

A man wearing a white cowboy hat and a green and blue plaid shirt is shown from the chest up. He is shirtless, revealing his muscular torso. He is holding a large, weathered wooden log horizontally across his waist with both hands. The background is a bright, clear sky with a hint of a horizon line, suggesting an outdoor setting like a field or ranch.

WILD RIDE

A HOT COWBOY
ROMANCE COLLECTION

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wild ride

A Limited edition collection of hot cowboy romance

Including Stories from:

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Beth Williamson - NYT and USA Today bestselling author

Stephanie Morris - USA Today bestselling author

Megyn Ward - USA Today bestselling author

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Rhonda Lee Carver

Euryia Larsen

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Dedication

To the readers who can't get enough cowboy hats, boots, spurs and the men that wear them. Keep inspiring us to create these stories with your unwavering support.

Thank you.

Blurb

Are you ready for a wild ride?

Hold on tight as some of today's bestselling western romance authors bring you stories of love, loss, torment, second chances, enemies-to-lovers, forbidden affairs, and happily-ever-afters fill the pages of this steamy small-town cowboy romance anthology.

Do you like your cowboys Wild, Rough and Tough, Rich, Hardworking, or Kindhearted?

Maybe all of the above.

Look no further because these stories are sure to keep you riding the edge of your seat...and falling in love.

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Rhonda Lee Carver

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Dove Daniels

Vic Leigh

Peggy McKenzie

Special Note from the Authors

Wild Ride is a labor of love that has been over a year in the making. We thank you for purchasing your copy and hope that you enjoy reading this anthology. Please be forewarned some of these stories contain violence, graphic language, flashbacks of abuse and other subject matter. The good news is we promise that each story has a happy-ever-after.

Happy Reading!

Her Re-Ride Cowboy
Harland County/HC Heroes Series
Crossover
Donna Michaels

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Her Re-Ride Cowboy

He's counting on a re-ride to win her heart for good...

After years of schooling and residency, Dr. Olivia Harrison has finally achieved her goal of helping people see better. But when she spots her childhood sweetheart back in Harland County—the guy who'd left her to join the rodeo circuit thirteen years ago—she realizes there's no prescription to cure her attraction to the sexy cowboy.

Former rodeo legend, Josh Masters returns home with two goals in mind; One, to learn the bull trade from his buddy so he could start his own business. Two, win back the only woman he ever loved. One is a lot easier than two. Not a problem, because he doesn't give up and he always wins.

But he's going to need more than a re-ride...he's going to need a little help from the county's secret matchmakers.

Prologue

“How do y’all feel about dusting off our matchmaking hats again?” Hannah Masters asked while she and her husband, Nate, sat to have coffee with their friends, Leeann and Alex McCall, in the McCall’s large kitchen.

Their longtime cook, Emma, immediately showed up to set a plate full of fresh blueberry muffins on the table and pour everyone a hot cup of coffee.

“Oh, Emma, you know these are my favorite. No one makes them better than you,” she said, reaching for a still warm muffin that already had her mouth watering. “Thank you.”

The others echoed the sentiment.

A pretty blush filled the older woman’s face. “You’re more than welcome.”

In her early seventies with no intention of retiring, Emma was as much a staple on the ranch as the McCalls. The place would not be the same without her. And not just because of her amazing cooking, but because of her kind heart and all the extra help and guidance she’d provided to Hannah’s girls and Leeann’s boys, and not just while they were growing up. Nope, she’d helped with a few of the *pushes* when needed, too.

Emma was an integral part of their very successful matchmaking team.

After having matched their two children to each other as well as helping a handful of their children’s friends pair up with their significant others, their team batted a thousand with their many matchmaking efforts.

Hannah hoped they could add one more to their list of accomplishments.

“Let me guess.” Leeann tilted her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. “You want help with your nephew, Josh, and Olivia.”

“Yes.” Hannah smiled, although her heart ached for the guy.

Josh had lost his mother when he was ten, then his father a few weeks after he’d graduated high school. She suspected that was what had led him to leave Harland County behind along with his college plans and his childhood girlfriend and join the rodeo circuit at eighteen.

“Those two did seem perfect together. I actually thought he and Olivia were going to get married after she finished college,” Leeann said after sipping her coffee.

“Or even sooner when my brother passed away,” Nate said with a sad shake of his head. “I don’t think any of us expected him to sell the house he’d inherited and join one of the rodeo associations and then hit the circuit.”

Leeann sighed. “Especially poor Olivia.”

“I think much of his decision stemmed from making his father proud and doing what he thought his father had wanted him to do,” Hannah said. “Rick definitely made it no secret how proud he was of Josh and his prowess on a bull.”

Nate nodded. “Yeah, my brother never missed any of Josh’s competitions, and always said his son was going to be a household name where bull riding was concerned.”

“And he was right,” Alex said. “That boy came on the scene just after Connor left, and we could all tell—especially Connor—that Josh was a natural and had something special. That’s why my son sponsored him.”

Hannah added cream to her coffee and stirred it while the others spoke. Her nephew was a good man. He’d lost so much. It was time for him to enjoy happiness and contentment.

“There’s no doubt Josh made a name for himself and had a successful career, but I agree with Hannah,” Leeann stated, reaching for the cream she’d returned to the table. “He’s back in town, ready to settle down, and I’ve seen the way he looks at Olivia whenever he catches a glimpse of the woman.”

“My wife is right,” Alex said. “But from what I’ve heard, she keeps avoiding him.”

“Yeah.” Hannah nodded. “She put on a brave face, went off to boot camp for the National Guard, then right into college. She’s a strong woman. A good woman. Izabelle and Urban raised her well. But we all know Olivia was hurt. I think Josh is going to need a little help in the proximity department where those two are concerned.”

She and Leeann had gone to school with Izabelle, and they currently served on a few committees together. Their friend’s three daughters were smart, beautiful, and grounded like their mother.

Alex sipped his coffee before setting his cup down. “True. It does make it hard for him to apologize or grovel with his tail between his legs when she runs out the door as soon as he enters a room.”

Nate nodded. “We need to create situations where they’re forced to remain in the same space together.”

“Exactly.” She set a hand on her husband’s arm and squeezed.

“Any ideas?” he asked.

Alex raised a brow. “This might not be as simple as it seems, considering Josh is currently working for Connor here on the ranch, learning the ropes of raising bulls, and Olivia is an ophthalmologist.”

“And a good one at that,” Emma chimed in as she rolled out dough on the kitchen island. “She’s given my niece, Loni, a precious gift of time, helping to slow down the progression of her disease.”

Hannah’s chest squeezed. There was no cure, but giving the young woman more time to enjoy her sight before her vision completely disappeared was indeed a precious gift.

“Yes, that’s wonderful.” Leeann broke apart a muffin while blinking her overbright gaze. “Olivia deserves to be happy, and since she’s single, I don’t see any harm in giving her a little push in Josh’s direction.”

“Uh oh. My wife’s got that look in her eyes,” Alex said, a smile spreading across his face. “What’s going on in that

pretty little head of yours, sweetheart?”

Hope had Hannah leaning closer. “You have an idea already, don’t you?”

Her friend nodded. “I may have thought of a way to get Olivia to visit the ranch a couple of times, hopefully over the next few weeks.”

“Considering she’s an eye doctor, it can’t be work related,” Nate said, and Alex nodded.

Usually on the same wavelength as her friend, Hannah sat back in her chair and smiled. “You’re going to call her sister, aren’t you?”

“Yes, later today, and Izabelle too, when they get out of work,” Leeann replied with a smile on her face. “I think it’s time Wild Creek hosted another wedding.”

Hannah suspected Olivia was going to need more than a few run-ins with her nephew to open up and work through the pain of the past, but at least this was a start.

Chapter 1

Re-ride: a second attempt given to a rider if their first attempt in a rough stock event, such as bull riding or bronc riding, was not successful or fair.

Olivia was having one of those days—strike that—one of those *weeks* where nothing was going right. Thankfully, none of it was work-related. She enjoyed her career in ophthalmology and loved helping people keep or regain as much of their vision as possible.

No, Dr. Olivia Harrison had no issues, but Olivia Harrison, eldest daughter of Urban and Izabelle Harrison and sister to Emily and Amanda, was another story.

It never ceased to amaze her how her mother always managed to contact her when she was either on break or without a patient. That morning, her mother had called to tell her she'd run into Olivia's ex at the local bakery, and they'd had a lovely catch up over a quick breakfast of cinnamon buns and coffee.

Her stomach had knotted then, and it repeated the process again now.

He asked about you...

Her mother's words resounded in her head, and that knot in her stomach tightened.

Thankfully, her mom hadn't offered to give the guy her phone number. Frankly, she was kind of shocked that hadn't happened. Shocked but grateful, which she'd told her mother.

“Oh, I wouldn't do that, hon. I know better. But I did find out Josh is staying at the McCall's ranch...or was it the Dalton's? I don't know. I can't remember,” her mother had said dismissively. “Either way, maybe you should look him up. You two used to be so cute together. I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on.”

Thirteen years had passed since they parted ways to follow their dreams. At least, that's what everyone thought. In

actuality, he'd left her to join the rodeo. And it had taken more than half of that time for the deep laceration on her heart to start healing. Currently, it was crusted over with a nice, thick scab, and she had no intention of picking that sucker off.

Over the past six months, between her mother, father, and her sisters constantly mentioning her ex, she was fed up with the subject and with voicing her lack of interest in a reunion. For some reason, her family seemed to think her happiness was tied to the guy.

With a sigh, she unlocked her car and got in, setting her purse on the empty passenger seat before removing her keys to start the engine.

Ever since her sisters had moved back to Harland County, fell in love, and got engaged this year, they'd taken turns trying to help her find a mate.

It was unwanted and unnecessary.

What she needed was to find a way to make them *see* that she was happy with her personal life and didn't need to change a dang thing. Unfortunately, telling them that didn't work, since she had—many times—over the past several months.

Her life was just fine.

She had a wonderful, well-meaning, sometimes pushy family, a great townhouse close to work, and a super sweet cat.

She also had her work.

Olivia had known at the tender age of eleven that she wanted to be an eye doctor...thanks to her baby sister, Emily. The precocious seven-year-old had insisted on climbing a large, old tree to rescue a kitten. In order to keep her sister safe, Olivia had scaled it instead, and as soon as she grabbed the kitten, the rotted branch beneath them broke. She'd managed to keep a hold of the kitten until she hit the ground. It scurried to Emily, safe and sound.

Olivia hadn't fared so well.

Her left eye had been injured when she landed on a pile of branches and sticks. The piercing and burning... God, the pain

had been unbearable, but the fear was the worst. She'd been so scared, imagining the doctor removing her eye, the kids at school gossiped about by her, or calling her a pirate because she'd have to wear a patch.

It'd been a nightmare until they'd called an eye specialist to the ER.

Dr. Kramer's calm and reassuring demeanor had enveloped her, and the way he'd taken control of the situation, control of her emotions, had been amazing. Once he'd finished treating her, including necessary surgery, he'd restored most of her eyesight. Sure, she'd had to wear glasses, but it had been so much better than the eye patch she'd imagined.

The kind man had changed her life.

By the time she left her final check-up with him, Olivia had known she'd wanted to help people with their vision and possibly change their lives, too. And many years later, after eight years of schooling and a year for deployment when she'd been in college, she considered herself blessed to do her thirty-six-month residency here in Harland County under Dr. Kramer. Afterward, she'd had the honor of working for the man at his practice, and just recently, she'd taken it over when he'd retired.

It was ironic how she was running the very practice that had saved her eye all those years ago. She truly felt blessed.

The ringing of her phone startled her as it blared through her radio. She used Bluetooth in her car in case a patient or another physician called so she could talk while driving. A quick glance at the screen told her it was Emily.

She hit the button on the panel to accept the call. "Hi, I'm on my way."

"Okay. I'm here. Amanda's going to be late, but she told me what to order for her," Emily said, her voice coming in loud and clear through the speakers. "I'll go in and grab a booth."

"Sounds good. See you shortly," she said before disconnecting.

It was nice that all three of them were back in their hometown, pursuing their careers. This also meant they could hold monthly get-together dinners. Olivia enjoyed hanging out with her sisters, except when they donned their matchmaking hats.

Sighing, she drove the five minutes it took to travel from work to Annie's Diner. Her office was in the medical arts building attached to the hospital, the location perfect. It was also close to several great food options in town.

It made life easier, and she was all about that.

Olivia pulled into the parking lot, pleased to find a spot next to Emily's vehicle. With luck, tonight would be about sharing good food and a good time with her sisters, and her siblings would finally take her request to "cut it out" to heart.

Snorting, she put the car in park and cut the engine. Olivia wasn't going to hold her breath. But considering her sisters hadn't spoken *his* name to her in the past four weeks, plus the fact Emily had suggested they eat at the dinner instead of the Texas Republic—or Tex Pub—as the locals called the popular restaurant, a restaurant Josh frequented, gave her hope.

Not allowing her mind to go any further, she squared her shoulders and entered the diner, walking up the two steps to where it leveled out. It took no time to spot her sister, since she was waving at her from a booth along the back wall in the bump-out section of the dining room, her head of brown curls bouncing with the movement.

Olivia weaved around tables on her approach.

"Amanda just texted," Emily said. "She's on her way.

"Perfect," she replied, sitting across from her sister.

A second later, the server appeared and took their orders, including Amanda's via Emily. Olivia hadn't needed to look at the menu. She went with her old chicken Caesar salad standby. After the server returned with their drinks, they talked about the latest edition to Emily's animal sanctuary—an eleven-year-old beagle with arthritis and glaucoma.

Emily's passion for rescuing animals rivaled Olivia's passion for helping people with vision problems. Her sister was a fantastic Animal Control officer and wonderful caretaker of the animals in her sanctuary. The ones left behind.

Boy, could she relate.

To dispel those thoughts, she pulled her water closer and grabbed a straw. "I take it you have to give him a regimen of drops." They would have to be administered daily without fail.

Glaucoma was a fault in the eye's drainage system which caused fluid to back up and put pressure on the eye. Over time, the pressure could heighten and ultimately erode the optic nerve tissue, resulting in vision loss. Humans and animals were susceptible.

"Yes, but I know eventually, it probably won't be enough." Her sister sighed. "I already discussed it with my vet. She'll remove each eye when the pain becomes too much."

She nodded, glad Emily wasn't just stubborn, she was a realist, too.

Olivia's heart squeezed for the poor dog, having nearly faced that scenario. "What's his name?"

"Waldo." The dark shadows disappeared from Emily's gaze as she grinned.

A smile tugged at Olivia's lips. "Regardless of Waldo's prognosis, he is in the perfect place with the perfect pet parents, and the outlook for the rest of his life is great."

There was no way her sister wasn't already spoiling the dog.

Emily sat back, her grin widening. "Thanks. Yeah, we love him. Yesterday, he crawled onto my lap on the couch and slept for over three hours. I couldn't move afterward. My legs were too stiff and tingling. Holden had to help me up."

"The couch?" She lifted a brow. "So, you aren't going to keep him in the kennel area?"

The sanctuary had an amazing building with tricked-out kennels for the dogs no one wanted. They were living the good

life, now.

Her baby sister shook her head of curls. “No. He’ll live out his days in the house with us.”

Yep. Spoiled.

Good.

“How are your other dogs taking it?” Olivia knew there were three others in the house.

“Surprisingly, well,” Emily replied. “It’s as if he’d been living with us forever.”

“You have a sweet dog family, Emily,” Amanda said, apparently having heard the tail end of their conversation as she approached. A warm smile creased her lips, in fact, she was practically beaming as she slid into the booth next to Olivia. “It’s nice to see you so happy.”

She couldn’t agree more.

Warmth entered Emily’s eyes, too. “Thanks. Holden, the dogs, the sanctuary, my job...they do make me happy.”

Olivia set her drink down after taking another sip. “You have a sweet family too, Amanda. I’ve never seen *you* so happy or content. It looks good on you.”

A blush filled her sister’s cheeks. “Thanks. Dante’s amazing, and so is Noah. I’m just so blessed. I can hardly believe they want me in their lives.”

“Hey, they’re lucky to have you, Sis.” Emily tipped her chin. “It goes both ways. Now, we just need to get Olivia up to our level of happiness.”

Their attention shifted to her.

Here we go again.

She quirked a brow. “I am happy. Our family is expanding. Not only am I gaining two great brothers-in-law, but I’m also gaining an adorable, almost three-year-old nephew too.”

Her heart swelled every time Noah called her Aunt Olivia.

Thankfully, their food arrived and surprisingly, her sisters didn't push their happiness on her further. As they ate in comfortable silence, she dissected the "our level of happiness" remark.

There was nothing wrong with her life. She was content. Work, family, her cat, Gatsby...her life was full. She lacked for nothing. She was happy and content.

Life had been rolling along smoothly, until recently.

Until *he* returned to Harland County. All this concern from her sisters had started the day Josh Masters had shown up in town.

Pushing aside thoughts of the man who put the *dis* in the disquiet that rippled through her whenever he was near, she concentrated on finishing her meal, adding to the conversation when needed.

A half hour later, the server returned to take their empty plates and their dessert orders. One didn't eat at Annie's without ordering a slice of the owner's award-winning pies. They each chose a different flavor.

"Okay, now that our meal is over, I've got some news to share," Amanda said, joy bright in her eyes.

Emily stilled. "Oh my God, are you pregnant?"

Amanda blinked then shook her head. "No. Dante and I set our date."

"That's wonderful! Congratulations!" Olivia set her hand on her sister's arm and squeezed before releasing her.

"Yes, congratulations," Emily echoed. "You guys are quick. Holden and I haven't even thought about a date yet. We're still narrowing down a month in the spring. When is your wedding?"

Amanda's smile broadened, and she shifted in her seat as if she could barely contain her excitement. "The first Saturday in November."

Shock rippled through Olivia and stilled the forkful of apple pie halfway to her mouth. "This November?"

“Yes,” her sister replied before digging into her blueberry pie.

Emily blinked. “The November that’s less than six weeks from now?”

Amanda nodded as she swallowed.

“Does Mom know?” Emily asked, using her fork to slice through her strawberry rhubarb pie. “I mean, she’s going to freak, trying to make plans, take you for your gown, do invitations, and—”

“That’s just it,” Amanda interrupted, her grin returning. “She doesn’t have to worry about all that. Well, except for the gown, but I don’t want anything fancy anyway.”

Olivia leaned closer. “What do you mean, she doesn’t have to worry about all that?”

“It’s crazy, but Mrs. McCall invited Dante, Noah, Mom, and me over after school ended today and offered to throw our wedding for us...and a bridal shower. The food. The flowers. The setting it up, and they’re going to take care of everything.”

Holy crap.

“Wow.” Olivia’s brows rose.

Emily set her fork down and narrowed her gaze. “Who is the ‘they’re’ that’s going to take care of everything?”

“Mrs. McCall and Mrs. Masters,” her sister replied. “Apparently, it’s been a while since Wild Creek hosted a wedding, and they miss the hustle and bustle. They’re excited to do this for Mom and Dad, and for me, Dante, and Noah, of course.”

Huh.

Somehow, Olivia wasn’t surprised. The McCalls and Masters were big patriarchs and matriarchs of the county. The women were also childhood friends of her mother. The three of them had chaired several boards and charities together over many years.

“That’s amazing, Amanda,” she said. “But if it’s too soon, don’t feel like you need to do this.”

“Yeah,” Emily agreed. “That’s really amazing, but you don’t need to say yes.”

“Oh, they weren’t pushing the date.” Amanda smiled. “In fact, they said it didn’t have to be this year at all. But Dante and I talked it over privately while there and, well, we wanted it to be this year.”

“Pretty sure it was Mac and Stef’s wedding that was held there a few years ago,” Emily said. “And Loni and Lori did the cake. I saw pictures. It was incredible.”

Mac was the McCall’s nephew, and Loni and Lori Champion were Emma, their cook’s nieces. The sisters owned the local bakery. Loni was also one of Olivia’s patients that she’d inherited from Dr. Kramer.

Olivia nodded. “It was. Loni brought some photos in during one of her appointments.”

“They’re going to do mine too.” Amanda wiggled in her seat. “Dante and I have an appointment with them next week.”

“Wow.” Emily snickered scooping more pie onto her fork. “Things are moving fast. I’m surprised you didn’t have your wedding next month.”

She thought the same thing, but remained quiet and finished her pie instead.

Amanda shook her head. “No. Noah turns three in October. We wanted him to have that month to himself.

Of course, she would. Her sister took thoughtfulness to the extreme. The woman was amazing, and truly deserved this gift the McCalls and Masters bestowed on her and her soon-to-be family.

“You are a good mother,” she said, and watched tears spring to the softie’s eyes.

Amanda sniffed. “Thanks. I just want Noah to be happy, you know?”

“Honey, he is happy,” Emily said. “His smile beams when you’re around.”

Olivia nodded. “It’s true.”

“Well, I’m the lucky one.” Amanda patted the wetness from her face with a napkin. “That’s why Dante and I chose November. He was happy to do whatever I wanted, and the sooner the better.” She grinned. “Not because we need to, but because we want to get married as soon as possible. If it wasn’t for this offer, we definitely wouldn’t be getting married until late next year. There’s so much that goes into planning a wedding, and with me just starting this job and wanting to spend as much time with Noah as possible, there’s no way I could fit it all in. Heck, even with Mrs. McCall and Mrs. Master’s help, there’s still going to be a lot to do.”

“We’re here for you,” she said, willing to pitch in wherever she could.

Emily nodded with a mouthful of strawberry rhubarb pie. “Yeah.”

“Thanks. Because Mom wants to make an appointment to go dress shopping ASAP.” Amanda wrinkled her nose. “Sorry, but I did tell her we needed to coordinate with you guys, and Christa. I’d like to have her in my wedding along with you two.”

Christa was the mother of Noah’s best friend. They’d been instrumental in helping the little guy transition into his new home, school, and town.

“I think that’s great.” Olivia slid her arm around her sister and pulled her in for a quick hug. “And I’d be honored.”

“Thanks.” Amanda sniffed.

“Me, too.” Emily reached across the table to squeeze Amanda’s hand as soon as Olivia released her.

“Thanks.” She sniffed again. “I’m still not sure which of you I want to be my maid of honor. It’s really tough to decide.”

For the first time since her sister arrived, Olivia noticed her beautiful green gaze cloud over.

“Hey, this is supposed to be a happy time,” she said. “Don’t stress. It’s okay. Just pick. We won’t be offended.”

“Exactly.” Emily dug in her pocket then set a quarter on the table. “Why don’t you flip a coin?”

Amanda’s eyes widened. “You guys would be okay with that?”

“Of course.”

“Hell, yeah. That’s what I plan to do, although I have to include Lyndsey in the mix, too.” Emily sighed. “Might have to have the three of you draw straws.”

They laughed.

Lyndsey was her sister’s best friend, so she wasn’t surprised nor at all upset with the addition.

“But we’ll worry about that next year,” Emily said. “Right now, let’s concentrate on Amanda’s wedding.”

“I agree.” She smiled. “And I think I may have a solution to your dilemma, Amanda.”

“Oh?” Her sister turned to her and blinked. “You do?”

Olivia nodded. “Do you know who Dante wants for his best man?”

“Yeah. Holden, of course,” Amanda replied.

She knew the two men had been tight when they were in Delta Force, so it hadn’t been difficult to come to that conclusion.

“Then you should absolutely have Emily as your maid of honor,” she said.

Her sister frowned. “Are you sure, Olivia? Because I don’t think Holden would mind standing up with you if you won the coin toss.”

“He wouldn’t mind,” Emily agreed.

“But I would,” she said firmly. “You know how I like things nice and neat. Why split up the next bride and groom-to-be?”

“You’ve got a point.” Amanda nodded. “That keeps things even.”

She nodded back. “Exactly. So now that that’s settled, what else can we help you with?”

“Can you both come to Wild Creek this Sunday for brunch to discuss plans?” Amanda replied. “I know it’s short notice, but Mom wants to get a jump on the things that we need to do as well as coordinate with Mrs. McCall and Mrs. Masters.”

The only plans she had for Sunday were to match her Tupperware containers with their lids and toss the unmatched pieces, then rearrange her sock drawer with the new organizer she’d bought online.

God, she was boring.

“I’m free this Sunday,” Emily said. “And even if I wasn’t, I’m not about to miss out on Kerri and Emma’s cooking.”

She agreed.

Emma’s meals were legendary while they were growing up, having had the pleasure of enjoying a few parties at Wild Creek. And Kerri was such an amazing cook now because Emma had been her mentor.

“Count me in too,” she replied.

Amanda smiled. “Thank you. And make sure you bring a bathing suit. Apparently, there’s swimming after brunch, and Noah is excited about it.”

“Will do.” Emily grinned.

Olivia kept quiet. She didn’t exactly own a suit. It’d been years since she’d gone swimming, and she would be content just to sit and watch everyone have fun.

“Okay,” Amanda said, pushing back her empty pie plate. “I hate to eat, lay all that on you, then run, but I’d like to get

home in time to give Noah a bath and read to him before bedtime.”

“Of course,” she said, giving her a slight shove out of the booth when her sister went to reach for the bill their server had left on the table. “Don’t worry about that. You go.”

“Yeah, we’ve got this.” Emily snatched the bill as she rose to her feet, then pulled Amanda in for a hug. “Go enjoy your night.”

Amanda drew back, smiling. “I’ll see you both around eleven on Sunday. Oh, and Holden’s invited too,” she told Emily, before rushing toward the exit.

“I should probably give you a heads up, then.” Emily set a hand on Olivia’s arm. “My guy is a bacon guy, so make sure you grab your bacon on Sunday before he gets near the pan.”

“Good to know,” she said, and together they laughed as they walked toward the cashier near the entrance. “What do I owe today?”

Her sister shook her head as Olivia pulled money out of her wallet. “Nothing. I’ll get it. You can—”

“Pay for my dinner and half of Amanda’s,” she said, cutting Emily off, and handing the cashier the money she had in her hand. “Please take this off the bill and charge her the rest.”

The cashier smiled. “You got it.”

Emily narrowed her gaze then shook her head. “You know karmas got nothing on me, right?”

She smiled. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

She was still smiling when she descended the two steps to the exit, but when she set her palms on the large fundraiser poster for the local high school taped to the door and pushed, the door flew open with an ease she hadn’t expected.

The motion propelled her forward until a wall of muscles stopped her short. A second later, a very familiar wave of awareness shot through her body.

Josh *freaking* Masters.

His hands immediately snaked out and grabbed her upper arms, increasing that awareness with a trembling force. “I’m sorry.”

Her body wasn’t.

It heated and tingled, and every inch of her instantly thawed and came to life, resurrecting things best left dormant.

Not good.

The well-defined chest under her palms was warm and strong, and covered a heartbeat that spiked as they stood there for what felt like an eternity.

A very warm, and perfect...

“Are you okay, Olivia?” Josh asked, and even though she didn’t want to, she couldn’t stop her gaze from lifting to stare into his mesmerizing blue eyes as he released her arms to straighten her glasses.

Those dark lashes of his surrounded a warm and welcoming gaze. Happy, sexy, hot memories came flooding back.

Nope. Not going there.

“I’m fine,” she finally replied, and to prove it, she removed her touch and stepped back, praying that her wobbly legs would hold her. “Excuse me, I have to go.”

He didn’t move other than to dip down to catch her gaze. His was hopeful and still warm, and his dimples threatened to make an appearance. “Can we have lunch sometime? Or a coffee? Maybe split a jelly donut?”

Her heart squeezed.

Oh, that bugger. He remembered her weakness and was trying to use it against her. And, damn, it almost worked.

She shrugged. “What’s the point?”

He lifted a brow. “To catch up. To apologize.”

“Pretty sure you said all there was to say when you left thirteen years ago.” This time, she side-stepped him and nearly ran into another taller, muscled wall, standing in front of two other handsome cowboys. “Oh, hello, Connor, Cole, Kevin.”

Connor and Cole McCall were the sons of the woman throwing her sister’s wedding, and Kevin Dalton was Cole’s best friend and genius business partner.

“Hello, Olivia.” Connor smiled, revealing a set of dimples that caused many women in the county to swoon, including her friend, Kerri, who’d married him.

It was funny how those dimples had no effect on her despite the guy being drop-dead gorgeous.

No, it was another gorgeous man with dimples who had once ruled her heart, her body, her pulse, her soul.

Everything.

Then he left, and she had to relearn how to exist on her own.

“What’s up, Doc?” Kevin Dalton grinned, his blue eyes twinkling with humor and mischief, and she couldn’t help but grin back.

“A word meaning movement from a lower to a higher position,” she replied, and he laughed along with the others.

“Good one, Olivia,” Cole said, his brown eyes warm and handsome face just as swoon worthy as his brother’s, minus the dimples. He was married to Jordan, and she could still remember her friend telling her on the playground that she was going to marry him someday.

Once upon a time, she’d had similar thoughts about the man still holding the door open behind her.

At least one of them had fate on their side.

She nodded to the men and walked as nonchalantly as possible to her car and away from temptation.

Josh Masters had been addicting, and Olivia had gone through horrible withdrawals.

She couldn't—wouldn't—go down that road again, no matter how much her body wanted to take him up on his offer.

That wouldn't be smart.

He'd moved on. So had she. It was best to leave the past in the past. Those were all the things she'd told herself over the last few months whenever she'd caught sight of the handsome guy around town.

So far, Olivia had managed to resist him and would continue to do so...as long as they didn't accidentally *bump* into each other again.

She wasn't stupid.

Prolonged close contact would be her undoing.

Chapter 2

Josh watched Olivia walk away, her shoulders straight, her chin lifted, and the sweet sway of her rounded hips. Her dark, wavy hair was twisted up and clipped to her head, but it in no way diminished her beauty. The style showcased her slender neck, pretty face, and gorgeous hazel eyes.

One of her sisters had brown eyes, and the other had green, but Olivia had a combination of both, which had always mesmerized him.

He'd barely recovered from the shock of someone slamming into him when an onslaught of awareness hit him like a ton of Brangus bull. His body had instantly recognized hers. And he knew she'd felt their chemistry too. Her soft curves had trembled against him, and that was enough to keep him going, to encourage him to continue to work on his plan to win her back.

He knew he'd hurt her even though that hadn't been his intention. Leaving her behind had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

"Well, that went well," Connor said with a grin. "Don't even think you lasted eight seconds."

Josh snorted. In a rodeo, a rider had to stay on a bull for at least eight seconds to earn a score. His buddy was right. That was a failure, but he wasn't the type to give up.

"I'm looking forward to your second round." Connor grinned.

"Yeah, me, too," Kevin said. "I'm bringing popcorn."

Cole shook his head. "Don't mind them. You just stay the course."

"Yeah, this is going to take some time, but she's worth it," he said, turning to head inside the diner and he nearly ran into another Harrison female.

The woman raised a brow. “Bet your ass she is. So, don’t give up on her.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded to Emily, happy that she supported his plan to pursue her sister. “I’ve given her enough space since I returned. It’s time to change that.”

Emily set a hand on his arm and walked outside with him, allowing customers the use of the door. “Any chance you’ll be attending brunch at Wild Creek this Sunday?”

He blinked at the unexpected question.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I always do, why?”

A grin spread across her pretty face. “All the Harrisons will be there, along with Holden, Dante, and Noah.” She squeezed his arm before releasing him. “She won’t be able to run.”

Hope flickered through his chest.

“That’s great,” Connor said. “Not the running part, although, yeah, that’s great. I mean the fact that you’re all coming to the ranch.”

Cole nodded. “The kids will be thrilled to play with Noah. But can I ask how this came about?”

Josh was wondering the same thing, not that the McCalls didn’t often have friends over for their famous brunches.

“Oh, well, you might want to hold onto your hats for this one.” Emily chuckled. “We’re supposed to discuss wedding plans for Amanda and Dante afterward.”

Kevin smiled. “We heard about the proposal. Dante’s the man.”

“For sure.” She laughed. “It was so sweet.”

Cole nodded. “So, did they set a date?”

“Yeah, first Saturday in November. Your mother graciously offered up the ranch, and she and your mother-in-law plan to take care of everything.”

Josh raised a brow. “That’s great. I’m happy for them.”

Amanda was the middle sister and had always been a sweet and gentle soul. It was gratifying to know she'd found someone worthy.

"Oh, shit." Connor scrubbed a hand over his face.

Cole nodded. "They're at it again."

His frown matched Emily's. "What do you mean?"

"My parents, your aunt and uncle...they're up to their matchmaking tricks again," Connor said, setting a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, man, but I'm betting you and Olivia are in their sights."

Emily slapped her hand off her thigh. "That explains the out-of-the blue offer. I just couldn't figure out why they'd be so generous."

Connor held up his hands. "Oh, the offer was genuine, I'm sure. They've been lifelong friends with your parents, and my mom loves to throw parties. But this is also a way to get your sister on the ranch where Josh works."

Well, hell.

He blinked again. "Not sure how to feel about it."

Manipulation wasn't his style, unless it had to do with a bull.

"Again?" Emily tipped her head. "What do you mean? Who else have they meddled with?"

Cole raised his hand. "Jordan and me."

"Kerri and me," Connor replied.

Kevin grinned. "You can add Shayla and me to that list, as well as my cousin Kade and Brandi."

"And that's just to name a few," Connor said with a shake of his head.

Damn, sounded like he'd missed some fun. Josh could only imagine the craziness that had ensued. He almost felt sorry for the guys, except they were now happier than he'd ever seen.

Emily's gaze grew pensive. "Really? Then they have a great track record, because everyone you just mentioned is happily married."

Josh scratched his jaw. "You're right."

"True." Connor nodded. "Although, I'd like to think we all would've gotten there on our own."

"Sometimes fate needs a push," Cole said quietly.

He'd heard how the guy had been a widower for a few years when Jordan had returned and brought him back from his spiral. Of that, he had no doubt. His cousin, Jordan, was a force of nature, and she'd always loved Cole.

Emily snorted. "Or in my stubborn sister's case, fate will need a good shove."

"Oh, trust me, no one is more stubborn than these two," Kevin said, slapping a hand on Cole and Connor's shoulders. "My buddy, here, needed to get out of his own way and let go of the past, and nearly blew it. And *McMoose* needed to get his head out of his ass and grab onto the best thing to ever come his way. None of it had gone easy."

"He's right," Cole stated.

Connor nodded. "Amen."

"Then perhaps this time the matchmaking will go easier," Emily said. "After all, Josh is already open to getting back together with my sister."

"True." Connor turned to him. "What do you think?"

Good question.

He blew out a breath and shrugged. "Not sure. I don't want to badger Olivia, I just want the opportunity to talk with her, spend time with her, even if it's among other people."

The damn woman kept disappearing whenever they happened to be in the same place.

"Seems like this is the *shove* that's needed, then." Kevin grinned.

Emily nodded. "I'm assuming we're going to have more than one meeting at the ranch, plus the bridal shower and wedding. This will give you those opportunities you mentioned, Josh.

He lifted a shoulder. "True."

"But that doesn't mean my sister will listen," Emily said. "I hate to pry, but if you don't mind me asking, what exactly transpired between you two to make her so hellbent on avoiding you? I thought you'd both decided to part ways because your futures were on different paths."

Connor nodded. "That was my understanding, too."

Josh shook his head as memories of that day flooded his brain. "Not exactly. We did part for those reasons, but I was the one who suggested it. Your sister didn't want to break up. She wanted to try a long-distance relationship. But she deserved better, so I didn't agree. I was kind of an ass. Had to be to get her to let go."

"Oh." Emily blinked. "That explains a lot."

His gut tightened. He didn't like the sound of that.

"Well, she is an amazing doctor," Cole said. "Emma's niece is proof."

Connor nodded. "And the rodeo is now behind you."

"Which means the two of you are available," Kevin added.

"And ready for a re-ride on your relationship." Connor grinned.

Emily sighed. "Just don't expect it to go smoothly. Have I mentioned my sister is stubborn?"

"I know." A smile tugged at his lips. "That's why she's so successful." And one of the things he loved about her.

"Well, good luck Sunday," Emily said with a pat on his arm. "I hope she gives you a chance to talk."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Me, too."

Josh didn't want to corner Olivia or trap her but feared it might come down to that.

"I should let you guys go eat," Emily said, turning a suspicious gaze on Connor. "Does your wife know you're here cheating on her with Annie's food?"

His cousin, Kerri, was an amazing chef and the chief cook at the Texas Republic Bar and Grill she owned with her sister. But Annie's had been around since they were kids, and Kerri loved eating here.

Connor chuckled. "Hell, yeah. She's the one who sent me. She's got a hankering for some blueberry pie."

Josh laughed with the others as they waved goodbye to Emily.

"Yeah, maybe you should give Olivia some carrots," Kevin said, and they all turned to look at him. "You know, 'What's up, Doc?', and a carrot..."

He rolled his eyes while the McCall brothers groaned.

Kevin frowned. "You don't get the bunny reference?"

"Oh, we got it." Connor snorted. "You're just an idiot."

"So, do you have a plan for Sunday?" Cole asked as they finally headed into the diner.

He shook his head. "Not really, other than to apologize."

"And grovel," Kevin said, with a slap to his back.

He nodded. "Yeah, that too. But I don't want it to sound rehearsed, so I'd rather just wing it."

"Smart."

That was how he was trying to handle it. This was too important. He didn't want to blow it, or his second chance with Olivia.

"Well, with the McCalls, Masters, and apparently the Harrisons on your side, perhaps you'll tip the scales of fate in your favor."

God, he hoped so.

All he wanted was a chance.

After nearly six long months of giving Olivia her space, he was done being passive. It was time to start winning her back.

Chapter 3

Sunday arrived bright and sunny, and Olivia embraced it by wearing her favorite yellow sundress with tiny white daisy print, and white sandals for brunch. She loved how the material brushed the top of her knees when she walked. The outfit always made her smile. She felt good, and that empowered her to face whatever the day might bring.

It had nothing to do with the possibility of accidentally running into her ex at the ranch. No, that would be stupid, especially since she had made it clear to him at the diner that she wasn't interested in seeing him socially.

Although, part of her was definitely interested. Her good parts that had reawakened when they'd pressed against his hard body that day. Ever since, Olivia had tried her best to ignore the long-buried memories and bouts of longing the encounter had resurrected. Since then, they'd plagued her more and more frequently, to the point where they even intruded her sleep.

To catch up. To apologize.

His words and the hope in his gaze had plagued her the rest of the week.

Had she been too harsh? It wasn't like her to act that way.

No. He'd deserved it since he'd refused to hear her out when she tried to plead with him to stay together all those years ago.

But they had been just kids. And it was in the past.

She needed to get over it and move on. A snort rose up her throat. She thought she had moved on but apparently, she was wrong. Otherwise, that encounter wouldn't have affected her so deeply.

The beep of a horn sounded, snapping Olivia out of her unsettling thoughts. It was Emily and Holden. She'd taken them up on their offer to ride with them to Wild Creek today, and when they arrived at the ranch fifteen minutes later, she

was glad she had agreed. She found it much easier to enter as a group than if she had been on her own.

“Emily, Olivia, so nice to see you again,” Mrs. McCall said, moving aside to let them in. The pretty woman with her brown hair twisted up like Olivia’s had to be in her late sixties, but amazingly appeared twenty years younger. “And you must be Holden.”

He nodded, holding out his hand. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you for inviting me.”

“Our pleasure,” their hostess said, shaking his hand. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

Holden raised a brow. “You have?”

“Yes, from Kade.” Mrs. McCall smiled and motioned for them to follow. “He comes here often. As a matter of fact, he’s here right now with his family.”

Kade Dalton ran the local animal shelter where both Emily and Holden volunteered. The Animal Control Center was also on his property. Olivia knew the guy too, not so much from childhood since he was several years older than her, but from the National Guard. Kade had been her First Sergeant.

Quite a few years had passed.

They continued walking past a gorgeous wooden staircase and down a marble-floored hallway with walls of similar wood. Olivia could hear people talking and children laughing.

A smile tugged at her lips. Despite being surrounded by all the opulence, the place always had a warm, welcoming feeling.

“Emily, Holden, and Olivia are here,” Mrs. McCall announced when they entered the ballroom full of people.

The large room was set up for brunch with a buffet of food at one end and several tables pushed together to create a single long table where several people were already eating, including her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Masters, Kerri and Jordan and their families, Amanda, Dante and Noah, plus Amanda’s friend Christa and her son Dillan.

She waved to everyone as she headed over to greet her parents. Emily and Holden followed suit.

Her gaze hadn't landed on Josh, but she could feel his presence. He was definitely here. She could tell by the way awareness was trickling through her body.

Mr. McCall rose to his feet and walked toward them with a smile on his handsome face. He looked debonair with the silver at his temples spreading out to mix with his dark hair. "So glad you could come," he said, shaking each of their hands. "Grab a plate and dig right in."

With a nod, their hosts returned to their seats, so she followed her sister and Holden to join the small line still piling food on their plates. The smell of bacon, sausage, and chicken filled the air, along with French toast, pancakes, cornbread, and macaroni and cheese.

Olivia's stomach dutifully growled.

"Was that you or me?" her sister asked.

"Both," Holden replied and received an elbow in the ribs from Emily.

As she moved through the line, making sure to grab some bacon since Holden was behind her, she added a mixture of breakfast and lunch entrees to her plate, along with some fresh fruit.

"Hello, Olivia," Kade said, adding fruit to an empty plate, no doubt for one of his children.

Even though the gorgeous guy was no longer in the military or the local sheriff, he still wore his brown hair short, which gave him a commanding presence.

That was probably why she had to resist the urge to salute. Olivia smiled, instead. "Hi, Top. Good to see you again."

"Now, what did I tell you about that?" he asked, raising a brow, his green eyes twinkling.

She sighed. "Right. Hi, *Kade*. Good to see you again."

“That’s better.” He grinned then nodded toward the tables. “I think you’re being summoned.”

Her heart rocked. She hoped it wasn’t Josh, because she couldn’t be rude with such a large audience.

But when she turned around, relief eased the tightness from her body at the sight of her soon-to-be nephew waving at her.

“Aunt Olivia! Sit across from me!” Noah said excitedly, sandwiched between his buddy, Dillan, and Amanda, with Dante on her sister’s other side.

She smiled. “Okay, I’m coming.”

Kade was now talking to Holden and Emily, so she carried her food toward the table.

Noah looked so cute in a red button-down shirt. Even his friend was dressed up in a collared shirt instead of one of his usual superhero T-shirts.

“Hi, Dillan,” she said from across the table as she headed for her seat. “You look nice today.”

The little boy leaned and whispered loudly, “I’m in the *skies*.”

When she realized he’d meant in *disguise*, she winked. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Dillan nodded and sat back.

She greeted his mother, Christa, before moving to the empty seat next to Jordan. It put her across from Noah.

“Is this good?” she asked the little dude.

Noah’s head bobbed excitedly. “Yes! Right *der*. *Dat’s* good. And *ders* water and juice in *da pictures*.” The cutie pointed to the pitchers on her left.

Holding back a grin, she nodded. “Thank you. I’ll have some.” After setting her plate down, she took her seat before pouring water into the empty glass near her silverware.

A trickle of awareness tickled her spine before it kicked up in intensity.

Shoot.

Josh was close.

She quickly scanned those nearby from under her lashes and spotted him sitting next to Dante. Good to know. Don't look past Dante. Got it.

"How've you been?" Jordan asked, and she happily turned her attention to the woman cutting pancakes on a plate for one of her children seated on her other side.

Olivia smiled. "Not as busy as you."

Not only was her friend the mother of young twins, but she had also recently started working full-time with Emily as an Animal Control officer. The woman had also been the Sheriff of Harland County for several years after Kade, and before the current sheriff, Gabe. He was currently sitting with his wife, Lyndsey, who happened to be Emily's best friend.

"I somehow doubt that," Jordan said with a shake of her head. "You were always too humble. Isn't that right, Josh?"

Her heart lurched. Dammit. She had hoped to get through brunch without having to look at him.

"Yes," he replied, his tone sexy, his voice sincere. "She often let others take credit for the things she did."

Unable to prolong it or resist, she let her gaze find his, and the warmth in his gorgeous blue eyes set off a fluttering in her stomach. He needed to stop that because she was enjoying it.

She held his gaze for a few beats before she found her voice. "Think you got me mixed up with Amanda."

"Hey," her sister said, gaining her attention. "I'm not humble. Am I?" Her sister frowned from across the table

She smiled. "Yes. You're amazing."

"I agree," Dante said, leaning over to kiss her sister's cheek.

Olivia concentrated on her meal after that, only looking up to converse with Noah when he addressed her. She was acutely aware of the warmth and interest in Josh's eyes, because her attention strayed that way a few times. Dammit. It scared her since she knew if she held his gaze too long, she'd start to believe he was serious.

She'd traveled down that road before and got lost.

What if he led her there again?

Go for it, her body perked up.

A deep breath barely settled her naughty thoughts, but it was enough to get her to finish her food.

"Aunt Olivia! Aunt Emily! You want to see *da* bulls?" Noah asked excitedly. "Aunt Emily doesn't have bulls at her place. She *gots* pigs. I like *da* pigs. And *da* goats."

She couldn't help smiling. "Sure, that sounds fun."

Not really, but she'd do anything to keep that smile on his cute little face.

"Yay!" He rocked back and forth in his chair. "I ate all my food, so Daddy and Mommy said Mr. Josh and Mr. Connor can show me *da* bulls."

Shoot. Her heart rocked. Of course, Josh had to be involved. He was the reason she hadn't cared to see the bulls.

Too late to back out now. She'd never do that to Noah. Olivia rose to her feet and met up with the bunch near the entrance to the ballroom, feeling guilty for leaving her dirty dishes on the table, even though Jordan had assured her that was the norm.

Luckily, the rest of the children along with their parents joined them too. Safety in numbers, she told herself, and took advantage of it by walking with some of the children and Noah, who held out his arms for her to pick him up.

When they were halfway to the corral, he grabbed her face in his tiny hands and stared into her eyes. "Don't touch *da* bulls or stick your hand inside *da* fence, right, Mr. Josh?"

“That’s right, Noah,” Josh said, moving to stand beside them

The muscles in his arms rippled as he carried two adorable little girls. She was pretty sure one was Jordan’s daughter, and the other was Kerri’s. They both giggled and clung to Josh and dammit, her heart cracked open a little and melted.

Then it squeezed tightly as an unwanted thought occurred.

They could’ve been your children, years ago.

She inhaled then let it out slowly, trying to ease the unexpected pain.

They could be your children now.

“Are you okay?” he asked as they stopped near the others at the barn that housed the bulls.

Olivia blinked and forced a smile. “Yes.”

Thankfully, she didn’t have to elaborate because the children all clamored, encouraging Josh and Connor to get the bulls.

She was saved by the bull.

Swallowing down a snort, she stood holding Noah next to Amanda and Dante, while the other children were safe with their parents. The sight of Josh and the bulls sparked memories of the past. Because she’d held them back for so long, they rushed in with an intense force.

When they were together, she’d attended every one of Josh’s competitions. It all came rushing back. The danger, the excitement, the adrenaline, the sight of her handsome boyfriend conquering the massive beasts—the victory sex afterward—it had all been incredible.

God, she missed it. She missed him.

Her throat heated with unshed tears. She swallowed them down and blinked her eyes. No. No more. That was in the past. The pain needed to stay in the past, too.

This was here. This was now.

“You doing okay?” Amanda asked quietly, taking Noah from her arms to hand him to Dante, who moved closer to where the others were grouped.

She shrugged. “Yeah. Why?”

“Because you got awfully pale,” Emily replied, appearing at her other side, concern darkening her gaze. “Josh told me about your break-up.”

She jerked her head back, her heart rocking hard in her chest. “He did? When?”

“At the diner, after you brushed him off the other day,” Emily answered.

Holden quietly walked with Christa and Dillan over to Dante as if knowing the girls needed privacy to talk.

But Olivia didn't want to talk. “It doesn't matter.”

Emily snorted. “Like hell,” she stated, in a hushed tone. “You're still cut up over it, and it's been over a decade.”

Thirteen years, but she wasn't about to correct her.

“Maybe you need to talk about it,” Amanda said. “What exactly happened? I thought it was a mutual break-up because your plans were different.”

This time Olivia snorted. “That'd be a no.”

“Really?” Amanda blinked. “I'm sorry. I didn't know.”

“No one did,” Emily said. “That's how Olivia wanted it. Right?”

She nodded. “Yes. It was my problem. Besides, there wasn't anything you guys could've done anyway.”

“We could've supported you.” Amanda frowned. “That what sisters do. It was a terrible thing for you to go through on your own.”

Her chest tightened. “I managed.”

“Here's the thing,” Emily said, setting a hand on her shoulder. “I don't think you did. I think you bottled up all that pain and pushed it down so you could get through boot camp,

then college, then medical school, then residency. And now with Josh back in town, it's bubbling up to the surface."

That was exactly right.

"Can I offer some advice?" Kerri McCall asked, stepping closer.

Shoot. Had they been talking too loudly?

"You weren't loud. I was just too close," her friend replied as if reading her mind. "Whatever you bottled up, let it loose. Face it and move on. It'll go a long way toward healing and clearer thinking."

She frowned. "Sounds like you're speaking from experience."

Kerri nodded. "I am. And that helped. I understood myself better and what I wanted. And I want that for you." Her friend gave her a quick hug then released her. "And also, men are idiots."

Her sisters laughed.

"They're not good with their feelings or expressing them," Kerri continued. "They often think with the head behind their zipper, and not the one residing on their shoulders."

This time Olivia laughed along with her sisters.

"And sometimes, they act like that appendage too." Emily grinned.

Kerri smiled. "It's in their DNA."

They laughed again.

"Too much testosterone," Olivia added.

"Probably." Her friend's smile slowly disappeared. "As for my cousin, I don't condone him leaving you, but I think I know why he left."

Her brows shot up along with her pulse. "Me, too. Because he didn't want me tying him down."

There. She'd said it out loud. Voiced the words that had resounded in her head for more than a decade.

“No.” Kerri shook her head. “He’d just lost his father. My uncle was so proud of Josh and all his accomplishments when he competed. It was hard for him to stay here with the memories.”

Olivia nodded, remembering sitting beside the kind man and how proud he was whenever Josh was on a bull. They used to yell and root for Josh and hugged each other when Josh landed a great score. “He never missed a competition. We cheered in unison.”

“And I’m thinking that might’ve been part of my cousin’s faulty reasoning.” Kerri sighed.

Emily frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He sold the house and hit the circuit, trying to outrun the sadness,” her friend answered.

Frowning, Amanda shook her head. “What did that have to do with Olivia?”

“My guess is she reminded him of happier times,” Kerri replied. “The times when his father was alive. I think he needed a clean break.”

Her heart squeezed. Was that what had happened?

“Like I said, men are idiots.” Kerri sighed. “I hope you’ll think about everything I just threw on you.”

She nodded but remained quiet as she watched her friend return to the others.

“Well, I don’t think we could top that advice,” Amanda said.

Emily lifted a brow and stared at Olivia. “Are you going to take it?”

Truthfully, she had no idea what to do with everything Kerri had said. There was a lot to take in, to contemplate, to dissect.

“Why wouldn’t you?” Amanda set a hand on her arm and frowned. “I mean, some of it kind of made sense.”

“What if I told you he wants you back?” Emily asked quietly.

Olivia’s heart lurched so hard her head jerked back. “What? He...he told you that?”

“Wow.” Amanda pushed a curtain of caramel-colored hair behind her ear.

Emily cocked her head. “Does it change things?”

She inhaled and nodded. “Makes it worse. I can’t go down that road again. I know we were young, and this might sound stupid, but the pain of him walking away...it was too much. The only way I could get through the rest of my life was to bury it.”

And she shouldn’t be discussing this on the McCall’s ranch with plenty of people nearby, and Josh Masters on the other side of the fence.

“Then you need to talk with Josh. Face the past. Get it all off your chest so you can move on with life,” Amanda said, pulling her in for a hug. “You deserve to live in the now.” Her sister released her but held her gaze. “And from what I can see in Josh’s eyes, he needs to do the same.”

If Olivia were honest, she had to admit she’d noticed there had been more than warmth in his gaze. There had been a lot of shadows over the last few months, too.

“She’s right,” Emily said. “Talk to Josh. Hear him out. Let him hear you out. This festering is bad. And if you decide to let him into your life again, that’s great. If you decide not to, that’s fine too. We’re here for you, either way.”

Amanda nodded. “You can’t move forward until you face the past.”

For the next thirty minutes, Olivia stood on the outskirts of the crowd, following them to another corral while her sisters’ words replayed in her head. Then Kerri’s words drifted in, making her more and more confused.

Occasionally the children’s laughter broke through her contemplation, and she’d watch the delight light up their faces

as Josh, Connor, and Cole brought out horses and took each of the kids for a ride.

She remembered riding horses with Josh. She remembered doing a lot of things. She remembered riding him.

Despite her mixed-up thoughts, she couldn't stop a smile from claiming her lips.

There'd never been anyone like Josh. He'd been her first lover and her best lover.

Her mind was heavy with those memories as she wandered into the nearby barn, stopping at each stall to admire the beautiful horses inside.

She'd eventually dated...in medical school. College had just been too soon. But in her second year in med school, Olivia had connected with one of the guys in anatomy class, and they'd started dating. His ambition and focus had matched her own, but when he was accepted to do his residency in Chicago during their final year, he'd sent her a dozen roses with a card that read, "I'll never forget you. Wish you well in your future endeavors."

Right then and there, Olivia had decided to never open her heart again. She'd done it twice, and twice the guy had left her to follow his dreams, proving she wasn't enough to share in them. Granted, the last one hadn't hurt nearly as much as Josh's dismissal, but it had confirmed that a relationship wasn't worth the risk.

"You're thinking too hard," Josh said from behind her.

Olivia jumped and turned to face the man ruling her pulse. "Geeze, you scared me."

A rueful smile tugged at his lips. "Sorry. I thought you'd heard the horses announce my approach."

No. If they'd snorted or whinnied, it had fallen on her deaf ears because she'd been too lost in thoughts of him

"Nope," she replied and changed the subject. "Kids all done having fun?"

He nodded. “Yeah, they’re on their way back to go swimming.”

“I should be getting back too,” she said. “I’m here to help plan my sister’s wedding, not stroll through the barn.”

It was funny though. She couldn’t get her feet to move. Not even when Josh drew nearer, each step causing the intensity of awareness to increase in her body.

“Amanda is going in the pool with Noah, Dante, Christa, and Dillan,” he said. “So, no rush.”

Except there was...a big one. She needed to get away from him.

Talk to Josh. Hear him out. Let him hear you out.

Emily’s words skittered through her head.

“I’m sorry, Olivia,” Josh said, stopping a foot away to lean against the wall of the nearby stall.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. She didn’t want to hear it.

You can’t move forward until you face the past.

And now Amanda’s words resounded in her head.

“I know I hurt you, but I swear that hadn’t been my intention,” he said, quietly. “The last thing you needed was to try to fit in time to see me. You had the Guard and college, then med school. Trying to keep a relationship with all that going on would’ve eventually interfered with your grades. I wasn’t about to mess up your dream.”

She inhaled then blew out her breath. “That was very magnanimous of you. Did you ever think that maybe I would’ve liked to have made that decision?”

“Yes.” He nodded, and her blood pressure increased. “You would’ve chosen me, and I would’ve ruined your dream.”

She threw her hands in the air. “You don’t know that. No one does. And we can never find out, because you took that choice away from me too.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “My life was already in an upheaval. I wasn’t about to bring you into that mess. I love—”

“No!” She leaned forward to slap a hand over his mouth. “Don’t you dare use those words. If you loved me, you never would’ve tossed me aside.”

She released him in time to watch his face turn red and his brows crash together to form a deep V.

“My God, Olivia. I didn’t toss you aside. I did the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I let you go to live your life. You had goals. Dreams. I had no right to keep you with me.”

“Again, that should’ve been my choice,” she muttered, blinking back stupid tears. “My goals and my dreams were two very different things. I had a goal early on to become a doctor, yes, that’s true, but my dreams...they were all tied around you. Spending my life with you, Josh...*that* was my dream.”

She swiped the wetness from her face, but the stupid tears kept coming. And it was just her luck that her feet were rooted to the damn ground again.

Josh muttered a curse a second before he crushed her close and held her tightly. “I’m so sorry,” he murmured near her ear.

Her first instinct was to push him away, but oddly that never happened. Her body slowly relaxed without her permission, and her hands even slid up around his back, splaying across his shoulder blades and an array of muscles.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated again. “I was an ass. I thought I was helping you. Thought I was doing the right thing.”

She shook her head. He was saying all the things she’d wanted to hear, all the things she’d dreamt he’d say—years and years ago. But it was too late. Right?

God, she was so confused.

But there was one certainty she could cling to and that was how damn good it felt to hold him and be held by him again. Warmth had spread through her body, paving the way for a tingling heat only Josh could induce.

Olivia had no idea how long she stood there basking in his warmth and strength, knowing she should push him away. It was no use. Her body was calling the shots now, not her brain.

“I’ll never hurt you again, Olivia. I swear,” he said, brushing the side of her head with his lips. “Never again,” he repeated as his mouth kissed a path to her cheek, then her chin.

Her pulse pounded loudly in her ears. She drew back, intending to finally move out of his arms, but her heart did a crazy roll in her chest when she met his gaze.

Remorse and longing and something much stronger blazed in his eyes and promptly stole her strength. Olivia fisted his shirt and accidentally leaned in and caught her mouth on his... twice.

Her heart fluttered as heat spread to all her good parts, causing her to tremble against his rock-hard body. It’d been so long...so very long since she’d experienced this incredible rush.

A raw, sexy sound rumbled in his throat as his mouth opened under hers and took over the kiss. Long and slow, he explored, tasted, and nipped, and she eagerly took as good as she gave.

The feel of him...his taste. Oh, how she’d missed this. She’d missed him. All these years, they could’ve shared this passion, could’ve had a life together. Could’ve had a family, if only he hadn’t pushed her aside.

But he had...like a well-worn sock.

Common sense returned with a force that had her breaking the kiss and stepping out of his arms. His very strong, muscular arms.

She shook her head to clear it. “I’m sorry.” She panted. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why?” He cocked his head, dragging in air. “Your body knows we’re meant to be together.”

She shook her head again. “Too bad your brain didn’t realize that thirteen years ago.”

Already regretting her uncharacteristically catty remark, Olivia turned and strode toward the exit, her body a walking contradiction of longing and indignation.

“My brain, along with the rest of me, realizes it now, Olivia,” Josh called softly from behind. “Be warned. I’m not giving up on us.”

Chapter 4

Josh had spent the last few days at an auction assisting Connor, learning the ropes for when he could finally start adding bulls to his land. Land that he'd purchased from the McCalls not long after he'd returned to Harland County.

He was walking it now, inspecting the house he'd commissioned Kade's wife, Brandi, to design and oversee the construction. The foundation and reinforced walls were up, and the roof was starting today.

It had to be perfect. It needed to be perfect for *her*.

"Looking good," Cole said, cupping his shoulder as they walked into the house along with his brother.

"Thanks." He grinned. "Brandi captured Olivia's vision perfectly. She always wanted a two-story house with a large front porch, a porch swing, and lots of bedrooms."

For lots of children, but he kept that part to himself.

Connor cocked his head. "Remind me again why you aren't showing this to Olivia? It could sway her your way."

"That's exactly why." He stopped in the area that would one day be a huge kitchen, already imagining Olivia making cookies with their beautiful little girls who looked just like her. "I need her to forgive me and move past my stupidity, not confuse her by bestowing gifts on her. I want to earn her trust, not her gratitude."

Cole stopped next to him. "Good plan. A solid foundation leads to a solid relationship."

He'd had that with her in the past and aimed to build one again.

"Haha, foundation." Connor stomped his boot on the floor. "I see what you did there."

Josh snorted. Never a dull moment or conversation with Connor around. And Kevin, but the guy had work on his horse ranch with Kade to deal with today.

“You’re an idiot.” Cole shook his head, a grin tugging at his lips.

The guy’s brother cocked his head. “Runs in the family.”

“Good thing I’m related to your wives, then,” Josh said, slapping them both on the back.

Cole chuckled. “Yeah, you got the good genes.”

“No argument here.” He held up his hands and smiled.

“So, what can we help you with today?” Cole asked, glancing around.

He shook his head. “Nothing inside, yet. Have to wait for the electricians and plumbers to finish, then pass inspection. After that, Brandi said the drywall will go up, then the floors, then we can paint.”

“Sorry, Josh. I’m busy that day,” Connor said.

Cole snorted. “You don’t even know when that day will be.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Connor grinned. “I’m busy any day that has paint in it.”

Josh chuckled. “I’m sure I can find something else for you to do. But right now, I need help with the fence for the bulls.

“You going with what we talked about?” Connor asked.

He nodded. “Yes, I want three pens covering six acres to keep developing yearling and mature bulls separately, as well as a holding/corral area. The perimeter fences will be five-strand barbed wire and one offset hot wire. The interior fences are three hot wires.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Connor grinned. “So, let’s get to it.”

The smaller horse barn was almost finished, as well as the larger barn for the bulls across the way. He’d already finished the fence for the horse corral, but barely started the one across the yard for the bulls. He was grateful the McCall brothers had offered to help. It was going to take quite a few Saturday mornings to finish this project.

“So, any progress with Olivia?” Connor asked as the three of them donned gloves before loading a bunch of wooden posts into the back of his pickup, which he’d drive out to the field.

He dropped his load of lumber into the truck bed and shrugged. “Not sure.”

“I saw you two in a lip lock at the ranch on Sunday,” Connor said before adding more posts to the pile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to spy, but you were in the barn, and I was putting the horses back into their stalls. I did it quickly, though, and backed out the way I came.”

The memory of that *lip lock* visited his mind daily. She was exquisite, and he was an ass for letting her go. Olivia’s taste, her eager responses to his kisses, the way her soft curves melted into him resurrected hot images from their past, and a fierce need to create new ones. No one but Olivia ever made him so hot, so hard, and so hungry with just a few kisses.

He had hoped they would’ve shared a few more by now, but he’d been out of town.

“By the frown on your face, I take it you haven’t seen her since.” Cole sent him a knowing look before setting more posts on the pile.

Josh nodded, adding a roll of barbed wire to the back of the truck.

“Yeah, we were at the auction this week,” Connor said, tossing another roll of barbed wire onto the pile as if it were a bag of cotton balls.

“Ah,” Cole muttered, as they closed the tailgate of the truck. “That was this week.”

Connor slapped a hand on Josh’s shoulder. “Just remember, this week isn’t over yet.”

True.

Josh kept that in mind all day, even after the McCalls were long gone. The skies started to cloud up as he headed to his temporary home—an extremely nice cabin on the Dalton’s

property. Apparently, it had been housing for the ranch manager, but he'd married Jen Dalton and now resided in the main house. Then Kade's brother-in-law had lived there with the local vet until they too, got married and moved into a house Brandi had designed and built for them on the property.

Josh hoped he was next. Since he was the current resident, perhaps he'd encounter a similar fate as the prior two men.

Time would tell.

After a quick shower, he called the local pizza joint and ordered a dozen wings. There was plenty to eat in his fridge, but he was restless for some reason, so a trip to town was in order.

It had nothing to do with Olivia, except it had everything to do with wanting to see her again. If he knew where she lived, he would happily offer up some of his food, but he didn't, so that was out. It wouldn't be difficult to get her address and phone number from one of his friends, but he didn't feel right about it.

No, he was going to have to rely on fate, good luck, a little heavenly intervention from his father, or maybe she'd show up for brunch again tomorrow.

Again, time would tell.

Josh climbed into his truck just as the clouds opened and rain started to hit his windshield. It'd been over a month since it had rained. They definitely needed it.

He turned onto the road that led to town and flicked on his windshield wipers. The rain was coming a little faster now. A few miles down the road, he passed the Wild Creek entrance, and several miles beyond that he spotted a car with its hazard lights flashing, pulled off to the side of the road.

Josh automatically pulled over to help. It sucked to have car trouble, but it sucked worse when it was raining. He pressed his own hazard lights before getting out to walk toward the woman digging in her open trunk.

He didn't need to see her face to know it was Olivia. His body had already alerted him to that fact with a rush of heat

that funneled straight to his groin. He did his best to squelch it, but the way the wet material of her dress clung to her beautiful curves, leaving little to the imagination, left barely any room behind his zipper.

“Can I help?” he asked and heard her mutter a curse.

She turned around, frustration darkening her eyes. “Hi. Maybe. I know how to change a tire, but I can’t get the darn spare loose.”

He knew she could change one because he was the one who’d taught her.

Josh moved to her side and peered into the cleanest trunk he’d ever seen, other than in a new car. “Let me try,” he said and grasped the restraining bolt and twisted it hard. After a few seconds, it gave and started to loosen.

“Seriously?” Olivia blew out a breath. “I’ve been here tugging on the darn thing for almost fifteen minutes.”

“Then you loosened it for me.” He straightened with the bolt in his hand and smiled...and was gifted a smile in return.

His chest warmed, and if it wasn’t for the rain, he would’ve gladly stood there staring into her eyes until she realized she’d let her guard down.

Josh removed the jack and set it in her outstretched hands before he lifted the tire out of the well and leaned it against the side of the car.

She cleared her throat and blinked. “Thank you. I can take it from here.”

He nodded. “I know you can, but I’m not leaving until you’re on the road again.”

Her mouth opened but no protest came out. “Okay,” she said instead, grabbing a large rock from the side of the road to place it in front of the front passenger tire.

Good.

But when she knelt down on the dirty road to start taking off the lug nuts, he grasped her upper arm. “Let me do that.

You're getting your dress dirty."

She snorted. "It's already dirty from the rain." With a slight tug, she freed herself and continued to remove the lug nuts.

Shit.

Josh was stymied. He didn't know what to do. He'd never been in this position before. It went against his code to let her suffer in this weather, but he was certain she'd be mad at him if he insisted that she sit in the car, out of the rain, and let him change the damn tire.

"Olivia," he said. "I can't stand here and do nothing."

"Good. Grab the umbrella out of my driver's side door and hold it over me."

He laughed until he realized she was serious. The only reason he listened was because it would keep her from getting wetter.

So, he stood there, holding an umbrella over the stubborn woman who'd stolen his heart in ninth grade. Yeah, he'd do anything for her.

Still, he hoped to God no one drove by, especially Connor or Kevin, because he'd never hear the end of it.

Luckily, not a single car appeared. A minute later, she sat back and grumbled.

"Stupid things."

Apparently, two of the four lug nuts were giving her trouble.

Josh retracted the umbrella and set it in the trunk before he bent down next to her in the rain. She mumbled something under her breath as she handed him the wrench. It took a few tugs, but he got them off, and was pleased when she allowed him to help her swap out the tire and put the lugs back on.

After she stowed the jack and the rest of the tools, he put the floor back and was about to carry the flat and toss it in the bed of his truck when he caught himself.

That would be taking liberties, and a big mistake in her eyes.

“I don’t think any garage is open tomorrow,” he said. “Will you be able to drop this off on Monday? I’m not sure what your hours are, so they might be closed by the time you get out. If you want, I can take care of it for you.”

She wrinkled her brow, causing rain to run down her nose. “Thanks. Actually, that would be a big help, but only if you promise to let me know what I owe you.”

“Of course,” he said, although he had no intention of taking her money.

He carried the flat to the back of his truck and tossed it over the side before walking back to her, a little surprised to find Olivia where he’d left her. Normally, she would’ve used the opportunity to jump in her car and put distance between them.

Josh took it as a good sign. Progress. Baby steps. He’ll take whatever she’d give him.

Shaking her head, she closed the trunk then swiped the wetness off her face, but more rain simply took its place. “Thanks for your help. I’m sorry you got soaked.”

He shrugged, resisting the urge to use his tongue to follow the drops sliding down her neck. Wrong time. Wrong place. “No worries.”

Because those urges were getting stronger and stronger, he walked to her driver side door and opened it for her, but the closer she got, the harder it became to resist the need to touch her.

She must’ve felt it too, because instead of sliding into her seat, she stood there facing him, her chest rising and falling with her hitched breath.

That was it. His undoing. He wasn’t strong enough.

Josh stepped up to her and cupped her face, looking for signs of protest, but all he found was heat and need in her gaze. It ripped a growl from his throat, which repeated when

his lips touched hers. She moaned and opened her mouth, and he wasted no time slipping his tongue inside to reacquaint himself with her essence.

Her tongue brushed his, and things got a little wild. Using his body, he pressed her back against her car, loving the feel of her beaded nipples poking him through the thin material of her dress. She arched into him, sliding her hands up his chest then into his hair and held tight as her tongue met his stroke for stroke.

Aroused and fully loaded, he was so hot, steam was rising from his body as the rain continued to soak them. It was incredible and perfect, and still he wanted more.

Without breaking the kiss, Josh trailed a hand down her body then back up to cup her breast and grazed her nipple with his thumb.

She broke the kiss and moaned, and he'd treasure that sound until his dying days. So, he did it again, dragging his mouth down her throat, licking the rain from her skin. Olivia inhaled and released his head to sneak her hands under his shirt and stroke his abs. They instantly quivered under her touch. She had him so damn hard, he questioned the integrity of his zipper.

Stroke after stroke, she continued to tease him, inching lower and lower.

Yeah, almost there...keep going, he silently urged.

And just as her touch was about to close over his throbbing erection, the blaring of a car horn had them jumping apart.

Thankfully, whoever it was kept going.

“Shit, Olivia, I’m sorry,” he said between breaths. “I can’t seem to help myself whenever we touch.”

She nodded, gulping in air as she straightened her dress. “Ditto. You’re too addicting.”

He knew exactly what she meant.

“We can’t do this in public,” she uttered. “I’m a doctor. I need to worry about my reputation.”

He was a damn idiot. He hadn't acted this out of control since high school. It was funny, but he was beginning to think it hadn't been adolescence that had made him crazy and horny and out of control back then.

It had been Olivia Harrison.

"I understand."

She exhaled. "Good. So, uh, I should go."

He moved back to the outside of her still opened door and waited until she climbed inside. "Drive safely," he told her as she clicked her seatbelt.

"You, too." She glanced up at him. "Thanks again for helping me."

He nodded. "Anytime."

After shutting her door, Josh walked around the front of her car and removed the rock by her passenger tire.

And as he stood back and watched her drive away, a smile tugged at his lips. She'd said, *We can't do this in public*. She hadn't said *anymore*, which meant he still had a chance. He hadn't been shot down...just grounded. The door was ajar, and he was ready to step inside and back into her life.

Now he just needed to not screw up like tonight. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Christ, he hoped whoever blew that horn wouldn't cause any trouble for Olivia.

Chapter 5

Olivia sat in her office, sipping her coffee on her morning break, trying to concentrate on her mother's words through the phone, but her damn mind kept drifting back to Saturday night and Josh's...helping hand.

All she'd had to do was get in the damn car. He hadn't made a move. He was very sweet and helpful, even going so far as to let her choose what to do about her getting her tire fixed. She appreciated that he hadn't just tossed it in his truck and announced he'd take care of it.

And even though that was exactly what was happening, she at least had been given the opportunity to make that choice.

"So, what do you think?" her mom asked, and Olivia blinked.

Shoot. She had no idea what the question was referring to.

Olivia sighed. "Sorry, Mom. My mind was elsewhere," she admitted. "What did you ask?"

"That's okay, sweetheart." Her mother's tone was patient and warm. "You work too hard. I worry about you. You need to make time to play."

Oh, boy.

"I do," she insisted. "Amanda, Emily, and I go out once a month."

Her mother snorted. "I mean with a man."

Of course, she did.

She smiled. "Sometimes their guys are around."

"Ack! That's not what I meant, and you know it. Unless..." Her mother's pause was heavy with foreshadowing. "Unless they've introduced you to some of their single guy friends?"

She shook her head. "Pretty sure they're all taken."

“That’s too bad.” Her mother’s sigh rustled through the phone.

Olivia shrugged. Although Dante’s buddies were all former military and very easy on the eyes, the men he worked with at Eagle Security and Investigations never sent her pulse into orbit, not like a former rodeo cowboy she knew.

That kiss in the rain two nights ago had morphed into a hot embrace so fast it was crazy. Her body still heated every time she thought about it. So, Olivia tried not to, but usually failed. She knew she should regret it, but the kiss had been too incredible, too sensual, too amazing. No, what she regretted was the fact someone had witnessed it.

She kept waiting for a judgmental remark from one of her patients or staff, but so far, no one had said a word. Between the darkened sky, the rain, and the fact Josh had blocked her with his muscled body, perhaps the person who had honked the horn hadn’t even recognized her.

It could’ve just been some kid passing by.

“Well, I’ll let you go, hon,” her mother said. “I just wanted to let you know I picked up the color swatches for the gowns you all tried on yesterday and dropped them off with Amanda. With the wedding so close, you girls will need to make a choice sooner rather than later.”

She took a sip of coffee before setting her mug on her desk. “I know. She already called. We’re all meeting her at the Creamery for ice cream and swatch choosing at lunch today.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear.” Relief was evident in her mother’s tone. “I’d better let you get back to work, so you’re not late meeting them.”

They hung up then, and Olivia finished a consult on an upcoming cataract removal and a recheck on another when she was called to the ER to evaluate a young car crash victim.

Her mind was on the surgery she now had to perform in three hours and definitely not into color swatches, but she showed up at the Creamery only mildly late.

“Sorry,” she said, rushing to the table where Christa and her sisters sat eating bowls of ice cream, and dropped into the chair next to Emily. “I was in the ER.”

Which meant she’d skipped lunch and chowed down on a protein bar she’d learned to keep in her desk.

“No worries,” Amanda said, concern darkening her eyes. “I hope everything went okay.”

She blew out a breath. “Won’t know until after I’m done with surgery this afternoon. Even then, only time will tell.” She shook her head, trying to keep her own memories at bay. “She’s just a teenager.”

Emily patted her arm. “And she has the best surgeon looking out for her.”

“Yes.” Christa nodded.

“Exactly.” Amanda smiled.

Just then, a young server came over, saving Olivia from her wayward thoughts, but instead of taking her order, she set a CMP and a glass of water in front of her then left.

Olivia blinked, and Amanda grinned.

“Since you were running late, I took the liberty of telling them to make your usual when you arrived.”

Her usual was a CMP—chocolate, marshmallow, and peanut sundae, but with chocolate ice cream, not vanilla. She looked at the side of the tall, clear sundae dish and smiled. It indeed was full of chocolate ice cream.

She returned her sister’s smile. “Thanks. This looks great.”

While Olivia dug into her sundae, she listened to the girls discuss the swatch board Amanda set on the table.

Yesterday, they’d all gone to Houston for Amanda to try on wedding gowns. As soon as her sister came out in the third gown, everyone knew it was “the one”, especially Amanda. Her sister had tears in her eyes as she gazed at her image in the full-length mirror. All their gazes were a little over-bright. It was perfect for her. The A-line gown was white with tulle, lace

flower appliques, spaghetti straps, and billowy off the shoulder ruffles as well as a laced-up back. Amanda was glowing and was going to knock Dante for a loop when he saw her walking toward him on their wedding day.

Then the owner of the shop informed them there were similar gowns for the bridesmaids and showed them photos. The smile on Amanda's face was enough for them all to agree on the style, get their measurements taken, and promise to choose a color from the swatches that were currently with another customer. Her mother had arranged for the woman to call her as soon as they were returned, and she'd picked them up.

That was this morning, and now they were gazing at said swatches.

Olivia continued to devour her CMP and let the others choose, because the samples were truthfully all stunning. All the soft colors had the same lace appliques that matched the bride's, except hers were all white, while these lace flowers were pale yellow, purple, orange, blue, and pink. Plus, there was an occasional butterfly.

Truly fitting for her down-to-earth sister's wedding.

"What color do you like best, Olivia?" Amanda asked, pinning her with an excited gaze.

She glanced at the samples again and lifted a shoulder. "They're all beautiful. What colors do you like best? It's your wedding."

Amanda wrinkled her brow. "I agree with you. They're all beautiful."

"But...?" Emily prompted. "Come on, I know there's a but in there."

Christa nodded. "Yeah, Amanda, tell us your favorite or favorites."

Her sister cocked her head as she stared at the materials. "Okay, I'm kind of partial to the green ones. I think the dark one would be great for Emily as the maid of honor and the medium shade would be wonderful for Olivia and Christa."

“Then green it is.” She grinned.

“Yep.” Christa nodded again.

Emily sat back and smiled. “Works for me.”

Tears filled Amanda’s eyes as she shoved the swatches into her tote bag. “I’m sorry to take up so much of your time lately.”

“There’s no need to apologize, we’re happy to do it,” she said, reaching across the table to touch her hand. “This is exciting.”

“Olivia’s right,” Emily said. “This is exciting.”

Christa set a hand on Amanda’s arm. “Exactly. We’re honored.”

“You guys are the best.” Her sister sniffed. “Thanks.”

She gave Amanda one last squeeze before releasing her hand. This wedding was a bright spot in their family, and even though it was slightly rushed, it still held all the excitement and anticipation of any wedding.

“Hi, ladies,” Jordan said, walking toward them with a milkshake in her hand, followed by Kerri, who carried a smoothie.

Olivia motioned toward empty chairs. “Join us.”

They nodded and pulled two chairs over to their table and sat down.

“I couldn’t help noticing your swatches,” Kerri said to Amanda. “Those gowns are going to be gorgeous.”

A flush filled her sister’s cheeks. “Thanks. It was a tough color choice, but we went with two shades of green.”

“Holden, Hunter, and Josh are going to be sucker punched in the gut when they see you three.” Kerri grinned.

She nearly choked on the water she was sipping. “I agree about the first two, but Josh and I aren’t a thing.”

They’d shared two kisses. Okay, two incredible kisses, but there was still too much baggage that needed sorting. Like the

fact they'd shared a hell of a lot more than that in high school, and then he'd left her. She didn't want to set herself up for that again.

Jordan laughed. "Sure looked different to me on the side of the road Saturday night."

Olivia's heart rolled. "You blew the horn?"

Her friend nodded. "I didn't want to, trust me, but I knew your parents weren't too far behind me."

Holy...her heart rolled again. "Thanks."

What if they'd been ahead of Jordan? Heat rushed into her face and her chest tightened. She needed to stay away from him. Her brain cells disappeared whenever he was near.

Jordan shook her head. "No, distance won't work," she said as if reading her mind. "Believe me, Cole and I tried that. It makes things worse. You two need to talk."

