my ear as he rubbed my clit, and I squeezed my legs around his hand, already close to an orgasm. I wanted to come. I didn’t care if I saw his face or not. I could feel myself breathing harder as I pressed my face into his chest. I was so close. “Don’t stop!”

I shifted my legs and kissed his skin. He increased the pace of his fingers, slipping one inside of me as he played with me. I bit down on his shoulder, clinging to him. “Oh, shit. Oh, yes. Please . . . oh!” The intensity was too much. I climaxed against him as he played with me. My body shuddered, and I would have collapsed, but he held me tight to him and kissed my forehead.

“You came?” he whispered in my ear.

“I did,” I breathed.

“I’m glad.” He reached his fingers into his mouth and sucked. “You taste like candy and the creek.”

I couldn’t believe I was standing here naked with this man I barely knew. I’d given him half of a blow job, and he’d just made me come with his fingers. I should have been self-conscious and embarrassed, but I wasn’t. I’d never felt more alive in my life.

“We should put our clothes on,” I said, pulling back from him. “Before we actually catch a cold.” I looked around for my sweatpants and top. I could see the disappointment on his face. I wasn’t sure if he’d wanted us to get down and dirty in the grass. It would have been sexy but uncomfortable, and now that I’d just orgasmed, I just wanted to sleep.

“You’re right. We should get back to the ranch.” He grabbed his jeans. “I don’t want you to miss any of your beauty sleep.”

“Why, aren’t you thoughtful?” I smiled at him as I wiggled back into my sweatpants.

“I’m a giver, not a taker.” He winked at me and I laughed. “Though right now, my cock is telling me I made a poor decision.”

“I’m sure he’ll get over it.” I winked back at him and hugged my sweater to my body to warm me up.

“Oh, he’ll get over it all right,” he said. “In about thirty minutes, when I’m in the shower and reliving the feeling of your mouth on me.”

His blue eyes gazed intently into mine. I was tempted. A large part of me just wanted to grab him and feel him inside me, but that was a step I wasn’t willing to take just yet.

Chapter Thirty-Six

B eau

My cock was hard when I opened my eyes.

I'd spent the night dreaming of Olivia, and even though I'd jacked off in the shower before I'd gone to bed, it hadn't completely relieved me of how badly I wanted her. I gripped my cock under the sheets, moving my hand back and forth quickly as I thought about her mouth sucking me off and the way her breasts had pressed against my chest.

Fuck, she was hot, and I'd barely been able to see her clearly. I wondered if I could sneak into her bedroom. I looked over at my alarm clock: six a.m. Mom and Dad would be up already, so there was no way I could bang her. They'd easily hear her shouts down the corridor. I grinned at my cocky thoughts. I'd bet money that Olivia was a screamer. The way she'd been panting and biting my chest when I fingered her had shown me that she could be pretty vocal. And that had only been one finger inside her. If she was filled with all of me, she'd be fucking begging me to take her to the edge. And oh, how badly I wanted to do that. My hands moved up and down quickly, and I was close to coming when there was a knock on the door.

"Fuck," I muttered. I really needed to start construction on my own place. The knocking came again. "Yes?" I shouted.

The door opened slowly. Olivia walked into my bedroom in her nightgown. I could see she still had no bra on, and I

wondered if she had on any underwear. Was she deliberately trying to turn me on?

“Morning.” She closed the door behind her slowly and moved closer to the bed.

“Morning.” I sat up. She was avoiding eye contact with me. Her hair was messy, and her lips looked puffy, as if she’d been well kissed the night before. I grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” She gasped as I pulled her down for a kiss.

“What you came here for,” I said, pressing my lips against hers. “Slightly surprised you popped in, but your wish is my command.”

“No, that’s not why I came here.” She shook her head. “I came to tell you that we have to pretend last night never happened.”

“What?”

“I don’t want Amelia and Ranger thinking I’m some sort of whore.”

I suppressed a groan. “It’s not like we fucked.”

“Yes, but . . . you know . . .”

“What?” I brushed my fingers against her nipples through the sheer fabric of her nightgown.

“Beau.”

I stroked her cheek. “Did you sleep well?” I asked her as she shifted slightly on the side of the bed.

“I did, thank you. You?”

“You don’t have to be so polite, Olivia. We know each other pretty well now—intimately, actually.” I grinned as she blushed. “Not as intimately as I would have liked, though.”

“You can’t say things like that, Beau.”

“I can’t say things like what? I can’t tease you?”

“No, you can’t tease me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll forget, and you’ll tease me and say something like that in front of your parents. And oh my gosh, what would they think of me?”

“Do you care?”

“Yes, I care.” She rolled her eyes at me. “I haven’t even been here a week yet and—p”

“And we went swimming in the creek. You had fun, right?”

“Yeah, I had a lot of fun. But I also only had my panties on.”

“Well, I only had my boxers on.”

“But then my panties came off.”

“And my boxers came off.”

“Then I was on my knees, and you know . . .”

“But you didn’t finish sucking me off. You didn’t swallow my cum. So does that even count? It’s not like I bent you over and fucked you, Olivia.” I could feel my cock spring up at the words. I could imagine bending her over the bed and taking her from behind.

“I know, but . . .”

“But what?”

“I’m just saying that I don’t think they should know.”

“How about I go into the kitchen and say, ‘Hey, guess what Mom and Dad? Last night I worked up a really big appetite for breakfast because last night—’”

“No, stop it!” She slapped my shoulder playfully. “It’s not that you would say something like that. I don’t want anything to slip out by mistake.”

“Oh, I don’t think it would slip out at all. Once it’s in, it’s in.”

“Beau, you know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Fine. I’ll make sure I don’t tell my mom or dad anything or tease you in front of them. On one condition.”

“What’s the condition?” She looked at me suspiciously.

“Well, if you don’t trust me, I’m not even going to say.”

“Beau!”

“Get into bed with me,” I said softly, pulling her toward me.

“What?” She shook her head.

“Just fifteen minutes.”

“No, I can’t.”

“I know you want to, Olivia. Don’t you?”

“I mean, I don’t know.” She looked away.

“Come on,” I said. “It would have been nice if you’d actually spent the night with me.”

“That would have been a bad idea.” She grinned at me. “I don’t think we would’ve gotten much sleep.”

“Ah, maybe I would have liked to not get much sleep. Come on, Olivia. Fifteen minutes.” I needed to feel her body next to me. I just needed to taste and touch her one more time before I had to go off to work for the day.

It was a bad idea, of course. My mom could come to the door. My dad could come to the door, or one of my brothers. And I knew they wouldn’t keep their mouth shut, though I wasn’t about to tell Olivia that.

“Fine,” she said. “Just for a moment.” She pulled the duvet back, got into the bed next to me, and rested her head on my chest. I grinned as I ran my hands up the side of her legs. “What are you doing?” She shifted.

“What do you think I’m doing?” I reached up under her nightgown and moved my fingers up her inner thighs.

“Beau,” she said.

My fingers made their way to the apex of her legs. “No panties.” I groaned when I felt how wet she was for me.

“You’re horny for me, aren’t you?”

She slipped a hand into my boxers and gripped my cock. “I guess you’re still hard for me.”

“You are a tease, aren’t you, Olivia?” I gazed at her, at the seductive look on her face, the way she was biting down at her lower lip. “Is that why you came here this morning, to tease me?”

“No.” She gave me a sly smile. “I honestly came to tell you that I don’t want your parents to know anything. You’re the one that wanted me to get into the bed with you.”

I grabbed her and rolled her on top of me. Her eyes widened, but she leaned forward and kissed me on the lips.

She was now sitting on my lap, and I could feel her wetness seeping through my boxer shorts. If I shifted even just slightly, my cock would fall out of the slit in the front of my boxers and be between her legs. With one move, I could be inside her. We both knew it. All it would take was a shift of positions and we’d be fucking. She sucked on my lower lip and moved her hips back and forth. I closed my eyes as I reached up to play with her breasts.

I wanted her so badly, more than I’d ever wanted anyone in the world. But I knew we didn’t have enough time, especially if I wanted to fuck her. I didn’t want it to be fast. I wanted to tease her for hours, just like she was teasing me. I wanted to hear her begging me and calling out my name. I wanted to prolong the sweet agony of making her wait. Because it wasn’t just her who’d be begging and hoping for it. I wanted her badly now, but I was patient. This was only the beginning. It might not be the best decision I was going to make in my life, but it was a decision I was definitely going to make.

“We should get out of bed,” I said reluctantly. “I have to take a raincheck on our ride today. I hope you don’t mind.”

She jerked back, surprised. “No, not at all. I understand.” She practically jumped out of the bed and ran for the door.

“I don’t think you do, Olivia. I have to check out the numbers on—” I paused as she opened the door. “We can go tomorrow.”

“Sure.” She nodded. “Of course. I’ll see you later.” She slipped out the door, and I cursed under my breath.

“Well, that was a train wreck.”

She’d obviously taken my words badly. We’d gone from hot to not in less than ten seconds, and I knew I was to blame. I didn’t have time to fix it right now, though. I’d had an idea for the ranch, and I needed to check on some things quickly. I didn’t want to say anything, because I wasn’t the sort of man to say something I couldn’t guarantee or didn’t mean.

I’d explain it to Olivia later, and hopefully she’d understand that the fact that I didn’t want to go riding with her had nothing to do with her. And the fact that we hadn’t had sex had everything to do with me working on a solution to both of our problems.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

O livia

My stomach grumbled as I sat in my room, journaling. I'd skipped breakfast because I hadn't wanted to have to sit with Beau at the kitchen table. It had been a mistake going to his room this morning. I should have left well enough alone. We'd just had a little fun the night before, and this morning had made it more real. We could have laughed off last night as two people who got carried away, but this morning had been about more than that. This morning had been about lust and need. He'd wanted me and I'd wanted him, but somehow, it got awkward. I really wished that Lucy was back already. I needed to talk to her about what had happened. I needed another perspective before I totally lost my mind.

"Olivia." Sadie rushed into my room, her eyes wide. "You need to come out here!" Her blonde hair was up in a messy bun, and her eyes were wide.

"Um, why?" I asked her curiously. "Is someone looking for me? Amelia? Ranger?" I didn't dare say Beau's name, though of course I was hoping it was him.

"No. Amelia and Ranger ran into town, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." I had no clue, but I wasn't going to say that.

"And the guys are all out at the ranch." She frowned. "I was sitting in the kitchen hoping you'd come out, but now we have another problem."

“Oh no, what’s going on?” I wondered what she’d been doing in the house if no one else was there, but this was like Sadie’s second home, so it really wasn’t for me to ask. I didn’t live there at all.

“Oh my gosh, I don’t even know where to start.” She made a face. “Will you come with me? Now?” There was urgency in her voice.

“Okay.” I jumped up off the chair and put my pen and journal down. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a girl at the front door. With a kid.” She raised her eyebrows. “A *little* kid.”

“Okay, and?”

“She’s . . .” She paused. “Just come with me, okay?”

“Fine.”

I followed her out of the room and down the hallway toward the main door. On the front doorstep stood a tall, beautiful woman with light brown hair and big green eyes. She looked nervous as she stood there holding a little girl’s hand. The little girl had blonde hair and blue eyes and was clutching a doll in her other hand.

“Who are they?” I whispered to Sadie. My heart was racing, but I didn’t know why.

“No idea.” She shook her head. She opened the front door and stepped out. “Hi, I’m Sadie.”

“I’m Arya.” The lady stepped forward, holding her hand out. Sadie shook it awkwardly, and then they just stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Hi! I’m Eloise,” the little girl said. “And this is my baby, Doll.”

“Not a very original name.” Arya laughed. “But she chose it.”

“Doll is my best friend,” Eloise said, grinning. I could see that she was missing a front tooth. She appeared to be about five or six, but I wasn’t really great with kids’ ages.

“I don’t suppose Beau Hamilton is here, is he?” Arya said, a nervous expression on her face. Her green eyes were quite piercing.

I shook my head. I could feel myself stiffening as I stared at her. Did she know Beau? “No, he’s not here right now. The guys are out on the ranch doing cattlemen stuff,” I said, trying to sound as official as possible, even though I had absolutely no idea what that actually meant. “They’re bailing hay and . . . stuff.”

“Oh.” Arya frowned. “I was hoping to talk to him. It’s important.”

“Um, we might be able to help,” Sadie said. “I’m a long-time friend of the family. In fact, Amelia and Ranger practically consider me their daughter.” She laughed. “Um, that’s Beau’s parents, if you didn’t know.”

“Of course I knew,” Arya said quickly. “But it’s vital that I speak to him as soon as possible.”

“Okay,” Sadie said. “Well, I could call him. Who should I say is here?”

“You should tell him that his daughter is here.”

“His daughter?” Sadie’s jaw dropped, and a chill swept over me. Sadie looked at me and then back at the lady in front of us. “You’re his daughter?”

“Sadie, really?” I huffed, shock making me impatient. “Think about it.”

“Ohh!” Sadie slapped her hand to her mouth. “I’m an idiot, sorry. You’re no way young enough to be his daughter. Not that you’re old, but . . .” She blushed. “Sorry, I’m messing this up. So, Eloise is his daughter? Oh boy, this is going to be drama.”

“You think?” I said, knowing she was correct.

“Oh, yeah. Beau never told anyone he had a kid.”

“That’s because he didn’t know,” Arya said softly. “But we’re here now, and”—she shrugged—“well, you know.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sadie said, though the expression on her face said she wasn’t sure of anything. “Would you guys like to come in and have some tea and sandwiches or something?” She looked at me. “What would Amelia do in this situation?”

“Come in, Arya, Eloise,” I took over, trying to sound confident and strong, but my heart was breaking. “Let’s go to the living room and sit down, and maybe we can make you some snacks.”

Arya was beautiful. Eloise was cute. Beau had a family. There was definitely no chance for me now. No matter how many times we flirted or toyed with the idea of doing something more intimate, it was never going to happen, not now that his long-lost family had shown up. I wondered what Amelia and Ranger would say. I’m sure they’d be happy. They wouldn’t turn away their grandkid, but I knew they’d be disappointed. They didn’t seem to be the sort that would appreciate any of their sons having kids out of wedlock. But these were modern times, and I supposed a lot of parents didn’t get married before they had kids. In fact, a lot of parents didn’t get married at all.

“Do you want to go make the snacks?” Sadie said as we walked into the living room. “I’ll occupy Arya and Eloise.”

“Sure,” I said, happy to get away.

“And then when you get back,” Sadie said, “we can call Beau.”

“I guess that’d be a good idea.” I wasn’t sure what he was going to say or how he was going to react. I wondered if he’d feel as disappointed as I did, because this certainly meant there was never going to be anything between the two of us. A part of me wished I had slept with him this morning, because now I knew I’d never have the chance again.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

B eau

“Sadie, what is it?” I snapped. Being left with blue balls this morning had put me in a bad mood, and my meeting at the bank had made it even worse.

“Beau, you have some visitors at the ranch,” she said in a tiny voice.

I sighed. “Well, I’m not at the ranch. Can’t you entertain them until I get back?”

“I guess, but they’re really important visitors.” She cleared her throat. “Like visitors that might become guests.”

“What are you talking about, Sadie? You’re confusing the heck out of me.”

Her voice lowered. “Eloise and Arya are here.”

“Who?”

“Oh, yeah, you don’t know Eloise yet. Arya is here.”

“Uriah?” I frowned as I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel. “Uriah Heap?” I laughed at my own joke.

“No.” She sighed and then coughed. “Arya.”

“Sadie, I don’t even know an Orion.”

“Arya.”

“Arya?”

“Yes.” She was quiet. “So what should I say?”

“Say to who?”

“Hold on.” I heard her whispering something to someone, and then Olivia came on the line.

“Beau?” Her voice sounded beautiful, and I smiled into the phone. “It’s me. It’s Olivia.”

“I know.”

“Sadie wanted me to let you know that Arya is here.”

“Is this some sort of joke? I have no idea who Arya is.”

“Arya.”

“Arya, Arya, Arkansas. I’m really busy at the moment.” I was starting to get annoyed.

“She has someone with her. Someone you’ll want to meet.” She sounded like she was pissed at me, and I wasn’t sure why. “It’s your ex, Beau. Your ex is here.”

“My ex?” I made a face. “Brittany?”

“No.”

“You said my ex was there. Brittany is my ex, and I have no idea why she’d be at the ranch. She certainly isn’t welcome.” Brittany had been one of the biggest dating mistakes of my life. She’d gone around telling everyone that I was close to proposing to her when it was the furthest thing in the world from the truth. Her dad had threatened to shoot me if I didn’t buy her a diamond, and I’d told her I never wanted to see her psychotic face again. The sex definitely hadn’t been worth it.

“There is no Brittany here, Beau.” Olivia sounded impatient. “Think of another ex.”

“Oh, shit, not Ginger.” I groaned. “Please just ask her to leave. I don’t have time to deal with her drama.” Ginger knew everyone’s business and loved to gossip and stir up trouble. She’d been a firecracker in the bedroom, but I still wasn’t sure if she’d been faking it half of the time.

“Look, I don’t want to hear about all your exes, but Arya is here.”

“Olivia, I have no idea who the hell that is.”

“Well, you better start remembering because she’s here with your daughter!” And with that, she hung up the phone.

I sat in my truck, feeling like someone had just slapped me hard in the face. What the hell? My *daughter* was there? Who the hell had gotten pregnant by me? I’d always been careful. I’d always worn protection. Every single time. Fuck. There had to be some sort of mistake. I knew for a fact that neither Brittany nor Ginger had been pregnant. And Gretchen had been in grad school, Louise was now married, Jenny was now gay, and Yoko was a lawyer in Boise. Who else had there been? A couple of one-night stands in college—I couldn’t remember their names. Had one of them gotten pregnant?

Fuck! As if my life wasn’t complicated enough as it was. What the hell was I going to do now? What would Mom and Dad think? And worse, what was Olivia thinking? Did she think I was a deadbeat dad? But if she did, what did it even matter? She wasn’t my girlfriend. Shit, she wasn’t even going to be in Montana in a few weeks. I didn’t know why I cared, but for some reason, I was more concerned about what she was thinking and feeling than anything else.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Olivia

“Beau is on his way back now.” I smiled politely at Arya and Eloise as Sadie and I walked back into the living room. “Are you sure I can’t make you a sandwich or something?”

“No, that’s okay, thanks,” Arya said stiffly. “Do you know how long he’ll be?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Sorry.”

I studied her. So this was Beau’s type. She was beautiful. There was a pride to her that made me feel like she was just as uncomfortable as I was in this situation. The way she tilted her chin up every time she spoke showed me that she wasn’t the type to shy away from confrontation. She looked like she was going to go off on Beau when he arrived. That made me feel slightly bad for him—but not that bad. How could he not have known that he had a child?

“Hey, hey. Whose around?” Chet walked into the living room in a cowboy hat and cowboy boots with a huge smile on his face. “Why, howdy, Sadie. Ms. Olivia.” He winked at me and lifted his hat. He really was far too smooth for his own good. Despite the drama, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling back. “Who’s this, now?” He looked at Arya and Eloise on the couch.

“This is Arya. She’s here to see Beau,” I explained.

“He really does get all the ladies, doesn’t he?” Chet chuckled ruefully.

“Oh, Chet.” Sadie hit him in the shoulder. “You’re the Hamilton brother that gets the most ladies.”

“Who, me? I’m a one-woman man.” He grinned.

“Yeah, right!” Sadie laughed and grabbed his hat and put it on her head. “More like a one-hundred-woman man.” She giggled and moved quickly to try and grab his hat off her head.

“What’s going on in here?” Wyatt walked into the room, his face lighting up when he saw Sadie. Then he spied his brother grabbing her hand and frowned. “Sadie, what are you doing?”

“Chet’s just being Chet.” She giggled and pressed the hat down firmly on her head. “I’m just a cool, hot cowboy.”

“I knew you thought I was hot.” Chet grinned before grabbing his hat back. “Now you do look like a pretty cowgirl in my hat, Sadie, but I think you have plenty of your own.”

“Maybe I do.” She went over to Wyatt. “What’s up, grumpy?”

He scowled at her. “I’m not grumpy. I’m just tired. I’ve been in the barn all morning.”

“Aw, okay.” She rubbed his shoulders. “You should meet Eloise and Arya.” She nodded toward the couch where the two guests were sitting and watching Sadie.

I could guess what they were thinking and feeling because I felt the same way. It was clear that all the brothers adored her. I was a little jealous of her relationship with them. I was positive that every single one of them would kill anyone that tried to harm her. She must have felt like the most protected and loved woman in the world. But it didn’t make me hate her, because even though she was gorgeous, she was also the warmest and sweetest woman I’d ever met. If you looked up *genuine* in the dictionary, you would see her face.

“Hi, Eloise and Arya.” Wyatt nodded. “Friends of yours?” he asked Sadie.

“No, they’re friends of Beau’s.”

“Oh, okay.” He shrugged. “Sadie, come with me real quick?”

“What for?”

“I need you to massage my back. I’ve got some knots I really need to get out.”

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But you really do need to get a professional masseuse at some point. My fingers hurt.”

“They’re fine. Excuse us, everyone.” He grabbed her arm and almost dragged her out of the room. I stared at them as they exited, and when I turned back to focus on the room I was in, I realized Chet was next to me.

“You think they’re going to bang, right?” Chet grinned. “But nope, she’s really going to give him a massage. I’ve never seen two more clueless people before in my life.”

“It seems like everyone in your family thinks they should be together.”

“If anyone else even tried, Wyatt would kill them.” He laughed, his light blue eyes dancing. “So, you’re entertaining Beau’s friends?”

“Um, yeah.” I nodded. I wanted to say, “Those aren’t his friends. That’s his baby mama and kid,” but I knew it wasn’t my place to drop that bomb.

“Would you like anything?” He looked at Arya and she shook her head, not even looking at him. “Well, okay then.” He shrugged. “I’m going to go have a shower. I’ll see you later, Olivia.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Bye.” He walked out of the room.

I continued to stand there, awkwardly staring at Arya and Eloise.

“Is that your boyfriend?” Eloise asked me.

I walked over to the couch so I could sit down. “No, he’s Beau’s brother.” I chewed on my lower lip, not even sure what to say next. “My best friend, Lucy, is marrying Austin, who’s

another one of the brothers. I just came to visit her. I'm from New York."

"Nice." Arya looked faintly impressed. "That's cool."

"It's okay."

It was weird. I usually raved about the city, but being here in Montana was having a funny effect on me. I was finding that I actually quite liked nature and quiet. But maybe it wasn't really nature that I was falling for. Maybe that had to do with a certain hot cowboy who was about to find out he was a daddy.

Would he want to get back with Arya? It seemed like he hadn't even known who she was. They must have had a one-night stand or something. Jealousy stirred within me, but I ignored it. It was before he'd ever met me. But what would happen between them now?

"Are you hoping to get back together with Beau?" I asked Arya lightly, trying to act nonchalant. I didn't want her to know how much I cared about her answer.

"Uh." She blushed and looked away.

"He's single, if you were wondering."

"Look, I . . ." She sighed. "This is an awkward situation. I don't know what to say."

"He's a good guy. I'm sure he'll do right by you." As I said the words, I knew them to be true. Beau Hamilton was a standup guy. There was a reason why he was the most eligible cowboy in Montana. He was a bit of a grump, but he was honest and sweet and hot. And he was hung—oh boy was he hung—but I needed to stop thinking about that now. I wasn't going to tell Arya that I'd had him in my mouth the night before or that we'd been naked together.

I could feel my face growing red. This was too much. What had I gotten myself into? Why did I always have such bad luck with men? As soon as I met a guy I thought I might like, a baby mama showed up. I'd have no luck if it wasn't for bad luck.

I heard a truck pulling up outside and stood up to look out the window. I saw Beau jump out of his truck and head toward the house, a scowl on his face. He looked pissed. I looked back at Arya and Eloise, and all of a sudden, I felt nervous. I hoped he wasn't going to be an asshole.

No child should think they were unwanted. I murmured something to Arya and hurried out of the living room to intercept Beau. I ran to the front door and practically fell into Beau's arms as he crossed the foyer.

"Olivia." His expression softened, his blue eyes warm as they took in my face.

"Hey, Beau." I swallowed hard and ignored the urge to kiss him. I certainly didn't want to kiss him now. This was the last situation I wanted to find myself in the middle of.

"Had a good morning?" he asked, his voice raspy. "I still want to take you to my room and—"

"Beau, your daughter is in the other room."

"So that wasn't a bad joke?" His eyes narrowed as he took in my face and sighed. "Fine, take me to this kid and the woman who claims I impregnated her." He rolled his eyes. "Looks like I might have to sue a rubber company," he muttered under his breath.

I ignored him and led him to the living room.

Chapter Forty

B eau

There was a cute blonde kid sitting on the couch next to a woman I'd never seen before in my life. I walked over to the couch to get a better look at her, but I was almost positive I'd never met this woman before.

"Hey, I'm Beau. Can I help you?"

"It's me." Her green eyes were nervous.

"And you are?"

"Beau," Olivia chided me as she stood next to me. "That's Arya, and Eloise, your daughter."

"Look, I don't know what's going on here, but I have no idea who these people are." I narrowed my eyes at the lady. "Sorry, have we even met before?" She swallowed nervously, and I could see her thinking before she responded. "Or did you see my profile in the *Bozeman Daily* listing the most eligible bachelors in Montana and think you'd pretend to know me?"

"No, I . . ." The lady blushed. "I don't know you, but Eloise *is* your daughter."

"Auntie Arya, I'm thirsty," Eloise piped up.

"You're her aunt?" Shit, so this kid *could* be mine.

"Yes." She nodded. "My sister, Lexi, had her four years ago."

“Who?” I stared at her. “I’ve never heard of a Lexi.”

“Alexa?”

“It’s not ringing any bells. I’m not trying to be funny, but where is this Lexi and why did she send you?”

“She went away.” Arya looked at Eloise. “She left Eloise to me with a note before she went to live with her new boyfriend.”

“Oh no!” Olivia looked shocked. “How could she do that?”

“My sister is very irresponsible.” She sighed. “But she thought I could find Eloise’s dad for some help.”

“And she said I’m her dad?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How the hell had I gotten caught up in this?

“Yes.” She pulled a note out of her pocket and handed it to me. “This is the letter she left me.” I opened it quickly and read it. Then, I reread it.

To My Darling Arya,

I have run away to be with Brad. I know you don’t approve of him, but I love him and he loves me. We’re going to head to Texas, and he’s going to enter rodeos. I’m leaving Eloise with you. She loves you more anyway. I know you’ll make a better mother than me. If you need help, find her father. He’s rich and can provide for both of you. Just find Horseshoe Ranch near Billings and ask around for Beau Hamilton, eldest son of Ranger and Amelia Hamilton, net worth 1.2 billion, educated at Montana State University. He can afford to pay child support. I love you, Arya. Wish me luck!

Your adventurous sister,

Lexi

“Is this a joke? This reads like the bio that was in the article in the magazine.”

“You really don’t know her?” Arya sat on the couch, her lower lip trembling.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never dated or slept with a Lexi or an Alexa, and I would remember. And I always use condoms so . . .” I looked over at Olivia, who was looking like she’d rather be anywhere than here. “I’m just saying, is all. Condoms are ninety-nine percent effective.”

“I’m so sorry.” Arya jumped up, looking distraught. “I should have known it wasn’t true. Come on, Eloise.”

“You can’t leave like this.” Olivia walked over to her. “You’re upset.”

“I shouldn’t have come. I had a feeling this was wrong.” Arya burst into tears.

“It’s okay.” Tears made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t want to cause this woman any more grief. “You can’t drive if you’re upset. Where are you staying?”

“In my car,” she said softly, looking down.

“What?” I frowned. “Why are you in your car?”

“Lexi took all our money, and I couldn’t pay the rent.” She wiped her eyes. “Sorry, I know this isn’t your problem. I just hoped you were the dad because we really need the help, but it’s fine. I have a job and—”

“You’ll stay here.” I noticed Olivia giving me an approving nod.

“No, we can’t.” Arya shook her head. Eloise was staring up at her aunt, looking sad.

“You can and you will. We have plenty of room here.” I walked over to Eloise and knelt down on the ground in front of her. “Hi, Eloise, I’m Beau. Would you like to have some milk and cookies?”

“Yes, please.” She nodded eagerly and then looked over at her aunt quickly. “Can I have some please, Auntie Arya?”

“Of course.” She smiled at me. “Thank you, that’s really sweet of you. I don’t even know what to say.”

“All you have to say is that you’ll have some as well.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know.” She looked hesitant. “You really don’t have to be so nice. I know this has been a shock. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Your sister said I was the father. You believed her.”

“I mean, I didn’t completely believe it, to be honest.” She chewed on her lower lip and looked away from me. “She’s lied in the past, but this time I had hope, I guess.”

“What are you going to do?” Olivia asked her, a note of real concern in her voice. She walked over to Arya and rubbed her shoulder. “If you need anyone to talk to, I’m here.”

“Oh, thank you. You’re both so nice.” She wiped her eyes again. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“Now we don’t want that,” I said quickly. I wasn’t equipped to deal with a crying woman right now. “Come on, Eloise, let’s go and get some cookies.”

“I have an idea.” Olivia’s eyes lit up. “Maybe we can make some cookies?”

“Oh, yes, please.” Eloise jumped up eagerly. “I love baking cookies.”

“Well, sure.” I shrugged. “I don’t know that we have everything you need to make them, but hopefully we do.”

“Your mom bakes all the time.” Olivia smiled at me affectionately, and my heart skipped a beat. “I’m sure she has flour, sugar, butter, baking powder, and chocolate chips.”

“We can check.” I headed toward the kitchen, and they all followed behind me. I could hear Sadie and Wyatt giggling about something further away in the house, and I wondered when they would finally figure it out. “Okay, have at it.” I gestured to the cupboards as we all made our way into the kitchen. My phone rang at that moment, and I grabbed it from my pocket. “Hello?”

“Hi, can I speak to Beau Hamilton, please?”

“This is he.”

“Mr. Hamilton, this is Doreen Sheidlin from Montana Bank. I’ve received your paperwork for the construction loan and had some questions. Do you have time to talk right now?”

“Yes, yes, I do.” I mouthed, “I have to take this” to Olivia and headed out of the kitchen. I felt bad about leaving them alone, but the ranch had to come first. “So what questions do you have for me, Ms. Sheidlin?”

“First off, I wanted to say I was surprised to see your application on my desk. Don’t you have one of the most successful ranches in the state?”

“Yes, we do.”

“I’ve seen write-ups of you and your family in the papers. I see you also have several bank accounts here. Was there a reason for the loan?”

“What’s that saying—spend other people’s money?” I chuckled. When she didn’t respond, I hurriedly added, “In all seriousness, much of our money is invested in stocks and held in trust for each of the brothers. As you know, there are seven of us. My parents wanted to ensure we all had an equal share.”

“But there are hundreds of millions of dollars—”

“Most of our valuation is in the land. We’re not worth hundreds of millions in cash money.”

“And you don’t want to sell any of the land?”

“No.” I was firm. “The land stays in the family.”

“So I’m reading your business proposal. You’re going to build a wellness ranch?”

“That’s part of the plan. It’s something my brothers and I have been talking about for a while. We weren’t sure, but I think it’s a good idea.”

“I understand your brother Austin is also building a place?”

“The family will pay for that.” I didn’t really want her in our personal business. “The business loans will be used for business purposes only.”

“You’re still going to keep the cattle?”

“Yes.” I made an effort to soften my tone. “We have a large estate. The units we build for tourists will be closer to the creek. Also, as my proposal stated, part of my plan is for tourists to see how a working ranch operates. I want them to be one with nature, in all ways. I think people will pay for that. I think they’ll appreciate the reality of what it’s like to live on a ranch.”

“You sound passionate about the project. I might like to come myself.” Her tone shifted. “Your profile says you’re single. Is that correct?”

“Yes, I am.” Was she flirting with me? “I’ve never been more single.” I looked up as I heard a small gasp. Olivia was just a few yards away from me, looking at me with a weird expression on her face.

“I’m surprised.” The banker laughed.

I cleared my throat. “Oh? Why is that?”

“Well, you’re practically the most eligible cowboy in the state. I’d think the women would be swarming.”

“Trust me, they aren’t.” I spoke into the phone, but my attention was on Olivia now.

“Maybe I can come over for dinner this evening. I can bring some beers with me. You cowboys love beer, right?”

“I’m not really dating right now. I don’t need complications.” I wasn’t sure who I was trying to convince: Ms. Sheidlin, myself, or Olivia. “Was there anything else you needed from me right now? I need to get back to some ranch business.”

“No, that’s all I need for now. I’ll be in touch soon,” she said in a husky voice before hanging up. I placed the phone back into my pocket and looked at Olivia.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you.” She looked awkward. “I was just wondering if you knew where the mixing bowls were?”

“No idea.” I shook my head. “Maybe Sadie knows.”

“Maybe I know what?” Sadie popped up from behind me.

I shook my head. The house was filled with non-Hamiltons. It felt weird but nice. Was this what it would be like once we opened the resort?

“Where the mixing bowls are.” Olivia threw up her hands. “We want to make cookies, but I have no idea where anything is.”

“Oh, of course. Follow me.” Sadie grinned. “I know where Amelia keeps everything.” She pushed past me and headed toward the kitchen. “The boys are useless. They don’t know anything.”

“Way to be sexist, Sadie,” I grumbled, but I wasn’t upset. “Hey, Olivia. I was wondering if . . .” I gave her a look that indicated I’d like some alone time with her, but she just shook her head.

“Sorry, I don’t have time for any complications right now.” She hurried behind Sadie, and I cursed under my breath. Was she really going to be pissed at me? It wasn’t like I’d promised her anything. We hadn’t even had sex.

Chapter Forty-One

O livia

“This is so much fun, Auntie Arya,” Eloise said as she stirred flour in the pretty green-and-pink mixing bowl.

“I’m glad you’re having fun, Eloise.” Arya beamed at her niece and then smiled at me. “Thank you,” she mouthed. The look of gratitude on her face made me think she hadn’t experienced many compassionate people in her time.

“It’s fine,” I said, feeling slightly guilty about the fact that I hadn’t been happy to see her originally. She was such a sweet woman and seemed to be the best auntie to Eloise. This was the least we could do for her. “I’m just glad you’re having fun.”

“I’m having fun too.” Sadie’s blue eyes danced with glee. “I love baking. I’m not very good, though. You’d think I’d be good because I’m a country girl, but I’m absolutely crappy.”

“I don’t think you’re crappy,” Eloise said, tugging on Sadie’s white “Cowgirls do it right” T-shirt.

Sadie looked down at her and beamed. “You’re such a sweetie.”

“Thank you. You’re very pretty, Miss Sadie.”

“Aw. Well, thank you. No one’s ever said that to me.” She grinned at Eloise and handed her a chocolate chip, which the little girl took happily.

“Really?” I looked at her in surprise. With her long blonde hair and her big bright blue eyes, she was an absolute stunner. And her disposition only made her prettier. How had nobody ever complimented her before?

“Really,” she said. “I guess I’m a bit of a tomboy, and guys just don’t look at me like that. That’s why I’m trying to change my image. Actually, Olivia . . .” She gave me a sweet smile.

“Yes?”

“Can you give me a makeover?”

“A makeover? Why? You’re beautiful already.”

“Thanks, but I’m not having any luck on dating apps. I’ve gone on a couple of dates recently, and they sucked. And I’m ready to find love. I mean, look at Lucy and Austin. It’s so romantic, and they’re so sweet together. I want that. I don’t want to be forty years old and still single while all my friends are happily married.”

“You’re not even close to forty. And hey, forty is the new twenty-one anyway.”

She sighed. “I just really want love. I love being with the Hamiltons, and I have a great life, but sometimes I feel like I’m never going to find someone who really *sees* me and thinks I’m beautiful.”

“Sadie, you’re absolutely gorgeous,” I said in complete honesty. “If you were in New York, you wouldn’t be able to walk down the street without a million different guys asking you out.”

“You think so?” She looked at me wistfully.

“I know so. Trust me,” I assured her. “But if you want a makeover, I can help. You’re pretty much set, but I can see how you might want to change some of your clothes and stuff.”

“Oh, yeah. Jeans and overalls are a thing of the past. I want to wear dresses—”

“You want to wear dresses?” Wyatt walked into the kitchen, giving her a look. “You’re going to wear dresses to

ride and muck the stables?”

“No, Wyatt. Obviously, I’m not going to wear them on the farm.”

“Then what are you talking about?” He looked at me. “What’s she talking about?”

“She’s talking about finding the love of her life. And I told her I think there are plenty of guys out there who would be interested in taking her on a date.” I watched his expression closely to see how he’d react.

He frowned and made a face. “What guys? Sadie, what is she talking about?”

“You know I’m ready to find love,” said Sadie.

“Oh, gosh, really?” He shook his head. “Love is not the most important thing in the world. We’re young. You don’t have to find anyone yet. You’re having a good time.”

“I don’t think it’s for you to tell me what I want, Wyatt.”

“I’m not telling you what you want—”

“Hey, guys,” I interjected and looked at the bowl, “who wants chocolate chips in their cookies? We have white chocolate chips, milk chocolate, and dark chocolate. We even have some butterscotch chips here. Your mom must really like baking, huh?”

“What?” He blinked at me, confused, and then shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. She’s always in the kitchen doing something.”

“I hope she’s not going to be mad.” I looked around at the mess we’d made. There was flour on the floor and all over the countertops, cracked eggshells, and butter. I chewed on my lower lip. This wasn’t my kitchen. Maybe I’d made a mistake by telling Eloise and Arya that it was okay. It wasn’t like I hadn’t asked permission. Beau had said it’d been okay, but it wasn’t really Beau’s decision to make. He didn’t really do anything in the kitchen.

I frowned thinking about him. He was such a jackass. I couldn’t believe I’d overheard him saying that he wasn’t looking for a relationship because it would complicate his life.

I had a feeling he'd been saying that so that I could hear him. He wanted me to know that just because we'd kissed, it didn't mean anything. Well, screw him. It wasn't like I wanted a relationship with him anyway. Asshole.

"I think Amelia will be fine," Sadie said cheerfully. "She's used to a mess. Sometimes Chet used to cook, and oh, my gosh!"

Arya looked up, interested. "Really? Chet doesn't look like the sort of guy that would cook."

"I know, right?" Sadie said. "But that's because he's all tall and buff now. Picture him fifteen years ago, when he was just a teen. He wasn't that cool cowboy you see now. He was this geeky"—she looked at Wyatt—"well, you know."

"It's true," Wyatt said. "He was a geek. Not me, though."

"Oh, no. Not Wyatt." Sadie rolled her eyes. "He was always tall, dark, and handsome. Wyatt was the popular one in school. He dated the cheerleaders, was captain of the football team. Typical all-American boy."

"What can I say?" Wyatt playfully flexed one bicep. "If you got it, you got it."

"You're just spoiled because you're the youngest," Sadie told him.

"Well, don't be jealous."

"I'm not jealous." She looked at me. "So will you help me please, Olivia? All my life, I've just been living in the shadows of those bigger and greater than me. I feel like it's my time to shine now."

Wyatt groaned. "Sadie, you are so dramatic. When are the cookies going to be ready, by the way?" he asked with an impish expression on his face.

"Come back in about thirty-five minutes," I said with a laugh. "We still have to put them in the oven."

"I don't mind raw cookie dough." He reached for the bowl of dough.

I swatted his hand away. “Nuh-uh. We don’t want you getting salmonella.”

“I don’t mind if he gets salmonella,” Sadie said. “He deserves it.”

“Is that any way to speak to your best friend?” He glared at her, but his eyes were twinkling. I could tell this banter was familiar to them.

“Whatever, Wyatt Hamilton.”

“Whatever, Sadie.” He mimicked her voice and laughed as he walked out of the kitchen.

“You two seem to have a very close relationship,” Arya said as she looked at Sadie. “You guys have been friends for a long time, huh?”

“Yep, pretty much all my life.” Sadie nodded. “And it’s true; he did date almost everyone he wanted to in high school. And basically, I had no dates. Do you know what it was like to be sitting at home watching movies, and then he would come over after his dates and tell me about them? I felt like such a loser.”

“Oh, Sadie, that’s horrible.” I looked at her. “You must have been so sad.”

She nodded. “Yep.”

“Have you and Wyatt ever . . . dated?” Arya asked carefully.

“Me and Wyatt?” Sadie made a face. “Are you joking? No way, no how, never ever. He’s not someone I could date. We grew up together.” She shook her head, and I thought she was protesting far too much. There was definitely a pink hue to her face.

I didn’t know Sadie well enough to tell her that she could be honest with me and that if she liked him, I’d be willing to help her figure something out. I knew I could still technically tell her that, but I didn’t want to overstep any boundaries, especially given my situation with Beau.

That was quite complicated. Or maybe it wasn't complicated at all. Maybe I wouldn't kiss him again. Maybe I wouldn't even talk to him again. That way, it wouldn't complicate his life at all anymore.

A car door slammed outside, then we heard the front door open and Amelia and Ranger's voices in the hall. I looked around the kitchen, wondering what Amelia was going to say.

"We're in the kitchen, Amelia!" Sadie shouted, not looking nervous at all.

"Oh, who do we have here?" Amelia said as she entered the room. She was smiling, but she seemed more tired than when I'd seen her earlier, the lines on her face appearing a little deeper. Ranger was standing behind her looking somewhat somber.

Amelia gave Sadie and me quick hugs and surveyed the kitchen. "Baking, are we?"

"Yeah, we thought we'd make some cookies. This here is Arya and her niece, Eloise." I nodded over to Arya and Eloise, and Amelia smiled at them.

"Why, hello. I didn't know you had any friends in town, Olivia."

"Oh, they're not . . . Well . . ." I stammered because I didn't really know what to say. I didn't want to be the one to say that Arya had shown up saying that Beau was Eloise's dad.

"No. She doesn't know me." Arya walked over to Amelia with her hand held out. "I'm Arya. I actually came because my sister, Eloise's mom, left me a letter, and she told me that Eloise's dad lived here. And so I thought I'd come. But it turned out that it wasn't true."

"Oh, I see." Amelia didn't look fazed at all. "One of my sons isn't the father?" She looked around the room.

"No, I don't believe he is," Arya said quickly. "We can go if you want to. I didn't mean to intrude or—"

"No, dear. How could I have you leave when you're baking such delicious cookies?"

“I’m so sorry about the mess, Amelia,” I said as I looked around the kitchen. “We’ll clean up.”

“I have seven boys. This is nothing.” She laughed and looked over at Ranger. “Honey, you should sit down. Would you like some tea?”

“I’m fine, Amelia. Don’t fuss.”

“I’m not fussing.” She sighed. “Please sit down, Ranger.”

“Fine,” he said, and he walked over to the kitchen table and took a seat. “And I guess I will have tea with some sugar, then.”

“I’ll make you an herbal tea, honey. Would you like chamomile or peppermint?”

Ranger sighed. “Here we go. You decide, dear.”

“Okay.” She picked up the kettle and headed to the sink so she could fill it with water. “Would anyone else like some tea?”

“I would love some,” Sadie said.

“I’d like some as well, please.” I nodded.

Arya looked nervous.

“Do you want some, Arya?” Amelia asked.

“Well, I don’t—”

“Oh, dear. Of course, you’ll have some tea. And what about Eloise? Would you like some hot chocolate?”

“Yes, please. I love hot chocolate.” Eloise started bouncing up and down excitedly.

“I think I gave her too many chocolate chips,” Arya said with a guilty smile. “She’s going to be up all night.”

“Where are you staying tonight?” Sadie said. “Are you at one of the hotels?”

Arya’s eyes shifted between the three of us. “Oh, we’re—”

“We’re staying in the car,” Eloise said, and Arya’s face flushed. “It’s okay,” Eloise continued. “It’s not the most

comfortable, but Auntie Arya says it's like camping."

"You're sleeping in the car?" Amelia frowned. "You're more than welcome to stay here tonight, of course. And as long as you need. We have plenty of room."

Arya shook her head quickly. "I couldn't intrude. I—"

"My dear, please stay." Amelia went over to her and touched her hand. "We'll be more than happy to have you."

"If you're sure." Arya chewed on her lower lip.

I could tell that even though she wanted to stay, she felt guilty about it. I understood because I felt the same way, and at least my best friend was marrying into the family. Arya didn't even have that connection.

"All right," Arya finally agreed. "Thank you."

"It fills my heart with joy to see so many people in the kitchen, and children." Amelia beamed as she looked around. She placed the kettle on the stovetop and turned it on. "Okay. We've got tea coming, and then your cookies will be done soon, I hope." She smiled at Eloise. "What kind did you make?"

"I made chocolate chip with butterscotch," Eloise said. "They're going to be yummy."

"You can have one," Arya said.

"I want two," Eloise said.

"We'll see." Arya shook her head, looking guilty. "Sometimes it's hard for me to say no to her given everything that's happened."

"Oh, dear, I understand," Amelia said. Then we heard noises coming from the back of the kitchen. My heart leaped for joy as Lucy and Austin walked in.

"Lucy, you're back!" I gave her a big hug.

"Olivia, I'm so glad you're here," she replied.

"Where else would I be?" I laughed. "It's not like I know my way around."

“I know. Did you miss me?”

“Of course I missed you.”

She lowered her voice so that only I could hear her. “Do you have any updates?”

“Yes,” I whispered back.

“Ooh, tell me!”

“Not here.”

“Okay.” She laughed. “Hi, Amelia. Hi, Sadie.” She smiled at Arya and Eloise. “Hi. I’m Lucy, Austin’s fiancée. I haven’t met you guys yet. Are you cousins?”

“No. This is Arya and this is Eloise,” Amelia said. “They’re guests of ours for as long as they want. They’re making cookies for all of us, so you’re back just in time.”

“Sounds good. I love me some cookies.”

“You love you some everything,” Austin said.

“Really, Austin?” Lucy smirked. “I haven’t heard you complaining about that before.”

“Would I ever complain?” he said.

“Now, now, children.” Sadie giggled. “Keep that kind of talk for the bedroom.”

“Sadie!” Lucy gasped, and everyone burst out laughing, even Ranger and Amelia.

And then I felt the hairs on the back of my neck prickling up. I knew Beau had walked into the room even before I turned around and saw him.

“There you are, Beau.” Ranger stood up and stretched. “Can we go to the study? We need to talk.”

Beau frowned. “Now?”

“Yes, son. Now.” He looked over at Amelia, who nodded. Beau and Ranger left the kitchen and headed to the study.

I wondered what was going on. It looked like Ranger wanted to have a serious conversation with Beau. Was the

ranch really in as much trouble as Beau thought? It made me anxious for them. I didn't know the Hamiltons that well, but I could already tell they were a loving, warm, and welcoming family. I didn't want for them to lose their ranch. I didn't want *anything* bad to happen to them.

I walked over to Amelia and touched her hand gently. "Is everything okay?" I said. I didn't want to pry, because I didn't know them very well, but I wanted to help in any way that I could. Granted, I didn't have any money or agricultural skills, but maybe there was something I could do.

"You're a very astute girl, aren't you, Olivia?" She looked at me with kind eyes. "Thank you for asking, but it's okay. We'll be okay." The whistle went off on the kettle. "Will you hand me some cups, please?"

"Of course." I walked over to the cupboard to pull some cups out.

Amelia grabbed a box of tea bags and started placing them into the cups I put down next to her. I looked around the kitchen at the smiling, happy faces, and I realized that this is what a home really felt like, being with people that you loved, just enjoying little things, like tea, together

I was going to feel lonely when I got back to New York. I was going to miss this group of people, even though I'd known them for such a short amount of time. There was something about Montana that caught in your heart and stayed. Or maybe it was just the Horseshoe Ranch. This place was special, and I suddenly understood why Beau couldn't walk away and didn't ever want to give it up.

Chapter Forty-Two

B eau

“So, son, your mother and I are going to Seattle for a couple of weeks.”

I frowned. “Why?”

My dad looked at me with an inscrutable expression; I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. “That’s something I need to keep private at this time.”

“What?” It was my turn to look annoyed. “What do you mean? You’re not going to tell me?”

“At this point, I think it’s best that I don’t.”

“Is something wrong? What’s going on?”

“I just need to see about some business with your mother. I’ve spoken to the attorneys, and I’ve drawn up all the official paperwork, so you’re now legally in charge of Horseshoe Ranch, and you can make all the executive decisions while I’m gone.”

“What about everyone else?”

“What do you mean?”

“What about Austin? And Wyatt, and Chet, and Huck, and Knox, and Flint?”

“I’m glad you can remember the names of your brothers, son. That’s a good sign.”

“Very funny, Dad. They’re not going to be happy to know I’m—”

“I haven’t given you the entire business. I’ve just put the business into your name for now so that you can make executive decisions. You’re the oldest, and I trust you. You’re also the most responsible, and I know you will always do what’s right for the family and for the ranch.”

“Well, yeah. But I just don’t understand. I’ve been running the ranch for ages—”

“Son, it’s something I should have done a long time ago. If anything were to happen, it’s better for everything to be in your hands. You may speak to your brothers and get their opinions, of course, but you’re the final decision maker. Didn’t I ever tell you too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the broth?”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned that, but I don’t cook and neither does anyone else, aside from Mom.”

“Come on now, Beau. You know what I’m talking about. Everyone’s going to have a different opinion, and if everyone’s opinion is catered to, nothing will get done. As the executive decision maker, you can ensure things get done. I know you’ll do what’s right for the ranch. And when I get back, you can tell me all the plans.”

“I don’t understand. Why Seattle?”

“I told you, I wanted to see about some things, and your mom and I need a break.”

“Right now? Austin and Lucy just got engaged. I thought Mom would’ve been over the moon, planning a wedding and everything—”

“The wedding isn’t going to happen right away, and your mom will still be involved in the plans. Lucy loves her like her second mother. That’s not going to be a problem.” He scratched on his earlobe, and I could tell he was worried that it actually *would* be a problem, even though he was saying it wouldn’t.

“You’re right,” I said, “Lucy loves Mom. She will definitely want her input.” I wasn’t sure why I was placating him, but I figured that whatever the reason was for him going to Seattle, it was important. Maybe he was worried about the ranch more than he’d let on. Maybe he was going to try to secure funding with some other people. Whatever it was, I knew he wouldn’t tell me anything else. I wasn’t happy about it, but I respected and honored my dad enough not to pry. He would tell me when he wanted to.

“So I’m thinking about going ahead with the eco-retreat,” I said, switching to business mode. “I think it could be a good idea, a real income generator.”

“If that’s what you think is best.” Dad nodded, his blue eyes wise and kind. “Where would we put it?”

“Initially, I was thinking near Rock Creek because it’s beautiful. But we have our cabin near the bridge where we go for privacy, so I don’t really want tourists there. I was thinking perhaps further along the creek, and then we could build another bridge, maybe a canopy bridge. People seem to love them. And then we’d build maybe ten to twelve units around that space, little luxury cabins. Actually,” I said, thinking out loud, “I was thinking that maybe Olivia could help us with the interior design.”

“Oh?” My dad continued looking at me. His expression didn’t change, but the tone of his voice told me he was curious why I’d mentioned Olivia.

“Yeah, she’s into interior design—”

“I thought she worked in a boutique?” He was rubbing his forehead now. “Did I get that wrong? Doesn’t she sell clothes, or is the boutique fancy furniture or something?”

“No, she does work in a boutique selling clothes, but it’s her dream to be an interior decorator. I figured, we have this project and she needs the work, so . . .”

“And she’ll be able to do that from New York?”

“I guess so. I mean, designs can be done from anywhere, right?”

“Won’t she need to see the space?”

“I’ve only briefly spoken to her about it, Dad. I was just running it past you before we get too much into it. But I was thinking it could be a possibility.”

“I see.” Dad smiled.

“Why are you smiling?”

“No reason. Can a man not smile?”

“This isn’t because I like Olivia or anything, and it’s not that I want to be with her, so don’t get that into your head. And please don’t say anything to Mom. I was just thinking, since she’s Lucy’s best friend—”

Dad laughed.

“What are you laughing at? I’m just saying.”

“You have an awful lot to say for someone that’s just doing his brother’s fiancée’s best friend a favor.”

“I’m a kind guy. You know that.”

“Yes. You’re very kind to beautiful young women.”

“It’s got nothing to do with the fact that she’s gorgeous—”

“I didn’t say she was gorgeous.” My dad grinned. “But yes, she is. So, you like this lady?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’m focused on the ranch—”

“Son, I put you in charge of the ranch because you are the best man for the job. You’re diligent and you’re hardworking, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have a personal life. You need to also take care of yourself.”

“Right now, the ranch has a cash flow problem. Austin’s getting married. I’m sure he’s going to have kids coming soon. That’s a lot of expenses we have coming up. And, who knows, maybe Sadie and Wyatt will figure it out sooner rather than later, and that’s even more expensive.”

“We’re not poor!” Dad banged his hand down on the desk. “We have money.”

“Dad, we have money in trusts, and we have operational costs for the ranch. You know that we need to increase cash flow. We have a large property. We hire a lot of people. I don’t want to have to fire anyone. We keep a lot of people in their homes, and I want to make sure that we continue to do that while still making a decent profit.”

“You just want to keep your most eligible bachelor in Montana status, don’t you?”

“Not really.” I thought of Arya and her sister. “I’ve become too much of a target for women.”

“I would’ve thought you’d like that.” My dad grinned. “Seeing as you are a ladies’ man.”

“I’m not a ladies’ man. Yes, I’ve dated many beautiful women, and I’ve had fun, but my focus right now is the ranch.”

“And I’m glad to hear it, son, but please don’t forget that no man is an island. You cannot do it by yourself. I wouldn’t have gotten through everything without your mom. You need to take care of yourself, and you need a partner.”

“Please, you’re sounding like Mom. I don’t need two moms in my life.”

My father chuckled. “You know your mother means well. And by all means, see if Olivia’s interested in the project. Get her input. Maybe take her down to the spot where you’re thinking of building the lodges.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about doing that.” I nodded. “I also need to finalize exactly where Austin is building his house for him and Lucy.”

“Okay. And what about yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you want your own space, son. I know you wanted to build your own house.”

I sighed. “Well, we all want our own space.”

“Don’t think about the money, son.”

“How can I not think about the money? It’s important. I don’t want us going into the red for this.”

“You’re a worrier. We have plenty of money.”

I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t getting it. “Yes, we have money in the bank. But by my calculations, if our income from the ranch remains stagnant, then we are going to run low on funds within the next five years.”

“Don’t worry. Everything is going to look up. I promise you.”

“It’s my job to worry. And it’s my job to plan ahead and look at all possible circumstances to ensure that no matter what happens, everyone at the ranch is protected. The family, our extended family, our workers, our friends. Horseshoe Ranch means something. It stands for something in the community.”

“I know.” My dad got up and put his arm around my shoulder. “You’re a good boy. I love you, you know that?”

“Yes.” I narrowed my eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it’s true. Your mom and me, we’re proud of you boys. We taught you right.”

“Yes, you did, Dad.”

“Thank you. Now you go and tell your girl—”

“What girl?”

“Sorry.” He grinned. “You go ask Olivia if she’s interested in helping you with the eco-retreat and maybe get started on that right away.”

“I’m trying to get a loan for it right now.”

He frowned. “What?”

“To pay for the construction. I don’t want—”

“Son, we don’t do loans.”

“Interest rates are so low right now. It would be crazy not to take advantage of them.”

My dad sighed. “Fine. I put you in charge for a reason, I guess. I trust you to do what you think is right.”

“Thank you.” I nodded. “And just so you know, the only reason I’m asking Olivia is so that she can put something on her resume so that when she goes back to New York and starts looking for interior design jobs, she’ll have an actual portfolio to show to people.”

“Well, aren’t you a kind one?” Dad grinned. “So thoughtful of you to look out for her and her future job endeavors in New York.”

“I know,” I growled. I knew he was making fun of me, but I wasn’t going to take it on. I was doing it to help her. I wanted her to be a success in New York and to live her dreams. It had nothing to do with the fact that her lips tasted like sweet strawberries on a summer day, or the fact that her body was soft and supple. I shook my head to stop thinking about it. I was going down a very dangerous path, and I didn’t have time for that. There was far too much going on in my family for me to worry about having any sort of relationship with anyone, even a woman as beautiful and as sexy as Olivia.

Chapter Forty-Three

O livia

“So who’s got cookies for me?” Beau walked into the kitchen and smiled at Eloise.

“I do, I do! I have plenty of cookies for you.” She grinned up at him. “I even have decorated cookies, if you want one.”

Her sweet little voice was so eager that I couldn’t help the loving smile that crossed my face. This poor girl didn’t have a mother or a father, and she was so sweet. A part of me wished that Beau had been her father so that she could be a member of this amazing family. When Arya and Eloise had shown up, my heart had frozen at the thought that Beau could be her father. But seeing this little girl and the way she interacted with the family made me sad that she wouldn’t be sticking around.

Beau walked over and kneeled down so that he was eye level with her.

“Eloise, how many cookies can I have?”

In the far corner of the kitchen, Amelia was watching her son, a loving expression on her face. Then Ranger walked into the room. Amelia looked over at him, and he nodded slightly. She nodded back, but I had no idea what they were nodding about. He walked over to his wife and put his arm around her shoulder and whispered something in her ear. That seemed to make her happy because she smiled. She looked over at me

and gave me a sweet little smile that filled me with happiness. What a warm, happy family.

I walked over to Eloise. “Can I have a cookie too, please?” I asked. Beau looked up at me, an odd expression in his eyes.

“I have something to talk to you about. If you have some time later?” he asked, his voice uncertain.

I wasn’t exactly sure how to feel about his request. I was happy that he wanted to talk to me but nervous that maybe he wanted to let me know officially that he wasn’t interested. Sure, the chemistry between us was off the charts, but maybe he could see that I was starting to like him a little bit more every day. And it was about much more than just our attraction.

“Sure,” I said. “And hey, are we ever going to go riding at all?”

“I know I owe you a lesson.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I mean, if you don’t have anything else to do.”

“I have no plans tomorrow. And if something pops up, I’ll delay it.”

“Oh, no. You don’t have to do that,” I said, flustered. “Business comes first, obviously.”

“I promised you a ride, and I’ll give you one.” He winked at me.

My face warmed. Everyone around us probably assumed he meant horse riding, but I knew he was talking about so much more.

I wasn’t going to let myself go there. This was already getting far too complicated and too emotional for me. I was more invested in this man and his family than I should be.

“I want some cookies too,” Lucy said. “Let’s have cookies for everyone.”

“Now, now,” Amelia interrupted, “everyone can have *one* cookie. I don’t want you all to get full on cookies before

dinner. And I'm making pot roast tonight."

"I love pot roast!" Eloise said excitedly. She ran over to Amelia and looked up at her. "I love pot roast. It's my favorite!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Amelia touched the top of Eloise's head and beamed at her. "I'm very glad to have you here, Eloise."

"Me too!" Eloise replied. "I was sad because I thought we were coming here for my daddy. But Auntie Arya says my daddy doesn't live here. And this is such a nice house. And it's so much bigger than the car."

"Eloise!" Arya looked mortified. "I'm so sorry. We are very, very grateful for all of your generosity. And we really don't want to intrude. We can definitely leave tomorrow."

"I'll hear nothing of it," Amelia said firmly. "You stay here as long as you like, my dear."

"I told you she would say that," Sadie said, grinning. "Amelia's the best."

"Thank you, Sadie." Amelia smiled at her. "Now everyone take a cookie and get out of the kitchen. It looks like I have some cleaning up to do."

"Oh, no, Amelia." I shook my head. "Please, you can't tidy up this mess. I'll do it."

"And I'll help," Arya said.

Amelia smiled. "This is something I live for. And you all don't really know where everything goes. So I'll tidy up, and you all have fun. Maybe play some games? Oh, we do have corn hole. Beau, Austin, why don't you go and get the corn hole out of the barn, and everyone can play in the backyard."

"What's corn hole, Auntie Arya?" Eloise asked.

"It's a game where you throw little bean bags filled with sand and try to get them through a hole on a wooden structure," she said and looked at me. "I hope I got that right."

“Yeah. I haven’t played it many times because corn hole and New York City don’t exactly go together. But that sounds like it to me.”

“Can we play, Auntie Arya?” Eloise tugged on her aunt’s top and gave her the most beguiling look. I had a feeling that Eloise could get whatever she wanted when she gave looks like that.

“Yeah, of course.” Arya looked over at Amelia. “Are you sure you don’t mind tidying up? I feel absolutely awful. The kitchen was so pristine when we got here and now it’s a mess, and oh, I’m a guest in your house.”

“My house is here to be lived in. A house that’s spick-and-span with no mess, well, there’s no family living there,” Amelia said softly. “I have a large family made up of blood and nonblood.” She smiled at the room. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, grab your cookies and go outside. We might have badminton as well.”

Ranger walked up and stood next to Amelia, and then he looked around the room. “Now listen to my wife because she’s the boss of the house.”

“Yes, Dad.” Austin laughed. “Come on, guys, follow me.” He picked up the tray of cookies.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Amelia said.

“What, Mom? We can’t let the cookies go to waste. And trust me, after we play all afternoon, everyone’s still going to have room for pot roast and mashed potatoes.” He smiled at Eloise. “I hope you like mashed potatoes as well because my mom makes the best mashed potatoes in all of Montana.”

“It used to be in all of the world.” Amelia sniffed, but her eyes twinkled.

Austin chuckled. “Of course, Mom, the best in all of the world.”

I stood there in the kitchen, not knowing how I was going to leave and go back to New York City. It was going to be hard. Not just because I was leaving Lucy, but because I was going to be leaving all of the Hamiltons. They were a big,

rowdy bunch, but they loved each other, and I'd never seen a dynamic quite like this before. Maybe that's what families were like that grew up in the country and on farms. It was about family life, not about status and keeping up with random people you'd never even met.

"So maybe we can talk in the backyard," Beau whispered softly in my ear.

I looked into his eyes and frowned slightly. "What do you want to talk about Beau? If it's you wanting me to go into the stables and bend over so you can . . ."

His eyes widened. "If I want you to go into the barns and bend over so I can do what, exactly?"

"You know," I whispered, hoping no one could hear me.

"I wish you would say it."

"I'm not going to say it. That's disgusting."

"But you were thinking it." He laughed. "So it can't be that disgusting."

"I wasn't thinking it. I—"

"Yeah, you were. Otherwise, why would you bring it up?"

"You're too much, Beau Hamilton."

"Well, you haven't had enough of me to say that quite yet." He licked his lips, staring into my eyes as he did so.

"I do think that you are rather full of yourself."

"Maybe," he said. "But in all seriousness, I do want to talk to you. I have a suggestion."

"I'm not going to have a sexual escapade with you in the stables, in the barn, in your bedroom, in my bedroom, or at all," I said. "In case that's what you're going to suggest."

"You think I would ask you if you wanted to have sex with me like it was some sort of business deal? That's not sexy or seductive. If you have to plan for sex, then you're not doing it right." He leaned forward again. "Trust me, Olivia, when we have sex—because we *will* have sex—it will be in the heat of

the moment. It will be because we are so passionate and can't keep our hands off each other. I don't need to make an appointment with you for it. It will just happen. Believe you me. It will just happen."

"Whatever," I said, flustered and sure my face was bright red. I could see Amelia and Ranger to the side of the kitchen, looking at me.

"Everything okay?" Amelia said.

"Yeah. Let's go, Beau."

"Of course," he agreed. "Are we going to the bedroom?"

"No!" I hissed. "What if your parents hear you?"

"What if they do?" He grinned. "Wouldn't that make it even sexier?"

I stared at him, appalled. "Are you fricking joking?"

"I'm teasing you, Olivia," he said softly. "Now let's go play. We'll chat later."

"Fine."

As we walked outside, my mind buzzed. What was his plan? What was his suggestion? And did he really mean it when he said we were going to have sex? I thought he was about to write me off completely. Of course, sex didn't mean we were going to have a relationship, but my body didn't care about that. My body was buzzing and tingling and feeling all sorts of things that I shouldn't be feeling among a whole group of people.

I looked back at Beau, taking in his handsome face, sparkling blue eyes, and rugged stature. All I could think about was when our night of passion was going to happen and what he wanted to talk to me about. I was going to have a very hard time concentrating until we had the chat.

But sometimes anticipation makes it even sweeter.

Chapter Forty-Four

B eau

“Can we talk?”

I slid onto the couch next to Olivia as Lucy got up and left the living room. We were all watching an episode of *Big Sky*, and Austin had hit pause while everyone got refreshments. Austin and Chet had gone to get some more beers, and Lucy was getting cookies and popcorn. Wyatt and Sadie were arguing at the table over a game of chess in the corner, and Arya had gone to check on Eloise, who was already in bed. This was the first opportunity I’d had all night to get Olivia to myself, and I knew I didn’t have a long window of time.

“Sure.”

Olivia’s beautiful brown eyes looked at me curiously. She had a small smile on her face, which I appreciated. Olivia always looked happy to see me, even if she was pissed off at me. I liked the fact that she didn’t act like I was some sort of irritant, which I had found many women did. It annoyed the shit out of me when women acted like bitches to prove a point. I wasn’t the sort of man to play games.

“So I think I told you that we’re planning on building an eco-retreat on the property, right?” I asked her, and she nodded. “It’s to increase revenue, and testing shows us that nature retreats are highly sought after by many families. I want our retreat to be high-class but also fit the setting.”

“It sounds really cool,” she replied. “That’s exciting.”

“It is and it isn’t.” I shrugged. “As a family, we’re quite private, but we need to diversify the business. Our main income is from cattle, and then we have large crops of wheat, potatoes, flax, and garlic. We employ thousands of people within a two-hundred-mile radius. We send kids to college, we have a school on the ranch, we provide scholarships, and we do a lot for the community. I just want to make sure we have the funds for generations to come.”

“I get that.” There was a thoughtful expression on her face. I wondered if she knew that she had the most expressive face. I could always tell what she was thinking and feeling. Maybe I wouldn’t say anything. I didn’t want her to start guarding her emotions around me. It was refreshing to interact with someone that was open and honest.

“You know when you say that, I actually believe it,” I said. “So many people say things they don’t mean or they feign an understanding they don’t have. It drives me crazy. I’m not used to that. In my family, we’re all honest because we all know if we don’t have honesty, we don’t have anything.”

I could feel my blood pressure rising. I was feeling overwhelmed. Not just by Olivia, but by everything. I couldn’t get my parents’ trip out of the back of my mind. Where were they going and for what? What was my dad not telling me?

Chapter Forty-Five

O livia

Beau rubbed his forehead, and for a moment, he looked just like his father. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to rant or anything.” I could see the stress lines on his forehead.

“It sounds like the ranch plays a wonderful role in the community.” I thought for a moment. “And it sounds like you’re not really sure about creating this eco-retreat.”

“You’re right on both accounts.” He sighed. “I don’t know how I feel about a bunch of strangers coming to the land and possibly defacing it, littering the environment, or being a noise nuisance.” He gave me a wry smile. “My family has owned this land for generations, but we consider ourselves caretakers. It’s our responsibility to preserve it for future generations of humans and animals.”

“I understand.” I touched his hand lightly. He looked at me in surprise. “I’m glad you care enough to do the right thing.”

“I’m trying.” He nodded. “So, I wanted to talk to you about the cabins we’re planning on building.”

“Oh?”

“I want them to all have a real cohesive but unique feel, and I’d love your help. I thought maybe tomorrow we could ride—” He paused and then shook his head. “Actually, maybe we’ll drive to the spot I had in mind.”

“When do I get to ride?” I pouted, teasing him.

“Right now, if you want.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me. “You can even do the reverse cowgirl.”

“Beau Hamilton!”

“Am I in trouble?” He sat back and laughed. “In all seriousness, we can ride for fun in the morning before breakfast, and then after breakfast, we can go out to the spot I have in mind.”

“That sounds wonderful.” I wasn’t really sure what to say. “I would definitely love to help, but is it a feasible project for me? Don’t you want someone based in Montana? Someone with experience?”

“Olivia, I have faith in you.”

“But you haven’t even seen any of my designs.” I wrinkled my nose. “Is this because you feel bad?”

“Feel bad about what?”

I blushed. “About what you said.”

“What I said?”

“You know . . . on the phone.”

“Why would I feel bad about the truth?” He shook his head. “I like you, Olivia, I do. I think you’re a beautiful woman, but I’m in no position to get into any sort of relationship right now.”

“But you’re willing to sleep with me?”

“I mean, if you beg.”

“That’s not funny.” I glared at him. It hurt me more than it should have. Obviously, I didn’t know this man well, and he had been upfront and honest from the beginning. He wasn’t looking for a relationship. And it wasn’t like I hadn’t met hundreds of men before him who had been up for a bounce in bed but didn’t want anything more. I hadn’t cared enough to be offended or upset; I’d just sent them on their way.

But Beau was different. He was a good guy, the sort of guy you could depend upon. A guy who was strong, honest, compassionate, caring, sweet, and sexy as hell. He was that one-in-a-million guy. I hadn't known him long, but already, I knew that. I'd just met him at the wrong point in his life—which was just my luck.

I supposed there was a reason why he'd been named the most eligible cowboy, and it was more than just the net worth of his ranch. I wasn't going to allow myself to be sad, though; it wasn't something I could control. We lived in two completely different states anyway.

“Okay, you don't have to beg. I'll still do it.” He winked. “And if you're feeling tired, you don't even have to be on top.”

“Beau, really?”

“What?” He laughed and leaned over and kissed my nose. “Did you know that when you get upset, you wrinkle your nose up and glare?”

“Stop it.”

“And your brown eyes shoot golden daggers at me.”

“You're looking at me too much if you know that.”

“I love looking at you.” His lips brushed mine. “I love doing all sorts of things to you.”

“You're so inappropriate.” I swallowed hard. Why did the room feel like it was closing in on me? Why did I enjoy this flirtatious banter knowing this was going absolutely nowhere?

“But you love it.”

“Olivia loves what?” Sadie said behind us, and I jumped. “Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you. Or eavesdrop.”

“Did you guys finish your game?” I asked her, changing the subject.

“We did, and Wyatt won.” She made a face.

“I always win.” Wyatt looked proud of himself as he stood behind her. “Maybe one day you'll win.”

“Maybe one day I’ll be hanging out with my boyfriend, and I won’t care if I win or lose.” She stuck her tongue out at Wyatt like she was a little kid, and he rolled his eyes.

“There’s more to life than men, Sadie. Try and think about things other than guys with six-packs.”

“Whatever. Jerkface.” She turned around and poked him in the stomach. “Oops, not feeling any abs there.”

“Oh, yeah?” He pulled up his shirt and showed off a perfect six-pack. “Might not feel it, but you can definitely see it.”

“Wyatt, put your shirt down.” Beau sounded exasperated. He jumped up off the couch, his eyes laughing, and hit his brother in the shoulder. “These ladies don’t want to see your scrawny body.”

“My body is anything but scrawny, thank you very much.” Wyatt grinned. “I have a black book of numbers belonging to ladies who would agree.”

“You’re such a pig.” Sadie glared at him and sat down next to me. “How can my best friend be such an egotistical jerk?”

“Because he’s a man.” I laughed and glanced at Beau. “They all have big heads.”

“That we do.” Beau winked at me, and I could feel the heat rising in my entire body. Why did he have the ability to make everything an innuendo? “Wyatt, come on and let’s see what’s going on in the kitchen. I do want to watch the end of this episode sometime tonight.”

Once they both left, Sadie poked me in the side, her blue eyes curious. “What is going on with you and Beau?”

I put on my best blank expression. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play coy with me.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I might be a country girl, but I’m not dumb.”

“I never—”

“I saw Beau kissing your nose.” She raised her eyebrows. “And I saw him talking to you with his lips pressed against yours. I know these Hamilton men are rough, but they’re not stupid. Men don’t kiss your nose or your lips for no reason.” She winked at me. “So, Olivia, I’m asking you again, what’s going on with you and Beau?”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands before looking back up at her. “I can’t believe it’s so obvious.”

“Well, you were sitting in the living room canoodling.”

How was she so observant about me and Beau flirting but so clueless about her relationship with Wyatt? Why was it that people could never figure their own crap out, yet they were always in other people’s business?

“In all honesty, Sadie, I don’t really have much to say. Nothing is going on.”

“So you’re trying to say that you two weren’t flirting and that he just kissed your nose because you had an owie or something?” She gave me a look. “Come on, Olivia. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Okay, obviously there’s a flirtation between us, but it doesn’t mean anything. Men and women flirt all the time. And I guess maybe it’s been a while since he’s had someone to flirt with.”

I gave Sadie just enough information to make her happy, hopefully. And the question I asked—well, the question I wanted an answer to—I’d phrased in such a way that I wasn’t being deliberately nosy. But if she picked up on the hint, she’d be able to answer it.

Sadie smiled. “Are you asking if he’s had a girlfriend recently?”

“No.” I blinked innocently. “Why would I ask that?”

“That’s exactly what I was going to say. If you’re not interested in him, why would you want to know if he’s had a girlfriend recently? But no, not really. At least not one as nice as you.”

“Why are you so sweet?”

“I don’t know, maybe because I’m a Montana girl. I guess that’s not necessarily true; not all of us Montana girls are sweet, trust me. You’ll meet a few of them that aren’t very nice if you stay around long.”

“Oh?” I asked her curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Well, obviously Beau is handsome, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And I’m sure you’ve heard about the magazine feature, where he was named the most eligible cowboy in all of Montana.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about it several times now.”

“Let’s just say that there’s a long line of women who want to take Beau off the market.” She made a face. “I made the mistake of going to 12-Point Buck Bar with the brothers recently, and it was just Beau and me sitting at the table. This one bitch—excuse my language.” Her cheeks turned a little pink.

I laughed. “It’s fine. I say bitch all the time.”

“Okay then. Well, this one beyotch came up to the table and said to Beau, ‘Hey, honey, aren’t you the most eligible cowboy in Montana? You could do a lot better than her.’ Well, Beau’s an amazing guy so he said, ‘I don’t think anyone’s better than her,’ in regards to me.” Sadie beamed. “But who did she think she was? Some of these women really think they’re all that just because—you know what? I don’t want to turn you off to Montana, so I’m going to keep my mouth shut.”

“Don’t worry about that. I think Montana’s great.”

“Yeah, you think it’s great because you’ve been here a couple of days and you’re visiting your friend, but do you think it’s great enough to live here?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“I mean, if you and Beau—”

“Sadie, really?”

“What? It’s a question I have to ask.”

“No, you really don’t.”

“I’m sure Lucy was thinking the same thing when she got here, but I could tell that she and Austin had sparks right away, just like I can tell that you and Beau have sparks.”

Just like I can tell that you and Wyatt have sparks, I thought to myself, but I didn’t say it out loud. I had a feeling Sadie wouldn’t like to hear that. “I’ll be a hundred percent honest with you. Beau and I have kissed.”

“No kidding.” She rolled her eyes. “That’s pretty obvious.”

“Oh, is it?”

“Yes,” she said. “Like I said—”

“You weren’t born yesterday,” I finished for her, and she giggled.

“I like you, Olivia. I do hope that you stay.”

“That’s not even an option.” I shook my head, though a part of me did kind of want to stay. “But that’s all it was. We’re two consenting adults who kissed.”

“Did you do anything else?” Her wide eyes were eager.

“If you mean did we sleep together, that’s a personal question, Sadie.” I kind of laughed. “But because I like you, I’ll answer it, and the answer is no. No, we did not sleep together.”

“Oh.” she pouted. “That sucks.”

“Why does that suck? It would suck if we *had* slept together and he didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“But he obviously *does* want a lot to do with you. As soon as Lucy got up, he came and sat next to you, and he was flirting with you and trying to kiss you—”

“He wasn’t trying to kiss me.”

“Well, he was trying to do something.” She laughed and then sighed. “Aw, man, I wish a guy would look at me the way

that Austin looks at Lucy. You can tell they were made for each other. Oh, I know I keep going on about it, but I just really want to find love. Have you ever been in love, Olivia?”

“Have I ever been in love? I mean, I’ve *thought* I was in love, but it wasn’t true love. I haven’t found my true love yet. And honestly, I know what you mean. When I look at Austin and Lucy, I’m happy for them, but also a little jealous that I haven’t found my person yet.”

Sadie nodded. “We will one day, though.”

“I sure hope so.”

“Do you want to go to the bar tonight?” She looked at the clock. “Okay, it’s too late tonight, but maybe tomorrow night?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m going out on the ranch with Beau during the day, but maybe we could go after dinner.”

“That would be great.” She nodded. “Maybe Lucy will come—if Austin lets her.”

“Oh, Lucy’s independent. She won’t not come just because of Austin, and I’m sure Austin trusts her. What’s she going to do, hook up with someone at the bar?” I rolled my eyes. “Let’s ask her when she comes back.”

“Oh, sweet. And maybe Arya will come as well, though she might be too nervous about leaving Eloise.”

“No, I think that would be really fun for her, and then Amelia could babysit. I’m sure she’d love that. And the boys can help her. With all of these Hamilton boys, one of them has to know how to look after a kid, right?”

Sadie snorted. “You’d think. But no, none of them know how to look after kids.”

“Who are you talking about?” Wyatt said as he appeared back in the room.

“You and your brothers. Where are they, by the way?” Sadie jumped up and grabbed the beer out of his hand.

“Hey, that was mine!” he objected.

“Well, where’s mine? In the kitchen where you left it? You’re not a gentleman at all.”

“What? I don’t have to be a gentleman with you. You’re my best friend.”

“So? I’m still a lady.”

“You are?” He looked her up and down. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“You’re such a jerkface, Wyatt.” She hit him in the shoulder and he chuckled. I was about to say something, but then Beau, Austin, Lucy, and Araya entered the room.

Lucy was carrying a tray of steaming mugs. “Okay, we’re back. Sorry about that. We wanted to pop some fresh popcorn, and then Arya had the smart idea of making hot toddies.”

“Ooh,” I said. “That sounds good. Hey, Arya and Lucy, Sadie had an idea.”

“Oh?” Lucy said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “We were thinking perhaps we could go to the bar tomorrow. Just us girls.”

“Yeah,” Sadie chirped up. “We can go down to 12-Buck Point Bar. I think Chip’s working tomorrow, so we’ll get half-priced drinks.”

“Oh, I remember Chip,” Lucy said with a little giggle. “He’s the bartender I met on my first day in town. Same day I met Austin. You’ll really like him, Olivia.” She looked at me. “He’s really nice and kind of cute.”

“Oh, yeah?” I wondered why she was bringing up a bartender when she already knew I had a crush on Beau. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Beau frowning, as was Austin, and I wondered if this was her ploy to try to make him jealous.

“I guess I can make it tomorrow,” Beau said.

“Who invited you?” Sadie looked at him. “It’s a girls’ night.”

“I don’t know about that.” Austin looked at Lucy. “I don’t ___”

“It’s a *girls’* night, Austin.” She gave him a little stare. “I think it’ll be a lot of fun. Arya, you in?”

“Well, I don’t know. I have Eloise,” she said softly. I could tell she was tempted, though.

“I’m sure my mom can look after her,” Austin said with a shrug. “If you want to go.”

“I do,” she said, “but I don’t want to ask your mom that. She’s already done so much.”

“Austin, you can look after her. And Beau and Wyatt,” Sadie put in.

Wyatt made a face. “Oh, no. I’m no good with kids.”

“You can say that again,” Sadie said with a laugh.

“What does that mean, Sadie?”

“You know what it means.”

“No, I don’t.

“Guys, guys,” Lucy interrupted them as she walked and sat next to me on the couch and handed me a drink. “Come on, let’s finish watching this episode of *Big Sky*. I want to know what happens. How can they not have found the serial killer? The state’s not that big.”

“You’d be surprised.” Austin gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“I guess I would be.” She grinned.

Beau turned the lights off in the room, and we all gathered on the couches and got comfortable again. Once everyone was seated, he pressed the remote and started up the episode again.

I sipped on my toddy, feeling happy and content. I’d never had an experience like this before—being in a room with so many people, just happy to be together. We weren’t having a party. It wasn’t a special occasion. It was just living.

I liked it, and I was excited for the next day and spending it with Beau Hamilton.

Chapter Forty-Six

B eau

“Oh my gosh. That was so scary,” Arya said as the episode ended. She was curled up on the couch, and she looked around the room with a panicked expression. “I don’t know how I’m going to be able to sleep tonight. Thank God I have Eloise in the bed next to me. That was so creepy!”

“I know,” Olivia said from her position on the couch. “I don’t know how I’m going to stay in Montana, knowing there are serial killers on the run.”

“You do know that this is a TV show,” I said dryly and looked at the ladies. “Talk about drama queens.”

“Beau, fact is actually stranger than fiction,” Lucy insisted. “So I think they have reason to be scared. I’m kind of scared as well. How creepy is this show? I love it, but it’s creepy.”

“Don’t worry, darling.” My brother Austin kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll keep you warm tonight.”

“Oh, yeah, you going to protect me?”

“With my life,” he said.

The women all sighed while I groaned. “Oh my gosh, guys, take it to the bedroom. Enough.” What had happened to my brother? He was the second oldest and most considered him even tougher than me, but he’d become a wuss in love. I couldn’t believe it.

“And with that, I think we’re going to head off to bed.” Austin jumped up and grabbed Lucy’s hand. “Night, guys. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night.” Lucy smiled at everyone. “And, Olivia, I heard you’re going riding with Beau tomorrow morning before breakfast?”

“Yeah. I’m nervous, but it should be fun.” Olivia looked over at me. “It *will* be fun, right, Beau?”

“I can’t make any promises,” I said, “but I’ll give you a good horse. We’ll get a good canter in.”

“Do not let her canter right away!” Lucy shook her head. “She’s a newbie. And as one who has had to canter far too quickly, I think we should break her into it gently. Just a trot tomorrow, please, Beau.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you for sticking up for me, Lucy.” Olivia winked.

“That’s what best friends are for.” Lucy gave her a quick hug. “I’ll see you at breakfast, then?”

“Yeah, okay. Night,” Olivia said.

No sooner than Austin and Lucy left the room, Arya stood up, yawning. “I guess it’s time for me to head to bed.”

“Would you like me to escort you?” Chet said, smiling at her in a way I’d never seen him smile at a woman before.

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that.” Arya blushed and looked down.

“No, it’s fine. I’m on my way out anyway, so I’ll make sure no bogeyman gets you,” Chet said with a laugh as he took her arm and guided her out of the room.

It was just myself, Olivia, Sadie, and Wyatt now. Sadie and Wyatt were sitting on the floor with their backs against one of the chairs, talking about the show we’d just watched.

“So, guys, I think I’m going to get ready for bed. Olivia, can I speak to you about tomorrow morning? Maybe I can escort you to your room as well?”

“Um, sure,” she said with a nod. “Night, guys.” I looked over at Wyatt and Sadie. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“We won’t,” Sadie said and looked at her watch. “Oh, man, I should get home. My parents are going to be wondering why I’m out so late again.”

“You can just sleep over here,” Wyatt said with a shrug. “There’s no point in going home.”

“I guess,” Sadie said, “but your mom has so many people here already.”

“So?”

“I don’t want to make another dirty bed for her. Like, how many sheets is she going to have to change?”

“Sleep with me,” Wyatt said. “We’ve done it our whole lives; what’s one more night? Just don’t snore, okay?”

“I don’t snore. You’re the one that snores.”

He made a loud snoring noise, and the rest of us laughed.

“Oh, Wyatt, why do you tease Sadie like that?” Olivia said with a small smile.

“Because I can,” he said. “She’s my best friend. We’ve been best friends for years.”

“We get it, Wyatt,” I said, though he clearly didn’t. “Well, I’ll see you in the morning, Sadie.”

“Okay. Night, Beau. Night, Olivia.”

Olivia and I headed down the corridor. As we got to her room, she looked at me. “Well, you haven’t said anything about the horse ride for tomorrow, so . . .”

“So what?” I said, distracted as my gaze caught on her full lips.

“So I’m guessing there was nothing you wanted to discuss about it?”

“Not really.”

“What time should I be up to meet you in the morning?”

“Four o’clock.”

“Four o’clock? No way! That’s far too early.”

“I’m joking. How about seven?”

“Okay, I can do that.” She looked relieved. “Well, good night, Beau.”

“Good night?” I stared at her as if she were crazy. “But it’s not the end of the night for us.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?” she said.

“Exactly what I said.” I grabbed her hand. “Come.”

“Come where?” she asked me suspiciously. “We’re not going down to the river again, are we?”

“No.”

“Beau Hamilton, I am not going to have sex with you tonight.”

“I’m not asking you to. Is that the only thing that’s on your mind? When you look at me, is that all you think about?”

“What are you talking about?”

“When you look at me, do you just see my hands and face and my gorgeous, manly body?”

“Don’t you mean when I look at you, do I not see your scarecrow body and your—”

I started laughing before she could even finish the sentence.

“You forget that I am a cowboy and a cattleman, and I work morning, noon, and night on a farm. I’m ripped, and I know it. So you can pretend you don’t like my body, but”—I shrugged—“we both know you do.”

“Excuse me?” She was blushing now.

“You forget that I had my fingers inside you yesterday.”

“Beau!”

“And I felt how wet you were for me.” I smiled. “And when someone’s that wet, it usually means they’re turned on.”

So my scarecrow body turned you on, didn't it, Olivia?"

"I cannot believe you just said that!"

"Which part? Me being inside you yesterday?"

"Shh! You're talking too loud."

"Then let's go into your room."

"But I thought you wanted to take me somewhere?"

"I think the only place I want to be right now is in your room."

"We're not—"

"I didn't say I wanted to sleep with you tonight. Maybe I just want to talk."

"Yeah, sure. You want to talk."

"Don't you think I like talking to you? Or is it that you don't like talking to me?"

"I do," she admitted. "But I don't know if we're just playing with fire here. I'm here for Lucy, and I'm going home soon. And even if I wasn't going home soon, you aren't looking for a relationship."

"We're two consenting adults, Olivia. We can flirt. We can kiss. We can even sleep together if we want to. As long as we both know what's up, as long as neither one of us lies to the other, there's nothing wrong with it."

"I guess so."

"Or are you trying to tell me that you're one of those women that can't have sex without being in a relationship? Because if that's what you're trying to tell me, I'll back off. It'll be hard not to kiss you, but if you're one of those women that can't be kissed without—"

"Oh, shut up, Beau," she said. She leaned into me and pressed her lips to mine. I kissed her back, loving the feel of her body against me.

"Let's go into your room, Olivia," I said softly. "We won't do anything you don't want to." I opened the door to her room.

We both slipped in, and I closed it behind us.

“So,” she murmured. “What do we do now? Can you keep your hands off me?”

“Very funny.”

She touched her lips. “I can’t believe I just did that.”

“What? Kiss me?”

She nodded.

“Do you regret it?”

“No, I don’t regret it, but I’m not the sort of woman that just goes around kissing men to shut them up. Even when they deserve it.”

“You’re funny, Olivia. You know that?”

“I try my best.” She smiled flirtatiously.

“I know you don’t think I can just talk, but I haven’t had someone to do that with in a long time. I haven’t had someone to get to know.” I paused. “Actually, that’s not true. I’ve had many someones to get to know, but I haven’t really wanted to.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, I’m a man. I enjoy sex and I enjoy physical attraction. Of course, there have been women, but there hasn’t been any woman in a while that I’ve cared enough to just lie in bed with and talk to. And I’m saying that’s what I’d like to do now.”

“So you’re *not* hoping that this will turn into sex?”

“Well, I’m not *planning* on it turning into sex. If it does, I will say yes, definitely. But if it doesn’t, I won’t be disappointed.”

“Like you weren’t disappointed this morning?”

“Really, do you think that? Oh, because I left? I didn’t leave the bedroom because we weren’t going to have sex. I left because I had a meeting and—Olivia, you really don’t think that badly of me, do you?”

“I just don’t know what to think. You’re all over me in physical ways, but every other minute, you’re telling me you’re not looking for a relationship and you don’t want to complicate your life and this, that, and the other. And, well, it’s confusing.”

“I’m just trying to be transparent and honest with you. I think you’re fucking hot. You’re maybe the sexiest woman I’ve seen ever. I know from the look on your face that you don’t believe that, but it’s true. I’m attracted to you, and yes, I want to touch you and hold you and do all sorts of unmentionable things to you. But this isn’t a good time in my life right now to get into anything deeper. I understand if you don’t want to become more intimate with me knowing that.”

“And we’re about to have a working relationship,” she said softly. “How professional would that be?”

“I don’t care about being professional,” I said. “I’ll be as unprofessional as I can if it means I just get to spend more time with you and—”

“Do me?” She ended my sentence.

“It’s about a lot more than doing you, Olivia.”

“Is it? You’re not looking for a relationship. So what more is it about?”

She had me there. I didn’t know how to answer her because it was true. If I wasn’t looking for a relationship and this wasn’t going to be anything long term, then really, what was it about it?

But it wasn’t just about the sex. I was being honest. I just liked spending time with her. I liked seeing her smile. I liked the way I felt when I looked into her eyes and saw that she was giving me all of her attention. There was something about being with her that just felt comfortable. I’d never felt that with a woman before, and I didn’t really know how to explain it, but I had too much on my mind to think about it too deeply.

And this was exactly the reason why I didn’t want a relationship.

“If this is too much, then I can leave.” I turned toward the door. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked to stay.”

“No!” She jumped up and walked over to me and pressed her hand against my chest. “I want you to stay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Plus, I have some ideas.”

“Oh? Like what sort of ideas?”

“What do you think I mean?”

“Are you thinking like sixty-nine? We both get off, but it’s not actual sex?”

“No, Beau! That’s not what I’m thinking.” She rolled her eyes at me. “You really do have a one-track mind.”

“I’m joking.” I laughed. “Well, kind of. I’d be down for sixty-nine.”

“Beau!”

“Okay. No sixty-nine.”

“I had some ideas about the eco-retreat and the different cabins.”

“Oh, really? Already?”

“Yeah. I was thinking we could do different themes in different cabins based upon the different animals and different crops that you grow here on the ranch.”

“Oh, interesting. That could work. I mean, for the more . . .” I stopped as I stared at her. “Sorry, I completely lost all train of thought.”

“Oh no. Are you okay?” She pressed her hand against my forehead.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I was just so blinded by your beauty that it took all thought out of my brain.”

“Really?”

“I know you think it’s a line, but”—I leaned down and gave her a soft, sweet kiss, then pulled away—“I like you,

Olivia. I really like you. And perhaps if this was a different time in my life, things would be, well, different.”

“Yeah, I get it.” She sounded almost sad, and I hated to see the wistful expression on her face. “Come on,” she said, “let’s lie on the bed and talk.”

“Oh? So I don’t have to go?”

“No, you don’t have to go. Let’s just get to know each other and talk. It’ll be nice. It’s been a long time since I’ve met someone that I want to get to know better as well.”

We both climbed onto the bed and lay back, our shoulders touching as we stared at the ceiling. I shifted so that my thigh was pressed against hers and took her hand. She let me hold it, and I squeezed it as we lay there in companionable silence.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Let’s play twenty questions.”

