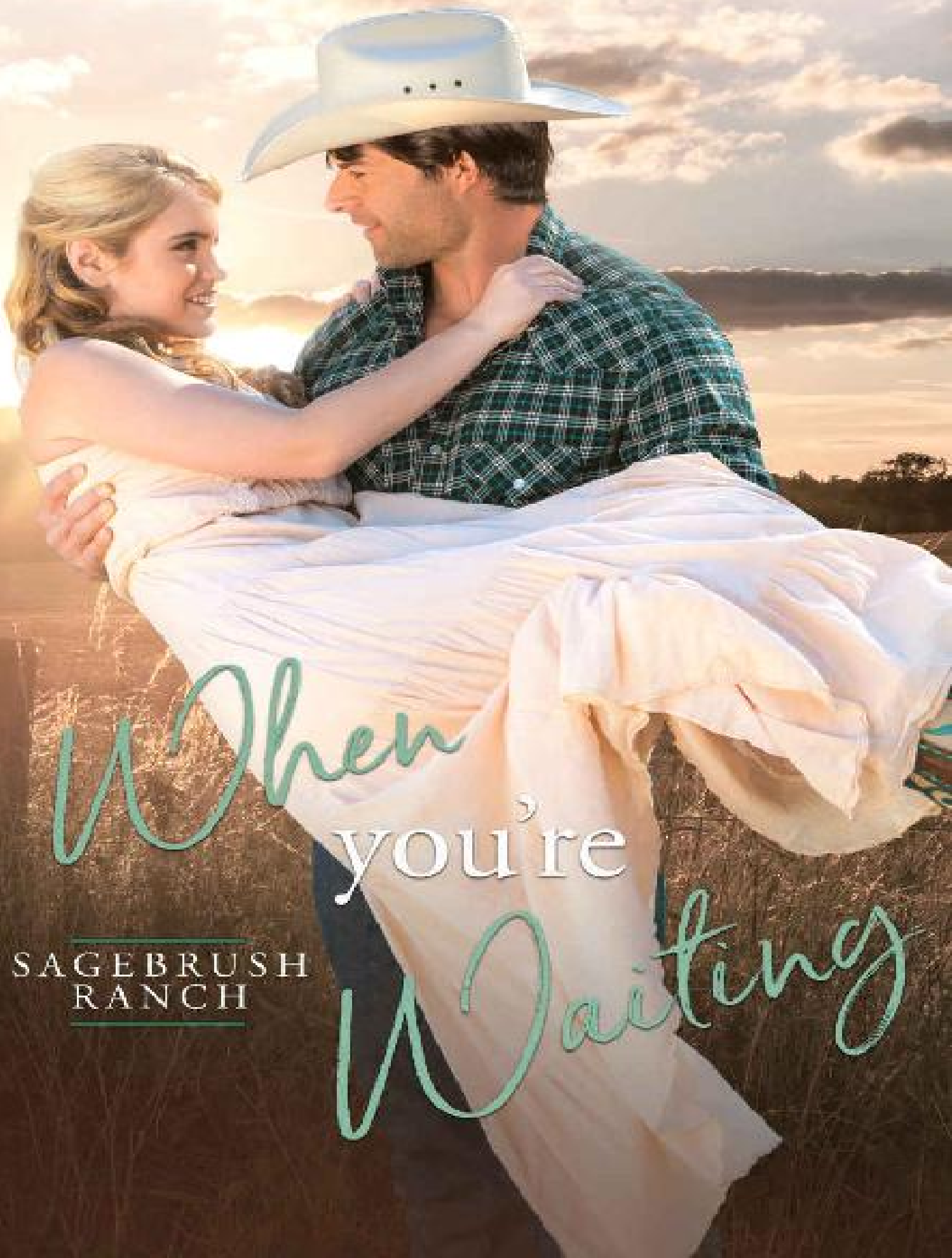


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
APRIL MURDOCK



When
you're
Waiting

SAGEBRUSH
RANCH

WHEN YOU'RE WAITING

SAGEBRUSH RANCH - BOOK 2

APRIL MURDOCK



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WHEN YOU'RE WAITING

SAGEBRUSH RANCH - BOOK 2

APRIL MURDOCK

CHAPTER ONE

“UNFORTUNATELY, WE HAVEN’T SEEN MUCH CHANGE.”

Jack bounced Lily on his knee as her doctor scanned the document in his hand.

“Her last screening shows nearly identical results from the one we took today.” Dr. Martinez’s brows pulled together and he shook his head, releasing a deep sigh. “I wish I had better news for you, Jack, but it looks like Lily might be permanently deaf.”

Jack’s heart sank. He knew this was a possibility. Lily’s eardrums had been severely damaged from the accident, and he shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up. It had been a little over a year since the accident. If eleven months hadn’t been enough to improve her hearing at all, then they needed to come up with a new plan.

“Does that mean she won’t be a good candidate for a hearing aid?”

Dr. Martinez shook his head. “Hard to say. Right now, I’d hesitate to do anything that might disrupt the healing process.”

“What healing process? You said there wasn’t any change.” His voice rose a decibel but neither the doctor nor his daughter reacted.

“That’s just it. This kind of hearing loss can be volatile. She isn’t showing any signs now, but three years down the road...” He shrugged. “We don’t know what might happen.”

“*Three* years? She can’t wait that long. She’s supposed to be talking, but all she does is make humming noises. There has to be something we can do.”

The doctor placed his paperwork on the counter and faced Jack. His narrowed eyes landed on Lily and he released another breath through his nose. “Like I said, we don’t know how things will go. It’s possible her hearing will get better. There’s a chance she can regain it completely. We’re going to have to wait and see. In the meantime, sign language is a very good option.”

That was what he’d been afraid the doctor would say. “Wait and see.” “Sign language.” This wasn’t how his life was supposed to turn out. This wasn’t how Lily’s life was supposed to go. She wasn’t supposed to lose her mother *and* her hearing.

The thought of Zoe tore at his heart. He needed his wife now, more than ever. She would have known what to do. As it stood, he didn’t have a single clue what he should be doing or the best course of action.

“I don’t think I can just wait and see. There has to be someone I can take her to. A specialist. A second opinion.”

“Jack, we talked about the consult we got from my colleague at the Children’s Hearing Center at Stanford. He agrees with the diagnosis. And the interim options of sign language and other therapies are good choices. Of course, you’re more than welcome—”

Jack shot out of his seat, holding Lily tightly in his arms while glowering at her doctor. “Thanks for your time.”

Going through the motions, he buckled her into her car seat and drove the familiar route from Billings all the way to Rocky Ridge. So much for finding a specialist who could help him. Sign language? That was just a way for the man to wash his hands of this case. He didn’t want to have to deal with them anymore.

The fury continued to build in Jack’s chest the farther down the road they got. If Zoe hadn’t gotten hit by that drunk driver.

If he'd been willing to watch Lily that day instead of asking that Zoe take her on that trip to the city. If... if... if...

His hands tightened on the steering wheel so firmly the leather beneath his grasp squeaked in protest. The anger slowly made its way from his chest upward, much like the molten lava in a volcano.

He couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't keep hoping that everything would just work out as long as he had faith. He'd had faith his wife would survive a year ago, and look at where that had gotten him.

The closer they got to Rocky Ridge, the more antsy his daughter became in the back. She moaned and grunted, kicking her legs. Her own frustrations had reached a boiling point. They needed a break. Only, he didn't know what they could do.

A park in the distance caught his eye when light glanced off a tall slide. Beside it was a swing set and other various playground equipment. That looked like just the place he could take Lily so they could both get out their own individual frustrations.

Jack veered off the road, earning himself a loud honk in protest. He waved his hand at the other driver, but the flippant reaction did nothing to ease the tension that continued to grow within him. If he mentioned this to any of his siblings, he knew what they would say. They'd tell him he needed to find someone new in his life. Fourteen months on his own was long enough.

Okay, his brothers would probably leave him alone; they knew better than to meddle in his life. But Gabby, his sister-in-law, would team up against him with his sister and insist all he needed to do was go on a date.

Well, they were wrong. This tightness in his chest wasn't because he was alone. It was because he'd lost everything he held dear. It was because no one understood where he was coming from. His life was in shambles and dating a new girl would do nothing to fix that.

He jerked the gearshift into park and stared at the playground without truly seeing it. Zoe used to love coming to places like this when she was pregnant. She'd talked about how he would push their child on the swing or catch them coming down the side. She had insisted they come once a week and have a picnic.

Maybe coming here was a bad idea. He nearly put the truck back into drive when Lily's cries pierced the air.

Letting out a sigh, Jack climbed out of his vehicle. They'd stay for a few minutes and that was it. Then they would go. Just enough time to get some fresh air.

He carted his daughter over to the smaller of the two playgrounds and set Lily in the sandbox. She got unsteadily to her feet and hobbled over toward a bucket that sat in the sand.

Over a year without her mother. Did she even remember the woman who'd carried her? Or was that part of her life already missing from her brain?

His heart lurched, and a tear slipped down his cheek. Quickly, he brushed at it with the heel of his hand. Showing his pain in public was something he'd promised himself he would never do. Jack looked up to the sky and winced when the sun blinded him temporarily. When he brought his gaze back to watch his daughter, it was like a blanket of peace draped over him. It might have been brief, but it was enough of a reprieve that he was able to breathe again.

Lily made small gurgling sounds as she picked up fistfuls of sand and filled her bucket. A few other children playing around her were doing the same. He wasn't sure who had brought all the toys, but he was grateful for it all the same.

The few minutes he'd planned on staying turned into more until he lost track of just how long they'd been there. When he finally got the strength to head out, a woman followed by several children caught his attention. The woman was slight with long, wavy blonde hair. The children following in her wake couldn't be more than four or five years old. He counted eleven of them and they were all listening to her as if she were a character from their favorite television show.

Impressed by her ability to wrangle so many children, he watched with keen interest. They left their van, making their way toward the playground. As they got closer, she let out a laugh. It was a lilting one that even drew the attention of the kids playing in the sandbox.

Everyone except Lily glanced in her direction.

Jack scowled. This was just another way for the universe to point out how different Lily was from the other children her age.

The train of children started singing a song with their leader, something about frogs and lily pads. When they stopped just short of the slide, she put her hands on her hips. “Okay, we get to stay for forty-five minutes. That means when I say it’s time to line up, what do we do?”

“Line up!” About half of the children chanted the answer together.

She stepped to the side, sweeping her arm out and allowing them access to the playground. Squeals of laughter and excitement filled the air, even more so than before.

Jack couldn’t tear his gaze from the woman—which ended up being problematic.

She had the most dazzling green eyes he’d ever seen, and they were staring right at him.

He swallowed at the lump that formed in his throat and looked away. Great. He had just been caught staring at a complete stranger. If he wasn’t careful, someone might call the cops and have him carted away.

Jack focused on Lily instead. She sat with her legs sprawled out. This time, instead of dumping sand into the bucket, she took handfuls and dropped it on her legs.

“Lily, no.” He jumped up and grabbed her from the sand, placing her on her feet. He dusted off her pants and made her look at him. “No,” he said slowly. “No sand.”

Her face scrunched into a pout and he expected her to have a meltdown. But then her eyes landed on something else and she

toddled off toward the new toy. He wasn't quite sure why he was drawn to her, but Jack glanced up at the woman he'd been enthralled with. She wasn't looking at him, thankfully, but she was crouched down, speaking to another child.

No, she wasn't speaking. She was signing.

He couldn't drag his eyes from the scene. The small child's hands moved quickly, his facial expressions conveying his emotions. At the moment, his brows were drawn low over his eyes and he glanced once or twice toward a group of boys who were huddled at the swings. The woman shifted her attention to the boys, then signed something to the boy again.

It was hard for Jack to pull his attention away from this interaction. She made it seem so easy to communicate with the boy without actually speaking. As much as he didn't want to admit that the doctor had made an excellent point, he couldn't deny that sign language was one of his only options at this point.

The conversation came to an end and the little boy hurried off. The woman's smile had the ability to warm even Jack's hardened heart. But it was more than that. She laughed, and the lilting sound penetrated right down to his core.

Something heavy landed in his lap and he jumped to find Lily had deposited the sand she'd been playing with there. He shot out of his seat, dusting the sand from his lap, ready to snap at her, but then Lily turned her bright eyes toward him—eyes that looked so much like Zoe's. She was the spitting image of her mother.

Immediately, his irritation morphed into guilt. She was the final piece he had of Zoe. And she hadn't known any better. They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity until he dropped down onto her level and pulled her into his arms.

Holding her tight against him, Jack fought back the emotion and ache that returned with a vengeance. He needed to be more careful. He couldn't afford to do anything that would destroy what he had left of his family. Lily was his everything.

Jack pulled back, brushing the sand from Lily's pants and off her grubby hands. "We'll figure this out," he murmured despite knowing she couldn't hear a single thing he said. "I promise."

CHAPTER TWO

IT WASN'T THAT EMILY WAS UNHAPPY. SHE HAD A FULFILLING life. She had an amazing job, a nice place to live, and the best friends.

And for the most part, she showed her appreciation every day. There was usually a smile on her face. She could almost always find the bright side of things.

Perhaps that was why she had finally hit a wall. At twenty-seven, she'd thought she would have been married by now, with her own child or even a couple of children.

Teaching and caring for a dozen kids who were not her own had its drawbacks. Emily had finally gotten to the point where she realized she wanted her own family. But she couldn't exactly go up to a random stranger and tell him that.

Most definitely not that father at the park.

Her stomach filled with flutters at the thought of him the whole drive home from work. He'd kept his distance, but she hadn't missed the way he had been looking at her—watching her. She'd been flattered by the attention and she'd nearly gone over to talk to him. When she was younger, she might have done just that.

These days, things were different. She'd moved out of Billings for a better-paying job. There weren't many folks out here who could sign. Mathew's parents had moved to town a few months ago and discovered that very issue.

So she took the job they offered, not realizing her dating pool would turn into a dating puddle. There weren't many men on

the apps. Out here, it seemed you were lucky if you met someone who was single.

And that man at the park probably had the slimmest chance of falling into that category solely due to him having a child.

She heaved a sigh as she shouldered her way into the studio apartment above the local library. At this rate, she'd be lucky to find love at all. She might as well adopt fifty cats and call it good.

Emily tossed her keys onto the counter and placed the bag of Chinese food beside it. She'd had enough of her moping. She needed to get out of her own head—again. Finding a husband wasn't the most important thing.

Leaning against the counter, she pulled out her phone. Time to get her head out of the clouds and focus on what she had rather than what she lacked. A smile touched her lips as she noticed the missed call from one of her newest friends.

Gabby had introduced herself when they'd bumped into each other in the library, both reaching for the same book. Too bad she wasn't her type. That would have made for an adorable meet-cute.

Either way, they'd hit it off. Gabby probably loved reading more than Emily did, which was saying something. It was one of the reasons they connected so well. Just as Emily was about to return Gabby's call, her ID populated on Emily's screen.

With a laugh, Emily answered the call. "Let me guess. You already want the next book in that Academy series you insisted on borrowing from me."

"No. Well, yes. But that's not what I'm calling you about." Gabby's excited voice filled the quiet of the studio where Emily resided.

She laughed again as she pulled the phone from her ear. "You seriously need to chill. You're talking so loud."

Her friend laughed, too. "No, you need to chill. I have something I needed to talk to you about and I wanted to do it now before Bo loses his nerve."

“That doesn’t sound good,” Emily mused. “Do I really want to know what you’re up to?”

“Oh, most definitely. What do you keep saying that you wish was different about Rocky Ridge?”

“I don’t know. Nothing? This place is great.”

Gabby groaned. “We both know better than that. Come on. What were we just talking about.”

“Books?”

Another groan.

Emily laughed. “We talk about a lot of stuff. You’re, like, my only friend.”

“Exactly,” Gabby muttered. “You need to make more friends.”

“Ooooh, let me guess. You’re finally going to take my advice and invite a bunch of girls over so you can have a bachelorette party.”

“I wish!” Gabby’s exaggerated words only caused Emily’s smile to widen. “But I don’t think Bo would appreciate my inviting over more people than the fire code allows. He says the place is already smaller than he’s used to. Not sure it’s going to be big enough for both of us.”

“Yeah, well, from what I hear, his parents’ place is huge. Anywhere is going to be smaller.” Emily pulled out a stool from the counter’s edge and settled down on it. She faced her Chinese food, fiddling with the plastic bag handles. “Well, if it’s not the party you *should* be planning, then what is it?”

It was strange how a simple conversation with a friend was enough to pull her from the depths of where she had been dwelling. Gabby had a knack for doing just that right when Emily needed it. Perhaps she should scrap her dinner altogether and they could go out for coffee or drinks.

Then again, Gabby was getting married soon. She probably had far better things to do than to hang around out with a girlfriend. Emily sighed, but it did nothing to ease the ache that had started to grow yet again.

“You remember the last time we talked, you said that all the decent guys are either halfway across the country or already taken?”

Emily snorted. “I was being facetious. I know there are eligible guys, they just haven’t bothered to leave their steeds or the fields they protect.”

Gabby huffed. “You make it sound like the guys here are untouchable—”

“In my defense, they sorta are. I can’t think of one date I’ve been on that hasn’t ended early because the guy had to hurry home to get ready for the next day. I still don’t understand how they can all get up before the sun rises. They’re nuts.”

“I know, right? But you get used to it.”

“I most certainly will not.” Her vehement tone was meant to be serious, but Gabby laughed as if it was the funniest thing Emily had said all day. “I mean it, Gabby.”

It was hard to fight back the laughter when Gabby’s was so infectious.

“Anyway,” her friend continued, “I think it’s time you let me help you in that department.”

“What? Getting up at the crack of dawn?”

Gabby snorted, then laughed and coughed all at once. It almost sounded like she had been drinking something when Emily asked her question. When she caught her breath, she sounded mildly irritated. “You can’t say stuff like that when I’m eating.”

“And I know you’re eating because...? Are you forgetting we’re on the phone?”

Her friend ignored her question. “What I was getting at is that you want someone to date. A good guy you can relate to, right?”

“You just described a unicorn, hun. Are you sure you’re not hallucinating? Because last I checked, they were extinct.”

“Come on, Emily!” Gabby’s exasperated voice finally caught Emily’s attention. “I have someone I want to set you up with.”

A blind date.

She hadn’t been on one of those since she was in college. Did she really want to put herself out there in that way? A blind date ensured one thing: her friend was going to be in the middle. Gabby would know both parties so if it worked out, she’d talk about how she was the one who made the match. If it didn’t... she might be inclined to pick a side.

“I take it from your silence that you’re considering it.”

Emily worried her lower lip and shifted in her seat. The part of her that wanted to give it a try was quickly overriding the side of her that insisted this wasn’t a great idea. What was the worst that could happen? They don’t work out and Gabby tells her other friend that they can’t hang out anymore?

Okay, okay. With Emily’s luck, it would turn into a situation where Gabby would spend less time with her. Gabby was a local. Whoever she chose to set Emily up with would likely also be a local.

A cowboy.

Just like that, her thoughts bounced back to the man in the black cowboy hat that had been at the park earlier today. The man with the cute little girl who couldn’t seem to stop staring at her.

The man that made her insides quiver just a little bit.

That thought alone was enough to help her in her decision-making. If there was a guy out there that made her feel this way and they hadn’t even spoken, then it probably wouldn’t do her any good to have Gabby set her up with someone who wouldn’t hold a candle to this stranger.

Before she could politely decline, Gabby jumped in again. “Good! I knew you would be on board. That’s why I already told Bo to set things up.”

“Wait, I thought you said you wanted to talk about this before he lost his nerve.” Her thoughts were in an uproar. “Bo knows

this guy? Gabs, it's not one of his brothers, is it? I told you I didn't want to be set up with one of his brothers."

"Why not? They aren't so bad once you get to know them."

Emily rolled her eyes. "What happens if it doesn't work out? When you have your first kid and you invite everyone over for their first birthday, what then? I can't be the ex that no one wants around, and I refuse to lose my friendship with you."

"That's not how it's going to be," Gabby insisted. "Jack isn't like that. He would never make the rest of his family shun you just because things didn't work out with him."

"Jack? Which one is he?"

"Oh, he's great. I think you'd really like him. This is gonna be a match made in heaven, just you wait."

She racked her brain for any information she could link to Bo's brothers. Since Emily hadn't been able to go to the wedding or any of the festivities, she hadn't met any of them. All she knew was that Bo had three brothers and one sister. All of them were local now, all helping around at the ranch. One was in the military. One had a coffee shop in town. And one had a kid. Beyond that, Emily was at a loss.

"You're not going to tell me anything about this guy, are you?"

"Why would I? That would defeat the purpose of a blind date."

"I can't just go into this blindly..." She heard the way her words sounded just as they left her lips, not surprised in the least at Gabby's explosion of laughter. "Yeah, I get it. Very funny."

"Don't worry about it, Emily. I think the two of you are perfect for each other. I'd be surprised if Jack doesn't immediately see it the same way."

"Well, I guess if he's on board then I am, too. One date couldn't hurt. I've been needing to get out of the house a little more lately, anyway. So, what's the plan? Is he gonna come pick me up? Does he need my address?"

“Oh, we’ll handle it on our end. You just need to show up at the bakery on time and you’ll be golden.”

“The bakery?”

“Of course. Bo and I are going to treat the two of you to brownies and an Italian soda.”

Emily’s stomach gurgled, alerting herself to the fact she still hadn’t eaten her dinner yet. “Look, Gabs, I’m gonna go. Thanks for the setup. I’ll make sure I’m there tomorrow. Just text me with the details, okay?”

“Deal.”

Emily hung up and stared at her phone for a few moments, then shook her head and let out a soft laugh. Her friendship with Gabrielle was just one more thing to be grateful for.

CHAPTER THREE

LILY'S SMALL HAND SHOT OUT AND GRABBED ONTO THE SPOON in Jack's hand. Oatmeal went everywhere, and Jack let out a groan. They didn't have time for this. There was too much to do today.

He glanced up at his mother as she entered the kitchen. "Are you sure you can't feed her? Bo said I had to help with something and I'm not sure I'll be out there in time."

She glanced at him and offered a small smile. "You know she only eats for you. We've all given it a shot."

His scowl deepened. "Well, one day, she's going to have to realize that she'll either have to let someone else feed her or she's going to go hungry."

Jennifer's smile seemed to tighten slightly around the eyes. He'd seen that look before. It was the one she gave him when she was thinking something but didn't want to say it.

"Just tell me what you want to say and get it over with."

Her brows lifted marginally. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"Maybe not, but there's something you *want* to say. I can tell. Have you forgotten that you raised me? I know when something is on your mind."

She sighed, crossing the kitchen tile until she stood directly behind Lily's highchair. "You moved back home so we could help you. If that means that you have to focus a little more on Lily than you do on the ranch for a while, that's okay. No other

job would offer you the same courtesy. Don't worry about other things. You have a lot on your plate as it is."

"It's been over a year, Mom. I think that by now we should have gotten to a point where no one has to treat us any differently."

"You have a baby," she protested. "You lost your wife and now you're on your own. There is no *normal* timeline to get over that. One year, five years—only you will be able to tell what is right for you."

Lily let out an excited shriek, her gibberish a stark reminder that she wasn't progressing the way she was supposed to. Maybe they were both doomed to stay in this rut for longer than he considered reasonable.

His mother had left his side at some point and returned with a damp rag. He pried the spoon from Lily's fingers and watched as his mother deftly cleaned up his daughter. Lily didn't appear to be hungry anymore and she made that clear when she lifted her arms to her grandmother.

Jack gathered the bowl, spoon, and rag and headed over to the sink. "Are you still good to watch her? I'm not sure what Bo wanted me to do today. I might not even be done by lunchtime." His eyes shifted to Lily. "Maybe she'll be willing to eat some chopped-up food if you distract her." He placed a gentle hand on his daughter's head, smoothing down the wispy hair that never stayed put.

"We'll do our best. And if she doesn't eat for me, then you can feed her a good dinner." Jennifer nuzzled her granddaughter's neck, eliciting a giggle. "Go on. Get your work done and We'll see you at dinner."

He nodded. "Thanks, Mom."

Bo was out in the barn putting a saddle on his horse when Jack finally tracked him down. "You said you needed me for something important?"

His brother glanced over at him and turned his attention back to the task at hand. "Yeah. There's a guy I'm considering hiring for some stuff out here. A few things need repairing."

Jack lifted a brow. His brother's words were like a splash of cold water. "You're going to let someone else do the work out here? What's so complicated that you need to hire out?"

Bo gave him a flat look. "I'm busy. There's a lot to do to prepare for this fall. And none of you guys are willing to put in the effort I do. So I'm going to hire a handyman to do some of it."

"Okay, but I don't see what that has to do with me. You always do the hiring."

Bo stopped what he was doing and glanced at his watch. "I need you to do the interview. Meet with the guy. Tell me if he's worth his salt. I'm not going to let just anyone come onto our ranch and pick up a hammer." A hint of a smile hid beneath Bo's expression as if he were telling himself a private joke. "Do you think you can meet him in two hours?"

"I don't know. I'd rather stay close by. Lily—"

"Isn't Mom watching Lily?"

"Yeah, but you want me to go around lunch. What if—"

"Lily will be fine. She just ate. Mom isn't going to let her waste away. And I can't do it. I don't trust Andrew to go, and Daniel said there was an emergency at his coffee shop. So you're the only one. The guy has a job in town and said he could meet at the bakery. Thirty minutes of your time. That's all I'm asking."

Jack pulled off his hat and raked a hand through his hair. Interacting with people lately hadn't really been his forte, but he had told Bo that he was willing to do whatever it took to help out since he had brought two mouths to feed when he moved back to the ranch.

He nodded grimly. "I'll be there."



JACK HELD his hat in his hand as he entered the bakery and glanced around. There was only enough room for three tables

that seated two chairs each on one side of the establishment. The other side was filled with displays full of baked goods and sweets.

The whole room smelled almost sickly sweet, but that could have been due to the fact that he'd skipped breakfast. His appetite had diminished greatly since Zoe died. His clothes didn't fit as well as they once did.

Thankfully, his mother hadn't noticed, otherwise he might be the one force-fed.

One of the owners emerged from the back of the bakery—Allison, if he remembered correctly. She smiled brightly at him and stopped what she was doing. “Can I get you anything?”

He shook his head. “I'm meeting someone here. I'll let you know.”

She nodded. “How is your mother doing? I haven't seen her in here for a while.” She let out a soft laugh. “Then again, I haven't been in for a while, either. Things have been busy at our other location.”

“She's good. Should probably bring her one of your pies, though. I doubt she'd forgive me otherwise.”

Allison grinned. “I know just the one. I'll box it up for you.” She hustled over toward the display where all the pies were showcased and grabbed one from the shelf.

Jack headed for one of the tables. He was the only one in the bakery except Allison and another worker who also came into the main area from the back.

He placed his hat on the table and glanced toward the large storefront windows. It was proving to be a beautiful day. If Zoe were alive, she would have insisted they get a dessert to go and enjoy it out in the sunshine.

Stop it. It had been almost a year and a half. He needed to quit dwelling on how things might have been. It was time to live in the present.

His gaze snapped to the familiar form of someone who waited to cross the street. The woman from the park. He'd only seen her once, but he would have recognized her anywhere. The long blonde hair was a dead giveaway. Folks out here didn't typically wear their hair down. There was too much going on for that kind of nonsense.

She hurried forward, darting just fast enough to avoid getting in the way of a large tractor that rumbled down the street. When she stopped in front of the bakery, her eyes swept over the business and she opened the door.

The bell overhead tinkled and her eyes found his. Immediately he dropped his gaze and stared hard at his hat, hating that he continued to get caught staring at this woman.