She laughed. "We tried that, but my damn body wants to do the talking."

"Okay, I'm going to need to know—in great detail—what exactly happened between you and Josh on the side of the road Saturday," Emily said, sitting back in her chair, interest in her gaze.

Amanda nodded. "Me, too. Did you two kiss or something?"

She glanced around the Creamery, happy to find the place empty except for them and the girl behind the counter.

She nodded. "And I don't even know how it happened. I was trying to get the stupid spare tire out of my car so I could fix a flat when Josh pulled up behind me."

"Aww, that's sweet." Amanda sighed.

Jordan shook her head. "No, pretty sure that's fate."

She jerked her head back. "Fate? Why do you say that?"

"Well, it could've been me or your parents who came across you," Jordan replied. "But it was fate that sent him into

your path first.”

True.

“Okay, let’s get back to him showing up,” Emily said. “I take it he managed to get your spare out?”

She nodded, then told them the rest, up until the kiss. “I thanked him and just needed to get in the damn car. But—” She paused to glance around again. “I’m so easy when it comes to that man. My body takes over, and I have no say.”

“I hear ya.”

“Same here.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Welcome to the club.”

“Isn’t it great?”

Olivia felt a little better hearing the simultaneous responses, knowing she wasn’t the only one who suffered from the same affliction.

“And if you’re embarrassed about being in a compromised position, don’t be,” Kerri said. “I’m sure we’ve all done the deed in a precarious location.”

Jordan nodded. “Cole’s office in Houston. And handcuffs may or may not have been involved.”

Damn. Olivia bit her lip while her brows rose. Jordan was definitely super woman.

“I want to be like you when I grow up,” she said, and everyone laughed.

Kerri raised her hand. “It was the loft for me, while Connor’s men were working below.” She grinned. “Several times.”

Christa’s face flushed. “At work when no one else was there.”

Considering the woman was an amazing tattoo artist, Olivia got the gist of her location.

She smiled, starting to feel much better.

“Outside in nature.” Emily grinned. “And I intend to repeat it, just need to remember to shut down the security camera in that location first.”

Amanda sighed. “I must be vanilla, like my ice cream.” Her sister glanced down at her empty glass. “The only exciting thing I’ve done was when I wasn’t living with Dante, and we would make out in his bathroom while Noah slept upstairs.”

“Oh, that definitely qualifies,” Kerri said. “We have to take our alone time where and when we can.”

Jordan lifted her shake in a mock toast. “Amen.”

“Why is it so bad if you lose control with Josh?” Christa asked her.

She blew out a breath and met the woman’s gaze. “Once upon a time, we were high school sweethearts. I happily gave everything to him, but then he left me behind to hit the rodeo circuit and never looked back.”

“How do you know?” Kerri asked quietly.

Olivia frowned. “Because he never tried to contact me. Ever. Not me. Not Mom. Not my sisters. No one. He could’ve easily gotten my address from my family, but he didn’t. And why would he with those buckle bunnies to keep him occupied?”

Jordan shook her head. “No, that’s not Josh. Don’t believe everything you read in the papers or on social media.”

True. Olivia knew that.

She didn’t really think he was having a high old time with the bunnies. But neither did she believe he’d been celibate for the past thirteen years. He was a single guy with no family or anyone around while beautiful women freely threw themselves at him. Of course, he’d enjoyed the perks that had come with being a rodeo star.

“All of that was in the past. This is the here and now.”

“Yeah, I’m afraid I’ll make the same mistake.” She eyed Jordan closely. “Can I ask you, where is Josh living?”

She frowned. "In a cabin on the Dalton's property."

"I thought I saw his truck go by," Emily said. "Now it makes sense."

"Yeah, it did." She exhaled as her chest tightened. It told Olivia he was living temporarily.

Kerri's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"He isn't here permanently, or he would've bought a house." Or at least, leased a place. "I can't afford to let go of the past and embrace a future with him when he could easily leave me behind again."

Jordan set a hand on her arm. "Josh isn't going anywhere. Trust me."

"Yeah." Kerri nodded. "He's here to stay."

Both women stared at her with confidence in their gazes and appeared as if they wanted to say more but they didn't.

Jordan gave her arm one last squeeze before she released her and rose to her feet. "As for my cousin not thinking about you? I'd suggest you pull up his stats online. You'll notice there was one year where he sucked and suffered his worst injury. I'll let you work it out as to why that particular year was hard on him."

"Well, we'd better go get our kids," Kerri said, standing up. "They're having a play date with the Daltons. Pretty sure they're about to wear out their welcome. Four hours is plenty with all that energy."

Christa and Amanda chuckled.

Olivia bid the sisters goodbye, but her mind was stuck on Jordan's words.

I'll let you work it out as to why that particular year was hard on him.

"Well, damn," Emily said, glancing at her phone. "You need to see this, Olivia."

Chapter 6

Olivia's heart raced as she held Emily's phone and viewed Josh's stats. There was a definite difference in only one year.

The year she'd been deployed.

His scores were down, his injuries up. And her chest squeezed tightly at a photo of him being carried out of the ring on a stretcher.

She gasped. "I never knew."

Emily took her phone from Olivia's shaking hands and handed it to Amanda. "None of us did. I mean, we knew he got hurt, but we never realized it was while you were overseas."

"Wow." Amanda blinked, and Christa shook her head. "For him to even know you were deployed has to mean that he was asking the McCalls about you, since the Masters were living in California at that time."

Olivia nodded. She'd thought of that too.

"And for him to keep in contact with them to get news about you means one thing," Emily said.

She sucked in a breath, already knowing the answer. "What?"

"He never stopped caring about you, Olivia," Emily replied quietly.

Her chest tightened further, and her throat burned with unshed tears. "Why didn't he contact me?"

"It's like he told me the other week. He didn't want to interfere with your life," Emily stated.

She exhaled and a stray tear rolled down her cheek. "He *was* my life."

"Remember what Kerri told us." Amanda smiled. "Men are idiots."

Emily snickered. "And Josh is not exempt."

Olivia chuckled despite the turmoil going on inside her. “True.”

“So, the question is, can the idiot become your *life* now?” Amanda asked.

She shrugged. “I...I don’t know. There’s a lot to take in, but I need to table it and get my head on straight for this surgery.”

The girls all nodded.

Emily was shoving her phone back into her pocket when she got a call. “Okay, I’ll be right there,” she said before pushing her phone into her pocket, then rising to her feet. “I’ve got to go, but Olivia, listen...I know an entire decade has passed since you were deployed, but anyone who sees Josh around you can tell by the adoration and warmth in his eyes that his feelings for you never changed.”

She inhaled past a tight throat and nodded. “But...” She cleared her throat. “There’s still no guarantee that he won’t leave again.”

“True,” Emily said. “But that’s where a leap of faith is in order. And perhaps, second chances.” Her sister winked. “Okay, got to run.”

A second later, she was gone.

“I know how you feel,” Christa said. “I fought my feelings for Hunter, worried he was going to leave. Why would he want to settle down with a single mom with a little boy when he was used to traveling and saving the world? But it turned out, we were his world, and I wasted precious time fighting it for nothing.”

She nodded, happy that things had worked out well for the sweet woman and her now husband. But Olivia wasn’t naive. Not everyone had a happily ever after. Once upon a time, she’d thought that was how her and Josh’s story would end, but it hadn’t.

Your story isn’t over, her brain reminded.

True.

That was why she filed everything Jordan's bomb had dropped, with plans to revisit it after this afternoon's surgery.

Olivia scrubbed a hand over her face and exhaled. "Okay, my brain is so full now, it's hurting."

The girls laughed.

"I guess so. That was a lot to take in," Amanda said. "Listen, if you need to talk and hash things out tonight, call me. I'll come over."

She smiled. "Thanks. But I'll be okay." Then she glanced at the clock on the wall. "I'd better get back. My lunch break is almost up. Thanks for the CMP."

Amanda grinned as they all rose to their feet. "Picking up the tab is the least I can do for all of you for clearing space in your day to meet me for lunch. I can't believe October starts tomorrow."

"Pretty sure it was our pleasure." Christa grinned, and Olivia agreed before they all went their separate ways.

It was almost six o'clock by the time Olivia left work that day. She'd hung around the hospital, making sure to be there when her teenage patient awoke from surgery.

After Olivia meditated in her office and pushed the information overload on Josh to the back of her mind, she was able to get on with her day, finishing two check-ups and another two consultations before she tackled the young girl's surgery.

Everything went well, as far as she could tell. Only time would reveal if the surgery was a success.

Olivia's mind was heavy with thoughts of the young girl as she walked toward the parking lot. She'd tried to be as upbeat as possible, hoping she'd alleviated some of the fear from the girl, while not giving her false hope. It was a fine line to walk, and she hoped she'd channeled Dr. Kramer in her efforts.

The sound of people laughing caught her attention and pulled her back to the present. As she neared her car, her heart pounded hard in her chest at the sight of Josh posing for

pictures with several children in front of his truck that was parked next to her vehicle. Then he was given a Sharpie and he signed the back of the young boys' shirts.

"Thank you," the mother said.

"You sure you're retired?" one of the boys asked. "'Cause you were the greatest."

Josh smiled, handing the marker back to the mother. "Thank you, and I'm sure."

The woman took the Sharpie and tipped her chin. "I read an interview recently with your publicist, and she said not to count you out."

Olivia watched Josh clench his jaw before it relaxed into a smile. "Can't believe everything you read. I've told her many times I'm not interested in coming back. In time, she'll latch on to a rising star. You guys will too," he told her sons. "Just give it a little time, and there'll be a new *greatest*. There's always someone up and coming that'll ride stronger and longer."

"I'm going to be the next greatest like you." The taller boy smiled, pride straightening his shoulders.

Josh nodded to the boy. "I believe you will."

"Thanks again," the mother said, then ushered her children into a nearby car.

Olivia continued to watch Josh watching them. She didn't detect any sorrow or remorse about retiring.

It was funny how that eased some of the tightness in her neck.

He turned to her and the light and warmth that entered his eyes ricocheted through her.

"Hey," he said, walking toward her. "You look like you had a rough day."

She tried to hold back a snort but failed. "Yeah. It's been a bit of a roller coaster."

“I brought your tire back. All fixed,” he said. “I would’ve put it on, but I didn’t have your keys to get into the trunk.”

She blinked. Oh, right. Her tire. The one he’d taken Saturday night. The night they were on the fast track to having sex against her car in the rain.

Heat flooded her face, but she was suddenly too tired to care.

“I hate to ask you this, but would you mind following me to my townhouse and changing it there? The parking lot is spacious and flat.” She rubbed the back of her sore neck. “I could really use a hot shower right now.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

Olivia got in her car and drove the short distance to the complex of detached townhomes and parked in front of the last one in the second row. Josh pulled in next to her as she popped the trunk.

He got out and met her behind her car. “I’ll take it from here. You go in and take care of your neck.”

She didn’t bother to ask how he knew it was sore. The guy always knew her body’s needs. “Thanks,” she said. “But come in when you’re done. I’m going to order pizza.”

His gaze softened and he reached out to touch her face. “That isn’t necessary. You’re exhausted. You don’t need to feed me.”

She smiled. “I know, but I *do* need to feed me.”

He removed his fingers and laughed. “Okay, then. Pizza sounds good.”

“There are drinks in the fridge. Help yourself.”

Olivia headed inside, stopping long enough to pick up Gatsby, who’d been waiting by the door for her. Loving on him as she walked to the back of the two-story townhouse, she entered the smaller of the two bedrooms. Even though the upstairs bedroom was the master, she preferred to use the one downstairs. She didn’t need anything fancy right now. There

was no one to share the larger room and attached bathroom with anyway.

An image of a certain sexy, rodeo cowboy flittered through her mind.

Heat pooled low in her belly, and she groaned. Nope. She didn't want to think past her hot shower and removing some of the tension from her body.

She set Gatsby down on her bed. "We're going to have company shortly. You behave."

What was she saying? Her cat loved everyone.

Smiling, she entered the bathroom and shut the door. The enticing thought of a shower had been on her mind for hours now. She stripped, turned on the water then stepped into the shower. The heat and pulsating rhythm of the water hitting her neck and shoulders worked wonders. It felt so good, she hated to leave.

But then she remembered Josh had changed her tire so she could take this shower. She quickly washed up, rinsed off, then washed and rinsed her hair before shutting off the water. After towel drying her body and hair, she slipped into the robe she kept on a hook on the back of the door before returning to her bedroom and closing the door.

Gatsby was no longer on the bed, but she wasn't surprised. He would definitely be greeting the newcomer in hopes of getting praise for his handsomeness.

With a snicker, Olivia got dressed, opting to slip into a sundress that had a built-in bra, because now that hers was off, she really didn't fancy putting another one on for the night. Comfort was key to days like today.

She donned a pair of bikini panties, fixed the skirt of her dress, then ordered their pizza before heading to find her guest. There were a few things she needed to ask him.

"Sorry, I hope you weren't waiting too long," she said. "Pizza will be here in twenty minutes."

“No, not at all, and okay,” he replied, sitting on the couch, petting her cat now perched on his lap. “Who’s this guy?” When he glanced at her, his eyes widened before heat and appreciation claimed his gaze. “Damn, Olivia...your hair...”

She grabbed a handful of her wet waves and frowned. “What’s wrong with it? Is it still sudsy?”

He set the cat down and stood. “No,” he replied, moving to her. “It’s so long and beautiful.”

Her pulse kicked up as he lifted a hand to run his fingers lightly through her hair. After a few seconds, he seemed to catch himself because he released her.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to take liberties,” he said, stepping back. “It’s just that I’ve only seen you with your hair twisted up since I’ve been back.”

Olivia inhaled then blew out the breath, her entire body tingling. “I’m too hot in the warm months, so I wear it up off my neck.”

A grin twitched his lips and his sexy dimples appeared, kicking up her pulse again. “Pretty sure you’re hot year-round.”

Her first thought was to laugh because it was funny, but the heat in his gaze burned that idea right out of her head. “Uh, thanks, I think.”

They stood in the middle of her living room, gazes locked, and all the things she’d discovered about him at the Creamery flooded her mind.

“Sorry you got injured because of me,” she blurted like a goof.

Out of everything she’d learned, that made its way out first. But she’d been horrified to think he’d been gored because his mind had been on her and not the bull.

His head jerked back, and his gaze narrowed. “I’m not injured. I was a little dirty maybe, but that’s to be expected when changing a tire. I used your kitchen sink to clean up because you were in the bathroom. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, no, I wasn’t talking about today,” she said with a shake of her head. “Can you maybe sit down? I can’t think when you’re near.”

His grin returned. “Sure.”

She waited until his butt hit the couch, and her cat reclaimed his new favorite seat. “That’s Gatsby, by the way. He’s a people lover, and a lap cat.”

“Never would’ve known,” he said, his grin still in place while he stroked her feline friend. “So, what did you mean I was injured because of you?”

Needing a crutch, she moved to stand behind the chair that faced the couch. “I was looking at your stats online and saw an article with a photo of you on a gurney.”

God, she felt awkward as hell. How did she explain this without sounding full of herself?

Realization removed the creases in his brow and lit his gaze. “Yeah, that was a tough year. Trying to compete knowing my girl was overseas in the war messed me up pretty badly, and the bulls took advantage of my lack of concentration.”

“Y-your girl?” She blinked, moving around to the front of the chair to sit down. “But you left me. I wasn’t your girl anymore.”

“Olivia,” he said quietly, getting up to crouch in front of her. “You’ve never stopped being my girl. You’ll always be my girl. There is no other for me.”

The hot tears burning her eyes spilled down her cheeks. “Then why did you let me go?”

“I told you. I didn’t want to hold you back.” He lifted a hand to gently wipe away the moisture with the back of his knuckles. “And it’s a good thing, because look how many people who can still see because of you.”

Her doorbell rang, and she nearly jumped out of her seat.

“Pizza’s here,” he said. “I’ll get it.”

Feeling both foolish and restless, she got up and set paper plates and napkins on her table and was grabbing them each a water from the fridge when he returned and placed the pizza on the table.

Somehow, while they were eating, she found herself telling him about the surgery she'd performed on the young girl earlier that day, and he told her about the auction he'd attended last week with Connor.

All too soon they were done with dinner, and she found she didn't want him to leave.

"How much do I owe you for the tire?" she asked inanely as she cleared their plates before he could grab them.

He shook his head. "You don't. Connor's cousin, Mac, employs a guy who did it for free."

She narrowed her gaze on him, but found no deceit in his eyes, so she nodded. "Okay."

"I think you're pretty amazing," he said out of the blue.

Unsure how to respond, she just held his mesmerizing gaze instead.

"You were meant to be a physician, Olivia. You were meant to help people like that girl today. If you would've been with me..."

"I would've been happy," she said, moving past him to enter the living room.

He followed. "But would you still be a doctor?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but I'd like to think I would be."

"Well, right now, there's no guessing," he said, stepping to her. "You *are* a brilliant physician with many grateful patients, and I'm so damn proud of you."

More unshed tears filled her eyes. Dammit. "Okay, you have to stop that."

He shook his head. "Never. And I've never stopped thinking about you, either. As a matter of fact, I wrote dozens

of letters to you over the years.”

Her heart rocked then fell into place. “You did?” She blinked back those threatening tears. “I never got any.”

“I know.” He nodded. “I never sent them. They were my way of keeping you with me.”

God, that was sweet. Her chest squeezed. But he must’ve been so lonely. “I hate the thought of you all by yourself back then.”

His smile returned. “I wasn’t alone, Olivia. I had you right here.” He lifted her hand and set her palm on his chest over his heart. “You’ve never left.”

“You never left mine either,” she admitted, staring into his welcoming gaze, and when he leaned in and brought his mouth within an inch of hers, she embraced the erratic beating of her heart, matching the rhythm of the one still pounding under her palm. “I’m scared, Josh.”

“Of what?” he asked, his warm breath washing over her skin.

She swallowed. “That I’ll get hurt again. That you leave me again.”

He released her hand to cup her face, his gaze so earnest her heart nearly burst. “I swear to you, Olivia. I will never leave you again. All I’m asking for is a chance to prove it to you.”

All she wanted was to hold him and never let him go.

She inhaled a shaky breath and nodded, taking that leap of faith her sister had mentioned earlier that day. “All right, you’ve got it, but I need to take it slow.”

Joy funneled into his gaze, and he released her cheek to hold up his hands. “You’re in control. I’ll do whatever you want.”

Several deliciously naughty scenarios flashed through her head.

This time, he inhaled. “But you can’t look at me like that, or I’ll lose more than my mind.”

“Okay.” She nodded but it was no use. She wanted him too badly.

He chuckled and pulled her close to kiss her nose. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I’ve got a few suggestions,” she mistakenly said out loud.

He slid his hands down her arms and leaned back, his gaze dark with desire. “As much as I’d love to make them a reality, you’ve had a rough day. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“Then can I take advantage of you?” she asked, and received a tighter grip on her arms.

“Any time, day or night.” His voice was deliciously low and full of the same fierce need rushing through her body.

She tipped her chin. “So, you’re saying *now* works for you?”

A grin spread across his lips, showing off his sexy dimples. “*Now* is perfect, as long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure if you don’t kiss me, I’ll have to hit you.”

Chapter 7

Olivia realized her mind was no longer in control of her mouth.

She didn't care. Thinking made her nuts. She needed some downtime from her own head, and a lot of *up* time for feeling. And, God, it'd been so long since she'd been in Josh's arms.

Over the past few weeks, the man had apologized, and she'd accepted. He'd explained, and she understood. And right now, he was offering, and dammit, she was taking.

She deserved to feel good, and he deserved the same. They'd both suffered over the last thirteen years. It was time to put the past behind them and take what the *here and now* was offering.

Olivia grabbed his hand and led him down the hall to her bedroom. Surely, that proved she was ready to take this next step. That leap. She wanted to take things slowly, but she hadn't meant no sex. Not with the way their bodies had responded to one another.

Once they entered her room, she released his hand and turned to face him, suddenly at a loss as to what to do next.

He lifted a hand to lightly touch her face. "Olivia, you don't have to do anything you don't want to..." His sexy voice trailed off, leaving the choice up to her, and it endeared him to her even more.

Shifting closer, she placed her hands on his chest, thrilled at the heat radiating beneath his shirt. "Oh, I want to," she said, clearly and with meaning. "I so want to." Her fingers curled around the material of his shirt, and she tugged him closer.

"Me, too," he muttered against her lips as he shoved his hand in her hair and covered her mouth with his.

Somehow, the door was shut. Olivia knew this because she found her back pressed against it, and heat spread through her body as his lined up perfectly with hers. She moaned and held

him tightly, and he wasted no time taking advantage of her open mouth.

There was a difference in his kiss and his touch. It was gentle and sweet as well as sure and purposeful. The delicious man took and demanded and gave with a thrilling enthusiasm that left her breathless and longing for more.

His hands were warm on her body, sliding down her waist and hips, then back up to skim her breasts, as if he needed to touch every inch.

She had needs too. Like touching him, so she slid her hands beneath his shirt and trailed them over his magnificent muscles and ridges. He felt so damn good, her insides quivered.

Normally, she would've been shocked at her utter lack of control. Not tonight. Not now. Not with the hot, hard, sexy man rocking into her while his tongue slid in and out of her mouth with equal hunger.

He drew back slightly to drag in a breath. "I've thought about this for years."

"Me too," she whispered his earlier words back to him.

He leaned in, placing his lips on her body, kissing a path down her jaw to the curve of her neck, making her hungry for more. So much more. Then his big, warm hands were on the move again, gliding up and down her sides, sending goosebumps all over her body.

"Good to know." He slid her a sexy grin. "I'll store it for future reference."

Secretly thrilled to note his words held the promise of a future together, she nodded and grasped the hem of his shirt, needing to remove the cloth barrier. "Ditto."

Smiling, she tugged his shirt up his torso, and he helped by grasping the material with one hand and yanking it up over his head. Olivia's breath hitched in her throat as she watched it fall to the floor.

Wow...

He'd filled out. His muscles were thicker, his ridges were many, and her mouth watered at the thought of kissing and licking every delectable inch on display before her. His hair was tousled, thanks to her roaming hands, and heat darkened his eyes to a deep, brilliant blue.

In Josh's arms, she'd always felt safe and warm, or trembled with a deep-seated need. The years behind them had only intensified that feeling. Olivia hoped he felt it too.

She glided her hand over his muscled chest then down the ridges of his gorgeous abs, thrilled at the way his body quivered under her touch.

Yeah, he still felt it.

Empowered by that thought, she reached behind her to pull down her zipper and let her dress fall in a clump at her feet.

Josh sucked in a breath and devoured her bared breasts with his heated gaze. "So gorgeous."

He reached for her then, closing his hands around her upper arms before he slowly pulled her against him. The feel of her nipples crushed against his warm flesh had her legs threatening to buckle. Thank God he was holding her.

The man was so delectably close she only had to lean forward, and their lips would touch again. But Olivia refrained, curious to see what he had planned.

He stared at her mouth, his eyes heavy and deliciously heated. A spike of desire raced to all her neglected good parts. The easy, sure strength with which he held her against his hard chest had butterflies fluttering in her stomach. She may be rusty, but her body was working fine, and definitely remembered his.

Still gazing at her mouth, he flexed his jaw as if it were an effort to hold back. "Feel that, Olivia?"

"Yes." She trembled, sliding her hands over his shoulders to cup the back of his head.

His skin was hot and body rock-hard, a heady combination that had heat spiking low in her belly.

“Me, too.” He walked her backward to the bed. “It’s only ever been like this with you,” he murmured, pressing her down until her back hit the mattress.

She’d only ever felt this crazy need to consume with Josh.

Leaning above her, he looked incredible—all sinewy and ripped and hungry. Damn. Those fathomless eyes were heated as they stared into hers, and anticipation drummed between them, driving her a little bit crazy before he finally bent to kiss her.

Yes...

Needy and a whole lot ready, she opened her mouth for him, sliding her tongue against his, thrilling at the deep, raw sound she ripped from him. His hands skimmed down her sides until they found her hips and gripped tightly, lining their bodies up just right again. Instinctively, she made room for him between her legs and arched up to rock against him. She needed to feel him. Every inch of him.

“Damn, Olivia,” he muttered as they broke for air. He leaned on his forearms while holding her gaze. “You’re killing me.”

She smiled. “Sorry.”

He chuckled and set his forehead to hers. “No, you’re not.”

The feel of him all pressed up against her was too much, and she couldn’t stop her hips from undulating again. He muttered a curse and pressed back with his impressive erection.

She cupped his jaw, lifting his face an inch, loving the feel of slight stubble against her palm. “It’s your fault. You make me crazy with need, and I have no control over my body.”

Trying not to panic at what she was feeling, Olivia watched her thumb as she skimmed over his lower lip. It’d been so long since she’d felt so moved, since she’d felt this all-consuming need pulsating through her. In fact, it was only with Josh that she’d experienced this foundation-rocking, earth-slipping movement.

It was amazing and scary. She didn't want to lose it again.

Josh whispered her name in a low, husky tone that had her insides trembling, and told her he was just as unnerved. That made her feel better. So much better.

Slowly, he lowered his head and kissed her again, deep and deliciously thorough. The sensual kiss left her hungry and yearning for more. He tasted bold and intensely male. This Josh was a much more potent version of the Josh who'd introduced her to sex.

He drew back, his gaze smoldering. "I've missed you, Livy," he murmured, using his old nickname for her.

Only Amanda and Josh had ever called her that. When he'd left, she asked her sister to use her full name.

Funny how it felt right again.

"I missed you too, Josh," she whispered, pulling his head back down. "And I want you so much."

At that, he let out the sexiest damn growl before his lips devoured her, taking what he wanted without apology. Their embrace went from aroused to wild as they took turns on top. She enjoyed a slow journey down the muscles and ridges of his magnificent body, kissing, licking, and nipping, loving the muffled curses she drew from him along the way. The adult version of Josh was lean and ripped, and she made another pass for the sheer thrill of it.

A second later, she was flat on her back with her wrists clamped in his hand and pressed high above her head.

Olivia moaned. She couldn't help it. He covered her completely with his entire weight, shocking many sensations to life. Craving more, she wrapped her legs around him, bringing him even tighter against her.

"Damn, Livy," he murmured, pressing hot, open-mouth kisses down her throat.

She gasped when he bit the special spot behind her ear, then happily turned her head to give him better access. He needed no further instruction.

He knew all her special spots.

Overwhelmed with sensations rippling through her body, she closed her eyes and clutched his biceps. The air changed then. Amped up. It was crazy. Insane. Amazing.

God, she'd missed this.

"Josh..." she whispered, forcing her eyes open.

"Yeah?" he asked, still kissing her neck.

"I need you in me."

He stilled for only a second before he shot off the bed to remove the rest of his clothes, giving her only a brief glimpse of all his magnificence. Then he was back, nuzzling the curve of her neck, nipping at her collarbone, making breath catch in her throat again. His lips continued to explore, kissing a path down one breast before gently sucking the tip into his mouth. The feel, the motion, were so pleasurable, so incredibly perfect, she arched up.

An unhinged sound rushed from her lips, full of all the hunger and need swirling through her pent-up body, a body that had needed his for years. A low, sexy sound rumbled through Josh's chest, conveying a fierce hunger and familiar impatience.

Yeah, his body needed this too.

While switching to tease her other nipple with his wicked tongue, Josh cupped her other breast, catching her tight peak between his forefinger and thumb. Arousal shot to her core. She moaned, hoping to encourage him to do it again. He did, several times until she shook with need.

Equally good at multi-tasking, she cupped the back of his head with one hand while sliding the other down his back to grab his fine ass. He made that rumbling sound again and thrust against her.

Olivia smiled. She was on board for much more of that.

Josh released her nipple to draw back and glance down at the only piece of material separating them.

Her black silk bikini panties.

His smoldering gaze slammed into hers. “Sexy.”

“You like?” she asked, brushing her thumb over his jaw.

He lowered his lips to within an inch of hers, his chest warm and deliciously hard against her tight nipples. “I love them, but they have to go.”

The heat in his eyes created in her a powerful urge to taste him. As if reading her mind, he brushed his lips to hers, kissing her softly and unhurried, stoking the fire he’d already started. When he finally lifted his head, she was trembling again.

“I can’t wait to taste you and be inside you again, Olivia.”

Now he was back to using her full name, and that felt right too. The raw need in his words, though, it liquefied her bones. She grabbed his ass again and rocked up, her good parts pulsing with that same need. “Good, because I can’t wait, either.”

Smiling, Josh nudged her legs open with his knee, and while he held her gaze, he slid a finger under her panties, right down to where she needed him most.

On his first stroke, she cried out, so damn ready and needy it was almost pathetic. But it was also good. So incredibly good. His touch had always been magic and perfect. He knew what she liked, and anticipation of his next move had her holding her breath. Sensations intensified so much on his second stroke, she tightened her grip on his arms, refusing to climax yet. Not yet. She needed to hold out a little longer and enjoy what he was doing to her a little more. Then he lowered his head and kissed her nipple, rasping his tongue over the tip.

Breath hitched in her suddenly dry throat. Lost in the bliss, she closed her eyes. “That feels...so good.”

“I’m just getting started.” He hooked his finger under the lace and tugged the panties down, kissing a path over her ribs, her belly, and hip. Lifting his head, he watched as he removed the final barrier, tossing it behind him. Josh sucked in a breath

as he stared at her nakedness. “Damn, Olivia...you’re even more beautiful than I remembered.”

She wanted to tell him he was more magnificent, but she couldn’t find her voice.

He slid his palms up her thighs and nudged until he wedged his shoulders between her legs, his gaze glued to his new view.

Her heart was pounding ruthlessly in her chest. “Josh, I need...”

She was unable to voice more, but she didn’t need to.

He knew.

The amazing, intuitive man leaned forward and lapped at her, ripping needy, low sounds from her throat, but as long as he kept doing what he was doing, she didn’t care. Sinking her fingers into his hair, she held on for the ride and rocked into her rodeo cowboy. When he added a finger, she cried out, barely comprehending all the sensations.

Damn...it felt so good.

And Josh enjoyed it too. He always had. A light sheen covered his shoulders as he continued to drive her out of her mind.

She trembled, every muscle taut and seeking release. It’d been so long since she’d felt this way. So long. Olivia moved her hands to Josh’s broad shoulders and clutched him with shocking desperation, so close to the brink already.

In tune with her needs, he held her at the edge for a beat before increasing the pace and pressure, sending her over with several delectable long, sure strokes.

Fast and intense, her orgasm burst through with merciless force. Josh removed his finger, but his mouth remained on her, bringing her down slowly as she shuddered against him.

Breathless and panting, Olivia released him and tried to find her way back to normal. A new normal...one that included Josh.

He lifted his head, gaze blazing with need and satisfaction. “I’ve missed your taste. It’s incredible.”

His words sparked heat low in her belly, shocking her that she could recover so soon. He pushed to his feet and dug a condom out of his pants on the floor. She wondered briefly if he always carried them, then pushed that thought aside. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that he had one, because if he hadn’t, she probably would’ve cried.

The way the light played on his muscles and ridges had her itching to do the same, and when her gaze fell to his thighs and all the glory in between, she was definitely glad he had that condom.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who filled out over the past decade.” She lifted onto her elbows and smiled at him.

A grin curved his lips, and within a few seconds, he was sheathed and looming over her.

Chapter 8

Josh was barely holding onto his control. If Olivia didn't stop looking at him like she needed him inside her fast, he was going to lose it before he could deliver.

God, she was gorgeous, and like he told her, even more beautiful than he'd remembered. More beautiful than the woman who'd visited him in his dreams for more than a decade.

And so damn responsive, he was never going to be able to keep from touching her again. How the hell had he ever left her?

It didn't matter now. He was back for good, and she was kind enough to give him another re-ride.

A second chance.

Right now, though, he needed to reacquaint himself with her sweet heat.

Running a hand up her thigh, he embraced the need coursing through him, and when he slipped a finger easily inside her, he let out an appreciative groan. She was so damn wet.

And her taste? Damn...so sweet. Much sweeter than he remembered, too. He was definitely going down on her again tonight, but not now. He had to have her. Reclaim her for his own.

Josh set his palms on the mattress on either side of her shoulders. "I'm going to die if I don't get inside you, Livy."

Emotions flashed through her eyes too quickly for him to name, but there was heat. Hell, yeah. Her gaze smoldered but then turned distressed as she lifted a hand to trace a finger over a scar by his ribs.

"Is this the one that was my fault?"

He bit back a curse. "None of them were your fault." He grabbed her hand and lifted it to his lips. "Let's let go of the

past.”

She nodded. “Concentrate on the now. Got it.” She reached with her other hand to grasp his erection, testing his control when she stroked. “I need you in me too, Josh. So badly.”

Inhaling against the sweet torture, he grasped both of her hands, entwining their fingers before pressing them into the mattress on either side of her head. Then he dipped down and kissed her, frantically yet thoroughly, sliding his tongue inside as he settled between her legs and nudged her opening with his throbbing tip.

As if her body instinctively remembered their past, Olivia wrapped her legs around him, inviting him in.

Needing no verbal instruction, he was more than ready. With his mouth still on hers, Josh pushed all the way in. A second later, they broke the kiss and their gasps of pleasure echoed around them. Their coupling had always been amazing, but this went so far beyond that...the feel of her walls wrapping around him, drawing him in...had him closing his eyes, trying to hold on to his dwindling control.

Her fingers clutched his as she drew in a ragged breath. “God, Josh...”

He opened his eyes and set his forehead to hers. “I know. It’s even better now.”

She nodded.

Then he began to move. Need hit hard and fast, spreading a consuming heat to every cell in his body. Knowing his rhythm, Olivia rocked up to meet his thrusts. So in tune with him. So perfect.

Only her.

“You feel so good, Livy,” he whispered, straightening his elbows as he drove slowly inside her. “So damn good. I’ve missed this. Missed you.”

He could stay in her warm, wet heat forever. Again, he wondered why he’d ever left.

A tear slid down the side of her face, and his stomach clenched at the sight.

“I’ve missed this too, Josh,” she whispered. “Feels even better now.”

Lowering himself, he captured her parted lips, kissing her slowly and deeply, enjoying the feel of her nipples scraping his chest as the slow pull of their bodies nearly brought him to the edge.

But not yet. He reaffirmed his control. He wasn’t done with her by a long shot.

Olivia slid her tongue inside his mouth, and he took that as a signal that it was time to take it to the next level. Josh pressed his tongue to hers and upped his thrusts to a spine-bending pace.

Her body trembled and fingernails dug into the back of his hands. “Josh...”

Again, she was close. He could feel it as she bucked wildly.

Determined to shatter her memories of the past and make the present a hell of a lot better, Josh drew on the last bit of restraint he had, slowed their pace, and straightened his elbows again.

“Look at me, Olivia.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and her gaze smoldered with a mixture of pleasure and need.

God, she was beautiful. Her face was flushed, and her lower lip was pulled between her teeth.

He released her hands and set one of his on the bed by her shoulder and lifted the other to caress her soft skin. Unlike both of her sisters’ skin, Olivia’s wasn’t light, nor was it as dark as her father’s. No. Her skin was the gorgeous color of a permanent tan. She had a sun-kissed glow that showcased her beautiful hazel eyes.

Unable to keep his hand still, he started on her shoulder then glided it over both of her gorgeous breasts to skim her

belly and linger above their connection.

“Josh...” Her voice was a breathless plea he felt straight through to his groin.

He watched as he shoved in and pulled nearly all the way out. Felt so damn good. Looked so damn hot.

“Please...I need...”

“What?” he asked, lifting his gaze to hers.

“You. Just you.”

His heart burst in his chest. “You have me, Olivia. You’ve always had me.”

Another tear slid down her face, but she increased her bucking, so he slid his thumb down and pressed on her center as he drove inside.

She cried out his name in a long, throaty whisper as she burst around him.

Aww, hell. That was it. He was done. She felt too damn good squeezing him. He grasped her hips and changed his angle, pumping deeper inside. When his release came, it hit with an intensity so strong it stole Josh’s breath and robbed him of his strength.

When he had no more to give, he slumped onto her, bending his elbows so he’d bear most of his weight. Josh buried his face in her neck as they both worked to catch their breath.

That was amazing. *She* was amazing.

For several minutes, he remained there, eyes closed, dragging in air, still rocking his hips to prolong their pleasure. Warm breath hit his skin in spurts as she nuzzled his neck and clutched his back.

So amazing. He’d wanted to shatter her past and forge a better future, but what just happened went well beyond that, and he’d been just as blown away. She was still breathing heavily when he pulled out and rolled to the side, before he set his forehead to hers.

“You okay?” he asked, lightly tracing her jaw.

She nodded. “Except I can’t feel my bones.”

Pride filled his chest, and he couldn’t stop the grin from claiming his mouth. “You’re welcome.”

She smacked his shoulder, and he chuckled. “Thought you couldn’t feel your bones?”

“That remark sparked a quick recovery.”

He grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers. “FYI, mine are mush right now too.”

“Good.” She smiled.

Despite the mush, Josh forced his body to leave her bed and head into her bathroom to clean up. When he returned, Gatsby was in his spot. “Oh, I see how this is going to be.” He picked up the purring cat and set him on Olivia’s other side. “I’m not taking over, bud. Just sharing.”

Her smiling gaze unexpectedly filled with tears. “That’s sweet.” She reached out to trace his jaw as he climbed in and tugged her closer. “Whatever just happened between us...that was so much better than I remembered.”

He nodded. “I agree. Our connection is definitely stronger.”

She caressed his face before moving her touch to his chest, stroking over his nipple, sending a zing through his awakening body. Her hand continued downward, skimming over his abs to lightly graze just below his belly. “Josh?”

“Yeah?” he replied, lifting his hand to do some caressing of his own. He brushed her nipple back and forth with his thumb, loving the way it puckered beneath.

Breath hitched in her throat. “Are your bones still mushy?”

Her hand slowly, temptingly inched south.

Awareness skittered down his spine, and his erection thickened against her leg. He grinned. “What do you think?”

She glanced from his growing hard-on to his eyes and smiled. “That I want a re-ride,” she said, reaching down to lightly grasp him in her hand, increasing his arousal to full mast. “But this time, I want to take top.”

He rolled onto his back and grinned. “Take whatever you want. I’m all yours.”

October was flying by, and Josh contributed it to time well *spent* with a good woman. For someone who’d wanted to go slowly, Olivia had vetoed that within their second week.

At first, she said she didn’t want to spend nights together. She’d needed time and she said that would sway her. It had sucked, leaving her warm, naked curves to head to the cabin before dawn, but he’d complied. He went to her place, because if they’d been in his bed, she would’ve been the one to leave, and he wasn’t about to let her drive home in the middle of the night.

But within ten days, that had ended. One night, he was getting out of her bed to leave when she’d set a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down.

“No. Stay. I’m ready for the next step,” she’d said. “I don’t want to wake up alone anymore. I want to wake up in your arms.”

He hadn’t looked back since, and neither had she. Olivia seemed to have finally put their past behind and trusted that he was not going to leave her again.

Hell, no. He’d finally won the biggest, most precious prize of all—having the woman he loved back in his life. The only place he was going in the future was to their new home...as soon as it was finished.

There had been a few minor delays, or he would’ve surprised her with it already. But only the kitchen countertops stood in the way now. They were supposed to be installed this afternoon, but he’d been spending the day with Olivia, so it was on his to-do list to check on them tomorrow.

His phone vibrated with a text.

He pulled it out and glanced at it then scowled. His former publicist again. Damn woman was persistent. Probably what had helped to get the sponsors and line his pockets, which made his land purchase and nearly finished house all possible.

But competing in rodeos was in the past, and he'd told the woman that more times than he could remember. Without looking at the offer, he sent her a "Not Interested. Stop texting me." message.

He shoved his phone away without bothering to block the woman because he already had, and yet, somehow the damn texts kept coming. The only other solution was to get a new number, but he had way too many contacts lined up for his soon-to-be bull business. They knew this number and he didn't want to take the chance that they wouldn't answer an unrecognized call.

Besides, it was the principle of the thing. If he blocked her, she shouldn't be able to text him.

"Okay, I'm ready for your help now," Olivia called out from the bathroom, gaining his attention.

Since Noah's birthday was the third week of October and so close to Halloween, Amanda and Dante were throwing a superhero costume birthday party for the little guy today, for which the McCalls insisted they use their ballroom.

Everyone was showing up in superhero costumes for Noah.

Josh was lucky. He was going as one of the galaxy superheroes, so he only had to borrow a brown leather jacket off Cole, and a portable cassette player with headphones from Olivia's father to go with his dark brown Carhartts. The costume also called for tall boots, but his favorite Ariats would have to do.

Olivia, on the other hand, had a more involved costume. She was going as green alien heroine from the same franchise. Apparently, her character and his were a couple.

"Coming," he said, hugging the wall as he walked past Gatsby, who sat in the middle of the hall licking his paw. "No

need to move, dude. I'll just go around you.”

He was smiling when he entered the bathroom, then he stopped dead. Even his pulse disappeared for a good second, then returned to race the heat funneling straight to his groin.

“Damn, Olivia...” He would've said more, but he'd couldn't remember words.

She stood in front of the mirror wearing nothing but a black thong.

Chapter 9

With all the blood rushing to his groin, Josh stood with his mouth open, enjoying the view. Olivia's hair had a reddish tint, and her face, neck, and the front of her shoulders were green, showcasing her glorious bare breasts.

"I'm loving the look. Trust me, it's hot," he said, leaning in the doorway. "But I don't think it's appropriate for a three-year-old's birthday party."

She smacked his arm. "No kidding. I need you to help make me green so I can get dressed, you goof."

"Okay, uh...how do I make you green?"

She nodded toward the counter full of different shades of green powders, a bunch of triangle-shaped sponges, a spray bottle, and a translucent powder. "You dip a damp sponge into the water-activated paint then pat it on my skin."

His entire body grew rigid.

He got to paint her breasts?

Josh didn't know what he'd done to deserve that treat, but he was going to enjoy every single *pat*.

Olivia demonstrated the technique—paint, translucent setting powder, paint, setting powder—until she was satisfied it was the correct color green for her character. Then he repeated the process with her. Together, it took about twenty minutes. He covered her back, and helped paint her front, paying particular attention to her luscious breasts.

"I don't want to disappoint Noah," she said, turning sideways to look at herself in the mirror.

"Well, you've certainly made me happy." He grinned.

She met his gaze in the mirror and laughed. "Glad I could help."

He was glad too. He was also so damn hard his dick could dent metal.

After he sealed their masterpiece with the sealant spray, he washed the green from his hands with soap and water. When he lifted his gaze, he found her smiling at him.

“Thanks,” she said.

He grinned. “It was my pleasure.”

“I better get dressed,” she said. “Don’t worry about this mess. I’ll clean it up tonight. Just relax in the other room.”

He grunted as he slowly moved to lean against the wall. “I’m going to need a minute.”

The erection threatening to burst his zipper took so much space in his pants, he could barely move, let alone walk.

Her brow wrinkled. “I’m sorry.”

He snorted. “No, you’re not. And neither am I.”

She left him with a hard-on and a smile.

Once she disappeared into her bedroom, he regained control of his body and returned to the living room within a matter of minutes.

As soon as he settled onto the couch, Gatsby appeared out of nowhere and curled up on his lap. The cat was purring before Josh even touched him. He was cute and sweet, like his owner.

“I think you’re going to like your new place,” he whispered to the black and white furball. “You’ll have lots more space to roam, and tons of bedrooms to choose from.”

Gatsby looked at him and halfway closed his eyes.

Josh took that as a sign that the cat approved.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Olivia rushed into the room, wearing black, skin-tight spandex that clung exquisitely to her rounded curves.

His erection instantly sprang to life again.

And when she lifted her hands and did a three-sixty for him, he promptly swallowed his tongue. Damn, her ass looked amazing.

“How do I look?”

With desire ruling his actions, he set the cat aside and rose to his feet. Already knowing her makeup was set, he moved close and kissed her, sliding his hands around her ass to cup both cheeks and crushed her against him. She gripped his jacket and kissed him back, zapping his brain cells with superheroine force.

When he broke for air, he smiled at her. “Does that answer your question?”

She dragged in a ragged breath. “What question?”

He chuckled and gave her one last squeeze before forcing himself to back away. “You do know I’m not going to be able to keep my hands off you tonight.”

“Yes, you will.” She smiled. “There will be a lot of children there, so you have to behave.”

He muttered a curse. “That’s right. I forgot.”

Hell, he was lucky he remembered his name with her smoking-hot body outlined in spandex. She was a brick house, and he was a lucky SOB to be the only occupant.

Smiling, she sauntered to him and slid her arms around his neck, snuggling those luscious curves against him, sending a shock of awareness straight to his groin.

“I’ll make it up to you later,” she murmured against his lips, then stepped out of his arms to grab the birthday gift off the table, leaving him hard and hanging. “But first, Noah’s party.”

Swallowing down an oath, he nodded, and slapped her ass on their way to the door.

They arrived fifteen minutes later to find the ballroom decked out in superhero decorations while life-size characters mingled around the room.

“Mom, Dad, look!” Noah exclaimed, rushing to them. He touched Olivia’s arm then glanced up at her. “Is it really you?”

Smiling, she knelt down. “It’s me, Aunt Olivia. Remember you asked me to come as the green alien woman?”

He grinned. “Yes, but you look just like her.”

“Yeah, Olivia,” Amanda said as she and Dante and a few others walked over. “You look fantastic.”

Olivia stood and shrugged. “Thanks.”

She never was good at taking compliments.

“But how did you make your skin green and your hair red?” Noah asked, still staring at her.

She squatted down. “I just used a shampoo dye that washed the color in, and a special body paint that washes off with soap and water.”

And damn, Josh was already looking forward to later when he got to take his time soaping her up in the shower. But that would have to wait, and so did those thoughts.

He handed the present to Olivia.

“Happy Birthday, Noah,” she said, giving the little boy his gift that she’d wrapped in what else? Superhero paper. “This is from Josh and me.”

He wished the little guy a happy birthday, and grinned when the toddler tore at the paper to get to his gift while all the children converged to watch.

“Sorry,” Dante said. “He hasn’t really had a big birthday party before. He’s still learning the ropes.”

Olivia grinned. “I say let him open when he wants to open. Sometimes people wait too late, and half the guests are gone by the time the presents are opened.”

“Cool! A superhero sleeping bag!” Noah gave him a hug, then Olivia. “*Danks.*”

“You’re welcome,” they said in unison as she rose to her feet.

“Now you can bring that with you when you stay at my house,” Dillan said, excitedly.

Noah nodded but his gaze was still on them. “Do you guys sleep *togeder*?”

“Noah!” Dante’s eyes widened. “That isn’t something you should go around asking people.”

The little boy frowned. “Why not?”

His father squatted down. “That’s something people kind of keep private.”

“I just wanted to know, ‘cause once you and Mom slept *togeder*, Mom moved in.”

A quiet chuckle sounded around them along with a gasp from Amanda.

“Yeah.” Dillan stepped forward and nodded. “That happened with my mom and dad too.” The little boy grinned. “And I told Noah that was the trick.”

Josh was clenching his jaw to keep his laughter in check.

Noah nodded and turned his attention back to him and Olivia. “If you guys sleep in *da* same bed, *den* you will live *togeder* and get married and I will have *anoder* uncle.”

God, he loved how little minds worked. Straight to the point. No added bullshit.

He squatted next to Dante. “Well, thanks for the advice, boys,” he said, maintaining a serious expression. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“You’re welcome.” The boys grinned then ran off to play with the others.

Dante shook his head as they both rose to their feet. “Sorry about that.”

He chuckled. “Don’t be.”

“Yeah,” Olivia said, sliding her arm around him. “That saying, ‘Kids say the darndest things’ didn’t come from nowhere.”

Amanda laughed. “True.” She set her hand on Dante’s chest and smiled up at the guy. “I can’t believe the next time

we're in this ballroom, we'll be getting married."

Dante lifted a hand to cup her chin. "I know. The next two weeks can't pass quickly enough."

The sentiment was understandable, but it was weird to see and hear it said between comic book characters.

The evening carried with it more weirdness and hilarity throughout. Between Dante's work buddies and the McCalls and Daltons, the entire superhero universe was in attendance. None was more fitting than Kevin as the trickster God, though. The joker embodied the part so well. But the one that made Josh laugh every time he caught sight of the guy was Connor as the superhero with a hammer.

The long, blond wig was Josh's undoing, although the women and kids seemed to love it. Go figure.

"Noah wanted the hammer guy, he was getting the hammer guy," Connor told him, but it was damn hard to keep a straight face while they talked.

Luckily, Olivia could sense his dilemma and pulled him away to dance when someone started playing the soundtrack which was also on the cassette in the player attached to his belt.

Happy to oblige, he led Olivia around the dance floor, her laughter and smiles sending warmth to his chest. His heart was so damn full, he thought it might burst.

When the song tempo slowed, he pulled her close and they swayed to the music like the other couples around them. At the other end of the room, some of the kids were batting balloons, while the others were putting puzzles together with Olivia's parents. And in the far corner by the wet bar, the McCalls and his aunt and uncle were toasting something with flutes of what looked like champagne. He didn't feel like it had anything to do with Noah's birthday, but hey, whatever made them happy.

He certainly was. Josh tightened his hold on Olivia and brushed her temple with his lips. "Having a good time?"

She drew back slightly and smiled at him. "I always have a good time with you."

God, it was so good to hear her say things like that.

He returned the smile. “I try.”

“You don’t need to try.” Sincerity gleamed in her eyes as she reached up to touch his face. “I love being with you.”

Josh didn’t think it was possible, but his heart swelled even further.

“In fact,” she said, her gaze soft and so damn sweet. “I love—”

“Doctor Harrison? Olivia? Is she here?” an authoritative male voice sounded behind them.

Olivia blinked, and they stopped dancing to turn in the direction of the voice.

“Sheriff Bryson? I’m right here.” She waved. “What’s wrong?”

Gabe Bryson strolled over with his brows raised. “Olivia? I never would’ve recognized you.”

She glanced down at herself. “Oh, yeah, right. What’s wrong? It can’t be my family, they’re all here.”

“No.” The sheriff shook his head. “It’s my family. My brother, Tyler. A Navy pilot. He was injured on base. He’s stable. And damn lucky. Has a broken shoulder and an injury to the right side of his face and eye. The doctors that treated him, said there isn’t anything else they can do. When I looked into specialists, you were highly recommended. I was hoping you’d take a look at him.

She nodded. “Yes, of course. Do you have access to his medical records, assessment, photos, X-rays, anything?”

“All those things.” The sheriff nodded.

“Good,” she said, then gave the guy her email. “Send everything to me. I’ll go home and start viewing it all tonight.”

Gabe blew out a breath as relief eased the tightness of his jaw. “Thanks, Doc. I’m sorry to bust up your night.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. But I’ll need a ride home.”

Josh set a hand on her shoulder. "I'll take you."

"No." Shaking her head, she turned to face him. "You stay and enjoy the party. I'll be working."

So basically, he'd be in the way, and he didn't want to interfere with her job. "Okay."

She leaned in to kiss him. "I'll call you tomorrow." A smile tugged at her lips as she lowered her voice. "And I'll take a raincheck on that shower."

Arousal flickered through him. *Yes, ma'am.* He winked. "You got it."

He watched her say her goodbyes along with Gabe's sister and husband before the bunch left the room.

"Do you think he'll be able to fly again?" Amanda asked, concern marring her brow.

Dante shook his head. "I don't know, but I doubt it."

"That's rough," Holden said, and everyone agreed.

Josh didn't know the guy, but he definitely had sympathy for his long road ahead. At least he had the best damn eye surgeon on his team.

A wave from Brandi caught his attention and had him walking to the woman dressed like a female agent from the forties. Her husband, Kade, stood next to her, wearing a WWII superhero Captain costume. Hunter wore the updated version of the same character tonight.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked when he neared.

"I wanted to talk to you about the countertop," his designer said. "It arrived today with a big crack in it. I called the supplier, and they'll cut another slab and have it installed, but the earliest is ten days, which puts it in the first week of November."

Well, damn.

Disappointment hollowed his gut.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know you were hoping to surprise Olivia this weekend.”

He exhaled. “Yeah. But, hey, things happen.”

Like an emergency interruption to what would’ve been an epic ending to an already fantastic evening. Fate had its own agenda and Josh had learned long ago it was better to just go with it than to buck it.

Besides, he was pretty sure she’d been about to tell him that she loved him tonight, so they had all the time in the world. Since it was now supposed to be installed the week of the wedding, he would wait until after that day. He was going to start moving some of his things over so he could just worry about her things when the time arrived.

Olivia had her plate full at the moment. He would rather wait until some of her commitments were over and she could concentrate on herself before he presented her with her gift.

A smile tugged at his lips.

He’d waited this long, another two weeks wouldn’t hurt.

Right?

Chapter 10

The day of the wedding was unseasonably warm for the first Saturday in November, but the nuptials were held inside anyway.

Her sister had made the most beautiful bride, and Olivia had never seen Amanda happier than when she exchanged vows with her very handsome husband. It had been an honor to stand up with one of Dante's friends, another McCall, and watch the happy couple merge their lives. But one of the best parts had been watching Noah walk down the aisle arm-in-arm with the little girl of one of Dante's friends.

They were so cute.

Noah had rocked a freaking adorable black tux like his dad, while the little girl had worn a white tulle dress with tiny yellow daisies on it, and daisies in her hair. As she held onto Noah's arm, she dropped rose petals on the red carpet runner, but every once in a while, she'd stop to pick them up and put them back in her little white basket.

The kids melted Olivia's heart. It was the soothing balm she'd needed after a less than easy two weeks.

The sheriff's brother, Ty, was a challenging case. Admittedly, she wasn't sure at first if she could even save the eye, but after the first surgery, she was pleased to have passed that hurdle. The second operation, earlier this week, took him from blurry vision to clear vision with glasses.

But the guy wanted her to try again. Try something new. Anything that could get his sight back to the way it was.

She'd explained twenty-twenty without glasses wasn't possible, not with his injury, but he wouldn't listen. Olivia had even consulted with Dr. Kramer, who'd gone over everything and had proclaimed her correct. She'd exhausted every avenue. Lasik wasn't an option, and there wasn't anything he would've done differently.

Still, she couldn't help but feel like she'd failed, therefore, she was not giving up. She'd find a way to improve his vision, although, at the moment, there wasn't any technology out there that would work.

"Smile, you're at a wedding," Josh whispered in her ear as they danced together.

She snapped out of her self-pity party and smiled. "You're right." She slid her hands from his shoulders to his chest. "Have I told you how handsome you look today?"

The guy was decked out in a black suit and black tie, and her heartbeats quickened whenever she looked at him.

"No." He grinned.

"Well, you do, and I can't wait to take you out of your clothes later."

Need darkened his gaze. "I can't wait either."

Guilt spiked in her gut.

Although he'd spent several nights at her place the past two weeks, they hadn't had a lot of sex. It was her fault. She'd been too caught up in Tyler's case, her mind continuously working out scenarios and possible surgical options to let her enjoy herself.

It was like a self-imposed punishment, which wasn't fair to Josh at all. But he'd insisted he wanted to stay, and never once pushed her for sex. In fact, he'd cradled her in bed, lightly rubbing her arms, back, and even her hair, until she relaxed enough to sleep.

Yeah, she owed him big time. And tonight was that time.

"What do you say we cut out of here as soon as the bride and groom leave?"

His grin widened. "I'd say you've got yourself a deal."

She patted his chest. "And we go to your cabin because it's closer."

"Works for me," he said, dipping down to kiss her lips.

She'd been thinking about doing that very thing all day. When he drew back, she gripped his lapel and gulped in air. "And that works for me."

He chuckled. "When do you think they're leaving?"

She glanced over his shoulder and spotted her sister and new brother-in-law wearing jeans. "I'd say very soon. They've already changed their clothes."

Josh turned to look but didn't release her. "That's great. Come on. They're already forming a send-off line."

Olivia slid her arm around Josh and waved bye to the newlyweds. As soon as Dante and her sister disappeared from the ballroom, Josh turned to her.

"Ready?"

She laughed. "Eager, are you?"

"You have no idea." His gaze heated, and her knees nearly buckled.

She gripped his hip. "You're going to have to turn down that smolder, or I won't be able to walk out of here."

A sexy grin spread across his lips. "Not a problem. I'd be happy to carry you."

She laughed. "Pretty sure that would raise some brows, and seeing as we're about to leave when there are still a few hours of daylight left, I should probably walk out on my own."

"You're right," he said begrudgingly.

"Mr. Josh! Mr. Josh! Can I have a bull ride?" Noah asked, rushing to them with several kids in tow, all asking for a ride.

She smiled when he looked apologetically at her, then removed his suit coat and handed it to her. "Okay," she said to the kids. "Two at a time. You have to take turns, so let's form a line."

For the next fifteen minutes, Josh moved around the dance floor on his hands and knees, raising up onto his knees, making the kids cackle while they held on tight. At one point,

his phone fell out of his pocket, so she'd picked it up and shoved it into his suit coat pocket.

After a few more minutes, Hunter and Kade showed up and told the kids it was time to give the bull a rest.

Several of the children grumbled, but they all thanked him and ran off to play another game.

“Ah, saved by a double dose of superhero Captains.” He grinned as he rose to his feet, then grimaced and shook out each leg.

“That was a different party, hon,” she said, handing him his suit coat.

He shrugged. “But it’s still fitting.” He took the coat but didn’t put it on. “This bull is too overheated right now.”

She slid her arm through his. “Then perhaps we should get this bull outside.”

Josh winked. “Perhaps we should.”

After saying their goodbyes, they walked to his truck, hand in hand. Thoughts of their late afternoon extracurricular activities quickened her step. He must’ve been on the same page, because after he opened her door for her then shut it after she gathered the skirts of her gown and climbed in, he hurried to the driver’s side and was seated next to her in what seemed like a blink of an eye.

Smiling, she took his coat from his hands and folded it on her lap to give him space. They were halfway to the Dalton’s nearby property when a text vibrated his phone on her lap.

“Can you check that?” he asked. “If that’s Kevin asking for a bull ride, then give it to me.”

Olivia laughed, fishing out his phone. “I’d be happy to type your response.”

He shook his head. “It’s too vulgar to say in front of you.”

“Aww, you’re sweet,” she said, glancing at the screen.

Her heart lurched and she could feel the blood rush to her feet as she read the text.

I did it! They agreed to everything you wanted! Snagged you a great sponsor and a spot in Fort Worth in two weeks! Call me, ASAP

“What is it? What’s wrong,” he asked, concern ruling his tone. “Olivia? Talk to me.”

She would, if she could catch her breath. The pain was so deep, her thundering heart had pounded her breath away.

He was returning to the rodeo and had never told her. How could he?

God, not again.

“Olivia?”

She held up a finger and forced her jaw to work. “I can’t believe you planned to go back onto the circuit without telling me.”

His head jerked back. “What? That’s bullshit. Who told you that?” he asked, switching his gaze from her to the road as he continued to drive.

“It’s in black and white right here on your phone.” The gall of the guy to lie to her face, and without blinking.

Although, he did seem shocked.

Probably because she’d found out.

God, she didn’t know. She was so confused.

“Then it’s wrong,” he said with such conviction, it gave her pause for thought.

As her heart cracked down the middle, she watched him through blurry eyes.

His jaw dropped open, then clenched as dawning enter his eyes, followed by a good bit of anger. “Carmella sent the text, didn’t she?”

Olivia shrugged. She’d seen that name on the screen, but she couldn’t bring herself to talk at the moment.

He muttered a curse and his knuckles whitened as he gripped the wheel. “I definitely need to explain something to

you,” he said, then turned onto a dirt road before he pulled over and parked.

Her heart pounded hard in her chest. Was he about to admit he was lying? Or that he had another woman? No, her mind immediately vetoed the last one. She knew the guy cared about her. If anything, it was the fact he missed the rodeo that he probably wanted to discuss.

That thought nearly sent her scrambling from the truck, but she was no longer a teenager. She was going to stay and face whatever this was about.

“Olivia, I love you. I’ve always loved you, and you know that.”

She inhaled and opened her mouth, intent on chewing him out for using her emotions against her until he lifted a finger in the universal signal, asking her to wait.

Why she did, she wasn’t sure, but there was something in his eyes, almost a pleading, that she couldn’t ignore.

His gaze clouded. “There are times I wish you’d trust me instead of jumping to the wrong conclusion. Like now.”

It’d been in black and white. How could she misinterpret that message?

He tugged his phone still gripped in her hand and glanced at the screen. “Dammit. What is it going to take to get her to listen?” he muttered more to himself than her. “The text is from my former publicist. She’s been trying to get me to come back to the rodeo ever since I left. I keep telling her no. I’ve blocked her, but she still manages to get through. Here, scroll up, you’ll see how many times I’ve told her I’m done and not interested.”

Josh held the phone out to her, but she shook her head, her chest tightening as she started to realize perhaps, she’d been wrong.

“So, you didn’t ask her to broker a deal.”

“No. God, no. I’m done with that life, Olivia. I meant what I said. I’m never leaving you again.”

She frowned as some of her anger funneled toward this woman. “She’s just doing this on her own?”

“Yes.”

Olivia inhaled then exhaled slowly. “You got an address for her so I can pay her a visit? Because she just nearly stopped my world.”

He choked out a laugh. “I don’t think you should visit her.”

Her eyes burned with tears of frustration and her stupidity. “I’m sorry. Josh. You’re right. I need to trust you.” She glanced down at her hands she clenched tightly on her lap. “But with you living in the Dalton’s cabin and working part-time with Connor, it gave credence to that text.”

He opened his mouth, but this time she held up her finger to silence him so she could speak.

“And I’ve been so happy—too happy. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.” She inhaled and decided to go for broke and completely open up. “The two times I’ve been in a relationship, the men left me for their careers. It’s what I’m used to. I guess I just expected it to happen again.”

He reached out to grab her hand. “Look at me, Livy.” When she did, he continued, “I will never leave you again. You were right. I shouldn’t have done it the first time. I do regret it. I deeply regret that I made you mistrustful. I’m so, so sorry.”

Her throat burned at his admission and her stupidity. “We’ve both made mistakes. Stupid ones. Ones I wish we could take back.”

He nodded. “Can we make a pact to leave the past in the past and learn from it?”

“Yes. And I’m sorry I jumped to that conclusion without asking you about the text first.”

“No. Don’t be sorry,” he said, squeezing her hand. “I understand how bad this text looked at face value, and that I need to continue to work on rebuilding your trust in me.”

“I want to trust you, so badly. And I do, it’s just I saw that message, and it pulled me back to that young high school graduate who’d lost her world.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head before opening them again. “I hope you believe me when I say I love you, Olivia.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

She swallowed past her tight throat and nodded. “I love you too, Josh, that’s why when I saw that text it hurt so bad.” She closed her eyes, and a few tears ran down her face. “God, I’m so glad I was wrong.” She opened her eyes to find raw emotion in his eyes.

It stole her breath.

“You said it.” He grinned. “You love me.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “Because I do. I’ve never stopped. I’ve just been too afraid to say it out loud in case I jinxed what we have going now.”

“Oh, it doesn’t jinx it, Olivia,” he insisted. “It makes it better. So much better.”

He hauled her closer and kissed her, softly, sweetly, deeply. She clung to him, pouring all her feelings into the kiss because she was receiving some heavy emotions from him too. And when they finally broke for air, he brushed a strand of hair off her face and smiled.

“Come on. It’s time I took you home.”

She cocked her head, wondering why his tone held a deeper meaning, and they were supposed to go to his cabin, not her townhouse.

In less than a minute, she could barely catch her breath. It was hitched in her throat now hot with another round of tears, only these were the good kind.

Remaining silent, he parked the truck and got out while she stared at the beautiful two-story house with a gorgeous front porch, complete with a porch swing. It was as if it’d

materialized from her dreams. The ones they used to talk about while lying in a field not far from here.

Her door opened, and Josh stood there, a warm smile on his face as he helped her from the truck and shut the door.

“I don’t understand.” She blinked and glanced around but didn’t see a For Sale sign. This place hadn’t been around in their youth, or they would’ve had to find a different field for dreaming and other special memories. “Where are we?”

“Home,” he said simply, waving his hand at the house.

Olivia’s heart rocked while her confusion grew.

She blinked. “Home? But...but how?”

“I bought this land from the McCalls when I returned to Harland, and I told Brandi about the house you and I used to talk about, and she’d produced this from all of my prize money that I’ve saved over the past decade, as well as the profit from my parents’ house.”

Shock pounded through her chest. “You sank it all into this?”

Too bad she hadn’t known this a few months ago...

No. That was a negative thought, and from now on, there would be no negative thoughts allowed. The past stayed in the past.

“Yes, I did,” he replied with a grin. “There’s also a horse barn and a bull barn so I can raise bulls for the rodeo.”

She smiled. “That’s so perfect for you.” And now she understood why he’d been working for Connor. The guy was a walking vat of knowledge when it came to cattle. “I hope you know I insist on contributing some money for your livestock or something, once I sell my townhouse.”

“That’s not necessary,” he said, then raised a brow when she cocked her head. “But I accept graciously and with much appreciation.”

She smiled. “Good.”

“I should apologize to you, though,” he said. “I realize now I should have told you about this place sooner, but I had this image in my head of surprising you.”

She lifted up to kiss his lips, enjoying the warmth as a light breeze kicked up. “It’s a wonderful surprise. I’m blown away.”

“Yeah?” His eyes were alight with joy and a little bit of mischief. “Wait until you see the inside. Brandi just finished the house this week.”

She gasped as realization dawned. “Oh my God...that’s why she was asking my sisters and me about decorating preferences when we saw her once at the Tex Pub this summer.”

He grinned. “She wanted to make sure she captured your style while leaving you a blank canvas to put your own touches on.”

Olivia had never experienced such happiness in all her life. It kept piling on her and piling on. She could barely breathe from the sheer joy bombarding her.

She turned to stare at the beautiful house that had been in her mind for so long. “I can’t believe this is really ours.” She returned her attention to Josh, her eyes filling with tears again. “And I can’t believe you did this.”

“I’d do anything for you, Olivia.” He gently cupped her face and brushed her cheek with his thumb. “We both accomplished our goals. Now, it’s time to live our dreams.”

Her heart leapt in her chest. “I so agree. Tell me...are there a lot of bedrooms?”

He grinned. “Yep.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” She ran her hand down his chest and shivered, partly from the cool air but mostly in anticipation of a heated night. “Then we should get started on filling them.”

“You read my mind.” He grabbed her hand and led her onto the porch, and after he used a key to unlock and open the

door, he swept her into his arms and carried her inside.
“Welcome home, Livy.”

* * *

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Donna Michaels is an award winning, *New York Times* & *USA Today* bestselling author of *Romaginative* fiction. Her hot, humorous, and heartwarming stories include cowboys, men in uniform, and some sexy primal alphas. With a husband recently retired from the military, four children, two granddaughters, two grandsons, and several rescued cats, she never runs out of material. From short to epic, her books entertain readers across a variety of sub-genres, and one has even been hand-drawn into a Japanese Translation.

Now, if only she could read it...

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The Cowboy Billionaire's Lucky Break

Sylvia McDaniel

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The Cowboy Billionaire's Lucky Break

The Billionaire Needs a Fake Engagement.

Since he struck it big with the Powerball, Adrian Landry has been dodging women. Only problem is that he needs an escort for the rodeo ball season, one without any expectations. And when he gets what he wants, it backfires on him, big time.

Accomplished lawyer Madison Benton yearns to return home to Oakdale, Texas, and abandon her high-powered career. When she learns of Adrian's predicament, she proposes a deal. She will be his date for the season if he assists her start-up legal firm. No strings attached.

Is it possible for two people to pretend to be engaged without becoming emotionally attached? Particularly when they've been friends forever.

Chapter 1

Adrian Landry knew he should have brought a date to the Burnett's roundup ball. Since his divorce two years ago, women seemed to think he was an open target – a billionaire in need of companionship. And Norma Jean Radcliffe had set her sights on him. All night she'd been flirting, buying him drinks, and laying her hands on him.

Problem was he knew her type of woman and wanted nothing to do with her. And yet, his manners insisted that he not act rude.

There was safety in numbers, so he did his best to remain in a crowd of men, talking cattle, horses, rodeos, and the current price of beef on the hooves.

The man next to him snickered. "Adrian, you're one lucky son of a bitch."

"Yes, I am," he admitted, wondering what brought this up.

Five years ago, Adrian won the Powerball. As a broke, about-to-lose-his-ranch cowboy, he'd stopped at a convenience store, and on a whim, bought a ticket. At the time, he'd thought why the hell not?

The next day when he heard on the news that someone in Callahan County had won the Powerball, he remembered he'd purchased a ticket. To his complete disbelief, he discovered the one little stop had changed his life forever.

First, he made the Kissing Oaks Corporation. Then he'd informed his brothers they were all going to college. They wouldn't receive their part of the money until they held a college diploma in their hands.

Next, he'd paid off the debts the ranch had incurred and even brought in a man to help him make the Kissing Oaks Ranch successful. And the man had helped him turn their inheritance into one of the richest spreads in Texas, right up there with the Burnett Family Ranch.

Finally, he'd let Laurie Brown convince him they were ready to marry. It seemed logical, but sometimes logical and practical didn't go together. And love? He'd been fooled by that emotion.

Now he knew better than to believe in that nonsense.

"Why am I lucky?" he asked the man.

"First, you win the Powerball, and next you have beautiful women throwing themselves at you."

"That's not luck," a man standing next to him in a custom tuxedo that looked like western wear said. "That's the power of money. Women can smell a rich man a hundred miles away. Adrian, here, is covered in the scent and they're on the hunt to catch him any way they can."

Adrian laughed. "You're right. I've already been caught once. She hooked me big time. But I'm older and wiser and way more jaded now. Once burned, twice shy."

The men nodded.

"Yes, but the sweet perfume of money is a potent attraction," the man in the tuxedo said. "Look at the gaggle of women standing over there staring at you. You're a wanted man."

Adrian was about to walk away. He didn't like to talk about his personal life or be the center of attention, and since he'd won the lottery, people tried to attach themselves to him. It was hard to know if people were his friends or just lured by the money they knew he had.

"Saw your interview in the Rancher's Magazine," Travis Burnett said. "Good information."

"Thank you," he replied, remembering how the reporter kept asking questions about his personal life and how he'd side-stepped most of them.

"Sorry to hear about you and Laurie," Joshua Burnett said.

What could he say? His ex-wife had found she didn't like being married to a cattleman. She'd expected a life of luxury and traveling the world in a private jet. But he had a ranch to

run. A business. He was determined to be successful. And that meant working long hours.

So she'd found refuge in another man's arms.

Half a million dollars later, she was out of his life for good. But now he was back on the meat market and women wanted to latch onto him and drag him to the altar.

One thing Laurie did was make him very aware of how easy it would be to fall prey to a pretty face and a woman's well-rounded curves.

"Thank you. But what these women don't realize is that I'm off the marriage market. I'm done."

The men chuckled.

"How many of you have ever said that?" Mr. Smartass in a tux asked. "I've certainly said it a number of times and then a pretty woman walks by and I'm a goner."

Cameron Burnett shook his head. "I've watched my cousins meet women and fall in love. As for me, I'm trying to build my own business. I'm looking to find a piece of property and turn it into a place where people can spend their vacation time. Sort of an exclusive B&B for the wealthy."

Tuxedo man shook his head. "Don't you Burnett's own enough of that market?"

"No, we cater to families. This would be for wealthy people. An adult getaway. Not families. A specialty western wedding venue. Weddings are big money."

The men were silent for a moment and Adrian was just about ready to tell them all goodnight when the tuxedo man started to laugh.

"Look out, Adrian, Norma Jean is headed this way with a determined glint in her eyes," he said, smiling. "Damn, I'd like a taste of her."

Adrian was really starting to dislike this guy and even wondered why he was here. But Adrian was networking and had made several lucrative deals with men he'd met at these

events. This was business. Not personal. Yet the man's comment was uncalled for.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Norma Jean said with a purr, dark lashes flickering over her brown eyes focused on Adrian. A pouty smile filled her full lips. "Adrian, would you dance with me?"

His mother, God rest her soul, had taught him to be a gentleman to all women. And as much as he didn't want to, he couldn't turn down Norma Jean's request in front of everyone.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, setting his drink on a tray. After this, he was leaving. He'd had enough for one evening. Time to go home to the quiet, soothing sounds of cattle.

Taking her into his arms, he swept her onto the floor to a waltz.

"How long have you been divorced," she asked him as they glided around the floor to the sounds of the band.

"Two years," he said.

She nodded and he realized she knew how long he'd been divorced. She was just laying the trap that he was certain she was about to spring on him.

"How long since you've been with a woman," she asked her voice a velvety purr.

A bear trap. And if he wasn't careful, he'd get caught.

How did he respond to that brazen question? It had been way too long, but he wasn't about to give in now. Not to the man snare she was setting out.

"Darling," he said with a low throaty growl, "where are you going with this question?"

She gave a little pout. "You're lonely, I'm lonely. We're two adults with needs. We can satisfy each other's desires."

There was no doubt she could satisfy him and probably half the men in the room, but he wasn't going to let his baser needs overtake his better judgment. She'd been around the

block a time or two, and he was not going to be her next victim.

He twirled her on the dance floor, maneuvering them around other couples to the sound of the music. "I'm sure that any man in this room would love for you to make that offer to him. But I'm not available."

It wasn't a complete lie. He wasn't available emotionally or physically to any woman. That tap had been turned off.

"Oh, you're seeing someone? I hadn't heard."

Now he would have to lie.

"Yes," he said, thinking maybe he should hire an escort service for a woman to go with him to the balls coming up. It was the beginning of the rodeo season. Tonight was the first gala, and he wasn't looking forward to turning down a woman each time.

A frown crossed her face. "Adrian, I have admired you from afar for years, and after waiting for your divorce to be over and for you to become available, I learn that you've already been snatched up."

Not really, but it was all right. Besides, he remembered her turning up her nose at him when he was a struggling rancher with little to no money. It was only now, post-wealth, that she had taken an interest in him.

It was a big temptation to remind her of how she'd ignored him until she learned he'd won the lottery. But again, he could hear his mother's voice reminding him to be polite regardless of how other people acted.

"Darling, I'm no catch. Just ask Laurie. I couldn't make her happy," he said.

She ran her hand up his chest, her fingers trailing along his muscles. "Some women are stupid. You would make me very happy."

A marriage took two people, and as much as he didn't want to admit it, he'd caused a fair number of problems that sent Laurie running into another man's arms. At the time, he'd

been going to college, learning from the man he hired to run the ranch, and determined to make the Kissing Oaks Ranch the best.

In the end, his hard work had been rewarded.

“And some men are just cruel,” he said, doing his best to discourage her from acting like a fool for him.

A grin spread across her face. “Honey, a woman like me can tame a cruel man. When I’m finished with you, you’ll be begging me for more. You’ll be a kitten waiting for me to stroke you.”

Damn!

What happened to letting the man pursue a woman? Even if he was interested, her actions were turning him off.

Thankfully, the music came to an end. Like a gentleman, he escorted her from the dance floor, his hand on the small of her back as he guided her toward the side.

Spinning around, she faced him.

“I don’t know who you’re seeing but drop her. I’ll make it worth your while. You won’t regret being with me,” she said as she leaned in close to his ear. “My pussy is tight and my tongue is wicked.”

Did the woman really believe that was going to entice him into spending the night with her? If he was going to attend any more balls, he had to do something to keep the vultures at bay. And he really needed to go to these events if he wanted to keep abreast of the ever-changing ranching business and valuable connections.

When they were off the dance floor, she leaned in and pressed her body into his, and he smelled the sweet perfume she wore. His dick hardened and she grinned, knowing what she was doing to him. It was a natural reaction to a beautiful woman, but nothing more.

At the moment, he felt nothing for this woman, except maybe contempt.

“Honey, follow me home and I’ll take care of that for you. Whoever your mystery woman is, she’s not doing her job. That would never be a problem if you were my cowboy.”

This was not how he wanted a woman. Two years ago, he’d given up his dreams of a wife and family. Two years ago, his wife had broken his heart and ended his hopes and dreams of a happy marriage like his parents.

This was not how he’d ever imagined his wife would act. Norma Jean was not the woman he wanted sharing his bed at night or day. Laurie had ruined him from ever finding a happily ever after.

He leaned in close to her. “Darling, you can quit trying so hard. It’s not going to happen.”

A red flush filled her face and her sapphire eyes flashed angrily and she grabbed his bolero and pulled him in close. “No man tells me no.” She reached down and rubbed her hand on his cock, even though they were in a crowded room. “Sooner or later, you’ll say yes. They all do.”

She released him and smiled. “Goodnight, Adrian.”

With a swish of her silk evening gown, she turned on her stilettos and walked away, her hips swaying with an open invitation.

People stood in small groups talking, and hopefully, no one had noticed that she’d done her best to persuade him to spend the night with her.

Standing speechless, he watched as she walked away, telling his cock to stand down. For the next ball, he’d have to do something different. Anything to help him ward off the vipers like Norma Jean.

Chapter 2

Madison Benton pushed her long blonde hair away from her face and listened to the real estate agent explain the terms of the lease.

“This space is right on Main Street and you’d have not only foot traffic, but also phone traffic. We only have one attorney in town. You’d be the second. You would be in the center of our small town.”

The time had come to move back to her hometown of Oakdale. At the age of seventy, her mother was beginning to have health problems, though she continued to work. Plus, Madison was tired of living in the overcrowded, sprawling city of Dallas. Yes, she was fortunate that she worked with one of the largest law firms in the state, but she longed for her own practice.

She longed to return to small-town living.

The man droned on and on about the little city of Oakdale, and she’d grown up here. She’d graduated from high school and went to Baylor three hours away. But at the age of twenty-nine, she wanted to be closer to her mother to help if she needed anything.

After her mother had a minor stroke, Madison decided it was time to go home. It hadn’t been a hard decision when she realized the time had come. Her mother nor she had any idea where her father had gone or if he was dead or alive. And frankly, she didn’t care. The two women had done fine on their own.

And now all she needed was ten small clients or one large one for her private practice to make it. And she knew one person who could help her. They’d been friends for years, but she seldom saw him since he’d won the lottery.

Still, maybe he would help her.

“I’ll take it,” she said, knowing it would be at least a month or longer before she could move in and work

permanently from this location. First, she had to finish up a big case she was on, then give her notice before she moved back to where she'd grown up.