“Twenty questions? What are we, in high school?”

“It’s not just for high schoolers. It’s a way for us to get to know each other better.”

“Does it really matter? If we’re not really looking for anything anyway?”

“I want to get to know you, Olivia, each and every part of you. So yeah, it matters.”

“Okay,” she said. “Who goes first?”

“You can go first.”

“Okay, let me think. Hmm. Give me a couple of minutes. Okay?”

“That’s okay. I’m thinking as well.” I could feel her heart beating through her hand, and I could smell her scent as we lay there. I wanted so badly to lean over and seduce her. I knew that if I slipped my fingers into her panties and sucked on her lips and then her nipples, it was a good possibility she would want to make love. But I knew that her mind wasn’t ready yet, even if her body was willing. And that was important to me. If we were to make love, I wanted her to come to me one hundred percent with no hesitation. I wanted her to be in—

completely in. And until that moment, I would let it go, because no matter how badly I wanted her, I wanted her to know I valued and respected her desires even more.

Chapter Forty-Seven

O livia

I could hear Beau breathing next to me as we lay there. His hand held mine tightly. It felt warm. And even though it wasn't the most comfortable of positions, I liked it. My room was dark, but I didn't want to turn on the light. It was almost as if we were outside, without having to worry about the elements.

“So, my first question, Beau.”

“Yes, Olivia?” His husky voice made me want to kiss him all over again.

“When you heard about Arya, was there a moment that you thought she was your ex and that Eloise was your daughter?” I asked. I wanted to know more about his past relationships, but I didn't want to be too invasive.

“When I heard about Eloise being here and that she was supposedly my daughter, I was concerned,” he said thoughtfully. “I didn't think she was mine because I've never been one to skip protection when I make love. In fact, I'm always very diligent about it. Obviously, sometimes protection doesn't work; it's not failproof. But when I thought of the women I've dated in the past, I couldn't think of one person who could have had a baby by me. Not that there have been millions of women.”

“So you kind of knew it wasn’t yours?”

“I did. But there was still that wonder in my head. Maybe. Why?” He turned his face to look at me. “Did you think she was mine?”

“I did,” I said, turning to look at him too. “There was this pretty young woman coming with this gorgeous little kid. I totally thought she was yours.”

“Were you jealous?”

“I don’t know. It was a weird feeling to know that the man I’d just been making out with had a baby show up on the doorstep.”

“Eloise isn’t quite a baby, Olivia.”

“That’s true; she’s not a baby. But you know, had a kid showing up. It was weird, and fine, I’ll admit it, I was a little jealous.”

“I can see that.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I can just see that. Okay, my turn,” he said. “Do you want to have kids one day?”

“What?” I blinked. “That’s a weird question.”

“Why? We were just talking about them.”

“I thought we were going to ask random questions, not personal questions.”

“Who plays twenty questions to ask random questions?”

“I guess.” I decided to be completely honest. “Yeah, I’d love to have kids, but I don’t know if I can. I have PCOS, and people with my condition find it a lot harder to have kids sometimes. But if I can, I’d like to have as many as possible.”

“You want a large family, huh?”

“I do. What was it like growing up in a large family? Would you recommend it, or do you think it was too many kids?”

“I absolutely loved it,” he said. “My brothers are my best friends, my parents are amazing, and we grew up on this huge ranch. I probably had one of the best childhoods anyone could have. My parents were lucky, though. They could afford seven children, and we had all this space and beauty and nature.”

“So there was nothing about it that you didn’t like?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I missed having my own space and having more time with my parents. Don’t get me wrong, they loved us and they showed us as much attention as they could. But with seven boys, there’s only so much individual attention to go around, you know? I know that they tried their hardest, but sure, there were times I wished I’d had them to myself.”

“Oh, you mean like when you had to take over the ranch and take care of everyone?”

He nodded slightly. “Being the eldest comes with a lot of responsibility, and it’s a responsibility I don’t take lightly. I’ve been blessed, and I want my brothers and their families to be happy. I have a lot of people I have to think about.”

“Above yourself, huh?”

“Funny you should say that. My dad made a comment quite similar to that this afternoon.”

“Oh?” I wondered if that’s what they’d been talking about when they went to chat in the study.

“Well, not exactly those words, but something similar. He asked me if I wanted to have a family someday and if I wanted to settle down. Told me I should focus on being more well rounded, I guess. But”—his voice lowered—“there’s just not enough time to dedicate to everything. I have so much on my plate right now. I’m trying to manage this ranch. I need to start up the eco-retreats. I need to oversee the building of different houses. The list goes on and on and on. I have to find other ways to diversify.”

“Are you that worried about money for everyone?” I asked, squeezing his hand. I knew what it was like to worry about money, the anxiety that came from it. And I only had

myself to think about; I could only imagine what it would feel like to be responsible for so many people.

“We have healthy bank accounts. And of course, the land is worth millions, if not billions, but we would never sell. I would never allow anyone in the family to sell. You know, it’s just been a bad couple of years for crops, what with the weather. And screw those people who don’t believe in climate change.” He made a face. “Idiots. They only have to look at how our crops have been affected to become believers.” He sighed. “Sorry, I’ll try not to go off on any tangents.”

“Well, I promise you that I believe the world is round,” I assured him with a smile.

“Oh, you’re not part of the Flat Earth Society? Darn it.”

I laughed. “I’m not. You’re a really strong and wonderful man, Beau Hamilton.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just because you are. And I respect what you’re doing for your family, even if you are making yourself into a martyr.”

“I’m not making myself into a martyr. I’m just doing what’s right. And one thing I’ve learned from my time on this earth is that when you do something, you have to do it well, and you have to do it to the best of your ability. And when you’re doing one thing to the best of your ability, it’s very, very hard to give the same amount of attention and time to anything else. And, well, right now my priority is the ranch.” His eyes looked sad. “It disappoints me; I can’t say that it doesn’t. I wish that you lived here in Montana. I wish I could spend more time with you, get to know you. I wish we could date and just see what happens.”

“But we can’t.” My heart cracked a little but I smiled, not wanting him to know how sad that made me.

“Okay, your turn for a question. A fun one this time.”

“Um, let me think.” A few seconds passed before I continued. “Who’s your favorite brother?”

“Oh, no. I’m not going to answer that question.” He shook his head. “That will get me into trouble.”

“So you *do* have a favorite brother?”

“It changes. But I guess Austin, if you have to know, is probably my closest brother, just because we’re the two oldest and a lot of responsibility has fallen on our shoulders.”

“Okay. I have another question for you, and you have to be honest.”

“What is it?”

“Do you like Lucy? And were you sad when Austin chose to marry her? Did you wish that you could have her?”

“That’s far too many questions,” he said. “But I’ll answer them. One, I think Lucy is amazing. I really and truly do. Two, I never wanted her. Not to be harsh, because she’s beautiful and she’s wonderful, but she and Austin had a connection from the beginning, and their personalities just match, you know? She’s not the one that caught my eye.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really,” he said as he moved closer to me. “Now, if it had been you that showed up, Austin and I might have come to blows.”

I laughed, feeling happy at his words.

He grinned. “There’s no way I would have let my brother have you.”

“Wouldn’t I have had a say in that?”

“You could have had a say, but all it would take is one kiss and there would’ve been no one else for you.”

I arched my eyebrows. “I don’t know about that. Chet’s mighty good-looking.”

“Keep your eyes off Chet,” he growled. “Trust me. If you think I’m a player, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Well, I didn’t think you were a player, but I guess you’re telling me you are.”

“I’m really not. But Chet,? Oh boy. He’s the brother that had all the girls, and I mean *all* the girls. He even dated one of my girlfriends.”

“What? No way. He did?”

“Yeah.” He shook his head. “He’s a dog, like literally a dog. But I guess there’s always got to be one in every family.”

“Uh-oh. He looked like he was flirting with Arya. I hope that—”

“Oh, he wouldn’t do anything with her. Our mom would absolutely kill him. He doesn’t mess with sweet, innocent women, especially not ones that are taking care of kids.”

“Okay. Well, that’s good because I would hate to see her hurt. It looks like she’s got a lot going on in her life.” I bit my lower lip. “Actually, I’ve been thinking about that. I’m worried about her. What is she going to do next? She and Eloise can’t live in a car. They—”

“Don’t worry. You’re a sweetheart to worry, but I’ve got a plan.”

“Oh?”

“I figured I’ll help her get a job and set her up in an apartment or something.”

“Oh my gosh, Beau. You don’t have to do that. You don’t even know them.”

“I don’t, but she seems amazing. And little Eloise, well, we can’t just let her sleep in a car. Anything could happen to them.”

“So you’re going to take care of them?”

“I’m going to get them back on their feet. And once she gets a job, she can take over the rent.”

“I see why you need to make so much money.” I smiled at him. “You help so many people.”

“I try my best. There’s a saying that goes ‘To those that a lot has been given, they should also give.’”

“I don’t quite think that’s the exact saying.” I laughed.
“But I know what you mean.”

“So, Olivia?”

“Yes, Beau?”

“What’s it like in New York, living there?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you’re in bed at night, can you look out your window and see the stars?”

“No,” I said softly. “When I look out my window, I see another window.”

“What?” he said.

“Yeah. I see the window of the people in the apartment complex right next to mine. Very glamorous.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“You’re just being a snob because you’ve got this big, beautiful ranch and the country and you’re in nature. New York’s not so bad, but it’s definitely not scenic unless you like buildings.”

“I don’t like buildings so much,” he said. “Give me nature anytime. The blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the smell of the roses and sunflowers, and the beauty of the mountain range in the distance. I can ride my horse for hours and hours and still not meet that mountain range.”

“You make it sound so romantic.”

“I guess I do,” he said.

“You make me want to stay longer.”

“You can stay for as long as you want, Olivia.”

“I can’t, though. Amelia will need her house back eventually, and I have to work. I need to pay my bills.”

“I’ll pay you for your role as the interior designer for the cabins.”

“You can’t pay me. I don’t even have experience. You’re the one helping me get something on my resume.”

“Of course I’m going to pay you. I wouldn’t expect you to do it for free. Plus, I am excited to see your designs.”

“You’re far too good of man. You know that, right?”

“I don’t know that anyone’s ever said that to me.” He shook his head, and I felt my heart melting.

He was the best man I’d ever met in my life. A true gentleman. I leaned closer and kissed him, stroking his cheek and tangling my fingers in my hair.

“Olivia, I promised you that I won’t let anything happen tonight.” His voice was husky.

I pressed my fingers against his lips in response. I had been with men that hadn’t even been half as good as this man. I needed him. I wanted him. And to hell with the complexities of the situation. I was going to go with the moment. I tugged the hem of his T-shirt up, and he shifted to let me pull it off him.

“Olivia,” he said, his hands staying at the side of his body. “What are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“Are you sure this is something you want?”

“Yes.” I pulled my own top off so that I was lying there in just my bra and jeans.

He made a noise of approval as he pressed his lips on my collarbone. I felt his hands on my stomach, running up the side of my body, then around my back to my bra, which he unclasped before pulling the straps off my arms. Then he bent his beautiful head to take one of my nipples into his mouth and sucked.

I closed my eyes with a moan of longing as I ran my fingers down his back.

“You’re fucking gorgeous.” Beau shifted over to the side and kissed down between the valley of my breasts, his fingers

playing with my nipples. I quickly unzipped my jeans and pulled them off.

Beau took in the sight of me in nothing but my panties, a wicked glint in his eyes. “So we’re really going to do the dang thing, huh?”

“Keep talking like that and I might change my mind,” I told him.

He pulled off his own pants. I could see the outline of his cock through the material of his briefs. He was hard already. I reached up to stroke his cock, slipping my fingers inside his briefs. “Seems like you’re ready for me already,” I whispered.

“Always,” he said. “Whenever you want it, I’m ready,” he growled.

I giggled as he bent back down, took my panties in his teeth, and pulled them down and off my legs. Then I gasped as he licked up the inside of my leg all the way along my calf toward my thighs. His hands pushed my legs apart, but he stopped right before he touched my pussy. My entire body was shaking in sweet anticipation. I wanted this man, and I didn’t care about anything else.

And then he dove in. His tongue flicked and teased me, and I gripped the sheets. He seemed to enjoy the small moans I made because he grunted as he licked me. I cried out as I felt his tongue entering me. My eyes flickered open, and I saw that he was staring up at my face as he ate me. The intensity of his gaze made the experience even more powerful. I came, faster and harder than a downhill rollercoaster.

He gave me a self-satisfied smile as he kissed up my body and positioned himself between my legs, gyrating on top of me as he kissed me. I felt like every nerve ending in my body was about to explode.

I ran my fingers down his back, digging my fingernails into his skin as his right hand moved down the side of my body and teased me. I shivered beneath him and groaned as he jumped off the bed.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart.” He pulled his briefs down and grabbed his jeans. He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a wad of condom packets. He looked at me like a kid in a candy store.

I laughed as he jumped eagerly back on the bed. “Did you have this planned?”

“No, but I always like to be prepared.”

“So you do this often?” I raised a teasing eyebrow.

He laughed. “Oh yes, Olivia, I get laid every night. Didn’t you know?”

“Very funny.”

I couldn’t keep my eyes off his cock. I wrapped my fingers around him, and he stiffened even more in my hand. I giggled as he growled and ran his fingers across my nipples.

“You keep this up, and I’ll blow before I’m even inside you,” he whispered into my ear as his fingers made their way between my legs. I writhed on the bed as he lightly flicked my most tender of spots. He grinned and moved on top of me. Now, the tip of his cock was the one teasing me, and I spread my legs, desperate for him to fill me.

When he leaned down and kissed me, I wrapped my legs around him. His mouth fell to my neck, kissing and sucking his way down to my collarbone. I arched my back in ecstasy, crying out in pleasure when I felt his cock thrusting inside me.

He moved slowly at first, increasing his pace only gradually, teasing me and torturing me with each thrust of his cock. Then he put his fingers to work, pinching and stroking my nipples.

I hadn’t realized it was possible to feel so much pleasure at one time.

He pulled out of me suddenly, and I looked up at him in surprise. He grabbed my legs and put them over his shoulders, then reached down to rub my clit. I shuddered with pleasure, and he thrust into me again.

“Don’t stop!” I cried out, gripping the sheets. I was so close to coming, and I couldn’t believe how deep he was getting. Each thrust was perfectly angled to hit my g-spot, and I was almost delirious with pleasure.

“Say my name,” Beau growled as sweat built up on his forehead.

“Beau,” I whispered. “Oh, fuck, Beau. Yes, yes, yes!” I screamed as he shifted so that his cock was moving at a different angle. His fingers rubbed my clit furiously at the same time, and I felt myself coming harder than I ever had in my life.

He grinned down at me as he slammed into me even harder and then he stilled, his body shaking as he came. He collapsed on top of me, his cock still inside me, and kissed me tenderly.

Panting, we lay wrapped in each other arms for several minutes, catching our breath. Eventually, Beau rolled to the side and pulled the condom off. He got up long enough to drop it into the little wastebasket near the door before heading back to the bed and kissing me on the lips.

“So next question.”

“Yes?” I giggled as I stroked the side of his face.

“Was that the best sex you’ve ever had, or was that the best sex you’ve ever had?”

Chapter Forty-Eight

B eau

“Come on, Olivia.” I shook her gently. “Let’s go.”

“It’s so early.” She yawned. She looked at me with a shy expression, and I wondered if she was embarrassed about what we’d done the night before.

“We can always stay in bed if you want.” My fingers trailed along her skin toward her nipples.

“Beau, no, we can’t. You shouldn’t have even slept here last night.”

“Why not?” I chuckled, staring at her beautiful face.

“Because what if someone went to check on you in your room and you weren’t there?”

“Then they’ll think I was somewhere else.”

“Yeah, but what if they then came to my room to check on me and—”

“No one’s going to come to your room to see if I’m here.” I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it.” I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and then made my way to her mouth. She kissed me back sweetly and ran her fingers through my hair. I laughed as I pulled back and stared at her messy hair around her face. “You’ve got five minutes to get ready.”

“What? That’s not enough time to shower and—”

“You don’t need to shower. Plus, if we don’t leave now, we won’t have enough time.”

“Have enough time for what?” She pouted. “It’s dark outside, and I can’t even see anything.”

“That’s the point,” I said. “I want you to see the sunrise.”

“I’ve seen plenty of sunrises,” she grumbled.

“Not like this, you haven’t. Have you ever seen a Montana sunrise?”

“No, but I don’t really need to see one. I think the sun’s the same everywhere in the world. They all look the same.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know.” She blinked sleepily. “Can I just get ten more minutes of sleep?”

“No, Olivia. If you sleep for ten more minutes, it’s going to take me another ten minutes to wake you up again, and then we’re going to have to repeat this entire conversation, and we’ll miss it.”

“No, we won’t. I promise I’ll get out of bed as soon as you wake me up again.” She grinned and closed her eyes.

“I don’t think so.” I squeezed her nipple and she yelped.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“I thought that would wake you up.”

“I bet if you wanted to have a quickie, you’d delay the sunrise ride,” she said, smiling seductively.

“No.” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t.” I jumped out of bed and gazed down at her. Her eyes widened as she took in my cock. My morning wood was proud and hard, and even though I did want to fuck her again, I wanted her to know that I could wait. I could be patient. It was killing me inside, but I could.

“It looks like someone’s happy to see me.” She grinned.

“Oh, yeah. He’s always happy to see you. Come on.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the bed. She tried to pull back. “What? Come on, Olivia. Get out of bed.”

“I will in just a second,” she said. Her cheeks turned pink in the lamplight. “Turn around.”

“What do you mean, turn around?”

“I’m naked.”

“Yeah, I know you’re naked. I’m the one you got naked for.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to get out of bed naked.”

“Why not? I’ve seen all of you. I’ve tasted all of you. I’ve been completely inside you.”

“You can’t say you’ve been completely inside me because that’s just not possible.”

“Come on now, Olivia,” I said, grabbing her hand again as she reluctantly got out of the bed. I stared at her in all her naked glory and whistled. “You’ve got a beautiful body. You’re amazing.”

“Thank you, I guess,” she said. “And you’re not too bad yourself.”

“I know.” I grinned. I pulled her toward me so that her breasts were crushed against my chest, and I gave her a long, hard kiss. Then I turned her around and slapped her on her bottom. She yelped again, and I chuckled, loving the sound. “Now get ready. We need to be out of this room within five minutes.”

“Um, what are you going to put on?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re going to be wearing the same clothes that you wore yesterday.”

“And?” I shrugged as I grabbed my T-shirt.

“Um, isn’t someone going to ask you why you didn’t change your clothes?”

“You obviously haven’t been around men very much, have you? If so, you’d realize that we don’t really change our

clothes that frequently. I think I have about three pairs of jeans and four shirts.”

“Please tell me you have more than three pairs of underwear.”

“Well, of course I do.” I laughed. “My mom buys me briefs every Christmas.”

“No way! Your mom still buys you underwear?”

“Mom buys everyone underwear. Trust me, we don’t want her to, but I guess once a mom, always a mom.”

“I guess so. That’s so funny.”

I pulled on my jeans and watched as she walked over to her suitcase and pulled out some clothes. She reached for a pair of hiking boots. “Do you not have any other shoes that you can wear?”

“No, I don’t. I live in Manhattan, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, come on. Maybe later today we can go into town . . .”

“And what?”

“I was going to say get you some stuff. But I guess that would be pointless,” I said quickly. “Seeing as you won’t be here much longer.”

“Yeah, exactly,” she said quickly and turned away from me.

Well, that had been kind of awkward. It wasn’t that I wanted her to leave, but I was thinking of her wallet. From what I knew, she didn’t have that much money. Riding gear wasn’t cheap, and if she wasn’t going to be here that long . . . I knew I was overthinking it.

“Ready?” I said as she walked up to me with a brush in her hand.

“Give me two more minutes. I’m just brushing my hair, and I’d like to brush my teeth.”

“Oh, good idea,” I said. “I don’t suppose I could borrow some toothpaste?”

“Sure you can, but I don’t have another toothbrush, and I’d rather you not borrow mine.”

“Oh no, I don’t need to borrow yours. I have my fingers,” I said, wiggling them in front of her.

“Um, okay, and?”

“You mean you’ve never brushed your teeth with your finger?” I laughed as she shook her head. “Oh my gosh, us Hamilton boys must have invented the finger toothbrush. We were always losing our actual toothbrushes. It’s fine. It’s not something I recommend for everyday use, but it works when you just need a fresh breath.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“Don’t worry, Olivia. When I kiss you later on, my breath will be minty fresh.”

“Um, who says I’m going to let you kiss me?”

“Come on now. What could be more romantic than a kiss between two lovers in front of the rising sun?”

“Why did that sound so poetic?” she said. “Have you practiced that line on a lot of girls?”

“Never,” I said. “Maybe it’s you that brings out the poet in me.”

“Maybe it is,” she said.

* * *

“Wow, this is absolutely beautiful.” Olivia’s face lit up with happiness as she stared at the sunrise in front of the mountains. “I’ve never seen a sunrise like this before.”

“What? Not even in New York?” I laughed as she pushed me slightly.

“No, goofy. Not even in New York. It’s wondrous,” she said. “And look over there. Look at those cows.”

“You’ve never seen a cow before?”

“Yes, I’ve seen a cow, but I’ve never seen calves, and they just look so happy. And then the goats and chickens . . .”

“I guess, welcome to the ranch.”

“Do you have pigs as well?”

“We do.”

“Potbelly pigs?”

“We have one. He’s a big mess, but we love him.”

“Wow. It’s idyllic living here.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s idyllic. It’s a lot of work.” I sighed. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about work. Not right now.”

“Sorry,” she said softly.

“You have nothing to be sorry about. I’m the one that took it to that place.”

“I guess it’s always on your mind.”

“When you’re a cattleman, your whole life is the ranch,” I told her. “You have to think about the business twenty-four seven. It can be overwhelming.”

“If you were given a choice to not do it, would you still do it?” she asked. “What if one of your brothers said, ‘I want to run the ranch, let me do it. I’ve been waiting my whole life for this opportunity.’ What would you say?”

“That’s actually an interesting idea. I guess I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Really? With six brothers?”

“I’m the eldest, the responsible one. The one that’s taken on the majority of the tasks and chores. I guess I’ve always assumed this was my place at the head of the family. I mean, my dad’s still the head of the family, of course, but . . .”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “But if Austin or Chet or Wyatt or your other brothers asked to take over, what would you say?”

“That’s an interesting question.” I studied her for a few seconds, then shook my head. “You know, I don’t know that I’d want to give it up. I’ve always felt like this was a burden, but the thought of one of my brothers taking my place actually makes me sad. It makes me feel like I would be losing something.”

“I guess it’s your birthright, huh?”

“I guess so. It’s not like we’re royalty or anything, but I do feel like it’s something I’ve been destined for and something my firstborn son—”

“What about your daughter?” she interrupted me.

“Or daughter, if she wanted it. My firstborn, period.”

“It’s okay.” She laughed. “You don’t have to be PC with me. I’m sure that a woman would be capable of running a ranch, but I guess it’s more typical for a man to run it.”

“Yeah, definitely. But if I had a daughter first, and she wanted to and was capable, who’s to say no?”

“You’re open-minded.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Yes and no. I didn’t think you’d be so open to . . .” She paused.

“Change?” I said quietly.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I always thought people in Montana were just small-minded hicks.” She covered her mouth quickly. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “And yeah, there are some people here in my state that are small-minded and that are hicks. But to be a hick or to be country doesn’t mean you’re small-minded. It doesn’t mean that you don’t think of anything else. We just all like to celebrate family first here.”

“You’re not the only people that think family should come first, you know.”

“I know,” I said. “But we actually practice that, and we make it a point to take care of our family and to be with our family.”

“And you’re saying that in New York, we don’t?”

“Well, do you?”

“Yeah, I’m close to my family. And Lucy and her mom, well, they were best friends. But we didn’t have the sort of family that you have, you know?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I hope this isn’t a sore subject.”

“Not at all,” she said with a bright smile. “I love your family. They’re wonderful. They’re welcoming, they’re caring. I couldn’t think of a more picture-perfect family.”

“Thank you,” I said, touched by her words. I could tell that she meant them, and that was something special to me. I was glad to meet someone who appreciated the obnoxious, loving, and affectionate Hamilton brood as much as I did. “They all love you as well,” I said.

“Thanks. So, are we going to go home now, or are we going to go see the spot you have picked for the eco-retreat?”

“Neither.” I shook my head and took a step closer to her.

“What are you doing, Beau?” Her eyes widened as I took her hands and pulled her toward me.

“A morning kiss.”

“One kiss,” she said, her eyes glowing. I leaned down and kissed her hard and passionately. I cupped the back of her head as I deepened it. She kissed me back fervently, and I felt her hands on my back before I pulled away from her.

“I can give you a second one if you want.”

“I guess one more is fine,” she said with an impish little smile.

I gazed at her for a moment before kissing her again. This was the most romantic sunrise I'd ever had in my life, and she was the most perfect woman to be here with. I ignored the voices in my head that were screaming at me to get home as soon as possible, that this was a mistake. The more time I spent out here kissing her, the more time I got to know her, the deeper I was falling. And if the look on her face said anything, the deeper she was falling for me as well.

I didn't want either one of us to get hurt. I didn't want her to want something more from me, and I didn't want to regret not being able to give her anything else. I was going to spend today with her, and then I was going to back away for both of our sakes. No matter how much I wanted to be with her, I needed to protect us both.

She was absolutely perfect, and I knew I was going to have a hard time letting her walk away at the end of all this.

Chapter Forty-Nine

O livia

“Morning, Olivia,” Lucy beamed at me as I entered the kitchen. “Want some coffee?”

“Yes, please. Morning, ladies.”

“Good morning.” Amelia beamed at me. “How was your ride?”

“It was actually quite fun. My inner thighs feel a little bit sore, though. I’m not used to riding a horse. But it was amazing.”

“Oh, you’ll get used to it,” she assured me.

“Yeah, you’ll get used to it.” Lucy winked.

I could feel my face flush. Did she know that Beau had been in my bedroom last night? As I mentioned that my inner thighs were feeling a little bit sore, it had crossed my mind that they might have been feeling sore for a very different reason. But obviously, I wasn’t going to say that to Amelia. I only hoped that they didn’t know.

“Olivia, would you like an omelet for breakfast?” Amelia asked me.

“Yes, thanks. That sounds absolutely amazing. I’m starving. Beau woke me up early for this ride, and we didn’t get to eat beforehand.”

“Oh, how come?” Lucy said.

“Well, I guess I didn’t wake up on time, and he wanted me to see the sunrise. And we only had a certain amount of time to get to the spot he wanted to take me to.”

“Wow.” Lucy’s eyes were wide. “That sounds romantic.”

I could see Amelia looking at me, and I laughed as if it were a joke.

“Not at all. Beau just wanted me to see the property because he wants my help in figuring out the cabins for the eco-retreat.”

“And that’s why he took you on a sunrise ride?” Lucy said. “Really?”

“Yeah, it sounds romantic to me,” Arya said.

“Me too.” Eloise giggled. “Auntie Arya?”

“Yes, Eloise?”

“What’s romantic mean?”

“Oh.” Arya made a face as she looked at me. “It means when a man and a woman like each other, and they want to show each other a fun time.”

“Ooh, that sounds nice,” Eloise said. “So was it a fun time, Auntie Olivia?”

“Yeah, it was a really nice time.” I nodded. “I should go and wash up real quick, though.” I was flustered now. I didn’t really know what to say. “I’ll be right back.”

“Take your time, dear,” Amelia said. “The omelet will be ready in about ten minutes. Would you like toast with that?”

“I wouldn’t say no.” I laughed. “I’m very hungry.”

“I’m sure you must be.” She nodded with a knowing look, and I could feel myself flushing all over again.

Please, dear God, Amelia couldn’t know what Beau and I had done. Could she? She seemed like the old-fashioned sort. She wouldn’t be beaming if she knew that her son and I had

had carnal relations last night in my room. At least I didn't think she would be.

"Okay. Well, I'll be right back. I'm just going to have a quick shower and change," I said as I hurried out of the kitchen.

"Hold on, Olivia. I wanted to ask you something." Lucy followed behind me. "Hey, girl," she whispered.

"Hey," I said as we walked down the corridor.

"So I want *all* the details."

"The details?"

"Olivia, I know you're not playing coy with me."

"What do you mean?" I said, all innocent.

"Really? You're going to lie to your best friend? I saw you both go into your bedroom."

"You what?" My jaw dropped.

"Yeah. I was coming to talk to you, and I saw you both slipping in, so I changed my mind."

I groaned as we reached my bedroom.

"So are you going to tell me?"

"Come in here, quickly," I said, closing the door behind us. "Oh my gosh, Lucy. You will not believe what happened!"

"I think I might believe it," she laughed. "But please do tell me."

"Beau and I made love last night."

"No way! I thought the most you guys would've done was oral or something." She laughed at the look on my face. "What? I didn't think you'd go all the way."

"Yeah, well, we did. And it was amazing. Like, the best sex I've ever had in my life amazing."

"Yeah, I can see that. Austin's the best sex that I've ever had, too."

"But he's your fiancé."

“He wasn’t always my fiancé. So does that mean you guys are dating? Can I expect you to move to Montana?”

“No.” I sighed. “He’s not even looking for a relationship, because he thinks it’s going to complicate everything.”

“Complicate what? Arya isn’t his ex-girlfriend. Eloise isn’t his kid.”

“Yeah. But he’s in charge of running Horseshoe Ranch, and he has all his brothers.”

Lucy looked bewildered. “I know Austin does a lot for the ranch as well.”

“But does Austin feel the same pressure that Beau does?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Maybe not. Beau is the oldest.”

“Yeah, and I guess they’re not doing as well as they would like.”

“Oh, no. Are they in trouble?” Lucy’s eyes widened. “Austin’s never said anything. I know he mentioned them expanding or something.”

“I don’t think they’re in dire straits, but I guess they could be doing better,” I told her. “I don’t really know the ins and outs of it. It’s not like he’s given me all their bank account details.”

“I know.” She made a face. “So he doesn’t want to get into a relationship, because he’s running the ranch. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. That’s essentially it.”

“Oh, men.” She shook her head. “That’s so frustrating.”

“It is and it isn’t. I live in New York; it’s not like I could get into a relationship anyway.”

“Well, you never know,” Lucy said. “Oh my gosh, it would be absolutely amazing if you came to live in Montana as well. Could you believe it? Us two New York City girls in Montana?”

“No, I couldn’t even imagine it. Montana would not know what hit it.”

“Well, I think it would be cool.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Lucy. I don’t think it’s going anywhere. But maybe tonight at the bar, I’ll meet someone who *is* looking for a relationship, and I can stay and be with him.”

“So you *do* like Montana.” She sounded triumphant.

“Yeah,” I said. “And you’re my best friend, and you’re going to be living here. I don’t really have anything keeping me in New York now.”

“Oh, Olivia,” she took my hands in hers. “I’m going to miss you so much if you go back home.”

“I know,” I said. “I already miss you.”

“Well, we’re here now, together. Let’s enjoy it. And tonight, we’ll have fun, okay? And Olivia?” she said softly.

“Yes, Lucy?”

“Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you, and you only sleep with guys if you like them. And I think you really seem to have a good connection with Beau.”

“I do,” I said, honestly. “He’s probably one of the best guys I’ve ever met in my life.”

“I know. Which is why I’m worried. I don’t want to see you getting hurt.”

“I don’t want to get hurt either. When I first met him, I knew he was kind of closed off, you know? I could see it.”

“He seems like he’s the serious and introspective sort. And I just don’t want him to break your heart. I have a feeling that he’s the sort of guy who’s going to put the family ranch first, and he’s not going to let anything come between that.” Lucy had a pained expression.

“I understand what you mean. And you’re right, the more time I spend with him, the more I enjoy being with him. It kind of does hurt just thinking about the fact that he doesn’t want anything serious with me.” Tears started to well up in my eyes. “Oh my gosh. I can’t believe I’m about to cry. This is ridiculous. I’m not sad, you know. I love being here, and I love spending time with him. And I know what this is. I guess I’m just already sad about having to leave.”

“Then don’t think about it,” she said. “Just live each day as if it were your last and enjoy your time here, and what’s meant to be, will be.”

“I sure hope so,” I said softly.

“But if you think your heart will get really broken, then don’t sleep with him again, okay? You know what they say about sex?”

“No, what?”

“Every time you have sex with someone, your soul connects with them. And when your soul connects with someone, it’s like you’re tethering yourself to that person. If you already have a great connection aside from that, it’s like a cosmic connection now, and those are the hardest to break.”

“I know.” I nodded. “I’m going to have to think long and hard about what to do next.”

“You want anyone to chat with, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Lucy,” I said, giving her a huge hug. “You really are the best friend ever.”

“No, you are. I can’t believe you came out here to see me.”

“I was so happy to come and meet the family you’ve landed in, and your fiancé. Austin’s amazing. I was prepared to hate him, but he’s great.”

“He really is. It’s crazy how we met, and it’s crazy how we got to be together, but I wouldn’t change anything about it.”

“I get it,” I said. “A true romance.”

“I guess you could say that.” She laughed. “And you know what, Olivia? You’ll have yours, too. I promise.”

Chapter Fifty

B eau

“Ooh, omelets. Can I get in on one?” I said as I walked into the kitchen. My mom was standing next to the stove, flipping an omelet. She looked back at me with a warm smile.

“Sure, but this one is for Olivia. I’ll make you one after.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, dear. The usual?”

“Yep. Cheese, bacon, onions, tomatoes, and mushrooms.”

“What, nothing else?” She grinned.

“Very funny. I’ll put the bread in the toaster. Does Olivia want any?”

“She does,” she said. “She should be back in a moment. She went to change, and Lucy went to tell her something, I guess.”

“Okay.” I turned to Arya and Eloise, who were eating at the kitchen table. “Morning. How are you ladies today?”

“Fine, thank you,” Arya said with a small smile. “Also, Beau, I just wanted to apologize once again. Your family has been—”

“Stop.” I held my hand up. “Don’t even apologize. It’s not your fault, and you were desperate. Eloise is a beautiful girl,

and she deserves to know her dad. If I was her dad, I would want to know about her.”

“Where is my daddy?” Eloise asked.

Arya’s eyes widened. “I’m not sure, Eloise,” she said softly.

“Where’s my mommy, Auntie Arya? When is she coming back?” Arya looked pained. My mom hurried over to the table.

“Hey, Eloise, I have a secret surprise for you.”

“Oh?” she said. “What’s that?”

“I was thinking that we could go into town and we could buy you a doll and maybe a dollhouse and—”

“Oh, no.” Araya shook her head. “You really shouldn’t. She doesn’t need it, and I don’t know that I could afford that right now. I’m sorry.”

“It’s on me,” my mom said. “Don’t even think about it.”

“But I’m not sure where we’d put a dollhouse.”

My mom sat down in the chair next to them and grabbed Araya’s hands. “I hope you know that my husband and I and all our sons and everyone in the home would like for you to stay until you figure everything out. You and Eloise are more than welcome here.”

“I really couldn’t stay.” She paused. I could see tears welling in her eyes. “Thank you so much for the offer, but you don’t even know me. Oh, I feel horrible. I shouldn’t have stayed.”

“I didn’t mean to say it to make you feel bad. I’m sure Beau here can find some work for you on the ranch so you don’t feel like you’re taking advantage of us, which of course we wouldn’t think anyway.”

Arya looked at me hopefully. “Oh, is there some work that I could do? I’d love to earn my keep. I just need to be able to get back on my feet again and get Eloise into a kindergarten program—”

“Of course.” I nodded. “We’ll find something for you. We have plenty of jobs here on the ranch.” I beamed at my mom. She was such a warm, welcoming, and loving person, and I knew I was lucky to have been raised by her. Then my stomach growled and everyone laughed, even Eloise. “I guess I’m hungry.”

“I guess you are.” My mom nodded. “Well, I’ll be making your omelet in just a little bit.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

At that moment, Olivia walked into the kitchen with Lucy. Her hair was freshly washed, but the sad look on her face concerned me.

“You okay?” I said.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thank you.” She smiled at me and then looked around the kitchen. “Oh, the omelet looks absolutely wonderful, Amelia. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. Beau was just about to make some toast too.”

“Thank you.”

“No worries,” I said. “Would you like white, sourdough, whole wheat, or a bagel?”

“Wow. I feel like I’m in a restaurant. So many options.”

“My mom does a lot of shopping.” I laughed. “She keeps Costco in business.”

“No, I don’t, Beau. You’re starting to sound like your father.”

“Well, it’s true,” I said.

“I think I’ll just have whole wheat, please,” Olivia answered.

“Sounds good. And you’re sure you only want one slice?”

“Yeah. Just one will do, thank you.” Olivia grabbed the plate that my mom handed her and walked over and sat at the table. I put the bread into the toaster and waited.

“Arya,” my mom asked, “do you mind looking after this omelet for me for just a few minutes? I need to talk to Beau about something.”

“Oh, of course. I’d love to.” Arya jumped up from the table and went to the stove.

“Can we go to the study, Beau?” Mom was smiling, but her eyes looked more serious than normal.

“Of course,” I said and nodded. We left the kitchen and headed to the study. Mom closed the door behind her and took my hand.

“We should sit for this.”

“What’s going on, Mom?”

“I’m going to tell you something.” She sighed as we sat down on the small couch that was in the room.

“Mom, you’re scaring me.”

“It’s about your father and me. Well, we—”

“Oh my God. You’re not getting a divorce, Mom. You can’t get a divorce. You’re in love.”

“No.” She frowned. “Why would you think we’re getting a divorce?”

“I don’t know. When parents come to you talking like this, well, it’s normally about a divorce.”

“We’re not getting divorced, Beau. Don’t worry. But your father told you that we’re going to Seattle, right?”

“Yeah, but what for? He wouldn’t tell me why.”

“He doesn’t want you to know. He doesn’t want any of you boys to know, but I think you should. You’re the oldest and I’m going to need your support.”

“Mom, what’s going on?” The hairs on the back of my neck prickled as a sense of uneasiness swept over me.

Tears started flowing down Mom’s cheeks, and she wiped them away quickly. “We’re going to a hospital in Seattle. You

cannot tell anyone. Your dad doesn't want anyone to know. You understand?" Her voice cracked as she spoke.

I nodded gravely.

"Your dad needs a stent in his heart. He has heart issues." She broke down crying. I pulled her into my arms and just let her sob. We sat there for what must have been ten minutes, with her just crying while I rubbed her back.

I could tell her heart was breaking, and I knew this was probably the first time she'd allowed herself to cry. She was strong, and I was sure she hadn't wanted my dad to see how anxious she was.

She finally pulled back and looked at me. She held my face in her hands and gazed at me. "Oh, Beau, you are such a support to me and your father. You are such a good son. I mean, all of you boys are, but you have really taken on the responsibility of Horseshoe Ranch, and I love you so much."

"I love you too, Mom. And of course, I will always be here for you and for Dad. And also the ranch and every single worker." My voice cracked as I stared at her. "How dangerous is the surgery? Is Dad going to die?"

"It's a pretty commonplace procedure," she said quietly, "but there are always risks. Your dad's left ventricle—" She sobbed again. "I'm sorry. It's hard for me to talk about this, but his heart isn't in the best shape, and they're going to do everything they can to help."

"Does he need a heart transplant?"

"No." She shook her head. "But he does have to watch what he eats now, and he needs to ensure he exercises. There's also a possibility that he has diabetes. Oh, Beau, I'm just so frightened. He's my life."

"I know, Mom." I rubbed the back of her hair. "But he'll be okay. He's Dad. He's Ranger Hamilton."

She sniffed a little. "I can still remember the first time I met him, you know. I fell in love with him at first sight."

"And he's still here. He's not going anywhere."

She squeezed my hands. “You’re a good boy, and I didn’t want to worry you, but it’s a serious procedure, and in case something doesn’t go right, I needed you to know. Please don’t tell your brothers. They’ll only worry and that will upset your father.”

“I won’t tell anyone, Mom. I promise.”

“Thank you, son. Now, we better get back to the kitchen. I’m sure Arya’s finished your omelet, and it’ll be getting cold.”

“I don’t care about my omelet.”

“But you still have to eat your breakfast. Remember, no one can know.”

“I know.” I sighed, and we stood up and walked toward the door.

“Olivia’s a nice woman,” Mom murmured. “Did you have fun riding this morning? Did she enjoy the horses?”

“She was a natural.” I smiled, glad to change the subject. “It was like she’d been riding for years.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“She’s nice.” I shrugged. “I’m not really sure what you mean.”

“It’s okay.” She patted my shoulder. “Your father was that way in the beginning, and so was Austin.”

“What are you talking about? This isn’t the same as you and Dad or even Austin and Lucy. This is a very different situation, believe me.”

“Of course it is, Beau.” She laughed. “Well, let’s get back to the kitchen, and then you and Olivia are going onto the property, right?”

“Yeah. She’s going to give me some ideas for the cabins we’re planning on building.”

“That will be nice,” she said. “And you’re doing a good thing, you know, helping her like that.”

“How am I helping her?”

“With her career goals,” she said with a soft smile. “She wants to be an interior decorator, right?”

“Yeah, but she’s talented. That’s why I’m having her help. She obviously knows how to design and decorate. She presents herself well. She dresses nicely. She—”

“Son”—she smiled—“you don’t have to explain to me. I trust you, and I trust Olivia. She’s a very astute and kind woman.” She nodded to herself. “She’s a good girl. I like her a lot.”

“Well, thanks, Mom. That’s good to know. I’ll be sure to pass on the word to Olivia.”

“If she’s Lucy’s best friend,” Mom added, “she has to be a good one, right?”

“I guess so.” As we entered the kitchen again, Olivia looked up at me and then over at my mother. There was a curious expression on her face, but I just nodded at her before heading toward Arya at the stove.

“Your omelet.” She gave me a warm smile. “It might be a little lukewarm, but I covered it so that it didn’t get cold.”

“No worries,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“And I’ve got the toast on the table,” Olivia spoke up. “I made whole wheat for you as well. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sounds good to me.” I grabbed the plate and went and sat at the table opposite Olivia. “I hope you’re not feeling too sore from the ride,” I said, giving her a small wink, and she blushed.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Ready to go and check out the area near the river later?”

“Yeah, I am.” She lowered her voice and leaned forward. “Is everything okay?”

Mom was right. Olivia was very astute, and I could see the care and concern in her eyes.

“Everything’s fine,” I said brusquely. There was a weird feeling between us, like we’d known each other for years. We were comfortable, and she almost felt like my partner in the way that she asked me those questions. But she wasn’t, and I couldn’t allow her to think that, either.

I focused on my parents. I was going to have to be strong now. I was going to have to hold it together. The responsibility was piling on top of my shoulders. I was devastated at what my mom had told me, but I couldn’t break down. I had to be the strong one for her.

But what if my dad died? What if I never got to see him again? What if I never got to throw a football with him again? What if we never went fishing again? What if this was it? I couldn’t stand to think about it, but I had to be strong—for myself, for the family, and for Horseshoe Ranch. The only one that I could depend on was myself, because that’s all I had. Everything rested on my shoulders. I had to be hard as rock. And if that’s what I had to be, then that’s what I would be.

“You know, I think I’m going to take this to the living room,” I said, standing up with my plate. “I need to do some work, and I don’t need any distractions right now.” I left the room without looking at anyone directly.

I had to be away from Olivia. I just couldn’t be around her. I couldn’t look into her big, beautiful brown eyes. I couldn’t stare at her body, lusting over her, not now. Not in this situation. Not when there was so much I needed to do.

Chapter Fifty-One

O livia

“I’m so excited about tonight.” Lucy danced around in my room. “Are you not excited, Olivia? Why don’t you look excited?”

“I’m excited.” I sat on the side of my bed, not making any move to get changed.

“Oh, Olivia. It wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It really was. He barely spoke to me in the car ride there or back. We were only there for about thirty minutes. He showed me the area and he’s, like, ‘Okay, we’re going to have cabins here, here, here, and here.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, yeah. There’ll be beautiful views.’ And he was like, ‘Yep. So why don’t you think of some ideas and then get back to me?’ And I was like, ‘Well, don’t you want to hear my ideas now?’ And he was like, ‘If you have some.’ I mean, he was so cold. I feel absolutely awful, Lucy.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Why do you think he’s acting that way?”

“Maybe because he regrets having sex with me? Or maybe now that he’s hit it, he’s ready to quit it.”

“I don’t think he’s like that.”

“He’s a man. Why wouldn’t he be? You know most men are like that. What’s that saying? Why buy the cow when you

get the milk for free?”

“I think that’s more in terms of like, living with a man,” she said. “But I could be wrong. It could also refer to hookups and one-night stands and—”

“So you *do* think it was a one-night stand,” I said. “See?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” She chewed on her lower lip. “Oh, I’m just making a mess of this. Do you want me to speak to Austin?”

“No!” I jumped up and grabbed her hand. “Lucy, listen to me. Do not tell Austin anything, you hear?”

“Okay,” she said, looking away from me.

“*Lucy.*”

“What?” she said innocently, looking back at me.

“You’ve already told Austin something, haven’t you?”

“Well, not everything.”

“What have you told him?”

“Maybe that you guys hooked up? I know. I’m sorry.”

“Lucy, what happened to girl code? I’m your best friend. How could you tell him that?”

“He’s my fiancé and I love him. He’s asking about you guys all the time.” She sighed. “I know. I fucked up. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.” She pulled me into her arms and hugged me. “You’re my best friend and, of course, my loyalty is to you. I won’t tell him anything else or ask him for any advice or anything.”

“Good. Because I just don’t even want to think about Beau anymore. Obviously, he got what he wanted and now he’s done. He barely had anything to say to me today; he was so cold and distant. And I tried several times to start conversations and ask him if everything was okay, and he just shut me down.”

“Maybe he has something else on his mind.”

“Like what?” I asked. “He’s fine. It’s just, he doesn’t want me to get attached. And I guess he feels like most women get attached after sex. Well, screw you, Beau Hamilton. I couldn’t care less if you want to be with me or not.” I walked over to my suitcase and pulled out a couple of dresses. “Which of these dresses do you think I should wear tonight?”

“Are you going for sexy or demure?”

“I’m going for sexy. Let’s see what these local guys have to say.”

“Girl, I wouldn’t count on too much.” Lucy laughed. The last time I went to 12-Point Buck Bar, it wasn’t full of gorgeous guys.”

“Well, you did meet Austin there.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” She nodded. “And Chip’s really nice. I think he’s working tonight. At least that’s what Sadie said.”

“Sadie’s getting ready with Arya, right?”

“Yep. And Wyatt is pissed.” Lucy grinned at me.

“Really?” I said. “How do you know?”

“Well, I was with Sadie in the living room after dinner, and Wyatt came in and wanted to play some game or something. And Sadie was like, ‘You know I can’t play a game tonight. I’m going to the bar with the girls.’ And he was like, ‘What are you talking about?’ She’s like, ‘We’re going dancing.’ And he’s like, ‘Why?’ She’s like, ‘Because it’s going to be fun, and we’re going to meet hot guys.’ And you should have seen the look on his face. He was *pissed*.”

“When is he going to realize that he has feelings for her?” I asked her. “I mean, literally every single person in this house knows they should be together except for them.”

“I know,” Lucy said and nodded. “It’s like they can’t see their nose at the end of their face.”

I laughed. “I guess that’s true. They’re cute, though. When they finally figure it out, that will be amazing together.”

“I think so too,” Lucy said with a smile. “At least I hope they figure it out. Wyatt seems like the most clueless of all of them.”

“Yeah. That’s true.”

“Chet is gorgeous, though,” I said, fanning myself. “Like if I wasn’t attracted to Beau . . .”

“Oh my gosh, I was saying the same thing,” Lucy said. “If I didn’t have Austin, whoa. Chet is absolutely slap-you-in-the-face orgasmic.”

“Well, you’re getting a little carried away there, Lucy.” I laughed. “Are you sure you don’t have a thing for him?”

“Ha ha. Very funny.” She rolled her eyes. “But, wow, he’s amazing.”

“I know. I think Arya might think he’s cute too. I saw them talking earlier.”

“Uh-oh.” Lucy made a face. “We need to stop that.”

“Why?”

“He’s the biggest playboy of the bunch. Austin has been telling me about his brothers and Chet.” She pursed her lips disapprovingly. “I don’t think he’s good news for someone like Arya. She needs a good guy; she’s been through so much. And she’s looking after Eloise.” She sighed. “They need someone good. And I don’t know that Chet is the one.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t realize he had a bad rep.”

“Well, I’m not saying a bad rep,” she said. “I’m just saying that except for Beau, he’s the least likely of all the brothers to settle down.” She bit her lower lip. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s fine.” I forced a light laugh. It hurt, but what she said was the truth. “Beau doesn’t want to settle down, and that’s up to him, right? That’s his prerogative. I think he does probably want to settle down sometime in the future. He’s a man, so he can do it when he’s fifty years old if he wants. He’s got the ranch to take care of, and that comes first for him, so”—I

shrugged—“whatever. I’ll be going back to New York soon, and I’m sure I’ll meet plenty of guys there.”

“But I wanted you to stay.”

“I know. I wanted to stay as well.” I sighed. “Wow, I guess I finally admitted it out loud.”

“You really like Montana, don’t you?” Lucy said.

“Yeah. I’m shocked, because I never thought I would be a country girl.”

“We’re not country girls,” Lucy said. “We’re city girls who appreciate the country. There’s a difference.”

“True; there is a difference. I wonder if Beau will come and speak to me before we go out tonight.” I couldn’t keep the hope out of my voice.

“Do you want him to?”

“It would be nice if he came and apologized for being cold to me all day and gave me a kiss and told me to have fun or something. But I guess he’s not going to do that in front of you.”

“I can go back to my room to get changed if you want,” she said.

“No, no. It’s fun, us getting ready together like we did in the past.”

“I think so too. And you can always go to his room if you want.”

“I’m not going to him. He knows how to find me.”

“I agree. Okay, so you’re wearing the sexy dress?” Lucy looked at the two dresses I held up earlier.

“Yep,” I said. “I’m going to wear this sexy red piece. And what about you? Are you going to be sexy tonight?”

“Of course. Austin will be pissed, but hey, how many times am I going to be able to go out on the town with my girlfriend and shake what the good Lord gave me?”

“Not many times after you get married,” I replied. “Have you guys decided on a wedding date yet?”

“Not yet,” she said. “We realized we were rushing the wedding. We both want to get married, and we do want to start a family, but I’d like to be engaged for a little bit, you know? Plus, we need to build the house, and there’s just a lot going on. We don’t have to get married right away.”

“That makes sense. So I guess I’ll be coming out to Montana again for a wedding.”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind, of course.”

“Girl, any excuse to come and visit you.”

“Yay!”

There was a knock on the door then. Adrenaline rushed through me at the thought that it could be Beau.

“Who is it?” I opened the door, praying it was Beau, but then I saw Arya and Sadie’s faces.

“Hey, girls. How’s it going?” Sadie said. “We were just checking to see what you guys were going to wear tonight.”

“Oh, we were going sexy,” I said, trying to stay positive, even though my heart was breaking. I guess Beau wasn’t coming to see me after all.

“Oh, awesome,” Sadie said. “I’m going sexy, as you know. But we wanted to make sure we weren’t going *too* sexy.”

“We don’t want to look like strippers,” Arya added.

“That is true,” Lucy said. “I think Austin would draw the line at me going out looking like a stripper.”

Arya laughed. “Thank you so much for lending me something to wear, Sadie. I would’ve had anything if you didn’t lend me that silver dress of yours.”

“Of course. You can keep it. It looks better on you than it does on me anyway,” Sadie replied. “I’m so glad you girls are here. This is like a dream come true for me. You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting for real girlfriends.” She looked around at us. “You guys are amazing, and I’m so sad that

you're going to go back to Manhattan, Olivia." She looked at Arya. "I don't know where you're going to go. I just want all of us to be here together and enjoy fun times."

"It'll be fine. You've got me," Lucy said. "Olivia will come back and visit, and Arya will be here for a long time."

"Well, I don't know about a long time," Arya said. "But I'll be here for a bit, at least."

"True," Sadie said. "Yay! So much fun."

There was another knock on the door, and my heart leaped into my throat as I heard a deep voice say, "Hello?"

Then I realized it was Austin.

"Hey," Lucy said. "We're just deciding what we're going to wear tonight."

"Nothing too sexy, I hope." He raised an eyebrow.

"It's going to be *very* sexy," she said. "And don't even get started because I can wear what I want."

"I wouldn't even think about telling you what to wear, Lucy," he said, shaking his head. "Do you think I'm that sort of man?"

"Yes, I do." She laughed. "But I think you'll like it, especially when I get home tonight." She grinned and he walked over to her and kissed her.

"Guys, get a room," I said, and we all laughed.

Then I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge. I looked toward the door again and there stood Beau. He hadn't knocked, and he wasn't saying anything. I wondered how long he'd been there. He'd stared at me for a few seconds and nodded his head.

"Have a good night tonight, girls," he said.

"Thanks," I responded. A part of me hoped that he would creep to my room after I got back from the bar. I would love to make love again. I didn't even care that he'd been distant all day.

“Ooh, maybe when we get back from dancing, we can have some drinks with you guys,” Sadie said. “If Wyatt’s not still in a bad mood.”

“That sounds like fun,” Austin nodded. “You in, Beau?”

“I can’t.” He shook his head. “I actually have to go out somewhere, and I won’t be back tonight. But I’ll see you guys tomorrow?”

“Okay. Night,” Sadie said.

“Have fun,” Lucy said, but she was looking at me as she spoke.

“Yeah, have fun.” I beamed at him, trying to pretend that my heart wasn’t breaking. I wanted to know where he was going and what he was going to do. But obviously, that wasn’t something he cared to share with me.

“Thanks. I’ll see you later.” He left the entryway of the door and walked away. I stood there feeling lonely and sad. But I knew that if I allowed myself to think about my situation with Beau too much, the entire evening would be ruined. And that was the last thing I needed. The very, *very* last thing.

I turned to the girls. “Okay, guys, let’s get ready. Shall we have some shots before we leave?” I was determined to have a good night. I was determined for Arya, Sadie, and Lucy to go out with a happy Olivia. I didn’t want to be the friend who was down in the dumps and ruined the entire evening.

“Shots, shots, shots!” Sadie said.

“Hey, Austin, can you go make us some tequila shots?”

“Will do, ladies,” he said. “And I think I better drive you to the bar and pick you back up, because I don’t want you driving drunk.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Lucy said. “That okay with you, girls?”

I nodded. “Thanks, Austin.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “Okay. Four shots of tequila coming up.” He left and we all started laughing and dancing

around the room. It was going to be a good night. I would make sure that it was fun. I could always cry when I got back to my room later.

Chapter Fifty-Two

B eau

“Come on, Maisy. Let’s go.” I kicked the filly in the flanks to get her to gallop faster. The wind was cold on my face as we raced across one of the fields, but I didn’t care. I needed this time alone with nature. “Whoa, girl.” I brought the reins in, slowing her down as we made our way into a darker part. I didn’t want her to hurt herself, and I didn’t want for us to drift too close to one of the small tributaries.

Olivia had looked beautiful in her bedroom when they were getting ready to go out. I’d seen the look of surprise and hurt in her eyes as I said I couldn’t hang out with them later, but I didn’t have anything to say to her. All day, I’d been preoccupied with the news that my mother had given me. All I could think about was my dad and his surgery and what could possibly happen. The fact that I couldn’t share it with anyone made it worse.

I rode and rode until I got to one of the log cabins, where I tied up my horse and went inside. I looked around for a whiskey bottle that we kept up there and grabbed it, unscrewed the cap, and chugged directly from the bottle as I sat down on one of the Adirondack chairs. *I should start a fire*, I thought to myself. I heard something rustling in the corner—probably a rat. The place needed to be cleaned, but I’d worry about that later.

I took another chug of the whiskey. Thoughts of Olivia crossed my mind. She'd had some good ideas for the cabins, but I hadn't been able to focus on them. I didn't care about wallpaper or floor or paint colors, not at a time like this. It wasn't important. It wasn't as important as life and death.

I could feel the alcohol going to my head. I hadn't eaten dinner, and that had been a mistake. I didn't care. I chugged some more of the whiskey.

What was I going to do if my dad died? My brothers would be absolutely devastated that I hadn't told them what I knew, but I couldn't go back on my word to Mom. I knew she had gone against her word to Dad to tell me, and I had to honor her request. If my dad got back and thought that all of us knew, he'd be really upset. He wouldn't blame my mom, but I knew he wouldn't like it. He obviously wanted to shield us from the worry, from the pain and the concern, and I understood why, but I really wished he would be more open about what's going on.

But I suppose that's where I got it from. I was strong because of my dad. I emulated my dad, and he was one that kept everything to himself. He took the world on his shoulders. Maybe that hadn't been the right thing for him to do. Maybe he should've let others in. I didn't know. I didn't care about anything right now. I couldn't even think. I couldn't concentrate on anything.

I wanted Olivia. I wanted to hold her close and kiss her, tell her about my dad and have her presence as comfort. I wanted to feel her warm body against me, holding me close. I wanted to cry in her arms. I wanted to tell her that just because a man was tall and strong and masculine, it didn't mean that he didn't have feelings and hurts and pains and worries and anxieties. But I couldn't put all of that on her. I couldn't put *any* of that on her. She didn't deserve to carry the burdens of my life. She didn't deserve the emotional turmoil that I was going through. I was the strong one, and I was meant to be the protector. Not the one that needed protecting. Not the one with the fragile heart. But my heart felt like it was going to break.

“Damn it, Dad, you have to be okay!” I shouted into the cabin. “You *have* to be okay!” I took another chug of the whiskey, long and deep. It filled my throat and burned in my stomach.

I jumped up off the chair and ran outside. “You have to be fucking okay, Dad!” I screamed into the night sky. An owl hooted from one of the trees behind me, and I started laughing.

Who was I? *What* was I? I was this close to falling apart, and yet I was supposed to run the ranch? I was meant to ensure that thousands of people were able to provide for their families, and yet I couldn’t even deal with the fact that my dad was going to the hospital with a heart issue. He hadn’t even died, but the anticipation, the apprehension, that was almost as bad as hearing the news that he had died.

And my mom, she would collapse. She’d break down if my dad was gone. She’d still be happy day to day, and she’d still make sure that everyone else was okay, but I knew her heart would be broken. He was her rock. He was the rock of the family; who was I to think I could take over that role? I was no one.

“God,” I shouted into the night sky, “you have always blessed me and been here for me. I’m asking you for one favor. Please let my dad be okay. Please let him get through this surgery. Please, God, I’m not asking anything else of you. Please.”

I started running then. I ran as fast as I could toward the creek. I wouldn’t stop until I got there.

Though my running was disjointed, and I was tired and slightly drunk, I made it to the water and I dived in, not even bothering to take off my shoes. The water was freezing on my skin, and my clothes clung to me. I got out of the creek and started laughing hysterically again. What a fine state I was in.

“Olivia,” I whispered, “have fun tonight, but not too much fun.” I wanted to rush back to the ranch and tell her that I wanted to dance with her. And I hated dancing, but I figured she was the sort of woman that liked dancing. All women like dancing.

I wanted to spin her around and around and around and then hold her from behind and bump and grind into her. I wanted to feel her hands all over my body as I kissed her.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. She was captivating, bewitching, beguiling, beautiful. I thought about the previous night and the way she'd felt when I'd moved inside her. I needed to be inside her again, but it wouldn't be tonight. I didn't know when it would be. I had far too much on my mind, far too much to think about.

I'd have to call the architecture firm in the morning and start with the plans for the eco-retreat, then I would call the tractor dealership because we needed some new combine harvesters. And then I'd call the vet because we needed him to come in and check some of the cows. And then I'd call the bank to see if there was any update on the loan. I had a lot to think about. I had a lot to do. Fucking Olivia should be the last thing on my mind. She *had* to be the last thing on my mind.

I stumbled back toward the cabin. I needed to get home and take these clothes off. I hoped the women were gone already, because I couldn't stand to see Olivia looking all sexy, going out to a bar where she'd inevitably flirt with men who weren't me and who might not treat her with the respect and kindness she deserved. Would she flirt back? Would she giggle? Would she kiss them? My heart felt like stone as I thought about her kissing someone else. But she wasn't mine. If she wanted to kiss them, she could. If I saw, I'd punch the guy she kissed, but it's a good thing I wouldn't see.

I hauled myself back onto my horse and rode back to the ranch. All of the lights were out, and I couldn't hear any giggling. The women must have gone already. I headed to my room and took a quick shower before going to the study. I had to work on the books. I'd do that now, and then I'd go to bed.

* * *

I sat up. It was six o'clock in the morning, and I was still in the study at the desk. I must've fallen asleep here. I got up and

stretched my limbs. Everything felt sore. I groaned and sat back down. I heard a noise in the corridor and walked out. Mom and dad were leaving with two small suitcases. I stared at them from my doorway without saying anything. It felt odd to not rush over to them and whisper goodbye and good luck, but a part of me was too scared it would be some sort of bad omen. I walked back into the office and rubbed my forehead, saying a quick prayer for my parents before looking at my calendar and starting some of my admin duties.

“I guess there’s no time like the present,” I said as I picked up the phone. I’d call the architecture firm now. The people we were using were based on the East Coast, so their office should be open. I was waiting for someone to pick up when Austin poked his head into the room.

“Hey, bro, you coming to breakfast?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. No one answered at the firm, and I hung up the phone. “I’ve got work to do.” I picked up the papers and showed him.

“Anything I can do to help?” He walked into the room and closed the door behind him.

“No,” I snapped.

“Hey, I’m just asking if I can help. What’s got you in a bad mood?” He frowned as he walked over to me. “Dude.”

“What?” I said.

“Have you been in here all night?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “I’ve been working. There’s a lot to do for the ranch, you know.”

“I know, but you don’t have to do it alone,” he said. “You know that, right?”

“I’m the one in charge, and every decision comes down to me.”

“Beau.” He frowned and pulled out his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Hold on,” he said. His fingers flew over the phone, and then he put it back into his pocket. He came and sat in the chair across from the other side of the desk and he looked at me. “I’m worried about you, Beau. What the hell is going on?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Is this about Olivia?”

“Leave Olivia out of this. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Sure you don’t. Look, dude. It’s—” The door opened then and Chet, Wyatt, Austin, Flint, Knox, and Huck all came into the study.

“What? What’s going on?” I looked up. I hadn’t seen Flint, Knox, and Huck in weeks. “You guys are back?”

“Yeah,” Knox said, nodding. “We got back last night.” He yawned. “And I’m tired.”

“Okay, and why are you all here?”

“Because Austin texted us and told us to get our asses into the study right now.”

“Lock the door,” Austin said to Wyatt. He was still standing next to it. He locked it and then came and stood around the desk.

“What’s going on, guys?”

“I don’t know,” Huck said, yawning as well. “Austin, why did you call us?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re getting married to Lucy today,” Chet drawled.

“No, it’s got nothing to do with Lucy,” Austin said and stood up. “Look, we’re all brothers, okay? We’re the Hamilton seven. We all love each other and we’re all here for each other. Right?” He looked at me, and then he looked at Chet, Wyatt, Flint, Knox, and Huck.”

All of us nodded.

“You did not wake me up for a pep talk,” Knox said.

Austin moved to stand next to me. “Beau here is stressing the fuck out, and we’re not going to let that happen. You’re not allowing us to help you, Beau. Remember, this is a *family* ranch. This is Horseshoe Ranch. This is not Beau Hamilton Ranch, okay?”

I laughed a little at his words. “I know it’s Horseshoe Ranch. I’m not stupid.”

“Has Beau been trying to steal our inheritance?” Huck said with a wicked grin on his face.

“It has nothing to do with the inheritance,” Austin said softly. “Beau, we all respect and understand that you make the final decisions, but we are your brothers and we’ve all been raised on this ranch as well. You don’t carry this alone. We’re all here, okay?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Do you, though? Because you look like you’re stressed the fuck out, and the ranch shouldn’t be doing this to you. If it’s making you this miserable then we need to figure something out. You need to have balance. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

I so badly wanted to tell my brothers that it wasn’t the ranch that had me so stressed out. It was Dad, our dad. But I couldn’t break my word to Mom, and I understood why she didn’t want them to know. They’d be upset and they’d all be anxious. Dad was the stalwart. He was the glue of the family; the one who kept everything under control. We’d be devastated if we lost him.

“I got it, guys. Thank you. I will ensure that I do not do all the work myself,” I said.

“Okay. And then what are you going to do about Olivia?” Austin said.

“What?”

“Come on now, Beau.” Chet rolled his eyes. He looked over at the other. “So, guys, let me catch you up. Olivia is Lucy’s best friend. And you guys know Lucy. Well, Olivia came to visit Lucy, and guess who has a crush on her?”

I shook my head vehemently. “I do not have a crush on her.”

“You have more than a crush,” Austin said with a laugh. “I heard that they . . .” He made a sexual sound, and I glared at him.

“Really, Austin? How old are you?”

“Really, Beau? Why are you pretending like it didn’t happen?”

“Because that’s all it was, and I don’t want to make this a bigger deal than it should be. It was a one-time thing.”

“You don’t want to be with Olivia? Is that what you’re saying? And how am I supposed to tell my fiancée that you banged her best friend and now want nothing to do with her?”

“It’s not like that. I didn’t *bang* her. It’s not that I don’t want anything to do with her. This just isn’t the right time.”

“Really?” Austin said. “Why?”

“Because of the ranch.”

“We’re here to help you with the ranch,” Chet said. “You know that. I agree with Austin, Beau. You’ve been really stressing out about this whole thing. I know Dad put you in charge, and I know there’s a lot going on here, but we’re a family and we’ll get through this together, through thick and thin. We’re all here to help you out in any way that we can.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt said. “I may be the youngest, but I can work.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks, guys.” I stood up and we all put our arms around each other. It’d been a long time since we were all together. We’d grown up as a tight-knit group, and we all tried to make it for Sunday lunch, but recently, that hadn’t been able to happen with Flint, Knox, and Huck traveling around. But now they were home.

“It’s good to see everyone in the same room,” I said with a smile.

“We should have a big lunch tomorrow,” Austin said thoughtfully. “Sort of a welcome home lunch for everyone.”

“But Mom and Dad aren’t here,” I said.

“That’s okay,” Austin said. “Mom and Dad are in Seattle having fun.”

“Oh, they are?” Knox said. “I was wondering why I didn’t see Mom in the kitchen this morning. What are they doing in Seattle?”

“I think they’re on a second honeymoon or something.” Austin shrugged. “Do you know why they went, Beau?”

“Yeah, I think it was just to get away and have a fun trip,” I said quickly, not wanting them to suspect it was something more serious. “And that sounds like a good time. Let’s do a family brunch tomorrow. The women can cook and—”

“Don’t let Lucy hear you say that,” Austin said. “She’ll say, ‘What, are women the only ones that are meant to be in the kitchen?’”

“And I’d say yes,” Chet said, and we all groaned.

“And that is why you’re gonna be single forever,” Austin replied. “Okay, guys. Let’s leave Beau to get to work.” He looked over at me. “And it looks like some of you guys want to go back to bed.”

“I know I do,” Knox said with a yawn.

“Thanks,” I told them. “And maybe next week we can all have a big family meeting, and I can split up some of the duties and things that need to be done?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Wyatt said.

“Everyone in?”

“Yep,” all my brothers chorused.

As they walked out of the room, I felt my heart expanding in a way that it hadn’t in a long time. Austin was right. I did have my family, and I had to remember that. No man was an island. I couldn’t do this alone, and I didn’t have to. I was glad to have my brothers’ support.

And he was right about something else as well. Olivia did mean something to me. This whole thing had become far more complicated than it needed to be. I was hurting her and I was hurting myself, and for what reason? I'd have a talk with her and see if we could come to some sort of understanding and, well, maybe we could fuck afterward because I was feeling hard and horny, and that was something that wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

However, I had a lot of work to do before I could talk to her. I needed to sort out a plan for my brothers and me, and then I would chat with Olivia tomorrow at brunch. I had a feeling that I might sneak into her room if I stayed at the ranch, so I decided to go to the log cabin for the rest of the day and night.

Chapter Fifty-Three

O livia

“So we’re going to do a barbecue?” I asked Lucy as we walked into the kitchen.

“Yeah. Austin’s going to man the grill. We’re going to have steaks and hot dogs and burgers. And did you know that all the brothers are here?” She looked excited.

“Well, Beau’s not here,” I said softly. “Do you know where he is?”

“I don’t.” She shook her head. “I guess they all spoke yesterday, and Beau went somewhere.” She shrugged. “He has a lot of work to do, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I hadn’t seen Beau since early the morning before. He’d been gone all day yesterday. I had hoped that he’d come to my bedroom that night, but he hadn’t. I’d woken up this morning expecting to see him at breakfast, but he wasn’t there.

However, all of the other Hamilton brothers were there. They were a fun, lively bunch, not that I would’ve expected anything different. There was Austin, who only had eyes for Lucy, and then there was Chet, the most gorgeous of all the brothers with his light blue eyes and short, dark hair. They were all handsome, but he was just absolutely spectacular. And then there was Flint. He was really sweet and nice, and he had

a way about him that made me think he was quite soft spoken and poetic. There was Huck, who looked like he was the fighter of the bunch. And then there was Knox, who kept to himself as if he had secrets. And then, of course, Wyatt was the youngest. He only had eyes for Sadie, but not in a romantic way. He teased her relentlessly. I could tell she loved it, even though it did get on her nerves.

“So I guess I’ll make a potato salad,” I said to Lucy. “Everything seems like it’s going to be done, and I don’t want to not do anything.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” She shrugged. “But it looks like the brothers have got it all together.”

“Hey, Olivia,” Sadie said as she looked up and saw that we’d entered the kitchen. “I was thinking that you could do my makeup tonight.”

“Oh yeah? Why wait till tonight? Why don’t I do it for the brunch?”

“You don’t think it’s too much for me to get a makeover for brunch?”

“Of course not. I think it’ll be fun. I’ll do it after I make the potato salad.”

“Sure.” She nodded. “I was boiling the potatoes for you like you asked. Oh my gosh, it took forever to peel all those potatoes, but Arya helped me.”

I looked around the kitchen. “Where did Arya go?”

“She took Eloise out back to go look at the goats or something. I’m really excited that all the brothers are here.” She grinned. “But where’s Beau?”

“I don’t know,” I said quickly. “I guess he’s gone.”

“Do you think he was mad because you went out dancing?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t know. We haven’t really spoken at all, actually, except for when he came to my room the night we went dancing, and that wasn’t really much of a conversation.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Austin walked into the kitchen with gloves on.

“Where’s Beau?” Sadie asked him, not caring to beat around the bush. I guess she wouldn’t care. She didn’t have a crush on him, so she wasn’t embarrassed to ask.

“Oh, I’m sure he went to one of the cabins.” He shrugged. “I mean, that’s what all of us Hamilton brothers will do. I’m sure Lucy told you that I spent my own time in the log cabin as well.”

“That’s true.” She nodded. “I guess that’s where they go to get away from everything.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s nice to just have our own space. It’ll be great once we build everyone their own place. It sucks that we only have the two cabins on the property aside from the ranch right now.” He paused as Lucy gave him a look. “What? What did I say?”

“Nothing,” she said softly. “I’m just looking at you.”

“But you’re looking at me as if I said something wrong.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just looking at you because I love you.”

“Well, I love you, too.” He grinned. “But Beau knows we’re having the barbecue today, so he’ll be here.” He nodded. “I mean, it’s a celebration, right? All the Hamilton brothers in one spot.”

“Will your parents be back from Seattle soon?” I asked him.

“Couple of weeks.” He shrugged. “I guess they’re on some sort of second honeymoon or something.”

“Oh, really?” I was surprised. They hadn’t seemed like they were going on a second honeymoon, and Amelia didn’t seem the sort to leave strangers in her house—not because she didn’t trust them, but because she’d want to be the perfect host.

“Yeah, I thought it was funny timing, too.” Austin shrugged. “But you know married folks.”

“I guess so,” I said. “And Beau confirmed they went on a honeymoon?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I mentioned my guess to him and he didn’t correct me, so I guess it was right.”

“Okay. Well, I should go finish up the potato salad and then, Sadie, we’ll go to my room and give you the makeover?”

“Yay. That’s awesome. I made coleslaw.” She grinned. “Family recipe. Wyatt loves it. And we were going to do corn on the cob, right?”

“I have a cool recipe,” Lucy spoke up. “It’s called elote corn. I learned it from a Mexican friend of mine. It’s delicious. It’s like street corn and we put queso and—”

“I don’t know if we have queso.”

“Oh, actually, I got it wrong. We don’t put queso.” She laughed. “Oh my gosh. It’s been so long since I made it. Let me think. We’ll use sour cream, queso fresco, lime, chili powder, and cayenne pepper.”

“As I said, dear, I don’t think we have queso fresco.” He grinned. “We might have sour cream, we always have limes, and my mom will definitely have chili powder and cayenne pepper. Is there something you can use instead of the queso fresco?”

“Do you guys have cotija cheese?”

“Say what?” he said.

“You’ve never had cotija cheese?”

“I’ve had cheese.” He grinned.

“Don’t you guys have Mexican food out here?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but I don’t know the name of all the ingredients. Shit, I barely know a T-bone from a filet.”

“Oh my gosh, don’t lie,” Sadie said, rolling her eyes. “Don’t listen to him. These are cattlemen. They have thousands of Angus and Hereford cows. In fact, haven’t you

butchered a cow before, Austin? Let's be real, you know a T-bone from a filet."

"That's true." He laughed. "I do. But sorry, I don't know queso fresco, and I don't know cotija cheese."

"You know queso, though," Lucy said with a laugh. "You love chips and queso."

"That is true. And if you want to make chips and queso, I won't say no. Ooh, and maybe you can make some salsa as well," he said.

"Now you're asking for a lot," Lucy said. "Oh, but I do wish my friend Sylvia was here."

"Oh, the one that makes the mole?" I said.

"Yeah." Lucy nodded. "So delicious."

"Yeah, it is. We'll have to have a Mexican night and create all the dishes you guys might not really know here in Montana."

"Sounds good to me," Austin said with a laugh. "I never say no to good food."

"Yeah, I don't think you do, do you? Okay, so let's finish up here in the kitchen, and then the guys can get the grill going, and then we'll go and get ready." Lucy looked at me. "Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds like a plan to me. Is there anything else you need us to do, Austin?" I asked him.

"Nope, we got it covered. I'm going back out with the guys. We've got a whole bunch of beers outside if you want some."

"We'll drink later," Lucy said. "We don't want to get drunk before we eat."

"Speak for yourself," Sadie said with a laugh. "I don't mind getting drunk before I eat. You forget it's normally me and the guys, so if I don't drink right away, there are no beers left."

"That's not true," Austin objected.

“It’s very true,” Sadie said. “Hold on. I’ll be right back.” She ran outside and Austin followed behind her. Lucy and I looked at each other and exchanged a smile.

She rubbed her hand on my shoulder and then asked me, “Are you sure you’re okay? I know you’re worried about Beau, but if Austin’s not worried, I’m sure he’ll be okay. And he’ll be here soon, so you can talk to him.”

“I guess so.” I shrugged. “I mean, what if he didn’t go to the ranch? What if he went to see someone else?”

“Stop thinking the worst, Olivia. We don’t know where he is, but that doesn’t mean something bad. He’s been stressed out about the ranch, and I guess with his parents going on that second honeymoon, he’s got a lot to deal with, right?”

“I guess so. Also, I don’t really think they went on a honeymoon. Do Amelia and Ranger seem like the sort that would leave town to go on a second honeymoon when they have a whole bunch of guests in their house?”

Lucy was thoughtful for a second, then she shook her head. “No, not really. Definitely not Amelia. Ranger, I don’t really know because he keeps to himself and doesn’t say much, but Amelia’s like the hostess with the mostest.” She chewed on her lower lip. “So you don’t think they went on a second honeymoon, huh?”

“Nope.”

“And if they didn’t go on a second honeymoon, then where did they go? Oh, shit. Do you think the ranch is in much worse condition than they’ve let on?”

“I think so.”

“What if they’re going to lose their land and their property? Wouldn’t that be absolutely horrible? Oh my gosh.” She looked nervous. “It would break Austin’s heart. Maybe I should find another job so I can help.”

“What job are you going to find, Lucy, that can help cover a million-dollar ranch?”

“I don’t know, something. Maybe I could teach. It’s not going to make a lot of money, but it will help some.”

“We don’t even know if they’re in trouble.” I stopped talking as Sadie came back into the kitchen, three beers in her grasp. “What are you doing?”

“I brought you two a beer. I know you said you don’t want to drink, but it’s a Hamilton tradition.” She handed us our beers, and then we clinked the bottles together. “Cheers, girls. So glad you’re here. I had so much fun the other night.” She smiled. “I couldn’t believe what a blast it was. I need to go out a lot more.”

“It was fun.” I nodded, even though I’d been missing Beau the entire time. “Okay, let’s get to work, and then Sadie, I’ll do your makeup, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Olivia.”

“You’re welcome.”

* * *

Sadie stared at her reflection in the mirror and gasped. “Olivia, you should do makeup for a living. I look beautiful.”

“You really do,” I said as I brushed her long blonde hair a couple more times and admired my handiwork. I’d applied a light eyeliner that really maximized her vibrant blue eyes. I’d placed some glittery silver eyeshadow on her upper lid and put on some eyebrow pencil to make her eyebrows a little bit darker and more defined. I applied a hot pink lipstick with a juicy lip liner and gloss, and then I’d applied some bronzer to her cheekbones. She looked like a beautiful model on the catwalk. This cowgirl was about to blow a lot of cowboys’ minds.

“Shall we go out and show everyone?”

“I’m kind of nervous,” she said, not moving.

“Why? You look amazing.”

“I know, but the guys aren’t used to it. I’m normally just one of the boys, and I don’t want them to tease me.”

“Trust me, Sadie. No one will be teasing you,” I promised her. “Come on. Let’s go join them. Plus, I’m hungry. I need a burger.”

She nodded. “Let’s go.” I didn’t tell her that the main reason I wanted to go out was that I was curious if Beau had arrived yet. I was hungry, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to eat until I saw him. I really missed him, and I was worried about him.

I was worried that he was stressed out and upset. I knew this had to be about more than us having sex. It wasn’t like I’d become a stage-five clinger in a couple of days. Something else had to be going on.

We walked out of my room, down the corridor, and out to the back of the house. It smelled absolutely divine. There was something about the smell of grilling meat that just made me happy.

I looked around the backyard. It was packed. I hadn’t realized they were going to be inviting other people. As soon as we walked over to the grill, Chet whistled.

“Well, you two look amazing. Sadie, is that you?” His jaw dropped as he finally realized that the woman next to me was his childhood friend.

“Yes, Chet, it’s me. Like what you see?”

“You’re absolutely gorgeous,” he said and grinned. “Hey, Wyatt. Come over here!” he shouted.

“What, man? I’m playing Frisbee with Knox.”

“Come *here*, dude.”

“Oh, I’m coming.” Wyatt ran over and stopped next to Chet. “Okay, what did you want? I’m not doing the grill right now. I said I’d do it in an hour.”

“I know that. I just wanted you to see Olivia and Sadie.”

“Hey, Olivia.” He nodded at me and then he looked at Sadie. “Sadie?” His eyes widened as he looked her over. “What are you doing? You’re dressed up like Barbeque Barbie.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

“You look like Miss America or something. You know we’re on a ranch and not at the Four Seasons, right?”

“I’m not even dressed up, Wyatt. I just have makeup on.”

“Okay, is there someone coming that I should know about?”

“Sadie, ignore him. He’s just not used to you looking so hot,” Chet said.

“Well, thank you, *Chet*,” Sadie said pointedly.

Wyatt started to say something else, but I tuned them out when I saw Beau standing all the way to the right of us next to the fire pit.

“Hey, Sadie, I’ll speak to you later, okay? See you guys.” I headed over to Beau. He had started walking over to me as well, and we met in the middle.

“Hi.” He looked awkward.

“Hi,” I said.

He ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat. “So I guess I wanted to apologize for not being around much since we . . . you know.”

“Yeah, I was starting to wonder if it was me,” I joked, hoping he would tell me that of course it wasn’t.

“I’ve just had a lot on my mind recently,” he said. He cleared his throat again. There was a really serious expression on his face, and I was starting to feel nervous. “Look, there’s something I want to tell you, Olivia.”

“What is it?”

“So, do you remember when—” He paused and then looked over my shoulder. “Oh, shit.”

I frowned. “Sorry, what?”

“Nothing. It’s just . . .”

I heard a loud cackling voice behind me. I turned around to see what he was looking at. A beautiful redhead walked in wearing a tight white dress. She sashayed around the back of the yard, waving at everyone.

“I’m here. I’m here, everyone! Hold your applause, please. Hey, Chet. Sadie, I see you’ve gone to Macy’s and got some work done on your face. Wyatt, wow. You’ve grown up. Flint, Huck, Austin. Oh, is that your girlfriend, Austin? I heard you got with a city chick.”

Finally, she came up to Beau. She didn’t even bother looking at me. “Beau, honey, why are you so obsessed with me? Why do you keep calling me? And what was with that dick pic?”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Brittany?”

“I’m asking *you*. We broke up. It’s over. I mean, I guess I could give you another chance. I know that’s what you really want, but—”

“Brittany, what the hell?” he said.

She looked at me. “It’s crazy, these Hamilton men. They think they own you just because they fuck you a couple of times.” She rubbed his shoulder. “Yes, Beau, the fucks were good. And yes, I did love you. Obviously, you loved me, but you need to—”

Beau grabbed her wrist. “I’ll talk to you in a second, Olivia, okay?” He pulled her over to the side. It looked like they were arguing.

Lucy ran over to me. “Oh my gosh, what was that about?”

“I don’t know. I think that’s his ex.”

“Oh, is that Brittany?” she said.

“Yeah, that was her name. You’ve heard of her?”

She nodded. “She was his last ex. I forget why they broke up. Something to do with one of them not wanting to get

married and her dad telling him to leave her alone or something. I'm sorry. I don't really know what's going on."

"That's okay," I said, distracted. I was watching Beau and Brittany as they walked into the house. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay," she said. "You sure you're going to be okay, Olivia?"

"I'm fine."

I hurried toward the house. I knew I was being nosy, but I had to know what they were talking about. I entered the kitchen in time to see them walking down the hallway, arguing about something. I couldn't really hear what they were saying, and I didn't want to get close enough for them to see me. I tiptoed down the hallway, hanging back a bit.

"Look, Brittany, you need to move on with your life."

"You know you still love me. You know you want me and that we're meant to be together."

"I made a mistake, okay? I admit that. There's more to life than work. And our relationship—"

"I've missed you, Beau. I've missed you so much. You can't tell me you haven't missed me too."

"Brittany, I . . ." I couldn't hear what he said next because his voice was muffled, and I frowned. I peeked around the corner and saw Brittany holding on to him. He was looking down at her with an expression I'd never seen before and my heart froze.

"Brittany," he said, "you made me realize exactly what I want. I don't want to do this alone. The right person does make all the difference."

I gasped and stood back, pressing my head into the wall.

So he wanted to be with her, this Brittany. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't. I looked back around and saw that Brittany was still clinging to him.

“Oh, Beau. I’m so glad you’ve come to that realization. I’m so glad.”

Her eyes met mine over Beau’s shoulder and narrowed as we stared at each other. My face heated, and I quickly stepped back out of sight. Brittany’s voice got louder. Maybe she wanted me to hear her. Maybe she wanted to hurt me. But all I heard her say is, “I’m ready to marry you, Beau. Take me to your bedroom and fuck me like you did the last time. Fuck me hard and fuck me good.”

Tears rushed to my eyes, and I ran outside. I couldn’t deal with this anymore. Lucy was standing next to the fire pit, but as soon as she saw me, she rushed over.

“Olivia, what’s wrong? What’s wrong?”

“I have to go. I can’t do this, Lucy. I’m going to leave tomorrow.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

B eau

“Brittany, I really don’t know why you’re here.” I pushed my ex-girlfriend off me.

“You mean you’re not happy to see me?” She pouted and leaned up to kiss me.

I pushed her away again. “Brittany, we didn’t have a very good breakup.”

“But you just said you realized you’re ready for a real relationship because of me.”

“Yeah, but not *with* you.” I looked at her like she was crazy. “You’re crazy. Your dad came at me with a shotgun because you lied to him and told him I got you pregnant. And that I wouldn’t marry you.”

“Yeah, well, it *could* have been true,” she said. “Plus, you did kind of tell me that we were going to get married.”

“I never once told you anything like that. Brittany, you really need to—” My phone started ringing. It was Eric, one of my ranchers out in the field. “Hold on. Hey, what’s up? This is Beau.”

“Beau, there’s been an accident. One of the guys that works in the wheat fields has hurt himself.”

“Okay. How bad?”

“It’s pretty bad. It was with a combine harvester. It’s Tony; he’s really hurt. You need to come. Call the medics and bring the first-aid kit.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there. Where are you guys?”

“I’ll send you the compass location via text. Okay?”

“Sounds good.” I hung up. “Brittany, it’s over. I don’t know what trouble you were trying to start for me, but I’ve got to go. Will you go tell everyone at the party that there’s been an accident, and I’ve had to go out into the fields to see what’s going on?”

“Are you joking with me right now? What do you think I am, your secretary?”

“Please just do me this favor. And will you go tell Olivia I had to leave?”

“Who’s that? That little slut you were with? I know you’re not sleeping with her. Is she your girlfriend now?”

“I’m not talking to you about this. Just go tell her I had to leave. I can’t do this anymore with you.”

The expression in her eyes changed, and she smiled sweetly. “Of course, Beau. You just leave it up to me. You go help your men.”

“Thanks.” I ran out the front, grabbing my first-aid kit on the way. Chet and Wyatt were standing in the hallway as I left, and I decided to bring them with me. It was like they’d said—I couldn’t do everything alone.

“Hey, guys, we have to go out on the ranch. There’s been an accident. Tony. Combine harvester.”

“Oh, shit.” Wyatt nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Should we tell anyone?” Chet asked as we hurried toward the door.

“Brittany is taking care of it for me,” I replied. “She’ll let them know.”

“Oh, okay, cool.” We ran outside and I grabbed the keys to one of our Dodge trucks and sped off. My mind was still

reeling at the fact that Brittany had shown up. Fucking Brittany was still crazy. Why were some women so crazy and delusional? I had no idea why she'd come to the ranch and started making comments about me being obsessed with her and sending her dick pics. I'd never sent anyone a dick pic, and if I was going to, it certainly wouldn't be to someone like her.

I brought my thoughts back to where they belonged.

“Wyatt, can you call the Air Medics? The exact GPS location should be in my texts.” I handed him my phone. I wanted to speak to Olivia, but I'd have to wait. Why was this my luck? It seemed like I couldn't win for losing. Everything that could go wrong was going wrong. I just wanted to speak to Olivia. I just wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her.

I'd worry about that later, though. At least Brittany could tell her what was going on, and then I'd speak to Olivia later tonight, after the barbecue. It sucked that I was missing the barbecue. I loved hanging out with my brothers, and I'd been looking forward to relaxing a bit and having fun with them. I'd wanted to tell Olivia how I felt and see if she felt the same way. But now, I had to go again. Life sure was crazy, but I guess everything would work out in the end. I only hoped everything was going to be okay in the field. Right now, I had to focus on my ranch hands. That was what mattered right now.

“Did you see how Sadie was acting tonight?” Wyatt complained after he called the Helivacs.

“No.” I shook my head. “What was she doing?”

“She had on makeup and was dancing around.” He shook his head. “She has really let these city girls change her.”

“Um, what?” I stared at my brother for a few seconds. “You're complaining because she's trying to look pretty?”

“What are you going to do when she gets a boyfriend, dude?” Chet added.

“What are you talking about?” Wyatt snapped.

“Your best friend has gone all girly.” Chet laughed. “And she’s always talking about boys now. She’s not going on about mucking the stables anymore.”

Wyatt glared at him. “I have no idea what has come over her, but she needs to snap out of it.”

“Why?” I asked him. “You date. Why can’t she date as well? I think little Sadie deserves a good man.”

“Well, I think Olivia deserves a good man.” He made a face at me, and I just pressed my lips together. I wasn’t going to let him rile me up. If my idiot brother didn’t have a clue about his love life, that was on him.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Olivia

Brittany sashayed back into the backyard. I looked behind her to see if Beau was with her, but I didn't see him. I turned away and looked at Lucy so Brittany couldn't see that I cared. But she walked directly over to me.

"You're Olivia, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded slowly.

She glared at me. "I had a feeling."

"Excuse me?"

"Beau wanted me to give you a message."

"Um, okay."

"So I wanted to make sure that you're Olivia."

"We just confirmed that, right?"

"Yeah. He did say to look for the sluttiest woman in the back, and I saw you. So I kind of knew."

"He *what*?"

"Well, he wanted me to tell you that he's coming back to my place right now. He's actually just gone to pack some things in his bag, and we're going to be leaving. So have fun at the party." She looked me up and down. "I can't believe he

even gave you a second glance. But I guess he's come to his senses now."

"Excuse me? I don't—"

"You know exactly what I'm saying. Leave my man alone. And if I were you, I'd be gone by the time he gets back. No one likes a desperate woman."

"I'm not desperate. And I couldn't care less about Beau Hamilton."

"Sure, honey," she said, looking at me and then over to Lucy. "You must be the leftovers Austin hooked up with." She started laughing. "I guess he's slumming it as well."

Lucy just laughed. "You think Austin's slumming it with me?"

"No, honey. I don't think; I know." Brittany batted her eyelashes at us, and then looked back around the yard. "Such a beautiful place, Horseshoe Ranch. I can't wait till I'm the matriarch of this family."

"What are you even talking about?" said Lucy.

"When Beau and I get married, of course. Anyway, he's probably at the front waiting for me. Ta-ta!" She waved her fingers and walked around to the front of the house. I could feel tears prickling in my eyes again.

Lucy took my hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said with a quick nod.

"I don't believe her, Olivia. She's trash."

"She's beautiful. And she is his ex-girlfriend. I heard him saying something like she made him realize that he wants more in life or something like that."

"There's no way he's with her. She's joking. He'll be out in a second," she said.

"You think so?" Hope was the only thing I could cling to in that moment.

“Yeah, you’ll see. And then we’ll laugh, and he’ll laugh, and he’ll say that she’s just some psychopath, like from *Single White Female* or something. At least I don’t have to live with her.”

I pinched myself to stop the tears.

“You’re not really going to leave, are you?” Lucy said quietly.

“If Beau doesn’t come out and if this isn’t a joke, I am going to leave. I just don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“You’re here because you wanted to see me.”

“That’s true; I did come to see you. But I have a little confession to make.”

“Oh, what’s the confession?”

“You know when you FaceTimed me when you first got here months ago?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Beau was in the background then.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“And I kind of thought he was hot.”

“I know.” Lucy’s eyes widened. “Wait, you came for him and not for me?”