Her soft footsteps seemed louder than ever, probably because they were coming right toward him.

Wait.

They were coming toward him.

He stiffened when the feet came into view at the edge of his table. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to stare into a pair of the most beautiful green eyes.

She smiled sweetly at him, holding out her hand. "You must be Jack. I'm Emily."

His brows creased, confusion clouding any ability to put two words together.

Her smile faltered and she glanced around the bakery. "I'm sorry, are you not Jack—Bo's brother?"

Realization hit him over the head like he'd attempted to pass beneath a low-hanging ceiling. "You're not a handyman."

Surprise and confusion flickered across her face. "No..." She glanced at her watch, color flooding her cheeks. "There might have been a mistake. Gabby said—"

"Gabby?" He dragged a hand down his face and shot out of his seat. "My apologies, but there *has* been a mistake. I was set up."

“That’s... typically how a blind date goes.” A hint of a smile returned to her face, though the blush remained.

“Blind—” He let out a groan once more. “I’m gonna kill ‘em,” Jack muttered. “Look, I wasn’t aware this was a date. I was supposed to meet someone here and interview them. I’ll get you whatever you would like for your trouble.” He made a move to head past her, but her hand shot out and wrapped around his forearm.

“Don’t go.”

Jack stared down at where she touched him, then lifted his gaze to meet hers.

Emily released him, the blush deepening. She let out a laugh, similar to the one he’d heard at the park the other day. Warm shivers erupted along every nerve in his body and he tensed, unprepared for the sensation however pleasant it might be.

“What I meant to say is that I’ve cleared my schedule for the next few hours. I could use the company.”

It started out small, this feeling that maybe he should just give in. Out of everyone in town, Gabby had picked the one woman who had piqued his interest.

Just as quickly as that feeling made an appearance, he quashed it. Shaking his head, he stepped back. “I really have to go. I have a lot of work today. I’m sorry you were sent here under false pretenses, but—”

“I’m not going to bite.”

He stumbled over his words. “I’m sorry?”

She laughed again. “Look, there has to be a reason why your brother and sister-in-law thought it would be a good idea to set us up.”

“Yeah, they think if I find someone—” He nearly told her they wanted him to replace his wife. But even admitting that out loud was too difficult. He tried again. “They think if I start dating, then I won’t be such a grouch all the time.” His gaze swept over her from head to toe. “I’m guessing they think you would be a good influence.”

That statement alone made her smile shine brighter than he'd seen it, and that was saying something. "Then perhaps you should prove them wrong."

His head reared back. He wasn't expecting that reaction.

"You know. Go on this date and see if they're wrong."

Jack frowned. "I'm not interested in dating."

"But everyone can use another friend."

He eyed her once more. Something tugged on him, drawing him closer to her. He couldn't say for sure what it was, but he knew he shouldn't ignore it.

"Fine. But I've only got ten minutes. I have to get back to the ranch."

She adjusted her purse on her shoulder. "I'll go with you. It'll give us a chance to get to know each other a little better."

Before he could argue, she slipped out the door. He gaped after her, unsure of whether to be impressed or worried by how she'd managed to manipulate an afternoon out of him. He stepped toward the door but was stopped by Allison's voice.

"Don't forget the pie for your mother." She gave him a knowing grin. "It's on the house."

Today just kept getting weirder and weirder.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMILY STEPPED OUT OF HER CAR, LETTING HER GAZE SWEEP over her new surroundings. Horses wandered in corrals and men in cowboy hats looked like they were on a mission as they led their animals from one place to the next. It was a lot bigger than she'd been expecting.

The blue sky stretched overhead like it was about to swallow her. That was likely in part due to the fact there were fewer buildings out here.

She took in a deep breath and released it just as Jack wandered over to her. He all but shoved a pair of boots into her arms. Scrambling to catch them before they fell, she gave him an incredulous look. "What are these for?"

"You said you wanted to come to the ranch and get to know me better. Well, I'm gonna be busy. If you want to get to know me, you're going to be busy, too." He started walking away then stopped and spun to face her. "Unless you've changed your mind."

Her eyes widened and her stubborn streak came through. "No, I said I was willing to come and that's what I'm going to do." She gestured toward the sundress she wore. "Though, if you think the boots are going to be necessary, what about this dress?"

His gaze swept over her body, making her feel even more vulnerable than she was. "Your outfit is fine. The shoes are in case one of the horses steps on you."

Already she regretted that she'd opened her big mouth and invited herself here. She was outgoing, for sure, but she hadn't been on a real date in so long that she probably came off as desperate.

What was she doing? He clearly didn't want anything to do with her. She should have accepted that rather than lean into her own brand of crazy.

Well, it was too late now. Her pride wouldn't allow her to walk away after everything she'd said to get here. With that final thought ringing in her ears, she kicked off her Toms and pulled the boots on her feet.

He stared at them and brought his gaze up to meet hers. "How do they fit?"

Emily clicked her heels together with a grin. "I guess I'm not in Kansas anymore."

The blank stare he gave her only made her feel that much more like a fish out of water.

"You know, like in that movie."

Jack shook his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about." He strode off toward the barn and she scrambled after him.

"You can't tell me you've never seen *The Wizard of Oz*. The red shoes. The munchkins?"

His jaw remained tight as he eyed her. Clearly, he hadn't had the kind of childhood he should have. "Well, if you know what's good for you, you're going to let your kid watch it."

He stopped suddenly and faced her. "How did you know I had a kid?"

She stumbled back a step, his closeness throwing her off balance. "I saw you at the park."

Once again, his expression remained blank.

Emily rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. I know you saw me too. Not only that, but if you're a grown man at a park without a kid... then we have bigger problems."

One side of his mouth twitched but that was the closest he came to offering her a smile. Then he was off again.

“So, you are willing to let me come here and help you out, but you’re not willing to talk to me? I thought that was the point of this blind—”

“This isn’t a date,” he muttered. “We’re just...” He let out a sigh. “I don’t know what this is, but it isn’t a date.”

She fell into step with him, finally finding his gait. Whatever reason Gabby had for setting her up with him was beyond her. He was as grouchy as they came. “I suppose we can start with me. I work for a local daycare. It’s around the corner from that park so we go there a lot when the weather is good.”

Jack glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “That must be nice.”

“Sure. But just like anything, it can be hard. Kids are... hard.” She tilted her head as she peered at him. “I’m guessing you know that as well as anyone.”

He stopped again, just before they were to enter the barn. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’re a single dad. I don’t think there’s anything harder than raising a child on your own.” She was probably overstepping. This was one of those times when she should be keeping her mouth shut. She lowered her voice and looked away. “My dad raised my brother and me on his own. I know it wasn’t easy for him either.”

Jack’s expression softened. “And your mother?”

“Oh, she left when I was about three years old. I don’t remember anything about her. All I have are pictures.”

“I’m sorry.”

She forced a smile. “Don’t be. I turned out okay. There’s a lot to be grateful for even when things seem to be going sideways.”

His piercing blue eyes were such a contrast to his dark hair, and the way he was studying her made her uneasy. She

fidgeted beneath his gaze, almost wishing she'd just kept their conversation light, and her eyes darted toward the barn.

Desperate to change the subject, she asked, "What do we need to do?"

"Hmm?"

"Your chores. You said you had a lot of work to do."

His focus drifted toward the barn. "My dad and my brothers are out working with the cattle today, so I got stuck mucking out the stalls this week. I'd like to get it done before they get back, so I don't have to find a place to keep their horses."

She rubbed her hands together and flashed him an easy smile. "Okay, how many are there?"

He gave her a funny look.

"What?"

"You actually seem excited. You do realize that we're cleaning out excrement, don't you?"

Emily placed a hand on her hip. "Sir, I have worked in daycare my entire life. You don't go as long as I have without having to change poopy diapers and clean up vomit. I think I can handle horse manure."

He shrugged and turned away from her, but not before she saw the barest ghost of a smile touch his lips. Good. He was lightening up. He would need to if they planned on being friends.

Maybe he'd change his mind and they could be something more.

But she was getting ahead of herself. Just because she'd been looking for love in all the wrong places didn't mean Jack was the guy for her. He said himself he wasn't interested in anything long-term—or anything at all. That had been the problem with the last guy she'd dated.

She'd been silly to assume Adam was going to change his mind after they got serious. It didn't matter that they'd spent a good two years together. Nothing was ever going to come of it.

Emily just needed to learn to slow down and stop pushing what she wanted on other people.

She followed Jack into the barn, realizing that goal was going to be just as hard as ever. Jack was one of those people who clearly needed help and she was the type to want to save him.

Well, that was just great. Gabby probably knew exactly what she was doing when she insisted on setting up this date. Emily would have to have a stern word with her friend the second she had the chance.

Jack stopped at a stall so suddenly Emily collided with him. She stumbled back a step and her hand swung out to catch herself on whatever was in reach only to end up holding onto Jack's hand. It wasn't clear if he'd made his own attempt at saving her from falling or if he had just been in the way.

His eyes clouded over, turning more gray than blue as he scowled at her. "You need to be more careful. You can't just go tromping through here. You could scare the horses or hurt yourself."

She moved to tug her hand from his grasp, but he held firm. "Got it. Sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

"Clearly." He released her. "Working on this ranch isn't all fun and rainbows. The animals are big and they can kill you if you're not careful."

She snorted but sobered real quick when he shot her a dirty look.

His hand gestured toward an oversized shovel and a rake. "We're going to try to salvage the dry straw in the stalls and then scoop out the rest." He strode toward the tools, grabbed both of them, and held the shovel out to her. "I'll separate everything and I want you to dump the unusable stuff in the bucket."

Emily wasn't the type to shy away from hard work. She'd always been willing to roll up her sleeves and do what needed to be done, which was probably why she was impressed by the way Jack was getting right to work. There was this no-

nonsense way about him—something that would complement her own upbeat personality.

They got to work, cleaning out the stalls one by one. By the time they neared the end of the row of stalls, she paused and leaned on the handle of her shovel. “I get why you might not want to talk about it, but I’m curious. Is there a reason you don’t want to talk about your kid?”

He glanced at her, his expression still stony. “I suppose I don’t see the point.”

“Really?”

Jack heaved a sigh. “This isn’t going to go anywhere.”

“So you’ve said. But that’s just the thing. Sharing about your life can help foster a friendship, too. I told you about my family.”

He stopped his movements, his focus on nothing in particular. “I have a daughter, Lily.” His eyes darted to meet hers and then away again. “She’s eighteen months old.”

She grinned. “That’s one of the best ages. They start talking and toddling around.”

Immediately, he became closed off again, his hand gripping the rake.

“We’re done here. Thanks for your help.” Jack brushed past her and marched down the aisle toward the door. She almost expected him to stop and tell her he was joking, but he just kept going.

Emily hurried after him, unsure of what had just happened. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Of course not,” he muttered.

“Then why are you asking me to leave?”

He whirled around to face her. “Why are you even here? A normal person would take the hint.”

She stopped, her head rearing backward. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Why are you sticking around? We don’t know each other. There’s no reason for you to be here.”

It wasn’t often that her patience got depleted. She needed a reserve of it when working with children. But this moment took it right out of her. “I’m sorry, I thought we were getting to know each other. I thought you wanted to be friends.”

“I don’t need any friends.”

His curt reply was like a slap in the face. She stared at him, blinking, because she couldn’t come up with the words to put him in his place. Then she pushed the shovel hard into his chest and stormed off.

CHAPTER FIVE

JACK SHOOK HIS HEAD, FURIOUS NOT ONLY WITH HIMSELF BUT with his brother. There was no way Bo was in his right mind when he thought it would be a good idea to set Emily up with him. She was pushy and too... happy.

He definitely didn't need someone like that hovering all the time—friend or girlfriend. Watching Emily storm toward her car, he shoved aside the little bit of guilt he felt over what he'd said to her. She didn't deserve his frustration. This wasn't her fault. He'd let her come.

Shaking off the feeling that he had done something wrong, he put away the shovel and rake and headed back to the door.

That was when he stopped cold. Gabby had just pulled up and climbed out of her car. She threw her arms around Emily, and they started talking.

If he was lucky, Emily wouldn't say a thing about what had just occurred. She'd just be on her way. He watched them closely, hearing only the sounds of their voices rather than the actual words they were saying. Then they both looked at him.

He wasn't lucky.

From this distance, Emily didn't look incredibly upset, but Gabby sure did. She hugged her friend again before Emily got into her car and drove away.

Gabby stared at him for what felt like an eternity. He nearly thought she'd just go into the house in search of Bo, but she didn't. Instead, she headed right for him.

Jack froze. Instincts told him to dart inside the barn and find a hiding place, but he knew better. Gabby would seek him out no matter where he hid. By the look of it, she was furious with him. Yep. He'd run out of luck a long time ago.

"What on earth did you say to her?"

Jack crossed his arms, refusing to say a word.

Gabby continued. "Emily is the sweetest, kindest woman on this planet, and you did something. What did you do?"

He lifted a brow. "What did she tell you?"

"That's just it. She wouldn't explain anything. All she said was that she thinks she said something wrong when she brought up Lily."

His scowl deepened.

"So, she was right. You got offended. What was it? Because I can't think of a single thing that would be so offensive for you to kick her off the property."

He pointed an accusatory finger at her. "What about you? What did she ever do to you that you would torture her with setting us up on a date?"

Gabby snorted. "I thought you two would hit it off."

"Why? Because she can use sign language and my daughter is *deaf*?" The words exploded from his lips. "What exactly were you trying to accomplish with that pairing? Are you trying to say I'm not doing everything I need to for my child?"

"What? Of course not!" she shot back. "I was thinking that you needed someone in your life who could make you smile again, and Emily would be the perfect person for that."

"I don't need your help. You don't even know me. So how about you just let me live my life the way I want to?"

Gabby had never looked so mad. He wouldn't have been surprised if she came charging at him and tackled him to the ground. With that thought, he shrank back a little.

She shook her head, a huff escaping her lips. "You're an idiot."

He wanted to argue with her, but he knew better. There was no winning in that conversation, mostly because he was beginning to wonder if she was completely right.

“Did I set you two up because she could sign? No. But isn’t it a nice perk? You could have taken the opportunity to ask her a thousand questions and see what she thought would be a good place to start. You can’t keep ignoring the fact that Lily needs help. The longer you put it off, the harder it’s going to become.” She threw her hands into the air. “I thought you were better than this, Jack.”

“You don’t know me,” he muttered.

“Clearly.” She spun around, ready to take off, but his question stopped her.

“Did you tell her about Lily?”

His voice was quiet. He’d kept this from Emily for no other reason than to keep some semblance of his life private. But the longer he thought about it, the more he realized that Gabby had made a good point.

Gabby didn’t turn to face him. All she did was let out a sigh. “I didn’t tell her. I figured that was something you should decide to share all on your own.”

She retreated, leaving him to dwell on everything he’d done wrong today, starting with his daughter.

Lily only had one person to advocate for her and that was her father. It didn’t matter that his heart was still hurting nor that he wasn’t ready to start a new relationship. What mattered was that her future would be dictated by the decisions he made for her today, right now.

His thoughts shifted to Emily. If he’d been pressed, he would have agreed with Gabby that Emily was exactly the type of woman for him. The fact that her laugh had the ability to awaken something that had been long buried was proof of that.

The last time he’d allowed himself to fall for a woman, he’d only been able to spend a few short years with her before she left him.

Jack's stomach churned. If there was something he knew, it was that he didn't have the strength to lose another person he cared about. Not Lily. Not anyone in his family. And that meant he couldn't give his heart to anyone else.

The sound of horse hooves hitting dirt drew his attention and Bo came into view, pulling his horse to a sudden stop in front of the barn. The horse reared up slightly and tossed her head.

Bo let out a surprised chuckle. "I didn't expect you get back so soon."

Jack glowered at his brother, then stormed up to him and dragged him from his nervous horse. Bo's ability to land on his feet despite Jack gripping his shirt and shoving him backward would have been impressive if it weren't for the fury that Jack was experiencing.

"What do you think you were doing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The handyman? Did you really think that was a good idea? Honestly, Bo, I thought we had an understanding. What makes you think I would just willingly toss aside Zoe like that?"

Bo shoved Jack back a step. "No one wants you to forget Zoe. But she's been gone a year, Jack. You have to move on eventually."

Jack's jaw tightened. "I don't have to do anything. Think real hard, Bo. What would you do if Gabby died? If she was ripped out of your life by God and you were left with *nothing*?"

"But you weren't left with nothing," Bo ground out. "You have a daughter who depends on you. You have us—your family."

Jack spun away from his brother. "I can't believe you don't get it. She was the love of my life. Every time I look at Lily, I see her. And nothing is going to change that."

"We get it."

"No, you don't!" he shouted. "You will never get it until it's you standing over her grave asking God why he took her from you." Jack stopped, clenching and unclenching his fists. He

stared at the ground. “I don’t expect you to understand, but I do expect you to respect my wishes when I tell you to stay out of my love life. I don’t need to replace Zoe.”

Bo was quiet—so quiet that Jack nearly thought his brother had slipped out of the barn. It was only his heavy sigh that ended up giving him away. “Fine.”

“Tell Gabby she’d be smart to do the same.”

“Whatever. We only thought—”

He faced his brother, eyes flashing. “I know what you thought. And while I get that you think you were doing the right thing, you were wrong.”

“Jack—”

“Enough. No more dates. No more good intentions. If I want help, I’ll ask.” He turned toward the door and stopped. “Mom has Lily. She was expecting me back, but I think I need to cool off a little before I take her.”

Bo didn’t move and Jack couldn’t tell what his brother was thinking. It didn’t matter. He was the one in the wrong here.

“Watch Lily for me for a little while?”

His brother gave him a short nod.

“Thanks.” Jack hurried from the barn but instead of turning toward the house, he headed for the pasture. He needed to expend some energy and get his mind off a certain someone.

Even as he attempted to do just that, his thoughts went rogue. Emily’s smiling face, her green eyes, and her happy disposition filled his mind. None of this was her fault. She’d been a pawn in Gabby’s matchmaking game.

Then he’d gone and ruined any chance at a friendship when he’d snapped at her. Even if he wanted to ask her about Lily and the possibility of teaching his daughter sign language, there was no guarantee she would do it.

He wouldn’t blame her if she never wanted to see him again.

Jack made it out into the middle of the familiar pasture, not realizing until he reached the tree where he’d ended up.

This was the tree where he'd proposed to Zoe.

A breeze rustled through the tall grass surrounding the tree, playing with the leaves that clung to the branches overhead. Jack shivered, despite the heat of the summer. He reached out and touched the bark of the oak, letting his fingers trace the wood.

He continued to do everything wrong. If Zoe were here, she would have smacked him over the head and told him to stop being so stubborn. Another chill swept through his body, as if Zoe herself were agreeing with that thought.

Closing his eyes tight, he reached out with his mind and his heart, hoping he could feel her here. It had been two months since he'd felt her presence, almost as if she were trying to help him move on.

It didn't matter how long he waited, she wasn't going to come. For all he knew, it was all just wishful thinking, anyway.

Jack settled down beneath the tree, hating that he already knew what he needed to do to fix this whole mess. Lily needed him to advocate for her, which meant he needed to find someone who could help them both learn to communicate. If Lily's hearing never came back, she needed somewhere to start no matter what.

He glanced up at the branches overhead, surprised that he felt marginally better. The peaceful sensation that wrapped around him was similar to the feeling he'd gotten when he'd been closest to Zoe.

Perhaps he could save face and try to find someone who could teach Lily that *wasn't* Emily. He'd make a few calls in the morning—maybe reach out to the doctor. There had to be at least a few local people who knew how to sign. He just needed to find them.

With any luck, things would start looking up.

Bo and Gabby would just have to agree to their promise and keep their big noses out of his business.

CHAPTER SIX

EMILY HAD ALWAYS HATED THE WAY HER BRAIN WORKED. Whenever she put her foot in her mouth, she relived the situation over and over again until she was sick to her stomach. Her thoughts shifted continually to Jack and how she'd pushed him too hard, too fast.

Why did she have to do that all the time? It was like her mouth wasn't capable of behaving when she was around a guy she found attractive.

Stop it. Jack wasn't on the market despite what Gabby had said. He clearly wasn't over his ex, and the time Emily had spent with him hadn't done a lick of good to get his mind off her.

Emily was sprawled out on her couch, staring at her ceiling as that thought crossed her mind, and once again, she shut her eyes tight against the memories of that fateful day. It had been almost a whole week and she hadn't heard from Jack—or Gabby, for that matter.

She flushed, simply from recalling the conversation she'd had with her friend. It didn't matter how much Gabby insisted that Jack was just going through something, Emily knew deep down that she'd done something wrong.

Heaving a sigh, she sat up and grabbed the knitted blanket she'd been laying on, wrapping it around herself. Emily moved toward the window, hoping that watching what was happening outside would be enough to get her mind off a certain someone. She really needed to clear her head.

Perhaps she just needed to bite the bullet and sign up for one of those online dating apps. People were still having success with those, right? She pulled out her phone but thought better of it. Too many people on those platforms lied about who they were. There had to be a better way of meeting people.

The phone in her hand buzzed and she jumped, expecting to see a number she didn't recognize—hating how much she hoped it was Jack. But her brother's name populated the screen as the FaceTime call came through. She placed the phone on the windowsill and settled on the floor so she could use her hands before answering the call.

Gabe's happy face filled the screen and he immediately started signing, his hands flying faster than most people could speak. "Guess what happened to me today? Remember when I had those interviews a few weeks ago? Well, one of them called me back."

She beamed at him, her hands moving in ways that were so second nature she didn't have to think twice about it. "That's great! Which one was it?"

"The architect job. They want to relocate me to Austin."

"Austin? That's so far away!"

Gabe shook his head. "Not really. It would be farther to move out to be with you. It's just two hours from where I live now."

It was a good point. And Gabe preferred the more moderate winters. Communicating in the cold was hard enough without temperatures reaching below freezing.

"That's not the only reason I called. I wanted to give you more good news."

"Really?" she signed back.

"Yeah. I'm coming to Rocky Ridge for a week."

She squealed, momentarily forgetting herself, and spoke aloud. "You're coming to visit? When?"

He laughed and pointed to his ear, drawing focus to the fact that she'd forgotten to sign. It didn't matter, though. He had a talent for lip reading, mastering it about ninety percent of the

time. “I was hoping I could come in about two weeks. That’s when I’ll have my last day at my current job. Then the new place is giving me a week before I start with them.”

“That’s so exciting! I knew you could do it!”

Gabe nodded. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yes, you could have. You just needed a little shove in the right direction.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think you realize just how much you’ve done for me. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have ever chased after that dream.”

“Well, you’ve earned it. I’m so proud of you, Gabe. You’re going to be amazing.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, catching up with her work and what it was like to be living in the mountains. Thankfully, Gabe wasn’t able to see just how lonely she was feeling, or he might have attempted to convince her to move back to Texas.

And there was a problem with that idea. Mathew needed her. And his parents had pulled so many strings to get her a good-paying job just so their son had a provider who could communicate with him.

Gabe’s happy expression faltered and he peered at her. She stiffened, looking away as she fiddled with her hair. “Look, I have to go. I need to get some groceries so I can make dinner tonight. Text me your flight information and I’ll make sure to put in for the time off so I can get you from the airport.”

He signed something but she waved at him and hung up as if she hadn’t seen it. Dirty trick, but it was the only way she was going to avoid having him ask her a million questions and then she’d ultimately tell him about her faux pas with Jack.

She needed to get out of the house. Maybe then she’d be able to get back to feeling normal.



EMILY WANDERED down the street toward Cliff's Country Store. It was her favorite place to go shopping despite it being on the smaller side. Petunia always made sure to stock her favorite ice cream and she never told Emily she couldn't get order in special.

It was almost like Petunia was the aunt she never had. Just thinking about seeing the woman brightened Emily's day. She could update her on Gabe's new job offer and...

Her eyes snagged on someone coming the other direction across the street and Emily gasped. Of course she'd end up bumping into the one person she'd rather not see today. Wasn't Jack supposed to be really busy? That was the only thing he'd talked about when they were at the bakery together.

Emily darted down behind a chair at the new coffee shop that had just opened up. She sat scrunched behind it, face burning with embarrassment as a few of the patrons gave her strange looks. Cliff's was just a few doors down. If she turned her head away from the other side of the street, she'd be able to avoid Jack and get that ice cream she'd been craving.

Slowly, she stood and kept her face trained on the wall of storefront windows as she hurried toward the market.

By the time she darted inside, her heart was hammering so wildly it could have sprouted wings and taken flight. She could hear the whooshing of her pulse in her ears and her hands shook. She didn't dare look over her shoulder as she grabbed a cart and hurried toward the produce section.

Jack had looked like he was on a mission. He'd been moving quickly. Her chances were good that he hadn't caught sight of her. All she had to do was stay put until he was off the street.

Emily's eyes swept over the cucumbers and broccoli. She could get some of each for a salad. Her stomach growled in agreement. She reached for one of the larger cucumbers and examined it. If she prepped it right, she could make it last for a few days.

Cooking for one had always been a chore. There just weren't enough recipes that resulted in no leftovers. Salads were one

of the only things she felt she could mix up a little with different toppings or dressings. She placed the cucumber in a bag and then into her cart before reaching for a crown of broccoli.

“I never understood why people like broccoli so much.”

Her eyes flew wide and she stilled.

No. He couldn't have followed her in here. It wasn't Jack.
Please don't be Jack.

Slowly, she turned around.

Great.

Why did it have to be Jack?

She smiled widely, praying it would be enough to hide her disappointment from having run into him—and looking like this. Her hair was thrown up into a messy bun and she'd neglected to do her makeup. Of course he'd catch her looking like a gremlin.

“Jack. What a surprise.”

“Is it?”

She flushed. “Unless you have something to confess...”

He tilted his head, his brows pulled together. “Perhaps you're right. Maybe it only *appeared* as though you were trying to avoid me outside.”

The heat in her face intensified, giving her away. “Well, in my defense, we didn't exactly leave things all that pleasantly the last time we spoke, now did we?” Even to her own ears, Emily's voice sounded tight and accusatory. She forced a laugh and a bigger smile. “Could you blame me?”

“No, I don't suppose I could.” The corners of his mouth twitched but didn't lift into a full smile. Instead, he gestured toward the broccoli in her hand. “Please tell me you plan on slathering that stuff in butter and sautéing it with something.”

Emily laughed in spite of herself. “Actually, I prefer my vegetables the way they are.”

“What? Coarse and plain?”

She shrugged as she placed it into her bag. “Better the vegetables than the men in my life.”

“Ouch.” He chuckled. It was short and unexpected, drawing her attention immediately. While it was a bit rough, like he hadn’t had much practice using it, the sound of his laugh also managed to warm her, starting a fire in her belly.

Emily placed a hand on her hip. “Are you here to shop or to corner unsuspecting women you’ve slighted?”

He blinked at her and for a moment she wondered if she’d once again taken it too far. But then he chuckled again.

“You caught me.” Jack raked a hand through his mussed hair, sending it in all kinds of haphazard directions. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and looked away. “I wanted to apologize for how I left things with you. I shouldn’t have...” He shook his head. “The thing is, I lost my wife.”

She sucked in sharply. Gabby had been vague about his past relationship and Emily would have never guessed Jack was dealing with the death of his wife. Her heart ached for him, and immediately, the way he’d been acting started to make sense. “I’m so sorry.”

He nodded. “Thanks. The thing is... well, she died in a car accident.” Jack looked away as if unable to bring himself to meet her gaze. “Lily—my daughter was with her.”