“Great. Let's go back to the office and sign the contracts,” the man said with a smile.

Afterward, she would visit her mother and tell her the good news. She was coming home.

Failure was not an option, but if she didn't have enough clients within a year, she'd have to make some hard decisions about returning to the city. But for now, she could live off her savings.

An hour later, she got in her Jeep Wrangler Sport and unsnapped the top to let the sunshine in even though it was late January. Yes, it wasn't a glamorous vehicle, but it was a lot of fun. She'd gone off-roading with it, taken it to Colorado, and even to the beach on the National Seashore on Padre Island. The jeep had been her first major purchase out of college and she loved her vehicle.

Strapping in, she backed out of the real estate office lot and hurried out of town. Fifteen miles later, she turned down the road that led to the Kissing Oaks Ranch. It had changed so much since Adrian won the lottery. He'd made significant improvements, adding security and a very distinct iron gate with the silhouette of a tree.

The Kissing Oaks tree.

She stopped at the intercom and pressed the button. A camera swung in her direction. “Hi, Roger. It's me Madison. I'm here to see my mother.”

“Sure, Miss Benton. I'll open the gate for you.”

The gate swung open and she hurried on down the road. Years ago, the ranch had been nothing, but now a brand-new fancy house sat at the end of the lane. Since her mother's stroke, Madison had been trying to get her parent to retire, but she loved living out here. After working for the Landry brood for over twenty years, she considered them family.

“Who will cook for them?” she had said when Madison mentioned retirement.

“They’re rich; they’ll find someone,” Madison told her, but her mother refused.

Frankly, Madison didn’t care. They were grown men, and yet her mother loved taking care of the six guys who were scattered about the ranch. The men’s mother and father had passed away over ten years ago when Adrian was only eighteen, a senior in high school.

She pulled around to the back of the house closer to the kitchen area. After parking the car, she leaped out. It was Sunday evening and she planned on returning to Dallas tonight.

As Madison rushed into the house, her mother met her at the door.

“Madison, I didn’t know you were coming today,” she said giving her a hug.

“I told you, Mom,” she said, hoping this didn’t mean that her mother was getting dementia. “What smells so good?”

“Oatmeal cookies,” she said. “Adrian has been moping around today, so I made his favorite cookies hoping to cheer him up.”

Maybe this wouldn’t be a good time to speak to him after all. But all he could do was say no. But she needed him to say yes.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“A good housekeeper minds her own business,” her mother said, taking the cookies out of the oven. “What are you doing here?”

That same rule didn’t apply to her daughter.

The kitchen door swung open. “Do I smell cookies?”

It wasn’t Adrian but Blake his brother.

“She’s just taking them out of the oven,” Madison replied.

Her mother took a spatula and plated the snacks. Madison and Blake reached for one. She popped the delicious sweet in her mouth. Her mother was an excellent cook.

As the smell drifted through the house, the brothers began to congregate in the kitchen. Finally, Adrian appeared.

“Oatmeal cookies,” he exclaimed. “You are supposed to be resting.”

“A body can only lie around so much before it turns to stone. Plus, I got bored.”

Never once did her mother mention the real reason she’d made the cookies.

“Good to see you, Madison,” Adrian said, glancing at her. “I’m not letting your mother do much around the house.”

Madison’s brows lifted and she shook her head. “Do you really think you could stop her?”

“No, but I’m trying,” he said.

Madison couldn’t ask for anything more than a caring employer for her aging parent. Well, maybe one more thing.

“Heard you walked away from Norma Jean last night,” Garth, the youngest of the six brothers, said.

Adrian sighed. “How in the hell do you learn this stuff?”

Garth laughed. “Facebook. It was filled with pictures of the ball and the two of you dancing. And then someone posted that you were still available. That you had walked away from her.”

The man growled. “No, I’m not available. No girlfriend. No dates. Nada. These women are so eager to catch a man with money. Once you receive your inheritance, you’ll have the same problem.” Picking up another cookie, he gazed at it longingly. “Before the next ball, I’m calling a professional service to send someone over.”

His brothers roared with laughter. “Wait until that gets out. Adrian Landry resorts to hiring women.”

That wouldn’t be good. Not at all.

“Is it wrong to just want a woman to take to functions and nothing else?”

“No, women expect more,” his youngest brother said. “You’re a catch, and they have their hook, line, and sinker out trying to reel you in.”

It was easy to see that could be a problem.

Then an idea struck her. For a moment, she let it roll around in her brain looking at it from all angles. She could help him, and he could help her.

“The season is just getting started,” Dakota, one of the twins, said. He and Evan looked so much alike, it was hard to tell them apart, except that Evan was so devilish and loved to create trouble.

“Yes, that’s why I need a permanent, non-committed date. An escort. No attachments. No strings, just a good time.”

Taking a deep breath, Madison gazed at him. “I could help you.”

All heads turned simultaneously toward her, including her mother’s.

“We’re friends. Nothing more. I’m in the process of opening my own law practice here in town,” she said as her mother gasped. “I need clients for it to be successful. You let me handle some of your legal affairs, send me five clients, and I’ll pretend to be your girlfriend, your fiancée, whatever it is you need. No emotional attachments. Once the party season is over, we break up.”

The kitchen was silent as she gazed into the deepest dark brown eyes. Funny, she’d never noticed that about him before. They’d grown up together, attending the same schools, but she’d lived in town while his family had their ranch.

“Madison, when did you decide to open your own office here?” her mother asked.

“I’ve been wanting to get out of Dallas for quite some time. When you had the stroke, I decided it was time. Today, I rented an office in downtown Oakdale. In less than two

months, I hope to be living here and working in my own place full-time.”

Adrian had not responded to her offer.

She glanced at him. “If you don’t want to, you don’t have to do this. But while you were talking, I thought we could help one another. I’m not after your money. I just want to move back to Oakdale and be close to Mom and run my own practice. And Lord knows I don’t want a man, even a rich one. You men are nothing but trouble.”

After her college sweetheart and her father’s indiscretions, she’d given up on trusting men.

Shaking his head, a smile crossed Adrian’s face. “Do you have any idea what you’re getting yourself into? Norma Jean is a mean bitch and she’s determined that I’m going to be hers. Plus, half a dozen other women like to throw themselves at me. It’s this way every time I attend these things.”

She wasn’t afraid of the blonde bombshell. In fact, they’d not gotten along in school. She’d been a real bitch to Madison.

“I’m not afraid of her. In school, I slapped the fire out of her for being a bully. There is only one way to deal with people like her, and I know just how to put her in her place. And no, it won’t be a catfight.”

A grin spread across Dakota’s face. “Damn, this could get interesting.”

“Not really,” she replied. “In law school, you learn how to handle difficult people.”

“I want to go to the next ball,” Garth, the youngest, said.

“No,” they all said at once.

Madison knew better than to push him to make a decision. She sank onto a barstool in the kitchen and took another cookie.

“Honey, you don’t have to move here for me,” her mother said. “I’m fine.”

Yes, she was partly moving there to be with her mom, but she also wanted out of the big city.

“Mom, this is what I’ve been wanting for the last two years. But first, I had to get some experience under my belt. Now seems like the perfect opportunity.”

Reaching across the plate, Adrian tried to take the cookie from her.

“What are you doing?”

“If you’re going to be my fiancée and go to the dances with me, you don’t need to gain weight or you won’t fit in your formal. Besides, I love these cookies. I want them all.”

She put the cookie to her lips. “One of the rules of me attending is that you will furnish my ball gowns and I can weigh whatever I want. So if I gain five pounds from Mother’s cooking, you’re not saying one word about it.”

A grin spread across his face and he reached into his pocket and pulled out his billfold. Pulling out a thousand dollars, he handed it to her. “Is that enough for a retainer?”

“It’s plenty. Next weekend, I think you should take me to dinner. That way, it won’t be a total shock when we show up together.”

“All right,” he said. “Where do you want to go?”

“To the country club, of course. There we’ll get the most tongues talking about us.”

He nodded. “I’ll let you handle all new contracts. Right now, I’m working on two more for cattle sales and three for new construction. Oh, and you’ll have to sign a nondisclosure agreement. Whatever is said and done when we’re together is private. No sharing on social media.”

She nodded.

“Expect to show everyone you’re off the market,” she said, knowing it would be important for people to see they were a couple.

With a shake of his head, he sighed. “All right, but just until we get the gold diggers put out to pasture. At the end of the ball season, we’re over.”

“Agreed,” she said.

Elation filled her. She’d gotten everything she’d wanted, plus a few new dresses.

Sliding off the stool, she hugged her mother.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got to find someplace to live,” she said. “And I need to write my resignation letter to the firm.”

Everything was coming together just like she’d planned. Hurrying out the door, she climbed into the jeep, then Adrian came out the door.

“One more thing. I’m not sleeping with you,” he said.

She laughed. “Good. This is a business arrangement. Nothing more. See ya.”

Chapter 3

In some ways, Adrian felt like he was dating his sister, but he would never let his sister out of the house wearing the dress that Madison wore tonight.

Damn, but when she stepped out of her mother's quarters, his mouth had dropped open and he'd stared at her. The dress fit her figure, showing off her full breasts and small waist. And the heels she wore just made her legs look like they went on forever.

Her blonde hair was swept up off her neck, with a few twirls around her face. Blue eyes with long lashes that hinted at laughter or seriousness. And the woman was smart. She'd graduated at the top of their high school class with a full-ride scholarship to Baylor.

Why was she still single?

"Damn," Blake said. "When did you grow up?"

She laughed. "I'm almost twenty-nine. Where have you been?"

He laughed. "Weren't we out playing rescue the princess just yesterday?"

The princess that wore pigtails and was skinny and they knew threw a mean right hook. Madison was not someone you wanted to get into a fight with at that age.

Those were the fun days. The days of playing outside without a care in the world until your mother called and said it was time for supper and baths.

But this version of Madison was all grown up. Why had he never looked at her like a woman before today?

Even though they had seen each other when she came to visit her mother, he'd never really looked at her like he was seeing her tonight. And tonight's version had his chest aching while he tried to breathe.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Time to make the Oakdale country club believe we’re dating.”

“Are you going to kiss her?” Evan asked, grinning.

He would be the one to make this uncomfortable. Already, he could see the mischief on his brother’s face, and knew if they didn’t leave, it was soon going to be very embarrassing.

“Yes,” she said. “No one will believe we’re dating if we don’t act like we’re happy. And that requires a kiss.”

Shit. How in the hell was he supposed to kiss her without becoming involved? Already he could see this was going to be much harder than he’d originally planned. Just glancing at those full ruby-red lips had him wanting to groan.

“Any more embarrassing questions?” he asked, glancing at his brothers who had all come out of their homes to see them off.

They each had their own house down the road and yet they found an excuse to be here tonight to witness them going on their first date. Though this was really not a date, but a business arrangement. He would help her, and she would keep the women off him.

“Well...” Garth his youngest brother and the one most likely to get into trouble said with a grin.

Oh no, Adrian knew Garth was going to say something that would humiliate both of them.

He pulled out several packages of condoms and handed them to Adrian. “You can never have enough of these. Here’s a couple more.”

A blush spread over Adrian’s face and he shook his head and stuffed them into his tux pocket. There was no need for them, but he wasn’t going to make a big to do in front of his brothers and embarrass Madison.

Taking her by the elbow, he led her to the door.

“On that thrilling conclusion, we’re leaving. Don’t wait up for us,” he said which was their clue to get back to their own homes and out of his.

Holding the door open, Madison walked through and he followed her.

From outside, he could hear his brothers' laughter. Glad to have made their evening.

"Sorry about that. Garth's mouth is often a problem," he said, opening the door to his truck. He watched with fascination as she stood on the running board and then slid onto the seat. Her dress slid up exposing more of her long legs. Legs that could wrap around a man's waist.

"It's fine. He was always the troublemaking one of the group," she said. "Him and Evan."

"Nothing has changed," he said, shutting the door and walking around to the driver's side. Why did this feel like a date?

It was and it wasn't.

It was a fake date and yet Madison looked hot enough that he feared he would be the one protecting her from the single cowboys at the country club.

Once he climbed into the truck, he started it and they drove down the lane.

"We need to make a game plan," she said. "One that we're both comfortable with and that shows everyone we're a couple."

Oh, great. More about them kissing.

"Also, we need to decide when we're going to make the announcement that we're engaged. Do you have a ring or something that I can wear that would say engagement?"

Oh yes, he had the ring that he'd taken back from his ex-wife. But did he want Madison wearing that ring? It felt cursed.

"I'll get one," he said, thinking maybe he could trade it in on something that looked more like Madison. She could wear it until they broke up.

"So when will we announce we've broken up?" he asked.

“After the Cattleman’s Ball. There are how many other balls or dinners before that one?”

“At least three,” he said, thinking he wouldn’t have to dodge over-eager young women now. And that felt really good.

“That happens the end of February, so we’ll be together until then,” she said. “Do you dance?”

They were not far from the country club, so they needed to make some decisions.

“Yes,” he said.

“Good,” she replied. “After dinner, let’s dance. Hold me really close and whisper something in my ear like you’re talking about what we’re going to do after we leave.”

Geez, how did he do that with someone he’d always considered to be his little sister?

“Later in the evening, I want you to kiss me in front of everyone,” she said. “Oh and be very attentive. Make it look like we can barely keep our hands off each other.”

Shaking his head, he wondered what he’d gotten himself into. “Are you certain this is going to work?”

A smile crossed her face, “Oh yes. Just wait and see.”

They pulled up in front of the country club and she looked at him and smiled. “We’ve got this. We can do it and you’ll get what you want and I’ll soon be moving to Oakdale.”

The valet opened his door. “Good evening, Mr. Landry.”

“Good evening,” he said, stepping out and then going around to Madison’s side of the truck.

Taking her hand, he helped her out and she leaned into him.

“Thank you,” she said.

After taking her by the elbow, they walked into the country club where the meeting of the Texas Ranchers Association was held tonight.

Adrian gave the girl outside the restaurant their information and she led them to a table where two other couples were seated.

He pulled out her chair and she sat quite daintily for someone who could empty a mud puddle with one jump. Of course, that was twenty years ago.

“Good evening,” she said, glancing around the table.

The other couples nodded and Adrian sat beside her.

“Norma Jean,” he said. “I didn’t know you were coming tonight.”

The woman all but glared at him. “Tony asked me to be his date.”

“Hello,” Adrian said to the other couple while reaching across the table and shaking the man’s hand. “Adrian Landry.”

“Jim Burns and this is my wife, Rachel,” the man said.

“My girlfriend, Madison,” he said introducing her to everyone at the table.

“Norma Jean and I know each other,” she said. “We went to school together.”

The girl frowned. “We did.”

“How are you?” Madison asked, being overly friendly.

“Fabulous,” she said though the sentiment didn’t reach her eyes, which had turned dark and stormy.

She was angry he’d brought someone, but frankly, he didn’t care. She was the reason he and Madison were together.

Soon their food was served, and trying to remember what Madison had said about how to appear like a real couple, he lifted his fork and stared at her.

“Taste my steak,” he said. Madison leaned forward, close to him, stared him in the eye, and took a bite. Her mouth wrapped around his fork.

The way she moved made it seem like they were an intimate couple, though all they'd ever done was roll around and fight in the dirt when they were children. That's when he'd learned she threw a mean right hook and given him a black eye.

She moaned. "Oh, honey, that is delicious. We should come here more often."

"We will," he said, smiling at her, and then he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

It was a start. A slow start, but she rewarded him with a smile.

They were faking intimacy.

"When did you two start dating?" Norma Jean asked.

Oh no, they hadn't talked about the particulars while they were in the truck.

Madison smiled. "We were childhood friends and then we saw each other again several months ago, and well, things just changed between us."

He liked how she had woven in that they had known each other a long time.

"Really?" Norma Jean said like she didn't believe them.

"Yes," he said. "Madison is so beautiful, I couldn't stop staring at her. And she's so smart. A lawyer."

Maybe that would make Norma Jean mind her manners tonight.

"What kind of law?" Norma Jean asked.

"Right now, I'm doing corporate law, but I'm opening up my own practice here in town so I can be close to my mother and Adrian," she said, gazing at him with a dark heat in her eyes.

Wow, he didn't know you could fake sexual stares, but she was doing a great job.

Dear God, did she have any idea what this did to him? Yes, they were pretending, but it felt so real, it was starting to scare him. And this was their first night. What would it be like by the time they made it to the Cattleman's Ball in February?

Norma Jean shook her head. "I'm trying to get out of this Podunk town and back to Dallas. Why would you return here?"

Smiling at the woman, she turned to him. "To be closer to Adrian. Be prepared for a lot of traffic in the big city. If you need information about where to live, just let me know and I'll do my best to help you."

Oh, my, she was trying to help his nemesis move.

Reaching over, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her chair as close to his as he could.

"I like having you close by," he said quietly, intimately.

"Oh, Adrian," she said, gazing up at him. "I like being close to you as well."

While they were eating dessert, the presenter spoke about how much cattle ranching had evolved in the last year. How the price on the hoof had changed and what the outlook was for the future. Boring, typical association stuff, but it always paid to be here.

Once that was over, the band played and Madison glanced at him and smiled.

"You promised me we would dance tonight," she said.

"Let's go," he said.

They danced a slow dance and he held her snugly against him. Close, but not indecent, and as they moved about the floor, he couldn't help but think this was nice. He liked the way they fit together.

She gazed up into his eyes like he was the only man in the building and he wondered what it would feel like to have someone act this way for real.

Leaning down, his lips covered hers as the song ended. A blast of heat from her lips went all the way to his groin, and for a second, he was shocked.

That couldn't happen. Releasing her lips, he smiled down at her.

“That was nice, but sometime tonight, you've got to give me a kiss that most women would swoon over. It's got to be a kiss that someone should say, get a room.”

Dear God, could he do that? Sure it wasn't the kiss he was worried about, but rather the feelings and emotions that went along with that type of kiss. You couldn't fake a *do-me* kiss and that's what she was asking for. Or maybe you could and he just had never experienced one before.

When he walked her back to the table, Norma Jean stood. “Would you dance with me, Adrian?”

Shaking her head, Madison stared at her.

“I'm sorry,” Madison said, gazing at the woman. “No one dances with my boyfriend. No one but me.”

Adrian shrugged his shoulders and watched as the two women looked like they were going to come to blows over who he could dance with.

“That's not right,” Norma Jean said.

“My boyfriend. My rules,” Madison said smiling. “Isn't that so, Adrian?”

“Darling, whatever you want,” he said, knowing she'd just blocked Norma Jean from dancing with him ever again. “Whatever makes you happy.”

Norma Jean stormed away from the table and he couldn't help but lean over and whisper in Madison's ear.

“You know how to play, darling. Remind me to never go up against you in a court of law or dating.”

She smiled and reached up and ran her hand down the side of his face. “Smart man. You're learning quick.”

“Have to if I want to stay alive,” he said grinning. “Oh no, here comes another one.”

Chapter 4

Madison had to tell three women they were not dancing with her boyfriend before the word must have spread.

She even overheard Norma Jean. “Don’t even think about dancing with Adrian, not as long as that bitch is sitting beside him. She doesn’t want any other woman with him.”

Never before had she played the jealousy card, but tonight it felt really good to let these women know that Adrian was taken and it was hands off. So far, he was playing along really well and they had raised several eyebrows when they tangoed.

Never had she danced with someone who knew the steps to the Argentine tango. In college, she’d taken a dance class and they had worked for hours on learning the movements to the sensual dance of love.

At the end, he’d finished off with a very hot kiss and her heart pounded in her chest. No, no, no, she’d warned the poor organ.

What was she doing? This was all being done as a fake romance and yet she’d enjoyed tonight way more than any date she’d had in years. But Adrian did indeed have a flock of gold-digging women seeking him out. And Madison...

Love was not going to work for her. It was one of the reasons she’d become a lawyer. And she loved her job. Especially when she was able to work with small one-on-one clients, not big corporations who sometimes knew they were in the wrong but just wanted a lawyer to get them out of trouble. Those cases, she had to remind herself, had hired the firm she worked for and who paid her salary.

It was starting to get late and she couldn’t help but think they had made progress tonight. As long as she was with him, the gold diggers had backed off.

Besides, she was starting to get tired of putting on a show for these females. After a while, it was tiring – looking happy,

acting like you were in love, and staring into Adrian's eyes like she adored him.

Of course, he wasn't hard on the eyes, especially with all those firm muscles beneath his tux. And when they danced, she felt like she floated in his arms. His dark hair and light emerald eyes could send a shiver through you with just one glance.

As much as she enjoyed tonight, she had erected a wall around her heart. This gorgeous man was not going to get through that unless he used dynamite, and even then, she wasn't certain she could love again.

"Are you about ready to go?" he asked as he leaned over and whispered in her ear.

Turning toward him, she gave him her sexiest smile and leaned into his body. She wanted it to appear like they were going home to have the best sex either of them had ever experienced.

And yet they were each going home to their empty beds.

"Yes," she whispered. "But first one last dance."

A grin spread across his face, and when she stood, she noticed that Norma Jean was glaring at her like she'd like to take her outside and rumble in the parking lot.

Smiling at the woman, she and Adrian waltzed, but when the music ended, a soft, slow ballad came on that they danced up close and personal. This was the kind of dance that could get you in trouble. This was the kind of dance that made you think about things the preacher warned of. This was the kind of dance that made her think about a relationship with this man she'd known all her life.

They had been friends since they were six years old. Since the day her mother moved out of an abusive relationship and into the Landry's home to cook, clean, and watch over their children.

Adrian's mother had been expecting baby number six and they had all been hoping for a little girl. Instead, Garth arrived as vocal then as he was today.

The feel of Adrian's big, strong arms around her and her own arms around his neck warmed her body. She felt every square inch of him snug against her own, except for his manly bits. Those he had pulled back and disappointment filled her.

This was not real. And being held like this only reminded her of the many reasons why she was still single. These moments were great. Those that led to breakups were why she had decided marriage wasn't meant for her.

First, her father. Then her college boyfriend. And finally, a man she dated in law school. No, men were not for her. They were liars and cheaters who promised and never delivered.

With a sigh, she was glad she and Adrian were just friends. Nothing more and she would need to remind herself of that on nights like tonight.

The music ended and she felt herself being leaned back in his arms and then his mouth covered hers.

The feel of his full lips covering her own, his tongue slipping in between her teeth, and the way he took control gave the ballroom audience the spectacular kiss that would have the gossips filling the local airways of how the ball had ended tonight for one couple.

When he finally ended the kiss, she lay in his arms dumbfounded. She'd been faked kissed before but nothing like this. Nothing that had heat spiraling through her straight to her center. Her lady bits clenched and sang the blues because they were going home alone.

What the hell were they doing?

"Get a room," a couple said as they walked past them.

"Thank you, we will," he replied as he lifted her to her feet and the room spun around crazily.

That kiss she'd not been prepared for. But she'd gotten the reaction she wanted.

"Let's get your coat and purse and go," he said, taking her by the hand.

"Yes," she whispered.

“Did I do all right on that final kiss?”

What in the hell was she supposed to say? Even now she was still reeling from the feel of his lips and the touch of his body against hers.

A little giggle escaped her.

“Yes,” she said. “Any better and it would have to be real.”

It felt odd to be critiquing his kiss, and yet, they were both trying so hard to mislead the gold diggers. Only problem was what if they entrapped themselves?

A smile crossed his face and they arrived at the table.

“Goodnight,” they said.

“Wait,” Norma Jean said. “Madison, we should have lunch sometime soon. Catch up and find out what’s going on in each other’s lives.”

The woman was fishing. She wanted to try to glean information from Madison about her relationship with Adrian. Not happening.

“Oh, I’d love to Norma Jean, but until I relocate here permanently, it’s going to be impossible. But I’m sure I’ll see you at the next ball.”

The woman frowned and nodded.

“See you next time. Adrian, call me sometime,” she said. “We need to talk.”

Of course, they did. She wanted to tell Adrian to dump Madison. Not happening.

“Norma Jean, we’ve got nothing to talk about,” he said as he slipped on Madison’s coat.

The woman’s face turned a brilliant red and Madison feared she was going to have a stroke if they didn’t leave right away.

“Goodnight,” she told the woman as she placed her hand in Adrian’s and they walked away.

When they were safely in the truck, she laughed. “You know what she wanted to talk to you about?”

“No,” he said.

“She wants to warn you about me. Don’t be taken in by a lawyer, they know how to steal all your money,” she said laughing. “Also I’m sure she would tell you that you’re the love of her life and she can’t live without you.”

A groan resounded from him. “The only one I’m not worried about is the lawyer. The rest terrify me.”

She grinned in the darkened truck as they made their way back to his ranch. Tonight, she would stay with her mother. The thought of crawling into bed beside Adrian surprised her, but then again, it had been a fun evening.

And he’d been right. There were at least three women vying for his attention. At first, it had been hard to believe when he told his side, but tonight, she’d seen it firsthand. In some ways, she’d enjoyed telling each woman that her boyfriend did not dance with anyone other than her.

They had been shocked and then they grew angry before they stomped off, embarrassed. She didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, but she was laying ground rules and doing her job to keep them at bay.

But occasionally, she thought Adrian was kind of sad he couldn’t dance with the woman. What if he was truly interested in one of them?

“Are you certain you’re not attracted to or interested in any of these ladies?” she asked needing to know the truth.

Quickly, his head spun in her direction. “No, I’m not. Why would you ask me that question?”

“I just wanted to make certain I didn’t destroy a relationship that you later on would want to maybe create,” she said.

Sighing, he shook his head. “After my divorce, I made the decision I would never remarry.”

“That bad, huh?”

His eyes stayed on the road as he said, “I came home early one day and found them in bed together. In *our* bed having sex.”

Oh, that had to have hurt so badly. She’d worked a lot of infidelity divorce cases and they were the worst.

“Thank goodness you didn’t have any children,” she said. “That would have made it worse.”

There was silence in the truck as he drove on toward the ranch.

“Did you want children?”

“Yes,” he said. “Later, I learned that the reason she hadn’t gotten pregnant was because she was on the pill. She *didn’t* want children.”

That was tough. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “One of the many reasons I will never marry again.”

And she couldn’t blame him.

They turned down the lane to the house. At the gate, it opened for him automatically.

“I know we’re just friends and we’re faking our relationship, but I had a fun time. Tonight felt like a success. How did it feel for you?”

He pulled up in front of the house, put the truck in park, turned off the engine, and turned to face her.

“It was the best fake date I’ve ever gone on,” he said, his face completely serious.

She started laughing. “We could write a book. How to fake date a billionaire.”

A grin spread across his face.

“You know, the only reason I’m glad that I won the lottery was it gave me the ability to keep the land. It wouldn’t bring back my parents. But we saved the Kissing Oaks Ranch, and for that, I am eternally grateful.”

The ranch had been in his family for over three generations and she understood why he didn't want to be the one to lose it.

After stepping out of the truck, he came around and opened her door and then helped her out.

Standing in the darkness with the moon glinting above the trees, she glanced up at him.

"I know tonight was not a real date, but I still want to tell you thank you. Thank you for the lovely evening of dancing and good food and I love the new dress."

"And the new dress loves you," he said softly. "You were the best-looking woman there."

"Thank you, now it's time I went to bed," she said. "Tomorrow I'm headed back to Dallas. In a couple of weeks, I'll be making the move here."

He took her arm and walked her across the drive and up to the front entrance.

After he opened the door, they stood inside glancing at one another awkwardly. "Have a safe trip back to Dallas."

"Thank you. And we're on again, next weekend?"

"Yes," he said. "But it's not formal. We'll be attending a barbecue. You can wear whatever you want."

She nodded. "All right. If you need me before then, just call."

"All right. I had fun tonight. Even if it was a fake date."

"Me too," she said and hurried into the kitchen toward her mother's quarters. For a moment, she was afraid he was going to kiss her again, and right now, she needed to put up more protection around her heart.

Adrian Landry's kisses were like heat-seeking missiles and she had to reinforce her defenses.

Chapter 5

On her mother's day off, she drove to Dallas to help Madison find a dress for the Cattleman's Ball. It was still a month away, but she wanted time to find the perfect dress and accessories.

"Why did you leave before I woke up last Sunday morning?" her mother asked.

They had already been over this, but she would tell her again. "Because I had work I needed to get finished, so I had to get back to Dallas," she said. "Besides, soon you won't be able to get rid of me."

What she wasn't telling her mother was that she wanted to leave before Adrian and his brothers asked all kinds of questions about the night before. The dancing, the kisses, and the pretending had been harder than she expected.

And those kisses of Adrian's were so damn hot. She'd needed to put space between them, so she'd left early that morning.

"Are you certain this is a good idea? The two of you pretending to date. When you were kids, I always thought that the two of you might end up together some day," her mother said.

With her arms loaded with gowns, she turned and faced her mother, surprised at her comment. "Why would you think that?"

She sighed. "I thought the two of you were always so cute together and you both seemed to gang up on the other boys. You two were the leaders and the others just followed."

Yes, but that wasn't a reason for them to become a couple. They had been close until high school. Then a girl had come between them. A girl who didn't like him being friends with Madison.

It had been years since she'd thought about that girl and she wondered where she was now. Jealous of their friendship, the girl managed to drive a wedge between them.

“You know,” her mother said, “his divorce really hurt him. He couldn’t wait for them to have children and then she never got pregnant,” she said.

“Mom, she was taking birth control pills,” Madison said. “He told me last night. And yes, the divorce hurt him badly.”

Divorces were ugly. She’d dealt with them in law school, and with her own practice, she’d be dealing with them again. And then there was the story of her parents’ divorce that had not been easy.

A sales clerk came to her. “Can I set you up a dressing room?”

“Yes, please,” she said. Madison continued to look through the dresses on the rack. “We’re friends. Nothing more.”

“Yes, but friends turn into lovers and I’d hate for you to hurt him,” her mother said.

Oh, that was priceless.

“What about me? What if he hurts me?”

“You’ve made it very clear that you never want to marry, so I’m more concerned about him. What if by doing this fake dating, he falls for you? What then?”

Why was her mother so concerned about Adrian and not her own daughter?

“We’re friends. Nothing more,” she said again. “Besides, I really helped him last night with his woman situation. Those bitties were after him.”

But when he’d kissed her, it hadn’t been nothing. It had been heat, fire, and flames, and like a plane going down, she had to come up for air.

“As my mother would say, you’re playing with fire and if you’re not careful one of you is going to get burned,” she said, grabbing a dress off the rack and handing it to Madison. “Try this one on for me.”

There was real truth to what her mother said, but she was certain she could keep her own feelings under control. She’d

always liked Adrian but that didn't mean they were meant to be together.

“Mom, you can stop worrying about Adrian. I protected him from three very aggressive women who wanted to make him theirs. We laughed, we had dinner, we danced, and we played at being a real couple. It worked. And when we came home, we parted ways and I slept on your couch. I'll be back next weekend and we're attending a barbecue,” she said.

Her arms were once again loaded down and she glanced toward the sales girl. “Come on, Mom, help me try these dresses on and tell me which one looks the best.”

They walked into the dressing room and she shed her jeans and shirt. She had worn shoes with a higher heel knowing she would need to know the length of the dress.

While she wiggled into the first outfit, her mother took a seat in a chair in the corner. Once she had the dress up, she turned so that her mother could zip it up.

Stepping back, she gazed at herself in the mirror. The dress was fitted and showed off her curves. She liked the color and it made her blue eyes sparkle.

“Not bad,” she said, gazing at herself in the mirrors as she twirled around.

“Too tight,” her mother said. “But I do like the color.”

The dress was very fitted.

Turning around for her mother to unzip her, she hung up the dress on a separate hook of possibilities.

“Madison, I know you were so angry at your father for leaving us and never coming back to see you, but don't let that stop you from finding a man who loves you, getting married, and having children.”

They'd had this conversation several times, too, but her mother would elaborate once more.

“Mom, like I've told you before, it's not just our family situation, though that doesn't help. I've almost walked down the aisle twice now. The first one came out as gay. And the

second one cheated,” she said, remembering the girl calling her up and saying she was pregnant and the father was Madison’s boyfriend.

“You’ve had two failures. That’s not the end of the world,” her mother said.

“And a father who left us because his second family needed him more,” she replied, recalling the hurt and anger she’d felt when she learned of his leaving.

That was when that her mother had taken the job out at the Kissing Oaks Ranch and she’d grown up there with the Landry boys. In many ways, she was stronger because of them – of the way they had not babied her but treated her like another brother.

Pulling on a soft-blue gown with a fitted bodice and layers of silk organza, her mother sighed. “That one is definitely in the keeper pile. It’s gorgeous.”

“But look at the skirt. It’s huge. I love the color and the design, but can you see me climbing into his truck in this gown? No.”

Reaching behind her, she unzipped the back partway and then let her mother do the rest.

“Maybe he would get a limo,” her mother said.

“Maybe, but every time I passed a table, I’d be fighting with the skirt. I like the dress, but let’s keep going.” Nothing had just said reach out and buy me.

Grabbing the next dress off the hanger, her mother sighed. “I know little girls adore their fathers, but I always hoped you would eventually get over how your father hurt us.”

She laughed. “I tried, Mother, really I did. But when he sent the invitation to his daughter’s graduation when he couldn’t attend mine, that incensed me. I understand he has a second family. But you don’t forget about your first daughter. And who would walk me down the aisle? Him? The last time I saw him, I was sixteen and we ran into him at a store where his entire family was getting new swimsuits. Remember that? It wasn’t that he planned to come see me, it was an accident

with his wife gazing at us like she wanted to kill us right there in the store.”

What pissed her off the most was that the man had two children with the other woman before he decided to leave Madison and her mom to help raise the other family.

Yes, she longed for her own family, but how could she trust a man to be there for her children? Never would she ever let her son or daughter be treated like her father had forgotten them.

“Harold wasn’t the smartest man,” her mother said. “And he certainly couldn’t keep it in his pants. She wasn’t the first one he’d cheated with.”

Speechless, she gazed at her mother. She’d never heard this story before. “You mean there were others?”

“Yes,” she said. “I kept thinking we would leave him, and then you would meet him at the door so excited to see him. And he was so happy to see you.”

“Until the day he wasn’t,” she said, recalling how he’d come home looking exhausted and frayed and he’d not given his usual greeting to her. What she hadn’t known at the time was that he was leaving that evening for good.

As she pulled on a gold gown, her mother gazed at her. “How can my beautiful daughter not find someone who will make her a believer in love.”

She gave a little laugh. “Maybe because your daughter sees too much reality that goes on between couples. I wonder if Daddy Dearest even knows I’m a lawyer. I should send him a note and offer to do his will for him.”

But she wasn’t that kind of lawyer, and she didn’t want anything to do with her father. Not even his will.

“Madison,” her mother said, “it’s best if we leave him alone. Let his other children deal with him.”

“True,” she said.

She put on another gold gown. The skirt was not huge, but it flowed while also clinging to her curves. It was like a dress

from the movie-star era and she instantly loved it.

“That one,” her mother said. “It’s clingy but has those layers of soft chemise that lets you only see your curves when you walk. It’s tempting and flattering and seductive all at once.”

Madison nodded. “I like it. With some gold heels, it would work great.”

“Maybe that dress will tempt the two of you into realizing you’re perfect for one another,” she said.

Laughter bubbled up from Madison. “Mom, we’re not really dating. It’s all a sham. And soon I’ll break it off with him and we’ll be done.”

“But his dating problem will just start again,” her mother said.

That was an issue. But Madison didn’t know how to solve that problem right now. As it was, she had to pretend he was the man for her while keeping her heart from getting involved.

Love had not been kind to the women in her family, and she didn’t want to make the same mistake her mother had by marrying a man who didn’t know the meaning of one-man-one-woman-forever.

Chapter 6

Adrian glanced out at the land that had been in his family for four generations. His great-grandparents had been homesteaders who worked the land and went from living in a mud hut to a nice farmhouse with three bedrooms, an outhouse, a bathing closet, and an indoor kitchen.

Then his grandmother insisted they update the old house with indoor plumbing. It had been a great upgrade. Later, his parents added on by building two more bedrooms and a master suite for them. He missed the old house.

But with the death of their parents, the responsibility of the ranch and taking care of his brothers had fallen on him having turned eighteen a month earlier. The state had given him custody since Susan, Madison's mother, would be there helping him.

Being a teenager, he thought he knew everything, and yet he'd been dumber than a box of rocks about to be ground into dust. His lack of experience almost cost them the ranch.

The sun beat down hard on them, though the temperature remained cool. January in Texas could be hot one minute and then an ice storm could trap you inside for days. They were predicting colder weather, so he wanted to move their herd closer to the house to get them food and water if they needed to.

His brothers sat on their horses, knowing what had to be done.

"I never heard," Blake said. "How was your date?"

Their mother had thought it would be amusing to name each of her sons the first letter of the alphabet in sequential order. But Frank had died at birth, devastating the family and leaving a hole in their hearts. Garth was the last child she'd had and was the youngest at twenty-two. None of them had married except for Adrian.

"The woman knows how to tango," he said.

Blake laughed. “You do love a woman who can dance.”

“Yes, I do. You should try it sometime. It’s the one place in life where a man is still in control. I lead, she follows.”

Cody spoke up. “Control. You like to be in control, and women today, they don’t like that.”

Maybe it was true. His first wife didn’t like him telling her what he thought. Was he difficult to get along with? This was why he was never going to marry again. He’d failed at ranching until he’d gotten lucky. Then he failed at marriage and filed for divorce. He wasn’t willing to try again.

Cody knew women very well. Being a professional football player kept women hanging on him all the time.

“How much do I have to pay you for that advice?”

His brother shook his head. “Smart ass. I’ve studied women. You should try it sometime.”

“Don’t need to. I’m not getting married again. One and done,” he said, wishing they would reach the herd so he could turn off this nonsense.

The youngest of his brothers leaned out over his horse.

“Frankly, I think Madison is smoking hot and smart. You’d be lucky to have her for a wife – a lawyer with long legs and a body that dreams are made of,” Garth said.

Oh no, he didn’t need his brothers thinking about Madison this way. Especially Garth, the womanizing Casanova who liked women way too much.

“Yes, that dress the other night was smoking,” Evan replied. “You’d be the envy of men all over town.”

Being the envy of other men didn’t interest him.

“You’ve never told us what happened between you and Laurie. I still don’t understand. And then she remarried almost immediately,” Dakota said. “I really liked her.”

The other brothers glared at Dakota as if saying shut up.

“Sometimes, Dakota, you’re blind about what is going on around you. I’ll explain it to you later,” Blake said. “Now stop trying to ruin today. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

It was funny how Adrian hadn’t said a word, and his brothers had come to his defense. Sometimes Dakota was too engrossed in himself and didn’t see the bigger picture.

The bigger picture of running a profitable ranch and knowing how to keep them from growing broke again. Hiring the right people to teach him how to be successful and even going to college to learn about ranching.

Now his cattle were high dollar earners and his bulls were some of the most sought-after specimens. But he limited his bulls to a pasture with forty heifers. No need to wear him out.

While he was married, he’d gotten his own degree in animal science and was using everything he’d learned to make the Kissing Oaks Ranch one of the best. And it was slowly working.

If only he’d been able to use the same techniques he’d learned in college and animal behavior on his wife. But he’d been unable to please her and she’d found refuge in another man’s arms.

Today, he could think about her without hurting. But he still felt sad that he’d failed at marriage and he wasn’t about to try again.

“Dakota, it doesn’t matter why we divorced. She wasn’t happy. Hopefully the man she married can make her happy,” he said softly.

They rode along in silence. A cold blustery wind blew and he pulled his coat tighter.

“Dad had a hard time making Mother happy some days,” Blake said. “I’m beginning to wonder if we’re meant to marry. What if we can’t find anyone who pleases us? Not many women like living out on a ranch in the middle of nowhere. They think because we now have money, we should be jetting around somewhere. But there is nothing like the peaceful sound of silence out in the fields.”

They all murmured their agreement. It was true. It only took Adrian a couple of days in the big city before he was ready to return to the ranch where it was quiet.

“I will say that you and Madison made a mighty nice-looking couple,” Cody said. “And she grew up around here. It’s why she wants to return. I think you should seriously consider her.”

That wasn’t going to happen. All he wanted was for her to be his fake date for the rodeo season. Once that was over, then they would part ways and she would have her law practice and he would go back to working the ranch business.

Somehow he had to get his brothers’ attention off Madison.

“But what if they broke up?” Evan cut in. “Then Susan would be upset, and she might quit. Who would cook our dinner, do our laundry, and make those great cookies she bakes? Sorry, but I’m not willing to lose Susan over Madison.”

Even though mischievous, Evan was always the practical one. And food was very important to him.

“Madison will be my escort until after the rodeo season and then we’ll separate as friends. She’s doing me a favor and I’m doing her one as well. It’s a business arrangement, nothing more. So don’t be worried about us breaking up or losing her mother as our savior.”

“I ate enough crap while in college. She cooks good meals,” Evan said, proving Adrian’s point.

A chuckle came from Garth. “I think Cody is right. It’s time you found yourself another wife and Madison is perfect. Take a chance. I’m going to bet you a new colt that by the end of the ball season you’ll be dating seriously. Anyone want to take me up on my bet?”

Certainly, they would not be dating. He could win this bet.

“I’ll take you up on it,” Adrian said. He really would like one of Dakota’s colts from his stallion. The horse was magnificent. “I’ll bet you a trip to Vegas that we’re not dating by the end of the last ball.”

“You’re on,” Dakota said. “As long as it’s during championship week.”

“That’s not until December,” Adrian said.

“So, I can wait. Because I’m going to win this challenge,” he said.

“What makes you say that?” Adrian asked, wanting to know what to look out for.

The man laughed. “I’m not telling you, but I think the two of you are perfect for one another. Sometimes the universe delivers what you need. Just like that lucky Powerball ticket. We needed a break and we received one. You need a good woman and I think the universe just delivered.”

“That’s bullshit,” Cody replied. “Total bullshit, nonsense.”

Dakota shrugged. “Think what you want, but I believe Madison is the perfect woman for Adrian.”

This was making him uneasy. Maybe he should cancel their next date. He’d had fun at the country club event, but he wasn’t looking for anything serious.

“Are you certain she’s not after your money like the others?” Cody asked. “Maybe she’s just smarter about the way she’s going about this.”

It was terrible how they all now questioned whether someone was just being their friend because they had money.

“She’s a lawyer,” Blake said. “She’s probably making a million a year on her own.”

They rode over the top of the hill and there were their cattle grazing down below. It was time to put an end to this nonsense and get to work. The herd was all together until roundup in the spring. But until this cold weather pattern passed, they needed to be closer.

“Damn, we’re lucky men,” Garth said, gazing out at the rolling pastures. “Our great-grandparents did us well.”

“Yes, until that damn twister struck,” Evan said. Their parents’ deaths had been hard on all of them, but Evan took it

the hardest. He'd been extremely close to their mother and finding her body beneath the house ruins had been tough.

Since then, Adrian had made a rule that every house built on their property had a storm shelter. The house might be destroyed, but if they were down in the storm shelter, they hopefully would survive.

"When is the Cattleman's Ball?" Dakota asked, obviously still thinking about the bet they just made instead of the job at hand.

"Not until the end of February. Hopefully all this cold weather will be done by then," Adrian said.

The ball was held each year in Fort Worth. And while Adrian could get hotel rooms for them both, he really didn't like spending the night there. He'd just drive his truck into Fort Worth and then come home. He'd need to check with Madison. By the end of February, she might be living in Oakdale.

"Let's get started," he said. "We've got almost a thousand head of cattle to move."

"I agree. I've got to work when I get home," Dakota said.

"You writing a new novel?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "And no there are no cowboys or cattle in my book."

"Damn shame," Blake told him. "I'd read it if there were."

"It's a romance," he said. "Women love them."

Adrian laughed so hard, he nearly fell off his horse. It was hard to believe that his brother was a best-selling romance author. But then, if it brought his brother happiness, he shouldn't care.

"Let's go," Cody said and they split up, going different directions and surrounding the herd.

The image of Madison flashed in his brain. All those damn curves in that dress. And her kiss. What he wouldn't tell his

brothers was how that kiss had left him wanting more. A lot more.

And he'd made that stupid bet just to make certain he didn't succumb to the desire he felt after one of her kisses.

Chapter 7

Saturday had come and Madison drove out to see her mother. Plus, she and Adrian needed to go into town. If people were going to believe in their engagement, they had to be seen together.

Today, she'd worn a sweater since the air had become cold. Last night, a front came through, and while it wasn't bad, today the highs were only in the fifties, and with the wind chill, the air felt like it was below freezing.

Sitting in the kitchen, her mother gazed at her. "Do you really think this phony engagement to Adrian is a good idea?"

After the night at the country club, she had questioned her decision. She'd never pretend to kiss someone before, and that one had been the most uncontrollable kiss she'd experienced in years.

Not since her breakup with her ex-fiancé. And even then, she didn't remember his kisses being that explosive. Maybe it was just her. Maybe Adrian was a good kisser and she'd been alone for so long that her body lit up at the feel of his lips.

"Mom, I need his help to support my law practice here. If I don't receive his help, then I probably couldn't move. And I so want to be closer to you and to get out of the big crowds and traffic. I've had enough corporate law to last me a lifetime," she said, thinking how her firm had not been happy when she announced she was leaving. She was not even near making partner. But she was a workhorse in their firm because she was single and had plenty of time on her hands. Well, now, her time would be spent working on her own clients. Not theirs.

The smell of cake permeated the air and she knew her mother was making the boys, the Landry men, yellow cake with chocolate frosting.

Adrian walked into the room, and she had to stop herself from staring. His jeans fit his well-muscled thighs and he wore a pressed shirt in soft green that made his emerald eyes pop. In his hands, he carried a black hat.

“Hey,” he said. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Oh,” she said. “What’s up.”

“Instead of us going to the country club or a restaurant tonight, would you like to go with me to the Burnett Ranch? It’s about an hour from here. I need to look at a couple of horses and talk to Travis about buying some of his heifers this spring.”

Madison had been friends with Desiree Burnett for many years. They had met during a rodeo when they were both barrel racers. It’d been a long time since she’d seen her friend and her response was automatic.

“Yes, let’s go,” she said. “Am I dressed all right?”

His eyes skimmed down her sweater, jeans, and boots.

“You look perfect to me,” he said.

She turned to her mom. “Bye, Mom. I’ll talk to you later tonight.”

“Be careful,” she said.

“I thought maybe we could stop at a restaurant between here and there and grab a bite to eat,” he told her, taking her elbow and leading her outside where his truck was parked.

“Sounds good to me,” she said.

After he helped her into the truck, she realized he had a top-of-the-line vehicle. But then again, why wouldn’t he? He’d won the freaking lotto, and she didn’t know if that was a help or a hindrance.

Once he was inside, he started the truck up, and they traveled down the road.

“How was your week?” he asked.

“I gave my notice at the firm and they aren’t thrilled I’m leaving. Even offered me a pay raise, but I said no. I want out of there. Is it wrong to want a slower lifestyle with time for me and with my mom?”

“No,” he said, glancing at her. “You never know when a tornado is going to completely destroy your life.”

With a sigh, she felt like a heel. She’d forgotten that was how his parents were taken. That day in high school, she would never forget. It had gotten so dark, and then the winds came. She remembered huddling inside the hall with the other students, her hands over her head, kneeling in front of the lockers. Like that would do a lot of good if a funnel of wind swirling three hundred miles an hour hit the school building.

“That day was a living nightmare. Do you remember the sirens blaring and the winds howling?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “All I could think about was that Dad had promised Mom for twenty years that he was going to build a storm shelter. And he never did.”

Madison remembered when they finally let school out, Adrian and his brothers rushed home and discovered the destruction of their home and their parents buried beneath the rubble holding one another. Nothing was ever the same on the ranch after that.

A gust hit the side of the truck and she noticed how he gripped the wheel. “The wind is really fierce today.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Often,” Madison said softly, “I think that if my mother had not been at the grocery store that day, she would have been in the house with your parents.”

“Yes,” he said with a slight squeak in his voice before clearing his throat. “Now any home built on the Kissing Oaks Ranch must have a storm shelter built inside. Either a room or a cellar beneath the house. If I can help it, we will never lose another family member to a tornado.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes and she enjoyed the scenery along the highway.

“Tell me about winning the lottery. Were you surprised?”

A smile crossed his face. “After Mom and Dad’s deaths, you left for college and I’d been in charge of the ranch. Of

course, I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing. We were close to losing the land. I bought the ticket on a whim. I never thought we would win, but I was kind of desperate."

She'd never heard that he was about to lose the ranch. That was surprising. And to think that money he won saved his inheritance.

"It wasn't until the next day that I heard the winning ticket had been sold there in town at the Beer and Bait shop, which was where I purchased the ticket. I found the ticket and then I sat there stunned."

Reaching across the seat, she squeezed his arm. "I'm so happy you won, especially since you were about to lose your home."

The ranch had been ingrained into his soul and she knew he would've been devastated if he'd lost the family home.

"What was the first fun thing you did?"

"I took my brothers on a trip to the Bahamas where I laid some ground rules. This was *my* money, but I wanted to share it with them. But in order to receive their trust fund, they had to finish college. Only Blake fought me. The rest were good. This way, they received an education in case something happened to the ranch or we lost the money. They need to know how to take care of themselves."

After a pause, he asked, "Whatever happened to that gaggle of girls you called half-sisters?"

She laughed. The "wicked witches" was a more appropriate title. But being they were truly her half-sisters, she couldn't say that out loud.

"Mother took my father aside and told him that if they mistreated me again, he would never get to see me." She sighed. Families could be difficult and it was one of the reasons why she never intended to marry or have children. She didn't want anyone else to suffer what she'd been through. "I never saw him again."

Adrian's head swiveled toward her. "You're kidding me."

“Nope. Not a birthday, Christmas card, or graduation event did my father attend. I guess the wicked half-sisters were more important,” she said.

Even today it hurt to think of how he’d chosen them over her, and how he’d laughed when her mother told him how the sisters had treated Madison when she went to visit him. He didn’t love his own daughter.

“Damn,” Adrian said.

“Yes, damn,” she agreed. “With a childhood like mine, how can you have your own family? My biggest fear is getting married, having a child, and then divorcing.”

The truck hit a bump in the road and they bounced.

“I’m thankful that me and Laurie never had children. We were trying or at least I thought we were until I found the birth control pills in her purse. That was when I began to suspect that all was not well in paradise.”

Glancing at him, she could see the pain on his face. “You really loved her?”

He sighed. “No, I married her because it was what she wanted. She had some dream of me not working, us flying around the world, buying a yacht. That’s not me. It’s not the life I want. All I wanted was to make certain the ranch became a success and have a family with all of us spending time together. Our dreams didn’t match, and she went in search of her dream.”

She laughed. “Sorry, but I can’t see you on a yacht. A big, strong cowboy like yourself. Did she have her eyes open when she married you?”

Laughter filled the truck.

“Money does things to people,” he said. “I can’t tell you how many people showed up at the ranch wanting money. Family members I’d never heard of. At first, I gave in to the hard luck stories, and then when I hired a money manager, he said it all stopped now. He said have charities contact me and then we can sit down once a month and decide who to donate

money to. He also is the one who insisted that I hire security for the ranch. A wise man.”

The thought of winning billions was not something she could even comprehend.

“And now you have me to be your pretend fiancée,” she said with a laugh. “And I’m a good choice. A woman who doesn’t want to be married, who is not interested in your money, but only being your attorney.”

A grin spread across his face. “So when is the fake engagement announcement.”

“At the next ball, you will make a grand gesture in front of everyone,” she said with a laugh. “A photographer will take our picture and put it in the newspaper. I’ve got to find just the right dress.”

“Do you need more money?”

“No, Adrian, you’ve given me enough,” she said. “I’ll be collecting enough from you in billable hours.”

He turned down the road that led to the Burnett’s ranch and getaway.

“I’ve known you since you were a little girl,” he said. “Who would have ever thought that we would be two lonely people both determined to never marry again.”

“So true,” she said.

They pulled up to the gate and he gave the attendant his name.

“Yes, sir, I see your name right here. They are expecting you down at the barn,” he said.

“Thanks,” Adrian replied as the gate opened and he went through onto the Burnett ranch.

Driving slowly, he went past the reception center and the cabins and then he pulled into a parking place by the barn.

“I shouldn’t be too long,” he said.

“No worries. I’m going to go find Desiree and catch up with her.”

After he climbed out of the truck, he came around and helped her out. Then he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “Have fun.”

“Thanks,” she said as she watched him stroll into the barn. During the years since high school, he’d become a muscular man with strong legs and arms that showed he lifted weights. But what she really liked was the way his hair lay against his forehead with just a swatch peeking out from beneath his hat. And those emerald eyes. Dark and gleaming that left you feeling breathless.

They were doing little affectionate things to make people believe they were dating, but there was no one around and yet he’d kissed her on the forehead. Strangely, she wanted more and knew that was not possible.

“Madison,” she heard her friend squeal and she turned to her.

They met in the middle of the parking lot and hugged.

“How are you?” Desiree asked.

“Good,” she said with a grin as she hooked her arm through hers. “Let’s go catch up. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you.”

“Yes,” Desiree said. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

Madison was shocked when they went into cabin five. There Desiree had tea and blueberry trifles set up.

“How nice,” Madison said.

“Oh, just wait,” Desiree said. “Remember how I told you that my great-great-great-great-grandmother had visited me?”

“Yes,” Madison replied, taking a bite of the trifle. It was so good.

“You really didn’t believe me, did you?” Desiree said.

What could Madison say? It was hard to believe that her friend had seen an actual ghost.

“I’m hoping she’ll join us today for tea,” she said laughing.

What? A ghost? Really?

“Okay,” Madison said, wondering if her friend needed counseling of some sort.

“You see, she’s been matchmaking all my cousins. So far, she’s found a wife for Travis, Tanner, Tucker, Joshua, and Jacob. As the original owner of the ranch, she’s determined that the Burnett line will continue.” Desiree giggled. “As long as she leaves me alone, I’m fine.”

Madison didn’t know what to say. She’d never really given ghosts much thought.

“What about you? Have you found anyone since your last breakup?”

Why did everyone think that you had to find love or you weren’t happy?

“No and yes,” she said, thinking of the impending fake engagement. “All I can say is that I will never marry. After going through my parents’ divorce and then after my engagement ended, I’m just not interested in finding a man.”

Desiree frowned. “But what about a family?”

“No kids,” she said.

Still, the chances of divorce were just too high. She wasn’t willing to risk going through what her mother had. Or her children being disappointed with their parents.

For a moment, Desiree sat quietly.

“I’m not willing to risk my child being treated like I was by my father and my half-sisters.”

Taking a deep breath, Desiree stared at her. “Someday you may change your mind and that’s all right. Travis said he would never marry again and here he is married with a little boy and another baby on the way. He’s happy.”

Madison remembered how Travis's wife and their unborn child had been killed in a tragic accident that involved a drunk. It had been such a sad time and even Madison had attended the funeral to support the Burnett family.

Just then the smell of lavender filled the air.

"Where is that coming from?"

"It's my grandmother," Desiree said. "I want you to meet Eugenia Burnett. She's been matchmaking our family for generations."

Just then an apparition slowly came into view. The image of a grandmother wearing a long blue dress, her white hair up in a bun, appeared.

"Nice to meet you, Madison," she said.

Madison stared, gobsmacked, at what she was seeing. Was she real?

"Dear, I heard what you said about not getting married and having children. I'm so, so sorry you feel that way. I saw you come in with such a nice-looking young man," she said sinking down into a rocking chair in the corner.

Desiree laughed as the elder gazed at Madison. "From your expression, I can see that you're shocked."

"Of course, I am," Madison said. "I'm a lawyer. I'm trained to look at things in an observant manner. How are you projecting her?"

"I'm not," she said.

"If only I could have a bite of that trifle," she said, her wrinkled hand reaching out. She sighed. "But I can't eat."

"Are you dating Adrian?" Desiree asked her. "I know you rode over here with him but are the two of you seeing each other?"

All Madison could do was stare at the older woman rocking there in the chair. "Yes and no. I'm helping him out by attending some balls this season with him. He's helping me out by being my first big client in my new law practice."

“You’re opening your own practice?”

“Yes,” she said. “Back in Oakdale. After my mother’s stroke, I decided it was time to move closer to her.”

Desiree’s face lit up with happiness. It would be great to be close to her friend again.

“Oh my goodness, we’ll be so close,” Desiree said. “I’m so excited.”

The ghost nodded and smiled. “Adrian. I like that name. You two look very good together and I think there is something between the two of you. I’m going to make a prediction that you’ll eventually marry him.” She sighed. “If you both stayed here, I could make certain the two of you came together.”

What? No. That couldn’t happen.

The ghost could predict all she wanted, but there would be no wedding between her and Adrian. And yet, there was the bogus engagement coming up and she couldn’t tell her friend because then the truth might get out.

“No,” she said.

The ghost laughed. “You’re as bad as my grandsons. None of those kids thought they would marry and now more than almost half of them are happily hitched. When the time is right, Desiree will wed, but now is not the right time. I haven’t found her the perfect husband, but I will. And you, dear. You must learn to forgive so that you can marry that handsome cowboy who is buying a horse from Travis.”

Madison was not going to argue with a ghost. It would just be a waste of good breath. The apparition could believe what she wanted, but she wouldn’t be marrying Adrian.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you. But I must get back to working on Justin,” she sighed. “That boy is impossible.”

Standing, she blew a kiss toward Desiree. “Madison, believe child. Believe that you are worthy of a good man. A man who will adore you. Forgive and be healed.”

And just like that, there were sparkles in the room as she left.

Why should she be the one to forgive? Her father was the one who walked away from her. Walked away and never looked back.

“Isn’t she something else?” Desiree said smiling. “I’m sorry if she upset you.”

“Oh no, she didn’t upset me. But I’m not getting married or having children. And my father is not worth my time. Forgiveness is not necessary when you no longer care.”

Chapter 8

As they left the Burnett's, he noticed that Madison was quiet. Normally, she was much more outgoing, but after her visit with Desiree, she seemed more introspective.

“Did you enjoy visiting with Desiree?”

She laughed. “Yes, I did.”

He was glad to hear her laughter. The sound soothed him and filled him with warmth. Yes, they were a pretend couple, but he would always want her to be happy.

“Did you know they have a ghost?”

That was an odd statement.

“I saw her,” she said. “She’s been matchmaking Desiree’s cousins. Seems she’s been on the Burnett ranch for years.”

That was strange, but then again, a bunch of the Burnetts had married over the last couple years. Five of them to be exact. And poor Travis had sworn he would never remarry after the loss of his wife and baby.

“What’s her name?”

“Eugenia Burnett. She is one of the original founders of the Burnetts and she’s determined that the ranch continue.”

He laughed. “Well, I don’t think they have to worry.”

Shaking her head, she sighed. “I can’t help thinking about what she said to me. Told me I needed to forgive. I’m supposed to just let go and forgive my father.” Shaking her head, she laughed. “That’s not going to happen.”

Madison had every right to hate her father like she did, but he also knew from experience that it was better to just let go and forgive someone. That way you weren’t filled with hate and anger. Just like he’d had to forgive Laurie.

And that had been tough.

Still, that didn’t mean he wanted to remarry.

“A ghost. Sounds like a really good marketing idea. Tell people if they come to your cabins, you’ll be on a working ranch with a matchmaking ghost who will also find you your perfect mate,” he said with a flourish.

They both laughed and she sighed.

“I didn’t think it was real, either, but Desiree assured me Eugenia was not some machine that showed her picture on the wall. And she did respond to me.”

Maybe to the Burnetts, she was real, but not to Adrian. Why wouldn’t his parents have returned to guide him and give him directions when he needed them the most if there were ghosts?

“And the smell when she arrived,” she said almost to herself.

“If she’s been dead awhile, she must have stunk,” he said.

“No, she smelled like lavender,” she replied surprised.

“A ghost,” he said, twirling the thoughts in his head.

“A matchmaking ghost. So far five of the Burnetts have married because of her,” she said shaking her head. “She said you were a handsome cowboy.”

He grinned. “And she wanted to find me a wife?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “Me. I told her that was not happening.”

“I’d be a damn good catch,” he said grinning.

“We both understand what we’re doing here,” she said. “Only thing happening between us is fake dating with a fake engagement.”

For a moment, they were silent as they traveled down the road. It felt comfortable being with Madison. And if they hadn’t both been burned by life, there might have been something between them. So far, they were having fun, and there wasn’t an expectation between them.

And so far, kissing her had been enjoyable. As in way too much fun. When he had helped her out of the truck at the

Burnetts, it just seemed natural to pull her in close and kiss her. At the last moment, he'd diverted his mouth from her lips to her forehead.

As they got near the edge of town, he glanced at her. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," she said.

"Want to go to the busiest restaurant in town on Saturday night?"

She grinned. "I'd love to. It's been years since I ate there."

As they reached the edge of the city limits, he pulled into a restaurant on the big lake. Catfish Cafe. It looked more like a dive, but the food was excellent.

After he parked the truck, he came around and helped her out. Taking her by the arm, they walked into the packed restaurant. Mostly it was filled with locals and he immediately recognized several ranchers and their families.

"If you wanted us to be seen together, this is the place to be," he said, whispering low into her ear.

She smiled up at him and his heart skipped a beat. Making her happy filled him with joy.

"Good," she said. "That way it won't be a surprise when we announce our engagement."

A chuckle rumbled through his chest. And yet, part of his mind was screaming warning sirens. He liked being with Madison. He liked the way they were as a couple and there was no pressure with her.

Their waitress took them to a table in the center of the room. Not far from them was Sally Jones—the lady who was always flashing him her long legs and grinning at him. Sometimes he feared she was going to pull a naughty stunt and spread her legs and he would have to quickly turn away.

A smile filled her face until he pulled out Madison's chair and seated her. Then her eyes narrowed and he feared that if there was a knife at Sally's table, Madison could be in trouble.

He nodded his head toward Sally and leaned in close to Madison. “Second most ardent admirer is at a table at ten o’clock.”

She leaned up and ran her hand down his face. “Good to know.”

After he was seated, she put her hands on the table and he took her hand in his. “We’re getting really good at this.”

Suddenly her bare foot was running up his leg. His dick swelled at the feel of her foot caressing his muscle. Damn, pretending was even hard when she did things like this.

“She’s watching, so I’m giving her a show,” she said grinning.

He could see that the little minx was enjoying what she was doing to him. And sadly, he liked the feel of her foot through his jeans.

“Darling,” he said leaning in close. “I could get used to this.”

She giggled just as the waitress came to take their order.

While they waited for their food, they held hands and leaned across the table to talk to one another.

“We could be in a movie,” she said. “We’re acting and doing a really good job.”

Only problem was that he was having to remind his dick this was not for real. This was for show. Only. There would be no driving her home later and taking her to bed.

Where had that thought come from?

And she was probably staying with her mother tonight in his home.

“Do you think we could win an Oscar for our performance?” he asked, trying to keep this lighthearted and fun while his breath seemed to die in his throat. Tiny tremors of heat zinged through him and his jeans had grown tight in the groin area.

This was all play. Just like the feelings he was experiencing right now. They had to be fake, because if they were real, he would be in so much trouble.

“Oh no, Norma Jean just joined Sally for dinner,” she said smiling. She released his hand and waved.

“We do know how to draw a crowd,” he said, leaning toward her and kissing her briefly on the lips as he knew they were all staring at them.

She giggled and he loved that sound. It was carefree and fun.

The waitress brought their dinners. “Enjoy,” she said.

They separated and gazed down at the food on their plate. Why was he suddenly not hungry? The only thing he wanted was to feel Madison’s hand in his again.

“Oh, this looks so good,” she said as she dug into the catfish.

It was perfection. The food was delicious, the company was outstanding, and right now, he was miserable in his tight jeans. Why did it feel like tonight something had changed between them? Or was it there all along, and he’d just ignored the way she made him laugh and the ease of their relationship?

With a sigh, he finished his food and leaned back. If they were married, he would take her home and carry her up the stairs to his bed. There he would unwrap her like a gift and explore every inch of her satiny skin. Taste her in every area and have her crying out his name as he took her.

But he was just fantasizing.

“Oh my goodness, that was so good,” she said. “I’m stuffed.”

It was time to take her back to her mother. Back to his house and let her go, because if he held onto her, then he would lose her.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said softly.

After he paid the bill, they stood. The other table was also leaving at the same time. Damn, his timing really sucked.

Putting his hand on Madison's back, he guided her out the door.

"Adrian," Sally called.

Crap, they were not going to escape without talking to the two women he avoided at all costs.

They stepped outside the restaurant into the cool evening air and the women followed. There was no evading these two man-traps.

"Adrian," Norma Jean called.

Slowly, he turned and stared into her cold gray eyes. In some ways, she reminded him of Laurie, but with a lot more need for control. "Hi, ladies. Did you enjoy the food?"

"Very much," Sally said.

They had not said hello to Madison. Bitches.

"You ladies, know my date, Madison," he asked to draw their attention to the fact that he was with a woman.

"Hi," they each responded in a deadpan.

"Yes, we know each other," Norma Jean said. "Your date? I thought you didn't date."

Caught in a second lie.

"Only occasionally," he said. "We've just hit it off so well, we're seeing each other daily."

They would think he was sleeping with Madison, but he didn't care. People were going to think what they wanted.

"Oh," Sally said. "But you're not engaged. You're not exclusive, right?"

Still looking for an opening. A way to get to him.

Suddenly Madison reached up, her hand cupping his cheek, she pulled his mouth toward hers and he met her halfway.

The kiss was deep and passionate and filled with the promise of more. The promise of love and sex and all the things they were avoiding. And yet, he couldn't resist pulling her close and holding her tight.

The feel of her breasts crushed against his chest almost had him moaning. There was so much more he wanted from Madison, but this was only for these two ladies to witness.

Madison was going to give them a show and he was her lead actor. Whatever she wanted, he would have given it to her at this moment. This kiss had his erection squeezing his jeans tight.

The feel of her in his arms was more thrilling than he'd planned. What in the hell was he doing? If they were doing this to be a show, it was starting to have real consequences for him.

When she broke loose, he pushed back her hair that had fallen in her face and she smiled at the two ladies.

"We're exclusive. He's mine," she said. "It was great seeing you two."

They stared at them, their mouths hanging open.

As they walked off, a chuckle rumbled through him. "Damn, that was perfect, honey. I enjoyed every minute of it."

She probably thought he was talking about the show they had just put on, but in reality, it was her kiss. The feel of her lips had left his heart pounding in his chest with his dick throbbing in time.

Whatever was happening between them, he liked it and now he just wondered if he'd made a terrible mistake hiring her as his bodyguard.

Chapter 9

What had she just done?

As Adrian helped her up in the truck and closed the door, she took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. Her legs had felt like spaghetti noodles walking to the vehicle.

Where had she gotten the courage to kiss him like that in front of those two witches?

In fact, she had wanted to continue kissing him right there. It was like she'd gone into a world without anything but Adrian. Like everything around her disappeared at the touch of his lips on hers.

Once their lips fused, he'd taken control, and all she'd wanted to do was surrender to the feelings he evoked. And that was not a good reaction for a pseudo-relationship.

Even now her center throbbed with heat she could not remember ever feeling. What was she doing?

Opening the driver's door, he stepped inside the truck shaking his head.

"Remind me to never get into an argument with you or do any kind of side deals. You could probably outwit Einstein," he said laughing. "Did you see their faces?"

She had and enjoyed every moment of them realizing their defeat. But what would the future bring? Sure, they could make everyone believe they were a couple, but what happened when they broke up?

"Yes, especially Norma Jean's expression," she said. "Honestly, I hope she finds a man and settles down and lives a great life."

The woman was catty and insensitive, but still, Madison didn't want to wish ill will on her. Everyone deserved happiness.

"Just not with me," he said. "And, Sally, I feel sorry for her. But that doesn't mean I want to spend the rest of my life

with her either. And I feared they were going to gang up on me and somehow trap me into marriage.”

She'd seen cases where women did this to rich men. But Adrian seemed like a man who had a good head, and she doubted that anyone could ever convince him to marry again.

The man had a sweet heart and didn't want to hurt these women, but he was tired of them pursuing him.

With a sigh, she leaned back against the truck's seat. The kiss had happened spontaneously without her giving much thought to it. All she'd wanted to do was brand him as hers before the women were emboldened to do something to Adrian. That kiss had let everyone know that he was hers. Back off.

And yet, it also frightened her. She couldn't do that again. Especially after the reaction she'd experienced to his lips.

More and more, she enjoyed spending time with Adrian. More and more, she felt a hot rush of heat fill her center, making her legs go limp, her body wanting to cling to his when their lips touched. More and more, she could feel herself developing feelings that were unwanted by both of them.

“Thank you for pointing out that I was there. Those women didn't want to acknowledge me. The housekeeper's daughter,” she said.

A frown appeared on his face that she could see in the light from the dashboard.

“Why wouldn't they want anything to do with the housekeeper's daughter?”

She laughed. “You obviously don't know how mean girls can be in high school. Yes, we're not in school any longer, but they can still be mean bitches.”

For a moment, he was silent. “Madison, you're smart. You've got a great career and you're beautiful. Why do you think they want a husband?”

She shrugged. “To make beautiful little babies they can entrap men with?”

“Exactly. Those ladies are looking for someone to take care of them. They don’t want to work or have a job. All they want is for some man to put them in a life of ease. Can you imagine what those women would have been like in the old days when our grandparents worked so hard to make a living off the ranch?”

“No,” she said. “In some ways, I feel sorry for them too. Being self-sufficient is a wonderful thing. No matter what happens, I can always take care of myself. Even if my practice fails, I will go back to work for a group of lawyers.”

“Your practice is not going to fail,” he said with the confidence she didn’t feel.

Hope filled her and she prayed he was right. “At ten clients, I break even.”

“See, you’ve already done the numbers and know what it’s going to take to be successful.”

He turned down the ranch road to the house. When they came close, the gate opened automatically. As they bounced down the lane, she wasn’t ready for the night to end. Suddenly he pulled the truck over about a half mile from the gate.

“Why did you stop?”

A grin spread across his face and he leaped out of the truck and ran around to her side and helped her out.

“Don’t worry, the rattlesnakes are hibernating. We should be safe,” he said.

“What are you doing?”

“Look up?” he said, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her in close. “Look at that moon. It’s so full and bright. It’s beautiful. You don’t get that kind of moon in Dallas.”

It was true, and yet all she could think about was the way his arm felt around her and the closeness of his body. It was like she’d come home and this was where she belonged. The aroma of a strong man overwhelmed her and she liked the smell.

A cow mooed in the distance as they stood there, arm in arm, gazing up at the moon. The bright light reflected off the pasture. The night echoed with the sound of a coyote bemoaning his loneliness.

“He’s calling for his mate,” Adrian said as they leaned against the truck.

If they were actually dating, she would have loved that they had stopped somewhere along the road and were out gazing at the land and the moon and the cattle. But instead, all she could think about was that kiss and now she wanted him to kiss her again. To once again feel his lips caressing hers.

So far, she felt like she’d been instigating most of the kisses, except for that very sweet, gentle kiss he’d given her earlier on the Burnett’s property. And that one had been so good.

But this relationship was not going anywhere. It was doomed to fail before it began. And yet, she had not experienced these emotions since Randall, her former fiancé. Looking back, they had not been right for one another. She didn’t even fully understand why she’d accepted his proposal. But it had finalized her feelings on marriage.

“Why did your family name this the Kissing Oaks Ranch?”

Maybe her mother had told her when she was a kid, but she didn’t remember, and now she wanted to know.

“You see that old, gnarled oak tree in the distance?”

“Yes,” she said, squinting at the tree in the shadow of the moonlight.

“My great-grandparents, the original settlers, were married beneath that tree. There is a superstition in our family that your marriage will last if you ask the person you love to marry you beneath that tree.”

Strange how families developed superstitions or ghosts or other things to keep them together. Maybe it was why her parents’ marriage didn’t last, because they had no traditions, no superstitions. And they most certainly had not liked one another.

“Did you ask Laurie to marry you beneath that tree?” she asked.

He was silent and then with a sigh he replied, “No. She wouldn’t go horseback riding with me. And she was definitely not going to walk across a field filled with cow patties and possibly rattlesnakes to see an old tree. She didn’t know until later the significance of that tree in our family. By then, it didn’t really matter. She laughed at the very idea of such nonsense.”

They watched the moon’s shadow dance over the grass, both of them silent.

“Your family has such a rich, colorful history,” she said. “The Burnetts have a wonderful history too. My parents didn’t have any of that and now the only thing we share is a divorce. You’re so lucky to have this story to tell your children.”

It was another reason not to have children. What could she tell them about their lineage? Oh, your grandparents hated each other so much that your grandfather created a second family and when your grandmother found out, he left. Then he dumped his daughter for them.

“I feel very blessed to have been raised by loving parents and grandparents and the times we have on this land. And you can’t imagine the horror I had of almost losing this place when I was eighteen. It would have devastated me. Honestly, I think my great-grandparents probably helped me win that lottery. That’s why it’s so important to me, that I make this place a success. I’ve been given a second chance. I doubt there would be a third.”

A shiver of cold went through her. It was the first of February and they were out gazing at the moon in the darkness. And yet, she was enjoying every minute of being with Adrian.

“And now you have something that your children will tell their children about,” she said.

“I hope so. Are you cold?”

“A little, but I’m enjoying being out in the country at night, listening to the cows, watching the moon, and just talking to someone I enjoy being with.”

Had she said too much? It was true. She liked Adrian. Always had, ever since her mother came to work at the ranch. He’d been her favorite Landry boy.

Pulling her in front of him, he wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm.

“This is peaceful, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said. “In Dallas, I would be listening to sirens and cars and airplanes. Occasionally, a gunshot. But here, all I hear are cattle and the gentle breeze blowing through the grass.”

“Don’t forget the coyotes,” he said.

She laughed. “Can’t forget the coyotes.”

She liked the feel of his body snug against her own and the heat that flowed from him to her as they stared out at the pasture.

“Look, a shooting star,” she cried suddenly. “We need to make a wish.”

“A wish?” he said.

“Yes, haven’t you heard that you should wish upon a shooting star?”

“No, I was told that meant someone died,” he said.

“I like my version better,” she told him as she closed her eyes and wished.

It was a strange wish, a mixture of wanting and longing. A wish that she was willing to try marriage and have children, but only if she could do it with this man. Eugenia, the ghost, had told her they would marry, but Madison didn’t believe in ghosts or their matchmaking abilities.

Right now, it was a magical night and she needed to keep her mind and heart focused on what this time was all about.

Helping Adrian with his women problem and setting up her practice in town.

He didn't believe in marriage and neither did she. But there was a rapidly forming bond between them. A bond that felt good. A bond that had her imagining things she had no business thinking about.

“What did you wish for?”

“If I told you, then it wouldn't happen,” she said but then grinned. “I wished that my dreams would come true. That soon I'll be living here in town and practicing law, making enough money to live comfortably.”

His arms squeezed her and a delicious spiral of passion made its way through her body.

“You don't want to live rich? Drive a fancy sports car, own a yacht, and fly somewhere new each weekend?”

“Not really,” she said. “I own a jeep that I love. Flying has become a hassle, though I do love a nice vacation once a year. But every weekend? No. A yacht? What would I do with that?”

He laughed.

“More than anything, I like the freedom of owning my own practice. Making my own hours, being able to take off when I need to, and I don't want to screw people out of money. I just want enough to live comfortably.”

It was true. Sure, if she had a nice big fat bank account, it would be reassuring that she would never go hungry, but that's all. Being here with her mother for the last years of her life would be so good. She wouldn't worry about her as much.

“That's why being a rancher is great. Especially now that I know more about what I'm doing, and I'm not so young and proud that I'm afraid to ask for help. I'm grateful for the life I've been given.”

“Me too, Adrian,” she said. “Me too.”

They saw a jeep headed in their direction.

“Oh no, security is making its rounds. They’re going to think we’re crazy for sitting out here on a cold night, watching the moon and the stars.”

She smiled. “I like being a little crazy.”

“Yeah, me too,” he said. “Come on, we better go before your mother gets worried about you.”

“Adrian, I’ve had a really nice day. Thanks for inviting me,” she said.

As his arms unfurled from around her, he glanced down, and for a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her, but then the sound of the jeep interrupted them.

“Me too, Madison. Me too,” he said before he released her and hurried over to the man in the jeep.

Chapter 10

Tonight was the night of the engagement. They were attending one of the smaller parties at the country club and it was by invitation only.

Yesterday had left Adrian confused. The day had been the most fun he'd had in a long time, and just being with Madison was entertaining. The woman was self-reliant, happy, and confident. And when she'd kissed him in front of the other women, he'd almost lost it right there.

That kiss left him reeling with the need to pick her up and carry her home and not let her out of his bed. But that wasn't possible. That would mean another marriage and he wasn't certain he was capable of getting married again.

Last night, he'd come home to having doubts about what they were doing. Maybe he should not be pretend dating anyone. What if Madison was starting to have feelings for him? But more than anything, what if he was developing feelings for Madison?

Neither one of them could fall for the other, but he felt out of control. And that was a feeling he never wanted to experience.

Fixing the tie on his tuxedo, he glanced in the mirror and checked his pocket for the ring. He'd wanted her to wear the biggest ring he could find. Why he wanted it to be a great ring, he didn't know, but even pretending, Madison deserved the best.

Tonight had to be perfect and yet he didn't understand the pressure he was putting on himself.

This was a fake engagement. Nothing more.

Before he headed downstairs, he checked the shine on his cowboy boots and they shone with brilliance.

As he approached the kitchen, he heard Madison and her mother.

“Mom, that’s perfect,” Madison said.

“I don’t like this,” her mother replied. “I’m worried about you.”

There was silence for a moment. “Nothing to worry about, Momma. I’m fine. You know how I feel about marriage.”

“Which is ridiculous, but that is a discussion for another day. This just feels like a dangerous game the two of you are playing. Someone is going to get hurt,” her mother said.

There was no sound, and he cleared his throat to let the ladies know he was in the kitchen.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I’ve got to go, Momma. You worry too much.”

“Have a good time,” she said. “Be careful. Watch out for drunk drivers.”

Madison stepped out from behind the center island and his knees grew weak. The gown she wore was stunning. It shimmered with a gold essence that made her sapphire-gray eyes glow. Her hair and makeup were spotless. He would be the envy of every man there tonight.