“Don’t take it like that. I came for both of you. Of course, I wanted to see you. I missed you. But I kind of wanted to check him out, I guess. He’s gorgeous, and I don’t know. Maybe I saw us having a love story like you and Austin.” I could feel my face getting warm. “I’m embarrassed even saying that out loud.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, Olivia. We all have daydreams and fantasies of a true love story.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t always work for us. Or at least not for me. It worked for you.”

“Austin’s amazing. I’m glad I came here. I took a chance, but it might not have worked out. Probability says that it

wouldn't have worked out. You know that right?"

"I know." I sighed. "I think I need to go pack my bags."

"Oh, please not now. Please?"

"Maybe after I eat something."

"Come on." Lucy led me over to the grill, where Austin was standing.

"Have you seen Wyatt?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"He was meant to man the grill. I bet he's gone off to do some bullshit just so he wouldn't have to take his turn. He's so irresponsible." He shook his head. "You girls, okay?"

"Yes. Thank you." I nodded.

"We're hungry," Lucy said. "Can we have some burgers, please?"

"Coming right up," he said. "You want cheese?"

"Yes, please," Lucy said.

"Hey, Sadie!" Austin shouted.

Sadie trotted up to us. "Yes?"

"Where's Wyatt?"

"How am I supposed to know? I'm not his keeper." She turned to me and Lucy. "Oh my gosh, Wyatt is really getting all my nerves. Do you know what he said to me?"

"No, what?"

"He said that only hookers wear red lipstick in the day."

"No way!"

"Yeah. Can you believe that?"

Despite being upset about Beau, I laughed. "How old is he? He sounds super old-fashioned."

"Right?" She paused. "You know what? I'm not even going to give his words any more credence. He's such an asshole."

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. Maybe he’s just—” I was about to say *into you*, but Lucy shook her head.

“Maybe he’s just what?” Sadie asked cluelessly.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “So Brittany said that she and Beau are leaving.” I looked at Sadie and Austin to see if they knew what was going on.

“What do you mean, leaving?” Austin growled.

“She said that he realizes he wants more from life and that he needs the support or something. And I guess he wants to try with her again.”

“No fucking way!” Austin cursed. “I can’t believe this bullshit. After everything I’ve done for this dude, he goes back to Brittany.”

“So they had a special relationship before?”

“I don’t know that I would say special. I mean, they fucked.” He paused and looked at Lucy, who was glaring at him. “Well, you know,” he stammered. “Look, I’m a dude and I don’t really know what you want to hear. But let’s just say Beau has been kind of out of his mind recently. He’s taken on a lot here at the ranch, and maybe it’s just been too much. Me and the rest of our brothers talked to him, and we told him we’ve got his back and he should focus on other things. But I didn’t mean to get back together with Brittany.” He shook his head. “That dude is crazy.”

Lucy touched him on the arm. “I think that’s enough about Brittany.”

“What? I’m just saying. You’re the one that asked; I was only answering. It’s not like they were in love or anything. They banged a couple of times, and I don’t even—” He stopped and looked at me. “Sorry, Olivia. Is this a little TMI?”

“It’s fine,” I said, almost choking on my words. “If they had something and they’re getting back together, I guess it is what it is. Good for him. I’m happy for him. He deserves happiness. He’s a good guy. I need to go inside now.” I turned and rushed into the house.

“You see what you did, you jackass?” I heard Lucy hiss at Austin as she followed me. “Hold up, Olivia. Hold up!” She ran after me and grabbed me by the arm. “I’m sorry. He’s a man, and you know men don’t think when they talk.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m glad to know the truth. I guess Beau’s not coming back out.”

Sadie caught up with us. “Hey, is everything okay? What was that about Brittany and Beau?”

We stood next to the French doors in the kitchen as the tears ran down my face. Then Arya stepped into the kitchen as well.

“I saw you girls running. Is everything okay?” She saw my face. “Oh no, Olivia what’s going on? What happened?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Beau’s just gone to be with his ex-girlfriend.”

“No,” she shook her head. “No, there’s no way.”

“He did. He left. And he sent *her* to come tell me. He’s gone. He’s not in the house. I guess he didn’t want to face me. Maybe he knew he would hurt me, and he didn’t want to deal with it. I don’t know. I can’t believe this has happened to me.”

“I thought he really liked you.” Arya looked stunned. “I guess I really can’t tell what guys are thinking at all. I’m so sorry, Olivia.”

“It’s okay. It’s really okay.” I said, though I’d never felt less okay in my life.

“I just don’t believe it,” Sadie said, flabbergasted. “Brittany has always been a crazy bitch. Wyatt and I could never stand her when they were dating. And I don’t even think Beau even liked her that much. Is he crazy?”

“I think all the Hamilton men might be crazy,” Lucy said.

“You’re right about that. Wyatt’s acting like an asshole, too,” Sadie grumbled.

Lucy stroked my arm. “We could go to the bar again tonight.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to the bar anymore. I just want to go home.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Lucy asked. “Can we get you anything? Do you want us to sit inside?”

“You guys go back to the party, okay? I just need some time to myself to think and pack.”

“You can’t leave,” Lucy said. “Not right away.”

“I don’t want to see him again, Lucy. It hurts too much. I feel used. I feel stupid. I feel—I don’t even know anymore, but my heart is breaking and I can’t see him. What if he comes back with her? I couldn’t bear to see them together, kissing each other and touching each other. I just couldn’t.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’ll fly back to New York with you.”

“No, you can’t. You belong here.”

“I’m not letting you go back alone. I’m your best friend. Austin will be fine without me. He’s lived most of his life without me anyway.”

“I’ll come too,” Sadie said. “I’d love to see New York. And if you have me in town and you have to show me around, it will keep your mind off Beau.”

“Oh, Sadie, you don’t have to do that.”

“I’d offer to come,” Arya said, “but I really have no money, and I can’t move Eloise again.”

“Please don’t worry about it.”

“But I can come, right?” Sadie said. “Please?”

“Okay, sure. It’ll be fun. And maybe you’ll meet a New York guy, and you won’t even want to come back to Montana.”

“That would be pretty cool. I’d miss my family. But sometimes, it kind of sucks being around the Hamilton brothers,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong. I love them, they’re fantastic, and they’re like my family. But do you know what it’s like to grow up with seven really attractive, really hot guys and not one of them look at you like you’re a woman?” She

sighed. “And I *am* a woman now. I’m not a little kid. I’m not a tomboy. But they don’t see me like that. They make me feel invisible.”

“I never really thought about it like that.” I gave her a quick hug. “But you’re gorgeous, Sadie. Trust me, any man would be happy to be with you.”

“Well, I hope so,” she said. “Maybe once I get out of this small town, I’ll meet a guy that really appreciates me.”

“Oh, you will,” I said. “Trust me on that. But, guys, go back to the party. I don’t want people to start worrying and talking. I’ll be back out in a little bit. I just need some time to myself, to compose myself and have a little cry.”

“Okay,” Lucy said. “But if you need anything, you text or call me and I’ll come right to the bedroom.”

“Thanks, Lucy. You’re amazing.”

“You’re my best friend.”

“You’re my best friend, too. And Sadie and Arya, we might be new friends, but you’re two of the best women I’ve ever met in my life, and I’m proud to call you my friends as well.”

“Thank you, Olivia.” Sadie beamed at me.

“I’ve loved meeting you all,” Arya added. “I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“Okay, guys, let’s not have a cry fest,” I said. “Shoo. I’ll talk to you later.”

I headed to my bedroom. I needed to be by myself. I needed to let it all out because my heart was breaking. I couldn’t believe that Beau hadn’t been man enough to come and tell me himself. He’d sent Brittany, who seemed like an absolutely horrible person. Even if he wasn’t with me, Beau could do better than her.

As horrible as she was, there was no denying she was beautiful. I guess for some men, that was all that mattered.

I opened my suitcase and started flinging my clothes into it, then gave up, falling on top of the clothes and sobbing into them. This was going to be so hard— leaving my new friends, my new family, and the man I had fallen for.

Because I knew one hundred percent that I had fallen in love with Beau Hamilton with all my heart.

Chapter Fifty-Six

B eau

“Well, I’m absolutely exhausted,” I said to a very tired Wyatt and Chet as we walked back into the house. It was almost midnight. We’d been gone all day. Tony had lost a couple of fingers, and he hadn’t been the only one who’d been injured. It had been a shit show out there. I didn’t even know what to think, but we were going to have to hire some new foreman and ranch hands.

“I’m just glad that everyone’s alive,” Chet said, shaking his head. “It sucks that we missed the barbecue.”

“Yep.” Wyatt yawned. “What a day. I’m glad we were able to be there with you, big brother. You shouldn’t have to handle something like that yourself.”

I managed a chuckle. “Well, sounds like the youngest is trying to make me feel all sappy and sentimental.”

“Why do you always call me the youngest?” Wyatt said. “I’m an adult, you know.”

“You might be an adult, but you’re still the youngest. So you’ll always be our baby brother.” I grabbed his ear and pulled.

“Knock it off, Beau!” he grumbled. “I’m not a little kid, and you’re not Mom or Dad, so you can’t get away with it.”

“I’m almost like your dad,” I said, chuckling. But I sobered up quickly, thinking that if Dad did pass, I would be in charge once and for all.

“I’m going to bed,” Wyatt said. “I’ve been texting Sadie all night as we drove back, and she hasn’t responded to me. I’m guessing she’s mad or something.”

“Maybe you should apologize with some flowers,” I said.

“Eh, I don’t want her head to get too big.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean, if I compliment her and give her flowers and stuff, she’s going to think she’s the belle of the ball or something.”

“Wyatt, are you freaking kidding me right now?”

“What?” He looked at me with a confused expression. “I’m just saying, you know how girls are.”

“I know how women are. And obviously you don’t,” I said.

“You’re going to lose her, man,” Chet said. “You’re a fricking idiot.”

“We’ve been best friends forever. That’s never going to change.”

“You don’t think that when she gets married, her husband is going to be her best friend?” Chet said.

“She’s not even dating anyone. She’s not going to be getting married anytime soon. So no, I’m not really worried about it.”

“Okay, dude.” Chet rolled his eyes and looked at me. “Absolutely fucking clueless.”

“Clueless about what?” Wyatt started to get angry.

“You don’t think Sadie’s hot, bro?”

“Sadie?” Wyatt made a face. “Oh my gosh. Are you joking? She’s *Sadie*.”

“Chet, leave it.” I laughed. “He’s an idiot. Anyway, I’m going to check out the stables and make sure everything’s okay, and then I’m going to head to bed as well. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

We parted ways and I walked to the kitchen so that I could get a beer. I thought about going to Olivia’s room, but I wasn’t sure if she was in bed. I’d also tried calling her once we’d figured everything out, but she hadn’t answered my calls either. Granted, I hadn’t started calling until ten p.m., so maybe she was already asleep. I decided to go check out the stables and then drop by Olivia’s room. But then I realized it was already late. I’d go to Olivia’s room first.

I walked quietly down the corridor, not wanting anyone to know what I was up to, even though Austin and Lucy already seemed to know everything. And if Austin and Lucy knew it, then I was pretty sure everyone else in the house knew that we’d hooked up. Aside from my dad and his health issues, there were no secrets in the Hamilton family.

I knocked gently on Olivia’s bedroom door. There was no answer. I knocked a little bit harder, but still no response. I turned the door handle and peeked in to see if she was sleeping, but the bed was empty. I frowned as I walked into the bedroom and looked around. She wasn’t in here. And the door to her bathroom was open. Where the heck could she be?

I walked back out of the bedroom and down the corridor feeling flummoxed. I wanted to ask Lucy where she was, but I knew Austin would kill me if I went into their bedroom. They were either making love or sleeping. Either way, they wouldn’t be happy if I interrupted.

I sighed and walked back outside. There was a light on in the stables, and I frowned. There should be no lights on in the stables. It was always dark after hours. I grabbed one of my guns and headed toward the stable. Hopefully, there wasn’t going to be more trouble today.

“Who’s there?” I said as I reached the stable entrance. I saw someone on a horse walking toward me. “Olivia?” I was

surprised to see her sitting on a new mare who wasn't yet broken in.

“What are you doing?” I said, concerned. This horse was far too powerful for a new rider like Olivia.

“I'm going for a ride,” she said. “What are you doing? How come you're back already?”

“Um, because everything's done.”

“Oh, so you got some and then left another woman by herself?” she snapped.

“What are you talking about?”

“Is that your MO, Beau Hamilton? Do you find a woman, fuck her, and then leave?”

“What?” My jaw dropped. “What are you talking about?”

“Whatever. I'm going.”

“Olivia, wait!”

But she kicked the horse in the flanks and went galloping past me. Fuck. I couldn't believe it. She wasn't listening to me. I quickly went around to one of the stalls and grabbed another mare and jumped on.

“Come on, Maisy. Let's go,” I said, kicking the horse into a gallop.

I felt sick to my stomach when I heard Olivia's screams in the distance. I was pretty sure that her horse had probably gone too fast and she'd fallen. There was no way she'd know how to hang on, because this horse also liked to buck and rear. She was a good horse with a lot of potential, but she was still in training.

What the hell was Olivia thinking? I couldn't believe she'd decided to go riding in the middle of the night by herself. I found her a moment later. She was on the ground, crying, her horse standing a few yards away.

I jumped off Maisy and rushed over to her. “Are you okay? Where does it hurt? Tell me where hurts.”

“Ah, everything hurts,” she said, rubbing her leg. “Oh my gosh. Why? Why did it do that to me?”

“Because you went on a pretty much unbroken horse. What were you doing? I was trying to tell you to stop.”

“I thought you were just telling me to stop, not that the horse was faulty.”

I couldn't help a laugh. “The horse isn't faulty. She's just not well trained yet.”

“Well, why didn't you tell me that?”

“Why did you think you were ready to go riding by yourself in the middle of the night when you've gone riding exactly one time in your life?”

“Because you said that it makes you feel better. When you can't sleep and you just want some nature, you like to go riding. I couldn't sleep, and I thought it would help me.”

“Why couldn't you sleep?”

“Because of you and Brittany.”

“Me and Brittany?” I sat down on the ground next to her and cradled her head into my lap. “What are you talking about?”

“You left to be with Brittany because you love her.”

“Okay, I'm really confused now. What?”

“Brittany came when you left this afternoon. She told us you went to go pack up your stuff so that you could take her on some sort of romantic date or something.”

“Brittany did what? The fuck!” I shouted. “Oh my God, that bitch is getting on my last nerve.”

Now it was Olivia's turn to look confused. “Why did you call Brittany a bitch?”

“Because she's a bitch, obviously. That fucking liar.”

“She lied? But you disappeared.”

“There was an accident on the ranch. I had to go right away. I'd been talking with her right when I got the call. I

asked her to go to the back to tell you and the others that I had to go tend to an emergency and that I'd be back later. Of course we weren't running off into the sunset together." I shook my head. "Do you really think I would do that, Olivia?"

"I don't know." She sniffled. "I thought you fell in love with her again and wanted her back." She was sobbing now. "My leg hurts."

"Oh, darling," I said and moved her head slightly onto the ground. "I'm going to feel your legs, and we're going to see if anything's broken or sprained. Okay?"

"Oh my gosh. Why did this happen to me?"

"Because you didn't listen to me."

"I'm so fed up with this place."

"What does that mean?"

"I want to go home."

"Why?"

"Because of you and Brittany."

"But she lied, Olivia. I just told you that."

"Well, because . . . I don't know. I just can't deal with this anymore."

"You can't deal with what anymore?"

"This just hurts too much, Beau. I don't know if I'm coming or going with you. You're hot and you're cold."

"I'm sorry. That's why I wanted to talk to you this afternoon," I said. She winced as I touched her ankle. "You've either got a fracture or a sprain. Let's hope it's a sprain. I'm going to hold you up, and we'll see if you can walk on it."

She sobbed again. "It hurts. Can you give me a couple of minutes to just lie here?"

"It's cold, Olivia."

"Please."

“Fine,” I said. I sat back down, put her head back on my lap, and stroked her hair.

“Brittany is an ex. We dated, but she was crazy. She told her dad we were going to get married, and when he found out I had no intention of marrying her, he threatened to kill me. I told her I never wanted to hear from her again. It wasn’t even a serious relationship. We hooked up a few times. I have a past, yes, and I made a mistake. Lots of us men do. She was hot and —”

“You don’t have to tell me anymore.” She was starting to look annoyed.

“Fine. I just wanted you to know that she means nothing to me. You have to believe that.”

“I was wondering how you could be with someone like her. She’s horrible.”

“Trust me, I know. And I will have to have a very serious conversation about what she said to you this afternoon.”

“I don’t want you talking to her again. She’s a bitch.”

“Don’t worry about it, Olivia. I need to talk to her again, because if she thinks she can go around lying about me, she’s got another thing coming. I can ruin her father. She doesn’t know this, but we have an eighty percent stake in his ranch. I could have them out within days if I chose.”

“Oh, wow. I didn’t know that.”

“No one knows that,” I said. “Part of the reason why we’re so overextended is because we’ve invested in a lot of smaller ranches in the area that haven’t been doing well financially. I know you don’t really know about dairy farms and farming in general, but it’s a dying industry. And a lot of families haven’t been making enough money to pay their bills and take care of their kids and families. And my family and I, we don’t want to see people losing their livelihoods. People losing the ranches that they’ve had in their families for years. So we’ve been helping them out financially.”

“That’s really kind of you.”

“Oh, we’re not a nonprofit. It’s business, and we’ll make a profit. It’s just a slow process.” I sighed. “But enough about that. I need us to talk about us.”

“Us?” she squeaked.

“Yes, us. Brittany lied because she was mad, and she was jealous because she knows I want you. I don’t want her. I’ve never wanted her. And she knew that. She was mad because I finally found someone that I did want.”

“You did?”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you this afternoon. I had a meeting with my brothers the other day, and they made me realize that I’m not in this alone. We can handle this business at the ranch together. I’ve been obstinate and stupid, and it’s been a lot of pressure, and I didn’t think I could handle taking care of the ranch and being in a relationship because relationships require time and energy. But I realize now that there’s nothing more important to me than you.”

I stroked her hair. “You make me happy. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before. You make me want to be a better person and help others. Have a family and love. I want to see little kids around here.”

“But you know I might not be able to have kids, Beau. I told you about my PCOS.”

“I know.” I nodded. “We’ll go to fertility doctors and whatever we need to do. If we’re not able to have our own kids biologically, then we can adopt or foster. It doesn’t matter. You do want to have kids, right?”

“I want a huge family; I told you that before. I just don’t know if it’s going to be possible.”

“You know, Olivia, whatever God’s plan is or whatever the universe has in store for us, it’ll happen. I have faith in that. If it’s meant to be, it will happen. Because you know what?”

“What?” she said, beaming up at me.

“Years ago, I wished for a happy marriage and a connection with someone like my mom and dad have. I’d

almost forgotten about that. But as I thought about how much I loved you and wanted to be with you, I realized that we have that. We have something really special. And even though it wasn't something I'd been looking for recently, or even on my mind, it was something I wanted subconsciously. I don't want to lose you. I need you, Olivia. I think I'm falling in love with you. I don't want you to go back to New York; I want you to stay here. I want to continue getting to know you better and making love to you every single day. And you can design our cabins from here, and our house."

"*Our* house?"

"I'm not like Austin. I'm not crazy, and I'm not going to propose after a few dates. But I already know you're the woman I want to marry. I want to see you walking down that aisle in a white dress someday. And who knows? Maybe by the time Lucy and Austin get married, we'll be ready as well, and we'll have a double wedding."

"Firstly," she said with a laugh, "I hope when you do propose, it's much better than this. And secondly, I don't know about a double wedding. Every woman wants to feel special on their wedding day."

"Fine," I agreed. "Trust me, I might not be the most romantic man in the world, but when I propose, it will be the most romantic experience of your life."

"Really?" She was smiling now.

"Really," I told her. "But right now, this is my promise to you. I promise to love you, listen to you, honor you, respect you, and to always be there for you. I promise not to ever let you feel alone. And I'm sorry if I've made you feel that in the last few days. It's been a lot."

"I know. The ranch has been weighing heavily on your mind, hasn't it?" She reached up and stroked my face. "I understand, Beau. It seems like a lot; a really big responsibility. I'll do whatever I can to help."

"It's more than that," I said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

“It’s about my dad.” My voice cracked.

She sat up. “What is it? Beau, what is it?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I trust you and I love you and I need someone to know. I need some support.”

“Oh my gosh. Beau, what is it?”

“My dad’s sick. He’s gone to Seattle for heart surgery, and he might not make it. We don’t know. Mom and Dad didn’t want my brothers to know, so you have to promise not to tell anyone. Don’t tell Lucy or Sadie or anyone, okay?”

She grabbed my face and kissed me firmly on the lips. “I’m so sorry. You’ve been carrying this by yourself?”

I nodded as a tear rolled down my cheek.

“Oh, Beau.” She ran her hands through my hair and kissed me again, and I felt myself softening as we held each other.

“Thank you for understanding,” I said. “It’s been a lot. I’m strong and I can take it, but it’s been a lot. I’m so worried. What if he doesn’t make it? What if he dies? I don’t know what I would do.”

“He’s not going to die.” She grabbed my hands and squeezed. “Look at me,” she said firmly. “He’s not going to die. He’s going to be okay. I promise you that.”

“But you can’t promise me. You don’t know.”

“Trust me,” she said. She took my hand and placed it on her heart. “He’s going to be okay. I feel it in my heart. He’s going to be okay.”

I kissed her and then ran my fingers through her hair. I could feel her heart beating as we kissed, and I wondered how I could have lived so many years without her in my life. Without someone as wonderful and calming and passionate and sweet and sexy as Olivia.

I pulled back and looked into her eyes. “You’re everything to me. You know that, right?”

“Really? I don’t know what to say.”

“You’re perfect. Absolutely perfect in every single way. My mom made a comment to me once that you are astute, but you’re so much more than that. You’re loving. You’re sweet. You’re kind. You’re everything I ever could have dreamt of or asked for.”

“And so are you, Beau. You are the most marvelous, standup guy I’ve met in my life.”

“And the sexiest?” I grinned.

“And sexiest.”

“How’s your ankle?” I asked.

“It’s okay. Why?”

“Well, if you were up to it, I was thinking . . .”

She giggled. “You were thinking what?”

“Well, you know.”

“Um, Beau, we can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too cold!”

“Well, can we if we get back to the house?”

“I guess so.” She smiled. “If you want to.”

“I always want to.” I laughed. “Is that even a question?”

“I guess not.”

“I love you, Olivia. I really and truly love you. My heart is so full right now. I don’t even know how to express the amount of love I have in there.”

“Maybe you can express it to me in the bedroom.”

“Oh, I can definitely do that.” I laughed. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and placed it in front of us.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m taking a photo. I want to capture this moment forever.”

“I look like a mess,” she said, shaking her head.

“You’re beautiful. You’re always beautiful,” I said as I took the picture and showed it to her. “See?”

She laughed. “We look cute.”

“So you like it?”

“I do.” She nodded. “You’ll have to send it to me.”

“Of course. I’ll print it out, and I’ll put it in a photo album and in a picture frame and all over the house.”

“I think one copy is okay.”

“I’m going to also have a copy of my wallet so I can always remember this moment.”

“That would be nice,” she said. “That’s so sweet.”

“No, Olivia, there’s nothing sweeter than you. Today has been such a long, horrible day, but tonight you’ve made all my dreams come true. I love you.”

“I love you too, Beau. I’ve never loved you more than anyone in my life. And I love your family. And I’m so happy that I’m here.”

“My mom is going to be so happy when she gets back.” I laughed.

“You think so?”

“I know so.” I nodded. “She loves you already, and to know that we found love, it’ll make her a day. Just as much as it’s made mine.”

Chapter Fifty-Seven

O livia

My arms were wrapped around Beau's neck as he carried me through the hallway to his bedroom. I giggled slightly as I looked up at him, giddy with happiness. I couldn't believe that he was in love with me. I couldn't believe that Brittany had lied to me—though if I'd been smart, I would've understood that there was no way Beau would be with someone like her. Even if he hadn't come to his senses and let his guard down with me, he wasn't the sort of guy to be with a bitch like Brittany.

"What are you thinking, my love?" he said as he opened the door and we walked into his bedroom.

"Nothing," I said softly, not wanting him to know I was thinking about Brittany. She didn't deserve any more energy from either of us. "You didn't have to carry me, you know. I'm too heavy for that."

"No, I'm just getting practice in."

"Practice in for what?"

"For when I carry you into our matrimonial bedroom," he said.

"Really, Beau?"

"What? You don't think that's romantic?"

I laughed as he put me on the bed and then sat down next to me.

“How’s your ankle?”

“It’s okay,” I said and moved it slightly and then winced. “Okay, it’s aching a little bit.”

“I’m going to get you an ice pack and some ibuprofen and water.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I do have to do that,” he said as he jumped up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” I looked around his bedroom as he left. It was a typical masculine bedroom. He had pictures of Ferraris and horses on the wall. I wondered if the posters were from when he was a child. There was a cowboy hat sitting on a chair and a bunch of jeans on the floor. So at least he wasn’t a neat freak.

He was back almost immediately. “I’m going to wrap this around your ankle. It’s going to be cold.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do it now, do you?”

“Yeah, and I’m going to put a pillow under it as well. We should keep it elevated.”

“But how are we going to make love if my ankle is wrapped in ice and my leg is resting on a pillow?”

“Don’t you worry about that, Olivia,” he assured me. “I’ve got my ways.”

“You are a dirty man, aren’t you?”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” He winked at me and handed me a bottle of water and two ibuprofens. “Now, take these. It will help with the pain.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “I really don’t want you to be lying there in pain if you don’t have to.”

“Maybe I’ll take one,” I said. I opened the bottle of water, chugged a little, and then swallowed the pill. I placed the other

pill on the side table next to the bed. “You’re a good nurse.”

“Nurse?” he said. “Don’t you mean doctor?”

“Sorry, Beau. You’re a good doctor.”

“I pride myself on being gentlemanly, especially to the woman I love.”

“I love you, too.” I stared at him, happy to say the words and almost unbelieving. I couldn’t believe I was that much of a cliché to fall in love with someone so quickly. When Lucy had told me she was falling for Austin, I’d rolled my eyes. How often do you fall in love with someone and decide to marry them and move thousands of miles away? But here I was, just a few months later, falling in love with her fiancé’s brother.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed suddenly.

Beau looked at me in concern. “What is it? Is it really hurting?”

“No, I just realized something.”

“What did you realize?”

“When Lucy marries Austin and we get married, it means Lucy and I will be sisters. We’ll be real sisters. We’ve always been best friends and we’ve felt like we were sisters, but this will be real. It’s amazing. I just can’t believe it.”

“I didn’t even think about that.” He grinned. “I guess that makes you happy?”

“It’s amazing.” I laughed. “I can’t wait until I tell her.”

“Okay.”

“If you don’t want me to say anything, I won’t.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you to say anything?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you want to keep it a secret for now?”

“Honey, there’s no keeping it a secret. I love you and this is now your bedroom. There’s no way you’re going back to your own room after this.”

“What about your parents?”

“As soon as my parents get back, God willing”—he took a deep breath—“I’m going to let them know that we’re in love, you’re staying, and you’re going to help me with the eco-retreat.”

“I was thinking maybe I could take an interior design class online or see if there’s a community college or something around here where I could do some design classes.”

“Whatever you want, my love.”

“You’re so sweet, Beau. And I can get student loans to pay for it. You don’t have to worry that I’ll expect anything from you.”

“You’re not getting student loans.”

“But I don’t have enough money in the bank to pay for it.”

“I’ll pay for it.”

“No, you can’t pay for it. That’s just too much.”

“I’m not broke, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter if you are,” I said softly. “I’ll still love you even if, for some reason, you don’t have the ranch anymore and we have to move to a motel or a trailer park or whatever. I’ll still be here for you. I’ll still love you.”

He laughed. “I have millions of dollars in the bank. All of the brothers do.” He stroked my cheek. “I’m not going to be in the street. We’re not going to be in a trailer park unless you want to live in a trailer or an RV or whatever you want. Frankly, I don’t care. I just want to be with you.”

“But you’ve been so worried about money—”

“My family has trusts for all of us. My brothers and I are well taken care of. The real concern is the ranch and all the other families we support,” he said. “If push comes to shove, we could dip into our own personal finances and see what we could do. But in business, that’s not always a smart idea. I’d like to be able to leave something for future generations, just as this was left for us.”

“I get it.” I nodded. “I understand.”

“But I love you even more knowing that you’d still be with me if I was broke.”

“Of course, Beau. I didn’t fall for you because of your money.”

“I know. It was my big cock.”

“Really?”

“What? Tell me you don’t love my big cock.”

“Are you going to say that again?”

“Say what? Big cock, big cock, big cock?”

“Beau Hamilton, that is enough.”

“Would you rather me say gigantic cock?”

“Beau!”

“What?” He kissed me on the side of the face. “I love seeing you looking all mad at me.”

“I’m not mad at you, but I wouldn’t call it either of those things.”

“What would you call it then, my dear?”

“I’d call it your *ginormous* cock.” I giggled.

“Oh, yeah? And do you want this ginormous cock inside you right now?”

“You’re so dirty.”

“As you get to know me better, you’ll realize this is only the beginning. I like it dirty. I like it rough. I like it in nature.” He blew into my ear. “So whenever you’re ready and willing, I’ll show you every single side of me.”

“Oh, I’m willing. Trust me, I’m willing.”

“Really?” he said.

“Maybe I like it dirty, too.” I licked my lips slowly and he growled. He reached for my pants, undid the zipper, and pulled them down. “Beau, what are you doing?”

“I’m about to fuck you, my love,” he growled as he pulled off his shirt. I pulled my top off and he whistled. I loved the way he looked at me. “Take your bra off,” he ordered.

“Oh? What if I say no?”

“Then I’ll take it off for you.” He chuckled and I felt his hands running over my breasts and slipping inside my bra. He pinched my nipples, and I cried out at the feel of his rough, callous hands against my skin. His hands reached around to my back, unclasping my bra and pulling it off.

“Hey!” I objected.

“I told you if you didn’t do it, I’d do it myself.”

“But you didn’t even give me a chance.”

“I couldn’t wait any longer,” he said. His lips pressed against my skin, and he kissed his way down to my breasts. He started sucking on my nipples, and I cried out as his fingers slipped inside my panties and rubbed my clit. I was ready for him.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he murmured against my lips, slipping a finger inside of me. “I want to be inside you right now, Olivia.”

“Then fuck me, Beau. Fuck me deep and hard.”

“I don’t want to hurt your ankle.”

“I don’t care about my ankle right now. Take your pants off.” I reached over and undid his zipper and his button.

He laughed as I fumbled with his jeans. “I got it.” He jumped up and quickly pulled off both his jeans and his shirt. I stared at the outline of his large cock. In response, Beau grinned and pulled his briefs down. His cock sprang free, and I leaned forward and pulled him back onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Something I’ve wanted to do for a long time.” I smirked as I got on top of him.

“Oh?” He grinned up at me as I straddled him. I felt his cock rubbing against me. He groaned as he reached up and

pinched my nipples. “Fuck, I’m so hard and so ready for you, Olivia. I’ve been thinking about this since the other morning.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

“Well, I guess I did fool you, but now you know the truth. I want you with every fiber of my being.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said as I moved forward slightly and rubbed myself back and forth on his hardening cock.

“Oh fuck, Olivia.”

“Yes?” I said as I reached down and positioned him between my legs and then lowered myself on his cock. He was big and hard, and I had to move back and forth slightly so that I could fit all of him inside me.

“Shit, shit,” he groaned. “Oh my God. I should put a condom on.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “I’m on the pill.”

“Well, you’ll need to come off that soon.” He grinned up at me.

“Oh?” I looked at him with a small smile.

“If we want to try for kids, you should come off it, right?”

“Do we want to try for kids right away?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “If it might be hard, maybe we should try and figure out if we can have kids or not as soon as possible.”

“I guess so.” I gasped. “But this is something we can discuss later.”

I rocked back and forth on his cock, and he growled as he grabbed my hips and guided me up and down. We moved in a rhythm that both of us seemed to know intuitively, and I could feel him getting harder and harder. I was already close to orgasm, and as he reached up and played with my clit, I felt myself trembling on top of him.

“Don’t stop,” he moaned as I stilled. “Don’t stop.” I kept moving my ass around in circles as I bounced on top of him

and before I knew what was happening, he was moving my hips faster and faster so that both of us were exploding at the same time. I felt his hot semen spurting inside me as I came on top of him, and I collapsed, kissing him on the mouth. He kissed me back passionately, and I rolled over to the side.

“That was fucking amazing,” he said with a small smile. “Oh my God, you are absolutely the best, Olivia.”

“I can only be the best because I’m with the best.”

“I can’t wait to make love to you for the rest of our lives every morning and every night.”

“And some lunchtimes in between.”

“Oh, every lunchtime if you want. Hey, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Whatever you want is fine by me.”

“You think you can go that many times, big boy?”

“I know I can,” he said. “In fact, give me five more minutes and I’ll have you on all fours, and I’ll be fucking you from behind.”

He reached down and played with my clit. I squirmed on the bed. I was ready for him again already, and I loved the fact that we were so open with each other.

“Can you believe this is actually reality?” I said to him as we lay there.

“Yes,” he whispered in my ear, “I can. I’m so thankful for you.”

“And I’m so thankful for you as well,” I said. “I guess we must’ve been good people in one life.”

He grinned. “Only one? Maybe two.” He laughed. “But at least we know we’ve got a whole eternity to please each other and make each other come.” He growled and pushed me up, and I raised my eyebrows at him. “I’m ready for round two if you are,” he said.

I rolled over onto all fours with a grin. He pushed me forward and my ass went up into the air, and I felt him positioning his cock at my entrance.

As he slid inside me, I cried out, “Oh, yes! This is amazing, Beau. Please never stop fucking me.”

“I never will.” And then all I could hear were the sounds of him slamming inside me. As he reached in front of me and played with my clit, I felt like I had died and gone to heaven, and I never wanted the feeling to end.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

B eau
One Week Later

“Okay, guys, I think he’s coming. Be quiet.” I looked around the room and glared at my brothers so that they didn’t dare talk.

“Okay. I mean, wow. Mom and Dad are coming back from their second honeymoon. Yay.” Austin rolled his eyes.

I gave him a quick glare and looked over at Olivia. She touched my hand gently, and I smiled back at her in appreciation. She was the only one that knew how momentous this really was.

Mom had called me two days ago to say that the surgery had gone well and Dad was recovering. He needed to watch his diet and his exercise level, but the doctors were hopeful that he had plenty of years left as long as he took care of himself.

“He’s coming,” Sadie said, running back into the kitchen. “They’re coming, they’re coming!”

“Shh, Sadie,” I said. “Hide.”

“Yeah, Sadie,” Wyatt added as she crouched next to him behind the kitchen table. They’d been arguing all morning because Sadie was going to go to Idaho for a week to hang out with her cousins and party, and he wasn’t happy about that.

But I figured it would do Wyatt some good to spend time without her. Maybe he'd realize what he was missing if she wasn't there. Olivia kissed me on the cheek and I grinned at her.

“What was that for?”

“For being strong, and for being the sort of man that looks after his family and makes things okay.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she said with a small smile.

We heard the door open and then footsteps in the direction of the kitchen. As my parents approached, it suddenly struck me that this might not be the best idea. If Dad had heart issues, was it really smart to give him a surprise party? I didn't want to give him a heart attack.

I looked around at everyone waiting in anticipation. I didn't want to ruin the surprise that Wyatt and Sadie had come up with, but I also didn't want to tell them why the surprise might not be a good idea.

“I don't know if this is a good idea,” I whispered to Olivia. “With Dad's heart issue, what if the shock gives him a heart attack?”

“Oh, I didn't think about that.” She put a hand to her mouth. “What do we do?”

“I don't know, but we don't have long. They're about to walk into the kitchen.”

“Okay.” She jumped up and ran out of the kitchen. “Amelia, Ranger. It's so great to see you both! Everyone's in the kitchen. Come on in.”

I looked around the kitchen. Expressions ranged from disappointed to hurt to angry. My brothers were pissed, and I knew they were going to give Olivia a hard time because of this. But I knew why she'd done it, and that's why I loved her. She didn't care what my brothers thought about her, and she also knew I didn't want to betray my parents' trust. So she did the only thing she could do. She ruined the surprise before my

dad walked into the kitchen. I jumped up and followed behind her.

“Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad, how was Seattle?” I said as if I didn’t know what was going on.

“It was fine. Thank you, son.” Dad gave me a firm pat on the arm. “I’ll want updates on everything that’s been going on since I’ve been gone.”

“Sure. We can talk tomorrow morning?”

“Sounds good.”

Amelia looked back and forth between me and Olivia and she smiled. “Am I picking up a sign that you two are possibly together?”

“Yes.” I wrapped my arm around Olivia’s shoulder. “Olivia and I are in love and we will be getting married. Not right away, but she’s going to stay here in Montana, and we’re going to work on the eco-retreat together. She’s going to take some classes online and learn more about the ranch.”

“Well, I guess we need to go away a bit more often, then.” Mom gave me a big hug and kiss. She then turned to Olivia and gave her a big hug and kiss as well. “Welcome to the family, dear. We’re so happy to have you.”

“Thank you,” Olivia said. “I hope you don’t think this is absolutely way too fast and crazy.”

“Not at all. I’ll tell you a little secret.” Amelia lowered her voice. “The first time Lucy told me her best friend was coming, I had hope.”

“Mom, do not tell me that this was part of your plan as well,” I interrupted.

“Of course not.” She shook her head. “I’d never even met Olivia, but I knew whoever was a good friend of Lucy’s had to be a wonderful woman, and when she showed up and I saw the way you two were together, I did have my hopes and dreams, and I guess they came true.” She smiled. “Now, where are my other boys?”

“They’re in the kitchen. Sadie’s there as well.”

“Ah, Sadie.” She looked at me hopefully. “Anything new with her and Wyatt?”

“Mom, you know he’s clueless, and she’s kind of clueless too.” I shrugged. “I don’t know if that’s ever going to happen.”

“We shall see,” she said. “Two boys down, five more to go.”

“I guess so. But you better go in there. They’re about to kill me and Olivia, seeing as we ruined the surprise party.”

“The surprise party?” She gave me a look. “I see.”

“But Olivia made sure it didn’t happen.”

“Thank you, Olivia.” My mom squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Come on. Let’s go inside to the kitchen. We have cake and drinks and all sorts of goodies,” Olivia said.

“Hold on, Olivia. Mom and Dad, you guys go through. We’ll join you in a minute, okay?”

“Okay,” Mom said, and they walked into the kitchen.

“Aren’t we going to go?” Olivia looked at me through narrowed eyes. “Do not tell me you want to make love right now because I’m not going to have a quickie with you while your parents are in the kitchen celebrating.”

“I wouldn’t say no if you wanted to, but no, that’s not why I wanted you to wait. I have something for you.”

“Okay. What?”

“Come with me.” I grabbed her hand and walked her toward my bedroom. “It’s not a quickie,” I said, pulling her into my arms and kissing her. We walked into my bedroom, and I handed her a flat package that I’d wrapped carefully.

“What’s this?” She said, shaking it.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to tell by shaking it.”

“Okay. Should I open it now?”

“Yeah, I wanted you to open it now.”

She took the ribbon off carefully and placed it on the side of my mattress and then unwrapped the gift. She stared at the newspaper in her hands with a frown.

“Um, what’s this?”

“Check it out,” I said. “What’s the date?”

“It’s today.”

“Open up the paper and look at it.”

“What part?” She looked confused, and I just smiled.

“The front page.”

“Okay.” Her eyes scanned the front page and she stilled. She looked at me a couple of times, and then she looked back at the newspaper and started laughing. “Is this for real?”

“Yeah, it is. What do you think?”

“I love it.” She held up the newspaper and read aloud. “Montana’s most eligible cowboy is no longer available.”

Under the words was the photo of the two of us that I’d taken that night we’d confessed our love.

“How did they get this photo? And how did they know you’re no longer available?”

“Because I told them, duh. For a beautiful and smart woman, you sure are dumb sometimes.”

“Don’t call me dumb.” She laughed and pressed her lips to mine. I kissed her back softly.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it. I really, really love it.”

“I wanted to make it official, and I wanted you to know that no more women would be going around town calling me the most eligible cowboy and trying to get into my pants.”

“Well, aren’t you a thoughtful one, Beau?”

“I try my best,” I told her. “I love you.” My heart melted at the look of adoration in her eyes. I took her hand and kissed her wrist. “I have one more gift for you.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“Hold on.” I walked over to the drawer and opened it. “I wasn’t going to do this now, but it feels like the right time.” I pulled out the small jewelry box and walked back to her, and her eyes widened.

“Beau, what is that?” I opened it and took out the diamond ring I’d bought just the day before. I got down on one knee and looked up at her.

“Olivia, since I met you, nothing has been the same. You have brought joy and happiness into my life unlike I’ve ever known before. I know I said I didn’t want to rush this, but being with you and sleeping with you and spending my days with you has been amazing. I want the world to know you’re mine and that you’re no longer on the market. Everyone knows *I’m* not on the market because of that paper. But without a ring”—I grinned—“no one knows that *you’re* off the market.”

“What are you saying, Beau?”

“Will you marry me, my darling? Will you make me the happiest man in the world?”

She nodded and whispered, “Yes.”

I jumped up as I slipped the ring onto her finger and pulled her into my arms and swung her around.

“I love you, Beau. Oh my gosh, I love you!”

“I love you so much, Olivia. I never, ever want to spend another day without you.”

Thank you for reading Most Eligible Cowboy. To read a bonus chapter, [click here!](#)

His Favorite Cowgirl

Wyatt Hamilton has been my best friend since we were in diapers. He is the yin to my yang, and we've always been inseparable. But now I'm trying to break away. I'm ready to find a man who thinks of me as more than his best friend. I'm looking for a boyfriend—heck, a husband! And I'm not going to find him if Wyatt Hamilton is always hanging around me like an overprotective big brother.

He considers me his favorite cowgirl, but I'm looking for a man who wants to make me his woman. But Wyatt isn't getting the hint that I need my space. I'm doing everything in my power to ensure that he sees that I'm now a woman. Even if that means that we can't be in each other's lives as much anymore.

But I never expected him to react in the way that he did. I never expected to find out that my best friend wasn't just a cowboy, but a confident sexy alpha male as well.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Wyatt

Will you be picking me up at the airport? My dad wants to know if he should come.

Wyatt!

Are you going to answer me?

I stared at the last three text messages that my best friend Sadie had sent me the day before. I hadn't answered them right away because I was mad at her, though I was loath to admit that to anyone. She'd been in Idaho for three weeks doing who knew what, and I hadn't heard from her in two weeks until yesterday.

As I looked at the phone, I saw the three dots pop up on the screen indicating she was texting me again. I grinned as I waited for her new message. There was something eternally satisfying about having someone wait anxiously on your response. I supposed I was a shitty friend for making her wait, but I never claimed to be perfect.

Wyatt Hamilton, answer me right now!!!

I was about to respond when I decided to call her instead. She answered right away.

“Why didn't you respond to my texts, Wyatt?”

I could picture the exact look on her face. I'd grown up having her annoyed at me at least once a week.

"I was busy. I don't just sit around waiting for your texts all day." Which was true and made it even more grating that she hadn't bothered texting me before now.

"Whatever. Are you picking me up or what?"

"I'm surprised you're coming back already with all the gallivanting you've been doing around Boise."

"I was in Idaho Falls."

"Same difference."

"So are you telling me to stay here?" Her voice rose.

I frowned. Was she serious? I would die of boredom if she stayed another three weeks in Idaho. What was she doing anyway? Picking potatoes? "What time is your flight tomorrow?"

"I emailed it to you."

"I don't live on email. Tell me the flight number and time and I'll be there."

"I knew you missed me."

"You know nothing, Sadie Johnson." I laughed, unable to stay mad for long. Sadie and I had been best friends since we were five years old and went to kindergarten together. We had known each other since birth, though, as our mothers were good friends. But on the first day of kindergarten, another boy had been making fun of me, and Sadie had marched right up and told him off. She'd told him she was going to fight him if he continued being mean to me and that had been all it took. From that day, we'd been tied at the hip. All the way through high school. We'd even gone to the same college, and while we both had other friends and our own lives, we'd always been each other's number ones.

"Text me the details, and I'll see you tomorrow," I told her. "Maybe we can grab some barbeque when you get back. I've been craving ribs."

“You’re always craving something.” She laughed. “How are Olivia and Beau doing? Did he start building the ranch yet?”

“It’s only been three weeks since you’ve been gone. Everything is the same.”

Beau was my eldest brother, and he had recently gotten engaged to Olivia, who was best friends with my brother Austin’s fiancée, Lucy. Beau and Austin were the oldest of the seven Hamilton boys, and they still treated me like a kid, but at twenty-five, I was ready to take on a lot more responsibility at the ranch. I wasn’t just the baby of the family. And now that we were having a cash flow issue, all of us brothers were back at the ranch and trying to figure out our roles.

“Oh, well, I can’t wait to see them. Who knew that Beau and Austin could be so romantic?” Sadie sounded wistful. “Olivia and Lucy are so lucky.”

“They are?” I snorted. “For hooking up with two stinking cowboys?”

“Two cowboys that love them more than life itself,” she said, her voice soft.

I groaned. “Sadie, you’re not going to start going on about love and romance again, are you? How’s about we plan a shooting trip when you get back? That’ll be fun.”

“I don’t want to go hunting.” She sounded annoyed. “I want to find love.” “Anyway, I have to go. My cousin Daisy invited some guys she knows over, and we’re all going to go drinking.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“It’s a great idea that might lead to even better ideas,” she snapped. “I think I’m going to wear a new catsuit I got.”

“A what?”

“You know, what Cat Woman wore in *Batman*?”

“Sadie, no way in hell are you wearing anything like that, do you hear me?”

“Can’t stop me, Wyatt!” She giggled. “Bye now, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And with that, she hung up. I frowned at the phone. Sadie Johnson had lost her ever-loving mind. I headed out of my bedroom and down the familiar long corridor that led to the kitchen. I could smell bread baking in the oven and my stomach growled.

“What you making, Mama?” I asked as I entered the kitchen and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Hi, Eloise.”

A little girl was standing next to my mom with flour on her hands and in her light blonde hair. Eloise and her Aunt Arya were staying with us. She was a cute kid, and I could tell that my mom loved her, but that just made me worried for the day Eloise and Arya would leave. Mom already moaned about needing grandkids on a daily basis.

“Pot roast in the oven, along with some sourdough bread.” She beamed at me. “Eloise wanted to try her hand at making some shortbread cookies.”

“Yummy.” I grinned. “Save some for me.”

“I will.” Eloise beamed at me. “Is Auntie Sadie coming over for dinner?”

“No,” I shook my head. “She’s still in Idaho.”

“I miss her.” Eloise’s cute little face scrunched up. “I hope she comes home soon.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged, feeling Mom’s gaze on me. “Don’t suppose you’ll make me a sandwich, Mom?”

“You have two good hands, Wyatt Hamilton.” She hit me lightly with a dishtowel. “You can make your own sandwich.”

“Yes, Mama.” I laughed and headed to the fridge. “Oh, by the way, I won’t be home for dinner tomorrow night. I’m picking Sadie up from the airport, and then we’re going to go out for barbecue.”

“We can have a barbecue here.” My mom sounded excited. “A welcome home party for Sadie.”

“Mom, she was only gone for three weeks. And if anyone should have a party it should be her parents.”

“Well, you know the Johnsons aren’t into parties,” Mom replied. “Sadie would love it.”

“Maybe we can do something this weekend.” I grabbed some sliced turkey breast from the fridge and some string cheese. “That way everyone can hang out.”

“That’s a good idea.” Mom nodded. “Sadie can invite some of her other friends as well.”

“She doesn’t need anyone other than me.” I grabbed a plate and a napkin and made my way to the kitchen table to take a seat.

“Oh, Wyatt.” Mom looked at me with an almost pitying expression. “You better wise up soon.”

“Huh?” I said with my mouth full.

“Sadie is a woman now. A *beautiful* woman. Believe me when I say there are many men in town that would like to get to know Sadie Johnson. And when she gets married, I’m afraid she’s not going to need you the same way anymore.”

“What are you talking about? Are you trying to get her married off as well?” I grabbed a can of soda. “Don’t you have enough sons to worry about, without trying to hook Sadie up, too? Shouldn’t Chet be next? He’s your next single son.”

“I’m not trying to hook Sadie up, and I certainly wouldn’t think about trying to hook Chet up. I’m not a busybody.”

“Sure, Mom.” I glanced down at Eloise who was staring at us both, a curious expression on her young face. “You save me some cookies, you hear?”

“Yes, Uncle Wyatt.” She giggled, and I rubbed the top of her head.

“Okay, I need to go. Beau wants me to check on some of the wheat crops. Looks like we might have a locust or grasshopper problem.” I frowned thinking about the damage the insects could cause our cereal crops. With everything else

that going on, we couldn't afford to lose much of our wheat production.

“Good luck, son.” Mom gave me a quick hug. “I know you'll take care of it.” She smiled warmly at me and then looked into my eyes. “Oh, when you see Sadie tomorrow, please let her know that Shane wants her to call him. I saw his mama in town yesterday, and he's back home.”

“Shane?”

“Shane Wakefield. Your friend from high school.”

“He was no friend of mine.”

Shane had been one of Sadie's many crushes, but he was a total douchebag. I certainly wasn't going to be passing on that message, but I didn't tell Mama that.

Chapter Sixty

Sadie

I stood outside of the airport and glanced at my watch yet again. Wyatt was already 15 minutes late. He wasn't normally on time, but I figured as he was picking me up at the airport, he'd try to be reasonably punctual.

Increasingly impatient, I was about to call him when I heard a honk. I looked up to see the familiar red Chevrolet pickup, Wyatt in the front seat, his cowboy hat on his head. I dragged my suitcase across the sidewalk toward him.

Wyatt rolled the passenger side window down and leaned over. "Hey, Sadie."

"Hi, Wyatt. You're not going to get out of the car and put my suitcase in the back?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

"Didn't your mama raise you to be a gentleman?"

"I am a gentleman."

"And aren't gentlemen meant to treat women like—"

"Oh, hurry up, Sadie. The police are going to come and move me on if you don't get in the car quickly."

"Fine." I grabbed my suitcase and hauled it into the cabin behind the seats, then jumped into the front and buckled the

seatbelt. I had barely closed my door before Wyatt floored the gas.

“Hey, dude, I am barely in!”

“But you *are* in, and you’re buckled, right?”

“Yeah, but I’d barely closed the door!”

“But the door was closed, right?”

“Wyatt!”

“Yes, Sadie?”

“Nothing.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. I’d known Wyatt almost all my life. I couldn’t remember a time without him, but sometimes he absolutely frustrated me.

He glanced over at me as he sped out of the airport. “So how was Idaho?”

“It was fine.”

“I thought you were staying longer.”

“It didn’t go as planned. At all,” I added under my breath.

“Why? What happened?”

“Let’s just say I went on a couple of dates, and they didn’t quite work out.”

“You went on dates?” He frowned at the windshield.

“Yeah, I went on dates.”

“With who?”

“With *whom*, you mean.”

“I don’t care if it’s who or whom. Who did you go on dates with?”

“No one you know, obviously, unless you know all the men in Idaho.”

“No, I don’t know losers.” He glanced over at me. “But I guess you do.”

“Thanks. That’s a really nice way to talk to your best friend, Wyatt Hamilton.”

“So, are you going to tell me about these dates or what?”

“Well, I went on one date with one guy, and ...”

“And?”

“... we went to brunch.”

“Okay.”

“And it was really nice,” I said, thinking about my date with Paul.

“So if it went really nice, what was the problem?”

“Well, he asked me to go on another date,” I said, remembering, “and I said, ‘Sure, what would you like to do?’ He said, ‘Maybe we can go for mini-golf,’ and I said, ‘Okay, that sounds like it will be fun.’” I paused and looked over at Wyatt.

“Can you hurry this story up?” He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. “I don’t want to fall asleep while I’m driving.”

“You’re so rude, Wyatt.”

“What? I’m just saying, is all.”

“Do you want me to tell you this story or not?”

“Continue, Sadie.”

“So, anyway, we’d finally decided that we’re going to go to mini-golf, and I think that’s fun. It’s a fun second date, don’t you think?”

“I guess.” He shrugged. “So what happened? You went to mini-golf, and he cried because you beat him?”

“No. So he called me, and he’s like, ‘So Sadie, we’re going to meet for mini golf at four, right?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, I’m looking forward to it,’ and he’s like, ‘Great. Do you mind if you drive up by yourself because I’m not sure I’m going to have time to pick you up,’ which I thought was weird because it was a date. Isn’t a man supposed to pick you up for a date?”

“Not a second date, Sadie. And I’m guessing you met him online, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So do you really want a stranger coming to your house?”

“I mean, we’re in Idaho. What’s he going to do?”

“There are a lot of psychos in Idaho, Sadie. I really, I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Whatever, Wyatt.”

“So anyways, continue.”

“So we get off the phone, and I’m happy, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘Okay, what am I going to wear?’ Then five minutes later, he calls me again.”

“Okay, and?”

“And he says to me, ‘Hey, Elizabeth, it’s me, Paul. I’m just confirming our date for mini-golf tonight at seven. Does that still work for you?’”

“He got your name wrong?” Wyatt started laughing. “No way.”

“No. Remember he was meeting me at four. Elizabeth was some *other* girl he was going to meet at seven.” I was still flabbergasted at what had happened. “So I said to him, ‘Paul, this is Sadie, and I thought we were meeting at four.’ He swore under his breath and then he hung up.” I frowned. “Can you believe that shit?” I looked over, and I could see that Wyatt was laughing silently. “It’s not funny, Wyatt. It’s really not.”

“Who goes out with a guy named *Paul* in *Idaho* to *mini-golf*? lame. You dodged a bullet there.”

“I didn’t dodge a bullet. He was a really good-looking guy, and I thought he was really interested in me. I didn’t think he was going to be a player.”

“He was really good-looking and you met him online, but you didn’t think he was going to be a player?”

“Yeah. He said he was a really down-to-earth guy, and he was a teacher, man.”

“He was a teacher. You dated a teacher.”

“I wouldn’t say I dated. I went on one date and accepted a second date.”

“So you accepted a second date with a teacher?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong with teachers?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Aren’t teachers normally women?”

“You’re so sexist, Wyatt Hamilton. No, teachers can be men and women. And there’s something really sexy about a ___”

“Sexy?” he interrupted me. “No way. Now you’re saying this guy was sexy. Really, Sadie?”

“Really, Wyatt.”

“What do you know about sexy? Last thing I knew, you were still a virgin.”

“So? Just because I’m a virgin doesn’t mean I can’t say someone is sexy.”

“Yeah, well—”

“What, you were going to give up your V card to this loser?”

“He wasn’t a loser.” I paused. “Well, maybe he was a loser, but not because he was a teacher, and not because he was from Idaho, and certainly not because his name was Paul.”

“So there was Loser Paul. Who else did you go on a date with?”

“If you’re going to make fun of me, Wyatt, then I’m not going to tell you.”

“Of course, you’re going to tell me. I’m your best friend.”

“Yeah, you’re my best friend, which is why you’re supposed to be supportive—”

“And what, I shouldn’t be honest with you? If someone’s a loser, I’m going to tell you they’re a loser.”

“Do I say that about the hoes that you date?”

“The hoes that I date?” He started laughing even harder. He glanced over at me and shook his head. “Really, what hoes have I dated? I don’t remember paying any of them for sex.”

“You’re nasty, Wyatt.” I rolled my eyes and looked out of the window. “I’m not talking about this with you anymore.”

“And that’s fine by me. I can put on the radio.” He leaned forward and turned the dial on the radio, and Howard Stern’s voice came through the speakers.

“Oh, my gosh. I don’t want to listen to Howard Stern.”

“Well, that’s what we’re listening to,” he said. “Ready to get some barbecue?”

“Yes,” I grumbled. I was starving, but I wanted to give him the silent treatment. I thought about telling him to take me home, but knowing Wyatt, wouldn’t listen anyway.

“Oh, come on, Sadie. Don’t be upset.” He turned the radio down. “You just got back into town. Let’s have a fun evening. And who knows, maybe you’ll meet someone at the barbecue place.”

“Who am I going to meet at the barbecue place?” I said. “I know everyone around here.”

“You don’t know everyone around,” he said. “Maybe there’s some new guys in town.”

“Maybe.” I let out a deep breath. “You just don’t understand, Wyatt. It’s easy for you because you can get any girl that you want because you’re a Hamilton.”

“I can get any girl that I want because I’m hot, and I’m funny, and I’m smart—”

“Not modest, that’s for sure.”

“Well, I just wanted you to know I can get women just because I’m *me*. It has nothing to do with me being a Hamilton.”

“No, of course not. It doesn’t help you at all that you’re one of the Hamilton boys of Horseshoe Ranch.” I rolled my eyes.

“What, you think being a Hamilton boy means something in Montana?”

“Dude, of course, it does. Everyone wants to date a Hamilton man.”

It was true. I’d grown up around girls who wanted to be my friends because I was so close to the Hamilton family. They wanted to date one of the brothers. They didn’t even care which one. All the Hamiltons were handsome and rich, and there had been a rumor in school that they were all packing. Not that I’d ever told Wyatt that, or any of his brothers. I didn’t want to think about the Hamilton boys like that, though I was admittedly curious. Not so curious that I would ask Wyatt, though, or even check him out too much. That would just be weird. We’d been friends for so long.

“Sadie, Sadie, Sadie. What are you thinking?” he said in a singsong voice, and I blinked.

“Sorry, what?”

“I just asked you if you wanted to do something after the barbecue, and you ignored me.”

“Sorry, I was thinking about something else.”

“What were you thinking about?”

I could feel my face heat up. It wasn’t like I could turn to my best friend and say, “I was wondering just how big you were down there.” I would be absolutely mortified if he knew that had even crossed my mind.

“Why is your face red, Sadie? What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “How are Beau and Olivia doing? And how’s Austin and, um—oh, shit.”

“Lucy?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“You forgot Lucy’s name? Isn’t she like, your new BFF?”

“I didn’t forget her name. I was just—”

“What is going on, Sadie?”

“Nothing. I’m just a little upset about Paul,” I lied. I couldn’t care less about Paul any longer, but I would rather Wyatt think I was upset about Paul than to know that I was wondering about if he was packing or not.

“Oh, Sadie, get over him. Trust me, he wasn’t worth it. Plus, you can’t date someone in Idaho. You don’t want to be in a long-distance relationship.”

“Well, if it would’ve worked out, I would’ve stayed in Idaho, duh.”

“You would’ve stayed in Idaho?” He sounded shocked. “But Montana is your home.”

“Montana is my home for now. But if I meet a man who wants to marry me, and he wants me to live in his state, and his state happens to be Idaho, well, my new home state will be Idaho.”

“Sadie, you’re not thinking straight.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You can’t go to Idaho. Get that out of your head. If you really want a boyfriend, he should be somewhere local because this is where you belong.”

“What you mean, this is where I belong?”

“You belong in Montana, and if I have anything to say about it, you—”

“Wyatt Hamilton, are you saying that you don’t want me to leave the state of Montana?”

“I’m just saying how are we supposed to be best friends if you leave the state of Montana?”

“Lots of people have best friends in other parts of the country, Wyatt. Anyways, when we get married, our husband and wife will be our best friends, and we will just—”

“Sadie, you’re already trying to replace me.” He nodded slowly. “I see how it is.”

“I’m not trying to replace you. I’m just stating a fact.”

“I don’t know what’s come over your head, Sadie, but I think you need to stop being so boy-crazy. I thought that was a phase in high school that died down in college. But now it seems to have reared its ugly head again.”

“What are you talking about, Wyatt? Just because I want a boyfriend, just because ...”

I let my words trail off. There was no point in having this conversation with him. Wyatt didn’t understand what it was to want to be in a serious relationship because he didn’t want one. He didn’t understand that I wanted to get married and have a family, maybe because he wasn’t in that place in his life. He liked the status quo. He liked going out with women and doing whatever he did, and then having me there on the side as his best friend to talk to and do other fun things with. But that wasn’t enough for me. I didn’t want just a best friend. I wanted a lover, someone who would take care of me and look at me with adoration in his eyes.

I loved Wyatt. He was my best friend, and he would always have a special place in my heart. But I was getting older, and I wanted more than that.

And after speaking with my cousins in Idaho, I knew that I had to make a move for myself. I had to look for love, even if Wyatt Hamilton didn’t approve.

Chapter Sixty-One

Wyatt

“Oh, shit,” I mumbled under my breath as Shane Wakefield walked into the barbecue restaurant. It was just my luck that he would show up.

He saw me almost immediately and then looked over and saw Sadie sitting next to me. A grin spread across his face as he headed over to us. He held up his hand to wave, but I looked away, pretending I didn’t see him. I did not want to talk to this asshole. I turned to Sadie in hope that she wouldn’t notice him. “So I was thinking that—”

“Hey, guys!” Shane obviously missed the fact that I didn’t want to speak to him as he stopped by our table. “Hey, what’s up, man?” He nodded at me. “Sadie, you are looking absolutely beautiful today.”

“Hi, Shane. I didn’t even know you were back in town.” She jumped up and gave him a hug.

I frowned. She was far too friendly. Didn’t she understand that men took hugs to mean something else? Shane was probably thought she was a sure thing already. I would have to talk to her later.

“Yeah. I got back to town about a week ago,” he replied. “In fact, my mama saw Mrs. Hamilton at the store yesterday

and asked to pass along a message because I didn't have your number."

"Oh, what message?"

"I just wanted you to give me a call. I guess I could have popped over to your dad's ranch, but I didn't want to just show up on announced, you know?"

"Oh, that would've been fine, but I wasn't even there. I just got back from Idaho today. Wyatt picked me up."

"Hey, man." Shane nodded at me. "Good to see you, buddy."

"Yeah," I said in response, not really happy to see him. Shane and I had been friends in high school. We'd both been on the football and baseball teams together, but he had been a douche bag. He had broken almost every girl's heart and didn't care. Sadie had had the biggest crush on him for the longest time. He had never shown any interest in her, but he'd talked all kinds of trash about her in the locker rooms.

The day he said he wanted to take her behind the bleachers so that he could bend her over, I'd told him in no uncertain words that if he even dared think about it, I would knock his front teeth out. And that had been that.

"So, what you've been up to, Wyatt?" Shane asked.

"Just working on the ranch. You?"

"Well, I told you I finished law school. Oh, rather, I guess I didn't tell you, but I'm sure you saw on Facebook."

"Nah," I shook my head. "I don't really use Facebook or Instagram or any of those social media things. Waste of time, I think."

"Oh, Wyatt, you sound like my granddad." Sadie rolled her eyes. "So, congratulations on the law degree, Shane. Didn't you go to like Duke or something?"

"Yep," he nodded "But I'm back home now. Dad wants to expand, and we're thinking about ..." He paused, "Well, I guess I shouldn't say anything right now as its private information, and you're a competing ranch." He looked at me.

“Okay,” I muttered.

I really didn't give a rat's ass what he and his dad's ranch were going to do. Horseshoe Ranch, my family's ranch, was one of the largest ranches in the state of Montana, and we were at the forefront of everything. There was nothing that Shane's dad could do that we couldn't do, but I wasn't about to get into a competition. I was the youngest of seven brothers, so what I had to say didn't really matter at Horseshoe Ranch.

On the other hand, Shane Wakefield was the oldest in his family, so he could make decisions because one day he'd inherit the whole thing. I chewed on my lower lip. I didn't mind being the youngest brother most times, but sometimes it irked me. Having six older brothers meant you didn't really have much of a say in anything. And I had a lot of ideas, a lot of really good ideas, but no one listened to me because I was the baby of the family. It was annoying as shit.

“Hey, Wyatt,” Sadie sat in the chair next mine, “what do you think?” I blinked looked at her. She was smiling, her blue eyes alight with happiness.

“What do I think about what?”

“Shane just invited us to come over tonight. He said we could go canoeing.”

“Canoeing?” I looked at her and then I looked at him. “I don't think so. We have plans.”

Sadie looked confused. “What plans?”

“It was going to be a surprise,” I lied. There was no surprise, but there was no way in hell I was spending the evening with Shane and Sadie. I knew Shane would start flirting. And the last thing I wanted was for Sadie to flirt back with him. She had the absolute worst taste in men. I didn't know what she would do without me looking after her. She'd probably end up with some douche bag.

“Is it something that I can join?” Shane grabbed a seat and sat at the table with us.

“No.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Nice manners, taking a seat before you've even been invited.”

“Wyatt!” Sadie hit me in the shoulder. “He’s just joking,” she said to Shane. “Why’d you say that?”

“Why did I say what?” I looked at her. “We were enjoying a meal—”

“Oh, Wyatt, stop being so grumpy.” She looked over at Shane. “He’s just pissed off because I was going on some dates in Idaho, and he thinks that I have bad taste in men. And I guess I hurt his feelings because I said I might have stayed in Idaho, but I didn’t stay in Idaho. I’m here. So there’s no need to be grumpy.”

“I’m not being grumpy. And if you move to Idaho, that’s on you. Though why would you move to Idaho from Montana? It’s a significantly inferior state.”

“I’ve got to agree with Wyatt there,” Shane agreed. “Idaho?”

“I have cousins there.” She glared at me. “And you know that I’m ...” she paused. “Anyway,” she said quickly looking over at Shane. I realized she didn’t want Shane to know that she was looking for a husband. I cleared my throat.

“So, Shane, you know that Sadie’s looking for a husband. She wants to get married and have lots of kids right away. Don’t you Sadie?”

“No!” She glared at me.

“Is that what you’re looking for, Shane?”

“Um, well, you know, I just got back into town.” He got up quickly, glancing between Sadie and me. “But I guess you guys are busy and eating. I’ll see what you’re up to later. Okay?”

“Okay.” I raised my cowboy hat and nodded at him before turning to Sadie. “Well, I guess he’s not Mr. Right.”

“You’re such an asshole. Why would you tell him that?”

“Why would I tell him what?” I shrugged innocently. “Aren’t you looking to get married and have kids soon?”

“Yeah, but that’s not something you tell a guy before you even go on the first date.”

“So you were trying to go on a date with Shane Wakefield? Really? After he was such a douche canoe in high school?”

“How is he a douche canoe? He and I never even dated. So maybe he’s really sweet.”

“You forget I was on varsity football and baseball with him. And you heard the rumors.”

“I don’t know if the rumors are true.”

“Trust me, the rumors were true.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t believe it. There’s just no way.”

“Trust me. There was a way.”

“So you are saying it is true that every single member of the varsity cheerleading squad gave him a blowjob?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “Every single member.”

“But didn’t they know about each other?” She shook her head. “That’s so disgusting.”

“They didn’t care, girl. And who knows what lies Shane told them?”

“I guess. But we’re not in high school anymore. He’s changed.”

“Men like Shane Wakefield don’t change. Trust me.”

She sighed. “You think that every guy’s an asshole, but there are some good guys out there.”

“Name me one,” I said.

“Well, there’s Beau, there’s Austin, there’s you, there’s Ranger, there’s—”

“Who’s not a Hamilton.”

“There’s my dad.”

“You want to date your dad?”

“Ew! You’re absolutely disgusting. This isn’t like Oedipus!”

I laughed at the horrified look on her face. “Yeah. Let’s hope not.”

“You’re horrible, you know that, Wyatt?”

“I’m not so horrible that you don’t love me, though.”

“I love you because you’re my best friend. And we’ve been friends for ages, but if I were just meeting you now?”

She wrinkled her nose, and I thought how pretty she looked. I’d missed her. I’d missed laughing with her and bantering with her. I didn’t want her going back to Idaho anytime soon. In fact, I didn’t want her going anywhere anytime soon.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. “You have a weird expression on your face.”

“I was just thinking that, yeah, maybe I did miss you a little bit.” I grabbed a fry off her plate. “But only because I miss having your annoying little voice in my ear every day.”

“Um, is that some sort of backhanded compliment?” She reached over and took a fry off my plate.

“Is it a backhanded compliment or just a compliment?”

“Does it really make a difference?” She laughed.

“I guess not. Welcome home, Sadie.”

“It’s good to be back,” she said softly. “I missed you too, you know?”

“Of course you did. How could you not?”

She rolled her eyes. “But you know, I am looking for a boyfriend, Wyatt, and ...” She paused.

“What? Spit it out.”

“You make it harder.”

“I make what harder?”

“Goofball. You make it harder for me to find a boyfriend.”

“How do I make it harder for you to find a boyfriend?”

“Because we’re always together. And men just assume that we’re together like boyfriend, girlfriend or something. So they don’t approach me.”

“Um, that’s not true.”

“It is true. When I was in Idaho, all these different guys approached me, and I was telling my cousins that never happens here.”

“Maybe the men in Idaho just aren’t as polite.”

“No, it’s because they see you with me and they think I’m taken, but I’m not taken.”

“So what? What do you want to do?”

“I think I need to hang out sometimes without you.”

“You do hang out without me.” I rolled my eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, maybe a little bit more.”

“You don’t want to hang out with me? What, are you trying to end our friendship or something? Are you crazy, Sadie? Are you so man-crazy that you’re going to end our friendship just so you can go on the prowl for a man?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying that ...” She sighed, “Obviously I’m not going to end our friendship, and obviously I’m not going to stop hanging out with you, but I will need more me time.”

“Okay. Is this like, a feminine thing?”

“No, it’s not a feminine thing, but I guess I’ll be hanging out with Olivia and Lucy again.”

“Beau and Austin aren’t going to like you taking their girlfriends to go prowl for other men. Trust me on that.”

“I’m not going on the prowl for anything. Why are you so condescending to me, Wyatt Hamilton?”

“I’m not condescending to you, and since when have you used SAT words?”

“Since forever, because I’m smart.”

“Uh-huh. So what are we going to do tonight?” I said changing the subject.

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“I was thinking maybe we’d watch a movie. You can stay over at the ranch.”

“Okay. You sure your mom and dad won’t mind?”

“When do they ever mind?” I laughed. “Come on now, you practically live there.”

“Fine, but let’s drop my mine first so I can see my mom and dad and let them know I’m back. And I’ll pick up some clothes so I can stay at yours.”

“Okay. Sounds good.” I grinned at her. “If I didn’t tell you already, I’m glad you’re back.”

“You told me ten minutes ago, Wyatt. Do you have Alzheimer’s or something?”

“Oh, let’s hope not.” I pulled her towards me.

“What are you doing?” She pushed me away.

“I don’t know. I just wanted to give you a hug or something.”

“Oh, Wyatt Hamilton, you are a weird one.”

“Mm, I might be a weird one, but I’m not as weird as you, Sadie Johnson.”

“So what are we going to watch tonight?”

“What do you want to watch tonight?”

“A rom-com.”

“Oh no.” I shook my head. “I hate rom-com. They’re so unbelievable. And they make women think that men are going to be perfect. And trust me, there are no perfect men, and you of all people should know better, Sadie, because you’ve grown up with seven Hamilton men. You know none of us are perfect. And yet you have this idea that you’re going to be swept off your feet by a Prince Charming.”

“I *am* going to be swept off my feet by a Prince Charming,” she insisted. “I mean, I hope so.”

“Girl, there are no Prince Charmings. When are you going to understand that?”

“Don’t say that, Wyatt.”

“What? You don’t want to hear the truth?”

“Just because *you* aren’t romantic doesn’t mean a romantic man’s not out there. I mean, look at Austin and Beau and how much they love Olivia and Lucy. I want what they have.”

“Okay.” I shook my head. “Delusional.”

“Why am I delusional? Just because I want a fairy tale?”

“Yeah. Fairy tales don’t exist, Sadie. And as your best friend, I’m here to remind you of that. Don’t have all these crazy expectations. And the best way to stop having these expectations is to stop watching rom-com.”

“Fine,” she said, “We can watch anything you want to watch then, seeing as you’re the boss of everyone.”

“You’re such a drama queen, Sadie. But I’m glad you know I’m the boss of you as well,” I teased her. “That’s great. There’s this new horror movie on Netflix—”

“I don’t want to watch horror. I hate watching horror at night. I can’t sleep.”

“Well, you can share the bed with me. And if you get scared, just bury your head in my shoulder.”

“But I get nightmares when I watch horror movies.”

“Well, I’ll protect you, Sadie. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She smiled. “You are the *best* best friend, Wyatt. But ...” She turned away.

“What? I frowned “What’s the matter?”

“My cousins think it’s kind of weird that we still share a bed sometimes.”

“What are you talking about? Your cousins are getting on my nerves, you know that? We’ve been sharing a bed since we

were little kids.”

“Yeah. But they said we’re not little kids anymore, and we’re not. And they just think it’s weird that, you know ...”

“Know what?”

“That we share a bed, but nothing’s happened.”

“Ew.” I shook my head. “Sadie, really?”

“I know,” she laughed. “That’s what I said to them. But I was just ... wondering, you know?”

“What were you wondering?”

“What age should we stop?”

“What age should we stop sharing the bed?”

“Yeah.” She stood up. “I’m just going to go to the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

I watched as she walked away, her hips swaying from side to side, her long legs shown off in her short shorts. I mean, she was Sadie. She was my best friend. I didn’t see her as a woman ... but that wasn’t to say that she wasn’t one.

I knew her cousins were right in a way. I’d just never really thought about it like that. Some of the girls that I’d dated had been very upset that Sadie and I would share a bed and were so close. They always thought I was cheating on them with her, but Sadie and I didn’t have that type of relationship.

We’d never even kissed. We had both been very clear about the fact that we were friends and we weren’t going to go down that road together because it would ruin our friendship. And that was the last thing I would ever want to do. The very, very last thing.

She was my Sadie, my best friend, my confidant. My favorite cowgirl. The person I loved to spend the most time with in the world.

The way I saw it, Sadie's quest for a boyfriend was going to interfere with both of our lives.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Sadie

Men were so annoying. And I should know, seeing as I'd grown up around plenty of them. I just couldn't stand how condescending some men could be, especially Wyatt. He always acted like he knew what was best for me, and he always put down my ideas about love and romance. But I'd show him. I could find love, a true love, just like Lucy and Olivia had, and I wasn't going to let Wyatt make me think I was crazy.

"So, have you decided what you want to watch yet?" Wyatt looked up from his phone.

"I don't really want to watch any of these movies, Wyatt." I stared at the TV screen in front of me. "*The Purge* doesn't sound like it's going to be fun. And I told you, I'm not into those *Halloween* movies. They're so scary."

"But I'm here to look after you, Sadie. You can count on me."

"Yeah, but I don't want to watch a movie where my head is buried in your shoulder for half the night."

"Why? You never cared about it before," he said as he pulled his T-shirt off. I glanced at his naked chest and swallowed hard.

I don't know when I'd started noticing how hot Wyatt was. He had a chest that looked like it had been chiseled by an Italian sculptor, and the spattering of hair across his pecs made it even sexier. He had a dark golden tan, which I was completely jealous of because we lived in Montana and barely saw the sun.

His blue eyes gazed into mine. He had such a handsome face which I'd always known was handsome, but I'd never thought of him as sexy or rugged before. But around the time we'd both turned 25, I'd suddenly started looking at him a little bit differently. It wasn't that I wanted to be with him or sleep with him, but I'd certainly realized that my best friend had become a man, especially when we shared a bed ... which I was starting to think we were too old to do.

I mean, it was cool and fun and I was used to it, but sometimes when I woke up in the morning and I was pressed against him, I could feel my lady parts getting slightly excited—not that I would ever tell him that. And when he kissed me on the forehead, sometimes I wished that his lips would meet mine and he'd try to touch me, which was absolutely crazy because he was Wyatt Hamilton and I'd known him forever. He was like my brother.

Only not really.

“Sadie. Oh my gosh, are you daydreaming about romance again?” Wyatt sighed as he jumped off of the bed.

“What are you talking about?” I said, flustered.

“I said you have two minutes to make a decision, and you're not even paying attention to me.”

“I was thinking, thank you very much.”

“Really? You're going to tell me you weren't thinking about romance?”

“I was thinking perhaps I could convince you to watch a romance,” I said quickly. I definitely did not want to tell him that I was thinking that his chest looked sexy as hell and that when we slept in the bed together, I was kind of hoping his hands would wander down my legs.

I would absolutely die if he ever found that out.

Wyatt groaned. “Sadie, do we *have* to watch a romance movie?”

“Well, I don’t want to watch a horror movie.”

“But you agreed to it.”

“Well, I’m changing my mind. I’m allowed to change my mind, you know.”

“I know,” he grumbled. “You’re a woman.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying. Women love to change their minds.”

“You shouldn’t lump all women together, Wyatt.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m not about to get lectured, am I?” He pulled open his closet door, grabbed a t-shirt, and threw it at me. “Here. You can put this on tonight.”

“Oh, well thank you.” I stared at the T-shirt in my hands. It was one of his longer T-shirts, but I knew that it wouldn’t go much past my butt. “Do you have any boxer shorts I could borrow?” I was wearing a thong, and I really didn’t want him seeing my ass.

“Boxer shorts? Why?”

“Because this T-shirt isn’t very long,” I held it up, “and I am not wearing the most appropriate underwear.”

He smirked. “Is that your way of telling me that you’re not wearing any panties?”

“Wyatt, really?” I grabbed a pillow and threw it at him.

“What?” He caught it with a laugh. “Don’t tell me. You decided you wanted to feel sexy, so you decided not to wear panties.”

“No, I’m not wearing no panties. I’m just wearing,” I blushed, “a thong, okay?”

“You’re wearing a thong?” His jaw dropped and his eyes crinkled. “No way. Let me see.”

“No, of course I’m not going to let you see.” I shook my head vehemently. “Are you crazy?”

“What? I just can’t imagine you in a thong.”

“Well, you’re not supposed to imagine me in a thong,” I said.

“Come on, Sadie. Let me see.”

“No way, Wyatt. No!”

“What if I let you watch a romance movie? What if I let you choose whatever movie you want to watch, as long as you let me see?”

“I’m not letting you see my thong.”

“Come on, Sadie. I just can’t believe you’re wearing a thong. You always wear the goofiest underwear.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, weren’t you the one that had Mickey and Minnie Mouse panties? *So* sexy.”

“Don’t make fun of my Disney underwear. I think they’re really cute.”

“Yeah, they’re cute, but they’re not exactly sexy, are they?”

“Well, I don’t need to wear sexy underwear to be sexy.”

“So then why are you wearing a thong?”

“Because I wanted to see what it felt like, and my cousin said that if you’re looking to attract a man, you have to feel your sexiest. I even bought some new bras.”

“You bought some new bras? What sort of bras?”

“They’re lace and see-through.”

“What?” His eyes widened and he looked me up and down. “Really? You’re wearing a thong and a see-through bra?”

“Yes, Wyatt.”

“Next thing you’re going to tell me you’re wearing crotchless panties.”

“Maybe I’ll wear them next time. And no, I definitely won’t be showing you them.”

He shook his head quickly. “I don’t want to see you in crotchless panties anyway. That would be gross.”

“Excuse me? What’s not supposed to mean?”

“I mean, Sadie, you wearing crotchless panties—it’s almost like you’re a woman or something.”

“I *am* a woman, Wyatt Hamilton. How dare you?”

“I mean, I know you’re a *woman*, but—” he wrinkled his nose, “come on now.”

“You’re a jerk!”

“What?” His forehead furrowed. “Why are you on my ass?”

“I’m not. You’re so annoying.” I headed towards the bathroom. “I’m going to change.”

“You can change in here. We always change in the same room.”

“Well, close your eyes.”

“Why? Because of your thong?”

“Yes, Wyatt.”

“So you really don’t want to watch a romance movie, or are you just scared?”

“Scared of what?”

“I don’t know. Scaredy-cat.” He grinned.

“Fine. I’ll show you my thong, but I get to choose the movie tonight *and* the next movie we watch.”

“I don’t know if I can stay awake for two movies tonight, but sure.”

“Okay,” I said, unzipping my shorts and then pulling them down. I stepped out of them and glared at him. He stared at

me, smirking.

“Okay, I can’t even see anything. You have to turn around.”

I could feel the air on my ass and shook my head. “You didn’t say I had to turn around.”

“Sadie, how else can I tell that you have a thong on? Your top is so long that I’m not seeing anything.”

“You’re such an idiot. You know that, Wyatt?” I said as I turned around.

“Pull your t-shirt up, then, Sadie.”

“Really, Wyatt?” I shot a glare at him over my shoulder.

“Scaredy-cat,” he teased.

“I’m not a scaredy-cat.” I walked over to him. “You know what, Wyatt Hamilton? Here you go.” I pulled off my top and stood there in my new lace bra and thong. I stared at him and poked him in the chest. His eyes widened as his gaze trailed down my body.

“W-whoa,” he stammered.

I could feel my face flushing as he gazed at me. I turned around so that he could see my ass, and he let out a low whistle. I turned and back around. There was an expression in his eyes that I’d never seen before.

“So you weren’t joking,” he said softly, still staring at me.

“No, I wasn’t.” I could feel his gaze hovering over my bra, and I swallowed hard again. My nipples were hard and pointing out, and I knew he could see them. I felt almost naked standing there so close to him. He was only in his boxers and I was just in my underwear. It was a weird, very intimate moment.

“Well, okay,” he said, looking at me one more time and shaking his head. “Put on the t-shirt, Sadie.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re just standing there, almost naked. I think you should put on the t-shirt.”

“Fine.” I pulled the T-shirt over me, a little disappointed that he hadn’t made the effort to say something nice. “So what did you think of them?”

“What did I think of what?”

“My bra and panties. Do you think they’re sexy enough?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I don’t really think they’re very appropriate, but—”

“Appropriate for what, Wyatt?”

“I mean what, are you planning on getting naked on a first date with some random dude? No, I don’t think you should wear that.”

“No, of course I’m not planning on getting naked on a first date with some random dude. Do you really think I’d do that?”

“I don’t know.” He pulled a pair of boxer shorts out of a drawer and handed them to me. “Put these on.”

“Okay,” I said and stepped into them. He looked me up and down and smiled with a satisfied look on his face.

“That’s much better.”

“Okay,” I said. “Well, aren’t you going to put a t-shirt on too?”

“I never sleep in a t-shirt,” he said.

“Well, maybe you should, Wyatt Hamilton.”

“Fine, if you feel like you’re going to be tempted.” He grabbed another t-shirt and pulled it on. We sat down on the edge of the bed, our thighs resting against each other, our shoulders touching. We sat there for a few seconds in awkward silence, and then we both looked at each other.

“So,” he said. His gaze fell to my legs.

“So,” I said. My gaze was drawn to his luscious lips. I wondered what it would be like to kiss him, and I wondered

what would happen if I did, though I wouldn't dare go for it. That would change everything.

"Maybe you should choose the movie now, Sadie." Wyatt got up suddenly. "I'm going to go and get a drink. Do you want anything?"

"Sure, a beer or some wine would be great."

"Okay." He hurried out of the room.

I sat there looking after him, wondering what he was thinking, wondering what he'd really thought about me and my new sexy underwear. I felt like something had changed between us, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. It felt awkward, but neither one of us had really said anything to make it awkward.

I guess I'd never looked like that before. I wondered if he thought my thong was sexy or if he just thought that I looked like an idiot. I'd ask him when he came back. I really wanted to know what his opinion was.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Wyatt

“Holy shit,” I mumbled. I adjusted myself as I made my way to the kitchen.

Sadie had looked sexy. I shook my head in complete and utter confusion as I thought about what I’d just seen. She’d been wearing a black thong that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. She had an ass unlike any I’d seen on a woman before, and I certainly hadn’t expected that in my best friend. And that bra! Damn, I was going hard just thinking about it. Her nipples had been hard and poking through the thin material. I swallowed hard as I made my way into the kitchen. She had looked sexier than I’d ever seen her before.

What the hell was going on? I was pissed off that she was wearing those things. Not because I didn’t like them. I loved them. But I didn’t want to see them on her, and I certainly didn’t want any other man seeing her in them. She was too innocent and sweet, and I knew that she wanted love so badly that she could very well end up in a bad situation.

And any guy who saw her looking like that? Well, they wouldn’t be as strong as me. They wouldn’t be able to resist the goods she had on offer. They’d want to take her. And knowing Sadie, she’d think it was because they were in love with her when all they wanted would be to fuck her. I was going to have to talk some sense into her.

“Hey, what’s up?” Chet looked up from the kitchen table where he was reading a newspaper.

“What are you doing in here? It’s late.”

“Yeah. I just figured I’d spend some time in the kitchen.” He flipped a page of the newspaper. “You know, in case anyone needed something.”

“In case anyone needed something?” I raised an eyebrow at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know. In case Eloise or Arya got lost or something.”

“In case Eloise or Arya got lost at nine o’clock at night in our house?” I stared at him. “Really, Chet?”

“What? I’m just trying to be helpful.” He folded the newspaper and stood up. “They’re our guests, and I want to make sure that they have everything that they need.”

“So you just figured you’d sit in the kitchen reading.” I looked at the paper. “*The Wall Street Journal*? What the what?”

“Shut up, Wyatt.” He punched me in the shoulder. “Anyway, I’m going to my room.”

“Okay, then.”

“Why are you in here?”

“I’m just going to get me a beer and a beer for Sadie.”

“Oh, she’s staying over again?”

“Yep. We’re going to watch a movie or something.”

“In your bedroom?” He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You guys are watching a movie, or you guys are making a movie?” He chuckled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. The sort of movie you wouldn’t want to find on the internet.” He winked at me.

“What?” I thought for a second, and then I realized what he was talking about. “Chet Hamilton, you’re such a douche bag. No, Sadie and I are not making a fucking porno movie.” But even as I said the words, I could feel myself growing hard at the thought.

“Eh, well, if it’s not you, it’ll be someone else.”

“Chet! That’s not even funny. Don’t even look at Sadie. Do you hear me?”

He held his hands up quickly. “It’s not me you need to worry about, bro. Every guy in town wants to get with Sadie Johnson. She’s the most beautiful woman around.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dude, Sadie was always a pretty thing, and now she’s absolutely gorgeous.” He shook his head. “Plus she’s a cowgirl, she knows how to work a farm, she knows how to shoot a gun and fish and hike and hunt. She’s the perfect woman.”

“Whatever.” I sighed. “Don’t say that around her, please. I do not want that going to her head.”

“What? You don’t want her to know that there’s a long line of men that want to be with her?”

“Dude, she doesn’t need to get married anytime soon. She’s only 25 years old.”

“Oh, my God, Wyatt. You’re so stupid. You know that, right?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“If you want her, then you need to make a move, and I suggest you make it fast.”

“What are you talking about? She’s my best friend. I don’t want her.”

“Yeah. Your best friend is in your bedroom, sitting on your bed or in your bed so that you can watch a movie together. Like, come on, dude. You’re twenty-five years old, not five. I

mean, it wasn't even cute when you were fifteen, let alone now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dude, you sleeping with a beautiful woman in your bed. You don't wake up with a hard-on?" He stared at me. "Seriously, are you straight?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Chet? Of course, I'm straight." I said to him and shook my head. "Sadie is my best friend, and I don't look at her like that. She is a girl, but I don't consider her a woman in that sense of the word."

I flashed back to her, standing in my room in her bra and panties, and swallowed hard. That had been true up until this evening. Now I couldn't get the image of her sexy body out of my mind. Fuck. I didn't know what I was going to do, but at least she had on a t-shirt and boxers now, so it wasn't like she'd be flashing me in that sexy bra and barely-there underwear again.

"I think you know exactly what I mean, Wyatt." Chet chuckled. "She's getting to you, isn't she?"

"What are you talking about?" I was frazzled now.

"Dude, I saw the look in your eyes just now." He grinned. "You've noticed that little Sadie is all grown up."

"What?" I said.

"She's sexy as hell. Come on, Wyatt. Let's be real here. Every cowboy in the fucking state wants her."

"If you say that again, Chet, I will sock you. Don't you ever talk about Sadie like that."

"Okay, then. Well, have a nice night, Wyatt, with your delusions." He laughed.

"You're a jerk, you know that?"

"I'm just being honest, but hey, if you don't want to listen to me and you don't want to listen to Mom ..."

"What does Mom have to do with this?"

“You know Mom’s been hoping that you and Sadie will get together forever.”

“What? You’re stupid. No, she hasn’t.”

“Wyatt, how are you so clueless? I thought you were one of the smartest brothers, but you’re stupid. Or maybe you’re just stupid when it comes to love.”

“I’m not stupid when it comes to love, and no thanks, I’m not looking for love right now. Maybe you should start worrying about yourself, because Beau’s coupled off now, and Austin’s coupled up now, and guess who’s the next brother in line?” I gave him a hard stare. “Yep, you. So if I was you, I would be worrying about myself.”

“Mom knows that I’m never getting married.” He smirked. “Look at me. A man as fine as me shouldn’t settle down. That just wouldn’t be fair to all the women out there.”

“Are you seriously my brother, dude? I don’t know one woman who would care.”

“I think I know about twenty—including Sadie.”

“Sadie’s not interested in you, bro.”

“You want to bet?” He grinned. “I bet you if I asked her on a date, she’d say yes.”

“Don’t you dare,” I growled at him. I was pissed off at even the thought of him asking Sadie out. “If you ask her out or lay a hand on her...”

“You’ll what? You’ll beat me up? If you’re not interested, what do you care if I’m interested?”

“I’m going to stop you right there.” I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. “You better think long and hard before you say anything else about Sadie. You hear me?”

“Oh, shit.” He took a step back. “You’re going to fight me for this girl?”

“She’s my best friend, and I will not have you disrespecting her.”

“I’m not disrespecting her.” Chet chuckled. “I’m just saying, maybe I can take her on a date, show her how a gentleman would treat her.”

“You are no gentleman, Chet Hamilton. I feel sorry for any woman that actually believes that you are.”

“Oh, Wyatt, Wyatt, Wyatt.” He shook his head. “I have many things to teach you.”

“Oh, yeah? Like—”

“Hey, excuse me?” a soft voice said.

We both looked over to see that Arya had walked into the kitchen.

“Hey.” Chet’s demeanor changed all of a sudden. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said in her soft voice. “I just came into the kitchen to get some milk for Eloise. She couldn’t sleep, so I was going to warm some up for her.”

“I’ll help you,” Chet offered quickly.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

“It would be my pleasure, ma’am. A cowboy at your service.”

“Thank you.” Arya blushed.

Chet looked over at me and winked.

I just rolled my eyes. He was such a douchebag. Now I understood why he’d been sitting in the kitchen. He’d probably been hoping that Arya would show up. I surely hoped he wasn’t going to seduce her. The last thing we needed was drama.

I didn’t know Arya very well. She’d shown up recently with Eloise, claiming that my older brother Beau was Eloise’s dad, but that had all been a mistake. Beau had never even met Eloise or Arya’s sister, who was Eloise’s mom, but we’d let Arya and Eloise stay because they had nowhere else to go. They were both sweet and good people, and I was glad that we could help them.