Emily’s heart jumped into her throat, making it hard to breathe. “Is she okay?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Jack swung his gaze up to meet hers. “The accident caused her to lose her hearing. She’s improved some. I guess she can hear sounds, but they’re all muffled. The doctor doesn’t know if she’s going to get her full hearing back. He suggested...” Once again, Jack fidgeted and looked away. “He suggested I find someone who can help us learn the language—sign—ASL. Whatever you call it,” he muttered with exasperation.

She offered him a reassuring smile. “All of those are acceptable. Have you had any luck?”

“That’s just the thing. Turns out there’s only a handful of people who might be able to get her in right away, and they’re all in Billings. I don’t have the kind of schedule to do that.” His voice was dry, seemingly strained from even their small conversation. “I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind... if there was a way we could hire you...”

“Don’t even say another word. I’d be happy to help.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“SEE? THAT WASN’T SO HARD.” GABBY STOOD OVER JACK, her arms folded across her chest and the smuggest smile he’d ever seen plastered on her face.

He scowled, not willing to maintain eye contact with the woman who was beating him over the head with her “I told you so’s.”

“Emily is the sweetest person. I knew she’d be willing to help you with this. All you had to do was ask.”

“I get it, Gabby. You were right, I was wrong,” he muttered.

She dropped down and sat beside him. “Hey, is everything okay?”

He shot her a dirty look. “What do you think?”

Gabby reached out and rested a hand on his knee. “I know it doesn’t feel like it, but everything will work out. It always does.”

Jack bit back the retort that threatened to erupt. Had everything worked out when he was sitting in the hospital surrounded by everyone as he’d received the news that his wife was dead at the scene and his daughter had sustained several injuries?

No, everything would never work out the way it should. But instead of reminding her of that very specific fact, he just nodded.

“Maybe you’ll be willing to get yourself back out there. I know Lily would benefit from it.”

He shot her a dark look. “My love life, whatever that may be, has nothing to do with Lily. And it’s none of your business either. I don’t want you getting anything into your head about Emily and me. We’ve both agreed that dating is off the table. She’ll be here to help out with Lily and that’s it.”

Thankfully, Gabby didn’t argue. That was the last thing he needed right before Emily was due to arrive. He couldn’t afford to have anyone get into his head. This meeting was about his daughter and helping her learn how to navigate the world without her sense of hearing.

The doorbell rang, and Gabby looked over toward the front of the house. She met his gaze and got to her feet. “I’ll get it.”

Jack scooped Lily into his arms, shaking his head as he also rose. “No. I’m taking this session outside. I don’t need any of you getting ideas about setting the two of us up... *again*.”

Gabby pressed her lips together, clearly in an attempt to bite back her smile. Instead of heading for the door, she made a beeline for the kitchen where Bo was fixing some lunch.

Jack opened the door, Lily on his hip, and was once again taken aback by how pretty Emily truly was. Today, her hair was pulled into a long braid that rested over her shoulder. She held a large red tote and she wore jeans with a T-shirt. She smiled broadly at Jack but then immediately shifted her attention to Lily.

The tote dropped to the floor with a thump and Emily stepped a little closer, her hands waving through the air as she spoke along with them. “Hi, Lily. I’m Emily.”

Lily’s eyes widened, glued to Emily’s movements.

“I’m going to play with you today. Do you like to play?”

Still, Lily didn’t move. Her only reaction was a single blink.

Emily laughed, meeting Jack’s eyes. She continued to sign even though she was speaking to him. “That’s a good sign. Lily is interested in the signs that I’m doing. That means she’s going to pick them up a bit quicker than we might have anticipated. I’ve worked with kids who are harder. They don’t

have any interest and finding what motivates them is incredibly difficult.”

He barely registered the words she was saying as her hands seemed to dance through the air with each syllable. There was no way he was going to be able to learn what she was doing. It seemed far too complicated.

She gestured toward her own chin and snickered. “Your mouth is open.”

Jack clamped his mouth shut, unsure of what to say.

“I know this seems overwhelming, but you’ll get used to it. Sign is a lot easier than a foreign language. You just have to associate words with signals and drop the unnecessary fillers.” She glanced around him. “Is this where you want to get to work?”

He couldn’t explain it, but he knew that Gabby or Bo—perhaps both of them—were eavesdropping. If that wasn’t bad enough, any of his other siblings could walk in on this session and he would never hear the end of it.

Jack shook his head sharply. “I’d rather go outside if that’s okay. We will get more privacy that way.”

Thankfully, she didn’t question him on that.

Jack wasn’t paying much attention to where they were headed until he found himself under the same tree where he usually went when he was dealing with heavy stuff. He glanced up at the branches overhead as they swayed in the breeze, and he closed his eyes to hear the way the leaves seemed to whisper, “Hello again.”

“This is a beautiful place,” Emily murmured as she helped him spread out a blanket for them to sit on. “If I had a space like this, you can bet I’d be out here all the time.” She glanced back toward the house and the barn that sat on the edge of the property. “What kind of ranching work do you do here?”

“Cattle, mostly. We dabble in some crops, but that’s mostly to feed the animals we have.” Jack placed Lily square on the blanket. “One day, I plan on teaching Lily how to do dressage.”

“Dressage?”

“It’s a competition for riders to show how well trained their horses can be. The best riders can put their horses through a series of steps without any perceptible movements.”

“That sounds really interesting.” Emily dug into her tote and pulled out a few books, some laminated sheets, and a few toys. “I think I’d like to see that someday.”

“Beats watching a cowboy get thrown from a horse and nearly trampled, that’s for sure.” Emily gave him a funny look, and he gave her one right back. “What?”

She shook her head with that laugh he enjoyed so much. “You’re a cowboy.”

“Yeah.”

“I would have thought you loved rodeo stuff.”

He set his focus on Lily if only to help him avoid looking directly at Emily. Zoe hadn’t wanted to raise Lily here. She’d loved the town and the people, but she’d been more interested in moving to the city. She had wanted a career, and he wasn’t about to stand in her way no matter how much he loved his hometown.

“Not all cowboys agree with the way rodeos are run. A few years ago, we were all set to move away from Rocky Ridge, anyway. My wife—we thought we’d be able to give Lily better opportunities in the city. Probably still would... all things considered.”

“So why haven’t you moved out there, then?”

Jack met her gaze this time. “I needed my family. I—” It was embarrassing to admit just how much of a failure he’d become since he started his role as the single dad. “It was just easier for Lily to have the support of everyone here.”

That was the closest he’d come to admitting his flaws to this stranger.

Emily stilled her efforts, her eyes drilling into him. It was as if she could read his mind and there was nowhere for him to

hide. Tearing his gaze from her wouldn't do much good when she could see every last bit of him.

Yes, that notion was ridiculous. But that was how it felt.

Lily squealed and lunged forward to grab at the toys on the blanket. Her small, chubby fingers wrapped around a toy horse and she held it up to him with pride. Jack shot an uncertain look at Emily. Lily couldn't hear him, so speaking seemed worthless.

Emily scooted closer and carefully pried the horse out of Lily's fingers. She held up the horse with her left hand and placed her other one near her forehead. Resting her thumb against her temple, she curled all of her fingers except her pointer and middle finger.

"Horse," she said as she bent and unbent those two fingers twice.

Just like before, Lily watched her with an intensity he'd never seen before.

Emily repeated the motion again and said, "Horse." Then she held out the toy as she signed the word before lifting Lily's own hand to create the sign. It took about five minutes of Emily repeating the word for Lily to catch on, but then she demonstrated the sign on her own.

Jack let out a laugh of surprise. "She did it! I can't believe she did it!"

"Of course she did. Like I said, your daughter is very bright. She'll pick it up faster than you might think. Normally by the age of one, a baby can sign ten or so words regularly to express their wants or desires. Their vocabulary explodes after that. She's a little behind right now, but I wouldn't be surprised if she's made leaps and bounds by this time next year."

Lily held the horse out to her father and made the sign again. Jack nodded, a wide smile on his face and emotion burning behind his eyes as he signed back.

"Horse," he whispered. He glanced up to find Emily watching him. Strange how one simple word could do so much to ease

the weight that had been crushing his heart all this time. “What other words can we teach her today?”

Emily laughed. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. We don’t want her to overdo it. I brought all these books and toys so we could let her set the pace. She might only retain a couple today, but we can show her the sign for as many things as she wants. The only words I think are imperative are ‘milk’ and ‘eat.’ She needs to be able to ask for what she wants.”

“That makes sense.”

They spent the majority of the next hour letting Lily point at pictures and signing each word. There was far too much for Jack to retain. Some of the signs were simple enough, like the sign for “milk” being similar to the motion used to milk a cow. Or the sign for “eat” was bringing his pressed fingers and thumb to his lips. But there was one that had really thrown him off.

Lily had pointed to a cartoon drawing of a mother, father, and baby. She pointed her finger at the baby and Emily pretended to rock a baby. Then she pointed to the father. Emily glanced once at Jack then brought her thumb with all fingers outstretched to her forehead. *Father*. Lily crawled into Jack’s lap and mimicked the sign.

She lunged for the book and pointed at the mother. Emily placed her thumb with fingers outstretched at her chin. *Mother*. Lily stared at Emily hard for a moment, then signed the word.

Emily shook her head. She placed a hand to her chest. “I’m *teacher*.” She brought both hands to her temples, flattened like a squished ‘o’ shape, then she pulled them away from her head and opened her hands straight as she dropped them lower in the outline of a person. “Teacher,” she repeated.

Lily shook her head and tapped her thumb to her chin. *Mother*.

Jack’s heart crumbled just a little bit more. They didn’t have many pictures of Zoe, but the ones they did have could easily be mistaken for Emily to an infant. The blonde hair, the green eyes—both characteristics were there.

Emily offered Jack an apologetic smile. “Don’t worry, she’ll get it. I was the same way. I still don’t remember my mom.”

Her ramblings only made this whole situation feel that much worse. He had to put a stop to it.

“It’s fine,” he muttered. “She’s still learning her words. Things are bound to be mixed up.”

“Exactly. Do you have a good picture of her mother? Maybe we could use that the next time I come.”

“I’ll see what I can find,” he said gruffly. “I’ll help you clean up. I think we’re done for the day.”

“Of course.”

With that, they cleaned up, and Jack did everything he could to forget that his daughter would never remember her own mother.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“YOU WEREN’T THERE, GABBY. YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT IT was like,” Emily insisted as she paced her small apartment.

Her friend stared up at her from the comfort of the overstuffed chair in the corner of the room. “All I know is that at dinner, he didn’t seem as moody.”

Emily snorted. “I don’t believe that for a second. You should have seen how crushed he was when Lily said I was her mother.”

“To be fair, she’s a baby. Her mother passed away when she was only a month or two old. Things will change when she gets older. Jack will have stories to tell her and she’ll be able to save *those* memories.”

Emily raked both hands through her hair. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

Gabby laughed. “Do you even hear yourself? Life isn’t fair. You know that. You had to deal with your own hardships with your brother. You’re doing everything you can for that little girl. There are bound to be bumps along the way.”

“I guess you’re right.” Emily sighed as she collapsed onto her couch. She stared up at the ceiling, like she was wont to do—as if the texturing that had been plastered overhead held all the answers she needed to solve her problems.

“So are you going to go out with him again?”

She groaned. “I *told* you. That’s off the table.”

“Nothing is off the table, Ems. You two will be spending a lot of time together over the next long while. I wouldn’t be surprised if something changes.”

“Stop trying to get into my head.” Emily sat up in her seat and gave her friend a dirty look. “I don’t know why you keep insisting that Jack needs to find someone to date. He’s got a lot on his plate already. And I told you that I’m probably the worst person you could have set him up with. I always jump into things way too fast.”

“And that’s why you’re perfect. He needs a push, and you need someone to hold you back. See? Balance.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Well, for now, nothing is going to come of it. I made a promise to just be his friend and help him with Lily. That’s all. No more talking about dating or falling in love.”

“Who said anything about falling in love?” Gabby snickered. “But seriously, I think you need to get out, just the two of you.”

When Emily shot her friend a warning look, Gabby shrank deeper into her seat.

“I only mean so you guys can discuss the next steps for Lily. You know, get to know where your expectations are.”

Emily contemplated Gabby’s words for a moment then nodded. “I suppose that’s a good point. We could set up a schedule for when we meet and what he should be doing with her in the interim.”

“And if you guys start to fall for each other, it’s a win-win.”

“*Gabrielle!* Enough already!”

“All right, all right. No more matchmaking talk. I get it.” Gabby rolled her eyes. “But if you two ever do get together, I’m taking full credit.” She snickered, holding up placating hands when Emily glowered at her.

They were settled on the blanket once again beneath the prettiest tree Emily had ever seen for their fifth session. Lily played with a few of the toys, her attention span depleted after

practicing a series of words Emily had picked out for the week.

Jack was flipping through a baby sign language book she'd brought for him. Emily observed the two of them together and something strange flickered in her stomach. She held a hand there, waiting for the sensation to return. When it didn't, she lowered herself onto her tummy to play with the horses Lily held. Rather than saying the simple word "horse," she added to it.

"Brown horse."

"Happy horse."

"Sad horse."

"Fast horse."

"Baby horse."

Lily peered at the small brown figurine with the cutest amount of concentration that Emily had ever seen. Then she picked up the one that matched it but was two sizes bigger. "Mother horse," she signed.

Emily nodded. "Mother horse."

Lily grabbed another one, this one similar in size but black. "Father horse."

Emily nodded again, a smile stretching across her face.

"Father sad."

Her eyes flitted up to Jack, relieved to see he wasn't paying attention. She hadn't expected Lily to grasp that word when it was so new. Emily picked up the horse in question, pretended to study it for a few moments, and shook her head. "Father happy."

Lily repeated the signs and returned to her playing.

Sometimes Emily forgot how perceptive babies even as young as Lily could be. She glanced once more at Jack and stilled, not expecting to find him watching her. She could feel the blush creeping up the back of her neck before it spread across her cheeks, but there was no way to prevent it.

When Jack didn't immediately look away, she forced a smile. "I was going to ask you something."

He continued to stare at her, but this time it was more expectant.

"What would you say to dinner?"

Jack stiffened.

"As friends," she hurried on to say. "I figured we could discuss what expectations we will have for Lily moving forward without her here to distract from the conversation. We could even put together a schedule. Of course, if you're too busy—"

Thankfully, he cut off her rambling. "Sure. I think that would be a good idea. I have a few questions I've been meaning to ask you that I've been jotting down." He smiled. It wasn't big by any stretch of the imagination; in fact, it probably only hinted at what he was capable of. But it still set off that strange flutter again. "I would ask you now, but I can't remember half of them."

"That's completely fine. I'm happy to answer anything you need to know."

He closed the book in his lap and placed it aside. "Actually, there is something I've been wondering."

"Go for it."

"Sign language. It's not a very common thing for people to know. Usually, people learn it because they plan to use it in their future careers. Or they know someone."

"Sure. That is an astute observation." She shifted the way she was sitting so she could fold her legs beneath her.

"Which one are you?"

"Pardon?"

Jack glanced away briefly. "Are you the person who learned it because you knew you would want to use it in the future, or did you know someone?"

"Oh," she mumbled, realization washing over her. "My brother was born deaf."

His brows lifted. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be. He never knew any different. I don’t think we ever figured out if it was genetic or if it happened while he was in the womb. Either way, he was born with only about ten percent of his hearing, and that quickly faded into nothing by the time he was a toddler. I learned sign language so I could communicate with him.”

“That explains why you’re so good at it,” he murmured. “And why you seem to have more empathy for our situation.”

“I suppose you’re right on that front, too. It’s going to be difficult for Lily to be in a world full of people who can hear when she can’t. My brother used to ask me what a bird’s song sounded like or the rev of an engine. I couldn’t give him any answers. Those are the kinds of things we just take for granted, you know? They can get close—feel the vibrations of things—but that’s about it.”

“Sounds really depressing.” Jack’s sorrowful gaze landed on Lily, who continued to play, blissfully unaware that she was being discussed. “She’s going to miss out on so much.”

“But she’s also going to experience a lot of things we don’t. When one sense is stunted, others compensate. I wouldn’t be surprised if we found out she has an amazing sense of smell or taste.”

He blinked. “She is really picky. She only ever wants me to feed her.”

“That makes sense. Perhaps it’s a combination of those. Think about how comforting a certain smell can be. Your scent could be the thing that helps her cope. She associates you with comfort and she likely always will.”

Emily’s explanation seemed to hit him harder than either of them had expected. It was as if he was finally connecting with his daughter on a level he hadn’t before.

Jack lifted his gaze to meet hers and his blue eyes made her freeze in place. “Thank you.”

It was a simple sentence, but it held a specific kind of significance only the two of them could understand. And in

that moment, Emily knew she was a goner. If it wasn't hard enough watching this sweet father attempt to raise his daughter when he was already on the brink of destruction, it would only get harder to see them learn to become stronger together.

Why did he have to be single?

Dang it! She should curse Gabby for even suggesting the blind date to begin with. The only one getting the short end of the stick was going to be Emily.

Lily grabbed onto the toy horses and climbed into her father's lap. She ran the horses up and down his arms and legs, all the while signing, "Horse." Every so often she'd switch it up and say, "Father horse," or "Baby horse." Thankfully, she wasn't obsessing over the word "mother" as much today.

Jack glanced up at her and his smile widened. It was probably the first, genuine, happy smile she'd seen on him since they'd met. "She's really getting the hang of it, isn't she?"

Emily nodded. "She really is." Her heart felt like it was being torn in two. She needed to stop these feelings from developing and fast. If she failed to do so, she'd end up getting hurt again.

But the more carefree side of her insisted that falling in love was always worth it. Sometimes, it didn't work out, but she still grew and learned something from each different relationship. Starting a family would come in time. She didn't have to try to tie down the first great man she met.

What if that great man was also a rugged, grumpy cowboy with eyes that rivaled the bluest sky? What if that man was a broken bird that had been knocked from his nest and just needed a caring heart to help heal his wounded wing? And what if that man not only had the sweetest little girl, but a relationship with her that rivaled any she'd ever witnessed?

Would it be so bad if she allowed herself this one vice?

Could she come out on the other end and not be completely destroyed?

Her questions didn't have any answers. They all swirled together in her mind, giving her a dizzying headache, and leaving her with only one clear option.

She couldn't walk away. If that meant she developed feelings for a man who would never return them, so be it. There were only two ways for this to go.

At least she had a fifty-fifty shot at coming out on top.

CHAPTER NINE

JACK RIPPED THE TIE OUT OF HIS DRESS SHIRT WITH A vengeance. Emily had said this *wasn't* a date, so why was he making things complicated and dressing like it was exactly that? She wanted to go to dinner and discuss Lily. This dinner was nothing more than a work meeting.

Except he wasn't paying her for her help. Maybe that would have made things easier to swallow. He probably should have pressed her more when it came to offering compensation for her help. As it stood, she was just a friend who was getting him started.

He scowled at his reflection in the mirror, unsure of whether he should just grab a T-shirt or keep the dress shirt sans tie.

Jack tossed the tie onto his bed and let out a heavy breath. Not a date. He wasn't expected to dress nicer than he'd been dressing when Emily came to work with Lily.

He strode from his room down the quiet hallway but paused when he heard the sound of voices coming from the kitchen. His family was busy with their usual Saturday night dinner plans, and he had neglected to tell them he wouldn't be joining.

What would the fallout be if he just slipped out of the house without saying a word?

No, he couldn't do that. Lily was in there. He couldn't just abandon his daughter even though he knew she would be taken care of. She had a whole family who adored her, but said family needed to know Jack would be gone for a few hours.

Shuffling toward the kitchen, he couldn't predict whether his family would approve of this particular situation. He might as well be heading to the slaughter at the rate his heart was thumping.

Everyone was here for tonight's dinner. His folks were already seated at the head of the table. Bo and Gabby were both standing, darting from the stove to the table as they retrieved the casserole dishes from the oven. His other brothers and his sister were at the table as well, and everyone paused to look at him when he entered.

Bo was the first to comment with a slow whistle. "You're a little dressed up for family dinner. Is there some grand announcement or something?"

Jack crossed his arms, his gaze darting from each individual in the room to the next. "Actually, I'm not going to be able to make it to this one. I have a... an appointment."

Bo lifted one brow while his mother smiled warmly. She reached out to touch Lily's hand where she sat in her highchair. "Will you be taking Lily? Or do we need to keep an eye on her?"

He couldn't remember a time he appreciated his mother more than in this moment as she took the attention away from him. Jack shook his head.

"I'm not taking her with me. I did feed her something about an hour ago. I don't think she's going to be very hungry, but you could put stuff on her tray if you think she might like it." He shifted, itching to get out of there before they asked any more questions. "I should only be a few hours. I'll be back in time to put Lily to bed. Call me if there is an emergency."

Jack could almost see the cogs in Bo's brain working. There was something about the way his eyes narrowed and homed in on Jack that made him realize he wasn't about to get away with a single thing. He darted far too quickly toward the door, slipping on the area rug in the doorway and barely making it out of the kitchen with only the surprised chuckles from his family to follow.

Unfortunately, he wasn't nearly fast enough as he hurried out of the house and made it to his truck. Jack had been looking behind him, expecting the door to open after he'd shut it, and when he got to his truck, it was as if Bo had materialized out of thin air.

Jack let out a yelp and stumbled back a few steps.

"You seem to be in quite a hurry." Bo's infuriating smile spread across his face accusingly. He walked around Jack with his hands behind his back, looking him up and down. "You're dressed nice. You combed your hair. Heck, it even looks like you trimmed your beard." He came around the front of Jack and poked him in the chest. "You're going on a date."

"It's *not* a date." Jack knocked his brother's hand aside and brushed past him. "It's a meeting with Emily to discuss what we can do to get Lily on the right track."

Bo jumped in front of him, that smile still mocking Jack. "Sounds like a date to me."

"I'm telling you. It's not a date. This is just a meeting."

"I knew you two were a good match. The second Gabby told me about Emily, I *knew*. Granted, I was worried at first that she was going to be wrong. I told her we should just leave you alone, but—"

"That's exactly what you should have done," Jack ground out.

Bo wagged his finger at his brother. "Nope. You needed this. You and Emily are a match made in heaven. You just haven't figured it out yet."

He laughed as he slipped away toward the house.

"It's *not* a date!" Jack hollered. His brother wasn't going to listen no matter what Jack said. He shouldn't even bother. The more he pushed, the more Bo would egg him on.

Jack climbed behind the wheel, even more agitated than he'd been before. When would Bo start minding his own business? Just because he'd found his own love didn't mean he needed to take on the responsibility of matching everyone else up.

Jack drove straight to the Steer House, pleasantly surprised by the lack of traffic for a Saturday night. He was seated almost immediately and given his menu. The fact that he didn't pick up Emily was just one more thing he could throw at Bo when his brother inevitably tried to weasel information out of him afterward.

He didn't know what it was that tipped him off to Emily's arrival. Perhaps there was a shift in the air around him, or his sixth sense alerting him to her presence, but either way when he glanced toward the hostess's podium, he saw Emily standing there. She wore a simple pale purple sundress with white sandals. Her hair was down and curled.

If Bo was here, he'd point out that this definitely looked like a date.

Jack focused on keeping his features smoothed so as not to make Emily think he was angry with her—because he wasn't.

He was angry with his brother for getting into his head and causing this strange sensation in his stomach as he watched Emily move toward him through the restaurant. It was as if she were capable of floating. Her feet were barely grazing the ground.

Shaking off the visual and the coinciding flurry of feelings that started in his gut, he rose from his chair and pulled hers out. She gave him an appreciative smile as she took her seat in front of him.

"Sorry I'm late. I got held up on the phone with my boss."

"I hope everything is okay."

She nodded. "It's fine. There's just a child in my group of kids who will be attending kindergarten next year and his parents want to know if I would be interested in becoming an interpreter for him."

Surprise sliced through him. "That's amazing." He leaned forward, his brows furrowed. "It *is* amazing, right? It sure sounds like something that is right up your alley."

Emily lifted her shoulder. "Yeah, it would be a nice change of pace. I'd be responsible for just him throughout the day at

school but then I wouldn't get to do stuff with the kids I'm currently working with. I think I'd miss it."

The change in career seemed like a no-brainer to him, but then he would prefer to avoid the chaos that happened when so many children were together. "I don't know how you do it."

Her bright smile warmed him. It always seemed to have that effect. When he was around her, things felt less... heavy. He found himself starting to relax as they looked over their menus and picked out what they'd like to eat.

Their waitress came and went, and without the menus in front of them, they were stuck with discussing Lily.

Jack took a sip of his water and glanced in her direction. "If you were to take that job as an interpreter, would you still be willing to help Lily? I know we haven't discussed pay—"

"Oh, I'm not going to take any pay from you."

He stilled. "Are you sure? Because you're clearly someone who people want working for them."

She flushed and looked away. "It's only been a couple weeks and already I—well, I adore Lily. And I... I *like* you. I don't think I could in good conscience accept money for what I'm doing. I'm not even a speech and language therapist. You should find one who specializes—"

"I don't want anyone else working with her. Not yet, anyway."

He was still reeling from her confession. Just because she'd said she liked him didn't mean she was developing feelings for him. It was too soon for any of that. They got along. They were friendly.

"And that's just fine. But you should still have her see one. You can tell them that there's someone willing to work to teach her sign language, but I in no way should be the only therapist she sees." Emily let out a strangled laugh. "All I can offer you is insight."

"That's good enough for me."

She was quiet for a moment, his response seemingly good enough to stop their conversation. Then she reached for her

glass, tracing the rim with her finger absently.

“I was curious about something.”

He glanced at her, instinctively not liking where this was going.

“You said that Lily lost her hearing in the accident?”

He nodded stiffly.

“How long ago was that?”

Jack looked away. “About a year.”

She didn’t move, didn’t even make a comment right away. The heaviness returned to his chest and when he looked up, she was staring at him. She reached across the table and grabbed his hand. For whatever reason he couldn’t fathom, he didn’t pull away from her.

“I can’t believe you’ve been dealing with this for so long. Have you seen anyone?”

He scowled, pulling his hand from her grasp. “I told you, I don’t want to date.”

She shook her head, the blush returning to her cheeks. “No, I mean a therapist. Usually when someone goes through something this traumatic—”

“I’m going to stop you right there. I don’t need some shrink to listen to me whine and tell me that talking about it is going to make everything better. And I’m done having this discussion. You said we’d talk about Lily. That’s what we’re here to do.”

She snapped her mouth shut and nodded. Even though she didn’t comment, he couldn’t help feeling like the new tension that had developed between him was all his fault. The guilt made him feel sick to his stomach and all he wanted to do was charge out of that restaurant and head home.

There was no way he would let someone else get close to his heart when the chance that they could be snatched from his life was such a real possibility.

Jack was about to call for the check and just leave without their food when it appeared. Emily’s demeanor shifted,

returning to the bright and bubbly person he'd gotten used to. Hopefully, she'd gotten the hint and they could finish their meal in peace.

CHAPTER TEN

ONCE AGAIN, EMILY HAD CROSSED THE LINE. SHE REALLY needed to stop doing that. Why couldn't she be a normal person and just allow the conversation to be organic? That was what Jack needed, after all.

She took a bite of her grilled chicken and glanced up at him. "My brother is coming to town in a week or so. I think you should meet him." Emily could practically see the fear flood Jack's face and she let out a sharp laugh. "Don't worry, it's not what you think. I figured since he's deaf, you'd like to meet him and ask him some questions about what he remembers as a child. Maybe it would make you feel more at ease with Lily."

Jack's expression shifted from anxious to one of relief and curiosity. "That might actually be a good idea."

"I thought you might like it." She chewed thoughtfully. "There isn't much of a sign language community out here, but you can usually find people in bigger cities. I wouldn't be surprised if there were some activities in Billings that you could take Lily to."