“Wow,” he muttered. If he ever married, she would be the type of woman he would want, but he wasn’t going to say “I do”. And while he’d been feeling a little wishy-washy on the subject, it sounded like Madison was certain of her feelings. Good, that went for both of them.

“A special dress for a special occasion,” she said smiling.

“A special dress that will have me keeping the men away from you. I think our positions have reversed.”

A grin spread across her face.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she said, picking up an evening shawl and purse that matched the dress.

They walked out the door and he helped her into the truck. The dress had a slit on the side, and the sight of her long, slender legs, had him swallowing down the passion that rocked through him.

When he climbed in, she reached over and picked a piece of lint off his black tux. “You look mighty handsome yourself. No wonder the women in town are chasing after you. There might be a stampede of women coming after you at the ball tonight.”

He grinned at her.

“Not with you by my side,” he said.

“Nope,” she said confidently. “Next week is the last ball of the season,” she said. “We have two more big dates and then we’ll have to decide how our breakup happens and why. The season will be over and you can go back to being the most wanted bachelor in town.”

He was dreading that. No, he wouldn’t be in town much except to pick up supplies from the hardware store, but the thought of women pursuing him again was not fun. Already he knew that Norma Jean would try to offer to console him.

What if this didn’t have to end?

The thought popped into his head, and he knew he was playing on a dangerous playground. Neither wanted marriage, but what if he could arrange a deal with her to always be his fake fiancée and be seen together in public occasionally? Would she consider the deal?

She could be like his permanent non-relationship party date. They could both help each other out.

“Tell me the plan for tonight,” she said.

He didn’t want to tell her. He wanted this to be spontaneous and fun.

“When the mood feels right, I’ll get down on one knee,” he said, suddenly feeling frustrated and he didn’t know why. They had talked about this for the last couple of weeks –how he was going to not be harassed by women.

“Do we have to break up?” he blurted.

In the darkness, he could see a frown cross her face. “We only agreed to do this during the rodeo ball season.”

With a sigh, he pulled into the parking lot of the country club. “I know. It’s just been so convenient and I like not having women pursuing me.”

She was silent. “You know I would step in and go with you whenever you need a date.”

But that wasn’t what he wanted, but he just thought the same thing a second ago. Right now, he didn’t know what he wanted. Confusion swirled through him, and after he turned off the truck, he turned to her.

“I’ve enjoyed our dates. Being with you has been easy. Not having women chasing me has been wonderful. I know we only agreed to do this during the rodeo party season, but it’s been nice.”

She bit her lip. “It has been nice. I’ve had fun with you. Right now, I need to focus on moving here and getting my law practice set up.”

“You could always live out at the ranch with your mother,” he said.

Shaking her head, she reached out and touched his arm and desire filled him. “Thank you, but no. Everyone would believe we’re living together and I want to make it on my own.”

With a sigh, he opened the door of the truck and climbed out. She was right, and he hated that. What was it he wanted with Madison? No, he didn’t want marriage, but he didn’t want to let her go either.

He helped her out of the truck. “Let the fun begin,” he said sarcastically as he took her by the hand and led her into the club.

When they walked into the ballroom, music was playing and people were dancing. They wound their way through tables until they found where they were to sit.

He grumbled when seeing they were seated at the same table as his ex-wife and her new husband. With a sigh, he pulled out Madison's chair and realized it was going to be a long night.

Leaning down, he whispered in her ear. "Are you going to be all right sitting with Laurie?"

She smiled up at him. "It's okay. What about you?"

"I hate the cheating witch, but I can be polite to her," he said. "I just want you to be comfortable."

"We'll make this work," she replied and kissed him quickly and softly on the lips.

Damn! Just that little comforting kiss set his blood on fire. It was the fact that she was concerned about him and not herself that really made him feel special.

This fake relationship was starting to feel very real and he was frightened. He loved and he hated it.

"Laurie," he said as he sat. "Chuck, how are you?"

"Doing very well," the man said.

The bastard had been sleeping with his wife in his own bed. All he'd wanted to do was deck him when he caught them, but his brother Blake had talked him down.

Even now he wanted to punch the man but would refrain. It might be an early evening.

"Do you remember Madison?" he said as he glanced at Laurie.

How had he ever thought his ex was beautiful? Compared to Madison, she was just plain.

"Hi," Laurie said, her voice strained.

"Hello," Madison said, "nice to see you again."

"You too," she said.

"Do you know Chuck?" he asked.

"No," Madison said. "I'm Madison Benton, attorney at law."

Laurie's eyes widened.

"Chuck Jones," he said.

The music stopped and the director of the rodeo stepped to the microphone. For the next five minutes, he gave the statistics on this year's events, how many people had attended, the standings of the cowboys riding in the rodeo, and whatever else.

Beneath the table, Madison laid her hand on his leg and gave it a squeeze. He turned toward her and she smiled.

"You should be riding in the rodeo," she said. "I remember when you used to compete."

"Darling, that was a long time ago. I'm too old now," he said. "That sport is for younger men."

Laurie made a face. "He never was any good at it."

"I disagree," Madison said. "When we were in high school, he went to the state championship."

Chuck reached over and patted the back of Laurie's hand. "Now, darling, be nice. I remember Adrian being very good. Better than I ever was."

The man was trying to keep the peace while his wife was a total bitch, but Adrian was not going to let her get to him. Not when he had Madison by his side.

Their food was delivered and another couple joined them at the table which helped keep the conversation light. As soon as the dancing commenced, Adrian was going to ask the band to play a special song, and at the end, he would ask Madison to marry him.

Then after that, they were leaving. It was unfortunate that Laurie and Chuck had been seated at their table. But he was determined the two were not going to ruin this evening.

As the waitstaff were picking up the dishes, he spoke to the band leader. "I want to propose to my girlfriend. Do you know *Marry Me* by Bruno Mars?"

The man grinned. "We'll play it next."

“Thank you, and at the end of the song, I’ll make an announcement,” he said grinning.

Why did this feel so real? So perfect even though it was all fiction?

When he returned to the table, Madison was laughing with the woman sitting next to her. Laurie and Chuck were in a heated discussion.

The music began to play and he gazed at Madison. “Dance with me?”

“Of course,” she said and he helped her from her chair.

When they reached the floor, he took her into his arms. It felt so good to hold her close. To feel her body moving in time with his. Damn, but this was getting so close to feeling real and he liked the way they were together. He liked holding her and wanted her in his bed.

Just the thought made him tense but it was time for them to once again put on a show. As the music came to an end, he pulled away from her.

“And now for something really special,” the band leader said.

Dropping to one knee, Adrian took her hand in his. She lifted her other hand to her face and smiled.

“Madison, you make me feel like a whole man again. You’ve healed my hurts and given me joy. I never thought I would say these words ever again. Will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

She laughed and then she pulled him to his feet and laid her lips over his and kissed him deeply. When they came apart, she grinned at him. “Yes, Adrian, I would love to be your wife.”

They hadn’t mentioned words of love and yet he felt like they hovered in the air around them.

He took the ring out of the box and slipped it on her finger. The crowd broke into applause and he took her into his arms again.

The band began to play *All of Me* by John Legend and he pulled her closer.

She grinned at him and then leaned against him. “That was a beautiful proposal, Adrian.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I practiced.”

A giggle came from her.

A couple danced by them. “Congratulations, you two.”

When the song ended, they walked back to the table where Laurie glared at them.

“Congratulations,” Chuck said.

“Yes, congratulations,” she spit out. “Watch out for the prenup. He really screwed me over.”

Adrian gave her a smile. He’d been more than generous with her, but she’d wanted half and he refused. That’s why he’d had her sign a prenup. That money was his before he married her and it also belonged to Kissing Oaks Ranch.

“No worries,” Madison said with a smile. “Remember, I’m an attorney. I don’t want or need his money.”

Laurie’s eyes widened. “Oh my God, look at that ring. You never spent that kind of money on my ring.”

He shrugged. “Only the best for Madison.”

Laurie’s face turned a bright red, and for a moment, Madison feared his ex-wife was going to lose it right there in the ballroom.

Madison gazed at him. “Darling, I’m ready for you to take me home and take me to bed.”

A groan escaped from him. The woman was killing him. Killing him! That was exactly what he wanted to do, but their agreement did not include exploring each other’s bodies.

And he longed to do nothing but peel that dress from her body and taste every inch of her.

“Let’s go,” he said eager to get out of there.

Rising from her chair, he wrapped the shawl around her, and she picked up her purse.

“Goodnight, everyone,” she said, smiling as she laid her hand on his arm. “Take me home.”

“Your wish is my command,” he said, knowing that would irritate Laurie even more.

They walked away, but when they reached the door, Norma Jean was waiting for them.

“You’re engaged,” she said, her face red, her eyes shooting daggers at Madison.

“Yes,” Madison said, holding up her ring to show her the rock. “He did so well choosing the ring.”

Shaking her head, the woman stared at the two of them. “You said you were never going to marry again.”

And he wasn’t, but this woman didn’t need to know this.

“Sometimes love has a way of winning a person over,” Madison said. “And he’s ridden right into my heart.”

Adrian grinned at her. The woman must be an excellent attorney because she was a fine actress.

“Come on, darling, let’s go home,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied, gazing up at him. “Goodnight, Norma Jean.”

When they got into the truck, they turned and gazed at each other and burst out laughing.

“That was fun,” she said. “Who knew your ex-wife would be here.”

“Yes,” he said laughing. But why was a small part of him already hurting knowing this would end soon?

This woman was getting to him. He liked the sound of her laughter, he loved her smile, and the touch of her hand on his was enough to send passion pouring through him. There was so much about them that he liked.

Why did this have to end?

Chapter 11

Madison had worked all day on setting up her office. Right now, she had no receptionist, and until she had more clients, she'd not be hiring any help. The store had delivered the desk she'd chosen, and her matching file cabinets were set up. The phone company had been here and installed her landlines.

On Sunday, she started moving into the new apartment down the street from her new place of employment. She would be able to walk to work. No more driving in heavy traffic or paying every month to park downtown.

She'd filed the necessary paperwork to get her business off the ground and running and soon she would be a real bona fide lawyer's office.

The only problem was that she would now see more of Adrian than ever before and that was turning out to be a problem.

The handsome man was kind and sweet and his proposal the other night had been wonderful. Better than Randall's proposal by a long shot. And it had made her stop to think about how much she was enjoying being with him. How much she laughed when she was in his company. How comfortable they were together.

This felt way too real and that did worry her.

As her client, she shouldn't be dating him, and they would officially end their relationship after this weekend's ball, but still, this ending was going to be harder than she anticipated.

The phone rang and she jumped.

"Benton Law Firm, Madison Benton," she said smiling. It was the first time she'd received a call in her new business.

"Madison?"

The voice sounded familiar and a trickle of anger shimmered through her. Why was he calling?

“Yes,” she said, knowing this was not a phone call she wanted to take.

“It’s your father. I heard about your engagement to Adrian Landry. Congratulations,” he said.

It was the first time he’d called since she was in school. At least a decade had passed. Why would he call her now?

“Thank you,” she said suspiciously.

“It’s been a long time, baby,” he replied.

That’s what he’d called her when she was a little girl. The memory of him saying those words and the warmth they brought her filled her with fury.

“Yes,” she said. “Ten years.”

“That long? It seems like only yesterday,” he replied. “The next time I’m close to Oakdale, I’ll stop in and see you and your own law firm. You’ve grown up and are doing so well for yourself.”

With no help from him. Her mother had helped her as much as she could, but her father had contributed nothing to get her through college or law school. She’d worked part-time and she had student loan debts that she was slowly paying down.

“Your sisters are all in college,” he said.

They weren’t her sisters. They shared some DNA that he’d sown while married to her mother. She didn’t want anything to do with them after the way they treated her as a child, with their mother’s approval, no less.

“Denise, your second mother, is doing quite well,” he said, like saying their names would interest her in them.

“How’s your mother doing?”

“She’s fine,” she said not willing to share with him that her mother had suffered a stroke and miraculously recovered without any lasting effects. If he was phishing, he’d get nothing from her.

“So when is the wedding?” he asked.

“We haven’t set a date,” she replied. And no, he would never walk her down the aisle.

A sigh escaped him. “I was hoping you could help me out. Putting three girls through college is putting a strain on us and I was hoping you could lend me twenty thousand dollars since you’re marrying a billionaire.”

Curses filled her brain. Her body went cold before fire rushed through her and she gasped unnerved by the gall of the man.

“Excuse me” escaped from her mouth before she had time to recover. “How much did you help me when I was going to college? Who is paying for my student loans? When was the last time you paid child support?”

About three years after the divorce, he just stopped supporting his child. When her mother asked about it, he told her he’d be sending her a check next week. Only next week never came. Every time she asked, it was always *the check is in the mail*.

“Now, honey,” he said. “You’re marrying a very wealthy man. You could share a little of that wealth with your father.”

Everything she’d learned about controlling her emotions in the courtroom disappeared. Only this man could make her training vanish.

“Like hell! It’s not my money, it’s Adrian’s. You have a lot of nerve to call me after ten years and expect me to send you money. You may be my father by blood, but you’ve never been a father to me since I was a little girl and you decided your second family was more important than Mother and me.”

There were other things she wanted to say to him, but she couldn’t think of them as rage flowed through her brain cells igniting them. It was a wonder her hair wasn’t on fire.

“Madison, I knew you were well taken care of by your mother. My family needed me,” he said. “All I need is twenty thousand.”

Did he not get the message?

“Yes, your other daughters needed you,” she said, her voice trembling. “Tell that to the nine-year-old who stood waiting for you to pick her up after school to spend the weekend with you. You left me at school. Did you ever think that maybe I needed a father as much as they did? And then you have the nerve to call me and want me to give you my fiancé’s money. People in hell will receive ice water faster than you’d get a dime from me or Adrian.”

With that, she hung up the phone.

Laying her head on the desk, the tears flowed. The first time he’d called her in a decade and all he wanted was money. Money that wasn’t hers and she had no right to offer. A sob escaped her as she cried for the little girl who had lost her father. She cried for all the hard work she’d done to put herself through school with only her mother’s help. She cried at the graduations he’d missed. Her high school graduation, college, and even her law school graduation. He never attended one.

And yet when he learned that she was engaged to a billionaire rancher, he wanted twenty thousand dollars.

The front door opened and she quickly swiped the tears from her eyes. Someone had walked into her law office already.

Walking out of her office, she saw Adrian with a huge bouquet of flowers in his arms.

“Congratulations,” he said, his face going from happy to one of concern. “What’s wrong? Why are you crying,” he asked, putting the flowers down and rushing to her.

He took her into his arms and she held on to him.

Did she dare tell him what her father had just done? Wasn’t this exactly like the women who were after him for his money? And now her own family member was doing the same thing.

“Nothing,” she said, the tears filling her eyes again.

Guiding her to a couch she had put in the lobby, he sat her down and took both of her hands in his.

“You’re crying. Something’s wrong. Tell me what upset you,” he said, wiping a tear from her cheek.

With a sigh, she told him about the call with her father. When she finished, she started crying again. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? It’s not your fault,” he said. “This is what happens when someone has a lot of money. Suddenly people come crawling out of the wood shavings looking for a handout. Twenty thousand is actually a pretty low request. Normally, they want a hundred thousand dollars.”

Shaking her head, she sighed. “It’s just I hadn’t heard from him in so long and he calls to ask me for money. He did say *congratulations*.”

“Maybe us getting fake engaged wasn’t such a great idea,” he said. “Now you’re going to experience what I deal with on a daily basis. I didn’t even think about that.”

If that was a taste of what he had to deal with, then no, she didn’t want a billion dollars. She didn’t want people calling her and begging for money. Her father was an easy person to turn down, but what if someone had a dire need for cash? What would she do then?

The phone rang and she was afraid to answer. What if it was him again?

Slowly, she reached for the phone sitting on the receptionist’s desk.

“Benton Law Firm, Madison Benton,” she said.

“How dare you hang up on your father like that,” her stepmother Denise said. “We need that cash.”

Taking a deep breath, what she’d learned in school took over. This one was easier to deal with since she’d never liked the woman.

“Hello, Denise, how are you? I hear your daughters are all in college,” she said.

“We need that money to keep them in school,” she said. “You’ve got plenty now that you’re marrying a rich man.”

These two people deserved one another. And yet, she had her father's DNA. But she would never be like him. She would never be anything like these two welches.

"Oh, you've heard about my engagement," she said, calmly thinking the woman hadn't even said congratulations, just she wanted money.

"You know, I have so many school loans to pay off because I didn't receive any help getting through college or law school. Mother and I have made it on our own for many years without my father's child support. And yet the first time you hear I'm marrying a wealthy man, you two call and want money."

"Uh, the years just got away from us," she said. "We've been busy raising our daughters."

"Of course, I completely understand. But I will tell you like I told dear old Dad, it's Adrian's money, not mine. I'll tell you like Dad always told Mom, the check is in the mail. It was great talking to you. Have a wonderful life."

Click. She hung up the phone. When she turned to Adrian, he busted out laughing.

"Damn, one day I'm going to come see you in court. I bet you can tear up a witness with your subtle questioning."

With a sigh, she pushed back her blonde hair. "I'm sorry. I never thought they would call to ask for money. That takes a lot of gall. My father is the reason I never want to marry or have children. I come from his blood and what if I become like him?"

Adrian shook his head. "No, you're nothing like your father. And you never will be."

"Did you know that he created a second family while he was married to my mother? Then after they divorced, he would pick me up and take me to spend the weekend with them. Where Denise would mistreat me when he wasn't looking. Though the girls were only a year or two younger than me, they enjoyed being mean to me. One time, I stood outside school waiting for him to pick me up and he never

showed. No call. Nothing. After that, I never went to his other home again.”

Adrian pulled her into his arms and she cried against his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Shhh, you have no reason for being sorry. He was a terrible father,” he said. “I can’t imagine being left at school. What kind of father does that?”

“A lousy one,” she said. “Because of him, I’m afraid of marriage. What if the man I marry left me and created a second family? What if he never saw our children or paid their child support? I can’t take a chance on getting married.”

Leaning down, he kissed the top of her head and she clung to him, enjoying the feel of his chest against hers.

“Come on, I’m taking you to dinner tonight,” he said. “We’re going to celebrate you opening your law firm. We’ll laugh and have fun and forget about the call from my future degenerate father-in-law. You did tell them they would not be invited to the wedding?”

She leaned back in his arms and saw he was teasing. Laughter filled her chest. He made her feel better.

“No, I forgot, but they wouldn’t be,” she said. “Thank you for bringing me flowers. That means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome. Now come on, we need to add some water to them and then we’ll go,” he said. “Let’s celebrate.”

Chapter 12

It was their last date. Their last ball, and after tonight, they would figure out a way to break their engagement. And yet the last two months had been the most fun he'd had in years.

Being with Madison felt right and he fought his need for her. He didn't want to need any woman, and this one was the hardest of anyone he'd ever dated. She fit him just right and that scared him.

As of this week, Madison had her law practice up and running, she'd moved into her new apartment, and even had her first client besides him. Everything was falling into place for her and he was glad. He'd even helped her move her furniture into her new place and liked the fact she could walk back and forth to her office.

And the way she'd handled her father and stepmother had impressed him. Sure, having her father call asking for money after not seeing her for ten years had hurt her, but her stepmother had just angered her. Not to mention he wanted to call on them and tell the bastard to never call her again, but that wasn't his right.

Yet, the urge to protect Madison overwhelmed him.

He felt guilty because he had never thought about people calling her and asking her for his money. And yet she had his back. She'd turned them down so fast, the telephone line was still probably crackling from her hitting the disconnect button.

The wind outside howled and he wondered if they should go tonight. They were predicting sleet later and they would need to keep an eye on the weather to make certain they got home before the ice storm arrived.

Of course, Texas weathermen had predicted the worst before, and they hadn't even received a drop. But you didn't want to have to slip and slide home either.

Tonight's shindig was in Fort Worth which was an hour away. He'd thought about hiring a limo driver but decided it

would be better if he took his truck. That way, they could leave whenever they were ready. Plus, he had four-wheel drive if the weather did get dicey.

Waiting for her in the living room, he stood with his heavy coat and gloves. It was already colder than a witch in Montana and they were used to the cold weather.

His brothers told him they had moved the cattle to the closest pasture and had put out plenty of hay and water with more available first thing in the morning.

The pipes outside of the house were covered. They were as prepared as they could be if they did receive this ice storm. But most of the time, the jet stream flowed farther to the east and not so much south.

She walked into the room and his eyes widened at the sight of her in a blue gown that made her light blue-gray eyes sparkle. The gown fit her curves and hers were all in the right place.

Damn, the woman was gorgeous and he wondered why he'd never considered dating her before now.

"If you get any prettier, I'm going to have to hire you bodyguards," he said.

She smiled. "You are such a flatterer. Keep saying such nice things, but it's not going to get you anywhere."

That was the problem; he wanted more. A lot more, but there was this no-marriage thing standing between them. And he was as much to blame as she was.

After hearing about her father and listening to the conversation with her stepmom, he understood her feelings about matrimony. Yet what they had felt real. It was comfortable in some ways with a dash of fire sparking between them.

"Are you ready?"

"You both be careful," her mother said. "The weather is supposed to turn nasty."

“We’ll be back early if it starts sleeting,” he said. Not really wanting this night to be short because this was the end.

As much as he hated it, he didn’t think she would take a chance on them dating for real.

Tonight, she was taking her big coat and he helped her slip into the long fur-lined jacket. It would be warmer than the shawl she normally wore.

“Goodnight,” her mother called and Madison took his hand in hers.

They walked out to the truck without saying a word and he helped her up.

“I thought about hiring a limo tonight, but decided we’d have better luck in the truck, especially if we decided to leave early.”

Turning to her, he pulled the gift he’d bought her on a whim out of his pocket.

“I got you this,” he said, handing her the small, wrapped box.

Her eyes widened. “Why?”

“Because I wanted to,” he said, wanting something for her to remember him by.

She peeled the paper away and opened the box that contained a tennis bracelet encircled in diamonds. Yes, he’d spent some money on it, but she was worth every penny.

“No, Adrian. I can’t accept this.”

“I bought it because I wanted you to have it. It’s something to remember our time together by.”

“It’s too much,” she said. “And I’ll never forget our time together. It’s been way more than I ever expected.”

“Me too,” he said. “Please, I want you to have it.”

Reaching up she pulled his face to hers and gave him a brief kiss on the lips. Oh, how he wanted so much more than

that simple touch. And he wanted those kisses not to be fake but real. Real with meaning and feelings behind them.

“Thank you,” she said, “but you’ve already given me so much. My law practice is going because of you and the new client I received this week.”

“Good,” he said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He started the engine and they were on their way. It took them less than an hour to reach Fort Worth with little traffic. When a winter storm was predicted, most people stayed home.

He pulled up in front of the hotel where the event was taking place and valet parked. Handing a young man the keys, he got out of the truck.

Then he walked around and helped Madison alight from the truck. She left her coat in the vehicle and he noted she was cold as they hurried inside the hotel.

“This place is beautiful,” she said.

Tonight, they would hand out the trophies and cash prizes to all the cowboys who had won the different divisions of the rodeo.

Leading her into the ballroom, they were shown to their table. Thank goodness tonight they were not placed next to his cheating ex and her husband.

For over an hour, they sat and listened to awards being handed out while they ate the delicious dinner. Finally, the music began to play and he led her onto the floor to dance.

He wanted to hold her for as long as possible and share as many dances as he could with her. This was the last ball of the season and he had no need for her to protect him from the overzealous women any longer.

And yet he didn’t want it to end.

“What if we continued to see each other,” he said as they glided across the floor. She felt so good in his arms but the moment he said those words, she tensed.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said.

“Why not?” he asked.

She bit her lip. “Because sooner or later, one of us will develop feelings for the other and then we’ll both end up hurt. Because you haven’t changed your mind on marriage and neither have I. In fact, hearing from my father this week confirmed what I knew. Marriage is not good for me.”

While he knew what she was saying was true, that didn’t mean he didn’t want to see her any longer.

“We’re having fun. Why can’t we continue to keep things light and casual?” he said.

“For the reasons I just outlined,” she replied.

Suddenly they heard tapping on the glass panes on the ceiling of the ballroom.

It was sleeting. Damn, for once, the weathermen were right.

“We need to leave,” he said.

She grabbed her purse off the table and they hurried to the valet stand.

Other people were doing the same, and there was a line of people waiting to get their cars. The poor guys were doing their best to get people their vehicles, but it was a madhouse.

Standing inside the hotel, Adrian watched as Norma Jean approached.

“Seasons over,” she said, glancing between the two of them. “When’s the wedding?”

Adrian didn’t want to talk to this woman or any other woman right now. He wanted Madison.

“We’re just enjoying being together,” Madison told her. “We’re going to wait awhile.”

The woman smiled. “Or you’re going to break up and I’ll have my chance at him again.”

Adrian felt Madison tense beside him. “Oh, Norma Jean, I feel truly sorry for you. Adrian is mine and will be until the

end of time.”

The words sank into him, and he realized he wanted to be hers until the end of time. In the two months they’d dated, he’d fallen in love with this saucy woman and he’d even agree to marry her if that would keep her by his side.

“Darlin’, they just pulled the truck up. Be safe gettin’ home, Norma Jean,” he said as he helped Madison out the door.

When they were both safely buckled in, he began the treacherous drive. The sleet was really coming down.

He felt the back tires of the truck slide and eased off the gas.

“Whoa,” Madison said.

The sound of ice pellets was loud as they drove through downtown Fort Worth.

“Hopefully, this will stop when we reach the south side of town.”

They were both quiet as he concentrated on driving.

They hit the interstate and traffic came to a dead stop.

“We might have been better to spend the night at the hotel,” Madison said.

“Maybe.”

After an hour of being in the truck, the traffic began to slowly move. It was past midnight and the sleet had not let up. The ground was turning white. They were going so slow, it would be morning before they arrived at the Kissing Oaks Ranch.

He hit the brakes to stop and the truck slid sideways. He managed to stop before he hit the vehicle in front of him, but he quickly reached a decision.

“Find us a hotel. We’re not going to make it home tonight,” he said. “We’re getting off the highway and out of the weather.”

She sighed and grabbed her phone. “There’s a hotel at the next exit.”

It took them another twenty minutes to reach the exit and he had never been so glad to get off that interstate.

They pulled up in front under the cover and he hurried her inside.

It wasn’t a bad-looking place, but he saw from the number of cars in the front that they were busy. Everyone on the highway was doing the same as them. Seeking shelter from the storm.

“Do you have two rooms,” he asked.

The clerk behind the desk shook his head. “I only have one, but it says there are two queen beds.”

“We’ll take it,” he said, not looking at her.

She didn’t argue with him and he knew she had been just as nervous as he was while sitting on that interstate.

“Good thing you got off the highway,” the clerk told him as Adrian paid for the room. “The interstate is closed about a mile down the road. We’ve been talking to our sister hotel down the way and they have sold out of all their rooms.”

He’d made the right decision.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to Madison. “Why don’t you go on up to the room and I’ll park the truck.”

“All right,” she said and he could see she was nervous.

Quickly, he secured the truck in one of the last spots available.

Before he went upstairs, he searched around the hotel for food or drinks. All he found were some candy bars, popcorn, and soda.

Not exactly what he wanted. He would’ve loved to have a beer or a cocktail, anything to prepare him for sharing a room with Madison for the night.

With his hands loaded down with junk food to keep his mind off her sleeping in the room with him, he stepped into the elevator.

At the room's door, he quietly knocked.

When she opened up, she stared at him with surprise. "Are you hungry?"

It was all he could do to keep from saying, *only for you*. But he smiled and stepped into the room.

There was only one bed.

"I thought it was two beds," he said.

"Me too," she replied, gazing at him, her sapphire eyes large.

"I'll sleep on the floor," he replied, setting the snacks on a small table in the room.

"No, you will not," she said. "Look at the floor. It's not nasty, but it's not clean either. We'll find a way to make this work."

"Did you call your mother?"

"Yes," she said. "She told me it's coming down hard there and we were smart to stay in town."

That was a two-edged sword. It was smart to get off the road, but to spend the night together in a hotel room when all he could think about was getting her to change her mind about the two of them wasn't the brightest idea he'd ever had.

He'd fallen in love with this woman and they were in a very precarious situation.

"They had a little stand downstairs with extra toothbrushes and toothpaste," he said. "I bought us each one."

Handing her a toothbrush, she sighed. "This is weird."

"Yes," he said.

"It's our last date, and here we are in a hotel room, spending the night."

They had no nightclothes, and he was not about to sleep in his tuxedo, and she could not sleep in her evening gown.

What would she wear?

“You can sleep in my shirt,” he said.

“Thanks.”

They were both nervous and felt awkward. It had never felt like this between them before.

“I’ll use the bathroom first and then you can change into my shirt,” he said, walking into the small bath.

Quickly, he brushed his teeth and removed the tux coat and his shirt. He was going to leave his pants on until they went to bed and then once the lights were out, he’d remove them.

When he walked out of the bathroom, he handed her the shirt.

“Here you go,” he said.

A few minutes later he heard her brushing her teeth and then he heard her struggling.

She opened the door and stared at him. “I can’t get the zipper down on this dress. Can you help me?”

Oh God, did she know what she was asking him to do and yet he couldn’t refuse her.

“Yes,” he said in a quiet whisper.

Turning her back to him, she lifted her hair off her neck and he gazed at her bare back. The dress was strapless and her hair had hidden that gorgeous expanse of her neck and back.

Easing the zipper down, he couldn’t stop himself when he leaned down and his lips kissed her neck and then found their way down her back.

She sighed and a shiver ran through her.

“Adrian,” she gasped.

Whirling her around, the dress dropped to the floor and she stood before him in a thong and strapless bra. All that expanse of pure silky skin was before him.

She was beautiful. So damn gorgeous and he couldn't resist her any longer.

He layered his mouth over hers and kissed her like he'd wanted to for weeks. His mouth conveyed what his body yearned for, and he couldn't resist pulling her against him wanting her to feel what she did to him.

This was not fake. This was the real deal.

But if she didn't want this, he would never force himself on her.

Leaning back, he gazed into her eyes. "Madison," he said with all the longing consuming him.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Shut up and fuck me," she said. "I need you, Adrian."

Chapter 13

Was she crazy?

When she walked into the room, the sight of that big empty bed sent images of the two of them naked beneath the sheets and exploring each other's body surging through her brain.

And then Adrian walked in the door and her heart skipped a beat. At the thought of sleeping beside him, she knew she was in trouble. Especially after he made the suggestion that they continue dating.

She couldn't. But her heart was already involved, and after tonight, the tentacles of love would be wrapped around her, demanding that she do everything in her power to stay with him no matter what her head told her.

Blood roared in Madison's ears as she leaned into Adrian's kiss, unable to resist the pull of his attraction any longer. The realization that she cared for this man left her feeling reckless. Coupled with the ball tonight, the gift he'd given her, and the engagement ring she wore, she was defenseless against her unbearable need to be in his arms. And she could no longer fight the feelings she had for this man.

Somewhere along their journey, she'd fallen in love with this sweet, kind cowboy.

Consequences be damned, she was hungry for the feel of his body entwined around hers, delirious with wanting him, desperate to be possessed by Adrian.

While his mouth plundered hers, she returned his feverous kisses with fierceness that surprised her.

This wasn't their first passionate kiss, but it was the one that mattered. This kiss was not fake or for show. This kiss expressed the emotions she had for him. Placing her hands on his face, she molded his lips to hers, opening to receive him. Sweet, sinful sensations erupted in a delicious soft moan that escaped from the back of her throat.

They would have no tomorrows, but they had tonight.

His hands gripped her shoulders as though he would never let her go, his lips commanded her surrender as he guided her back until her legs bumped into the bed. That big, empty bed they would soon occupy. He leaned into his kiss, pressing his arousal through her thong into the V of her legs. From the feel of his muscular thighs to the strength of his sinewy chest, she felt all of him. Every delicious, rock-hard inch.

While she was almost naked, he still had way too many clothes on.

Since the very beginning of their dates, she had fought the way their bodies seemed to be drawn to each other. All it took was an ice storm, and in a weak moment, he managed to overcome her defenses.

She slid her hands over his shoulders, down his muscled back, past his waist, until she gripped his buttocks, melding them even more firmly together.

Oh, how she wanted this. How she'd dreamed of being in his arms. Her mind was screaming warnings while her body demanded he take her. Tonight, she was shutting off the rational part of her brain and experiencing what she'd secretly longed for.

She was past the point of control. Nothing could stop her from being with this man, not even the risk of losing her heart to him. Not even the chance of him walking away and leaving her behind.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with the consequences.

She was tired of fighting these sensations. She wanted Adrian.

He moaned, his tongue tracing the ridges of her lips, his kiss turning savage as she held him tightly against her, intoxicating her with desire. Nothing mattered at this moment except this man, this kiss, and the feel of his body taut with need for her, only her.

Adrian made her feel alive. He made her feel things she tried to resist. He made her feel like a woman. No other man had ever made her feel the way he did.

His lips moved to her throat.

“Madison,” he moaned, his voice husky.

Her hands skimmed his naked chest. “You have way too many clothes on,” she said.

She wanted to touch him, make him as giddy with passion as she felt. Tonight, she needed Adrian. She was tired of being his make-believe fiancée.

Letting her fingertips guide her, she traced the hardened muscles of his chest, touching every solid ridge. For two months, she’d felt the strength of his broad shoulders, but never been able to experience the feel of his flesh.

Why couldn’t she put him out of her mind instead of craving his touch? Why couldn’t she walk away from the cowboy and just let their time together end without tonight?

Because no matter what, he made her feel complete in ways she’d never experienced. With just one smoldering glance, her senses quivered in anticipation.

Neither of them had planned on taking their game this far, but somewhere along the road, it became real. At least for her.

“Madison,” he moaned, his lips covering hers once more. As their kiss deepened, his fingers deftly unhooked the strapless bra she’d worn beneath her dress. The cool night air brushed her skin, and she felt a moment of panic. What was she doing?

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

And then his lips touched the sensuous part of her neck, causing her to shiver. His lips trailed the material down her chest, nipping her in the curvature of her shoulder. A shudder passed through her as his lips seared a path down to her breasts.

She leaned her head back, giving him full access to her body. She was crazy with want for him, and at this moment,

nothing else mattered. Her breathing was fast and shallow as she reached for the snap on his tuxedo pants.

“Wait, Madison,” he whispered as he sank down on the bed and tugged his boots off, kicking them across the room. Then he reached for his pants and quickly undid them while she stepped out of her thong. Rising, he stood naked, all male before her. His manhood protruded before him, smooth, long, and hard. With a decisive pang, her heart filled with passion and she realized it was too late.

He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back onto the bed, following her down. With a seductive cry, she reached out and touched his face, her hand caressing his cheek and pulling him toward her. “I want you.”

Her lips expressed what her heart knew and her voice could not say as she covered his mouth with hers and became lost in the sensation of his lips.

There were no future promises, but there was the pleasure of now.

“Thank God, you do,” he whispered, nipping the curvature of her neck.

His lips trailed down to her breasts, and his mouth closed over her nipple, laving the bud until she gripped his head, her breathing harsh.

His one hand skimmed her body, sending quivers through her, while his other delved into the center of her femininity. She jerked at the unexpected jolt of pleasure that rippled through her. She wanted him desperately, yet she was afraid.

“I’m going to tease you until you beg me to stop,” he gasped, breathing hard to fill his lungs.

Madison moaned, the sound loud and voracious in the darkened room. She arched against his hand, gripping the sheets against the raging need his fingers were building with his caresses.

“Please,” she said while his fingers teased and tormented her. Never had a man with just the touch given her such

pleasure. Never had she experienced this ache that let her know she needed him.

“Adrian!” she cried as she tensed, trying to hold on to the sweeping pleasure that descended on her as she disintegrated beneath his hands.

For a moment, she lay there, her breathing hard and quick, her eyes closed while she slowly collected herself. Then the feel of Adrian thoroughly aroused and lying beside her caught her attention.

She opened her eyes and gazed at him, knowing this night would forever change them. His eyes were dark, hungry, filled with passion for her and so beautiful, she had to resist the urge to kiss each one.

She didn't want to love him and didn't want to experience these emotions. But there was no denying he made her feel wonderful. He made her laugh, and he made her feel special, but most of all, he made her feel so loved. And there was no denying she had fallen for him.

Her hand slid past his waist, teasing him, getting just close enough to brush her fingers across the tip of his manhood. She gazed at him and watched as anticipation rippled across his face.

“My big, strong cowboy,” she said softly, goading him. Wanting him inside her.

Finally, she wrapped her hand around his rock-hard shaft. She gently slid her palm over the tip and then wrapped her fingers around him. She stroked the hot, smooth length, gripping until he grabbed her hand.

Rolling himself on top of her, he caught and held both of her hands high above her head.

She writhed beneath him, teasing him with her body when her hands could not do the job.

Slowly he slid his body over her breasts, her thighs, still holding her hands captive in his own.

“Enough, Madison,” he whispered, his husky voice sending tremors down her spine. “It’s past time for me to feel you wrapped around me. It’s past time for me to fuck you.”

His knees nudged open her thighs, his hands released her wrists and gripped her waist as he brought her hips up to meet him and he entered her in a single thrust.

She moaned, the sound loud in the hotel room as he thrust into her welcoming body.

“Adrian,” she cried unable to contain the passion their bodies were creating.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked, staring at her, his gaze hard and unwavering.

“Not until I die,” she said as she rose to meet each thrust.

He delved into her rhythmically, filling her, melding to her when she clutched him, relishing in the feel of his flesh against hers.

With each thrust, his moans filled places deep within her heart that had been empty for so very long. He opened his eyes, staring at her, filling her soul as well as her body with sweetness and contentment that had long been denied. A pleasure that even now was rushing toward her, unstoppable.

Clinging to him, Madison could feel the passion building within her. She cried out in satisfaction as her body went rigid, spasms of desire rippling through her. Cascading shivers of delight left her holding onto Adrian while he reached his own climax, shuddering, gripping her, as he found pleasure.

Madison breathed deeply the musky scent of Adrian and pressed her lips to the inside of his neck between gasps for air. She was completely spent as she lay relaxed, sated, and more confused than ever by the sensations Adrian generated.

Adrian’s breathing was fast and shallow as he leaned against her. For several minutes, they lay in each other’s arms, their breathing slowly returning to normal.

“Damn, Madison,” he said softly.

“Hmm,” she said, lying in his arms, spent, never having experienced sex like that. Never.

There in the darkness, listening as the weather took a turn for the worse, she knew she was in trouble.

“Madison, I just want you to know that I’m—”

“Stop,” she said. “Let’s just enjoy this time together. We’re stuck in a hotel room while a storm rages outside. Let’s not think about tomorrow. Only tonight.”

She was in so much turmoil, she didn’t want to talk about the implications of this night. Right now, she wanted to savor this moment to remember and enjoy when the heartache came. And it would come roaring for her very soon.

Rising onto his elbow, he gazed down at her. “Sometimes, you can be a real pain in the ass.”

She laughed to diffuse the situation. “I’m a woman. That’s my job.”

“Since that was so good, I’m ready to go again,” she said, staring up into his emerald eyes growing dark with passion once more.

All she wanted was to enjoy this man, because tomorrow...tomorrow, there would be pain. Lots of pain. And she wasn’t ready to think about that just yet.

Chapter 14

The ice storm was one of the worst in history. It held the metroplex hostage for two days. And there was nothing either of them could do but stay in that hotel room.

Most of the time they were in bed, trying to keep warm by making love. The heater was not the best, and the freezing temperatures kept the room on the cold side. Plus, they didn't have any clothes but their evening wear.

On the second day, it occurred to Madison that they had not been using condoms. And in fact, they had no condoms. It was early enough in her cycle that she thought they were safe but it was still a terrifying thought.

This morning, she'd awakened early to the sound of a large diesel engine in the hotel parking lot. Jumping out of bed, she hurried to the window to see a big rig tractor-trailer pulling out. The roads were wet with an icy sheen, but the temperature had warmed overnight, and today, they would be going home day.

Today would be the day that Adrian would want to talk and she wasn't ready. She couldn't face either of them saying that it had been fun, but it was over.

Looking at Adrian curled up in bed sleeping, fear cinched her heart. She'd fallen in love with this man, and she couldn't imagine how they could say good-bye. In fact, she didn't want to have him drop her off at her apartment and say *see you around*.

That would cheapen everything about the last two months.

He didn't want to marry and neither did she and she was not the type of woman who could sleep with a man without her feelings being involved. Glancing about, she found her evening gown and put her clothes on.

Gathering her things, she wondered how she could get out of here without Adrian knowing.

Picking up her coat and her evening purse, she quietly opened the hotel door and hurried out.

Her cell phone was almost dead. But she quickly found the number she was looking for.

“Desiree, how is the weather there?”

“It’s clearing up. How are you?”

“I’m in trouble,” she said tears filling her eyes. “I’m in so much trouble. I’m at a hotel in Burleson. The roads look like they’ve cleared. Would you mind coming to get me?”

She started to cry.

“I’m on my way,” she said. “It will take me about thirty minutes to get there or longer if the roads are still icy.”

“There is a restaurant down the road. I’ll be waiting there,” she said, thinking she could walk there to get away from Adrian.

Right now, she needed some time.

“See you soon,” Desiree said.

“Thank you,” she replied.

As soon as she disconnected the phone, she went to the desk clerk.

“Could I leave a written message for the man in room three twenty-three?”

“Of course,” the woman said, gazing at her like she’d lost her mind.

She looked like a fancy hooker in her evening gown.

The woman handed her a pen and paper and she quickly penned Adrian a note.

I had to get away. We agreed that there would be no commitments between us and every minute I spend with you is making me doubt everything we said. Please don't try to find me. I'm headed home. Thank you for a wonderful two months. I'm sorry. Madison.

A tear slipped down her cheek. She put the note in an envelope and sealed it. Wrote Adrian's name on the front and then she handed it back to the clerk.

"Thank you," she said.

With a sigh, she put on her coat and glanced out at the sidewalks.

"Is it still icy?"

"Yes, in some spots," the woman said.

The restaurant was a block away. Taking her time, she walked as quickly as she dared in her heels. When she safely reached the restaurant, she felt relieved stepping inside the building.

The woman at the entrance gazed at her like she was a streetwalker.

"Well, good morning," the woman seating customers said. "Looks like you've had an interesting night?"

"Try three days," she said already missing Adrian and suddenly doubting her decision.

Part of her felt like she was running from something really good while the other part told her she was protecting herself. And yet, she felt like she'd left her heart in that hotel room.

"Breakfast?"

She was hungry. Two days of living on the little food the hotel had left her starving for something substantial. And yet, her heart wasn't really in the mood for a big breakfast.

"Yes," she said. "Mainly coffee."

The woman sat her at a table and then poured her a cup of coffee.

Sitting there, she watched as Adrian came out of the hotel, jumped in his truck, and tore out of the parking lot.

What had she done?

Was this the right path or should she have waited for him knowing it would be an awkward good-bye?

She ordered toast and scrambled eggs.

Just as she finished, Desiree texted her she was in the parking lot.

It was then she saw the text from her father. How he'd gotten her cell number, she didn't know, but she didn't need his nonsense right now.

We need to talk. Urgent. If you don't help me, I'll go bankrupt.

With a sigh, she texted Desiree she was coming right out. Then she paid her bill and walked out the door.

When she stepped into Desiree's SUV, her friend's brows rose.

"This is a story I need to hear," she said.

Tears welled in her eyes.

As they drove toward Oakdale, Madison filled Desiree in on the last forty-eight hours. Of how she'd done this to help Adrian and ended up falling in love with him. And neither one of them wanted to marry.

"Oh, come on, Madison. If you love the man, why won't you take a chance on marrying him?"

She'd asked herself that question. "Because he's been married once and it didn't work out. And look at my family situation. My father had a second family while he was married to my mother. He cheated on her. My ex-fiancé cheated on me. What if Adrian cheats on me?"

"No," Desiree said. "His wife cheated on him. She was the one at fault."

"Men cheat," she said, remembering her mother crying when she'd learned of her father's second family.

Her father's blood ran through her veins. Maybe she would be the one to step out on Adrian.

After Randall cheated on her, she'd made the decision never to marry. Never to give anyone the chance to hurt her like her father had hurt her mother.

“Many of my cousins have found their mates, and I think if you’re happy, you don’t want to hurt the person you love. Obviously, your father wasn’t happy, and he cheated on your mother. Does Adrian make you happy?”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh. “Very much. But he also doesn’t want to get married. Women are after his money, and he said he wasn’t going to take another chance on marriage.”

They rode along in silence.

“You do remember that Eugenia told you that you would marry him,” Desiree said.

Eugenia? Then she remembered. The ghost.

“Look, I know you believe in her, but I’m not taking the advice of a ghost,” she said. “I don’t believe in them.”

Desiree laughed. “You sound just like the men in my family. They don’t believe in her until she finds them the love of their life. She didn’t find yours, but she did tell you that you were going to marry him.”

“No, I’m not marrying any man,” she said. “I’m going back to Oakdale and getting busy on making my law practice successful. And no, I won’t fake date any man ever again. I didn’t expect it to be this hard. I didn’t expect to fall in love with him.”

Desiree reached over and patted her arm.

“I think I’m glad I haven’t found love yet,” she said with a sigh. “It’s not all fun and roses like the movies make it out to be.”

“No, it’s not,” she said, wondering how she could ever see her mother again without running into Adrian.

They pulled into town, and soon, they were in front of the small apartment she’d rented. She was home. Safe and sound and she couldn’t wait to get out of this dress she’d been wearing for three days.

It was going in the trash. Too many memories were associated with the silk gown.

“Thank you for bringing me home, letting me cry on your shoulder, and listening to my sad tale of woe,” she said. “I owe you a big steak dinner.”

“What are friends for?” Desiree said. “Someday it could be me calling you.”

“Anytime,” Madison said, stepping out of the SUV.

“Be careful, it’s still icy out there,” Desiree said.

“You too,” she replied and shut the door. She glanced up at her apartment and wondered if she’d made a mistake quitting her job in Dallas and moving here.

Waving to Desiree, she hurried up the stairs. When she reached the top, Adrian was sitting there at the door waiting for her.

Gulping, she glanced at him. The handsome man’s face was red. He was furious.

Chapter 15

After the best two days of his life, he'd awakened this morning to an empty bed, an empty room, and a broken heart. He'd known immediately when she wasn't in the room that she'd run.

When he reached downstairs, the desk clerk handed him her note and he'd left.

Damn her for running and not talking about what happened between them.

Damn her for making him worry about how she'd gotten home, if she was safe, or if some asshole had picked her up.

When he'd seen Desiree pulling up to the apartment building, he'd known Madison was safe, but still he wanted to speak to her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I'm making sure you got home safe and sound. And now we're going to talk," he said.

"There's nothing to talk about. Our verbal contract ended the night of the ball," she said. "It's over. We're done."

Her words infuriated him. Didn't she see what they had was special? He'd never experienced this kind of love with Laurie. He'd never felt so close to another human being. And she wanted to destroy it all.

She put the key in her lock and opened the door. For a moment, he feared she was going to shut him outside.

"There's nothing left to say," she said.

"The hell there isn't," he said, walking in behind her.

"What are you so afraid of?" he asked her.

Turning she glared at him. "Me? I'm not the only one who doesn't want marriage."

"You're right," he said. "I'm afraid. But I thought we could try dating for real and see if this thing between us is

worth pursuing.”

His heart clenched. Yes, he wanted to marry her. He'd do it tomorrow if she would give him even half the chance. She'd changed him for the better. Madison was a good woman. And no, he didn't want anyone else.

“I'm not good marriage material,” she said. “My father cheated on my mother. It's in my genes.”

“You're not your father,” he said, wondering where this had all come from.

“You don't know that,” she said. “I may be just like my mother and he cheated on her. My ex-fiancé cheated on me. You could cheat on me.”

He laughed. “From someone who has been cheated on, I can promise you that would never happen. It sucks. It's painful. If I'm not happy, I would seek out marital counseling before I would ever leave. But why are we talking about this? Why can't we just date for a while and see if this is what we want.”

She swallowed. “No, I can't. We agreed to fake dating. That is now over and we're done.”

Stepping in close to her, he lifted her chin with his finger and gazed into her eyes. “Tell me that the last two days have meant nothing to you. Tell me that you didn't enjoy yourself as much as I did. Tell me that you have no feelings for me and I'll go quietly.”

She swallowed and tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“No, it was just a fling. If we had not gotten trapped, it would never have happened.”

Surprised, he stared at her and shook his head. In the last two days, he'd realized he'd fallen in love with her. He'd realized that he wanted more than just two months of being with her. He wanted it all.

And yet she was denying that she'd felt anything at all. Maybe she was unable to feel anything for anyone.

Stepping back, he knew he needed to leave. It was over.

“I’m glad you made it home safely. Thanks for the best two months of my life. You actually made me whole again. Laurie had left a pit in my heart. I hated women. I never wanted to feel anything ever again, and you showed me I could find happiness. Thank you. See you around.”

With that, he walked out the door. Hurrying down the stairs, he reached his truck and climbed inside.

“Damn!” he said as he sat there, emotions raging through him. “Damn. That was not how I wanted this to end.”

He backed out of the parking lot and drove home, wiping the tears that rolled down his cheeks. Why couldn’t he be the one to find an everlasting love? Why?

This time, he thought he had found a forever love, only to be disappointed once again.

Chapter 16

The next week was hell. First, her father called her and begged for money. When she told him she was no longer engaged or seeing Adrian, he'd cursed her and called her every kind of fool.

And she had just listened to him and even agreed with him before she told him that she hoped it would be another ten years before she heard from him again.

On Sunday, her mother stopped in to see her.

“What happened between you and Adrian?” she asked.

She gave her a brief synopsis of how things ended between them.

“Madison, you're a smart woman. What makes you think you'll be like your father?”

“I don't know,” she said. “I'm just not willing to take a chance on marriage and having children, and then find out one of us is cheating. The kids will have to spend every other weekend with the other parent. The new spouse will mistreat them and I'm not going to put my kids in that kind of situation.”

Her mother sighed. “I had no idea that your father's new wife was so cruel. As soon as you told me, I told him you would not be returning there. That if he wanted to see you, he would need to make other arrangements. I didn't realize he would just drop off the face of the earth.”

Madison started laughing. “Oh no, Mom. He's still around.”

She told her about how he had been calling her and that he wanted Adrian to give him thousands of dollars. How he put his wife up to calling her and demanding the cash.

With a sigh, her mother shook her head. “I'm sorry, Madison. You were the best thing out of that marriage. And I won't lie to you and say that marriage is easy, but you are your

own person. The mistakes you make in life are yours to make and no one else's. Don't shortchange your life because of what happened between me and your father. If I hadn't married, I would not have you. And you are the best thing in my life."

Tears spilled down Madison's cheeks as she stared at her mother. Was she making a mistake not taking a chance with Adrian?

"Adrian is a good man who was hurt deeply by his wife's infidelity. But between the two of you, I saw something I didn't see with him and Laurie. He cares deeply about you. And I think you enjoyed him. Is it love? I don't know. But don't be afraid of loving someone just because of me and your father."

Her mother stood and hugged her. "Whatever you decide, you know I'll support you. Now I'm going to get back to the ranch. I've been really tired today and I want to get supper cooked and then rest."

Madison nodded. "Why are you so tired?"

"Because I'm getting old," her mother said with a smile.

"Maybe it's time for you to retire. You could move into town with me and we could get a small house to rent."

Shaking her head, her mother hugged her. "No, you need to live your life. I'll be all right. I just need to rest more."

Madison watched as she walked out the door.

"Talk to you later, love you," she said.

As her mother closed the door, she thought about what her mother had said. Yes, her father had screwed up their lives, but they had each other, and if her mother hadn't married her father, then Madison would not be here.

Was she being too hard on herself? The image of Adrian swam before her and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Oh, how she missed hearing his laughter, his voice, the way he treated her. How in two months had they gone from being just acquaintances to being good friends and even lovers?

It was early afternoon and she and Desiree were going to have that steak tonight.

Rushing to get ready, she hurried out the door. After an hour, Madison stepped inside the reception building where her friend waited. The smell of lavender filled the air.

“Eugenia, not here,” Desiree said. “A guest could walk in.”

“Do you think I give a rat’s *patatoe* about your guests?” the woman said, shimmering in the air. “I need to speak to Madison.”

This was so strange. And she didn’t dare tell anyone about these encounters, because if she did, they would lock her up. She’d be known as the crazy woman lawyer in Oakdale.

“Yes, Eugenia,” she said not really believing she was speaking to a ghost. She looked around the room for a camera, a machine, anything that could put her image into the room.

“You’re being unreasonable,” Eugenia said. “You are not your father.”

“Did you tell her our discussion,” she said glancing at Desiree.

“No, I did not,” she said. “I don’t tell her much because that information can and will be used against you.”

“Desiree, is that any way to speak about your great-grandmother?”

“Yes, ma’am, it’s the truth,” Desiree said.

“Oh hush. Like I was saying, Madison, your parents were never meant to be together. There was someone else your mother should have married. But then you would not have been born. Adrian is a good man. Don’t let fear keep you from finding happiness.”

The essence shimmered in the doorway to Desiree’s office. A ghost was speaking to her, telling her she was acting a fool.

“Thank you, Eugenia,” she said. “I’ll take your words under consideration.”

“Do more than that,” she said. “Go get your man.”

Desiree snickered. “But first, she’s buying me dinner and you need to disappear. Here comes a guest.”

The ghost vanished, but the smell of lavender remained.

“Come on, let’s go eat. And you can update me on your fake dating.”

“I’m never do it again,” she said. “It hurts as bad as real dating when it ends.”

Two hours later, she dropped Desiree off at the Burnett Ranch and began the long drive home.

Her phone rang and she saw it was Adrian. Why was he calling her? It was almost ten o’clock at night.

She didn’t answer because she was driving. The road was dark and windy and she had to watch for deer.

When she pulled up in the parking lot of the apartment, she saw his truck sitting there.

He got out and met her at her car.

“Come on, we’ve got to go,” he said. “I’ve been trying to reach you for two hours.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s your mother. We need to get to the hospital. They took her by ambulance about seven o’clock this evening.”

Fear spiraled through her and she ran to his truck. He helped her inside and then he sped down the road.

“I’m sorry. I was driving and I didn’t want to answer while I was on that road from the Burnett’s,” she said.

He nodded.

“What happened with Mom,” she asked. “She was at my house earlier today and she complained of feeling tired.”

“She collapsed while she was making dinner. Blake found her on the kitchen floor and called 911.”

Terror gripped her. She couldn’t lose her mother. Not now. Not after everything with Adrian.

They reached the small hospital and they both jumped out of the truck and she ran inside with Adrian by her side.

The person at the desk advised that her mother was in the ER. In the waiting area, all of Adrian's brothers were sitting there, looking out of place. They all loved her mother and that warmed her heart. What would it be like to be a part of his family?

In some ways, they already were, but if she married Adrian, it would be official.

"We haven't heard a thing," Blake said, a worried expression on his face. "She's been back there several hours now."

"Let me see if I can find out anything," she said, walking up to a desk.

The nurse led her back to her mother and she grabbed Adrian's hand for him to come with her. The touch of his fingers wrapped in hers gave her strength, and she glanced at him. He still wore a worried expression.

"Mom," she cried rushing over to her.

"I'm all right," she said. "It wasn't another stroke. My blood work is not looking good and they're going to keep me overnight to stabilize me. I knew I was tired and not feeling good today."

Her mother glanced at Adrian by her side. "Sorry about dinner tonight."

"Susan, I don't give a damn about dinner. You scared us so bad. As long as you're all right, that's all that matters."

She smiled at him and then she gazed at her daughter.

"If something happens to me, you know where everything is right?"

Terror spiraled through Madison. She couldn't lose her mother, not now.

"Don't even say it. You're going to be fine. I'm sorry I wasn't here when they brought you in."

“It’s all right. You were having dinner with Desiree,” she said. “I’d forgotten until just now.”

The nurse walked in. “Good news, we have a room ready for you. Let us get her transported up there and then you two can come in and say goodnight. She needs to rest.”

Together, they walked out of the room and were greeted by his brothers.

“They’re admitting her. It’s not a stroke, but they want to run more tests and make certain her blood work is good,” she told the men who all stared at her.

The guys relaxed and she couldn’t help but reach out and pull them all in for a hug. “Thank you for taking good care of her.”

“She’s everything to us,” Blake said.

“She’s our second mother,” Cody replied.

Dakota and Evan grinned. “We want to see her. We want to make certain she’s really going to be all right.”

Only Garth remained quiet, his face white with worry.

“They’re going to move her to a room and then we’ll all go up and see her,” Adrian said. “But we can’t stay long because she needs to rest.”

Garth, the youngest, shook his head. “I think one of us should stay here and make certain she receives the care she needs.”

This was the family she wanted around her. Not her stepsisters, stepmother, or father. These were the people who cared about her and her mother.

Glancing at Adrian, she decided she needed to be honest with him. As soon as they left the hospital, she would tell him her feelings.

Thirty minutes later, they all stood around her mother’s bed, smiling at her and telling her to get better when the nurse came to the door.

“All right, folks, you’ve had a chance to tell her goodnight. It’s time for me to take her vitals, give her some medication, and turn down the lights. Time for you to go home.”

Madison leaned over, hugged her, and kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, sweetie,” she said. “Remember what we talked about.”

She nodded. Then the boys, one by one, hugged her goodnight.

When it came Adrian’s turn, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “Goodnight.”

They all left the hospital together and when they reached the parking lot, he glanced at her. “Do you want one of the other boys to take you home?”

“No, I want you,” she said.

His brows rose and he opened the truck door for her and helped her inside.

They were silent on the way to her apartment. But when they pulled into the parking lot, she gazed at him. “Come up, we need to speak.”

Once they were inside the door, she took off her coat, put her purse on the counter, and then she motioned for him to sit on the couch.

Sinking down beside him, she sighed. How did she tell him the reason she ran was because she had fallen in love with him?

“You know my family situation,” she said. “After you left last week, my father called and demanded I give him money. I told him that you and I had broken up and he called me all kinds of names. Said I was the biggest fool. And in some ways, I have to agree with him.”

Adrian shook his head. “You’re not a fool.”

“No, but I realized before the ball last week that I was falling in love with you. That you were the perfect man for

me. We had fun, we laughed, we played, and that scared the hell out of me. I still believe that I'm not good marriage material because of who my father is. And yet, this week I've been so miserable without you. I've missed you. But you don't want to marry either."

He'd shown no reaction to her telling him that she was falling in love with him. None and that scared her. What if he didn't want her love or thought she was just another woman after his money?

"I'm not like the other women who were chasing after you. Your money is yours, not mine, and it never will be," she said, hoping he was going to respond to her declaration of love. What if she was the only one feeling this way?

He held up his hand. "Before that last ball, I knew things had changed between us. Remember, I even asked you why we couldn't continue to date and you refused."

"That's because my feelings were getting involved and I was so afraid."

He grinned. "Then after we stayed at that hotel for two of the best days of my life, I woke up and you were gone, and it about destroyed me. I've fallen so hard for you, Madison. I love you. I want to marry you. I want to have a family with you. You are the girl I should've been with all along, and I know deep in my heart that you're the right choice for me."

Tears filled her eyes. He loved her.

"These last two months, you've healed my wounded heart and made me believe in love again, and while I know that you're not ready to dance down the aisle with me, someday soon, I hope you'll be my wife. During my 'fake' engagement announcement was when I realized you are the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with."

He pulled her into his arms and she clung to him. "I'm so, so sorry I left you that day. Desiree gave me so much crap about leaving without speaking to you, but I was terrified. And then my father started texting me. I love you, Adrian. I love you so much, it frightens me."

“Me too,” he said, holding her. “We’ll take it slow. One day at a time. And when you’re ready, we’ll make it official. Our bogus dating and engagement have turned real and no one is going to come between us. No women pursuing me. No cheating. Nothing. Only you and me and the family I hope we someday create.”

Standing, she pulled him up, took him by the hand, and led him to the bedroom.

“Tonight, we’re going to celebrate the love we have for each other,” she said, pulling his face down to hers.

“I love you, Madison,” he whispered against her lips.

“I love you, Adrian.”

Chapter 17

A month later, Adrian and Madison were horseback riding through the pasture in the spring air.

Susan was home from the hospital, and they had put her on new medication that they hoped would keep her out of the hospital.

The boys were busy moving cows to the farthest pastures to enjoy the new spring grass and getting cattle ready for market.

“Where are we going?” she asked him.

“What?” he asked her. “Can’t we spend time together?”

The last month, they’d spent dating. Real dating. And in his pocket, he had a new piece of jewelry for her.

“There’s the family oak tree,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, wondering if she’d guessed his intent.

They pulled their horses beneath the tree and he ground tethered both horses before he came around and helped her off.

“Adrian, what are we doing here?”

He grinned. She was getting suspicious. Gazing at her, he saw the fear on her face, but then he also saw something else. Something that he hoped was excitement.

Getting down on one knee, he pulled the ring box from his pocket. “I know we’ve done this once before, but this time I wanted to ask you to marry me beneath the family oak tree. The place my family believes is traditional and couples who come here last forever. You know I love you, Madison. You own my heart. Here, beneath this tree, I’m asking you to be my wife. To let me love you all the days you have on this earth. And I pledge to you that I will never cheat on you. You’re the only woman for me.”

He opened the ring box. “Will you marry me?”

A smile spread across her face and she launched herself into his arms. “Yes, I’ll marry you. The sooner the better.”

That surprised him.

“I mean it, Madison. We’ve both suffered from cheaters in our lives. I’m yours forever.”

“And no one can tear me away from you,” she said, kissing him on the lips. “I love you, Adrian. I can’t wait to be your wife. And when I said the sooner the better, it’s because we might have created a little bundle of joy in that hotel room.”

Jaw hanging down, he stared at her.

“You’re pregnant?”

“I think so,” she said. “I’ve got all the signs and symptoms. And I’ve not had a period in almost two months.”

Excitement filled him and he kissed her hard.

“I’m so thrilled. A wedding *and* we’re going to start our family.”

He took the ring out of the box and placed it on her finger. It was the same ring he’d given her during the fake engagement, but he’d had the jeweler add a special message on the inside of the band.

Yours for real and forever.

“I love you, Madison. I can’t wait to start our life together.”

She reached up and stroked his face. “Me too, Adrian. Me too. I love you and I’m so excited about being your wife and this baby we’re going to have.”

Sweeping her into his arms, he grinned. “Let’s go back and tell the family. I love you so much, Madison.”

“I love you,” she said grinning. “From fake dating to forever love.”

“Forever,” he said.

* * *

Continue the Kissing Oaks Billionaire Brothers in book two,
with Blake's story, The Cowboy Billionaire's Fate.

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About the Author

USA Today bestselling author Sylvia McDaniel has published more than eighty western historical romance, and contemporary romances. Known for her sweet, funny, family-oriented stories, Sylvia is the author of The Burnett Brides, Lipstick and Lead Series, Bad Girls of the West, and the Return to Cupid, Texas series.

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Pure Seduction
Stephanie Morris

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Pure Seduction

Love unexpectedly blossoms amidst grit and grease...

Wild child tomboy Bailey Scott is her father's daughter. She can change the oil or a flat tire on a truck with her eyes closed. But when it comes to men, she's a lost cause. Thankfully, there aren't any interested in her because grease and dirt are her makeup. And she wouldn't be caught in a pair of heels or a dress if her life depended on it. This is why she automatically becomes suspicious when sexy cowboy, Duke Murphy starts sniffing around. Whatever he's selling, she ain't buying.

Duke Murphy noticed Bailey Scott the moment he takes his uncle's truck in for maintenance. Underneath the layers of grit and oil is a sexy woman that gets his engine revving in more ways than one. Bailey is suspicious of his intent but he's willing to do what it takes to show her he isn't playing games. He wants her and he's going to prove it.

Chapter 1

“Bailey! There’s a customer out front asking for you.”

Bailey clenched her teeth as she slid from underneath the truck she’d just finished working on. Thankfully it was just an oil change. Something she could do with her eyes closed because her father had thought her how to do it when she could barely walk. But that wasn’t what agitated her about being interrupted.

It was the customer out front looking for her. There was no doubt of who it was.

Duke Murphy.

The sweet-talking cowboy had become a thorn in her side since he’d brought his uncle’s truck in for maintenance last month.

Unfortunately, Duke didn’t understand that she wasn’t buying what he was selling. No matter how many cupcakes he brought her from her favorite bakery.

She still didn’t know how he’d found out that information but in a town like Centerville, it wouldn’t be hard. The population was barely above five thousand and everyone knew everyone or was related to someone.

“Bailey!” Harry called out again.

“I heard you,” she yelled.

She pushed to her feet before grabbing a well-used rag to wipe her hands. Then she tossed it aside and stomped out to the main area. As suspected, Duke stood there looking so smug she was tempted to punch him in the face. But she had no inkling to spend a night in jail.

A wild stint with her best friend Ginger had landed her there once and that was enough. Although egging Nick’s car their senior year had been well worth it. The jerk had tormented her for as long as she could remember.

Destroying his prized cherry red Mustang had been worth every second of the community service she'd had to do to keep the charges off her record. Since then, she'd managed to keep her nose clean and her record clear.

Something Duke was now threatening to destroy.

"No," she grumbled as soon as she reached the counter.

Duke grinned, showing off his tempting dimples. That was the other thing that confused her about him. The man was drop-dead gorgeous. The way his broad shoulders filled out his button-down shirt. Then there were his muscular thighs and mouth-watering butt. They made the jeans he wore look downright pornographic.

He might have only been in town for a few months, but Duke looked like he'd been working on a ranch all of his life.

That was the other thing that made it somewhat difficult to completely dislike him. He'd relocated from Des Moines to help Miss. Jorie, his aunt, after she'd suffered a mild heart attack. Her husband had died a year ago, leaving her to run their cattle ranch on her own. While they only had a little over one-hundred head of cattle, it had proved to be too much for Miss. Jorie to run on her own.

She didn't know a lot about Duke, because she'd tried to ignore the gossip mill as much as possible. But she knew that it took a lot for a person to uproot their life for someone else. It appeared to be easier for people to hurt others without any regard. Something she knew all too well.

"You don't know what I'm going to ask yet," Duke replied.

Bailey clenched her hands into fists and her thighs together simultaneously. His deep baritone resonated down her spine making it difficult to remember that she was against doing anything with him.

"The same thing you have every week for the past month. You want to take me to dinner," she replied dryly.

He chuckled. "Not this time. I want to take you to lunch. Right now."

Bailey couldn't hold back her scoff of amusement. "I have to give it to you. You are persistent. But the answer is no. I only have thirty minutes and what I have on under my jumpsuit isn't suitable for a public place."

Somehow she managed to keep her left eye from twitching as she told the half-truth. While the tank top and joggers that she had on underneath her work uniform were far from indecent. Still, she wouldn't be caught walking around town in the ensemble.

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Duke replied. "I brought lunch to you."

He tilted his head toward a chair. Her eyes widened when she spotted the basket sitting on it. For once, she was struck speechless.

"Bailey?"

She jumped at the sound of her father's voice not realizing he'd walked up behind her. "Yes, Daddy."

"Put the man out of his misery and have lunch with him. Besides, I have to respect a man that gives it."

Confusion filled her. Normally her daddy would have the shotgun he kept in the back aimed at a man who dared approach his daughter. She'd seen him do it.

"What?" she managed to get out.

Her father smiled as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "He asked for my permission a few days after he picked up his uncles' truck."

"To date me?" she asked.

"No. To marry you," her father replied before turning to walk away. His chuckle trailed behind him.

Her eyes widened. Then she turned her attention back to Duke. Surely he hadn't. She opened her mouth to say something but no sound came out. Closing her mouth, she swallowed hard, then tried again with the same result.

"I think that means yes," Harry interjected.

She snatched a pen off the counter and threw it in his direction. He ducked before giving Duke a sympathetic look.

“I hope you know what you are getting yourself into,” he said.

Duke grinned. “No idea, but I look forward to discovering what’s to come.”

Harry shook his head. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He turned to leave before pausing. “Oh, and she has a mean right hook. I would avoid it if I were you.”

“Harry, if you don’t get back to work I’m going to call your mom and tell her about Victoria,” she threatened.

Harry groaned. “Now, that’s just mean. Enjoy your lunch.”

Her growl was cut off by the sound of Duke’s laughter. She turned her glare to the man who either was insane or had a death wish.

Then she’d realized she’d been going about this all wrong. Duke didn’t know her. Perhaps she needed to let him do just that.

“I don’t know what you are planning but I would hate to eat the two cupcakes that I brought you for dessert,” he threatened.

She couldn’t even pretend as if she didn’t start salivating. This man knew her kryptonite and that made him dangerous.

Finally, she conceded. “Let’s get this over with.”

Chapter 2

Duke tried to contain his excitement over having Bailey sitting across from him. She was the last thing he'd expected to find in Centerville. While he'd spent two weeks every summer with his aunt, he'd never run into Bailey.

If the rumors were to be believed, it was because Bailey practically lived at the auto mechanic shop that her father and uncle ran. A fact that he thought was hot as hell. He liked a resourceful woman. He always had.

Mainly because he was ambitious himself. Right after college he'd taken a huge gamble and started his own marketing and advertising company. He'd known from an early age that he wanted to run his own business like his aunt and uncle did.

Aunt Jorie had been one of the main people that believed in him even when Mom didn't. Not that he blamed his mom. She'd been a single parent dealing with the premature death of a spouse while raising two kids on her own. He'd done his best to take it easy on his mom but there were times when he'd been frustrated because she hadn't understood him and had been more preoccupied with trying to mold him into who she thought he should be.

That's why he felt more at ease than Bailey probably realized. He was drawn to her because from what he'd experienced, she was unapologetically her. That's all he needed her to be. If she thought a little oil or grease on her face would turn him off, she had another thing coming.

She was beautiful and funny. Even when she was grumpy. Which was more often than not because she was trying so hard not to like him. But then there was her laugh. An adorable giggle so full of happiness that he wasn't above engineering things to make sure he heard it every time there were together.

If he had his way, that would be a lot.

Yep.

He was a goner.

The last thing he'd ever expected was to find the woman he wanted to give his last name to in the middle of what was a time of pure chaos. Losing his uncle last year had been painful. But the news of his aunt having a heart attack had almost pushed him over the edge. After everything they'd done for them, the least he could do was help take care of his aunt and their cattle farm while she recovered.

After all, he probably wouldn't have had some of the success that he had without them. They'd been his first customer when he'd been trying to build his portfolio. He'd been shocked when they'd paid him after the success of his marketing campaign for them. His aunt and uncle had become paying customers ever since but he wouldn't take more than fifty percent of what he normally charged.

At the age of thirty-two, he'd achieved more success than he'd ever expected and did pretty well for himself. His chosen career also gave him a lot of flexibility that he appreciated in moments like this.

He returned his attention to Bailey as he balled up the wrapper his sandwich had been in. She was in the process of performing what could only be described as oral sex on her cupcake and he stifled a groan. If he hadn't seen her enjoying one of the ones he'd tried to bribe her with before this moment, he would have thought she was egging him on. Instead, it was just a testament to how much she enjoyed the baked treat.

"You're ogling me again," she said after swallowing the icing she'd just removed from the dessert.

"What can I say? You're gorgeous," he replied.

She shook her head. "How long do you plan to keep this ruse going?"

"As long as it takes for you to realize that it isn't one," he countered.

Bailey put her cupcake down, warning him that things were going to get heavy. She studied him for several seconds

before clearing her throat.

“I’m not like other women, Duke,” she warned.

“I know. That’s what attracts me to you,” he said. “I’d like to think that I’m different from other men.”

“You are,” she whispered then bit her lip.

She looked away for several long minutes before turning her gaze back to him. What he hadn’t expected was for them to be full of unshed tears.

“Shit, Bailey. I’m not trying to upset you,” he stated.

She shook her head before discreetly wiping away a tear. “It’s not you, it’s me.” Then she laughed. “That does sound cliché when I say it aloud.” She paused again, exhaling deeply. “I won’t go into much detail right now but life hasn’t been easy for me. I’m a daddy’s girl through and through. Only I don’t wear high heels and makeup. It’s shop jumpers and motor oil for me.”

She picked up her cupcake and took a bite. He did everything to stay relaxed and looked as if he had all the time in the world to wait to hear what she had to say. Technically he didn’t but he wasn’t going to rush her. They were having a break through and he was certain this was something he needed to know.

Several minutes ticked by before she was finally composed enough to continue. “I’ve had bullies for a long time about not being ‘girly’ enough. Even now, men tease me about knowing more about cars than they do. Relationships are hard for me so I don’t have them. I haven’t wanted to. But you...”

Her voice trailed off as she frowned. As if she didn’t know what to say when it came to him. Something that didn’t bother him. He wanted her to think about him as long as it was in a good way.

“You make me feel things I can’t quite explain,” she admitted. “I’ve never really felt them before and it’s scary.”

She stared at the cupcake in front of her as if it held the answer to all of the secrets in the world. When she finally

looked up at him, the emotion in them was almost blinding.

“I need to know this isn’t a game to you. That you won’t hurt me,” she whispered.

“Why do you think I would do that?” he probed.

“Well, the obvious elephant in the room is that we aren’t the same race,” she stated. “Then it’s obvious that I am different. Maybe this is just a challenge for you.”

He didn’t consider that to be a big deal. Over the years he’d connected with people from all walks of life. A person’s skin tone was the least of his worries. Now he needed to make that clear to Bailey.

“I’ve dated outside of my race before. That’s not a problem for me. Is it for you?”

Her eyes widened at his question. “Of course not, you’ve met my best friend, Ginger, even if only in passing.”

“True, but having a friend of a different ethnicity doesn’t mean that you are willing to date someone that is.”

“I’m fine with it,” Bailey confirmed.

He extended his hand to her. She hesitated a second but stretched hers out and placed it in his. While it was soft, he felt a rough spot or two. They weren’t quite callous stage but it was clear that they knew hard work. His respect for her grew even more in that moment.

“Then I think we’re okay. Now, I can’t promise you that I won’t ever do anything dumb,” he began and she stiffened before making a move to pull her hand back. He tightened his grip with a smile. “But I swear that I will never do anything to intentionally hurt you. That would make me beyond stupid considering how hard I’ve worked to get here.”

She studied him for several seconds and then nodded. “Okay. I’m willing to give whatever this is a shot.”

“Good. Now finish your cupcake,” he ordered.

She picked up the baked good before looking at him again. “Speaking of which, you have to cut back on bringing me

these. I can't afford for my hips to spread any more than they already have."

"Trust me when I say you have a gorgeous ass. There is nothing to worry about," he replied.

"I didn't say anything about my *ass*," she retorted before rolling her eyes and taking a bite of the cupcake.

"I know, but it is connected to your hips so I wanted to clear that up in case you were wondering," he retorted.

She shook her head. "You're off to a bad start."

"Really? Am I not supposed to compliment you?" he asked.

She frowned. "I'm getting ready to change—"

"Bailey!"

She jumped at the sound of her father calling her. Then she glanced down at her watch and flinched.

"Crap. My time is up. I have to get back to work," she stated before stuffing the last bit of the cupcake into her mouth.

Duke rose to his feet, waving her away when she started hustling to clean up. "I have this. The only thing I want you to worry about is where you want to go for our next date."

"Oh! Um...okay," she stammered. "Uh..."

He pulled his cell phone out, unlocked it, and handed it to her. "Add your number while I put this away."

There wasn't much to get rid of so by the time he'd finished, she handed his phone back. Before slipping her arms back into the sleeves of her jumper. Much to his dismay, she had been more decent underneath than she'd claimed. The tank top covered more of her delectable skin than he'd hoped.

"I texted you from my phone so that I know it's you when you reach out."

He accepted the phone with a nod. "I'll call you tonight."

"Okay," she replied with clear confusion.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s okay if you just want to text,” she stated.

“Nope,” he replied with a shake of his head. “While there are times when I may be too busy to talk I prefer to hear your voice and your laugh. Besides things don’t always come across well on text.”

“True,” she murmured. “Okay, then I’ll talk to you later.” She went to walk away then stopped before looking over her shoulder. “Did you ask my father for permission to marry me?”

He laughed. “That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

Chapter 3

Bailey had no idea how much of a whirlwind her life was going to become. Lunch with Duke had turned into dinner a week later, another lunch date, and then another dinner date after that. Every moment they spent together, he bulldozed the barriers she'd erected and it scared her.

So why couldn't she say no to him? Why did the thought of him make her giddy? She couldn't ever recall feeling this way about anyone.

And that was the reason why she was still sitting in the driver's seat staring out the window like a loon.

She didn't know why she'd said yes to coming out to the cattle farm today but she had. A part of her wanted to see Duke in this element. A marketing consultant turned cowboy was a little of a stretch for her to believe.

But by all accounts of town gossip, he was doing a great job of it. There were also a few whispers of her because it was now clear that she and Duke were involved. Even though she was usually able to convince Duke to go the next town or two over for their dinner dates.

Yet, the one lunch date they'd had at a local diner had been enough to get some tongues wagging.

When the front door of the main house swung open, she realized she could no longer delay the inevitable. Only she was surprised when an older woman stepped out on the porch. She knew it wasn't Miss. Jorie because the woman wasn't old enough. When she waved, Bailey pushed her door open and swung her legs out.

"Bailey?" the woman called out.

"Yes," she confirmed cautiously.

"Hi, I'm Rae, the part-time housekeeper. Duke asked me to keep an eye out for you. One of the ranch hands hurt his back so Duke is a little behind with the evening chores. He's finishing up in the barn. Can I offer you something to drink?"

“Um...thank you, but I’m fine. Can you point me in the direction of the barn?”

If her request seemed strange, Rae didn’t bat an eye. “Of course, just go around the side of the house and follow the trail toward the back. You can’t miss the corral or the barn.”

“Thank you again. Nice to meet you,” Bailey replied before heading in the direction she’d been pointed in.

As she cleared the house her breath stalled in her chest. It was beautiful. Green pastures for as far as she could see. Several of the black cattle roamed the enclosure and part of her felt a little guilty. The steakhouse in town was one of her guilty pleasures and she knew they purchased their meat here.

Realizing that she was wasting time, she walked toward the barn, finding one of the main doors open. As soon as she stepped inside she realized why. The smell was horrendous. She fought back the urge to gag. Then Duke stepped outside of a stall carrying a bucket.

“Oh my God,” she mumbled.