But Mom and Dad would not be happy if Chet tried to seduce Arya. He did have game, but he left way too many broken hearts. I was almost positive that there was an “I Hate Chet Hamilton Club” somewhere in the state from all the women who had dated and been dumped by him.

“Well, goodnight, guys.” I grabbed the two beers and headed back out of the kitchen towards the bedroom.

“Night, Wyatt.” Arya gave me a sweet smile.

“Night, bro.” Chet winked at me again. I just ignored him.

I headed back to the bedroom and opened the door. Sadie was sitting on the bed, skimming through the channels. She looked up with a smile, her long blonde hair hanging past her shoulders. Her face was so familiar to me. So sweet. So pretty. But now I saw her in a different light. I saw that sexy side of her. I saw that vixen in her. I shook my head, trying to erase the thoughts from my brain.

“So,” she said, as she jumped up. “How about we watch *Bridesmaids*?”

“*Bridesmaids*?” I groaned. “Just the name tells me I’m not going to like it.”

“No, I’ve seen it before, and it’s really funny. I think you’ll like it.”

“Really?” I said as she headed over to me. I couldn’t help noticing the way the fabric of the t-shirt stretched across her breasts. I handed her a beer, and she popped off the cap and took a swig. As I stared down the long expanse of her neck, I had to fight a sudden urge to lean down and kiss it.

I could not believe the thoughts that were running through my head and turned away from her. What the fuck was going on? Was I going out of my mind? I never thought sexual thoughts about Sadie.

“Wyatt, *please*,” she interrupted my thoughts.

“Sure. We can watch *Bridesmaids*,” I conceded as I sat down on the edge of the bed. “If it’s not good though, we’re watching something else.”

“Give it 50 minutes, and if you hate it, we’ll watch something else. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.”

I leaned back against the headboard. Sadie sat back next to me, her long legs stretched in front of her. I licked my lips as I stared at her bare skin. Shit. Why was I all of a sudden noticing how long and slim her legs were?

Then my eyes landed on a strip of leg hair. I laughed, mainly in relief at the distraction. “Oh my gosh, Sadie.”

“What?”

“You didn’t shave well, did you?”

“Huh?” She was staring at me like I was crazy. I reached down and ran my fingers along the front of her leg up the small patch of fuzz on her thigh.

“You forgot this part,” I said.

She giggled. “Oops. Yeah, I was trying to be fast in the shower, and I must have skipped over that.”

I stared at her for a few seconds, my fingers still on her leg.

“Sadie, how are you going to seduce a man if you can’t even shave properly?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She looked at me with beguiling eyes.

“I mean, if you can’t shave your legs well, how well are you shaving everything else?” I’d meant just to tease her, but as soon as the words were out, I realized I was getting into dangerous territory.

“Shave everywhere else?” She raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“You know.” I nodded down towards her crotch.

“Are you asking if I am clean-shaven?” She raised an eyebrow. “Really, Wyatt?”

“What? I’m just curious.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Why not? We’re best friends. We share everything.”

“I’m not going to share if I have a wax.”

“So, do you?” I really wanted to know.

“Wyatt, seriously? Why are you asking me this?”

“I don’t know. I’m just curious. Anyway,” I said. “I could have checked it out when you had your thing on earlier, but I was being a gentleman.”

“What do you mean you could have checked it out?”

“When you were facing me, I could have seen if there was any hair there.”

“Really, Wyatt?” She hit me on the shoulder. “That’s so inappropriate.”

“What? I’m just curious. Do you go and get waxed, or do you shave yourself, or are you au natural?”

“Fine. You really want to know? Yeah, I do.”

“You do?”

I realized I was way too invested in her bush status. I didn’t even want to think about Sadie as someone with a pussy. The thought of it made me squirm, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to know and the more I actually wanted to see it.

I was wading into dangerous territory and I needed to stop.

“Yep. I had a Brazilian wax when I was in Idaho,” Sadie replied.

“You did?” I said blankly.

“And don’t even ask, Wyatt Hamilton. I’m not going to show you.”

I laughed, throwing my head back. “I wasn’t going to ask you to show me,” I lied, because a part of me had wanted to see if she would say yes. “Come on, turn on the movie.”

“Fine. Are you going to keep the lights on?”

“Yeah, let’s keep the lights on for now.”

I didn’t really like watching movies with lights on, but turning the lights off would make it too dark and too intimate. And right now, I did not need to be in the dark with Sadie Johnson. I didn’t want to do anything that would put our friendship at risk. I certainly didn’t want to touch her and see how she’d react. Even though I was feeling an attraction to her that I’d never felt before, I knew that I had to fight against it. Sadie Johnson was too important in my life. She wasn’t someone that I could just mess around with. She deserved so much more than that.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Sadie

I felt overly warm when I woke up. I'd fallen asleep in the middle of the movie, and I blinked sleepily, trying to orient myself. Wyatt's arm was sprawled across me, and I could hear him snoring. Not that he'd believe me if I told him. Wyatt refused to believe that he snored, but he wasn't terribly loud so it wasn't bad. I shifted slightly in the bed and lay on my back, staring at the ceiling.

It had been weird seeing Shane Wakefield the day before. I had such a huge crush on him in high school, but he hadn't been interested in me at all. I mean, I had been a bit of a geek, and I'd always been around Wyatt, who everyone had automatically assumed I was in love with. Wyatt had been popular and handsome, and every single girl and every single boy seemed to think that I was lusting after him, but there'd never been anything more than that between us.

I looked over to the side and watched him sleeping. He was handsome, much handsomer than I would ever admit out loud. It was weird lying here in bed next to him almost as if we were boyfriend and girlfriend, even though we were nothing of the sort. In fact, I was surprised that his mom and dad let us still sleep in the bed together, but I guess they knew that we were just friends, and with six other sons to worry about, Wyatt was probably the last thing on their minds.

“Morning.” Wyatt smiled sleepily as he opened his eyes. “I’m surprised I didn’t have to wake you up, sleepyhead,” he teased me.

“Your breath stinks,” I said, but it was a lie. I couldn’t smell anything.

“No, it doesn’t. I used Colgate.”

“Ooh, Colgate?” I laughed.

“Yeah. So *Bridesmaids* was sooo good, huh?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying it was so good, you fell asleep after about 15 minutes.”

“Because I was tired. I did have a full adventure in Idaho, you know?”

“Uh huh,” he said. “You and your ‘dates.’” He stretched and then pulled off his t-shirt.

“What are you doing?” I looked at him in the face trying not to look at his chest.

“I’m warm, okay?”

“I mean, I’m warm too, but you don’t see me taking off my T-shirt.”

“You can if you want to.” He grinned at me wickedly.

“You’re bad, Wyatt.”

“I know.” He yawned again. “I’m still tired. Maybe I’ll grab another hour or so.”

“No,” I pouted. “I wanted to go into town so we could get donuts. And then I thought we could go riding.”

“Donuts ...” he repeated thoughtfully. “Well, now, my mom could make us something for breakfast.”

“I don’t want your mom to have to make us breakfast every single time I stay over here. She’s not our maid, you know.”

“My mom loves cooking for the family.”

“Yeah. But I want some fresh, hot donuts with cinnamon sugar. Doesn’t that sound good?” I pleaded with him.

“It sounds okay, but I think I’d like an omelet with cheese and bacon and mushrooms ...”

“Fine,” I sighed. “We’ll stay here like we always do.”

“But if you really want to get the donuts,” he shrugged, “I’d be down.”

“Really?” I clapped my hands. “Really, really, *really*?”

“You only have to say really one time, Sadie. And yes, you haven’t been in town for a while, so we can have whatever you want for breakfast today.”

“I knew you missed me!” I laughed.

“I don’t know that I *missed* you,” he said. “I just don’t want to hear you moaning all day long about wanting donuts.”

“Whatever.” I jumped out of the bed. “Okay. I’m going to shower, and then we can go?”

“Well, I need to shower as well.” He stretched. “You’re goofy,” he said, looking me over.

“Why am I goofy?”

“Because your hair is all a mess.” He climbed out of bed and tugged on the ponytail at the top of my head.

“What? My hair was getting in my face, so I just put it in a high bun last night.”

“Okay,” he said. “Interesting.”

“Don’t be rude, Wyatt.”

“I’m not being rude. I mean, if I was being rude, I’d say you look like a hot mess in the morning, but did I say that?”

“Really, Wyatt?”

“What?”

“You look like a hot mess too.”

It was a total lie. He looked absolutely adorable with his floppy short blonde hair and his bright blue eyes.

“Don’t lie, Sadie.” He wiped the sleep away from his eyes and gave me his signature lazy grin. “It doesn’t become you.”

“I’m not lying!” I narrowed my eyes indignantly at him. “I’m just trying to be honest with you like you are with me. You look like a hot mess.”

“Sadie, you’re the only woman that thinks I look like a hot mess in the morning. Trust me.” He licked his lips. “Women can’t get enough of Wyatt Hamilton.

I hit him in the shoulder. “Really, dude?”

“Really.” He laughed. “Come on now. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors.”

“What rumors, Wyatt? There are no rumors.”

That was a lie, too. I heard all the rumors. Wyatt Hamilton was supposedly one of the best lovers in town. At least that’s what three of his ex-girlfriends had said. They’d also said that he was very well equipped.

Not that I cared about that. Ew.

“I can tell by how red your face is that you know exactly what I’m talking about, Sadie.” He laughed, “Go on, get a shower, and then we’ll go.”

“So you don’t need a shower after all?”

“No, my natural scent is good enough. Who knows? Maybe there’ll be a line of women waiting for me in town.”

“Whatever,” I rolled my eyes. “Maybe Shane will be waiting for me.”

“Shane?” The smile vanished from Wyatt’s face. “Shane Wakefield?”

“What? He said he was very happy to see me and that he wanted to contact me.”

“Sadie Johnson, do not call Shane Wakefield. Do not get involved with him. I’m warning you.”

“What do you mean, you’re warning me? Warning me about what?”

“I’m telling you that Shane is not a good guy to get involved with.”

“I didn’t ask you for your advice, Wyatt.”

“I don’t care if you asked me for my advice. I am telling you as your best friend, do not call Shane Wakefield. He will only break your heart.”

“Oh my gosh, Wyatt. I haven’t even gone on a date with him. How’s he going to break my heart?”

“Sadie.” He crossed his arms and glared at me. “Don’t call him. I forbid you to call him and hang out with him. That’s all I have to say on the matter.”

“Yes, boss.” I rolled my eyes. Wyatt thought he could control everything I said and did. It was one of his worst personality traits.

“Don’t give me that look, Sadie. I will know if you call him.”

“And what are you going to do about it if I do?”

“You’ll see.” He smirked. “Trust me.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I’m going to get a shower now, and then we’ll go and get donuts. Okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded. “And then I guess we can go for a quick ride. I have to go out on the ranch again today. Turns out we have a locust problem. I’m going to have to spray.” He sighed. “Ugh, what a mess.”

“I can help you if you want. My dad had a locust problem on the farm a couple of years ago, so I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “I mean, I know you just got back from Idaho and you as might as well be [inaudible 00:09:36].”

“Of course, I’m more than happy to help.” I smiled at him. “You know that, right?”

“I know.” He smiled. “And you know what, Sadie?”

“Yes?”

“I am glad you’re back. And yes, I did miss you. And no,” he said quickly, “I’m not going to watch *Bridesmaids* again. I’m choosing the next movie.”

“Fine,” I said, “but anything but a horror movie.” I grabbed my clothes up off the side table.

“Sounds good to me. I was thinking ...” Wyatt began.

“Yeah. What?”

“Maybe we can have a barbecue this weekend. My mom was thinking it would be nice to welcome you back to town.”

I laughed. “I was only gone three weeks.”

“I know, but you know my mom. Any reason to have a party.”

“True. That’d be fun. And I’ll get to see Lucy and Olivia and Arya.”

“And Mom said you could also invite any of your other friends.”

“Cool. Can I invite Shane?” I gave him a wicked grin.

“Don’t even try my patience, Sadie Johnson.” He glared at me. “No, you cannot invite him.”

“I mean, if it’s my party and my guest list, I can invite whoever I want. Right?” I blinked innocently at him then turned and headed to the bathroom.

I had no idea why Wyatt was so opposed to me contacting Shane. It wasn’t like they were enemies. In fact, they’d been pretty good friends in high school. Wyatt was just one of those men that always had to have the final say in everything. But he had to learn that he wasn’t my dad or my older brother. He was my best friend.

I cared about his advice, but that didn’t mean I always needed to take it.

Chapter Sixty-Five

W yatt

“Hey, Beau, can I talk to you?” I approached my eldest brother as he exited the office. He was frowning about something, and I hoped he wasn’t in a bad mood.

“Yeah, what’s up?” His blue eyes glanced at me briefly and then looked away.

“I had an idea for the ranch. A way for us to increase revenue.”

“Oh, yeah?” He nodded but kept walking. “Can we discuss it later? I told Olivia I would meet her to talk about plans for the cabins, and I don’t want to be late.”

“Sure.” I withheld a sigh. “But can we talk later?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He ran a hand through his hair. “So I heard Sadie is back.”

“She is.”

“I heard she’s got the hots for Shane Wakefield?”

“What?” I frowned. “No, she doesn’t. Mom needs to stop spreading rumors. He’s interested in her, but she knows better to waste her time on a loser like him.”

“Didn’t he just graduate from law school?” Beau raised an eyebrow. “I heard he just started at a big law firm making a hundred and fifty grand a year. Not exactly a loser.”

“Sadie doesn’t want to date a lawyer.” I scoffed. “She wants to have a life that doesn’t focus on kissing ass.”

“I bet she’d love to kiss Shane’s tight ass.” He laughed and then shook his head. “Lighten up, Wyatt, it’s a joke.”

“Not a funny one.” What was up with everyone making jokes about Shane and Sadie? Couldn’t they see what a douchebag he was? “Anyway, just in case you hadn’t heard yet. Mom is throwing a barbeque on Sunday to welcome Sadie back home.”

“She was gone for less than a month.” Beau rolled his eyes. “Mom will use any excuse for a party.”

“I guess she wants to continue the celebration after she and Dad partied it up in Seattle for their anniversary.” I shrugged.

“Yeah ...” Beau said slowly. “I guess she’s still in the partying mood.”

“And now she has both Olivia and Lucy encouraging her.” I shook my head. “Three women. That’s a whole lotta estrogen.”

“Don’t be jealous, Wyatt.” Beau wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “You’ll have a real girl of your own one day.”

“I have a girl—” I started and paused as I realized I was thinking about Sadie, and she was very much not my girl. Not like that.

“Blow up plastic dolls don’t count, bro,” Beau added.

“You’re an asshole.” I pushed him off of me as he laughed.

“What? I’m just saying.”

“Your sense of humor is about as good as your fashion sense.” I gave his red plaid shirt a meaningful look. The same shirt he wore almost every day.

“And you’re the one complaining about the women?” He raised an eyebrow. “Who are you? Christian Siriano?”

“Who?” I had no idea who he was talking about.

“A designer that was on *Project Runway*.” He grimaced. “Don’t ask me how I know that.”

“I guess Olivia has her claws into you deep.” I laughed.

“Wait until you fall in love. You’ll be watching all sorts of crap too.”

“Never going to happen.” I ignored the fact that I’d just watched *Bridesmaids* against my will. He didn’t need to know that.

“Wyatt, there are many things we think are never going to happen in life, but never say never.”

“Spoken like a true biatch.”

“Is that any way to speak to your brother?”

“You mean my cuckold brother.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Nah, I think that’s you and Austin.” I grinned as we walked into the kitchen. Mom was sitting at the table chatting with Chet and Arya. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Arya was just telling us that she got a job interview at the bar,” Mom said. “Chet was trying to convince her it was a bad idea.”

“It pays really good money.” Arya looked at me hopefully as if she was seeking my approval. “It’ll help me get on my feet so that I can look after Eloise.”

“I don’t think a bar is a good place for you to work.” Chet’s lips were thin. “But what do I know? I’ve only frequented hundreds of bars in my time, and I’ve seen how men treat pretty women.”

Beau raised his eyebrows at me and shook his head. “That is my cue to step out for a little bit. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said quickly, not wanting to get into the middle of another mess. “I need to do some research. Beau, we’ll chat later?”

“Yup.” He made a beeline for the French doors.

I grabbed a can of pop from the fridge and hurried back out before anyone could say anything else. I headed for the study so that I could get on the internet. I'd been thinking about purchasing some yearlings to train and race for a while now. I knew there was a lot of money to be made in racing, and there was a horse auction coming up soon in Kentucky. If I could convince my brothers to give me some capital to purchase some horses to train, I was sure I could make a success of it. I'd been a keen rider since I was young, and I'd broken many wild horses. But thoroughbreds sold for five or six figures. It was a big investment to ask of the family ranch, but all I needed was a real chance. I knew I could make this happen, and I was confident I could grow the business to the millions. I needed to convince my brothers that I could turn a hundred thousand into a million in a couple of years. To even have a chance, I'd have to know my stats and figures like the back of my hand.

All my life, I'd never really known what I wanted to do, but I knew now. I just needed my family to believe in my dream as much as I did.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Sadie

“Hey, Olivia. Hey, Lucy. How’s it going?” I looked up as they walked into the living room. I was happy to see them, but I didn’t want them to see that I was feeling a bit sorry for myself. I was normally always happy.

“Good. You okay?” There was concern in Olivia’s eyes. She came over and sat next to me on the couch.

“I’m fine,” I replied, though that wasn’t really true. I felt like a loser. I knew I shouldn’t let a man define my self-worth, but it was hard not to feel sad that I seem to be the only person in the world that wasn’t able to find love.

Okay, I knew that was a bit of an exaggeration. There were many women like me who hadn’t found love, but being in this house with Lucy and Olivia and seeing how much Austin and Beau loved them, well, it made me feel sorry for myself.

“Hey, Sadie,” Lucy took a seat on the other side of me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said but my lower lip was trembling. I was an absolutely awful liar.

“Come on, Sadie. Did Wyatt say something to you? Did he hurt your feelings?” Olivia’s expression darkened. “If he did, I will take care of him. And if I can’t take care of him, I’ll have

Beau take care of him. And you know Beau will definitely knock some sense into his head.”

“No,” I said half-giggling and almost crying. “It’s not Wyatt. He hasn’t done anything to me that he doesn’t always do. It’s just—I don’t know. I see you guys and your relationships, and I just feel sad. I want a relationship too, you know?”

“Oh.” Understanding bloomed across Olivia’s face. “I know. When Lucy first got into her relationship with Austin, I was jealous, too.”

“You were?” Lucy looked at her in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah! Not only was I losing my best friend to some guy on the other side of the country, but she’d also found love. And of course, I was happy for you, but you know,” Olivia looked a little bit shamefaced, “I was a little upset for myself too.”

“I understand,” Lucy nodded. “I would’ve felt the same way.” She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and gave me a quick squeeze. “And I understand how you feel, Sadie. Of course you want love. I mean, you’re not a little girl anymore. It must have been hard growing up with all these men and not really having a true love.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I mean, I love the Hamiltons. They’re amazing. They’re like my family, but I want true love. You know? I want one guy to look at me like I’m not his sister.” I pause. “I know this sounds bad, but I want some guy to look at me like I’m some sort of sex goddess.”

“That doesn’t sound bad.” Olivia grinned. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“You know, I don’t think I’m unattractive.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re beautiful!” Lucy said.

“Thanks, but it’s weird when you’re around so many guys that don’t even look at you like you’re a woman.”

“Yeah, I understand that,” Olivia nodded, “but that’s because they’re the Hamiltons. They’re goofy anyway. We

need to get you out there so you can meet some better men. Some men that will appreciate you.”

“Well, there was this one guy.” I looked around the room to make sure that Wyatt hadn’t walked in when I wasn’t looking.

“Yeah?” Lucy looked eager. “Who?”

“So, there’s this guy I went to high school with, Shane Wakefield. And I think he wants to take me on a date.” I smiled thinking about it. “Which is absolutely crazy, because in high school I had the biggest crush on him and he wasn’t interested.”

“So go,” Olivia urged. “Why are you even thinking about it? You should be on a date with him right now.”

“I know, but Wyatt ...” I made a face.

“What did Wyatt have to say?” Lucy asked.

“He doesn’t like Shane. He thinks he’s bad news. And he doesn’t want me to date him. In fact, he said, he *forbade* me.” I started laughing. “Can you believe that bullshit? He thinks he can forbid me from anything.”

Olivia chuckled. “He’s crazy. He did not actually use the word forbid, did he?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “I mean, of course, I told him I didn’t have to listen to him, but I don’t want him to cause any drama.”

“Girl,” Lucy said, “I know he’s your best friend, and yes, you should respect his opinion, but did he give you any good reason why you shouldn’t go out with Shane?”

“He said Shane’s a user, and that he just dates girls to get some.” I shrugged. “And I mean, that’s probably true. I don’t know that he’s ever been in any sort of long-term relationship. And I have heard he goes from woman to woman. But at this point, frankly, I don’t care. I just want to go on some dates. Does that make me horrible?”

“Of course not,” Olivia said. “Sometimes you just need to get out there.”

“Exactly. I mean, it’s not like I think he’s my future husband. It’s not like I’m going to give him my V card,” I giggled. “Not that I would tell Wyatt that. I mean, that’s none of his business.”

“Of course not.”

“Have you thought about what you want your first time to be like?” Lucy said.

“Of course. I’ve been daydreaming about it for years and now it still hasn’t happened. I kind of just want to—” I pressed my lips together as Wyatt walked into the living room. My cheeks grew warm as he looked at me.

“You kind of just want to what?” Wyatt said. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

“Yeah, we were just talking about out perhaps going out this weekend,” Olivia said. “We thought we’d go dancing again.”

“You girls and your dancing.” Wyatt rolled his eyes. “There’s more to life than dancing.”

“And there’s more to life than fishing and hunting, Wyatt Hamilton,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but fishing and hunting’s fun. Dancing? Eeewwww.”

“No one asked you to come anyway, Wyatt.”

“Well, fine, if you don’t want me there,” he shrugged, “I guess I’ll just stay home and watch a movie or something.”

“You do that.”

“Yeah, because I think Shane will be there, won’t he?” Lucy said.

I shot her a quick look. The tension in the air rose as Wyatt walked towards me, an eyebrow raised.

“Not Shane Wakefield.” His voice was cold.

I frowned at him. “So what if it’s Shane Wakefield? I took your opinion into consideration, Wyatt, and I decided that it doesn’t matter to me.”

“You decided that my opinion doesn’t matter to you? What the—”

“Of course your opinion matters to me, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to talk to Shane. If he wants to take me on a date, fine. I mean, it’s not like I’m going to marry the guy.”

“So you don’t mind him copping a feel?” Wyatt crossed his arms over his chest. “Really?”

“I didn’t say that, Wyatt.”

“Well, essentially, that’s what you’re saying if you go on a date with him. You’re telling him that you can touch you and you can—”

“Actually, me going on a date with him isn’t telling him any of those things, thank you very much.” I looked at Olivia and Lucy, who both had bemused expressions on their faces. “You see what I’m dealing with?”

Olivia looked thoughtful. “So, Wyatt, what is it about Shane that you dislike? Like, why would he not make a good date for Sadie?”

“Do I really have to explain why he’s a shitty-ass guy?” He rolled his eyes. “Really? If I tell you he’s bad news, you should just take me at my word.”

“But how is he bad news?” Lucy said. “You still haven’t said that.”

“I just told you he’ll be groping her.”

“Really, Wyatt? In the middle of the restaurant, he’s going to grope me?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe under the table,” he said.

“Whatever, Wyatt.”

“You know what, Lucy?” Wyatt glared at Lucy. “And you know what, Olivia?”

“What, Wyatt?” They chorused at the same time. I giggled.

“You guys are like twins.”

“Almost,” Olivia nodded.

“Neither of you knows Shane Wakefield, and you don’t know the sort of man that he is. And I think that it’s very, very ...” He paused as he was getting heated.

“You think it’s very what?” Olivia said with a small smile.

“I think it’s very disrespectful to disregard my opinion on this matter.”

“We’re not disregarding your opinion on this matter,” Olivia said, “but Sadie wants to go on some dates, and Shane is interested. I don’t see how one date can hurt.”

“That’s because you don’t know him.”

“Well, we’ll get to know him when we go out on Saturday night, and then we’ll give you our opinion. Okay, Sadie?”

“Sounds good to me.” I beamed. “So there, Wyatt.”

“Okay, fine. Take these two women that don’t know this man from Adam and see what they have to say about him. But believe you me, they’re not going to think he’s a catch.”

“Well, maybe there will be some other guys there on Saturday night that we do think there is a catch,” Olivia said.

“You know what? I am going to the office. Sadie, I will talk to you later?” Wyatt just shook his head. “We need to purchase some new yearlings in a couple of weeks and I need to do some research on which ones will make the best racehorses.”

“I didn’t know you guys bred racehorses,” Lucy said with a surprised glance.

“Well, this will be our first year doing it seriously,” Wyatt said. “I’ve always had strong opinions about breeding racehorses, and I think this could help bring some extra income to the ranch. We’ll see.”

“Well, that’s awesome, Wyatt,” I said. “So Beau agreed?” I was surprised that he hadn’t mentioned it to me. Wyatt had been talking about purchasing horses for racing for the last few months and he’d been nervous to bring it up to his brothers, with everything that was going on.

“Not yet,” he shook his head, “but that’s why I’m going to do my research first so I have the numbers to show him. And then maybe he’ll dip into the coffers and allow me to invest in at least two horses.” He looked over at Olivia, “But who knows? Maybe I don’t have to speak to him. Maybe you could speak to him for me.”

“Very funny,” Olivia said with a smile. “You know he respects your opinion, Wyatt.”

“Sure he does.” Wyatt took a deep breath. “Anyways, I’m out. I’ll speak to you later. Bye.” He walked out of the room.

I looked at Olivia and Lucy. “Uh oh, I think he’s kind of pissed at me.”

“Well, let him be pissed. He’s a typical man,” Lucy said. “He wants it his way or the highway. You’re entitled to your own opinion as well. I mean, he couldn’t give you one good reason why Shane Wakefield is not a good guy. Aside from the fact that he’s going to grope you at the restaurant,” Olivia said. “Does he seem like the kind of guy who’s going to grope you at a restaurant, Sadie?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “But I know self-defense. So if he even tries,” I grinned, “I’ll take care of him.”

“Well, we definitely want to meet him on Saturday just to make sure,” Olivia said. “I mean, there is a possibility that Wyatt is right and not just jealous.”

“What do you mean, jealous?” I wrinkled my nose. “He’s not jealous.”

“Oh, Sadie, you have a lot to learn about men.” Olivia laughed. “But come on, let’s watch a movie, and then we’ll discuss plans for the weekend later. Sound good?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “And then I have to get home. My parents are kind of wondering where I’ve been the last couple of

days.”

“I bet they are,” Lucy said. “They probably miss you, too.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I laughed. “They don’t really seem to have time to focus on anything other than the ranch these days, but it is what it is. I’m happy to have a home and a family. And I’m so thankful that the Hamiltons let me stay here so often.”

“I wonder if Wyatt’s going to be pissed that you don’t stay over again tonight,” Olivia said.

“I don’t think so.” I shake my head. “It’s not like I stay every night. Plus, I’ll see him this weekend at the barbecue and maybe dancing if he comes to Twelve Point Buck Bar.”

“Maybe he’ll come dancing with us,” Olivia suggested.

“I don’t think he will.” I shook my head. “He’s not into dancing at all.”

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Wyatt

“So, Beau, can we chat?” I asked my brother after dinner.

Bea was whispering something into Olivia’s ear that made her blush. “Uhm, can it wait?”

“First thing tomorrow, okay?” I said with a sigh. “It’s important.”

“Fine.” He looked me up and down. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Everything’s fine.” I looked at my watch. “I think I’m going to go to the bar. Anyone wanna come?” I looked around the room and the only one that seemed interested was Chet. “You down?”

“Sure. Why not?” He looked over at Arya, who was ignoring him. It seemed like she’d been ignoring him all through dinner. I assumed she was still upset over him lecturing her about the job at the bar—the very same bar we were headed to tonight. Ironic.

“I’m going to text Sadie, but I’ll meet you out front in five?”

“Sure. Let me go take a piss and I’ll meet you out front.”

“Chet, really? There are women in the room,” Mom scolded him. I grinned as he apologized.

“Sorry, Mom. Excuse me while I go and use the john.”

She shook her head. “Ranger, please talk to your son.”

We all laughed. Mom always complained about living in a houseful of men, but now she had Lucy and Olivia, and I knew she was counting days until one or both of them were pregnant and she had grandchildren. I had a feeling she was hoping for a bunch of girls.

I headed out of the room, texting Sadie as I walked toward my room. I had a feeling she was annoyed with me, and I wanted to clear the air before I went out and got buzzed.

Hey girl, what are you up to? I asked.

Her reply came a moment later. **I’m reading.**

Whatcha reading?

Do you care?

I took a deep breath. Sometimes I didn’t have the patience to deal with women. **If I didn’t care, would I be asking?**

I’m reading a book called *The Inheritance Games*.

Oh, fancy.

Not really, but I’m enjoying it.

Cool.

I waited for her to text back and ask what I was doing, but she didn’t. I went into my room with a sigh. It was so hard dealing with Sadie when she was in a mood like this. I sat on the edge of the bed and noticed the t-shirt I’d lent her the previous night folded up neatly on the side. I picked it up and sniffed it, surprised to find that it still carried her scent. I breathed it in for a few seconds and then threw the shirt back down.

Why was I acting like a fucking creeper?

My mind flashed back to the image of her in her thong. Since when had she started wearing sexy underwear? Her cousins in Idaho had a lot to answer to. Fucking country bumpkins.

I laughed out loud then. I was really the pot calling the kettle black. You didn't get more country than me and my family. I looked back down at the phone to see if she'd sent me anything, and when I saw she hadn't, I started getting angry. What the hell was her problem? Was she this upset because I'd told her not to see Shane "I'll fuck anyone" Wakefield?

I quickly texted her. **If you want to be an idiot and join Shane's how-many-fingers club, go ahead, I'm not going to stop you.**

What are you talking about?

When we were in high school, Shane had a club, he called it the finger club.

I don't know what that means.

Why was Sadie so innocent? Sadie, he would finger-bang girls and then say how many fingers he was able to put in them."

Oh. :(

Yeah, but if you still want to think he's a good guy, go ahead.

I never knew he did that, she replied.

Well, now you do.

Maybe he doesn't want to finger me.

I know he doesn't want to finger you. He wants to bang you.

Wyatt!!

What? If you can't handle the heat, get out of the kitchen.

He's not going to try and bang me on one date.

Go ahead and see. Whatever.

Well, now that I have your permission, I will.

You're an idiot. I have to go now.

I powered off my phone and hurried out of the room. I don't know how it had happened, but I was angrier now than I'd been before. Why wouldn't she listen to reason? I was done trying to protect her. She could do what she wanted. I was going to get me a hottie tonight and forget all about stupid Sadie Johnson and her date with loose-lips Shane.

"So, what do you think about Arya?" Chet asked me as we guzzled beers at the bar.

"What do you mean, what do I think about Arya? She seems like a nice enough girl, I suppose." I shrugged. "Why?"

"I was just asking." Chet looked around the bar. "Hey, what do you think about those two?" He nodded toward two hot blondes that were giggling at something.

"Not my type," I said, barely glancing at them.

They were pretty gorgeous, and it was obvious they were interested in us because they were staring directly back at us. But I just couldn't focus on women right now.

"So, do you think that Beau was really Eloise's dad?" I said, not knowing what else to say.

"What are you talking about, Wyatt?" Chet rolled his eyes. "We know that Beau's not Eloise's dad. Beau never even met Eloise's mom."

"I know, I know. I'm just saying, is all." I grabbed my beer and chugged it down and then jumped up. "I'm going to go and get another one. You want one?"

"Sure," he said, "but you're sure getting through them beers fast. There's something you not telling me?"

"No, why?"

"Because you're on your fifth beer in an hour, and you're not flirting with those two hot blondes."

"What, I got to flirt with a hot blonde every time I see one?"

"Well, you do love blondes."

“Whatever. I love all women, and I’m actually not that partial to blondes,” I said, thinking about Sadie and her long blonde hair. Forget blondes. I was moving on.

“Sure you’re not, Wyatt.”

“Dude, what is this about?”

“Did you and Sadie have another argument or something?”

Tension crept up my back. “Why does Sadie have anything to do with this?”

“Whoa.” He put his hands up in the air. “Dude, chillax.”

“What are you talking about?” I said, getting angrier.

“I don’t know what your problem is. Why are you getting an attitude with me just because I brought up Sadie?”

“Dude, Sadie is my best friend. She’s not my fricking wife. I’ve got a lot more going on. In fact, I have to talk to you about something.”

“Oh? Don’t tell me you’re into Arya.”

“What? No, I’m not into Arya. Is that why you keep bringing her up?” I asked him. “Dude, I don’t want Arya. I mean, Eloise is a cute kid, and Arya is very nice, but I’m not interested in her, so stop trying to set me up. Oh my God, did Mom put you up to this?”

“What are you talking about?” It was his turn to look confused. “Why would Mom want you to go out with Arya? She’s older than you, and she needs a real man, not—” I raise an eyebrow at him, and he paused. “I mean, not that you’re not a real man, but you’re young and ...”

“You know what, Chet? I’m going to go and get the beers. And when I get back, let’s change the subject.”

I turned and walked away without waiting for him to answer me. He was fricking getting on my nerves. This night was not going as planned at all. I looked down at my phone to see if Sadie had called or texted an apology, but of course she hadn’t. She was frustrating the living daylights out of me. I stood there waiting at the bar, ready to order two more drinks,

when one of the blondes who had been sitting at the table sidled up next to me.

“Why, howdy there, cowboy,” she said, a wide smile on her face.

“Howdy, ma’am,” I replied.

“So, you having a good night with your hot friend over there?”

“That’s my brother, and it’s fine. What about you?”

“Well, me and my best friend, Lacey, we wanted to get into some trouble tonight,” she almost purred as she stared at my lips.

“Oh, yeah? What kind of trouble?” I smiled at her. I wasn’t really interested, but I was still Wyatt Hamilton. I couldn’t not flirt back.

“Well, what sort of trouble can you think of for me to get into?” She bit down on her lower lip. I didn’t know if that was in the lady’s handbook to seducing guys, but it seemed like every woman that I met did it when they were flirting. Someone should tell them that it wasn’t sexy. It certainly didn’t turn me on.

“Hey, there, Wyatt,” the bartender greeted me. “Two more?”

“Yep, and whatever the lady’s having.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” she said.

“Of course. It’s on me. And whatever your friend wants as well.”

“Oh, that’s really nice of you. I knew you’d be a gentleman.”

“Well, I am a cowboy, ma’am.”

“Not all cowboys are gentlemen, you know.”

“All Hamilton cowboys are.”

“Hamilton,” she said, thinking. “Oh, from Horseshoe Ranch?”

“Yep, the one and only.”

I didn't ask how she'd heard about it. Everyone who lived in the area and knew Horseshoe Ranch and knew of the Hamilton men.

“Wow, so you're a Hamilton.” She looked even more impressed than she had earlier. “I don't suppose you happen to know Beau Hamilton, do you?”

Given that I'd just said I was a Hamilton who lived on Horseshoe Ranch, this struck me as a pretty silly question, but I smiled politely. “He's my older brother.”

“Yeah, I was reading a magazine article where it said he was the most eligible cowboy in the state.”

“Not anymore.” I shook my head. “Sorry to break your heart, but he's engaged now.”

“Oh no,” she said. “That's such a pity. I really was hoping to meet him.”

“Oh, yeah? You wanted to catch yourself an eligible cowboy?” I said, not sure why I was continuing on with this.

“Well, I mean any cowboy will do.” She leaned into me and put her hand on the top of my arm and squeezed my muscles. Instinct made me flex them slightly, and she gasped as she squeezed. “Wow, what big biceps you have.” She winked at me.

I chuckled, shaking my head. This lady was not smooth, but most men had egos the size of Texas and so they probably ate shit this up.

“Well, you know.” The bartender put the drinks down on the bar in front of us. I pulled out a couple of bills out of my wallet and placed them on the bar. “Keep the change, eh?”

“Thanks, Wyatt.”

I grabbed the beers and smiled at the girl next to me.

“So, I'm going to go and sit with my brother.”

“Oh, yeah. I'm sure Lacey would love to join as well. Hold on.”

“Um ... Okay?” I wanted to point out that I hadn’t invited them,” but I was too much of a gentleman.

I walked over to the table while she went to get her friend.

Chet grinned at me when he saw the two women approaching. “So I guess you *are* in the mood to hook up tonight.”

“I’m not looking to hook up.” I shook my head. “She probably wants to hook up with me, but ...”

“Uh huh.” Chet stopped talking as the girls reached our table.

“Hi, thanks so much for the drinks.” The other woman held her drink up. “I’m Lacey, Emily’s best friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Lacey.” Chet raised his glass and then looked over at Emily. “And you, too, Emily. I’m Chet, Wyatt’s brother.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Chet. You are *so* handsome,” Emily gushed. Well, I guess she wasn’t interested in me after all. Emily sat next to Chet, and then Lacey sat next to me.

“Hi,” Lacey said breathlessly. “You’re really cute as well. How old are you?”

“I’m 25. And you?”

“I’m 28, but I can be a cougar if you want.” She licked her lips and scrunched up her nose in a way that was probably supposed to be cute, and it was everything that I did not appreciate in a woman. She was pretty, sure, and if her top were any lower, her boobs would be exposed, but she just wasn’t my type. I mean, she might have been fun for a night, but I was old enough that I didn’t bother wasting my time with that type of woman anymore. Far too much drama.

“So, Chet,” Lacey leaned forward on the table, “you have such a familiar-looking face,” she said. “Have I seen you on TV or in movies?”

“I don’t think so,” Chet replied. “But you know, maybe you’ve seen me in your dreams.” He winked.

I groaned. “Really, Chet? Does that line work for you?”

“I don’t know. Ladies, does that line work for me?”

“Oh, yes.” Emily was touching his chest now.

I could see Lacey glaring at Emily. Maybe both of them were after my brother. I laughed inwardly. Here I was not wanting to be with either one of them and trying not to be rude, and it seemed like neither of them wanted to be with me anyway.

I was about to make my escape when Lacey turned back to me. She put her hand on my jeans and ran her fingers up my inseam, stopping directly over my crotch, and squeezed.

Startled, I jumped a little.

“Just checking the goods,” she said, squeezing again. My cock reacted, but not because I wanted to be with her, more because her fingers were squeezing me quite hard.

“Okay.” I grabbed her hand and moved it away. “Do you normally go up to strange guys and grab their cocks?”

“No.” She leaned forward and whispered in my ear, “I normally go up to guys and grab their dicks, though.” She giggled and poked her tongue into my ear. It was wet and cold, and I moved away quickly. The whole thing was starting to feel like a bad dream.

“I think you might have the wrong impression here,” I said, keeping my voice down. “Me and my brother actually just came out for a drink. We weren’t really looking to hook up tonight.”

“Speak for yourself,” Chet said.

Emily was running her fingers down his arms now and squeezing his biceps. I guess she preferred his because she was *oohing* and *aahing* like no one’s business. I tried not to roll my eyes. This was absolutely ridiculous.

“So, Wyatt ...” Lacey leaned towards me again.

“Yep, that’s my name. Don’t wear it out,” I grumbled.

She giggled. “Oh my gosh, you’re so funny. You’re so, so funny. Can I tell you something, Wyatt?”

“Go right ahead.” I took a deep sip of my beer.

“You know what my favorite position is?”

“First position?”

“What?” She looked at me blankly.

“I figured you were talking about ballet.”

“No, silly.” She ran her fingers up my thigh again, and I grabbed her hand.

“Don’t,” I said.

“Reverse cowgirl,” She licked her lips again. “I can be pretty wild, you know.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine.

I couldn’t believe how desperate she was acting. I stood up quickly.

“I kind of got to go take a shit right now,” I said, being deliberately crude. “Excuse me while I go find a toilet.”

“What did you say?” She was clearly taken aback.

“I said I’ve got to go take a shit. Hopefully, I don’t have diarrhea. Would you be willing to wipe my ass if I did?”

“Ew, no. You’re disgusting.” Her lips curled in disgust. “Emily, did you hear what he just said to me?”

“No, what?” Emily was clearly annoyed at being distracted from whatever she was saying to Chet.

“He said he wants me to wipe the diarrhea from his ass.”

“Ew, what?” Emily looked up. “That’s gross.”

Chet burst out laughing. “You mean you wouldn’t wipe diarrhea from my ass?”

“No, I would not.” She looked over at her friend and then looked back at Chet. “You know what? Forget it, guys. Thanks for the drink.”

Both of them got up and walked away. I sat back down again, laughing along with Chet.

“That was crazy,” I said, “and I’m surprised you didn’t want to hook up with her. She was hot.”

“Dude, she just kept talking about Beau and asking how much money the family had.” Chet shook his head. “Those two were trouble. I don’t like to fuck crazy women.”

“Exactly.” I raised my glass and he raised his, and we clinked. “What a night,” I said, shaking my head. “What a night.”

“You can say that again, bro.” He nodded and laughed. “Wait till we tell everyone tomorrow how this night turned out.”

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Sadie

The sound of the phone ringing woke me up, and I stretched, cursing under my breath. I glanced at my phone. Three in the morning. Why the hell was Wyatt calling me at three a.m.? I yawned as I answered, “Hello? What is it?”

“What are you doing?” He sounded drunk.

And I rolled my eyes. “What do you think I’m doing, Wyatt? It’s three in the morning.”

“Actually, it’s 3:05 in the morning. What are you doing?”

“I’m in bed, obviously.”

“Wearing your sexy thong?”

“Wyatt, really? Why are you calling me?”

“I just wanted to see what you were up to.”

“Wyatt, you’re so fucking drunk right now. What is going on?”

“I went to the bar, and I had some drinks with Chet. And now I’m home, and I’m going to have some vodka.”

“I think you need to go to bed, Wyatt.”

“You want to hear what happened to me tonight?”

“Why, what happened to you tonight?”

“You want to hear about the hot blonde that was all over me and squeezing my cock?”

I sat up, pissed off and wide awake. “What are you talking about? Did you have sex tonight?” I could feel my face going red. Jealousy surged through me. Oh my God, why was I reacting like this?

“No, I did not have sex tonight. If I’d had sex tonight, would I be calling you at three in the morning?”

“Well, actually, it’s 3:05 in the morning, remember?”

“Actually, it’s 3:06 now, thank you very much, Sadie Johnson.”

“Wyatt Hamilton, why are you bothering me?”

“Are you still mad at me?”

“What?” I was taken aback. I mean, I was still mad at him, but I hadn’t thought he’d realized it.

“I want to know if you’re still mad at me.”

“Is that why you’re calling me?”

“You never stay mad at me for this long. I mean, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. I just don’t appreciate how you talk to me. I don’t appreciate you forbidding me to go on a date with Shane Wakefield. Even Olivia and Lucy thought that was absolutely ridiculous.”

“Fine. I don’t forbid you anymore. Do what you want.”

“The point is, you can’t tell me what I can and can’t do. It doesn’t make it better you saying that you un-forbid me because even if you did forbid me, I wouldn’t listen.”

He groaned. “Are you going to go on and on and on about this for the rest of our lives?”

“I certainly hope not, Wyatt,” I sighed.

“You’re absolutely ridiculous. I think I’m going to go in the hot tub.”

“I don’t think you should go in the hot tub. I think you should go to bed.”

“I don’t want to go to bed. I’m going to come over to your house and see you.”

“You cannot come over to my house and see me. You’re drunk. You cannot drive drunk. You know that.”

“What if I ride a horse?”

“You can’t ride a horse drunk either.”

“And you say *I’m* bossy,” he grumbled.

“You *are* bossy. And it’s three in the morning. And do not say it’s 3:06 or 3:07, or whatever the actual time is now.”

“Hey, you catch on fast.”

“Oh, Wyatt,” I said. “So what went on with this woman? And why was she touching you?”

“I don’t know. She was at the bar with her friend. They made a beeline for me and Chet, and I guess they wanted to have some sort of hookup. I don’t know. Maybe they wanted an orgy or something. Maybe they’d heard about the Hamilton men.”

“What are you even talking about?” My ears felt hot. I knew exactly what he was talking about.

“She’s most probably heard how hung we are, and that we’re all dynamite in bed.”

“Really, Wyatt?” I said, even though I had wondered about the same thing myself. Not about all of that Hamilton men, but one Hamilton man in particular, though I would never admit that to anyone. Certainly not to Wyatt.

“What? It’s true. What can I say? I’ve been blessed with a very large—”

“Stop it,” I interrupted. “Wyatt, this is not appropriate.”

“What’s not appropriate?” He started laughing. “You don’t want to hear about how large my—”

“Wyatt!”

“What? I was just going to say my feet. Don’t you want to know my foot size so you know what size shoes to get me for my birthday and for Christmas?”

“Wyatt, you were not about to say your feet. We both know that.”

“What? What did you think I going to say?”

“Wyatt ...”

“My ears. Do you think I have large ears?”

“Yeah, Wyatt, you have super large ears.”

“Or did you think I was going to say my cock? Did you think I was going to talk about my—”

“Wyatt, I’m going to hang up. Right now. That’s absolutely ridiculous. You cannot talk about your ... you know.”

“What, Sadie? You can’t say the word cock?” He started laughing again.

“Wyatt, I’m going now.”

“If you hang up the phone, I’m driving over to your house.”

“No, you cannot drive over to my house.”

“Talk to me, Sadie. I don’t want to go to bed, and everyone else is asleep.”

“So was I!”

“But you’re up now.”

“Fine. What do you want to talk about? And do not say your ...” I paused, “little man.”

“My little man?” he started laughing. “Are you trying to insult me? If anything, it’s my big man.”

“I’m not going to call your you-know-what *big man*.”

“Sadie?”

“Yes, Wyatt.”

“Can you come over?” Something in his tone shifted. He sounded more serious.

“Why?”

“I just want to talk to you in person and, you know, get some things off of my chest.”

“It’s late, Wyatt. Can we talk in the morning?”

“I don’t know if I’ll have the courage in the morning,” he said quietly. “Please?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll come over.” I climbed out of bed. “Let me just put on some clothes, and then I’ll be there in about fifteen.”

“You don’t have to put on any clothes.”

“Wyatt Hamilton!”

“What? I’m just saying. I’ve seen you in a thong. You don’t have to put on any clothes.”

“How many times are you going to talk about the thong?” I grumbled. “I never should have let you see.”

“What? I don’t deserve to see my best friend wearing a sexy thong? Is that only reserved for other men?”

“For crying out loud, Wyatt, there are no other men! And no, I’m not sure it’s appropriate that you saw me in a thong.”

“What? You’ve got a nice ass, Sadie. You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not embarrassed, Wyatt. I’m—”

“Are you coming over?”

“Why do you want me to come over?”

“I told you, there are some things I want to talk to you about.”

My heart started thumping in my chest. “Like what?”

Was Wyatt going to declare his undying love for me? I mean, I was starting to think I had feelings for him, but this was going from zero to sixty really quickly, and I wasn’t sure I

was ready to make the leap just yet. I needed to be wooed. I wanted to be wooed. I *deserved* to be wooed. Whether by Wyatt or someone else.

“Come on, Sadie,” he pleaded. “Come over”

“Fine. I’m coming.”

“Good,” he said. “And I’ll have a surprise waiting for you when you get here.”

“Oh, yeah? A surprise I’m going to like?”

“I think you’ll love it,” he said. “I think it’s something you’ve been waiting your entire life for.”

And with that, he hung up.

I stood there, staring in the mirror. Oh my God. Wyatt Hamilton was about to declare his undying love for me! Wyatt Hamilton had realized that he had feelings for me, as well! Wyatt Hamilton was seeing me in a new light. He probably had flowers and maybe even jewelry for me.

I mean, what else could it be? He knew that I was a true romantic. And if it was something I’d been waiting for my entire life, well, he was really going to go above and beyond.

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. There was no way I was rushing over to his house with bedhead and no makeup. I was going to have a quick shower, blow dry my hair, put on makeup, and a really cute sexy outfit. If he was going to declare his undying love for me, I was going to make sure I looked hot. Even if it was three in the morning. This was something I’d been waiting my entire life for. If Wyatt Hamilton was finally ready to take our relationship to the next level, well, I was willing to go there with him.

And I wanted to know if the rumors were true. Was he dynamite in bed? And was his cock magnificent? Even as his best friend, I didn’t dare ask him how large it was.

But if I was his girlfriend? Shit, I’d get out the measuring tape and figure it out for myself.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Wyatt

The wind was cold on my face as I lay in the backyard. I heard the sound of a truck pulling up around the front and I wondered who it could be, and then I remembered that I'd called Sadie. I yawned and stood up, stretching my stiff back. I'd been an idiot for coming out in the backyard and having another drink.

I walked around to the front just as Sadie was getting out of the truck. My breath caught at the sight of her.

She was stunning. Where had she gone last night that she was so made up? Her long, blonde hair was straight as a pin, and she was wearing a cute navy-blue dress that stopped mid-thigh and wedge-heeled shoes. Where the hell had Sadie gone last night?

I marched over to her, getting angrier with every step. "Sadie!"

She turned towards me. "Hey, Wyatt." Her face fell as she looked me up and down. "You look awful."

"Thank you." I stopped in front of her. "Where did you go last night?"

"What?"

"I didn't stutter, did I? Where did you go last night?"

“Nowhere.” She looked around. “What is going on, Wyatt?”

“Why are you so dressed up? You look like you have makeup on and your hair looks different. It’s not all frizzy, and I haven’t seen you wearing a dress in ages. Or heels.”

“These aren’t heels. These are wedges,” she said.

“I meant wedges. I knew they were wedges. I just said heels by mistake.”

“Okay, since when have you become an expert on women’s clothing?”

“I’m not an expert on women’s clothing, but I do recognize women’s shoes. You have talked about them enough times.”

“Did you ask me over here just to argue?”

“No, I just want to know,” I braced myself for the answer, “did you go out with Shane Wakefield last night?”

“No, I did not go out with Shane Wakefield. Is that why you called me over here?” I could tell that she was pissed.

“No, it’s not. I told you I had a special surprise for you.”

“I know.” Her voice suddenly got softer. “And I’m kind of here to hear what the surprise is. It’s four o’clock in the morning, dude. Your parents are going to be up soon. Beau and Austin are going to be up soon.”

I snorted. “I doubt it very much. Lucy and Olivia have them worn out.”

“Wyatt!”

“What? It’s true. Just wait till you have a boyfriend. You’re going to be worn out, too.”

She flashed me a wicked little smile. “I sure hope so.”

“Really, Sadie?” My eyes narrowed at her. “Did you understand what I was saying?”

“Yes, Wyatt. I’m not stupid. I’m going to be worn out from all the *sex* I’ll be having.”

I chuckled. “Seriously, Sadie?”

“What? That’s what you were talking about, wasn’t it? What’s good for the goose is good for the gander, Wyatt.”

“Well, I’m neither a goose or a gander, so ...” I shrugged. “Come on, let’s go to the back.”

“Oh, do you have something set up there?”

“Something set up?” I stared at her, wondering what she was talking about. Did she think I’d make breakfast or something this early? “Just come with me.”

“Wyatt, do you really think this is the right time? I mean, you’re drunk, and I ...”

“What? What does me being drunk have to do with anything?”

“I just kind of hoped that this moment would come at a time when we were both sober.”

“You’ve thought about this moment before?” I hadn’t realized that Sadie had been anticipating this. I hadn’t thought about it until a couple of hours ago.

“I can’t say that I’ve been ...” She paused. “Anyway, I don’t want to say anything else until you surprise me with whatever you’ve got.” We rounded the corner, and she stopped and frowned. “I don’t see anything back here.”

“What were you expecting to see?”

“I don’t know, some candles, some flowers, maybe.”

“Candles and flowers? I mean, I guess I can get some candles if you can’t see well, but I can always put the flashlight on my phone.”

“The flashlight on your phone?” She raised an eyebrow. “Wow, how romantic.”

“Romantic?” I had no idea what Sadie was talking about, and I wasn’t about to ask. “So you really didn’t meet Shane last night?”

“Wyatt!” She almost yelled this time. “I’m not going to tell you again. No, I did not go out with Shane last night. I didn’t do anything last night, okay?”

“Okay.” I held my hands out. “No need to shoot the messenger.”

“What messenger? You don’t have any message for me.”

“No need to shoot the cowboy.” I grinned, thinking a little of my boyish charm might improve her mood.

She just rolled her eyes. “Don’t give me that look, Wyatt. You’re getting on my nerves. You woke me up in the middle of the night for some surprise, and I’m still waiting to find out what it is.”

“Oh my gosh, do you want me to go in and get some candles or something? Will that make you feel better? I don’t know, maybe I’ll find some potpourri.”

“Potpourri?” She frowned. “Why would I want potpourri?”

“I mean, it’s the next best thing to flowers, right?”

“Honestly, Wyatt.”

“What? And they smell good. I think my mom has a drawer of potpourri somewhere.” I shrugged. “I mean, I thought it was for the toilet when you did a stinky deuce, but —”

“Wyatt Hamilton, seriously? I do not want to hear about your bathroom habits!”

I laughed. “Seems like that’s a theme tonight.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That lady I told you about, the one at the bar that was hitting on me.”

“The one that grabbed your junk?”

“Yeah, you remember.” I winked at her. “She was trying to whack me off or something.”

“She was trying to whack you off?” Sadie laughed. “Like she wanted to kill you?”

“Oops. No, I’m drunk. I mean she was trying to jack me off or something.”

“She was trying to jack you off in the bar?” Sadie raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“I mean, I don’t know. But she put her hand on my crotch twice.”

“That’s so gross. Why are some women like that?”

“Can’t tell you. I guess she was just being forward.”

“Okay, and why did you feel the need to tell me about this?”

“Because you’re my best friend and I tell you everything.”

“I don’t really want to hear about some woman who’s trying to jack or whack you off, okay?” She sighed. “Come on, let’s get this party started.”

“What party? You want to party?” I grinned.

“No. What’s the surprise you had for me? What did you want to tell me, Wyatt? This is really not going as I thought it was going to go,” she added quietly.

“Okay. Wow, you’re sure excited, aren’t you?” I grinned. “I guess you’ve been waiting for this a long time?”

Her expression softened and her lips curved into a shy smile. “I mean, maybe. I don’t know, I guess I never really thought about it until recently the other night, you know?”

“I know, right?” I held my hand up for a high five.

She looked at me in surprise. “High five, Wyatt?”

“What? I think it’s cool that we’re both on the same page here.”

“I guess ...” She slowly raised her hand for a high five.

I slapped her hand hard. “Here, girl! I knew we were on the same page.”

“Yeah, I guess I just didn’t expect it to be like this.”

“I know.” I shrugged. “I wouldn’t have expected it to be like this either, but I figured why not right here, right now?”

“Okay,” she said. “Should I be standing up for this or sitting down?”

“It’s up to you.” I shrugged. “Whatever gives you the best view.”

“The best view?”

“Don’t overthink it, Sadie. I mean, it’s only going to be quick.”

“It’s only going to be quick?”

“Yeah, I mean unless you want more, of course.”

“Unless I want more? I mean, the more, the better, right?”

“I guess. I didn’t expect to hear you say that, in all honesty.”

“You didn’t? But you know me.” Her eyes were lit with excitement.

“Wow, you really want this, don’t you?”

“I mean, I guess it’s been a long time coming,” she said.

“Okay, then. Well, here goes.”

“Okay.”

I handed her my phone and turned the flashlight on. “Don’t be too shocked, okay? I’m not a skinny dipper or a nude sunbather or anything.”

“What?” She blinked at me. “What are you talking about, Wyatt?”

Before she could say anything else, I turned around, pulled down my pants, and flashed her my ass.

“Wyatt, what the fuck are you doing?” she yelled.

I turned around to look at her shocked expression and pulled my pants up quickly. “What? What are you so surprised at? Is it whiter than you expected?”

“Is it *whiter* than I expected? Why are you showing me your ass?”

“Isn’t that what we’ve just been talking about for the last five minutes, that I was going to moon you?”

“What? *That’s* the surprise? You wanted to surprise me by showing me your ass?”

“I mean, the other night when I saw you in your thong, you looked really embarrassed because I saw your naked ass, and I wondered if that was why things between us have been weird. So I figured, ‘Hey, I know a way to stop you feeling so embarrassed. You can see my naked ass as well.’ Awesome, huh?”

“No,” she said. “No, no, no! This is not awesome. You called me at three o’clock in the morning so I could come over and see your fucking ass?”

“Whoa, why are you so angry? Did you expect me to have a better ass or something?”

“No, I did not expect you to have a better ass. I ...” She let out a deep sigh. “You know what, Wyatt? I am just a fucking idiot. I cannot believe that I came over here thinking—” She stopped herself and handed me my phone. “I’m going home.”

I yawned, suddenly was feeling very tired. “You came over here thinking what?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter,” she said quietly. “Just go to bed. I’m going to go home.”

“You drove all the way out here, though.”

“Yeah, and I can drive back.”

“Stay.”

“No, I’m not staying.”

“Please? Or I’m going to think it’s because you didn’t like my ass.”

“I didn’t like your ass, Wyatt.”

“You’re saying, what, my ass isn’t good enough for you?” I grinned at her. “I mean, I can show you my front, and I think you’ll like that a lot better.”

“Wyatt Hamilton, I do not want to see your front.”

“Are you sure about that, Sadie?”

I took a step closer to her but she shook her head. I could see that her cheeks were flushed. I wasn't sure if it was because of the cool air or because I was embarrassing her. “Sadie, Sadie. I think you do want to have a quick peek,” I teased.

“Wyatt you're drunk.”

“So what? I'd show you even if I wasn't.”

“I don't want to see your...” I pressed my finger against her lips. She pulled away from me. “What are you doing?”

“We both know you're not going to say dick or cock or penis, so I figure don't say anything because I sure don't want to hear ‘little man’ or ‘pee-pee’ or anything childish.”

“Really, Wyatt? I can say cock, you know.” The word sounded sexy coming from her mouth.

I stared at her in surprise. “Say that again.” My voice was husky now and all of a sudden, I was noticing just how short her skirt was and just how tight the dress was. And was she not wearing a bra? Were her nipples poking through the thin material of her dress? And how deep was that V-neck? If she slipped or moved to the side quickly, I might be able to see her nipple. And if I moved my hand upwards, I could easily pop her breasts out and ... I needed to stop thinking about Sadie like that.

“Earth to Wyatt. Hello?” she said, interrupting my lurid thoughts about her.

“Fine, you can go home,” I said quickly. I was so drunk that I might do something I shouldn't do if she stayed the night.

“What, so now you don't want me to stay? I just said I *would* stay.”

“You did?” I swallowed hard as stared at her lips, so pink and luscious and juicy. Since when had Sadie gotten juicy lips that made me think of sucking on them?

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her towards me. She swallowed hard, her eyes widening in surprise. I could feel her heartbeat racing as she whispered, “What are you doing, Wyatt?”

“I don’t know,” I said softly, staring at her lips and reaching my hand down to cup her ass lightly. She made a little moaning sound, and I started getting hard, really hard, and she hadn’t even touched my cock. The reaction was swift, and I knew she could feel it against her stomach. She stepped back, her eyes widening.

“I should go,” she said softly.

“I thought you just said you were going to stay.”

“But you said you want me to go.”

“I want you to stay more than I want you to go.” If she stayed, something would happen that would change our relationship forever. But I was too drunk to make smart decisions.

I wanted to feel her next to me. I wanted to touch her. I wanted to breathe her in. I wanted to know Sadie in ways that I had never known her before.

“What are you thinking about, Wyatt Hamilton?” She stroked my shoulder, her touch warm and soft.

“I’m thinking that I want to know why you thought I called you to come over tonight,” I said softly. Had Sadie come here for a completely different reason? Had Sadie come here wanting to be seduced by me?

And did I really want that as well?

Chapter Seventy

Sadie

I felt like a fool.

I'd actually thought Wyatt was going to declare his undying love for me or at least tell me that he liked me. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me and the rug had been swept from under my feet. Wyatt had called me over here so he could *moon* me?

I mean, I wasn't going to lie. He had a perfect ass, and I wasn't sure what he'd been talking about when he'd said he was pale white. His ass was just as golden brown as the rest of his body, which led me to think that perhaps he did sunbathe nude and I just didn't know about it. How did he have such a beautiful olive tone? I didn't know, and I wasn't about to ask.

"So you're staying over tonight, Sadie?" he said, gazing at me with wide seductive eyes.

Did he know what he was doing to me? Wyatt was used to getting his own way. He was the sort of guy that could get a woman into his bed with just a look. I knew that because I'd been his best friend for years and I'd seen it happen, only I hadn't cared then. I thought it was funny that my best friend had game and I had none, but somehow something had shifted along the way. I didn't find it funny anymore when I heard him talking about other women. When he'd told me about the girl touching his crotch, I'd wanted to go to the bar and punch

her, even though I didn't even know who she was. And the elation I'd felt when he told me he wasn't interested, well, that scared me.

Wyatt was still standing far too close to me. I could see the light blue specks in his otherwise dark blue eyes. The moonlight shone on his face as if highlighting him, trying to make him even more attractive, which I hadn't realized was possible. I'd always known he was handsome, but tonight he looked distinguished. He looked like a gentleman. He looked like a sexy cowboy.

"Sadie, are you staying, or are you going?" He lifted his hand and touched the pulse on my neck. I knew he could feel my heart racing.

"What are you doing?" I asked him softly.

"I'm just counting your heartbeat."

We both stood there for a few seconds. There was a tension in the air between us like nothing I'd ever felt before in my life.

"I should go home," I whispered.

This was dangerous territory for us, and if he found out that I had no bra or panties on under my dress, well, I wasn't sure what he'd say. What if he asked to see my thong or my underwear again? I have to tell him I didn't have anything on. I knew it had been brazen of me, but I'd figured if he was going to tell me that he loved me or at least had a crush on me, we could have some fun.

So much for that bright idea.

"I don't want you to go home, Sadie," he murmured.

"I'm tired. I want to hug and sleep."

"You don't need to hug me to fall asleep. And since when do we hug and bed? But we can start now," he added.

I swallowed hard. "What the hell is going on? Wyatt ..." I pressed my hand against his chest and that was a mistake. Touching his warm, hard body in this state made me feel almost woozy as if I were the one that was drunk.

“Don’t touch me like that, Sadie, unless you want something to happen.” His words were almost a growl.

I looked at him in surprise. “What?”

He stepped back, running a hand through his blond hair. “Sorry, I’m just joking. Look, you can sleep in the spare room if you want. You don’t have to sleep in bed with me. I just don’t want you to have to drive home again. You drove all the way out here. And I guess my little surprise didn’t go down well. I guess I was too drunk to think it through properly.”

“Yeah, Wyatt. I don’t think many people want to come over to your house at four o’clock in the morning to see your bare ass.”

“Well, I think there are a few women that would love to see my bare ass.” He chuckled.

It was the truth. Half the women in Montana would want to see his bare ass. I swallowed hard again. I’d actually wanted him to turn around. I could didn’t believe I was even admitting that, even to myself, but I’d wanted to see his goods, see what was Wyatt working with.

I told myself it was purely for scientific purposes. I wanted to know if the rumors were true. Where all the Hamilton men hung? Was Wyatt? And just how hung was he?

But I knew that was completely inappropriate.

“I’ll stay,” I blurted out loud before I’d thought it through.

“Oh, good,” he said. “In your own bed or ...?” The words hung from his lips.

“I’ll sleep with you. I always sleep with you. Duh.”

I was absolutely crazy. Literally crazy. Lack of sleep and being woken up early had made me crazy. I was going to make a big fool of myself. I just knew it.

“Well, come on, then, sleepyhead. Let’s go to bed.”

Wyatt grabbed my hand and led me towards the French doors at the back of the house. As we walked through the

kitchen, he put a finger to my lips. “Shh,” he said, “I don’t want to wake anyone up.”

“I don’t want to wake up anyone either,” I whispered back. “Can you imagine if your mom came out and saw me sneaking to your house at four o’clock in the morning? She’d think we were doing it or something.”

“Well, we could do it if you want.” He grinned.

“Really, Wyatt?”

“What? I’m a man.”

“You’re also my best friend.”

“Yeah. So?” He rolled his shoulders and waved me off. “Don’t mind me, I’m drunk.”

“Likely story.”

We walked into his bedroom, and he quickly pulled off his shirt and jeans so that he was standing there in just his boxer shorts. I took in his gorgeous hands and manly body. Was he going to pull down his boxer shorts in front of me? Was he that drunk?

I was disappointed when he sat down on the mattress. No plans to pull down his boxer shorts, then.

“So you want a t-shirt, or are you okay?”

“I’m not sleeping in this dress. A t-shirt and boxers would be great.”

“Boxers? You don’t want to just sleep in a t-shirt and your underwear?”

“Uh, no,” I said quickly. Oh Lord, he wasn’t going to play this game with me again, was he? There was no way in hell I wanted him knowing that I didn’t have on any underwear.

“You got on your sexy thong again tonight, Sadie?”

“Nope.”

“Really? Why do I not believe you?”

“I don’t care if you believe me, Wyatt. I don’t.”

“Oh, so you’re back to your granny panties, huh? I guess you really didn’t go out with Shane last night then?” He laughed, and it annoyed me. Did he really think that all I wore was granny panties?

“Women don’t wear thongs always for men,” I said. “Sometimes we wear them for ourselves.”

“So, you are wearing a thong, then?”

“No, but—”

“So then you’re back to your granny panties.” He laughed. “Let me guess. Minnie Mouse? Or Mickey?”

“Very funny, Wyatt,” I said, and then, because he was driving me crazy, I turned around and lifted the side of my dress up to give him a quick peek before pulling it down again.

The room went silent, and then he let out a low whistle. “Holy shit, Batman,” he said in a husky voice. I turned back and looked at him. His eyes were wide. “You don’t have on *any* underwear?”

All of a sudden, I wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, if you can flash me, I can flash you,” I said matter-of-factly, trying to pretend that there wasn’t a weird tension in the room.

“You have no panties on under a very short dress.” He stood up and walked over to me. “A dress that could easily fly up at any time.” He stared at me. “What are you thinking, Sadie?”

“What do you mean what was I thinking? I just grabbed the closest item of clothing I could find when I was rushing over here. I thought you had something important to tell me.”

“Why do I not believe that? The Sadie I know would not go out without underwear.”

“Well, Wyatt, maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“I think I do. The Sadie I know is still a virgin.” He paused. “Are you still a virgin, Sadie?” His words were a whisper on his lips. “You are still a virgin, right, Sadie?”

“I don’t know why you care if I am or not.”

“I’m just curious,” he said, but there was a slightly annoyed tone to his voice.

“Well, duh, of course, I’m still a virgin. Do you think I lost it in the three weeks I was in Idaho?”

“Who knows? You’re acting kind of crazy lately.”

“So if I wasn’t a virgin, it would be because I was crazy?”

“No, but you’ve waited your whole life for someone special, and you’re not going to meet someone special in fricking Idaho in three weeks.” He shrugged. “And you already told me that the dates you went on were crappy. So if you weren’t a virgin anymore, it would mean that you had just given it up to some random dude.”

“Well, maybe I just want to give it up.”

“Don’t give it up to some random dude.” His expression was grave. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not stupid. And it’s up to me to decide when—”

“You will give it to a man you love,” he said. “That’s important to you.”

“Yeah. So maybe I’m never going to meet a man I love.”

“You will,” he said. “Of course, you will.” He grabbed my hands. “You know that, right, Sadie? Because you’re wonderful. You’re ... Just don’t be stupid.”

“So why didn’t you wait to give it to someone you love if you think I’d be stupid for giving it up to someone I didn’t love?”

“Because I’m a guy,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Wow, way to be a feminist.”

“Dude, I’m a guy. What can I say? I didn’t grow up thinking I wanted to wait to have sex with the woman I was going to marry. Shit, I don’t even know if I’m going to get married. What, am I going to be a virgin all my life? What am I going to be like the 40-year-old virgin?” He shook his head.

“That wasn’t a good look on Steve Carell, and it sure wouldn’t be a good look on me.”

“Wow, Wyatt. Way to be mature.”

“What? Sex is fun,” he laughed. “I’m not going to lie. It’s great. And when you have sex, you’ll see what I mean. But you’ve waited this long, don’t give it up to some shit head.”

“So, are you a shit head?”

“No. Why? You want to give it up to me?”

All of a sudden, the room went tense again. I burst out laughing, trying to break the awkward moment. “Of course, not. Don’t be stupid. Why would I give it up to you? You’re my best friend.”

“Sometimes friends make the best lovers. I could teach you all the things that ...” He paused. “Don’t listen to me, I’m drunk.”

“You could teach me all what things?” I said, pressing him. I was growing wet between my legs, and I shifted my position slightly. Fuck, I was getting turned on. I shouldn’t have come. And I certainly shouldn’t have come to his bedroom. This was turning into a moment unlike any we’d ever had before.

“I’m just saying that, obviously, I know what I’m doing. And maybe you need someone to teach you what you like.” He licked his lips. “I mean, who better to figure out what you like than your best friend?”

“That’s disgusting, Wyatt.”

“What’s disgusting? Me pleasuring you?”

“Wyatt Hamilton!”

“I’m just joking, Sadie.” He groaned. “Shit, I should have a cold shower right now. Maybe that will help me think straight.”

“You’re that drunk that you need a cold shower?”

“I need a cold shower, okay? But it might not be because I’m drunk.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. “Let me

get you a t-shirt and some boxers, and you can get ready for bed. I think I need that shower.”

“Okay,” I said.

He pulled a t-shirt out of a drawer and threw it at me. And then he grabbed a pair of boxers.

“Here you go.”

“So now you think I should wear boxes, huh?” I grinned at him wickedly, not sure what had come over me.

“Um, you’re not wearing on underwear. So, yeah, I think so.”

“Well, you didn’t think I needed boxers before.”

“Well, that’s because I thought you had underwear on.” His eyes narrowed. “Are you teasing me, Sadie?”

“Would I do such a thing?” I bit down on my lower lip, and he drew in a swift breath.

“Are you coming onto me, Sadie Johnson?”

I blinked innocently. “No. Why would you think that?”

“Because you seem to have read the handbook.”

“What handbook?”

“Nothing. Change. I’ll be back,” he said, and then he walked into the bathroom.

I quickly pulled off my dress and changed my clothes. I got into the bed and pulled the duvet up over me. What was he talking about when he said I’d read the handbook? What handbook? Was there something I was missing? I was going to have to ask Olivia and Lucy later.

I lay there waiting for him to come out of the shower. He sure was taking a long time. Maybe the cold water would sober him up. I touched my legs lightly and closed my eyes imagining it was his fingers touching me. Why was I feeling this way about Wyatt?

Did he really think that friends made the best lovers? And did he really think he could teach me what I would like? And

why would he have even suggested it if he just moments before told me to wait for the man that I loved?

Everything was so confusing.

And as the door opened and he stepped back out. Water glistened on his body, and his hair was wet. I looked away quickly. He yawned as he walked back into the room and turned off the light. He headed towards the bed and got onto the mattress.

“You still awake?” he said softly.

“Yeah,” I whispered back, staring over at him as he slid under the duvet. His legs felt warm as they came in close to me. And I looked up at his face.

“So, Sadie ...”

I swallowed hard as I stared into his eyes. “Yes, Wyatt?”

“I have a question for you.”

“Yes?” My heart was racing now. This was it. He was going to ask to be my lover. He wanted to devirginize me. He wanted to show me the ways of the world. I knew I should say no, but the devil in me was begging me to say yes.

Chapter Seventy-One

Wyatt

I had no idea what she was thinking, but I enjoyed staring at Sadie's beautiful face in the dim, early morning light. The cold shower had sobered me up, but it hadn't done much to cool my raging hormones. And all I could think about was how inappropriate I'd been with her. Hopefully, she knew that I was just joking. Hopefully, she knew that I didn't have any intentions of trying to show her what pleasure was all about.

Though I had to admit to myself if she had taken me up on the offer, I wouldn't have said no. I loved her, and I would never want to hurt her. But she was also sexy as hell, and when she'd lifted up her dress and showed me her ass, so juicy and supple, it had been hard to resist her.

I'd gone as hard as a rock right then and there. I'd had to rush to the shower because the more I thought about her and the closer she was, the more I needed to be with her.

"Wyatt, are you going to tell me what you're wanting to ask?" Sadie implored as I just stared at her.

"Sorry, I was kind of falling asleep. It's late, you know."

"Well, you're the one that got me to come over here. So, what's your question?"

"So, I was thinking about something ..."

"Yes?" she said softly.

“Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“Do I think what’s a good idea?” She licked her lips nervously.

“For me to approach Beau and ask him about funding my plan for the yearlings.”

“Oh.” She rubbed her forehead. “You wanted to ask me about your business plan?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why? What did you think I wanted to ask? Did you think I was gonna ask you something sexual?” I grinned, knowing that was exactly what she was thinking as her face turned bright red.

“No, of course not,” she said quickly.

I chuckled. “Don’t lie to me, Sadie. The last thing you should do is lie to me.”

“Well, I mean, yeah, I did think you were gonna ask me something sexual because that’s what you were talking about before you went in the shower, and now we’re in bed.”

“I mean, I’m glad you didn’t share,” I said.

“So, what would your answer have been?”

“What would my answer have been to what?”

“If I would have asked you to do something sexual?”

“Wyatt, really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Well, I guess it would have depended on what you would have asked me to do,” she whispered.

I pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. “You’re crazy. You know that, right?”

“No, you’re the crazy one. And by the way, I think your idea is brilliant, Wyatt. I think you should be proud of it. And I think it could bring a lot of money to the ranch. Do you know how much people pay for a winning racehorse? A lot of money. Trust me, I know.”

“How do you know? Do you know these people that will pay a lot of money for a racehorse?”

“Not personally, but I’ve heard all about them.” She smiled. “And, hey, if I need to go out and find them and tell them to go to your ranch and buy one of the horses you’ve trained, I will.”

“I know.” I stroked her hair. “You really support me a lot, and I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Wyatt. I know you’re trying to do everything for the ranch, and I think it’s a great idea. You’re carving your own path, and that’s admirable.”

“You’re too sweet,” I said. “But I feel like no one listens to me. It’s like I’m invisible.”

“That’s not true, Wyatt. You’re not invisible.”

“Yeah. I mean, everyone knows that I’m here, but no one cares about what I have to say about the business. When I went to approach Beau, he basically dismissed me. But I’m not gonna take it personally. This is how it’s been my entire life.”

“Your family adores you.”

“Yeah, I’m adored because I’m the youngest, but no one takes me seriously. No one thinks I have a brain. No one thinks—”

“I do,” she said softly. “I know you’re brilliant, Wyatt. And no matter what you put your mind to, you’ll be a success.”

“Sometimes I think I should just go out on my own,” I said, expressing the thought that I’d never shared with anyone.

Sadie studied my face, considering. I could tell that she was thinking hard. “Where would you create your new business? And what would that be?”

“I mean, I’d be a rancher, of course. It’s in my DNA,” I said, with a smile, “but I don’t know where it would be. I’d like to stay in Montana. It’s my home. And I know the soil,

and I know the weather, and I know ...” I paused. “Well, you know.”

“Yeah,” she said, “I’d want you to stay in Montana too.”

“Even though you’re gonna be gallivanting all over the world with your husband-to-be?”

“I don’t know that we’ll be gallivanting all over the world. And it wouldn’t be forever.” She grinned at me mischievously.

“You’re too much. You know that, Sadie?”

“No, you’re too much, Wyatt. But I’d missed you if you were to leave Horseshoe Ranch.”

“I mean, you could come and work for me if I were to leave,” I said. “Hey, I’d hire plenty of ranch hands. Maybe you’d fall for one of them.”

But I felt sad even as I said the words. I didn’t want Sadie to fall for one of my ranch hands that didn’t even exist yet.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve got my family’s ranch and your mom.”

I stopped her. “Really? My mom? You’re not gonna come and help me on my ranch because of my mom?”

“Well, she’s like my mom.”

“And I’m your best friend. Where do your loyalties lie, Sadie?”

“Well, Wyatt, it’s not like you’re actually going to go to another ranch, right? Speak to Beau tomorrow and see what he says about your plan. I mean, how much money do you need him to invest?”

“Honestly? Three hundred thousand.”

“Three hundred thousand dollars?” Her eyes widened. “Whoa, that’s a lot of money.”

“I know, but to buy a good yearling with a good pedigree, I have to spend a lot of money. And I can’t just buy one. I need to at least invest in three.” Her eyes widened. “I’m also gonna

need some help. I gotta hire a couple of guys to help me break them and do the training ... Yeah, maybe it's too much."

"It's not too much. And I have an idea."

"What's your idea, Sadie?"

"If Beau says no, I can always dip into my trust fund."

"No way," I shook my head. "You're not putting money into this project, Sadie."

"I believe in you. I trust you. We'll split the profits."

"No. Plus, I have my own trust fund as well, you know," I reminded her. "I'm not a broke ass."

"I know you're not a broke ass, Wyatt. That's why all the women love you." She laughed.

"Well, that's not why all the women love me. But, hey, maybe some of them. Some of them love me for my money. Some of them love me for my handsome face. Some of them love me for what they've heard about me down there." I winked at her.

She giggled, then her giggle turned into a yawn. "I'm tired. Can we talk about this again in the morning?"

"It is the morning," I said softly.

"You know what I mean. After we get some sleep."

"Of course," I said. "Thanks for coming over, Sadie."

"It's okay. You know whenever you call, I'll be there."

"I know," I said. "And you know that's the same for me as well, right?"

"I know."

And because I wasn't thinking, I gave her a quick kiss on the lips. I pulled back when I realized what I was doing.

"Night." I closed my eyes and turned around. My back was to her. And all I could think was, *Oh, my God, I just kissed Sadie on the lips.*

I'd wanted to do more, but I knew I couldn't. This was such a weird space to be in, and I just didn't know how to feel. I could feel her body pressed up against mine, and I could smell her scent even though I wasn't facing her.

I turned around even though I knew I shouldn't. My arm fell across her waist, and she shifted slightly so that she was closer to me. Her hair was spread out on the pillow, and a lock of it brushed my nose. I meant to just move it away but I found myself stroking it with my finger just as she rolled toward me. Her head was now on my shoulder.

"Oops," she murmured.

"It's okay." I looked into her eyes. "Go to sleep, Sadie."

"But that's not comfortable for you. I don't wanna be lying on you."

"It's fine," I said. And it was. I'd like the feel of her next to me.

And at that moment, I realized what she'd said earlier was probably true. We were getting too old to share the bed together. Things between us were changing. She was a woman now, and I was feeling things for her that I had never felt before. I could feel the warmth of her legs against mine, and my gaze was pulled toward the t-shirt that she was wearing. Her breasts pressed against the material, and I could tell that she had no bra on. My hand moved slightly on the t-shirt so that it was now resting on her stomach. She shifted again, and the t-shirt ran up slightly. My hand was now on her bare skin. I moved my hand so that I was rubbing her stomach. She giggled slightly as my fingers played with her belly button.

"What are you doing?" she murmured.

"Nothing," I said. "Go to sleep, Sadie."

"You're tickling me!"

"No, I'm not," I said, my fingers still playing on her stomach. I moved them up slightly so that they were now under her t-shirt and resting on her abdomen. She stilled as my fingers kept moving up. They were now on the underside of her breasts.

We both stilled then. One more move and I'd be covering her breasts and squeezing her nipples. I could hear her breathing heavily. She hadn't told me to stop yet, and she hadn't pushed my hand away. We both were wondering what was gonna happen next. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to touch her so badly, but I was scared. I was nervous about what that would mean and what she would think.

She shifted again, and I moved my hand down. I could hear her breathing once again. My heart raced as I moved my fingers back up. This time my fingers didn't stop, and I lightly grazed the bottom of her breast. She sucked in a swift breath of air.

I groaned because I couldn't stop myself. I groaned because I needed to touch her.

My fingers topped her breasts, and she whispered, "Wyatt?"

"Yes, Sadie."

"What are you doing?"

"What do you think?" I moved my fingers gently across her nipples. She breathed in deeply then and gasped as I ran them back across again. Her nipples were hard, and I could tell she was enjoying it by the way she moved on the bed so that she was pushed up against me.

"Sadie?" I whispered.

"Yes, Wyatt?" she breathed.

"Do you want me to stop?" There was silence for a few seconds, and I didn't move my fingers because I didn't know what she wanted.

"No," she said.

That was all I needed, the only answer I wanted. I didn't know what was going to happen next, but I did know that I was going to enjoy this moment and I was going to make sure that Sadie enjoyed it as well.

Sadie closed her eyes, and I pulled her close to me, pressing my lips softly to hers. I wondered how she would

react, and I was surprised when she kissed me back assertively. She tangled her fingers in my hair, tugging on it as she sucked on my lower lip. Pressing my body to hers, I deepened the kiss, slipping my tongue into her mouth. She whimpered against my lips as I slipped my hand down her back and cupped her ass.

I was wading into dangerous territory, but I couldn't stop.

I ran my hand back up to her hair, pushing it back to reveal the soft skin of her neck. I kissed down her neck and then back up to her lips. She growled as she kissed me back.

I laughed gently. "What was that?"

"What do you think it was?" She kissed me again.

I reached up under her top and ran my fingers across her stomach and up towards her breasts, stopping before I reached her nipples again. I wanted to move them up further but something stopped me. Instead, I moved my hand down slowly, inching towards her legs. She stilled, her enormous eyes gazing into mine. I lightly grazed her thighs and moved my hands back up slowly in between the middle of her legs, teasing her but not being too aggressive.

With any other woman, my hands would've been in her panties by now, playing with her, touching her, caressing her, making her call out my name. But I didn't want to do the things I did to other women to Sadie. I didn't want to use my playbook of moves on her. She deserved more than that. As much as I wanted to touch her and feel her and be inside of her, I didn't want to complicate our friendship. There was a line, and I couldn't cross it.

I kissed her again, and something stirred in my stomach, a yearning, a desire like I had never felt before in my life. The way she looked at me, the way she tasted, the way she touched me, it all felt like it was the first time. I felt like an innocent.

And when she ran her fingers down my chest and squeezed my arms, and I wanted to protect her from the world. The way she touched me so tenderly, it was like I was her protector and her man. But I wasn't, and I knew I couldn't allow myself to

feel that way. I pulled her closer to me again and kissed her. I was bordering on desperate now, desperate for her to feel what I was feeling and to know how badly I wanted to completely devour her.

But I couldn't do that to my Sadie.

The way she gripped my hair and squeezed my arms and kissed me back told me that she was enjoying it just as much as I was. I pulled away from her and we both gasped for air as we stared at each other, her eyes twinkling.

I didn't know what to say. This moment was unlike any we'd ever had before. And we'd had so many moments in our life, so many tears, so much laughter, so much joy. She was the only person in the world who knew my secret desires and hopes and dreams and plans for the future. She was the only person in the world that I told absolutely everything to, and I couldn't lose that.

There were so many things I wanted to do to her, so many things I wanted to say. But I couldn't use the same lines that I'd used on other women ... even though now they didn't feel like lines.

"Your eyes look like the sky," I whispered. She burst out laughing. "What's so funny?"

"My eyes look like the sky?" She raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm surprised you didn't say 'like sapphires.' I mean, 'my eyes look like the sky,' how ridiculous is that? That's totally not unique. I've heard you say that to other girls." She giggled and pressed her lips against mine one more time. "You don't have to compliment me or lie to me, Wyatt. This can just be our little secret."

"What do you mean, this can just be our little secret? It's not a secret, and it's not little. And I wasn't telling you a line." I had used that line on many women before, but I hadn't meant it when I'd said it to them. "I'm serious. Sometimes when I'm in bed and I wake up in the morning and look up at the sky and it's a light vibrant blue and it just draws me in. And when I look into your eyes, they draw me in as well."

She stared at me for a few seconds and then giggled again.
“Seriously, Wyatt?”

“You don’t believe me?”

I was annoyed but how could I blame her? I almost couldn’t believe myself, even though it was true. I ran my hand across her face and through her hair and then down her arms. She shivered slightly as my fingers grazed her skin. I moved my fingers over to her stomach and played with her belly button, and she stilled slightly as my fingers slipped into her panties and touched her in her most tender and private of areas.

I hardened immediately when I felt how wet she was. This was the most intimate we’d ever been before. In fact, this might have been the most intimate Sadie had ever been with a man, period. Had she ever been touched like this by anyone else? Had she ever been eaten out? Had she ever had an orgasm? But even though we were best friends, that was none of my business.

Besides, if the answer was yes, I didn’t want to know.

I stroked her clit a couple of times, relishing the way she gasped. She looked at me through veiled eyes, almost shyly, and I knew I had to stop because, if I didn’t, I wouldn’t stop at all. I moved my fingers out of her panties reluctantly and kissed her on the lips one more time before quickly climbing out of the bed.

“I just remembered, I have something to do,” I muttered.

I got a glimpse of her on the bed, looking up at me with trembling lips and wide eyes, and I turned around quickly. If she stared at me like that for even a few more seconds, I wouldn’t be able to resist her. I would have to have her, and that would be the worst thing for our friendship. I could not do that to my Sadie, no matter how badly I wanted to claim her and make her mine.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Sadie

I looked up at the blue sky as I walked past the fields and remembered Wyatt's line about my eyes.

Was this all that life was about?

I had been overthinking and overanalyzing my situation with Wyatt for far too long. In fact, I had been thinking about men for far too long and romance for far too long. Yes, I wanted a great love. And yes, I wanted to get married and have kids one day. But what if that wasn't in the cards for me? Would that mean that my whole life was pointless?

As I gazed at the beautiful pink and red flowers, I realized that life was too short to obsess over something that might never even happen. I needed to have a plan. I needed to have a goal, something to achieve, something to dream about.

Something that didn't involve a man.

I laughed to myself. It was an absolutely absurd idea for someone like me, someone who had spent her entire life thinking about what her wedding day would be like and what her wedding ring would look like, and how her boyfriend would propose. I'd dreamt of so many different proposal scenarios, being on the beach or flying or being at a baseball game, even riding horses at night. So many different ideas had

come into my mind, so many different ways for a man to let me know that he loved me.

And yet here I was, still single with no prospects of getting married anytime soon.

I wasn't scared that I wouldn't get married, but I was scared that I would lose Wyatt because I was too intense. Everything I was thinking and feeling was too much, even for me. I felt like crying half the time. I wanted to ask Wyatt a million and one questions that he most probably couldn't answer because, up until this morning, we were just friends. Up until this morning, the idea of us ever doing anything that would change that hadn't even a possibility.

And now here I was, alone in a field wondering about how I could make things right, wondering how I could continue with my life without thinking about Wyatt and his kiss and the way his hands had touched me and the way his skin had felt under my fingers. There'd been a magic there, the kind of magic I'd only seen in movies or read about in fairy tales. When his lips had touched mine, time had stood still. His blue eyes had the depth of the ocean, and the way he had smiled at me had made my heart leap for joy as if I were a horse in a field cantering and jumping over tree stumps and rocks.

I felt something different for Wyatt. I felt something that was so real and scary that it was making me rethink my entire life. I wanted to ask if he'd felt the same way. I wanted to know if he had also felt like he'd died and gone to heaven. But I knew I was overreacting because I was innocent and hadn't experienced anything like that before.

"Hey, Sadie," called a soft voice.

I looked around to see Arya. I was surprised that Eloise wasn't with her. I smiled and waved. "Hey. I didn't see you there."

"You were in a dream world." She smiled back. "Can I walk with you or would you prefer to be alone?"

"Oh, no, of course you can walk with me," I said. "Did you come out here to think as well?"

“Yeah,” she nodded. “It’s wonderful being here, you know, but I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“Oh, you could never overstay your welcome,” I assured her. “You know that, right? The Hamiltons are the most wonderful, generous family—”

“Oh, I know,” she interrupted me, “but that doesn’t mean that I should take advantage of their generosity. It’s not right.”

“But you’re not taking advantage, Arya.”

“I am taking advantage. I’m staying here for free, I’m eating their food, Eloise is eating their food, and we’re contributing nothing.” She shook her head, “It’s not right. They don’t owe me anything. Beau isn’t Eloise’s dad, and we’re not related in any way.”

“You don’t need to be blood relations—”

“But we’re not *any* relation. If I hadn’t come here thinking that Beau was Eloise’s dad, you guys never would have ...” She paused and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be complaining.”

“No,” I stopped her, “I understand where you’re coming from, trust me. But they’re happy to help you and Eloise. And I’m happy too. If you don’t want to stay there, you’re more than welcome to come and stay at my family’s ranch. We have plenty of room, trust me. My mom would be very grateful for the company. She thinks the house is far too empty.”

“You’re sweet, Sadie, thank you. But no, I need to get a job and find my own way in the world.”

“I know exactly what you’re saying.” I gave her a sympathetic smile.

“You do?” She studied my face. “You look like you have a lot on your mind. What are you contemplating?”

“Life.” I laughed but it turned into a groan. “I’m frustrated, I’m annoyed, I don’t even know what I’m feeling anymore. I just ...”

“Is this related to Wyatt?” she asked.

“Yeah. That obvious, huh?”

“No—” She paused. “Well, maybe.” She grinned. “It’s very obvious that there’s a chemistry between the two of you.”

“Really?” I was surprised. “We’re just friends, we’re—”

“You’re more than friends, Sadie.”

“Well, *now* we are,” I said. “Oh, what am I doing? What am I *doing*?” I almost screamed.

“What happened?”

“Just a special moment.” I bit my lip, wondering if I should confide in her. Then I realized that of course, I was going to. I needed to talk to *someone*, and out of all my choices, she was the best bet. I wanted to tell Olivia and Lucy, of course, but I didn’t want them to push anything, and I certainly didn’t want them to tell Beau and Austin. “So, you know, when I stay over, I usually sleep in the same bed with Wyatt?”

“Yeah ...” Arya said.

“What?” I said looking at her face.

“Nothing,” she said quickly.

“No, I can tell by your expression that you have something to say about it.”

“I just think that when you’re over the age of twelve and you’re sharing a bed with someone of the opposite sex, things can get complicated.”

“Over the age of twelve, seriously?”

“I mean that’s when hormones really kick in, right?” She shrugged. “Obviously, you guys have been okay with it, but normally...”

“I know I’m not normal,” I sighed. “I mean, we’ve shared the bed forever and it hasn’t really been anything. I’m honest when I say we’ve just been friends. And we would talk about boys and girls and things we wanted to do in our lives, but there was never any chemistry there. I didn’t want him. I never even had a crush on him. Until recently.”

“So you do have a crush on him now?”

“I don’t want to admit it but yes. And I just don’t know what to do.”

“Well, does he have a crush on you too?”

“I don’t know ... We kissed,” I admitted.

“You kissed? Really? And how was it?”

“Amazing,” I sighed, “it was absolutely amazing. And that’s what’s got me so nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?”