He glanced at her, a hint of a smile touching his lips. "I'll have to look into it."

They finished their meal, and as they left the restaurant, she gave him a little wave. "I guess I'll see you next week. Same time?"

Jack hesitated. He opened his mouth, then shut it.

Uh-oh. It was entirely possible that she had overstepped so much by bringing up therapy that he wasn't interested in having her help Lily at all. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realized just how understandable it would be for him to tell her he was done. It wasn't like he was paying her.

"Look," she started, "I wanted to say—"

"Do you want to get some ice cream?"

"I was..." Emily blinked, her mouth snapping shut. She glanced down the street as if she might find someone behind her that Jack was actually speaking to. "You want to get ice cream?"

"My treat." He stepped forward. "Still not a date, of course."

"Of course," she murmured, her own smile returning. "Wouldn't want to complicate things more than they already are."

She said that last bit under her breath, but she really should have just kept her mouth shut.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," she insisted.

They made their way down the street, passing Sweet Everything bakery. Jack slowed his steps as they continued walking, pointing at it with confusion. "Don't you want to go to the bakery? They've got the huckleberry ice cream."

"Well, if you need huckleberry, then sure." She stopped, facing him, and juted her thumb over her shoulder. "There's a place that just opened up around the corner. It's called Zero Degree Desserts. They make ice cream a new way, using liquid nitrogen to freeze the cream that comes fresh from that local dairy farm."

"Liquid nitrogen? Is that even safe?"

She laughed. "Of course it's safe. People have been using the stuff since the seventies."

"You can't possibly know that." He strode toward her.

“It’s true. If you don’t believe me, look it up. I swear.”

He tilted his head, studying her face for a moment before he pulled out his phone.

She gasped and snatched his phone from his hand. “How dare you!”

He lunged for his device, chuckling as he did so. “You *told* me to.”

Emily brought his phone down to her middle and crouched lower, so it was even more difficult to grab it. His arms came around her in a way that made her whole body heat up. She let out another gasp and darted away, feeling betrayed by the way her entire being had reacted. The interaction had taken mere seconds but already her hands were shaking, and so were her legs.

She forced a laugh and shoved the phone into his hands, but the damage had been done. “Fine, look it up. But you owe me when you find out I’m right.”

The look on his face was about the same as the way she felt on the inside. It was like someone had pushed a button somewhere and stopped him in his tracks. He stared at the phone in his hands, then glanced up at her. His brows creased, lowering over his eyes, and he gave a sharp nod as he put the phone back in his pocket.

“Aren’t you going to look it up?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to owe you a dang thing.” His tone was light and if she wasn’t staring at his stony expression, she might have noticed the teasing lilt to it. But at the moment, all she could see was how she’d gone and made their little outing awkward again.

Jack moved toward her and she jumped back a step only to realize he was just falling into step beside her so they could continue toward the ice cream shop.

They walked in silence for several paces until Jack finally spoke. “I feel a little guilty.”

Here it was. This was the moment he was going to bring up what he'd done. That strange hug he'd given her even though he'd only been trying to retrieve his phone.

“We should have brought Lily.”

Emily glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Does she like ice cream?”

He chuckled. “If she could eat ice cream for every meal, I think she would. That’s the one thing she will eat from anyone. It doesn’t even have to be a specific flavor.” He peeked at her. “If I’m honest? She would willingly eat dirt-flavored ice cream as long as it was in a cone and had sprinkles on top.”

She couldn’t help it. A laugh burst from her lips. “That definitely sounds like something a toddler would do. Maybe you should look into making ice cream with a vegetable base. Then at least she’s getting some nutrition with it.”

Her suggestion was meant to be funny, but Jack ran with it.

“That’s not a half-bad idea. We could put her baby food into the blender.”

Another laugh spilled from her lips, causing Jack to smile. It was his biggest smile to date, one that made his eyes crinkle at the edges and a dimple appear in his cheek. Her heart burst with nervous jolts of electricity and she had to force herself to look away.

“And hey, if I pair it with some carrot cake, she’d probably get her daily serving of vegetables right off the bat.”

“Hey, don’t knock carrot cake. I happen to like that stuff.”

Jack wrinkled his nose. “Don’t tell me that. Carrot cake deserves to be buried with all the other dessert imposters.”

“Imposters? Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“Yeah, like the zucchini brownies.”

She gasped and flung her hand over her heart with exaggeration. “Zucchini brownies are the *best*. Mostly because they don’t taste a thing like the vegetable that they come from.”

He shook his head and made a face. “Now you’re just trying to make it worse. Come on. Vegetables in desserts? I’m not against tricking my toddler to eat something with veggies slipped in. But there’s no way I’m trying it.”

Their continued laughter filled the air as they arrived at the ice cream shop and ordered their desserts. They moved their little ice cream date to the bench outside of the shop and as Emily nipped at her cone with her lips, she glanced at Jack every so often, noting how much more handsome he’d become since he’d let down his walls.

His shoulders weren’t as tight, which seemed to be directly linked to the softness of his features. She found herself wishing she’d known him before he’d lost the love of his life.

Except if that had happened, she wouldn’t be on this date with him right now.

Okay. It wasn’t a date no matter how much she wanted to convince herself that it was. Dates couldn’t be one-sided.

She took another bite of her ice cream and blurted something she immediately regretted. “Did your wife like ice cream, too?”

Jack shot her an irritated look. It wasn’t entirely obvious; in fact, there was a very real possibility that she had imagined it because when he faced her, there was a sort of mask that prevented her from reading how he felt. He could be angry or frustrated or just hurt, there was no way of telling.

“How is your ice cream?” He gestured toward the plain vanilla flavor that had always been her favorite despite the teasing she’d gotten when she was a kid. “Kinda bland, isn’t it?”

“Definitely not vegetable flavor.” She forced a smile, relieved when he matched it with one of his own.

“But not as good as rocky road.”

“Please tell me you didn’t get rocky road because they named it *Rocky Ridges and Roads*.” It was nice that Jack hadn’t dwelled on her question, but at the same time, she couldn’t help but be disappointed in his inability to discuss something that should be second-nature.

Jack shrugged. “It’s great marketing.”

There seemed to be only one thing that she could discuss with him. Only one thing that wouldn’t trigger his instincts to shut down.

Lily.

Emily examined her cone with veiled interest. “You know, I think Lily has got to be one of the most amazing kids I have ever met.”

Jack’s smile widened. “There’s one thing we can agree on.”

“Right? She’s been through so much—both of you have, really. And she’s adorable. That’s for sure.”

“She didn’t get it from me.” Jack chuckled. That was probably the closest Emily would ever get to getting Jack to talk about his wife.

“And she’s funny.”

“That she *did* get from me.”

She rolled her eyes, bumping her shoulder with his. “You’re going to have to prove that to me because I haven’t seen a single instance of it.”

“Hey!” He nudged her back.

Emily snickered. “On top of all of that, she’s so smart.”

Jack glanced at her, his hand lowering just slightly. “You really think so?”

“Oh, definitely. There was this one session where we were working on something. Two things, actually, and she ended up putting them together. It was like something clicked and she could understand that sentences had structure to them. It was really impressive.”

He stared off in the distance a bit and she could see a wave of emotions flutter across his face. Jack didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. He was allowing himself to not worry nearly so much. At least, that was how it appeared.

Emily reached out and took his hand in hers, squeezing it until he brought his focus back to meet her gaze. “She really is going to turn out just fine.”

He smiled, his emotion showing through quite a bit more than he probably wanted it to.

“And one day, she’s going to learn the secret to baking the perfect fruitcake so you can enjoy one Frankenstein dessert without feeling the compulsion to bury it in the ground.”

Jack snorted and ducked away, his hand tearing from hers and covering his mouth. He shook his head, coughing as he did so.

“You made the ice cream go up my nose!” he accused.

Emily tossed her head back and let out a raucous laugh. “Then it was totally worth it.”

Unfortunately, she probably should have been paying attention, because the second he got composed, he pushed her cone to her face. Freezing ice cream ended up not only in her mouth but in her nose as well. She gasped, unable to move, and faced Jack only to find him laughing harder than he’d done since they’d met. The sound slipped beneath her skin and traveled with electrifying energy along her spine to every nerve ending.

This was the man who had been hiding beneath all those layers of pain.

And she was already falling for him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JACK COULDN'T TELL WHAT HAD HIM IN SUCH A GOOD MOOD lately. The sky seemed brighter; the air smelled cleaner. But he would never go so far as to say that Emily had anything to do with it.

Yes, they had been spending more time together, but that was just so she could help him learn the signs he needed to communicate with his daughter. Emily was just a good person. One person didn't have the ability to make such a big difference.

It probably had a lot more to do with Lily not throwing as many temper-tantrums. His brothers and his sister weren't on his back as much, either. Everything in his life was finally starting to settle down.

Jack could breathe.

That was all it was.

He had finally found himself in a good place.

Jack headed down the stairs toward the kitchen after getting ready for the day. They had a lot of work to get to on the ranch. He'd picked up a lot more chores since one of their ranch hands had moved. It didn't help that Bo had started taking more time for personal matters, but that was expected considering how much time it was taking to plan his wedding with Gabrielle.

Wandering into the kitchen, he found his mother feeding Lily. He stopped, surprised as Lily willingly accepted the small spoonful of oatmeal from Jennifer.

However, the second her eyes landed on him, she knocked the spoon from his mother's hand. The small, red, plastic spoon landed on the floor with a clatter. His mom gasped, then let out a laugh.

"Lily! You were doing so good. What has gotten into—" She glanced over her shoulder and her gaze landed on Jack. "Oh. Well, that explains it. Just because your father finally found his way to breakfast doesn't mean you can play favorites." She reached for a damp rag and wiped her granddaughter's face. "Sleep well?"

Jack nodded, making a quick beeline toward the fridge. "Actually, yes. It's funny, the last couple of nights have been pretty good."

Her knowing smile gave him pause.

"What?"

She shook her head and lifted a shoulder. "Nothing. I'm glad you're getting more sleep. Will Emily be coming by today for a session with Lily?"

"I think so, why?"

"Just wondering."

There was a lilt to her tone he couldn't ignore this time and he turned to face her, his hands on his hips. "Okay, okay. What is it?"

Her brows lifted and she gave him a look that nearly had her eyes bugging out of her head. "What?"

"I know you, Mom."

"Well, I should hope so. After raising you and tending to your every need growing up—"

"No. I mean I know what's going on. You're implying that there's something between me and Emily, aren't you?"

She huffed. "I said no such thing."

"You didn't have to. I can see it in the way you're looking at me. And I can definitely hear it in your voice."

Jennifer set back to work feeding his daughter, but he didn't miss the way she avoided looking directly at him. "Well, that's not what I said."

"You don't have to. I *know*." Jack gave her a hard look, though it was hardly worth it because she didn't seem to want to meet his gaze. Her lips quirked upward at the corners, though, which told him more than the conversation ever could. "Just do me a favor."

This time, she did look up at him. "What's that?"

"Just... don't say anything like that or make it look like there's more between us whenever you're around her. We've set some professional boundaries, and I want to honor them."

Jennifer frowned, one hand resting on her hip. "Why would you go and do a silly thing like that? She seems like a sweet girl."

"What are you talking about? You haven't said two words to her."

"No, but I've watched the way you two get along when you're with Lily. And Bo mentioned that date you had with her about a week ago."

Flames ignited beneath his skin and immediately he could feel his walls coming up. Of course, Bo had said something to their mother. He would be an idiot to think that his brother wouldn't immediately return to dinner and tell everyone what was happening. The strange thing was that no one had asked him about his 'date' since that night. Had his brother also told everyone to leave him alone?

"Relax. He only said you were seeing Emily and that he thought the two of you would make a nice couple. Everyone agreed."

He lifted a brow. "*Everyone*?"

She laughed. "Okay, so Andrew said we should all just mind our own business and your father said that was a good idea. That being said, I think all of us have noticed a change in you... since she's been around." Her voice softened, as did her expression. There was something behind her eyes too,

something that told him she was worried about him. “I want you to be happy, Jack. And if that means letting go of the past, I’ll do what I can to help you accomplish it.”

His gut twisted and emotion rose up his throat like bile. “I can’t forget her, Mom,” he whispered. “I won’t. She’s always going to be part of my life.”

“No one is telling you that you have to forget her. Zoe is a big part of who you are. But she would never want you to stay unhappy.”

What she said rang true in several ways. But she didn’t understand what he was going through. She’d never lost her husband. She’d never lost her soul mate.

Forcing a smile, Jack nodded at his mother. “I’ll think about it. But I don’t want you to get your hopes up. Lily is my main priority. She always will be.”

She pressed her lips together firmly. “Just remember that you don’t have to push everyone away. One day, your heart will be ready to accept someone new in your life, and you should listen to it. Emily is a beautiful woman, inside and out. Don’t discount that she came into your life for a reason.”

He picked up an apple from a nearby fruit bowl, tossed it in the air, and caught it with one hand. “You can bring Lily out when Emily arrives. I’m going to do some work out in the barn today. There’s a lot that needs to be organized so we can get ready for the next few months.”

Before she could say anything regarding his relationship plans, he slipped out the door that led to the backyard. Talking about Emily had made him uncomfortable, but not for the reasons he had expected.

Jack found himself wanting his mother to be right. He wondered what it might be like to have someone like Emily in his life. She was the kind of woman who could help him raise Lily and provide her with all the things she needed to make it in the world. But was he wanting Emily in his life because *he* wanted her? Or was he interested in her because he wanted her to be in *Lily’s* life?

The latter presented problems and he knew it. He needed to approach this friendship with Emily in a way that made sense but also didn't take advantage of her.

His phone buzzed as he strode toward the large white barn that towered higher than anything else on the property. He smiled as he pulled it out of his pocket, knowing who exactly was on the other end. Emily texted him at least once every day.

Sometimes it was related to sign language. She sent him articles and book links that she thought he'd find helpful. Other times, she sent funny memes or pictures. He found himself looking forward to hearing from her. If lunch hit and she hadn't messaged him, he got a little antsy.

The message was a picture of a rectangular fruitcake with large, bold print stating *doorstop*. Beneath that it read, "We get one every December."

He chuckled, quickly typing the word *true* as a response. There didn't seem to be a shortage of messages or images for their little running joke on that particular dessert. He watched the three dots on the screen, indicating she was typing something, come and go.

His heart beat a little faster as he waited for her to complete her thought and send it to him. When it didn't come, the disappointment dropped in his stomach like a rock. He wasn't the kind of guy to go fishing for responses. Then again, he didn't exactly give her much to go on when he'd replied. If he wanted to keep this up, he probably needed to offer more than single word text messages.

Jack: *When will you be here today?*

Emily: *Coming at 10:30. Is that okay?*

Jack: *Sounds good. Lunch after?*

His thumb hovered over the send icon. Would his asking her to lunch be construed as something more? No. She knew what was expected between them. It would be fine.

He pressed send but immediately regretted it.

If they had lunch here, his whole family would be privy to it. That was the last thing he wanted to put her through.

But he didn't have time to retract his question before those little bubbles appeared again.

Dang it.

Emily: Love to.

Great. Now he needed a plan to get her as far away from his home as possible. He could offer to take her to town; that seemed like the most ideal option. Then again, perhaps he needed to plan something a little more... family-friendly?

His stomach swirled. Spending lunch with Emily and Lily felt like he was walking right into the kind of trap his mother wanted him to find himself in.

For the next few hours, Jack worked on oiling saddles, organizing tools, and putting the barn back in order after it had been neglected. His thoughts mercilessly remained on Emily and whether he should attempt to pursue her. He couldn't get his mother's words out of his head.

Zoe would want him to be happy. But letting go of the past meant he might lose the part of him that held onto Zoe—not just for himself but for Lily, too. Already, Lily couldn't remember her own mother. She'd only have the pictures.

He picked up a saddle and hefted it with a groan onto its stand. Even the grunt work he had done today didn't take his mind off his troubles. So much for the day being brighter. There were still a lot of uncertainties to overcome.

A small stone skittered across the cement, and he stopped what he was doing to look over his shoulder, finding Emily standing a few feet away. She gave him a little wave with one hand, and in her other arm, she held Lily.

“Ready to get to work?”

He glanced at his watch, stunned to find he'd lost track of the time so badly. Dusting his hands on his palms, he nodded. “Absolutely. Where would you like to work?”

She glanced around the barn. “What about here? There are a lot of words we can use with her. I think she enjoys being with the animals.”

Jack nodded. “I think you’re right.”

He held out his arms to his daughter, but when she didn’t immediately lunge for him, it gave him pause. Lily had a fistful of Emily’s blonde locks in her hand. She was smiling like she held the secret to happiness. And maybe she did.

Emily laughed. “Okay, Lily. Go to your daddy.” She signed the words with her free hand. When Lily finally leaned toward him, Emily signed some more as she said, “I’m going to get my things from my car. Be right back.”

Jack and Lily both watched her go, their eyes trained on her until she disappeared from view. Then, Lily turned her cherubic face toward him and grinned, signing the word, “Mother.”

Once again, his heart twisted and knotted. She had only ever been taught that word with the pictures of her own mother, but it appeared she associated both Zoe and Emily as the motherly figure in her life. And part of him wanted to let her innocent view remain for as long as it could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“SADDLE,” EMILY SIGNED. “RIDING HORSES. SIT ON THE saddle.”

Lily repeated most of the signs, and each time she was successful, Emily and Jack shared excited looks. Lily toddled over toward one of the stalls and reached both hands up toward the horse that now poked its head out. She signed the word for horse, then looked over toward the adults and signed it again.

Emily got to her feet as she glanced at Jack with a wide smile. “Okay, okay. Let’s pet the horse.”

She picked Lily up and placed her on her hip, not missing the way Jack seemed to keep his eyes trained on her. It almost unnerved her, having him watch her so closely. But then again, he was learning the language just as much as Lily. She needed to get used to feeling his stare on her.

Lily reached out with her small hands to touch the horse’s nose and let out a shrill giggle, which caused the horse to bob his head and jerk away momentarily.

Emily gasped, reaching for Lily’s hand and holding it firmly before releasing it and placing a finger to her lips. Lily pouted. She glanced toward the horse and reached for it, her fingers clawing out and in.

The horse nuzzled her open hand and Emily guided her, helping her with her gentle touch. She held out a hand in the shape of a claw and squeezed it flat while saying the word, “Soft.”

Lily signed the word, then signed, “Horse.”

Emily nodded. “Yes, soft horse.” She glanced again toward Jack, not surprised in the least to find him watching her with intent. “She’s really catching on, isn’t she?”

He nodded. “You’re amazing.”

Emily’s brows pulled together and she frowned.

Jack jumped and cleared his throat. “It’s amazing... that she’s doing so well.”

Letting out a soft laugh, Emily adjusted her hold on Lily. “It really is.”

He got to his feet and moved closer to her. His large hand dwarfed Lily’s head as he caressed the back of it. Then he leaned closer and pressed a kiss to his daughter’s halo of hair.

When he glanced at his watch, he stilled. “I guess that’s time. You’ve already gone over by fifteen minutes.”

“Really?” She peered at her own watch. “Wow. That went fast. Ready for lunch?”

“Did I hear you say you’re going to lunch?”

Emily nearly laughed at the comedic way that Jack jumped when they turned to find who could only be Jack’s mother standing in the barn doorway. Her bright smile made it easy to see where Jack got his. Jack had a great deal of his mother in his features and it fit him quite well.

The woman moved closer. “I’m sorry, I haven’t officially introduced myself. I’m Jennifer Reese, Jack’s mother.” She glanced up at her son and held out her hands toward Lily. “And I was just coming to get this little one ready for lunch.”

“That’s not necessary, Mom. We can take her—”

“Nonsense. I’ll feed her here and put her down for a nap. You two go enjoy your lunch.”

She winked at her son, which only caused him to grow stiffer, and it took everything in Emily’s power not to laugh out loud. It wasn’t hard to see that this woman was trying to play

matchmaker. If Emily wasn't already crushing on Jack so hard, it might have been easier to ignore the blatant attempt.

Jack heaved a sigh and shot a side-eyed glance toward Emily. "Really, Mom, it's fine. We can take her."

"I'll hear nothing of the sort. You two have been working too hard. In fact, I'm sure your father wouldn't mind if you took the rest of the afternoon off."

"*Mom.*" Jack's tone held notes of exasperation, but she was already halfway out the door.

"Say bye to Daddy, Lily."

When she was gone, Jack faced Emily. He rubbed the back of his neck as his eyes darted away and color filled his cheeks. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be." She offered him a small, hopefully reassuring smile. "She's your mother. She's never going to stop looking out for you."

"I've told her there's nothing going on between us, but I don't think she believes me."

Emily dropped her eyes to her hands, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Her voice softened as her thoughts shifted to her own family. "My mother would probably do the same thing."

A lump formed in her throat as embarrassment flooded her being. She really needed to keep this light. They weren't going to be anything more than friends and she just needed to get that through her head.

"Well, I guess there's nothing more for us to do than head out to lunch."

She nodded, lifting her gaze to meet his once more. "Sounds nice."

Emily followed Jack in his truck, something they'd both decided would be better so that she could head home afterward and not have to worry about coming back to the ranch. The whole way there, she thought about what he must be going

through. His sister-in-law, and now his mother, both pushing him toward something he wasn't ready for.

And dang it! How she wished he was actually ready for it—to start something with her.

Jack pulled up in front of Cliff's Market rather than a restaurant. Emily made a funny face as she climbed out of her car.

"I have to say, I've been on a lot of dates, but never to a grocery store."

His expression was one of surprise, so much so that she had to go over what she'd said in her head. Then her eyes widened, and she clasped her hand over her mouth.

"Sorry. *Not* a date. I don't know why I said that." A burning sensation filled her face, but there was no stopping it. "So, what are we going to get for lunch?"

Jack still didn't say anything right away, but something in his eyes had shifted. They narrowed only slightly, and if she hadn't been staring at him, she wouldn't have noticed. There was also an almost imperceptible tilt to his head.

Finally, she had to tear her focus from him and turn toward Cliff's. "Well? Are you going to feed me? Or am I going to have to go in there myself and satisfy my hunger all on my own?"

"Right," he muttered. "Well, Cliff's actually has a secret that not many know about."

She wrinkled her nose. "I doubt that."

"*Really*. They have the best fried chicken this side of the Mississippi."

"We're not even close to the Mississippi." She snickered.

"But we're on one side of it, right?" Jack took her hand and tugged her toward the store. It was a strange sensation for her to feel her fingers laced with his when they were definitely not supposed to have feelings for each other, but she wasn't about to tell him to stop. The sparks that flickered from his touch

were enough to fill her entire body with a fresh feeling of longing—one that wasn't terribly unpleasant.

Jack continued to guide her all the way toward the back of the store, where they offered their limited deli selection. He stood in front of a glass display holding an assortment of breasts and legs. "I'm telling you, they have the best recipe for fried chicken, and that's saying something because I grew up on my mom's fried chicken. Until I tasted the chicken here, I thought no one could beat hers."

"Really? That sounds like some super-amazing chicken."

He peeked at her out of the corner of his eye and grinned. "I haven't even told my brothers about this place. They would crucify me if they knew I was eating someone else's fried chicken." He gestured toward the display. "Pick what you want and we can go find a spot to relax and eat."

It was cute seeing his childlike excitement over something as simple as fried chicken. She felt like she was seeing more into the kind of person he was beneath all the pain and behind all the walls he'd erected around himself.

"I guess I'll have a breast. I'm pretty sure more than that would be more than I can eat."

"I think you're missing out on the dark meat, but it's your choice." Jack nodded toward the employee behind the counter. "Two breasts, two legs, and a basket of those seasoned fries." He leaned closer to her. "The fries are just okay, but they're good enough with the chicken."

She snickered. "I'll have to take your word for it... and are you having two legs and a breast?"

"Maybe. But I also thought you might change your mind." He smiled and then winked.

Jack paid for their food and they wandered down the street until they came to a stop in front of the coffee shop. Outside were three sets of wrought iron tables with chairs. Jack motioned for her to take a seat, and she gave him a strange look.

"We didn't buy anything here."

“It’s okay. I know the owner.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not, actually. My brother owns this place.”

Emily’s brows shot up and she took a second look at the little shop. “I thought you all worked at the ranch.”

“We do. This is just something he always wanted to do, so he spends some of his time here and when we need his help, he delegates.” Jack gestured toward the table again.

She took her seat and they started eating. Jack moaned his appreciation of the food, causing her to laugh. “It’s good, but it’s not *that* good.”

“Blasphemy!” Jack accused, drawing more laughter.

Emily watched him, noting how he seemed happier than he was when they first met. She couldn’t imagine what might have changed. Perhaps he was just the type of guy who held his cards close to his chest. They were becoming better friends.

They ate in comfortable silence, and when they were done, Jack asked if she’d like to take a walk. She obliged.

“You know, this is the sort of thing Zoe loved doing.”

She stiffened. *Zoe*. His wife.

Emily didn’t dare say anything for fear of ending what they had going right now.

“She was the kind of person who was always smiling. Always quick with a joke.” Jack wasn’t looking at her, but she could see the smile and far-off look on his face. “She had the best laugh—kinda like yours.”

Chills danced down her spine, taking with them any sense of control she might have had. Her hand reached out to grasp his, and she squeezed.

He looked down at where they were connected and stopped. They’d reached the end of the busy street and turned down an alley that would take them back to their cars. He stopped, his eyes studying their interlocking fingers as if it was something

he'd never experienced before—even though he'd held her hand just an hour earlier.

Jack blinked and lifted his gaze to meet hers. "I..." He closed his mouth tight, pressing his lips together. His thumb trailed over the back of her hand. "You probably don't want me talking about her."

"On the contrary," she whispered. "I think it's good for you to talk about her. She's always going to be a part of your life. Now. In five years. In fifty years, even."

His eyes locked with hers, gluing her in place and making it hard to move.

Then, with a sudden movement that was too fast for her to know what was going to happen, he grasped her chin with his finger and thumb before closing his mouth over hers and pressing a firm kiss to her lips. Electricity lit a fire between them, making it impossible for her to pull away if she wanted to.

Only, she knew with absolute certainty that was the furthest thing from her mind. She wanted this.

She wanted him.

Emily was like putty under his touch and she shifted closer, lifting her hand to clasp behind his neck. Jack stiffened, and before she knew what was happening, he'd jerked back from her.

"I'm sorry," he muttered as he hurried away from her.

She blinked, staring at the space he'd once occupied. What... just happened?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WRONG.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Jack shouldn't have kissed her and he knew it. He'd let his desires get away from him. He'd given in when he'd told himself he shouldn't. Everyone had gotten into his head with talk about allowing himself to date Emily.

Best-case scenario, she would think this meant they were dating. Worst-case scenario, she'd tell him she couldn't continue helping Lily with her signing.

Why did he feel like he was losing twice as much after allowing himself to kiss her?

The whole drive back to the ranch, he felt like hitting himself over the head. He needed a good beating. He'd betrayed Emily, Lily, and Zoe.

His stomach twisted uncomfortably, roiling at the thought of Zoe looking down on him right now. She would have seen everything. He couldn't imagine her being happy about it no matter what his mother said. He had promised his heart to *her*.

By the time he pulled up to the house, he had successfully called himself every derogatory name in the book. It wasn't the act of kissing Emily that had him hating himself—it was how good it had felt in that moment. Something had awakened within him that he'd thought would never return.

That something that was only supposed to belong to Zoe. That vow, that commitment to his wife was for a lifetime—*his*

lifetime.

Jack slipped into the house, praying no one would see him—specifically his mother. She'd be able to tell that something had happened with Emily. She'd probably push him to give her all the details, and he'd end up confessing that he'd kissed her.