Evidently, she was loud enough for him to hear her for he looked in her direction. The sexy grin he flashed her almost distracted her from the fact that he didn’t have on a shirt. That was what he’d been hiding under his clothes all this time?

Yes, she’d figured that he was in good shape because, during the handful of kisses that they’d shared, she’d always ended up clutching his firm shoulders and chest. But the sight before her was beyond her wildest dreams. Duke had a six-pack that tapered off into a sexy vee that begged to be touched.

The only blemish was a scar that seemed to start at the base of his throat and trailed down to the top of his abs. She frowned at the sight of it. Something like that could only be the result of a serious injury or surgery.

“Bailey?”

“What? Oh, sorry. I...was...uh...yeah. I’m here,” she stated weakly.

“I see. Sorry that I’m running a little behind schedule. One of the ranch hands has an old back injury that flared up today. But I’m done. I just need to get rid of this then we can head to my place for dinner.”

“Your place?” she parroted.

He nodded. “I took over one of the bunkhouses that was in decent shape. It still needs some work but it works for me.”

He continued toward the empty corner of the barn and sat down the bucket. “By the way, you look beautiful. New blouse?”

She smiled. “How do you always do that?”

“What?” he asked as he pulled on a blue button-down shirt.

“Know what to say to put me at ease,” she replied.

He frowned. “Are you nervous?”

“With you? Always,” she admitted.

“Why?” he asked as he motioned for her to go ahead of him.

“We’ve talked about this,” she reminded him. “This is new to me. Technically you’re the first man I can honestly say I’ve dated. I haven’t been able to keep a man’s attention long enough for it to be more than something casual.”

“You’ve been meeting idiots. Something I’m selfishly happy about,” he replied as they exited the barn. “You park by the main house?”

She nodded.

“Okay. I’ll lead the way to my place.”

He opened the door for her and then waited for her to get it. “It’s not far. See you in a bit.”

Duke closed the door, then walked a short distance to his uncle’s truck before climbing into the cab. True to his word they arrived at a quaint home that was perfect for a bachelor based on the outside.

But she was shocked when they stepped over the threshold. It was masculine and cozy but clean. It smelled like Duke, sandalwood, and leather.

“Make yourself at home. I need to take a shower, then I’ll get the food on. Fortunately, I seasoned the steaks this morning. Would you like something to drink?”

“I’m fine,” she murmured, still looking around.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

“Take your time,” she stated as she walked over to the photos lining the wall.

They were all candid photos of Duke. Most appeared to be with his family and a handful of friends. It made her realize just how he’d given up to move to Centerville to help his aunt.

“Hey.”

She jumped at the sound of Duke’s voice before turning with a smile. “Hi. That was quick.”

“I’ve been gone for twenty minutes,” he replied with a grin.

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes. Now, let me get dinner started before it gets too late. Want to join me in the kitchen? I don’t expect you to help, just keep me company.”

“I’d like to help,” she offered.

“I’m okay, but first, something I couldn’t do earlier,” he murmured.

Before she could question him, he pulled her into his embrace and lowered his mouth to hers. As usual, her brain completely short-circuited. She went up on tip-toe, clasping his shoulders as she leaned into him.

Arousal surged through her and she bit back a moan. What was too soon in her opinion, Duke pulled back.

“Hey,” he greeted with a grin.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Come on. Tell me how your day was while we prepare dinner,” he stated as he grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the kitchen. “Did you do anything fun today?”

She washed her hands as she nodded. “Yes, I finished rebuilding the engine that I’ve been working on.”

Excitement and pride swamped her. It was a side project. One she’d started just to challenge herself. Other than verbal consultations with her father, she’d done it by herself.

“Nice. Congratulations,” Duke stated as he pulled a container out of the fridge. “What do you plan to do with it?”

She shrugged as she dried her hands. “I’m not sure. It was just a challenge to me. What do you need me to do?”

“I’m thinking of a salad and baked potatoes to go with the steaks,” he replied as he put the container on the counter. “Let me get you the stuff for the salad. I’ll work on the potatoes. I hope you don’t mind if I quicken the process by putting them in the microwave instead of the oven.”

She shook her head. “I don’t. I’m starving and I love Josie’s beef. I almost felt bad over admiring the cattle earlier while thinking about how good they taste.”

Duke laughed. “It is kind of weird, huh?”

“Yep, but it’s the circle of life, so.”

They made small talk as they moved around the kitchen making dinner. A short time later, they sat down at the table. She studied the food on her plate before looking up at Duke.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” he asked.

“Making me feel normal,” she answered.

Chapter 4

Bailey's statement weighed heavily on his mind as Duke dug into his food. She was beautiful inside and out. The more he got to know her, the more it became obvious. Deep down he knew it was one of the main things they'd have to work through to have anything real. While he had intended to keep the evening light. That was no longer possible.

"Do you usually not feel normal?" he asked.

She paused in mid-bite before continuing to chew. Once she'd finished, she swallowed hard before clearing her throat.

"It depends on who I'm with," she admitted. "There are only a handful of people in my life that don't make me feel as if I'm constantly being judged by them."

"In what way?" he probed.

"The fact that I'm a jeans and T-shirt kind of girl instead of a dress and heels. I know it may not seem like a big deal to you but I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone whisper that I'd be more attractive if I remembered I was a girl." She paused as she shook her head before sitting up in her chair. "What they didn't realize was that I didn't want that. I never did. I enjoyed spending time with my dad. Trust me, you can't change the oil in a frilly dress. It will never work out well."

Duke chuckled even though he knew she was making a joke at her own expense. "What about your mom? You never talk about her."

Bailey tensed as her entire demeanor changed. "That's for a reason. I don't want to speak about her. I hope you can respect that. Maybe one day but not right now."

Not wanting to push too hard, he relented. "I won't push but I do hope that you will trust me enough one day to talk to me about it."

"I hope so, too," Bailey whispered. "But it's painful. I don't know if you've ever experienced anything in life that it

physically hurts to talk about. This is that for me.”

Instinctively, Duke rubbed his chest. Her words struck home big time.

“Strangely enough, I have,” he replied.

Memories assailed him and he tried not to get lost in them. He tried not to let his thoughts overwhelm him but it was hard. Realizing what he needed to do, he lowered his hand.

“When I was ten years old. My dad and I were in a car wreck that killed him instantly and left me clinging to life. I had to have several surgeries. Mainly because of the blunt force trauma to my chest. It all happened so fast that I don’t recall what happened.”

He reached for his glass of water and took a sip, ignoring the small tremor in his hand. “There was just the squeal of tires and then a hard impact. Then I woke in a hospital three weeks later with tubes everywhere.”

Bailey’s gasped before reaching across the table to grab his hand. “Duke...I’m sorry. That’s horrible.”

“Life changed after that point. I had to have several more surgeries over the next couple of years to repair all of the damage. It also meant that I couldn’t have the life of a typical kid. I had to wear a chest plate for a long time to keep any freak accidents from happening. Even once it came off, I had to be careful. Any unexpected impact to my chest could send me into cardiac arrest.” He shook his head. “Try explaining to an active boy why he can’t do all of the things his friends are doing. I didn’t always make it easy on my mom but she did the best that she could.”

He leaned back in his chair with a smile. “In a way, I think that’s why I became so close to Aunt Josie. You would never be able to tell that she and my mom are sisters. They are like night and day. At first, I thought it might have been the accident because I remember my mom being more carefree before it happened but Aunt Josie said mom has always been the way that she is.”

When he realized that Bailey had stopped eating, he paused. “I didn’t mean to ruin your meal.”

She glanced at her half-empty plate before looking back at him. “You didn’t. I’m full. I promise. I overdid it, to be honest.”

“Okay. Let’s get this cleared away then go into the living room. We’ll be more comfortable there.”

She nodded and they removed everything from the table, put away the leftovers, and washed the dishes before retreating to the family room. He was glad when she joined him on the couch, snuggling up close to him.

“Anyway, I became close to my aunt. Mainly because it was freeing to be here on the farm. She and my uncle didn’t coddle me. They didn’t make me feel different. I know now that they still kept me safe, but it never felt like it.”

His words trailed off as he collected his thoughts. It had been a long time since he thought about everything that happened. But what he hoped was that his words were enough to explain to her why he was so drawn to her. That he did understand her.

“So, that’s why you have the scar?” she asked. “I saw it earlier when you had your shirt off.”

He nodded. “Yes. I still have to be careful.”

“How do you stay in such good shape?” she probed.

He grinned. “You think I’m sexy?”

She frowned and hit his arm. “I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to. I can tell. But to answer your question I can work out as long as I’m safe. Nothing that could result in an unexpected impact on my chest.”

Her eyes widened. “So you can’t play sports?”

“No. I never have. Too dangerous.”

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him. He could tell in that moment that she understood. When the first tear rolled

down her cheek, he reached out and cupped her face in the palm of his hand.

“Hey, I didn’t tell you that story to make you sad.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But I get it now. Here I was thinking that we are complete opposites. Yes, we have some differences but we also have a lot in common.” She closed her eyes and lowered her head to his shoulder. “Thank you for sharing your story. I will keep my word and share mine but not tonight.” She paused. “I need some time to collect my thoughts. It will be very difficult for me to talk about.”

“I can live with that,” he replied. “When you are ready, let me know. Until then, let’s watch a movie.”

“Are you sure? It’s late and I know you have to get up early.”

He nodded not wanting to give up any time with her. “Yes. I’ll be fine. That’s what coffee is for. As long as I get at least six hours I’ll be good.”

She cuddled close to him. “Okay then. What are we watching?”

He picked up the remote and found an action movie before pulling her close again. They were halfway through the movie before he realized she’d drifted off. Selfishness made him wait until the movie ended to wake her.

He waited until he was sure she was alert before allowing her to get behind the wheel to drive home. Before he closed the car door, he leaned down and pressed his lips to her briefly. When he pulled back, he held her gaze with his.

“Bailey, the next time you come over. Bring a bag to stay the night.”

Her eyes widened briefly then she nodded. “Okay.”

“Be careful going home. Call me once you’re there to let me know you’ve made it,” he requested before closing the door.

He waited until her taillights were no longer in view before going back inside and locking up. Just as he’d finished

brushing his teeth, his phone rang. Recognizing the ringtone he'd assigned to Bailey, he answered quickly.

"Hey, sweetheart," he greeted.

"Hi. Just letting you know that I made it home," she replied.

"Good. Get some rest. Pleasant dreams."

"Goodnight," she whispered.

He disconnected the call and stood there for a moment. Then he grinned. He didn't know how he'd become lucky enough for this to be his life but he was grateful and didn't plan to waste a moment of it.

Chapter 5

Bailey tried not to squeeze Duke's hand as he led the way to his home. He released her to open the front door. He held the overnight bag she'd nervously packed. When he'd picked her up for her date earlier, he'd spotted her holding the bag but hadn't made any mention of it. Instead, he took it, kissed her in greeting then guided her to his truck.

They'd just made it back from the diner having dinner. Another major step in their relationship. It was the first date that they'd had in town. Before now, her fear had been other people scrutinizing her and putting her under the microscope that they had for as long as she could remember. So they'd always gone a town or three over for their dates.

But after he'd shared his story with her last week it gave her the comfort level to be seen with him in a town that was well aware of the fact that they were dating.

Duke had seemed to know just how important of a step this was for her because he'd huddled close to her. But there hadn't been any rude comments or uncomfortable stares. Halfway during dinner she'd finally relaxed.

But it hadn't been until they'd been walking down the main street hand-in-hand while they enjoyed ice cream cones that she realized things had changed and she was ready for the next step in their relationship.

Still, as she stepped over the threshold to enter his home, it didn't mean that she wasn't anxious. Duke seemed to notice it.

After he closed the door, he turned to face her.

"I'm going to put your bag in the guest bedroom. My invite for you to stay the night was not meant to pressure you for sex. It was so I wouldn't worry about you being on a country road late at night by yourself."

She placed a hand on his chest. Right on top of the spot where she knew the scar was.

"I'm ready," she stated softly.

He studied her silently for several minutes before grabbing her hand. She followed him silently down the hallway not stopping until they stepped inside his room. It was apparent that it was his because it had a masculine feel and it smelled like it.

There was more space than she'd expected, even with the large bed dominating it. She tried not to stare at it for too long, instead, taking in the rest of the items in the room.

“Do you need anything from your bag?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. Not right now.”

He carried it over to an oversized chair sitting near a large window. The blinds were closed but she knew that in the daytime, it was probably a perfect spot to sit and read or to just sit and relax.

“Are you sure about this?” Duke asked as he moved closer to her.

“Yes,” she replied and she stepped toward him.

Hoping that despite her nervousness it would be a sign that she didn't plan to change her mind. She wanted this even as blood pounded in her ears and her heart thudded heavily against her ribs.

“I didn't realize how much I was looking forward to this moment until now,” Duke continued. His scorching gaze travelled over her leisurely and she quivered in response.

“You are perfect in so many ways,” he mumbled and reached out to brush a strand of hair out of her face. “The wicked things you make me want to do you don't matter.”

“There are things that I want to do to you, too,” she admitted, gasping as his fingertips stroked her cheek. Lightning bolts of heat raced through her body. “Lots,” she murmured.

“I can't wait to see what they are,” he stated quietly.

“Taking our time.” She tilted her head back to keep her gaze up at him. “Right?”

“Yes. We go as slow as you need to.”

She inhaled deeply, shakily, dragging his masculine scent into her lungs.

“Duke,” she mumbled, “I don’t want to go slow.”

“Then we won’t,” he responded as he lowered his mouth to hers.

She placed her hands on his shoulders, pulling him closer. Her lips parted for him and her tongue met his in a passionate duel. In an untamed, frantic joining, their mouth mated, breath merging, tongues delving, stroking.

Bailey pressed into him, rubbing her stiff nipples across his firm chest. She inhaled sharply as one of Duke’s hands deftly undid the clasp on her jeans before sliding the zipper down. He slid underneath the waistband of her jeans. His fingertips lifted the band of her panties and his hand slipped lower, to rub her bare bottom. She arched into him and felt his body, already rigid and ready.

Eagerly, ravenously, his tongue moved in and out of her mouth, tasting, touching. This wasn’t a gentle, loving kiss. This was feral. An unfathomable, inherent need that required completion. He sealed his mouth to hers as if attempting to steal her breath for his own. She met his insistence with an untamed, overpowering hunger that promised to leave her curled up on the floor. When he finally pulled his mouth away from hers, Bailey almost whimpered at the loss.

But a heartbeat later, he was pulling her shirt up and over her head and she was helping him. It hadn’t touched the ground before he also removed her bra. His hands cupped her breasts and his thumbs softly caressed the firm, sensitive tips of her nipples. She moaned in the back of her throat and began fumbling with the buttons on his shirt, tugging it free of his jeans.

In as desperate a state as she was, Duke let her go long enough to unbutton a few of the top buttons then pulled the shirt over his head and toss it to the floor. Then he reached for her again and drew her tight against him. Skin to skin, heat to

heat, the intensity already running so rampant between them that it exploded into a firestorm of desire.

She lowered her face into the crook of his neck and licked the skin there. In response, he swept her up into his arms, took the rest of the steps toward the bed, and placed her onto it. Then he lowered himself to the bed, taking her with him, all the while caressing and touching every inch of her body.

She clutched his shoulder, basking in the feel of his firm flesh beneath her hands. Hot, sturdy, his tanned chest had a definition she wanted to trace with her tongue.

“Bailey,” he murmured before bending his head to take one of her nipples into his mouth. His lips and teeth nibbled at the tender skin until she was twisting beneath him, powerlessly caught in the next of passion they had unseeingly fallen headfirst into.

Bailey clasped the back of his head, her fingers clutching strands of his hair. She felt his hand slide down her body to tug her jeans and panties off and she raised her hips to assist him.

“Please, Duke,” she begged in a tormented tone. “Now. I need you inside me, Duke. I want...” Her voice trailed off. How could she begin to tell him what she wanted when she barely comprehended it herself? This was more than lust. More than untamed passion. Something deep inside of her was aching to be with him. To feel the sensation of his body sliding into hers. She had never known such need, such mindless hunger before.

It both frightened and thrilled her.

“Soon, sweetheart,” he promised and moved away from her, despite the moan of protest she emitted. Before she could find the words to explain her disappointment, he had rid not only her of her clothes but his as well. Then he was back over her, kneeling between her thighs, stroking the flesh of her bottom with his masculine hands. She writhed within his hold, reaching for him.

“Duke,” she murmured. “Please Duke, now.”

“Your wish is my command,” he stated in a low tone. “But first...”

She bit back words of protest as his mouth covered her breast and suckled her tender nipple. She grasped his torso with her thighs, urging him on. She wanted him so much. Too much.

His lips grazed her belly, sending tremors of delight along her skin. She arched her hips and moaned when his mouth rested against her already pulsing center.

Honeyed and hot, Duke tasted her desire. She bucked wildly, thrusting her sex against his mouth. He flicked his tongue over her clit until it budded and Bailey raised her hips high, demanding release. Closing his lips over her, he suckled, drawing on her needy clit. She tensed beneath his lips, her legs trembled as she came.

Duke eased his tongue between her quivering folds to taste the hot nectar of her climax.

Her thighs relaxed and Duke lapped one last time at her sweetness as she lowered her hips.

“Now,” he rasped, “I’ll give you what you want.”

Chapter 6

Duke looked down at her as he lifted her hips for his entry before pushing deeply inside her tight, hot body. She arched into him and a broken cry tore from her throat as he filled her. He clenched his teeth tight to bite back a groan of satisfaction building in his chest. He held perfectly still, buried inside her, fighting for control. An explosive climax was only a breath away and he would be damned if he would give in to the pleasure before she was ready to take that leap with him.

In the space of a few heartbeats, he was able to move within her again. And then there was nothing but the overpowering, driving urge to brand her as his. To fill her so deeply, so completely, that even when they weren't together, he would still be a part of her.

She lifted her legs and locked them around his hips, drawing him tighter, closer.

Duke's gaze locked with her and saw the stunned wonder he knew was written on his features. He pressed his mouth to hers and their bodies raced toward completion. He swallowed her cries when they were at last swept over the edge of passion and fell tumbling into peace.

When it was over, they lay locked together, neither of them willing—or able—to move, to separate. Heart pounding, Duke rolled over onto his back, keeping her with him, cradling her close. Her head on his chest, he felt her breath brush across his skin and tried to get feeling back into his limbs. He'd never experienced anything like that in his life.

Bailey lifted her head slightly and pressed her lips against his chest. When she brought her hand up and rested it on his stomach he exhaled deeply. There was something about her touch that moved him in a way he never thought possible before now.

Even now her simple caress was making him hard again. So hard all he could think about was being inside her, bringing her to climax again. Bailey was ready for a second round as

well because she sat up and straddled his thighs before lifting her hips to accept his erect length within her slick folds.

Her gaze locked with his as she moved her hips in a wanton display of grace and desire. Riding astride, she took him, drawing him inside her, over and over, making him forget she'd brought him to a heart-stopping climax followed by near exhaustion a short moment earlier.

But this time the fire built slowly, fueled by her supple undulations. The provocative sway of her breasts, tipped with large, dark brown nipples held him spellbound and kept him hard. She leaned closer to him and he closed his lips over her breast and drew lustily at her nipple.

Increasing the tempo of her hips, she rode him, as if challenging him to match her hunger. Thrusting her fingers into his hair, she pulled back his head, then kissed him.

A forceful kiss, devoid of love, savage and lust-filled.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders, driving her nails into his skin as she forced the hard length of him, deeper, pounding her sex against his.

He slapped her buttocks. The light stinging impact of his hands appeared to drive her wild as her head fell back and she yelled out her release.

From somewhere deep in him, her climax set off his like a rocket. Unlike anything he'd experienced before, Duke welcomed its intensity, wresting every morsel of gratification from his flesh.

Finally, Bailey stilled.

Duke's chest heaved beneath her hands. His breath escaped in puffed harsh gasps.

"Christ, I thought you were going to pull it off."

"You didn't like it?"

"I loved it. For a moment there, I thought I was having a damn heart attack. My chest still hurts."

“Did I hurt you?” she asked, concern etched into her features.

“Next time you’re liable to kill me,” he said, then quirked an eyebrow. “But I’ll die happy.”

When she realized he was kidding, she relaxed and settled into his embrace. It took several minutes for his heart rate to return to normal. The instant that his body had found rest though, his mind finally switched back on. As one, irrefutable detail presented itself, he had to mute a curse of disgust. He had acted like some inexperienced randy teenager. For the first time in years, he had acted without thinking. As a result, the two of them might have a dilemma that neither one of them was prepared for.

Bailey released a pent-up breath as she lifted her head and stared at him. Giving him a shy smile, she said, “I didn’t expect it to be like that.”

Halfhearted, he grinned back at her. Shit. Now what? The understanding that had dawned on him hadn’t clicked in her mind yet.

“Bailey,” he said, then paused, trying to figure out what he should say.

“You don’t have to say it,” she mumbled.

“What were we thinking?” Dumb question, he told himself.

He knew exactly what had happened. For the first time in years, he had let his body make his choice for him.

“I don’t know about you, but I can’t for certain that I was,” she said, scooting closer to him.

He ran the palm of his hand down her back, trying to figure out how he should say what he needed to tell her.

“Bailey, we need to discuss what to do next...”

“About what?” she asked as she propped herself up on one elbow.

He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. “We didn’t use any protection, Bailey.”

Chapter 7

Was the entire earth-shaking? Or was it just her?

Unexpectedly sick to her stomach, Bailey blinked frantically, trying to clear her vision. It wasn't working.

She slapped one hand to her forehead and looked at him through wide eyes. Protection. Birth control. Oh no. This kind of fiasco only happened in awful movies. How could they have overlooked something so basic? Because she conceded wordlessly, they had been too preoccupied with something far more basic.

“Oh, God.”

Flopping back onto the bed, she buried her face in her hands.

He exhaled heavily. “As far as one concern goes,” he said in an anxious tone, “I can tell you that I'm clean.”

Bailey wanted to crawl under the bed and hide. How could she have been so dumb?

She had even thought about that and she should have considering everything that was out there.

“So am I,” she whispered when she realized he'd stopped pacing to look at her inquisitively. Did he think she wouldn't be? At twenty-six, she'd had exactly three lovers. Including Duke. With that being the case it was no surprise she'd committed such a blunder. She didn't have enough experience to handle a man like Duke.

She muffled a groan and tried to quell her racing thoughts so she could focus on what he was saying.

“However, concerning pregnancy...” He stopped in mid-step and instantly she felt his intense gaze. “Please tell me you're on some sort of birth control,” Duke said.

“Fine,” Bailey stated tiredly. “I take birth control.”

“Which type?”

“All right,” she said, fighting not to break down into tears. “I’m not on birth control.”

“Just great.”

She scowled at him. Was he attempting to place all of the blame for their lack of caution on her? Well, he had another thing coming. They had been in the bed together...*both* of them.

Two extremely dim-witted people.

“Excuse me for not being prepared. I wasn’t thinking that far ahead,” she snapped and attempted to overlook the ball of anxiety already beginning to form in the bottom of her stomach. She sincerely hoped that was *all* that was starting to form.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Sure you did.” She rose to her feet and stormed past him, heading for the bathroom room. She wanted to scream when she heard him following her. Marching over to the sink, she turned on the water and splashed some on her face. She turned off the faucet, gripped the counter, and shook her head.

“I am so stupid,” she mumbled.

“Hey,” Duke replied as he walked over to her. “We were in that bed together. I could have said hold on. I should have been prepared to use something. I’m not placing the blame on you. We are both at fault here.”

She looked at him and then shook her head before storming past him. “This is major, Duke.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he stated as he followed behind her. “While I wish I could roll the clock back an hour or two, we are beyond that. We just need to talk about what to do next.”

Bailey quickly redressed while her mind raced. Fortunately, Duke grabbed a pair of sweatpants and put them on.

“I need time to think,” she stated. “This is something I never considered.”

He frowned. "Birth control? Why not?"

She yanked the shirt over her head before glaring at him. "No. Not birth control. But just so you know, I don't make a habit of jumping into bed with men. You would probably laugh if you knew how long it's been since I've had sex before we just did what we did."

One corner of his mouth curved upward. "How long?"

She froze, then took a deep breath to keep calm. Finally, she was able to respond. "Is that all you can think about right now? Because I am completely freaked out over the idea that we may be dealing with an unplanned pregnancy."

Duke crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her for a long time. "You're right. Let's focus on what's important here because we can't turn back the clock. How long would we have to wait to find out?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I've never been through this before. But I don't want to wait. Can you take me to the store?"

He frowned. "This time of night? Nothing is open here."

"No, to Osceola. There is a twenty-four-hour supermarket there," she clarified.

Duke walked over to the pile of discarded clothes and picked up his shirt. "Sure, but I think it's too early for a pregnancy test."

"I don't want one. I'm hoping they have emergency contraceptives," she replied.

Once her words registered shock flashed across his features before he stiffened. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "My friend Ginger had a scare like this one time so I know what to look for." She paused. "Who would have ever thought that I'd be here having the same crisis of my own?"

"Bailey—"

She stopped him by holding up her hand. “We can talk later. Right now I just need you to take me to the store or drop me off at home so that I can go myself.”

“That’s not an option.” He stepped closer to her. “Whatever your decision, I will not leave you to do it alone. Our momentary lapse of judgment is on both of us. We were both caught up in the moment.”

She didn’t want to remember. She didn’t want to ponder why she had responded to him in such reckless fashion—one that had led to this moment. Never could she recall experiencing such a strong reaction. She had never known a man could be so alluring that she needed to be with him. Until she had met Duke Murphy, Bailey’s social life had been boring and well-orchestrated as the rest of her life.

Dull, her mind taunted her.

“Bailey,” he continued, “if we screwed up, we did it together.”

Screwed up. What they had done was stupid. Immature. But a mistake? Immediately, she recalled the feeling of fulfillment she had experienced when he entered her. When their bodies were joined together.

Was that discovery a screw up?

And if they had made a child together—would the child be considered a mistake as well? She cringed at the thought.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked, his voice low.

For a second, she didn’t know what he was talking about. Then it registered. She looked up at him. “Yes.”

He released a pent-up breath. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Chapter 7

Duke couldn't ever recall feeling this physically ill. Not when his uncle had died. Not even when he'd found out that his aunt had a heart attack. But right now, it was all he could do not to pull the truck over, open the door and throw up.

The drive to the supermarket and back had been quiet and tense. In all of his thirty-two years, he'd never had a slip-up like this. For it to be with the woman that things were already fragile with, left him feeling like there was lead in his stomach.

He finally pulled to a stop in front of his home. Bailey opened the door and hopped down from the cab before he had the key out of the ignition. He caught up with her before they reached the porch.

She stood silently while he unlocked the front door. Then she surprised him by walking over to the coffee table, setting the bag down before turning to him.

"Can we sit on the porch for a minute? I need some fresh air," she stated.

He nodded before grabbing the quilt on the back of the couch then followed her outside. She made her way over to the porch swing and sat before clenching her hands in her lap. He sat next to her and then placed the blanket over them before kicking the swing into motion.

Several minutes ticked by but he remained silent. He was smart enough to know this was the one time he couldn't push her.

"I can hear your thoughts over here," she said as she moved closer to him. "I have a lot to say, I'm just trying to figure out where to start."

"Wherever you think is best," he replied softly.

"That's difficult," Bailey said and met his gaze head-on, seriously. A breeze swept several strands of hair across her face and she reached up to brush them out of the way.

“My mother left me,” she stated as she looked away.

All of his breath was expelled from his chest, but he managed not to make a sound. That was the last thing he’d expected her to say.

“I was young, so I don’t remember her,” Bailey continued. “My father doesn’t talk about her but I know that her leaving hurt him. He’s done the best he could, but I think he still thinks he failed me sometimes.” She paused, then sniffled. “He didn’t though. He’s the best dad I could have ever asked for. I try to tell him that every day.”

She shook her head as her bottom lip trembled. “I’m scared, Duke. I’ve never thought about having kids. I didn’t expect to ever meet someone that would care about me enough to make it possible.”

Her voice broke and she stopped speaking. As far as he was concerned, she had all the time in the world to talk. He knew this was information he needed to know if their relationship had any chance of surviving.

“When I realized tonight might have resulted in a baby, I completely panicked. Then I wondered if that was what my mother had felt. I’ve spent my entire life hating her. Wondering why she’d left me. But at that moment, I understood.”

Bailey paused again. Several minutes ticked by.

“Then another fear filled me. I don’t know how to be a mother, Duke. I’ve never had anyone in my life to show me what that’s supposed to be like. What if I have a daughter who isn’t like me? Maybe she will want to play with dolls and have tea parties. What do I do?”

His heart constricted over the amount of pain he heard in her voice. This was the last thing he’d ever expected to hear from her. But he now understood so much.

“You show her the love that you never felt from your mother but always wanted. If she wants a doll, you’ll buy it for her. When it’s tea party time, you’ll be there with your oil-

covered jumper on making sure that nothing in the world matters more than her.”

More sniffles filled the air as Bailey’s shoulders started to shake. When she moved closer to him, he finally pulled her into his embrace and held her tightly. He lost track of how long she cried but it didn’t matter. There was nowhere else he’d rather be.

She finally pulled back and he offered her the corner of the quilt so that she could discreetly clean her face. Once she was finished, she turned the quilt so that the soiled side was furthest away from them.

“I’ve never thought about it like that,” she finally whispered. “But I’m not sure I’m ready.”

He squeezed her shoulders before pressing a kiss to her temple. “Then we go inside and we use the emergency contraceptive.”

“The box says I have up to seventy-two hours. It’s late and I want to take a little more time to think about it,” she admitted.

“Then we go to bed now and see how you feel when we wake up,” he suggested.

She nodded. “Okay.”

He pushed to his feet and grabbed the blanket before holding his hand out to her. She grasped it and he pulled her to her feet.

“Go get ready for bed while I put this in the wash and lock up for the night,” he instructed.

She nodded before turning to head toward the bedroom. Once she was out of the room, he leaned heavily against the door.

Damn.

He was so angry at himself for losing his head and putting them into this situation. Not because the idea of having kids sent him into a panic. He wasn’t afraid of a committed

relationship, marriage, or having a family. Not when he'd had so many great examples of how it looked.

To know that Bailey had never had that made his heart ache for her. No wonder she'd been so wary of him and his intentions.

Pushing away from the door, he made his way to the washroom and loaded the washer. Then he made his way to his bedroom, trying to slow his racing thoughts. The ball was in Bailey's court.

It was her body.

Her decision.

But a huge part of him wanted everything with Bailey. He'd been captivated by her from the moment he saw her, but now that he'd gotten to know her the feeling was even stronger.

He'd known from the beginning that he'd had his work cut out for him, but now he understood why. When he realized that didn't make him want to run in the opposite direction it became clear that this wasn't just lust.

When he entered his bedroom, he was shocked to find Bailey under the covers reclined against the headboard waiting for him.

"Are you waiting up for me?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Okay. I won't be long," he promised.

He emptied his bladder and brushed his teeth before exiting the bathroom. As he neared the bed, one corner of his mouth curved upward. Even with red-rimmed puffy eyes, she was still the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

He crawled underneath the covers and turned off the bedside lamp before reclining onto his back. She immediately scooted closer to him, resting her weight on him and he reached out to steady her. Every square inch where her body met his was instantly aware. He wrapped his arm around her

waist. She pressed a kiss to his chest and he called himself all sorts of names for being so weak.

“Bailey,” he said suddenly, “I’m sorry for losing my head and putting us into the situation.”

She reached out and pressed a finger to his lips, quieting him. “We were both lost in the moment. I don’t want that to taint one of the best experiences of my life.”

He grinned even as he tried not to let his ego over-inflate. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I kind of want to do it again, but we’ve already been risky,” she mumbled.

A billion conflicting emotions roared through him. He’d originally planned to spend the entire night making love to her before the reality of his lapse of sanity had kicked in. Now he wasn’t sure it would be the same if they did.

“I have condoms,” he admitted. “I purchased them the day after I told you to pack a bag for the next time you came over. I just got caught up in the moment.”

“So, we can be safe this time?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She was quiet for several minutes before nodding. “Then I want to.”

Duke finally released the groan he’d been holding in, reached for her, and pulled her into his embrace. He lowered his mouth to hers like a starving man after the only nourishment left in the world and shoved aside the slight shame at his tactics in the wave of lust pulling him under. No sense in denying himself what he craved.

Chapter 8

Bailey sighed with pleasure when Duke pulled his mouth from hers to trail long, hot, slow kisses down the column of her throat, leaving his every sense heightened.

Duke couldn't hold back any longer. He had already suffered through the longest three hours of his life. He drew her closer, needing to feel all of her. Caress all of her. The cool air in the room didn't do anything to cool either of them off from the heat swamping them. The light from the moon outside gave her skin an ethereal glow and he stroked his hands up and down her back, enjoying the softness of her skin.

Bailey's hands grabbed his shoulders and every one of her fingertips seemed to mark him, sending tiny arcs of fire that reached into a part of him that had gone untouched for longer than he could remember. Her breathing was rapid, panting, filtering out over his skin, warming him. A blaze flared up within him. His heart began to thud rapidly in his chest and everything but feeling the warmth recess of her body became unimportant. All he craved, all he *yearned* for was her. Her lips against his. Her caress. The feel of her body gripping his as he thrust into her. He lowered his head to take one of her nipples into his mouth. She pressed closer to him, her fingernails scoring his back.

"Duke," she murmured around a gasp. He could relate to the need that he heard in her voice.

Purposely, he skimmed the edges of his teeth over her stiff nipple. Bailey moaned and moved one hand to the back of his head, holding him in place. She didn't have to worry about him stopping. Even if it had meant taking his last breath, he couldn't have quit. Tugging on the sensitive bud, he suckled her, pulling on her flesh with a gradually mounting force that propelled her forward, toward the edge of a cliff they had both teetered over for hours.

As he gave one breast, then the other, his full attention, his hand eased between her legs. When he found her drenched with need, he lowered his head even more, placing kisses

along her rib cage, across her stomach, and finally, on the patch of curls guarding her sex. Bailey arched upward and he tightened his grip on her.

“You’re stunning,” he whispered as his hands traveled up her leg. “I don’t think you realize just how much.”

She gasped and clutched at his shoulders again to steady herself. “Duke,” she murmured, “don’t keep me waiting. Make love to me.”

“I plan to, sweetheart,” he replied and gently eased her legs further apart. “Nothing is going to stop us from being together tonight.”

Hands spanning her waist, Duke moved closer and trailed a line of kisses along her stomach. Her legs quivered. His hold on her waist tightened and he lowered his head to taste her.

“Duke!” she moaned his name and dug her fingernails deeper into his shoulders.

Quivers traveled through her, leaving him dazed. He pressed the tip of his tongue against the small, hard bud and felt her body tremble in response. Wet heat tickled out and Duke gave himself over to the feeling of pleasuring her. Each moan of enjoyment that erupted from her throat only fed the out-of-control yearning rushing through him.

“Yes, Duke. Don’t stop,” she managed to get out around a gasp. Her leg muscles tensed, her hips thrust against his mouth as she attempted to open herself even more to him.

He flattened his tongue across the sensitive spot as he brought his hand up to join his mouth. His lips and tongue caressed her silkiness and Duke tenderly dipped two fingers into the tight heat of her body. She stiffened, every muscle in her body abruptly going rigid. He redoubled his efforts. His fingers slid in and out of her velvety softness and his mouth picked up the slack to pay attention to whatever his fingers couldn’t.

Bailey spread her legs even further apart, allowing him into the heart of her, quietly demanding the orgasm that he knew she was rushing toward. A stilted cry fell from her lips

when the first quivers of release rippled through her. She clutched the back of his head to her and Duke moaned along with her as if her satisfaction were his own.

After several moments passed, he lifted his head to look at her. She gave him a shy smile.

“Duke, I never knew that it could be like this. So...” Her eyes fluttered closed and she inhaled deeply before releasing the breath shakily. When she reopened her eyes again, she reached for him, lifting arms that were still quivering.

Not able to wait for another second to be within her, he surged upward. He hesitated only long enough to reach into the nightstand next to the bed. Then he turned back to her, already opening the foil packet.

She stared up at him and smiled. “Thank you.”

Duke slipped the latex on, then moved to rest between the legs she opened in the provocation. Smiling at her, he said, “This time we’re going to do it right.”

* * *

Bailey raised her hips as he slid into her with one smooth glide. Even though the remnants of her release still fluttered through her, she was instantly aroused again. As his solid, resilient body moved in and out of hers, she felt another surge of need building within her.

Tightness filled her limbs. She squeezed her eyes shut, positive that this time, the orgasm will kill her. Bailey squeezed him tighter, holding herself to him. Explosions rocketed through her. Her hips matched his in rhythm. Hands stroked. Mouths mashed together in hungry kisses that left them both struggling to draw in air. One last thrust and her body tightened rhythmically around his. He moaned her name as he fell into her arms and Bailey used the last of her strength to embrace him.

His strong, firm body weighed her down and she could hardly draw a good breath. Regardless, she still had no desire to dislodge him. She wanted to freeze time so that this moment never ended.

In a few hours, she would have to decide if she wanted to take the emergency contraception sitting on the table in his living room. Tears began to gather in her eyes and Bailey blinked them back before they could fall. Duke pulled her closer as if he could sense her need for comfort.

She never thought she would have to face such a difficult situation. The last thing she wanted to do was be like her mother. Speaking her fears into existence earlier had lifted a weight off of her that she did know she'd been carrying. Hearing the level of understanding in Duke's words, feeling it in his embrace had made her feel supported in a way she'd never experienced.

Still, she was smart enough to know that a baby didn't guarantee that a couple would stay together and be happy. Her parents were proof of that. She refused to put herself in a situation to walk down the same path that her parents had.

Not even for a man as potent as Duke.

Somewhere along the way she'd done something she'd thought impossible when she'd met him—fallen for him. She didn't know when it had happened or even how. The fact of the matter was that she'd allowed a man to steal her heart. She shut her eyes and tried to figure out how she was going to keep it together if he was no longer a part of her life.

Chapter9

Bailey exhaled heavily as she walked up to Duke's front door. It had been a long and exhausting day. When she'd awoken next to him this morning, she'd felt a sense of calm that was almost strange. But the immediate panic she'd felt over a possible unplanned pregnancy had faded some and she felt like she could think about what she wanted to do with a clearer mind.

That included having a heartfelt conversation with her father. She'd pressed him for details about her mother that she hadn't before now. At first, he'd resisted, but then he realized she wasn't going to let it go.

While there hadn't been any shocking revelations, it had been a conversation that had been long overdue. She had even more admiration for her father. Even though her mother hadn't been present in her life, her father had. While she might not know anything about make-up or fashion she knew the important stuff that she needed to get through life.

And now that she'd made her decision she needed to discuss it with Duke.

Raising her hand, she knocked on the door. It didn't take long for it to swing open.

"Hi, sweetheart," he greeted before stepping aside to let her in.

"Hi," she replied as she stepped over the threshold.

After closing the door, he pulled her into his embrace before briefly touching his lips to hers. When he went to release her, she gripped his biceps and rested her head against his chest. The rhythmic lub-dub made her smile.

"Is everything okay?" he asked as he tightened his arms around her.

She nodded. "Yes. I just like your hugs."

“You can have as many as you want whenever you want,” he promised.

They stood there for several more minutes before she pulled back to look up at him. “Where do you see our relationship going?”

“The right way,” he replied with a smile. “That’s the reason why I pursued you. I knew we were compatible even if you couldn’t see it at the time.”

“What’s going to happen when your aunt is back on her feet? Are you going back to Des Moines?”

He shook his head. “I like it here in Centerville. I don’t plan to leave Aunt Jorie or you.”

An emotion she couldn’t name filled her as he nixed one of her last remaining fears.

“You’re right. I’ve fallen for you quicker than I ever imagined,” she admitted. “I think I knew something was different about you. That’s why I fought it so hard in the beginning. I don’t want to fight any of it anymore.”

He reached up to cup her cheek in the palm of his hand. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that because I have fallen for you, too.”

“Will you feel the same if I take the emergency contraceptive?” she asked.

“Of course. It’s no different than me using a condom or you actively taking birth control.”

She closed her eyes and exhaled heavily. “I’m not ready to become a mom right now.” She reopened her eyes and looked at him. “Perhaps in the future, but not right now.”

Duke smiled at her. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He didn’t say anything else as he led her over to the couch. Once she was seated, he went into the kitchen and returned shortly with a glass of water. She reached for the box with hands more steady than she expected.

Duke joined her on the couch as she took the pill. After she put the glass of water back down, he pulled her into his embrace.

“I will always have your back, Bailey,” he vowed. “I plan to spend the rest of our lives proving that to you.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she murmured as she rested her head against his chest.

Epilogue

Two Years Later

“Bailey!”

Bailey froze and then grimaced before looking around for a hiding spot. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to be easy. Just as she found a place, Duke came around the corner.

“What are you doing out here?”

She immediately burst into tears causing him to shake his head as he rushed forward.

“Damn it. Don't cry,” he begged.

He pulled her into his embrace...well as much as her extended belly would allow. At eight months pregnant, she was huge so that wasn't much. A fact that only made her cry harder. Pregnancy had her emotions and hormones all over the place. She still wasn't used to how much so. The simplest of things could make her laugh one moment and cry the next.

“Calm down, woman,” he pleaded. “You are going to make yourself sick.”

“I'm sorry. I just wanted to see it,” she managed to get out.

Duke chuckled. “Now, Bailey, we both know that you wanted to do more than see it. All you had to do was be patient for a few more seconds. Your dad is here.”

“He is?”

“Yes, and he *was* going to let you help, but I'm not sure now,” Duke stated as he looked down at her with a frown.

More tears filled her eyes and he shook his head. “I said maybe. The only way we're going to agree is if you stay in the chair and put your feet up. I don't like the way your ankles look and it is just mid-morning.”

She clutched the front of his shirt as she looked up at him. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“The same thing I did for me to deserve you,” he replied before leaning down to brush his lips against hers.

She smiled before wincing and pressing her hand to her lower back. Duke looked at her warningly.

“I didn’t overdo it this morning. I promise.”

His expression was full of disbelief as he led her over to the chair he’d placed in the corner once he realized it was going to be impossible to keep her from venturing out to the shed.

“Duke! Bailey!”

“In here, Daddy,” she called out.

Her father chuckled as he entered. “Couldn’t wait, huh?”

Duke helped her back to her feet so that she could embrace him.

“No, but I swear I didn’t touch anything. I was just looking,” she replied.

“Only because I found her before she could,” Duke grumbled.

Her father extended his hand to Duke. “I told you that you’d have your hands full with this one the day you asked me for permission to marry her.”

Bailey frowned as she looked between the two men. “I’m surprised you waited that long to warn him,” she joked.

“Oh, I didn’t,” her father replied. “He asked me for your hand before you even agree to go out on the first date with him.”

Tears filled her eyes as the memory of that conversation assailed her. She looked at her gorgeous husband who stood there grinning like a loon.

“You did?” she whispered.

“Yep,” he replied without hesitation. “I knew that I wanted you to be mine from the moment I saw you and I was willing

to buy an entire bakery of cupcakes if that's what it took to seduce you into believing the same."

Bailey groaned. "Let's not talk about cupcakes. That's the reason I can barely move now."

Duke placed his hands over her stomach. "No, it's because you are carrying our son, you gorgeous woman."

She smiled as she motioned for her father to get started on the tractor that was giving Duke trouble. Normally she was able to tinker with whatever he needed fixed but she hadn't seen her ankles in months, so leaning over to access a tractor engine was out of the question.

"Come on, let's get this show on the road. I don't have long before I'll need to use the bathroom, eat or take a nap...if not all three."

She didn't know who laughed louder, her husband or her father, but both men began discussing what the issue could be while she watched. Chiming in when she thought it was helpful.

But her gaze never left Duke.

Her husband.

The father of her unborn child.

The man that had given her everything she could ask for and more from the day she'd met him.

The man that had set out to seduce her with cupcakes had succeeded.

She loved him more and more every day. As if he realized she was thinking about him, he looked in her direction and winked. She blew him a kiss in response.

There were still times when she had moments of uncertainty but she knew she could talk to Duke about them and they worked through it.

She rubbed her stomach as her son shifted. To say she'd been nervous when she'd gotten pregnant was an understatement. After a year of marriage to Duke, it had been

her idea to start trying. Still, when it happened her anxiety had flared. It lessened with every milestone that she hit in her pregnancy. Expecting a boy didn't hurt either. Although she was already planning to try for a girl. Something she hadn't told Duke yet, and wouldn't until the one inside of her was at least walking and talking.

“Bailey?”

She looked up when Duke called her name, realizing she'd zoned out with her thoughts.

“Have you finished already?”

Her father shook her head. “No, I need a couple of parts so I need to run back to the shop.”

“Oh, okay.”

Duke walked over and helped her to her feet. “Which means it is perfect timing for you to use the bathroom, eat and take a nap.”

She slapped his arm and he laughed. Then she frowned when she realized he was right—at least about the bathroom part.

“Thank you for helping, Daddy,” she called over her shoulder as she headed for the door. “I'll see you back here in a bit.”

Her father said something in response but she was only half listening as she focus on making it back to the house without having an accident. Something she recently learned was possible.

Duke walked with her, supporting her every step of the way. As they entered the house they'd recently started expanding upon, she knew that would never change.

* * *

I hope you enjoyed reading Duke and Bailey's story.

If you'd like to dive into another small town romance grab
your copy of

[Love Me Again](#)

* * *

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About the Author

Stephanie Morris is a three-time USA Today bestselling author and three-time EMMA award winning who enjoys creating a story that combines sensual energy with a captivating storyline. She believes in romance and happy-ever-afters. Sometimes her heroines have an edgier persona, and sometimes they are of a softer essence. But all the time, her heroines are like real women, just trying to make a living and keep on going no matter what challenges life brings them. In Stephanie's opinion, there is nothing like curling up with a good book that you can't put down, and she is addicted to writing them.

Visit Stephanie at her [website](#) to find out about her latest book releases, sign-up for her newsletter or win free books and other giveaways.

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Finding Honor
Rhonda Lee Carver

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Finding Honor

A forbidden tryst with the rich boss's daughter could land him in a heap of trouble...or with an unexpected future and a hankering for forever.

There's an invisible line at Sagebrush Rose Ranch. Sam Rose's beautiful daughters know it's against the rules to fraternize with the hands, a boundary Honor Rose has respected until she meets Cave McCoy.

Coming from the wrong side of the tracks, Cave's fully aware that Honor is both out of his league and big trouble, but sometimes a cowboy must take a risk to put out an internal fire. He thought he could dip in and dip back out unscathed, but Honor has a secret that will change their lives forever.

Forbidden romance, secrets, and second chances will set Sagebrush Rose Ranch on a tilt. Will Honor and Cave succumb to their feelings, or allow birthright to extinguish happily ever after?

Chapter 1

Honor Rose's stilettos clicked ominously on the natural stone floor of the hotel lobby as she made her way to the sleek gold trimmed desk. The tall, lanky man in a black suit and tie brought his attention up from the computer screen. "Good evening, Ms. Rose," he said while discretely sliding a keycard across the polished marble. "Your guest has already arrived. Room 430."

Guest?

Taking the key, she closed her fingers around the plastic and felt her knees shake. Nothing was forcing her to do this, but she had no other choice. Blood pounded in her ears, competing with the sound of the piercing instrumental tenderness of Bach playing from the lobby speakers. She found herself humming along which helped ease her restless energy some.

"Going up, ma'am?" The bellhop gestured for her to step inside the elevator.

She crossed the threshold and the heavy doors closed, trapping her inside. There was no turning back now. She needed to stay on task.

The elevator quietly glided upward, taking her closer to her destination.

Goosebumps scattered across her skin and she felt exposed in the designer black dress with the open back that she'd worn to the annual charity auction for the library that her sister, Freedom, chaired. Honor had come straight from the event and hoped she found some answers to the questions currently plaguing her.

Checking herself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror, everything about her appearance seemed in order. The dress. The hair. The pumps. Inside though she was a tangled mass of nerves. Her mother always said, "If you look like a star, you are a star".

Who was waiting in Room 430?

Was she crossing a line by coming?

The bell *dinged* and the doors hissed open. The bellhop offered her a reassuring smile. Did he sense her uneasiness? “Here we are, ma’am. Have a good evening.”

Her senses shifted into high gear as she stepped into the corridor lit by a row of gaslight sconces and antique glass chandeliers which added to the old Hollywood ambiance.

Following the patterned Nylon carpet, she looked over her shoulder as the elevator doors closed with finality. Her palms were sweaty and she felt a little woozy. She stopped long enough to gain her bearings.

For the hundredth time, she changed her mind about following through. And for the hundredth time, she squared her shoulders and put one foot in front of the other. She and Liberty might have agreed to give each other space, but there were boundaries to that agreement.

Swallowing back a lump in her throat, she continued to her destination.

Staring at the shiny knob like it was inoculated with poison, she paused.

There must be another way...but this was the quickest way. She needed to know where her sister had gone. Whomever was in the room must know something.

Starting to knock, she caught herself. She had a key for a reason.

Tapping the keycard, the lock beeped and the light flashed green. She slowly pushed the door open a scant few inches and peeked inside. Cast in shadows, the only source of light came from the moonlight flowing in through the large window.

Her knees knocked as she took a step across the threshold. Her heels sunk into the thick rug and the whirling of the air conditioner made her temples ache. The intoxicating scent of sandalwood clung to the air.

A mixture of curiosity and fear raced through her, making her dizzy. The hair on the back of her neck lifted.

She gave a little jerk when she heard the scraping sound of denim behind her. She swiveled and the fibers of the rug caught her heel, but she managed to keep her balance. Searching the shadows, she could make out the large silhouette of a man. “Hello?”

“You’re late,” came the husky voice—a familiar voice that made Honor’s stomach lurch.

It couldn’t be possible. Could it?

Her voice wouldn’t work.

“I don’t like waiting.” The low gruffness of his words penetrated her skin.

No doubt. It was *him!*

Cave McCoy. She was in a hotel room with Cave McCoy of all people! *The* cowboy who worked as a hand on her family’s ranch, Sagebrush Rose. The man who she couldn’t look at, think about, without feeling every possible emotion on. Every hour, every second, of their secret affair came back like a wave from a massive tsunami. A part of her wanted to rush into his arms, and a bigger part wanted to unleash all her hurt and pain. She reminded herself that she didn’t come there to see him.

Of course, she didn’t...

What was he doing meeting Liberty?

Was Cave why she sent a vague message a week ago telling Honor that she needed time and space and not to search for her? Why hadn’t Honor honored the request? Because they were twin sisters and she’d always been there for Liberty.

He took a step closer. She could feel his warmth and his heady scent filled her nostrils, making her feel weak, and yet alive at the same time. Her eyes drifted closed. Would he touch her? Kiss her?

She opened her eyes when the bedside light flooded the room with incandescent light. She blinked rapidly as her

vision adjusted until finally, she managed to focus. His narrowed eyes locked on her. She couldn't quite read his expression.

“Cave...?”

He came to stand before her, his expression so powerful that she didn't know if she could control the tears.

The AC unit made a *popping* sound as it shut off, causing her to jump.

She couldn't do this. Not now. “I shouldn't have come.” She brushed past him and let out a tiny squeak when his strong, muscular arms folded around her waist, delicately trapping her against the hard lines of his body. She knew firsthand how good it felt being with him. She still wanted him even now.

Reality swarmed in like a silent deadly killer. *Wake up, Honor!* He was expecting to see Liberty.

When she started to question him, nothing came out of her mouth but a feeble whimper that sounded very much like an invitation, even to her own ears. Her sense of logic went right out the window.

The rigid bulge behind his zipper pressed against her bottom causing an avalanche of desire in her. Her treacherous body needed to cool its jets!

Honor shouldn't want Cave. They'd found themselves on different paths in what they wanted for the future. She should be horrified to be here with him after his ultimatum...

Oh, but she wasn't.

She hadn't managed to eradicate him from her mind like she'd hoped she could after being away. The flame was reignited and burning hotter than ever.

Finding herself in the center of her wildest fantasy, an unexpected excitement swirled through her. She needed to press the pause button, but it appeared as if her body didn't quite agree.

A frustrated sigh escaped him, and he dropped his arms.

She bit her lower lip to stifle the moan that worked its way up into her throat and she turned to face him, feeling warmth crawl up her neck. He wore his usual button-down chambray, frayed Wranglers, and dusty boots but he looked different. Three months couldn't have changed him that much, but they had. Or maybe she'd changed.

He had the resemblance of a Viking examining his prey. His rolled-up sleeves revealed the intricate ink design of a tree that covered his bicep and the roots wrapped around his elbow. His thick peppered whiskers didn't hide the hard set of his jaw.

Tension filled the air, making it hard to breathe. Her lungs ached. There were so many questions left hanging between them, and she hated that her body craved his touch. Hated that a man could so easily blind her with lust—a man she once wanted more than her next breath.

She lowered her gaze to the floor, feeling both humiliated and sensitive.

He touched her chin. "Look at me."

"Cave...I..." There was so much she needed to tell him.

Chills skittered over her skin and yet she felt like a fire kindled in her core.

A groan of impatience vibrated his chest. He scooped her up, embracing her in his powerful arms. She let out a moan of surprise. "Wh—what are you doing?"

In a urgent stride, he carried her to the massive king-sized bed, laying her in the center of the red satin comforter.

She could only stare up at him as her mind screamed like a sizzling hot pan. Her heart thumped faster as he slowly and deliberately undid the top button of his shirt, then the next, until the material opened to expose his massive, smooth chest that had more swirls and lines of ink that traced the defined planes of his torso. All the while logic demanded that she jump off the bed and flee from the room for a quick escape. But was it possible to ever escape what they'd shared? A commanding connection still existed between them.

Honor wanted to stay...just a minute longer to see where this headed.

He dragged the soft shirt down his shoulders and bared his torso to her hungry eyes. Her senses were in overdrive and her inner thighs dampened. How was she supposed to think rationally when she had a half-naked cowboy near her? Not just any cowboy mind you, but Cave. The man she'd fallen for the first day he came to work at Sagebrush Rose last year.

He gave the shirt a toss onto the floor. She bit down on her bottom lip to stifle an *oh my God* from finding its way to freedom. He'd always been confident. Not egotistical like many men, but self-assured. He'd grown up on the wrong side of the tracks which gave him grit, determination, and street smarts—everything she found attractive in a man.

And good sex.

They'd had lots of wild, amazing sex, but what she really knew of him, of his character and morals, could fit inside a thimble. Honor had heard a few of the hands say he didn't talk much. He liked hard work and kept to himself. He also knew the value of discretion because no one knew about their short-lived affair, except for Liberty.

But *why* was he here? She needed the answer more than she needed the next breath in her lungs.

In just one more minute...

He made a growling sound that sent an invisible electrical shock through her. Her mind swirled with doubts and thoughts and longing. "You've been a bad girl." His words were muted because the blood in her brain rushed like a river.

"I have been?" she whispered.

"I think you like being bad." The raspy edginess of his voice made her mouth go dry.

"Cave..." she moaned his name again. Why couldn't she find the words to end the madness?

"Shh," he coaxed as the bed dipped under his weight. His fingers brushed against her ankle a second before he separated

her legs. She trembled and filled her parched lungs with much-needed oxygen. The seams of her skirt stretched, and a few threads ripped as he settled himself in the V of her parted thighs.

It was now or never.

She opened her mouth to speak but his lips came down to press against hers. His tongue swept in for a sample as he gripped her breasts, kneading the sensitive mounds. Why wasn't her body obeying logic?

She had to know...

“Why are you here to meet Liberty?”

His hands paused and she could practically see the wheels spinning in his mind. With a savage groan, he pulled back and tore his hand through his hair.

“Fuck!” He pushed off the bed and looked down at her in such a way that made her skin crawl. This was a look she never saw from him before. The heat in his voice matched the blue blaze in his eyes. His irises were wide, and his nostrils flared. “What the hell is happening?”

“My thoughts exactly.” She pushed up onto her elbow, not allowing his anger to intimidate her.

He slammed his hands to his hips and shook his head. “I thought we were done with the games?”

Feeling like he'd slapped her with those words, she suddenly felt vulnerable. She tugged the torn hem of the dress down her quivering thighs and sat up, sweeping her legs primly over the side of the bed.

He grabbed his shirt up from the floor and she took one last look at his naked torso before he stuffed his arms inside. He didn't bother buttoning it as if the act would take too much energy. Irritation was etched on his face. She'd always thought his eyes belonged to someone who had seen too much in his lifetime. The silver buckle glistened at his waist, naturally drawing her gaze lower down his body.

His hands clenched into tight fists. Was he disappointed that it was Honor who showed up and not her sister?

He reached down and brazenly shifted the bulge behind his zipper. She felt the contrast of awkwardness and exhilaration.

She didn't like feeling this vulnerable.

She wanted to storm out of the room, away from him, but she'd have to endure being near him for a bit longer.

Wriggling her toes in the soft plushness of the carpet, she stood and lifted her chin higher. Her legs wobbled but she quickly managed to gain control. "I'm Honor. Not Liberty. I'm sure that's a surprise. Unfortunately, you can't tell the difference between us." The words burned her tongue.

One corner of his thin lips lifted. "The cross gave it away." His eyes settled for three heartbeats on the small tattoo between her breasts. His pale blue eyes were like hot irons burning her skin.

Absentmindedly, she reached up and touched the referenced mark on her body—tribute ink for her mother who died when Honor was twenty. A lifetime ago.

"I'm still waiting. Where is Liberty then?" He scrubbed his whiskered jaw with his wide fingers and surprisingly clean nails for a man who worked in the dirt from sunup to sundown. When she didn't answer his growl echoed off the white walls. "Liberty isn't coming. Was this the plan all along? You wanted a fuck for old time's sake?"

Chapter 2

Cave was angry enough to bite the head off a rattler.

Facing the one woman who'd screwed with his head and his heart stood two feet away staring with those eyes that always did make him sweat.

She'd been a thorn in his ass since day one so why did he expect anything to be different now?

And why was she trying to play a game?

Honor was beautiful, no doubt, but it wasn't just her beauty that made him rock hard. It was a combination of things. Her scent, how she moved with sexy grace, the intoxicating way she looked at him like she wanted to rip him inside out then take him to paradise. Her smile could win a man's attention with one glance, but right now her smile was buried behind a frown.

For the first six months of starting at Sagebrush Rose, he'd watched her from afar, salivating over her like a love-sick teenager. He'd been a sucker for the tight, frayed jeans and cropped tops. Right away, he'd learned that it wasn't her style to sit back and let the boys handle the tough situations on the ranch. Many times, she'd pushed one of them out of the way to take care of a crisis herself. She always had her hand in the game whether it was running livestock between pastures, inoculating the cattle, or mucking the stalls. At times, he felt like she got a kick out of flirting with him—elusive acts of playing with her hair and smiling at him like she knew his dirtiest secrets. Yeah, he had a few.

At some point, temptation got the best of him, and he found himself doing something he never did. He slept with the boss's daughter. Maybe even fell for her, but he didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to think about the fact that she was cold-hearted and left him in the dust.

The sexy off-the-shoulder black dress showed off her unbelievably nice breasts that were the size of melons, teeny-tiny waist, and large round derriere that still haunted him. He

lowered his gaze down her toned legs to the impractical heels and felt his dick jerk in response. They were his favorites. A couple of times they hadn't made it far enough for her to take off the strappy shoes before they got down to business.

Some of her silvery blonde hair had come loose from the mass she had pulled up in an elegant twist. The runaway pieces framed her flushed cheeks and pink, dewy lips. She looked at him with that familiar gaze. The one that promised dirty things that he wasn't capable of resisting. She could be downright wicked when she wanted to be.

He refused to let her suck him back in though. A man had to stand up for what he believed, and Cave didn't see a future in sneaking around behind her father's back.

Cave knew from the get-go that she was out of his league. The high maintenance type had no place with a man who began the day at sunrise and by the time the sun dipped over the horizon he smelled like one of the livestock. Sometimes worse. Although he was working on her family's ranch, he didn't plan to stay much longer. He had big plans of getting his own place in the works. A homestead to call his own. Pride stiffened his backbone. After managing to save up enough to make his dream come true, the money was burning a hole in his bank account.

Her tongue shot out to roll over her plump bottom lip and his body became rock hard again. In his defense, any red-blooded man would find himself tied in knots when they were around Honor. All five sisters were stunning in their own unique way. Even though Honor and Liberty were identical twins, they both had a special quality that separated them from the other. They were both full of spice and spitfire that oddly he found attractive in a woman. From the beginning, and he wasn't sure why, but he couldn't keep his eyes off Honor. But here now, her coming in and spewing off something about "meeting Liberty" and that he "couldn't tell the difference between the two" left him cold. As if he wouldn't know that she wasn't Liberty. He could wear a blindfold and still pick Honor out of a lineup just through her scent. It was unlike anything he'd ever known before.

“You leaving yet?” He jutted his chin toward the door.

An expression flicked across her delicate features that made the hair on the back of his neck lift. “When I’m good and ready.” Her sharp tone took care of the problem behind his zipper.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” He took a step back, needing the space as everything suddenly switched up on him.

“How dare you act like a grumpy old bear with me,” she snapped.

“So, what was this? A game? Pie in the face of the lowly hand? Payback that I dumped your ass?”

Her mouth dropped as if she had something to say, but she clamped her lips shut. It didn’t take her long though until she found her voice. Her eyes reflected the golden light making them as blue as sapphires. “You dumped me? Excuse me, I believe it was the other way around.” She tapped the toe of her shoe.

“Even you, sweetheart, aren’t always right.” He chuckled.

“Sorry that I disappointed you by showing up.”

“Yeah, you did.” He shoved his hands into his front pockets. He should have never come.

“I’m sure you were looking forward to an evening of fun.” She haughtily smoothed the wrinkles out of the dress.

“Yeah, I have some restless energy that I needed to work off.” He created even more physical distance between them because the top of the dress had slid dangerously low on her full breasts. Were they bigger? *Holy nut sack*. He took a long gulp, but it didn’t ease the tension in his gut one iota.

One corner of her lips curled, and she squared her slender shoulders. At six-three he towered over her but that had never intimidated her, not that he’d ever wanted to intimidate her. No taller than his chest, she had the confidence of a giant.

Cave didn’t want to watch her, but his gaze latched onto her full hips like a kid to candy. Hell, she was candy. She

paced the floor, leaving a trail of her expensive perfume in her wake.

“Before you allow your ego to get out of hand, I didn’t come here to sleep with you.” She gave a small laugh that burned its way through him.

“Why are you here then?” His patience was thinning.

“It appears we both have a few secrets.”

“Is that right?” His throat tightened. What did she know? Had word gotten out that he was eyeing her Uncle Pete’s land, Rose Two, to buy?

He took in the heart-shape curve of her bottom before she dropped down on the end of the bed, crossing her legs which sent the torn slit of the skirt riding high on her toned thigh. He knew she was in prime condition.

A smile carved her lovely lips. Cave had a feeling she liked teasing him.

He knew that it went against his better judgement to show up. He felt like a jackass. A week ago, when he’d received the text message from her asking that she meet him here he’d gone back and forth on making the trip. But he couldn’t deny he’d been incapable of resisting the opportunity to see her again. He’d assumed she wanted sex and he’d been all for it.

Now he felt like a bigger idiot. “I’d like a clear explanation. Not a Rose infested one.”

Her eyes glistened. “You want an explanation? That makes two of us. Why are you meeting Liberty, in a motel, and jumping her bones—or rather my bones?”

He blinked. What kind of fucked up situation was this? “Why did you come and not Liberty?” He needed to press her for information. He wasn’t quite ready to tell her his side of things.

“I’m guessing because she isn’t in town. I’ve been looking for her after finding a vague note in her planner with the hotel name and time for today. Now I see why she was imprecise.” Her wide gaze journeyed over him in accusation.

“You tricked me.”

“How did *I* trick *you*?” Her long lashes fluttered over the top of her freckle-spattered cheeks. That was another thing that set her apart from her sister.

“How long did you plan to let things go before you stopped me? Or did you enjoy pretending to be Liberty?” He blew out a long breath and pressed his fingertips into his temples where a headache threatened to ensue.

“Did you know it was me?” She practically cooed.

“I don’t have time for this.” He stomped for the door.

“Don’t be in such a hurry, Cowboy. I can see you’re very upset that your plans have been hijacked, but there’s more to this than you’re letting on.” Some of the taunting had left her tone.

He swiveled on his boots and shook his head at her. “What do we need to discuss?”

“I didn’t know you were here, and I certainly didn’t expect you to practically screw me the second I walked in the door.”

He wanted to argue but what could he say in his defense? He’d been horny the second he decided he would come here. “If you have something to say, then say it. Otherwise, I’m out.”

Her fury sprang to life in shining eyes and pursed lips. Pushing off the bed, she faced him, her chin tilted slightly at a stubborn angle. “I was wrong by coming here. Clearly you were just my sister’s toy.”

Why did her words slice through him like a hot blade?

“I’m no one’s toy, sweetheart. You should know that.” He vaguely referred to the night he gave her an ultimatum. She could either tell her father that she was seeing Cave or he would break things off. She’d made her choice.

“And here I thought you might actually be...never mind.” She strode to the door, jerked it open, and stepped into the hallway.

Cave hesitated. He didn't want to run after her, but something instinctual told him he should. Grabbing his hat off the desk, he shoved it down on his head and took off at a jog.

"What the hell were you going to say?" he asked when he caught up to her. She walked fast for being so petite.

"Stop following me," she seethed.

"You're acting like a child," he growled.

She reached the elevator, stabbed the down button then turned to face him—a lot of fury resided in her scrunched features. "I'm the one acting like a child?" She laughed sarcastically. "That's funny coming from the 'guest'."

"Can you stop talking in code?"

The second the doors opened to the elevator she stepped inside. "I don't like your attitude." The doors started to close but she stopped them. "I don't know why Daddy ever hired you." She rolled her eyes which made him want to turn her sassy sweet behind over his lap and spank her.

"Maybe for the same reason you slept with me. You both find it refreshing to find someone who won't kiss your asses to get ahead."

She gasped. "Don't kid yourself. I slept with you because I was bored."

She dropped her hand and the doors started to slide shut and he blocked them with his foot.

"Bored? You have time for boredom in between the tasks of steamrolling over people in typical Rose fashion?"

"Do you think Liberty is interested in you?" She jabbed her finger into the center of his chest. Her face turned pale and she gave her head a shake. "I should have known better than to speak to you."

He jumped inside the elevator.

She wrinkled her nose. "Get out. This is *my* elevator."

"You don't own the elevator. You get out."

“The name Cave suits you. It must be short for caveman.”

“Wow. How long did it take you to come up with that comeback?” He snorted.

“I have to dumb-down my verbal communication for some people, present company included.” She stabbed the down button repeatedly.

“Do you think that’s going to help get us to the lobby faster?” He blew out a disgruntled breath. “And since you asked, I never said Liberty *is* interested in me.”

She blinked. “I understand why you two were meeting. I caught a bit of it myself. A bit of advice, you might want to check and make sure you have the right woman before you grope her tits.”

“I’m so confused.” He wished the damned elevator would hurry.

The doors did close but the elevator wasn’t moving.

“Is this your way of making your way through the family? After Liberty, who comes next? Justice, Freedom, or Hope?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

Did she really believe her own words?

He leaned in so close to her that their noses almost touched. “For your information, I learned my lesson with the first Rose sister. The one whose name doesn’t suit her because she wouldn’t know honor if it bit her in the ass.”

She stamped her foot. “And there’s a lot of honor in ultimatums, huh? Am I supposed believe that you and Liberty were meeting here to discuss politics? Irrigation systems? Betraying family perhaps?”

Cave wanted to punch the wall. Not out of anger but frustration because he still cared for Honor. Still wanted to press her against the wall and kiss her until she could no longer talk any nonsense. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but you’re the one who asked me to meet you here. I’ll take full accountability that I thought you wanted to revisit

old times. Hell, call me a walking dick because you can still make me hard, but things end today.”

“What?” Her cheeks were now rosy.

“What *what?*”

“I asked you to meet me?”

“The text message. A week ago. Are you drunk?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I didn’t send you a text. Are you sure it was from me?”

He pulled his cell phone out of his back pocket, clicked on several buttons, and turned the screen to her. “You see?”

Her mouth twisted as she looked at the message. “That’s not my phone number. It might be signed Honor, but it wasn’t me.”

“Bullshit.” He shoved his phone back into his pocket.

“Why would I lie?” Her voice had lost some of the bitterness.

“Who would send me a message pretending to be you?”

“Apparently Liberty would.”

The elevator started moving slowly.

He narrowed his eyes. “And why would she do that?”

After a long hesitation, she finally answered. “If she’d answer my calls, I could ask her. I need to get out of here.” She stabbed the lobby button with annoyance.

“I told you, don’t do that—”

The elevator *dinged* then came to a grinding stop between floors three and two. “Now what? I can’t be stuck in here with you!” she groaned.

“What did you do?” He scanned the panel. Every light was blinking. “You broke the elevator.”

“I didn’t break anything. It was moving slow from the start.”

He swiped off his hat and hit it against his thigh. “I shouldn’t have gotten in here with you.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. I didn’t ask you to.” She started to press the buttons again.

“What are you doing? It’s best to leave them alone,” he scolded.

“And then what? Stay in here until someone finds us?” Her cute nose wrinkled.

“Let me take care of this.” He pushed the red HELP button. A moment later the speaker buzzed and a man came over and introduced himself as Manuel, hotel security. “Hi, Manuel. My name is Cave, and we have a problem. It seems we’re stuck in your elevator.”

After receiving a polite and robotic “be patient and wait for help”, Cave rubbed the tension from his brow. His day was heading to Hell in a handbasket and he couldn’t stop it from happening. He plopped down on the carpet and stretched his legs, staring at his boots. How had things turned south so quickly?

“What are you doing?” Honor looked at him with disgust.

“Looks like we might be in here for a while. Might as well get comfortable.” He set his hat in his lap and bit back a laugh when she moodily chose a spot on the floor as far away from him as she could get.

“This was not how I wanted to spend my evening.” She tugged the hem of her skirt lower on her thighs.

“And I did?” He could tell she refused to meet his gaze. “What’s going on, Honor? What did you mean by Liberty isn’t responding to you?”

Then she looked at him. Much of the anger left her features. “I got a message from her saying that she needed space and she didn’t want me looking for her.”

“So glad you listened.” He laughed.

“If my sister needs me, I want to be there for her.”

“Maybe she’s with friends, or a boyfriend, and having the time of her life. I always said you two were stuck up each other’s butts. It’s time to break the dependency issue.”

“I’ve called all her friends, and she doesn’t have a boyfriend, at least I don’t think she does.”

He reached for his hat and set it back on his head as if that might deflect the invisible lasers shooting from her eyes. “You can apologize now for your accusations back in the room.”

“Apologize? For what? This isn’t my fault.”

“You called me Liberty’s boy toy.”

“Fine. I’m sorry for calling you that. I was angry.”

“Obviously she planned this. She wanted us to be here together. Have any idea why?”

“No,” she answered quickly. “Daddy’s birthday was yesterday, and his party is in a few days. This isn’t like her to disappear, especially when she planned the party and insisted we have a huge blowout.”

His mouth was as dry as the Sahara. Sweat beaded on his temples and he was starting to feel a bit claustrophobic. He loosened the top few buttons of his shirt hoping to relieve some of the heat. “I haven’t seen her if that’s your next question.”

She fastened her eyes on him. “So, you thought I wanted to meet you here and you came?”

With a casual shrug, he said, “A momentary lapse of judgement.”

“You certainly did seem excited to see me.” Her smile made her eyes dazzle.

“Don’t look so smug. If I hadn’t stopped, you and I would be knotted together at this very moment. As much as it kills me to admit it, even that sounds a lot better than being stuck here in this stuffy elevator.”

“Gee, that’s real flattering.”

“I have a question. Why do you hate me?” He realized he could be opening a whole new can of worms but he figured now was as good a time as any since she couldn’t walk away.

Her expression softened some. “I don’t hate you.” She looked genuinely offended.

“Well, you certainly don’t like me.” Cave rubbed the kinks out of the back of his neck.

She plucked a piece of fuzz from her dress. “I don’t exactly dislike you either.”

“So, walking away without a goodbye or kiss my ass is your MO?”

Her shoulders slumped some as she looked at him. “I don’t negotiate with someone who gives me an ultimatum.”

“How long do you figure we could have gone hiding our affair? I was the one who stood to lose if Sam found out.” He rubbed his jaw.

“Were you expecting to put a ring on it?”

He wasn’t sure why he felt socked in the gut. “What if I asked? Would you have said yes? Wait, don’t answer that. I just thought what we shared meant more than getting your hands dirty with a ranch hand.”

Her brows knitted. “There are things you don’t understand.”

She took the words right out of my mouth. “I think I do.”

“Why are you trying to start an argument?”

“I didn’t know the last one had ended?”

She flashed a weak smile. “Oh, I think it ended.” She reached up and released her hair. The shiny mass fell down her shoulders and back which made him squirm. “I can’t believe I didn’t bring anything with me. My phone. Purse. An S.O.S. kit.”

“It’s not like we’re lost in the Bermuda Triangle. They’ll call the fire department and have us out in a jiffy. Look, about what happened back in the room...”

With a tight shrug, she said, “I’d like to forget about that.”

“I was caught up when I saw you. I should have cooled my jets.”

Her eyes were as glossy as glass. “It’s both of our faults. We skipped a lot of bases.”

“Wait...you’re admitting fault? This should be written in the history books.”

“I can admit to my faults.”

“Now that we’re talking about it I can see how foolish it sounds that I thought you were inviting me here for sex.”

Her smile looked forced. “I’m sure someone has stepped in and taken my place.”

“Believe it or not it’s hard to have a love life when I’m living at Sagebrush Rose.”

“You don’t enjoy living at the bunkhouse?”

“Oh sure. Highlight of my life. The only ass I see these days is hairy and bumpy. Sky doesn’t like to wear pants and the other nine bastards are about as annoying and stinky as a fart in a pipe. By the way, when we last saw each other did I accuse you of being jealous of Liberty?” He remembered how he’d been angry and said some things he shouldn’t.

“Yeah, among other things.”

“I don’t think you’re jealous of your sister,” he admitted. Hell, Honor didn’t have reason to be jealous of anyone. With a reputation of being the best horse trainer in Wyoming, and smart and beautiful to boot, she probably had an entire line of people envious of her accomplishments.

She shifted and leaned her back against the wall, her hands clasped in her lap. “Liberty and I have been accused of being jealous of each other all our lives.” She paused and he could see the new creases around her eyes. “It never failed that we found the same men attractive. Some men found it a challenge to see which one of us he could catch first. It certainly doesn’t promote sisterly love, does it?”

The skirt rode up higher on her hip and he noticed another tattoo. She quickly tugged the hem down. “Sorry. Just a little curious.”

“What? That I have a rose tattoo? Or that I have tattoos?”

“I’ve always known that you are both wild and rooted.” He leaned his head back on the mirrored wall and looked up at the ceiling. “I’m sure you realize that you and Liberty are like night and day.”

“I think it’s hard for some people to see past the fact that we’re twins.” She played with a tendril of her hair, revealing a stack of diamond studs down her ear. “Liberty has always been the outgoing one. Growing up with her meant accepting a role as wallflower. She’s beautiful, charismatic, charming, and is an enigma people would love to decipher.”

“Wait...to be fair...you’re all those things too. By the way, you look beautiful,” he said. He felt her curious gaze settle on him.

“Are you hitting on me?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, maybe.” He couldn’t help but smile. She was stunning all the time, but when she smiled, she had an unbelievable glow.

Honor’s eyes widened. “Cave McCoy is paying *me* a compliment. Are you okay? Is the tight space getting to you?” Her laugh seemed more genuine, like the Honor he fell for.

“Don’t pretend I’m telling you something you don’t already know. Women know when they’re attractive.” He searched her face, seeing a vulnerability there that he couldn’t remember seeing before.

“Some of us want to be seen for something other than our looks. Liberty learned early on that her looks were an advantage. Things came easy for her. Education. Invitations to the most elegant parties. Even riding horses and competing. There were rules to being a Rose and learning how to ranch and ride didn’t have gender limitations. I think each of us were working the land before we could walk and competing in barrel racing before we lost our front teeth. If we weren’t

winning the top prize, well then, we spent our evenings and Saturdays with a trainer who believed winning is as important as Daddy does. But Liberty, she didn't need extra lessons." She looked into the mirror as if looking into the past. "I swear I can't remember the first time I sat in a saddle, but I swear I can remember the day she did. Isn't that odd? The sun was shining bright, the sky was clear and so blue, and she told me to watch out because she was getting on her horse, Shortcake. She barely reached the saddle, but she climbed up like scaling a tower and sat in it like a princess claiming her throne. Daddy had been so proud of her. After that day she became his number one and I knew then what it meant to make him happy."

"And so you became a three-time Texas Barrel Racing Champion. That's amazing."

"Liberty has a better record than I do."

"We're not talking about Liberty but what's odd is that you keep turning the conversation back to her. You always have. That was what I meant by you two needing your space."

"I didn't realize you followed my barrel racing career."

"It's kind of hard to miss the fact when everyone talks about it. At Sagebrush Rose. The local bar. At the hardware store. Rose this. Rose that. Aren't people sick of talking about the Roses?"

He half expected her to be angry over his comment, but she laughed. "Why does that bother you so much?"

"It doesn't. Not at all." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Hopefully Liberty comes back soon."

She sighed and pushed up from the floor, pacing the small space. "Something's not right."

"What do you mean?"

She stopped and faced him. "I know my sister better than anyone and I can feel that something has changed in her. She wouldn't go this long without speaking to me."

He stood too. "You seem concerned."

“I don’t know if I should be.” She crossed her arms over her waist. “She’s free spirited.” Her chin came up and she locked gazes with him. “I came back to Sagebrush Rose because I have some things I need to take care of.”

Seeing the desperation in her expression, he had a feeling that he was one of the “things”. “What brought you back?”

“I’ve been unsure how to tell you—”

The elevator lurched, sending Honor forward into Cave’s arms. She made a faint grumbling sound and looked up at him through the thick veil of her long, dark lashes. Her piercing blue eyes burrowed past every barrier he’d built since she left. Feeling an overwhelming need and a stirring behind his zipper, he did what any sensible man would do when faced with desire. He covered her mouth with his, only meaning to sample her sweetness, but instead he plunged his tongue inside. She tasted like a perfect cocktail. He could have stayed there, lost in this moment, but the whining, cracking sound of the elevator as it roared back to life made him pull away.