“Because I’m an analyzer and an overthinker and—I just don’t know what to do.

Wyatt and I have been best friends for years. And I’ve always been a true romantic, he knows that. He knows that I’ve always wanted to give my virginity to the man I’m going to marry, the man that I’m going to love forever. He knows how intense I am. And I *am* intense, if you couldn’t tell, and I don’t want to force him into an awkward situation. I don’t want him to think that I think it’s more than it was.”

Her forehead furrowed with concern. “Did you sleep with him?”

“No.” I shook my head. “But did I *want* to sleep with him? Yes.”

“But you didn’t, right?”

“No.”

“Did you ... do other stuff?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like oral?”

“No,” I laughed, “though I can’t lie. I wanted him to go down on me, and I kind of wanted to go down on him. Which is weird because I’ve never gone down on a guy, and when I’ve thought about going down on a guy it’s felt kinda icky. But I touched him and, you know, I wanted to taste him. Oh my gosh, I can’t believe I admitted that out loud.”

“It’s okay, Sadie. You’re a woman, and you’re embracing your sexuality.”

“Yeah, but maybe he’s not the right person to be embracing it with. I don’t want ...” I sighed. “Like, even this conversation, this is what I mean. I’m stressing about this too much. I should just be fun and light and ...”

“Then just be fun and light. It’s not that hard, Sadie.”

“I know. I think it’s because I have nothing else going on in my life,” I explained, a little ashamed. “I need some new goals. I need to want more than to get married, you know.”

“I know. Trust me I know.” Arya let out a deep sigh. “I mean, ever since Eloise got left with me, I’ve been thinking, wouldn’t it be great to have some strong handsome man that can take good care of both of us. But *I* need to be that strong figure because *I* need to take care of us. And maybe one day, I’ll meet the love of my life, and he’ll embrace Eloise as his own. But until that day, I need to figure out my life.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I think I’m going to take that job in the bar.”

“The one that Chet told you not to take?”

“Yeah.” She rolled her eyes. “Don’t even get me started on Chet.”

“Oh boy, another one of the Hamilton men has struck again, huh?”

“He’s absolutely infuriating. I mean, when I first met him, I thought, ‘Oh, he’s a really nice guy, he’s really handsome,’ but the more I get to know him, the more obnoxious he seems.”

“Chet is the most obnoxious of all the Hamilton brothers. Trust me, I know them very well.”

“He’s so gorgeous though ...”

“He is? I mean they’re all pretty fine, you have to admit.”

“Yeah,” she laughed, “they are. So, I have an idea.”

“Oh, what’s the idea?”

“Why don’t we brainstorm career goals and career paths and what we want to do with our lives? Just in case ...”

“Just in case we don’t meet the love of our lives and get swept off of our feet?”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “I mean, I’d love for that to happen for both of us, but just in case.”

“Arya,” I said, “I’m glad that you caught me here. You want to chat tonight?”

“That would be great,” she said

“I’ll pick you up around eight, and we can go to a place I know.”

“Not the bar.” She made a face, “I don’t want Chet and Wyatt or Austin or Beau or Hunt or Flynn or Knox to see us there.”

“Don’t worry. I know other spots in town.”

“I thought that was the only bar?”

“That’s the only bar, but I know somewhere else that’s cool.”

“Okay, I’m intrigued.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up around eight.”

“Yeah. Meantime, you want to walk down to the river and just chill?”

“Let’s do it.” I smiled at her. “I’m really glad you’re here, you know, Arya.”

“Thank you, Sadie. I’m kind of glad I’m here too.”

Chapter Seventy-Three

Wyatt

I shouldn't have kissed her.

All I could think about was the way she'd pressed herself against me and the way that her lips felt against mine. I shivered as I thought about how wet she'd been for me. She had been enjoying it just as much as I had, but it had just felt wrong. Not in the 'I shouldn't be kissing her' way, but in the 'I shouldn't be kissing her because if I hurt her, I lose her' way.

I'd known Sadie practically my whole life, and I knew that what she craved more than anything was true love and romance—and that was what I craved least. I couldn't care less about romance or love. I was fine with the way my life was. I mean, I wasn't totally happy with my role at the ranch, but I was happy with the other areas of my life. I dated when I wanted and had Sadie there to do everything else. It was fun, it was easy, it was compartmentalized.

I didn't want to complicate my friendship with Sadie. I couldn't afford to lose her. She was my sounding board. My biggest cheerleader. The one who knew all my secrets. The one who pushed me to make more of myself. If it hadn't been for her, I would never have even approached Beau about my idea.

All my life, people had teased me about my friendship with Sadie. They'd said that boys and girls couldn't be best

friends without doing more—and that they definitely couldn't transition from young kids to teenagers to adults and still keep that level of closeness. Both Sadie and I had scoffed at their comments because we'd both known that our friendship was pure and unbreakable. It had nothing to do with sex or chemistry or messing around ... And now I'd gone and ruined that.

Kissing her had awakened something in me that had laid dormant for a long time.

It wasn't that I had never noticed that she was beautiful or that she had a body that wouldn't quit. It just hadn't mattered. She was Sadie, my best friend, and now I'd crossed that line. I knew I'd acted like a jerk when I'd left, but I'd been scared. I'd wanted to go further. I'd wanted to touch and taste her in ways I was pretty sure she'd never been touched or tasted before. But I was afraid I'd lose her in the long run.

Was I being selfish? Would I be taking something away from her? She'd waited such a long time to meet Mr. Right. She'd waited such a long time to be with her forever man, and I didn't want to ruin that ... although just the thought of another man touching her made me angry.

"Hey, Wyatt," Chet walked up to me, then his expression grew grave as he studied my face. "What's wrong?"

"What are you talking about?" I growled.

"Uh-oh, wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Why are you talking about my bed?"

He held his hand up to cut me off. "Whoa, bro, rhetorical question. I don't know what went on in your bed last night." He grinned, "And I don't think I want to know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying that you got a bee in your bonnet about something, and I certainly don't want to get involved. I'm going to go out to the ranch to check something with the ranch hands. I think some of the mares are—"

“Look, dude, I don’t care. Have you seen Beau? I really need to talk to him about my business plan, and I feel like he’s just blowing me off.”

Chet’s eyes widened. “Well, don’t take it out on me. Maybe we need to have a family meeting or something if you’re this pissed off about it.”

“Beau thinks just because he’s the oldest, he’s in charge, and yeah, he’s in charge of running the ranch, but we all have a say in how it’s run. It’s Horseshoe Ranch. It’s the Hamilton family ranch. It’s not Beau Hamilton’s ranch, it’s not Austin Hamilton’s ranch, it’s a family ranch. And I think I should have as much of a say in the running of this business as he does.”

“You’re right.” Chet’s face was grave. “I hundred percent agree with you. And if that’s the reason why you’re so worked up, we will definitely have another family meeting. Maybe Mom and Dad should be involved as well.”

“Maybe they should,” I grumbled. “I’m about fed up. I told Beau several times I need to chat with him, and he keeps blowing me off because he has to do this, that, and the other. Well, I have ideas for the ranch as well. He’s not the only one that wants to ensure that we succeed and that we are here for many generations to come. I guess Beau and Austin feel because they’re the only ones getting married anytime soon that they’re the only ones that will produce kids to take over the ranch.”

Chet snorted in agreement. “Yeah. I mean, hey, good for them, but I want to stay too, you know?”

“Exactly. I mean, we shouldn’t have to get married just to have a say in how things are run.”

“Exactly,” Chet said. “By the way, have you seen Arya or Eloise?”

“No. Why?”

“Well, I was thinking that I would take them into town. There’s a fair, and I figured Eloise would like it.”

“You’re going to take Arya and Eloise into town to the fair? Since when do you go to fairs?” I grinned. “Oh my gosh, are you falling for Arya?”

“Of course not!” Chet scoffed. “I wouldn’t get involved with a single mom. Granted, she’s not Eloise’s mom, she’s her aunt, but she’s pretty much her mom. And I’m not looking for that sort of drama.”

“No kidding. I mean, out of all the Hamilton brothers, you’d be the last one I’d want for Arya.”

Chet folded his arms across his chest and scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just mean out of all of us, you’re the biggest playboy going,” I laughed. “Let’s be real. I don’t think you’ve ever had a serious girlfriend in your life.”

“I’ve had girlfriends,” he objected. “But it’s not my fault that they all fall for me super hard—”

“You’re so full of shit. You know that, right?”

“Let Mom hear you say that.”

“Yeah. You know I’m Mom’s favorite.”

“Only because you’re the baby.” He put an arm around my shoulder. “But you’re feeling better now, Wyatt?”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t in a bad mood,” I lied.

“You sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing that I need to talk about.”

“So there’s nothing going on between you and Sadie?” Chat raised an eyebrow at me, his eyes twinkling.

I glared back. “There is nothing going on between me and Sadie. Never has been, never will be. She’s my best friend, and that’s it.”

“Okay,” he shrugged. “Because you know one of these days, she’s going to find a man who’s able to step up and admit he has feelings for her. And when that day comes,” he pursed his lips, “well, I’m going to feel bad for you, little bro.”

“Don’t feel bad for me at all. I’d be more than happy to see her get into a relationship with someone that truly loves her and wants to be with her. I want the best for her.”

I said the words as earnestly as I could because deep down inside, I didn’t want the best for her. I didn’t want her to meet a man. I didn’t want her to go and get married to someone else. I wanted things to remain the same as they always had been, but I knew that was selfish of me. I wasn’t sure how to reconcile my feelings for her well-being and the feelings I had for her sexually.

Oh, shit. Was I getting way in over my head? Was I about to fuck up the best relationship I’d ever had in my life?

Chapter Seventy-Four

Sadie

“Just a little farther,” I said to Arya as we made our way through the stables at my family’s ranch.

“Where are we going?” She looked around the stables. “We’re not going to go riding, are we?”

“No.” I laughed as I looked at the sleeping horses. “They wouldn’t be happy if we dragged them out now. No, we’re going to one of the barns at the back here,” I grinned at her. “I know, not exactly a bar, but I’ve got a bottle of wine, and an old stereo up there so we can listen to some music. And I’ve got fairy lights. It’s pretty nice.”

“Wow, I can’t wait to see it!” Arya beamed. “Sounds cool.”

“Yeah, my dad let me renovate it and decorate it when I turned 18. I think he wanted to make sure I stayed close to home. Which was nice of him, I guess.”

We made our way to the end of the stables, and then I pushed the door. “Come on, this way.” We walked out of the stables and towards the large red barn. I opened it, stepped inside, and turned on one of the lights.

“Wow!” Arya’s eyes widened as she looked around.

I looked around the barn with fresh eyes and smiled. The fairy lights were twinkling. I had an old brown couch on one

side. Next to that, was a reclaimed-wood table. On top of it sat an old record player with a stack of records that I had ordered throughout the years. On the right side of the barn, there was a fridge, a small stove, and a large countertop that my father had made for me especially. There was a large white-wool rug on the hardwood floor.

I smiled as Arya walked over and ran her fingers along the reclaimed-wood table.

“This is real wood. I love this place! It’s gorgeous. You could live here.”

“Yeah,” I said, “probably. I’ve slept in here a couple of nights.”

“Oh?” she looked at me in surprise.

“Just so I could get my own space, you know.” I held up the bottle of wine. “So, you want a glass? It’s a Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“I would love a glass, thank you,” she nodded. “Can I help?”

“No, it’s okay. Have a seat.” I opened the wine bottle and poured two glasses. I handed a glass to Arya and sat next to her on the couch.

“Cheers!” I held up my glass, we clinked, and I took a long sip of the wine. “Mm, I love red wine.” I laughed. “Well, actually I love white wine, too, and rosé. I guess I just love all wine.”

“Wine is very nice,” she said, “just like this barn.” She looked around again. “I can’t get over how beautiful it is. It looks like something I’d see in a magazine.”

“Thank you. Not many people have been here, actually.”

“Oh?” She turned to me in surprise. “You don’t have parties here every weekend?”

“No,” I shook my head, “it’s my safe space. The only person that’s been here, actually, is Wyatt.”

“Ah, makes sense,” she nodded. “He’s your best friend?”

“Yeah, he is but he still doesn’t know everything about me.”

She took another sip of her wine. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I sat back against the couch. “You want to know something, Arya?”

“What?” she said.

“So, I know that all the Hamilton boys think I’m this happy-go-lucky, fun-loving girl and that I want love so badly and romance is all I care about and I live in dream world. And maybe there’s some truth to that. But...” I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, feeling the familiar heat pass over me.

“Hey, are you okay?” Arya touched my hand lightly.

“Yeah, sorry. So, when I was eleven years old ...”

“Yeah?” Arya said softly.

“I found out that my dad was having an affair,” I took a deep breath, “I couldn’t believe it.”

“How did you find out? Your parents told you?”

“No,” I shook my head. “He was actually having an affair with someone that worked here, on the ranch,” I looked into my wine glass. “I didn’t know her well, but one day, I walked into one of the stables and I heard a noise and I saw them.” I shuddered a little at the memory. “And I screamed and my dad saw me and ... It was kind of a big thing, you know.”

“Oh, Sadie. I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I mean it wasn’t okay, everything was kept hush-hush, my dad didn’t want anyone to know, my mom didn’t want anyone to know. No one knows,” I sighed. “It sucks. I never even told Wyatt because I didn’t want him to judge me.”

“Why would he judge you, Sadie?”

“I don’t know. When I was younger and I’d look at his picture-perfect family and, well, I just wanted the same thing for myself. I think that’s why I spent so much time over at the

Hamiltons' ranch because they had the family life I'd always wanted. But honestly, I don't even know if I believe in true love anymore. I don't even know if I truly believe that there's one person for everyone and that we each have a soulmate out there somewhere."

"You know what I believe?" Arya said after a pause. "I believe that there are several people that could be the one. There are several people that could be our soulmates. And it's okay if it doesn't work out with one of them because they're not the only one out there for you."

"What if there's no one out there for me?"

"Oh, Sadie, why do you think that?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "It's just that all my life, I've always been the ugly duckling. And I know I'm not ugly. I know that many men find me attractive, but I guess I've always been in the shadow of the Hamiltons ..."

"You know what I think it is?" Arya said.

"No, what?"

"I think is that guys are scared to approach you because you have seven older brothers who would absolutely murder anyone that treated you badly, and no guy wants to be murdered." She gave me a wry smile. "Trust me. If guys have any sense that you've got people backing you up, they back off if they don't have the right intentions. And let's be real, guys in high school and guys in college? They often don't have the right intentions."

"I know, but," I sighed, "it just sucks, you know? When is it going to be my time?"

"Have you thought about leaving? Going to live somewhere else?"

"Yes ... but I don't know that I could leave Wyatt and our friendship. He just means so much to me."

"At the end of the day, Sadie, what do you want more?"

"What do you mean?"

“Do you want your friendship with Wyatt, or do you want a man that truly loves you?”

“Can I have both?” I asked. “Can’t they actually both be the same person?”

“So, you *do* like Wyatt?”

“Yeah, I thought I was pretty obvious about that.”

“Well, I had my suspicions, but when you said you didn’t want to make a big deal out of the kiss, I didn’t really know what to think.”

“I know. I’m all over the place. And I don’t want to be all over the place. I don’t want to make Wyatt feel like he needs to be with me or do something with me just because we kissed.”

“Let’s not talk about Wyatt anymore,” she said. “Let’s think about something else. You wanted to focus on a career, right? You wanted to focus on the big thing in your life aside from love?”

“That’s true.” I took another sip of my wine.

“So, what do you want to do, Sadie Johnson? Who do you want to be? Where do you want to go in life? What do you want to be remembered as? You want to be remembered as a mom? You want to be remembered as a wife? Or do you want to be remembered as someone who changed the world?”

I chuckled. “I never thought about it like that. “Of course, I’d love to be remembered as someone who changed the world, but how would I do that?”

“You can change the world in small ways, not just in big ways. In fact, you can change the world by just helping one person. That one person could go on to do brilliant things and say it was all because of Sadie Johnson.”

“You’re right. I always looked at things in such a micro or macro way, but everything’s not black and white. It’s not all or nothing. I can do something that benefits a small community or a small group of people or ...” I paused. “I did have one idea but ...”

“What?”

“So, you know when you and Eloise came to Horseshoe Ranch?”

“Yeah?”

“I thought about how horrible it was that you guys were in that position ...” I hesitated, not wanting to offend her.

“It’s fine, Sadie. Go on.”

“I thought maybe I could do something to help single mothers.”

“That sounds like a brilliant idea. What would you do?”

“Well, I’ve worked on a ranch all my life, and I have a lot of skills that correlate to ranch life, but also could correlate to the real world. I have carpentry skills. I mean, I’m not a carpenter but I know how to build a thing or two. And I know how to work on a farm and take care of daily tasks, and I thought maybe I could teach at a non-profit and give women skills that they might not have so that they can find jobs that usually go to men. We always have so many ranch hands that are men, and we hardly ever have any who are women. But why shouldn’t women have the same opportunity, you know?”

“I think it’s brilliant, Sadie,” Arya grinned at me. “And you see? I feel special.”

“You do? How?”

“Because if I hadn’t come with Eloise, then maybe you wouldn’t have gotten that idea, right?”

“That’s true.”

“So, my presence sparked something in you that made you want to go on to help others?”

“Yeah, it did.”

“And your presence in someone else’s life could spark that in them and lead to even bigger things for someone else they know.”

“You’re right ... So, you think I should go ahead with it?”

“I do. Do you know how you would start to teach these classes?”

“I figured I could call around some nonprofits and see?” I shrugged. “I don’t really know.”

“Well, I’d be willing to help you, if you want. I can make some calls and help you figure it out.”

“Oh, would you, Arya? That would be absolutely amazing?”

“Of course,” she said. “I think it’s a wonderful idea. And actually...”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“I might want to take your class as well. I’d love to learn some new skills.”

“Oh my gosh, you don’t have to take a class. I can teach you—”

“No, I want to take it in the class in a formal setting,” she insisted. “I think it will be fun. And I’ll get to meet other women who are in a similar situation to me, and it will be a real bonding experience.”

“Yeah. Wow, you got me excited, Arya! I’m really, really excited about this. I wish I could make the calls now, but it’s night.”

“I know. What does Wyatt think about it?”

“Oh,” I said, wrinkling my nose, “I kind of didn’t tell him.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Well, he’s got so much on his mind, and I didn’t want to be a burden to him. Plus, since the kiss, we haven’t really spoken.”

“Oh, no. It’s not awkward, is it?”

“Well, he’s called and texted me a couple of times, but I haven’t answered because I just don’t know what to say.”

“Oh, Sadie, you can’t do that! You have to speak to him if there’s something on your mind.”

“I know, I know,” I interrupted her, “but I don’t want to think about it right now. Can we just drink our fears away for now?”

She laughed. “Sure.”

“And I can put on some music. I’ve got some old Johnny Cash records.”

“Sounds amazing,” she said. “I love ‘Ring of Fire.’”

Chapter Seventy-Five

Wyatt

Sadie hadn't called or texted me in days.

I knew we'd crossed a line, but I hadn't thought she would take it this seriously. I mean, it had just been a kiss. Granted, it had been one of my finest kisses, and granted, Sadie had probably never been with a man like me before, but I hadn't expected her to blank me. A part of me even wondered if I wasn't as good of a kisser as I thought, but that couldn't be the reason why she was avoiding me.

I finally grabbed my phone and called her. It rang three times before she answered.

"Hello?" She sounded breathless, as if she'd been running.

"Hey, it's me."

"Hey, Wyatt. Can I call you back? I—"

"No, you can't," I interrupted her. "What's going on, Sadie?"

"What do you mean what's going on?"

"I mean, what's going on? I haven't seen you in days, we haven't spoken, you're not texting me, you haven't even called me."

"I've been busy. I've been thinking about a lot of stuff and ___"

“Oh my gosh, have you been thinking about the kiss? Look, I—”

“No, Wyatt, I haven’t been thinking about *that*. I’ve been thinking about stuff related to my life and my career.”

“What career?”

“Exactly. I don’t have a career, and I’m thinking now is the time for me to really get my ass off of my couch and do something about it.”

“What are you talking about? Where has all this come from?”

“Nothing. Look, can I talk to you in a little bit? I have a phone call.”

“What do you mean you have a phone call?”

“Do you remember Nancy Donovan?”

“Nancy Donovan,” I mumbled under my breath, thinking hard. “Do you mean Patrick Donovan’s mom, the old lady that lives on the ranch in Billings?”

“Yeah, exactly. Well, she saw my mom recently—”

“Don’t tell me she wants to hook you up with Patrick.”

“Of course she doesn’t want to hook me up with Patrick. He’s fifty years old!”

“Well, I don’t know. It seems like you’re interested in anyone these days.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Wyatt Hamilton?”

“It just means that you—”

“Anyway,” she cut me off, “I’m talking to her because she might have some information that could be very helpful for me.”

“What information?”

“Look, I can’t tell you, but I’ll speak to you later and fill you in then?”

“Sadie, what is really going on?”

“Nothing’s going on, Wyatt.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you. Why would I lie to you?”

“Because we kissed and it was amazing, and you most probably haven’t been able to think about anything else since the kiss.”

She burst out laughing. “You’re so obnoxious. I can’t believe that you actually think that the reason I haven’t been blowing up your phone is because we kissed and I thought it was amazing.”

“Well, tell me that’s not the reason.”

“That’s not the reason, Wyatt. Is that the reason why you haven’t been blowing up *my* phone?”

“I *have* been blowing up your phone. You’ve just not been picking up.”

“So, have you been blowing up my phone because the kiss was so amazing?”

“It was pretty breathtaking,” I admitted. “And that wasn’t the only thing that was breathtaking.” I thought about the way she’d melted against me, the way her skin had felt under my fingers.

“Wyatt, this doesn’t seem like it’s going to be an appropriate conversation.”

“Since when did you care about appropriate conversations, Sadie Johnson?”

“Wyatt Hamilton, this is not the time nor the place for this. I will call you later.”

“You promise?”

“I promise, okay?”

“Okay, because I’ve been tracking your location—”

“What do you mean you’ve been tracking my location? Are you stalking me?”

“No, of course I’m not stalking you. You’re the one that wanted us to share our locations with each other.”

“Should I stop that?”

“Don’t you dare! That’s the only way we can ensure that we’re both safe. I need to know where you are, and you need to know where I am.”

“I don’t know if that was such a good idea. And it’s not like I go anywhere anyway.”

“Don’t you dare stop it, Sadie.”

“Fine, but only because if anything happens, I want you to know where I am.”

“Exactly. And if anything happens to me, I want you to know where I am.”

“I know.”

“I miss you, Sade. I want to talk to you. I want to hang out.”

“I miss you too, Wyatt. And we can hang out.”

“And we can talk?” I asked softly.

“Yeah, we can talk.”

“Okay. Well, go and call Nancy, and I’ll speak to you later.”

“Okay. Bye, Wyatt.” She hung up quickly.

I frowned at the phone in my hand. Why was she calling Nancy Donovan? Nancy was the biggest gossip in Montana, and that was saying a lot because there were a lot of gossips here.

I walked past the kitchen where Mom was chatting with Eloise and Arya. They always seemed to be puttering around doing something. I was hungry, but I didn’t need my mom interrogating me right now, especially if she wanted to ask why Sadie hadn’t been over in a couple of days. I knew she’d be able to tell from the look on my face that something was up.

I sighed and opened my phone again to check Sadie's location. She was at home. Well, I guess that was something. She hadn't been lying to me about that.

I needed to talk to her. I needed to figure out what was going on and if we could get past this. And I kind of wanted to kiss her again, though I knew that might be one of the worst moves I could make. If one of my kisses had already driven her crazy, I couldn't imagine what a second one would do to her.

Chapter Seventy-Six

Sadie

“Hey, thank you, Nancy,” I said to the old lady on the phone. “I’ll head on over to Olive Ranch right now and meet with them.”

“Oh, no, they’re not going to be at the ranch, honey,” she said softly. “They’re in town.”

“Oh, okay.” I bit down on my lower lip. “So, should I go into town to meet them?”

“Yes, dear. Go to Chicken Sisters restaurant and ask for the Olivio brothers. They’ll be able to help you.”

“Okay, sounds good,” I said. “And they know why I’m going to be meeting with them, right?”

“Yes, dear, yes. I told you, they’re looking to start a learning ranch program. You called me at the right time. They were asking me if I knew anyone who would be interested in the teaching classes.”

“Well, it is quite fortuitous,” I said happily. “Okay, I will head into town, and I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Oh, of course. I’d love to hear how it goes. Thank you, Sadie. And you tell Wyatt, Amelia, and Ranger I said hello when you see them next, okay?”

“Will do,” I said quickly, hoping she wouldn’t ask me any more questions. “Well, I better go now, bye.”

“Bye, dear.”

Nancy and I hung up and I walked quickly towards the mirror to study my reflection. Did I look professional? I was wearing a loose navy-blue top with jeans. I was about to change my jeans into a skirt, but then I decided this wasn’t exactly a professional business interview—and I was trying to get a job working on their ranch. No one wore a skirt on a ranch. I quickly brushed my hair and applied some lip gloss and hurried out to my truck. This could be the opportunity that I’d been waiting for.

The Olivio brothers had recently bought Olive Ranch and were interested in creating a program where tourists would come and learn how to be ranchers. It was a sort of gimmick they were using to attract clients to the ranch, like a more serious version of a dude ranch. Nancy had said they were interested in training local people as well. If I could set up a program where I could teach single mothers and other people how to farm, raise cattle, and train horses, well, then I’d be killing two birds with one stone. I didn’t mind teaching tourists as well, and if that’s what I had to do to set up this program, then so be it.

“Okay, Dominic Olivio and Tom Olivio, here I come.” I took a deep breath as I pulled up outside Chicken Sisters restaurant and checked my phone. I had a missed call from Wyatt, but I wasn’t going to call him back. I quickly texted him, “Hey, can’t chat right now, at Chicken Sisters. But I’ll give you a call later.”

I powered off my phone before he could respond, put it into my handbag, and headed into the restaurant. I looked around to see if I could recognize either of the two brothers. At the far end of the restaurant, there were two tall identical-looking men with cowboy hats on. One of them lifted it up and called out to me, “Sadie? Sadie Johnson, is that you?”

“Yes!” I hurried over to them with my hand out. “I’m Sadie, nice to meet you.”

“I’m Tom,” he grinned. “And this is my brother, Dominic.”

“Wow, nice to meet you both. You’re twins?”

“No, Dominic’s a year older than me,” Tom laughed. “But you wouldn’t guess it, right?”

“No, you look pretty much identical.”

Dominic grinned. “And if you saw our father, he looks just like us as well, if we were thirty years older.”

“Yep,” Tom laughed. “And what’s crazy is that some people think he’s our brother too. Please have a seat. Would you like something to eat or drink?”

“I’m okay, thanks. I’ll just get some water.” I was about to stand up again but they shook their head.

“The waitress will be along in a second. So, Sadie, Nancy called us and told us that you are very interested in running a learning program just like we’re planning. And you grew up here, right?”

“Yeah, I did. My family owns a ranch, and my best friends, actually, own the largest ranch in town.”

“Oh,” Tom looked at me, his eyes twinkling. “Horseshoe Ranch?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Wyatt Hamilton is my best friend. He’s the youngest son. I pretty much grew up on Horseshoe Ranch.”

“So, you have experience working on a large-scale ranch then?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say working on. I mean, I’ve helped out a bit, but I’ve never really worked on their ranch. I mean, I help out on my ranch as well. I know, of course, the intricacies of day-to-day life on a ranch, and I know how to run a ranch, and—”

“You don’t have to sell us.” Tom grinned. “We’re actually very happy that you’re interested in working with us. What exactly did Nancy tell you about the program?”

“Well, she said that you’re setting up a resort and you want to make it a working ranch so that people who are visiting aren’t just coming for relaxation, but they’re coming to see what it’s like to actually work on a ranch.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” Tom said. “Nancy said that you wanted to create some sort of program for local people.”

“Well, my big thing right now is trying to help out women, in particular, who don’t have skills and find it hard to get jobs working on ranches because, unfortunately, it’s generally a woman’s job. And right in this day and age... Sorry, I meant to say it’s generally a man’s job.” I made a face. “Sorry, I’m a little nervous.”

Dominic reached out and squeezed my hand. “Don’t be nervous. You’re doing great.”

“Thank you.” I was a little taken aback at the way he’d touched me and the way he was smiling at me now. “Well, I meant to say, you know, is that it’s men that are generally expected to work on a ranch, and women aren’t really given those skills. Even in school, you know, we’re expected to focus on other things. And in this day and age, women need to be able to work and make an income as well. And we’re just as capable as men as doing many of the same jobs. So I want to create a program that trains women and gives them these skills. I’d like to focus on low-income women, single mothers, women that had to drop out of high school, or who weren’t able to go to college.” I chewed on my lower lip. “And, of course, men as well, of course.”

“Of course,” Tom said. “You want to help those who don’t have the skills and maybe don’t have the money to pay for an education to get them.”

“Exactly. I have a friend who’s a single mom. And she’s looking for a job, and she really can’t get much, and she’d love to pick up some skills. I know she’d love to be part of the program.”

“Indeed, indeed,” Tom said. “So how do you see this program working in conjunction with tourists that are visiting?”

“Well, I figure maybe a certain percentage of the class could be made up of local people who are part of the course run through a nonprofit.”

“Hmm,” Tom said. “And do you have a nonprofit in mind?”

“No, but,” I took a deep breath, “I was thinking perhaps I could start the nonprofit, and the program could be a joint venture with my nonprofit and your company.”

“I see,” Dominic said. “I’m surprised.”

“What are you surprised at?”

“I’m just surprised that you’ve thought this through so thoroughly. I believe Nancy just spoke to you this morning about the program, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I’ve been thinking about my nonprofit idea for a while.” That was a slight lie. I’d been thinking about it very recently in depth, but they didn’t have to know that.

“Okay, well, I like the sound of it. Do you have any idea what it would cost?”

“No, but I could figure it out.”

“And do you have any idea as to the size of the program?”

“Well, I think that would also depend on how many tourists you want in the program and how many other people you’re planning on hiring to do the training. I mean, I’m only one person.” I grinned. “And yes, I’m a hard worker, but I can’t do it all.”

Tom shook his head and smiled. “We certainly wouldn’t expect you to do it all.”

Dominic raised an eyebrow. “And it’s not going to be a problem with your friends at Horseshoe Ranch?”

“No, why would that be a problem?”

“Well, I know Horseshoe Ranch is planning on opening some sort of eco-resort. I don’t know if their plans also include a learning ranch or what. I just want to make sure that there’s not going to be any conflict of interest here.”

“Oh,” I said, “No, of course not.” I thought for a moment. I had heard Beau and Austin saying something about opening an eco-resort, but they weren’t also going to do a learning ranch, were they? I didn’t recall them having said anything. And while it would have been easier for me to go to them and suggest the program, I didn’t want to get too involved with their family business, especially if things between Wyatt and me were complicated. The last thing I needed was more drama coming my way.

“Sadie, I really like you,” Dominic said. “I think this could be a really good venture for all of us. I would love to chat more ...” He paused and looked up as the bell over the door jangled. “Oh, look, it’s one of your friends.”

I turned around. “Not sure who you’re...” And then I saw him. Wyatt stormed towards the table, a dark look on his face. What was he doing here?

“Sadie,” he said as he stopped next to the table, looked at me, and then looked at the two men. “Are you for real?”

“What are you talking about, Wyatt?”

“You’re on a date with two brothers.”

“*What?*”

“Are you really this desperate for a man that you’re going to go on a double date with two brothers and see which one you like best?”

My jaw dropped. I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. “What are you even talking about, Wyatt?”

“Everyone knows the Olivio brothers love to chase the same woman.” His lips curled in disgust. “So, which one do you like, Dominic or Tom?”

“Wyatt, this is not—”

“Uh-huh, save it, Sadie,” he grabbed my hand. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m talking to them—”

“Sadie, I know you’re innocent, but this is absolutely ridiculous. You cannot just accept a date with any old man that

asks you out. And you certainly cannot accept a date from two guys that are constantly in competition trying to get the same woman. Do you have no self-respect?"

"Are you freaking kidding me right now, Wyatt Hamilton? This is not a date." I looked over at Tom and Dominic who were both grinning and laughing.

"Sorry," Dominic shrugged. "He's not lying. We do like to take out the same woman and see which one she'll choose. But, bro, this is not—"

"Save it," Wyatt cut him off. "Sadie, let's go."

"Wyatt, you need to go right now. This is not a date. This is a business meeting, okay?"

Wyatt's eyes went wide as he dropped my hand. "What are you talking about?"

"I said this is a business meeting, and you need to leave. I cannot deal with this right now."

"Okay, whatever," he said. He took a deep breath and looked back at Dominic and Tom and then looked at me. "But be careful, Sadie, because they might be telling you this is a business meeting, but I'm pretty sure I know what they want." He pointed at them. "If you dare make a move on her, I will hunt you down." He stared back at me, "Call me later. We need to talk."

And with that, he was gone.

I looked back at the brothers, wishing the floor would swallow me up. "Sorry about that. Wyatt can be a little bit, um, overprotective."

"You can say that again," Tom said with a chuckle. "He is way more than overprotective."

"He's freaking crazy," Dominic added. "I thought he was going to beat my ass just for looking at you."

"I'm sorry. He didn't understand that this was a business meeting and that you two don't have any inappropriate feelings toward me." I giggled nervously.

“Oh, well, I wouldn’t say that,” Dominic winked at me, and my face got warm. “I mean, you are a hottie, Sadie Johnson. I cannot lie.”

I blinked at him, at a loss for words. Was he hitting on me? Was he hoping to get into my pants as well as go into business with me?

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Wyatt

I couldn't believe I'd been such a frickin' idiot. How could I have accused Sadie of flirting with the Olivio brothers when she was actually there for a business meeting? But what the hell was she doing going on a business meeting without consulting me? Granted, we haven't really spoken in the last since our kiss, but I'd been busy, and I figured she'd been busy too.

"Hey, Chet."

I walked into his room without knocking. He looked up from his desk and scowled.

"Dude, you can't just walk into my room like that."

"Well, why not?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Because what if I was doing something?"

"Dude, it wouldn't be the first time I've caught one of my brothers pleasuring himself."

"Wyatt, you're disgusting. That's why you're single."

"Let's not talk about that," I said. "You want to go out?"

"What'd you mean, go out?"

"I don't know. We could go shooting."

“Mm ... nah,” he said. “I don’t really feel like shooting.

“Let’s go to the bar, then. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“You’re going to buy me a drink?” He laughed. “Whoa, this must be serious.”

“It’s fucking serious, trust me,” I said.

He stood up and grabbed his wallet off of the desk. “You want to see if Knox and Huck want to come?”

“No, just you. I don’t want them making fun of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cause I know they’re going to tease me, and I’ve already had a bad day.”

“Okay. What about Beau and Austin, you want to see if they want to come?”

I shook my head. “Dude, they’re so whipped over Lucy and Olivia. And I don’t need to hear it from them, either.”

“Okay, just you and me, bro. Let’s go.”

“Thanks,” I said.

We headed out of his room and towards the front of the house. I could hear Mom laughing in the kitchen, talking to someone. I knew I should go and give her a kiss and tell her I was leaving the house, but I just couldn’t.

“You’re not going to tell Mom bye?” Chet said, surprised.

“No, she’s not my warden.” I said, “Let’s go.”

“Fine,” he shrugged. “I mean, you’re the mama’s boy.”

“Whatever.”

We jumped into my truck, and I started the ignition. The truck lurched as I stomped my foot down on the accelerator.

Chet grabbed the side of the car and looked at me with a stern expression. “Dude, you trying to kill us tonight or what?”

“No, I just need a drink.”

“I don’t know you should be drinking and driving.”

“I’m fine, okay?”

“What happened, Wyatt? What is going on?”

“What do you mean, what is going on?”

“I mean, you’ve been a bitch ass for the last couple of days, and now, you’re being even more of a punk. What the fuck is going on?”

I sighed. “So, okay, you cannot tell anyone.”

“Who am I going to tell? The brothers? I’m not going to tell anyone. What happened?”

“Sadie and I kissed.” I banged my head against the steering wheel a little too hard. The car jerked suddenly to the right, and Chet cursed.

“Dude, if you’re going to drive like this, you should pull over and let me drive.”

“My bad, my bad. I got it.”

“So you and Sadie made out. Whatever. I’m surprised this is the first time it’s happened.”

“Yeah, but it’s more than that.”

“What’d you mean it’s more than that?”

“It was good.”

“Uh, making out, generally, is good.”

“I mean it was better than I thought. And look, she’s Sadie. I can’t be kissing her and touching her and ...Gah! What did I do?”

“What do you mean what did you do? It was a fucking kiss, dude. You’ve kissed people before, she’s kissed people before.”

“Yeah, but we’ve never kissed each other. And I ... kind of touched her, too,” I admitted.

“Oh, boy. What do you mean you touched her? Like you sucked on her titties and fingerbanged her, or—”

“Dude, you cannot be talking about Sadie like that.”

“Dude, you’re the one that said you touched her. I’m just trying to figure out how deep you went, no pun intended.”

I growled out a curse. “You’re a fucking idiot, you know that, Chet?”

“You’re the one that—”

“Enough. Let’s just say it was more than friendly touching.”

“Well, I assumed it was more than friendly touching. I haven’t kissed any of my friends.”

“Whatever, dude. It’s just made things awkward.”

“Awkward, how?”

“Well, we haven’t really spoken and ...” I sighed. “I went into town today and I happened to see her car outside Chicken Sisters.”

“Shit, man, why didn’t you bring me back some fried chicken?”

“I didn’t get anything to eat. I went inside because I saw her car there.”

“Okay, and?”

“And she was sitting with the Olivio brothers.”

“Oh, shit. Dominic and Tom?” He chuckled.

“It’s not funny.”

“What? They’re the biggest flirts in town. Was she on a date or something?”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed. “That’s exactly what I thought. I thought she was on a fucking date.”

“Oh, I take it she wasn’t on a date?”

“No, she wasn’t on a date. She said she was in some frickin’ business meeting.”

“Business meeting?” He sounded surprised. “What’d you mean business meeting?”

“That’s exactly my point. I had no idea she was going to meet them to talk about business. I don’t even know what she was talking about.”

“So she didn’t tell you?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“I thought you guys told each other everything?”

“We normally do, that’s what I mean. I fucking have dynamite lips. Ever since the kiss, she’s most probably gotten crazy and she’s probably been daydreaming about being with me and who knows what.”

“I don’t think your lips are that dynamite.”

“Trust me, they are. It’s a curse.”

Chat burst out laughing. “Oh, my God, Wyatt! And people say I’m obnoxious.”

“You *are* obnoxious.”

“Not as obnoxious as you. You kissed Sadie once, and you think she’s gone crazy because of your lips? Dude, I’ve seen your lips and I’ve seen you kissing other girls, and trust me, it didn’t look very dynamite or explosive to me.”

“That’s because you’ve never been a recipient of one of my kisses.”

He held up his hand. “And don’t you dare even try!”

“Of course, I’m not going to kiss you, you idiot.”

“You’d better not.” He laughed for what felt like a full minute, then finally calmed down. “Is this what’s got you so upset? Because you fucking kissed Sadie, and now you’re worried she’s totally into you, and that’s why she’s not speaking to you?”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t understand what’s going on. Why can’t she just be normal about this? Why can’t we just be friends that have fun?”

“So you want to be friends with benefits with your best friend. And you really think that’s a good idea?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Of course, I don’t want to be friends with benefits. I mean ...” I groaned. “Look, I just don’t even know what I want. Why do things have to be so complicated?”

“Trust me, I know what you mean.” Chet suddenly sounded serious.

I looked over at him in surprise. “Why do you say that?”

“I think she’s falling for me too.”

“What the fuck!” I pulled over and stopped the car.

“Dude, what the fuck are you doing? Why did you pull over like that?”

I turned on the light and looked at him. “Why the fuck do you think Sadie is into you?”

“Huh?” He blinked and then started laughing again. “Oh, my gosh. You’ve got it bad for her, don’t you?”

“Tell me why the fuck you think she’s into you!”

“Dude, I’m not fucking talking about Sadie. If I wanted Sadie, I would have had her a long time ago.”

“You wish. Who are you talking about then?”

“I was talking about Arya, of course.”

“Arya?” I was taken aback. “What do you mean she’s falling for you?”

“I mean, come on, look at me. I’m a stud, and I’ve been nice and friendly. And, well, I think she’s into me, and I just don’t know what to do. Maybe I’m just too charming, you know?”

“Seriously, Chet?” Now it was my turn to laugh. “What makes you think she’s into you?” I paused. “You haven’t slept with her, have you?”

“No, of course not!” He shook his head vehemently. “Do you think she’d be up for it, though?”

“If you think she’s totally into you, you would know that better than me.”

“She’s got Eloise to think about.” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Dude, what are you doing? You’re all over the place, Chet.”

“What’d you mean I’m all over the place?”

“I mean, you were just saying how she’s practically hanging on your balls, but now you don’t even know if she’d be interested? Like, make up your mind.”

He glared at the windshield. “Whatever, dude. You’re the one that fucking kissed Sadie and fingerbanged her, and now, you’re worried that she’s planning your fucking wedding.”

“I didn’t fingerbang her, dude.”

“Well, why the hell not?” He snorted. “Shit, the Olivio brothers are probably fingerbanging her right now.”

“What the fuck?” I grabbed ahold of his shirt and pulled him towards me.

“You’re going to punch me over this shit? Really, Wyatt?”

I let go of his shirt and pushed him. “You’re an asshole.”

“Let’s go and get a drink and forget these women,” he said. “It’s just too much.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m absolutely over this bullshit. You know what, Sadie Johnson, you can do whatever the hell you like. You want to go on a date with Dominic or Tom Olivio. You do you. You’ll come crying to me as soon as they break your heart.”

“Or when one of them gets her pregnant.”

“What the hell!” I exploded.

“You know what I mean. I heard those boys don’t use rubbers.”

“She’s not going to fucking have sex with either one of them.”

He shrugged. “It seems that she’s pretty desperate for a man.”

“No, she’s not.”

“Yeah, but what would you know? It’s not like she’s telling you anything anyway,” he pointed out.

I glared at him for a few seconds then switched off the light and turned the car back on. I turned on the radio and put the volume up loud. I didn’t want to speak to Chet anymore this evening. I was pissed off. I was to get drunk as hell, and I just forget about it all. I had no idea what Sadie’s problem was. But I figured I’d wait for her to come groveling back to me and begging me for forgiveness.

After all, she was the one that was acting like an idiot, not me.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

Sadie

“Hey, guys,” I welcomed Olivia, Lucy, and Arya into my barn. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“You’re welcome. Of course.” Olivia looked at me with a warm smile. “Is everything okay?”

I looked at them nervously. “I’m kind of going out of my mind right now,” I told them, “and I really needed some girlfriends to talk to. It’s just all too much right now.”

“What’s going on?” Arya squeezed my hand. “I got worried when I got your message. Did everything go okay at the meeting?”

“It was fine. I met with Dominic and Tom Olivio. They’re the brothers that want to start the learning ranch, and I think it’s quite possible that we can go into business together, but,” I let out a deep sigh, “Wyatt showed up.”

“Oh, my gosh, Wyatt is everywhere.” Lucy laughed. “What happened?”

“He thought I was there on a double date.”

“With two men?” Olivia raised an eyebrow.

“Exactly. He thought I was desperate enough to go on a double date with two brothers to see which one would want

me.” I rolled my eyes. “I mean, come on. Do you know how pathetic that made me feel?”

A smile spread over Arya’s face.

“What? It’s not funny.”

“I know it’s not. And I’m sorry, but I just think that it’s so ridiculous to think that any woman would deliberately go on a date with two brothers to see which one wanted her. Is he crazy?”

“I think all the Hamilton men are,” Lucy put in.

“You got that right,” I agreed. “I was pissed. I told him to get the hell out of there. Well, maybe I didn’t use those exact words, but he got the gist. And the worst thing is—” I paused.

“Uh-oh, what is it?”

“They *did* hit on me after he left!”

“Oh, shit. So, they did think it was a double date?”

“I don’t think they thought it was a double date because they knew I was there for a business meeting. But I think they wouldn’t mind mixing business with pleasure, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, boy,” Arya said. “Why do men have to be like this?”

“Because they have dicks and balls.” Lucy shrugged. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be crude, but you know it’s true.”

“I know. Oh my gosh, I just don’t know what to do. I don’t want to work with them if they’re going to hit on me. But this is an amazing opportunity. I told them about how I wanted to start my own nonprofit, and that we could work in conjunction together. I even told them about you, Arya, that you’d be interested in taking the course. I just think it would be such an amazing thing to give women the opportunity to learn skills that they wouldn’t otherwise have access to. Not all of these jobs have to be done by men. In fact, none of them have to be done by men.” I was getting worked up about this now. “I mean, sure, men have done it for centuries, and we’ve always been the caregivers, but I think women have proved that

they're more than capable of doing it all." I let out a deep sigh. "Sorry. I didn't mean to go off."

"It's okay," Olivia said. "You seem like you're really upset, and I'm sorry about Wyatt. He's a douche."

"And, well, I kind of kissed him and that's complicated everything even more," I admitted in a soft voice. Olivia and Lucy shot a look at each other and exchanged a smile. "What?"

"Nothing," Lucy said quickly. "But did you enjoy the kiss?"

"No," I lied. "Well, yes, of course I enjoyed it. He's a good kisser. He ..." I let out another sigh. "It felt amazing. Okay? My heart was racing and my skin was on fire. And the way that his fingers touched me, I didn't want him to stop. I wanted to have sex. And then he got all awkward and jumped out of the bed, and we just haven't had a proper conversation since." I rolled my eyes. "He's being a fucking fool. I just don't understand what's going on with him."

"I feel like you guys need to have an honest conversation about the status of your relationship," Lucy said. "I know that might be hard, but I feel like maybe both of you don't really know how to process what's happened."

"I just want things to go back to normal," I pouted.

"But do you really?" Arya said, "Do you want them to go back to the way they were, or do you want an actual relationship with him? Do you want him to be your boyfriend?"

"Oh my gosh, I don't know!" I whined. I sat down on a bale of hay and looked at them. The three of them stared back at me, their faces glowing with concern. "Okay, I'm going to be honest. Yes. I like him as more than my best friend. Yeah. I think he's handsome. Yeah. I think he's funny, and he's fun. And I love his family. And of course, some part of me would love for it to be more. But the other part of me doesn't know how that would ever work."

“And he’s Wyatt. He’s *my* Wyatt, and I know all the bad things about him. And all the crazy things about him, and all the other women that he’s been with. And he’s not the sort of guy that’s ready to settle down. I know that. I know *him*. He’s never been in a serious relationship. It’s not something he’s wanted. It’s not something he’s dreamt of, like me. I guess men are just wired differently. I don’t know that he could commit. And I don’t know that he’s interested in me like that, anyway.”

“Sadie,” Arya knelt beside the haybale and took my hand. “He kissed you. So we know he finds you attractive, at least.”

“Yeah, but do you know how many different women he’s hooked up with? I’m not sure he’s that fussy.”

“Yeah, but I have a feeling this was different for him,” Arya said.

Lucy and Olivia both nodded and sat down on either side of me. “I know it’s complicated,” Lucy said, “and I can’t even venture to tell you what to do, but we can brainstorm.”

“Well, I had an idea ...” I looked around at them.

“What’s the idea?” Olivia asked.

“I was hoping that we could all go camping. I mean, I know generally, it’s a guy thing to do to go camping and hunting and thinking. But I want you three to go camping with me and just destress, you know. It’s something that Wyatt and I always did when we wanted to get our minds off of something that was bothering us. And obviously, I can’t go with Wyatt.”

“I’d love to go,” Lucy said.

“Me too,” Olivia said.

Arya looked unsure. “I would love to go, too, but Eloise ...”

“I’m sure that Amelia wouldn’t mind looking after her,” Lucy said.

“I know, but I don’t want to take advantage of her kindness.” Arya winced a little. “I already feel like I have

taken so much, you know? And I'm not even a member of the family."

"I'm not a member of the family either," I pointed out.

"But you're like a member of the family," Arya replied.

"I know, Arya, I know," Olivia put in, "but I promise you, I know Amelia, and I know Ranger. And they love kids. Shit, half the reason why they wanted to get brides for Austin and Beau was so they could have grandkids. I think they want to get a bride for every single one of their sons."

"Yeah. That's very true," I agreed.

"And I don't know how lucky they're going to be with the rest of the brothers because they're all hardheaded."

"You can say that again." Arya rolled her eyes. "Chet was so condescending to me the other day. I had to tell him, 'You're not the boss of me or my father.' Who does he think he is?"

"So ... what's going on with you and Chet anyway?" Lucy looked carefully at Arya.

I was curious myself. They really did seem to have a very interesting relationship, the way they bantered, the way that I caught them looking at each other. I often wondered if they had small crushes on each other, but when Arya spoke about him, it didn't seem like she was interested in him in that way.

"I mean, he's handsome and he's nice, but I've got a whole life to take care of. And I've got a little girl to think of." Arya shrugged. "And having a fling with a hot cowboy doesn't weigh into that. Especially when I'm living in his parents' home."

"Trust me, I know what you mean." I nodded. "A part of me thinks that, hey, maybe it would be fun to just have some hot sex of Wyatt and getting out of my system. But I don't know that I could have hot sex of Wyatt and go back to the way things used to be. You know?"

"You definitely couldn't," Lucy said. "And I don't mean just you. I mean no one. I think friends with benefits is a really

bad idea because someone almost always gets hurt.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And I don’t want it to be me. Because out of me and Wyatt, it would definitely be me.”

Everyone was quiet for a few seconds.

“Well, I can ask Amelia if she minds,” Arya said. “When were you thinking about going?”

“I was hoping that we could go tomorrow morning.”

Arya’s eyes widened. “Tomorrow morning? That soon?”

“Yeah, I really need to get away ASAP. After the day I had today, I need to process everything. And, well, I’m still not sure what to do about Dominic and Tom Olivio. Should I keep going with my idea, knowing that they might hit on me?”

“Do you think either of them are attractive?” Lucy asked me.

“Honestly, yeah. They’re both gorgeous.” I nodded. “I can’t lie. They are handsome, and they’re hot, but they know it. They’re kind of cocky.” I wrinkled my nose.

“Okay. That doesn’t sound good, but I don’t know that they’re genuine like the Hamilton boys, you know? They’re players too, but they have good hearts. I feel like the Olivios are the sort of guys that would be like wham, bam, thank you, ma’am. And leave a note and \$100 on the side of the bed.”

“Oh, that’s horrible!” Arya shook her head. “Yeah. Don’t even give them the time of day.”

“To work with or you mean to date?”

“Well, definitely not to date, but we need to brainstorm if you should work with them.”

“Okay. Maybe we should head back to the ranch now and then I’ll ask Amelia if she minds watching Eloise. How long do you think we’ll be gone?”

“We don’t have to be gone long. Maybe a night. So two days, one night. We’ll come back the following day in the late afternoon.”

“Okay,” she said. “And I’ll make sure Eloise is okay with that. She loves your family, but she’s never really been without me since her mom left, you know.”

“I know.” I touched her shoulder. “You are doing an amazing job, you know that, Arya? And I’m sorry this has been all about me recently, but—”

“Oh my gosh!” she interrupted me. “You’re going through a lot and it’s definitely not been all about you. You girls are like the best friends I’ve ever had. So grateful to be here with you all. I have always wanted a sisterhood. And I feel like I’ve really gotten that.”

“Me too,” I said with a grin. “I think so as well. Group hug?”

“Group hug!” Arya said.

We all stood up and gave each other a big hug. I could feel the warmth and goodwill passing through us. Each of these women was wonderful, kindhearted, compassionate, and loving. Each of them was a true, kind soul, someone I was lucky to have as a friend. Many people couldn’t find one friend like these women, and I was lucky enough to have all three of them in my life. I was grateful that they had my back and that they were willing to come on this camping trip with me.

And I was grateful that I had someone to talk to about Wyatt because otherwise, I would drive myself absolutely crazy.

“Okay, is everyone ready?”

I looked around to see that Arya, Lucy, and Olivia each had a suitcase and a backpack, and I burst out laughing. “Guys, where do you think we’re going? We’re only going for an overnight camping trip, and I’ve got the tents and the sleeping bags.”

“But we need a change of clothes and makeup ...” Lucy started laughing. “Okay, maybe I didn’t need makeup.”

“Girls, you’re not even going to need a change of clothes!” I pointed out. “It’s not like there’s showers and bathrooms out there.”

“Well, I thought we could bathe in the creek or something.”

“We can definitely go for a swim, but I wouldn’t count on bathing. Come on, guys, jump in.” I indicated my Jeep and they all got into the car. “I’m so excited for this. You don’t know how much means to me.”

“I’m excited too,” Arya said. “This will be my first time camping with just girls.” She made a face. “I know that sounds horrible, doesn’t it? I’ve gone camping before but only with boyfriends, and I just kind of tagged along when they went on hunting trips.”

“Oh, I feel you.” An idea came to me. “Actually, I was also thinking that along with the training ranch program, maybe I could set up something for women to do actual wilderness camping trips.”

“What do you mean?” Lucy said. “Don’t they have stuff like that?”

“Well, they have glamping trips, which yeah, it’s fine and it’s more luxurious, but every woman doesn’t need to be in luxury. Sometimes we just want to go out and do what the guys do. Just because we’re women doesn’t mean that we can’t rough it as well.”

“Well, I don’t love roughing it,” Olivia said, “but I know what you mean. I wouldn’t mind something like that.”

“Yeah ...” I thought about it. “Maybe I could train women to work on a ranch and to become guides for all-women wilderness trips. That just came to me. I don’t know, is it a crappy idea?” I looked at the girls.

“I think it’s absolutely amazing,” Arya said. “I think that when we’re on this trip, we should focus on your business plans.”

“I agree,” Lucy said.

“Me too,” Olivia said.

“Yeah, I was thinking that I don’t want to talk about Wyatt on this trip, even though he’s the reason why I’ve been driving myself crazy.

“He might be the reason you’ve driven yourself crazy,” Arya said, “but he’s also the reason why you’ve decided to embark upon all these new career goals, right?”

“That’s true. If it wasn’t for my complicated feelings about Wyatt, I wouldn’t have started thinking about what I wanted to do for a career and where I wanted to take my life. I mean, don’t get me wrong. I still want to get married, and I still want to have kids one day, but that can’t be my be-all and end-all. I don’t want to be one of those women who isn’t satisfied unless she finds love.”

“Exactly,” Arya said. “I’m kind of in the same boat as you. I definitely want to get married and have kids one day, but I have other responsibilities now. And who knows? It’s going to be much more difficult as a single mom. I need to take care of me now.”

“Yeah, and I got you, Arya. I will definitely help you. I’m going to help get you some skills, and who knows? Maybe we’ll work together.”

“That would be absolutely amazing.” Arya’s eyes gleamed. “You’re awesome, Sadie.”

“No, you’re awesome, Arya.”

“Hey, what about us?” Lucy said from the back seat.

“You guys are awesome, too. You know that.”

Olivia spoke up. “Just because we’re engaged to Beau and Austin and doesn’t mean that we don’t totally understand where you’re coming from. And I know that I want to help in any which way that I can. I have some marketing skills, and I’d love to be able to assist you with this.”

“Me too,” Lucy said. “I want to help in any way that I can.”

“You guys are amazing. Thank you.”

“Oh!” Arya exclaimed. “I forgot to tell you all, but I accepted the job at the bar, and as part of the salary, I get to live in the apartment that’s above it.” She smiled. “I know it’s not much, but it’s a step towards my independence. I don’t want to rely on the Hamiltons for everything.”

I squeezed her arm. “Congratulations, Arya. That’s awesome. You’re going to be an amazing bartender, and we’re going to get you skills so you can do anything you want to do. The world is your oyster. And I’ll help you decorate your new place.”

“I’ll help you decorate too,” Olivia said.

“Me three,” Lucy said. “I love decorating.”

“Well, I don’t know that I’ll be doing much decorating,” Arya said. “I don’t have much money.”

“Hey, if there’s one thing I know,” I said, “is how to renovate and restore. We can go and find some cheap pieces and have them looking like priceless antiques or brand new. I got you.”

Arya beamed. “Thank you, Sadie.”

“Okay, girls, who’s ready?” I started the ignition and headed out of the Hamilton ranch.

“We’re ready,” Lucy and Olivia chimed in the background.

“I’m ready,” Arya said.

“Then get ready for the adventure of a lifetime!”

Chapter Seventy-Nine

W yatt

“I can’t believe that you just let Olivia and Lucy go without even asking them where they were going!” I looked at Beau and Austin in disgust.

“You do know I don’t control her, right?” Austin raised an eyebrow at me. “She’s gone camping with Sadie and Arya, and it’s not like she has to tell me exactly where she’s going to be.”

“Well, where did they go? And why aren’t they back yet? I thought they were coming back this morning.” I glared at them.

Chet laughed. “Dude, chill out. They went camping for one night.”

“Yeah, but who knows what could have happened?”

“Dude, Sadie knows the area like the back of her hand. Everything’s fine. Trust me.”

“Whatever.” I looked over at my mother. “Mom, at what point do we have to call the police to put out a missing person search?”

“A missing person search?” She pressed her lips together and if I hadn’t known better, I might have thought she was trying not to smile.

“Son, I don’t think that’s necessary.” Dad put an arm around my shoulder. “They said they’d be back later this afternoon, and we all know that Sadie is very capable of going on a camping trip. It’s not like she’s gone to Utah or someplace that she doesn’t know. She’s just out on the ranch.”

“Well, it’s very irresponsible if you ask me.” Everyone was staring at me, and my face was getting hot. “I’m just concerned about them, okay? I would’ve thought you guys would’ve been concerned as well.”

“Oh, Wyatt, Wyatt, Wyatt,” Beau chuckled. “So, you guys want to play some catch? I’ve got some time, and Wyatt, you could use a distraction.”

I still didn’t think they were taking this seriously enough, but maybe Beau was right. I just needed to take my mind off Sadie. “Fine, let’s do it,” I grumbled. I followed my brothers out of the kitchen into the backyard.

Austin picked up a football from the door, and I held my hands up. “Hey, pass it to me,” I shouted, and he did.

I caught it and ran down the path towards the fire pit and then kept going. It felt good to stretch my legs and run with the air in my face. I needed to talk to Sadie. I needed for us to have a real conversation. I really felt like she was avoiding me now. I felt like I fucked up everything, and all we’d done was kiss. What if we’d had sex? What would she have done then? Would she have taken a trip to the moon or Mars or something? Did I have to call Elon Musk and tell him, “Hey, if Sadie Johnson calls you asking for a ride, don’t let her go”?

“Hey, pass it to me, you old butthead.” Austin ran up and grabbed the ball out of my hand.

“Hey, what you doing?” I tackled him to the ground and grabbed the ball.

“Yo dude, chillax.” He wiped the mud off of his face. “I thought we were playing flag football.”

“Since when did you think we were playing flag football? We said we were going to throw the ball.”

“Well, let’s play some flag football.”

“Um, I don’t have time for all this,” Chet said. “I have got some work to do.”

“What work do you have to do, Chet?”

“Excuse me,” he frowned at me. “I’m not a bum, you know?”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Whatever, Wyatt. Take out your anxiety and your stress on someone else. I’m not your punching bag.”

“You know what, Chet? Shut up.” I grabbed the ball back from Austin, jumped up, and went running. I threw it to Beau who jumped up and caught it like a professional.

Beau had been the star football player when he was in high school. In fact, he could have gone pro if he’d wanted to, but he hadn’t been willing to let go of his responsibility to the family. He was also a talented filmmaker, and when we were young, he’d always talk about going to Hollywood to direct movies. I knew he’d given up that dream to look after Horseshoe Ranch and be the caretaker of the family business. I often wondered if he ever resented the family because of that.

“Hey, Beau!” I shouted.

“Yeah, butthead?”

“We should make a movie.”

“Um, what?” He looked confused.

“I said, we should make a movie of the ranch, help to advertise it.”

“Why would we do that?”

“If we’re going to be opening this eco-resort, let’s drum up some interest, right? Let’s get people excited. Let’s see if we can get influencers who want to come out and promote it, give us some free marketing and advertising, make it the spot to be. Let’s really push this thing.”

“Um, I don’t know,” he shook his head. “I’ve got so many other things to think about right now ...”

“I think it’s a pretty good idea, and you’re an awesome filmmaker, so you could maybe make something really cool,” I shrugged. “But hey, if you’re not interested.”

“I’ll think about it,” Beau said. “What’s come over you? Is this related to the idea you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No, the idea I wanted to talk to you about is something very different and something very specific, and I’m still hoping we can have that chat soon because it’s very important to me.”

“I know, I know.” He grinned at me. “You’ve got big ideas and big plans, and I’ll listen to them. But let’s not talk business right now. Let’s just enjoy the afternoon.”

“I mean, that’s what we’re doing, right?”

Just then, I heard a car backfire and I ran to the front of the house to see if it was Sadie and the girls. But no, it was just one of the ranch hands who’d driven up with a couple of his guys. “Hey, what’s up, Miguel?”

“Hello, Wyatt.” He nodded at me.

I walked slowly around to the back of the house.

“Was it them?” Chet asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Was it who?” I snapped.

“Your fairy godmother. Who the fuck do you think, dumbass?”

“Stop calling me dumbass, punk.”

“Boys,” Beau imitated our mother and we all laughed. “Wyatt, you really need to chill, okay? I know you and Sadie have got some sort of awkward, weird tension-chemistry thing going, but you’re freaking everyone the fuck out. Like, chillax.”

“I am chill. Look, I need to talk to her about something and she’s been acting weird, and ...” I heard another car pulling up at the front. This time, I froze.

Austin grinned at me. “You want me to check?”

“I don’t need you to check anything.”

“I’ll check,” he said. He ran to the front of the house and was back a moment later.

“So do you want the good news or do you want the bad news?” he asked me.

“Um, whatever,” I said.

“They’re back.”

“What?” I could feel my spirits rising. “So they’re okay?”

“Yeah, they’re okay,” he laughed. “And I’m going to go back and give my lady a big hug and a kiss if you want to come to the front and join.”

“No, I don’t need to go to the front and join. I mean, I’m glad they’re safe and sound, but I mean whatever. It’s not like she told me she was going on this trip, and it’s not like she checked in or had to check in. I don’t care. I just was concerned because your fiancée and—”

“Can it,” Chet rolled his eyes. “You sound like Grandma. You’re just going on and on and on.”

“I’m not just going on and on and on—” I pressed my lips together. “You know what? Whatever. I’m going inside to get some lemonade.”

“Okie dokie, smokie.” Austin chuckled and winked at me. “Anyway, I’m going to go and give my lady a big kiss. You coming, Beau?”

“Of course. I’ve missed my Lucy.” The two of them ran to the front of the house to greet their girlfriends, and Chet and I were left there.

“So you’re not going to go and greet Arya?” I said to Chet.

“No, of course not. You’re not going to go and give Sadie a big kiss on the lips?”

“Ew, of course not. Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re kissing friends now.”

“We’re not kissing friends now. We kissed one fucking time and—”

“Dude, honestly, I feel like I’m in high school again. If you like the girl, tell her. If you don’t like the girl, tell her and move on. But get over this shit. You’re making everything awkward for everyone.”

“You’re a fucking punk, you know that right, Chet?”

“I’m your brother and I love you and I’m being honest with you. You deserve that. But you cannot keep going on like this. I know she’s your best friend. I know you care about her. I don’t know what you want from her or don’t want from her, and I really don’t give a shit. Have a conversation with the girl. And if she’s playing games, tell her, ‘Look, Sadie. I’m not about to be a bitch ass punk.’”

“I’m not going to say that to Sadie.”

“Fine, don’t say that to Sadie, but just tell her you need to talk and you want some answers.”

“Um, I don’t think I’m going to say it like that either.”

“Dude, I don’t care what you say. Just have a conversation with her, okay?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’m going to get some lemonade, and then I’ll go and talk to her.”

“Okay, I’ll come in with you. I could drink a gallon of Mom’s lemonade.”

“Me too,” I laughed as we headed back to the kitchen. “Hey, Mom. We’ve come for some lemonade,” I said as we walked into the kitchen.

“Okay,” she smiled. “Help yourself to some scones fresh out of the oven as well.”

“Mmm, yummy.” I grinned at her. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, Wyatt,” she smiled at me. “And I think ...” she gave me a meaningful look.

“Yeah?”

“I think Sadie’s back.”

I grunted and headed towards the fridge.

Why was it that everyone wanted me to have a conversation with Sadie? At this point, I didn’t really know what anyone knew about the situation. I just knew that it was driving me crazy. *She* was driving me crazy. Something had changed in our relationship, and I didn’t like it. Something had changed between us. I wanted things to go back the way they used to be.

Except that was a lie because I’d enjoyed the kiss. I had really, *really* enjoyed the kiss. And I wouldn’t mind being friends who kissed, but I didn’t know if Sadie could handle that. And if she couldn’t, well, I didn’t need to kiss her. I’d find someone else. And if she really wanted to date one of the Olivio brothers, I’d be okay with it. I’d support her.

But my stomach curled at the thought. In my heart, I knew I was lying to myself. I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t want to see Sadie kissing anyone else. I didn’t want her getting into a relationship. I didn’t want her to find true love. I didn’t want her distancing herself from me.

I felt like a hypocrite and a fool and an asshole. I wanted her all to myself and yet I didn’t want to have to give her any more of myself than I already had, and I knew that wasn’t fair. I had to be honest with myself and with Sadie, so I had to figure out exactly what was going on between the two of us.

I owed it to myself, and even more so, I owed it to her. I was her best friend, and I needed to ensure that I acted with her best interest at heart.

Chapter Eighty

Sadie

I dropped off the last of the bags into the house and hurried back to my car as quickly as possible. The girls and I had had an amazing weekend, and I felt rejuvenated. However, I wasn't ready to have an actual conversation with any handsome Hamilton men. In fact, I didn't want to see anyone, and I didn't want to talk to anyone. I'd had an eye-opening experience camping with the girls, and I just wanted to go home and focus on the positive steps forward that I'd figured out during the weekend.

I was opening my car door when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, you were just going to leave without saying hello?" said a deep, familiar voice.

I turned around, forcing a smile onto my face. "Oh, hey Wyatt, how's it going?"

"Good. I thought we were going to chat." He crossed his arms and frowned and I thought about how much he looked like his dad when he gave me that look. I almost wanted to laugh, but I didn't think he would find it funny.

"I didn't know you wanted to chat right now. We've just come back from camping and frankly, I want to go home and have a shower and, um ..." I tripped over my words as I tried

to think of an excuse not to stay and talk. It felt weird because normally I never left Horseshoe Ranch.

The look on Wyatt's face told me he wasn't buying anything I was saying. I tried to ignore the way his steel-blue eyes pierced into mine. "Sadie."

"Yes, Wyatt?" I licked my lips nervously. How could my best friend make me feel like this?

He moved a little closer towards me. "Is this about the kiss?"

My heart pounded in my chest, and I wondered if he was about to kiss me again. As much as I wanted him to, I didn't need that complication right now. I didn't need to start daydreaming about Wyatt being my Mr. Right.

"No. I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"You've been awkward with me ever since the kiss."

"I haven't been awkward with you. I've just been busy—"

"Sadie, if this is about the kiss, then ..."

"Then what?"

"Then I think we need another kiss to get it out of the way." He pressed his lips softly against mine.

I kissed him back, my heart fluttering as his hands inching around my waist, pulling me closer. Unable to stop myself, I ran my fingers through his hair.

He pulled away and grinned at me. "So now that we've had our second kiss, that first kiss shouldn't affect you so much, right?"

"Excuse me, Wyatt Hamilton. That first kiss wasn't affecting me so much. I have just been busy. In fact, I couldn't care less about the first kiss *or* the second kiss. I couldn't care less about any of your kisses. I need to go and shower, and then I have to go out because I have a date."

"You have a date?" His brows slammed together and his smile disappeared.

“Yeah, I have a date,” I lied. I wasn’t going to let him think that he was the only man on my mind.

“With who?”

“With whom, you mean.”

“Sadie, this isn’t fricking English class. Who’s your date with?”

I thought quickly. “Shane.”

“Even though I told you not to go out with Shane?”

“You’re not the boss of me, Wyatt.”

“Sadie, this is getting absolutely ridiculous. You know that, right?”

“It’s not ridiculous, and anyway, I have to go.” I pressed my lips against his one more time because I couldn’t help myself and then pushed him away. “This has nothing to do with kissing you. It’s about me trying to do more with my life than just think about kisses, and romance, and stupid stuff. Believe it or not, I have dreams and goals that have nothing to do with your kisses.”

His expression softened but he still didn’t smile. “So, you’re going to tell me about these dreams someday or what?”

A part of me wanted to share everything with him then and there, but I was almost scared to hear what his reaction would be. Would he think I was being dumb? “I will,” I told him.

“When?”

“I don’t know. Tonight? Tomorrow? We’ll think of a time, okay?” I faked a yawn.

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

“Fine,” I said, flustered. “I’ll talk to you later.” I jumped into my car, fumbling with the keys as I tried to start the ignition. “Come *on*,” I mumbled under my breath. Finally, the engine sputtered to life. I sped off quickly, not daring to look in my rearview mirror until I got to the end of the driveway.

Behind me was Wyatt, a solitary figure in the distance, still standing there, still staring after me. I wondered what he was thinking. He probably knew that he was driving me crazy, but I didn't want him to know just how much.

As I drove out of Horseshoe Ranch, I touched my lips lightly. They were still tingling from his kiss. As much as I didn't want to admit it to Wyatt, I couldn't get him or his kisses out of my mind. Of course, the way everything had changed between us was making me think twice about our relationship. But I didn't know what he wanted from me. I didn't know if the kisses meant anything to him at all. They were special to me. They were toe-tingling, heart-stoppingly powerful, and they had me all confused.

As I pulled into my own driveway, I saw my mom puttering around in the front yard with a watering hose.

"Hey, Mama," I called out the window as I parked the car.

She smiled at me as she stood up, holding some recently cut sunflowers. There was a streak of dirt on her right cheek and her hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

"Hey, Sadie, how was the camping trip?"

"It was really fun. I had a really good time with the girls, and we talked about life, and what we want to achieve. And you know, I'm really focused now on trying to have a career."

"I'm proud of you, Sadie." Mom beamed at me. "You know, when I was young, no one expected me to do anything more than to get married and to be a good mother. Maybe to be a teacher or a nurse, but that was it. I was just expected to find a husband and settle down and be a good wife and mother. But you've got something different to look forward to. Your father and I, of course, we want you to get married and have kids. We support you because that's noble. But if you want to get married and have kids and have a career as well, I support you. And if you just want to go for your dreams and travel and live for yourself, I support you in that as well. You can have as many boyfriends as you want. Have some real romance in your life." She smiled wistfully.

“Really, Mama?” I’d never heard her saying anything like that before.

“Of course, Sadie. You are a strong, beautiful woman, and you can do anything you want to do. You can be anyone you want to be, and I’m not just saying that.” Her gaze grew more intent. “Don’t let your father ... or myself ... tell you what to do with your life.”

“Thank you, Mama, that means a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” She looked past me and smiled. “Looks like I’m not the only one who’s happy that you’re home.”

I turned to see a car coming down the driveway. My first thought was that it was Wyatt, but I didn’t recognize the truck.

It pulled up and stopped, then Dominic Olivio got out of the truck with a bouquet of roses in his hands. He grinned and gave me a little wave as he walked towards me.

What was he doing here?

“Things are different for you now,” my mama said softly in my ear. “You can have a husband, you can have kids, *and* you can have a career. You can have it all, Sadie. And I support you. Go for your dreams, my love, and go for the man of your heart. You might be surprised at who that man will turn out to be. If you’ll just be open to anything and everything, you might find excitement like you’ve never known before.”

She turned to walk back inside. I watched her go, surprised by her mysterious words, then turned towards Dominic.

“Hi, I’m surprised to see you here.” Surprised was an understatement. Shocked was what I felt. Why was he here with flowers?

He handed me the bouquet of roses. “I just wanted to let you know that I was very impressed with you when we met the other day.”

“Oh?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “Is this about business or is this about romance?”

“I didn’t make it a secret that I’m very attracted to you,” he said, his gaze roving over my body, “so the roses are to show you that I’m interested in wooing you.”

“Wooing me?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “You’re hot. And smart. And sexy. And frankly, I haven’t met a cowgirl I’d like to fuck more. Excuse my language.”

I studied the man in front of me. He was handsome, but he was no Wyatt Hamilton. Not by a long shot.

“But this contract?” He held out a sheaf of papers in his other hand. My heart skipped a beat for a second. Was he going to propose some sort of sordid sexual contract? Did he think he was some sort of Cowboy Christian Grey? Was he planning to spank me in the stables?

“This contract is for purely business purposes.” He handed it to me, and I tried not to laugh. I really did have an overactive imagination. “Read it over, then give me a call tomorrow night to let me know what you think. We can discuss the contract, and you can let me know if you’re interested in going into business with us, and then maybe we can have some phone sex. It’s been a while since I’ve had a pretty voice talking to me when I played with the baloney pony.”

“Uhm ...” I just stared at him. Was this man for real?

“And then we can talk about going on a date or something?” He grinned. “But I’ll let you read that and give you some time to think about it all. I know you must be overwhelmed and excited. I bet your panties are getting wet as we talk, huh?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not at all. Goodbye.” I turned around and walked into the house. I couldn’t believe how crude and rude he’d been.

“You’re not wearing any, are you?” he called after me as I walked away.

I didn’t even bother answering him.

Chapter Eighty-One

Wyatt

“Hey, Wyatt!”

I was headed for my room when Beau called out to me. I was upset and depressed, and I knew it had to do with Sadie and our interaction. Something had changed. She was too standoffish and distant, and it was making it very hard for me to focus on anything else.

“What’s up, Beau?” I looked back at him. “I’m kind of busy.”

“I was thinking perhaps we could have a meeting,” he replied. “Mom suggested it.”

“A meeting?”

“You said you wanted to talk to me about something, right?”

“Yeah. But why does that have to be a meeting? I wanted it to be between you and me. I can’t just have a fucking talk with my brother?”

“Whoa, there, cowboy.” He held up his hand and his eyes and narrowed. “Why are you cursing at me? I thought this is what you wanted.”

“I’ve been asking you for weeks, maybe months now, to have a conversation, and you’ve been blowing me off every

single time, and I don't appreciate it."

"If you have something to tell me, then tell me. Dude, you know I've been busy. I have not been deliberately blowing you off. I didn't realize it was that important. You should have said something."

"Well, it *is* important. Okay?"

"So then let's fricking have this meeting. Don't take out your bad mood on me, Wyatt."

"I'm not in a bad mood."

"Dude, I'm not going to take this personally because you've been acting funky for the last couple of weeks."

"No, I have not."

"You've been acting funky since Sadie went to Idaho. I mean, get your head out of your ass. You ready to have this meeting or not?"

"So now I have to have a meeting with everyone as opposed to just you? Do you, or do you not run this ranch??"

"I do not run this ranch solely. You know that, Wyatt. I'm not the owner of this ranch. It is a family business. Just get your shit together and meet in the study in twenty minutes. Okay?"

"Oh, so twenty minutes. Now you don't want me to come right away?"

"I want you to get your head together because if you have a pitch that you want to put by me and everyone else in the family, it'd better be good. And you better not come with any attitude."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. I know. And look, sorry. I've just been going through a lot recently."

"It's okay, Wyatt. You know, I kind of know what it's like to lose your head." He lowered his voice and put a hand on my shoulder. "If there's anything you ever want to talk about, I'm here. Okay?"

"I know. Thank you."

“No problem, brother. And you know what, dude? Everything works out the way it’s supposed to. I promise.”

“Okay. Let me go and get myself together, and I’ll meet everyone in the study in twenty minutes.”

“Sounds good,” he said.

I went to my room and closed the door behind me, leaning against it while I counted to twenty. Sadie was messing with my head. Her lips were messing with my head. Everything was messing with my head, and I didn’t know which side was up, but I could not allow that to affect me right now. I finally had a chance to pitch my idea, and I needed to make it work. I needed Beau to understand that this was something that could be great for the family. This was something that could help us.

I grabbed my paperwork and checked my reflection in the mirror. I looked like me, but I wanted to look like a businessman. I wanted to be taken seriously. My brothers saw me as the baby of the family, but I didn’t need to be taken care of. I needed to be seen as someone who was serious, who had good ideas, who was smart—because I was all of those things, and I needed them to realize that.

I quickly changed into a suit, chuckling a little at my reflection. I was completely overdressed for a meeting with my family, but I preferred to go in overdressed rather than underdressed.

A moment later, I walked into the study where most of my brothers were waiting. Knox’s jaw dropped, and Chet started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I said.

“Nothing.” He shook his head, but I could see that he was trying to hide a smile.

Mom and Dad walked into the study. Mom smiled at me lovingly, and I smiled back. I don’t know what I would’ve done if I didn’t have a supportive mother like her. I knew I was lucky to be part of a family like this, but sometimes it felt like a curse being the youngest, like I wasn’t able to be my own man.

Finally, Beau and Austin walked into the room and closed the door behind them.

“And we sure we don’t want Olivia, Lucy, Arya, and Eloise in here?” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

Beau just raised an eyebrow. “Come on now, Wyatt. You know this is a family business, and you know that I take you seriously.”

“So, I just want to ask, was it your idea for this meeting?”

“No, it was Mom’s.” Beau looked over at Mom. “She suggested that we have a family meeting because she’d heard that you had something you wanted to talk about.”

I glanced at my mom in surprise. I hadn’t thought I’d told her anything, but she had eyes and ears everywhere. She’d probably overheard something.

“Well, okay, then. Thank you. I’m glad that everyone is here.” I cleared my throat and walked to the front of the room. “Have a seat, everyone.”

“Okay.” Beau and Austin looked at each other. When everyone was seated, I took a deep breath.

“Hi, everyone knows me. My name is Wyatt Hamilton.”

Hawk burst out laughing. “Dude! Why are you telling us your name?”

“I’m going to ask for silence until the end of my presentation,” I said in my most diplomatic and assertive voice. “As I said, my name is Wyatt Hamilton. I am the youngest son of Amelia and Ranger Hamilton here on Horseshoe Ranch.

“As if we didn’t know that,” Knox said under his breath and then pressed his lips together as I glared at him.

“I am happy to have the opportunity to talk to you all today. Good afternoon, Ranger Hamilton and Amelia Hamilton.” My parents smiled benevolently. “Hello, Beau, Austin, Chet, Flint, Huck, Knox. It is great to see you all this afternoon. So today I wanted to talk to you about an idea I had for the ranch that I think would be a great business endeavor.

As you know, there are thousands of investors who like to purchase and bet on racehorses. And as many of you might know, breeding and training racehorses is particularly lucrative if you have horses or studs that become winners. I have spent my entire life riding horses, training horses, and breaking horses, and I believe that I could become a top trainer. I would like the opportunity to purchase two to three yearlings that I can train and enter into races. If my horses do well, they'll put Horseshoe Ranch on the map, and we will have investors coming to us, asking me to purchase and train yearlings for them. There's an auction coming up within the next month."

I stared at everyone to see what their reaction was, but no one said anything and their expressions gave nothing away. "I would like an initial investment of approximately two hundred thousand dollars."

Beau spoke up finally. "Two *hundred* thousand? Are you joking, Wyatt? I thought you were going to say two thousand."

"I can't purchase any quality yearling for two thousand. I will need to purchase horses that already have a pedigree so that I can ensure that I have the best chances possible. Two hundred thousand is enough to purchase the sort of yearling that I think will be viable for the ranch—"

"No," Beau said, shaking his head. "It's not going to happen. We are not in a position to just give you two hundred grand to flush down the toilet."

His words hit me like a slap. "Excuse me?"

"Beau, that was rude," Austin put in. "Wyatt, I understand what you want to do, and I think it's a great idea, but right now, that's a lot of money. We're already investing in building the eco-resort—"

"Excuse me," my mother spoke up.

Austin and Beau turned to her. "Yes, Mama?"

"I think that you forget that this is a family business, and we all get a say. Beau, you are taking over the running of Horseshoe Ranch from Papa, and we are forever grateful for everything that you're doing. Austin, you are Beau's right-

hand man. But don't forget, we all have an equal say in this ranch, and I think that Wyatt is onto a winning idea. I think that we should at least have a vote to see whether or not we will move forward with this."

"Mom, I don't think that's a good idea," Beau spoke up. "We really don't have two hundred thousand right now."

My dad cleared his throat and looked at me. "That is a large investment," he said. "I think that a hundred thousand could work." I could see a keenness and a respect in his eyes that I'd never seen before, and I felt proud of myself for coming up with this idea and moving forward with it.

"I really think that the minimum amount would be a hundred and fifty thousand," I replied. "I can't just buy one yearling if I really want to give it a solid chance. I need at least two, and I'm not going to get to great pedigree yearlings for a hundred thousand. I need at least one-fifty."

"So then, let's vote. A hundred and fifty thousand." My father looked around the room. "Sons, I have raised you all to be independent, forward-thinking businessmen. This ranch is our life, and I trust each and every one of you to do what's best for it. Just because one is the first-born or the second-born or the third or the last, it doesn't mean that one is more important than the other. Wyatt is twenty-five years old. No, he hasn't run a business yet, and no, he hasn't run a ranch by himself, but he has a good head on his shoulders, as do you all, and I would like to think that any one of you who came forward with an idea would be supported by the family. I realize we do not have the sort of cashflow that we'd like to be seeing right now. But we do have reserves, and I, for one, support this idea. So shall we put it to a vote?"

Beau looked at me and then looked at my dad. I could see that he was thinking.

Austin nodded. "Okay, let's put it to a vote. All those in favor, say aye."

I immediately put my hand up and said, "Aye."

Then my mother and dad put their hands up. I looked around the room at my brothers. Were they really not going to support me in this? My chest felt so heavy it was almost like I couldn't breathe. They didn't trust me. I was the baby to them. I would amount to nothing. At that moment, I realized that if that's how my brothers viewed me, I couldn't stay at Horseshoe Ranch anymore. I couldn't be the brother that did nothing but listen to orders.

Chet put his hand up. "I support you, bro."

"Thank you," I breathed.

"You got my vote," Flint said finally.

"Me, too." Hawk nodded.

Knox looked at everyone and grinned. "You got my vote. I think it's a great idea. I love betting on horses."

So it was just Beau and Austin. I wasn't sure if they would change their minds, but I knew that their two votes mattered the most to me. Austin whispered something in Beau's ear and Beau whispered something back to him. I couldn't tell what they were saying. I couldn't tell what they were thinking. They went back and forth for about a minute and then Austin nodded. He put his hand up.

"I support you, Wyatt."

Beau got up and walked over to me, his hand held out. He shook my hand and smiled. "I support you too, Wyatt. I'm proud of you. I'm proud of this idea, and I'm proud of you for coming to the entire family and thinking of something that was out of the box and something that could indeed be very worthwhile. And I support you. You have my vote as well."

"Thank you." I looked around the room. "Thank you, everyone. I don't even know what to say."

"Just make us proud, son," Dad replied.

Mom squeezed his hand. "You always make us proud, Wyatt, but you'll make us even prouder with this." She looked around the room and she stood up. "Sons, I've never been prouder of each one of you than in this moment. As a family,

we support each other. As a family, we stick together. And as a family, we will always have each other's backs. You hear me?"

"Yes, Mama," we all chorused.

"Now let me go and make some cookies, and everyone come to the kitchen in five minutes. Okay?"

"Okay," we replied. She smiled at us and left the room.

There was a huge smile on my face as I realized just how much I loved my family.

Chapter Eighty-Two

Sadie

I sat in my room, staring at the roses and wondering what I should do. There was only one person I wanted to talk to in this situation, and it wasn't Olivia, or Lucy, or Arya, or Amelia. All of them were absolutely fantastic in giving me advice, but none of them was my best friend.

I wanted to talk to Wyatt. I wanted to tell him about Dominic Olivio and ask his advice because I trusted him. Even after everything, I knew that he would tell me exactly what to do. I knew that he'd have my back and that he'd support me. And even though I knew those women would as well, they just didn't know me like he did.

I was just about to call him when my phone rang. Wyatt. My heart immediately melted.

"Hey!" I answered.

"Hey, there, Sadie. It's me, Wyatt."

"I know."

"You sound surprised to hear me."

"Really, I sound surprised?"

"No, you sound excited, but I wasn't sure if you thought I was someone else."

"Why would I think you were someone else, Wyatt?"

“I don’t know. Maybe because you haven’t sounded excited to hear me in a long time.”

“I’m always excited to hear from you. What’s going on?”

“I was wondering if you want to come over to the ranch.”

“Sure. You just want to hang out?”

“Well, I want to hang out and celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“I got the money.”

“What money?”

“I got the money for the business, to buy the yearlings. The family’s given me a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I’m looking now at flights so that I can go and buy some horses.” He sounded absolutely ecstatic.

My heart leaped for joy. “Oh my gosh. Congratulations, Wyatt! That is the best news ever. I’m so happy for you. I didn’t even know you were going to be talking to Beau today. When did this happen?”

“Actually, I spoke to the entire family. They all support me.”

“No way!”

“Yes way, but come on over, and I’ll tell you more.”

“Okay. I’ll just get my stuff ready, and I’ll come over.”

“Sounds good.”

“I think my mama made some muffins. I can bring them over.”

“Ooh. Did she make her famous chocolate chip and blueberry muffins?”

“Yep. And she made some banana walnut as well.”

He laughed. “I cannot wait. But don’t tell my mom because she just made a bunch of cookies.”

“Uh-oh,” I said. “I don’t want to get Amelia mad at me.”

“She’d never be mad at you. Now, hurry up. We’ll have some wine or beer or cider, whatever you want. I want to celebrate.”

Do you have any of that rekordelig?”

“Oh my gosh! Not that expensive Swedish cider, Sadie.”

“Yes. If we’re celebrating, then we should celebrate with something good.”

“Fine. I’ll check. You hurry up, now, Sadie.”

“I’m on my way, Wyatt.”

“I’ve missed you,” he said softly.

“I missed you too,” I said and then hung up quickly and hurried into the kitchen.

“Hey, Mama. I’m going to take some of the muffins over to the Hamilton ranch. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Tell Amelia and Arya I said, hi.”

“Will do. You going to be okay?”

“Of course, dear.”

“You sure?” I knew that she wasn’t fully over my father’s transgressions. It was hard living here. Not because I didn’t love my parents and not because we didn’t have a good life, but because I knew there was so much under the surface that they didn’t talk about. It wasn’t like Horseshoe Ranch where the Hamiltons were in each other’s faces and calling each other out. My mom didn’t do that to my dad. She truly believed that my father was the head of the household, and as such, he could get away with anything. It made me sad to know that her entire life would be like this.

Not that she hated it. And not that it was a bad life, but the fact that my father cheated, and that she wouldn’t say anything against him, let alone leave him made me sad. Not that I wanted her to leave him, but I wanted her to know she had options. I knew she didn’t feel like she had any.

“I’m glad that you’ve made up with Wyatt,” she softly.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m glad that you guys are talking again.”

“How do you know that we weren’t?”

“Because Amelia and I spoke.” There was a twinkle in her eye. “And between you and me—” she paused.

“Yes, Mom?”

“I much prefer Wyatt Hamilton to Dominic Olivio, or even Shane Wakefield.”

“Mom, what? How do you know so much?”

“We live in a small town, dear. And you know how everyone talks.”

“I guess so.”

“And Wyatt is your best friend. Don’t let a kiss come between you.”

“Oh my gosh, Mom!” I could feel my face redden. “How much do you know?”

“I know enough to know that kissing friends make the best friends.” She smiled. “I wasn’t always married to your father, you know. I’ve had other loves.”

“Oh my gosh, Mom. Really?”

“Well, sure. I think I told you my first kiss was with Jimmy, and Jimmy was my best friend through elementary school and high school. And sometimes I still think about him.”

“Really? Do you wish you would’ve married him instead of Dad?”

“No, because I wouldn’t have had you. And Jimmy was really nerdy,” she confided. “Very handsome, very charming, and a great kisser, but sort of a super-nerd. No, I’m happy with your father, even after everything.” She squeezed my hand. “I know it’s hard to understand. You’re an idealist and a romantic, but your father’s not so bad.”

“I know, Mom,” I replied.

“Thank you for listening to me.” She handed me a container full of muffins. “Now you go and take this over to Horseshoe Ranch. I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I drove quickly down to Horseshoe Ranch. I was excited to see Wyatt and to be able to have a conversation with him that wasn’t clouded by our kisses. I knew we had to talk about it, of course. We had to figure everything out and so that it didn’t happen again.

As I pulled up to Horseshoe ranch, I could see Wyatt waiting outside. I jumped out of the truck and hurried to the front with the container in my hands.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“I was waiting on you. Come on now.” He grabbed the container of muffins and opened it. “Mm, still warm.” He pulled one out and took a bite into it.

“Wyatt!”

“What? I love your mom’s muffins. So, Sadie?” He asked me as we walked into the house.

“Yes, Wyatt?”

“Did my kisses make you disappear?”

“We’re not going to have this conversation again, are we?”

He stopped and looked at me, a questioning look on his face. “Did my kisses make you disappear?”

“No, Wyatt. Your kisses did not make me disappear.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

“Good.” He leaned forward and gave me a light kiss on the lips.

I waited for him to step back and raised an eyebrow. “What was that for?”

“I just wanted to know if my kisses would make your heart race.”

“Really, Wyatt Hamilton?”

“What?” He laughed. “Your heart’s not racing?”

“... No.”

“Liar.” He grinned. “You’re such a liar, Sadie Johnson.”

“And I don’t know why you keep kissing me, Wyatt Hamilton.”

“Well, I just wanted to know if this sexual chemistry between us was going to be an issue.”

“Sexual chemistry between us!” I scoffed, though I wanted to fan myself.

“Yeah. Is it going to be an issue for you, Sadie?”

“I don’t think so, Wyatt. There’s not going to be an issue for me, because I don’t think a kiss equals sexual chemistry.”

“Really?” His lips twitched.

“No. Is it going to be an issue for you?”

“It’s not going to be an issue for me. So, Sadie?”

“Yes, Wyatt?”

“Come with me to North Carolina.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come with me to North Carolina. I’m going to bid on the horses at the auction.”

“You want me to come with you to the auction?”

“Yeah. Do you have anything else going on right now?”

“I kind of have some business plans ...”

“It’s next week. Do you have any business plans in place that need to happen next week?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you scared, Sadie?”

“Why would I be scared?”

“Then come with me. I dare you.”

He knew exactly what to say. When Wyatt Hamilton dared me, there was no way I could say no.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll come to the auction. Don’t mind if I do.”

“Good,” he grinned at me. “Then it’s a plan.”

Chapter Eighty-Three

Sadie

“I cannot believe that we are flying to North Carolina.”

“Why, you don’t like flying?” Wyatt looked at me from the seat next to mine.