Dang it! Why did he have to go and do such a stupid thing?

He removed his shoes and climbed the stairs on silent feet. There was noise coming from the kitchen. Probably his mother cleaning up after lunch. If he could make it to his room where Lily was likely sleeping, then no one would bother him until her nap time was over. That was his best shot at getting some time to himself without anyone interrogating him.

When he'd successfully made it to his room, he edged inside and shut the door, thankful his father kept the hinges well-lubricated.

His eyes darted across the room and landed on the small crib that was just big enough for his daughter—one she would soon grow out of. It rested beside the lone dresser in his room, and there on the wooden surface was a smiling picture of the one person he would have given anything to see again.

Zoe's smiling face stared at him as if her spirit were right there—soul communicating with soul.

Jack edged closer, not wanting to stir Lily. He could hear her soft breathing even from where he stood at the now-closed door. The turmoil within him continued to crash like the waves of an angry ocean.

Zoe was gone. She wasn't coming back no matter how much he wanted her to—no matter how much he'd thought he needed her to.

When he had kissed Emily, none of that had been in his head. It was like he'd forgotten about Zoe and how much he loved her. He only had eyes for Emily and what she'd become to him. She was a lighthouse in the darkness of his life. She had managed to drag him from the tumultuous, stormy sea and pull him onto solid ground.

Then something clicked, like the stark, blinding light being flipped on in the middle of the night. The rush of guilt had overwhelmed him, making him feel sick to his stomach. He had to get out of there before he did something else that would cause further pain to the one woman who had managed to break through the sturdy walls he'd built around himself when Zoe died.

He still wasn't sure what it was about her that had made that happen. He was either truly desperate to find help with Lily, or he was desperate to end the numbing pain he'd been experiencing.

Who was he kidding? It was probably both, which made this realization that much worse. None of his early reasons for wanting to be with Emily were the *right* ones. He should want to be with her because her soul spoke to his—like Zoe's had.

Jack shut his eyes tight and shook his head. He needed to stop comparing the experiences he had with Zoe to what he was feeling for Emily.

He slumped onto the edge of the bed and continued to stare at the picture of Zoe. He missed her beautiful eyes, her sunny disposition. Instinctively, he reached out and picked up the picture. His fingers traced her face as he whispered, "What would you want me to do?"

It was almost ridiculous that he expected her to speak to him—communicate something to him. But he didn't feel anything.

Lily crooned in her crib and rolled over. Through the netting, he watched her sleep and his heart twisted even more. Jack needed to make the right decision not only for himself but for her.

Then, all at once, he felt an overpowering sense of peace. It was like he could hear Zoe asking him why he was holding himself back. His eyes darted to the picture in his hands and he nearly threw it aside.

With a clarity he hadn't experienced in a long time, he realized he was using the love he had for Zoe as an excuse.

Worse than that, he might have officially ruined any chance he could have had with Emily after the Houdini trick he'd pulled when they kissed.

Jack placed the picture aside and pinched the bridge of his nose. The guilt shifted into humiliation so fast he felt dizzy. He needed to call Emily and tell her he was sorry. He needed to explain what he was feeling so she didn't think he was absolutely crazy.

Then a funny kind of thought washed over him, taking with it all of the guilt, shame, and otherwise uncomfortable feelings. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to start something slow with her.

He glanced again at the picture of Zoe before he placed the frame on the desk. Leaning down, he lightly touched the hair that framed Lily's face. He was doing this for her. She needed Emily just as much as he did. If nothing else, that made this decision a good one, right?

It was selfless.



JACK WAITED until after nap time to finally open the messages app. He'd thought Emily would have texted him after he'd disappeared on her, but he'd been wrong. He might have *really* messed everything up beyond repair.

What would he have done if the roles were reversed? He would have thought Emily wasn't interested. He might have thought he had bad breath.

But most of all, he would have known that he wasn't the guy for her.

That was probably what she was going through at this very moment.

He stared at his phone screen and frowned. Was it too soon to apologize?

No.

But a text wasn't going to cut it. He needed to say something to her in person. He needed to track her down and make her see that he was being genuine. How was he supposed to convey his regret through a few simple lines on a phone screen?

He shoved the phone to the side, letting it rest on the couch cushion a few inches from his leg. To call her or message her wasn't good enough. He didn't even feel like it was appropriate for him to ask her to meet with him.

Jack was officially stuck. This feeling was even worse than the one he felt when he was alone.

You are still alone, the voice in his head muttered mockingly.

Yeah, he was alone. He didn't have anyone besides Lily to call his own. That was why he needed to fix this and fix it fast.

Jack picked up the phone again, his eyes locking onto the messages app. He willed the little red notification to pop up on the corner of the icon to let him know Emily wanted to chat, but alas, that wasn't going to happen if it hadn't already.

She wasn't even joking about the kiss they shared.

Man, that kiss!

It had been like nothing he had ever experienced. He'd felt a different kind of spark with Zoe. This one was just as enjoyable as that... but different in a way he couldn't put his finger on. Side by side, there were a lot of similarities between Zoe and Emily. They had similar coloring, from their hair to their eyes. Their height was also similar. Their laughs, while both bright and infectious, had small nuances that he could pick out in an instant.

Emily was just... someone he could see himself with after he'd already shared much of his heart with someone else. She had been able to pick up the broken pieces and help him see that it was okay to want to heal and find love again.

Jack snatched up the phone and typed in a brief message before quickly hitting send so he didn't lose his nerve. He read over the simple sentence several times and hated it even more

after each one. He could have done better. He should have apologized.

Instead, he'd said the one thing a girl in Emily's position would never want to read.

Jack: Can we talk?

He let out a groan after twenty minutes came and went without a single bubble showing she wanted to respond. Then again, seeing those little bubbles populate the screen but having nothing come through might have been worse.

Jack tossed the phone aside and folded his arms tight across his chest. This was all Gabby's fault. If she hadn't butted into his business in the first place, then he wouldn't have met Emily. He wouldn't have allowed himself to believe there was life after losing Zoe.

And he definitely wouldn't have kissed her when neither of them was ready for it.

The blood in his body ran hot and cold. He jumped up from the couch and paced back and forth. He couldn't message her again so soon.

At least he knew that much.

Big mistake.

Jack couldn't stay here, either. If he was left to his own devices, he'd end up doing or saying something that could put him in an even worse position—though he had no idea what that could be.

He needed to get some air.

Perhaps a good long horse ride would be just the thing to get his mind off the one woman he wished he could see most.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M EVEN TELLING YOU THIS,” EMILY muttered, her fingers digging into her hair with a vengeance. She rested her elbows on the table at Sweet Everything and let out another groan that probably sounded as if she were dying.

Well, maybe she was. She was dying of embarrassment, for one.

And perhaps she was dying from disappointment.

Paige reached out, tugging one of Emily’s hands from her hair. “You’re telling me because you need to talk about it. That’s a perfectly reasonable thing to do when you’re in your current situation.” Her eyes shifted toward Allison who stood behind the counter and gave a short shake of her head. “You can tell me anything. I hope you know that.”

Emily gave her friend an appreciative smile. People could bad-talk this whole town as much as they wanted to, but they were wrong. Rocky Ridge was the kind of place anyone could go to and find the kind of family they needed for whatever situation they had.

Paige had only been her friend for the last six months or so. They’d bumped into each other at Cliff’s Market one Saturday, reaching for the same sweet potato. And that was that.

Besides Gabrielle, Paige was the other person Emily could confide in. As for Emily’s most recent encounter with Jack, Paige was the *only* one she could talk to. Discussing one of Bo’s brothers with Gabby was about as good an idea as tossing a pig from the roof to see if it could fly.

Emily let out a sigh, squeezing her friend's hand tightly. "You wanna know the worst part? I don't even know if he knew what he was doing."

Paige let out a laugh. "Ems, I'm sure Jack knew exactly what he was doing when he kissed you. There's not a man on this earth who makes a move like that and doesn't know."

Emily shook her head. "We were talking about his *wife*."

Her friend stiffened. "He has a wife?"

Shutting her eyes tight, Emily flushed. "His wife died, remember?"

"Oh. Right."

"Anyway, we were talking about his wife, and suddenly he gets this 'deer in the headlights' sorta look, and the next thing I knew he was kissing me. I mean, who *does* that?"

Paige shrugged. "Beats me." She made a face, her expression contorting with the grimace that crossed her features. "I hate to even suggest this, but what if he's using you?"

Emily sucked in a sharp breath. "He wouldn't do that."

"Didn't you say that you've been helping his daughter with signing? What if that kiss was a way to keep you hooked?"

Another gasp escaped Emily's throat and she shook her head vehemently. "He's not the kind of guy who would use a woman like that."

At the same time, she couldn't help but wonder. Her arms wrapped around her middle and she hunched over to press her forehead against the cool tabletop.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"Has he messaged you?"

She shook her head without lifting it from the table. "That's weird, right? He should at least message me and tell me what just happened."

Paige didn't respond right away. With each passing minute, Emily's blood ran even colder. She sat up abruptly and reached

for her purse.

“You know what? I think I need to head home. This isn’t going to change no matter how long we discuss it. I’m going to let everything settle before I decide what I need to do next. Thanks for coming out here to meet me. I know you’re busy —”

“Don’t think a thing of it.” Paige smiled. “I’m always here if you need me. Guys can be hard to read sometimes. Whatever you decide to do, just take it easy. I don’t want to see you getting hurt.”

Paige’s words of warning were similar to those that others had said to Emily in years past, and they made Emily’s stomach knot even more.

Maybe she was feeling so terrible because she’d done exactly what she’d told herself she wouldn’t. She had a habit of jumping in too fast. Now she was scrambling to make sense of what she’d thought had been a life-altering kiss.

But Jack didn’t see it that way.

She’d reached the door of the bakery when her phone buzzed. Her heart rocketed from her body faster than a bullet when she saw it was from Jack.

Can we talk? That was what he wanted to ask?

Talk? It sounded so morose. Already she could sense the shame in that message. Jack didn’t have the guts to send her a message that said he was sorry or to even explain himself. He wanted to see her in person to lay out why this was so wrong.

Well, he’d have to do a heck of a lot more work to get what he wanted out of her. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of even seeing that she’d received the message. Instead, she shut off her phone and dropped it into her purse. What she really needed right now was some shopping therapy. Maybe that would help get her mind off things.



THREE DAYS and Jack had sent two more messages asking her to meet him. Each message was a fraction of what she knew he wanted to say. She should just put the guy out of his misery. But she couldn't bring herself to see him in person.

She didn't want him to see how much that kiss and these messages were tearing her up inside. Emily needed more time.

Time to get her head wrapped around why she was always so impulsive. And why it always seemed to happen when she had a thing for an attractive guy.

Emily had received three other messages from Jack over the weekend, but they'd stopped this morning—probably because he was working. Or maybe he thought she needed a break from him while she went to work.

Emily sighed as she climbed into her car after her shift. She picked up her phone, unsure as to whether she was relieved to see there were no more messages or disappointed by the fact.

She hadn't felt this upside down and out of sorts since she was in high school. Dating in her late twenties wasn't supposed to feel this way.

What she really needed right now was a good, long bath with a pint of her favorite ice cream. She needed to get back on solid ground before she reached out to him.

Only there was a problem with that, too.

What about Lily?

Letting out a discontented groan, she dropped her forehead to her steering wheel. She couldn't just abandon the baby when she was making so many strides. And if she were honest with herself, she didn't want to abandon what she thought had been forming between herself and Jack, either.

It was time to stop avoiding him.

But only after she got her ice cream, or what she considered to be her frozen courage.

Emily parked on the busy street and headed straight for Cliff's Market. It was busier than normal for a Monday afternoon.

She wasn't sure what was going on in town, but there were several people wandering the streets.

Nearly colliding with a cowboy and his son, Emily let out a strangled laugh. "I'm sorry."

"You're good," the cowboy reassured, his hand coming down onto his son's shoulder. "Come on, Tyson, the truck is over here."

Emily darted into the grocery store and headed straight for the frozen food section. Time for a reboot. She needed to get back to the person she was before she met Jack. She'd been outgoing, confident, and sure of herself. Whatever had made her this skittish little rabbit that thought it was a good idea to avoid him needed to go.

She'd get her ice cream, watch a romcom, and then she'd return his messages. Her throat tightened as her heart tried to pull her back down the hole.

No.

There would be no more of that. She knew what she wanted, and it wasn't a guy who refused to be romantic but then in the very same breath did just that. The turmoil she was experiencing would come to an end tonight, one way or another.

She gathered her things, took them to the front of the store, and waited in a line that was longer than it should have been. Tapping her foot, she attempted to focus on anything else but her fluttering heart rate. She was better than this. *Stronger* than this.

Emily lifted her chin as she continued giving herself a pep talk in her head.

Heck, she might even go over to Jack's house and tell him to his face that what he'd done wasn't acceptable. She deserved better.

She nodded resolutely as she grabbed her paper grocery bags and spun toward the exit, fueled with a newfound sense of self.

And then she collided with something hard.

Or rather, she collided with *someone*.

The bags slipped from her hands from the impact and she let out a gasp. Face flushing hotly, she dropped to the ground to gather the ice cream that had made its escape by rolling a few inches away. That was when she noticed a pair of familiar boots.

As if in slow motion, her eyes dragged upward in one fluid movement until they landed on the one person she both wanted to see and would have given anything to avoid. The tightness in her throat worsened but her resolve remained.

Emily rose, blinked once, twice, then nodded toward him. “Hi, Jack.”

“Emily.”

Dang it, just hearing her name on his lips did things to her—made her relive those precious seconds when he’d kissed her almost a week ago. Her legs turned to jelly and she had to put all her effort into appearing as the strong woman she knew she could be.

“I’ve tried messaging you.” His voice was smooth, dripping like warm honey into every crevice of her mind.

She fought the shiver that threatened to rock her to her core and lifted her chin a fraction of an inch. “I saw that.” Dropping her focus to her things, she jumped down to gather them up again, her blush only intensifying.

Jack crouched, too, now eye level with her. He tilted his head slightly and his gaze shifted to the store, bringing her back to the harsh reality that they weren’t alone.

His voice was low when he brought his eyes to meet hers once more. “Can we talk?”

“We’re talking now,” she bit out, though it sounded more like a squeak. They both reached for the pint of rocky road ice cream and his fingers grazed hers. Goosebumps rippled up her arms and across the back of her neck, making the hairs stand on end. She jerked her hand back and focused on turning the bag upright.

“Not here,” he murmured. “I want to—”

Emily shot to her feet, clutching the bags to her chest. Her eyes narrowed as she drilled her stare into him. “I don’t think I have any interest in talking about... well, you know. You crossed a line you never intended to. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.” He held out the ice cream toward her, growing quiet for a few moments before he let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve had some time to think about what happened and I...” He smiled, but it wasn’t one of the smiles she had grown to love. “Can you come by the ranch tonight? We could go for a ride. There’s too much to talk about here.” Jack glanced around again and leaned in closer. “And honestly, I’d rather not have an audience.”

Emily stiffened. Looking around, she noted several curious stares with the occasional knowing smirk. Something told her that if she didn’t accept his request, she’d come to regret it.

“Fine. I’ll stop by tonight after you put Lily to bed. Happy?”

A hint of that fun-loving cowboy returned when he smiled at her next. And just like that, she was suckered back into something she wasn’t sure she was ready for.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JACK PACED IN THE BARN. TWILIGHT HAD FALLEN AND THE trails they could ride would be limited, but at least he'd gotten her to agree to come out with him. He rubbed his sweaty palms roughly against his jeans.

He'd had all weekend to think about what he wanted to tell her. He should be able to do this.

The only reason he could come up with to explain why he was so dang nervous was because the last person he'd dated had been in college. He'd met and married his wife and hadn't needed to find anyone else.

He was definitely out of practice.

Maybe he should have just accepted Gabrielle's offer to set him up on some blind dates before he met Emily.

Wait, that wouldn't have worked, because Emily had been Gabrielle's choice.

Jack dragged his hand down his face, raking his skin with his fingernails. This was going to be bad. He'd just end up fumbling over his words and would come off sounding like a complete idiot. This was where everything would come crashing down on him.

He'd lose his shot at starting a relationship with someone he had a lot in common with. He'd lose the woman who had been willing to help him with his daughter. He'd lose so much more than he'd bargained for when he'd met her in the first place.

There was no quelling the nerves as they continued to grow more agitated within him. Emily was almost here. This was his one shot at making her understand where he wanted things to go.

One chance.

Headlights flashed over the hill as a car approached. They were too low off the ground to be one of his brothers' trucks, and as far as he could recall, they were already home for the evening.

Jack rubbed his hands on his pants once more, then tilted his neck from side to side before he stepped out of the barn and into the darkness of the night.

He couldn't see her face due to the headlights blinding him. Jack lifted a hand to shade his vision and waited for her to cut the engine before climbing out. His heart beat wildly against his chest, pounding like an angry visitor at the door. He took three deep breaths and stepped toward the car just as she climbed out.

She waited for him, standing by her car as if unsure of what to do.

Jack stopped a few yards from her. "Hey."

Emily tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She glanced toward the house and back to him. "Hey."

He held out his hand toward her, disappointed when she glanced at it and gave her head a less-than-subtle shake. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Her dismissal stung more than he wanted to admit, but now was not the time to dwell on that. His arm swept back toward the barn and he offered her a strained smile.

"I got the horses ready."

"You don't think it's a little late for a ride?"

He chuckled. "Well, the moon is pretty bright tonight. I don't think we'll have a hard time. But if you would rather—"

“No, it’s fine,” she said hurriedly. “I agreed to go for a ride. That’s what I’m here for.”

He nodded. “Right, okay.”

Jack waited for her to move first, walking ahead of him as they headed to the barn. She didn’t say a single word as he pulled the horses out of their stalls and helped her into her saddle, but her eyes communicated everything. She didn’t trust him, and it was all his fault.

Jack swung into his saddle, then nudged his horse forward. Emily’s mount fell into step beside his, and they made their way out onto the trails that led behind the barn and toward the pastures where the cattle were kept. He probably glanced at her a hundred times from the moment they left the barn. The ride was far too quiet for his liking, but he couldn’t come up with the best way to start the conversation he knew they needed to have.

“Jack, I wanted to say sorry for not returning your messages.”

He stilled, his hands tightening on the reins. That was an unexpected turn of events.

Once more, he shot a look at her. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“Yes, I do. We’ve been texting every day since we met and I wasn’t being a good friend when I ghosted you like that.”

Jack cleared his throat, though it did nothing to ease the discomfort that was lodged there. “I wasn’t a very good friend either.”

He grimaced even as the words escaped his lips. He didn’t want to put them in this situation—the friend zone. He’d finally found the guts needed to tell her that he’d changed his mind.

In the moonlight, he could see her silhouette relax slightly. A timid-looking smile spread across her face, and she let out a breath as if she’d been holding it this whole time.

“Good. I’m glad we got past this.”

“Actually, that’s what I wanted you to come over to discuss.” Jack urged his horse to speed up just enough to pull around the front of Emily’s and force her to come to a stop. He hopped down from his saddle and marched over to her side.

“Jack, what are you—”

Jack ripped his hat from his head and peered up at her. “I was wrong.”

The area where they’d stopped was cast in shadow from the towering oak tree that blocked the moon, and he wasn’t able to see Emily’s face clearly enough to see her reaction. For all he knew, she was upset, or worse, terrified.

He itched to pull her down from her perch so he could get a better look at her. For the first time that evening, he wished he would have listened to her and gone for a walk instead.

“Okay, maybe I wasn’t wrong in the beginning, but something has changed.”

“Jack, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her voice was soft, shy, like she’d turned into a rabbit or a deer.

Stifling a groan, he peered up at her again. “Would you mind climbing down? It’s incredibly difficult to have this conversation with you on a horse.”

She snickered. “I thought you wanted to go riding.”

“Please?”

She stilled. It felt like an eternity before she finally climbed down from the saddle. The second her feet hit the ground, he regretted that decision also. “Okay, I’m out of the saddle. Say what you’re going to say.”

He gnawed on the inside of his cheek. Courage. That was the one thing he needed desperately and the one thing he felt like he’d left back home. Jack nodded.

“Zoe was the love of my life.” It wasn’t the best opening line, but it was the only thing that came to mind. “I met her in college and from the moment I saw her, I knew she was the one I would marry.”

Emily looked away, but he could hear the swift intake of breath and noted the way she'd grown increasingly fidgety. "I don't think—"

He hooked his finger under her chin and forced her to look at him. "A little over a year ago, I lost my soulmate. It broke me. I didn't have a prayer in heaven that I would be able to find myself."

She squeezed her eyes shut and her voice shook. "Jack, I really don't want to talk about this with you. I've had to deal with a rollercoaster of emotions this weekend and I just—"

"Until I met you."

Emily quieted. Her eyes opened and she gazed at him with what could only be described as shock.

Bolstered by her reaction, he pressed forward. "I didn't think I could open my heart to someone new. In fact, the idea of doing so still fills me with a heavy weight I can't describe. I don't even know if what I'm about to propose is going to work out."

He must have successfully put her in shock because she still hadn't moved.

"I feel..." He searched for the words, finding them harder than ever to say. "I feel like there is this force pushing me toward you."

And then it was like she woke up from her slumber. Emily jerked away from him, shaking her head. "I can't."

"You can't?"

She shook her head again. "This is a bad idea. I don't know what you thought would happen, but—"

"I thought I would tell you that I'm interested in you."

Emily's sharp bark of laughter caused the horses behind her to shuffle a few steps. "You thought you could just spin this around after a couple weeks of toying with me?"

"Toying with you? I wasn't toying with you."

She placed her hands on her face. "You're right. I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm saying." When she lowered her hands,

she stepped toward him. “I was ready to be in a relationship, but you refused. Then you kissed me. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“You’re supposed to accept that I’m telling you the truth—and might I add that I’m doing all of this against my better judgment. That even though everything in my head tells me this is wrong, my heart is demanding something different.”

He could feel her slipping through his fingers. He needed to do something to change the trajectory of this conversation and fast.

Emily laughed again, but it wasn’t the sweet, melodious sound he’d grown to adore. “You want to be with me even though you think it’s a mistake. Do you even hear yourself? You sound insane.”

Desperate, he snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her hard against him. “Maybe I’m just realizing that I have feelings for you that are too hard to fight.”

Her hands pressed against his chest, keeping just enough distance between them to give her the advantage if she wanted to run. And he would let her if that was what came of it.

He searched her eyes, seeing just the barest hint of hesitation. “You can’t deny that you want to see where this might go. Admit it.”

Emily exhaled and her voice came out as a whisper. “I have a terrible habit of jumping into things without thinking. I don’t think it would be smart to just let my heart make these kinds of decisions.”

“Why not?”

“I...” Her lashes fluttered wildly, and her eyes darted away. When she finally brought them back to his face, she let out a whisper of a groan. “I don’t want either of us to get hurt. What if you’re not ready?”

“I’m ready.” It was a lie. Heck, he’d practically admitted to it moments ago. But right here in this moment, it felt *right* to lie. Fueled by his desire to prove he was ready, he lowered his mouth to hers, brushing a soft kiss to her lips. Her hands

moved from his chest to around his neck and this time she clung to him with a desperation that mirrored his own. They needed each other. Their hearts and souls had found someone to connect with, and now that they were past this hurdle, everything would get easier.

It had to.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WASN'T OFTEN THAT EMILY FELT UNEASY ABOUT something. Then again, she'd never been in a relationship that she wanted this badly before.

That had to be it. She wanted to be with Jack so much that it was making her sick to her stomach. Maybe this unease wasn't actually what she thought it was.

Only one day had passed since they had their talk but the rollercoaster that she had been on was far worse than she expected. She'd be up on a high one minute and then worried that she'd inadvertently done something that forced Jack to make a decision he wasn't ready for the next.

She let out a groan and placed her head down on the table in front of her. People passing the coffee shop were probably giving her funny looks. Of course they would. She was making a fool of herself.

"You... okay?"

She twisted her head around and peeked at Gabrielle. "Yes. Not really. Of course, and definitely not. How does that sound?"

Gabrielle tilted her head as she peered at Emily with amusement. "I know that feeling. You have a thing for him, don't you?"

Emily made a face. Of course, she had a thing for Jack. But no one, as far as she knew, was aware.

Okay, so that was a stretch. His family probably knew because she was there all the time to work with Lily. Gabrielle obviously knew because she was a friend. But beyond that, nobody would care.

At least no one knew that they'd started a relationship. She wasn't ready for people to look at her differently. There was no telling how his family would react. Would they think it was a conflict of interest?

"Yeah, I like him," she muttered. "And it's all your fault."

Gabrielle snorted. "*My* fault?"

"Yes, *your* fault. You had to go and set me up with a guy who—while noticeably grumpy, like, all the time—is somehow super sweet. You know that a guy who takes such amazing care of his kid is total kryptonite for me."

Her friend's amused expression only fueled Emily's frustrated tirade.

"But then he said he wasn't available."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes so hard Emily wouldn't have been surprised if they popped right out of her head. She groaned and fixed Emily with a stare. "If Jack isn't available, there's nothing more to say."

Emily gave Gabrielle a pointed look.

"Right. That was a bad example. Jack is totally available. He might not realize it, but he needs someone as bad as any of us do... maybe even more so." Gabrielle's expression tightened and she leaned forward slightly. "Is he still giving you the run-around? I thought the two of you were hitting it off. You've been spending an awful lot of time together lately. At least, that's what Bo said."

There was no hiding it now. She had always been terrible at keeping secrets.

Gabrielle leaned forward even more and gasped. "Something happened."

"No." Even to Emily, the single word sounded hollow. It definitely wasn't confident by any means.

The smile that was currently plastered on Gabrielle's face was more than irritating. It was downright embarrassing, and Emily couldn't figure out why it even mattered that things were finally working out between herself and Jack. She should be shouting the news from the rooftops.

But no matter how many times she tried to convince herself that everything was going to be okay, she couldn't get past whatever this feeling was that held her back.

Emily dug her hands into her scalp as she thumped her elbows on the table. "Okay, fine. Something happened."

Not a peep was heard from her friend. In fact, it sounded far more quiet than it should have for being lunchtime in the middle of town. Still, Emily couldn't bring herself to raise her head to look Gabrielle in the eye.

"Jack insisted that we couldn't be involved. He said he wasn't ready so many times he was practically blue in the face. I finally came to terms with it."

"Did you, though?"

This time, Emily did look up at her friend. "Of course I did."

Gabrielle tilted her head, her eyes dancing with that knowing look. "Emily," she admonished, "tell the truth. You had a thing for him from the get-go. You thought he was cute, charming, and whatever."

"Does it matter if I did or not?"

"Of course it matters. Okay, so something happened. Tell me."

Emily groaned. "Fine. We kissed, okay?"

Gabrielle's squeal of delight drew the attention of patrons who had been drinking their beverages in peace, but she didn't seem to mind. "Okay. Then what?"

"That's it." Emily's eyes darted toward her cup and she turned it around in her hands, staring hard at the logo on the side of the textured cardboard. That wasn't the whole story. A kiss could mean anything.

The talk they'd had last night meant so much more.

Emily sighed. “Alright, alright. He said he wants to see where things go.”

“I *knew* it!” Gabrielle crowed. “I knew the two of you would hit it off. I just didn’t think it would take so dang long.” She took a long swig of her drink. The smile she wore was so wide and stretched her lips so tight that Emily thought it looked far too painful to last very long, but if anyone could do it, Gabrielle could.

Emily’s dismal outlook shifted a few degrees in the other direction. Gabrielle’s enthusiasm for this change of events was enough to pull a laugh right out of Emily’s chest.

She shook her head. “You’re nuts, you know that?”