Cave felt dumbfounded at her half-lidded, shining gaze. Her chest rose and fell with each accelerated breath. Her lips were still slightly parted, moist from his kiss.

“Thank God. We’re finally moving.” She quickly moved away from him, looking flustered as she combed her fingers through her hair.

“What did you need to tell me?” he asked.

He could practically see the walls coming up. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“It certainly didn’t seem like nothing.”

She simply stared until the doors glided open. On the other side stood a short, balding man in a sweat-stained, starched shirt and wrinkled ironed slacks that matched his frazzled features. As he burst into apology Honor continued walking. Cave was caught by the very concerned Manuel.

Cave only partially paid attention to the man as his gaze stayed pinned on the sexy blonde that sashayed through the

lobby as if she didn't have a care in the world. Hell, she probably didn't. She was a Rose.

Chapter 3

“That’s the funniest story I’ve heard in weeks.”

Cave eyed his best friend, Hukkandeka “Huk”, across the backyard patio where he stood at the grill flipping steaks. He was full-blooded Shoshone Native American and wore his long, black hair in a braid. He always wore moccasins with his T-shirts and jeans. “Glad you find this funny.”

“Don’t get your panties all in a bunch,” Huk said in his distinctive accent. “I told you from the beginning that going to the hotel was a stupid idea. Dealing with the Rose family is trouble with a capital T, especially when you’re an employee.”

“I caved. What can I say?” Cave didn’t regret going either. He just wished things had turned out differently.

“What did you think was going to happen? Honor Rose was going to get down on one knee and propose? You two are from two completely different social circles.”

Cave laughed. “*Pfft*. Marriage? You must think then I’m a glutton for punishment.” He bent and petted Huk’s dog, Piper. Cave wanted his own dog, but first needed to get himself a home to put a dog in. When he found out Pete Rose was selling his land over in Kenworth Valley, fifty miles from Sagebrush Rose, Cave had wasted no time in letting the seasoned man know his intentions. He couldn’t say whether Pete had entertained any other offers, but he seemed anxious to sell. The plot was two hundred acres of natural beauty waiting to make Cave’s dreams, of breeding horses and developing an efficient way of raising livestock so that it doesn’t harm the environment, come true. He was busting at the seams wanting to tell Huk about the opportunity but was afraid he’d jinx himself if he told anyone.

“Yeah, I guess I do think so since you kissed her.” Huk’s nature had always been to say it just as he thought it.

“I shouldn’t have told you what happened.” He stopped petting the dog who then plopped down onto the planked floor of the deck.

“I don’t want to bust your balls, dude, but do you really want to go back to being used for sex?” He must have instantly realized the humor of what he said because he blew out a long breath. “Scratch that. Look, you fell for her. Lock, stock, and barrel. You’re playing with fire. Do you really want to ride down that path again? No matter how good it was you won’t get the ending you want and deserve, buddy.”

Cave brought his chin up. “My head is still on straight.”

“While you’re sitting there doing nothing, take care of the ice.” Huk waved the spatula through the air. “If Sam Rose finds out you and his daughter...” Huk whistled. “Don’t get sloppy.”

Cave ripped open the top to the bag of ice and poured it over the bottles of beer inside the cooler. “I’m not getting sloppy. What Honor and I share is history.”

“Whatever you say.” Huk saluted him with his bottle.

Stepping up to the rail and staring into the Wyoming mountainside looking for answers, Cave knew he wouldn’t find them. Since the elevator incident he’d been feeling like a criminal glancing over his shoulder every few minutes. Aware that Honor was back at Sagebrush Rose made him both irritated and excited.

“Speaking of hot sex, guess who I saw the other day? Catalina.”

Cave gave Huk a snarled expression. “And?”

“You said you enjoyed her company, and her big...” he cupped his hands in front of his chest.

“No, you said you liked that part of her when we met her at that concert,” Cave reminded him. “Anyway, that’s been over two years ago.”

“I’m still pissed that she chose you over me. Must be those blue eyes.” Huk laughed and slapped his hand against his thigh. “She’s still single and she asked about you. Asked how you’re doing and why she hasn’t heard from you in a long time.”

“Hopefully you didn’t tell her a damn thing since it’s none of your business to handle my affairs.”

“Hey, I’m just being a friend.” Huk’s booming response echoed through the yard. “Now that you and Honor aren’t involved, maybe you should look Catalina up. She’s pretty awesome.”

“Then why don’t you ask her out?” Cave scratched his nails down his whiskers.

Laying the spatula down, Huk tossed his empty bottle into the trash can. “I’m beginning to think you might be sticking around Sagebrush Rose because of the view.”

Cave squinted. “The view? Are you referring to mountains and pastures, or blondes with big attitudes and an overprotective Pa?”

“It’s like Playboy Mansion over there.” Huk was a tall man with a slender, athletic build and as stealthy as a panther. “Is it true that the sisters lay out in the nude around the pool and have parties with super models and stars?”

With a snicker, Cave shook his head. “Don’t believe everything you hear, my friend. I don’t know where you’re getting your information but it ain’t from me. I’m working my ass off at the ranch and I barely have time to monitor what going on outside of my aching back.”

“Dude, you can tell me.”

“Tell you what?” He’d already told his buddy too much.

“You want Honor and that’s why you haven’t left Sagebrush.”

Taking a long swig, the beer burned his throat. “I’m a logical man, Huk. A cowboy knows when a woman’s out of his league. I don’t have time for games.”

“What do you plan on doing?” Huk went back to the grill and poured melted butter over the steaks.

The savory sizzle made Cave’s stomach growl. He couldn’t wait to sink his teeth in some good barbecue. These days his diet consisted mostly of deli sandwiches and bags of

chips eaten on the tailgate of his truck while listening to the other hands chatter incessantly about who they'd like to smash. Cave knew all too well how crude random talk could get between men, but he didn't have any desire to join in the conversations. Sure, he was as horny as the next man, but he didn't want to share his thoughts with dudes. Since being hired on at the Ranch, he'd kept himself at a distance from the others as much as possible. In the end, it was best not to form any close friendships when he didn't plan to stay long. This was only a pit stop to getting his own place.

Taking him back to Huk's question, he thought over the answer. "Letting it drop and not talking about her." He reached into an open bag of chips and popped one into his mouth, wincing at the taste. "Dill pickle chips? Really?"

Huk frowned. "Don't judge, A-hole. Keep your hands off my chips."

Cave scraped at the label on the bottle. "I can't seem to get my thoughts off the idea that..." He wasn't sure he should mention the subject.

"Off what?"

Leaning his elbows on the rail, Cave decided to go ahead and elaborate. "She wanted to tell me something."

"Honor?"

"Yeah. I could tell it was important."

"Maybe she wanted to tell you that she finds great enjoyment in toying with you? She likes having her claws in your balls."

Cave felt he should have known better than to try and be serious with his buddy when it came to Honor. "Never mind."

"Damn, you're really troubled about this, aren't you?"

"You know, Honor and I did share some conversation outside of sex. She can be quite interesting." Although they hadn't dug too deep into each other's lives, he felt he'd gotten to know her well. Sometimes it wasn't the things that a woman said that a man needed to listen to but more the things she

didn't say. What Cave understood, she had a love-hate relationship with her father, a man who put business as a priority and expected the same from his daughters. He'd become more focused on work after his wife died. Cave didn't know Sam well, but what he did know was the sixty-something man took pride in everything that he'd built from the ground up. The few discussions they'd had, he got right to the point and didn't waste time on small talk. Cave could appreciate that efficiency because he'd never been one with a lot of words either.

“Good luck, buddy, but I foresee a shit show in your future.”

The back gate clanked and slammed shut. A second later a tall brunette swept onto the patio. It was Huk's sister, Layla, dragging her sandaled feet like a frustrated toddler would. She looked like she'd had a rough day...week. Maybe month. “I'm going to tell you now, fellows,” she droned. “I'm hungover and I'm irritable.” She came to a stop and whipped off her sunglasses, squinting her red-eyed gaze at Cave. “Aren't you a welcome sight. I haven't seen you around lately.”

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. At twenty-two, she felt like his little sister too. “Been busy.”

“I bet.” She snorted. She pushed her glasses back on and stepped over to drop down on the lounge, draping her body over the cushion like a rag doll. “Don't expect anything more from me than polishing off a steak and my beautiful presence.”

“What the hell happened to you?” Huk asked.

“Monique's wedding reception. Free drinks and fun.” She rubbed her forehead. “Kill me if I ever say I'm drinking again.”

“Did you say you wanted a beer?” Huk held the beer bottle underneath her nose.

“No,” she whined.

“Huk told me he's having you clean the drip plate on the grill after we eat.” Cave couldn't resist teasing her.

She groaned, looking a bit green. “I warn you both, if I vomit, I’ll make sure it’s in your direction.”

“Do you really want to do that to someone who’s grilling you a big, fat juicy steak with dripping butter?” Huk scooped one up on the spatula and showed her.

After flipping him off, she pushed off the chair and headed for the sliding door. “I can’t handle either one of you right now.” She stepped inside.

Chapter 4

It was the day of Sam Rose's birthday celebration, and everyone got an invite, including Cave and the other ranch hands.

From what he'd heard, the celebrations for any of the Roses were always grand and spectacular. He didn't feel any excitement thinking of hanging out in a crowd, especially one filled with people he didn't know. If he didn't attend it would not only be suspicious, but he would miss an opportunity to broker some trust with Honor.

Yeah, he'd decided they needed a reboot.

Cave strolled into the lodge located on Sagebrush Rose property and scanned the guests, looking for one person. Tugging at the neckline of the new shirt he bought just for the occasion, it needed a few rips and tears before it became comfortable.

Passing the bar where a group of hands were sitting, Cave shared a quick greeting then ordered a beer from the bartender. He was handed an international brand. He'd never been into prestigious things and considered himself a simple man. Instead of being at the party, he'd rather be holding a fishing rod, and if he had to guess he'd say ol' Sam Rose would rather that too. Hobnobbing with a crowd who wouldn't look twice at him out on the street was never a good time for Cave.

Hearing booming laughter, he watched the patriarch, Sam, twirl Justice around the dance floor. By his expression, he was happier than a pig wallowing in mud. He had a confident, cocky air, but he was fair. What would he think though if Cave bought Pete's land? Or married his daughter?

Whoa.

Where did that left field statement come from?

Cave wasn't sure what had come over him, but he needed to pull back on his gunshot reins.

The song ended and Justice, who looked like Honor with her blonde locks, bright blue eyes, and award-winning smile, gave her father a kiss on the cheek and they parted ways. Sam's girlfriend, Trinity, who was at least twenty years his junior swept in to dance with the birthday boy.

Cave didn't know a lot about love, but the old man seemed pretty darn happy, almost youthful. There came an unfamiliar tightness in Cave's chest. He'd never been one to envy anyone's life. He had everything he needed, except for one thing. Honestly, it wasn't jealousy that he felt, especially not for Rose's money, but as Cave neared his thirty eighth birthday, he guessed it would only be natural to start thinking about his future. The one thing he missed was companionship. Not the kind made of friendships. Hell, he lived with a bunch of men that made him crave peace and quiet. The kind that he wanted could only be found with a person—his person. Someone who both appeased and challenged him. A soft, warm body, intelligent conversation, and commitment. Loyalty.

After serving a contract with the Navy in his twenties, then joining the rodeo circuit for a few years, and after traveling and working ranches, he'd finally found a place at Sagebrush Rose, and he felt like he had the wandering bug out of his system. Now it was time to plant some roots.

Cave flicked his gaze over the crowd. Still no sign of Honor.

Maybe Huk had a point. Cave did enjoy working at the ranch. Not that he wanted to give up his dreams of owning his own, but he'd learned a lot and each night he practically fell asleep before his head hit the pillow because he'd worked his ass off.

There was something humbling a man got by working daylight to dark on a ranch. Rides at sunset and feeling accomplished. The pay wasn't the best, but he lived okay.

As good as things were there, there were some aspects he'd never get used to. For instance, sleeping in the bunkhouse could make the most patient cowboy frustrated. What could be

worse than a room full of farting, snoring, cocky sum'bitches all crammed in one room? Or seeing another cowboy's swinging dick because he didn't think anyone minded if he walked around naked. And just yesterday one of the hands pissed all over the bathroom floor after indulging in one too many shots of whiskey. None of them were good toilet shooters so he didn't understand how they could all lasso a calf on the first swing.

Shaking his head, Cave resituated his hat.

Raised voices drew his attention across the room. Honor had finally arrived and, of course, she was fashionably late. The woman knew how to make an entrance and his breath caught somewhere between pain and bliss. A horse wearing a bikini prancing through the lodge at that moment couldn't have pulled his gaze off her. She looked radiant, and sexy as hell. The tail of the low-cut, red sequined number floated like a cloud behind her. If she was trying to make a statement then he got the message loud and clear. He still wanted her—more than he'd ever wanted anyone or anything.

Except for land. They were on equal footing.

He watched her glide up to her father, who was now sitting at the head of the VIP table, and whispered something in his ear that made him smile. She kissed his cheek, and all seemed right in the world, but Cave saw something a bit harried in her—almost draining. Honor always seemed pulled together, but maybe she was a bit pale. Or the smile didn't quite light up her eyes like normal.

Not caring if anyone noticed, Cave kept his attention on her as she waved the server away offering her a champagne flute. She elegantly squared her shoulders and some of the worry in her expression faded.

Look at me. Look at me. Cave repeated the silent mantra. Why did he want her to look at him so badly? She had her undivided attention on her family. Then she turned her attention to the dance floor when a new song played. Did she like to dance? A sudden urge to ask her overtook him. He'd never much liked dancing himself but he guessed he'd be

willing to forsake his comfort zone to do the two-step at least one time with her.

But he couldn't. It would be breaking the unwritten rules.

Rose would never want one of his daughters seen fraternizing with a hand, and probably why the sisters liked to dip dirty so often. Cave could see that each Rose was about as stubborn as a few of the wild horses Honor trained. They wouldn't outright tell their father to mind his own business, no, they weren't that brave, but they certainly did like to test the waters. Maybe Liberty's disappearance was a silent "fuck you" to the overbearing controlling Sam.

Honor laughed over something someone said at the table and the melodic sound played Cave like a harp. He was too old to fall into such romantic notions, and yet, he wasn't immune. She had a glow about her, reminding him of an angel. He about shot the sip of beer through his nose at the preposterous idea. Honor was the farthest thing from an angel, and that was what he liked most. No surprise that he was fixated on her, as well as about a dozen others in the room who couldn't seem to take their eyes off her. The temperature in the room raised and something else in his pants. Good thing the seams of his new Wranglers were durable and hid his growing issue.

Back to the core problem, he had to be kidding himself if he thought a woman like Honor Rose—of the well-known, wealthy family of Sagebrush Pines, Wyoming, would ever want a man like Cave. Sure, he'd never win any modeling gigs, had stained hands with a couple of crooked fingers from previous breaks, and was a little rough around the edges, but he'd never had any trouble with getting a woman. He ventured to say that even a sophisticated woman like Honor liked a confident cowboy.

With those thoughts, he took his fancy beer outside on the terrace for some much-needed fresh air.

Everything was beautiful tonight. Even Mother Nature provided a clear, warm evening for the celebration. Cave guessed that one of the Rose's asked and Mother Nature provided. The sky blinked with thousands of twinkling lights.

The chattering of the guests drifted out onto the terrace and the gentle chords of the string ensemble helped him relax from all the tension he'd carried with him all day. Hell, all month. This was a busy season when they did "spring cleaning" on the ranch. They tore down old fences to put up new ones, cleaned the existing barns and built a new one, irrigated the hay meadows, put in a new irrigation system, and took care of inoculating and branding the livestock.

Cave caught a glimpse of the new ranch hand, Mav, dancing with Justice. Recently, Sam had hired the ramrod to handle the wrangling team and he'd been butting heads with all the men by pushing his opinions. Cave could lie and say he'd sort of hoped he would have made trail boss which didn't make any sense when he didn't plan to stay much longer. That proved that he needed affirmation, which was completely against the grain. He didn't care what Rose, or his daughter, thought of him.

Damn. Why did he feel an unsettling kick in his gut?

He anchored his elbows on the wrought iron, watching the dance floor through the open French doors. He could see couples moving to the song as they stared into each other's eyes. He gave a little laugh. At one time he'd been close to marrying, or at least thought he would. Looking back, the feelings were probably more about lust than anything. He and Beth had met in high school, started dating, and when they graduated it seemed like the next natural step would be engagement. However, they decided they'd slow down and talk about the future when he came back from training, but things never made it that far. A visit home, with a diamond ring in his pocket, showed him how quickly people changed. Beth had news of her own to tell him. She'd fallen for someone else, and she was pregnant by the cowboy in question.

Cave would be lying if he said he wasn't crushed, but after the initial pain of loss faded, he realized he and Beth would always be on different pages. They would have married and found themselves divorced within the year. He hocked the ring, bought himself a motorcycle, and that was when he took

freedom by the horns and never looked back. He hadn't even found someone who made him think about marriage again, until Honor.

Probably because he couldn't have her.

He shifted and his gaze naturally found Honor in the growing crowd. She was now talking to her Uncle Pete. A stern-old man who never shaved, always wore faded denim overalls and had his corn pipe sticking out of the corner of his mouth. In fact, he had it with him now. He probably didn't care that he pissed a few people off. The man was smiling. Anyone could see that the sixty-something geezer had a soft spot for his niece. Cave guessed it had more to do with the fact that she was about the only one who could handle the man's cantankerous attitude. Pete liked to interject himself in everything on the ranch, like he'd been nominated as his brother's assistant. He didn't communicate the best and more times than not he rubbed hands the wrong way and they managed to bite their tongues. Cave, on the other hand, knew to control his temper.

Honor liked to use her hands while she talked, and they were swishing back and forth through the air as she excitedly told him a story. Her animated expression socked Cave right in the chest. He wanted her to have a conversation with him. Those crazy thoughts didn't have a place inside his head. Hell, it was okay to have the thoughts but not to allow them to roam free.

Turning away, he looked out into the distant gardens lit with luminaries.

He wasn't the least bit hopeful that he could win Honor.

But he wanted to.

"Are you hiding out here?"

Freedom stepped out onto the terrace. She had a plate filled with barbecued smokies. Freedom was the youngest with the signature Rose big blue eyes and a smile that invited everyone to be her friend.

"Nope. Just getting some fresh air."

“By the way. This is for you. A peace offering.” She handed him the plate.

“A peace offering?” He scooped up one of the smokies and leaned his back against the rail.

“For inviting you here. You look as happy as a rock.”

“I’ll survive.”

“I don’t know how she can tolerate him.” Freedom’s gaze was on Pete.

“She seems to do a good job of it.” Cave noticed that Pete suddenly seemed displeased about something. He was shaking his head back and forth and Honor had her arms crossed over her chest with a stubborn tilt of her chin. Were they having a disagreement? The protective side of Cave had the urge to walk inside and whisk her out on the dance floor to save her from the gritty man, but that would only cause problems. He also didn’t want to ruffle Pete’s feathers. A woman like Honor didn’t need much protection.

“I have a question.” Freedom leaned her hip against the rail and faced him, a smile forming on her expression. “Why don’t you just ask her out?”

The question caught him off guard. “Who?”

“Come on, you know very well who I’m referring to. My lovely sister, Honor. The woman you can’t keep your eyes off.” Freedom latched her inquisitive gaze on him.

“I wouldn’t even play with the idea of asking her out.” He took a long swig from his bottle. “I prefer to keep my ass grounded in reality.”

“I get that she’s a bit...distant, but against popular belief, she wants love as much as we all do. You might be surprised what you’ll get if you take a risk occasionally.”

“Are we talking about a risk or is it more like jumping out of a plane with a faulty parachute?”

She bit her bottom lip as if to keep from laughing. “You’d be lying if you tell me you’re not interested in her. It’s about as obvious as that black mole on Aunt Rita’s nose.”

With a chuckle, he finished off his beer. “I’m sure your father would have something different to say.” He felt comfortable enough to be honest with Freedom. They’d become pretty good friends since he started working at Sagebrush Rose.

“Cave, I think it’s safe for me to say that you need a strong woman who can handle you. Or should I say sharpen your pencil?” She lifted a brow over piercing eyes.

“Why do you say that?”

She took several steps then turned to face him again. “I’m going to be perfectly honest. You and I have spent how many evenings sharing a bottle of whiskey and long conversation and how many times have you made a move on me? Not once.” She didn’t give him time to respond. “I thought maybe you didn’t have a thing for librarians, but soon it was apparent that you’re in love. With Honor.”

He blinked, taking in her statement. He liked Freedom, a lot. They hung out on occasion, and she vented about the assholes in her life, and he’d always been a good listener, but he’d never looked at her as anything more than a friend. “Freedom, I—”

“Stop right there, Cowboy. It doesn’t require an answer or explanation. I’m just tossing that out. I’m being a good friend. I don’t know what you two have shared because it’s none of my business, but be careful. Make sure if you’re willing to win her heart you’re in it for the long haul.” She glanced through the doors. “Oh, I’d pay a pretty penny to see Daddy’s face when learning that one of his daughters has gone and found herself in love with one of his hands. You and Honor would make a cute couple.”

“What are you two out here planning?”

Hearing the familiar soft voice, Cave craned his neck, meeting the cool gaze of Honor. *Great.*

Freedom gave him a subtle wink. “I’ll let Cave explain. I’m going in to dance. I sure do love a stimulating party. You

two have fun.” She darted her gaze between them before she disappeared inside.

He didn’t necessarily want to look at Honor because she might just see his unwavering thoughts. He couldn’t shake off all the old feelings. His calm, cool nature was a bit off kilter these days. Now that he knew he wanted to find his way back into her good graces he didn’t know how to act. He wasn’t talking sleeping with her again, although as tempting as that might be, something in his gut felt like they needed to smooth the rough edges of their history together. She was someone he should never touch again. Never taste. Not allow her to haunt his days and nights. He’d made his feelings so obvious that Freedom saw right through him. Who else knew? Or had an inclination? Did Honor realize their secret affair wasn’t as secret as they thought? He always found himself looking for her, watching her, catching glimpses of her riding her prized horse. Her long platinum blonde hair flowing out from underneath her cowgirl hat and the ends caught by the wind. The way her firm bottom encased in nice fitting jeans bounced in the saddle.

Feeling a stirring below his belt, he realized his body wouldn’t give up the desire without kicking and screaming.

“Well, Cowboy?” She practically purred the words. “What were you and Freedom cooking up?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“I caught the tail end of the conversation. Is my little sister trying to fix you up?” A smile teased the corners of her lips.

“Not quite.”

“It’s okay. You can tell me.” She sashayed closer and the hem of her gown swished around her legs.

“Really?” He felt sweat bead on his forehead. “Last week you wanted to kill me and now you want me to swap stories like we’re old friends. Hot and cold.”

He wasn’t sure what reaction he expected, but not the teasing smile. The cool hue of the string of lights hung above them mingled with the ocean blue of her eyes, making them

appear jewel-like. God, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever had the pleasure of seeing. He felt an internal tug that sent warning bells off inside his head...and heart.

“You're not still upset over what happened at the hotel, are you?” The words glided off her tongue.

“There's nothing to be upset about. If I remember correctly, you're the one who seemed a tad troubled.” He scratched his smooth jaw which he'd shaven for the occasion. He couldn't help but feel something familiar towards her. No one could argue that they had chemistry and it burned deep.

“I've been pondering.”

“Pondering? Sounds dangerous if you ask me.”

“Over you and me. I think it's time we get past this... impediment. We can handle things like adults.”

He remembered the first time he met her, when he'd first arrived at the ranch. He'd received the obligatory invite to the main house for dinner to meet the family. He'd taken the path through the woods, preparing himself for the role he had to play, and came upon the sounds of splashing in the nearby lake. Instinct had warned him to stay on track, but Cave had always been too curious for his own good. He took the right at the fork instead of the left and found himself at the edge of the water seeing a sight that would forever be tattooed on the cells of his brain. She had been wading, naked.

After finding himself frozen, he finally came to and started to back his way out of sight, but then came...

“Take a picture, Cowboy. It'll last longer.” She'd caught him.

Feeling a little ashamed that he'd been staring, he'd gone in for the apology of the century. “Sorry. I heard a noise and was just curious.”

The golden rays of sunlight had reflected on her hair making her look like she had a halo. Her gaze had been radiant against her flawless skin. She was then, and still now, the most stunning thing he'd ever seen.

“Do you mind?”

Smack-dab in brain fog, he didn't immediately realize she was waiting for him to turn because she was coming out of the water. She was holding onto the ladder on the dock, wearing a smile that traveled through him like a laser. He'd caught a flash of her dripping wet body a second before he swiveled, giving her privacy.

“I'm decent,” she'd said in a soft voice.

He'd comprehended then that decent was a personal viewpoint. Finding her wearing a short white robe and a sexy grin, he'd been a goner. Cave had been caught in the snares of a woman's web who he knew nothing about. He got the feeling he fell at that very moment.

Big mistake.

Even if he'd known who she was, the outcome wouldn't have been any different. However, later, when he'd been sitting at the elegant dinner table decked out with lit candles and expensive china, feeling like a fish out of water, that very woman walked in—or rather swept in like she owned the world. Honor Rose, dressed in what some men would call “trouble”, Cave had felt a kick to the center of his chest. The blue gown had brought out the color of her eyes and the plunging neckline had been the catalyst for so many things in Cave. She would have been off limits no matter what being his boss's daughter, but with the last name Rose also made her out of his league.

Dragging his frazzled thoughts back to the present, nothing had changed within him. He still felt his chest tighten when she was around but by birthright they were on opposite ends of the social spectrum.

“How do you suggest we do that?” he asked, just for shits and giggles.

“Brace yourself. This might throw you for a loop.”

He lifted a brow. “I'm all ears.”

Honor's attempt had been lost when Justice interrupted. “Excuse me, you two. We're getting ready to sing Happy

Birthday to Daddy. You coming, Honor?" She then turned to Cave with a wide smile. "Hi. How are you?"

"Just fine," he said.

"Give me a minute," Honor said.

With a flick of her curious gaze from Honor to Cave, Justice shrugged. "Don't take too much time or you'll miss Daddy blowing out the candles."

Honor waited until they were alone again, then said, "I wanted to speak to you about something."

He narrowed his gaze. *Interesting*. "Yeah?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. "You'll definitely want to hear what I have to say."

"Are you going to tell me or am I supposed to guess?"

She shook her head. "Not here. After everyone leaves meet me in *our* place. Can you still find your way?"

"I think I can manage." The way she used the word *our*, like she'd slathered it in honey first, made his heart kick up in speed. During their "fling" they'd met upstairs in the empty apartment at least a dozen times. So now it was "their" place. He kind of appreciated that.

She took off in a flash of dancing sequins.

Cave stood staring at the empty doorway for the longest time.

He stepped inside just as the last chords of Happy Birthday played. Sam was sitting at a table surrounded by his friends and family, his daughters, minus Liberty, bracketing him. The plethora of lit candles brightened his worn and weathered face as he prepared to blow them out.

"Don't forget to make a wish, old man," Pete yelled.

People clapped and cheered him on. He didn't manage to blow out the fire on his first try, but he got the remaining of the sixty-three on the second.

Cave and Honor's gazes seemed to naturally meet. That look could reel him in. She certainly had him curious. Why did she want to speak to him?

The next few hours passed in a crawl as Cave anticipated meeting with Honor. He had to be careful so that no one saw him slip upstairs. When the orchestra was packing away their instruments and the bartender was breaking down, Cave checked to make sure he wasn't being watched and quietly made his way to the staircase.

He didn't have to bother knocking because the door was left open a few inches. Like old times. Stepping inside, he heard music playing and a row of candles were the only light.

"Come in and close the door," she said from somewhere in the apartment.

Crossing the plush rug that probably cost more than a month's wages, he peered inside the bedroom where more candles were lit. He found her sitting on the bed with the robe she wore the first day he saw her loosely tied.

What the hell?

Chapter 5

Honor stretched out on the bed, feeling butterflies take wing in her stomach. She had no clue why she felt so nervous.

She was about to reveal what she was sure was going to be shocking news to Cave.

Since their run in at the hotel, she couldn't get him off her mind and it had her turned inside out. During an early morning meeting with a potential client, she spilled coffee all over his lap. Then later, she sent her bookkeeper a guide on artificial horse insemination instead of the quarterly reports. He called her and asked, "Are you trying to tell me something?"

She had to do something quick. Logically, if they had sex, she could get the craving out of her system and then she could talk to him with a clear mind.

Laying her hand on her stomach, she hadn't started showing yet. At three months along, the pregnancy was still early but soon she wouldn't be able to hide her secret any longer. Several times she'd wanted to divulge the truth to Cave since she'd come back to Sagebrush Rose, but each time something stopped her. She needed to tell him before she told anyone else, especially her father. The only person who knew, outside of the doctor, was Liberty who had conveniently disappeared off the face of the Earth. Every text message and call Honor made to her twin sister went unanswered. What was she up to? Liberty had a lot of explaining to do.

And then there was Cave.

What would he think of becoming a father?

Would he even want to be a father?

The news would be a shocker, of course. This wasn't part of the plan, yet, she didn't consider the baby a mistake. At thirty-three, she was mature enough to handle an unplanned pregnancy. Whether Cave wanted to be involved or not.

Their whirlwind one night turned into two, then five, and ten until months had passed and they were sneaking around to

see each other nearly every day. Then Cave grew a conscious and felt guilty. He wanted her to choose between revealing their relationship or he would end it. Honor had never been one to cave when pushed into a corner or pressured to decide on anything. Her daddy owned the corner market on expectations.

She left Sagebrush Rose and two weeks later, Honor found out that she was pregnant. Someone could have rammed her with a wrecking ball and she wouldn't have been more slammed. For a week, she'd been in shock. She and Cave had been careful, but even careful wasn't enough sometimes. After a few days of wrapping her head around the pregnancy, she realized she wasn't disappointed. Her life would change, but change wasn't always a bad thing. She'd called Liberty with the news. After her initial shock had worn off, she'd made it clear that she thought Honor should reveal her secret to Cave as soon as possible.

And now here she was.

She knew she had to be truthful, lay it all on the line and let him decide what he wanted to do.

Honor found herself needing to share her secret with a cowboy who probably hated her.

Eventually no sounds came from downstairs. She'd heard cars leaving until nothing remained but silence. Would he come?

Her answer came by the muffled thudding of boots in the hallway. Her breath held as she waited.

She tracked his movement in the apartment. He lumbered through the living area, hesitant as if he might change his mind. Yet, he didn't because she heard him outside the bedroom, lingering a moment before he pushed open the door. She lifted her chin, looking at him as he filled the arched doorway. His broad shoulders nearly reached from one side of the frame to the other. The golden light of the lit candles caught his wide-eyed stare.

Pushing out of bed, she made her way to the window and looked down at the last car's taillights disappearing into the dark. Then she turned back to him where he remained in the doorway as if she might attack him. Maybe she would.

“Don't worry, Cowboy. You're safe. I won't bite,” she said.

One brow raised over his sultry eyes. “So, when did you stop?”

What could she say? She did enjoy a good nibble on occasion.

“Got anything that'll take away the taste of international beer from my taste buds?”

“Sure.” She sashayed toward him, wearing a smile that jacked up his ego. An Honor Rose smile could always make him feel like a warrior. She stood toe to toe with him. Her stare heavy on him and he had a craving that burned like a forest fire through him. He wanted to drag her into his arms and kiss her until she begged him to take her.

Dangerous path to walk down.

Then he realized she was waiting for him to move so that she could pass.

Obediently, he stepped out of her way and focused on her bare legs. He wondered what she had on underneath the robe?

“Is it a Jack or Bud Light kind of night?” she asked from behind the mini bar. As far as luxurious went, the lodge apartment would make a good man cave. Big screen TV. Recliners. Rustic décor. And a fully stocked bar. It had also been a damn good place to hook up.

He was glad that she remembered his choices of drink. “I'll take Jack.” He pursed his lips and watched her, tilting his head as if he focused on the task of watching her move about the small space preparing his drink. The front of the robe had parted, just enough that he could see the tops of her firm breasts. He knew what they looked like, felt like, how he

molded the large mounds in his palms and glided his thumbs over her perky pink-rose nipples. She had very sensitive ones and he could almost bring her to the edge of orgasm just by playing with the peaks.

She brought the drink to him. “Heavy on the Jack, a splash of Coke, and two ice cubes, just the way I remember you taking it.”

He brought the glass to his lips and downed half the drink in one gulp, squinting as the liquor burned his insides. “I noticed you disappeared after the cake was cut.”

Her ice blue gaze narrowed on him. “I’ve never been much into social gatherings.” She reached up and loosened her hair that fell like a platinum blanket down her back and shoulders, much like her attitude that came in waves. “I wanted to have an intimate birthday celebration this year for Daddy. Just family and a couple of his good friends but Liberty insisted we do things her way. She wasn’t even here to enjoy it.”

“Sam seemed to really enjoy it.” There was a hoarseness to his voice that came from the strain of his body hardening when she moved and the front of the robe parted like a curtain to a stage. He caught a peek of bare breasts and his composure ebbed.

How was he expected to think straight at a time like this?

“Daddy is always up for the spotlight.”

His mouth salivated. He wanted to sink his tongue in her mouth, and other places.

Maybe a part of him was hoping she’d asked him to come upstairs so they could revisit setting the sheets on fire, but it’d only complicate things.

“Let’s not play. All you Rose’s enjoy a good shindig no matter what you say.” He emptied his glass.

She stared at him for nearly thirty seconds, like a game of chicken. She clasped her hands at her waist which caused the robe to open even more, revealing more deep cleavage and that cross tattoo. She had nice tits. Yet, he was more of a leg man, and she had lots of it.

“That shows just how much you really know me,” she said in a soft voice.

“From what I can remember, I had only been permitted to know only so much. What your favorite position is and how you like to be touched to make you wet.”

Did her cheeks flush? He didn't know because she turned away and went to sit on the corner of the plush couch. She sunk into the cushions. “Why don't you have a seat. This might take a while.”

Before he went to sit down, he stepped over and poured himself more Jack, sans Coke, and chose the chair to have some distance between them. He stretched his legs and hooked his ankles. He'd nurse his drink this time. “If you brought me up here for conversation, we could have managed that downstairs.” The look she gave him could sear the hair off his nut sac.

He quickly lost his remaining grin. She ran her hands over the front of the robe. He had an urgency to have her fingers wrapped around his—

“Are you listening?”

Cave snapped back. “No. Was it important?” He took a long swig, wiped his mouth with his fingers before leaning deeper into the comfortable chair. This was one piece of furniture they'd never had sex on.

One corner of her mouth lifted. “Did you think I would rip your clothes off the second you walked in?”

“Is ripping my clothes off still on the table?”

She flipped the ends of her hair over one shoulder. “I won't lie. My intention was to get the tension out of the way quickly. I never was one who could think clearly when I'm in the middle of a dry spell.”

His breath caught. He knew how forthcoming she was, and it still shocked him sometimes. A lot of women expected a man to know what she was thinking and wanting, but not Honor. “What changed your mind?”

“Seeing your expression. You’re so uptight.”

He shrugged, hearing a few seams of the shirt pop. “Dry spells were never good for me either.”

One thin brow curved. “You seriously haven’t moved on?”

“No. Are you disappointed?”

Those light blue, almost gray, eyes studied him behind a thick fringe of dark lashes. “If I said you should have, I’d be lying. We did have a good thing.” She twirled a strand of her hair around her knuckle.

“Until someone had to go and ruin it,” he said smoothly.

“I’m glad you can see how wrong you were.”

He chuckled and braced the glass on his knee. “If I was wrong, I would have made it clear by now.”

“When did you get all soft hearted?”

“Soft hearted? Or logical? Not every man is out for a fuck.”

She blinked. “That was what you and I had agreed on. A good time.”

“Are we rehashing our last argument?”

With a sigh, she shook her head. “No. That’s spilled milk.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Before we get into the juicy details, how about we step outside onto the veranda. It’s a little warm in here.” She got up and made her way toward the French doors where she paused to motion for him to join her.

Chapter 6

The evening was lovely and warm. Honor needed the fresh air if she planned to tell him about the baby.

Luckily, the slight breeze coming off the lake helped cool her skin. She heard his footsteps behind her and a second later his arm brushed hers as he joined her at the rail, anchoring his elbows on the wrought iron. They didn't have to worry about being spotted on the veranda. Facing away from the house with privacy shades that offered discretion. That was why the lodge apartment had been the perfect location for adult play dates. A few times she and Cave been buck naked on the veranda. The chairs were at a perfect angle for a few of her favorite positions.

“Any news from Liberty?” he asked.

She pulled loose tendrils of hair away from her face, feeling his gaze on her. “She and Daddy had exchanged some heated words a few days before she left so my guess is that she's angry with him and taking some time to cool down, but knowing Liberty she could be doing anything. Shaving her head and getting a face tattoo wouldn't surprise me.”

“I'm just an outsider but it would seem you and Liberty share the trait of running when things get tough.”

She snorted softly. “I was born with wings, not locks.”

He chuckled. “Then why are you back?”

Feeling the warmth from his skin she wanted to scoot closer. She wanted to feel his arms wrapped around her. There were so many things she didn't know about him. He was a mystery. Could she trust him by telling him the truth? “Business.”

He shifted to his hip, facing her with his pristine gaze and his jaw tightened. “From my viewpoint, it looked like you and Uncle Pete were having an interesting chat at the party.”

“You were watching, huh?”

“Yes.”

She laughed. “In fact, Pete and I did have a very interesting discussion. He told me you made an offer on the Sagebrush Two property.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yeah, I did.” He scratched his temple.

“It is my business. You see, I had made an offer too.”

Cave yanked off his hat and raked his fingers through his thick, wavy hair. “Since when?”

“Since he first mentioned that he wanted to unload it.”

He pushed off the rail and settled his hat back on his head. Frustration made his jaw tight. “Let me guess, ol’ Pete has promised you the property?”

“Pete wouldn’t do that.”

“Until Sam gets involved and forces Pete’s hand.”

“I don’t want Daddy involved in this.”

He chuckled and scraped his short nails down his cheek. She followed his every move. “That’s a first.”

“I don’t need his input on everything.”

“Why do you want the land? It’s not even close to here.” He blinked as suddenly the pieces fell into place. “Ahh...that’s why.”

“I need to expand my business. I don’t want to be under Daddy’s thumb.”

“*Daddy...*” The endearment rolled off his tongue as bitter as lemon. “doesn’t have enough land to give you?”

“I told you, I don’t want him involved in my business.” She sighed heavily. “He’s already run one daughter off.”

“What am I missing?”

There was a long hesitation. “One would think Sam Rose is a modern thinker with the way he’s dating a woman half his age who uses OMG before every sentence. Turns out, he’s as

narrow minded as a conservative facing change.” She rubbed the back of her neck.

He continued to stare. “Powerful people tend to be on the narrow-minded side.”

She blew out a breath and stared into the twinkling sky. “Since his heart attack he’s tightened the proverbial ship. Talks about how he sees the future of Sagebrush Rose. It’s as if he’s planning his death. He’s a bit macabre if you ask me, but Daddy always did have a flair for the dramatic. My sisters and I thought he’d get over whatever rut this is, but boy were we wrong.”

“There’s more, right?”

She debated if she should tell him. What did she have to lose? “Before I left town he sat us all down, along with his attorney, and the new will was read that had some very interesting stipulations.” She sighed. “If my sisters and I aren’t married within six months we will lose our inheritance. We’ll still have Momma’s inheritance of course but we will lose any rights to Sagebrush Rose. She loved this place, called it home, helped work the land.” When Cave remained quiet, she looked up at him. He kept a poker face. “You don’t seem too surprised.”

He shrugged. “I’m more shocked that you are surprised. Sam has always controlled everything you and your sisters do. Why would he stop when it comes to marriage?”

“It scares me that you can see a sliver of logic to this.”

“I didn’t say I saw logic in his demands. I’m only saying I’m not shocked.”

She sat down on one of the cushioned wicker chairs and placed her palms on her thighs. “Uncle Pete and I were talking about this conundrum. He had a fascinating solution.”

“He did?” He pushed through tight lips.

“Yeah. It’s sort of funny.”

“Funny and Pete don’t jive in the same sentence.”

She laughed. “Brace yourself. He suggested that you and I marry and purchase his land together. That kills two birds with one stone, or so he thinks.”

He spewed Jack over the rail. After coughing and sputtering, he finally got himself under control. “Married? You and me? You’ve got to be kidding.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “No, he was serious.”

“Does he know...you know...about us?”

She crossed her legs. “Maybe. Maybe not. He’s always been the type to be practical though. He’s always said that he and Agnes didn’t marry for love and that’s how they’ve made it to fifty years of marriage.”

“He’s lost his mind.”

Her throat constricted. “If he ever had it to begin with,” she muttered.

“You did tell him no. Right?”

“I didn’t say anything.” When Cave didn’t respond, she looked up at him. He seemed to be mulling over what she admitted.

“Honor?”

“What?”

“Are you really thinking of marrying someone just to meet Sam’s demands?” He had a throaty huskiness to his voice.

The way he looked at her made her heart beat faster. “I’ve been mulling over what I should do.” She didn’t want to lie. Somewhere in all this she’d have to tell him about the baby too. Why did she lose all bravery when she came face-to-face with him? Because she knew he’d be thrown for a loop.

He dropped down in the vacant chair and sat there stiffly, staring at her. “When do you stop allowing him to control you?”

“It’s not so easy. This is my home. I can buy Uncle Pete’s place, but it’s not Sagebrush Rose.”

“Not much *is* Sagebrush Rose.” His shoulders dropped some. “Has it occurred to you that you couldn’t even reveal our relationship to Sam. You think you can tell him if we actually got married?” His laughter echoed into the darkness. “He wouldn’t agree to you sleeping with a hand, but he’d be fine with you marrying one? Is this why Liberty left?”

“I don’t know. I’m hoping she’s only away to get some space to think things over.” Leaning her back against the chair, she watched him. He watched her too. His jaw was tight and his gaze piercing. “Last year after Daddy’s heart attack, he has been worrying a lot.” She plucked a piece of lint off her robe.

“So you’ll marry someone to keep him from worrying? Sam’s the fittest, meanest, sum’bitch I know. He’ll beat death until he’s in his nineties.”

“I’m not suggesting that we do this.”

“That’s good, because I’m not saying that I want to.”

“I’m only saying that it is an option.” What was she saying? This wasn’t where she wanted the conversation to lead. Her intention was to tell him about the baby. Yet, here they were, discussing marriage.

Cave blinked. “If he finds out we’re even talking about this he’ll fire me.”

Emotion climbed inside her chest. “He won’t fire you.”

He lifted a brow. “Really?”

She scooted to the edge of the chair. “Uncle Pete won’t sell the land to you.”

He rubbed his jaw. “You plan to talk him out of it?”

She gave her head a quick shake. “He wants it to stay in the family.”

He gripped the arms of the chair. “What exactly are you saying?”

She met his gaze. “I’m not saying anything. I’m only letting you know what I’m sure of.”

“I’m reading this loud and clear. You’re telling me that you plan to purchase the land right out from under me?”

“I’m not doing it right out from under you. I want this land just as much as you do. We both know what this property is worth. It’s like finding a diamond in a haystack and it’s worth fighting for.”

With a harsh chuckle, he stood. “You could have told me this downstairs.”

“You don’t understand—”

Cave’s laugh grated her nerves. “You’ve watched Sam do this too many times and you think this works.”

“I’m not my father.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“This isn’t why I asked you to come up here.”

“That’s right. Seducing me fell through.”

His words were like a punch to the gut. Maybe she deserved his hostility but it didn’t mean she had to like it. “That’s unfair.”

“No, I think it’s very fair.”

She jumped up from the chair sending it hard against the wall. “I don’t know what I was thinking by even talking to you. Heaven forbid you act like a human. I don’t know what I’d expected.”

He cocked his brow higher. “Because I’m just a lowly ranch hand?”

“If you think about it, you’re the one who keeps calling yourself the “lowly hand”. If you’re so unhappy with your station in life, then change it.” She pressed her palm against her stomach where internal butterflies flitted inside.

“Now where in all this did you get that I’m unhappy with myself?” His jaw clicked.

“Can’t you see that I’m offering you advice about Uncle Pete’s land.”

“It sounded more like a marriage proposal to me,” he heaved.

“My God! You really are full of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I don’t want your advice.”

She swallowed against the tightness in her throat. “Good, because you won’t get it ever again!”

Cave laughed but he sobered quickly. “You’re a real piece of work. I’m good enough to sleep with, but you draw a line at telling dear ol’ Daddy that you have a taste for ranch hands. Then you sprint back in here and assume we can reconnect in bed. The Rose ego is out of control.”

“If my intentions were to have you in my bed you’d be there now. No, days ago. Pretend you wouldn’t be why don’t you. While we’re at it, what about your ego?”

Anger flashed across his expression. In two strides he was standing before her. She parted her lips to say something, anything, but he beat her to the punch. He cupped her cheeks and lowered his mouth to hers, gently pressing her against the rail. She pushed her hands into his chest but couldn’t find the motivation to give him the intended shove. Instead, she clutched the fabric of his shirt into her fists and leaned into him, surrendering to his kiss that made her weak-kneed.

The tip of his tongue darted past her lips, sampling her, igniting a flame in her center. Reaching up, she threaded her fingers in his hair, knocking the hat to the floor, as she nicked his scalp with her nails. His hands moved to her back, pulling her in, sparking more desire between them. Through the fabric of the robe, she felt the bulge behind his zipper, but she quickly realized the material had fallen open. And he wasted no time.

His large, callused hands cupped her breasts, kneading the mounds in his palms. Her sensitive nipples came alive, and she moaned under his spell. Like a limp noodle, she succumbed to the emotion and feelings swirling around them in a hypnotic blanket. He could have easily lifted her, hauled her over his

shoulder and taken her anywhere he saw fit, but instead he took a step back and the icy fingers of reality wedged in.

She stared up at him. His chest rose with each drag of air. His eyes were crazed like a wild animal caving a piece of raw meat. *Holy hell*. She was the raw meat.

With shaking fingers, she closed the front of her robe. There was so much she wanted to say but she couldn't get her voice to work.

He swiped the back of his hand across his mouth as if he could rid his lips of her taste. "The chemistry is still there. Like an undying flame. If you don't want this to happen again then avoid me, Honor. You should know that I plan to make an offer to Pete for his land that he can't refuse. Don't get in my way."

He left her sitting on the veranda. She heard the door softly open and close.

Chapter 7

Cave stroked his fingers down his whiskered jaw as he eyed Pete. Honor's warning replayed in

his head. "You can't be serious?"

With a raspy chuckle, the old man propped his booted foot on the bottom rail of the fence and shrugged a scrawny shoulder. "Serious as a heart attack."

"What in the hell makes you think I'll marry her just to get my hands on your land? There's land across the country." Cave stared out into the arena where the topic of discussion worked with a prize-winning mare. But he could barely see the horse because his eyes were glued to Honor who stole the spotlight off the horse and the scenery. As much as he wanted to deny the way his body was tied into a hundred knots, what would be the use? She had an undeniable hold on him and he couldn't quite shake it. From the tank top to the tight-fitting jeans that showed off her body, he couldn't drag his gaze away.

"How about we agree to not waste each other's time. It's not about the land, son. It's about Honor. Even a blind man could see the facts. You and my niece are doing a lousy job of hiding that you two have been basket-making. Hell, the entire ranch is talking about it."

"With all due respect—"

"With all due respect my wrinkled ass. Cut the claptrap, buttercup. She could do better, a helluva lot better, but something tells me she likes you." He snorted and his thin lips turned down, disappearing into his wiry white beard. "All I can guess is you're the only cowboy who she can't bend and break, which makes you a challenge. I guess that's what a Rose woman needs. Question is, what do you plan to do?"

"It's pathetic to even have a conversation that involves me marrying her simply to buy a parcel of land." And yet, thinking of her marrying another cowboy made Cave want to kick a hole through the barn wall.

Pete shifted and dragged up his baggy Wranglers as if the belt wasn't doing the job. "What's pathetic is you, cowpoke. I still can't figure out what your end game is, partner. Money? Land? A piece of the Rose heritage?"

Cave gritted his teeth. The old man had crossed a line. "Who's trying to exchange their niece for land?"

His thin lips curved upward. "I've never been one to stick my nose where it doesn't belong, but at my age I figure I can do as I damned well please. Honor's stubborn. A perfect storm of my brother and her momma. God rest her soul. She was one of a kind. She never once lost her temper with me, and she had right to more times than the moon shows itself. That's why I've made it my duty to help watch over her daughters. Honor probably would never forgive me if she found out that I'm doing just that. That's why I need a promise between us that you can keep your bazoo shut."

Cave had no idea where this conversation headed but it didn't make a lick of sense. "For what?"

"Just tell me, boy. Can I trust you to keep the kissing trap sealed?"

"Yeah, whatever." Cave said half-heartedly.

The seasoned man hesitated. He shifted his gaze over his left shoulder then his right as if to make sure the coast was clear. Satisfied that they were alone, he leaned in a bit. "I'm not supposed to know this, but the rabbit died."

Narrowing his gaze, Cave tried to wrap his head around what Pete was talking about. "Rabbit? What rabbit?"

"In the family way. Bun in the oven. Preggo. Damn, son. How many ways can a man say it?"

Feeling like he had landed in a "wordmuda triangle", Cave sighed. "You're saying someone is pregnant?" How hard would it have been to be straightforward?

"You're daft, aren't you?" Pete scrubbed his jaw then juttled his chin toward the arena.

Cave's breath caught. "Are you saying Honor's pregnant?" Why did he feel like he'd been kicked in the teeth?

"There we go, Einstein." Pete thumped Cave on the back.

Fuck. Was that why she was talking marriage with him? Looking for a baby daddy? He swept off his hat and hit it against his denim clad thigh. "I'd hate to be the motherfucker in Sam's target when he finds out. He's going to have a dying duck fit."

Pete started laughing so hard that tears slipped down his deep creviced cheeks. "I sure hope that baby has more smarts than you."

Cave's patience thinned. "Pete, have you been dipping into your homemade moonshine already this morning?" When the old man continued to laugh, Cave shook his head. "I've got better things to do this morning." He pushed away from the fence and got about three steps when he heard...

"How does it feel to know you're going to be a daddy?"

Feet frozen to the dirt and his mind racing, seconds passed before Cave managed to swivel on his heels and face Pate. "What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying is..." Pete crossed the distance between them, all laughter gone as he leaned in to whisper, "You've been knocking boots with the boss's daughter and you're in a heap of trouble. You'll want my land right quick now because your days are numbered, kid. After Sam's done with you, you'll be lucky to find work this side of Egypt."

"What makes you think it's mine?" The millisecond the words slipped off his tongue Cave wanted to fish them back. Of course, the baby would be his. He didn't doubt it for a second. Although he and Honor had been careful, sometimes things didn't go as planned. Why hadn't she told him?

Oh shit...she'd tried. The day in the elevator. What changed her mind?

Pete pulled back, locking gazes with Cave. "You going to be one of those fellows, are you?"

He journeyed his gaze across the dirt where Honor was leading the horse back toward the stables. Looking back, Cave had suspected something was different about her. When a man was thinking with his dick, he couldn't see what was staring at him in the face.

“Nah, it's mine,” Cave said assuredly.

“Way I look at it, son, you can make an honest girl out of Honor and I'll sell you both my land, or I'll see to it that you never buy land, work, or step foot back in Wyoming whether Sam does or not.”

Cave met Pete's icy cool gaze head-on. “Is that a threat?”

“I'm a Rose, buddy. We don't have to make threats.” He shrugged and wobbled a piece.

“By the way, Pete.” He didn't even look at the man. “Honor is honest, hardworking and independent. She doesn't need to be married to prove something to her dad. You and your brother both need to understand that.”

As Cave suspected would happen, Pete didn't say a word but the slight thudding of his boots against dirt faded as he walked away.

Cave stretched his gaze to the arena that was now empty. Honor was gone.

What had he gotten himself into?

What he was...an honorable man. Sure, he didn't think a woman and man had to be married to raise a child together—or that a woman needed to marry for any reason except for love—but why did he feel a strong sense of protective instincts building inside of him? Honor was pregnant. With *his* baby. Emotion climbed into his chest, nearly suffocating him. *Hot damn!* He was going to be a father.

Tears misted his eyes, and he blinked them away. He'd never been a crier, except for when his brother drowned. He was ten and had his entire life ahead of him. Cave was only five and the events of that sad day had blurred, except for one thing...the gnawing pain of grief that settled into his chest and

hadn't truly left ever since. That kind of sadness could stick with a man.

The suffocation turned into something more. A throbbing at his temples at the realization he'd be responsible for another human being. A tiny little human at that.

What if Honor didn't want him to be a part of his child's life?

Hells bells.

Nothing was ever for certain, was it?

She wouldn't do that to him. Would she?

He had a buddy that didn't know he was a father until the eighteen-year-old kid showed up at his house.

Cave would never let that happen. He didn't know what type of dad he'd be, but he'd be a present one. He could teach the kid how to fish, ride horses, lasso like none other.

Whoa! First things first. Cave needed to mend the bridge with Honor. He'd made a promise to Pete not to tell her that he knew about the baby. He didn't owe the man anything, except for being a man of his word.

Chapter 8

“Why?” Honor looked at Cave through her lashes.

He shifted. Everything about him was dusty. His light blue button down, his faded Wranglers, to the tips of his worn boots. He and the hands had been rounding up cattle all day which was arduous work.

“A woman’s got to eat, doesn’t she?”

She latched the stall door and dragged off her gloves. “I’ve been known to partake. I’m just a little caught off guard. Last time we met I got the distinct feeling I’d be the last person you’d want to see.” Although those were her thoughts, she also caught him staring over the last few days as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t work up the nerve to spit it out. She wanted to be immune to his pristine gaze and dimple bracketed smile, but with each passing day, each time she saw him, she became weaker kneed. She wanted to blame the condition on the baby, but in her heart, she knew she still cared deeply for him. The fact scared her. She’d never been in love. Never wanted someone to hold her like she wanted from him. And what scared her the most...she had the feeling he wanted to hold her too.

“Can’t a cowboy make amends?”

“Is that what this is then? An apology? Say you’re sorry through food?” She wasn’t mad.

He hooked his thumbs into his front pockets. “I was a dick.”

“Yes, you were.”

“And so were you.”

She blinked. She opened her mouth to argue, but what could she say in her defense? They always had a way of finding each other’s buttons. “That’s one thing we can agree upon.” She laid her gloves on the workbench and stepped outside. The day was a scorcher.

“Are you going to make me chase you?”

She swiveled to face him. “You’re a lot of things, Cave McCoy, but chasing is where you draw a line.” She saw several expressions flick over his face.

“I never liked the word chase because it insinuates something, or someone, doesn’t want to be caught. But I made a mistake by not following you the last time.”

The revelation made her heart slam against her ribcage. What had come over him? Did he get too much sun today? Either way, why did she feel like his words reached in and touched the deepest, most vulnerable threads of her emotions? “Are you saying then that I wanted to be “caught”?”

He took a step, so close that she could see the thin white scar a few inches above his brow. After a hard day’s work, he should stink, but he smelled like leather and straw. She could appreciate a man who liked getting his hands dirty.

“I could be veering down a dead-end road, but I think you did. I think you leaving could have been a test to see if I cared enough to come after you. I failed.”

My God. A swift wind would have tipped her over. He was onto something that she didn’t even know how to respond to. “Maybe you were glad to see me go?”

He winced as if her words cattle prodded him. “Let me treat you to dinner.”

The soft richness of his tone hypnotized her. What did she have to lose? Whether she liked it or not, they were bonded now. They would need to find common ground. “Fine. Let’s do dinner. Shall I meet you somewhere?”

“Nah, I’m picking you up.”

A gentleman through and through.

“I’ll meet you over in the south clearing at seven.” She heard a couple of the hands chatting on their way coming toward the stables. That was her cue to hit the dust. “See you later.”

Later, as she was thumbing through her clothes in her closet, she couldn't find anything to wear for the occasion, not even the selection of unworn items. Honor wasn't sure why she was so wishy washy. All she and Cave were doing was meeting for dinner. And yet, this could be the moment when she told him about the baby.

"Here. What about this?"

Honor found Freedom standing in the doorway holding a yellow sundress.

"How did you know I was looking for something?"

"I stuck my head in a few minutes ago and I recognized the deer in the headlights glare. This would look good on you. I haven't even worn it yet," She stepped in and laid the dress over the end of the bed.

Honor probably had things of her own to wear, but the sundress was very pretty. She touched the delicate material and already started deciding on what shoes she'd wear with it.

"Hot date?" Freedom dropped down onto her stomach on the bed and propped her chin on her palm.

"No. Just a friendly meeting." Although she and her sisters shared about everything, Honor wasn't quite ready to tell Freedom, Hope, or Journey about her secret. Honor needed to work some things out first.

She should have known Freedom, the most perceptive of the sisters, would know something was up.

"Friendly meeting my ass. Tell me who he is, and I won't tell a soul."

Facing her little sister, Honor sighed. "Don't lie. You know you tell the girls everything."

With a shrug, Freedom lifted to her elbows. "That's our sisters. I'm talking about everyone else."

As teens, none of the girls could keep a secret. "Fine. Cave and I have plans."

“I knew it.” Freedom smacked the bed. “It was about freaking time.”

Honor narrowed her gaze. “Time for what?”

“Honey, you two are so steamy when you’re within a mile of each other you shove bystanders into a veritable sauna. And if you think I’m the only one who sees the attraction then the heat has killed a few of your brain cells.”

“Do the others know?”

“Of course.” Freedom snorted. “We noticed it months ago. I should be offended that you didn’t trust me enough to tell me, but I get it. Sneaking around can be very sexy.” She wagged her brows suggestively.

Sitting down on the stool at the vanity, Honor glared at her sister through the mirror. “I don’t believe that Daddy has any idea. If he did, he would have fired Cave long ago.” She sprayed her face with a setting serum. She’d noticed that she’d been looking paler and her pores more visible these days along with under eye circles from sleepless nights. She’d also been having morning sickness which made everything seem more real.

“Daddy is so tangled in his girlfriend’s skirts that he can’t see two inches in front of his face. Take advantage of his blindness and have a little fun. Maybe he’ll come to his senses and stop the madness of trying to corner us into marrying.”

Honor turned on the stool. “I don’t think he will.”

Her groan echoed off the walls. “I’m prepared to walk away. If we all would do the same then it might jar him into thinking clearer.”

“We all need to have a meeting. I agree that if we stand as a united front, maybe it’ll influence his decision, but I’m not holding my breath. You know how stubborn he is. And traditional.”

“Until it comes to him. He doesn’t live by what he preaches.” She bounced up into a sitting position. “Anyway, please tell me you plan to find out if Cave moves in bed as smoothly as he does in his Wranglers.”

Honor had to focus to keep a straight face. One glimpse of her expression and Freedom would pounce on it like a predator in the night. “I...no...you’re misunderstanding this entire situation.”

“Oh. My. Gawd. You’ve already slept with him! Haven’t you?” Freedom’s laser gaze burrowed under Honor’s skin.

“What? No.”

“Don’t pretend with me. I know that look.” Freedom whirled a finger through the air.

“What are you? A walking lie detector test?” Honor groaned and turned back to apply her make up.

“I’ve been known to catch a few. Now spill the tea.”

Honor refused to look at Freedom. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Fine, but at least tell me if I’m right. He’s a rock star in bed, isn’t he?”

“I’m beginning to think you have a crush on Cave.” Honor squirted some tinted moisturizer onto her fingers.

With a casual shrug, Freedom said, “Maybe at first, but obviously I was right that he is already taken.”

“Taken is a strong word. More like involved.”

“See!” Freedom cried out. “I knew it!”

Deciding on keeping her make up simple, she finished and stood. “I’m running late.” When Freedom didn’t make a move to leave, Honor scooped up the dress and took it with her to the en suite bathroom, leaving the door open so she could continue her conversation. “What will you do if Daddy doesn’t change his mind about the marriage stipulation?”

There was a long pause from Freedom. “Considering the best hand is now off the market, I have no clue.”

“He’s not off the market.” And yet, Honor knew her words were a lie, especially with a baby coming.

“Imagine how pissed Daddy would be if we all marry ranch hands. That’d teach him a lesson.”

Dragging off her robe, Honor pulled on the sundress that fit her like a glove. The color accentuated her skin tone perfectly, her bigger breasts and curves tested the seams. She stepped out of the bathroom and Freedom whistled.

“Is this too tight?”

“Nothing is ever too tight, baby. You look amazing. Cave will have a hard time keeping his tongue in his mouth all evening. That sounded very dirty.”

Honor laughed. “He’s been working for two days on running cattle. I’ll be lucky if he doesn’t fall asleep during dinner.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll be awake and alert.” She wagged her brows again.

“Do you ever think of anything outside of men and their parts?” Honor glanced at herself in the full-length mirror and gave the skirt a twirl. “And you do have good tastes, Free.”

With the compliment, she bounced off the bed. “I do. I missed my calling as a fashion designer. I knew that dress would suit you better. You have more curves.”

Scooping up the sandals on the floor, she hurried to the door before Freedom started suspecting that Honor had bigger everything these days. “I’ve gotta go.”

“I expect a full rundown when you get home.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Honor called back as she dashed to the stairs.

She put her shoes on while on the move which made it very difficult. By the time she was on the worn path to the clearing, she saw Cave already leaning against the front of his pickup, his thumbs hooked in his front pockets and his hat dragged lower on his forehead shielding his face. He lifted his chin and pushed the brim of the hat higher. While his gaze journeyed over her in a way that reminded her of the time he drizzled chocolate syrup all over her naked body, she slowed

to a “normal” walk. By the time she made it to him her toes were damp from the wet grass. The storm had passed leaving a fresh scent in the air and the feeling of new beginnings just over the horizon.

A smile burst over Cave’s lips and goosebumps scattered across her skin.

“Sorry I’m late. I have a chatterbox sister,” she said with a shrug.

“Fashionably late, as always.” He opened the passenger door for her. “Your chariot awaits, ma’am.”

“Freshly shaved jaw. Opening doors. What do you have planned?” Her heart kicked up in speed.

“You’ll just have to wait and see.” He smiled and shut the door once she climbed inside.

When he was settled in the driver’s seat, she asked, “So where are we going?”

He started the engine that was as quiet as a kitten’s purr. “It’s a surprise.”

Not appreciating surprises, she had to control herself to keep from harassing him to spill the plans.

Cave drove the pickup down the narrow lane and once they were on the main road, he swept his gaze across the seat. “You look pretty. That color brings out your eyes.”

She lifted a brow. Since when did Cave notice the color of her dress. There had to be something in the water. “You don’t look bad yourself, Cowboy.”

“I’ve been known to clean up well on occasion.”

She had a feeling he wanted something from her. “Are you seducing me to get Uncle Pete’s ranch?”

Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re pulling out every stop except for the red carpet.”

“Night’s not over yet.”

Chapter 9

And there it was. The first hint of what he'd planned for the evening.

Did he really need Rose Two Ranch? No, but he wanted it, yet there was something else he wanted more. Honor. He'd thought of nothing else since Pete told him the news.

They didn't drive far and he pulled off into the grass on the country backroad. He looked over at her. "Do you remember?" He hoped she did.

"Of course. This is where you and I came on our first date, if that's what you can call it."

That night that seemed long ago, they'd walked down the grass, holding hands and had built a fiery hunger that took all night to extinguish. He'd been a bit presumptuous by erecting a tent that day so he didn't tonight because the last thing he wanted her to think was that he had sex on the brain. Well, of course he had sex on the brain, but that wasn't what he brought her out here for.

He'd wanted to open her door, but by the time he made it around the front of the truck Miss Independent had climbed out. "This isn't what I expected."

He shrugged. "I like to keep everyone guessing." He reached into the bed of the pickup and took out the picnic basket and blanket.

Her eyes widened some. "You made up a picnic basket?"

"Dolly did the honors." Dolly was the cook for Sagebrush Rose and when he told the bubbly cook what he needed, she gladly prepared the basket. And judging by the weight of the basket, she'd prepared a feast.

"Then we know the food will be edible," Honor teased.

Cave couldn't argue when he could barely boil a pot of water. "We can walk as far as you want."

She looked up at him. “I’m up for walking close to the water. That has always been my favorite spot.”

His too, especially when they’d christened just about every spot there. He held up his elbow in invitation for her to take. After a short pause, she circled her fingers around his arm. He realized he needed to cool it some or she’d suspect that he knew about the baby.

They walked in silence and when they finally reached the clearing, he’d worked up a good sweat. Why was he so damn nervous?

He set the basket down and unfolded the blanket, spreading it over a patch of soft grass.

She toed off her sandals and set them neatly aside before sitting on the blanket. He dropped down next to her and watched her open the basket to take out a few covered dishes, plates, utensils, and a bottle of wine.

“Ah, shit. I didn’t ask for that.” He fumbled for the bottle which earned him a narrowed glare.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure? Why not?”

“You’re acting like a cat surrounded by rocking chairs. Did you get too much heat today?” She set the bottle aside.

“Maybe. It was rough day.” Mainly because he’d anticipated the moment when he’d finally have her alone again.

“Never an easy one on a ranch the size of Sagebrush Rose.” She bit into a baby carrot.

Dolly had made a huge spread. Cave didn’t know what half the things were and he didn’t much care because he didn’t have an appetite. And for a big fellow like him that was saying a lot.

“So, when are you going to spit it out?” She stretched her legs and the hem of the dress fluttered higher on her round thighs. Her toenails were painted a bright lavender.

Now or never, big boy. “I’ve been thinking a lot about our conversation at the lodge apartment.” He really wanted to open the bottle of wine but that would be unfair to her.

“So have I. We both said a lot of things.” She leaned back on her hands. Her long hair hung loose about her shoulders and the breeze caught the ends, sweeping them around her flushed cheeks.

“Yeah, we did. Mainly you wanting to keep me from getting my hands on Rose Two Ranch.” He chuckled but she didn’t even crack a smile.

“Are you butt hurt? You can’t be surprised that Uncle Pete would want to keep it in the family.”

He could argue the fact that the land had sat unused for years, but he’d only be telling her what she already knew. “I’d think he’d want to see the land go to someone who’ll love it and do something with it.”

Her chin came up and tilted stubbornly. “And I wouldn’t?”

“Did I say that?”

“You don’t have to because that’s what you insinuated.”

“You don’t always know everything.” He sighed.

“Could have fooled me.” She stood and brushed off her hands.

He pushed up, realizing his plan had taken an unexpected detour. “Can you ever relax and give me a chance to explain myself?”

Her lips pursed. “Relax? As if I’m not.”

“About as patient as a bear after a meal.”

“That was my sentiment exactly. You always were about as gentle as a hungry bear.”

“Does every conversation have to begin and end on a sour note between us?” He swept off his hat and tossed it to the blanket. “If I have the attitude of a bear then it’s only because I’m being poked.”

“Always someone else’s problem.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it implies. You’re a lot like my father. You can’t see outside of the very box you built around yourself. Anything else is wrong.”

He felt a punch to his gut. “You have a lot of nerve to compare me to Sam. I’d never force my children to marry because of some perverse idea of what’s best for my legacy.”

“He’s become a man of righteousness and wants his children to have the American dream, not handed to them on a silver platter.” Her brows creased.

“Well, that’s very...sad for you.” He bit back a grin and stood.

Some of the sharpness disappeared from her face. “I guess maybe I do tend to overreact when I’m around you.”

He needed to tread carefully. “Why do you think that happens?”

A glimpse of a smile returned. “I think I know why.”

“Really? Care to share with me?”

He’d never seen her eyes so bright before. “I’d rather show you.”

She took that step, the one that was a line between safe and putting it all on the line.

Standing on tiptoe, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “All I need to know is if you’re willing?”

He swallowed against the constriction in his throat. “I didn’t bring you here for this. I promise.”

“I believe you.”

He pulled her close, lowering his head until their lips were inches apart. “Let’s get something damn straight before *this* happens. I don’t plan to let you go a second time.”

“What are you talking about—”

He pressed his finger against her plush lips. “I think we’re both in agreement that it’s a conversation best saved for later.”

He couldn’t imagine losing her a second time.

And now with a baby—his baby. Fuck naw. He’d crawl across red hot coals to make her his.

Did she want him back though?

He saw her pulse pounding in her neck and the glossiness of her gaze. They were feeding a fire deep within them and once it was stoked there was no putting out the flames.

There was revelation within him. A future he wanted and would cling to like a pit bull hanging onto the throat of determination.

He growled and kissed her. Not just any kiss but one full of pain, anguish, and frustration. He wanted to rip her clothes off and take her because his body had become parched long ago.

A shudder of breath brought him back on track. She needed to set the pace. When this was all done, she couldn’t blame him if she regretted what they’d done.

But when she reached down and rubbed the heel of her hand over his zipper, his body switched to auto pilot and all-systems-were-go. They lowered together to the blanket—or rather half on the blanket and half off but who the hell cared at a time like this? She gave him a shove and he fell to his back, watching her like a starving man facing a buffet of all buffets.

She lifted her skirt and his eyes feasted on her bare inner thighs. Bare from panties and from nature’s bounty of downy hair. She had one of those services. What had she called it? Hell, if he knew. Didn’t care either. All he knew was that it made her silky, wet lips as soft as butter. She straddled his hips between her legs, widening her thighs across his lap.

Her breathing was erratic, loud, and wicked. His was the same and he knew if he didn’t release his cock soon, he would forever have a bent dick. In a flurry of metal, denim, and the biting teeth of his zipper, she reached in and grasped his shaft. He let out a long moan that sounded like a ravenous dog.

“I’ve missed this,” she said in a ragged voice. “You made me out to be a liar, Cave.”

“Yeah? How?”

“I told you in a recent heated moment that I’d never touch you again.”

It was clear they were on the same page.

He slid a finger over her damp crease and felt her muscles contract against him. He slid his finger into her slick heat and practically came in his hand when she bucked her hips.

There were a dozen reasons why he should walk away before he lost himself to her. What was a mess right now could turn into a ten on the Richter Scale. But he would fight every natural disaster—some Honor made too, to keep her with him.

She might be one helluva pain in the ass but he wanted her to be his pain in the ass.

He started to mention grabbing a condom from his wallet but what could happen now? He’d already planted his seed inside her. And why was he allowing those thoughts to rattle him. She was the only woman he’d ever had sex with without a condom. That was how they ended up here.

Here wasn’t bad though.

He realized they would have a lot to work out. Make decisive plans. Compromise. It might be hard because she was about as damn bullheaded as an old mule. They had plenty of time to work out the wrinkles, to work on a future. For now, he wanted to focus on pleasing her. And she’d started moving, lifting and settling her hips on top of his, taking a rhythm that sure could kill a man.

She heaved her bottom up, and he removed his hand as she seated his very tip where she wanted it. He slid himself into home base. It had been a while so he needed to pause, take a breath, gather his head.

He’d told himself he’d let her take the lead, but if he didn’t take the reins this would be over before it got good.

Lifting her and rolling her to her back, he pressed himself deep inside her. He built up his thrusts until he was slamming against her, skin slapping. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Feeling constrained, he grabbed a hold of his shirt and ripped. Buttons popped and material shredded, but he got what he wanted. The barrier was gone.

“I want to try another position.”

He pulled out and watched her lift to her hands and knees. The skirt shifted high on her torso showing off her amazing heart-shaped ass.

Situating himself behind her, he fisted his shaft and slid inside her with ease. Her bottom rippled as he banged in and out. He grabbed her shoulders, giving him better leverage. Her back arched and she reached around, grabbing his nut sac. It seemed fitting since she always seemed to be busting his balls. The intense bittersweet pleasure could no longer be denied.

A ragged moan came from deep within his throat. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

“Harder!” she demanded.

That word, said with such command, nearly was his undoing. The pressure built like a metal song. He was already skirting the edge of an orgasm and his body craved to dig in deep, but he didn't want to hurt her. He'd never been with a pregnant woman before and had no clue if he could hurt her if he got too feisty.

So, he restrained himself.

Each deep plunge erupted a whimper from her lovely mouth.

She lowered her shoulders, bracing on her elbows, which sent her ass higher. When he saw her anus pucker, he growled, sliding his finger over the creased skin. She cried out and bucked her bottom against his hips. He sunk his fingers into her plump cheeks.

“Yes!” The word came on a faint moan.

That sent him into a frenzy, and it took all his control to not allow his body to give her what he needed. He watched the spot where their bodies connected, watched how she milked him with her tight, slippery body. Suddenly he was at a cross between wanting to hold her, kiss her, look into her eyes, but that would have to come another day and another time. For now, he was caught in the snares of wild temptation and he was desperately seeking a release.

Cave meant what he'd said. He wouldn't let her go. She could claw his eyes out and he'd be there for her. And their baby.

With each give of his reserve, with each tumble of resistance, he felt the days of his freedom slip away like a ship in the misty night. And he didn't give one damn. What would freedom be if he didn't have her in his life? A man was only free when he wasn't bound to someone and his heart belonged to Honor.

He reached around and pinched her clit, just enough that she cried out and in the next second she exploded around him, clenching him so tight he thought she might pop his head off. Warm heat spilled over his dick, and he knew she'd gone hard. While she still delicately spasmed, he took one last dive, and his orgasm came just as hard and swiftly. His balls emptied and there was no question about it, he had nothing left except for his emotions. Never in his life had he experienced such a mind-blowing experience, not even the first time they were together which had been freaking amazing. Was it because he knew she was pregnant with his child? Did that make him some sick fuck? No, he didn't have a fetish for pregnant women. Maybe it was just that he'd come to the realization of something just as mind-blowing. Cave was chained to her with links made of feathers. The thought couldn't make him any happier.

After a few moments, he pulled his wet dick out of her and dragged his jeans up, zipping them.

She lowered her skirt, rolled onto her hip and looked up at him. "I feel much better. Your poor shirt though, it's nothing but shreds."

He touched the ripped fabric and chuckled. “Don’t say you didn’t come here wanting that. Sans panties says a lot.”

He wanted to spill his soul to her. Tell her that he knew about the baby. Why he’d brought her here, but loyalty to his word scabbed over the open wounds inside him. His heart was pounding so hard that sent his thoughts into a nosedive. His body felt like it had shattered and then was glued back together. By her. She made him whole. Made him forget the pain of his past.

“Honor, I think we should get hitched.”

Chapter 10

Their clothes were now on and the only remnant of what they'd shared was in the warmth of her

body and the throbbing between her legs. She was reeling from his statement.

"You think we should get hitched?" She had to repeat it just to be sure she heard him right.

"Yeah, that's what I said." He looked like a man who'd swam the icy seas and lived to talk about it.

"And that's why you brought me here?" The words left a sour taste on her tongue. Didn't this solve her issues? She'd settle her daddy's demands. The father of her child would be in his/her life. And they could purchase Rose Two Ranch. Everything would be perfect...and yet it wouldn't.

She wanted to marry him for love, and he couldn't possibly love her.

But she loved him.

Damn. She knew she did.

"Why are you looking at me like I've grown horns? You said you needed to get married. I'm offering myself."

"Why?" She fluttered her hands to her stomach, a natural act that she'd caught herself doing increasingly these days. If she was already this protective over her baby, what would she be like when he or she was born? Would she be a helicopter mom? Oh shit. Her kid was going to hate her because she'd be too protective.

He blinked as if she'd asked a scientific equation that he needed to solve. "Why not?"

"Good answer. No, thank you." She jumped up and slid her feet into her sandals.

"What the hell?" he said when he stood. "You and me...we are good together."

“Wrong. You and I want to kill each other and then we have great make up sex.”

“You have a point.” He blew out a long breath. “Shit. That ain’t right. You are a pain in my ass but I can handle it.”

“That’s so romantic.” She faced him. “Please be my wife because I love you being a pain in my ass,” she said in a mocking voice.

“I don’t sound like that and that’s not how I asked.”

“Just so we’re clear, when I mentioned marriage at the lodge I wasn’t fishing for a proposal.”

“Liar.”

She brought her chin up. “That’s what you got out of that conversation? Let’s face the facts, this comes from fear knowing you won’t get your hands on Rose Two.”

“Honor, if that’s what you really think then you don’t know me.”

Her face softened. “Okay, I don’t think that about you, but what has brought this on?”

“I had time to process the idea.”

She reached down and grabbed a grape from the bunch, popping it into her mouth. “Have you thought that if we got married, we’d have to live together. Under one roof. That would be a blood bath.”

“You’d have to learn to behave yourself.” His cheesy grin betrayed the harshness of the words.

“I’m not a behaving kind of woman. How much fun would that be?” She would much rather bask in the aftermath of great sex than be talking about their absurd situation.

“I believe I’m about the only bastard this side of Wyoming that can tame Honor Rose,” he groaned.

“There are many wild horses that can be tamed, but there’s always that one who loves her freedom way too much to give it up.”

“I’d never want you to change.”

Her shoulders slumped and some of her confidence slipped. “This would never work...you and me.”

“Where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“And you’d be willing to be a part of my endeavor? To open a horse training facility.”

He gave a full-blown laugh then. “How lucky that would make me. Marry a Rose so that I can leave the Sagebrush Rose Ranch to continue to work for another Rose who’d be my wife. I must have lost my mind somewhere in all this.”

“I didn’t say you’d be working for me. I’m only telling you what my plans are for the land.”

“That’s just like you to only see your goals.” He shook his head. “This would have to be a partnership. Do you know what that word means, Honor?”

“I know exactly what it means. Question is, how do two people who can’t even have a civil conversation without bickering make decisions on a home together? That’s funny.”

“There would be rules, of course.”

“Rules. Taming. Submission. How much deeper are you going to make that hole of yours?” She snapped up a brow. “There would need to be some boundaries, and at some point, we’d want to divorce. I’m assuming. Right?” His warm gaze was on her, making her chest tighten. It had to be bad luck to be talking about marriage and divorce in the same conversation. When he didn’t answer, she smoothed the wrinkles from the dress. “This is all too much. It’s an overload on my brain.”

“What’s the other choice? Marry some other bastard? That won’t happen. Or you can tell your dad you won’t marry.”