“I love flying. I just can’t believe that we’re going on this trip together.”

“Well, I’m glad you said yes. It’s going to be so exciting. I’ve already written down all the horses that I’m interested in.” His jaw tightened. “I just am unsure how the auction’s going to go.”

“You’ll be fine. I bet you’ll get all the horses that you want.”

“I sure hope so, but I don’t know if I’m going to have enough money. These horses are expensive. Do you know what some of the prize money is for some of these races?”

“No.” I said, “But I was wondering ...” I paused, trying to be tactful. Do you really know enough about training? I’m not trying to offend you or anything,” I added quickly, “but you’ve never trained a racehorse.”

“I may not have trained a racehorse, but I’ve trained horses, Sadie, come on. We grew up on horses. You know how many horses I’ve broken in that none of my other brothers would ride.”

“That’s true.”

“And I can ride fast. True, I’m not light enough to be a jockey, but there’s some kids in town and I’ll train them up. They just need to be able to hold on. I can do this.”

“I know you can. I’m excited for you.” I patted his arm reassuringly.

“Thanks. I’m excited, too. You know what I was thinking?” he asked. I shook my head. “I was thinking that while we’re in North Carolina, we should act like tourists.”

“What do you mean, act like tourists?”

“You know, when we were young, we always said we wanted to travel. So, let’s make North Carolina our first destination.”

“When I said I wanted to travel, Wyatt, I meant I wanted to go to Italy and France and Greece and Cypress and Portugal, not North Carolina. North Carolina doesn’t feel like an adventure.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll make an adventure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. We’ll have fun.”

“Sure, Wyatt we’ll have fun.”

I looked at his handsome face, and for a moment, all I could think about was a different kind of fun. Maybe he was thinking the same thing because his eyes twinkled.

“You need to get your mind out of the gutter. You know that, right, Sadie?”

“What are you talking about?” I said innocently.

“You know what I’m talking about.” He laughed. “You’re thinking about my lips on your lips.”

“Wyatt, you’re obsessed with that kiss.”

“Am I? Or are you?”

“You know what? I’m watching a movie,” I said and closed my eyes.

Wyatt laughed. “You can’t watch a movie with your eyes closed.”

I opened them. “I mean, I’m going to sleep.”

“I’ve got you all befuddled, don’t I?”

“You’ve got me something, Wyatt Hamilton. You’ve got me something.”

When we checked into our hotel room in Raleigh, I was relieved to see that there were two full-size beds. I’d been wondering if he might have gotten one king-size bed. I mean, we were used to sleeping together, but we hadn’t slept in the same bed since everything had gone down, and I wasn’t sure that I could deal with that familiarity right now. Not when things were still quite awkward between us.

“So I figured we could go and get a drink.” Wyatt opened up his suitcase. “You ready?”

“Can I wash my face and put on some fresh make-up and maybe change?”

“Typical girl,” he grumbled.

“Yes, Wyatt. I am a woman. That’s why you kissed me.”

“So you don’t think I would’ve kissed you if you were a man?”

“I don’t know, Wyatt. Would you have kissed me if I was a man?”

“I don’t know. Maybe if you looked as hot as you do now.”

“Wyatt Hamilton, really?”

“What?” He stepped closer to me. “You don’t like to hear that you’re hot?”

“I think you’re a weirdo.”

“What? I’m just happy to be alive. I’m happy that we’re here. Don’t you understand how big this is for me?”

“I do.” I said, “Trust me. We’re both really making changes in our lives and doing things for a better future. And I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you too. Sadie.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him.

“What are you doing?”

“I think that we should talk.”

“I thought you wanted to go for a drink,” I said, my voice suddenly hoarse.

“Well, I do want to go for a drink, but that doesn’t mean that we have to go for a drink right away.” His lips got closer to mine and my breath caught. “What are you doing?”

“What happens on vacation, stays on vacation, Sadie,” he said softly.

As he kissed me, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my mouth to his. He stroked my hair and my body melted against his. It just felt so right. Kissing him, holding him, his body warm and hard against mine. Finally, I pulled back breathlessly. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why? Because we’re best friends?”

“Yes. That’s why.”

“I think that’s the best reason for us to be doing it.”

“Let’s go to the bar.”

“I have an idea.” He walked over to the mini-bar at the side of the room. “We can get drunk in here if we want.”

“In the bedroom?”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “You know what I wanted to show you?”

“What?”

“Hold on.” He opened a small bottle of rum and chugged it.

“Wyatt, you’re going to get drunk!”

“Well, I need to get drunk to show you what I’m going to do.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Remember that movie that you loved back in the day?”

“I love a lot of movies.”

“Remember the one that got you all hot and bothered?”

“Not really.”

“Well, you’ll remember this one.” He started gyrating his hips.

“Wyatt, what are you doing?” I laughed at his odd movements.

“Come on now. Play some music for me.”

“Play what music for you?”

“I don’t know. Some pop, some rock, some hip hop.”

I grabbed my phone and played the first song I found, a Drake song. I caught Wyatt rolling his eyes, but he began moving his hips to the beat. “Wyatt, what are you doing?”

“My name’s not Wyatt, my name’s Mike.”

“Your name is Mike?”

“Yeah, Magic Mike.” He winked at me and started undoing his shirt.

“Magic Mike?” I grinned at him. “Are you going to dance for me, Wyatt Hamilton?”

“Well, I don’t know. Would you like me to?” He threw his shirt onto the ground.

I nodded eagerly. “Ahhh, yes, please!”

“Well, what’s the magic word?”

I giggled. “I said please, Magic Mike.”

“Nah, I don’t think I’ll go by Mike.” He ran his hands down his abs toward his belt buckle. I swallowed hard. “Why don’t you sit over there, young lady?” He pointed to a chair.

I walked over and sat down. Was Wyatt going to give me a striptease? This was absolutely crazy. “Uhm, what’s going on, Magic Mike?”

“I told you, I’m not Magic Mike.”

“Uhm, Magic Wyatt?”

“That’s my name.” He pulled off his belt and threw it to the ground, then grabbed my hand and placed it on the button of his jeans. I looked up at him with wide eyes. “What would you like me to do, Miss Sadie?”

“I thought we were going to the bar to have a drink and walk around the city before we got ready for tomorrow—”

“There’s plenty of time for that, Sadie.” He leaned down and blew into my ear. My whole body trembled. This was hotter than anything I’d ever experienced. There was no way I was going to stop Wyatt now.

Chapter Eighty-Four

Wyatt

Sadie's blue eyes sparkled with laughter as she threw her head back. How wonderful it was that she was here with me. I couldn't remember a time when I'd been happier or more alive or more excited about the future. Everything was finally falling into place. As she reached into her handbag and pulled out a handful of dollar bills, a mischievous grin on her face, I realized that she was absolutely perfect. She was funny, she was gorgeous, she was my best friend. And no matter if we had ups or downs, we always ended up in the same place. We always supported each other. We always loved each other.

I pulled down my jeans. She gasped as I stood there in my briefs. I was hard, and I knew she could tell, but I wasn't embarrassed. I wanted her to see what she did to me. I wanted her to know that I wanted her. I wanted her so badly, and there was nothing wrong with that. Just because we were best friends didn't mean that our friendship couldn't go to the next level. It didn't mean that we couldn't try for more.

I knew that it was a risk. If one or two kisses had complicated things, what would sex do? But I didn't care. I needed her more than I needed oxygen. More than I needed water. She was life itself.

She giggled as I pulled her hand and lifted her off of the chair. "Wyatt Hamilton, what are you doing?"

“I want you to dance with me, Sadie.” I twirled her around. Giggling, she stumbled slightly. I caught her so she wouldn’t fall.

“I’m dizzy,” she said. “And I need some alcohol too if we’re going to do this.”

“If we’re going to do what?” I wondered if her mind was in the gutter, just like mine.

“I don’t know,” she bit her lip, “but I’d like some vodka and Sprite.”

“Vodka and Sprite coming up.” I hurried over to the bar where I opened a small bottle of vodka and checked the fridge to see if they had Sprite.

“Does 7-Up work?”

“Of course!” she said.

I poured it into one of the glasses I saw sitting on the table and handed it to her. She gulped it down.

“Oh my gosh, maybe I should have eaten something first.”

“They’ve got potato chips here,” I pointed out.

“No, I want something more than potato chips. I want pizza or—what are they famous for in North Carolina?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m not thinking about food.”

I pulled her towards me and towards the bed. She giggled as she stumbled into me and kissed me. I looked at her, surprised. I couldn’t believe she’d made the first move.

“What? I like kissing you just as much as you like kissing me,” she whispered.

We fell back onto the bed together and I pulled her onto my lap. She moaned softly as she shifted so that she was sitting on top of my groin. I grew even harder as I felt her moving back and forth on me.

I lowered my voice. “Like what you feel, baby?”

She rolled her eyes “Don’t make that voice. It sounds weird.”

“What sounds weird?”

“You trying to sound like Elvis Presley.”

“Trust me. That was not my Elvis Presley impression. If I wanted to do an Elvis Presley impression, I would.”

“You can’t do an Elvis Presley impression.” Her blonde hair swayed back and forth as she shook her head.

“You want to see me in my blue suede shoes, honey?”

She laughed. “That was awful. You didn’t even sound like you were from the South.”

“I’m from Tennessee. I’m from Memphis.”

“Wyatt, please or never quit your day job to be an actor or a voiceover artist, okay?”

“Are you telling me that I’m not talented in ways of the mouth?” I winked at her.

“I didn’t quite say *that*.”

I pushed her back on the bed and kissed her. I ran my fingers down her face and she gasped as I bit gently on her lower lip.

“You’re beautiful. You know that, Sadie?”

I kissed down her neck, and she stilled as my hand slid down the front of her top. I pulled her top up slightly so that I could see her belly button. I leaned down to kiss it then licked all the way up.

“What are you doing?” she said softly.

“I’m doing whatever you want me to do.”

I reached up to pull her top off, and she nodded slightly, giving her assent. I pulled it off, running my fingers lightly over her sheer bra. My lips moved between her legs, over her belly, between her breasts, relishing the taste of her skin.

She trembled slightly as she stared up at me. “Is this why you brought me to North Carolina, Wyatt?”

“No. But is this why you came?”

She shook her head, but I could tell from the wicked glint in her eyes that that was a lie.

“You came to seduce me, didn’t you Sadie?”

“How could I come to seduce you when you’re the one that invited me? And you are the one that decided to be Magic Mike—I mean, Magic Wyatt—”

“Shh ...” I placed my finger on her lips then tugged her skirt off so that she was lying there in just her panties and bra. She was absolutely gorgeous.

My Sadie.

Eager to taste more of her, I kissed along her stomach towards her panties. She gasped as my teeth grabbed the top of her panties and pulled them down her legs.

“Wyatt!” Her eyes were wide.

I grinned as I spread her legs and ran my fingers up her inner thighs. “I’m going to show you pleasure tonight, Sadie.”

“Wyatt, I don’t know ...”

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked her softly, kissing her lips.

“No.” She lay back and closed her eyes.

Normally I would tell her to keep her eyes open as I wanted her to watch me as I ate her, but I knew this was her first time. Instead, I pressed my lips against her clit and felt her wetness against me. I opened my mouth and sucked, I licked and flicked with my tongue, her body trembling as I played with her. She tasted like cotton candy.

As I stuck my tongue inside of her, I couldn’t believe just how much she was enjoying it. She moaned and squirmed, and I looked up and saw that her hands were gripping the sheets. She was close to orgasm already. I could feel from the way her thighs were pressed into my head that she wanted me to continue. So I fucked her with my tongue as if it were the last thing I was able to do on earth.

When she finally orgasmed, I smiled listening to her screams and whimpers.

“Oh my God, Wyatt! Oh my gosh,” she said as I kissed up her stomach and kissed her on the lips.

She stared at me with wide eyes. “That was absolutely amazing.” She ran her fingers down the side of my face. “I can’t believe we just did that.”

“Really?”

All I could think was why had it taken us so long? I pulled her close and ran my fingers down her arms, kissing her again on the lips. She put a hand flat on my chest then slowly stroked down to my abs. And I laughed as she ran her fingers to the front of my briefs and squeezed my cock, but my laugh turned into a groan as she slipped her fingers beneath my briefs and touched my member. She made to move down, and I stopped her.

“You don’t have to,” I said, shaking my head.

“I want to return the favor,” she said.

But I stopped her. “Tonight is about you. We can worry about me later,” I said, with a wicked grin.

She laughed. “Oh, Wyatt Hamilton. Why do I think that’s a promise?”

“Because you know me too well, Sadie Johnson. You know me too well.”

I kissed her forehead and unclasped the back of her bra so that it fell off. I moved my lips to her nipples and sucked and she moaned once more as I played with her breasts. I couldn’t believe how supple and warm they were to the touch. I couldn’t believe that I was doing this with Sadie. Not because it felt wrong, but because it felt so right. She was my Sadie. She was everything I’d never realized I was waiting for.

And this was one of the hottest nights of my life. I wanted to fuck her. I wanted to take her right now. But because she was special to me, I stopped myself. Because she was special

to me, I wanted to ensure that tonight was only about her and her pleasure.

I didn't want her to have any regrets whatsoever.

Chapter Eighty-Five

Sadie

I could hear the sound of Wyatt humming from the bathroom as I opened my eyes. My cheeks were pink and flush as I remembered what had happened the night before. I couldn't believe that Wyatt had gone down on me. It had felt amazing and I had orgasmed in a way that I didn't think was possible. In fact, the way he'd made me feel had made me want to sleep with him. I'd wanted to give myself to him. I'd wanted to taste him. I'd wanted to see his face erupting in pleasure as I took him in my mouth, but he'd stop me.

I'd been slightly annoyed when he'd pushed me away, but I'd understood what he was trying to convey. He didn't want me to feel used. He didn't want me to feel like this was only about the sex or the oral sex or whatever it was that was going on between us. I frankly, was still nonplussed about the fact that he'd given me a lap dance and moved around the room like he was Channing Tatum. In fact, he was even sexier than Channing Tatum, but I wouldn't tell him that.

I stretched slightly as I sat up. I wasn't sure what to say. It felt weird to be waking up after a night of pleasure between the two of us. I mean, yes, we'd kissed a couple of times, but it had not been anything like this. I sat in the bed trying to think about what to do or say next when he walked out of the bathroom.

“Hey, morning, Sadie,” he said, a cheerful smile on his face as he ran his hands through his still-wet hair.

I stared at his naked chest and swallowed hard. He was so fine.

“Morning, Wyatt,” I said, wondering if he was going to bring up the night before. Would he try to go and down on me again? Not that I would say no. It had been amazing, and I would be an absolute fool to ever reject him.

“Hurry up and shower,” he said. “We got to get going.”

“Oh?” I looked at him blinking. What was he talking about?

“The auction starts in an hour, and I’m sure you want to have breakfast and get a coffee like you always do. So get moving!”

“Oh yeah, the auction, that’s today?”

“Yeah, goofy,” he laughed.

He walked past the bed and grabbed a shirt. “What do you think about this?” He held it up against him. It was a crisp white shirt and I stared at him smiling.

“It looks very plain. Not like you at all.”

“Well, it’s not like I can wear my cowboy t-shirt,” he said laughing.

“Sure you can. We’re going to a horse auction. I’m sure it’s going to be full of cowboys.”

“It’s going to be full of businessmen. I want them to see a businessman. I don’t want them to see a cowboy.”

“Can’t you be a cowboy businessman?” I asked.

“Well, I can and I am, but I want them to see the professional side of me.”

“Okay,” I said as I got out of the bed.

He walked over to me and grabbed me and pulled me into his arms. He gave me a long, deep kiss and then pulled away.

“Whoa, what was that for?” I said blinking at him in surprise.

“I wanted to make sure you were fully awake,” he grinned, and then he slapped me on the ass. “Now go and shower and hurry.”

“Yes, sir,” I giggled as I ran into the bathroom.

I was so happy that we had something to do this morning so that I couldn't just focus on the night before, and this way I didn't make things awkward. I hurried into the shower and got dressed quickly. He wasn't even in the room when I came out of the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the bed waiting, wondering where he was. The door opened about five minutes later and he had a coffee in his hands.

“Here you go, my dear,” he said, handing it to me. “One mocha with extra whipped cream.”

“You got me a mocha?” I asked surprised.

“Yeah. You love mochas, right? Or did that change when you went to Idaho?”

“No, it didn't change when I went to Idaho, but I thought we were going to go and get breakfast and coffee now.”

“We are,” he said, “but I called the restaurant downstairs and they don't do mochas. They only have regular coffee, and I know that you don't love regular coffee, so I went out to get you a mocha.”

“Wow. Thank you.” I was really touched by how thoughtful he'd been.

“Hey, don't let it go to your head. I just want to make sure that your head is in the game today. I'll want your opinion when we look at these horses.”

“Okay. I mean, I'm really happy. I'm excited,” I said as I sipped on the mocha. “Mmm, this tastes delicious.”

“I know,” he said, “I had to sip myself.”

“You took a sip of my mocha, Wyatt?”

“Of course. I had to make sure it wasn't bad.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Plus, as a prince, I have to sip the princess’ mocha to make sure it’s not poisoned.”

“I’m not a princess and you’re not a prince.”

“What are you saying?” He laughed. “You don’t consider me your Prince Charming?”

I laughed as I shook my head, but the words stayed in my mind. Did he consider himself my Prince Charming? Did he want to be my Prince Charming? And what did that mean? Did it mean he wanted to be with me? Did he want to be in a relationship with me? Did he one day see himself marrying me?

Of course, I wasn’t going to ask those questions right now. We’d had a couple of kisses and one night of fun. We hadn’t even had sex yet. I definitely didn’t want to be that girl that was asking the hard questions when our situation didn’t really call for it.

“Come on.” He grabbed my hand. “Let’s go.”

“Okay. I’m coming.”

He held up a stack of papers and showed them to me.

“So I have my eye on four different horses. We’re going to go and have a look at them before the auction starts. Everyone has a chance to inspect the horses, and I want your feedback and opinion.”

“Sure, but I don’t really know what makes a good yearling better than another.”

“Temperament,” he said, “plus their pedigree. We can see who in their family has actually won races.”

“But won’t those be the most expensive horses?”

“Yes,” he nodded, “but here’s my thought. We see the traits that they have and we look for those same traits in other horses that aren’t as expensive and we bid on them.”

“Ooh, smart thinking, Wyatt Hamilton.” I looked at him with respect to my eyes. “You’ve really given this a lot of

thought.”

“Of course I have,” he said, seriously. “I have \$150,000 and that’s a lot of money. My whole family has gone to bat for me and they trust me, and I really want to make sure that I do them proud.”

I squeezed his hand. “You will, I promise.”

“You’re so sweet. Now come on, let’s go and see.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, that breakfast was absolutely delicious,” I said rubbing my stomach as we left the hotel.

“Thank you for sharing those Dutch apple pancakes with me. I shouldn’t have eaten them, though,” he groaned. “I feel absolutely stuffed.”

“But that’s good. At least you won’t get hungry later on.”

“That is true,” he nodded. “Okay, are you up for walking, or should I get us a cab?”

“How far is the walk?” I asked him suspiciously. I didn’t really feel like walking, but I should walk off the breakfast. I’d probably eaten about 2000 calories.

“Let me check.” He pulled up his phone. “It says that it will be a 15-minute walk. Is that okay?”

“15 minutes walking fast or 15 minutes walking slow?”

“It’s just over a mile.”

He looked at me and I looked at him with wide eyes.

“Sadie, a mile is nothing. You were on the cross-country team in high school.”

“Yeah, but I just ate a whole ...” I paused, “well, a half Dutch apple pancake, and an omelet with hash browns and white toast, and I had that mocha and orange juice.”

“So you’re telling me you don’t want to walk it off?”

“I’m telling you I don’t think I *can* walk it off. I’m stuffed.”

“Okay, let’s get a cab.”

He looked around, but there were no cabs to be seen.

“Um, so?”

He stared at me for a few seconds and I shrugged.

“Fine, we can walk, but if I collapse, you have to carry me.”

“Anytime you want me to carry you, Sadie, I will,” he said.

He gave me such a meaningful look that my heart flooded. It was weird being here with him like this. We’d been in so many situations together, but this was the first time we’d been together on a business trip, and the first time we’d ever been intimate in this way.

“I hope that you had a nice night last night,” he said as we walked down the street.

“I had a really nice night,” I said smiling at him.

“Yeah, I had a good night too,” he grinned. “You know when you moan you make the most gorgeous, silly face.”

“Wyatt,” I wrinkled my nose, “I do not want to hear about when I moan.”

“Why not? Didn’t you enjoy moaning?”

“Wyatt!”

“What? Now your face is turning red. Am I embarrassing you?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Am I embarrassing you so much that you don’t want to do it again?”

“Well, I didn’t say that.” My lips twitched. “You’re so bad. You know that, right?”

“What?” he said.

“I mean you were nervous that we were messing things up by kissing and now we’re doing more than kissing.”

“Well, I was using my tongue and my lips, so technically I was kissing you. I just wasn’t kissing your lips,” he chuckled. “Well, actually I just wasn’t kissing the lips on your face.”

“Wyatt Hamilton.” I hit him in the shoulder. “Really?”

“What? You are going to go down on me as well.”

“Yeah, but you stopped me.”

“I won’t stop you the next time,” he said with a wink.

“Wyatt.”

“What? We’re best friends. Can’t we talk about this?”

“Yeah, we can, but it’s just weird.”

“It’s weird, why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because this is really new for us, and maybe because I’ve never done this before, and maybe because I’m worried that our friendship won’t be the same again.”

“Our friendship will never change, Sadie. If anything, it will only get better.”

“Okay. Well, if you say so.”

“I do say so,” he said.

“Okay, look, we are nearly here.” He held up his phone and showed me the map. “Only about five more minutes to go until we get to the stables.”

“Wow. I am really excited. It’s not even me buying the horses, but I’m super excited.”

“So am I,” he said. “I feel like I’m finally starting my life you know? I feel like I finally found my purpose ...” He looked ahead. “It’s exciting, and it’s momentous, and I just want to do the Hamilton family proud. I want Hamilton Stables to become world-renowned. I want kings and queens and princesses and dukes and duchesses and sheiks and barons and tech tycoons to come to Hamilton Ranch and ask me to find them a horse and to train a horse that they could run in the

Kentucky Derby and at Ascot, and ...” he let out a deep breath. “Well, you know.”

“I know,” I said, “and they will. I promise, one day they will.”

“Well, I just got to find the right couple of horses to start with, and then maybe one day.”

We stopped as we reached the stables. He grabbed my hand and was silent for a few moments.

“Thank you for coming with me, Sadie. There’s no one I would’ve wanted here with me more than you.”

“Thank you for inviting me, Wyatt. I’m happy to share this with you.”

He picked me up and swung me around and around and then stopped as I giggled.

“Let’s do this. Let’s do it,” I said with a nod.

I followed him inside. And as he started observing and touching the first horse on his list, I just stared at him. This was a Wyatt I’d never seen before. This was a Wyatt that was professional and focused and deep. He had a goal and a plan, and it made me even more passionate about my own ideas and plans. I was proud to be his best friend and I was proud to be with him on this journey to the next step in his life.

And I realized more than ever that I also needed to take that next step.

As much as I wanted to daydream about Wyatt and me being together and Wyatt and I falling in love and Wyatt and I making love, I knew that wasn’t the be-all and end-all of my life. I had to focus on more than just sex and romance because, at the end of the day, I wanted to be proud of my own business goals as well. I wanted him to support me, not just as his best friend and the woman that he might date, but as a professional as well.

Chapter Eighty-Six

W yatt

There was an excited buzz in the room as we all waited for the auction to officially start. I stood there with the papers in my hand, my fingers gripping the pen. I could see Sadie standing there, watching me, smiling at me. And it made me feel happy and proud that she was here with me. I was also grateful that we'd gotten to the auction this morning. When I'd woken up, all I'd wanted to do was pull her into my arms and make love to her, but I knew it was still too soon. She was open and willing, but I wanted to make sure that everything we did was on her terms. I wanted to make sure that the timing was right, and I wanted to make sure that, emotionally, she was ready for whatever came next.

Sadie had infiltrated my bloodstream like nothing I'd ever felt before. I'd never expected to feel this way about anything or anyone, and I was just glad that I was able to focus on the horses as much as I was able to focus on her.

"So you know which ones you're going for?" she whispered in my ear.

I handed her the paper with the horses that I'd circled, paying careful attention to ensure that no one around us could see. I didn't want anyone going for the same horses as me, though I was pretty sure I would have competition in the bids.

“Don’t let anyone see,” I said softly. And she grinned as she held them up to her face.

“Don’t worry, Batman, I got you,” she laughed. She nodded as she looked at the horses I’d circled. “I like them, too,” she grinned. “In fact, King Dasani is my favorite.”

“Shh!” I laughed at the made-up name.

“I know, that’s not the real name,” she giggled.

King Dasani was her nickname for Prince Waterman. I guess because Dasani was a type of water, she figured that Prince Waterman was a good nickname. I didn’t want to tell her that anyone with half a brain would be able to figure out that King Dasani was actually Prince Waterman, seeing as Dasani was one of the most popular bottled waters in the country. But Prince Waterman was my number one pick. I had high hopes that I would be able to get him. I’d had a good feeling when I had touched him and made eye contact with him and taken him out into the corral that this was a horse I could work with. This was a champion in the making. I only hoped that I would win the auction.

I was quickly realizing that a hundred and fifty grand was nothing to this crowd. There were big-time trainers here from England and Scotland and Canada and even Dubai. A lot of people were here, and they were willing to bid a lot of money.

I chewed on my lower lip. I was starting to feel nervous. Sadie reached over and squeezed my hand, “It’s okay, Wyatt. You’ll get the horses you want.”

“I hope so,” I said. “A hundred and fifty grand isn’t really a lot of money.”

“If push comes to shove, I’ll sponsor one of the horses.”

“What do you mean you’ll sponsor one of the horses?”

“I will give you the money for the rest of the bid. For Prince Waterman. If you don’t have enough by the time the auction comes, I will make up the difference. I’ll be an official sponsor. And when he enters races and he wins, you can pay me back out of that.”

“I don’t know about that, Sadie. I don’t want to use your —”

“Sh. I’m a businesswoman too, you know. And you’re not the only one with an inheritance.”

“Yeah, I mean, I can invest my own money—”

“No,” she said. “You don’t have access to it yet. I know the terms of your trust. But I have access to my money. And I can afford to put in any amount that you might need. And we’ll sign a contract and it will be a business deal if you don’t feel comfortable just taking it from me. I believe in you, Wyatt. I believe in your vision and I think you’ll make an awesome damn trainer. And if you’re not doing a good job, I’ll come over and train the horses, too. So with two awesome trainers, well hey, how can we lose?”

“Are you serious, Sadie?”

She looked me straight in the eyes. “Dead serious.”

“And this isn’t about last night or the kiss or—”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what last night was, and I don’t know where we’re going or what you think or feel for me. And that is a conversation we’ll have another time. But,” she stared at me with love and pride in her eyes. “This is about business, and this is about my faith in you. I’ve got you, okay?”

“Thank you, Sadie. You’re the best best friend a guy could have.”

“I know,” she said with a grin.

I realized then just how much I loved her. She was the sort of woman that a man should have by his side for a lifetime. She was the sort of woman that a man would die for. I would die for her. And I would do anything to be with her. I didn’t want Sadie just as my best friend. I wanted her as my lover, I wanted her as my life partner. I finally understood what Beau and Austin felt for Olivia and Lucy. I finally understood what my mom and dad felt for each other. I finally understood how all-consuming love was. And it scared me.

But it didn't scare me so much that it made me want to run. It scared me so much because I was scared that I would lose her. I was scared that some other guy would come along and snatch her away from me. And I realized that that had been my fear all along. I'd been jealous. I'd been jealous of the men she was meeting in Idaho. I'd been jealous when Shane Wakefield showed interest in her, and I'd been jealous when I'd seen her with the Olivio brothers, scared that they would sweep her off her feet and whisper sweet nothings into her ear because I didn't want her to be with anyone else.

And I realized that my family had known that all along. All along, the whispers and the murmurs had been true. I was in love with Sadie Johnson and I wanted her more than words could say and as soon as the auction was over I was going to tell her.

"Are you sure about this, Sadie?" I said as I raised my paddle. The bid was now at two hundred thousand. I hadn't bid on any of the other horses yet.

"I'm sure," she nodded quickly.

Two hundred thousand to number 0148," the auctioneer said. I watched as my competitor put up his paddle. "And what do we have here? Two-twenty-five to number 01132." I looked back at Sadie.

"Go up," she said. "Go to \$250,000."

"That's a lot of money, Sadie. That would be \$100,000 you're putting in."

"I've got it," she said, "I'll put it in."

I lifted up my paddle again. "\$250,000," I said. The auctioneer looked at me and then looked around the room and everything seemed to go in slow motion as he raised his gavel and slammed it back down again.

"Sold!" He pointed to me and a man rushed up to me to grab my information.

"I just bought a horse." I stared at Sadie in shock. "I just bought a horse. Prince Waterman is mine!" I shouted. Sadie reached and grabbed me and pulled me into a hug. We were

jumping up and down with happiness and I couldn't believe it. "Oh my God, Sadie, what did I just do? I just bought a horse but I only bought one horse. What am I going to tell everyone?"

"All you need is one," she said softly. "All you need is one winner."

"Yeah, but I wanted more than one just in—"

"Don't doubt yourself. You knew as soon as you saw him that he was the one for you, right?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"So then he's the one. I have faith. This is your winner."

"Thank you, Sadie. Thank you."

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Sadie

“That dinner was absolutely delicious,” I said, as we made our way back to the hotel room. I was well-fed and just a little bit tipsy as well. I stared at Wyatt. I could hear the anticipation in my voice, but I didn’t care. It had been an absolutely amazing day.

“I just want to thank you again—” he started, but I shook my head.

“Wyatt, enough. I don’t want you to keep thanking me. Thank me by training the shit out of Prince Waterman and making him a winner.”

“Well, I’ll do that, all right.” He laughed. “So, you said there was something you wanted to tell me?” He raised an eyebrow, and I nodded.

I took a deep breath as we made our way into the hotel room. “So I know we’ve been focusing on the auction and the horses, and I’m so proud of you, but everything that’s gone on recently has made me think.”

“Is everything okay?” He sounded concerned.

“Yeah, no, it’s great. I was just thinking that it’s so awesome that you’ve got these plans to be successful and have a career. And I just felt like I’ve been just sort of going by, day by day, not really doing much. And I had this idea where I

wanted to train women and teach them skills to work on different ranches. That's why I met with the Olivios, because they're starting this working ranch and they wanted to start a program and we could work in conjunction with each other. I would run this program at their ranch, but they kind of seem a little bit sleazy and—"

"I told you so." Wyatt smirked

"Anyway, I was thinking maybe I should apply for an MBA or a master's program because I really think it would be awesome if I could start my own nonprofit, but I don't really have the skills to do that yet. And instead of relying upon someone else's generosity and someone else's farm, I could start this program myself and go to different ranches, and—"

"We'd love to have you at Horseshoe Ranch," he said.

"I know." I grinned. "And I would love to do it at Horseshoe Ranch as well, but I just don't want to do with people I know. I want to be able to go to many different ranches and encourage ranchers to hire women because there are a lot of women out there who need work and who could do amazing jobs. They just need the skills, but farmers don't want ranch hands that are women. They don't want to teach them. They don't think we're strong enough, but we are! I feel like if I could give them the basic skills and they could show up at these ranches and show farmers just how dedicated they are, then maybe they'd be given in a shot."

"I think that's an amazing idea," he said. "And wow, you sound so passionate about this. I didn't even realize this was something in your mind."

"I know, I guess I didn't really have the opportunity to tell you yet."

"It's because of what's been going on between us," he said.

"I have been all over the place," I agreed. "Not because of the kiss, or at least not just because of the kiss, but because everything's been so different between us ever since I went to Idaho. You've been so distant."

“I know, and I’m sorry. I guess I just didn’t want to admit some things to myself.” He chewed on his lower lip. “But if you really want to leave Montana and pursue further education, then I want to support you.”

“Really? I thought you’d be upset.”

“Of course, I don’t want you to go.” His eyes were dark and soulful, “but I realize that I can’t hold you back, Sadie, not from your dreams. We’re twenty-five years old, and if this is what you want to do, if you want to get an MBA and start a nonprofit, I will support you. I will be there for you. I will never hold you back. You know that, right?”

“I’ve never thought you would hold me back, Wyatt. I know I’ve been selfish. I’ve taken our friendship for granted. You’ve always been there for me, and maybe I’ve been a shit friend because I didn’t even realize that maybe you wanted more from life. Maybe you just weren’t focused on getting married and having kids. And I guess that’s all I talked about.”

“One day, I want that too.”

He looked away for a few seconds and I wasn’t sure what he meant by that. It was the first time I’d ever heard Wyatt say that he wanted kids and a family.

“This has been a really good weekend, Sadie. I’ve learned a lot about myself and I’ve learned a lot about you. And I really like who we’re both becoming, you know?”

“I really like who we’re both becoming as well,” I said.

He moved closer to me and kissed me, gently at first and then more urgently. I kissed him back hard, slipping my tongue into his mouth and sucking on his lower lip. He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me in tightly to his body. I could feel his hard-on pressing against my stomach, and the sensation drove my desire for him to a new level.

I giggled slightly as he kissed down my neck. He stepped back long enough to pull my blouse off over my head then unclasped my bra, letting it fall to the floor. He led me to the bed and gently pulled me down next to him.

I reached out and started undoing the buttons on his shirt. He let me, and then he slipped the shirt off and it fell to the ground. We fell back against the pillows, and I felt his lips on my nipple, sucking and teasing.

I ran my fingers down his back and scratched hard. I loved the way that he felt against me. I loved the way that he kissed and touched me. He didn't treat me like some delicate little doll. He was passionate, and I loved the feeling of him next to me. I felt his fingers against my stomach trailing down towards my pants. I held my breath as he undid the buckle and unzipped them. He pulled them off so that I was just lying on the bed in my panties. I looked up at him.

"Take off your pants now, Wyatt," I ordered.

His eyes were dark and glittery as he slid his pants off. I stared at him in his black briefs. And swallowed hard as I saw the outline of his cock, thick and hard.

"Take off your briefs as well."

He stared at me for a few seconds, silently asking if that was what I really wanted. I nodded. He grinned and pulled his boxers down. His cock sprang free. It was every bit as magnificent as the rumors had said. I reached over and stroked it. He shuddered slightly as my fingers moved up and down.

"You're going to make me cum. You know that right?"

"Don't come just yet," I laughed but the laugh turned into a moan as I felt his fingers slip between my legs and rub me through my panties.

"You're already wet," he said with a grin, as he slipped a finger inside and rubbed my clit. I whimpered and squirmed on the bed. His hand reached back up and squeezed my nipple and I moaned again.

"I just love to hear you moan," he whispered

"Well, I want to hear you moan too."

I pushed him back and straddled him then leaned forward, brushing my breasts against his face. He reached up to suck on my nipple as I kissed his forehead. I'd never felt as

empowered as I did at this moment. I couldn't believe that I was this woman. I was seducing him. I felt his hands on my ass, squeezing. I moved back and forth, rubbing myself on his giant cock, then I moved down, kissing down his chest until I came to his member. I glanced up at him to see if he would push me off.

He stared at me through veiled eyes and I just grinned at him before I took him into my mouth and sucked. It was such a heady feeling to have his cock in my mouth. I moved my mouth back and forth and sucked him as my fingers played with his balls. He gripped the sheet and mumbled something under his breath.

“What did you say?” I said, giggling as I looked up at him.

“How the fuck did you know to do that?” he gasped.

I just winked at him. “There are videos online, you know,” I laughed.

I took him into my mouth again, relishing the growling noise he made. I moved up and down as quickly as possible, blowing and sucking, enjoying the feel of him inside of me. I opened my mouth as wide as possible so that I could take him in as deep as possible. I wanted to rip off my panties and sit on him, but I knew that now wasn't the right time. I wanted to have sex with him so badly, but I also wanted to wait until we'd had more of a conversation about where we stood.

He tangled his fingers in my hair as he guided my head up and down, and then without warning, I felt him shuddering on the bed and his hot cum spilled into my mouth. I sucked and licked him up greedily. And then when he was finished, I kissed my way back up his chest until I kissed his lips. He stared at me with wide eyes.

“I can't believe we just did that,” he said.

I laughed as I ran my fingers down his chest. “I can. And it was just as amazing as I thought it would be.”

“You've thought about it?” His voice was husky.

“Of course. You never thought about me?”

“Every single night.”

He pushed me back, and I felt his lips moving down my body as he spread my legs. Then his tongue was inside of me. and it was my turn to grip the sheets. I didn't want this moment to end. It was absolutely perfect. I loved him. I loved Wyatt Hamilton with all of my heart. And I wanted to tell him that, but I was scared. I was scared to change our relationship. I was scared to ask for more because he hadn't promised anything. He hadn't promised me forever. He hadn't promised me an everlasting love.

But he was here, now, in this moment, and I would take what I could get. And as he sucked on my clit and fucked me with this tongue, I knew that I would never forget this moment. It would live with me forever.

Chapter Eighty-Eight

Wyatt

“Hey, guys, we’re home,” I called out as we entered the kitchen at Horseshoe Ranch. Sadie was by my side glowing, and I wondered if people could tell that we had been intimate. We hadn’t had sex yet, but we had spent the weekend going down on each other more times than I could count, and I was actually surprised that I’d been able to stop myself from going for more, though I knew that Sadie deserved better than to lose her virginity in a hotel in North Carolina on a business trip away.

“Hi, there!” Mom beamed at me as she turned around. She walked over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Hi, Sadie, so good to see you. How was North Carolina? How was the auction?”

“Oh, it was great, Mom. Absolutely great. In fact, I have some good news to share with everyone. Is everyone home?”

“I’m here, Uncle Wyatt,” Eloise piped up.

I beamed at the little girl. “Hey, Eloise, how are you?”

“I am good. I missed you. And I missed you, too, Auntie Sadie.” She walked over to Sadie and gave her a hug.

“I missed you, too, Eloise.”

“So where’s Dad?” I looked around. “Where is everyone?”

“Everyone’s out on the ranch doing work.” Mom laughed, “We’re just making cookies.”

I shook my head. “You guys are always making cookies,”

“And you seem to enjoy them, Wyatt,” Mom pointed out, and I laughed.

“Well, I am a cookie monster.”

“Yes, you are,” Sadie agreed with a smile.

“Well, you know, I do like the cookie,” I winked at her. “I could eat the cookie all night long.”

“Wyatt!” Sadie glared at me.

“What? Don’t you like cookies? Or do you prefer hotdogs?”

“Wyatt!” Sadie glared at me.

“What? I think you like hotdogs more than you—”

“Enough,” my mom said, giving me a look. “Wyatt, you’re making Sadie uncomfortable, and I’m not even going to ask what the two of you are talking about. But if the look on Sadie’s face and the color in her cheeks is any indication, then I think I know. You forget I have been your mother for twenty-five years, and I have six other sons. This is not the first time I’ve heard about cookies and hotdogs,” she laughed.

“Oh, my gosh,” Sadie buried her face in her hands, “I’m going to absolutely die right now.”

“Can I have a hotdog, please?” Eloise said, and we all started laughing.

“Sure,” my mom said and turned towards the fridge. “I’ll make some hotdogs. Are you guys hungry or did you eat before you go got here?”

“I’m not hungry, thank you.” I looked at Sadie, “You?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks. I guess I’ll go home and ...”

“Don’t leave,” I insisted. “Do you have to get home?”

“Well, I guess not yet. My mom knows I’m with you.”

“Then stay. Let’s just enjoy the evening together, and I want you to be here when I tell all the family about Prince Waterman.”

“Okay,” she nodded, “That will be exciting.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

A little while later, the family was gathered in the living room, looking at me with some apprehension in their expressions.

I cleared my throat. “Well, thank you, everyone, for gathering. I want to let you know that I had a successful trip to North Carolina with Sadie, and I was able to purchase a yearling.”

“A yearling?” Beau raised an eyebrow. “Not three, or four, or five?”

“I was able to purchase a, as in singular, one yearling,” I admitted.

“Whoa! So are you saying that we have change?” Austin said with a laugh.

“No,” I shook my head. “In fact, not only do we not have change, but Sadie ...”

“Oh, please don’t tell me what I think you’re going to tell me.” Beau closed his eyes.

“Sadie is an investor in the horse that I bought.”

“Sadie’s an investor?” Beau raised an eyebrow. “How much money did this horse cost?”

Sadie spoke up. “Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and Wyatt and I signed a contract. I’ll get paid back out of the winnings. I have no claim to the horse, in case you’re worried about that. Literally, we have a simple contract that pays me a hundred thousand back over the next ten years. I think that was a pretty good arrangement for the family.”

“You *are* family, Sadie.” Mom smiled. “You know that. Don’t listen to Beau.”

“Yeah, but two hundred and fifty—” Beau began.

“Beau.”

“Sorry,” he looked at Sadie, “and you know you’re family.”

“Thank you.” Sadie smiled back at him.

“So tell us more about this horse.”

“His name’s Prince Waterman,” I said. “I’m not sure if I will keep that name, but he’s a year and a half. I took him around the corral, and I was able to ride him. I was able to see what he has to work with, and I think he will be a winner,” I said straightforwardly. “Obviously I’ve never trained horses for racing before, but I am confident that he’s the real deal and with some good training, I’ll get him in the winner’s circle sooner rather than later.”

“Congratulations!” Olivia grinned.

“Yeah, that sounds amazing,” Lucy added. “Can’t wait to see him.”

“And I have some news as well,” Sadie said. “I guess I should tell my parents first, but seeing as you guys are like family as well, I wanted to bring it up. I’m thinking about going back to school to get my MBA or a master’s program in nonprofits because I think I want to start my own nonprofit and train women in the skills they need to work on ranches.”

“Wow, that’s absolutely amazing,” Arya said, “And, you know, I will definitely sign up for those classes because I would love to work at a ranch and I’d love to have those skills to really ... be an important ... feature.” She stumbled slightly over her words. “And I guess seeing as we’re all announcing things, I should announce my news.”

“Oh, you have news?” Mom looked at her in surprise. I noticed that Chet’s expression grew wary.

“Yes,” Arya said. “I’m actually going to be moving out in a couple of days. I’ve accepted a job working at the bar. And as part of my salary, I’ve been given access to one of the apartments on top of the bar, and Eloise and I are going to live there. I’m hoping that until I figure out daycare, Eloise will be welcomed here, but of course ...”

“Oh, my gosh. Of course, darling,” Mom said quickly. “I’d be more than happy to look after her.”

“Me too,” Olivia nodded, “anything you need.”

“And me three,” Lucy said, “I love Eloise. We’re here for you.”

“*What?*” Chet suddenly yelled. We all turned to stare at him.

“Sorry?” Arya said. “What do you mean?”

“What are you talking about—you’ve gotten a job at the bar and you’re moving out? Did I or did I not tell you that you cannot take a job at that bar? Those men are not—”

“Chet, I appreciate your thoughts on this matter, but I am taking the job because there’s a paycheck, and I’m grateful to have been offered it seeing as I don’t have any real experience as a bartender.”

Chet’s face was dark. “The only reason you got that job is because you’re pretty and all the—”

“Enough!” Dad’s voice cut across the room.

“Dad, look, I’m not going to let Arya get taken advantage of.” Chet jumped up and walked over to Arya. “Can I talk to you outside please?”

“Well, I—”

“Now,” he said. “I really would like to talk to you.”

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes. I saw her give a look to Sadie, and Sadie just shook her head. We all watched as Chet and Arya walked out of the room.

“Well, what was that about?” Beau said. “How many hot heads do we have in this family?”

“Too many, I’m afraid.” Olivia shot him a little smile and then looked at me. “Is there anything else you want to tell us, Wyatt, any other news that you and Sadie have?”

“Um, I’m not sure what you mean ...” I began. At that moment, Sadie’s phone rang.

She glanced at it. “Hey, I just need to take this. Excuse me.”

“Sure,” I nodded.

She walked over to a corner of the room but I could still hear her easily. “Hi, Dominic. Yeah, this is Sadie. Um, I did think about it. No, I don’t think I’m actually going to take you up on your offer. Um, no, I’m not interested in a date. Nope. No. Not with you or with your brother. I understand. Yes, I did take that into consideration. No, this has nothing to do with that. He’s not a hothead. I appreciate your call, but I think I’m going to have to go now, Mr. Olivio. Yes. The answer is firm no, thank you,” she said and hung up.

She turned to see me grinning at her. “Were you listening to my conversation, Wyatt?”

“Um, no,” I laughed as I walked over to her.

She snorted. “No as in *no* no, or no as in, yes, I was definitely listening?”

“What do you think Sadie? You know me better than that.”

“Well, yes, that was Dominic, and he wanted to know if I was going to take him up on his business offer, and I said no.”

“I think he was wanting to know about more than the business offer, right?”

“Yeah. He wanted to know if I wanted to have a threesome with him and his brother.”

“He fucking *what?*” The expletive fell out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

“Shh, there are kids in the room!” Sadie glared at me.

“I will go and beat his ass. How dare he?”

“I said no. It’s okay.”

“I mean, ugh, that is just not acceptable.”

“Why?” She said, looking at me with a small smile.

“Because no man should be propositioning my woman.”

“Your woman, huh?” She laughed. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that there is one more thing I need to tell the family.” I cleared my throat and grabbed her hand. “Hey, guys.”

“Yeah?” Beau looked up at me from where he was sitting on the couch.

“I do have another announcement to make.”

I could see my mom grinning. I turned to look at Sadie, and she was looking at me with a confused expression on her face.

“Don’t tell me. You borrowed another hundred grand so you can buy a McDonald’s franchise?” Austin laughed.

“Very funny, not.” I glared at him.

However, he and Beau raised their hands and high-fived each other.

“That is so not funny. Mom and Dad, is that funny?”

“Don’t pay any attention to them, Wyatt,” Mom said. “So what’s this announcement?”

“I would like everyone to know that Sadie and I are dating.”

“We are?” Sadie’s eyes were wide with shock.

“Aren’t we?” I said with a soft smile.

“Um, this is the first I’ve heard about it.”

“Well then let me be very clear, Sadie Johnson. I really like you. You’re my best friend, and a whole lot more. And I’d like to explore this, and I’m hoping that you would like to explore it, too. Will you be my girlfriend?”

I looked around the room and everyone was staring at us in shock.

“And now I know I’ve put you on the spot, and this is kind of awkward doing it in front of my family. And I do apologize about that but ...”

“Oh, of course, Wyatt!” She giggled and pressed her lips against mine.

I pulled her in for a hug and everyone started cheering and clapping.

“Well, there you have it guys. Sadie and I are now officially an item.”

“Took you long enough,” Beau said, and he and Austin started laughing again.

“Come on. I’m going to show Sadie something.”

“I hope it’s not another hotdog,” Austin snickered.

“Really? Mom, did you tell him?”

“I didn’t say a thing,” she said with an innocent expression on her face, and I just shook my head.

“Come on.” I tugged on Sadie’s arm and led her out of the room. She looked at me with a small smile as we made our way to my bedroom.

“Are you serious about this, Wyatt? Are you sure that you want me to?”

“I think we’ve both known for a long time that we’re perfect for each other, and maybe we’ve just both been dumb, and stupid, and complacent in our friendship. Well, maybe that was just me, but I’m not going to let you get away, Sadie. You’re amazing.”

“Is this because you want to have sex with me?”

“I do want to have sex with you, but, no, I wouldn’t ask you to be my girlfriend because of that.”

“Are we going to your room to have sex?” she said, raising an eyebrow and giggling.

“If I said yes, what would you say?”

“Wyatt, I think you know me well enough to know that I’d be all for it.”

“Well, unfortunately, I don’t think now is the right time, but I can pleasure you in other ways,” I suggested.

“Hmm, I think I’ll take you up on that.”

I pulled her into my room and pushed her up against the door, kissing her hard. She moaned against my lips, and I grinned, loving the sound. Then her phone rang again.

I groaned. “Oh, don’t answer it.”

“I need to see who it is at least,” she said, pulling the phone out. “Oh, it’s my mom. Let me take it real quick. Hey, Mom.”

I used the time to take off my shirt and undo my pants. Might as well get ready. I walked over and wrapped my arms around her waist and played with her breast as she spoke to her mom.

“Is everything okay, Mom?” she said. “Oh, my gosh, what? No. Okay. I’ll be home as soon as possible.” She turned the phone off and then looked at me, her eyes wide and her face pale.

“What is it?” I asked her. “What’s wrong?”

“I have to go,” she said, her lip trembling. “I have to go now. My mom’s leaving my dad. She’s getting a divorce. She’s finally had enough.” She burst into tears.

“Oh, my God, Sadie, I’m so sorry.”

“I just don’t know what to say,” she sobbed. “I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

She ran out of the room. I struggled to pull my clothes on and caught up with her in the driveway just as she was getting into her car.

“Let me drive you there at least. Let me—”

“No, I need to be by myself now,” she said. “I need to be there for my mom.” She gave me a huge kiss. “Thank you though, Wyatt. This has been the most amazing week of my life.”

“It’s been mine too,” I said. “Call me as soon as you get home, okay?”

“Okay.” She jumped into her car and was gone.

I walked back into the living room and sat on the couch next to my mom.

“Hey, is everything okay?” she said, a worried expression on her face as she took in my face.

“Sadie’s mom and dad are getting a divorce,” I said. “Sadie’s gone home to comfort her mom.”

“Oh, my,” Mom sighed. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“You did?”

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know about their relationship, and I guess a lot of families have secrets, you know? Let’s just say Sadie’s dad has not been the best to her mom, but I guess now she’s finally taken action, and I say good for her.”

“I feel so bad for Sadie, though. She’s always been such a believer in love. I’m sure this must be breaking her heart.”

“Well, she has you, Wyatt.” Mom squeezed my hand. “She has you and she has us, and we’ll always be there for her. And I’m glad you finally figured out your feelings.”

“What?” I said, staring at her.

“I know you love her, Son, and I know you know it,” she grinned. “I have something for you to give to Sadie when the time is right.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

“Don’t worry about it, Wyatt. I’m just happy that you and Sadie have finally realized that you’re perfect for each other. All you can do at this moment is be there for her, okay?”

“Okay, Mom,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you too, my boy. I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

Chapter Eighty-Nine

Sadie

Sad country music songs played through the speaker in the barn. I lay on the ground staring at the fairy lights that I had strung around the room. Men sang about cheating girlfriends and lying wives, and women sang about men who couldn't be trusted and cowboy trucks. And all I could think was my life as I've known it had officially ended. My mom and dad were getting divorced and everything was going to change. They were going to sell the ranch because my mom had decided she was going to move to Washington State. She wanted a brand-new start.

I guess the conversation I'd had with her had led her to see that she could have more in life. While I was happy that she was going for it, that she didn't think she was too old to start again, I was incredibly sad to think that it was because of me that she was leaving my father. Not that he deserved a second chance, not after everything he'd put her through. But still, I'd wanted to believe in the fairytale. I'd wanted to believe that they were in love as much as Amelia and Ranger Hamilton were. I wanted to believe that he knew he'd made a mistake and that he'd change, but I knew he wouldn't.

He was selfish and narcissistic. All he cared about was himself, about his image and having his needs met, and my mom deserved more than that. She deserved to be happy. She deserved a life full of love and laughter. She deserved to do

more and be more. It pained me to know that she'd thought all she could ever do was cook and clean and take care of her family, especially knowing that she wanted more. She told me that she'd dreamed of being a race car driver when she was younger. Now she was thinking about going to school and getting a nursing degree. That had also been a dream of hers, and I could see my mom as a nurse. I could see her taking care of people.

It'd been ten days now. I felt guilty about the fact that I hadn't returned any of Wyatt's calls. Olivia had called, Beau had called, Lucy had called, and Austin had called. Amelia and even Ranger had called and left messages, and I hadn't returned any of them.

I knew they were my family. I knew I could count on them, but I almost felt like I didn't deserve it. I almost felt like it would be wrong to go back to life as normal when my mom was still struggling and I was about to lose my childhood home.

I didn't know where I was going to go or what I was going to do. I knew that the Hamiltons would make it better. I could live with them, I could be with them, I could forget any of this had ever happened but I couldn't ask that of them. I couldn't put that pressure on Wyatt. He had just told me that he wanted to be in a relationship with me. He had just admitted his feelings for me, and that was special and I didn't want to rush anything. So I'd kept my distance, and I hadn't called or texted.

And yes, I missed him like crazy, but I needed to figure things out. As much as I wanted Wyatt and needed him to tell me it was okay and to feel his warm arms around me, I knew I had to be strong.

I heard a noise outside the barn and blinked as I sat up. Carrie Underwood was singing something, but I ignored her as I moved towards the doors of the barn. I was just about to open them when they flung open and I saw Wyatt, Austin, Beau, Lucy, Olivia, Arya and Eloise, Amelia and Ranger, and Chet, Knox, Huck, and Flint, all standing there with flowers and bottles of wine and picnic baskets.

“What are you doing here?” I said, my lips trembling.

“We came to make sure you were okay.” Wyatt stepped forward and handed me a bouquet of roses. “It’s been a week and a half, Sadie, and you haven’t gotten back to us. If your mom hadn’t told us, we wouldn’t have known how you were.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’ve just been trying to process it all.”

“I understand.” He nodded. “I know this has been a lot for you, but you’re not alone. You’re never alone, okay? I don’t know why you didn’t call or text.”

“I didn’t want to make you feel like you were responsible for my feelings, Wyatt. You’re my best friend, but you’re also my boyfriend now, and I didn’t want you to feel pressured.”

“Are you joking, Sadie Johnson? Are you joking? I would never feel that. Don’t you understand how much I love you? I love you, Sadie Johnson. I love you more than words can say, and you would never make me feel that way. I *want* to look after you and take care of you. I’ve just been waiting here worried that you didn’t call me because you didn’t want to be with me, that you changed your mind and you didn’t want to be in a relationship, and you didn’t know how to tell me.”

“Oh my god, Wyatt. Don’t be silly.” I blinked back tears. “I love you too, I just didn’t want you to feel that just because we ...” I looked around at his family, “kissed and stuff, that you had more of a responsibility towards me than you do.”

“Sadie, don’t you realize that this is more than just a few kisses? You’re my person. You’re my woman, and as much as I’ve made fun of Austin and Beau, I completely understand the love they have for Olivia and Lucy because I have that love for you, only my love is far greater.” He looked back at his brothers, “Sorry guys.” He shrugged. “But I love you more than life itself, and I’m here for you no matter what you need, okay?”

“Thank you.”

“And I also wanted to tell you that I will support you no matter what you want. If you want to go away to school to get your MBA, I will come with you, I will follow you because I

know you would do the same for me, and I don't want to be selfish. I want to be that support."

"But Prince Waterman and the training and—"

"I'd figure it out. Even if I had to fly back and forth, you're my first priority." He looked back at his family. "And I'm sorry to say that, guys. I know Horseshoe Ranch is important to all of us, but I love Sadie and I will do anything to make her happy."

"It's okay, son." Amelia touched his arm. "I'm proud of the man that you have become, and I'm so happy that you and Sadie finally see how much you love each other. And Sadie, you know you are always welcome in our house. I love you like a daughter. You are like a daughter to me, and you are like a sister to my sons and to Olivia, Lucy, and Arya, and you're like an auntie to Eloise. You're not alone. I understand that this is a very hard time for you, and your mother is going through so much, and we are here for her as well. We're here for everyone in your family. I want you to come back to Horseshoe Ranch with us instead of listening to sad and depressing country songs about love that doesn't last. I want you to be surrounded by love and see love. And I know you're going to roll your eyes at this, but I have seen the love between you and Wyatt for years and years and years, and I've just been waiting on both of you to notice it as well."

"I love you, Amelia." I gave her a huge hug. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, dear. Will you come back with us?"

"I will," I nodded, "I will."

"Well, not just yet," Wyatt said with a grin. "I have a surprise for Sadie that I would like to show her before everyone completely overwhelms her at the ranch."

"Okay."

"What about this picnic and all this stuff we brought?" Beau said holding up the baskets. "Did we come out here for nothing?"

"You didn't come out here for nothing," Olivia told him. "You came out here to show your support for Sadie."

“We love you, Sadie,” Beau said. “Now can we eat?”

“Beau, really?”

“What? I’m hungry and there’s food right here—”

“Come on guys,” Amelia said, “Let’s leave Wyatt and Sadie to themselves and we can go and have a picnic on the ranch. Sound good?”

“Okay, sounds good.”

They all left my barn until it was just Wyatt and I standing there.

“You didn’t have to do this, you know?” I said.

“You’re lucky I didn’t come here a week and a half ago.” He laughed. “It was my mom that told me to give you your space. I wanted to be here much sooner than that.”

“You’re really kind of amazing, you know that, right?” I stroked his cheek.

“Yeah, I think I’m kind of amazing too, but not as amazing as you.”

I grinned and kissed him. “So what’s the surprise you have for me?”

“Well,” he says, “You willing to go on a short walk?”

“A short walk? Hm.” I wrinkled my nose. “Where are we going and can it wait?”

“Can it wait for what?”

“I don’t know.” I started to undo the buttons of my dress.

“What are you doing, Sadie?”

I slipped the dress off and stood there in just my bra and panties. “I think you know.” I stepped forward and undid his shirt and pulled it off. He grinned at me as I started to undo his pants and pulled them down.

“Sadie?”

“Yes, Wyatt?”

“Are you doing what I think you’re doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” I pulled down his briefs as he stood there gawking at me. I could feel his heart racing as I touched his arm. “Are you excited to see me, Wyatt Hamilton?” I grabbed his cock and stroked it until it was rigid in my hand.

“I’m always excited to see you,” he said in a husky voice. He undid my bra and let it fall to the ground. Then his hands went to my panties and he pulled them down. “You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen in my life, Sadie Hamilton.”

“And you’re the fucking hottest naked man I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“I believe I’m the only naked man you’ve ever seen in your life.”

“That’s not true,” I said with a small smile and he glared at me.

“Who else have you seen naked?”

“I’ve seen plenty of men naked in videos online.”

“Very funny, Sadie.” He laughed as he pulled me towards him.

I felt his lips on my neck and I closed my eyes, my body almost purring under his touch. He led me to the back of the barn, and we lay down in the hay.

“It feels kind of scratchy on my back.” I laughed as he ran his fingers down my thighs.

“Is it too scratchy?” He looked concerned. “I mean, if it’s ___”

“No,” I shook my head, “It’s perfect. I’m a cowgirl this is how my first time should go.”

“In the hay?” He laughed.

“Yeah, in the hay. Is there any better way for a cowgirl to lose her virginity?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I do know one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re my favorite cowgirl, Sadie Johnson. My absolute favorite.”

“I would like to think that’s true.” I laughed as I felt his finger slipping in between my legs and rubbing me. He slipped a finger inside of me and I moaned as my back arched and he slipped in another finger.

“Are you sure that this is how—”

“Stop asking me.” I kissed him hard. “I know what I want.”

He moved over on top of me and I felt him positioning himself between my legs. I stared up at him and he looked down at me with love in his eyes. I felt his fingers on my neck caressing my lips.

“I love you, Sadie Johnson.” He said as he pressed his lips against mine. “I will always love you.”

I felt him guiding the tip of his cock to my pussy and I held my breath waiting to feel him inside of me. I’d always heard that it would hurt the first time and so I braced myself.

“Relax.” He said as he squeezed my hands and kissed me on the lips again. “I’ll be gentle, I promise.”

“Okay,” I said with a soft nod.

He guided himself inside of me slowly at first. My legs felt weak and I wasn’t sure if I was going to explode the moment as I felt him pushing deep inside of me. He moaned as his cock filled me up, and I moaned too as I squeezed my legs together.

“Did it hurt?” he asked softly.

“No.” I shook my head and laughed. “Must’ve been too many horse-riding lessons.” I grinned, and he laughed too as he moved slowly back and forth. “You can go a little bit faster,” I urged him. In response, he thrust into me deeper and harder.

I scratched his back and gasped as he pumped inside of me. It was the most delicious and wicked thing I’ve ever felt and done in my life and I absolutely loved it.

“I love you, Wyatt. I love you,” I murmured as he fucked me hard and soft at both the same time. “I never imagined it would feel like this!” I cried out as he slammed inside of me and kissed me softly.

“Oh fuck, Sadie. Oh fuck, I’m not going to last long,” he groaned. I felt his body shudder as he came inside of me and pulled out. He collapsed next to me and kissed my cheek. “I’m sorry, I guess I’ve just been waiting for this for so long.”

“What are you sorry about?” I laughed. “That was absolutely amazing.”

“But I wanted to make sure you came first.”

“Wyatt, did you not know that I came when you did? You didn’t realize?”

He played with my nipples. “No, but if you give me ten minutes I’ll make sure to realize the second time.” We both laughed at that.

“You know what, Wyatt? You are absolutely adorable. You’re my best friend, and you’re the best boyfriend that I ever could’ve asked for.”

“Well, you know what, Sadie Johnson? You’re my best friend and the best girlfriend I ever could’ve asked for, and I love you more than words can say.” He leaned over and kissed me on the lips. “I love you so much that I think I might be going a little bit crazy.”

“Crazy how?”

“Well, you’re the only thing I can think about.”

“You’re the only thing I can think about as well,” I replied.

“You know one day we’re going to get married, right?”

“I know.” I grinned at him. “And have lots of kids.”

“What do you mean by lots?”

“I don’t know, five, seven, nine?”

“Whew, so many kids! I need to make sure that I really train up these horses.”

“It’ll be fun. And we both know Prince Waterman’s going to do great.”

“I think so. So, do you know where you want to do your MBA program?” He asked me softly. “And you know I was serious, right? I wasn’t just saying that. Wherever you want to go I’ll go, too.”

“I just want to be with you,” I told him. “And, you know, I was looking at there are MBA programs that I can do online so we don’t necessarily have to move away. I love it here in Montana. I just want the skills to be able to make this non-profit a success.”

“Well, you have my support no matter what you want to do.” He kissed me again. I felt his fingers sliding between my legs and he rubbed my clit. “And by the way ...”

“Yes, Wyatt?”

“I’m ready for special number two if you are.”

“Oh, I’m always ready,” I said with a slight giggle. “Hit me with your best shot, Wyatt Hamilton.”

“Oh, trust me, my dear, I will.” He kissed me and rolled over on top of me again.

I stared up at him my heart racing with love for this man. I couldn’t believe I’d been so lucky as to fall in love with my best friend.

Most Obnoxious Cowboy

Arya Waterstone never thought she'd be a single mom—especially not to her sister's child. But now that her irresponsible sister has run off with a rodeo cowboy, she has taken responsibility for her adorable niece, Eloise. When she showed up at Horseshoe Ranch hoping to find Eloise's father, she never expected to meet a wonderful family like the Hamiltons. Or their third son, Chet.

Chet Hamilton is as obnoxious as he is handsome. A tall, gorgeous man who is annoyingly charming and bossy. When he tries to stop her from getting a job at a local bar, Arya knows she has to leave the ranch and get her own place. She doesn't want to leave the comfort of Horseshoe Ranch, but she doesn't need the complications that she knows Chet Hamilton will bring to her life—even if he is determined to flirt his way into her good graces.

Chapter Ninety

A rya

The sound of the horses grazing in the field behind me was soothing. Holding the sack of apples I'd brought from the kitchen, I headed towards the mares closest to me. Arabella, the chestnut brown mare that was a particular favorite of mine, glanced at me, a keenness in her eyes that made me smile. Sometimes, I really thought that animals understood a lot more than we gave them credit for.

"Hey, girl." I opened up the bag and pulled out an apple. It sat on the palm of my hand as Arabella sniffed her way to me eagerly. "You can only have one today, Arabella."

I laughed as she grabbed the apple and munched on it happily. I ran my fingers through her long mane and patted the side of her face.

"You really are a beautiful horse, aren't you?" I gazed at the other horses behind her and quickly continued. "Not that all of you aren't gorgeous as well." I surveyed the green fields and beyond, the Bitterroot Mountains in the distance, tall and majestic. The Hamilton property stretched far and wide, and I never ceased to be amazed by how much land they owned. For all that they were incredibly wealthy, they were also incredibly kind.

I jumped up onto the solid wood fence and sat there, looking up at the white fluffy clouds above me, feeling

peaceful and calm. It was nice to have these moments to myself, moments when I could just think and process my life.

Eloise was in the kitchen with Amelia Hamilton, the matriarch of the family, helping her bake something. I knew that both of them enjoyed their time together immensely. Amelia was married to Ranger, a serious man with twinkling blue eyes that followed her around the room with love. They had seven sons, all of whom were strong, rugged, and handsome. Until recently, they had all been single, but now the two eldest, Beau and Austin, were engaged to two best friends, Olivia and Lucy, and their youngest son, Wyatt, had just gotten together with his best friend, Sadie.

That left four other equally handsome sons and a whole heap of testosterone in the house.

I'd initially come to Horseshoe Ranch because I'd believed the eldest son, Beau, was my niece Eloise's father, but that had turned out not to be the case. Which hadn't really surprised me.

My younger sister, Eloise's mother, had always been a bit of a liar and a manipulator and when she'd run away to be with a rodeo cowboy, I hadn't been that shocked. I'd been more devastated for Eloise, who was still too young to fully realize what had happened. I thanked God every day that she was still a happy, well-adjusted girl, even though her mother had run off and we had no idea who her father was.

I loved my niece, but sometimes I felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of having to look after her. I had no job, nowhere to live, no savings, and no other family to depend upon. Sometimes I felt like I was one day away from being on the streets, and that scared the living daylights out of me. I knew that if that happened, Eloise would be taken away from me and put in foster care, and there was no way that I would let that happen. She was my absolute world.

I felt myself tearing up as a flock of birds soared overhead. I wondered where they were going. I loved being here on the ranch—it was the first place in my life that I'd ever felt truly comfortable and happy—but it wasn't my home. The

Hamilton family had taken me in and provided me shelter and food, but I was starting to feel like I was taking advantage of their kindness. I wasn't providing anything, and I didn't like feeling like I was using them. Even though they had never so much as hinted that they thought that I had overstayed my welcome, I still felt self-conscious.

"It's time to move on, Arya," I whispered to myself.

I pulled out my phone and pressed play on the last message I'd received from Chip, the owner of 12 Point Buck Bar. He'd offered me a job as a bartender and the use of the apartment above the bar, for free. He was a nice man, and I was excited to finally be able to make some money. I'd miss not being here on the ranch, though. I'd miss all of the crazy Hamilton family as well. They were some of the best people I'd ever met in my life.

"Arya, there you are!"

Lucy ran towards me, her long blonde hair flying in the wind. Lucy was engaged to Austin, and had actually moved to Montana from New York, though she'd already adapted well to living here.

"Hi, Lucy. I was just feeding the horses some apples." I held up the bag next to me. "Well, only Arabella got an apple," I admitted. "What's up?"

"Oh, not much. Sadie, Olivia, and I were wondering if you'd like to have a girls' night tonight? We were thinking we could do our nails and stuff. Sadie just got a new shipment of some cool supplies from Korea."

"Korea?" I raised an eyebrow. "That's pretty far away."

"It is," Lucy agreed. "But they have the best beauty products. We can do facemasks and gossip about boys."

"That sounds like fun. I'd love to join." I didn't tell her that I would feel slightly left out as I had no man to gossip about.

"Yay!" She grinned as she jumped up onto the fence next to me. "It really is beautiful here, isn't it?"

“I could sit here all day and just watch the animals,” I said. “It’s so quiet and peaceful.”

“So different from where I used to live,” Lucy agreed. “I can’t believe I’m pretty much a cowgirl now!”

“Do you miss New York?” I cocked my head to the side and gazed at her curiously. “You lived there your whole life, right?”

“Yeah.” Her face was thoughtful as she looked around. “Sometimes I miss it. Not much. I miss the memories more...” She paused and took a deep breath. “When I think about my mom and the things that we did, well, most of my memories of her are in New York.” She sighed. “I miss not being around those places because I feel like I would feel her spirit there, you know.”

“I get it.” I reached over and squeezed her hand. “You must miss her a lot.”

“I do.” She smiled gratefully and quickly wiped a tear away. “Sometimes, I feel so happy and grateful to be alive and then other days, I wake up and I just want to call her and say hello.” She looked down. “I want to tell her about Austin and how in love I am and how great he is. I want her to meet him.” She took a deep breath. “Sorry, I don’t want to depress you.”

“You’re not depressing me. I totally get it.”

“Your parents are in Montana as well?”

My insides curled up with dread. “We’re not close.”

I didn’t tell her that my dad was an alcoholic, and my mother encouraged his drinking because she liked him being dependent on her. I didn’t tell her that both of them had a meth problem. A part of me was too sad to talk about it and the other part of me was too embarrassed. I was ashamed of my parents. I hated them for choosing the drugs over their kids. And that was I couldn’t really hate my sister. She’d escaped that life the only way she’d known how. She was a shit mother, but I was still proud that neither one of us had succumbed to drug use. We were just a statistic to the rest of the world. In school, the kids had whispered words like “trailer

trash” behind our backs. My sister had gotten by on her back and I gotten by burying my nose in books.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” Lucy said softly, wincing as if she regretted asking me about my parents.

“It’s okay.” I shrugged. “We don’t all get great parents. Maybe that’s why I like being around the Hamiltons so much. They remind me that it is possible to have a family that’s not totally screwed up.”

“Yes and amen to that,” Lucy agreed. “They’re wonderful.”

“I know.” I jumped down off the fence, feeling slightly morose. “Shall we go inside? I don’t want Amelia to think that I’m treating her like some sort of unpaid babysitter.”

“You know she doesn’t mind. Eloise is a sweetheart.” Lucy jumped down as well and we headed back towards the house. “They’re baking some sort of apple cake right now, and the kitchen smells absolutely divine.”

“Yummy! I think I will definitely be snatching a slice or two when it comes out of the oven.”

“If the boys don’t eat it all first.” We both burst out laughing. “By the way, I think Chet is back tomorrow,” Lucy added.

“Oh yeah?” I asked innocently as my ears perked up and my heart started racing.

Chet Hamilton was the third oldest son, and when I’d first laid eyes on him, I’d thought my heart might beat right out of my chest. He was absolutely the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen in my life. And his blue eyes were the most devious delicious peepers I’d ever looked into. He constantly walked around in tight jeans, a Stetson hat, and an air of confidence that made you want to kiss and smack him at the same time.

“Yes,” Lucy gave me a sideways glance. “Just thought you might want to know.”

“Makes no difference to me.” I shrugged, but all of a sudden, I couldn’t wait for the next day to arrive. Chet

Hamilton was the sort of cowboy that dreams were made of.

Chapter Ninety-One

C het

“Oh boy, get out of the kitchen fast.” My brother Flint grabbed an apple as he headed to the French doors at the back of the house, a pep in his step I hadn’t seen since the last time we’d gone to a rodeo.

“Huh? What’s going on?” I looked up from my bowl of cereal. I’d just gotten back to the ranch about thirty minutes ago and I was hungry.

“Mom has a stack of wedding magazines that she’s going over with the girls.” Flint rolled his eyes. “And you know what that means.”

“What?”

“We’re next!”

“Huh?”

“Well, Beau, Austin, and Wyatt are all engaged now. That means we’re next on her hit list, and I don’t know about you, but I’m not done sowing my wild oats yet.” He laughed as he opened the door. “So, you coming?”

“Fine,” I mumbled. “I haven’t even finished my cereal yet.”

I pushed the chair back, grabbed an apple, and hurried to the back door as I heard women’s giggles approaching the

kitchen. Olivia, Sadie, and Lucy were talking about going into town to look for wedding dresses. That was not a conversation I wanted any part of.

Flint and I closed the doors behind us and headed into the backyard. I took a bite of my apple and ran down the steps, following Flint towards the stables when I heard the sound of singing coming from the fields to the right. I looked over to a vision of yellow. Arya and her niece Eloise were picking daisies and singing.

I stopped, smiling at the sight of them making a daisy chain, and headed over to them.

“Making a crown for me?” I asked. Eloise squealed and jumped up off the grass and ran to me.

“Uncle Chet!” She giggled as she grabbed my hand. “We’re singing songs.”

“I heard.” I beamed down at her. Arya stood up and brushed some grass off of the front of her bright yellow dress. “Hi.” I waved at her, trying to ignore how the sun seemed to make her skin glow.

“Hi Chet, how’s it going?” Arya asked.

“Just trying to avoid Ma and that devious glint in her eyes.” I grinned to show I was just joking. I loved my mom, even if she was one of the most meddlesome women I knew. People thought Amelia Hamilton was a sweet innocent older woman. I knew better. In fact, all of us Hamilton men knew better.

“She trying to hook up another one of your brothers?” Arya laughed happily. She was a different woman than the one who had shown up a few months ago with Eloise by her side, looking for Eloise’s father.

“My mom won’t be happy until we’re all married off with kids.” I shuddered. “And now that Beau, Austin, and Wyatt are settled down, she’ll be looking at me, Knox, Huck, and Flint.”

“I think the four of you will be very hard to marry off.” There was a twinkle of mischief in Arya’s eyes. I wondered

what she would do if I told her I wanted to kiss her. Not that I could say anything in front of Eloise, of course.

“Oh yeah?” I cocked my head to the side and smiled widely, trying to banish my impure thoughts. “And why is that?”

“You all seem very opposed to marriage.” She turned to check on Eloise. “Okay, no more daisies, honey. I think we have enough.”

“What are you going to do with the rest of those daisies?” I asked. Eloise had one of the daisy chain crowns on her head, making her look like a fairy princess. She and Arya both looked like characters from a fairytale.

“I’m going to play he loves me, he loves me not.” She started pulling off the petals.

“Aren’t you too young to be worrying if he loves you or not?”

“He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not,” she murmured in response. I turned to look at Arya, who was watching her with an indulgent gaze. “Does she have a boy she’s thinking about when she pulls those petals?”

“I think any boy will do.” She cleared her throat and lowered her voice. “Actually, I wanted to let you know that Eloise and I are moving out next week.”

“What?” My smile faded and I could feel the tension rising in my lower back towards my shoulders. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we’ll be living in the apartment above 12 Point Buck Bar. I start working there—”

I cut her off. “I thought I already told you what I thought about that. That’s not a place for you to be working. Who’s going to watch Eloise?”

“Well, your mom and Sadie have offered, and then I figured I’d get a sitter.” She sighed. “You know I can’t just stay here, Chet. I’m not even family.”

“This isn’t going to work for me, Arya.”

I was getting heated. Was she crazy? Did she really think that working at a bar with a bunch of drunk men was a good idea? What if they hit on her?

Her forehead wrinkled in the beginnings of a frown. “What are you talking about, Chet?”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be living on top of the bar.”

I knew I sounded bossy, but I didn’t care. Arya was a beautiful woman, and I knew the sort of men that went to 12 Point Buck Bar. They were just looking for a good time, and when they had enough drinks in them, they wouldn’t want to take no for an answer. And it wasn’t like I could hang out there every night and look out for her.

“I really appreciate your concern, Chet, but I’ve been looking after myself for a long time now, and I think I’m capable of telling some guys where to get off if they get out of line.”

I could tell by the look on her face that she was annoyed. But I had six brothers who got annoyed at me every day; I didn’t care how many faces she gave me. That wasn’t going to stop me from telling her exactly what I thought. And I wasn’t going to let her move to the bar. It was as simple as that. She could either decide to stay on the ranch of her own volition, or I was going to make her stay. No matter what it took.

Chapter Ninety-Two

A rya

Chet Hamilton was one of the most obstinate, arrogant, annoying men I'd ever met in my life. He was also one of the most handsome.

He was quite possibly the most gorgeous man in Montana. With his big blue eyes and dark brown hair, he had the sort of looks that would have every woman over eighteen swooning. He was probably the best-looking Hamilton brother of all of them, and that was saying something as the entire family was gorgeous.

I still couldn't believe that I was here at Horseshoe Ranch with Eloise. It had been a risk coming here to find Eloise's dad, especially given that I wasn't even sure that he lived at the ranch, but it had been worth a shot, not just for myself, but for Eloise.

I loved Eloise like she was my own, but I worried about what would happen as she grew older. Would she resent that her mother had left and she didn't know who her father was? Would she hate me? Sometimes, when I was being selfish, I wondered if I'd ever be able to get married and have my own kids. Would any guy want me seeing as I was basically a single mother?

The Hamilton family was unique. They were loving, kind, and sweet, but as much as I didn't want to leave the ranch, I

knew that I had to. I didn't want them to think I was taking advantage of their kindness, their generosity, and their good hearts.

I knew I could be happy spending the rest of my life here, but the truth was, I wasn't a Hamilton, and neither was Eloise. I needed to move on with my life. I didn't want to work at 12 Point Buck Bar forever, but it was a good opportunity for the time being. The fact that it came with the rent-free apartment above the bar was an added bonus. Amelia had said that she'd look after Eloise on days I had to work, and Sadie, Lucy, and Olivia had offered to babysit Eloise during the evenings when I had to work as well. Chip, the bar owner knew that I could only work part-time right until I saved up enough money to get a babysitter. It wasn't ideal, but it was the only option I had right now. I wanted to be able to provide for myself and Eloise without having to rely on someone else. I didn't want to accept handouts, even though I knew the Hamilton family didn't look at their generosity that way.

I began brushing my hair as I looked around the room and took in the old wooden bed I slept in and the gorgeous view from the windows. I could see the mountains in the far distance, and I wondered if the men, Chet in particular, liked skiing and snowboarding. I imagined what it would be like to go out riding on the ranch with him towards the mountains. We'd gallop across the acres as quickly as the horses could carry us and then stop by the river for a bite to eat. How magical would that be?

But I didn't want to let my imagination get the better of me. That was not a possibility for me right now. And just because Austin, Beau, and Wyatt had fallen for three amazing women didn't mean that the other Hamilton men were ready. As far as I could tell, the rest of the Hamilton men were even more stubborn.

Chet, Knox, Flint, and Hawk weren't going to get married anytime soon. That I could tell. And I didn't care either way. Good for them.

I looked up at the sound of a knock on my door. I placed my brush down on the table and opened it.

“Hey,” I to Sadie, who was holding a glass of milk in her hand.

“Hey, what are you up to, Arya?” She took a sip and I smiled at the milk mustache that was left on her face.

“Just getting ready for dinner. Eloise is in the kitchen with Amelia making cookies. She’s becoming a real Cookie Monster.” I smiled a little sadly. “I feel bad because I don’t cook that much, and I especially don’t bake, and well, she’ll miss these days.”

“Oh, but she’ll be here all the time,” Sadie assured me. “And I don’t bake that much either, so don’t feel bad.”

“I’ll try not to. So, how are you and Wyatt?”

“Amazing. Like two fools in love.” Sadie looked dreamy. “Two sentences I never thought I’d say, but I’m pleased about it. Um... are you sure you’re going to go work at 12 Point Buck Bar?” she suddenly asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because I just came from town, and the bar shut down.” She studied my face for my reaction.

“Shut down? What do you mean?”

“Well, there was a huge sign, and there were a bunch of guys outside the door complaining...” Her voice trailed off and she shrugged. “I figured maybe you knew something about it.”

“No, I have no idea, but I don’t start till next week,” I said hopefully. “Maybe Chip just took a couple of days off.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She sounded like she didn’t really think that was what happened. “I mean the bar never shuts down, so I don’t know what’s happening, but hey, I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

“So, what do you want to do tonight?” I changed the subject quickly, not wanting to dwell on what this might mean.

“I was thinking that perhaps we could play a board game or something. I was telling Wyatt that I just got this new board

game, and it arrived, but we need at least six people.”

“I guess there’s you, Olivia, Lucy, Austin, Beau, and Wyatt, right?” I wasn’t sure I was in the mood to play a board game.

“Yeah, but it plays better with ten. So I figured with you and Chet, that makes eight, and then maybe Hawk or Flint or Knox, maybe even Amelia and Ranger will play.”

“Well, sure, I’m down. I do like board games. I don’t want to be the seventh wheel, though.”

“Oh, Arya, you could never be the seventh wheel, you know that!” Sadie linked arms with me. “Now come on, let’s go to the kitchen and grab some of those cookies before dinner.”

“Amelia won’t like that.”

Arm in arm we walked down the hallway. I loved how Sadie always made me feel comfortable. She was more of a loving sister to me than my own sister was. I guess I was finally beginning to understand the difference between blood family and the family we choose.

“Ah, Amelia will get over for it. She’s flying high right now.”

“Oh, why do you say that?”

“Because she’s planning three weddings. She was just hoping for one son to find love, and now she has three sons about to get married. How amazing is that?” Sadie grinned. “All her dreams are coming true.”

“And you’re okay with Amelia planning your wedding?” I asked Sadie, curious. Sadie was one of the most independent women I knew, and I couldn’t imagine her not being in charge of her own wedding.

Sadie burst out laughing. “Girl, I’ve been planning my wedding for years! So I’ve already figured out all the important details, but I love her input. She has such great taste, and Wyatt’s an absolute bore about the whole thing.” She rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t want to hear anything about it,

and he has no opinions about anything. It's becoming kind of frustrating, if I'm honest." She made a face, but I could tell from the humor in her voice that she wasn't really mad about it. She'd known Wyatt long enough to know that he'd be no help planning their wedding.

"Did I hear my name?" said a deep voice behind us, and we both turned around.

Sadie let go of my arm and ran towards her fiancé. He picked her up and swung her around.

I watched as they shared an intimate kiss, happy that they'd finally expressed their love for each other but also feeling a little bit of sadness and jealousy for myself.

"So what were you saying about me?" Wyatt asked as they finally broke apart.

"I was just telling Arya that I'm grateful that your mom is helping plan the wedding because you're no help." Sadie poked him in the chest.

"Well, isn't wedding planning a woman's thing?" He frowned as he realized he'd made a statement that was most definitely going to get him into trouble.

Sadie put her hands on her hips. "Really Wyatt Hamilton, a woman's thing? You do know that this is 2022, and there are no such things as women's things and men's things?"

"Uhm, okay." He pressed his lips together. I could tell he was trying not to laugh.

"What do you mean by 'uhm, okay'?" Sadie crossed her arms in front of her and gave him a stern look.

"I don't know where you get your ideas from, Sadie, but we live on a ranch, and there are definitely things that men do that women..." His voice trailed off. "I'm guessing I'm not going to win this conversation, am I?"

"No, you're not, Wyatt Hamilton. I know you're not about to spout something that goes against my feminist beliefs."

"Since when are you a feminist, Sadie?"

“Since forever.” She swatted him on the shoulder. “And this is why I’m starting my non-profit to empower and train women so that men will finally respect the work we can and already do on the ranch.” She looked back at me. “Anyway, Arya and I are going to steal some freshly baked cookies from the kitchen. You are more than willing to join us if you want.”

“Does my mom know you’re about to do that?”

“She won’t mind. She’s too preoccupied.” She winked at him and linked her arm through his.

“I know.” He groaned. “She’s caught up in wedding planning.” He shuddered dramatically then grinned at me. “As if I don’t already have enough on my plate.”

They play punched each other, and I felt another little stab of envy at their banter. They seemed to get each other in a way that showed me they were perfect for each other.

They had such a close and happy relationship. It was the sort of relationship I would have loved to have. I wondered how much of it was because they were soulmates and how much of it was because they’d been best friends since they were little kids. I was pretty sure it was both.

We walked into the kitchen, and I realized we weren’t the only ones who had the same idea. Austin and Beau were both sitting at the table with plates of cookies and glasses of milk.

Amelia was standing next to the stove, and Eloise was helping her with something. My heart expanded as I watched Eloise with Amelia. Amelia was like a grandma to her, and I knew that Eloise would miss not being in the house with her every day.

I sighed. Was I making the right decision for Eloise, or was I being selfish?

“What’s going on in here?” Chet said, walking into the kitchen, with a cowboy hat on his head. “Hey, Mama.” He grinned at his mother and took off his hat, placing it on a rack next to the wall. “Something smells good. What are you cooking?”

“Pot roast and cookies,” Eloise said, answering him with a wide smile. “You want a cookie, Uncle Chet?”

“No cookies for Chet, no more cookies for anyone,” Amelia said, shaking her head and frowning at Beau and Austin, who were stuffing their faces at the table.

“Mama!” Beau grabbed another cookie quickly.

“You boys are going to ruin your appetite and not be able to eat your dinner.”

“Mama, how many times do we have to tell you,” Austin said, “we don’t lose our appetite. We’re men.”

“I’m just saying Eloise and I have spent the afternoon cooking a massive pot roast and lots of mashed potatoes and carrots—”

“It’s going to be delicious.” Eloise said. “Hey, Auntie Arya,” she said, running over to me. “I made mashed potatoes.”

“Ooh, yummy!” I gave her a big hug. “Are you having a good evening?”

“Oh, yes. We made oatmeal and raisin cookies and chocolate chip cookies, and we even got to put in butterscotch chips too, and they were so delicious. Right, Grandma Amelia?”

I pressed my lips together as I realized what Eloise had called Amelia.

“I hope that’s okay,” Amelia said, heading over to me, her eyes soft. “She asked me if she could call me Grandma Amelia, and I said yes. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” I said, beaming at her. “That’s really wonderful of you. Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, dear. Now have a seat, everyone. Everyone can have one cookie with some milk until dinner.”

“Me as well.” Ranger entered the kitchen and rubbed his belly. Amelia groaned out loud. Eloise burst out giggling as she ran up to him and gave him a hug, and everyone looked at

her adoringly. My niece was absolutely too precious, and I knew that I had to ensure that she always had her loving beautiful heart.

“Okay, cookies, and milk for everyone.”

“Can I have chocolate milk, please, Grandma Amelia?”
Eloise said. And Amelia nodded.

“Yes, of course, my dear, come on.”

I sat back and looked around the room at my adopted family. There was love everywhere. I almost felt like I was living in a Hallmark movie, such was the love and happiness in the room. I knew it was going to be hard to leave, but I also knew that I couldn't get used to this. I had to make my own life, and in all honesty, I needed to see if I could meet someone myself, start my own family, get a real grandma and granddad for Eloise. Maybe one day I'd even have some kids of my own to give her brothers and sisters.

At least that was my hope.

Chapter Ninety-Three

Chet

“So, Chet, I just got some interesting news.” Wyatt walked into the barn.

I looked up from the hay I was baling. “Oh? What’s that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He grinned.

“Seeing as you’re the one that walked into the barn and told me you had exciting news, I couldn’t give a fuck, dude.” I shook my head, annoyed. I hated it when my brothers weren’t straightforward. “What’s going on?”

“Well...” He paused dramatically.

I rolled my eyes. “I think you’ve been hanging out with Sadie too much. Dude, I don’t have time for this high school show. Either tell me what you wanted to say or go and find a cow to milk.”

Wyatt laughed then, and the sound infuriated me. I wasn’t in the best of moods. “I just got the news that 12 Point Buck Bar is going to be closed for the next month.” He spoke as if he were delivering a speech on national TV, and I froze.

“Oh?” I said, feigning a composure I didn’t feel.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“Nope.” I pitched another forkful of hay, not making eye contact.

“Well, now that it’s going to be closed, it turns out that Arya and Eloise can’t move to the apartment above the bar.”

“Well, that’s a shame. But what’s that got to do with me?”

“Turns out that the owner, also known as Chip, has decided that he’s going on a vacation to Europe.” Wyatt cocked his head. “You really couldn’t stand to see her go, could you?”

My stomach sank, but I kept baling the hay. “What are you talking about? See who go?”

“Chet, are you really going to pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about? You’re not that good an actor.”

“Exactly. I’m not a good actor, so that’s why I’m saying I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I pressed my lips together.

Wyatt laughed again. “Dude, you absolutely suck. You know that, right?”

“What?” I turned around to face him. “It was a stupid idea for her to go and live on top of a bar with a little kid in a town she doesn’t really know. And what was she thinking, working around the horny idiots that live around here?”

“You’re one of the idiots that lives around here.”

“I am not an idiot. And I’m just looking out for her best interests.”

“Dude, did she need you to look out for her best interest? Plus, she has Mom and Sadie and Olivia. They all said they’d help.”

“Yeah, well, they can help from here.”

Wyatt gave a low whistle. “You’ve really got the hots for her, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t have the hots for her. I’m just being protective like I would with Sadie. She’s like a younger sister.”

“Dude, really?” Wyatt scoffed. “I don’t know who you’re trying to fool, but you’re not fooling anyone.”

“What do you mean, I’m not fooling anyone?” I folded my arms. Sometimes Wyatt really acted like a superior asshole. He was my brother and I loved him, but he sure knew how to get on my nerves.

“You’re calling Arya your younger sister.” He threw his arm around my shoulder.

“I’m not saying she *is* my younger sister. I’m saying that I’m looking out for her as if she were a younger sister.” I brushed his arm off me.

“Uh-huh. And would you want to bone your...” He grimaced. “I can’t even finish the sentence. It’s just disgusting.”

“Look, Wyatt, are you going to help me here, or are you just going to talk shit all day?”

“I think you really need to have some honest conversations with yourself,” he said. “And by the way...”

“Yeah, what?”

“I have a feeling Arya’s not too happy with you.”

“Well, what Chuck decides to do with his bar has nothing to do with me.”

“Uh-huh. I’m just letting you know as a heads up.”

“Anyway, how do you know the bar is closed and Arya is upset?”

“Because Sadie told me.”

“Okay, and Sadie knows because?”

“Because Arya told her, and she’s really upset and she doesn’t know what to do. She was really looking forward to that job and that income. And now you’ve ruined that opportunity for her.”

“I haven’t ruined anything.” I rubbed my forehead. I was starting to feel guilty.

“She’s not going to get a paycheck. Yeah, she’s staying here for free, but I’m sure she needs money to buy stuff for herself and Eloise. And now, she can’t afford to buy anything.”

“Well, what does she need? I’ll get it for her.”

“Don’t you understand, Chet?” He sighed. “I’m the youngest, but I feel like I’m the smartest out of all the Hamilton men.”

“Yeah, right.” I snorted.

“No, I’m not. But she’s not going to come to you if she needs money for, I don’t know, tampons or lube or whatever.”

“Why would she need money for lube?” I snapped. “You’re an idiot, you know that right?”

“I’m just saying. Who knows? If she goes on some dates ___”

“There’s no date that she’s going on. And trust me, I would know.”

“How would you know if you’re not interested? Oh, I guess because you’re being the protective big brother. You want to make sure she doesn’t date any assholes.” Wyatt put his hand on the barn door. “You know, I had a thought.”

“Yeah? What’s your thought?”

“If you’re her brother, then I’m her brother, too.”

“Your point being?”

“Well, if I’m being protective of her and I don’t want her to date a jackass, you know what that means?”

“No, Wyatt, but I’m pretty sure you’re going to tell me.”

“It means that I wouldn’t let her date you.”

“Excuse me?” I glared at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you’re the biggest asshole in the valley, dude.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re a player. You’re a ladies’ man. You’re a—”

“Wyatt, if you’ve got nothing else to say, then I suggest you get out of here.”