“No, I’m just happy I get to tell Jack that I told him so. Ever since Bo and I got together, Jack has been telling us to be careful and not to take everything for granted because we will only get to find this kind of love once. He’s been such a downer.”

Gabrielle’s words had a sinking effect. All it had taken was a few sentences and now Emily was back to square one. Did Jack really believe that there was only one person out there for him? If he did, then why was he telling her he was ready?

“Oh no, you don’t.” Gabrielle’s voice dragged Emily from her dismal thoughts.

“What?”

“I see what you’re doing. You’re getting into your head again. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I can assure you it’s wrong.”

“If you don’t know what I’m thinking then how can you tell if it’s wrong?”

Gabrielle let out a laugh. “Because anyone can see that you’re in love. And if you’ve officially had *the talk*, then it’s gonna happen. Don’t be the thing that gets in your own way. You have to give him the benefit of the doubt. If he’s decided that he’s ready to date again, just go along for the ride.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“You’re going to have to try.” Gabrielle scooted her chair closer to Emily. “Look, I get it. You haven’t had a great track record with dating lately. You come on strong and you’ve scared off a few. But Jack is a good guy. And maybe he needs someone to give him that boost. You never know.”

“Actually, I *do* know. This isn’t some fear-of-commitment issue I’m dealing with. This is completely related to losing the love of his life. How am I supposed to compete with a dead woman?” The words left her body in a whoosh, leaving her feeling almost weak. “Gabrielle, I need you to help me.”

The giddy expression that had graced the face of her friend immediately washed away to reveal concern. “Help you with what?”

“Help me do what you just said. To go along for the ride. I don’t want to push him too far too soon.”

“Sweetie, if he said he’s ready, then you need to trust him. That’s what a relationship is all about. You can’t be the one to do all the work. It’s going to be fine, you’ll see. Just... have some fun on the way to finding out what you two want.”

It couldn’t be that easy. There was no way it was.

Emily had been in enough failed relationships to know better—but none with a guy as good as the Mr. Perfect she’d currently managed to snag herself. She nodded firmly and forced a smile she didn’t feel like giving.

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. Jack is a big boy. He knows what he wants and so do I. Even if he’s got some residual issues, he’s on his way to working through them and he’ll come around. It’s just a matter of time.”

Gabrielle grinned again. “See? There’s my girl. Now we get to spend all our time talking about how things are going between the two of you.”

“There’s not much to tell. We kissed. We had the talk. That’s about it.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute.”

“Well, you’re going to have to. Besides the whole late wife thing, it’s all rather simple.”

While the ache in her chest had eased up quite a lot, there was still some residual pain left behind. The one thing she had realized during this conversation was how impossible it would be to compete with his dead wife.

If Gabrielle had been in this situation, Emily knew what she’d say. It was easy. They were different people. Jack liked them each for unrelated reasons. So why couldn’t she talk herself out of that one concern?

Because it was always harder to take her own advice than it was to give it to someone else. Right now, she had to be responsible and actually listen.

Emily swallowed the lump in her throat and changed the subject, purely out of self-preservation. “How about you tell me how the wedding planning is going. I’m sure you have a lot to figure out.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and let out an embellished groan. “Don’t get me started. Everything has to be planned out to the letter because we’re going to get married at the chapel and the reception is on the ranch. Jennifer is really very sweet, but she’s also a perfectionist when it comes to stuff like this. I swear, it wouldn’t even be different if my mother was still around.”

Emily let her friend rattle on about her plans for the big day. Her thoughts drifted to the one person she would have loved to spend some time with today.

The memory of Jack’s low, husky voice slipped between the crevices of her mind and settled there. She shivered from the sensation of it all. Rubbing her arms up and down, she delved deeper into that memory—the one where he’d first kissed her.

Gabrielle was definitely right about one thing, Emily was a goner when it came to how she felt about Jack. She wanted this to work out more than she’d wanted anything. The appeal to just give in and let Jack take the wheel was far too tempting.

That settled it. She wasn't going to worry herself about this problem that wasn't even likely a problem in the first place. Every last concern she had was in her head. It would all work out. Stuff like this usually did.

Emily smiled at Gabrielle, forcing herself to focus on the words her friend was saying.

“And that's why I think that you would be perfect.”

“Hmm?”

“My maid of honor. You know, because Jack is going to be the best man. It's kismet, don't you think?”

Kismet. Emily liked that. “Yeah. Sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EVER SINCE HIS TALK WITH EMILY, JACK HAD BEEN ON CLOUD nine. He'd managed to shove aside every last bit of doubt he had been carrying on his shoulders.

Were there moments when he wasn't sure he'd made the right decision when it came to diving into a relationship? Sure. But didn't everyone have reservations after going through something like he had? He was positive of it. These feelings of insecurity would leave. He just needed to throw himself into this budding relationship.

Jack hurried down the steps from his bedroom toward the kitchen, his steps lighter than they had been in almost eighteen months. It was easier to brush aside his worries when he could think about how much he looked forward to seeing Emily. She was coming by today to work with Lily, and he couldn't wait to take both of them out on a ride—like a little family.

Delight rippled through him and the smile he wore spread wider on his face. He entered the kitchen where the rest of his family minus his sister were seated at the table, eating their breakfast—or rather, finishing up.

“You slept in a little late,” Bo murmured, getting to his feet to take his dishes to the sink. “There's not much left. All the bacon is gone. You should have come down sooner.”

Jack shot a quick look at the clock on the microwave. Sure enough, he'd come down later than expected. He must have slept in. That was a first. Normally, he had a hard time not only getting to sleep but staying that way.

He flashed his older brother a smile. “I think I’ll just have some eggs and toast.”

Not even the lack of bacon could ruin the way he was feeling right now. Jack hummed softly, preparing his plate and settling beside his daughter.

Lily slammed her hands on the highchair with delight then lifted her hand to her head. “Daddy.” She tapped her fingertips together once, twice, and a third time. “More.”

He looked down at her tray and noted she still had everything she could want except for a small spot where the residual red juice from sliced strawberries indicated the absence of the fruit.

Putting his fingertips together, he signed back. “More?”

She repeated the sign.

Jack shot an excited look toward his mother. “You see that? She’s getting it. No one told her to do it, either.”

Jennifer nodded. “She’s doing really well. What does Emily think?”

“She’s impressed with Lily’s improvement. I think Lily has a real good shot at getting to where she needs to be before starting school.”

With that thought, his excitement dimmed. School. He’d almost forgotten about that. Lily would need special education help. He had a good bit of research to do to help him find out what was available for students like his daughter in Rocky Ridge and then make decisions. That was one more reason he should reconsider moving to the city, where there were more opportunities for his daughter to get the care and education she needed.

It was like whiplash, the excitement he had over seeing Emily today to wondering what would happen when Lily was older. He didn’t think he could ask a person to uproot their life for someone they weren’t even related to. Moving to the city didn’t seem like a possibility.

No. He wasn't going to borrow trouble. That future was too far off for him to worry about it. Things could change. They might not even end up together for more than a few months.

That thought was dismal. Dang, he needed to stop this.

Jack turned his focus back to his daughter as he scooped up a spoonful of strawberries onto her tray. She grinned widely, grabbing two of them into her fist and lifting them to her mouth.

"Isn't Emily coming to work with Lily today?"

He glanced up at his mother again. "She's coming just before lunch. Are you still okay watching Lily until then?" Jack nodded toward his father and older brother. "I was still planning on helping with the cattle today. You said they're due for vaccinations, right?"

Eli nodded. Ever the quiet observer, Jack's father seemed to watch him with his usual keen interest. There was no telling what his father was thinking. He might not like that Jack was clearly interested in Emily—though he hadn't said a thing to his family about the shift in their relationship. Or Eli might be judging him due to his less-than-stellar work ethic.

Well, he wouldn't have noticed if Bo hadn't been slacking on how much he brought to the table. Heck, Jack had almost moved out of state—his father should count himself lucky that he was still around.

"Okay then. We'll herd the cattle into the pens and get them all set for the next six months. After lunch, I'll be taking Lily on a ride. She seems to enjoy riding lately."

"Well, of course she does." His mother's voice raised a pitch and she crooned at his daughter. "She's a Reese, isn't she? She was born to ride."

As he gazed once more at his daughter, he wondered how her hearing might affect her abilities in the saddle. There were still so many unknowns.

Jack finished his breakfast and headed out on his horse toward the herd in the pasture. Bo, Andrew, and Daniel all worked in tandem with their father, moving the cattle and guiding one at

a time into the area where it would be vaccinated. They had the process down to a science. It was how they'd been raised. They took care of their animals, and the animals would provide for them. It was the circle of life that his father had raised them with. And he'd wanted to take Lily away from it.

This wasn't the first time he'd considered this fact.

If he and Zoe had chosen to stay here, to help with the family ranch, maybe Zoe would still be alive. She'd been on her way to the city to see a house with Lily. He hadn't been able to get away from the responsibilities he'd had here.

Jack shoved aside those debilitating thoughts with vengeance. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. It was time to move forward.

During a quiet moment, he was able to sit back and watch his family. The way they worked together with one purpose and one mind. It was one of the things he loved about growing up here. It was also the reason he'd decided to put off moving to the city after losing Zoe. Family was everything. These men understood him in a way that no one besides his late wife ever had.

He might be dealing with a lot, but at least he had that.

Emily was the only other person who came close to giving him that something he had been searching for, and he needed to do everything in his power to keep it.



AFTER THEY COMPLETED THEIR WORK, Jack barely had any time to think before Emily's car arrived. He pushed his horse into a gallop to return to the house just as she climbed out of the driver's seat. She remained by her car, resting an arm on the door as she smiled up at him.

"You sure look dashing."

Jack removed his hat with a grin. "Well, you're a sight for sore eyes. I've missed you."

Her eyes darted toward the house, then the barn, before returning to him. He could almost hear her thoughts. Had he told his family yet? At this point, he really didn't care if they saw. Jack wasn't sure if it was because her presence gave him the confidence for such thoughts or if he was just starved for her, but he swiftly dismounted and strode right up to her.

He tossed his hat aside and slipped his arm around her waist. His voice lowered to almost a whisper. "I've been thinking a lot about you." He cocked his head slightly. "You and me."

"Yeah?" she whispered back. "What about me and you?"

"I think I've been wasting too much time worrying and I want to start living again."

She exhaled, her eyes glittering with what could only be described as pleasure. "I think that sounds like a wonderful idea. We only live once."

Up until this moment, he hadn't realized just how much he hated that phrase. But he was turning over a new leaf. He didn't have to be triggered by something like that.

Jack nodded. "Time to live in the moment."

Without giving her any warning, he swooped down and pressed a firm kiss to her soft lips.

Emily's sharp intake of breath was the last thing he noticed before he saw stars. He could escape in her arms, feeling her body against his. There was something magical or healing about being with Emily this way.

Perhaps it was both. She could help him forget the pain he'd been through. He'd willingly follow her into oblivion if he didn't have to experience any of the turmoil he'd been trying to bury for so long.

Jack's hold on her tightened as he pushed reality further and further into the recesses of his mind. If he was to live in the right here and right now, this was the way to do it.

Someone cleared their throat behind him and he stiffened but didn't immediately jump away from Emily. Slowly, he turned toward the intrusion.

Of course, his mother was standing on the porch. It had to be her. Jennifer had Lily on her hip and a knowing smile on her lips.

“Sorry to interrupt, but your daughter would like to eat before you take her on her ride. I wanted to see if you’d like to join us.” She looked around Jack and met Emily’s gaze. “You’re welcome to join us if you’d like.”

Jack glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, not knowing what to expect. To his surprise, she stepped forward. “I’d like that very much.”

Even Gabrielle showed up to eat lunch with Bo. Every seat was completely filled by members of his family. He didn’t miss the fact that each one of them was stealing glances at Emily with the same kind of knowing smirk his mother had worn when she’d caught them kissing.

Well, the truth was out. Everyone knew. It wasn’t as bad as he thought it was going to be. Instinctively, he reached for Emily’s hand beneath the table, drawing even more attention from Gabrielle, who sat across from him.

She glanced from him to Emily and back again, then dropped her gaze to her plate as she started eating again. He didn’t miss the smile she attempted to hide.

Whatever. She was right. He could admit it.

Emily was a good match after all.

After Lily’s sign language session, Jack and Emily took Lily for a ride. They didn’t stay out long, but the time together was good. They laughed together and Emily’s heart swelled when Lily held out her arms to her. Jack passed his daughter to Emily and they finished the ride quietly as they both got lost in their own thoughts.

Once they returned to the barn, Emily left. Jack and Lily watched her drive away from the front porch. Voices drifted toward him from an open window at his back and his ears perked up immediately.

“Didn’t I tell you they were perfect for each other? Jack needed someone to take charge and Emily was the one to do

it.” Gabrielle’s voice dripped with satisfaction.

Bo’s voice came next. “Yeah, okay. I thought for sure he’d never speak to me again, but you nailed it.”

Jack rolled his eyes, his own amusement hard to swallow back. They could have this win.

“The ironic thing is that she says she always rushes into relationships too fast—that she throws herself into them so hard that she ends up scaring the guy off. But what she doesn’t realize is that it’s more than that. Sometimes, she’s pushing the guy to be something he’s not.”

There was silence as it appeared Bo let this news sink in. Jack did the same. That wasn’t how his relationship was. He’d been the one to push her into it. Gabrielle was way off. Still, he strained to hear the rest of the conversation even as the voices quieted as the couple left the room.

“Do you think that’s what’s happening with Jack?” Bo asked.

“Of course not. Emily is...”

Emily is what? Jack stared at the window, hating how the niggling doubt crept back into his mind like a shadow behind a flickering candle flame.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LUNCH EMILY HAD WITH JACK'S FAMILY WAS EYE-opening. His big family was loud and fun and she enjoyed being with them. Granted, there were two people in the room rooting for her.

Emily couldn't have missed Gabrielle's smirk if she tried. Everyone else was nice enough. The men were understandably quiet, and even Jack's mother seemed to stay away from any conversation related to Jack and Emily as a couple. It was easy to assume that she didn't want to make Emily feel uncomfortable—something she actually appreciated.

Their relationship was happening at a speed that both exhilarated and unnerved Emily. Didn't people date for quite a bit longer before they had dinner with the family? That was what she had to remind herself of when she was making relationships move too quickly.

But this wasn't her doing. Jack had decided to make his relationship with her clear to his family. He'd been the one to kiss her in front of his mother and hold her hand at the table.

Even getting a good night's sleep wasn't enough to help her accept the trajectory she was on. It wasn't *bad*. She just couldn't wrap her head around how well everything was going. Jack was proving her wrong at every turn. Maybe he *was* ready for the next steps. Maybe she should invite him over and make him dinner.

She wandered down the aisles of the grocery store, picking up a few essentials. She smiled to herself as she grabbed a jar of

tomato sauce. She'd always been pretty good at making spaghetti. All she needed now was a few vegetables and pasta.

Emily made her way to the produce section and gathered the onion and peppers she wanted to add to the sauce. Then she doubled back to the aisle with the dried pasta. Her fingers wrapped around a box of spaghetti noodles when two older women she didn't recognize wandered down the aisle.

They all exchanged cordial smiles, but then one of them started speaking and Emily froze.

"Did you hear about Jennifer's son?"

"The one who's getting married? What a lovely young man."

"No. The other one. The one who was already married. He's got a little girl now."

Emily peeked over her shoulder at the women. Only one son had a daughter.

"Oh. I know who you're talking about. John? No, *Jack*. That was his name."

"Yes, that one. Turns out he's found himself another love interest."

The second woman paused her perusing of the shelves and glanced toward her friend. "Really? Didn't his wife pass not so long ago?"

"It's been more than a year now, poor thing. That young man definitely needs someone in his life. Raising a daughter on his own is hard enough as it is." She gave the second woman a pointed look. "And I heard that little girl is still struggling with her hearing."

"Oh, how sad."

A nod from the first who'd started the conversation, but she smiled as she turned back to the shelves of groceries. "That family really lucked out, finding someone willing to fill Zoe's shoes. That woman was a saint. No one will ever compare."

Emily's blood ran cold. The hairs on her arms lifted and her face flushed. She wasn't really a local, made ever more clear

due to these women not recognizing that she was the one attempting the impossible by replacing the great Zoe Reese.

Her heart thrummed with jealousy that quickly shifted into unease. She'd only had a few instances where she was concerned about being Jack's second love interest. She'd never be able to compete with a dead woman, but it seemed it was worse than she thought.

Zoe's reputation was such that even the town was saddened by her loss. How was she ever supposed to fill that kind of role?

Emily's fingers wrapped tightly around the box of spaghetti noodles as the women continued their shopping trip. The unease that slipped into the recesses of Emily's mind was enough to make her feel like the weight of a hundred bricks now rested on her shoulders.

She'd always thought it would be hard to date someone who'd gotten a divorce because of the history he shared with someone else. She'd never really thought what it might be like to be in a relationship with a widower. It wasn't common for a man as young as Jack to have lost his wife.

Jack didn't have a choice in letting Zoe go. She was always going to be a missing piece. He was always going to be thinking about her and how his life would have been different if she was still with him and Lily.

Emily's stomach bottomed out as she considered one thing that hadn't crossed her mind before. What if Jack couldn't help comparing her to his late wife? Their marriage was so short and they probably didn't have even one fight. The perfection had been cast in stone, forever carved on Jack's heart.

What if she wasn't ready to be the woman to fill the hole left behind by Zoe's departure? She couldn't force him to forget Zoe, even if a small part of her wished she could.

Guilt hit her over the head, making her dizzy. Her stomach knotted uncomfortably, and her legs felt weak.

Just the jitters.

That was all this was.

Emily put the box of pasta into her cart and continued her shopping, doing her best to keep the strangers' conversation out of her mind. As soon as she saw Jack again, she'd feel better about all of this nonsense.

As soon as she got out of the store and into her car, she pulled her phone from her pocket. She held the device in her hand for a moment and then put it aside. If spending time with Jack was what would make her feel better, then she should probably just go over and visit him. He wasn't usually busy in the evenings.

She started her car, pushing herself to forget what she'd heard in the store if only to build the courage she needed to see him.

By the time she pulled in front of the Reese home, she was already feeling better. It was silly to think she could be swayed so easily by something said by a couple of old women who obviously didn't know the Reese family as well as they thought they did. Otherwise, they would have known that Emily was being welcomed with open arms.

Emily climbed out of her car the second she saw Jack's familiar silhouette in the doorway of the barn. She moved toward him, intending to rid herself of the more depressing thoughts she'd battled with since she'd overheard those women gossiping at the grocery store.

She picked up her speed, jogging until she got to him. His back was to her but he must have heard her coming because right as she reached him, he turned to face her. She launched herself at him and peppered his face with kisses.

Jack didn't react right away. Slowly, his arms wrapped around her waist, but she sensed him holding back from her. He'd become stiff.

No, that was in her imagination. She was just looking for problems. It was like at the store. Those women didn't know she was the new love interest in Jack's life. They probably wouldn't have said anything if they had known.

Emily pulled back, reaching up to touch his face. Her hand cupped his cheek and she smiled. "I missed you."

His brows came together and he gave her a half-smile. “You saw me yesterday.” He glanced over to her car and the confusion in his gaze deepened. “Why did you come out here today? We didn’t have a session, did we?”

She froze, her body going rigid. That wasn’t something a boyfriend would say. Wasn’t she more to him than just his daughter’s teacher?

Emily backed up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and forcing herself to remain cheerful. “I wanted to see you. I was having a bad day and I thought it would be nice to catch you on my way home.”

“Way home from... where?”

The blush came like a tidal wave. There was no stopping it even if she wanted to. Emily let out a soft laugh. “Okay, it wasn’t really on the way home. But I wanted to see you and ask if you’d like me to make you dinner tomorrow.”

He continued to stare at her for a moment. Then he squinted his eyes as he stared up at the sky and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not sure I’m going to be available.”

“Not *available*?” She let out a strained laugh. “Okay, then later this week. I make the best spaghetti. Well, not the *best*, but pretty good. At least that’s what my brother says.”

“Sure, maybe I can come by on Thursday.”

Her brows furrowed. Why did it sound like she was suddenly forcing him to spend time with her? What was holding him back? That conversation in the grocery store came to mind again and she couldn’t help but wonder if he was having second thoughts about starting their relationship.

The weird thing was that, for once, she hadn’t been the one to push the issue of a relationship. It had been hard, but she’d managed to keep her distance like he’d asked.

He caught her stare and shifted uncomfortably.

Something was definitely up. Jack was holding back, retreating like he had before when she’d shown even a small degree of interest.

Emily could feel her own walls coming up but was unable to prevent it from happening. She took a step back, crossing her arms and peering at him with distrust. “What?”

“What?” he repeated. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Exactly. It’s not what you’re saying. It’s what you’re *not* saying.” She worried her lower lip, gnawing on it until it almost became painful. “Something happened, didn’t it?”

He brushed past her, heading toward the house. “Nothing happened. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I can do dinner on Thursday. Do you want me to bring anything?”

She hurried around him to stand before him, her hands on her hips. “No, you don’t get to just run away like I know you want to. That’s not how this works.”

His brows lowered and his eyes clouded over. It was as if she could see his own defenses coming up as he prepared to protect his castle.

“Maybe I’m having a rough day. Have you considered that? Sometimes it happens.”

“I have bad days too. I had one today, in fact—I actually think I shared that info with you. But it doesn’t affect our relationship. Whatever this is,” she gestured at him vaguely, “that’s not it.”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe things will be better tomorrow.” He moved to get around her again, but she blocked him.

“What is going on?” she demanded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HOW COULD JACK TELL HER THAT HE'D MADE A MISTAKE? It was becoming increasingly clear that he wasn't ready to start a relationship. It was way too soon.

Or maybe he wasn't ready to start something with Emily, even though he wanted to very much. His jaw tightened as if his head was preventing him from saying something he might really regret.

Because what if he was *wrong*? What if he was overreacting and shying away from what might be his only chance at happiness?

Overhearing Gabrielle couldn't have happened at a worse time.

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose and set a firm stare on Emily. "You're being a little pushy, don't you think?"

Her eyes widened, then narrowed again. "Excuse me? Pushy?"

He let out a sigh, already hating what this conversation had turned into. "Honestly, Emily. We see each other every single day. I feel like maybe we need to slow it down."

"Slow down..." she said in a low, measured voice.

"Yeah. You're here every day with Lily and then we spend more time just the two of us."

Emily blinked and took a step back.

A weight settled into his heart, dragging it down and crushing his insides. "Emily—"

She held up a hand, shaking her head. “No. Give me a minute.”

His stomach churned as the sickening shame caused a deeper ache than he’d been prepared for. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he’d just realized that this wasn’t right for either of them. “I’m—”

“Let me get this straight. You insisted you didn’t want to date anyone because you weren’t ready. Then you—*you*—insisted you were ready. You held my hand, you kissed me, you invited me to spend time with your family—for all intents and purposes, we were a couple. And a few days later, you suddenly want to take it *slow*. And the way it feels right this minute is that slow equals stopping.” She raked a hand through her hair and let out a mirthless laugh. “You hear it, right? You’re the one who’s giving both of us whiplash. I should have known better than to let myself get wrapped up in this.”

Her voice had hardened along with her expression. If looks could kill, he wouldn’t still be standing.

A normal, healthy man would have taken what she had said and apologized. He would have told her that she was right and wished her luck.

As it turned out, he wasn’t one of those guys. Emily’s words stung, cutting deeper as each one was uttered. He frowned even as he knew she had made some good points.

“You’re not entirely innocent either.”

Her brows shot up and the disbelieving laughter that burst from her lips only spurred his frustration. She folded her arms again, putting more between them.

“*Me*? You think that *I’m* the one moving things too quickly? Right.”

He let out a groan. “It doesn’t matter. All I was trying to say was I felt we should step back and...”

“You know what? I think you’re right.”

Jack’s mouth nearly fell open.

“Sure. I can see what’s going on now. You’re projecting your worries, blaming me for what is making you uncomfortable—totally a jerk move, by the way. You don’t want to lay this out for what it really is.”

His face flushed and his whole body tensed. Every sentence dripped with disdain, making him realize even more that this had been a mistake. “And what is that?”

“You’re not interested in a relationship. You know what you want? You want someone to fill the hole left behind by your wife. You want someone to carry the load of caring for your daughter, and when you’re comfortable enough to get through the current stage, you’re just going to drop the one who’s been there for you. And for Lily.”

He gaped at her in irritation. “Now, hold on—”

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it?” she snapped. “You know no matter how hard you looked or how long, you would never find someone who could take her place. Your family loved her. The town loved her. Heck, I bet even the horses love her more than they would ever love me.”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“Am I?” If she’d been a cat, her back would have been arched and her fur would have been sticking up at all angles. He could almost see her that way now and it bordered on terrifying. She lowered her voice and took a step toward him. “I never asked for this. I was ready to find love. That was why I was willing to let Gabrielle set us up. I want to start a family of my own. But that isn’t going to happen with you. You’re right. This has been a mistake, and you’re fooling yourself if you think you were ready. I hope for Lily’s sake you are one day. Goodbye, Jack.”

Her final words stung him, cutting deeper than a knife. He watched her stride away, her back straight as a rod. She didn’t even look back at him as she climbed into her car and drove away.

Jack was left standing there scouring his brain for what he could have done differently.

So many things.

He wished he could say there was one good thing that came out of this conversation. It would have been nice to be able to tell himself that they both needed to grow and this was for the best.

But he couldn't. Not even in his head was he able to convince himself that everything would be okay. Because right now, he just felt hollow.

His hands balled into fists and rather than head for the house to check on Lily, he turned on his heels and strode right back into the barn. He needed a ride to clear his head. He needed to figure out why Emily's statements had rocked him to the core.

Jack slammed the side of his curled fingers against one of the stall doors, startling a horse that had been minding his own business. He didn't hesitate as he grabbed a saddle and made a beeline for one of the horses that had an attitude.

Right now, he needed to feel anything but the resentment that coiled within him like a venomous cobra. Hissing rang in his ears. Heat stirred in the pit of his stomach.

He saddled the horse and climbed into the saddle. Immediately, the horse catapulted forward. Warm wind whipped at his face, tugging at his clothes and stinging his eyes. It was a welcome relief from the pounding that had taken over his head.

All he'd wanted was for her to take a step back. That wasn't so hard to do. Taking it slower was fine. She was the strange one. She was the one who had flung insults at him over his past.

Those insults had left their mark. It was like she'd slapped him clear across the face, leaving a bright red handprint.

How dare she accuse him of using her? He'd never do something so callous. Ever.

And with that thought, another came.

Hadn't he told her he didn't want to get into anything because he knew he wouldn't be able to forget his wife? Zoe would always be part of him. Emily was the one who'd said that.

Out of the two of them, Emily was the one in the wrong. No one would look at this breakup and blame him. That much he knew.

Jack leaned forward, urging his horse to continue pushing its limits to see just how fast he would go.

When Zoe died, he'd felt his life spiraling, spinning around him until he couldn't stand on his feet anymore. He'd lost all control of his life without her in it. Even twelve months later, it was like he couldn't let go of that feeling of helplessness. Logically, he knew he needed to move forward. That was the normal path to take.

So why couldn't he just do it? What was it about losing Zoe that had him so at odds with himself and his life?

Lily's small face flooded his thoughts, filling all the darkness with her bright light. Every decision he'd made since Zoe passed was for Lily. He'd lived for her, done everything he could to make sure she would be cared for and that she felt his love. She was the reason he'd stuck around the ranch. He was thankful for his family—especially his mom—for their help with Lily. And she was doing so well. Grudgingly, he knew he had Emily to thank for much of that.