She narrowed her gaze. “It can’t happen, huh? Did you take a testosterone injection before we got here?” She wasn’t sure where this sudden overbearing protectiveness came from, and what was even worse, she wasn’t sure she minded. Honor understood that sometimes she tended to run the show and it

was a breath of fresh air that Cave never allowed her to become too full of herself.

“Damn, Honor.” He tore his hand through his hair as tension creased lines around his eyes and mouth. “I want to be a part of this.”

“A part of what?” Her pulse quickened. Then it struck her. Did he somehow know about the baby? Could it be possible? It couldn’t be, not when she hadn’t told anyone but Liberty. Her sister wouldn’t have told anyone. And yet, she had set Cave and Honor up for meeting at the hotel.

His eyes turned a shade lighter. “Your life. We might kill each other, but we might also make a damn good team. But if you think for a second that you’re going to marry another cowboy you can get that idea out of your head. I’d hate to have to tell Sam that...” His words drifted and his eyes widened.

“Tell Daddy what?” She tapped her toes.

“That I’m caught in his daughter’s web and I ain’t running.”

She looked across the top of the water that appeared so peaceful. It instantly calmed her. “There would need to be a few conditions. We’d have to stay married for at least six months and we must live under the same roof that length of time. That’s a stipulation.”

“Six months. We won’t kill each other too bad.” He chuckled.

“We’d go half on the purchase of Rose Two, but when it came time that we wanted to call it quits I get the land with my business, and I’ll give up all rights to your half of the property.”

“I’m curious, why do you think your dad really wants you and your sisters to marry? I don’t think it has anything to do with Sagebrush as much as something else.”

“I think he’s afraid he’ll pass away and my sisters and I will be alone.”

“He truly is a man that kills an ant with a bazooka.”

Just walk away, Cave.

But he couldn't. Wouldn't. He needed to make sure that he was a part of his child's life. And Rose Two would be a dream come true. Within two years he could have his ranch and be seeing profit. This was what he'd always wanted, except the marriage of course. Yet, he didn't cringe when he thought of marrying her?

On the flipside, she could still say no. He'd have to find another place to purchase, which wouldn't be easy. He'd been searching for nearly a year and most places he found were too expensive or wouldn't turn over a profit. Then Rose Two seemed like the perfect opportunity. He'd be emptying his savings for a down payment...but it'd be all worth it.

“Are you saying yes?” he asked.

“I need time to think about it.”

What was amazing was that she acted like she'd be doing him a favor. Well, he'd let her believe whatever she wanted. “Don't take too much time, sweetheart.”

“Do you have other plans, Cowboy?”

“No, but Pete might. He doesn't strike me as a man with a lot of patience.”

She pressed her fingers into her left temple. “I don't know what has come over him but he's pushier than ever. There must be something in the water because all the cowboys have lost their ever-loving mind.”

“Try being a hand around him.” Cave didn't meet her gaze. This was where he felt a bit pulled in multiple directions. Honor would skin him alive if she knew he was aware of her secret and didn't tell her. But ol' Pete could make a man's life hell and Cave didn't want to be on the wrong end of his target—or Sam's. At least not until Cave had a solid plan.

She gave her head a slow shake. “I can't believe we're even contemplating this. How do I know you're committed to

this? You could change your mind. Divorce me before the six months are up.”

No doubt, from a business standpoint, he could see her point. “You don’t trust me?”

She sighed. “And do you trust me?”

There was another good point. “Probably as much as you do me.”

Her shoulders dropped. “I’ll let you know in the morning.”

They packed up and headed back to the truck, leaving the peaceful area. The long drive became longer because neither were talking.

Truth was, he wondered why Honor *would* want to marry him?

Because she was in a pickle.

Honestly, Cave wasn’t too surprised that Sam had finally put his foot down and made some demands for his daughters. It wasn’t that Cave thought they were spoiled, at least most of them weren’t, but it had become obvious they were comfortable in their situation. Not that he believed forcing them to marry was the right answer, but it certainly did get them out of their comfort zone.

Swiping his palm down his cheek, Cave shook his head. Marrying Honor would make his life a helluva lot easier. But then again, he couldn’t remember a time when he’d been handed a break—not that he’d ever asked for one. After his Pa and Ma divorced after his brother drowned because the grieving was too hard on them, she had to take on three jobs to pay the bills, leaving Cave and his sister, Yvette, home to fend for themselves most evenings. He’d learned early on how to survive and by the time he’d turned fifteen he’d joined the workforce to help support his family so his Ma could quit one job. He knew struggles and he wasn’t afraid of hard work, but what he didn’t want was for his child to have the same childhood that he had. He had a Ma who loved him, he knew she did, but they’d caught up in grief and pain that they put blinders on.

Cave had learned a lot when he started at Draker's Farm... the only place close enough that he could walk the three miles each day. A teenage boy could always see things as an adventure. Although it had been hard work, he'd never complained over an honest day's work. Each of his days were spent at school, a couple hours of football practice and then the rest of his evenings were spent learning the ins and outs of cattle farming. Harvey Draker had been an iron-fisted boss, but he never asked anyone to do anything he wasn't willing to do right alongside them. He was a genius when it came to farming and taught Cave a helluva lot.

With his wages that he made at the farm, his Ma had quit two jobs and was getting by with just one, but problem was, he wasn't making enough to support himself. So, by his eighteenth birthday, right after high school graduation, while all his buddies were heading off to college, Cave chose a different path. He joined the Navy and when he came back he signed up for the rodeo circuit as a stable hand. It wasn't a glamorous job by any means but it got his foot in the door of something better. He had big dreams of traveling and making enough money to send home while managing saving up. A year in, he got lucky. A seasoned rider took Cave under his wing, showed him the ropes of running the rodeo circuit, and soon he found himself bull riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, and riding in bareback bronco competitions, and earning more money than he could believe...at least for a kid who grew up wearing hand me downs and eating beans and rice almost every damn day of the week.

At a local rodeo event was where he first met Sam Rose. He took a liking to Cave from the start, and although they'd never be buddies, Sam had offered him a job on the spot. Everyone had heard of Sagebrush Rose Ranch. Cave had thought he'd won the lottery so he'd jumped at the opportunity. It had been time to move on from the rodeo anyway. The shelf life of a riding cowboy didn't last too long after thirty. Cave had made it longer than most.

Unfortunately, Sam would probably want to beat his ass when he learned that his daughter was pregnant.

Hell, there was no running from fate, and she obviously had a plan for Cave and Honor.

Gripping the steering wheel, he stared into the narrow road lit by the headlights.

He should have known from the start to stay away from the Rose women. They were lethal weapons in stilettos. Cave should have stayed in his lane, like the rest of the ranch hands, and just admired the beauties from afar.

When he drove onto the ranch, she already had her hand on the door, ready to sprint. When he stopped far enough away from the main house that no one would see her getting out, she muttered a quick goodbye and made her exit. He sat there staring at her silhouette disappearing in the dim headlights.

Parking his pickup along the row of other beat-up farm trucks, he slid out. Stepping inside the quarters, the place was a hive of activity. A handful of cowboys sat at the table playing poker, smoking cigars, and another group were crammed on the couch watching a football game spilling popcorn and chips all over the floor. The place looked like a toddler on a sugar bender had been released inside. Empty bottles, cans, cigarette packages, and pizza boxes filled the kitchen counters and coffee table.

The place was a shithole to begin with.

All of it. The furniture, the marked-up walls and the stained linoleum that had probably been put in when the place was built in the seventies. The lodge was like a large efficiency apartment where everything was connected, except for the bathroom and a half wall that separated the sleeping quarters from the living area. It was a bitch to sleep when the boys wanted to stay up all night shooting the shit.

Beyond the half wall were the bunks, basically a step up from cots. They were all lined up like military barracks. The galley kitchen needed updated, but with a dozen men living there things would only get torn up. The old almond-colored appliances reminded Cave of what his Ma had in her kitchen. The bathroom door had been broken off the hinges more times

than he could count so now it sort of hung cockeyed and squealed like a wounded pig when it was opened and closed.

“Hey, look who’s back. Prince Charming,” Chip, one of the seasoned hands, said.

“How was the date, handsome?” Hearing the leering from Sky Channing, a tall, slender cowboy who also once rode in the circuit, Cave was reminded that he wasn’t always a people person. Like never. There were times when a man just wanted to come home, take his clothes off, and be alone. Or hold a curvy body close. None of that could happen at the bunkhouse. Rose had a strict policy that no females were allowed in the lodge, and what woman would want to visit anyway? Cave was as rough and tough as any man, but he got disgusted by listening to burps, farts, and snoring every single day.

Cave received halfhearted greetings from a few of the men, but they were consumed by football or poker, or both, so he grabbed a water from the refrigerator and headed to his bunk. It at least offered a bit of privacy and quiet for the moment. He placed his hat on the hook, dropped down onto the hard mattress and kicked off his boots, then settled his head into the knotty pillow. One of the players must have scored a touchdown, or a winning hand because he hooted and hollered.

“Great.” Cave liked football too but some of the men ruined it for everyone. He rolled over and stared at the life-sized poster of a blonde woman with big tits wearing a teeny tiny pink bikini. There were ten more like it hung throughout the lodge. When, and if, he ever had a place of his own he would forego the posters for a painting of a horse, or ranch, or something that didn’t make him feel like a walking dick. He appreciated a woman’s body just as much as the next person, but there was more to him than just a horny man’s fantasies.

Closing his eyes, his mind wandered to Honor. What was she doing right now? Was she sharpening her teeth on the bones of prey? Was she in bed? Already asleep? Did she sleep in the nude or one of those silky, lace trimmed nightgowns that rich ladies wore? Hell, did rich ladies wear those? He didn’t

have a clue. But he'd bet his eye teeth that she preferred being naked.

Lifting his head, he punched his pillow, what little good it would do. Dropping his head back down, he closed his eyes again hoping that Honor stayed out of his thoughts.

After what they shared, he should be satiated for the moment, but instead he had so much restless energy it felt like a livewire was goosing him in the ass.

Then a thought came to him.

He flicked his eyes opened and the woman on the poster seemed to be staring at him.

What if he and Honor married and Sam was pissed off enough to veto them purchasing Rose Two? Nah, he wouldn't do that, would he?

But Cave and Honor would be married, and whether Sam liked it or not, Cave would always be connected to his daughter. And whether Sam liked it or not, he would have a grandchild as proof of their bond.

Chapter 11

Honor could barely contain her laughter as she stared back at the hands who were all scattered around the kitchen, mouths wide open, and pinched expressions. Some were dressed and some were in their baggy underwear. She didn't blame them for looking like deer caught in the headlights. No female Rose had ever stepped foot in the bunkhouse.

Usually, the crew was very friendly. Greeting her with waves and smiles when they saw her on the land, but not one made the initiative to offer her a simple good morning. So much as a friendly hello. Or even a nod. Were they all that tongue tied? Floored to see her standing in their kitchen.

She scanned the cluttered "bachelor pad" and resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose in semi-disgust. She'd heard rumors how the hands lived, but now she saw it with her very own eyes. However, some of the issues weren't the problem of the residents. The place needed some paint slapped on the walls, some furniture that didn't look like it hung on by a thread, and some new flooring. Or a match and hot dogs to roast over the bonfire. Posters of half-naked women hung all over the walls. Probably to hide the dinginess.

Honor wondered if Daddy had been in the place lately? It didn't seem like him to let the men live in such a dump. She made a mental note to take care of the situation herself.

"Nice décor." She looked around at the counters and tables cluttered with pizza boxes, beer cans and playing cards.

"We were just fixing to clean, ma'am." Casey Mitchell, probably the youngest of the crew, began grabbing up the trash and disposing of it.

"Who the fuck used all the hot water?" came the brawny voice a second before a naked Sky stepped into view. All heads turned, including Honor who no longer held back her smile. She would have never guessed that the short stocky cowboy carried such a big gun. He continued to vigorously dry

his hair with a towel, so he had no clue that he had an audience.

“So now all you pussies are quiet? Any other time I can’t shut a fuckin’ one of you up.” He dragged the towel off his head and looked at each of them with a twisted grin until he came to Honor. It took him a good second or two to register that he was seeing her. Without any grace, he used the towel to cover up his parts but it was too late. She saw the reason he was referred to as the “ladies’ man”.

Not wanting to make the circumstances any more awkward, she kept her gaze on his face. “Morning, Sky. Could you point me in the direction where I can find Cave?”

The hand had lost some of his tan as he lifted a hand and gestured to the room on the other side of the half wall. Honor had a feeling the cocky cowboy had lost some of his gumption. “He’s still in his bunk.”

“Thank you, and please, Cowboys, don’t mind me. Go back to your breakfast and coffee.” She happily flounced toward the sleeping quarters. It was easy to find which bed was Cave’s because he was still in it. Soft, muffled snores came from him, and he didn’t even stir when she sat down on the edge of the bed next to his hip.

His hair stood up all over the place and salt and pepper whiskers hid his wide jaw. The sheet landed up under his chin and he looked peaceful. She almost felt guilty for disturbing him, but she had a day.

Shaking his shoulder, he groaned in irritation.

“Wakey wakey, Cavey,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“I told you to leave me alone. I’m sleeping in a few more minutes,” he moaned and rolled onto his back, flinging his arm over his closed eyes.

“Sorry, but I’m already here.”

He lifted his arm just enough that she could see he opened one eyelid. Then the other. He must have finally realized she wasn’t one of the men. He came up to a hasty sitting position and the thin sheet fell to his lap, exposing his smooth chest, six

pack abs, and a glimpse of his morning salute peeking through the hole in his boxers. If they were alone she might be tempted to wake him fully but hearing the men on the other side of the lodge mumbling squashed any fantasy or dirty thought.

Swallowing hard, she stood, needing some space. She still had the finger bruises on her ass from what they'd shared yesterday and she wasn't mad.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" He pushed through thin lips. She couldn't quite tell if he was angry or just recovering from the rude awakening. He darted his gaze toward the outer room. "What about the hands?"

"Well, since you asked, I'm here to tell you my answer," she said brazenly. His scowl didn't ruffle her feathers in the slightest.

"What time is it?" He blinked as he looked at the window.

"Six thirty. AM." Honor smiled.

"And on a Sunday." He shook his head.

"I know you boys get your days started early, and by the looks of it you're the only one who is still in bed."

"That's because this is the only day I get to sleep in before I head out to check fences." His gaze wasn't as laser sharp.

"Oh, sorry."

"Are you?"

"Not really," she admitted. "But now that you're up, let's go for a ride."

His scowl increased. "Now that I'm up, I'm going to get dressed and head out on the land to get my chores done."

"I thought you said you were going to sleep late?"

"I have a job, even on Sundays." He pushed the sheet back without a care in the world.

She couldn't resist checking out his blue tented boxers. "I promise to have you back in an hour."

He looked like he hadn't gotten much more sleep than she had. She'd tossed and turned most of the night and around four she'd given up. The bunkhouse had been a magnet. Standing here now, feeling an overwhelming desire, she probably should have thought this out more carefully.

"If I tell you yes will you go away and let me shower and dress?"

"I'll wait for you outside unless you need some help washing your back." She wagged her brows.

He didn't look amused. "And have the whole damn posse spewing your name off their filthy mouths. I'd have to give a few of them a dentist's appointment." He clenched his hand into a tight fist.

She'd never been a damsel in distress, but it was a turn on to see him willing to come to her honor. "So, this is where you lay your head every night, huh?" She craned her neck to look around the massive room.

"And you shouldn't be here. Not a one of them can keep their mouths closed." He jutted a chin toward the kitchen where the quite chatter continued.

"Come now. Do you have something to hide? The nude posters of women? Are there abandoned panties? Lipstick stains?" she teased and tilted a hip.

"You've been watching too many TV shows. If there are abandoned panties anywhere in this lodge they'd have to belong to one of the hands." He scrubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Well, now, that would be a discussion for another day I suppose. Don't dillydally, Cowboy. The horses are saddled and waiting, and so am I." She gave him a sassy finger wave and sashayed back through the kitchen.

All chatter stopped when she walked in, and she became the spotlight again. Good to see that Sky had dressed but the shocked expression remained.

"Everything's safe, boys. He's not contagious." She pushed her sunglasses back on and took a step toward the

door. "See you later."

"I have a proposition."

"Ah hell. It's too early in the morning for negotiations." He groaned. Lack of sleep and a cold shower because someone had used all the hot water left him irritated.

Why did she get so much enjoyment out of pestering him?

"I hear rumor that you like to race horses." She tilted a hip. She looked amazing in a white tank top and jeans that fit her frame like a racecar on a curve. His gaze automatically drifted to her stomach. She wasn't showing any signs of the pregnancy yet.

Clearing his throat, he dragged his gaze upward to safety. "Now who the hell told you that?" Racing horses was against the rules of Sagebrush Rose.

"Doesn't matter. I'm here to propose a challenge. My horse, Sunflower, against Monty."

Monty was a damn strong horse.

His gaze narrowed. "Now why would I want to race you?"

"I see fear in your eyes."

"Real funny."

"*Bock, bov, bock*. Chicken."

"Why do you get so much enjoyment from pestering me, woman?"

She hesitated then the corners of her mouth lifted into a heart wrenching smile. "You win and I'll purchase Rose Two and sign it over to you," she said confidently.

Their gazes locked. He chuckled. "You can't be serious."

"Why would I joke about something like this?"

"What if *you* win?"

"Oh...I'll marry you and we'll share Rose Two." Her eyes sparkled.

He liked how she made it appear like he'd be a winner. Truth was, he would be. He should have known she'd make him work to get her. "I have a stipulation of my own."

"Do you? Spit it out then."

"If I win, I want to also be given the liberty of asking three questions that you must answer."

Some of her cockiness disappeared. "Three questions? And I must answer them? This is an easy win, so I'll agree. But for theory's sake, how would you know if I'm telling the truth or not?"

"I'd know. No doubt." He resituated his Stetson.

Cave hid it well, but he wasn't too confident. Monty was strong because Honor had trained him, yet everyone in a hundred-mile radius had heard of Sunflower and how many races she'd won.

But he had to take a risk.

"You're on," he said.

Honor sat atop Sunflower like a queen on her throne. She rubbed her hand down the muscular slope of the horse's back. Clearly, they had a silent language between them, and he knew why people called her the "Horse Whisperer".

Cave had never been close to Sunflower because the mare was Honor's prized horse and was kept at the private stables on the other side of the property. He remembered Honor once telling him, "Just about anyone can teach a horse basic riding instructions, but very few can train a horse to love racing and its rider." She had the gift.

"What happened to her?" Cave pointed at the multiple spur tracks and several deep scars above her eyes.

As if to comfort Sunflower at the mention of her scars, Honor bent close and whispered something in the horse's ear. Then she finally answered, "A high-profile reining trainer turned out to be a complete idiot. He didn't like that she refused to do a flying lead change. She was only two and a half and not prepared. She's still a bit skittish, but she's been

through a lot and has every right to be. We saved you from that bastard, didn't we, girl?"

Emotion climbed into Cave's chest. Honor would be a good mom. He knew it. "It almost makes me feel bad that she'll be losing today—almost."

Honor whipped her chin up, nailing him with her sky-blue gaze. "You certainly do have a healthy amount of confidence for a man who knows he's about to be left in the dust."

"There's a time for everything."

"That time is not today, Cowboy."

He shrugged. "Let's do this." He climbed into the saddle and settled himself into the worn leather of the saddle he'd had since he was in the rodeo circuit. It had cost him a small fortune, but it was worth every pretty penny. The leather fit his body like a glove.

He knew without a doubt that Honor was a skilled rider. She'd raced when she was a girl, but he wasn't sure why she gave up the sport.

Waiting for her to lead Sunflower into the pasture, he followed. By now, they'd gathered the attention of a few hands who'd stopped their chores to watch. No surprise to Cave. After all, their tongues were probably still wagging after she pranced her way into the lodge like she owned the place. And he guessed, in a way, she did.

His pulse quickened as he watched her bounce in the saddle when Sunflower trotted. Honor was gorgeous. She was everything he'd ever wanted. Her long blonde hair cascaded down her back and the light breeze caught the ends, blowing the heavy waves to and fro. She looked back at him, and his breath caught. She knew what control she had over him, and probably other men. Her blue eyes seemed to glow against the backdrop of her flawless features. The horse was a huge mare, sleek and muscular, but Honor had complete control. Sunflower got special by her owner. Cave had heard rumors that Honor loved the horse so much that it wasn't uncommon

to find her snuggled up in the stall asleep. Cave didn't doubt that she'd be that kind of mother too.

He patted Monty's neck who was equally as muscular as Sunflower. Built like a tank and loyal. "We can do this, boy. Let's not let the ladies intimidate us," he said close to the horse's ear.

"The finish line is at the old barn," she said.

He nodded.

Without gesture, she spurred Sunflower into a sprint.

"Shit!" Cave clicked his tongue and Monty obeyed, kicking up dirt and grass in the pasture as they went in chase-mode after Honor and Sunflower. She pushed her horse, but Monty stretched out in tremendous, wide strides. His hooves pounded the dirt. Cave tightened his inner thighs and his fingers on the reins. There was nothing quite like a wild ride.

He'd give Honor props. She rode like the wind and put up a good match, but Monty caught up without much effort. The pounding of hooves against the earth vibrated upward through Cave's body like painless electrical bolts. His cheeks ached and he realized he was smiling. She looked back at him and what he saw in her eyes caught him in his gut. The little minx knew she had him by the nut sac.

Monty and Sunflower were neck to neck now. He could see the finish line.

And then Honor lifted a hand, two fingers crooked, and Monty slowed to a walk.

What the hell?

"What are you doing, boy? We could have taken them."

Honor waited with Sunflower at the old barn while Monty lumbered that direction.

"You cheated," Cave said in a lowered voice and slid out of the saddle when they finally made it to the barn.

Honor was breathless and laughing. "I've been training him to do that for weeks. Now I know he has it down." Her

eyes glistened in pride.

“So, this was all a set up?”

She hooked the reins of Sunflower to a tree and turned back to him to say, “I didn’t cheat. Anyone worth his saddle knows every horse on this ranch is trained to hand commands.”

He secured Monty and stomped through the tall grass, catching up to her as she reached the barn, looking back at him with heavy lidded eyes. Without consideration for what he could be unleashing, he took the distance between them, grabbed her waist and tugged her hard against him. “You’re a little minx.”

She laughed but he bent his head, pressing his lips to hers, cutting off the melodic sound.

Chapter 12

A low groan from deep in his throat vibrated Honor's mouth. His kiss sent delicious ripples down her body, making her nipples respond. His hands were in her hair, on her neck and shoulders, and she read the primal desire. She wanted him. More than she could ever imagine. She didn't care about the race, or the fact that she wanted a business arrangement with him, or that he could walk away from her.

I need this.

He lifted his head a mere inch and whispered, "Are you sure you want to be mine?"

Their gazes locked and she swallowed hard. "I won, Cave. Looks like you're mine too."

He did move his gaze but wrapped his fingers around her wrists, capturing them in his tight embrace, lifting them above her head while he pressed her against the scratchy wall of the barn. A squeak popped from her mouth as he released the hold and lowered one hand to the small of her back, grinding his hips against hers to show her what she did to him.

He growled and took her mouth, his teeth skimming her lower lip, causing an avalanche of primal need to spiral straight for the apex of her thighs.

"Are you sure I'm what you want?" he said against her lips.

Her mind raced. She'd always wanted him. "Yes." The words slipped from her lips. Shivers darted down her spine. His palm glided over the curve of her ass. "After all, you did say you wouldn't let me go a second time."

His tongue slid inside her mouth as his fingers dug into her bottom causing a ribbon of delicious pleasure to wrap around every cell of her body. Then both hands were cupping her ass as he ground his bulging zipper against her.

"You drive me insane," he whispered against her lips.

She arched her back, opening her thighs a bit more to gain better contact.

I shouldn't want him so much. Shouldn't be willing to agree to being his wife but it felt...right.

She wanted to live. Wanted to feel. Something she hadn't been doing much of for a long time.

“Take me.” She didn't recognize her own throaty voice. She felt bolder, needier, surer than she'd been in years.

He stilled for a moment, their gazes locked. “Once I start, I'll never stop.”

His words trailed off and he stroked the curve of her mouth with his tongue while his fingers pressed into her hips. She squirmed against him, relishing the bold sensations washing over her. His hands were all over her, finding their way up under her shirt, gliding over her bare skin until he cupped one breast.

They were far enough away from the hustle and bustle of activity of the hands that no one could see them. They were alone there in the pasture with only the soil and sky as their witnesses.

“Are you worried that someone might see us?” The end of his sentence was sliced off with a groan.

“We're alone,” she said confidently.

His grip tightened on her hips. “I want you. Here.”

His breath ghosted over her cheek as his hand kneaded her breasts, his thumbs gliding over her nipples that pressed against the lace of her bra. His bulging crotch grazed over the juncture between her legs, like a match striking against flint.

“Do you even care if someone's watching?” If he expected her to answer he wouldn't get it. Her voice was lost. “I bet every fucking hand on this ranch wishes they could be here, touching you. Sliding inside you.”

His words were like a caress to her insides, causing goosebumps to scatter across her skin and the soft hair on her nape to lift.

The heat from his body soaked through her clothes as he pressed against her.

Yet, she caught the apprehension in him. “But...?”

“No but, yet I do think you owe me at least one question since you cheated at the race.”

“Maybe,” she whispered.

“Tell me what you want?” he demanded.

“You.”

“How do you want me?”

“Inside of me. Now.” Her voice trembled.

His hand lowered and dipped inside her jeans, the tips of his fingers glided over the soaked seam of her inner thighs. “Yes, you do want me.” he said huskily.

Her stomach trundled and her knees quaked. “Yes...” her voice trailed off.

His hand stilled. “You’re a bad girl, aren’t you, Honor?”

“Is that what you like about me?” She held it all together, like chains wrapped around a velvet box. With him she felt like she could break the links and be set free.

“Just one of the things.” He slipped a finger inside her, plunging knuckle deep. Her gentle cry mingled with the sound of birds chirping from a nearby tree. “That’s right, Cowgirl. Ride my finger. I take good care of what belongs to me.”

The breeze carried away her whimpers. All care and doubt disappearing as he continued to dive his finger in and out of her in long strokes.

“Yes, yes. Please. I need this.” She dug her fingers into his shoulders, clinging to him.

“Tell me everything, sweetheart.”

She barely comprehended his words.

Her need became more desperate as the tension grew like a thunderstorm. She’d think about the future tomorrow but for now she wanted Cave to put out all her internal fires.

“What do you need?” His question sifted through the brain fog.

Sliding her hand between their bodies, she cupped the bulge stretching his zipper to maximum capacity. “This.”

He removed his finger out of her, and she heard the unzipping of his jeans, rustling, and then his hard cock was warm against her fingers. She wrapped them around his wide girth and slid them over his swollen length. He thrust himself against her palm and she felt him quiver. His fingers were tangled in her hair, pinning her with his body .

“Can you handle this?”

“Yes!” Her cry was muffled against his neck where she kissed his salty skin.

He released his grip, and he turned her around. Her stomach and cheek were pressed against the barn wall.

“I might not fit into this tiny little body.” There was promise in his words that made her squirm in excitement. Moisture flooded her legs, and she rolled her ass against him in invitation.

His arrogance should be a turn off. But she loved his confidence.

He is huge. A man who could back up his words deserved to be a little cocky.

He grabbed a handful of her jeans at the waist and dragged them lower on her bottom, following with her lace thong that ripped in his grip.

“Oh God,” she cried.

“Prayers might be needed before it’s all said and done.”

His fingers closed around the tendrils of her hair as she felt him press against her channel. He slowly and gently entered her. She wasn’t sure if he was being careful not to hurt her, or he wanted to tease her relentlessly. Finally, he plunged to the hilt, and he filled every available space of her, stretching her tight, slick muscles.

“Can you take it?” he asked.

“Yes. Don’t hold back.” There was challenge in her tone and he must have understood.

He unleashed and pounded into her. He took on a rhythm of deep and quick thrusts, his tip reaching all the spots that brought her on the edge of orgasm fast and furiously. The cowboy certainly knew his way around a vagina.

Pinned into place, she couldn’t move her hips, but the feeling of confinement wasn’t a turn off. He continued to stroke her, taking what she was giving. He was a man of his word, and she loved it. One orgasm and then another came in quick succession, sweeping through her body like a wave crashing against the shore. Intoxicating her while liquifying her veins. Before she could catch her breath, another built within her, threatening to shatter the earth. Her body had reached new levels of pleasure.

She went again, but this time it came so strong that if he didn’t have her she might have fallen to her knees. All coherent thought turned to mush.

His groans vibrated her chest. His strokes become needier, tighter. Then with one last thrust he stilled against her. His heart was racing and hammering against her back.

Neither made a move to separate their bodies. This was one of those moments that there were no coherent words.

He stepped away and the cold air of reality settled against her heated skin. She took a long breath then reached down and dragged her clothing back into place. She swiveled and found that he had his back to her.

When he turned back to face her, his eyes were glazed, and his chest was rapidly rising and falling. “There can’t be any regrets.”

She gave her head a quick shake. “I won’t regret this.”

With a tight nod, he said, “We should go.”

She didn’t want to go back to the real world yet. She wanted to stay in the safe cocoon of what they just shared a

little longer.

Chapter 13

After taking Sunflower back to the stables, she headed to the house, still reeling. She hoped the wild lovemaking would continue once they were married.

Married.

She and Cave had agreed to marry. That packed a bit of a wallop.

A niggling feeling weighed heavily on her shoulders. She was down to the wire. She had to confess to Cave that she was pregnant before things went any further.

The house was quiet when she walked inside, and she started for the stairs, but she paused when she heard a muffled voice coming from the kitchen.

Stepping that direction, she walked in to find Liberty and Dolly having a hushed conversation over blueberry muffins.

The cook was the first to see Honor and she said, "I made fresh muffins to welcome your sister back home. Would you like one, my dear?"

"No, thanks." Honor offered Dolly a kind smile. "Do you mind leaving my sister and I alone so we can talk?"

Liberty had swiveled on the stool, wearing a bright smile.

"Sure. I should grab some vegetables from the garden anyway." Dolly took her leave.

"Don't look so glum, sis. I'm back." Liberty jumped up from the stool and did a little dance.

"I've been worried, not that you seem to care."

Liberty rushed into Honor's arms for a tight hug. When they separated, Liberty was smiling from one ear to the other. "I'm sorry, honey." She wrinkled her nose. "You smell like leather."

Honor didn't explain. "Where have you been?"

Liberty practically pranced around the room before she stopped, lifted her left hand and wiggled her fingers. “Look.”

Honor saw the plain silver band on her fourth finger. “What is that?”

“I’m married.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Honor muttered. “You didn’t get married and not tell anyone.”

Liberty shrugged. “It happened so fast that I didn’t have a chance to tell anyone. Daddy should be very happy.”

“I don’t think this is what he had in mind. You sneaking off and getting married.” Honor groaned and dropped down into one of the chairs around the pockmarked farm table that they had shared many happy meals around.

“I didn’t exactly ask for his blessing,” she said sarcastically, pulling out a chair and sitting down. “Do you think I was going to sit around and allow him to pick a man for me? Not happening. I suggest you find a husband before he starts thrumming through his contact list.”

“Who is he? Who did you marry?”

She rolled her tongue over her bottom lip. “Wyler Ranks.”

“Wyler? As in the Wyler who was a hand here until he quit two months ago?” Honor was shocked and yet not as much as she should be given the present circumstances.

Liberty pressed her hands together in prayer-like. “I hope you can forgive me for not telling you first, but I couldn’t take the risk of anyone stopping me. Wyler and I go way back.” She wagged her brows. “You’re not the only one who can keep a juicy secret.”

“Have you told Daddy yet?”

The shake of her head sent tendrils slapping her flushed cheeks. “No. I was sort of hoping I could get your help.”

“My help? How?”

Liberty pressed her palms into the table. “Well...” she cooed. “You tell him.”

Honor almost choked on her saliva. “Tell Daddy that you’re married? I don’t think so.”

Untucking her legs, she leaned forward. “Come on, Honor. You’re his favorite. And you owe me.”

“I owe you? How?”

“For not telling Daddy that you’re preggo.”

Blinking, Honor narrowed her gaze. “I plan on telling him myself.”

Liberty stood. “When I get back from the bathroom, I want to tell you all about my honeymoon. We had a small ceremony...” she continued talking as she stepped into the adjoining bathroom.

Honor laughed. It was just like her sister to do something so wild. Wait until she heard about Honor’s last few days.

Liberty’s phone vibrated which sent it scooting across the smooth granite countertop.

Honor rushed to grab it before it fell on the floor. “Liberty, someone’s calling.”

“Who?” she called out.

Glancing down at the phone, Honor saw that it was Wyler calling. “Your new husband.” Smiling, Honor started to step away when the screen switched to a text message. Honor spotted her name. Swiping through the message, she felt her heart drop into her toes. The thread was a lengthy conversation between Uncle Pete and Liberty, and they were discussing that he needed to find a way to pressure Cave into marrying Honor. The last message was Pete saying, “It’s like taking candy from a baby.”

“We had the best eclairs you ever did taste in your life. Chocolate with ooey-goey—” Liberty stopped dead in her tracks. “What’s wrong?”

“You tell me.” Honor leaned a hip against the edge of the counter, feeling dizzy.

The shine in Liberty's eyes dulled some. "You look like you lost your best friend. Are you not happy for me?"

Honor counted to five, carefully considering her next words. "When were you going to tell me that you and Uncle Pete were planning to force Cave to marry me?"

Liberty paled. "It's not how it seems."

"No?"

"Pete and I weren't trying to force anyone into anything. We were only..."

"Meddling?"

"No. Yes. I guess. Honey, you know you love Cave, but you have a way of...well, how do I put this?"

"In words would be a good place to start." Honor couldn't hide her anger.

"You won't give in to your heart because you don't want to go against Daddy."

Honor laughed. "Just in case you're wondering, Cave did ask me to marry him, and I said yes."

Liberty covered her mouth in excitement. She dropped her hand and let out a *woot!* "This is exciting!"

"Is it? Really? You and Uncle Pete scheming to bring Cave and I together?" Honor blinked away tears. "I might be pregnant, but I don't have to marry him."

"Come again?"

Hearing the grave, stone-cold voice, Honor swirled and faced Daddy who was standing in the arched doorway. He looked as white as the cabinets.

She felt her stomach lurch. She knew eventually she'd have to tell him the truth, but not today. Not like this.

"Oh boy," Liberty whispered.

Knowing she'd done nothing wrong and had nothing to apologize for, Honor lifted her shoulders and chin higher. "Yes, Daddy. I'm pregnant. And you know what else, Liberty

is married to Wyler.” Turning and giving Liberty a there-you-go glance, Honor found it almost comical. Feeling justified, she marched out of the room.

“Why are you dodging me?” Cave had looked all over the place for Honor and finally found her at the lodge apartment. She was sitting in the dimly lit room, in a chair by the window, staring out into the darkened night. She didn’t even look at him.

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that I’m dodging you. I just don’t want to see anyone.” Her voice sounded full of emotion.

He wasn’t about to allow her to run away a second time. Determined, he stomped across the room and stood in front of the chair. “What is happening? Change your mind already?”

She brought her chin up, her expression blank. “I’m letting you off the hook.”

“If we’re relating what we have to a hook then I’m mighty content being hooked.” He shifted on his boots.

She sighed. “The jig is up. I found out everything. I even spoke to Uncle Pete who admitted he coerced you into asking me to marry you. He also told me you know about the baby.”

He felt like he’d been punched. The old man could have at least warned him. “Yeah, I knew.”

“You didn’t think to tell me?”

“I don’t know, honey. Didn’t you think to tell me that you were pregnant, and instead I had to learn it from Pete?”

She scooted to the edge of the chair. “I planned on telling you.”

“Yeah? I don’t know if I can believe you,” he growled.

“Right. Because I lie.” She pushed up from the chair and stood at the window, looking out. “That was a big reason I came back. I wanted to tell you.” She turned to face him, her glistening eyes were on him.

“This doesn’t change anything, Honor. I want to marry you and have a family with our baby. Sure, this might have sped things along, but I believe the result would have been the same.”

She looked very tired. “I don’t think you mean that.”

“Bullshit. You know I’m telling the truth. Why do you think I wanted you to tell your father about us? I wanted our relationship out of the dark so I could...”

“What?”

“Fuck!” he muttered under his breath. There was so much he wanted—needed—to say. “I should have told you a long time ago how I feel. I’ve never been the best at communicating my emotions. Hell, I don’t even know if I knew how I felt at the time. I do now. If you don’t want to marry me, we don’t have to. But I promise I’m not giving up on us, on our family. I’m going to be here for both of you. Protect you. Make sure you both have everything you want and need. I don’t care if I ever set foot on Rose Two. I’ll find another ranch, even if I must scour the earth for the perfect spot. That’s what I’ll do for you, and for our baby.”

“Why?” The word sounded like it came from a hidden box of emotion.

“Because I love you.”

“Cave...”

“Don’t demean my feelings with your logical deflection.” He crossed the rest of the distance between them and took her hands into his. “You tell me right now that you don’t want me, don’t want us, and I’ll give you your wish, but I won’t leave my baby. That’s not even up for debate.”

There was a long silence. “I do want us. I’ve wanted us for a long time. I love you too.”

“You what?” He pointed to his ear.

She smiled. “I love you.”

He pulled her into his arms. The tips of their noses touched. “Just remember you did say it. If you don’t want to

marry me—”

“I do. Yes, I want to marry you. But the stipulations are off the table. I vow to not divorce you in six months, six years, or sixty years. I promise that we will share Rose Two equally. I can’t promise that I’m not going to be a pain in the ass.”

“It’s growing on me.”

She playfully swatted him. “This is going to be a wild ride, Cowboy.”

“When hasn’t it been?”

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About the Author

At an early age, Rhonda fell in love with romance novels, knowing one day she'd write her own love story. Life took a short detour, but when the story ideas were no longer contained, she decided to dive in and write. Her first plot was on a dirty napkin she found buried in her car. Eventually, she ran out of napkins. With baby on one hip and laptop on the other, she made a dream into reality—one word at a time.

Her specialty is men who love to get their hands dirty and women who are smart, strong and flawed. She loves writing about the everyday hero.

When Rhonda isn't crafting sizzling manuscripts, you will find her busy editing novels, blogging, juggling kids and animals (too many to name), dreaming of a beach house and keeping romance alive. Oh, and drinking lots of coffee to keep up with her hero and heroine.

Read more from Rhonda Lee Carver

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Seeing Blue
Beth Williamson

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Seeing Blue

Love doesn't ask permission to arrive – it comes right through the front door.

Blue Malloy wants nothing to do with Levi Maverick. She left him behind ten years ago, and now he's unexpectedly back, standing at her front door, insisting she ride with him.

Levi knows she's reluctant to see him, but the issue of their shared creek is too critical for both their ranches. Without water, their livelihoods are at stake. They must uncover the truth.

As they delve into the past, it collides with the present. Despite being meant for each other, life drove them apart. Blue and Levi are bound to collide once again.

Will this collision mend their broken hearts and reignite their love?

Chapter 1

He snatched her breath away. Every. Damn. Time.

Blue Malloy scowled at the man at her door. Levi Maverick was a big man, well over six feet with slabs of muscle and the face of a Renaissance statue with strong lines and beautiful cheekbones. He yanked off his hat and the wavy soot-colored hair that always looked as though someone ran their hands through it.

His dark, dark eyes regarded her steadily, not a twitch of emotion to give away why the hell he was at her house. Lines bracketed the sides of his mouth and across his forehead. It was three in the afternoon so his jaw was darkened with whiskers.

The rest of him, however, was covered in mud, dried and tacky. He looked like he'd been rolling in it.

“What do you want Levi?” She cursed the minute tremor in her voice.

“Nice to see you too, Beatrice.”

Blue bit back a curse, refusing to rise to the bait even as her pulse thundered through her body. No one, except this big fool, ever used her given name. Everyone called her Blue after her bluebonnet colored eyes. She started to close the door in his face.

One big callused paw slapped against the well-worn wood. “I’m sorry to just drop in but I need to show you something.”

She raised one brow and raked her gaze up and down his incredible, but muddy, body. A shiver threatened to escape and she beat it back. Five years since she'd seen him and she still reacted like a teenage girl instead of a thirty-year-old woman. “I’ve seen it. Not interested.”

He huffed out a breath. “It’s important and I’ve already saddled Butch.”

Blue was annoyed he dared to assume she'd hop on her gelding and follow him all doe-eyed and buzzing with arousal. Those days were past. "I have work to do, Levi."

"I've found something and it concerns the Malloy ranch. And mine." As her nearest neighbor, the Maverick ranch shared a border and problems when they occurred.

Her dog nudged her thigh with his great head. Levi's eyes widened at the size of the canine. For once, Blue was delighted by the size of her Irish wolfhound. A gift from a client from the UK three years ago, Paladin was a bed hog and a gentle giant.

"Couldn't you have found a bigger dog? Looks like you picked a runt."

She swallowed the chuckle that threatened. No need to be charmed by his sense of humor. "Every rancher needs a good dog."

The corner of Levi's mouth kicked up. "Usually not one that can outrun the horses."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you." She couldn't be more blunt with him. He was her past and she wanted to keep him there.

"Truth be told, I feel the same way but I'm here anyway." He blew out a breath. "You need to see what I found at the creek."

The primary source of water for the Maverick's herd and the horses the Malloys raised, the creek meandered across both their properties. The fact he was muddy told her that he was telling the truth about something.

"What is it?" She didn't need another reason to not sleep at night. Her stomach couldn't possibly get tied up any tighter.

"It's better to show you." He stepped back and gestured behind him. "Please."

Damn. Now she had to go. She grabbed her hat from the peg on the wall to her left with a snort. "If this is some sort of game, I'll geld you myself."

They walked across the dusty ground sending up puffs of dirt as they walked. It was a warm day in May and she was already sweaty from exercising one of the new Colts. Sweat trickled down her spine as she almost stomped toward the barn. Blue had average size legs but Levi's were a mile long. She was annoyed to notice he had shortened his stride to match hers.

Blue had convinced herself that distance from him was the best course of action. Nobody stayed with their first love, especially after the massive break-up they had ten years ago. They had burned brighter than the sun, hot and fiery. Their end had been fated to be as intense.

The last time she was him was her mother's funeral five years ago. He had attended with his parents out of respect, which at the time, she appreciated, but she'd had no room to think about him that day. Her world had been turned upside down and the ranch, along with her three younger siblings, were the only things that saved her. Grief had been overwhelming—Mama had been the rock in their lives. Without her, all of them had been spinning in one direction or another.

Cat, the horse whisperer, had gotten pregnant, not unlike Mama who had four children without ever being married, or admitting who the fathers were. Violet had brought life back to the ranch. The precocious little Malloy had her mother's angelic looks and was smarter than all of the adults put together.

Callum was the one who went to college and was now a veterinarian. He worked all over the county but always came for Sunday dinner. He and Cat were close, as twins were, and he was a doting uncle to little Violet.

And then there was the baby, Declan. At nineteen, he was more than ten years younger than Blue. He was a happy, mischievous child who seemed broken after Mama passed. During her illness, he took care of her night at day, even though he was a boy at the time. He hadn't been heard from in two years. Blue's heart ached with his absence, knowing he

was out there alone. More worries, more anxiety, more dark clouds in her life.

Nope, she didn't have time for a relationship and she sure as hell didn't need to spend any time with Levi Maverick. He was her past and she had to focus on the ranch, which was teetering on the brink of being flat broke. This year's sale of the colts and fillies was critical. If they didn't sell, then Blue would have to sell the ranch. The auction was two days away and the last thing she needed was another problem to solve.

The ranch foreman, Reed Dempsey, stood at the barn next to Blue's gelding, Butch. He'd been her mother's best friend, the man that had been a quasi-father to the Malloy children growing up. In his sixties with a full gray beard and closely cropped hair, he was solid as an oak. With his beefy arms crossed, his frown could have cut glass.

"You wanna tell me why Maverick saddled your horse?" His gravelly voice carried across the yard. "Mikey came and told me, as he should have."

Of course the boy who worked in the barn went and tattled. He kid idolized Reed, as all the hands did.

"I'm thirty years old, Reed. And I have a weapon on me at all times." She patted the pistol in her waistband. "We're going to check out the creek. Levi found something."

"Looks like he was rolling around with the pigs to me." Reed huffed out a breath and his arms dropped. "I'm coming with you."

Levi sighed and walked toward his horse. "Let's get to it then."

Chapter 2

She took his breath away. Every damn time.

Blue Malloy had infiltrated the very marrow of his bones and no matter how long he was away from her, the tug between them only grew stronger. Seeing her had sent a shockwaves through him that made his bones vibrate.

Her reddish brown hair was full of sunset colors and her eyes shone like the bluebonnets that bloomed in the field nearby. He'd been five when he met her, a precocious two-year-old who could already ride a horse. Bossy, fearless, smart as hell.

Levi had been the one to call her Blue for the first time. She had followed him around wanting to play with him. He'd gotten annoyed and told her to get lost with those bluebonnet eyes. The name stuck and here he was again in her orbit. She'd made it clear they were done ten years ago and yet fool that he was, he'd never moved on.

Idiot.

In the last five years, she hadn't changed a whit except for the dark circles under her eyes. Something was worrying her and it wasn't the problem he found at the creek. It was none of his business and he sure as hell wasn't going to ask.

As they rode toward the creek, the silence was only broken by the sound of the horses, the drone of a random bee, and birds swooping across the sky. If it had been any other day, Levi might have said it was beautiful.

Not today.

Every muscle in his body vibrated with tension. Finding that calf in the mud was only the beginning of his problems. His gut was tied in knots for more than one reason.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Her voice startled him.

“It’s better if you see.” He didn’t know how to explain it. Fortunately she didn’t push.

“I got better things to do than ride out to look at water,” Reed mumbled from behind him. The foreman never liked Levi and he certainly never held his opinion back. The older man was devoted to the Malloys and Levi suspected he’d been in love with Blue’s mother, Angela. He’d seen the foreman at the funeral and he’d looked broken.

Levi understood a broken heart when he’d lost Blue, but not permanently. He didn’t know if he’d ever get her back but the possibility he might flickered deep down.

Yep, he was an idiot.

When they rode within sight of the creek, the reality of the situation yanked him back from his ridiculous thoughts about Blue.

She gasped. “Holy shit.”

In a blink, she kneed her horse into motion and streaked toward the creek bed. Reed was right behind her. Levi knew what they’d see and he gave them a minute to absorb it. He could hardly believe it and he’d had a two hour head start.

As he rode up beside her, she slipped from the saddle with a grace only she possessed. He watched as she stared at what had been an eight foot wide and six foot deep creek. Now it was a mud puddle with mosquitos buzzing in a frenzied dance. The gentle sloping bank ran for half a mile and was the favorite of the livestock. The creek also irrigated the hay he’d planted to feed the cattle in the winter.

Having this creek dry up was devastating. More than that, he could lose the entire herd without water. It was as though some giant came through and sucked up all the liquid to quench his thirst.

Deep footprints marred the sticky mud from where he had to yank out the calf that had gotten stuck. Poor thing was up to his little hips crying to break his heart and her mama bellowed right along.

“Calf was stuck in it. Took me near an hour to get it out. The mud is like molasses.” He brushed at the dried patches on his pant leg, knowing it would have no effect.

Blue got to her knees. “What the hell happened?”

“Damned if I know.” He dismounted and walked a few steps north. “I was here a week ago while I was moving the herd to the northeast pasture. The water was flowing then.”

Her hands clenched into fists. “Reed, ride back and let everyone know the situation. I’m going to ride upstream.” She glanced up at him, her gaze hidden by the brim of her hat. “Unless you already did that?”

He shook his head. “I came straight to your ranch. Both of us have a stake in this water and we’re in deep shit if it’s dried up for good. Before I made any decisions, I, uh, thought it best to talk to you.”

“I appreciate that but you could have warned me, Levi.” She got to her feet and blew out a breath. As usual, her expression was inscrutable.

“You would have argued with me for a spell and not believed a word I said until you saw it with your own eyes.” Levi was well aware of Blue’s proclivity for stubbornness. “I cut out that messy part and just brought you here first.”

“I ain’t leaving you here alone.” The big foreman growled.

Levi snorted. The foreman had never liked him and made no effort to hide it.

“I’m armed and fully capable of riding on my own ranch.” She put her hands on her hips. “I don’t need you to babysit me.”

Reed protested. “I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to.” She swung up onto her horse. “I’ll be back when we figure out what happened.”

“I don’t like it,” Reed repeated.

Blue ignored him and rode away. The foreman scowled at Levi. Nothing like staring down a three hundred pound armed

man.

“I’ve got water and supplies. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“If you do, nobody will ever find your body.” With that lovely thought, Reed turned his horse around and rode away.

He needed to find out what happened to the water just as much as she did. There was no help for it. They both had an equal stake in the situation.

Levi took a deep breath and geared himself up to spend time with Blue. The girl who became the woman who broke his heart. She wielded too much power over him and she could never know just how much.

* * *

Cat Malloy led the colt into the stall cooing softly to him. He was the best of the lot of six that were prime horseflesh to be auctioned. She named all the little ones after famous cowboys. This one was Wyatt. If all went well, there would be a bidding war over him.

A girl could dream anyway.

She started to rub Wyatt down when someone rode into the yard. A few seconds later, Reed bellowed her name.

“Catherine!” He was the only one who used her full name. He used Blue’s real name, Beatrice, and it drove both of them crazy. He claimed it was respecting their mother’s wishes. Pfft.

“I’m right here.” She continued to rub Wyatt down. “Stop yelling or you’ll spook some of the younger colts.”

He poked his grizzly head into the stall. “The creek’s dried up. We’ve got to get water up to the horses in the north pasture if they haven’t already bolted looking for water.”

“I need to come—”

“Your sister has it handled. Stay here.”

With that bomb, he disappeared, bellowing for a few others. Cat took a moment to absorb what he said. Of course

Blue had it handled but for once, Cat wasn't going to sit on her hands and wait for her big sister to fix things.

These were Cat's horses, dammit. She helped to birth every one of them. She trained them, took care of them, and loved each and every one.

No way Blue was going to be the hero without Cat.

Chapter 3

An hour into the ride, Blue thought she might scream in frustration. Every square inch of the creek was the same. A muddy, fly infested mess.

Her gut was twisted so tight, bubbles of bile squirmed up her throat every time she breathed. The fact was, the horses might have already gone in search of water off Malloy property. They could have been taken or worse.

The future of the entire ranch was in jeopardy. They might make it through the auction and have enough to keep going for another six months. Without the herd, the damn *mares* that made up most of the north pasture, there would be no more generations of Malloy horses. After 150 years, Blue would be responsible for destroying the legacy built by her family.

In flash, she was off the horse, on her knees and puking into the dry grass. A large, warm hand pressed against her back and a wet cloth pressed into her hand. Ashamed, mortified, embarrassed, and any other dark emotions raced through her.

She hoped a giant hole would open up and swallow her whole.

After a minute she managed to suppress the heaves and tried to stand. He pressed on her back with no real force.

“Take your time, Bea.” His gentle words made it worse.

She shook off his hand and struggled to her feet. “I didn’t eat lunch. The heat made me nauseous.” A bald-faced lie.

He frowned and held out a bottle of water to her. Freaked out about the creek, Blue hadn’t had a thought other than finding what happened. She had no food, no water, and no supplies other than her pistol and one mag of bullets.

She nodded her thanks and took the water. As she swished out her mouth and gave her stomach a stern talking to, he watched her. Blue felt his gaze on her back.

“Stop staring at me. I’m fine.”

He didn’t answer nor did he stop looking at her.

“What do you think happened to the creek?” She handed the water back to him and made herself check Butch’s saddle. Something, anything to distract her from the nearness of this man. The pull between them was still as strong, if not stronger, than it was. She wanted to throw herself in his arms.

Foolish.

“It wasn’t natural. I’m sure of that. We’ve had plenty of rain.” He stood at the bank and looked at the mud. “I was checking the calves a week ago and the water was flowing.”

“The foals and mares are up here too. It’s got the richest grass and the low bank on the creek makes it easy for the young ones to drink.” Her throat grew tight at the thought of any of her horses without water.

“Let’s get going.” She hauled herself up into the saddle and kned the gelding into motion. As they rode north, against her will, the past washed over her with the power of a rogue wave.

As they searched for water, memories of racing him across pastures as kids flew through her mind. They were in perfect step physically. That was never a problem, of course.

It seemed like yesterday that she had walked away from the man she had always planned to spend her life with. Ten years ago, she was ripped in half when it happened. The reasoning behind her choice was sound or it felt that way to Blue. Her mother had been diagnosed with cancer and the ranch had to come first. There was no time for a relationship and when Levi said he was quitting school to help the Malloy ranch, she made the hardest decision of her life.

She couldn’t let him give up his future and ignore his own family’s needs. Levi was too smart to not finish college. She would not be the reason he didn’t get a degree. His family’s ranch and future needed to be his priority. She did what she needed to do, knowing he would never forgive her.

Knowing she would never stop loving him.

The air hung between them, heavy and full of history and hurt. She couldn't deal with that while there was a crisis to solve. Later, much later, or never, she would unpack the lingering feelings for this man.

They reached the end of the Malloy ranch property. Levi pulled up with a grunt.

“Shit.”

Blue stopped with a bit more grace and slipped from the saddle. She opened the small section of the fence to allow a horse or person to get through.

She glanced over to her right. “How much further does your ranch go?”

“Ended about half a mile back.” He rode his horse through the fence and waited while she closed the gap in the fence and jumped back on Butch.

“Who bought old man Pearson's ranch?” She tried to remember what she'd heard in town. The rancher who had owned the property north of the Malloys had died a year after her mother did. Blue had no time or capacity to focus on someone else's land. She regretted it now.

“A company based in L.A.”

It was Blue's turn to grunt. Damn foolish to buy up ranch property in the middle of Wyoming and make a dude ranch. Yet that was happening everywhere. She wasn't the only resident who resented the practice.

“Did they make it into a dude ranch?”

“I don't know. I hadn't heard that but it's possible.”

She grimaced. “I hope some yahoo didn't dam up the creek to make a swimming pond for their guests.”

He snorted. “They're in for a lawsuit if they did.”

Her gut churning, they continued riding for another half an hour. The terrain grew rougher as they grew closer to the foothills. The horses were sure footed and picked their way through the smaller rocks.

Levi saw the issue before she did. “Holy shit.”

A second later she saw the rockslide. “Damn damn damn.”

When they arrived at the site, each of them dismounted and approached the damage. A few massive boulders were surrounded by thousands of smaller rocks. Rockslides weren't uncommon in Wyoming but they didn't affect the ranches very often. This was an exception. An inconvenient and frustrating exception.

“We're gonna need to find out who owns this land and get permission to remove the debris.” Levi was always the logical one. He thought five moves ahead and used to kick her ass at checkers when they were kids. “I've got a friend in Laramie with heavy equipment. I'll give him a call.”

“There's no signal out here. Too far from any tower.” Blue usually carried her long range walkie but Reed had taken it back with him.

They both stood there for a silent minute. Blue was relieved to find there wasn't a saboteur in their midst. Nervous because they were trespassing already and needed to convince someone to let them bring equipment in to clear the rockslide. Out in the middle of nowhere. It wasn't inconveniencing anyone but the Malloy and Maverick ranches.

Before she could put her thoughts into words, three things happened at once throwing an enormous monkey wrench into their day.

The sound of a rattler.

The scream of a horse.

The bolting of both horses away from the snake.

She shot the damn rattler before it could strike. Could this day get any worse?

“Well double shit. That was a midget faded rattler.” He stared as the horses disappeared over the rise they had crossed ten minutes earlier. “How far will they go?”

“No idea.” She tucked the pistol back into her holster. “We closed the fence so unless they're going to jump six foot,

they're going to ride as close as they can to home."

It had been two hours since they started following the creek. On horseback. On foot, it would take them significantly longer to get back.

"It will be dark in an hour. We need to find shelter." He pointed east. "There were trees back a few miles."

"We should follow the horses." She put her hands on her hips, throwing her chin up at him. Blue wasn't short but she was compared to him. It didn't make a difference to her though. She would take on a giant without blinking.

"We'll never catch them. Reed knows where we went. When we don't come back by dark, he'll know to come look for us." Levi sounded so damn logical. It infuriated her.

She started walking back the way they came. No way she could spend a full night in Levi's company. It had been hard enough to spend two hours with him. Her heart and soul were in jeopardy.

Blue's stomach rolled a little and she realized she'd missed lunch. She was going to be hungry and miserable. Not to mention thirsty.

He fell into stride beside her and she had to stop herself from stepping six feet to her right. His scent, his warmth, all permeated the air around her.

It was going to be a very long night.

An hour later, they arrived at the edge of the Malloy ranch. No sign of the horses. Blue wanted to howl at the moon. He opened the fence for her to walk through. Being back on this land was a small comfort at least.

"It's almost dark. We should stop and hunker down for the night."

"I want to keep going." She tapped the flashlight app on her phone. "I don't want to spend the night out here. With you."

To her annoyance, Levi didn't reply. Honestly she shouldn't be annoyed. None of this was his fault, but her old feelings were crowding her, pulling her back to a time when she was hopelessly in love with the man walking beside her.

It would be far too easy to let herself get caught in the web of her past feelings. She needed to get away from him. To her frustration, there was simply nowhere to go except forward.

With him.

"I have a protein bar in my pocket. We might be able to get some water from the moss in the woods."

Surprised, she stopped short. "Have you taken survival training? Water from moss?" She wasn't sure because of the twilight around them, but she thought he shrugged.

"I have many skills you don't know about."

Oh boy. She wasn't sure how to take that but the sound of his rich voice was like warm honey. A shiver ran down her spine.

"I'm sure your parents are proud." She kept walking, holding her phone out to light her path.

"I have a flashlight too."

This time she whirled on him. "What else do you have hidden in your pants?"

As soon as it came out of her mouth, she gasped and slapped a hand over her traitorous lips. He started laughing and in moments, it was a full out guffaw. She couldn't stop herself from joining him. Soon they were both laughing like loons.

It felt so good. It had been so very long since she had let herself enjoy a moment.

He handed her the flashlight as the laughter faded to chuckles. "I started wearing tactical pants after I left the Army. Convenient. I tend to load them up every morning."

Blue's mouth dropped open. "You were in the Army?"

"A lot has happened in ten years, Bea."

That was an understatement obviously. She thought he went back to college, got his degree and had been happily working at the Triple M Ranch since. Gone was the boy she loved long ago. In his place was this man, a virtual stranger, who wore tactical pants and had been in the damn *Army*.

“I’m sorry.”

The words hung in the air, heavy and full of meaning. She didn’t know why she blurted it out but it was overdue. Blue had hurt him, pushed him away, selfishly and brutally. She was surprised he didn’t show more rancor toward her.

She hated herself for what she’d done to him. To them.

Angry at herself for her emotional reaction to everything, she took the flashlight from him. “Let’s keep walking.”

* * *

Cat winced as she slid her injured wrist into the bucket of ice water. The troughs were out and full of fresh water for the mares and foals. The only problem now was her sister was missing.

It was after ten and no sign of Blue or, to Cat’s surprise, Levi Maverick. They went off together to follow the creek, according to Reed. The night was pitch black, cloudy with no moon. There was no way Blue would risk her horse to ride back alone. Cat hadn’t been worried until Butch rode into the yard, lathered and riderless.

That was when Cat called the sheriff. She was waiting impatiently for them to arrive and hoping she hadn’t broken her wrist. The front doorbell rang and Cat yelled, “It’s open.”

A deputy sheriff walked in and he about filled the doorway. Cat leapt to her feet from the sofa, splashing water all over him and his pants.

He wasn’t overly tall but built like a brickhouse, straining the seams of his uniform at the shoulders. Sandy blonde hair with a bit of a wave topped the handsomest face she had ever seen in her life. Strong jawline, prominent cheekbones, and soft looking lips.

Oh my, oh my.

He glanced down at the water now decorating his clothes. “Ma’am, I’m Deputy Cade Marshall. We had a call about a missing person.”

“Yes, no, yes! I’m sorry about the water.” Her arm dripped on the floor, her socks, and down her pantleg. “My sister and a neighbor left here about five and haven’t been back.”

One blond brow went up. “It’s been five hours.”

She frowned. “One of our hands found her horse running along the fence line alone. He was agitated and lathered. Believe me, something is wrong.”

The deputy assessed her with his dark brown gaze before he nodded. “Then give me all the details.”

Cat swept her arm toward the great room table. Spraying just a bit more water on the poor man. “Er, have a seat?”

Chapter 4

Blue gave up an hour later. It was pitch black, blacker than black, with no moon and a cloudy sky. Her feet hurt and she was about ready to suck on that moss Levi had mentioned. And she was damn hungry.

He walked behind her, like a silent sentinel. Always there, always watching her. She could almost feel his gaze on her back. This night couldn't possibly get any worse.

“Do you want half of this protein bar?” His voice startled her and she lost her footing.

Less than a second later, she and the ground said hello. Intimately. She felt her nose pop and her wrist screeched in pain as she hit the dew-covered grass. The flashlight rolled to the left, shining on her prone form like a macabre theatre performance.

He knelt beside her. “Are you trying to make things harder? If so, it's working.”

If she had any breath in her lungs, she would cuss at him. Instead, she was absurdly grateful when he rolled her over and she sucked in air.

“Life is never dull around you, Beatrice Nicole Malloy.” He pressed a cloth to her nose.

“Don't call me Beatrice.” She pressed the cloth to her nose and winced. A damsel in distress? Embarrassing.

He chuckled. “Yes, ma'am.”

He scooped up the flashlight, then helped her to her feet. Levi kept one large hand on her back as they walked toward the trees ahead. His bodily warmth surrounded her in the coolness of the night. Although he was a big man, he was gentle giant.

He shined the flashlight on a fallen log. “Sit down and let me take a look at the damage.”

She managed to sit down without falling down. Her voice was nasally and thick. “I think I broke it and my wrist hurts like a bitch.”

The meager light shone on his face as he examined her injuries. She started to lose herself in the depths of his dark eyes. The heat between them still existed. All it needed was a poke for the embers to transform into flames.

“It’s not broken. Let me clean you up.” He ripped off his sleeve, exposing the most beautiful bicep she’d ever seen.

Levi was always a muscled young man but as an adult man, he was all muscle, sinew, and bone in a perfect package. A low heat flared to life in her belly.

Blue pushed away the arousal. Now was not the time to give into baser urges. It shouldn’t ever happen again with Levi. She had burned that bridge ten years ago. No way to undo what she’d done.

He cleaned her face with the sleeve and she felt something she hadn’t in a long time. Not since her mother got sick and couldn’t take care of herself much less her three children.

Tenderness.

Tears pricked her eyes and it wasn’t from the pain in her nose. After all she’d done, Levi was a better person than her. Taking care of her injuries. Ensuring she knew about the creek issues. Being a good human being.

She, on the other hand, was not.

“Why?” The word slipped out of her lips before she could stuff it back in.

He cupped her face in one big paw. “Do you think I should let you bleed all over yourself? No matter what happened in the past, I care for you, Blue. You were everything to me for the first twenty years of my life. Nothing can erase that.”

Now she had to hold back tears. “I’m not worth that much, Levi. I destroyed all of it.”

He shook his head as his thumb slid down her cheek, leaving goosebumps in its wake. “You pushed it away but you

couldn't destroy it.”

Blue tried to push away from him and instead used her left wrist to send a jolt of pain up her arm. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Let me take a look at your wrist.”

“Are you a doctor now too? Did you learn that in the Army?” Her mouth just kept going no matter what she did.

He probed her wrist with the same gentleness. Then he ripped off his other sleeve and wrapped it around her injury. The warmth from the fabric, from his body, permeated her chilled skin.

“I think it's a sprain. Probably hyperextended it when you fell. You should get an x-ray when we get back.” He sat down beside her. “Blue, I'm not your enemy.”

She snorted. “You should be.”

“If there is one thing I know about you, about Malloys, is that family always comes first. It took me a few years to realize you broke up with me because of family.”

She didn't want to have this conversation. Ever.

“Your mother's diagnosis meant you were in charge at the ripe age of nineteen. Of the ranch, of the twins and Declan.” He kept on talking and she wanted to scream at him to shut up. She didn't. He was right about everything.

Damn it.

“You could have told me why instead of telling you didn't love me anymore. That one hurt for a long time. Still does if I'm honest.” He stretched his legs out in front of him. “You probably thought I needed to finish college and get that degree to help my own family.”

Of course she did.

“Truth was, I had already decided to quit school. It wasn't for me. I didn't want to spend two more years in classrooms. I belong out here.” He slid his arm around her shoulders. The man was like a living furnace. “I was in pain so I did the only

thing I could do. I left Wyoming and joined the Army for four years.”

Now she was listening intently. Hoping he would continue. Drat the man because he stopped talking.

“Did you see combat?”

He cleared his throat. “That’s not something I want to talk about. I finished my contract and came home about a year before Angela passed away. When I saw you at her service, how thin you were, dark circles under your bluebonnet eyes, all I wanted to do was scoop you up and hold you.”

Oh she wished he had. So much so.

“I held back because I knew you didn’t want to appear weak. Beatrice is always the strong one. She takes on the weight of the world no matter the consequences.”

The silence hung heavy between them. Blue owed him an explanation, a real apology, and she needed his forgiveness.

“You’re right about one thing. Family is most important. My mother might have been unconventional and had four kids on her own, but she loved us fiercely. A, B, C, D for done she always said. Naming us alphabetically was odd but it was part of who she was. She held on in pain that would have stopped anyone else. If I could, I would be as wonderful as she was. Someone who was willing to do anything for family.” The words leaked out from behind the dam of emotion she’d kept bottled up for too long.

“You are that person, Blue. You’re more like Angela than any of your siblings.” He rested his hand on arm. “No matter what, never doubt that she was and is proud of you.”

Blue didn’t remember how she ended up clutching him, quietly crying into his shirt, but there she was. His scent surrounded her and she pressed against him. Needing him and letting go of the pain she’d carried for too long.

* * *

After she’d cried herself out, Blue wiped her face on her sleeve and tried to think of a way to extricate herself from

Levi's arms. Not that she wasn't enjoying being this close to him but she couldn't allow herself to go any further.

And then he kissed her temple.

Then he kissed her cheek.

Then he kissed her.

The world around her shrank to this moment. Time slowed to the feel of his soft lips on hers, the light scrape of his whiskers on her cheek, the rough calluses of his fingers on her neck.

A pulse of arousal raced through her body. He was so gorgeous with his jet-black hair and dark eyes, the way his smile lit his entire face. And his hands. Jesus, she dreamed of his calloused hands on her hips and breasts. Just seeing him again set off an immediate arousal.

Still, she loved him. That would likely never change. After all, she couldn't make her heart do something it didn't want to. Surges of pure Grade-A arousal raced through her, making every hair on her body stand at attention. Her heart thumped hard and fast, making her a bit lightheaded.

He unbuttoned her shirt slowly giving her time to stop him. Goosebumps raced down her body as he exposed her skin. Luckily she wore a front clasp bra and he flicked it open exposing her breasts to the cool, dark air.

Fingertips lightly traced a path down her arms to circle her nipples. She held her breath until she grew lightheaded. When his fingers finally reached the sensitive tips, she moaned.

The first touch of his hot tongue felt like fire on her skin. Then there was a storm of wicked laving, followed by sucking that echoed through her body. Sweet, wet pleasure. She wanted more though. Much more.

"Bite them."

His teeth closed over one nipple, nibbling and bringing her to hardened peaks that she'd never achieved before.

"God yes, harder."

A sharp snap of pain joined the pleasure.

Blue hadn't known his tongue was so double-jointed or that he could give such amazing sensual ecstasy. He continued to pleasure her nipples until she thought she'd lose her mind.

“Stop.”

He released her immediately, and she was able to take a deep breath. The throbbing in her pussy reminded her that there was much more to come. His cock pulsed against her hip.

“More.”

His harsh breathing broke the silence, nearly as loud as Blue's heartbeat. Her mind contemplated the possibilities of the twists their relationship had taken. She wasn't quite sure yet what it all meant, but it didn't really matter. That was a problem for another day.

Blue remembered the last time she'd felt so good—and it was in Levi's arms. She'd denied the fact they had so many years apart was a tragedy. There was love there and a lot of it.

After fumbling with their clothes, he laid his down on the ground as a makeshift blanket. His heat surrounded her, the feel of his body against hers was paradise. She opened her legs and welcomed him home.

As he slid into her, she held her breath, savoring the feel of him. She'd never felt anything like it with any other man.

He was her mate and she was his.

His cock filled her, rubbing deliciously within the walls of her pussy. He thrust in and out slowly, giving her ample time to enjoy the hardness, the sensation of having him inside her. She was frustrated by the darkness and the fact she couldn't do much because of her wrist.

Levi distracted her again by pulling one nipple into his mouth. Tingles of pleasure traveled straight through her as he sucked and nibbled on her. He knew her hot spots, how to make her squirm and gasp.

She loved it.

“Deeper.” Blue grabbed at one shoulder, trying without success to position herself better.

He bit one nipple. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She barked out a laugh. “Impossible. I want you to fuck me deeper.”

He let the nipple go with another bite, making her hiss with pleasure. God he was good, so good.

He pulled out and she jerked at the loss of his heat. He got up on his knees, spreading her legs wide. Then he picked up her leg and slowly raised it onto his shoulder. “Am I hurting you?”

“Only by making me wait for you. Put it in.” She couldn’t believe how different the angle but damned if he wasn’t able to fill her and get inside her so deeply, he touched her womb.

Blue’s eyes closed as she clenched around him, eager for more. He didn’t disappoint.

“Touch yourself, baby.” His gravelly voice cut through the darkness.

Her uninjured hand crept down to her clit right above where his cock was currently pumping in and out. The combined sensations made her feel like a rocket about to leave the launch pad.

“I’m going to come fast,” she gasped as the wave began to wash over her.

He picked up his pace, fucking her hard as she pleased herself. The orgasm hit her like a tornado, spinning her around while she was buffeted by the most exquisite pleasure she’d ever felt. Levi whispered her name as he came. She milked him, clenching and unclenching as the ecstasy overtook her.

Blue was floating on air, in the clouds of love and pleasure. She was a rag doll, sated and happy. Levi withdrew, cleaned them both up, then tucked in behind her. She snuggled against him, telling herself that this was a one time thing.

It couldn’t happen again. Too much pain had poisoned their future to allow one night together to heal.

Chapter 5

Levi let her sleep, ladylike snores emanating from her injured nose. Blue was the love of his life, the woman he would always come back to. Even when she dumped him and blocked his number on her phone.

His dick was at half-staff being this close to her. Their sex had been the best of his life, hands down.

He wanted it again.

He wanted her in his life again.

She seemed determined to keep pushing him away. Soon she would be accusing him of orchestrating the rock slide to get close to her again. Blue was as hard headed as the rocks that were blocking the water.

The sun painted the sky in oranges and pinks with master brush strokes. He really should wake her up and start walking again. It was light enough to see their path. While he wrestled with his conscience, the sound of an engine broke the silence.

Shit.

Within minutes someone on a four-wheeler was going to find them.

“Wake up, Beatrice.” He knew her first name would annoy her even when sleeping. “We’ve got company.”

She slammed her head into his with a resounding crack that sent stars across his vision. Blue rolled to her feet with the grace of a cat. Her thick hair was a wild cloud around her head and her clothes were wrinkled and cockeyed.

“What the hell is going on?” She spotted him and blinked. “Levi?”

“You sleep like Rip Van Winkle.” He rubbed his forehead while he got to his feet.

The last twelve hours seemed to race through her memory because she blushed. *Blushed!*

“Are you okay?”

“Uh, yep. I’m good.”

He gestured to her shirt. “Then you might want to button up.”

The engines roared behind him and she whirled around to take care of her open shirt. Levi turned around to greet their rescuers.

Reed was on the first one, his expression as hard as granite. Two deputies were on the other four wheelers. And to his surprise, it looked like Cat Malloy was riding pillion behind one of them.

Cat jumped off and ran to her sister. “Blue, thank God!” She snagged her in back breaking hug. “When Butch was found, we were so worried. What happened to your arm? Is that Levi’s sleeve?”

“We’re fine. Just fine.” Her voice was oddly pitched, high and raspy, stopping her sister’s question tirade. “Do you have any water?”

Cat frowned at her but Reed interrupted their conversation by thrusting a bottle of water at Blue. The big man had been like a father to the Malloy siblings and his fierce scowl at Levi was warranted, if not welcomed.

“Are you folks all right?” The deputy Cat had been riding with spoke up. He didn’t look familiar but Levi had heard the sheriff had hired some new officers.

“A little dehydrated but we made do with what we had. Snake spooked the horses so we were on foot.” He pointed north. “Rock slide blocked the creek about five miles from here.”

While everyone milled around and chatted, Levi kept his eye on Blue. They had shared something the night before. Something that had meant a lot to him.

She was avoiding his gaze and keeping a distance from him. It didn’t bode well for any future plans for the two of

them. He wasn't going to give up though. She was someone worth fighting for and dammit, he loved her.

Now he had to convince her they belonged together.

* * *

Blue refused to go to the doctor after they got back. Her wrist hurt but it was already feeling a bit better. She escaped to her room and sat on the edge of her bed, trying not to cry. Paladin lay beside her, his great head on her lap. A girl could always count on her dog.

The last day had been really fucking hard. Between worry about the horses, riding out with Levi, the emotional conversations, and allowing herself to succumb to her baser needs, she was exhausted in every sense of the word.

She buried her face in her hands and winced when her wrist complained. She needed a shower and regain her self-control before she faced her family. No doubt Cat had called Callum and he would be at the ranch soon. Too bad Declan was off on an extended walkabout somewhere or they could have a sibling reunion.

Blue undressed slowly, leaving the makeshift bandage on her arm until the last minute. She unwound the fabric and pressed it to her nose. It smelled like Levi.

She was hopeless.

The hot water felt like heaven, giving her a chance to heal, emotionally and physically. She knew she'd stepped over a line with Levi, opening herself up to something she wasn't sure she wanted.

Her heart and mind warred with each other. Life had changed for both of them the last ten years. He'd been in the Army! She hadn't kept track of him or his doings. Knowing how he had been living her life would have been too hard. Self-preservation took precedence. It had torn her heart in two when she broke up with him.

Now everything had changed. No longer stuck in the comfortable bubble of work and the ranch, Blue had to confront her feelings for Levi and make a decision.

A knock at the bathroom door startled her. “What?”

“I’m worried.” Cat could never stand to not know what was going on. “You need to get that wrist checked. And eat more than a piece of cheese.”

“I’ll be out soon. Give me a few more minutes.” She heard Cat sigh. “Please.”

“Fine but only because you said please.”

Blue had so many worries in her life, starting a relationship with Levi would be yet another reason to stress. If the horses didn’t sell at the price they needed at the auction, she would be responsible for losing the ranch that had been in her family for a hundred and fifty years.

Her stomach tied in knots, she dried off and dressed in sweats. She had to stop herself from wrapping Levi’s sleeve back around her wrist.

Her heart heavy, she went back into the great room to find Cat sitting at the table with one of the deputies. They both jumped to their feet and exchanged a look Blue couldn’t interpret.

Another time she would grill her little sister about this situation. Not now.

“Deputy Marshall, ma’am.” The younger man was handsome as sin and judging by the slight color in Cat’s cheeks, she had noticed too.

“Thank you again for looking for us. Is there anything else you need?” Blue’s voice was strained and all she wanted was quiet.

“Be nice, Blue.” Her brother Callum stood by the fireplace. A local veterinarian, he was the only Malloy who had graduated college. His shaggy hair had been cut short to make him appear more professional. The girls had teased him mercilessly last year when he got his license and tried to look the part.

He had the look of their mother, with her green eyes and light brown hair. Tall and lean, he had been the little boy who

brought home all the animals. Callum had an affinity for knowledge too. Studying had been a pleasure for him, much to his siblings' amusement.

He lived in town near the vet practice he'd joined. His apartment also kept his sisters from monitoring his dating life. Malloys were nothing if not pushy, nosy, and devoted to each other.

"I had a shitty night, Callum. I'm allowed to be grumpy." She sat down heavily in a chair at the table.

"I already talked to Mr. Maverick and got the details. I'm going to close the case today." Deputy Marshall had a kind voice. "If you want to add anything, feel free to contact me." He handed her a card and with one quick glance at Cat, he donned his hat and left.

"I heard you need a doctor so I came over." Callum's lopsided grin normally would have made her laugh.

"I don't want a horse doctor." She scowled at him.

"Can I make you some eggs? Maybe toast?" Cat was almost wringing her hands. She was a worrier extraordinaire. The only time she relaxed was when she was with the horses. The world dropped away for her younger sister, the horse whisperer.

"Sure. I'll take some scrambled eggs and toast." It wasn't her siblings fault Blue had made a complete mess of her life. She needed them right now.

Callum sat next to her and used a gentle touch to examine her wrist. She gritted her teeth as he flexed the sore joint.

"I think it's just a sprain. You should take some ibuprofen and ice it." He got to his feet. "Let me get a bandage from my kit and I'll wrap it for you."

She smiled her thanks and waited while Cat pattered around the kitchen cooking. The peace of her home and the love of her family started to unknot the stress in her gut. At least partially. Tomorrow she would think about Levi and what they'd done last night.

Levi spent two hours on the phone tracking down the company that owned the property the rock slide was on. They were based in California and after seven phone calls, two hang ups, and being on hold for twenty minutes, he finally talked to someone who had a brain.

He had provided the information to his friend with the heavy machinery. If they were lucky, they could get the slide cleared in a week's time.

Levi sat back in his chair and blew out a breath. The last twenty-four hours had been the most intense experience of his life. Stress, fear, love, pleasure, and regret raced through him like an F1 race car.

He'd watched her climb behind Reed to ride back to the Malloy ranch. One of the deputies drove him home and took down all the details. Levi was able to send him photos of the rockslide from his phone.

His foreman had found his gelding Denver by a herd of cattle. Damn horse didn't know he wasn't a bovine, which made him a great ride for a rancher.

All the business was taken care of for now. His hands had moved the cattle to a different pasture with a water source. The wheels were in motion to clear the rock slide.

That left him with his thoughts. And they were all of Blue.

Spending time with her after so long had been a shock to his system and yet at the same time, comfortable and right. They had spent most of their younger years together. Then she was gone, ripped from his life without warning.