“Uh-oh. I think I’ve upset you.” He pulled a mock-innocent face.

“I can’t believe that Sadie thinks you’re mature enough to be her husband.”

“Oh, Sadie knows I’m mature enough. And I’ve got several other things going for me, thank you very much.” He doffed his cowboy hat and took a quick bow.

“Dude, and you’re calling me immature?”

“No, I’m just saying. Sadie knows what she’s getting with me. She’s known me my entire life. Arya, though? Well, she has no clue the sort of guy that you are. But I think she’s starting to get to figure it out, and I’m pretty sure she’s not happy about you getting her fired before she even started her job.”

“I didn’t get her fired. It’s not like she can’t start in a month if she still wants to.”

“Ah, so you admit it.” He grinned. “I knew it.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled. “...Is she really pissed?”

“She’s really upset, dude.”

“Fine. Let me go and talk to her. I mean, I didn’t think about the fact that maybe she didn’t have any money. And yeah, I understand that she wouldn’t want to come to us for money or anything, but she could’ve just said whatever she needed. I mean, I’ll take her to the store and get her what she wants. Tampons, whatever.”

Wyatt chuckled. “You’re absolutely clueless, aren’t you, Chet? I think you need to go and talk to Arya because I have a feeling that you are not in her good books right now.”

“I know I had to get into her good books, though.” I winked at him.

He groaned. “I thought you said you weren’t interested in her like that.”

“I’m not. But hey, if she’s interested in me like that, who am I to say no?”

“Dude, you are a pig. You know that, right?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. If anything, I’m more like a stallion.”

Wyatt laughed and shook his head. “I wish I had a video of you right now because I’d play that at your wedding and then your wife would leave you.”

“Well, joke’s on you, Wyatt Hamilton, because I’m never getting married.”

Chapter Ninety-Four

Arya

I entered the living room anxious and upset. I wasn't sure what I would do if I saw Chet. I was ready to give him a piece of my mind.

"Oh, my gosh. If looks could kill," Sadie said as she glanced at my face. "What's wrong, Arya?"

"I am so upset right now." I took a deep breath. "Have you seen Chet?"

"Chet? No. Why, what's going on?"

"Well, I finally spoke to Chip about the voicemail he left me earlier." I could hear my voice cracking from being so upset. "And he mentioned Chet..."

"Oh, about the bar being closed for the next month?" Understanding dawned on Sadie's face. "Oh, no. Chet didn't have something to do with it, did he?"

"Apparently, Chet paid a visit to Chip and suggested that..." I took another deep breath to stop myself from crying or shouting. "I'm going to lose it. I just can't believe he did this to me."

"So, the reason Chip's closed the bar for the next month is because of Chet, huh?"

“Yep. Good old Chet. I thought he was a friend. I thought he cared about me. I thought...” I sighed. “I just don’t know what to say, but I’m pissed off. I was really looking forward to that job. I needed it, and I needed a place to stay.”

“Well, you know the Hamiltons love that you stay here.”

“They are the sweetest family I’ve ever met in my life, but I can’t keep taking advantage of them.”

“But you’re not taking advantage of them, Arya. Everyone loves you and Eloise. I mean, I know I’m so grateful that you’re here. I mean...” She paused. “I know that doesn’t make you feel better about the situation though.”

“I mean, it’s hard, you know? In a perfect world, I’d love to live here, but the Hamiltons aren’t my family. We’re not related, and I’m not contributing anything. I have no money, and...” I sighed. “I’m in a bad position.”

“Oh no, what’s wrong, Arya? Tell me.”

“No,” I shook my head. I didn’t want to give her the full extent of just how bad things were for me.

“You can tell me anything. I promise I won’t tell anyone. Not even Wyatt if you don’t want me to.”

I let out a deep sigh. “I only have forty-five dollars to my name. Literally forty-five, that’s it. My telephone bill is coming up. Eloise needs things, I need things. I need a paycheck.” I could hear the desperation in my voice. “Please, don’t take this the wrong way, Sadie. I’m not asking you for money. I don’t want anyone to give me anything. I want to earn it myself. I really needed that job, you know? I just can’t believe that Chet would do that.”

“It’s because he thinks he’s protecting you.” She rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t think you should work at a bar.”

“I understand that he thinks that it’s not safe for a woman to work at a bar, but I’m *fine*. I can look after myself. It’s not like the area is known for its criminals.” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “He’s such a jackass. I just can’t believe that he would go behind my back and do that.”

“Are you going to talk to him about it?”

“Oh, you can bet I’m going to talk to him about it! I am absolutely furious!”

“He deserves it. I mean, all of the Hamilton men can be obstinate and pigheaded, but that just goes above and beyond.”

“It really does, but...”

“Arya,” Sadie put a hand on my arm, “you know I can give you some money to get by—”

“No,” I cut her off. “I understand that you want to help me, and I really, really appreciate it, but I can’t take your money.”

“It’s okay. I want—”

“No,” I cut her off again. “Thank you so much, Sadie. You are one of the best friends a girl could have, but I can’t do that. It wouldn’t feel right. I’ve already gained so much from being here. I need to make my own way.”

“It really sucks that Chet did that.” She shook her head. “Sometimes I just don’t understand what these guys are thinking.”

“I know what he was thinking. He told me not to leave, he told me not to take a job at a bar, he told me not to live in that apartment, and I told him it was none of his business. So, he decided to go over my head and make it so I couldn’t work there. Well, joke’s on him because I’ll just find another job, and another bar and...” I could feel myself choking up. “I’m just so upset and frightened and frustrated. It’s so hard, Sadie. I don’t want to break down in front of Eloise, but this has all just been a lot, you know? I sometimes just don’t know what to do.”

“Oh, Arya.” She pulled me into her arms as I struggled to hold back tears. “Don’t worry, Arya,” she whispered “I know you don’t want to take help, but I’m always here for you. And if you want to make it alone or if you just want to stay at my family’s ranch or work for my dad on the farm, you’ve always, *always*,” she stressed, “got a place with me, okay? You’re always welcome.”

“You’re absolutely the sweetest, you know that, Sadie?”

“I try,” she said. “Now, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go and look for Chet Hamilton and give him a piece of my mind.” I wiped my eyes and smiled at her. “I don’t suppose you know where he is, do you?”

“I think he went out to the stables,” she replied. “That’s normally where he is. You know he loves the horses.”

“Yeah. I love horses too, but I don’t know if they’re going to love me when they hear how I go off on their master.”

“You give it to him good,” she said. “Promise?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” I snorted.

* * *

I entered the first set of stables and looked around. Chet was standing at the far end with his back to me. I recognized him from his Stetson hat. My heart raced as I made my way toward him.

He turned to me with a self-assured smile, and my fingers itched to slap it right off of his face. I pressed my lips together so that I wasn’t smiling back at him.

“And to what do I owe this pleasure?” he said, lifting up his hat and smiling.

I stared at him, willing myself not to be affected by his charm. “You cost me a job.”

“Um, excuse me?” He blinked innocently and turned towards me fully. “I did what?”

“You cost me the job at the bar, and a place to live.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said.

“Don’t play innocent with me, Chet Hamilton. I spoke to Chip.”

“Ah, shit,” he muttered. “Really? Chip squealed?”

“Yeah, he did, and he told me what you said, and he told me what you did. And what do you think I’m meant to do now?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I have nowhere to go, nowhere to live, no money, no paycheck, nothing!”

“Well, you live here don’t you? You got a roof over your head, you got a warm bed. You could have my warm bed if…” He paused when he realized I wasn’t laughing. “I’m kidding. I’m just saying—”

“I know what you’re saying, Chet, and it’s not funny. And while I love it here at Horseshoe Ranch, this isn’t my home, and I don’t want Eloise to think that this is a permanent place for us. She deserves better than that.”

“What do you mean she deserves better than that? You don’t think we’re good people?”

“You’re great people, but she deserves to have her own home. I don’t want her to think that this is her home. Did you know that she’s already calling your mom Grandma?”

“That’s great. My mom’s wanted grandkids for ages. Maybe that will get her off of my back.”

“Dude, I don’t care if your mom wants you to have grandkids. It’s not fair to Eloise. Amelia’s not her grandma, and Eloise is going to be heartbroken when she’s no longer around you guys all the time.”

“Then why does she have to leave?”

“Are you not listening to me, Chet? We cannot stay here. I can’t afford to pay anything.”

“I don’t believe anyone’s asked you to pay anything.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Are you really this obnoxious and obstinate, or do you just not understand what I’m saying?”

“I don’t see what the problem is, I really don’t. You like being here at the ranch, yes?”

“Who wouldn’t? It’s gorgeous.” I was starting to get seriously annoyed with Chet.

“And we love having you here. So what’s the problem?”

“Because I need a job, I need to make money, I need my own place, I—”

“Then work here.”

“Doing what? I don’t have any ranching skills.”

“I can teach you all the skills you need. I’m not saying that you’re going to become head rancher or anything, but—”

“No, I’m not taking your charity, Chet. It’s not fair what you’ve done to me. You had no right to go to Chip and do that.”

“I was just doing what I thought was best. You have no idea the sort of guys that hang out at that bar.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, but what if one night you can’t? What if one night Chip’s not there and too many guys are giving you trouble? What are you going to do?”

“I’d worry about it when it happened.”

“Well, I’m the sort of guy that believes in prevention rather than cure. So, I think it’s best for you to not be in that position in the first place.” He took a couple of steps closer to me. “I’m not going to let anyone harm you, and I’m not going to put you in danger’s way.”

“What are you talking about, danger’s way? It’s not like I was freaking going to war. I was just doing a job at a bar. Do you know how many women are bartenders, Chet? It is a thing, you know.”

“I know it’s a thing. I’m just saying that—”

“Oh, I’m so annoyed and frustrated with you. I just can’t talk to you right now.” I turned around and headed to leave the stables. My heart raced with anger. He just wasn’t getting it. He thought he was protecting me, but I didn’t need his protection. I needed to get out there in the real world and start

making some money so that I could make a life for myself and Eloise.

“Stop,” he said. I could hear him walking behind me, and I increased my pace. “I said stop, Arya!”

I glared at him over my shoulder. “You’re just a jerk, Chet Hamilton! Do you know that?”

“I guess if that’s what you think,” he shrugged. “But maybe I can make it up to you.”

“How are you going to make it up to me?”

“I’ll help you find another job.”

“How are you going to do that, huh? How do I know you’re not going to sabotage every chance I have?”

“I promise,” he said, “and I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t realize that things were so tough for you and Eloise. And if you need money—”

“I don’t need money from you! I need to find a job. Now please just leave me alone so I can do that!”

I turned on my heel and stormed back into the house.

Chapter Ninety-Five

C het

“Hey, have you seen Arya?” I asked Wyatt as he walked out of the kitchen.

“Nope. Why?”

I turned away. “I’m going outside.”

“Okay.” He followed me. “So are you going to answer my question?”

“What question, Wyatt?” I snapped. I was annoyed and frustrated. It wasn’t his fault, but I was feeling super guilty about having convinced Chip to shut down the 12 Point Buck Bar. Arya was really upset, and now that I’d processed everything, I totally understood why. Obviously, she needed the money and obviously, she felt like she was overstaying her welcome here, but I didn’t know why she wouldn’t just accept my help. It wasn’t like I thought she was a grifter, and it wasn’t like I was doing it because I wanted something from her. I literally just wanted her to be safe and happy. I cared about her as if she were a member of the family. I would do this for anyone.

“Hey, bro!” Wyatt hit me on the shoulder.

“What?”

“Dude, I wouldn’t go looking for Arya if you’re going to be in a bad mood like that, she’s not going to be receptive to

whatever you have to say if you've got an attitude.”

“What attitude do I have, Wyatt?”

“Can you hear the words that are coming out of your mouth and the tone?” He raised an eyebrow at me. “You sure don't sound happy.”

I let out a deep breath. “I know, I just feel really bad and I want to speak to her, but I think she's ignoring me.”

“What do you mean you *think* she's ignoring you? She either is or she isn't.”

“Well, let's just say the last couple of times I saw her, I called out to her and she either didn't hear me or pretended she didn't hear me because she walked in the opposite direction. I don't think she's hard of hearing.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So that means she deliberately walked away.”

“So if she's deliberately walking away from you it means she doesn't want to talk to you right now.”

“Well, I want to talk to her. Obviously, she's upset with me and I understand why, but she has to see where I'm coming from.”

“Chet, are you listening to yourself? You want to go to apologize to her, but you want her to acknowledge where you're coming from as opposed to where she's coming from. You catch more flies with honey, dude, and you're not going to catch anything.”

“I'm just frustrated and annoyed and I just don't understand why she just can't stay here and be happy. We all love having her here.”

“Yeah, but she's not family, and I understand why maybe she feels uncomfortable. Maybe she wants her own space, maybe she wants to date someone. It's not like she could invite a boyfriend over here.”

“What boyfriend?” I looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Are you saying that she's met someone? Is that why she was

working at the bar? Who's she met? What guy, do I know him?"

"Chet, chillax, dude. I wasn't saying that she's met anyone yet. I mean, when would she have had the time to meet someone? I'm just saying maybe she wants to meet someone. Maybe she wants to be in a relationship. I mean, come on, Olivia, Lucy, Sadie, they're all in relationships now. She's the only single one. I'm sure she must feel left out. Plus maybe she's looking for a daddy for Eloise."

"Eloise is her niece, so if she was with someone, that man would not be Eloise's dad, that man would be Eloise's uncle."

"Sounds like you've thought about it quite a lot." Wyatt's voice was dry

"No, I have—" I looked up and saw Arya. "Anyway, dude, I'll talk to you later."

Leaving Wyatt behind, I quickly caught up with Arya. "Hey," I said, "I've been wanting to talk to you."

She looked at me with her lips pressed together and I could tell that she was still pissed off. I was frustrated that she wasn't smiling at me in her normal happy way and I was also annoyed that she wasn't thanking me for allowing her to look for another option for a job. Did she really want to work at a bar when she could be doing so much more?

"So, I was thinking ..." I started

"What?"

"You were thinking that what you could call Chip and tell them to reopen the bar so that I can actually start my job and move to the apartment I was meant to have?"

"No," I sighed, "that's not what I was thinking. I just don't understand why you really want to work at the bar so badly. Is it because there's going to be lots of men there?"

"Excuse me?" Her face grew dark with anger. "That's not the reason I want to work at the bar. And if it was, it would be none of your business."

“I’m just asking if the reason you want to work at the bar is that you’re looking for a man.”

“You know what? Chet Hamilton, you’re a jerk. You’re an obnoxious, arrogant jerk. And I don’t have to listen to you. I don’t have to deal with this.”

“I was actually just coming to apologize and to suggest—”

“You know what Chet, keep your apologies and keep your suggestions. I have absolutely no interest in listening to them!” She turned on her heel and strode away.

“Arya,” I said running after her, “I haven’t even gotten to —”

“You said more than enough.” She wheeled to face me. “You know Chet, when I first met you, I thought you were a nice guy, maybe a little arrogant, but basically a nice guy. But I realized I was wrong.”

“Excuse me? You don’t think I’m a nice guy? I’m Mr. Nice Guy. Okay? Everyone says so.”

“Who says so, Chet? Name one person that walks around calling you Mr. Nice Guy.”

“Aside from myself?” I grinned. She didn’t laugh. “Okay. Okay. Well, maybe I’m not known as Mr. Nice Guy. maybe I’m known as Mr. Hunky or Mr. Hot—”

She snorted. “You’re not full of yourself at all, are you?”

“What, you don’t think I’m hot?”

“Really? You really want to have this conversation now?”

I finally realized that my jokes and humor were not going down well. I wanted to alleviate the tension between us, but somehow I was just making things worse.

“Okay. So maybe we can just forget that, but I do really want to help you find a job.”

“Chet, I *had* a job, and I didn’t need your help. Okay? You butt in because you think you know better, and you don’t. This is my life, okay? And I’m going to do what I want to do, and

I'm going to take the job I want. So just leave me alone, okay?
I'm done with you."

And with that, she walked away.

Chapter Ninety-Six

Arya

I could hear Lucy and Olivia in the living room laughing about something. I wanted to go and join them, but I was still too upset with Chet for what he'd done. I couldn't believe that he had ruined my opportunity, thinking he knew better just because he was a man. It was so frustrating, and yet a part of me that I greatly disliked was actually happy that Chet had cared enough to butt in—not that I would ever tell him that.

As far as he was concerned, I was done with him.

“Hey there, Arya.” Amelia walked out of one of the rooms, and I could see from her expression that she was concerned.

“Hi, Amelia. How's it going? Thanks for dinner, by the way. It was absolutely delicious.”

“Well, you should be thanking Eloise.” She smiled at me warmly. “She's been such a dear and such a help in the kitchen.”

“She has a good teacher.” I smiled. “She would not be making half the things with me that she does with you, so thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time to teach her to cook and for spending the day with her and taking her to the store with you, and just everything you've done for her. And for me. I don't think I'll ever be able to pay you back for

everything you've done, but I want you to know how much I appreciate it."

"Oh, Arya, darling." She put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "You don't know how much joy she's brought to my life. I've always wanted a little girl." She smiled wistfully. "Don't get me wrong. I love my sons, every single one of them, but it's just different with a little girl, you know? Not one of my boys wanted to help me in the kitchen. All they wanted to do was eat the food. And even Ranger, as much as I love him, has never provided me with the sort of companionship that women can. Sadie's been here, of course, but she was a little bit of a tomboy and always with Wyatt, and I loved to watch their relationship. And now, I just feel so blessed with Olivia in the house and Lucy and Sadie always over, and now you and Eloise. I feel like all my dreams have come true."

"You're very sweet to say that, and I'm grateful that you've included us, but I do know that this isn't really my place or Eloise's place."

"I know. And I heard what happened with Chet." She shook her head. "My boys, every single one of them is stubborn and obstinate, and they all think they know best." She gave me a sly grin. "I don't know why, because I run this family. But they all like to think that they're taking care of someone. And I suppose Chet thought he was taking care of you. Now, now," she said as I was about to speak. "Trust me, I understand that you didn't need taking care of and I understand that he has greatly affected your income, and I know that you are a proud woman and you will not accept any money from us, but please do not feel you have to leave. In fact, I'd rather like to pay you to stay." She gave me a rueful smile. "Now, I know that obviously you most probably wouldn't accept that offer, but I do want you to know how much it has meant to me you being here. And I do have an idea."

I looked at her, torn. I did believe that she was happy to have Eloise and me here. She was a sweet lady, and I had no reason to believe that she would lie. However, I didn't want

her to come up with an excuse just to give me money or have us stay.

There was just something so sad about being pitied, and I didn't want to be pitied. I didn't want to have to accept handouts. I didn't want to be that person. I didn't want to be another statistic. *Oh, her parents are drug addicts and no good, so she's no good too.* I knew that the Hamilton family wouldn't think that of me, but *I* didn't want to think that of me, and I didn't want even the thought to cross anyone else's mind.

Amelia continued. "Now, I can tell from your expression, Arya, that you are doubtful of what I have to say. But you haven't even heard what I have to say."

"I just don't want to take any handouts, you know? I don't want to be a charity case, and I don't want Eloise to think she's a charity case, either."

"Oh, my. I do hope that neither one of you thinks that." Amelia looked sad. "Please let me know if I've led you to believe that anyone in the family feels that way."

"No, no," I said quickly. "No one has made me feel that way. I just... It's complicated." I sighed. "But I just have to be the provider, you know?"

"I understand." She nodded. "Come. Let's go to my little study."

"Your study?"

"Yes. The boys don't come here." We walked further down the corridor and into a small room I'd never been in. It looked like an old English living room in a Victorian house.

Amelia smiled. "I know it doesn't fit the rest of the decor in the house, but this is my spot where I come and I read Agatha Christie books or watch *Midsomer Murders* on TV. I am a bit of an Anglophile, you know."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"I don't have much time for it, but when I do, I come here. Come, have a seat." She patted the cushion next to her on the

small settee and I sat down. “So, you’ve probably noticed I love cooking.”

“Yes, I have.”

“And I have a mini cannery.”

“A what?”

“I can jams, marmalade, strawberry jam, blueberry jam. I also bake brownies and cookies. There is a little farmer’s market on the weekends, and I’ve been thinking for a long that I’d like to sell them.

“I’m sure they would sell really well there.”

“Well, I just don’t really have much time, especially on the weekends when all the boys are home, and Ranger, and now the three girls. And I’m helping them plan their weddings. I don’t have time to be sitting at a farmer’s market selling my goods five hours a day. So I was wondering perhaps I could hire you?”

“Me?” I said, surprised. “Are you sure you want me to sell your goods at the farmer’s market?”

“Yes, if you’re interested. Now, the pay’s not a lot. I figure ten dollars an hour until we see how everything sells, but I’ve already spoken to Maggie, and she said I can get a spot this weekend. And actually, it’s Saturday and Sunday through the rest of the year.”

“Are you sure? I’m mean, you don’t even have to pay me. I can go and just do it.”

“No, no, no!” she cut me off. “Just like you don’t want to accept charity, there’s no way I can have you working for me for free.”

“But I live here for free,” I pointed out. “I would just be sort of paying you back.”

“You listen to me, my dear. I understand times are hard and I understand you want to take care of yourself and Eloise without accepting help, but sometimes you got to accept a little help and not feel bad about it. Are you a Christian, Arya?”

“I think so. I mean, I am. I’m just not good about going to church.”

“Well, then you should know that it’s okay to accept a little help. Just pay it forward. You’ve heard the story of the good Samaritan, haven’t you?”

“I have. And you are very much my good Samaritan.”

“Well, I’m glad to be that person in your life and in your story. And maybe one day, you’ll be the good Samaritan for someone else.”

“I’d love to be a good Samaritan for someone else.”

“Honey, I’m almost positive that you already are.” She smiled. “You are a beautiful, kind, loving woman, and I just want you to know that. And I also want you to know that you shouldn’t feel bad about anything that you said to my son.”

“Oh?” I smiled a little sheepishly. “Did you hear that I went off on him? Chet deserved every single word, but he has a good heart, and he doesn’t know how to show it in quite the right way sometimes. I mean, I definitely think he’s nice. He just shouldn’t have gone over my head and stepped in, you know? He crossed the line.”

“I understand, dear. But maybe you could give him another chance to be your friend. You never know.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You know I’m not interested in him like that, right? I’m not going to end up with Chet.”

“Whatever do you mean, Arya?”

“I’m just saying I know you want to get all your sons hooked up. But even if I was interested—which I’m not,” I said quickly, “I just don’t have the time or the energy to even think about being in a relationship. I have to find a job. I have to find somewhere to live. I got to figure out Eloise’s schooling. I’ve got to figure out money and—”

“Oh, my dear, you do have quite a lot to figure out, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“So I just want you to know that if it’s to be, it will be. And if it’s not, it won’t,” she said simply. “You can’t stop an old lady from hoping, right?”

“No,” I said, “but...”

“But what, my dear?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “You’re really sweet. You know that, right, Amelia?” I leaned in and gave her a quick hug. “I wish I would’ve had a mom like you.”

“And I too wish I would’ve had a daughter like you.” She smiled and pat my hair. “But you never know. Maybe one day.”

“Amelia!” I said, finally understanding why her sons used to run when they heard her talking about matchmaking. She really didn’t like to give up.

Chapter Ninety-Seven

C het

“So, your mama was telling me what happened with you and Arya,” my dad said, looking at me sadly. “I taught you better than that, son.”

“What are you talking about, Dad? I was helping her.”

“You know she needed a job.”

“She didn’t need to work at the bar. Come on, you know the sort of guys that work there.”

“Only Chip works there. That’s why he was hiring someone else.”

“I mean, you know the sort of guys that hang out there.”

“Uh-huh.” Dad paused, then changed the subject. “It seems like you got a lot on your mind.”

“I do. There’s so much going on here at the ranch. There’s so much we’re going to change. Wyatt’s training horses. We got the plans back from the architect for some of the cabins. I was speaking to someone in Seattle who thinks that they can start a marketing program for us there and in the California Bay Area because there are a lot of rich people in tech that want to come to ranches like ours and just hang out.”

“Okay, well that’s all good news, right?”

“Exactly. So I’ve just got a lot on my mind, Dad.”

“And that’s why you decided to interfere in Arya’s business?”

“Dad, you wouldn’t want Mama working at the bar, would you?”

“No, but she’s my wife.”

“Exactly.” I chewed my lower lip as I realize that I completely misheard what he’d said. “I mean, obviously Arya’s not my wife, but I look at her like family. She’s got no one else, and she and Eloise have—”

“You have a soft spot for them. I understand. But that doesn’t mean you can just go and meddle in her business.”

“I didn’t mess in her business. It’s not my fault that—”

“Son, we both know that Chip all of a sudden got ten thousand dollars. And I wonder where he got that from.”

“I don’t know where he got it from.”

“So you don’t have a deduction from your trust?”

“Not that I know of.”

“You forget that my name is still on the paperwork of all of you guys’ trusts, so I can see when anything over five thousand dollars has been deducted.”

Oh shit, I remembered now. My dad didn’t really care what we did with the money, and he wasn’t necessarily overseeing it, but he was still on all of the accounts, based on how the trust had been written up. “Okay, well, I mean, Chip wanted to go away for a little bit and I figured, hey, why not now?”

“Son, I get it. You like Arya.”

“No, I don’t. It’s got nothing to do with that.”

“Okay. If you say so. Well, I’m just going to say this to you, Chet. There’s such a thing as being protective, and there’s such a thing as being overbearing. Now, I don’t mind it if you’re protective of the woman that you love or your child or your sisters-in-law or your grandkids, but if you’re going to be protective of someone you don’t know that well, then you’re going to have to find out and figure out if that’s what they

want from you. You're going to have to figure out your role in Arya's life."

"What do you mean, my role in Arya's life? I'm her friend."

"But if you're just her friend, then you're going to have to listen to what she wants. You can't dictate."

"What does me being her friend have to do with me dictating anything? I'm not dictating anything. It's not like you being married to Mom means you get to dictate her life."

"No, it doesn't. And I would never presume that I could tell your mother what to do, but we come to decisions together because we're partners. You and Arya are not partners."

"I know we're not partners. I'm just trying to look out for her because she doesn't know what it's like around here."

"Chet, she can figure out what she wants to do herself. Trust me, I understand your thought process, but what you did wasn't right."

"Well, I apologized to her and she's still pissed, so whatever."

"She has a right to be. She's got a child to take care of."

"I know she's got a child to take care of, but we're looking after Eloise too."

"But we're not family."

"That doesn't matter. We still love them all the same."

"Oh, Chet. You're a good boy and a strong man, but sometimes I do believe you're my most obstinate son."

"What's that supposed to mean, Dad?"

"I think you know what obstinate means, Chet. And if you don't, go look it up in the dictionary."

I chuckled. "Why does this remind me of when I was in elementary school and every time you said a word I didn't know, you told me to look it up in the dictionary?"

"Because that's what helped you win the spelling bee."

“I didn’t win, Dad. I came in third place.”

“Third place is better than last place.”

“True,” I said. “Okay, I messed up. I get it. And I do understand where you’re coming from. I overstepped and I shouldn’t have. And I’m trying to make it better, but Arya’s so upset with me I just don’t really know what to do.”

“You’re going out to the log cabin tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. I got to fix the roof. And Beau was saying he’d like me to see if I could renovate the kitchen.” I rolled my eyes. “Good thing there’s one brother who can actually do construction from the ground up.”

“Well, he’s not asking you to do construction from the ground up though, is he?”

“No, but...” I smiled. “I know. I’m just being a grouch. But yeah, I’m going out to the log cabin tomorrow. Why?”

“Maybe invite Arya to go with you.”

“What do you mean? Why would I invite her to go with me?”

“Maybe so you can talk it out.”

“Talk what out? She doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Oh my God, son. Are you really that dense? On the way to the cabin, take her down by the creek and then maybe have a little picnic and apologize to her, this time more sincerely than I bet you apologized the first time.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“I mean, if you don’t want to, you don’t have to. But I’m thinking you don’t want Arya to be upset with you anymore, right?”

“No, I don’t want her to be upset with me. How do you know?”

“Because I know anytime your mom is upset with me, I do everything I can to get her talking to me again. That’s the way it is when we care about the women in our lives.”

“She’s not exactly the woman in my life, Dad. She’s—”

“I know, I know,” he smirked, “she’s your friend.”

“Dad, please don’t go getting any ideas, and please don’t go telling Mom anything. I don’t want her to think that Arya and I are going to get together and I’m going to be the fourth son that’s getting matched up. You know that is not about to happen.”

“I know, son.” He looked thoughtful. “Why on earth would Arya choose to be with someone like you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, offended. “Why wouldn’t she be with someone like me? Why wouldn’t—”

“What do you care if you don’t want to be with her?”

“I don’t want to be with her like that, but that doesn’t mean that she should just jump into the bed with the first cowboy she meets.”

“Did I say that she was going to do that?”

“No, but that’s what you were pretty much saying.”

“No,” Dad shook his head, “I don’t think I said anything of the sort. But hey, I think dinner’s about ready, so we should go to the kitchen and see if your mom needs any help.”

“I think I’m going to go and wash up first,” I said.

My dad gave me a clap on the back. “Okay. And you best ask Arya tonight if she wants to go. Don’t just go assuming in the morning that she doesn’t have plans.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll ask her after dinner.”

“Good, good, good.” He nodded. I hurried to my room and walked into the bathroom so that I could wash off my face and my hands. My dad’s words had made me pause for a few seconds. I hadn’t liked the knowing look in his eyes, and I hadn’t liked the fact that he’d commented on Arya getting a boyfriend. I mean, I knew at some point she’d want to date someone, but that point wasn’t now, was it?

I leaned against the door and thought for a couple of seconds. Did I care if Arya got a boyfriend? No, of course not.

Not if he treated her well.

But I knew from the way my heart lurched at the thought that that wasn't exactly true.

I did not want to see Arya with another man. I mean, I didn't want her myself, I wasn't ready to settle down and she had far too many responsibilities for someone like me, but she was cute. More than cute. She was beautiful and sexy. Under other circumstances, I definitely would've had her in my bed.

But she was a guest in my home, and I knew that Mom would absolutely kill me if I even thought about making a play for her.

Though if Arya wanted me to, I wouldn't say no.

Chapter Ninety-Eight

A rya

Dinner was fun. I could tell that Amelia loved being around her family. She seemed to light up when she was with her sons, and each one of them looked at her with love and adoration.

“Aunty Arya, I’m going to help Grandma Amelia do the dishes.” Eloise picked up two dirty glasses from the table. “And then she’s going to read me a story before I have my bath and go to bed.”

“How’s about you help with the dishes and then have a bath and then Amelia can read to you?”

“Okay.” She nodded with a small smile. “Did you know that milk comes from cows, Aunty?”

“I did.” I nodded with a smile. I watched as Chet walked towards us and I could feel my spine stiffening. What did he want?

“Eloise, did you know that the very best cow milk is mixed with chocolate syrup?” He bent down and grinned at her. “Want some chocolate milk as you do the dishes?”

“Ooh, yes please.” She jumped up and down. “Can I, please, please?” She looked at me and I nodded. “Yay!” She went running out of the room.

“Eloise, do not run with glasses or anything else in your hands!” I followed after her. “You can hurt yourself if you trip.”

“Okay, Aunty Arya.” She gave me an embarrassed smile. “Sorry.”

“No worries, darling.” I watched as she headed to the kitchen and then turned to Chet. “You really shouldn’t have offered her chocolate milk. What if I didn’t want her having any?”

“Then you would have said so.” He shrugged. “Is it really a big deal?”

“It is a big deal to me.”

“Then my bad.” He gave me an apologetic smile. “I didn’t mean to overstep. I should have asked you first.”

“Yes, you should have.” I tried to look stern, but I couldn’t stop my lips from twitching as he gave me a doleful puppy dog stare. “Enough with that, Chet.”

“Why? Am I melting your cold, cold heart?”

“Nope.” I shook my head vehemently. “Never.”

“So I was hoping to ask you something...” He cleared his throat and all of a sudden his face looked serious.

“Now you want to ask me something?”

“It’s not about chocolate milk.”

“What’s it about?”

“So, I was thinking...” His voice trailed off and my heart started racing. Was he about to ask me what I thought he was about to ask? Because if he thought he was going to proposition me for sex, I would slap him. I didn’t even care if anyone saw me. I was absolutely fed up with Chet Hamilton.

“Do you want to explore the ranch with me tomorrow?”

“What?” I hadn’t expected that.

“Come with me to the ranch tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“So I can make amends for being an idiot asshole.”

“So you admit you’re an asshole?”

“I kinda have to, don’t I?” He gave me a wry smile, and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at him. He was a big old goof, but I couldn’t stay mad at him for long.

“You owe me big time,” I muttered.

“I can kiss your feet to make up for it.” He chuckled as I made a face. “How about a massage?”

“No thanks, Chet.”

“Or you could give me a massage.”

“You wish.”

“I do.” The way the words came out of his mouth made my heart flutter. He tilted his head to the side and gave me a long warm smile. “We could have a contest.”

“A contest?”

“We could see who gives the best massages.”

“Seriously, Chet?”

“I mean, I know I would win, but you could give it your best shot.”

“I would totally win.” I poked him in the chest and we both stilled for a few seconds at the physical contact. I quickly removed my hand and we just looked at each other for a few seconds in silence. He took a step towards me and I thought he was going to kiss me. My entire body felt flushed.

I knew I wouldn’t stop him.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Arya,” he said softly, his eyes teasing me. “Sweet dreams.”

“Night, Chet.” I blushed and turned around quickly. “Sweet dreams to you as well.”

Chapter Ninety-Nine

Arya

“It’s so early in the morning,” I said as I met Chet in the kitchen. It was still dark outside and I was yawning.

“I know, but we’ve got a long day ahead of us.” He handed me a cup of coffee. “Drink this. It will wake you up a little bit.”

“What is it?”

“It’s coffee.”

“I know, but did you add any milk or sugar or cinnamon?”

“Cinnamon?” He looked at me in surprise. “I’ve never heard of adding cinnamon to your cup of coffee.”

“Someone once told me that’s a trick to lose weight,” I said with a light laugh. “I don’t really know if it’s true, but I always add a little bit, just in case.”

“You don’t need to lose any weight Arya,” he said.

I felt my face flush as he looked me over. “I think every woman feels like she could lose a little weight,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “And all these cookies and cakes I’ve been eating recently haven’t been helping.”

“Oh well, that’s what happens when you live at Horseshoe ranch.” He started to smile then stopped. “I suppose you’re

going to tell me that's why you want to leave. So that my mom doesn't fatten you up anymore?"

"Well, I can honestly say that wasn't one of the reasons why I wanted to find my own place." I laughed. "I haven't had such good cooking in a long time."

"Speaking of food, I made some sandwiches for us." He held up a Ziploc bag. "I figured we could eat a little bit later. I know it's kind of early for breakfast."

"Later's fine," I agreed. "Never too early for coffee, though."

"I have a flask as well." He held up the flask next to him. "It's got hot coffee, and I've got some containers with milk and some packets of sugar."

"Wow. You really thought everything through."

"I can't lie, my mom told me what to do." He made a face. "That sounds kind of weird, huh?"

"No. Why do you say that?"

"I'm a grown man and my mom's telling me how to prepare for a ride out to the log cabin."

"She just loves you, is all. And she wants to make sure you have an enjoyable trip too."

"Okay, you ready? You got everything you need?"

"I do." I nodded. "So, are we riding?"

"Oh no. That would be too long a ride. We're going to take one of the trucks. I have a bunch of tools I have to take with me."

"Oh, yeah. You're redoing the roof or something?"

"There're just some patches that I need to take care of. And then they want to do a little bit of a reno in the kitchen, so I'm just going to check it out. See what I need to do. But we're going to go to the creek first. I thought you might enjoy that. And we'll have a little picnic."

"Don't tell me. You made lunch for us as well?"

“No. My mom packed it last night.” He laughed and I joined him. It was funny how comfortable I felt with him, even though I was still quite upset. I had told myself I was going to let it go, though, at least for now. I understood where Chet was coming from, and I did appreciate the fact that he cared about my well-being, even if he had completely overstepped.

“Eloise still sleeping?” he asked as we walked towards the french doors at the back of the kitchen.

“Yeah. I think your mom will wake her up around seven or eight and then give her breakfast. It’s really nice having her take care of Eloise. It means so much to me, and Eloise just loves her.”

“Well, you know my mom looks at Eloise as her first grandchild, right?” His voice was dry. “I mean, good for Mom, I guess.”

“Do you not want to have kids?” I asked as we walked around the side of the house to the truck.

He was also good with Eloise and sweet and kind. But the way that he talked made me think that he didn’t want kids, which I thought would be a shame. I rather thought he’d make a good father.

“I don’t really know. There’s a lot of us Hamilton boys, and well, I feel like there will be a lot of kids coming and I’ll have plenty of nieces and nephews.” He shrugged. “Maybe that will be enough.”

“So you don’t want to get married either?”

He chuckled. “What’s with all the questions?”

“What? I’m just trying to figure you out.”

“I guess that’s better than you being mad at me.”

“Oh, I’m still mad at you,” I assured him, “but I’m getting over it.”

He walked to the side of the truck and opened the door for me. I looked at him in surprise. “I’m a gentleman, a true gentleman,” he said. “I open the door for ladies.”

“Well, that’s very nice of you. You’re a dying breed.”

“I like to think not.” He closed the door behind me. I reached over and unlocked his door and opened it for him.

“Hey, thanks,” he said as he got into the truck. “That was mighty nice of you.”

“Someone once told me that guys like it when you open the door for them.”

“It’s true. It shows that the woman is thoughtful.” He grinned. “So I guess we both have manners.”

“I guess we do.”

He started the truck, and we headed down the path behind the ranch.

“So you didn’t answer my question. Do you want to get married someday?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “It’s not anything I’ve really thought about. I think women are the ones that care about that sort of thing. Men, not so much.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think that’s actually quite sexist, Chet.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, I’ve known guys that have talked about getting married and they seem quite excited. I think many men want to get married someday.”

“I’m sure they do. I can tell you, though, it’s never crossed my mind.”

“It’s *never* crossed your mind? You’ve never dated anyone who you thought, wow, I might like to marry her someday?” He looked at me and burst out laughing. “What’s so funny?”

I didn’t understand why he was laughing so hard. Was it really a joke to him that someone would want to get married?

“I’ve never been in a relationship where I’ve thought I would want to marry the woman someday. So does that make

me an asshole?” He raised his eyebrows at me. “I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I just think that’s really weird. What’s your longest relationship been?”

“Maybe like a year and a half, when I was in college.”

“Okay. So I guess still pretty young. But you never thought to yourself, maybe one day?”

“Not really.” He shook his head. “She knew she wanted to move to LA. She wanted to be an actress. I knew I would never live in LA.” He mock-shuddered. “Ugh.”

“You really don’t like LA, huh?”

“Can’t stand it. All those people, the traffic, the smog. All anyone cares about is money and fame and looks. No, thank you. Give me Montana any day. I like to look at the sky and the mountains. I like to be able to drive my truck and not worry I’m going to sit in traffic for three hours.” He shook his head. “I’m a small-town man, and I like it that way.” He paused for a moment. “Don’t tell me. You want to be an actress and move to LA too?”

“No.” I laughed. “I can honestly say that I’ve never wanted to move to LA. I have wanted to be an actress, but that’s when I was young. When everyone wanted to either be an actress or the president.”

He laughed. “Elementary school, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I think every kid wants to be the president when they’re young. And then when they become an adult, the president is the last job you’d ever want.”

“Well, not for everyone. Not for politicians.”

“True.”

“So, Chet?”

“Yes, Arya?” He snuck a quick look at me and smiled. “What is it?”

“So you’ve never been in a serious relationship. Is that because you just don’t like relationships, or it just hasn’t worked out that way?”

He sucked in a breath. “Wow. You are really trying to get to know me, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I figured if we’re going to be friends, then, I should know everything about you.”

“I don’t know if I want you to know everything about me.”

“And why is that?” I teased him. “You got secrets?”

“I have many secrets, Arya. There are many things about me that you would not want to know, trust me.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

“You’re really pushing this, aren’t you?”

“I’m curious now. You can’t make a statement like that and think I wouldn’t want to know.”

“Okay. Well, let’s just say you might not want to know what I was doing last night.”

“I don’t know. What were you doing last night?”

“Let’s just say, before I went to bed, I had a little fun.”

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed, heat rising to my cheeks. “Wow... You went there.”

“What? I was just saying. There are some things you might not want to know.”

“I mean, you’re a man, and I assume that you do that, so it’s not really a shock.”

“Hmm. Okay. Well, there might be a shocking part to it.” A wicked grin spread across his face.

“What’s the shocking part?”

“Well... I don’t think I should tell you. I want us to enjoy the day.”

“Chet!”

“What, Arya?”

“You can’t make a statement like that and not tell me.”

“Okay. Well, let’s just say that, when I was…” he paused, “pleasuring myself, I had a familiar face in my mind.”

“You had a… what?”

“I had a familiar face in my mind.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I was pretty sure I knew what he was saying and I was absolutely mortified. Not because I didn’t like the sound of it, but because we were going down a path I wasn’t ready to go down.

“Okay…” I said quietly. I wasn’t sure what to say next.

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask me who. But I think you already know, huh?”

“Chet!” My cheeks felt hot and I was pretty sure they were as bright red as a stop sign.

“Is the reason you know because you have done the same thing?”

“What do you mean, I’ve done the same thing?”

“Have you pleased yourself thinking about me?”

“Oh my gosh. Chet, seriously?”

I reached forward and turned on the radio. Country music blasted, and I sat back and looked out the window. I was even more mortified than before. Not because he’d asked a question, but because it was true. I had pleased myself, recently, and he had been the face in my mind.

There was no way in hell I was going to share that with him, of course. Not now, not after everything. Now we were going to spend the day together, it just felt too intimate, too real, and too embarrassing.

“I’m going to take that as a yes.” Chet leaned forward and turned the volume down. “You know what that means, right?”

“Know what?” I whispered.

“It means it’s almost like we made love.”

“What?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, if I pleased myself thinking of you, and you pleased yourself thinking of me, and we both came, well, it’s like we both came with each other.”

He winked at me, and I just stared at him. I couldn’t get the image of him touching himself and thinking about me out of my mind.

“So I guess the big question is...” He licked his lips and winked at me. “Arya...”

“What?” I said again.

“Did you come? And when you came, was it my name you screamed out loud?”

“I’m not finishing this conversation,” I said. “Let us talk about something else.”

He laughed then. “I knew you’d be a little scaredy-cat.”

“I just don’t think this is an appropriate conversation for us to be having, Chet Hamilton. What would your mother say if she knew this is what you were asking me?”

He didn’t respond for a couple of seconds. “You know what, Arya, you’re not always going to be able to change the subject when you don’t feel comfortable. One of these days, we’re going to have a real conversation, face to face, eye to eye, hand to hand, and it’s going to end in a much more explosive way.”

“Yeah. It’s going to end with me screaming and shouting at you.”

“Aww...I don’t think so.” He laughed. “I think it’s going to end one of two ways.”

“Oh yeah? And what are those ways?”

“Either with me on top of you, or you on top of me.”

I turned away from him quickly. My entire body felt warm, and I wasn’t sure how to respond. The thought of making love

to Chet Hamilton turned me on more than I was willing to admit.

“You’re the most obnoxious men I’ve ever met in my life,” I snapped. “You know that right?”

“Well,” he said. “whatever I do, I like to be the best.”

Chapter One Hundred

C het

“Wow, this is so beautiful,” Arya said as we stopped next to the creek. I looked around trying to imagine what it would look like to her, someone who hadn’t been here before, and I realized how right she was. It really was beautiful here. I watched her walk down to the river and dip her fingers into the water.

“It’s colder than I thought it would be,” she said with a smile as she looked back at me. When we’d gotten out of the car, all talk of sexual innuendo had stopped. It was as if she didn’t want to encourage me in that regard. I was frustrated, but I respected her wish to not go down that road. Perhaps it was smarter. For all I knew, she wasn’t attracted to me that way, but the demure looks and the way she touched me and talked to me led me to believe that she also felt a spark for me as well.

“So what are we going to do here?” she said as she stood up and headed back towards me.

“Well, we have our picnic,” I reminded her.

“I’m not ready to eat quite yet. Are we going to go swimming?”

“If you want. We could go skinny dipping.” My lips twitched as she rolled her eyes.

“No, Chet, we’re not going to go skinny dipping. Did you get that idea from one of your brothers?”

“What?” I said innocently, not wanting to let her know that my brothers and I talked about absolutely everything. “We could fish,” I said. “I’ve got some rods in the back of the truck.”

“Oh? What sort of fish are in the water here?”

“Lots of different kinds, actually,” I said, my mind distracted as she ran a hand through her hair.

“Lots of different kinds? That’s very descriptive,” she said with a laugh.

I turned around and headed to the truck and grabbed the fishing pole. I needed to take a breath and a moment. I was too attracted to her. I didn’t want to do something that I would regret later.

“Let me see if I’ve got the tackle and some bait as well,” I said, fishing around in one of the tool boxes.

“We don’t have to fish if you don’t,” she said. “Maybe we could go for a walk.” She pointed up to the left near the forest. “It looks quite mysterious in there.”

“It is not mysterious.” I laughed. “I guess I’m so used to being here that it doesn’t feel as special.”

“No way!” she said. “It’s amazing here. It feels magical. Eloise would love it.”

“Maybe next time we could bring her.”

“That would be nice,” she agreed, “if I’m still here.”

“What do you mean if you’re still here?” I knew I should keep my mouth shut. I knew I shouldn’t push the issue, but I thought she’d be staying now that Chip had closed up the bar for a month.

“Well, I’m still looking for a place. Just because I can’t work at 12 Point Buck Bar right away doesn’t mean I’m not going to look for another job and accommodation. I’ll just have to spend my entire paycheck on it as opposed to getting

free rent.” She shot me an aggravated look, and I swallowed hard.

“You know you don’t have to—”

“Please, Chet.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to have this discussion. Not again. Not today. Let’s just enjoy our time in nature.”

“I’m more than willing to enjoy our time in nature. We could also be one with nature,” I said with a wicked grin.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if we actually lived in nature, perhaps we would be naked.”

“Chet Hamilton, really? Would you say those words if your mother is around?”

“Maybe not.” I chuckled. “But she’s not around.”

“You’re really bad, aren’t you?”

“Did I ever say I was good?”

“No,” she shook her head, “you didn’t. But I figured you’re a Hamilton and you were raised by Amelia and Ranger and, well, they have manners.”

“Are you saying I don’t have manners?”

“I’m saying that some of your comments are quite inappropriate,” she said primly.

“Really? How so?”

“Asking me to skinny dip? Suggesting we get naked?”

“Well, it’s not like I just stripped my clothes off.” I laughed. “I think that would be much more inappropriate. Don’t you?” I pulled my t-shirt off and stood there naked from the waist up, noticing the way her pupils dilated as she took in my bare chest.

“W-what are you doing, Chet?” she stammered.

“I was feeling a little bit warm.” I shrugged. “No big deal, right?”

“No,” she said, “Not at all.” She walked towards a big oak tree and stared up at it. “I wonder how old this tree is.”

“No idea,” I said as I followed behind her. “Hundreds of years, I’m sure.”

“It’s magnificent,” she said. “It’d be really cool to have a swing hanging from the branches.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I think that would be a good idea. In fact, we’re planning on building some log cabins around here, and I think this would make a perfect spot for kids to play.” I frowned. “Though, maybe it’s too close to the creek. I don’t know that we’d want them to be too close to the water, just in case they’re not supervised.”

“Yeah. You’d really want to have a play area that was far away from anything potentially dangerous, though it would be a beautiful area.”

“Yeah.” I sighed, and she looked at me with a curious expression.

“Was that for?”

“What was what was what for?”

“You sighed just now. Are you not happy with the eco-resort you guys are building?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “This has always been a family homestead, you know? It will be weird having strangers here, making noise and taking up space. It feels like it will become something that I’m not sure my ancestors would’ve wanted.”

“Or the Native Americans,” she said.

“Yeah, this was their land.”

“Does that ever make you feel bad?” she asked softly.

I tilted my head to the side and stared at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, this land wasn’t yours initially, right?”

“No. It’s not mine now, either. It belongs to the Hamilton family.”

“I mean before the Hamilton family took it over.” She paused and shook her head. “Sorry, I won’t get into it.”

“No, I’m curious what you mean.”

“I mean, this was Native American land, right? And some people say it should go back to the Native American tribes.”

“Oh, I see.” I nodded. “Yeah, I understand the complexities of the situation.”

“Oh yeah?” She sounded curious.

“I mean, I understand that when colonizers came to the United States, they took over land that didn’t belong to them. And when families made it to the west, like mine, deals were made.” I sighed. “There’s a lot of complicated history in this country and I, for one, don’t really know the answers to the question you’re asking. Do I think that I own the land or my family owns the land? Technically, yes. Do I think that it’s ours to do what we want with? No.” I shook my head. “I think it’s precious, and I think that it should be respected and kept pure and clean. I just want to do what’s right for me, my family, my ancestors, future generations, and for the Native American tribes in the area.” I looked at her. “My father’s thought about this a lot, and actually, a percentage of our income goes to the local tribe.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened. “I didn’t know that.”

“It’s not something we advertise.” I kicked at a pebble. “Just like philanthropists don’t advertise their good works and deeds and donations, at least not the ones that are giving because they think it’s right.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I guess there are those who give and want the world to know just so that they can get the acclaim.”

“Yeah, my dad’s not like that.” I smiled at her. “What made you think about that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think about all sorts of things, you know? Inequality, equitable distribution of wealth.” She laughed a little.

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t know why I care, seeing as I have no wealth.”

“Maybe you care because you just want the best for everyone.”

“I do.” She nodded. “I just think that everyone should have an equal playing field, you know? If we all had the same options in life, the same chances to make it then, well, whoever rises to the top rises to the top, right?”

“Yeah. I got it. You’re right. You’re wise beyond your years, Arya.”

“I don’t know about that. Then I just think about Eloise and…” Her voice trailed off.

“What is it?”

“I want her to have everything in life. I want her to have all the options. I want her to be whatever she wants to be. I want her to dream big, and I don’t want her to feel limited by what I can offer her, which isn’t much. It makes me sad sometimes.”

“Why?” I said softly.

“I feel like she’s already got a bad start in life, you know?”

“What do you mean? She’s such a happy girl.”

“She is, but she’s young. She doesn’t have her mother. She doesn’t have her father. She’s with me, and that’s not saying much.”

“Don’t say that, Arya. You’re wonderful.”

“Thank you, but I don’t have a job. I don’t have any money. I don’t have a home. I don’t have much of an education. Right now, she’s young, and it’s not a big deal, but soon she’ll be going to school, and I just don’t want her to be behind. I just don’t want her to feel like she doesn’t have the same options in life, you know? I want to give her the world, but right now I can’t even give her a crumb.”

“Hey, you’re giving her the world. Your love means so much more than money.”

Her eyes watered and she looked away from me. “I wish that was true,” she said softly.

“Hey, you’re wonderful. You’re worried about so many important things that put my own worries to shame.”

“Oh Chet,” she said. “Don’t say that. I’m sure your worries are also important. I’m sure...”

I shook my head. “No. Today is about you. Let’s have some fun.” I took her hand and squeezed it gently. “I know you’re an independent woman, and I know that you don’t need my help, but anything I can do, absolutely anything, you just let me know.”

Chapter One Hundred One

A rya

“Wow, this log cabin is really beautiful.” I looked around. “Do you stay here often?”

Chet nodded. “I wouldn’t say super often, but I like to stay here as much as I can. In fact, all of my brothers do.”

“I can see why. It’s beautiful.” I looked out the window at the mountains. “The view is magnificent.”

“It is,” he agreed. “We’re hoping to build more cabins like this along the creek for the resort.”

“I think I heard Olivia saying something about that. For tourists?”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I’m not really cool with it, but what are you going to do?”

“If you’re not cool with it, then...”

“We need the money.” He grimaced. “I mean, we’re doing okay, but we’re not making as much money from on crops as we need to keep the ranch going.”

“I guess it’s quite expensive, huh?”

“You can say that again. So we’re investing and getting a loan, hopefully. I guess Beau’s the one taking care of that.”

“You sound... angry, almost,” I said carefully, not wanting to upset him.

“I guess. I just feel helpless, you know? I’m not the oldest. I’m not the second oldest. I don’t really have much of a say in what happens.”

“But don’t you all have an equal say?”

“I mean, yeah, there are seven brothers, and we all have a vote, along with my mom and my dad, of course, but really it’s up to Beau and Austin. They’re the ones in charge. They make most of the decisions.”

“But Wyatt, he’s buying those horses, right?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“I mean, that’s good, don’t you think?”

“Wyatt’s a good kid, and I think he can make a real success of horse breeding or whatever it is he’s doing.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just frustrated.”

“Why?” I walked up and touched him lightly on the shoulder. “If you don’t mind me asking, what’s got you so upset? It can’t just be because Beau and Austin are the oldest.”

“I guess I just feel like I don’t have any real input. I’m not doing anything. I’m just following orders. And I’m not a follower. I’m a leader. I was born to lead and, well, I’m not getting to do it here.”

“Do you want to leave Horseshoe Ranch?” Suddenly, it hit me. “Are you not happy here?”

He stared at me for a few seconds, the light in his eyes dimming. “Sounds sacrilegious when you say it.”

“You don’t want to be here.”

He let out a long sigh. “I had an opportunity to buy a smaller ranch, something that I could run and maintain, but, I mean, I can’t do that, obviously.”

“Why? Money?”

“No, I have money. We all have a trust fund, but I just wouldn’t feel right leaving the family to do this, you know?”

“But is it your dream?”

“My dream is for Horseshoe Ranch to be around for many generations. I want my kids to see where I grew up, where their grandparents grew up, and where their great-great-grandparents grew up. I want my grandkids to sit on my knee at that rocking chair in the living room, you know?”

“I get it. It’s a family legacy.”

“Exactly. And if I have to stay here and just follow orders, then that’s what I’ll do.” He looked around. “I guess I should fix the roof.”

“You’re a good guy, Chet.”

“Really? Do you really think I’m a good guy, Arya, or are you just saying that to try and make me feel better about my situation?”

“Maybe both.” I laughed. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, you can just sit pretty and—” he paused. “Sorry, is that not PC?”

“You can call me pretty if you want,” I said.

“Can I call you beautiful?”

“Only if you think it’s true,” I said shyly. He burst out laughing. “Hey, why are you laughing?”

“Because that’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“What is?”

“That I should only call you beautiful if I think it’s true. Arya, you crazy girl, you’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen in my life. Hands down.”

“You’re just saying that.” I could feel myself blushing.

“Trust me,” he said softly, “I don’t ‘just say’ anything.” We stared at each other for a few seconds.

Chet thought I was gorgeous. He thought I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life. I didn't believe him, of course. He had to have seen much more beautiful women than me, but his words made me feel warm inside and special and...

"So I was thinking," I said quickly, wanting to change the subject. "Have you ever heard of goat yoga?"

"Can't say that I have. Why?"

"I was thinking, if this was going to be a resort and you really wanted to attract people and bring in large crowds, maybe you could have goat yoga. I noticed that near the stables, there was a barn you weren't really using, and it has a really cool view of the mountains and the forest. And I was just thinking, how cool would it be to..." I stopped. "Sorry, I'm talking too fast, aren't I?"

"No, continue."

"Well, I was just thinking perhaps that could be like a yoga room, an outside yoga room. And if you had goats, well, that would just make it even more special. That would really bring in the crowds. I hear millennials love goat yoga. They'd spend a shit ton of money and..."

"And we need a shit ton of money." He grinned. "That's a great idea. Thank you, Arya."

I blushed at his compliment. "I just want to help."

"So you're really into yoga, huh?"

"I mean, I enjoy it. It helps me relax and it makes me more flexible."

"Flexible?" He raised an eyebrow and took step towards me. "Exactly how much more flexible?"

"I don't know an exact percentage." I took a step back. He was starting to come a little bit closer.

"So, maybe I'll suggest it to the family when we get back."

"Okay. Sounds good."

"And maybe..." he paused.

“Yeah?”

“You could teach the class.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“We’re going to need a yoga instructor to teach the class, right? And if you know yoga that well, you could do it.”

“Oh, but I’ve never taught before.”

“Would you like to teach though, Arya?” he said.

“You’re just saying that because you feel bad I don’t have a job,” I said.

“Trust me, that’s not why I’m saying it. This is for the business. You want to help Horseshoe Ranch, right?”

“Of course, I want to help Horseshoe Ranch. I want to help all of you. I…” I took a deep breath. “I’d have to get certified if I were going to teach the class. I wouldn’t feel right until I got certified.”

“How much does the certification cost?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know. I’d have to check it out.”

“Maybe we can do that when we get back. Maybe we can fund it.”

“No, you can’t fund my education—”

“Arya,” he grabbed my hands and pulled me towards him, “you need to stop objecting to everything I suggest.”

“I’m not objecting. I…”

“You’re what?”

He was standing so close now. Too close. I swallowed hard, not even remembering what I’d just been talking about. “What are you doing, Chet?”

“What do you think?” he said.

And then he pressed his lips against mine and I melted into him. He kissed me hard, and I felt my entire body trembling as he wrapped his arms around my waist. I could feel the length of his hard body against mine, and it felt absolutely amazing. I

never wanted him to let me go. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and I sucked on it gently. He pulled back gruffly and stared down at me.

“What are you trying to do to me, woman?”

“What do you mean?” I said breathlessly, staring up at him.

“You know you’re making me hard as hell, right?”

“What?” I giggled, giving him my most innocent gaze.

“I think you know it’s exactly what you’re doing, Arya.” He gave my ass a gentle squeeze. “I want you so badly.”

“Chet... we can,” I suggested, not believing how bold I was being.

“We can, but we’re not going to do it just yet,” he replied.

“I know you want me as badly as I want you, but you know what?”

“No, what?” I said softly.

“When the moment comes, I’m not going to act until you beg me to. You got that?”

“Yes,” I said, a shiver running down my spine.

Chapter One Hundred Two

Chet

We made our way back to the ranch in the early evening. All I could think about as I drove was the feel of Arya's soft lips on mine. The way she'd pressed herself against me as we'd kissed had been arousing, and I felt emotions that I hadn't felt in years, though I didn't want to dwell on those.

The fact was that she was as beautiful as she was funny; however, she came with just too much baggage. I wasn't the right man for her. I didn't know what it was to be a husband, let alone a father. Arya and Eloise deserved a man who was ready for the responsibility. I just wasn't ready for kids. I didn't have the money. I didn't have the time, and I didn't have the patience, even though Eloise was a doll.

I pulled up outside of the ranch and jumped out before Arya could open her door. I hurried over and opened the passenger door for her and my heart jumped for joy when she smiled at me in surprise.

"You didn't have to do that," she said as she stepped out

"I did." I bowed. "I'm a gentleman."

"So you said, but now I'm not so sure." Her cheeks were pink but her voice was playful. "Thank you for a really nice day today, Chet. I had a good time."

“I’m glad,” I responded. “I had a great time as well.” There was a pause, and she giggled nervously. I wondered if I made her nervous. I took a step closer to her. “Do I make you nervous?”

“No,” she said quickly. She took a step back and bumped into the door.

“You okay?” I asked as she rubbed her elbow.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “But we should go inside. We don’t know who’s watching.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t know if your mom’s looking, or your dad, your brothers, or Olivia, or Eloise.” She dropped her gaze to the ground, looking a little guilty.

“What? You don’t want them to see us standing outside here?”

“I just don’t want them to know that we kissed,” she said.

I threw my head back and laughed. “Shouldn’t that be my line?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Why?”

“I’m just saying Amelia is my mom and she’s the one that’s trying to get me married. If she knew that we kissed, she’d think that something else was going to happen. And, well, I don’t want to have to deal with that.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that.” Arya’s voice was suddenly sharp. “Nothing else is going to happen, anyway.”

I wasn’t sure what had happened. “Are you mad at me, Arya?”

“No, I’m not,” she said. “Let’s just go inside.”

“You sound like you’re mad.”

“Why would I be mad, Chet?” she snapped.

“I’m not upset that we kissed,” I said softly. “I just don’t want my mother to know that we kissed.”

“Why not?” she said.

“You’re the one that didn’t want them to know!” I was confused now.

“Yeah, because I was trying to protect you. But why don’t *you* want them to know?”

“For the same reason. Why were trying to protect me?”

“I just feel like...like maybe I’m not good enough for you,” she said.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I think you’re amazing and Eloise is amazing. She’s a sweet, adorable girl and she deserves to have a father figure. I’m just not in that position right now.”

“Okay, fine,” she said in a voice that said it was not fine. “Well, good for you. I’m going inside now.”

“Don’t be mad!” I made to grab her arm, then decided to let her go. We’d had a nice day and I’d ruined it with this conversation. I waited for her to go in, and then I walked inside and almost ran into Beau.

“Hey, what’s up bro?” he said.

“Not much,” I told him. “I’m just about to head into the shower. I had a long day doing work at the cabin.”

“Oh, yeah? What do you do?”

“Patched a couple places in the roof. What about you?”

“Well, I was on the phone talking to one of the lenders about one of the loans to build some more log cabins. It looks like we might be able to get two million.”

“Oh, that’s great,” I said. “Super exciting, so we can go ahead for sure then?”

“Yeah. I’m going to call a family meeting tomorrow maybe.”

“Sounds good.”

At that moment, Wyatt walked into the room. “Hey, what’re you guys up to?”

“Do I have to tell everyone today what I’m doing?” I snapped

Both Beau and Wyatt looked at me in surprise. “Anyway...” Wyatt said. “I just got off the phone with a family in New York.” He sounded excited.

“Okay,” I shrugged. “And why do I care?”

“Only because he’s a chairman at Goldman Sachs, and he wants me to train their horse.”

“Oh, that’s awesome.”

“You excited for me?” he said.

“Sure.”

“They’re going to pay me \$50,000.”

“That’s amazing,” I grumbled. “Good job, Wyatt.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You okay, Chet? You don’t see as chipper as usual.”

“I’m fine. It’s fine. It’s just been a long day.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “I thought maybe you’d seen the newspaper.”

“What newspaper?” Wyatt and Beau exchanged a look, and I caught Beau shaking his head slightly. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Wyatt said quickly. “Nothing at all.”

“Okay, fine,” I growled. I didn’t want to know, anyway.

I walked past them down the corridor towards my room. I could hear my mom and some of the women talking and laughing in the kitchen, but I kept on going. I wasn’t in the mood to make small talk with anyone right now.

I shut the bedroom door behind me, leaned against it, and took a couple of deep breaths. All I could think about was Arya and the fact that she was upset with me. It hurt. I’d been honest as I thought she was being, but obviously, she hadn’t liked what I had to say. I was a fucking idiot. I knew I shouldn’t have brought up Eloise, but I wanted to be

straightforward with her. I didn't want us to get into an entanglement that would make things complicated. I didn't want Eloise to think that I was going to have a larger role in her life than I was.

I tore off my clothes and headed to the shower, swearing under my breath. I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't have many options. I wanted to be with her. I wanted to do more than kiss her, but I also didn't want to complicate things. We'd had a really nice day. Yes, the kiss had been magical and yes, I wanted more from her, but I knew she wanted more from life than I had to offer.

Now was not the time to get involved in any sort of relationship, especially with a woman as special as Arya.

Chapter One Hundred Three

A rya

“Hey, how’s it going?” Olivia asked as I entered the kitchen.

“I’m good, thanks. How was Eloise today?”

“Oh, she was great. She’s in bed now. I read her a bedtime story.”

“Thank you so much, Olivia. What did you read?”

“Little Red Riding Hood. That was one of my favorites as a kid.”

“Oh, that’s one of Eloise’s favorites as well. Thank you.” I smiled at her warmly.

“No worries. I guess I’m just practicing for when I have kids.” She leaned toward me and lowered her voice. “So how did it go today?”

“It was fine.”

“I need *all* the details, Arya.” She grinned at me.

“All what details?” I said, flustered. I was already feeling slightly discombobulated after my conversation with Chet. I needed to analyze why what he’d said had made me upset, even though I knew he was just being honest.

“Well, did you guys have fun?” She raised her eyebrow at me.

“I’m not sure what sort of fun you’re talking about,” I lied.

“Did you guys do the deed?”

I burst out laughing. “No, we did not have sex, Olivia. What do you take me for?”

“Oh.” She looked disappointed. “You know, there’s nothing wrong with sex.”

“Seeing as Chet and I aren’t even dating, it would’ve been kind of messed up. I barely know him and he barely knows me, and just two days ago, I literally hated him for costing me my job.”

“True,” Olivia said, nodding. “He has been a bit of a jerk.”

“Yeah. You can say that again.” I paused. “But...”

“Yeah?” she looked back at me inquisitively.

“We did kind of kiss.”

“You kissed?” she screamed.

“Olivia!” I glared at her.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.” She placed her hand over her mouth, half laughing.

“It was just a kiss,” I said quickly.

“It’s never *just* a kiss with the Hamilton boys.” She shook her head. “Oh my gosh. I want all the details. There have to be a lot more details, right?”

“No, there aren’t that many more details. Trust me.” I paused as I looked around the kitchen. “Where did all these apple pies come from? Did you guys bake today? Is there a bake sale going on or something?”

“Oh my gosh.” Olivia’s eyes widen and she started giggling again. “You will not believe what Amelia did.”

“She baked a bunch of pies?” I asked.

Olivia shook her head.

“Okay, so what did she do?”

Just then, Amelia herself walked into the kitchen.

“Good evening, Arya,” she said with a gentle smile. “How was your day?”

“It was really good, thank you. The creek was amazing, and the log cabin was even more amazing. I think that the eco-resort is going to be gorgeous. People will flock here. I know the girls will do an awesome job with the interior decorations. Once you get the marketing going, people will pay loads of money to stay here.”

“Well, thank you,” Amelia said with a smile. “I’m so happy to hear that you think that it will do well.”

“I think it will do amazing, and it will be so much fun. I should go and have a shower. I’m feeling a little bit dirty from the day.”

“I’m sure you do.” Olivia gave me a knowing look.

I ignored her and yawned. “You guys have a good evening.”

“You too, Arya,” Amelia and Olivia chorused.

I made my way down the corridor where I was surprised to see Chet standing outside my bedroom door. “What are you doing here?” I said, annoyed.

“I need to talk to you,” he said gruffly.

“Can it wait till tomorrow? I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“No, it can’t wait.” He shook his head, drops of water falling from his hair onto my skin.

“Um, I’d like to take a shower. It’s been a really long day, Chet.”

“Can you not shower after we talk?”

“No. You’ve had your shower. Why should I wait?”

“Because I really need to talk to you now. Please? Can you just have a quick shower then?”

“I can, but I don’t really want to.”

“Please, Arya. I’ll give you fifteen minutes.”

“You’ll give me fifteen minutes?” I folded my arms across my chest. “Um, I think I’ll take an hour.”

“All right, please don’t be difficult. We need to talk. I didn’t really know what I was saying when we got out of the car, I was just joking around, and I think you may have taken my words personally—”

I cut him off. “I didn’t take anything personally. I just want to go to bed. Okay? It was a nice day, and now I’m done. We had a little kiss, and that was that.”

“It wasn’t just a little kiss, Arya. Please?”

I paused, too many emotions swirling around for me to make sense of. “Fine,” I conceded.

“I’ll meet you in thirty minutes.”

“Where?”

“What about outside on the back patio?”

“What if someone sees us?”

“Fine,” he said. “Come to my bedroom, then.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I’m not going to ravish you, Arya.” He rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry.”

“Really?” I said. “I wouldn’t put it past you to try and get to fourth base.”

“I mean, do you want to get to fourth base?” He shot me a cocky grin. I gave him a stony look in response. He held his hands up in surrender. “I just want to chat, okay? There are some things we need to talk about.”

“Fine. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.” I quickly walked into my room and closed the door behind me. I leaned back against the door and took a couple of deep breaths before walking to the vanity and staring at my reflection in the mirror.

Today had been some day, and that had been some kiss. I wasn’t sure what Chet wanted to talk about, but I knew whatever he had to say was going to be life-changing for me.

There was no way that it wouldn't be. This entire situation had already awakened sensations in me that I hadn't even realized were dormant. Chet was sexy and funny, and the sort of man that I would want to spend forever with, even if he was an asshole. And even though he was one of the most obnoxious men I'd ever met, there was just something about him... His charm, his charisma, his entire being just connected with me.

I was nervous about what he wanted to say. I would go and I would talk to him, but I didn't know how I would respond. He was a cowboy who knew he was completely and utterly irresistible. If he tried to kiss me again, I wouldn't be able to stop him because his kisses made me feel more alive than I'd ever felt.

And sometimes I just needed that.

Chapter One Hundred Four

Chet

Exactly thirty minutes after I'd left Arya standing in the hallway, there was a knock on my door. I opened I quickly, smiling at Arya, who was standing there in a long white nightgown and wet hair.

"Hey. Come in," I said quietly as I opened the door wider. I stepped forward and gave her a quick kiss that made me hard in seconds.

"I'm not staying for long."

I withheld a smile. I didn't want her to think that I thought the situation was funny, because it wasn't. I knew that.

"So what did you want to talk to me about, Chet?" She folded her arms and stared at me.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Is there a reason why you're so upset?"

"You just kissed me again."

"And you seemed to enjoy it."

"I, well, I..." She was flustered. "Anyone could've seen us," she said finally.

"Yeah, and that would've been a big deal because...?"

“You know why that would’ve been a big deal. They would’ve asked what’s going on—”

“I have bigger issues.” I cut her off and held up the newspaper I’d found on my mattress.

“Look at this ad.” I pointed to the full-sized photo of myself under the caption, ‘WANT TO MARRY A COWBOY?’

Her eyes widened. “What is that?”

“My mom took out a newspaper ad,” I growled. “To help me find a wife.”

“I thought you weren’t ready to get married.”

“I’m not.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Well, about that,” I said softly, taking a step towards her, just wanting to feel her body heat close to mine. “I had an idea.”

“What do you mean you had an idea?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. I had an idea.”

“An idea about what, Chet Hamilton?” I could tell that she was getting angry at me.

“You’re not this upset just because I kissed you, are you?”

“No. Yes. I just don’t understand what’s going on. You... you perplex me.”

“I’ve heard that said many a time,” I said with a grin.

She snorted. “And why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Come in. Relax. Have a seat.” I pointed towards the armchair in the corner of my room. She walked over slowly and sat down. I sat on the edge of my bed and looked at her.

My brain was ticking a million miles a minute and my heart was racing. I wasn’t sure if what I was about to suggest was smart, but I couldn’t stop myself. It had come to me when I’d stepped out of the shower and, well, I wasn’t sure it was the best idea I’ve ever had, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought it could work.

“What are you thinking about, Chet?” Arya interrupted my thoughts.

“Well, it seems to me we both have a problem. You have no job—”

“Thanks for reminding me of that.”

“You have nowhere to live.”

“And the knife just goes deeper into my heart,” she said.

“And you’re worried about what you’re going to do with Eloise.”

“I just want the best for her,” she said softly.

“I know, and I want the best for her too. I want the best for both of you.”

“Uh-huh. And so what’s your problem?”

“My problem is that I have a meddling mother who will stop at nothing to interfere in my business.”

“Okay.”

“And my other problem...”

“So you have two problems?” she said.

“I do.” I nodded. I stared at her seriously.

“And what’s your other problem?”

“My other problem is you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “How am I your problem? What have I done—”

“Arya,” I held my hand up to quiet her, “I want you very badly, and not just a kiss in the hallway or a smooch in the backyard. I want *you*.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, but from the way she blushed, I could tell she knew.

“I think you know exactly what I mean because I’m pretty confident you feel the same way.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do.” I stood up and I walked over to her, taking her hands and pulling her up out of the chair. She stood up slowly and stared at me, her eyes flickering as she gazed at my mouth. “I have a proposition for you.”

“What’s your proposition?”

“I think it’s something that will benefit both of us.”

“Oh my gosh, just spit it out already!”

“I want you to marry me,” I said matter-of-factly. Her jaw dropped and her eyes widened in shock.

“What are you talking about?”

“I want you to marry me. Not a real marriage, of course, maybe for a year or so, but this way it will get my mom off my back and it will allow you to stay here without feeling guilty. And...”

“And what?” she said.

“It will allow us to have intimate relations.”

“In-intimate relations?” She stumbled over the words.

“Yeah, like you and me sharing a bed, having sex, not worrying if my mom or my dad or my brothers know about us.”

“But...*What?* You want to marry me just so you can have sex with me?”

“That’s not the only reason why I’m marrying you. I just gave you the reasons. It will be a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“I can’t marry you to stop your mom trying to set you up with someone, and I can’t marry you just so I have somewhere to stay. I have to take care of Eloise myself.”

“I know you want a father figure for Eloise.”

“I never said that,” she said.

“You didn’t have to say it. You came here looking for her father. You came here thinking Beau was her dad.”

“Yeah, but he’s not.”

“I can be that father figure in her life. I really like her. I think I’d be a good father,” I said.

“You can’t do this. It just...”

“I think it makes a lot of sense.” I pulled her towards me and wrapped my arms around her waist. I pushed my erection against her, and she swallowed hard as she felt me. “I want you, Arya, and I know you want me too. And I think this situation could work out for the best of us.”

“But I just don’t understand. Are we just going to be engaged? Are we going to get married? Are we...”

“I figure with so many engagements in the family right now, we don’t even have to actually get married. We can just be engaged for a year or two. That will give you enough time to get whatever education you want and think about what you want to do in the future, and it’ll keep my mom off my back and let me concentrate on Horseshoe Ranch and ensure that we’re successful. Because Beau and Austin, as much as I love them, their heads are not in the game right now. All they’re thinking about is how much they want to get married and start families. I’m thinking about the longevity of this ranch. I’m thinking about future generations.”

“So you’re marrying me so you have time to work?” She made a face. “Does that really make sense?”

“We’re not actually going to get married. We’ll just be engaged,” I said. “And that way, we can share the same room and we can make love, and no one will be upset.”

“What about me? Maybe I’d be upset.”

“Would you be upset?” I asked. As my hand moved up the side of her body, she stilled. I kissed again, and this time, she kissed me back softly. I felt her hands stroke my hair, and I gave her ass a light squeeze and started tugging her nightgown up.

“What are you doing?” she whispered against my lips.

“I want to touch you,” I said softly. I pulled up her nightgown off over her head. She didn’t try to stop me. She

stood there in just a bra and panties, and I groaned as I really realized just how badly I wanted her.

I cupped her breasts, relishing the feel of them in my hands, before reaching towards the back and unclasping her bra. I waited for her to stop me, but she didn't. The bra fell forward and I pulled it off, staring at her naked breasts. I leaned down and kissed one nipple. She made a soft moaning sound.

"Chet, we can't," she said. I growled as I looked back at her and brought her in against me hard.

"I want you, Arya. I want you any way that I can have you. And I know you want me, too. This is a great idea. I've thought about it."

"How long have you been thinking about it?"

"Just this evening."

"So that's not really something that..."

"I know it will work. I know you're considering it."

"I just don't know. I just... What about Eloise?"

"She'll love it here with so many aunts and uncles and grandparents. And we can send her to school, and you can concentrate on getting an education and being able to do what you want to do. I really don't see any negatives to this situation." I kissed her, and she groaned.

"I just don't know, Chet."

"Tell me." I slipped my hand down between her legs and rubbed over her panties. I could feel that they were already wet.

"What?" Her voice trembled.

"Just tell me that you don't want me, and I won't even bring it up again." I slipped a finger inside her panties and rubbed her wet clit, and she cried out. "Tell me you don't want me, Arya," I said as I slipped a finger inside of her. She leaned forward and bit down on my shoulders as I continued to finger her. "Tell me, Arya," I said as I slipped my finger out of her

panties and took a step back. She looked up at me with wide eyes that were full of lust. She licked her lips slowly and she shook her head.

“I won’t lie,” she said. “I do want you, but...”

“But what?” I said.

“I just don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“I think it’s the best idea I’ve ever had in my life.”

I pulled her towards the bed and lay her down. She glanced over at me as I got onto the bed next to her and I palmed one of her breasts, pinching her nipple gently. She squirmed slightly. I could feel her heart racing as I leaned down and kissed her stomach.

“Chet, I need to ask you something,” she gasped. I looked up at her. Her eyes were dark with desire. I could tell that she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

“Yes, I do.” I grinned at her.

“Huh?”

I winked.

“I have protection, so don’t worry.”

I went to kiss her on the lips and she burst out laughing. “No, that’s not it. I mean, you’re not being serious, are you, Chet? You cannot seriously expect me to be your fake girlfriend?”

Chapter One Hundred Five

A rya

I frowned at her. “I’m not asking you to be my fake girlfriend. I’m asking you to be my fake fiancée.”

“That’s even worse. How can you even suggest such a thing?”

“Why is it worse?”

“Because that’s lying to your parents.”

“Look, I’m not going to marry you. I’m not going to have children with you. I’m not going to completely lead my mother on. However, I do want...” He paused and looked at me for a few seconds, and I looked back at him. His lips twitched slightly, and my eyes narrowed.

“What is it?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I do want to know. That’s why I asked.”

“Well, are you even considering my suggestion?”

“No,” I said and then paused. “Well, maybe.”

“Really?” His eyes lit up.

“Why do you sound so surprised? If you thought I wouldn’t be interested, then why even suggest it in the first place?”

“Because I was hopeful. I wasn’t sure if I had reason to hope, though.”

“You don’t have reason to hope. I’m just saying—”

“No, no. You can’t take it back now, Arya. You’re interested.”

“So maybe I am. So what were you going to say?”

“I was going to say that I think that we could both enjoy...” He paused again and his lips twitched.

“Okay, you know what? I don’t think I want you to finish that sentence.” I knew exactly what he was thinking. I mean it wasn’t hard to figure out, seeing as we were lying in his bed and I was already mostly naked.

“What? You’re the one...”

“I think I know how that’s going to end.”

“How do you think it’s going to end?”

“I think that you’re going to ask me...” I shook my head. “Anyway, I should go back to my bedroom now.”

“Wait.” He grabbed my hand. “Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

“I don’t know anything anymore.” I shook my head. “I feel like ever since I’ve been on Horseshoe Ranch that people are just...”

“They’re just what?”

“People are just confusing me.”

“What people are confusing you, Arya?”

“You. You’re confusing me, okay?”

“Oh, really? In what way am I confusing you?”

“You know in what way you’re confusing me. You flirt with me. You’re angry with me. You try to control me.”

“I’m not trying to control you.”

“Well, it feels like you’re trying to control what sort of job I have.”

“I’m not trying to control what sort of job you have. I just don’t think it’s a good idea for you to live on top of a bar. Who’s going to look after Eloise when you’re working?”

“I already told you that your mom said she would help me. And Olivia and Sadie and—”

“Come on now, Arya. So they’re going to drive to your place in the middle of the night to go and look after Eloise and then go back home? Is that safe?”

I pressed my lips together. He had a point. It was something that I’d thought about as well, but I hadn’t wanted to dwell on it because I knew that that arrangement couldn’t last forever. But I just needed to build up my savings, and then I could hire someone more professional, someone who wouldn’t mind working until the bar closed.

Chet pressed his lips against my forehead. “Say yes, Arya, you know you want to.”

I moaned softly as his fingers brushed my breast. “Fine,” I conceded. “We can do it, but only for a few months. I don’t want this whole thing going too far.”

He grinned triumphantly then moved closer to kiss me. I melted against him. It wasn’t long before we were both naked, and he was kissing and touching my body in ways it had never been touched.

I reached over and ran my fingers down his chest, loving the way he reacted to my touch. He groaned and grunted and called out my name in a deep raspy voice, and the way he looked at me when he brought me to a climax with his fingers made my heart leap in joy. He positioned himself between my legs and I stared up at him, feeling an intense emotion. I wanted to whisper to him how handsome he was, but his lips crushed down on mine before I could say anything. His cock rubbed me gently and with one gentle thrust he was inside of me, deep and hard, and I heard myself screaming his name. This seemed to excite him because he moved even faster and as our bodies writhed on the bed, I found myself close to climax again.

He reached down to rub me gently as he increased his pace and I panted desperately against his shoulder, close to orgasm again.

“Come for me, Arya.” He blew into my ear and that was all it took for my entire body to shudder with the most intense feeling I’d ever had. “Fuck, yes!” he grunted as he increased his pace even more. My breasts bounced against his chest and then he stilled and thrust one last time before collapsing next to me.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” he whispered as he lazily played with my breasts.

All I could think was that I was falling for this man. There was no way I could pretend to play his fake girlfriend or fiancée. It would break me too much inside to pretend to be something I wanted to be real.

* * *

Early in the morning, I slipped out of bed and put my nightgown back on, careful not to wake Chet.

I couldn’t believe that we had made love. My body was still humming from the way he touched me and the way he made me feel, and every single part of me wanted to crawl back into bed with him. But I knew that I couldn’t.

I had to get away from Horseshoe Ranch. I didn’t want Chet to think that I needed him. I didn’t want him to think that he was responsible for me and Arya. I didn’t want him to feel obligated to take care of us. Eloise was my responsibility. As much as I loved the Hamilton family, and as much as I knew they cared about us, I didn’t want to take advantage of them. I was going to have to find a job. Maybe the job at 12 Point Buck Bar had fallen through, but that didn’t mean there weren’t other opportunities in town. I didn’t have high standards when it came to a job. I would do what I had to do. I had to make money. I couldn’t let us be dependent on anyone else.

I walked into the kitchen to find Amelia there making tea. “Morning,” I said.

She looked up and smiled. “Good morning, Arya. Sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“And Eloise, did she sleep well?”

“Uh...yes,” I stammered. I’d forgotten to go to the bedroom to check on Eloise. “In fact, I left Eloise in the bedroom by mistake,” I said quickly and hurried out of the kitchen.

I wondered if Amelia knew that I’d spent the night in her son’s room. I was already slipping. I was already putting my own needs before Eloise’s.

I hurried back to my bedroom and opened the door. Eloise was lying on the bed, reading a book. She smiled as I walked in.

“Morning, Auntie Arya,” she said.

“Morning.” I rushed over to her and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I was just reading my book about Spot.” She showed me a page with a picture of a dog, and I smiled.

“And did you sleep well?”

“Yes, Auntie Arya. Did you sleep well?”

I wondered if she knew I hadn’t slept in the bedroom with her. I didn’t want to say anything. I didn’t want her asking questions. “Very well. Thank you,” I replied.

“What are we going to do today? Are we going to bake cookies with Amelia?”

“Um, I’m not sure what the plan is. Why don’t we head into the kitchen and see?” I needed to ask Amelia if she’d look after Eloise today. I was going to drive into town and search for jobs. I would take Eloise if I had to, but I didn’t want any potential employers to think that I had an issue with childcare.

Eloise got out of the bed and stretched. "I'm hungry. Can I have pancakes for breakfast and scrambled eggs?"

"I'm not sure. Let's see," I said, not wanting to promise anything. Of course, if we were in our own place, I would make her scrambled eggs and pancakes without thinking. But I didn't want to go into Amelia's kitchen and make a mess. It wasn't my place to do so. Just one more reason that it was so important for us to get our own home.

"And some orange juice, please," she said as we left the bedroom.

"We'll see," I said as we made our way toward the kitchen.

"Morning, Eloise," Amelia said with a bright smile as we walked in.

"Morning, Grandma Amelia." Eloise ran over to her and gave her a quick hug. Amelia's face glowed with happiness. Their bond really was something special.

"Amelia, I was wondering if you had any plans today," I asked.

"No, not really. Why, dear?"

"I was hoping to go into town to look for a job, and I was wondering if you could look after Eloise for a couple of hours for me?"

"Of course. You don't even have to ask."

"I mean, I do, but thank you," I said.

"Oh, you're welcome. And what would you two like for breakfast?"

"I'd like blueberry and chocolate chip pancakes," Eloise said, "and scrambled eggs and bacon and orange juice that's freshly squeezed, please!"

"Now, now, Eloise. That's a bit much. I'm sure Amelia has better things to do than to cook you up such a breakfast."

"No, that sounds absolutely delicious," Amelia said with a smile. "Would you like the same thing as well, Arya?"

“Actually, I’m just going to have some toast and get ready. Want to hit the streets and see if I can find a job.”

“It’s so sad about what happened at the bar,” Amelia said, shaking her head. “My apologies for my son. I know he meant well, but...”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly. “I understood where he was coming from, but you know, I kind of need a paycheck.” I looked down at the floor slightly embarrassed. I didn’t want Amelia to think I was begging for money or a handout because I really wasn’t and I’d absolutely die if she offered me any money.

“I know, dear. Don’t worry. Do you want to go get ready? I’ll have some toast and coffee ready for you in a couple of minutes.”

“That’s perfect, thank you. Eloise, I’m just going to go and change. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, Auntie Arya. I’m going to help Grandma Amelia.”

“Sounds good,” I said as I headed out of the kitchen.

I walked back down the corridor and stopped dead when I saw a Chet standing outside my bedroom door. “What are you doing?” I hissed as I hurried up to him.

“What do you mean what am I doing? I woke up expecting to find you next to me and you were gone.”

“Well, I had to go and check on Eloise.”

“You could have woken me up and said goodbye.”

“I don’t think so, Chet. Last night was a mistake.”

“Last night was a mistake?” he cut me off, raising an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes, it was.”

“So you weren’t pleased?”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. It was fun. But—”

“But what? Aren’t we going to tell my mother that we’re engaged?”

“No,” I shook my head quickly. “That’s not a good idea.”

“What do you mean? I thought it was a perfect idea. You seemed to agree with me last night.”

“I wasn’t in my right mind. I don’t want to lie. I’m not going to tell your family we’re engaged when we’re not. It’s not cool. I don’t want to get their hopes up. I don’t want to get Eloise’s hopes up.”

“Hmm,” he said, pressing his lips together. “But I want you in my bed.”

“Just because you want me in your bed doesn’t mean I’m going to lie to your family that we’re engaged.”

“Is this because you don’t want to be in my bed?” His face darkened.

“Oh, honestly, Chet!”

“What? Last night, you seemed to be all for it. And we made love and you seemed to be all for it. And now this morning, I wake up and you’re gone and you’re telling me that we’re no longer engaged.”

“We were never really engaged. It wasn’t going to be the truth. And I don’t feel comfortable lying. I need to get a job. I need to figure this out for myself.”

“What do you mean you need to get a job? I already told you, you can help me out at the ranch and we can pay you.”

“I’m not taking money from you or your family.” I shook my head. “That’s not cool.”

“What do you mean it’s not cool? We’re not just going to give you money. Obviously, you’d work for it and—”

“No,” I said vehemently. “It’s not going to happen, Chet.”

“Why are you so stubborn, Arya?” he said, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me in towards him.

“Don’t do that,” I said, pushing him away. But he held onto me tightly.

“I missed you this morning,” he said, brushing my lips with his.

“Chet, anyone could walk out and see us.”

“So?” He smirked and squeezed my ass.

“Chet!”

“What?” he said, grinning.

“We cannot be making out right here.”

“Hey, it’s not like we’re making love in the corridor.”

“Chet!” I said louder than I’d intended.

“Are you trying to wake up everyone else in the house?”

“No, I’m not. You need to go back to your room so I can go into my room and change.”

“Can I come into your room with you?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re really too much.”

“What? I think you’re sexy, and I think you think I’m sexy and, well, I’m feeling pretty hard right now. Wouldn’t mind a repeat—”

“Stop it!” I said, cutting him off.

He frowned and pretended to cry. “You don’t want to be with me, huh? Was I that bad?”

“No,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Obviously not. I’m just...” I sighed. I grabbed his face and kissed him hard and then pulled back. He stared at me with a dazed look on his face. “Look, what we had last night was fun, but that’s not my priority right now.”

“Will it be your priority tonight?”

“Chet, really?”

“What?” he said. “I’m hoping it wasn’t just a one-time thing.”

“I don’t know, but I really have to get ready. Eloise and your mom are waiting for me in the kitchen.”

“Fine,” he said, holding his hands up and taking a step back. “You go and do what you got to do, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you.” I slipped into my bedroom door and closed the door behind me. I took a couple of deep breaths and walked to the bathroom and splashed my face with cold water.

Chet was a rascal.

He was absolutely the most charming and irresistible man I’d ever met. Rugged, handsome, obstinate, obnoxious, and incredibly sexy. I was in over my head.

Last night had been absolutely marvelous, but as much as I wanted to sleep with him again, I was scared to. I knew the more I was intimate with him, the harder it was going to be for me to walk away. Chet wasn’t ready for a serious relationship, and I couldn’t get into anything with anyone unless it was going somewhere. I couldn’t do that to Eloise.

And I couldn’t do that to myself, either.

Chapter One Hundred Six

C het

I watched as Arya drove off in her car, wondering exactly where she was going. She'd said she was going to look for a job, and I was peeved that she wasn't considering my offer to work at the ranch. I understood that she wanted to be independent and make her own way, but I was frustrated that she wouldn't just accept my help. And if I was honest, I was also pissed off that she hadn't accepted my offer to be my fake fiancée, though admittedly, it had been a spur-of-the-moment idea.

My night with Arya had been amazing. Her skin had responded to my every touch, and the way her eyes had followed me as I kissed and teased her had turned me on even more. Arya was a mix of innocence and minx, and being with her had felt like being intimate for the very first time.

“Hey, what you doing?” Wyatt slapped me on the back.

Startled, I turned towards him with a frown. “Not much. What are you doing?”

“Going to train some horses,” he said with a smile. “Want to help?”

“Not really.” I shook my head. “That’s your thing.”

“It could be your thing, too. It could be what we’re known for at Horseshoe Ranch.”

“Yeah. I don’t think so,” I said. “You’re the only one that’s interested in the races.”

“You say that now, but if I train a winner, and we make millions of dollars, and everyone in the country is coming to us to buy horses, then everyone will be wanting to get in on the game.”

“You train that winner first and then we’ll see.”

“I’d love to get a horse entered into the Kentucky Derby,” he said, a dreamy look in his eyes. “That would be so cool.”

I nodded. “Is Sadie going to help you?”

“No, I think she is going to go into town to check on some cakes or something.”

“Shouldn’t you go with her?”

“Why?” He looked at me with a confused expression.

“You’re really not going to let Sadie do everything for this wedding herself, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about? I’m going to be there at the church.”

“Yeah, but she’s planning everything. I’m sure she wants you to help.”

“You know Sadie loves planning. She’s had this shit in her little black book for years.” He chuckled. “She doesn’t need me getting in the way.”

“Don’t you want a say in your own wedding cake?” I asked him.

“She knows what I like.”

“Okay,” I said. “But I’m just saying I think your fiancée would like you to be more active in the planning.”

“What would you know?” He rolled his eyes. “You don’t even have a girlfriend, let alone a fiancée.”

“Yeah. Well, that’s because...”

“Don’t tell me. It’s because you’re helping to save the ranch.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It just means that Beau and Austin used the same excuses and look where they are now.”