Just like the clouds in his heart, they gathered overhead in the darkening sky. The wind picked up, tugging on him as he continued along the familiar trails. The chaos that surrounded him was just as bad as that which raged within him.

He refused to admit that these dark feelings had anything to do with Emily. He'd found his love once. There was no finding that level of happiness a second time. It just didn't happen.

Lightning bolted across the sky, followed by a crack of thunder. His horse reacted, drawing up onto his hind legs and nearly tossing Jack from the saddle.

Jack's heart rattled in his chest but before he had a chance to climb down and steady his beast, lightning did the job for him.

The horse rose in the air again, tossing Jack to the ground before turning and taking off in the direction of the barn.

Jack wheezed, the air knocked from his lungs as he stared at the swirling gray and blue overhead. He wrapped his arm around his stomach and focused on dragging precious oxygen into his lungs. One fat drop of rain hit him on the forehead. Then another on his cheek. The water was warmer than he expected.

There wasn't a part of his body that didn't ache. Pain emanated from several areas, but at least it gave him a reprieve from the emotional trauma he'd been dealing with. It was like a plastic shield had come down between his heart and his head, offering a way for him to evaluate what he was dealing with in a better way.

Was Emily right? Had he sought her out as a placeholder for Zoe even though she was never coming back? He hadn't thought he could do something like that. But then he never thought he'd survive losing Zoe in the first place, and here he was, broken but still breathing.

Jack closed his eyes as more rain pelted his face. He liked Emily. He might even love her. He had really wanted to make things work with her and he'd let his own insecurities get in the way.

She was a wonderful woman and he'd just let her slip through his fingers. That was what had really happened. He deserved to be alone. That was what this all came down to. His life would be better served focusing on his family's ranch and his daughter.

Jack groaned as he sat up from the ground. He twisted, finding his hat a few feet away. Snatching it and shoving it onto his head, he got to his feet. Besides a very sore backside, he wasn't any worse for wear.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. The screen was cracked but it could still turn on. Thank goodness, because at the rate this storm had moved in, he wasn't sure he wanted to be here long. A new crack of thunder and flash of lightning seemed to taunt him, reinforcing his thoughts.

A quick dial to his brother and he was on his way. Hopefully, Bo would be able to find him.

There were two important things he'd learned from all this. He shouldn't have trusted his brother when he'd sent him to town to interview a nonexistent person.

And when it came to relationships, he had been right all along. He'd had his chance at love. He didn't deserve to find it again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

EMILY LET OUT A GROWL AS SHE PULLED UP IN FRONT OF HER apartment. She'd been an idiot. She should have trusted her instincts and told Jack that she didn't want him to jump into a relationship just because he thought she wanted it. Somehow, this whole situation had blown up in her face.

The worst part was how conflicted she felt over the whole thing. Deep down, she knew she might have been giving certain signals to Jack that had made him feel obligated to take the next step.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly the faux leather cracked beneath the pressure. As much as she wanted to convince herself that this was for the best, she couldn't help but call herself a liar.

Emily wasn't okay. She didn't want to be put in this situation. She was frustrated, broken, and tired.

Boy, was she tired.

She rested her forehead on the steering wheel and released a heavy breath. It didn't matter how many times she ran over it in her head, she would never figure out exactly what went wrong. That realization alone made it clear she shouldn't have even bothered getting close to him.

Emotion tickled the back of her throat, threatening to morph into something else. She didn't want to cry. She wouldn't give Jack the satisfaction.

He's not here. You wouldn't be giving him anything.

She scowled, her head still against the wheel. It didn't matter that he wasn't there, she wasn't going to cry over a guy who didn't want her to begin with.

And just like that, a tear escaped.

Emily brushed roughly at the tear, then sat up. A scream erupted from her throat as she came face to face with someone on the other side of her window.

Her brother waved at her, a happy smile on his face until he noticed her expression. Gabe reached for the door and pulled it open.

Before he could sign anything, she jumped from the car. "What are you doing here? You weren't supposed to come yet." Her hands were still shaking from the experience she'd just had.

"I got a few extra days off. I figured it would give me some more time with my favorite sister."

She shut the car door behind her, praying her face wasn't blotchy and red as it likely was. "Well, you could have called." She glanced around the parking lot, not seeing any car that he might have rented. "How did you get here?"

"I took an Uber." He stepped closer. Despite him being a few years younger, he was several inches taller than her—a fact he had once loved to rub in her face. His brows puckered as he studied her for a moment, forcing her to look away. He tapped her shoulder so she'd meet his gaze before he signed, "Emily, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She brushed past him and hurried toward her trunk. "You just scared me, that's all."

His steps scuffed along the pavement behind her. When she glanced at him, he started signing again. "I can tell when something isn't right. You might as well tell me because I'll figure it out eventually. I always do."

Emily huffed as she opened the trunk and tossed him a pointed look. "I don't think you're remembering our childhood as well as you think you are. You never figured out anything unless I wanted you to."

“Or are *you* remembering wrong? How many times did you end up talking to me about something because you just wanted to get it off your chest? Think about it, sis, I’m the one who got you to open up.”

She stilled, her thoughts shifting to when she’d gone through other hard times. Gabe was just easy to talk to. He didn’t usually force his opinion on her nor did he tell her what to do.

That was it. He was a good listener. The funny thing was that he didn’t have to hear her to be one. It was probably because he had to focus on what she was signing, but either way, she loved him all the more for it.

Emily shot a quick look at him then turned back to the groceries she was organizing to take inside. Gabe was going to make a wonderful husband to someone when he was ready to fall in love. But that didn’t mean she was ready to share what she’d just gone through. She still needed to wrap her head around it herself. It didn’t matter that Gabe was a great listener—she just couldn’t talk about this with anyone right now.

She let out a sigh and forced a smile in hopes that he’d drop the subject. Gesturing toward the groceries, she signed, “Are you going to keep jabbering away or are you going to help me with these groceries? It looks like rain.”

Gabe didn’t move immediately, she could feel his eyes delving into her like he could get past her defenses without even trying.

She heaved another sigh, this one more resigned than the first. “Okay, you want me to tell you what’s going on? I will. But I’m not doing it out here. And I have groceries to put away. So you can help or you don’t have to, but I’m going in.” Emily hefted a few bags into her arms and moved past him toward the apartment stairs. Having her little brother here for the next few weeks was either going to be the best kind of coping medicine for her or the worst.

The sound of her car trunk slamming shut was muted as she continued to climb the steps toward her apartment. When she got to the landing, she noted Gabe’s suitcase just sitting at the

door. How long had he been waiting? Had he noticed her little breakdown in the car?

Heat seared her cheeks as she fumbled for her keys. Hopefully he didn't plan on giving her a lecture over all of this. She wasn't in the mood for something like that. She just needed to get through the next twenty-four hours and then she would be fine.

They could spend some time together and she could take him to dinner. Gabe would be the perfect distraction for her to get over Jack.

She shouldered her way into the apartment and headed straight for the kitchen. The door was left open, allowing Gabe to bring in the rest of the groceries and then go back for his suitcase. She busied herself with the food, all the while avoiding Gabe as he took a seat at the breakfast bar. Once again, she could feel his eyes following her as she got to work.

Whatever, either he'd get bored, or he'd make her spill everything. Then they'd move past it and she'd be fine.

He tapped something against the counter.

Emily glanced in his direction, finding him holding a jar of spaghetti sauce.

"Spaghetti, huh?" he signed.

A wry smile touched his lips, and the look he gave her was a lot like the ones he'd had in the past. She hated that look. He always thought he knew exactly what was going on and he didn't.

"It's not what you think," she gestured with irritation as she faced the fridge to put away the veggies she'd grabbed. When she glanced at him again, she noted his narrowed eyes.

"So, you're not pining after a guy."

She gasped.

Her brother chuckled. "See? Whether you want to admit it or not, I know what's going on with you. You have such an *obvious* tell."

“Do *not*.”

“You’re one of the happiest people I know, Emily. You have a smile that could reach the moon if you wanted it to. It’s one of the things that draws people to you. But when you’re dealing with heavy stuff, that smile dims. The light goes out and you’re a shell of yourself.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not dealing with anything *heavy*.”

“Whatever it is, you don’t like it and it’s showing all over your face. You might as well tell me.”

“Pining after some guy isn’t heavy,” she insisted. “I’m just dealing with mistakes I’ve made.”

“What kind of mistakes?”

This was how Gabe did it. He kept pushing and poking until he got her to say the thing that he wanted to know. That was it. And she’d let him do it to her again.

Emily let out an exasperated breath. “I started seeing this guy and I think I ruined it.”

“How?”

She lifted a shoulder feebly. “I guess I pushed too hard.”

Gabe snorted. “That’s not a good reason to break up. You take a step back, slow down a little.”

She didn’t meet his gaze, shame and embarrassment filling her face. Wasn’t that exactly what Jack had wanted her to do? She’d let her insecurities take the wheel on this one and she’d gotten far too defensive.

Motion drew her attention and she glanced at him to find him waving so he could sign to her. “Emily?”

She signed the single word sharply. “*What?*”

“Are you seriously going to make me ask you?”

“You can ask all you want. I don’t have to tell you anything. You’re visiting *me*, and I’m not going to make this visit all about fixing my problems.”

There, that made sense. Even though she would have loved to find solutions to the problems she was going through, she wasn't about to let her little brother fix it for her. That was what big sisters were for.

Gabe sighed. "Fine. You're right. You don't have to tell me anything. But if I were you, I'd tell me everything that you're frustrated about just so I can make you feel better and you can start smiling again."

"What if there isn't any way to feel better? What if I'm the one who broke up with him because *I* felt insecure? What if I'm the kind of person who can't handle dating someone whose soul mate died because I can't bring myself to deal with wondering if he'll always be comparing me to her?"

She blew out a breath, hating the way the heat continued to intensify in her cheeks. She reluctantly met her brother's eyes.

"I see what you mean," he murmured as he climbed down from his stool. "It's definitely *not* heavy."

Emily let out a watery laugh. "Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not." He wrapped her up in a hug before pulling back to wipe a tear. His hand movements were smooth, simple, and soothing. "But you want to know what I think? I think he's a fool for letting you go."

She laughed. "Maybe it's the other way around."

Gabe scrutinized her. "Why would you say something like that?"

"You don't know him, Gabe. He's amazing. Jack is like... Mr. Perfect. He loves his daughter so much. He's kind and generous..." Her heart sank as she listed every single thing she liked about him. If she could put together a wish list of everything she wanted in a guy, Jack was the closest a person came to meeting those expectations.

His only flaw was his attachment to his late wife. And was that so bad?

"I don't care how perfect he is, if he's not right for you then good riddance, right?"

She nibbled on her lower lip, fighting the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. “Yeah, I guess.”

Even to herself, she didn’t sound convinced. Emily had either made the biggest mistake of her life or she’d done the most painfully right thing. Either way, she still felt terrible.

Taking in a deep, shuddering breath, Emily pulled away from her brother and motioned toward the tomato sauce. “What do you say we have spaghetti tonight? I have all the ingredients. Might as well, right?”

Gabe’s grin spread from ear to ear. He leaned past her to grab the jar and tossed it in the air.

Emily let out a shrill screech and lunged for it only for Gabe to snatch it before she could catch it. She gave him a withering look. “Don’t do that.”

He put the jar down and signed, “Come on, I wasn’t going to drop it. I like your spaghetti too much to make that kind of mistake.”

She smiled despite everything that had been going on. “I’m glad you were able to visit.”

He pulled her into a one-armed hug. “Me too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JACK DIDN'T EVEN LOOK AT HIS BROTHER AS THE UTV bumped along the trails toward their home. Thankfully, his brother didn't feel like giving him the third degree either. From the pounding headache to his sore muscles, Jack didn't need any other problems.

Rain pelted them but at least he wasn't out walking in this weather. The thunder echoed behind them as they left the main part of the storm. Jack folded his arms, his scowl deepening.

If he had thought he was miserable a few weeks ago, he was out of his depth now. Right here, right now was so much worse. He'd lost the love of his life to an accident. His daughter had lost her mother and her hearing. And now they'd both lost whatever Emily might have been to them.

His heart crumbled just a little more, sprinkling the rest of his insides with dust and debris.

"You gonna tell me what happened back there?"

Jack huffed. "Can we not?"

Bo shifted, glancing toward Jack briefly as he adjusted his grip on the wheel. He must have realized just what it meant for him to go poking around in Jack's business after he'd been the one to set Emily up with Jack in the first place.

They arrived at the ranch and Bo slowed the engine as they approached the barn where he'd park the UTV. Before Jack had a chance to jump out and escape what he figured was inevitable, his brother spoke again.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Well, that was unexpected.

“I shouldn’t have pushed you into going on a date with Emily when I knew you weren’t ready to start anything. You should have been able to make that decision on your own.”

Jack gaped at his brother. He was ready for Bo to tell him that he needed to chill out and call Emily back because Jack was clearly struggling with what was going on. He narrowed his eyes and glanced around before bringing his gaze back to Bo. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing anything.” The defensiveness in his voice came out harsher than Jack expected, but it didn’t stop him from pushing his brother.

“No, why are you *apologizing*?”

Bo gave him an incredulous look. “I’m not allowed to say I’m sorry?” He threw his hands into the air and shoved his way out of the UTV. “Fine. I won’t apologize.” He got a few feet away then stopped and spun around to face Jack. “You know what? I’m *not* sorry. You should have been set up with someone like Emily a long time ago. She makes you happy and every single one of us could see it. You’re a better brother and a better dad when she’s around.”

Jack’s mouth fell open. So many arguments flooded his mind. His own defenses rose and he nearly spewed exactly what he’d been thinking when Bo cut him off.

“I don’t know what’s going on with you and Emily. And I doubt you’d tell me even if I asked. But from what I can tell, you’re hurting—and in my experience, it’s never just one-sided. Whatever you did, you should call her up and apologize.”

Jack shoved his door open and climbed out, glowering at his brother. “And what if there’s nothing for me to apologize for?”

Bo laughed but sobered up real quick. His eyes narrowed and he shook his head. “Think about it, Jack. There’s no way a person like Emily would be the person to break the two of you

up unless she finally realized that you weren't as great of a catch after all."

Jack opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. He couldn't argue with his brother on that fact. The thought had crossed his mind on more than one occasion. Emily was too good of a person to have to deal with the baggage he carried around on his back.

"See? I can tell. You did something. She's probably not innocent in all of this either, but it'll take one of you to start the process of making this right." He let his words sink in then he moved closer to the vehicle. "Unless you don't want to fix this."

Bo held Jack's eyes, locking him into place as they stood there on either side of the recreational vehicle. Something told Jack that even if he wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to move. He was frozen, hanging on to every word his older brother was saying to him. Jack didn't utter a single word. Even his breathing had slowed. Then Bo spoke again.

"There's one thing you have to figure out."

"What's that?" Jack whispered, though he already knew the answer.

"You have to decide if you really want her. Do you care about her enough to fight to win her back? Or were you just interested in the idea of having her in your life because she made it easier?"

Jack snorted. "She didn't make my life easier."

"I beg to differ. Besides helping with Lily, she made you happy. Or have you forgotten that already? When we're happy, our lives are generally a lot easier than when we're angry at the world." Bo crossed his arms, breaking the spell when he glanced toward the barn door just as the sound of engines drew their attention. "Sounds like Mom and Dad are back."

"Didn't they go on a vacation? I thought they were supposed to be gone for the next few days."

Bo shrugged, giving Jack a knowing look. "That's not what they told me. They said they were going to some ranch just

over the state border to discuss the possibility of working with them.”

“Sounds like the kind of vacation you’d take,” Jack murmured.

“Yeah, well, it’s better than spending my whole life at the beach.”

“Better be careful not to say that in front of Gabby. Don’t think she’d be very keen on that kind of lifestyle.”

“How about you worry about your own problems right now. You have a lot to think about before you run out of time.”

Jack made a face. “There’s no time limit on this sort of thing.”

Bo laughed again, rubbing Jack the wrong way. There was something about it that made him feel like his brother was mocking him in a deeper way. “You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you? In my experience, the longer you wait, the bigger the apology.”

He didn’t give Jack a chance to respond. He just dropped his mic there and strode from the barn.

Jack followed his brother and headed out into the night. It was getting late and he probably just needed a good night’s sleep. The horse he’d ridden wandered in a nearby pasture, saddle intact. He heaved a sigh. First, he’d take care of the animal. Then he’d slip inside and hopefully avoid detection from his folks.



“JACK! IS THAT YOU?”

Jack froze, his stockinged foot on the bottom step leading upstairs. There was no way his mother had heard him come in.

No possible way.

He’d removed his boots outside. Heck, he’d even left them there. The door shut quietly enough. How on earth did she know he was going upstairs at this very moment?

“I thought that was you. What are you doing? We brought home dinner.”

Jenifer’s voice came from a few feet away and Jack turned around with resignation. He met his mother’s eyes and shrugged.

“I’m not feeling very hungry.”

She studied him like most mothers typically would, and he could see the exact moment when she noticed something wasn’t right. Jennifer moved toward him. Her eyes were shining, blue pools of... *pity*.

Jack’s whole body seemed to lose its strength. “Not you too.”

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

“What did Bo tell you?”

His mother leaned against the wall and glanced down the hallway toward the kitchen. “He didn’t say much.”

“Mom,” Jack demanded.

“He said you’re having problems with Emily. He didn’t say what happened.”

“And you’re going to try to convince me that I’m making a huge mistake and that I need to go to her and tell her that I’m sorry. Is that it?”

“Did you do anything deserving of an apology?”

He looked away. Of that, he wasn’t sure. Emily was right. He’d rushed in when he wasn’t ready and gotten scared. But the more he went over this in his head, the clearer it became. He wanted to be with her.

Bo was right.

Jack wanted to be with Emily, he just didn’t know how he would be able to do it. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

He turned toward her and settled onto the bottom step. “How do you do it?”

She let out a soft laugh. “How do I do what?”

“How do you live every day not worried about losing Dad?”

The humor drained from her face and she gazed at him with an expression he couldn't read. For a moment, he regretted asking such a question. He nearly took it back but she stopped him.

“That's a hard question to answer. I don't know anyone who has had to deal with what you've dealt with in losing Zoe. I can't comprehend the grief you face on a daily basis.”

Jack looked down at his hands, held out in front of him. “Yeah, I guess not.”

“That isn't to say that I don't worry about it,” she was quick to add. “Your father has had some pretty close calls. Ranching life isn't the easiest or the safest.”

He peeked up at his mother as her voice dropped to a whisper.

“But I can't live my life with crippling fear. One day, I will lose him. I pray that day is far off, but when it comes, I hope that I won't have any regrets. I choose to live each day like it could be my last.”

“That's not morbid at all,” he muttered dryly.

Jennifer smiled again. “You're not wrong.” She let out a sigh. “I've always been a firm believer that our lives are shorter than we realize. If I want happiness, I need to chase it.” She got up and he jumped to his feet.

“Where are you going? Aren't you going to ask me about Emily?”

She shook her head. “No, I don't think I will. Ultimately, you need to make choices that will bring joy. If you think Emily is part of that, you'll figure it out. If she's not,” his mother shrugged, “I'm sure you'll take a different path.”

“And you're not going to tell me to fight for her?” He was stunned. His mother of all people was the one he'd expected would try to convince him to get married again—if not for himself then for his daughter.

Jennifer chuckled. “Do you want to fight for her?”

“I don't know.”

“Let me put it a different way. Were you happy when you were with her?”

“Of course I was,” he blurted.

She gave him a pointed look. “Then there’s your answer. Your happiness trumps any fears or insecurities you might be facing right now. Relationships are hard. That’s not a secret. It’s terrifying to put your heart on a platter and give it over to someone else. But the rewards far outweigh the risks when they keep it safe for you. If you can see yourself with Emily, then I would suggest you find a way to work this out. No more sitting on that fence. You’re bound to fall off if you do.” His mother motioned toward the kitchen. “It’s fried chicken. Would you like me to fix you a plate?”

“I think I’ll pass tonight. Thanks, Mom. For everything”

She closed the distance between them, placing her palm against his cheek. “I love you, dear. I only want you to be happy.”

“I know.” He watched her disappear into the kitchen and headed to his room. He had a lot to think about.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“YOU DEFINITELY NEED ONE OF THESE.” GABE PLUCKED AN eclectic teapot from the shelf as they browsed through Horseshoe Antiques. He lifted his eyebrows a few times, not even trying to hide his grin. “Everyone needs one.” He signed the words awkwardly with one hand.

She eyed the neon orange and yellow teapot and gestured toward the chip in the spout. “Looks like it’s gotten into a few fights in its time. I’m not sure it would survive the trip home.”

He glanced at it and pouted before putting it down. “Come on, even strays need a home. This poor thing just needs some love.”

Emily laughed. “I don’t even have room for it. Besides, it’s hideous.”

Her brother wrapped one arm around the pot and gasped. “Shh. It can hear you.”

She took it out of his reach and placed it on a different shelf. “Pass. We’re here to look for a replacement pan since you seem to think mine isn’t good enough.”

“In my defense, your pan looks like it’s been in a few fights, too.”

Emily elbowed him. “Hey! And I’m not sure this is the best place to look for cookware. But it really is a nice place to wander around.”

He grunted, his smile spreading wider.

They continued their shopping and when they finally made their way to the checkout, she placed the items she wanted on the counter. Emily smiled at the woman behind the register as she pulled out her wallet. Gabe placed the hideous teapot on the counter and winked at her.

“You forgot this.”

Emily let out an exasperated groan. “I told you—”

Gabe withdrew his own wallet and slapped a twenty on the counter. “My treat.”

Her voice died in her throat and she shook her head. “You’re ridiculous, you know that, right?”

The woman hesitated before picking up the teapot and wrapping it with paper. She placed it carefully in a plastic bag, and then another. Her eyes shifted from Emily to Gabe and back.

“Don’t you even think about telling her to put it back,” Gabe warned. He turned to the cashier and did his best to speak aloud, the words a little more strained but understandable. “My sister just doesn’t understand art when she sees it.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “And you’re going to be a hoarder if you’re not careful.”

They spent the rest of their day strolling through town. She took him to the Steer House, where he ordered a burger, and they headed over to Sweet Everything for dessert.

Gabe scooped a bite of huckleberry ice cream into his mouth as they took their seats on one of the many benches out front. He placed the bowl beside him, keeping the spoon in his hand as he signed to her. “There’s something I’ve been thinking since I got here.”

She snickered. “That must have hurt.”

He gave her a flat look.

Emily laughed again. It was good to spend time with Gabe, to get her mind off other things.

Other people.

Okay, *one* person in particular.

Gabe slapped the bench between them, creating a sharp sound. “You paying attention?”

She jumped and stared at her brother. “What?”

“Geez, it was like you were on another planet.” Gabe took another bite of his ice cream. “I was just saying that I was curious about that guy. Jack?”

Her breath caught in her throat and she looked across the street so she didn’t have to maintain eye contact with him. Finally, she signed, “What about him?”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure about what?”

“That he’s not the one.”

She sighed. “I never said that he *wasn’t*.”

Gabe didn’t move for a moment. “I suppose you didn’t.”

The sounds around them seemed to blend together, merging and crashing around them. No longer did she hear the kids laughing at the table nearby. She couldn’t pick out the voices of people walking past on their way to the next shop. Everything just sounded a little too hollow.

Was this how Gabe felt every single day?

If her brother wasn’t willing to drop this issue, then maybe she had to start being honest with herself. Emily peeked at him before she took a bite of her ice cream. “Fine. Ask away.”

Gabe raised his arm and draped it over the back of the bench. He peered at her in a way that unnerved her, causing her to fidget. He signed with one hand. “Okay, why are you lying?”

Her eyes widened and her head reared back. “Excuse me?” The words came out on a startled laugh. “That was a little harsh, don’t you think?”

“Is it?” He poked her shoulder with his finger. “I’ve given you a few days to think it over. Now I think you should tell me what happened.”

Emily blew out a breath through pursed lips. “I don’t know, exactly. He’s been dealing with a lot with his daughter.” She raked a hand through her hair and let the strands slip back to her shoulders. “I got the feeling that he wasn’t ready for something serious and I... I ignored it. Maybe it’s my fault.”

“Don’t start that again. This whole Mr. Perfect thing. No one is *perfect*.”

“Okay, fine. It’s not just my fault, but I might have overreacted. He wanted us to step back and I... I didn’t want to.” Her face burned with the embarrassment of admitting such a thing to her brother. “See? It’s mostly my fault. I messed everything up and I don’t know that he would even want to see me again, let alone give me another chance.”

Gabe took a thoughtful bite of his ice cream. “Let’s say he did.”

“What do you mean?”

“What if you saw him again? What would you say?”

She blew a strand of hair out of her face and stared off into space. What *would* she say to him? If time was limited and she only had a few moments to get her point across, there was one thing she could think of.

“Sorry.” She lifted her eyes to her brother. “I’d tell him I was sorry that I didn’t give him what he needed. It was selfish.” Her stomach turned and she felt a wave of sadness rush over her. “The problem is that he was the one who wanted a break. I seriously doubt he would give me the time of day. He didn’t want me when things were going well, why would he want me after I told him that I knew we weren’t going to work out?”

Gabe shrugged. “Guys are easy. You tell them they’re right once and you’ll be set for a few months.”

Emily snorted. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“Okay, you twisted my arm. If you tell him he’s right, it might even last a full year.”

She laughed this time.

“So... when am I going to meet this guy? You know, so I can give him the talk.”

Shoving his shoulder playfully, she shook her head. “You’re doing no such thing. I’m the big sister. And you’re the little brother.”

“But I’m taller.”

Emily returned the flat look he’d given her earlier. “I’m going to pretend that’s not true.” She finished off her ice cream and got to her feet. “How about we pick up some ingredients for dinner and movie night, then we can head home.”

“And you can message Jack.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

For the first time in the last few days, she felt lighter. Jack might not want to give her a second chance, but she was willing to take a shot.



“DON’T FORGET to buy another pepper.”

Emily shot a confused look at her brother. “What for?”

“Spaghetti.”

“I made that for you a few days ago.”

“And I’m leaving next week. I need to get my fix however I can.”

“Then you’re making it.” She grabbed a bunch of bananas and examined it.

Gabe pouted. “But no one makes spaghetti like you.”

Emily placed the bananas in her cart, but not before giving him a funny look. “You keep saying that, but it’s no different than anyone else’s recipe.”

“Not true,” Gabe protested. “It’s the best and I’m never going to not think that.” He held up the pepper again. “Please?”

She sighed. “You’re going to get tired of spaghetti.”

“Who gets tired of spaghetti?”

Emily’s blood ran cold, then hot, and cold again. Jack’s voice was unmistakable, and he was standing directly behind her. Her throat tightened up as she slowly turned to face him.

It had only been a few days and yet it felt like an eternity had passed.

His features had changed somewhat. She couldn’t tell what was different about him, and probably wouldn’t even if she stared at him for hours.

Her fingers itched to reach up and touch his mussed hair, to trace the lines of his face that she’d gotten to know so well. As hard as it was to come face to face with him again, there was also something exciting about seeing him.

Jack’s eyes locked onto hers and it was like they were the only two people in the world. His lips quirked upward slightly, sending a familiar thrill through her. Just having him here in front of her was enough to make her forget everything she’d said to Gabe.

“Emily,” he murmured, “I... I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

She couldn’t help the small tug of a smile on her lips. “Really? Because we seem to bump into each other here.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The silence between them grew thicker and heavier. She needed to say something—*anything*. This was kismet.

No regrets.

Emily took a deep breath, drawing on the courage she knew she’d need to get through this moment. “Jack, I needed to—”

He held up a hand. “I was thinking about our last conversation.”

She stopped short.

“I think maybe you were right.”

Emily blinked rapidly. Right about what? She couldn't recall anything she might have said that she *wanted* to be right. "Jack, I—"

"I think maybe I needed to realize that I was in love with the idea of being with someone. I just didn't—"

"I love you."

The phrase was blurted before she could stop herself. She didn't know where she was going with this. Hadn't she told Gabe she just wanted to say sorry?

Emily swallowed hard, hating how hot her face felt, hating the way he stared at her like she had lost her mind. "I mean, I do, but I wanted to tell you that I overreacted. I'm sorry. And I know you're probably thinking that I'm more trouble than I'm worth. I get it."

Emily shot a look toward her brother but found he'd disappeared.

Traitor.

She dragged her eyes back to Jack. "I guess that's all I wanted to tell you. I have feelings for you—strong feelings. But I don't expect you to return them. And I don't expect you to say anything. In fact, I'm not even going to let you talk. I'm going to get my groceries and leave. You just think about what I've said and if you decide you'd like to start something again... you know where I live."

Emily took off, just as she'd promised. She needed to get out of there as fast as she could. The last thing she wanted was for Jack to follow her and demand an explanation or tell her that he wasn't interested and he didn't want to leave her hanging—though the latter might actually be good for her.

She grimaced, shutting her eyes briefly as she darted down an aisle toward the ice cream. Something cold would feel so good against her face, and she couldn't face Jack after confessing that she was in love with him.

Stupid.

Why did she have to go and say something like that?

Emily couldn't decide whether it was good or bad that he knew where she stood. It could go either way. When she finally spotted Gabe, she grabbed ahold of him and practically dragged him toward the checkout.

"We're leaving."

"How did it go?"

"I have no idea," Emily puffed. "But something tells me he probably thinks I'm even crazier than he ever realized."

"Well, I could have told him that."

She shot him a dark look and he laughed.

"Sorry."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

She loved him?

Emily, with her smile and her laugh. Her confidence and her ability to chase after what she wanted. This woman who had every trait he could only dream of having loved him?

And she was the kind of person he would be lucky to have in his life to help him raise Lily.

Who was he kidding? He didn't want Emily in his life because of Lily. He wanted her in his life because she filled a hole that he'd never thought could be filled.

There was no other way to explain it. He wanted to be selfish. He wanted to have someone to call his own again.

He wanted her.

Jack's eyes scanned the produce section, intent on finding Emily and making her speak to him. He hadn't planned on any of this. The second he'd seen her, he knew he had to do something to smooth over the argument they'd been in, and he knew it wasn't likely she'd do more than have a cordial conversation with him.

His smile widened and he let out a chuckle.

Emily loved him. Even after everything that had happened.

Jack headed in the direction where Emily had escaped but stopped himself. Maybe he needed to give her some space.

It wasn't a bad idea to give himself the same. They both needed to make sure this was what they wanted.

Jack shoved his hands into his pockets and took a step back as if the movement alone was enough to trick his brain into believing that was all he needed to do in this moment. He needed to let the two of them breathe.

But he also needed to think of something he could do for her—to show her that he loved her, too.

Jack's heart burst with that realization. He was in love with Emily, too.

He charged forward, seeking Emily out. He had to do something before she left. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that she'd avoid his phone calls and messages if he tried to contact her that way. What he really needed was another chance to talk face-to-face.

He'd made it to the edge of the produce area when his phone rang.

His stomach bounced and twisted. Had she felt something similar? Was she calling to tell him she wanted to see him?

He pulled out his phone to see his mother's number fill the screen. Heart-wrenching disappointment dragged him from his elated state and he considered not answering. Emily was just within reach and it felt like he finally knew where his life was going to lead. He was done with all the nonsense of fear and uncertainty.

Just like his mother had suggested.

It would never go away entirely, but he was going to push past it. Emily was worth it.

The phone went to voicemail before he could answer it and he'd nearly shoved it into his pocket again when it rang in his hand. He stared down at the screen, his mother's number scrolling across it once more.

A swirl of emotions flooded his entire being. She wouldn't call like this if it wasn't an emergency. Jack swiftly swiped his thumb across the screen and lifted it to his ear. "Mom?"

“Thank goodness you answered. We’re on our way to the hospital.”

His heart stuttered, making his chest feel like it would cave in on itself. “What happened? Is Dad—”

“Dad is fine. It’s Lily.”

Without a second’s hesitation, Jack strode toward the front of the store. “What’s wrong? Is she okay?”

“I think she’s fine. We’re taking her to urgent care. She’s been crying and pulling at her ears for the last hour, and nothing seems to console her. I think she might have an ear infection. Can you—”

“I’ll meet you there.”

The whole way to the hospital, Jack’s thoughts bounced and ricocheted around his skull. Everything would be fine. It had to be. Lily would be seen by her doctor and he’d give her the medication she needed to get better. This wasn’t life-threatening.

Even still, the one person he wished he could be with wasn’t by his side. Emily would know what to say to make him feel better. She’d bring him down to level ground. He didn’t know exactly when it had happened, but Emily had become the person he wanted to confide in—to spend the rest of his life with.

Emily was his person.

Jack itched to call her. To tell her what was going on and beg her to come be with them, if not for himself then for Lily. But the thought was ridiculous. Lily would be fine. Children got ear infections all the time.

The drive was miserable and the second he pulled into the parking lot, he was running toward the entrance of the hospital. Jack’s phone was to his ear before he made it through the doors, and thankfully, his mother answered on the first ring.

“They’ve already taken us back. We’ve let them know you’re on your way.”

Jack hurried to the front desk, his hands landing on the counter as he barked out the words, “I’m Lily’s father. She’s being seen right now.”

“Name and date of birth?”

He tried to push aside his irritation. The woman was just doing her job. He spouted off the information like he’d done a hundred times before and she pulled something up on her screen.

“I’ll take you back.” She got up from her chair and offered him a smile but it did nothing to quell the worry that churned inside him.

By the time they made it to the room, he had managed to calm down enough that he wouldn’t scare Lily. She wasn’t crying when he walked through the door, but she was still pulling at her ears as his mother held her in her arms.

Lily glanced up toward him and immediately shot her arms out so he’d take her.

Jack pulled her close to his chest, breathing in her baby scent. Her soft hair brushed against his cheek and his hold on her tightened instinctively. “Has the doctor seen her?”

Lily flinched and whimpered.

“Not yet. He should be here soon,” his mother whispered.

As if the man had been waiting on the other side of the door for his cue, the door opened and he stepped inside. He gave them all a warm smile as he glanced at his tablet. “What seems to be the problem with Lily today?”

Lily shrank back against Jack’s chest, rubbing her face there and whining.

“We think she might have an ear infection. She keeps pulling at them and she has moments where we can’t console her.” Jennifer glanced toward Jack. “We thought we’d better be safe instead of sorry.”

The doctor put his tablet down on the counter nearby and retrieved a little flashlight-looking device. “Well, let’s take a look at her.” He examined one ear then the next. His brows

creased and he once again checked the first. “That’s odd,” he murmured so quietly only Jack heard him.

Jack stiffened, his concern deepening. “What’s odd?”

“How long has she been acting this way?”

Jack glanced toward his mother.

“It just started this morning,” she answered.

“I’m not seeing anything in her ears that would indicate an infection. But you said she’s pulling at them?”

Both Jack and his mother nodded.

The doctor rubbed his jaw. “I saw in the paperwork she’s seeing a specialist about her hearing.”

“That’s right.” Jack frowned. What would that have to do with anything?

The doctor shifted until he was in a position where Lily wouldn’t be able to see him. He pulled out his phone, and for a brief moment, Jack’s irritation was too much to handle. Then the doctor held up his phone as a children’s song from what must have been a popular television show started playing.

It was small, but Lily reacted. She turned her head to look in his direction but almost immediately her face scrunched with unease, and she touched her ears again.

“I can’t say for certain, but I believe your daughter’s hearing is starting to return. I’d suggest calling her doctor as soon as you can to get her tested.” The doctor turned off his phone. “Lily might be dealing with some discomfort as her body adjusts to the changes occurring right now.”

Jack stared down at his daughter with wonder. The doctor had said it was possible, but he’d also made it clear he didn’t think the odds were all that great.

Jack whispered, “Lily?”

She glanced up at him.

His mother gasped. “Jack, it’s a miracle.”

Shock and wonder. Those were his only reactions. If Lily could get back even a small amount of her hearing permanently, they could fit her with hearing aids. And if she got it back in full, all the better.

He had to tell someone.

Not just anyone. Jack knew exactly who he wanted to tell.

Emily.



IT WAS dark by the time Jack made it out to Emily's apartment complex. The parking lot was full and there wasn't much going on. He was the only sign of life when he got out of his truck. He wasn't sure any of this would work.

If he was lucky, she would hear him out and accept his apology. If he wasn't... Well, he didn't want to think about that. Already too many things had gone in his favor today. Lily was finally making progress, and his heart was allowing him to venture out into the unknown. No longer would he allow himself to be held back by everything that had happened to him a year ago.

Jack pulled down the tailgate of his truck and climbed inside to spread out the blankets and set up his plan. His sister Katrina had walked him through everything on the phone. She'd coached him on what to say and how to go about winning Emily back.

He'd specifically left Bo and Gabrielle out of this whole plan. He didn't need Emily to be tipped off and then not be home when he got here.

Once he was sure everything was how it should be, he paused and looked up at the window he was sure belonged to Emily. The lights were off but there was a flickering glow that indicated someone was watching television.

As long as he wasn't waking her up, he'd be fine.

At least he hoped so. The way she'd run off at the market left a lot of anxiety for him to work through.

But this was it.

This was his moment to shine.

Jack moved toward the window, onto the grass from where he parked. His eyes searched for pebbles that would be small enough that they wouldn't break the window when he launched them into the air.

He found four that were the right size. Clutching them in his fist, he peered up at the window, and suddenly, he lost his nerve. His heart hammered and his gut twisted uncontrollably.

What if she said no?

That didn't matter. He had nothing to lose at this point.

Jack straightened his shoulders and set his focus on that window once more. No more excuses. No more running.

Moving one stone into his right hand, he pulled back and threw the rock at the window.

The small stone bounced off the glass and ricocheted back toward the ground. He watched, waiting for her to appear at the window to see what was going on. But when nothing happened, he tried again.

This stone plinked against the window below Emily's and Jack grimaced. Shoot.

Jack threw the third and prepared to throw the fourth when the second window opened. A man stuck his head out. Jack stumbled back a step and stared at the man.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hit your window."

"Are you seriously throwing rocks up here?" The guy called.

Jack shifted. "I was trying to get someone's attention."

"Have you ever heard of the door? What about a phone?"

He bounced his fist against his leg and looked away. "I thought this would be more romantic."

The guy gave him an incredulous look. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” He ducked back inside and the window slammed shut.

Maybe he had a point. He should just knock on Emily’s door instead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

EMILY CAME OUT OF THE BATHROOM TO FIND HER BROTHER staring out her window.

She tapped on his shoulder and gestured toward the movie. “I thought you wanted to see this show tonight,” she signed.

Gabe gave her the cheesiest grin she’d ever seen. “There’s a guy out there throwing rocks at your window.”

His movements were fast, but she caught every word.

“What? How did you even know?” She glanced toward the window but before she had a chance to investigate, he continued.

“Yeah, looks like he got the wrong window, though, and the guy downstairs scared him off.”

Her stomach bottomed out and the blood drained from her face. There was only one person who might do something like that and she wasn’t prepared to see him just yet.

She edged closer to the window and peered outside, but she didn’t see anyone.

Emily hated how the disappointment wrapped its claws around her throat and closed off her ability to breathe. “Well, he must have gotten the wrong apartment because he’s not there anymore.”

Gabe pushed past her and stuck his head out the window. “I saw the rock hit the window. I’m sure he was trying for yours.”

She tugged on him and signed again. “Let’s just finish our movie so we can get to bed. I’m tired and I actually have some stuff to do tomorrow.”

She moved toward the couch and settled down onto its cushions then grabbed the bowl of popcorn from the coffee table.

Served her right for getting her hopes up. Jack wasn’t ready. She didn’t know if he’d ever be. And worse, she was beginning to realize something that only made her feel sick to her stomach.

Her love ran deep enough that she wasn’t sure if she could handle it when he told her he wasn’t interested. She couldn’t see herself settling for anyone else. She’d already given her heart to him, and it had happened so fast she hadn’t even realized it.

Emily grabbed a fistful of popcorn and shoved it in her mouth. Her brother was still standing at the window, looking out as if the stranger was going to reappear.

When he glanced back at her, she waved him over before signing, “Just come sit down. I’m not going to keep it paused forever.”

“But he was just there,” Gabe signed.

“Clearly it was the wrong apartment. And it most definitely wasn’t Jack. He would never do something like that. He wasn’t ready to start a relationship. It’s fine. It’s not his fault and I’m done dwelling on it.”

Yes, that was a lie, but it was one she would continue telling herself until she made it real.

Gabe shook his head vehemently. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure it was that guy you were talking to at the grocery store earlier today.”

She froze, her mouth full of another handful of popcorn. Her eyes drifted toward her brother. Gabe couldn’t be sure. There was no way he could have seen Jack in the dark; she could barely make anything out when she looked.

Before she could chew and swallow, there was a knock on her door. Emily jumped, the popcorn in her lap flying with the motion. Gabe shot her a strange look until she glanced at the door. Then he followed her focus and his smile widened.

“How much you wanna bet that’s him?”

He moved through the apartment so fast she didn’t have a chance to stop him.

She shot up from her seat, knocking the remainder of the popcorn to the floor just as Gabe opened the door to reveal Jack.

He looked about as startled as she did. His eyes bounced from her to Gabe then back so fast she wouldn’t have been surprised if he had whiplash. Jack rubbed the back of his neck as he returned his attention to Emily.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” she murmured, then awkwardly covered her full mouth so the popcorn wouldn’t spill out. Her eyes widened and she let out an embarrassed laugh. Swallowing quickly, she moved toward him. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m...” Jack looked at Gabe. “I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?”

Gabe laughed and faced Emily. His hands flew in front of him. “He thinks we’re dating, doesn’t he?”

Jack’s eyes widened. “Is this your brother?”

Emily nodded, signing as she said, “This is my brother Gabe. He’s visiting for the next week. We were just watching a movie.”

Gabe shook his head. “No. I was just going to bed. You two were going to spend some time together.” He raised his brows a few times suggestively.

Jack shifted his focus to Emily. “I’m sorry. I only caught about four of those words.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “He said he’s tired and he’s going to bed.”

“That’s it, huh?” Jack’s lips quirked upward.

Gabe waved at him and headed toward the hallway where the bedrooms were located. As Emily watched him go, she couldn’t help but feel like she’d been completely abandoned. Her brother had betrayed her again.

She stayed glued to her spot, watching Jack with shrewd eyes. There was no telling what he might do now that she’d confessed everything. But why would he come here when a message would suffice? She would much rather read something that told her it was over than to have to face him like this.

Emily wiped her hand on her pant leg, her eyes darting away. “I’m sorry, what are you doing here?”

Jack stepped over the threshold, removing his hat before holding it to his chest. He dropped his gaze to the floor. “It’s been so long since I’ve had to have a conversation like this. I’m a little out of practice.”

“Out of practice?”

He didn’t shut the door, but he did stop just inside the apartment. His eyes flitted to meet hers and he offered her a wry smile.

“I haven’t had to apologize to someone I love since...” He swallowed and his Adam’s apple bobbed. “I love you, Emily,” he whispered. “You don’t owe me anything. And I would understand if you didn’t want to speak to me right now, but I was hoping...” He turned his hat in his hands and finally set a firm gaze on her. “Would you come out with me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Come *out* with you? Like on a date?”

Jack chuckled. “I know how it sounds. Just... would you please...” He glanced over his shoulder. “I made you dinner.”

She bit back a smile. “It’s almost nine o’clock.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I probably should have planned this for another night, but I couldn’t wait.” He reached out a hand. “Please?”

She stared at his hand and took a step forward. What did she have to lose?



“DON’T OPEN YOUR EYES.”

She pressed her lips together, but it did nothing to hide the smile she felt spreading across her lips. “I’m not.”

“Seriously. I want you to get the full picture.” Jack’s hand tightened around hers and the warmth of his touch sent shivers of pleasure through her arm and into the rest of her body. It was like the last few days melted away, leaving her with just a sense of pure joy.

Emily let out a laugh.

“You’re looking!” he accused.

“I’m not!” She laughed again.

“Then why are you laughing?”

“I don’t know.”

Jack stopped. He squeezed her hand again. The breeze ruffled her hair and the scent of the evening air wrapped around her, making her feel like she could do anything. She wanted this moment to last. She wanted to fight for something like this and keep it forever.

“You can open your eyes,” he whispered.

Emily had to blink a few times to focus. They stood in front of his truck, whose tailgate had been lowered. In the bed of the truck were two plates covered by bowls. Emily glanced up at Jack. “You think you’re pretty smooth, don’t you?”

He gave her a crooked grin. “I’ve picked up a few things over the years.”

“Yeah, I guess you have.” She faced him, tilting her head. “So what was the plan, then? Get me out here, sweep me off my feet, and then what?”

Jack lifted a shoulder as he glanced away. “I don’t know. I guess I figured I’d see how far I got and then wing it.”

Emily studied him, and for the first time in a while, it didn’t feel like he was hiding from her. She could believe him when he told her he loved her. Emily’s stomach flipped over.

“Did you really mean what you said?”

“When I said what?”

Her lashes fluttered momentarily and she drew on the last drop of confidence she could find. “When you said you loved me.”

Jack reached for her other hand so he held both of them in his. He rested her palms against his chest and, without a degree of wavering, murmured, “I love you more than I could have ever thought possible. I was so scared of losing myself and what I had with Zoe that I let myself get in the way of my own happiness. I didn’t want to fall in love only to lose you.”

He swallowed hard and his hold on her tightened further.

“What I realized is that you are worth more than every fear I have. If I can have you in my life for even a few months, it would be worth it.”

Her breath hitched in her chest. That was all she wanted—someone to just want her and no one else. She gnawed on the inside of her cheek. “You said something like that before... Are you sure you’re ready?”

“No.”

She blinked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready in the way I thought I needed to be. But I do love you, and I’m willing to risk everything to share my life with you.” He moved both of her hands into one of his and grasped her chin with his free one. He tilted her face upward and lowered his voice. “I will do whatever it takes to win you back.”

“I don’t think you ever really lost me,” she whispered.

With that final word, Jack dipped his face closer to hers and captured her mouth with his. He slipped an arm around her

waist, pressing her whole body against his. In that moment, the world fell away. She didn't know where this would all end up, but if they could overcome this hurdle, then they could overcome anything.

Jack was the first to break their kiss. Their heavy breaths mingled in the air between them. He grinned. "I wanted to tell you something."

"Yeah?"

Jack nodded. "Lily had to go to the doctor today."

"I hope it was just a routine visit."

He shook his head slowly. "But it turned out better than I expected. She's getting some of her hearing back."

Emily gasped. "You're kidding."

"I'm not. Looks like she could be a good candidate for hearing aids if this continues."

"That's wonderful!"

Jack turned her back to the truck and, as if she weighed nothing at all, lifted her to sit on the edge of the tailgate. "It is. But I hope you'll still work with her."

Emily placed her hands on his shoulders. "I'd love to." She glanced over her shoulder toward the plates. "So, what did you fix us?"

Jack made a face. "You probably won't like it."

Another laugh bubbled up from her chest. "Then why did you make it?"

Without explanation, he leaned over and grabbed one of the bowls to reveal the spaghetti that he'd made. The look on his face was one that made him look more like a child who hoped to impress her.

"It's probably not as good as yours. But I figured I owed you a spaghetti dinner."

She didn't know what to say. The amusement fled from her in its entirety. Out of everyone she'd ever dated, no one had ever

bothered to do something so... sweet. It was one thing to make her dinner, it was something else to make her a meal she'd tried to share with him before.

Emily bit back the emotion that threatened to escape. She returned her gaze to Jack, her eyes teary. "It's perfect. I love you so much."

"You sure?"

She framed his face with both of her hands and lowered her lips to brush against his. "Absolutely. What could be more perfect than spaghetti with a cowboy?"

EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Jack should have been watching his brother kiss Gabrielle like it was the last one he'd ever get, but all Jack could do was stare at Emily. She stood beside the bride with Lily on her hip. His daughter had escaped from his mother and made a beeline for Emily rather than anyone else.

Right there in front of him were the two most important people in his life. Emily was perfect with Lily and it wasn't because she was good with children or because she had helped them through a rocky time.

No, Emily was perfect because that was just who she was. She had a smile that could light up a room. Her eyes sparkled whenever she laughed. Just being in the same room with her could change his mood from grumpy to happy, and all it took was a quick look or a brief touch of her hand.

Her eyes drifted to meet his and she smiled. His insides exploded with pride, joy, and love. After losing Zoe, he wasn't sure he would ever find the kind of happiness he'd once had. But he'd been wrong.

So wrong.

The love and joy he found with Emily wasn't the same as the love he had for Zoe, but that was okay. They were different women and he was a different man.

Cheers erupted in the chapel as Bo and Gabrielle lifted their intertwined hands and ran down the aisle toward the exit. The chapel filled with joyful music as the guests followed the newlyweds through the door and out into the cool, fall air. The reception would be at the ranch, and the caterers were already there getting everything ready before the guests arrived.

Crisp orange, yellow, and red leaves danced in the autumn breeze as Jack and Emily stepped outside. Emily still held Lily, and he slipped an arm around Emily's waist to pull them closer to him.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder and let out a sigh. "I'm so happy for them."

"Yeah, me too," he mumbled. His eyes followed his brother as he stepped into the waiting limo that would take them to the ranch. "They look very happy together."

"Yeah, they do." Emily didn't speak for a few moments. She glanced up at him. "What was your wedding like? Was it as big as this one?"

He frowned, glancing down at Emily, unsure if he should discuss something like this. They were comfortable with each other—more so than he had hoped for—but he still felt strange about discussing his life with Zoe. It couldn't be easy being in her position. He knew he wouldn't be able to handle it—but then again, he wasn't as strong as Emily was.

"Are you sure you want to talk about that?"

She chuckled. "Jack, I know you have a past. It's not a secret. I want to know as much as I can about you—everything you're willing to share."

Still, Jack hesitated, but he finally gave in. The trust they shared would get them through anything. "It was a lot like this one. We got married in a church with family and friends. The reception was at a community center, though."

"Mmm. That sounds nice. But I think I would change some things."

"What things?"

“I’d get married at the ranch. The pastor could marry you just as easily out on the property as he could here.”

“True,” he murmured thoughtfully.

“And I’ve always been a fan of smaller weddings. They just seem so much more intimate—like a party.”

All this talk about weddings was enough to cause his thoughts to shift toward the future he would like to see with Emily—one where she remained by his side.

She gave him a funny look. “What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

A crooked smile touched her lips and she held Lily out to him. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. Whatever it is you’re planning, you know you’re going to spill the beans, right? That’s how it goes with the two of us.”

Jack shifted Lily to his other hip, his eyes sweeping over Emily in the pretty yellow dress she wore. His daughter leaned forward, her small hands grasping at Emily as if she could will the woman to take her back.

Emily chuckled. “I’m going to get the car. You stay here with Daddy.”

He watched her head down the steps and turn on the sidewalk in the direction where he’d parked. “I’m going to ask her to marry me, Lily. She’s going to be ours forever.”

“Mommy,” Lily offered.

“She’s going to be one of your mommies. You’re going to have two.”

“Mommy,” Lily repeated.

He chuckled as he headed down the steps. “Yeah. Mommy.”

“Andrew Reese, you get back here this instant!” a voice screeched right before Andrew nearly collided with Jack. Both of them miraculously darted in opposite directions as Andrew

continued to make his escape. His laughter could be heard even as he disappeared around the side of the church.

Shortly after, Julia sprinted past him. Her dress had a large wet spot and her hair hung limp and damp around her shoulders. Cheeks flushed crimson and hands balled into fists, she didn't look like the kind of woman anyone would want to cross.

"I mean it, Andrew! We're at a freaking church! And your brother's wedding!"

"Who's that?"

Jack jumped, finding Emily beside him, staring after Julia.

"And why is she chasing Andrew?"

"*That* is Luke's sister."

"And Luke is?" Emily smirked, her hand on her hip. "Honestly, sometimes I feel like you think I grew up here. I have no idea who any of those people are."

"Luke is Andrew's best friend. And Julia is his younger sister. They grew up on a ranch about ten miles from ours."

More commotion drew Jack's attention when Andrew leaped over a bench as he continued to make his escape from Julia.

"Mom! Unlock the truck," he hollered.

Both Jack and Emily shifted their focus to Jennifer, who crossed her arms. "You're going to get everything you deserve. You know better than to play these games on your brother's special day."

"Mom," he pleaded, "Bo's gone. He doesn't care."

Jack's eyes followed Andrew as he continued running and darting away from Julia and her contrived wrath. The two of them had never really gotten along, but at the same time, he couldn't think of a single time when one wasn't doing something to mess with the other.

"Come on, Mom! Bo wouldn't want anything to happen to me before I take pictures. You have to help me."

That was it—the nail had been hammered into the coffin. And Andrew knew it. Their mother’s shoulders slumped ever so slightly and she heaved a sigh.

“I’m sorry, Julia,” she called. “You’re going to have to get him back another time. We can’t have him doused with water before we take pictures.”

With that, she unlocked the truck and Andrew barely made it inside before Julia threw a water balloon at the vehicle.

The red latex burst, spraying water everywhere. Julia crossed her arms, her wicked gaze almost enough to burn a hole through the protective barrier of the vehicle where Andrew sat. He made a face at her, and she let out a growl as she spun on her heel and stormed away.

“See? There’s no way those two would ever get together.” Jack chuckled. “They’re like oil and water.”

“More like oil and vinegar.”

Jack headed down the sidewalk with Emily at his side. “You know, I’ve been thinking.”

“Yeah? About what?”

His heart and head thrummed with the anticipation of what he was about to do next. “Lots of things, really.”

She laughed. “Boy, you’ve been cryptic lately. What’s gotten into you?”

“Maybe I’m just in love.”

Emily’s clear green eyes danced with amusement. “From what I hear, you’re pretty lucky that the girl loves you back.”

“I am,” he agreed. “She’s the most amazing, talented, beautiful woman in town, and she’s all mine.” He watched her, waiting for a reaction he knew would come.

“Yeah? From what I heard, that’s not true. Not yet, anyway.”

“Then let’s make it true.”

The lightheartedness in the air dissolved, growing thick with expectation. Emily didn’t look at him right away. She kept her

gaze trained ahead and it took everything in his power not to pull her to a stop and make sure she understood where he was going with his statement.

When she did finally glance in his direction, he drew on the last morsel of courage he had left.

“What do you say?” Jack reached into his suit coat pocket and pulled out a small box. Holding it on his palm, he stretched out his hand. “Would you make us the happiest people alive and agree to be ours?” He adjusted his hold of Lily. “We want—I want us to be a family. Forever.”

She covered her mouth with a trembling hand and her eyes darted to the ring box. “Jack...”

“I love you so much—”

Emily threw her arms around his neck, successfully cutting him off from continuing his speech. Lily let out a shrill laugh and Emily joined in.

“Of course, I’ll marry you. I thought you’d never ask.”

Jack’s heart soared higher and raced faster than any animal on the planet could. He wrapped both his daughter and his fiancée in a firm, unyielding hug. The hold he had on them was tight and promised a future with the three of them together. He didn’t know what that might look like, but he didn’t have to. As long as he had Emily by his side, he was willing to live his life to the utmost.

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