“Yeah. Well, they can afford to.” I paused. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“Even though you’ve got your eyes on Arya?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snapped.

“Dude, if you guys aren’t fucking already, then you will be soon.”

“Excuse me?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“It means I see the way that you look at her, and I see the way that she looks at you. Talk about explosive.” He let out a low whistle. “Even Sadie was telling me that she thought you guys had chemistry, and you know Sadie doesn’t notice anything.”

“Um, I think Sadie notices quite a lot, but you guys both have it wrong.”

“So, you are not interested in Arya?”

“No, I’m not.”

“So, you haven’t slept with Arya?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said quickly, looking away.

“Uh-huh,” he drawled. “Chet, I may be your younger brother, but I can smell your bullshit from a mile away.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I know you guys have—” He paused. “Well, I’m going to be a gentleman about it.” He cleared his throat. “I know you guys have *made love*.”

“You know what, Wyatt? Shut up.”

“Would you rather me say I know you guys have fucked? Bow chicka wow wow.” He winked at me.

“You’re so immature, Wyatt Hamilton.”

“Yeah. Well, it takes one to know one.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” I grumbled.

“What’s going on, Uncle Chet?” Eloise came running into the corridor with a cookie in her hand.

“Nothing,” I said. “I was just speaking to Uncle Wyatt.”

“Hi, Uncle Wyatt,” she said, tugging on his shirt.

“Hi, there, Eloise. How are you?”

“I’m good, thank you. I think Grandma Amelia and I are going to cook lunch soon. Do you want some?”

“I would love some. What are you going to make?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said, seriously. “What do you want?”

“Ooh, I would love a shepherd’s pie.”

“We’re not cooking shepherd’s pie!” Mom shouted from the kitchen.

“Are you listening to our conversation, Mom?” I shouted back.

“Yes, I am.”

I bit back a curse. Exactly what had she heard? If she’d heard what Wyatt had been saying to me, I would kill him.

“I’m going out to the stables,” I said quickly and hurried out the front door. “See ya.”

I ran my hand through my hair as I made my way around the side of the house. I wasn’t going to go to the stables because I knew Wyatt was going to check on his new prized possession, and I didn’t want to have any more conversations with him. I needed to figure out exactly what was going on. I needed to figure out exactly how I felt about Arya and what I wanted from her.

I liked her. I liked her for more than just sex, but I wasn’t sure how she felt. I knew that she wasn’t interested in anything short-term. I knew that she wasn’t the sort of woman who could have a casual relationship. But as much as I wanted to

be able to give her more, I just didn't know that I was in that place.

The ranch was struggling, and now three of my brothers were getting married. That was three weddings we'd have to pay for, though I wasn't sure if Sadie's parents were going to put in money for her and Wyatt's wedding. But I knew Arya didn't have anything, and how was I going to pay for a wedding and to take care of her and Eloise? I just wasn't in the right stage of life to take on that responsibility. They deserve the best, and I wasn't able to give them the best just yet.

I sat on a pile of rocks and stared out at some of the buffalo. If only life could be as simple for me as it was for them.

You like her, my voice whispered in my ear. "I know I like her," I mumbled back to myself. *No, you really, really like her*. The voice in my head was getting louder. "I know I like her," I growled. But as I sat there thinking, I knew it was more than like.

Arya and Eloise had been growing in my heart for quite some time, and I was falling in love with Arya. The previous night, the way her body had felt against mine, it was more than just sex. It was more than just two bodies coming together for mutual satisfaction. She had fit against me as if she were made for me. When I'd woken up this morning and realized she'd gone, I'd panicked, and when I'd seen her walking down the corridor towards her room, that sweet little smile on her face when she saw me, I'd felt overjoyed.

I needed to figure this shit out. I needed to figure out exactly what I could offer Arya before it was too late because one night with her was definitely not going to be enough.

Chapter One Hundred Seven

A rya

I drove into town, listening to Shania Twain on the radio and smiling. As she sang about wearing men's shirts, I thought about Chet and wondered what it would feel like to wear a piece of his clothing. I knew I shouldn't dwell on the idea too much. I didn't want to feel like I was too close to him, which was a little bit too late, because now that I'd slept with him I already felt like there was a closeness there that hadn't existed before.

But I wasn't going to let myself think about Chet and our night too much. I had more important things to do.

I pulled up outside of a coffee shop and took a deep breath as I got out of the car. I'd love to work in a coffee shop. I'd love to learn how to make espressos and cappuccinos and lattes. I walked through the door and looked around. There was a lone cowboy sitting at a table, drinking a cup of coffee with his back to me. There was no one behind the counter.

"Hello?" I called out.

"Just a second," a voice called back to me from the back of the store.

"Okay," I said, standing patiently.

The cowboy turned and looked at me for a few seconds and then turned back to his paper. a moment later, an elderly

woman with bright blue hair popped out from the back. She had flour all over her face and a big smile.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Arya.”

“Hi, Arya. My name’s Betsy Lou.”

“Nice to meet you, Betsy Lou.”

“What can I get ya? A tea, a coffee, hot chocolate?”

“Actually, I was inquiring whether or not you were hiring.”

“Hiring? You mean to work here?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m looking for a job.”

Betsy shook her head with a resigned smile. “Oh, deary me. I don’t get enough business to hire anyone else, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, okay,” I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Well, I don’t mean to disappoint you, dear. Would you like a cookie to go on your way?”

“No, that’s fine, thanks.” I smiled and left the coffee shop.

One down, but hopefully someone on this main road would be hiring. I walked up a couple of blocks and then stopped outside a bookstore. I loved books. I didn’t know much about books, but I could learn. I walked in and plastered a smile on my face.

“Hello?” I called out. Yet again, there was no one there at the front to greet me. I walked towards the back of the bookstore. “Hello?” Still no response.

I looked around. It was a small bookstore, but there must have still been thousands of books. I walked over to one of the bookshelves and smiled as I pulled off a copy of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. This was a book that I remembered from my childhood.

“Oh, Laurie,” I whispered, thinking about the love that was not. “Oh, Joe.”

“Hi. Can I help you?” A woman around my age popped up beside me with a bright smile.

“Hi. I’m looking for a job. Are you hiring?”

“Hiring? Like for a job?”

“Yeah.” Wasn’t that what I just said?

“No, not right now. I’m afraid I don’t make enough money to hire anyone.”

“Oh, okay.” I have chewed on my lower lip. “That’s what the lady in the coffee shop said as well.”

“Oh, you spoke to Betsy Lou?”

I nodded.

“Yeah. This main street is not really happening.” The girl looked at me and shrugged. “Horseshoe Valley is a wonderful place to live, but we don’t get much business. You’d have to hop on over to St. Roses if you’re looking for a job. That’s the town twenty minutes away.”

“Oh, okay. I was hoping to stay in Horseshoe Valley, but I guess if it’s not that busy, I’ll have to go to St. Roses.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked me up and down. “Do I know you?”

“I don’t think so.” I smile shaking my head. “Why?”

“Well, we look about the same age, but I don’t recognize you from high school or elementary school.”

“Oh, I just got to town.”

“Oh, really? Where you staying?”

“I’m up at Horseshoe Ranch, with the Hamiltons.”

“Oh, Amelia and Ranger, and those goddamn fine boys.” She let out a low whistle. “Mm, mm. They are so delicious.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“But three of them’s off the table now. I can’t believe it.”

“Oh?” I asked her. “You know them?”

“Oh yeah. I went to school with Austin. We were in the same grade.”

“Oh, cool. Yeah. He’s getting married.”

“I know. He’s getting married. Beau’s getting married. Wyatt’s getting married. I just can’t believe it. Three Hamilton men at once. The next thing you know, they’re going to say Chet’s getting married.” She laughed.

I paused. “Do you know Chet?”

“Who doesn’t know Chet Hamilton?” She shook her head. “He’s the most infamous of all the Hamilton men.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“He was the star football player. He was valedictorian of his high school graduating class. He was a volunteer fireman. He was scouted by people in Hollywood. He used to do rodeo. Why, he’s just out there.”

“I didn’t realize he was so accomplished.”

“Yeah. And he used to date Miss Montana.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Actually, scratch that, she was Miss Teen Montana.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. She wanted to marry him, but he wasn’t fixing to get married.”

“Oh.” I knew I shouldn’t be gossiping about Chet or his family, but this was information I wasn’t going to get from anywhere else.

“Yeah. Well, don’t tell anyone I told you because I don’t like to be called a gossip.”

“Of course,” I agreed, though she was obviously a huge gossip.

“Well, he was dating Anna Maria—you know, Ms. Teen Montana.”

“Okay.”

“She was called that because I guess her parents went to Anna Maria Island in Florida. You know it?”

“I can’t say that I do. No.”

“Well, yeah. I guess they went there and they got pregnant with her then. So they decided let’s call her Anna Maria.”

“Okay...” I was starting to wonder how long was this story going to take.

“Well, anyways, Anna Maria fell for Chet, because why wouldn’t she? He’s tall. He’s hunky. He’s got those big blue eyes. Sheesh. When he bats those big blues of his, all the women swoon.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” I nodded in agreement.

“Well, Anna Maria told him that her daddy was fixing to marry her off to someone from Colorado that owns some big ranch.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Well, that wasn’t true. Anna Maria’s daddy didn’t have contacts like that, though supposedly, there was an oil baron in Texas that was interested in her. But he was like sixty years old, and Anna Maria was not about to marry him.”

“And what does this have to do with Chet?”

“I’m getting there. Well, Anna Maria was trying to trap Chet. Though I guess we don’t use those words anymore. Anyways, she told him she was on the pill so that he wouldn’t use a condom. Well, I guess. I don’t know exactly the story because I wasn’t there, you know? But she tried to tell Chet she got pregnant and well, she wasn’t pregnant, and Amelia Hamilton found out and she was not happy.”

“So his girlfriend pretended she was pregnant to get him to marry her?”

“Yup. And everyone was in town when it happened. And he said to her, ‘Anna Maria, I am not marrying you. I do not want to date you. I am never getting married. I do not want kids. I have six brothers. They will have plenty of babies, and I will be a good uncle.’”

I remembered what Chet had said about me and Eloise. I guess it wasn’t personal. That didn’t really make me feel better though.

“Well, yeah. I don’t even know how I got onto this subject.” The sales assistant laughed.

“I think because I told you I was staying with the Hamiltons.”

“Oh, yeah. They’re good people. They’re very good people. Now that Flint, he is by far the sexiest man I’ve ever seen in my life. Is he single, too?”

“I can’t say that I spend much time with Flint, sorry.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I guess you’re just working for them, then?”

“Yeah. Kinda.” I wasn’t going to elaborate anymore. This girl didn’t know how to mind her own business.”

“Well, if you are looking for a job and you want one that pays well, you definitely head over to St. Roses. You ain’t gonna find nothing here in Horseshoe Valley, unfortunately. Maybe when things pick up, but not right now.”

“Well, thank you. I guess that’s my next stop.”

Chapter One Hundred Eight

Chet

“Mama, we have got to talk.” I walked into the kitchen and folded my arms, looking sternly at my mom.

“What is it, son?” She glanced up at me and then looked back down at whatever she was rolling out on the countertop.

“Mama, I saw the newspaper with the ad that you created.”

“What ad, son?” She didn’t look up this time.

“Mama, I’ve got the newspaper with my name and my photo saying that I’m looking for a wife.”

“You’re not looking for a wife, Chet?”

“Mama, you know I’m not looking for a wife.” I walked over to her. “You’ve got to stop this. You’ve already got three sons getting married, why do you care about me?”

“Because you are my next oldest, Chet, and out of all my sons, you’re the one that needs a good woman the most.”

“What are you talking about, Mama? I don’t need a good woman. I’ve got you, I’ve got Sadie, I got Olivia, I got Lucy, I got Eloise, I got Arya.”

Mom stopped rolling and looked up at me. “Do you really have Eloise and Arya? What happens when they leave?”

“What do you mean, when they leave? Where’re they going?”

“They’re not going to stay here forever, you know. Arya wants to make a life for herself and Eloise. And as much as I would love them to stay here, she doesn’t feel comfortable.”

“Well, we’ll just have to make her feel more comfortable, won’t we?”

“Chet, we’re not her family, we can’t make her stay. She’s got no job and she’s got no money. And I need to talk to you about what you did with Chip.” She pressed her lips together. “That was not...” She paused.

“Yes, Mama?”

“I have to hold my words right now, Chet, because I was about to say something very unladylike.”

My eyes widened. “You’re really mad at me, Mama?”

“Yes, son, I’m mad at you. You know how important it was to Arya to have that job. And it came with free accommodation! You ruined that for her.”

“I was looking out for her, Mama. You know the sort of guys around here, and she’s working at a bar? She’s too innocent, and Eloise? I can’t have her around those people.”

“It’s none of your business though, Chet. It’s not up to you where Arya works or what Eloise is doing.”

“Mom, do you really want Arya and Eloise living on top of a bar?”

“No, but it’s her choice to make. We’ll always be here if she needs to leave.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t going to wait for something to happen before she came back.”

My mom let out a deep sigh. “Sometimes, Chet, I don’t know if I should scold you or hug you.”

“Just keep loving me, Mama. You know you raised a cowboy. I’m doing the best that I can.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Indeed. Is that why Arya spent the night in your bed last night?”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Darling, Eloise woke up very early this morning and joined me in the kitchen asking for some chocolate milk.”

“She did?”

“Yes, she did. I gave her some chocolate milk and then I tucked her back into bed. I know Arya did not spend the night there. Now, it could be that Arya spent the night in another bedroom, but I don’t think she would leave Eloise. So then I got to thinking she spent the night with my scoundrel son.”

“Mama, it’s not...”

“I don’t want to hear the details, that’s between you and Arya. But if you are going to be messing around with that girl, you better be a gentleman.”

“I’m always a gentleman, Mama, you know that.”

“I don’t think so, because if you were a real gentleman, you wouldn’t have taken her to bed.”

“Oh my gosh, Mom, we’re not in the 1940s anymore. People can sleep together without being married.”

“Yes, they can, but is that what’s right for Eloise and Arya?”

“Mama, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re getting close to them both. Arya is a good girl, and Eloise is a sweetheart. She’s going to start thinking of you as her daddy. And when you’re gone, you’re going to break that little girl’s heart all over again. She already doesn’t know her real daddy. Her mama left her. They came here searching for her father. You got to think about someone other than yourself right now, Chet. I know you like Arya, I know you’re attracted to her. I know you want to explore and see where things could go, but Arya can’t afford that right now.”

“What do you mean, Mom?”

“I mean, she can’t just explore and see where things go. She has other things to think about.”

“I know. And that’s why I’m not going to do anything else with her, because I know that I’m not ready to take on the responsibility of being a father.”

Mom looked closely at me. “Is this because Eloise is someone else’s child?”

“No, Mama. I love that little girl. I don’t care that she has different blood from me. That doesn’t make any difference.”

She gazed at me adoringly and put her hands on my shoulders. “I raised me a good boy. I’m proud of you, Chet.”

“You are?” I frowned, “Even though Arya slept in my bed last night?”

“I’m not proud of that, but I’m proud of the fact that you love Eloise.”

“Of course I do, Mom.”

“Eloise is a good kid. I would like to be her grandma for real.”

“*Mom.*”

“I know you’re not ready yet, Chet, but sometimes...” She paused and looked away.

“What, Mama? Sometimes what?”

“Sometimes by the time you are ready, they’re already gone.” She patted me on the shoulder. “Now you go outside and do some work. I’m going to finish making these rolls.”

“Okay, Mama, thanks.”

I headed out the back towards the stables, Mama’s words ringing in my ears. *Sometimes when you’re ready, they’re already gone.*

But that didn’t apply to me. Arya wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon and neither was Eloise. I had time to think everything through and figure out how to make things work.

Chapter One Hundred Nine

A rya

I was hungry and tired by the time I got to St. Roses, but I was determined to find a job before I got back to Horseshoe Ranch. I wanted to be able to make a way for myself. I didn't want to be dependent on the Hamiltons for anything. As much as I loved being with them and as much as I appreciated everything they'd done for me, I didn't want to take advantage of them.

And now that Chet and I had been intimate, I didn't want to overstay my welcome.

I parked and looked down the street. It definitely was a lot busier here in St. Roses. It didn't have the quaint, tranquil feel of Horseshoe Valley, but Horseshoe Valley didn't have people. St. Roses definitely did. I watched three middle-aged guys head inside a building, laughing. The sign above the door said St. Roses Exclusive Club.

"A bar," I thought to myself. Well, I'd gotten a job at a bar once before, maybe I'd be able to get one now. I reapplied my lipstick and headed inside. It was crowded, which I thought was a good sign.

I headed over to the side and stopped next to the countertop. "Hi," I said to the bartender.

The bartender was missing a front tooth. He nodded.
“What can I get you to drink?”

“Um, I was actually wondering if you were hiring.”

He looked me up and down. “Saw the ad in the paper?”

“No, but I heard that—”

“Hold on,” he cut me off. “Hey, Jimmy!” he shouted towards the back.

“Yeah?” a deep voice shouted back.

“There’s a girl come about the ad.”

“She good looking?” the voice shouted back, and I blushed.

He glanced at me. “Yeah, pretty fine.”

“Okay. I’m coming,” Jimmy responded.

“You stand right there,” the bartender told me. “He’ll be out to interview you.”

“Thank you,”

I waited for the guy, Jimmy, to come out, and I tried not to shudder when I saw him. He was about six foot four and three hundred pounds with a long gray beard. He wore dark sunglasses and a black leather jacket on top of a white t-shirt and faded blue jeans.

“You here about the job?”

I gave him my best smile. “Yeah, I am.”

“You ever done this kind of work before?”

“No, I don’t have much experience. But I’m a fast learner.”

“Okay. And you like music?”

“Sure,” I said nodding.

“You can dance?”

“Um, I’m no Gene Kelly, but I can hold my own.”

“Okay. You want to come to the back with me?”

“Um. To the back?” I raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you mean to fill out paperwork?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “And you know, for the interview portion.”

“Okay, sure.” I looked around the bar to see if anyone was paying attention to our conversation, but no one was looking at us.

“This way,” he said, and I followed him down a dark corridor to a small room. He took a seat on a leather chair and patted the seat next to it. “You can sit next to me.”

“Um. Okay. Thanks.” I looked around the dingy room. It smelled of stale beer and peanuts. “Do you have the forms I need to fill out?”

“The forms?” He shook his head. “I figured we’d do a little bit of an audition.”

“An audition?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Yeah. Make sure that you’re the right woman for the job.”

“Okay.”

“You could start tonight?”

“I could.” I nodded eagerly. “What’s the pay, by the way?”

“The pay? Tips.”

“Tips plus minimum wage?”

“No, just tips.”

“Okay.” I guess I’d see how much I’d make in tips. “How much do the bartenders usually make?”

“The bartenders?” He looked at me. “The bartenders make about \$50 a night, I’d say. You’ll almost certainly make more with your job.”

“Oh, okay.” Perhaps he meant because I was a woman?

He got up and pressed a button. Music blasted through the speakers.

“This here is one of my favorites,” he said, as heavy metal poured into the room.

“Okay,” I said, trying not to wince. The music was way too loud.

“You think you could dance to this?”

“Um, not really.” I shook my head.

He frowned slightly. “I guess this would be a hard one.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So, what sort of music do you like?”

“I mean, I have an eclectic taste in music, you know. I was listening to Shania Twain and Carrie Underwood on the way here.”

“Carrie Underwood? That blonde chick?”

“Yeah.”

“I prefer me Dolly Parton.”

“Um. Okay. I like Dolly Parton, too. She seems really lovely. I was watching this documentary and—”

“Lady, I’m not hiring you to hear about documentaries you watch. I’m hiring you to—” He paused as his phone started ringing. He held up his hand. “This is Jimmy. What’s up? Hey there, Bird. What you doing? Um. Yeah, I got time.” He looked at me for a few seconds. “Hold on. So, you’ll be back here around nine and you’ll start tonight. Okay?”

“So I don’t need to show you how I make cocktails or audition for the—”

“It’s fine. Go. I’ll see you at nine. Just make sure you wear the right clothes.”

“Okay. Thanks so much. You won’t regret...” My voice trailed off as I realized he was no longer listening to me. I left the room excited. I stopped by the bar so that I could look at what the other bartenders were wearing. They all seemed to be pretty casually dressed in jeans and t-shirts. I had plenty of jeans and t-shirts. This was going to be amazing.

“I’ll see you later, tonight,” I called out to my friend at the front.

“Oh, so you took the job?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m really excited.”

“Really? I never heard that one before.”

“Oh?” I looked at him in confusion.

“The last girl lasted about two nights.”

“Oh no. Why is that?” I asked, wondering if I underestimated how hard the job was going to be.

“I don’t know. She got like \$500.”

“She made \$500 in nights?”

“No, she made \$500 in one night,” he said grinning.

“Wow. No way!”

“Yeah. She sold her panties, though for \$300.”

“Um ... okay.” I didn’t know what to make of that. “Well, I better get home now. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. See ya.”

I headed out of the bar, slightly deflated but still happy. I mean, I wasn’t going to sell my panties, not even for \$300. But that meant she still made \$200 in one night. That was amazing. I could make a \$1000 a week if I worked five nights a week. That would be \$4,000 a month. I could definitely get my own apartment and a babysitter for Eloise then. Maybe everything was going to be okay. Maybe, just maybe, I’d be able to make something of myself.

Granted, I didn’t want to work here forever, but maybe in six months or so, I’d be able to save up some money. If I got a loan and a part-time job, I could think about going to school.

And then maybe I’d be able to stop thinking about Chet, the confirmed bachelor, and how badly I wished he wanted a real relationship with me.

Chapter One Hundred Ten

C het

“You got a job and you’re starting today?” I stared at Arya.

“Yep. I got a job.” She beamed at me.

“What’s the name of the place you got a job at?”

“You don’t know it.”

“Try me.”

“It’s called St. Rose’s Exclusive Club. I’m going to be a bartender.” She smiled triumphantly. I knew she was daring me to say something about the job. I cursed under my breath. This was the last thing that I needed.

“St. Rose’s? That’s ages away. I thought you were going to look for a job in Horseshoe Valley.”

“Yeah, well, the economy in Horseshoe Valley is doing really bad. No one’s hiring because they’re not getting much business.”

“That’s part of the reason why me and my brothers want to bring tourists to town,” I said. “Once we bring tourists, they’ll shop in town and then—”

“Well, I can’t wait on that,” she cut me off. “I mean, I think it’s admirable that you and your brothers are trying to help Horseshoe Valley as well as Horseshoe Ranch, but I need a job *now*.”

“Okay, so you’re going to be working as a bartender and you start tonight.”

“Yep. That’s what I said, Chet.”

“But how can they expect you to start today? You literally just went in.”

She ignored me. “I already spoke to your mom, and she says she doesn’t mind watching Eloise tonight. So,” she shrugged, “I need to go and get ready.”

“What are you going to wear?”

“Chet, seriously?”

“I’m just asking. I don’t want you to go dress in all slutty, and then those guys going to think they got a chance.”

“‘Dressing all slutty?’” She raised an eyebrow at me. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. Wearing some slutty dress with no bra and no panties.”

“Chet, I’m not trying to seduce every man at the bar. I’m going to wear a bra and I’m going to wear panties. Don’t worry.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Are you sure about this, Arya?”

“I’m sure about this. The last girl that was bartending there made five hundred dollars in one night.”

“Five hundred dollars in one night at St. Rose’s Exclusive Club? Really? Isn’t that place a shithole?”

“No, it’s not a shithole.” She paused. “Well, I mean it didn’t look like the nicest bar in the world, but obviously it’s not a shithole if the bartenders are making that much money.”

“I guess.” I folded my arms across my chest. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know,” I said again. “I really do not like the sound of this, Arya.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter what you think, Chet.”

“Oh, yeah?” I pulled her close and gave her a big kiss on the mouth.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“You can’t just kiss me when and whenever you feel like it.”

“Oh, yeah? Why is that?”

“Because we already agreed that we’re not going to be a thing. You and me,” she pushed her hands against my chest, “are not a thing.”

“Well, I’d beg to differ. I think we are a thing.”

“We’re not a thing, Chet. I already told you I’m not going to pretend—”

“I don’t want you to pretend,” I said.

“What?” she said, surprised.

“I don’t want you to pretend to be my fake fiancée.”

“Okay, well you certainly wanted me to yesterday.”

“I was in shock at the newspaper article that my mom had printed up and I wasn’t thinking. It was a stupid idea. There’s no way we could pretend to be engaged and then call the engagement off. My mom wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Okay, so then why are we still talking about this?”

“That doesn’t mean that we can’t still have a thing,” I said softly.

“What thing, Chet? You already told me that your—” Her phone started beeping. “That’s my alarm. I have to grab a shower and get ready.”

“But we were just talking about you and me.”

“There is no you and me, but there is a me in this job, and I need to make money. So this is all we’re going to say on the matter right now.” She gave me a pointed look and then walked away, leaving me to fume.

* * *

“Hey, Wyatt, what you up to tonight?” I asked my brother as he entered the kitchen, looking for something to eat.

“Not much.” He opened the door of the refrigerator and studied the contents. “Sadie said she’s going out with the girls, so I guess I’m left to do whatever I want. What about you?”

“I was thinking about going into St. Roses.”

“St. Roses?” He looked up at me. “Why?”

“Well, I’m not sure if you heard, but Arya got a job—”

“You’re not going to get her fired from another job, are you?”

“No, I’m not going to get her fired from a job. I just want to make sure that everything’s on the up and up.”

“What do you mean? What’s her job?”

“She’s working at the St. Roses Exclusive Club.”

“That bar?” He looked surprised. “She really wants to be a bartender, huh?”

“I guess so. I don’t know why she just won’t accept a job working here at the ranch.”

“Maybe because she doesn’t want to feel beholden to you.”

“Why would she beholden to me? Just because—”

“Dude, would you want to work for someone you’re sleeping with?”

“It’s not like we’re sleeping together actively. I mean, it’s not like I’m her Richard Gere or anything.”

“Her what?”

“*Pretty Woman*?”

“Yeah. She is a pretty woman. So?”

“No, I’m talking about the movie *Pretty Woman*.”

“Never heard of it,” Wyatt opened the fridge again.

I stared at him in surprise. “You’ve never heard of *Pretty Woman* with Richard Gere and Julia Roberts?”

“When did it come out, last year?”

“No, I think it came out in the ’80s or the ’90s,” I shrugged. “I’m not exactly sure when.”

“So then why do you think I would’ve seen it?”

“Well, anyway, in *Pretty Woman* Richard Gere is this rich businessman and Julia Roberts is a lady of the night.”

“A lady of the night?” Wyatt looked confused. “Dude, just speak in plain English, please.”

“She was a prostitute.”

“Oh, you mean like a ho?”

“We call them whores, Wyatt.”

“Whores, hoes, prostitutes, whatever.” He started laughing.

“What’s so funny, Wyatt?”

“It just reminds me of that song.”

“What song?”

“You know, there’s some prostitutes in this house. There’s some prostitutes in this house,” he sang loudly.

“Is that how the song goes?”

“No, but you know what I mean.”

“Oh my God, Wyatt. We’re getting sidetracked. I don’t care about your prostitute song. I just want to go and make sure that Arya is going to be okay.”

He looked at me through narrowed eyes. “So...she knows we’re coming?”

“No, she doesn’t know.”

“And you don’t think she’s going to be upset when we just show up at her new job?”

“Well, we’re not just going to show up at her new job as us.”

“Um, what do you mean?”

“We’re going to put on disguises.”

“Oh, hell no.” He put his hands up and took a step back. “I’m not dressing up as a drag queen.”

“Wyatt, sometimes I really think you’ve lost your marbles.” I was getting increasingly annoyed.

“What?” he said. “What do you mean?”

“Of course you’re not going to dress up as a drag queen. We’re going to go as old men.”

“Oh, and that’s better?”

“Are you coming with me or not?”

“I guess, seeing as I have nothing better to do, but if Arya finds out and she’s mad, you’re taking all the blame.”

“Yeah, yeah, and she’s not going to find out.”

“Really? You think we’re going to have that good of a disguise?”

“Yep,” I nodded. “I got some fake mustaches, and we’re going to wear dark glasses.”

“We’re going to wear dark glasses in a club?”

“Well, it’s a bar, and yeah, you know there are lots of weirdos in St. Roses.”

“That is true,” he laughed. “Okay, fine. When are we leaving?”

“Well, she left about an hour ago, so I think we should leave as soon as possible.”

“Okay, and you have the disguises ready? What are we wearing?”

“I figured we could wear overalls.”

“Overalls?” He shook his head. “No way, man. I know we live in Montana, but—”

“But what?”

“I ain’t no country dude.”

“Oh my God, Wyatt,” I laughed. “You’re too much.”

“I know. That’s what Sadie tells me all the time.”

I groaned at him. “Come on. Let’s go and put on the outfits I’ve got ready for us.”

“You’ve already got outfits ready for us? You just asked me if I was going to go.”

“Well, I had a feeling I could persuade you.”

“Uh-huh. Why do I think this is not going to be a good idea?”

“Trust me. It’s going to be fine.”

We pulled up outside the club about an hour later. I looked up and down the street. “This place already is giving me bad vibes,” I said to Wyatt as we got out of my truck.

“Why? We haven’t even gotten inside yet.”

“It just looks seedy.”

“I guess. So exactly how are we going to do this?”

He looked at me and I looked back at him and we both laughed. We had on big cowboy hats, fake mustaches, sunglasses, and overalls with cowboy boots. I didn’t recognize him and I was pretty sure he wouldn’t have recognized me.

“Let’s just go in and we’ll see if she’s behind the bar or if she’s waitressing or whatever. We just want to keep an eye on her. We’ll sit in the corner.”

“Okay. Whatever you say, Chet.”

“Just follow me,” I said, as I took the lead and walked inside the bar. I looked around and saw about ten different groups of men. It was pretty packed here. I couldn’t lie, a lot more packed than 12 Point Buck Bar usually was. I didn’t see Arya, though. I sighed as I looked back at Wyatt, who was fiddling with his mustache.

“Don’t touch it, dude. It’ll fall off.”

“Okay,” he said rolling his eyes. “So where should we sit?”

“Let’s go over there,” I nodded to a table at the back. We headed to the back where a couple of older women stared at us.

“Hey, there cowboy,” a woman with long red hair said to me. “You want to join us?”

She gave me a wink and I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

I hurried back and took a seat. Wyatt followed behind me.

“Well, I think one of us is going to have to go up to the bar,” Wyatt said, “because I don’t see any waitresses in here.”

“Yeah, me either. I also don’t see Arya.” I pulled out my phone to see if she’d called or texted me about something being wrong but I had no missed messages from her. “Something doesn’t feel right,” I said.

I was about to jump up and head over to the bar when a tall man walked into the middle of the room with a megaphone.

“Good evening, everyone!” he shouted, the noise reverberating across the room. “I’m glad I’ve got y’all’s attention. Tonight is a very special night. Tonight is gentleman’s night and I’m pleased to announce that we have for you a very special guest all the way from da da da da ...” He paused for dramatic effect.

“From where?” an old guy at a table next to us shouted.

“Texas,” he said. “We got a good old cowgirl from Texas and she’s about to show y’all how it’s done.”

“How what’s done?” another guy called out.

“You’ll see. Now, head on up to the back room, make sure you got plenty of singles. We can make change for you at the bar.”

I looked at Wyatt and he looked at me and I could feel my stomach sinking. “Oh, shit,” I said. “Please do not tell me that Arya took a job as a stripper. Did she really need a job that badly?”

Wyatt shook his head. “I don’t know what to say, bro. I mean, I would’ve said no, but now I’m not sure. It’s not looking good.”

“Come on, let’s go to the back,” I said, shaking my head. I was starting to get angry.

We followed a group of men into a darkly lit room. There was a stage in the center and a spotlight next to a microphone. There was no one on the stage and there was no one else in the room. Wyatt and I took a seat towards the back and we watched as the room got crowded. I looked at Wyatt and he looked at me.

“I can’t see shit, man,” he said.

“Take off your glasses, then,” I said, as I took my own glasses off. I was about to speak when Guns’n’Roses poured through the speakers.

“Okay, then. This is some odd music for a strip club,” Wyatt said with a grin.

“Wyatt, this is not funny.”

“I didn’t say it was funny. I just—”

“Shut up, bro.” Abruptly the music changed to “Sweet Home Alabama,” and I looked around the room wondering what was going on. The old man jumped on the stage and took the microphone.

“Welcome, everyone. Introducing all the way from Mesquite, Texas, we have Lady Two Guns. Come on, Lady Two Guns, get out here.”

And then before I knew what was happening, a nervous-looking Arya walked out onto the stage, wearing a long skirt, cowboy boots, a bikini top, a cowboy hat, and two guns in her hand. She looked absolutely mortified, and I just wanted to run up to the stage to help her.

I was about to jump up when Wyatt grabbed my arm. “Don’t do it, bro.”

“What? She’s obviously not comfortable up there.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t leave, so you need to let her finish what she started.”

“What? Are you joking? Look at these dirty old men. They —”

“Dude, she’s not going to appreciate it if you ruin another job for her.”

“I’m not ruining a job for her. I’m trying to save her.”

“She didn’t ask you to save her. Trust me. Be there to catch her when she falls, but don’t stop her from jumping, okay?”

“Fine,” I sighed. “When did you get to be so smart, Wyatt?”

“I’ve always been smart, big bro. You’ve only just started listening.”

Chapter One Hundred Eleven

Arya

I could hear the men chanting from their seats and I blinked nervously. I couldn't believe what had happened. As soon as I had arrived at the job, they'd led me to the back and told me to change into this absolutely horrendous outfit. I'd had a bad feeling as soon as I'd been asked my favorite songs to dance to. Now thinking back to the earlier conversation, it all made sense. I wasn't here to tend bar. I was here to be a stripper.

I'd wanted to leave right away, but I was too embarrassed to just go right home. Especially after Chet had told me he didn't think it was a good idea. But now, here I was, playing this Texas Two Guns and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I felt someone pushing me from behind.

"Get on the stage and start dancing," Jimmy said roughly. I took a step forward. The cheers went even wilder as I made my way to the front of the stage. *Just dance, Arya*, was all I could think to myself, just dance. I felt completely exposed in my bikini top and was glad that I'd been able to wear a long skirt as opposed to bikini bottoms.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do when the men started shouting for me to take my top off because there was no way in hell that was going to happen, and there was also no way in hell I was going to give any private lap dances. Really, I knew I should just leave, but I figured maybe if I just did a dance

that would be good enough. Maybe people would throw money on the stage. Maybe they would realize it was my first time and cut me some slack.

I started moving my hips back and forth to the beat of “Sweet Home Alabama.” *Please, God, let this end quickly,* was all I could think. *Let there be a fire in the kitchen or let a tornado hit the state right now.*

But I wasn’t that lucky.

The next song that started playing was “Pour Some Sugar on Me.” A man at the front stood up and walked towards the stage.

“Pour some sugar on me, baby!” he shouted and a bunch of other men cheered. I tried to smile, but I felt like I was grimacing.

“Sit on my face!” someone else shouted. And I strutted, I turned around so that my ass was facing the crowd and my face was towards the back. I moved my hips back and forth to the beat, I knew that I was an absolutely crappy dancer, but there wasn’t really much else that I could do.

“Start taking off your clothes!” someone else shouted. I would rather have died than take anything off.

“Come on, sexy. Let me see that ass!” another man yelled. I took off my cowboy hat and threw it into the crowd, and the cheers went even wilder. I could see how the fanfare might be appealing to some women, but it wasn’t appealing to me.

“I want that bikini top!” someone else shouted.

I took a deep breath, unsure what to do. Suddenly, a guy jumped on the stage and wrapped his arms around my waist. I turned around and pushed him off me.

“Hey,” I said, “stop it!”

“I’m helping you, beautiful,” he said. “You seem to forget where your bikini strap is.” Before I could respond another man had jumped onto the stage and punched the guy right in the face. The guy went flying to the ground and I screamed.

“It’s okay, Arya,” said a deep, familiar voice. My savior was wearing a cowboy hat, a fake mustache, and overalls, but as I looked into his eyes, I knew it was Chet.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed at him.

“Saving you.”

“Chet!”

“Don’t you mean, thank you?” He grabbed my hand.
“Come on”

“What’s going on here?” a man shouted.

“Let me take you home.” Chet squeezed my hand. “She’s done,” he shouted at the crowd. “Go home to your wives, fellas.”

“I want to see some titties and some ass!” an older man from the side yelled angrily. Chet let go of my hand and took a menacing step in his direction.

“You want me to beat your ass well?”

He took a hasty step back. Chet walked back towards me and grabbed my hand.

“Chet, this was my—”

“Really, Arya?”

He gave me a look, and I pressed my lips together. Before I knew what was happening, he swept me up and jumped off of the stage with me in his arms. He carried me as if I were light as a feather.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, “I just need to get my purse, it’s in the back.”

“Wyatt?” Chet barked. I blinked as I realized that his brother was there as well in an equally ridiculous get-up. “Go to the back and get Arya’s things. I’m taking her to the truck.”

“Okay. Hey, Arya,” he said with a smile.

“Hi, Wyatt,” I said sheepishly.

“What a night, eh?”

“You can say that again.” My entire body was hot with embarrassment. “You can put me down now, Chet.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, shaking his head. “Come on.” He carried me all the way through the bar and only let me down when we got outside.

“I cannot believe you just did that,” I snapped.

“You cannot believe I just saved you from a bunch of dirty old men?”

“I didn’t need you to save me!”

“What were you going to do next, Arya? Tell me that.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“They were begging you to take off your bikini top. A man jumped up to help you. What were you going to do next?”

“I...” I paused “Fine, I was out of my element and I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, but you shouldn’t have come. You can’t fight all my battles for me.”

“You want to bet?” He raised an eyebrow at me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that if you make stupid decisions, I will be here for you.”

“If I make stupid decisions—What stupid decisions did I make?”

“You took a job here, for one.”

“I thought I was going to be a bartender.”

“But you are not. You’re a stripper.”

“When you found out you were a stripper, why didn’t you leave? Did you want to be a stripper? Did you want to give dirty men lap dances? Did you want to feel weird men underneath you growing hard trying to grab at your pussy and...”

“Chet! You don’t have to say that!”

“I don’t have to say what?” You didn’t think every single man in there wasn’t thinking about how they could finger you and maybe pay you big bucks?

“No, I wasn’t thinking about that. They told me I could make \$500 in...” I sighed, “Now I know why I was going to make so much money.”

“Arya, I’m not trying to prevent you from earning money and making a life for you and Eloise. I am trying to protect you from signing up for stupid,” he glared at me “and yes, I said *stupid* jobs that will put you at risk”

“I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it my whole life.”

“I know you’ve been doing it your whole life, Arya, but maybe I want to help take care of you too.”

“Why? Why do you want to take care of me?”

“Maybe because I like you, you stupid woman.”

“Okay, well you like me, but I need more than like to pay the bills, okay? I have to provide for me and Eloise—”

“Maybe *I* want to provide for you and Eloise!”

“No, you don’t. I appreciate your friendship, Chet. It means a lot to me. You’re one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met, but—”

“Oh, you’re not going to give me the friend talk right now. You fucked me in my bed last night.”

“So? It didn’t mean anything to you. You said it yourself.”

“When did I say it didn’t mean anything to me?”

“You told me that.”

“I don’t think I did, actually. I think you assumed that without talking it through with me.”

I blinked. “So... what are you trying to say?”

Chet swallowed. “I’m saying that maybe, just maybe, I want to step up to the plate. Maybe I want to have a real go of this with you, Arya.”

“A real go of this?”

“Maybe it means that I’m falling for you, and I want to step up to the plate and take care of you.”

“I don’t need you to take care—”

“I know you don’t need me to pay for everything for you and for Eloise. And I know you don’t need me to be Eloise’s father, but I want to be there for you. Maybe I’ve realized that what I’ve been fighting is myself. And maybe I realize that two is always better than one. Or in our case, three.”

“What do you mean three?”

“You, me, and Eloise, silly.”

“You can’t just say things like that, Chet. This isn’t a game.”

“I never said it was a game.”

“I can’t just have someone in and out of Eloise’s life. If you’re going to be in her life, it has to be...”

“Forever,” he said softly. “I know that, and that’s what I want.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I know you don’t believe me, and I know this has just been an absolutely crazy week, but I want to be in your life forever. And I want to make this work. I want this to be a real relationship. Will you give me a shot? Please?”

The silence stretched out between us as I considered his words. “I have to think about this,” I finally said. “I just don’t know.”

“Okay. I’ll give you as much time as you need, but promise me one thing, Arya.”

“What, Chet?”

“Promise me you’re not going to take another job without talking to me first, please.”

“Fine,” I said. “I can do that, but...”

“What?”

“If I like the job, you have to let me do it.”

“Fine. I promise.” There was another long pause, then he smiled. “So does this mean you’ll spend the night with me?”

Chapter One Hundred Twelve

C het

“No, that’s not what it means.”

“But why not?” I didn’t want to spend another night without her.

“Because this is all really fresh and really new, and I don’t know if this is just adrenaline in you talking because I ended up in a really crazy job tonight. Or if this is something that you really want.”

“This is definitely something I really want, Arya. *You* are something I really want, or rather, you are someone I really want.” I leaned forward and I kissed her. She kissed me back and I felt her breasts pressed against my chest. I ran my hands down her bare shoulders and felt her trembling in my arms.

The sound of loud clapping interrupted us.

“Well, I see you two have made up.” Wyatt gave us a sardonic grin.

“Very funny, Wyatt.” I took a step back from a blushing Arya. “You got her stuff?”

“I got it.” He held up Arya’s purse and clothes. “So that was a kiss and a makeup?” I glared at him, willing him to shut up, but Wyatt went on. “So Arya, does this mean I can welcome you to the family now?”

“Wyatt!” I shouted at him. “Really?”

“What?” he laughed. “You said so many things to Sadie before she and I officially got together.”

“Yeah, but that was because...”

“Because what?” he said.

“Nothing! Let’s get in the truck. *You* can sit in the back,” I said pointedly to Wyatt.

“I knew I was going to be sitting at the back,” he muttered.

“But what about my car?” Arya said, “I can’t just leave it here.”

“You can and you will,” I told Wyatt. “I’m driving you home,” I said to Arya. “We’ll come and get your car tomorrow.”

“I can just drive it back now—”

“Nope, you’re not.”

“Dude,” Wyatt interrupted, “why don’t you drive her car and I’ll drive the truck? That way we don’t have to leave it.”

“Yeah. Can we do that please?” Arya said. “That car is all I have in the world, and I would hate for something to happen to it.”

“That works,” I admitted. “I guess I just didn’t think of it myself.”

“I guess you don’t know the answer to everything then, do you, big bro?” Wyatt flashed me a cocky grin.

“Come on, Arya. You want to put a shirt on? You, uh, look cold.”

Arya followed my gaze to the front of her bikini where her hard nipples were poking out. She blushed fiercely. “I’m fine. Thank you,” she said defiantly.

“Works for me,” I said with a grin.

Wyatt looked at both of us. “Guys, are you really going to have that sort of conversation in front of me?”

“I know, Chet, because that was so inappropriate,” Arya added, but I could tell she was teasing me now.

“Come on, Arya,” I said, “where’s your car?”

“A couple of blocks this way.” She took her handbag and clothes from Wyatt. “Thanks for getting this for me.”

“No worries,” he said. “Oh, and here’s twenty dollars.” He handed her a bill.

“Who gave me twenty dollars?” she said in surprise, “I know they didn’t pay me.”

“No,” he laughed, “it was from one of the gentlemen that was sitting in the front.”

“Why did he give me twenty dollars?”

“He said he hadn’t seen a fight like that in a while, and you made his evening.”

“Then I guess I should give the money to Chet.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” I said, “You keep that twenty and let it be a reminder to you that you will never take another job in a bar or at a strip club.”

“Really, Chet? You’re going to—” I interrupted her with a big kiss. She kissed back for a moment, then playfully pushed me away. “You can’t just shut me up by kissing me every single time you don’t like what I’m about to say.”

“Want to bet?” I said with a grin, and she just laughed.

“Okay, guys. I’ll see you back in the ranch,” Wyatt said, “Try not to be too late.”

“We’re following right behind you, dude.” I rolled my eyes.

“If you say so.” And with that, Wyatt got into the truck and drove off.

As Arya and I walked towards her car, she looked over at me, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I don’t know whether to be mad at you or to be really thankful to you,” she said in a soft voice.

“Um... Obviously, you’re going to be very thankful. Right?” I gave her my most beguiling look.

“I mean, I’m thankful that you were there... but I’m also mad because I told you not to interfere.”

“I know, but I know this area better than you, Arya. And when you told me it was at Rose’s Exclusive Club, well, I’ve never heard great things about that place. And I was right to come.”

“I guess,” she said, “But are you going to do that every single time I start a job?”

“If you tell me it’s at a club or a bar, yeah, probably. Can’t you get a different sort of job?”

“I don’t have that many skills and I don’t have much education.” She looked down at the ground. “I don’t really qualify for that much.”

“Well, you said you wanted to go back to school, right?”

“Yeah. But I don’t have the money.” She sighed. “I don’t want to get into this again.”

“I know.” I squeezed her hand. “We don’t have to talk about it tonight, but we do need to come up with some viable options for you because I want you to be happy in what you’re doing. You shouldn’t have to take just any old job to pay money.”

“To pay money?” She raised an eyebrow.

“I mean to make money. Sorry, I was so dazzled by your smile that...”

“Chet, shut up.” She hit me in the shoulder as we reached her car.

I pulled her into my arms. “You looked mighty sexy up on that stage.”

“Oh, really?” She smiled slyly. “How sexy?”

“Very sexy. So sexy that I wouldn’t mind you giving me a private lap dance.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Really.” I grinned at her.

“Well, how many singles are you going to throw in the air?”

“Maybe I’m not going to throw singles. Maybe I’ll throw twenties.”

She laughed. “You do realize that you just basically told me that you want me as a stripper, but just not for other men?”

“I think that’s pretty much how every man feels about the woman he’s in love with.”

She gasped, as I realized what I said. “You’re in love with me?” she whispered.

I stared at her for a few seconds my heart pounding. “I guess I am.” It was a weird feeling, but I knew it was true. “I think I’ve been in love with you for a while,” I added quietly.

“Oh, really? You could have fooled me.”

“Really? I mean, I take every opportunity I can to be next to you, to play with Eloise, to spend time with you, to just have you by my side. And I love kissing you and touching you and...”

“Fucking me?” She smirked.

“Now, now, Arya, we call it making love here in Horseshoe Valley.”

“Really? You call it making love?”

“I do.” I chuckled, “I mean, have I always called it making love? Maybe not, but that’s because I’ve never been in love before.”

“Not even with Miss Teen Montana?”

I froze as I stared at her. “What?”

“Weren’t you in love with Miss Teen Montana?”

“How the hell do you know that I dated Miss Teen Montana?”

“Let’s just say that a little birdie told me.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure who told you that, but no, I wasn’t in love with Miss Teen Montana. We went out for a couple of weekends. That was it.”

“A couple of weekends. Really?” She looked dubious. “And I’m supposed to believe that she wanted to have your baby after a couple of weekends.”

“You slept with me. Right?”

“Yeah. And?”

“You know how good I am in bed.” I chuckled. “Once you have Chet Hamilton, you don’t want to go back to anyone else.”

“Oh my God! Chet. Really?” She shook her head as we got into the car.

“Really,” I said. “You know, there’s something I’ve always wanted to do.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve always wanted to make love in a car.”

“You’ve never made love in a car?”

“Nope.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“What? It’s true. I’ve made love in a truck and I’ve made love on a tractor but never in a car.”

“You’ve made love on a *tractor*?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to try it sometime.”

“No, I don’t want to be your second.”

“Um... You’d be my third.”

“Chet!”

“Sorry. You asked.”

“I didn’t really want to know the answer to that.” She sighed. “You’ve just had so many women. I just don’t know

that I'm ever going to be enough for you."

"Arya, are you kidding me right now? There has never been anyone like you in my life."

"Really? Then prove it to me." Her eyes flashed with a challenge.

"How can I prove it to you?"

"Show me how special I am to you. Show me that you've never felt this way about anyone else before."

"Um...Isn't that what I'm doing right now?"

"No, you've said that, but I don't know if that's actually true. Maybe you're just saying that because you want to sleep with me."

"But I've already slept with you. So doesn't that kind of go against what you're saying?"

"No. Maybe you just want to sleep with me again. I just want to know that I really am special to you and not someone you feel like you need to take care of and protect. And your alpha maleness is making you think that it's more."

"Number one: yes. I'm an alpha male. And number two, I've always been an alpha male, and number three, I've never felt this way before in my life. I've never cared about someone so much that they occupy my every moment. I've never worried about someone so much, and I've never just wanted to be by someone's side so much."

I reached over and stroked her shoulder lightly with my fingers. "Just touching you, being close to you means the world to me. I don't even have to make love to you to feel that spark. Yes, I'm hard as hell right now. And yes, I'd love to fuck you hard and hear you scream my name, but even if that doesn't happen, you fill my heart and my soul. I love to see you smile. I love to see you frown. I love to hear you angry and sad and mad. And I know that sounds weird because it sounds weird even to me, but I love every single part of you, Arya. I love you."

There was a long pause. I took a deep breath. “And I notice that you haven’t said it back to me,” I added.

“Maybe because I feel like this is a dream,” she whispered. “Maybe because I feel like I’m going to wake up tomorrow and this never really happened.”

“Oh, you’re going to wake up tomorrow. And all you’re going to be thinking about is one thing,” I promised.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“About how good it felt riding my lap in this car.” I winked at her.

A smile crossed her face then she burst out laughing. Without warning, she reached down between my legs and pulled the lever so my seat went back.

“Whoa, what’re you doing?” I asked in surprise.

“You said you wanted me to ride you, right?”

“Yeah. But we’re still—”

“Don’t tell me you’re not up for it right here, right now, big boy?”

I felt her hand on my crotch, squeezing, and I groaned. “I thought we’d drive up to a field or something. I didn’t think we’d...”

“You scared to do it right here?” She unzipped me and I felt her hand pulling out my hard cock. I groaned as her fingers slid up and down.

“Fuck! Arya, you are hot as hell.”

“Am I?” she smiled. She brushed her lips against mine then straightened up, unhooked her bikini top, and threw it into the back seat.

“Fuck!” My hands moved up the side of her body and found her breasts. I played with her nipples and she started moving back and forth on my lap.

It was a tight squeeze, but still it felt absolutely amazing. She positioned my cock in between her legs. I groaned at the

sensation of her cotton panties against my tip.

“Fuck, Arya. I don’t know that...”

“You don’t know what?” She slipped her tongue into my mouth, and then she was sliding her panties to the side and my cock was rubbing against her wetness.

I groaned again. I yanked her panties all the way to the side and slipped my cock inside of her. She shifted her hips, easing herself onto me until she was impaled on my cock, and moaned against my lips. As she moved up and down, I grabbed her ass and moved her faster and faster against me. She moved up so that her breasts were brushing against my face. I caught her right nipple in my mouth and sucked.

She cried out as she bounced harder and harder on my lap. And I groaned as I could feel myself about to explode inside of her. She shifted back and forth a couple more times. And then I was coming hard and fast.

I didn’t stop her from bouncing up and down. Instead, I grabbed her hips so that I could increase her pace. And then she was crying out as well and exploding on top of me.

She sat back, gasping. “Oh shit! That was hot!”

“That was the hottest thing I have ever done in my life,” I panted in agreement.

“And you had sex on a tractor.” She grinned. I laughed as she moved over slightly and got back into her own seat.

“Well, that was out of this world,” I murmured, barely able to think.

“Maybe we should go home now,” she whispered.

“You’re going to sleep in my bed tonight. Right?” I asked her softly.

“Why? We’ve already fucked?”

“I don’t want you to sleep in my bed just because I want to fuck you, Arya. I want to feel your body next to mine. I want to wake up to your beautiful face in the morning...”

“Fine,” she agreed softly, “I’ll share your bed tonight.”

“I love you, Arya.” I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

“I love you too. Chet Hamilton. I think I’ve loved you since the first moment I saw you.”

Chapter One Hundred Thirteen

Chet

“Oh, boy,” I said to Arya as we pulled up to Horseshoe Ranch.

“What is it?” she asked me as she peered at me curiously.

“Wyatt just texted me to say Mom and Dad are waiting up to talk to me.”

“Oh, why?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s not good.” I let out a deep sigh. “She’s probably going to be mad that I went down to the bar to see how it was going. She’s not going to understand that I was trying to look out for you, but—”

“I’m sure she’ll understand,” Arya said, squeezing my arm. “I mean, I understand.”

“Yeah, but that’s because you’re...” I paused. My mom and dad were standing on the front porch waiting for me. They did not look pleased. “Oh, boy.” I let out a deep sigh. “You ready to face the music, Arya?”

“Why would I be ready to face the music?” She giggled. “It’s you they want to talk to you, right?”

“I mean, possibly. Maybe they want to talk to you. Maybe they want to offer you a job—”

“Chet,” she cut me off. “If they wanted to offer me a job, I’m sure they wouldn’t do it in the middle of the night.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I parked the car and turned off the ignition. “Okay. Let’s go inside.”

I hurried over to her side, but she had already opened the door. “I was going to open that for you.” I frowned at her.

“It’s okay. I can open my own door.”

“Yeah, but—”

“It’s okay, Chet. You’re just trying to delay talking to your parents.”

“Am I that obvious?”

She nodded. “Yes, you are. Come on, let’s go up.”

“Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad. You’re up late,” I said cheerfully as Arya trailed behind me.

“We wanted to speak to you, Chet.” My dad’s voice sounded gruff, and I could feel my stomach turning. This wasn’t good. “Where have you been?”

“Um, out?”

“Out where?” Mom asked.

“Just driving around. Why?”

“Because didn’t we both speak to you about butting into Arya’s business?”

Arya cut in. “It’s okay, Mrs. Hamilton. I—”

My mom turned to Arya. “Arya, you are a dear woman and Eloise is amazing, but my son is being very inappropriate.”

“I know he’s been inappropriate, but I was very grateful to him for coming tonight. He kind of saved me,” Arya said.

“He did?” My mother sounded surprised.

“Yeah, my bartending job actually turned out to be a stripping gig.” Arya grimaced, and my dad’s eyes widened in shock.

“Stripper?” Mom said. “Oh, my.”

“I told you, Mom. I had a bad feeling and that’s why I went because I—”

“We both know why you went, Chet.” Mom pursed her lips disapprovingly. “And honestly, I think out of all my sons, you’re the most obstinate, obnoxious, and—”

“Mom, Arya and I are in a relationship now.”

“What?” A smile blossomed across her face. “Wait. When? I had no idea.”

My dad put his arm around Mom and smiled. “So what’s going on here, son?”

“It just happened tonight. I realized that I was doing all of these things because I had feelings for Arya and I didn’t want any harm to come to her. I didn’t want her to meet any other men. I guess I just realized that I’ve been falling in love with her the last couple of months and she has been falling in love with me, and so we’re going to try and make it work.”

“What does that mean exactly?” Mom asked.

“Mom, is that really any of your business?”

“Well, someone needs to make sure that you have good intentions.”

“Mom, I’m your son.”

“Yes, and Arya’s like a daughter to me, and Eloise is like granddaughter. I need to make sure that—”

“Mom, I want to marry Arya. I want to have lots of babies.”

“You do?” Arya looked over at me in surprise. “You never said that.”

“I mean, I thought that was obvious,” I replied.

“How was that obvious?”

“Because I told you I love you and I want to be with you.”

“Yeah, but that—”

“Oh, Arya.” My mom started laughing. “You will soon realize that my sons are men of few words, just like their father. They always assume you know exactly what they’re thinking. But as I say to Ranger all the time, and as I’ll say to

you now, Chet, we can't read your mind, no matter how much you think we can."

"Okay." I looked at Arya and ran my hands through my hair. "I hope I haven't been too forward. I thought we were sort of on the same page there."

"You told me that you loved me and that you wanted to date me. You didn't tell me that you wanted to marry me and have kids with me."

"Is that going to be a problem?" I raise an eyebrow. "Is that not something you want as well?"

"Well, I'd love to get married and have kids," she said, "but I kind of thought I would be dating the person I was going to marry for a while."

"Yeah. Well, it's not like we're going to get married right away."

Arya's expression was doubtful. "I mean, is this real?"

"What are you talking about? What do you mean is this real?"

She looked over at my mother guiltily and sighed.

"What is it?" Amelia said. "What's wrong, Arya?"

"Well, I know you put that ad in a newspaper looking for a husband for Chet, and ever since that, Chet's been upset. Chet, you have to admit you're the one that said that you wanted me to be your fake fiancée just a couple of days ago. Now you're telling me you want me to be your real fiancée. I can't keep up. Are you saying this because you really do have feelings for me and you really do want this, or are you saying this because you want your mom to get off your back?"

"Oh, shit," I groaned. "I guess I asked for this one."

"What are you talking about?" Mom's eyebrows drew together. "Fake fiancée, really, Chet? You were going to pretend to be engaged just so—"

"Mom, you put an ad in the newspaper advertising for a wife for me."

Mom smiled and looked at my dad. “Well, I wasn’t really advertising for a wife for you.”

“What do you think an ad in the paper with my face and a caption that says, ‘Want to marry a cowboy?’ is going to suggest to pretty much everyone in Montana and Wyoming and Idaho and—”

“I know, son, but you know that I always do things for a reason.”

“You should know that by now,” my dad chimed in.

“So then what was your reason?”

My mom looked at me and then looked at Arya. “What do you think, son? Look who’s been here under your nose for the longest time.”

“I wouldn’t say the longest time, Mom.”

“Long enough. You’ve known from the first moment you laid eyes on her that Arya was something special. I’ve seen the bond that you have with her and the bond you have with Eloise. And Arya, let me tell you now, Chet has never been interested in kids. So when I saw that he was spending time with Eloise going out of his way to make you guys happy and to feel safe, I knew he was in love with you. I just needed him to figure this out by himself.”

“Mom, seriously?” I huffed. “You put an ad in the newspaper just so I could figure out that I was in love with Arya?”

“Well, it helped, didn’t it?”

“No, it didn’t help. What helped was Arya being a dumbass and taking those stupid jobs.”

“Excuse me?” she snapped. “I’m not a dumbass!”

“Honey, you are a bit of a dumbass. You taking a job at St. Rose’s Exclusive Club and not even knowing what you were hired for? Bells weren’t ringing in your head?”

“Well, not really,” she said. “...Okay, they were kind of ringing, but I wasn’t thinking properly.”

“So did you actually have to strip?” Mom looked worried.

“No.” Arya shook her head quickly. “Chet saved me just in time.

“Were you going to strip?” I asked her, eyes narrowed. “From what you said, you weren’t but—”

“I don’t know what I was going to do. I was nervous and I was scared, so I’m very grateful that you came to save me. You’re my Prince Charming.”

“Well, that’s more like it.” I grinned. “I’m your knight in shining armor.”

“So does this mean I’m planning a fourth wedding?” My mom beamed.

“Whoa, hold up.” I held my hand up. “We’ve just started dating. I don’t know about planning a wedding yet.”

“Yeah,” Arya said with a small smile. “We don’t even know if we’ll be able stand each other for a couple of weeks of dating, let alone a lifetime of being married.”

“Oh, you are very funny, Arya,” I grumbled. “You won’t be able to keep your hands off of me after a couple of weeks of dating. You won’t be able to go anywhere without me. You will just...” I pause as I looked up at my parents’ interested face bases. I realized that I could not continue my line of thought. “Well, anyway,” I said with a quick smile, “we should get to bed.”

“And exactly which bedroom will you be sleeping in?” My mom raised an eyebrow.

“My bedroom, of course.”

“And will you be having any guests?” She asked pointedly. Arya’s face turned bright red.

“Mom, really? Do you have to put her on the spot?”

“I’m just asking if I should be prepared to wake up Eloise in the morning.”

“Oh no, no, no. That’s fine. Thank you, Mrs. Hamilton,” Arya said, and shook her head. “See, Chet. I can’t sleep in

your room tonight. Sorry.”

“Um, you can and you will.”

My dad raised an eyebrow at me. “Really, son? Do you need to learn the hard way who the boss is?”

“I’m the boss, always.”

“I don’t think so, dear.” My mom shook her head. “But, Arya, if you’d like to sleep in Chet’s room tonight, that’s fine. I’ll wake up Eloise and make her breakfast. Then maybe we can get Eloise her own room.”

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that.” Arya shook her head. “I mean, that’s too much.”

“I’m sure she’d love to have her own bedroom though,” my mom said.

“Well, when I get my apartment—”

“Are you kidding me?” I stared at Arya. “You’re not getting an apartment by yourself. The next time you move, it will be somewhere that we moved together.”

“Really?” She looked at me with a small smile.

“Yes,” I said. “I love you, Arya. And from here on out, we’re planning our future together. Whatever one of us does, the other one needs to be on board with. Okay?”

“So, you’re telling me you’re not going to do anything unless I’m on board with it?”

“I guess that’s what I’m saying,” I said with a laugh.

“And you are ready to look after a kid and to get married and—”

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” I said. “But sometimes in life, you don’t wait for when you’re ready. You just wait for the right time and the right person. And you’re the right person, Arya. You’re my person, and I’m not going to let you go. I’m not going to let my hard head get in the way of true love.”

Chapter One Hundred Fourteen

A rya

“So, shall we tell Eloise in the morning?” Chet whispered into my ear as we lay back in his bed.

I turned to look at him. “Tell her what?”

“About us,” he said quietly, his hand moving over to my breast and squeezing gently.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “I don’t want...” I paused, wondering how to word my sentence delicately.

“You don’t want what?” He frowned as he turned onto his side and gave me all of his attention.

“I just don’t want her to get her hopes up about something and then...”

“And then what?” He was starting to sound annoyed.

“And then it doesn’t work out between us.”

“What?” He rolled over on top of me, and I blinked up at him.

“Hey, you’re heavy, you know!”

“Really?” He rested his arms on the bed and shifted his weight so that he was leaning on his elbows. I could feel him on top of me still, but he wasn’t as heavy. His eyes looked

down into mine sternly. “Are you seriously worried that we’re not going to make it, Arya?”

“Chet, we haven’t even been on a date. I don’t know what’s going to happen. Life is—” He kissed me then pulled away. “I didn’t finish my sentence.”

“Yeah, because I didn’t need you to finish your sentence. I need some positivity from you.”

“I am being positive, but I also have to be realistic. That’s what happens when you have kids. I don’t want to get her hopes up that she’s going to have this daddy and uncles and aunts and grandma, and then it doesn’t work out between us and it’s just me and her again.”

“It’s never going to be just you and her. I’m in her life forever. I mean,” he touched the side of my face, “as long as you’ll have me, of course.”

“You know I care about you a lot, Chet.”

“You just care about me? I thought you loved me?” He grinned as he positioned himself over me and then leaned down and took my breasts in his mouth.

“You know I—” I cried out as his teeth sunk into my nipple. “Ow, what’d you do that for?”

“I wanted to tease you, my dear.”

“Well, that hurt!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Let me kiss it better.” He sucked on it gently, and I licked my lips.

“You’re so bad,” I whispered. I ran my hands up his shoulders then pulled him to me for a kiss. “I love you, Chet.”

“And I love you, Arya. You are absolutely everything to me.”

“Am I, though? Am I really?”

“Yeah, and I hope you let me show you just how much you mean to me,” he said growling against me as he positioned his cock between my legs.

“Chet,” I said, “we just did it.”

“And you’re not ready again?” He grinned, as the tip of his cock rubbed against my clit. He laughed as he reached his fingers down and touched my wetness. “I think your pussy’s ready for me, honey.”

“Chet!”

“What? It’s true,” he said, as he slipped a finger inside of me, and I closed my eyes.

“You are going to be the bane of my existence,” I grumbled.

“Going to be, or already am?” He chuckled, as he positioned another finger against me.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“What you love.” He kissed me hard and I felt one finger tapping on my clit as the other finger thrust in and out of me.

“Oh, Chet. What are you doing?”

“I want to make you come,” he said. And before I knew what was happening, he slipped his finger out and positioned his cock and thrust inside of me. “You like this?” he asked, as he moved back and forth.

“Yes!” I cried out, as I dug my nails into his back.

“You’re so fucking hot, Arya. You know that, right? I want to fucking marry you, Arya. I want to marry you now. I want to give Eloise my last name. I want so many things. I just want us to start a new life.”

“Chet, you’re not ready for this. You’re—”

“I’m more than ready,” he growled and increased his pace. He thrust harder and harder so that I couldn’t even think anymore. I felt myself coming and scratching his back as he thrust into me hard one last time and exploded inside of me yet again.

He pulled out a couple of seconds later and then looked at me with a smile. “You know what I just thought?” he said, kissing the side of my lips.

“What?” I asked him recklessly.

“You might already be pregnant.”

“What?”

“Well, I haven’t used protection, and I don’t think you’re on the pill, right?”

I blushed as I stared up at him. I bit my lip nervously. “Would that make you upset?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’d like to be the first of the brothers to have a kid.” He grinned. “That’ll show Beau and Austin.”

“It’s not a competition, Chet!” I said but I couldn’t help smiling.

“It’s not a competition if I come first.” He lay back on the bed and pulled me into his arms.

I stroked his chest idly. “You think this could really work?” I said softly.

“I know it will work, and I’m not lying when I say I want us to get married right away. I know you might be nervous about Eloise, but I want to give you and her the certainty I’m not going anywhere. I love you, Arya. I’ve always loved you. I’ve always wanted to protect you, and I want to make this official.”

“I don’t know. I would feel so bad for Lucy and Olivia and Sadie. They’re all planning their weddings and—”

“And what? We could go to Vegas. We could have a quickie marriage and—” He frowned as he saw my face. “What is it? You don’t want to marry me?”

“It’s not that. It’s just...”

“Just what?” he said.

“I always envisioned myself getting married in a church.” He started laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“You want a large wedding, huh?”

“I didn’t say it had to be large. I just don’t want to get married in Vegas with an Elvis impersonator.”

“I never said anything about an Elvis impersonator.”

“You know what I mean, Chet.”

“Fine. But can we set it up quickly?”

“You really want to get married that fast?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Not just for you and me, but for Eloise. I want her to know that she’s a real part of the family, that she can relax and be comfortable with us, and well, yeah, I’d like to adopt her one day,” he said softly. “I meant it when I said I want her to be a Hamilton.”

“You don’t have to do that. She’s not even—”

“No.” He stopped me. “I do. Her dad’s not in her life. Her mom’s not in her life. We’re her parents, and I am determined to be the best dad ever, and she’ll be the best big sister ever when we have kids, perhaps in nine months.”

“Don’t say that.” I shook my head and hit him on the shoulder, though secretly it made me a little bit happy because I was totally up for something like that. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.” I smiled at him warmly.

“Why?” he said.

“Because I feel like all my dreams are coming true, and I never believed that this would actually happen for me.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking at me tenderly.

“Because when I was younger, I always dreamed that I’d fall in love and I’d meet the man of my dreams, and he’d want to marry me and have kids with me and live happily ever after. And I guess at some point I just figured it was never going to happen, that I wasn’t good enough, I didn’t have anything to offer. And, well, I kind of just figured that was okay.”

“I love you, Arya, and I want you to know that I will always love you and that you are always enough. You are more than enough. I can’t lie. I can’t say that when I was younger I hoped to get married and have a billion kids and all

those kinds of dreams. But I can tell you now, now that I've met you, now that I've fallen for you, I want to have kids with you. I want to be in love forever, and I want to travel the world with you. I want to be your Prince Charming. I want to be the one that you can come to about anything. I will always be here for you. I will always protect you. I will always take care of you, Arya. You and Eloise are my world. You have my word. I will never let anything happen to either of you. You're my princesses."

I could feel tears in my eyes as I gaze at his sweet, sincere face. "You really are one of a kind, aren't you, Chet Hamilton?"

He burst out laughing. "That's what I've been trying to tell you all this time."

Epilogue

A rya
Three months later

“Auntie Arya?” Eloise looked at me with big eyes.

“Yes, dear?”

“When is the baby coming?” she asked me as she patted my stomach. I smiled down at her.

“It should be here in six months.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I’m not sure yet, my love.”

“Is the stork going to bring it?”

“No. I’ll go to the hospital when it’s time for them to come, and then I’ll bring the baby home.”

“And I’ll be a big sister?” she said.

“Yes, you will. Have you finished gathering the blackberries?”

“Yes.” She smiled up at me happily and took my hand. “Grandma Amelia said she’s going to make a blackberry and apple pie, and I told her that sounds delicious.”

“Yes, it does, and I think Chet said he’s going to make homemade ice cream.”

“Yes. Daddy Chet said he’s going to make me vanilla ice cream to go with my pie.” She beamed. “When am I going to be the flower girl at the wedding for you and Daddy?”

“Well, that’s going to be this weekend.”

“I’m so excited. It’s too bad that the baby won’t be there, too.”

“Yes.” I laughed, already thinking about what I was going to tell my unborn child when they got older and found out that I got married when I was three months pregnant.

“There you are.” Chet came running out of the house. “You got those blackberries from me, Eloise?”

“Yes, Daddy Chet.” She let go of my hand and went running up to him. “I was just telling Auntie Arya that I’m excited to see the baby so I can be a big sister.”

“I know. I’m excited to see the baby, too.” He smiled at me lovingly. “Come on inside, guys. Mom’s waiting on the blackberries.”

“We’re coming, you darling man.” I smiled at him lovingly. I couldn’t believe that this was my life. I couldn’t believe that I was pregnant with his baby, and we were getting married in just a couple of days.

“You okay?” Chet said, as he stood back and waited for me to reach him.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re walking kind of slow. Is your back hurting?”

“I’m fine, honey. I was just walking at my normal pace.”

“Do you need to lay down or sit on the couch? Can I bring you anything?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“I just want to make sure everything’s okay.” He gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Everything’s fine. The doctor told you everything’s good.”

“And are you sure we can’t find out the gender before the baby is born?” he said. “I really want to know if I’m going to have a little boy or a girl.”

“We already agreed that we’re not going to find out until the baby is born,” I reminded him.

“I know, I know.” He sighed. “So you know Beau and Austin are completely mad at me.” “Well, I can understand why.”

“For what?” he said. “I didn’t blow the wind out of anyone’s sail.”

“Is that the term?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t know.” He laughed. “But it sounds vaguely right.”

“Yeah. I’m just lucky that Olivia, Lucy, and Sadie are so excited about the baby that they don’t mind that we’re getting married before them.”

“I told you I’d be first,” he said, grinning. “First to be married and first to have a baby.”

“Well, we were the dumbasses that had sex without protection.”

“Hey, when you got on me in that car and started riding me, I couldn’t care less about protection.” He winked at me, and I shook my head.

“We are not going to tell the baby that they were conceived in a car.”

“But it’s such a romantic story,” he teased me. “I can tell them that Mommy was about to be a stripper, and because I didn’t want everyone in Montana to see her boobs, I saved her.”

“Very funny, Chet.” I swatted him on the ass.

“Hey,” he said, “hoping for some happy-go-lucky time?”

“No, I’m not. We’re going to the kitchen, and we’re going to help your Mom bake this pie.”

“No, we’re not,” he said. “We’re going to the bedroom because I have something to give you.”

“Chet, I do not need you to go down on me. Thank you very much.”

“You know the doctor said it’s fine if we make love. I just don’t want my penis all up in there next to my baby.”

“But your tongue is okay?” I cocked my head at him.

“Well, my tongue is not reaching the same sort of places my penis is. I mean, yeah, I got a long tongue, but my dick is huge.”

“Chet. Oh my God.”

“What?” He grinned. “You don’t agree with me?”

I blushed. I didn’t want to feed his ego, but I couldn’t lie. He did have a beautifully well-proportioned penis, but I was not going to say that to him now.

“You cannot be saying these sort of things. You’re about to be a dad.”

“And a husband,” he grinned. “I’m really excited about Saturday, by the way.”

“Really? You’re not scared we’re rushing into anything?”

“I’m not scared. I’m happy. Now come with me to the bedroom.”

“But I told Eloise and your mom that—”

“You can go and help them in a minute, okay?”

“Fine,” I said. As we walk past the kitchen, I could hear Eloise and Amelia laughing about something. “This better be quick, Chet.”

“It will be quick. Don’t worry.” He winked at me.

“Chet, I told you, you’re not going down on me.”

“You want to go down on me instead?”

“No,” I laughed. He pouted, and I grinned at him. “Maybe tonight.”

“Oh yeah, baby.” He laughed. “But no, that’s not why I want you to come with me.”

We walked into his bedroom, and he closed the door. “I got these for you.” He handed me a dozen red roses.

“Wow, this is really nice. Thank you.”

“I wanted to give these to you before the wedding because I know you have a different bouquet and it’s not roses. But I wanted to give you red roses because I’ve never given you red roses before, and it’s kind of something you’re meant to do when you’re in love.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of the roses. “That’s sweet. But it’s fine, Chet. We kind of skipped a lot of steps before the marriage and baby thing, but I think it’ll be okay.”

“I know it will be okay, but I wanted to do things properly.” He walked over to the side of his room and opened his closet.

“What are you doing?”

“Just hold on, Arya,” he said, as he opened the closet door. He opened a small box and took out a key and handed it to me. “And this is for you.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“It’s a key.”

“I can see that.” I nodded. “A key to what, though?”

“It’s a key to my heart.” He pressed his lips against my forehead.

“Thank you. That’s really sweet,” I said, as I kissed his lips. “I didn’t know you could be so romantic.”

“I’m sorry.” He started laughing. “That was totally ridiculous.”

“What?” I asked him in confusion.

“Sorry, I was being corny. It’s not a key to my heart. You already have the key to my heart.”

“Um, okay. So then, what’s it a key to?”

“Our house.”

“Our what?” I stared at him in shock. “What do you mean, our house?”

“I mean our house.”

“But we live here on the ranch with your family.”

“And we’re about to start our own family.”

“But you can’t afford it. You got—”

“As I’m sure you know,” he said, cutting me off, “all of us brothers have a trust fund that is not connected to the ranch. It’s our own personal money to do with what we will. I’ve used some of it as a down payment on a small ranch about ten miles up the road.”

“But we can’t do a ranch. It’s too much work!”

“It’s not going to be a working ranch,” he said. “It’s only five acres. I got it for the land so that we can have horses. Eloise loves to ride, and I want her to be able to get her own pony.”

“But—”

“But nothing. We’re starting a life together. You, me, Eloise, and the new baby, and I want to start it right. I’ve already gotten things a little bit out of order, and I apologize for that.”

“You don’t have to apologize for that.”

“No, I do because you deserve the best.”

“Are you saying me getting married pregnant isn’t the best?”

“No, I’m saying that I want you to know that I love you, and I’m marrying you because I love you. I’m not marrying you because we’re having a baby.”

“I know that,” I said softly, “though that had been a fear in my mind.”

“I can read you like a book, Arya,” he said softly, cradling my face. “I know a part of you wonders if I still want to marry you if you weren’t pregnant. I do, and I would, and I just want you to know that this is forever.”

“I love you so much, Chet. I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

“I don’t know how I got so lucky, either,” he said. “I mean, maybe it’s because I’m just really good-looking and really funny and really...” He started laughing. “Okay, I’ll stop.”

“You really are so obnoxious, aren’t you?”

“Well, they don’t call me the most obnoxious cowboy in Montana for anything,” he said. “But I’m all yours now,” he said. “So whatever you want to do for me or whatever you want me to do for you, it’s done.”

“I love you, Chet.” I kissed him, melting against his body. “You are going to make the most wonderful father to our child. I’m so blessed to have met you.”

“And I’m so blessed to have met you and to be marrying you and to be able to knock you up 10 billion more times.”

“We’re not having 10 billion babies, Chet,” I said with a laugh.

“Oh, yeah?” he said. “Let’s just see.”

“Very funny.” I shook my head. “Now, come on. We should go back to the kitchen. Your mom is waiting on us.”

“Aw, do we really have to go just now?” he said, tugging on my shirt.

“Chet!”

“What? Your boobs are growing so big and I just want to touch them and kiss them.”

I giggled slightly, as he pulled my top off and before I knew what was happening, my bra was on the ground and his face was buried between my breasts.

“Let me pleasure you, Arya.”

I sighed happily, knowing I couldn't say no. I grabbed his hand and led him towards the bed. "Take off your shirt," I said.

Eagerly, he pulled it off, and then before I could say anything else, he was pulling off his pants and his boxers so that he was standing naked in front of me. He was already hard, and my jaw dropped at the sight of him.

"What?" he said.

"I can't believe you're that hard already."

"Why not? All I have to do is look at you and I'm ready for you," he said. He stepped forward and pulled my skirt down and my panties, too, before laying me down gently on the bed. I pushed him back and rolled over on top of him so that I was cradled in his lap.

"Um, what are you doing?"

"I'm about to ride you, Chet Hamilton. I'm about to ride you until I can't ride no more."

"Oh my God," he said, as he reached up and grabbed my breasts and I positioned his cock between my legs. He slipped inside of me easily, and I gyrated my hips on top of him, moaning as he grabbed my waist and lifted me up and down.

"Fuck, this shouldn't feel so good," he said.

All I could do is murmur in response. We fit together like a glove. Being with him was like coming home, and I never ever wanted us to lose this loving feeling. He was my everything, everything I could ever ask for.

"I love you, Chet Hamilton."

"I love you even more, Arya. And I will love you for the rest of my life."

* * *

"I used to sing a little song and then you came along, my love.

You came along and swept me off my feet and I don't think I will ever be the same.

I used to sing a little song when riding on my horses.

I looked out to the mountain, at the sky, and thought about a different life.

Never once did I realize that you would be the one to complete me. I

used to sing a little song and then you came along...

Arya, Eloise, you are the world to me and you are, and always will be, my family."

Chet stopped singing and looked at me and Eloise. I couldn't stop the tears from pouring down my cheeks.

"That was beautiful," I said, standing next to him at the altar in front of his family and friends. Eloise stood beside me, a small bouquet of pink and peach flowers in her hand and a white chain of daisies on her head. She looked like a little princess and I'd never seen her happier. But I understood why because I'd never been this happy myself.

"Your turn, Arya." The priest nodded at me and I took a deep breath.

I looked out at the crowds of people, some familiar, some unfamiliar. I saw Amelia and Ranger beaming with pride as they gazed at us. Sadie and Wyatt, looking lovingly at us both. Beau, Austin, Flint, and Huck, all looking proudly at Chet, and Olivia and Lucy looked happy and excited.

I cleared my throat. "I came to Horseshoe Ranch in search of a new beginning. I didn't know exactly what I was hoping to find, but I knew that there was going to be something there that would change my life." I looked around the crowds of people and then at Chet. "This might sound crazy, but I had a dream before I came here. I had a dream that told me that Horseshoe Ranch would provide me happiness, and I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't want to believe it. I thought, Horseshoe Ranch, what's that? And then I came here and I met the wonderful Hamilton family, who embraced both myself and Eloise without a second thought. Amelia, who has been

like a mother to me and a grandmother to Eloise. Ranger, the father I always wished I had. Beau, Austin, Huck, Flint and Knox and Wyatt, the brothers I'd always longed for, and Sadie, Olivia and Lucy, the sisters I never knew I needed."

"But, Chet, you are my happiness. You are the reason I was meant to come here. You are a strong, proud, handsome, loving man. You are the sort of man I've dreamed about my entire life. The prince, the king, the knight, all of the men young women want to be with in one. I love you. I will always love you, and I am so happy to become your wife today. I will never forget this moment and I will never forget how happy you have made me."

I was shocked to see tears running down Chet's face. I'd never seen him cry before. He grabbed my hands and squeezed.

"I love you, Arya," he said, his voice hoarse.

"I love you, too."

He reached down and touched my belly. "And I love our baby." He looked at the priest guiltily. "Oops, sorry." Laughter rippled throughout the crowd.

The priest smiled and shrugged. "It's okay. At least you're getting married now. That's all that matters."

I beamed at him, happy that he wasn't going to judge us.

"Can I say something?" Eloise spoke up, and I looked down at her in surprise. She hadn't told me that she would want to say anything.

"Of course, my darling. You can say whatever you want."

"Thank you," she said, softly. She looked up at me, a happy expression on her face. "I just wanted to say that even though Auntie Arya is my auntie, she's the best mommy I've ever had and I am so glad you came to take care of me, and I'm so glad we came to Horseshoe Ranch and I got to meet Grandma Amelia and Granddad Ranger and Daddy Chet, and I'm going to be a big sister soon and I just want to say I'm the happiest I've ever been in my whole entire life, even more

happy than when I went to a birthday party at McDonald's," she said.

Everyone laughed and clapped. The priest smiled at her adoringly.

"Well, now, from the mouth of babes," he said, and cleared his throat. "Everyone, we are gathered here today so that Arya and Chet will come together under the eyes of God in holy matrimony."

He continued talking, but I wasn't really paying attention. All I could do was stare at Chet and the love in his eyes. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. I couldn't believe that this was my life and this was my family. I would never take them for granted. This was the happiest moment of my life and I was going to make sure I was the best wife, mother, sister, and daughter-in-law that I could be.

Bonus Chapter

“We Three Kings of Orient are...” I sang my favorite Christmas song to myself and paused as I saw Olivia approaching me. She had a wide smile on her face, that showcased how happy and content she was.

“You look really happy, Lucy,” she said as she stopped next to me. We both looked at the fireplace for a few seconds and then to the enormous Christmas tree on the other side of the room. There was stacks of glittering presents on the ground and I was excited for Christmas Day. “Why did you stop entertaining us?”

“Is that a code for my singing sucks and keep it quiet,” I teased her, laughing slightly as she shook her head.

“No, you know I’ve always thought you have an amazing voice.” There’s a sincere look on her face and my heart warms. She really is the best friend a girl could ever ask for.

“Yeah, but we know that’s not exactly true,” I laughed. “I mean, you did tell me to apply for American Idol back in the day, even though we both know I can’t sing.”

“I know. I was only kidding you,” she grinned. “You have a nice voice, but you’re not Carrie Underwood.” I laughed and then we both looked over at the rest of the family and I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and squeezed.

“Can you believe that we are here right now?” I asked her as we stared at Austin and Beau. Sadie and Wyatt were dancing, and Arya and Chet were whispering something into each other’s ears. Eloise was playing with Mrs. Hamilton and

the three brothers were standing at the side with their dad, Ranger, drinking beers and talking about the snow that had come in earlier in the day.

“I just love it here,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I really wish my mom could have spent Christmas here with us. I really wish she would’ve seen how happy I am.”

“She’s here with you, even though you can’t see her,” Olivia said softly gazing at me. “I know you miss her. I miss her too.”

“She would’ve been surprised that I lived here in Montana,” I said laughing, thinking about my mom and how she would have reacted knowing I’d made the move to such a remote place.

“I know. Even I’m surprised and I live here too,” Olivia smiled. “We got really lucky meeting the Hamilton brothers.”

“I know, and just to think I almost married Beau.”

“Well, you didn’t really,” she said, making a face. She didn’t like to think that the plan had initially been for me to marry her guy.

“That would’ve been weird though, wouldn’t it?” I asked her.

“Yeah, because if you would’ve married Beau, then I would’ve married Austin and...”

“Oh no, you didn’t,” I said laughing. “You don’t have your eyes on my man, do you?”

“Well, you don’t have your eyes on my man, do you?” she said, and we both burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Austin said as he approached us. “Why’d you stop singing, Lucy, my darling?”

“Because I know I’m not the best singer in the world and I didn’t want anyone’s ears to burst.”

“You know I love your voice,” he said, and started clearing his throat to stop from snorting. “We can all sing Silent Night now if you want. It’s a family tradition.”

“Hey, everyone,” Olivia called out to the room. “Austin wants to sing Silent Night for us.”

“Well, I didn’t say that,” he said, quickly shaking his head. “I thought we could all sing it as a Christmas carol. What do you think, Eloise?”

“I would like that, Uncle Austin,” she said. “Can I mommy?” She looked over at Arya, who beamed at her. Arya tapped her stomach that was ready to pop anytime now.

“I think we can all sing Silent Night,” Arya said nodding. “Why don’t you start us off, Chet?”

“Why me?” he said. “Mama, why don’t you start?” Amelia beamed at all of us as she huddled us all close together.

“I think we can all start together,” she said in her soft voice. Amelia was the matriarch of the family, the matriarch to end all matriarchs. She made everyone in the Hamilton residence feel at home, and I was so grateful that she was a second mother to me. She loved me and took me under her wing, and I couldn’t imagine having a better mother-in-law.

“I love you,” Austin said, whispering in my ear. I looked over at him with a surprised glance.

“Why are you whispering that to me, Austin? What have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything,” he said grinning, reaching over and kissing me on the cheek. “I just wanted to let you know how beautiful you are and how much I love you.”

“Okay, what’s going on?”

“What? A man can’t love his best girl?”

“Yeah, and normally you save those sweet whispers of nothing until we hit the bedroom.”

“What? Do you think I only tell you I love you when I want to get some?”

“No, but I do know that you do like to be more romantic when you want to get some.”

“Are you saying I’m only with you for the sex, Lucy?”

“No,” I laughed and looked over at Olivia who was grinning. “Don’t eavesdrop, Olivia.”

“What?” she looked at me innocently. “I can’t help it. You guys are being so loud.”

“What are they being so loud about?” Beau walked over and pulled Olivia into his arms. He gave her a big kiss on the lips. “I just needed to do that. I missed you.”

“What do you mean you missed me? We’ve been in the same room for the last couple of hours?”

“Yes, but we haven’t kissed,” he said, “and when I don’t get to kiss your sweet lips...”

“Okay, what’s going on?” Olivia put her hands on her hips and looked over at me. “Why are you two acting so weird?”

“We’re not acting weird,” Austin said innocently.

“Hey, Sadie,” Olivia shouted across the room, “Is Wyatt acting weird?”

“A little bit,” she nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“Because Chet and Austin are acting weird too.”

“What’s going on, boys? Getting in trouble?” Flint looked over at us and burst out laughing. “And this is why I don’t have a woman because-”

“Because no woman wants you,” Wyatt said, and everyone started laughing. Flint glared at his brother, but I knew he was slightly sad that he was single. Even though the other brothers pretended that they were happy they hadn’t found anyone yet, I knew they were slightly envious of Chet, Austin, Beau and Wyatt. There was something to be said for being in love. There is something to be said for starting a family. There is something to be said for having a loved one in your bed every night.

“Hey,” I whispered over to Olivia, “Should we try and set Flint up?” She looked at me thoughtfully for a second. “I mean, we could try and find him a Christmas bride. What do you think?” I bit down on my lip and smiled.

“I think that would be awesome. Should we find one for Huck as well?” she asked, and I laughed.

“Well, why don’t we try one single brother at a time?”

“What are you two whispering about?” Austin asked as he chugged from his beer. “Is there something I should be worried about?”

“You tell me, Austin darling. Is there something I should be worried about?”

“No.” He paused, “Well, fine. Us brothers were hoping to go camping tonight,” he said looking at me. “Do you mind?”

“Um, no,” I said shaking my head. “Why would I mind?”

“I don’t know. Because you might not want to sleep in the bed alone and you’ll miss me.” I looked over at Olivia.

“Can you believe this? That’s why they’re acting so lovey-dovey.” Olivia burst out laughing.

“Guys, we love you, but we can do without you for one night.”

“Yeah,” Sadie said, “I am talking about a girl’s night.” Wyatt had a perturbed look on his face.

“What? You just going to let me go?”

“Honey, it’s not like you’re going to Vegas to hang out with strippers. You’re just going camping with your brothers. Down by the river?”

“Yeah,” he said nodding. Chet spoke up.

“Arya, if you don’t want me to go because-”

“Oh, you can go. I’ll hang out with the girls.” Amelia shook her head.

“Oh, it’s so funny to see my sons acting so nervous when we all know you guys have had this plan since last week.” I grinned and so did Olivia. The guys looked flabbergasted.

“What? You guys knew?”

“Of course we knew,” I said. “Your mom told us this is something you guys do every other year. You go on a big

camping trip right before Christmas and you like to go hunting.

“And fishing,” Olivia said.

“And you guys play poker,” Sadie said.

Arya spoke up, “And you like to eat a lot of jerky.”

“Ooh,” Eloise says, “I don’t like jerky.”

“Well, don’t worry,” Eloise. Chet said, bending down and giving her a kiss on the forehead. “You don’t have to have any jerky. You can have jelly.”

“I love jelly. Can I have strawberry jelly and grape jelly and...?”

Chet looked nervously over at Arya and mouthed, “I’m sorry.” She shook her head and smiled.

“How’s about you have jelly tomorrow, Eloise? You’ve already brushed your teeth tonight?”

“But daddy said I can have jelly.” Eloise started to pelt and Arya grabbed her by the hand.

“Come on then let’s go to the kitchen and see what we got.” I looked over at Austin and stared at him for a couple of seconds.

“Did you really think I was going to be upset that you were going to go camping?”

“No,” he said, “I don’t know, maybe,” he leaned forward and whispered into my ear, “or maybe I wanted you to ask me to stay.” I looked into his eyes.

“What?”

“Maybe I wasn’t worried that you would miss me. Maybe I was worried that I would miss you.”

“You’re going to miss me because of one night of camping? Don’t you know how much I love you, Lucy? Ever since we met, we’ve never had a night apart. Well, I mean since we got together,” he corrected himself.

“Yeah, because we had plenty of nights apart when we first met. I couldn’t stand you.”

“And I couldn’t stand you either,” he said, and we both laughed.

“I do love you, Austin, and I trust you, and I want you to have fun with your brothers, and of course I’m going to miss you. I always miss you when you’re not there, but what’s that saying, absence makes the heart grow fonder?”

“So you’re saying me going camping is going to make you miss me more?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say more, but,” I paused, “maybe I’ll get someone else to share the bed just so I don’t.”

“Very funny,” he said pulling me into his arms and kissing me hard. “You are not having anyone else in the bed.”

“Oh, yeah? What about when we have kids?” I asked him.

“Okay, well, when we have kids, you can have someone else in the bed,” he grinned, “but then they get their own bed real quick because even though I’m going to love our kids, I’m still going to want you all to myself when I can.”

“I know and you will,” I said smiling up at him. “I love you, Austin Hamilton.”

“I love you more, Lucy,” he said, pulling on my hair. “You know what I want to do right now?” he said.

“Sing Silent Night?” I asked him with beguiling innocent eyes. I loved to tease him because he always reacted in the same lustful way.

“No,” he said in the low voice, “I want to bend you over the bed, pull your panties down and fuck you so hard and fast that you will think about me all night long.” I blushed at his words and he grinned. “Yeah, baby. Just because I’m a sweet and charming cowboy doesn’t mean I don’t know how to get down and dirty.”

“Oh my gosh, I cannot believe you.”

“What? You know you like to ride a cowboy like me.”

“That’s true,” I said laughing. “I’ll always love riding you, my gorgeous, wonderful cowboy.”