Blue had no idea what he'd gone through after she slammed the door on him. Joining the Army had been the only path he could see to save his sanity. If he was busy getting his ass kicked by a drill sergeant then he didn't have time to wallow.

But he had wallowed. And felt sorry for himself. She cut him off and it was as though he'd lost a limb. His other half.

Now here she was, flipping him upside down and inside out. Having sex with her had made the world right itself again. It hadn't been fucking. It had been more than that.

Now he had to find a way to convince her to stay together. Losing her again wasn't an option. He wouldn't survive a second time.

Chapter 6

Blue escaped to the barn at dawn. Her sister meant well, but Cat had been hovering too much. Her heart was aching like it had when she'd dumped Levi ten years ago. Only this time it was a bone-deep ache, one that made everything hurt.

She entered Butch's stall and the familiarity of the scents and sounds soothed her. The gelding pushed his big head into her belly and she scratched behind his ears. If a horse could purr, he was doing it right about then. Paladin followed her in, plopping down in the corner to watch.

"Hey Butch. I'm sorry you got spooked yesterday. Smart of you to find your way home."

She spent the next thirty minutes brushing him, cleaning his hooves, and checking him from top to bottom. Butch was in perfect health, thank God. He had a crooked blaze on his nose, which made him unlikely to sell well at auction. Blue adopted him as her own and they'd been together for fifteen years now.

Tomorrow was the auction. Her cousin was a social media flunky and had posted the information everywhere online. They hoped for a hundred people but likely twenty-five. Later today, the rental company would be there to set up the tents, tables, and chairs.

A passel of cousins would be arriving to help. Malloys always helped Malloys in a time of need. They all understood how important it was to make this auction a success.

"I came by to see how you were." Levi's voice made her jump a foot in the air, startling Butch who skittered away from her to the corner of the stall. Paladin growled low at the unfamiliar voice.

Her heart slammed into her ribs at a thousand miles an hour. She pressed a hand to her chest and managed to suck in air.

“Paladin, quiet.” She waited a couple of beats. “Levi, what are you doing here?”

“I just told you, checking on you.” He was leaning against the stall opening, looking as delicious as a four course meal at a gourmet restaurant. Her body reacted with a rush of blood to her pussy, which pulsed once, hard and fierce.

“You could have called.” She cooed at Butch until he came back to her side.

“Can’t. You blocked my number.”

She smiled at his ridiculous, but true, comeback. “I’m fine. You can go now.”

“I also heard about the auction. I can bring my ranch hands over to help wrangle the horses. Anything to help.”

Why was he so damn nice? She needed him to go away.

Liar.

She wanted him to stay. In her bed. In her life.

How could she explain that to him? Not after all she’d done to hurt him. Sex was one thing but a relationship was something else entirely.

“The help would be appreciated. My cousins are coming over and they can help with the food and drinks if your men can help Cat and Callum with the horses.” She was absurdly grateful for the help. Truth was, her pride would have never allowed her to ask for it.

“We’ll be here as soon as the sun is up.” He watched her work for a minute. “I miss you.”

Her heart fluttered at the sincerity in his voice. Her throat grew tight at the emotion that surged through her. She didn’t know how to reply or what to say.

When she finally got the courage to turn around, he was gone. She pressed her forehead into Butch’s flank and told herself not to cry. Her situation was self-made and she had no one to blame but herself.

It was time she had an honest conversation with herself and take responsibility for her decisions. No more hiding from life at the ranch.

If she wanted a future with Levi, she had to make things right.

The day dawned cloudy, mirroring the tension in the house. Blue couldn't choke down any breakfast and stuck to coffee. The bidders were supposed to start in half an hour.

The rain needed to hold off. Her stomach needed to relax. The auction had to go off without a hitch. The cousins had already arrived and were busy putting linens on the tables for the food. Paladin currently watched her, his dark eyes worried. He was really the world's best dog. Cat had put a bowtie on him for the occasion although he would be in Blue's room for the duration of the auction.

Luckily for her, the Malloys were a big family. One of them was a caterer and provided the food at cost. Since this was a morning auction, little muffins and pastries with some fruit were just the thing. They were all coming together to help. It was like a hive of bees out there and Blue was hiding in the house.

Everything was riding on this day. If her tension grew any tighter, she might break into pieces.

"We've got the horses prepped." Cat poked her head in the front door.

Blue nodded. "Do you need me?"

Cat snorted. "Like a third nipple. Keep your hands off the horses." She started to close the door then stopped. "You got this, sis. Nothing is going to stop you. You're a fucking badass." With that, she disappeared.

After Cat left, Blue set the mug down in the sink and took a deep breath. Her sister's confidence was what she needed to stop dilly-dallying. Making herself pretty had been a chore.

Blue wore a dress to match her eyes and she'd put on makeup and jewelry. She was more comfortable in jeans and boots but today was far too important to be a stubborn cuss.

“C'mon boy, time for you to hide. We don't want to scare the bidders. They don't know what a softie you are.” He pressed his body into her leg as they stepped into her bedroom. She kissed the top of his head. “Be a good boy.”

She closed the door and straightened her dress. Time to be a ranch owner.

The auction booklets were in a box on the counter. She grabbed the box and went outside. Her confidence surged when she saw how wonderful everything looked. Her cousins were dressed in black pants with a white shirt and bolero tie. One of them was acting as valet to park cars in the front pasture. Reed was busy bossing everyone around, which was what he loved to do.

The chairs were lined up under the large tent. She would greet bidders at the table with a booklet and their bidding paddles.

“Wow.”

Levi's voice came from her right. He was dressed in slacks and a black shirt with mother of pearl snaps. His bolero tie was the same color as her dress.

He looked good enough to eat.

“You look gorgeous.” He held out his hands. “Can I carry that for you?”

This was the moment. She either accepted him or she walked away. Her heart thundered and damned if her eyes didn't prick with emotion.

“Yes please.” She handed the box to him. As she opened her mouth to tell him all the things, a car horn honked.

He smiled. “We have plenty of time to talk, Blue.” To her surprise, he kissed her.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled back at him. “Yes, we have plenty of time for us.”

His smile widened. “Let me help you greet the bidders.”

Happiness bubbled up inside her and she took his arm to walk to the bidder’s table. The next thirty minutes went by in a blur and she couldn’t forget for even a second who stood beside her. He smiled and shook hands, keeping bidders occupied while she registered them.

They were perfect together.

When she handed out paddle 85, she glanced at another half dozen people waiting in line, sipping mimosas and chatting with each other.

“Where did all these people come from?” She had less than three dozen at last year’s auction. Blue always hoped for at least a hundred, but to have that many was almost shocking. Getting top dollar for the horses was within reach with so many bidders.

“Levi!” The next man in line shook hands vigorously. “Glad you told me about this. I’ve been looking for a new horse breeder.”

“Glad to see you, Pete.” Levi chatted with the silver-haired man he obviously knew. She finished the registration and handed him the bidder’s paddle. “This is Blue Malloy.”

The man named Pete shook her hand. “If Levi recommends you, then I’m already sold.”

Blue managed to get through the last bidders and held up the three remaining paddles. “Holy shit.” She turned to Levi to find him with his arms crossed, a satisfied grin on his handsome face.

“You did this.”

“All I did was put out the word. People came because of the Malloy reputation. You and your family did all the work.” He took her hands, the callused fingers sending small shivers up her skin.

“Thank you.” Her voice was thick with unsaid words.

“Are you ready to start this shindig?”

This time her smile was wider than it had been for ten years. “Absolutely.”

Chapter 7

They sat under the tent munching on leftover pastries, the midday sun keeping the area warm but a breeze kept them cool. Sitting with Levi, Blue hadn't felt so content in a long time.

The auction had brought twice as much as they needed to keep the ranch going. Plus Cat had another five contracts in the works for some of the foals. The taste of success was on all their tongues and it was sweeter than ever imagined.

"Do you want to take a walk?" He got to his feet and held out his hand.

She glanced at her bare feet, the blue pumps abandoned as soon as the last bidder left. "Can I change first?"

"Can I help you change?" The sexy timber of his voice made her pulse leap.

"I want nothing more than to invite you into my bedroom but I want to talk first." She bit her lip, unsure if he'd take her decision as a rejection.

His expression eased. "How about we go to the tree?"

"Perfect."

The big tree in the yard was older than the ranch. The first generations of Malloys had been buried nearby. It was the tree they climbed as kids and the tree they had their first kiss at the age of fourteen.

To her shock, he scooped her into his arms and started walking toward the tree. She found herself giggling.

Giggling!

She was a thirty-year-old woman, not a fourteen-year-old girl. Yet the butterflies in her stomach told her that the puppy love she felt for Levi had matured into something deeper. Stronger.

His strength surrounded her, his warmth seeped through her dress and she felt... cherished. Blue was going to allow

herself to fully open to him. To let herself love and be loved.

It terrified her.

It gave her hope.

He set her down in the rich grass beneath the trees broad branches. The breeze slid across her skin as she worked up the courage to say what she needed to say.

“Please let me get this all out before you say anything. You were right about a lot of things.” She waited until he nodded. “I heard you were going to quit college to help me when my mother first got sick. You’re so smart and I couldn’t let you throw away your future. Nothing I said got through to you so I made the decision to let you go.”

He opened his mouth and she held up her hand. “I know, I didn’t let you go. I burned the bridge, smashed my phone, and ran the other direction every time you tried to see me. I was a coward, unwilling to see the damage I’d done. But I was a kid, a stupid kid who could only see one way forward.”

She took a deep breath. “I made a decision for us, a selfish one. I knew within a short while it was wrong. My mother lectured me weekly about it until I asked her to stop. I blocked out thoughts of you so I could focus on her and the ranch. I can say I’m sorry until the end of time, but it won’t be enough to undo the damage I caused.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and she leaned back on him. He kissed the top of her head.

“I was going to live the rest of my life alone. I built up walls of solid concrete and nothing and no one got past them for ten years. Until you showed up at my door, muddy and insistent.” She turned to face him. “For that I wanted to punch you.”

He smiled but she couldn’t yet return it.

“Spending the night with you was one of the worst and best experiences I’ve had. You dragged me back into the world of the living, kicking and screaming. For that, you have my thanks.” She cupped his cheek, the dark stubble rough against

her hands. "I know I don't deserve it but I'm asking you to forgive me for all I've done."

She stared into his dark eyes, trying to see a glimmer of what she hoped to find. Her heart only beat for him and if he refused to forgive her, she would be alone for the rest of her life.

He caught her around the waist and his dark gaze drank her in. She could feel every inch of him pressed against her, the sheer hardness of his body made her giddy.

"Ah, Blue," his voice was rough. "I've waited so long to be with you. We both made mistakes. What's important is what we do now." He kissed her softly on the lips.

"I've missed you."

His confession was low but she heard him loud and clear. "I missed you too."

This time when they entered her bedroom, it was as though they were stepping into a new life. Together.

Two days ago she would have bet every cent she had that she would never see Levi again. Now here they were, full of hope and a lifetime love.

Paladin leapt off the bed and thought it was time to play. She laughed and pushed him out the door. "Go play with Cat, boy."

"I think I'm jealous of that horse-dog."

She smiled. "Nothing to be jealous about. Paladin is my friend. You, well, you are much more than that."

It was her turn to undress him with deliberate slowness, pulling off his tie and shirt and throwing them on the chair. Blue ran his hands up and down his chest, reveling in the feel of the crisp mat of hair. His nipples hardened so she scratched at them.

He made a guttural sound in his throat, which made her smile. She pulled down his pants, then pushed him onto the

bed to remove his boots. That's when she noticed his hands were trembling, just a bit but it was there.

Somehow knowing he was also in the same boat as her made her feel better. Bolder.

After yanking off his socks, she peeled down his boxers, revealing an impressive cock, pulsing and ready for her.

“Another day I'm going to do more.” She licked her lips and he twitched. Oh there would definitely be more.

Within a few seconds, she had pulled off her dress and undergarments. She was wet with anticipation, pulsing with need and arousal. He was a banquet on her bed, ready for her to enjoy.

“Scoot back and lay in the middle. Now, cowboy, let's ride.” She positioned herself over his hard-on and slowly lowered herself.

When she was finally filled, they both groaned. The feeling of fullness, of rightness and tightness, made her shiver.

Then she began to move. Each time she lifted up, he tweaked a nipple with his callused fingers and then she slid down and leaned forward for him to suckle it. His hot tongue swirled around the peak, followed by a quick nibble.

It was sweet, sweet torture. A slow dance of love that had been done for an eternity. Her speed picked up as she felt her own orgasm racing like a train toward her.

“That's it. Come for me baby. Come hard.” He pinched her nipples hard enough to throw her over the edge.

As she spasmed around him, the universe righted itself and the stars were within her grasp. He held her hips and plunged into her, extending her pleasure.

When she was finally able to think again, she rolled off him. They lay side by side, holding hands and panting.

“I love you.” His whispered confession made her heart miss a beat.

“I love you too.” She squeezed his hand and rolled to her side to kiss him. “I’m sorry I cost us ten years of this.”

He smiled that dazzling smile of his and chuckled. “You can start making it up to me right now. Wanna ride again, cowgirl?”

* * *

<https://www.bethwilliamson.com/>

* * *

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About the Author

Beth is an award-winning, New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of both historical and contemporary romances. Her books range from sensual to scorching hot. She is a Career Achievement Award Nominee in Erotic Romance by Romantic Times Magazine, in both 2009 and 2010, and a quarter-finalist in the 2014 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Contest.

Beth is a mixture of small town girl, big city spirit, and country soul. She records on her phone while she drives, thereby avoiding an accident by typing on her laptop.

A writer who's done her time in the trenches as a journalist, a poet, and a technical writer, Beth has found her niche writing sexy romance novels. She is a bit quirky, as most artists are, and loves her family and friends dearly.

Beth has also published under the name Emma Lang.

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<https://www.bethwilliamson.com/books/>

Comin' In Hot
Peggy McKenzie

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Comin' In Hot

Stilettos. Spurs. And one sizzlin' hot Texas night...

Julie Foster is not afraid of hard work and when her boss promises her a seat on the board of his prestigious law firm, she jumps at the chance...until she hears his conditions. Now she must decide if the cost of success is worth the price—to her reputation and her soul.

Rodeo champion, Cord Cahill, is proud of his family's name, and for four generations, his Irish ancestors have done whatever it took to protect the Cahill legacy against thieves and outlaws. But unlike when the West was wild, it isn't as easy to spot an outlaw, especially when they're disguised in designer suits and smokin' hot red stilettos.

What happens when two worlds collide and everything's at stake?

Chapter 1

“Julie, get in my office. Now!”

The minute Julie Foster heard her name, her stomach sank to the bottom of her toes. She squeezed her eyes tight with dread pushing the frames of her designer eyeglasses against her cheeks. Forcing her tall, willowy frame to stand under the weight of what she knew was coming, she gathered her pen and legal pad like this was gonna be a normal meeting. But Julie knew these tools of her trade wouldn't be necessary today because this wasn't gonna be that kind of meeting.

“I'll be right there,” she replied in her brightest voice wondering just how far she'd fallen from grace.

She hurried to Mr. Howe's expansive office across the hall, ignoring the curious stares peeking out at her from behind desks through open doorways. A dozen steps later, Julie crossed the domain of Joneva Franklin, Mr. Howe's efficient executive director with the sub-zero attitude. In most corporate settings, someone in her position was referred to as an executive assistant or an executive secretary, but Miss “toe the line or else” Franklin insisted on a far more superior moniker. Once, one of the junior partners made the unfortunate mistake of referring to Miss Franklin as Mr. Howe's secretary. That was not a mistake he, or anyone else in the firm, would make again.

Without slowing her steps, she nodded to Miss Franklin and hurried inside. “You called for me, Mr. Howe?”

The senior law partner of one of the most prestigious law firms in the country raised his dark gray eyes and pinned her with an accusatory stare. “Close the door,” he replied, his tone cold and clipped. There was no doubt about it. The man was supremely pissed.

“Yes, sir.” Julie turned to close the door to her boss's office and was shocked to see the sympathetic look on Miss Franklin's face. This must be even worse than she expected.

“Now, sit,” he growled.

“Yes, sir.” She tried not to show her apprehension, keeping a death grip on her legal pad so her shaking fingers would not betray her. Seeking what little protection the expensive wingback leather chair could provide, she took her seat, crossing her long, lean legs and did her best not to squirm under his cold stare.

Several minutes passed before he finally seemed to have enough control of his temper to speak. “Would you care to tell me why you haven’t got those contracts for Mr. Carter signed yet? I put you on this case because you have always been my star performer. I was hoping this case would be enough to convince my partners that you deserve a seat at the table, even with your lack of tenure. But after my phone call just now with our very angry client, I’m having second thoughts. Care to explain yourself?”

“I have done my best to get that contract signed. Nearly at the detriment of my other cases, Mr. Howe. I’ve called Mr. Cahill a couple of dozen times and each time he hears my voice, he tells me the same thing. “The Cahill’s cattle ranch is not for sale and then he hangs up on me. It’s really hard to talk to a dial tone, and I’m not being disrespectful when I say that. Sir.” Julie knew Mr. Howe normally respected honest feedback. Would he feel that way considering the mood he was in today?

Julie met the senior partner’s direct glare and forced herself to hold it. She had nothing to be ashamed of. Granted she was used to getting her clients what they wanted. And this was a first for her. Frustrated as anyone, she could honestly say she had done her best. There was nothing she could do to force Mr. Cahill to sell his land if he didn’t want to. As far as she knew, that was still against the law.

The silence dragged by while she counted the ticks of the large grandfather clock in the corner. Finally, 158 ticks later, Mr. Howe broke the silence. “Alright, Julie, since your Plan A isn’t working, perhaps you’ll be open to listening to my Plan B.”

“Your Plan B?”

“Yes, my Plan B.”

“If you’re suggesting that I fly down to Texas and talk with Mr. Cahill in person, I’m certainly happy to try anything at this point, but I can almost guarantee what the outcome is going to be. Besides, he hasn’t been out of the hospital that long since he suffered severe injuries in a recent car accident. I’m not sure now is the time—”

“Now is exactly the time. You know my motto, Julie. Maybe you need a refresher course.”

“No, sir. I don’t. But I don’t believe your motto of hit them while they’re down going to work in this situation. He may be down, but he’s not out. And he has a dozen or more offspring to rally around the old gentleman while he’s recuperating from his injuries.” Julie had used every persuasion she could think of to talk Mr. Cahill into selling that piece of property to Mr. Carter. The elderly gentleman was having none of it.

“So, does that mean you’re not open to suggestions?”

“Of course I’m open. My ego isn’t as big as...some of my co-workers in this firm.” She was talking about one co-worker in particular who wanted to unseat her as star performer and get that recommendation for partner, but more than that he wanted her in his bed. She wasn’t about to let Reggie Blackstock get his foot in the door of her office or his... anything else in her panties. “What did you have in mind that I haven’t already tried?”

“Well, I suggest you go down to Texas and meet Mr. Cahill in person. It’s much harder to say no when you’re face-to-face with someone like you.”

“Someone like me? I’m not sure I understand ...”

“Oh come now, Julie, you aren’t that naive. But first I would suggest you try to appear more...approachable. Perhaps the man would be more agreeable if you were to... spruce up a bit. It helps to look your best when you negotiate in person,” Mr. Howe offered.

Julie stiffened and her jaw cramped under the stress of trying to keep from explaining to her boss exactly what she

thought of his suggestion and what cavity he could shove it in. She was tempted to do it anyway, but she knew it would be career suicide. Julie had known since well before law school her looks would get her more than her fair share of successes in life, and that is one of the reasons why she dressed down and worked her butt off. She wanted it clear that her success was because of her hard work and not because of her looks or who her father—

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I heard. You said you want me to appear more approachable. Perhaps, you could elaborate on that statement,” she challenged since she already knew what he was getting at and she wasn’t having it. “I believe I’ve always dressed in appropriate business attire, sir.”

“Come on, Julie, I’ve got eyes. I know underneath those less-than-flattering designer clothes and that no-nonsense bun you wad up behind your head every day, there’s a woman in there.

She supposed that was an attempt at a compliment, but that is not something she wanted to hear from her boss.

“You’ve already proven yourself a master at complicated negotiations, but I dare say if you could just use a little bit of what the good Lord gave you, you’d have a lot more success and that’s what the partners are looking for to fill that vacant position in the boardroom.”

“So, let me be sure I understand, Mr. Howe. You are asking me to use my looks to what? Seduce Mr. Cahill? Because you do realize he is seventy-five years old? I think that ship has sailed.”

“I’m not suggesting you seduce Old Man Cahill, Julie.” She reigned back her indignation just a bit. Perhaps she had misunderstood his implication. Perhaps she should apolo—

“I’m suggesting you seduce one of Old Man Cahill’s grandsons.”

“Mr. Howe, I will not use sex to gain my client a contract. That’s a highly offensive remark. I don’t know whether to sue

you for sexual harassment or a hostile work environment.” Julie needed this job more than she’d like to admit, but she refused to sell herself out. Either her reputation or her soul.

“Look, I’m not saying you have to sleep with anyone. Just turn their head a little. Pick the one you think has the most influence with the old man and then work your magic.”

“Just for clarification, Mr. Howe, exactly what do you propose that I do to work my magic?”

“Look, just turn his head in your direction enough to convince him this deal is a win-win for his family. Get on his good side enough so he might be willing to persuade his grandfather to be reasonable. Mr. Carter is offering a lot of money for that property. According to appraisers, the land is a mixed bag of contradictions. Some of it is rocky and of no use to anyone, not even developers. Some of it is dry as a bone and won’t grow a twig. While some of it is sandy and full of grass burrs. You need to convince the Cahills that selling this land will be in their best interests.”

Julie’s intuition was pricking at her common sense. “So, if it’s not that special, why does Mr. Carter want it so bad?”

“That’s not our business now is it?” His words clipped and sharp. Mr. Howe left his chair and turned toward the great window behind his desk. It was a grand view. One she had admired many times. She dreamed of having the office down the hall with the same extraordinary view. It was like sitting on top of the world, above all the dirt and drama and disappointment.

The room was quiet, both of them lost in their own thoughts for a few moments. Then, without looking at her, Mr. Howe spoke, “Julie. This is business. I had hoped we could come to an agreement without resorting to arm-twisting, but I can see you are going to be stubborn about this.”

Julie frowned. “If you mean refusing seduce a stranger, then yes, I am going to be very stubborn about this,” she huffed.

The man chuckled. She found it very irritating.

“Very well. Then let me put this to you another way. Your future at this firm depends on your ability to earn me and the other partners money. To earn that money we must provide our clients what they want so they will be inclined to pay for the services they hired us to perform. As far as Mr. Carter goes, he’s paying a lot of money to get that contract for the Cahill ranch. Do I make myself clear?”

Julie fumed underneath her practiced calm exterior. It took her a few moments to contain her anger and control her words. Finally, she unclenched her teeth. “Crystal.”

Mr. Howe turned and smiled, but it was a practiced look he used when it suited him. The smile never reached his eyes...or his soul. “Good. Now, I’ve asked Miss Franklin to book you a flight for this evening. I’ll send the company car around to pick you up to take you to the airport.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll go home now and pack. I’ll come back to the office to finish a few things before I leave. You can have the car pick me up here.”

“Very well. Have Miss Franklin take care of it.”

“Yes, sir.” Julie rose from her chair and turned to go when Mr. Howe stopped her.

“Julie?” She didn’t turn nor did she answer, but they both knew she hung on his every word. “Don’t disappoint me. You’ve got a lot riding on this. And if you can’t get the job done, Reggie Blackstock is just itching to get his hands on this case.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered back and started for the door again. Once she was outside and the door between them closed, she whispered to herself. “Damn him.”

Miss Franklin turned. “Did you say something?”

“No. I mean yes, Mr. Howe wants you to arrange for the car to pick me up here in time to make my flight to Texas tonight.”

“Already done,” the woman said in her efficient, no-nonsense voice.

Julie frowned. “Maybe you didn’t hear me, Miss Franklin. I don’t want them to pick me up at my apartment. I’ll be here working until time to go. Have the car pick me up here.”

“Yes, I know. It’s already handled.”

Confused, Julie shook her head and started to explain again, when Miss Franklin lowered her voice and spoke. “Miss Foster, I know about your situation and it was apparent you would not want...” she lowered her voice another notch “... anyone to know.”

Shocked at the woman’s unexpected kindness and understanding, Julie was speechless.

“Don’t worry, I’ve known ever since you were hired. Surely you don’t think there’s any stone unturned when vetting our employees, do you?” When she couldn’t seem to form a single word, Miss Franklin continued. “I know everything about every single person at this firm. Some things I’d rather not know, but that’s another matter.”

Finally, Julie found her tongue. “Does Mr. Howe know? What about the other partners? My co-workers?” Panic was close and she was having a hard time breathing.

For the first time...ever, Miss Franklin reached out and gave Julie’s hand a sympathetic squeeze. She honestly didn’t know the woman had a heart, much less sympathetic feelings toward another human being. “No. No one knows but me, and I keep the background checks and investigative files right here in this drawer.” She patted the bottom right drawer of her massive, very expensive desk. “And I have the only key.”

Still in shock and processing the news, Julie stumbled over her words. “Then you know what would happen if anyone found out about...you must know what the consequences would be to me...and this firm. If the media ever catches wind of this...”

The woman’s cold blue eyes warmed a couple of degrees before she nodded. “I do know and they won’t. But have you ever thought maybe they wouldn’t be as bad as you think?”

“Trust me. It’d be even worse. No one can find out about this.”

“Like I said I have the only key.”

Julie stood frozen in shock, her mind a whirlwind of confusion and questions. “But why would you—”

“Let’s just say I understand where you’re coming from. I have a somewhat similar story.”

“You do?”

“I do.” Julie waited for her to explain, but apparently the woman wasn’t going to divulge the details.

“Then if you know who I am, or rather who my family is, you know I can’t afford not to succeed at this job.”

“I do.” The woman was infuriatingly stoic in spite of her recent revelations.

“Okay, so, what would you do if you were me? I can’t afford to fail.” Julie’s voice broke.

The woman everyone was afraid to cross handed her a tissue. “Then don’t.”

“How am I supposed to get someone to part with something they don’t want to part with? You’re not going to tell me you agree with Mr. Howe’s Plan B, are you?”

Miss Franklin frowned. “I have no idea what Plan B is so I can’t comment on that, but failure has many different faces. Make sure you’re clear about the end goal.”

“I don’t understand. The end goal is to get that contract for our client, and if I don’t, then I’m screwed.”

“Perhaps. That’s gonna depend on your perspective. Either way, you don’t have time to feel sorry for yourself.” The barely thawed persona now returned to a more recognizable frosty temperature. “I suggest you get moving. You don’t want to miss that plane now do you?”

Julie shook her head. “No, I do not.”

“Then go home. Get packed.” The woman hesitated for a moment. “Make peace with whatever it is you need to resolve, and then get back here...say around seven. I’ll have the car pick you up at the side door at seven-fifteen sharp.” Without another word, Miss Franklin turned back to her desk as if Julie no longer existed.

Feeling like she should thank the woman for her discretion, she cleared her throat.

“Are you still here? I hope you aren’t going to make me sorry we’ve talked. You’re not, are you?”

It was obvious the woman abhorred open displays of emotions. Shoulders squared, Julie stiffened her spine and her resolve. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Miss Franklin, and I don’t have the time to discuss it. I have to get home and pack because I have a plane to catch and a contract to get signed.”

A whisper of a smile eased the sharpness in the woman’s face and she nodded in understanding. “I know what it means to find your own path in the midst of, shall we say, iron wills who do what they do beneath a banner of love.” The woman hesitated for a few seconds and she looked past Julie as if remembering something unpleasant. A look of what Julie would describe as regret flitted across the woman’s carefully made-up face. But when Miss Franklin turned her ice-blue eyes back on Julie, the woman pinned her with a look that brooked no argument. “Enjoy your life, Miss Foster. You only have one and no one else can decide what that life looks like. Except you.”

Just then the phone rang and Miss Franklin turned to answer without another word. It appeared the woman felt no need for polite goodbyes.

Julie was long gone by the time the woman was finished with her phone call. Now, all she had to do was come up with a plan to get that contract for Mr. Carter. If not, well, she didn’t really want to think about that.

Chapter 2

Cord Cahill watched his brother hit the ground. Hard. He could tell by the shocked open-mouthed look on Cooper's face that the blow had knocked the breath out of him. And Cord also knew from experience that it came with the job. "Get out of the dirt, Coop. You're never gonna be a champion down there. You're supposed to ride eight whole seconds, not eight tenths of a second."

"Ha, ha. The rope slipped and I lost my grip, that's all."

He watched his brother scramble to his feet and dust the dirt from his chaps and the front of his shirt. His younger brother picked up his crumpled hat and shoved the misshapen straw back on his head. Cord recognized his brother's frustration with each stomp across the arena.

He knew what his brother was going through. He'd felt it many times over when he was chasing his dream to be a champion bareback rider. He also knew the agony of defeat firsthand, probably more than most. Refusing to acknowledge the pain in his back and right leg, he decided to give his brother a break.

"Don't let it get in your head, Coop. It's gonna happen. That's why they call this practice. You're good. Better than good. Now, get back in that chute and let's go again."

Cord walked across the dirt arena and headed straight for the bucking chute while Colt and Cash, their cousins, cut another bucking horse out of the herd in the neighboring corral. They drove the big-boned gelding down the lane and into the bucking chute. Cord heard his brother take a deep breath as he climbed the rails behind the chute determined to give his brother some encouragement. "Just focus on this ride, Cooper. Not the last one. Not the next one. This one is all that matters. And remember, it's not just the strength of your hand and your arm. It's your focus. You know how to ride. Just don't get ahead of the whistle. Focus on the ride."

“Alright, big brother. I’ll do my best,” his brother said in earnest. Cord could see the gears in his brother’s hard head turning, going over every aspect of the ride. He knew the routine. Research the horse you’re gonna ride. In this case, Cooper was riding one of the Cahill Cattle Company’s own stock. A Quarter horse by the name of Jumpin’ Jack Flash. Cord knew the big gelding everyone called Flash, bucked hard the first two jumps out of the gate and then gave a twist to the left usually jerking a right-handed rider off the horse’s back. But Cooper knew this as well as anybody so he should be prepared.

Cash shut the gate on the horse after he entered the chute. A few more words of encouragement and Coop climbed the fence railing and eased onto Jack’s back. Hand in the rigging, feet over the horse’s shoulders for the first jump, Coop shoved his hat down on his head and gave the nod. Colt opened the gate and the horse with Coop onboard exploded into the arena. Conner, Cord’s younger brother, and Cooper’s older twin by two minutes, started the stopwatch the instant the gate opened. Cord grinned and nodded to the others as they all watched Cooper stick like glue to that powerful bucking horse’s back. Eight seconds later, Conner held up the aerosol air horn signaling the ride was over and Coop was still attached. Brody, another cousin, rode his horse alongside the bucking horse and Cooper grabbed him around the waist. Jack gave a few more half-hearted bucks before he headed to the exit gate. Cooper slipped off the side of Brody’s horse and turned toward the chute with the biggest grin Cord had seen in a long time on his brother’s face.

“I told you, man! You’re good. Really good!” he shouted at his brother busy being congratulated by the other guys in the arena.

“Don’t make his head swell,” a familiar gravelly voice said quietly over his shoulder.

Cord turned to see his grampa Cahill standing next to him leaning heavily on his cane. “You shouldn’t be up, Grampa. You know that.”

The patriarch of the Cahill clan never broke eye contact with the activity in the arena, but as always, he was never one to mince words. “I don’t know that. That’s what them fancy doctors from Tyler are saying. I don’t see how a man can get well if he’s cooped up in a house lying around all day. Don’t make much sense.”

“The doctors want you to get rest. The medicine they are giving you makes your body weak and they want you to...you know, give your body a chance to heal.”

He watched his grampa hesitate and then the man who’d been a rock in his world turned to him pinning him with a pointed stare. “We both know I ain’t gonna get any better than this, Cord. I’m old. Doctors can’t cure old, but I’m not gonna let them make an invalid outta me either. So, you can tell them when they come back, I’ll take their damn drugs if it makes you boys happy, but I ain’t stayin’ in that bed...or that house. I’m gonna go where I want when I want. Understand?”

Cord grinned. He was glad to see the old codger was getting a little of his fire back. For a while after the accident, Cord, along with everybody else on the ranch, thought he wasn’t gonna make it. But they shoulda known you can’t stop a Cahill, at least not Jefferson Cahill. “Yes, sir. I understand completely.”

A slight curve of the man’s lips exposed his soft spot for his eldest grandson. “Good, and while you’re at it, you can tell that woman undertaker the doctors ordered to ride roughshod over me that her services ain’t needed. I can do just fine by myself.”

“She’s not an undertaker, Grampa. She’s a caretaker and you do need help, at least until you’re back on your feet again.”

The stubborn set of his grampa’s jaw made it clear the man’s mind was made up, but this was something Cord would have to insist on. He and his brothers and cousins had too much work to do to stay at the house all the time to make sure Grampa ate and bathed and didn’t fall. They’d taken turns during the worst of it, but they needed this caretaker to take

over and it was up to him to make his stubborn grampa see reason.

“I’ll tell her what you said, but then I’m gonna help her get moved into that spare bedroom across from yours,” Cord proclaimed knowing there’d be a fight.

“You will do no such thing, Cord Walker Cahill. I’ve made my mind up and—”

“And I’ve made up mine. At seventy-five, you said it yourself, you’re not a spring chicken anymore. And after—”

“I ain’t discussin’ it. I won’t have a stranger livin’ in my house takin’ care of me like I’m some damn snot-nosed baby. I won’t have it!” His grampa’s voice rose and several heads turned in their direction. A quick glimpse caught Conner’s questioning frown. Cord turned his attention back to the man standing beside him.

“Grampa, be reasonable. You had a horrific car accident, but even worse, the cause of that accident was the heart attack you suffered. Medics say you by all accounts you were deceased when they flew you to the hospital in Dallas. You’re lucky to be alive at all, much less up and gettin’ around. The doctors thought you’d never walk again—”

“That’s ‘cause they don’t know what us Cahill’s are made of,” his grampa said proudly, his chin rose in determination and stubbornness.

“But I do. I know what we are all made of, and to be honest Grampa, I was the one who asked for the caretaker. Me and the other boys...well, we needed the help.” Cord knew it was risky admitting there might be a weak link in the Cahill clan, but as stubborn as his grampa was, Cord also knew he wasn’t selfish. If he could make the man understand the situation fully without making him feel like he was a burden, he had a good chance of winning this argument.

“What the hell do you mean you asked for the caretaker? You think I’m ready to be put out to pasture?” He heard the anger in his grampa’s voice, but he also saw the hurt and sadness in his eyes.

“No, of course not, but think about it. How can any of us concentrate on our work, on our jobs, if all we’re doing is worrying about you? Worrying about whether or not you slipped in the shower and are lying unconscious up at the house while we’re all away. Worrying whether you tripped over Old Ben lying at your feet and hit your head on the floor. Worrying if you ate. Worrying if you took your medicine. Plus, it won’t do you any good to have to lay there needing help until someone gets back up to the house and—”

“I get it so you can stop talking now.”

Cord reached out and squeezed his beloved grampa’s shoulder. “Please understand, we have a ranch to run, but mostly we’re doing this because we love you. We were all scared out of our minds when we got that phone call. It’ll only be for a little while, I promise. When you say the word, and we can see you’re ready to get back to ranchin’ again, then I swear I’ll send the woman packin’.”

“I’m gonna hold you to it, Cord. I’m only agreeing to let the woman stay just till I’m able to move about on my own, understand? Ain’t been no other woman living in that house since your grandma died and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I understand completely. And if it makes you feel any better, the woman I hired to help take care of you is someone you know.”

“Who?” His grampa’s gruff tone made it clear he was less than excited about the prospect, friend or no friend.

“Mrs. Bennett.”

“Nate Bennett’s widow, Audrey?” His grampa quizzed.

“Yes, that’s the one. When I asked around for names that might be interested, her’s came up. When I spoke with her, she said she needed a purpose for her life since Nate died and her kids live in Dallas now. So, looks like you just became that purpose. Now, can I walk you back to the house? You should get off that leg. Doc said you shouldn’t put any weight on it until you get the cast off.”

“Hell, boy. When you gonna learn them doctors don’t know nothin’ about doctorin’ a Cahill. Why I remember one time ridin’ bareback when I was younger than you, I broke my leg, twisted my arm, and knocked myself silly when I landed, and I still walked out of that arena and—”

“I know. I know. You walked out of that arena and five miles uphill on a broken leg, with a dislocated shoulder, carrying two hay bales on your back—”

“Don’t get cocky, boy. I can still whoop your ass if need be.” Grampa’s tone was stern, but Cord saw the amusement in the old man’s eyes just before he turned and headed back to the house.

“Let me help you,” Cord offered.

“No thanks. I made it down here all by myself. I can make it back the same way. Might even grab me a couple of hay bales to strap across my back on the way up.”

Cord laughed. It really was good to see the fire back in his grampa’s attitude. He watched his dad’s father climb the slight rise back to the house. Ten steps into his journey, he stopped and turned to face Cord. “I suppose you and some of the boys are gonna head on over to the Rusty Spur tonight?”

“Maybe. Hadn’t really thought about it much, but it is Friday night in the big city.” He laughed since the town of Wagon Gap boasted a population of around a thousand folks or so now.

“Try to get out and have you some fun, Cord. Life ain’t all work. Find you a woman. Give me some great grandbabies. You and them brothers and cousins of yours need to settle down and get busy raising the next generation of Cahills. What’s gonna happen to this ranch if there’s no young’uns to raise up?”

At thirty-four, Cord had heard this plea a few hundred times before. The Cahill clan was a large one and when the call for grandbabies wasn’t coming from his mom, there was a long line of aunts and female cousins who couldn’t wait to

play matchmaker. “Okay, Grampa. I’ll grab the boys and see what kind of trouble we can get into tonight.”

The old man nodded. “I’m countin’ on you and your brothers and cousins to lead this family into the next century. Don’t let me down, boy.” Leaning heavily on his crutch, his grampa made his way back to the house that had been in the Cahill family since the late 1800s.

Cord felt the crush of responsibility on his shoulders. He knew his grampa was right, especially with some unknown interloper with a huge stack of money trying to push them into selling this place. But that’s why those people, whoever they were, didn’t deserve to have this land. It wasn’t the monetary value of this place that made it so special. It was the legacy of the Cahill family that had been handed down from generation to generation. “I won’t let you down, Grampa. That’s a promise.”

Chapter 3

It was almost midnight when Julie stepped off the plane and onto the tarmac at the small regional airport. She'd flown from New York to her connecting flight in Dallas and into this tiny terminal. She'd never seen an airport so small. Only *two* gates. Waiting for her baggage seemed to take almost as long as the fifty-five-minute flight she'd just taken from Dallas. By the time she got to the rental car counter, it was closed.

Thankfully, she had activated the rental car company's check-in policy through the law firm. The rental agreement and payment had already been submitted so all she had to do was find the rental parking lot and match her confirmation number to the car. *Easy enough*, she thought as she dragged her checked bag, her carry-on, her briefcase, and her purse through the airport lobby, out the front door, and down the sidewalk to what looked like it could be a lot full of rental cars.

She looked at her phone screen again and re-read the confirmation number. Why hadn't they put the color or make and model of the car on the receipt too? "That would have been too easy, right?" Julie muttered to herself. She walked up one row and down another looking in each car's front window for the number. "Bingo!" she shouted, then looked around to see if anyone witnessed her craziness. "But then again who but me would be crazy enough to still be out here at this time of night," she admitted to no one but herself.

The keys were supposed to be stored in a lock box hanging off the driver's window. Pushing the code from her rental agreement into the lockbox keypad, she blew out a big sigh of relief when she heard the lock click and the little door flipped open exposing a key fob. Julie hurried to unlock the car. Rear hatch open, she tugged and pulled to load her large suitcase into the back of the compact SUV. She'd been spoiled by valet parking, which always came with a porter to load her luggage. She needed to remember to tip them better when she flew back to New York.

A quick look at her surroundings, she placed her carry-on and briefcase in the back seat, while she and her expensive handbag slipped into the front seat. First order of business, find her hotel and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow she'd come up with something to convince Mr. Cahill to sell property that has been in his family for a couple hundred years. "Yeah, a piece of cake," she murmured to herself and started the car. Julie followed the signs out of the parking lot and turned onto the dark highway. Driving north, she focused on the car's navigation map to the next highway, turned left, and picked up speed. She had just reached the next intersection when she heard a loud thumping noise outside her car. "What the hell is that?"

A quick glance in the rear-view mirror indicated she needn't worry about putting her hazard lights on. Hers was the only car on the road at this time of night. That was bad because she had a feeling she was going to need help and by the looks of things, help wasn't coming anytime soon.

She pulled over to the shoulder, put the car in park, and got out to find a very flat tire on the rear driver's side. "Great! That's just great!" Julie looked at her phone. The battery was almost dead. She should call a tow truck or roadside service, but she had no idea who to call. Gathering her wits, she decided the first order of business was to find her phone charger and plug in her phone. Then she would search for the closest help and go from there.

Julie walked around to the passenger side and rummaged through her purse until she found her charging cord. Greeted with the satisfying ping of her phone charging, she let out a sigh of relief. "Progress." She quickly glanced at the text messages that popped up on the screen. One from Mr. Howe. *Don't forget. I'm expecting you to work your magic and get Old Man Cahill to sign that contract for Mr. Carter. Don't disappointment me, future partner.*

"Asshole," she mumbled and flipped through a text from her mother, one from her hair stylist, and one from Reggie Blackstock asking her out *again* and congratulating her on getting the primo job assignment. *Let me know if you want me*

to come down and take lead on this. I'd be happy to spend some time with my fav co-worker.

Julie shivered. "No, thank you."

She scrolled through her phone's screen and searched for tow trucks on the internet. There were only two in this area. She called both numbers and got a recording that they were closed now, but they would be open tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. "Wonderful."

It was then she caught a faint note of music nearby. She turned, her eyes searching for its source. Through the sparse foliage of a copse of trees just off the highway, she saw the faint lights of colored neon. Living in New York City all her life, her best guess, the source was a bar of some kind about six city blocks away. An easy walk for help. Or at least find someone who could point her in the direction of help. Hopefully.

Julie gathered her purse, her barely charged phone and charger, and the fob to the rental car. Standing on the side of the highway, she hit the button and locked the car. The last thing she needed on this trip was someone making off with her luggage, although from the looks of the deserted area it would just be plain bad luck if that were to happen.

She stuffed her phone and charger into her purse and shouldered it as she stepped off the concrete shoulder and promptly buried her Christian Louboutin cherry red patent leather stilettos into the red clay dirt. "Really?" Too bad they weren't the same color of red, she gringed. Nothing to be done about it now, so she tiptoed her way across the expanse of landscape, through the trees toward the source of the music.

If she'd packed her running shoes, she could have easily covered the distance to the source of the lights, but her current choice of footwear hindered her ability to move freely through the woods, therefore, she was forced to move slow through dead leaves, downed branches, and what looked to be the carcass of a furry woodland creature. *Ugh*, she inwardly groaned.

Finally, a good half hour later, she arrived at the front door of the source of the neon lights. Studying the lay of the land, she decided the condition of the outside didn't bode well for the inside. She might need to rethink this. In limbo between going in and turning around, she suddenly found herself thrust into the middle of a group of rabble-rousers coming out of the bar. Three to be exact. Before she could find her usually glib tongue, the three men, dressed like they'd just stepped out of an old western movie, stopped short and stared at her as if they'd never seen anything like her before tonight. One of the cowboys removed his hat and held it in his hand. "I'm sorry, ma'am. We weren't expecting you."

She straightened her waist-length jacket and stood tall in her shoes. She became abundantly aware when all three men seemed to be gawking at her around mid-thigh. Her wit and razor-sharp vocabulary returned with a flourish. "Of course you weren't expecting me. I just arrived. What I'd like to know now is if you three are going to just stand there and rudely stare at my legs or are you going to insult me by asking, *what's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this?*" The two cowboys in the back had the decency to look embarrassed. But the one in front, she assumed the cowboy in charge, didn't seem affected by her dressing down at all. In fact, he seemed intrigued if the look of interest in his eyes was any indication. And she was good at assessing her opponents. When he didn't answer, she pushed. "Well?"

"I'm thinking," he quipped. His two lookalike sidekicks laughed, one covered his amusement with a fake cough. The other turned to look at some imaginary point in the sky.

"I see. So you're the funny one of the bunch. Is that your claim to fame?" She wasn't sure why she was enjoying taunting the man so much, but she was definitely enjoying the verbal spar fest they had going on.

"No, ma'am. I mean I can be funny when I wanna be, but I have other talents I'm famous for." He grinned and she felt her lacey designer panties evaporate beneath the heat from that look filled with promise. And secrets. And answers to questions she hadn't asked—yet.

Momentarily stunned by her reaction to the man, she didn't volley back right away. His right eyebrow did a Dwayne Johnson impersonation as if to ask what was she afraid of.

"Nothing, I'm not afraid of a damn thing," she blurted and then realized too late he'd never said a word.

"I see. Well, that's good to know." Without warning, he put his hat back on his head and settled it at a slight angle that gave him a rakish look as he eased toward her until he stood with the brim of his hat almost touching the top of her head. Instincts told her to take a step back, but something intangible held her in place and she found herself holding her breath in anticipation. For what, she wasn't exactly sure.

"So, since I'm not looking at your legs anymore, I guess I'll have to resort to my second choice."

Julie was usually razor-sharp in predicting what her opponents would do next, but at this moment, she had no idea what the man was even talking about. *What second choice?* "I'm not following," she admitted, reluctant to let the man know he had the upper hand.

He studied her for a moment as if he was looking for something. Finally, he said, "You gave me and my twin brothers here, two choices. We could look at your legs or ask you a question. Since I'm too close," he paused and her gaze dropped to his lips and watched as they gently curved in that damn panty-melting grin again, "to look at your legs, I guess I'll have to ask the question."

She could swear he was leaning in ever so slightly. Was he about to kiss her? How long could she keep from leaning into that kiss she suddenly wanted so badly? To her credit, she didn't move a muscle and instead held her breath. "The question?" she repeated, her voice sounding breathy and needy. She decided she was under some kind of cowboy spell.

"Yeah. The question." His sexy, slow, southern drawl in tandem with that grin sent her into a tailspin. "You know, *the* question: *What's a girl like you doin' in a place like this?*"

Chapter 4

Cord was used to women eyeing him and his brothers. He could admit without being arrogant he and his brothers cut a striking example of manhood. None of them had ever been short of female companionship. Maybe that ability to attract women so easily was why he'd never had a serious girlfriend. But standing in front of him was a woman unlike any he'd ever crossed paths with. Why, he couldn't say at the moment, but he was not about to let this opportunity to get to know her better slip away.

“Well?” he pushed, hoping she was up to more sparring with him because he wanted more of whatever she was dishing out.

“Why should I answer? Are you the sheriff of this little posse? Is that why you have the audacity to make me stand here answering your questions?” she sniped at him cutting a sharp look to his brothers and back to him. She acted fierce and appeared to be in control, but something told him she was out of her element and he found that very interesting.

He laughed and turned to his brothers. “Hey guys, where are our manners? This is Texas where we practice southern hospitality.” Then he turned back to the woman who had certainly caught his full attention. He took his hat off again and offered her a grin, one he knew from experience was hard for the ladies to resist. “Ma'am, please accept my apologies—our apologies.” He swept his hat in hand toward his brothers and back. “I won't insult you by asking you that question again, but it's obvious you're not from around here, so...” He dropped his gaze to her cherry red shoes and slowly rose to follow her long legs up and over her lovely curves until he reached the place where her blouse was stretched tightly over what must be two magnificent breasts. His fingers itched to reach out and—

“You were saying...” Her voice pulled his attention—and eyes—back to her face. Her eyes sparked with a smidge of reproach and a whole lot of interest. It was obvious this

smokin' hot city girl had never seen a cowboy up close and personal. The thought sent a flash of heat to his southern region. He discreetly moved his hat in front of him to hide the evidence. Oh, he was willing to get real close and real personal if she was willing. He sensed she was enjoying their banter. He also sensed she was curious. About him or about cowboys in general? From her looks, she'd never even met a cowboy before, much less stepped into a honky-tonk bar.

Unapologetic, he laughed. "I seem to have lost my train of thought. Now where was I?" His eyes dropped once more to the place where her blouse stretched tight against her body, but he didn't linger long. Just long enough to watch her readjust her jacket as if it was suddenly too tight. He was intrigued by this woman and wanted to get to know her better. Where'd she come from and why was she here? "Oh, yeah, you're not from around here—that much is obvious—which only leaves two reasons a woman such as yourself would be about to enter an establishment such as this after midnight."

"Only two reasons. Well do tell, sheriff," she emphasized the title she'd given him with a hint of amusement curving her luscious red lips.

"Alright, as an experienced lawman, I've come to the rescue of many a damsel in distress."

She smirked. "I'll just bet you have, but I can assure you I'm not a damsel in distress. I don't need to be rescued."

"Well, if you don't need help, then the only other reason I can think of you'd be out here this late is you've come looking for a good time." He saw the surprised look on her face and knew he had her right where he wanted her. Damn, he was good.

"That's ridiculous. I was just trying to find..." she sputtered. He could see he'd finally bested her in the sparring contest and he wasn't gonna give her time to regroup her defenses.

"Boys, did you hear? This lovely lady has come a long way to find a good time. Now what kind of gentlemen would we be if we left her to have fun all by herself?"

“Scoundrels.” He heard his younger brother, Cooper, say, amusement tempering his mock indignation.

“And what do you think, Conner?” he asked the other half of the twins without ever breaking his focus on the woman in front of him.

“I’d say Momma would tan our hides for leaving a lady to have fun all by herself,” Conner answered joining in the fun.

Cord turned his attention back to the woman, offered her another sexy grin, and he gave her a mock bow sweeping his hat low in front of him. “Then it’s settled. You, not-a-damsel-in-distress, are coming with us.”

Pleased to see her eyes round in shock, he watched her stammer her refusal. “No, I—I can’t do that. That’s not why...”

He wasn’t about to give her time to strengthen her defenses so he made it hard for her to refuse. “You’re already here, and may I say you look like you’re dressed for a party with those sexy sky-high heels. I’ll bet if you took off that jacket and loosened your collar a bit, you’d fit right in. Wouldn’t she boys?” He knew it was a rare occurrence when a woman walked into the Rusty Spur on the arms of three Cahill men. The town will be buzzin’ tomorrow. He couldn’t seem to wipe this stupid grin off his face.

Cord stuck his hat back on his head and threaded his arm through hers. Now, side-by-side, and close enough to smell her perfume, Cord stiffened again beneath his jeans. Intrigued, he looked over at her and ignored the panicked look on her face. “Come on, darlin’, don’t you worry one little bit about anyone botherin’ you in there. I’m gonna let ‘em know right up front that you are under the watchful eye of me and my brothers here. Trust me, no one’s gonna bother you with us three by your side. Now let’s put those deadly-looking heels of yours to work. Conner, open the door. Cooper, lead the way. Me and the little lady are comin’ through and we are gonna have some fun tonight.”

Without another word, Cord pulled the woman along, very much aware of how each step they took brushed her thigh back

and forth against his, creating friction in a whole lot of other places.

From the moment they walked back into the noisy bar, it took less than sixty seconds for the news to travel all the way around the dance floor. Soon, everyone was looking in their direction while the jukebox played on. *Why wouldn't they gawk?* He and his brothers stood surrounding a stunningly beautiful stranger. He could imagine what people were thinking. They were trying to figure out where the hell the Cahill brothers had found her. He grinned real big. By tomorrow morning, this would be all over town and he for once was pleased as punch. Maybe this will temper some of his most ardent pursuers and their matchmaking mothers.

“Okay, boys, let's make our way to the bar and get this little lady a drink,” he said. Conner and Cooper took the lead and cleared a path to the bar. He felt a subtle tug of resistance, but he hugged his companion's arm a little tighter and gave her no chance to disappear on him. Funny, he thought to himself as the sea of cowboys and ladies parted. Fifteen minutes ago, he was bored out of his gourd. That's why he was headed home so early. Now, for the first time—in a long time—he was excited as hell that something—no someone—could spark his interest and turn his attention from the worries and responsibilities of running a ranch the size of the Cahill Cattle Company. Someone besides those damn pesty lawyers that refused to take no for an answer.

Soon, he and his mystery not-a-damsel-in-distress arrived at the bar. He cut a side glance to the woman he had pinned against his side and was surprised to see so much curiosity on her face. She was acting like she'd never been in a country western bar before. He found himself wondering what else she'd never done before. “Hey, Ranger,” he hollered at the bartender above the chatter of the crowd. It appeared everyone had recovered from their surprise and now picked up where they'd left off.

Ranger nodded. “Hey, Cord. I thought you boys left already.” Amusement in his voice.

“Yeah, we started to, but decided we weren’t done having fun yet. Meet my newest acquaintance, Miss—” He stopped short and looked at the woman beside him. “I can’t keep calling you not-a-damsel-in-distress, now can I?”

She drew in a breath of resignation. “I suppose not now that we’ve gone this far,” she snarked. Then she turned to Ranger and extended her hand. “Hi, I’m Julie.”

Ranger wiped his hand off with a bar towel before he shook Julie’s hand. “Glad to meet you, Julie. What can I get you?”

Cord saw the interest in Ranger’s greeting and something poked at Cord’s chest. In fact, he was downright uncomfortable until his friend behind the bar released Julie’s hand. He frowned. If he didn’t know better, he’d say he’d just had his first jealous feeling since fourth grade when Willa Oakman chose Stoney Buchanan to be her square dance partner at the fall festival instead of him.

Cord shook his head in denial. He didn’t know the woman and by tomorrow she’d be just an image in his rearview mirror. He wasn’t the type to commit to anything other than his lifestyle as a cowboy and preserving his family’s legacy. That was all he had time for. “Ranger, give Julie one of those Texas Tornadoes you make.” He turned to Julie. “You’re gonna love this.”

Chapter 5

Julie couldn't believe how things had taken a turn when she'd approached this off the beaten path country bar. Julie Foster, rising star for one of the most prestigious firms in New York who graduated with top honors from Yale Law School, and who just happened to be Julian Carmichael Foster's daughter, was standing smack dab in the middle of a honky tonk bar. She shivered at the thought of her father ever finding out she had darkened the Rusty Spur's door. Not to mention her mother. Oh, Lord. Vanessa Nash Foster, the darling, and only child, of the multi-billion-dollar Nash Industries, Inc. Heaven help her if they ever found out she'd disgraced their family name. She could hear her mother's shrill voice now screaming her indignation that her only daughter was making a mockery of the Foster name.

"Whattaya think, Julie?" her joined at the hip companion whispered in her ear. Delicious shivers scurried across her skin pushing goosebumps forward to shine bright in the neon light.

"About what?" she whispered back and discretely rubbed her skin to create enough friction to make the troublesome reaction go away.

"The Tornado." He nodded toward the tall drink in her hand.

"It looks good. Not something I've had before. What's in it?" She tugged the straw to her mouth and pulled a long drag. It really was good she had to admit and took another long pull.

"No one really knows. Well, no one but Ranger that is. It's what this place is famous for."

"Is it now?" she said with a fair amount of sarcasm.

"You don't believe me? Come here. I'll prove it to you." He pulled her through the crowd while she hugged her drink close. He stopped in front of a wall nestled between the men's and women's restroom doors. It was then she noticed a lot of framed...stuff.

“What is all this?” Squinting to see in the dim light, she leaned forward and soon realized there were a plethora of newspaper articles, awards, and pictures of people she recognized. It seemed her ordinary bartender wasn’t so ordinary after all. “He’s been on all these television shows?”

“Yep. On the cover of every newspaper and magazine known and unknown.”

“Because of this drink? Really?” She couldn’t believe a man could reach stardom for concocting an alcoholic drink.”

“Not just the drink, although that is what this place is known for. He’s also famous for starting a non-profit organization for ex-military. He has a soft spot in his heart for veterans.”

“That’s nice. It must be very fulfilling to do something that benefits others, especially our veterans. What’s the name of the organization?”

“It’s called The Veterans Guardian Network.”

“Sounds like something worthwhile. I’d be interested in learning more about it.”

“I’ll be sure and let Ranger know. He’s always happy to share information and he’s looking to expand if you happen to know anyone with deep pockets.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Julie filed the information away while she studied the wall a little longer until she spied a picture of a younger Ranger standing with President Bush. “You mean Ranger is a former military guy? He won the Purple Heart? That’s former President Bush awarding him that medal. That means he was injured,” she stated without expecting clarification.

“Yeah, he’s been out of the military for about fifteen years now, but he was injured during his last tour of duty.”

“What branch?” Julie asked now extremely curious about the man behind the bar that made this killer drink.

“Army Rangers.”

“Are you joking?” She turned to face the man who a moment ago she could have accused of physically kidnapping her, but now she was just curious enough to gladly put him through a battery of questions.

He laughed at her comment. “Around here, we call that *pullin’ your leg*, and no, I’m not pullin’ your leg.” His eyes drifted south to where her skirt hit her leg mid-thigh and lingered for a moment before his eyes lifted again. “Not sayin’ I wouldn’t like to though.”

She felt her face heat at his suggestive compliment. She wasn’t so sure she would mind it either. She shook her head and laughed it off. But she wasn’t laughing at the way her body had reacted to the sound of his deep voice combined with that devastating grin of his. What was it about this cowboy, besides his rugged good looks and panty-melting grin, that got through her defenses? He was very charming, of course, but she’d met charming men before, and yet he seemed different somehow. Like anything was possible ... She must be losing her mind ... Nah. It had to be the drink she decided as she pulled in another mouthful through the straw. “But I’m not kidding about Ranger. He was an Army Ranger. That’s where he got the nickname.”

So he had been kidding about pulling her leg. Too bad, she thought. “And here I thought that was his name,” she admitted and took another couple of big sips from her drink. Whatever was in this goblet of blue liquid was damn good. She might even have another one if she decided to stay a bit longer. Although, she should probably ask about getting roadside service for her car. Maybe she could just get a ride to her hotel and worry about the car tomorrow. Or maybe she could ask Cord to give her a ride to her hotel. Or maybe she could convince her Cowboy Romeo to—

“Hey, where’d you go?”

Julie cut a surprised glance to the man currently filling her brain with the most alluring fantasies. Not sure she could lie about where her thoughts had been, so she asked, “What’s his real name?” in hope of distracting her companion. Keeping her

eyes fixed on the wall in front of her she studied his reaction in the reflection of the picture frame glass.

“His name is Alex Beckett, but he likes to be called Ranger. So we do.”

Julie heard a strange sucking noise. “What on earth?” she exclaimed looking down at the empty glass in her hand. “Oh, my.”

Cord laughed and she didn’t miss the fact that more than one female head turned in their direction. “Darlin’, you just sucked that Texas Tornado dry as a bone.”

Julie looked down at the empty glass in her hand. “I guess I did.” She giggled. “I don’t usually drink hard liquor. I’m more of a wine girl, I suppose,” she offered as an explanation.

Cord reached for the empty glass and set it on an empty table behind them. “How about we take a spin around the dance floor before I buy you another one of those?”

Before she could say no, he pulled her onto the huge wooden dance floor amidst a lot of other dancing couples. “Do you know how to dance?” he asked as he placed her left hand on his shoulder, and put his left hand against her waist while his right hand held hers, fingers entwined. The warm glow of her beverage softened her usually resistive defenses and her spine felt like a giant licorice stick, all wobbly and bendy. So this was what it was like to just relax and have a good time. It had been so long since she’d allowed herself such decadence, she’d forgotten how good it felt.

“Of course I know how to dance,” she retorted. Why wouldn’t she? Her mother kept her in dance lessons for most of her high school years. She neglected to add that country dancing was not a part of the curriculum though. She dismissed her doubts. How hard could it be?

The song on the jukebox was something sad and slow. And familiar. It was a tune her Granddad Nash used to play when he was still alive. If only he were still here, things in her life would be so different, at least that’s how it was in her wish-upon-a-star universe. Tears burned her tired eyes and emotions

swirled inside her chest. The weirdest part about this unexpected, and unusual, bout with melancholy tonight was that under normal circumstances, no matter how sad she got or how much wine she drank, she hadn't cried in years. And yet, for some unexplainable reason tonight... She hiccupped and stumbled a bit.

"You alright?" Cord's sexy voice spoke right into her ear, his breath tantalizing her cheek. She realized she'd somehow leaned into him and rested her cheek on his shoulder. She really should put some distance between them, but...

When she didn't answer, he pulled back, his eyes searching for an answer. "Are you okay, Julie?"

She should say no. That she wasn't okay. She was flirting with disaster and she knew it. But right now. Right at this moment. She just couldn't make herself regret where she was, what she was doing, or who she was doing it with. For the first time, in a long time, she was relaxed and for just a little while, she wanted to enjoy herself. Kind of like Cinderella. She would pretend to be someone else until the clock signaled her fairy tale was over. "Yes, I'm fine. I guess that Texas Tornado hit me a little harder than I thought."

Her dance partner pulled away from her and looked deep into her eyes. "You can't be drunk. Not from just the one drink. I know girls who've had ten of those and still managed to line dance without stepping on too many toes," he teased.

"Oh, yeah. Well, I'll have you know I'm a very competitive woman and if your run-of-the-mill girl can down ten, I'll have to take that as a challenge." She heard him chuckle, but even more delicious than the deep, sexy tone, she felt it vibrate in his chest through her thin blouse.

He continued dancing, but he no longer held her close so she took the initiative and leaned into him. "Like I said, I don't usually drink hard liquor, but I find I've developed a taste for those Tornadoes. Mind if I have another one?"

"It would be my pleasure." He led her to the edge of the dance floor to an empty bar table. "If you're sure?"

“I’m sure. After all, you said it yourself. I can’t be drunk on just one.” She batted her eyelashes at him in an exaggerated fashion until he laughed again. She had to admit she really liked the sound.

“Alright, then. Stand here. I’ll be right back. Don’t you disappear on me.” He grinned again. Damn it, why did he have to keep doing that?

“I can’t disappear. My pumpkin is broken, remember?”

Julie stood at the tall table he’d assigned her watching the man swagger his way through the sea of tables. Greeting first one and then another, it was apparent her companion was well-known and well-liked. That fact became even more obvious when a particularly attractive woman joined her at her table. Julie’s instincts told her the woman was looking for something and she had a pretty good idea what that something was.

“Hello.” The unnamed woman said and pulled up a tall bar stool on the other side of the table where Julie stood.

“Hello,” Julie answered in a guarded tone.

“You new in town?” the woman was wasting no time at getting to the point.

“As a matter of fact, I am. You?” Julie knew how to keep her opponents off guard and for some reason she was getting vibes from the woman they were not going to be friends.

“Well, no. I grew up here.”

“Then wouldn’t you know if I was *new* in town?”

For a moment or two, the woman was silent. Julie couldn’t tell if the woman was trying to find an answer to her comment or appear as though she didn’t have a care in the world. But Julie knew better. Finally, the woman with the too long lashes and collagen filled lips turned to her. “I was just being polite.”

“I see. And what is it you really want to know?” Julie was going to make this person work for whatever information she was looking for.

“Are you here with Cord? You know, on a date?” She would give the woman credit for not evading the subject.

Julie smiled. "Describe what you mean by a date." She knew that would ruffle the woman's seemingly self-assured composure.

As expected, the woman frowned. "What do you mean what do I mean by a date? You know, a date."

Julie shrugged. "I can't really answer your question whether or not I'm on a date unless I understand your expectations of what a date is. Oh, by the way, I'm Julie."

The woman looked dazed as she extended her hand. "I'm Jolene. You know, like the song."

"Well, that's an interesting name. It fits you somehow, but I don't know what song you're talking about," Julie said as a way of reducing her adversary's self-importance. She wasn't prepared for Jolene's reaction.

"You've never heard of Dolly Parton's song Jolene?" Shock rounded the woman's heavily lined eyes.

"I'm sorry. But, no, I don't know the song."

"But...but you know who Dolly Parton is, right?" The woman's voice rose a couple of notches gaining the interest of a few surrounding tables.

"No, I don't know who Dolly Parton is. Is it important that I do?"

Just then, Cord returned with their drinks in hand. Julie could tell by the look on his face he suspected there was trouble brewing. "Jolene." He greeted the woman and handed Julie another Texas Tornado. She took a long pull off the straw.

"What are you doing with this woman?" Jolene demanded.

Julie watched her handsome companion's face darken. "I'm not sure that's any of your business, Jolene." His words were sharp and clipped. Julie pulled another drink from her glass through the barber pole colored straw. This woman was obviously jealous of her and Cord. Was she an old girlfriend? By the look of things, a rather recent old girlfriend.

The woman's pretty face contorted in anger. "She doesn't even know who Dolly Parton is, Cord. What the hell are you thinking?"

"Jolene—"

Julie watched as her non-date stopped short, cast a confused look her way, then back to their visitor. "It doesn't matter who she does or doesn't know. Julie and I are just trying to have a little fun tonight. Why don't you stop embarrassing yourself by causing a scene." His tone softened a little. "Jolene, please. Just...go."

Julie could see the shine of unshed tears in the woman's green eyes, but before she could blink those same eyes hardened and the woman stood a little taller in those disco ball boots she was wearing. "I'm going, but you remember this, Cord. She's not one of us and she will never be one of us." With a look of green-eyed jealousy she turned in a whirl of denim and lace and sparkles and grabbed the first cowboy she came to and yanked him out onto the dance floor.

"Are you alright?" Cord asked and eyed her drink.

"Well, of course, I'm alright. Why wouldn't I be?" she retorted, trying to take another long pull off her straw only to be met with that sucking sound again.

"I think that answers your question. You drank that down twice as fast as the first one. Maybe I ought to take you home —"

Julie's streak of independence rose up in protest. "Oh, no, you don't. You are not the boss of me. If I want to go home, I'll take myself home. But what I do want right now is a dance, damn it. Get on your feet, cowboy." She quickly stood and a rush of alcohol flushed through her body. "Oh." She sat back down on her bar stool, half on and half off teetering on the edge. "Maybe if I took off these shoes."

Cord grinned. It was all she could do to stay sitting on that damn stool when he squatted down in front of her, his face level with the hem of her skirt. She suddenly had the urge to jump into his lap. Or on his face. Whichever she could get to

first. Tingles of desire had her squirming on her very narrow bar stool.

“What are you doing?” Her breath barely a whisper over the loud music. He pushed the brim of his hat back so she could see his face from down there. He grinned and placed his hands on her knees.

“I’m just doing my part to help a damsel in distress.”

Before his words could register in her Tornado induced haze, he rested both hands on the back of her knees. She felt her eyes widen in surprise and she knew this was highly inappropriate behavior, but when he removed his hand from her right leg, she found herself wanting him to put it back. Which, of course, was total insanity she berated herself again.

Now both of his hands were on her left leg and ever-so-slowly they drifted down over her calf muscle and even lower to her ankle while his eyes held hers with a look that would melt a cast-iron chastity belt. It was only when he stopped at her heel and slipped off her shoe she realized he was only doing what she’d asked him to do. “Oh. Um. Thank you.” She managed while he massaged her foot before moving his attention to her other leg—er, foot—er, shoe—whatever. Cinderella never had it so good.

His eyes still locked on hers, he stood and reached out his hand. “Let’s dance, Julie.” His voice smooth as honey, his tone just as sweet. Mesmerized, she let him lead her to the dance floor and pull her into his arms. Rocking back and forth to the beat of the music, he whispered against the side of her head, just above her ear. “You’re a lot shorter without those crazy shoes of yours, you know that?” Amusement evident in his tone.

“Yeah, I know. Five whole inches, Einstein,” she teased.

He laughed and pulled her even closer if that was possible. She could feel a hardness against her stomach. Was that his belt buckle she’d noticed before or was that—

She stumbled a little when Cord changed directions. “Just hang on to me, sweetheart. I won’t let you fall.”

Julie's heart stumbled on his words. He'd called her sweetheart. No one ever called her sweetheart. She didn't know if it was the alcohol, the stress of knowing her job was on the line, the constant persecution by her family who professed to love her, or her competitive nature, but all she wanted to do right now was kiss this cowboy holding her in his arms. She would analyze the reasons later.

Before she could make her move, Cord pressed her head against his shoulder where she berated herself for her impulses, but she was soon distracted again when she realized numbly it was a great shoulder. Her fingers began a dance all their own exploring the hard muscles across his back and shoulder. Pressed tight against him, she realized her right hand rested on his chest. That was great too. A really great chest she decided. It was hard and muscled and pressing tightly against her breasts. Her jacket front was hanging open and her designer silk blouse rubbed back and forth against her lacy bra causing friction to her nipples with every sway of the music. She was feeling so good. And free. There was no one here to judge her, except that Jolene woman, and Julie didn't really care what she thought regardless of her self-importance at being named after some supposedly important song. *She* was the one dancing with this handsome cowboy, not glitz and glamour Jolene.

She might be a little bit drunk, she decided. That is the only rational conclusion as to why she was feeling so free and loose. She knew she wasn't in love with this cowboy. She'd barely known him an hour. But he made her feel special when he called her sweetheart, though he probably called every woman he dated sweetheart. Dated? This wasn't a date. Besides Julie had learned a long time ago, men weren't interested in Julie Nash Foster, the woman. They were interested in the only heir of Foster and Nash money. They were interested in Julie Nash Foster's bank account. Maybe that's why she felt so free. This guy had no idea who she was. Whatever the reason, she'd already learned to keep her enemies close and her heart closer. That was a lesson she'd learned the hard way—in front of every news outlet in the world.

Her heart still ached at the memory of the revelation that her only value to employers or men or friends or even family, was how many zeros were in her trust account.

She cast a discreet glance to her dancing partner. Her attraction to him was only skin deep since she knew absolutely nothing about him, but there was something about the way he looked at her that made her feel seen. Or maybe it was because she felt something she thought she'd never feel again: Desire. Julie stumbled at the thought. Getting involved with a stranger wasn't a good idea. Social media had a way of finding out little secrets you thought well-hidden. But Julie knew if he didn't stop looking at her like he could devour her in one gulp, there was gonna be trouble. And social media be damned. To take her mind off Cord's lips and the hard lump bumping against her, she redirected her thoughts to a safer subject. "So, tell me about this Dolly Parton person."

Chapter 6

Cord laughed and he noticed several heads turned in their direction. He found himself stabbed by Jolene's green-eyed stare. He quickly averted his gaze to some unnamed spot on the far wall.

He didn't want to hurt Jolene. She was a nice girl—for the most part. He'd only taken her out a couple of times as a favor to his mother and her aunt, but Jolene wanted much more than friendship right from the beginning. After the first date, she started carting around bridal magazines in her purse. By the second date, she had them married with ten kids. He shuddered at the thought of being married to someone like her. And she was most definitely not his type. Too showy. Too loud. Too selfish. Now she was making it hard to just be friends.

He pulled Julie just a little bit tighter as they moved slowly across the dance floor. "Are you going to answer my question?"

He leaned back to look into Julie's beautiful dark eyes. "Oh, you were serious. You've really never heard of Dolly?"

"No. My parents liked a quieter type of music. I take it Dolly sings country?"

Cord couldn't imagine there was a single person in the entire world who had never heard of the Queen of Country Music. But here was one, dancing in his arms. "Yeah, you could say that."

"So, I suppose that's a big faux pas around these parts not knowing who she is. That would explain your girlfriend's indignation when I didn't know the importance of her name." He heard the sarcasm in her voice.

"You are somethin'. You know that?" Cord pulled her close again and he was thrilled when she snuggled against his chest again. It seemed so natural to wrap his arms around her delicious curves.

“Is that a good thing?” He heard her say and he wondered if she was fishing for a compliment. Well, he was happy to give her one.

“Yes, sweetheart. You are definitely a good something.” He didn’t add the fact that he could totally get used to this. At least until the new wore off he reminded himself. He just wasn’t the marrying kind.

“So, this Dolly person sang a song about Jolene? About that Jolene?” Julie asked in all sincerity nodding her head toward the woman across the dance floor.

“No. Not that one in particular. But yeah she wrote a song about *a* Jolene. Dolly is probably one of the all-time greats in country music. She’s often referred to as the Queen of Country Music. She makes a lot of money, but she donates a lot of it to worthy causes. She’s a good person.”

“Good to know. The next time someone mentions this Dolly person, I’ll be happy to admit I’ve heard of her,” Julie noted with only a slight slur to her speech.

Cord pulled away from the tantalizing woman in his arms. “How about we sit this dance out? Maybe get some water to wash down that Tornado.” He started to pull her off the dance floor when she balked.

“No, siree. You promised me a good time, cowboy. And a good time I shall have.” She pulled him forcefully back to the place they had been slow dancing and wrapped herself around him as another slow song echoed around the great dance hall.

Heat burned deep as thoughts of what she might consider a good time bounced around in his head. Long legs tangled in his sheets. Dark hair cascading over his pillow. Dusty nipples rigid with desire. *Shit*. He needed to find a new topic to occupy his mind or his attraction would be evident for the whole world to see.

Willing himself to refocus his attention on something less arousing, he told her about more country singers while they danced in each other’s arms.

When the dance was over, he turned to lead her off the dance floor when a catchy tune echoed around the building and he watched with amazement as her expression changed in an instant. “Hey, this sounds fun. Let’s dance to this song. I find I am really getting into dancing to country music.”

“Do you know how to line dance?” he asked because he couldn’t imagine this sophisticated woman in her designer suit and those shoes anywhere near a line dance. She seemed more the slow dance ballroom type to him.

“Sure, people dance in a straight line all the time, don’t they?” She frowned in confusion.

Cord laughed. She was adorable. Julie didn’t have a clue what a line dance was. He wasn’t surprised, but if she wanted to line dance, he’d be happy to be the one to teach her all the moves. He just hoped he could keep his hands to himself out here. People around these parts tended to talk and what they hadn’t witnessed themselves, they gossiped about. The story got bigger with each retelling. The rest, they just flat made up. The last thing he wanted for himself, or Julie, was to be at the center of the gossip train. He would just have to behave himself...as best he could.

“Okay, let’s do this.” He grabbed Julie’s hand and twirled her around like a country ballerina, then pulled her against him when she returned to center. The heat between their bodies simmered and he could swear she was about to lean in and kiss him. It probably wasn’t a good idea to be seen kissing in the middle of the dance floor ... but then again, he wouldn’t turn her down.

Instead, she pushed away with a cheeky, slightly drunk grin and said, “Okay, Sheriff. Show me what to do.”

Desperate to give his mind something else to think about, he agreed. “Stand next to me so you can see the steps and do what I do.”

The dance floor was already alive with whoops and hollers. Cowboys and cowgirls lined up in front and back of each other across the dance floor moving in unison. Cord led Julie to the back of the dance floor so they wouldn’t be

impacted by the already active dancers. He looked down at Julie and grinned. “Just follow my lead.”

Cord waited for the beat of the music and then stepped sideways right, left, right, then tapped the toe of his right boot behind him. He stepped left, right, left, then tapped the toe of his left boot. “Got it?”

Julie was watching him closely and then she glanced at the dancers around her. “Simple enough.”

She was a quick study and with only a couple of stutters, she picked up the footwork of the line dance and soon she was taking the steps right on cue. She was so cute dancing beside him in a business suit and barefoot. He would love to see her in tight-fitting jeans and a fancy pair of cowboy boots. Soon the song ended and people were clearing the dance floor when the disc jockey intercepted everyone with an announcement. “Wait. Don’t go. While everyone is on the dance floor, we have one more line dance, so stay where you are. Here we go!”

He heard the intro of another popular line dance song and everyone hollered their delight. Dancers raced to get back in place before the first verse started while Cord used the time to quickly instruct Julie of the different steps. “This one’s really easy. Watch me.” Cord stepped out the new moves. Julie caught on fast. Then the verse started and everyone moved in unison. After the first set of steps, they simply repeated turning left each time until they were facing in the direction they had started and then repeated the steps all over again. Julie traced the steps with ease.

“You’re a natural. Are you sure you’ve never been in a country bar before?” he teased.

She laughed. Her face flushed with excitement and maybe one too many Texas Tornados. “I can assure you, that would not have been allowed.”

“Really? So your parents were strict on you then?”

She stopped dancing and turned to face him with an odd look on her face. “What?”

“You said you weren’t allowed to go to a country bar, and I asked you if your parents were strict. You know when you were growing up?” The two of them were standing still facing each other at the edge of the dance floor surrounded by moving dancers. “I’m sorry, did I hit a sore spot?”

He watched unnamed emotions flit across her face. He couldn’t tell if she was angry at his question or sad. He thought that was such an odd reaction to his innocent question. “Julie? Are you alright? I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Don’t be silly. Why would a question like that *hit a sore spot* as you say? No, I was trying to figure out if I’m thirsty or not, and I am. How about another one of those Texas Tornados your friend is so famous for?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” He certainly didn’t want to get Julie drunk.

“Just to be clear, Sheriff, you are not in charge of me. I am my own boss so when I decide to have another drink, I will have another drink. And I don’t need you to buy it for me. I am perfectly capable of buying my own drinks. Got it?”

Cord nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I got it. Loud and clear.” He didn’t know why his question about her parents bothered her so much, but he did know the sharp-tongued, sparring Julie he first met at the front door of the Rusty Spur had returned. He just wasn’t sure why his innocent question had brought her back. Suddenly, he found himself wanting to do just about anything to bring that sexy smile back to her beautiful face.

Chapter 7

Julie jammed her feet into her shoes and grabbed her purse off the table. “Just so we’re clear, I don’t need anyone taking care of me. I can manage quite well all on my own. And that includes getting my own drink.”

“Julie, whatever I said or did, I’m sorry. Please, wait here and I’ll grab you another drink from the bar. I’ll be back in five minutes, tops,” he promised.

Julie knew she was being a royal pain, but she didn’t owe this guy any explanations about anything in her life. When he reached up with his finger and lifted her chin forcing her to look at him, he apologized to her. Again. “Truly, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” His apology was as sincere as it was unexpected.

Her rigid shoulders relaxed and she let out the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “No, I’m sorry. I just—I just don’t like to talk about my family. We don’t ... get along.” It was all she planned to say about her world.

He offered her an understanding smile. “Hey, I get it. Family can be a pain in the ass sometimes. Not only do I have my two brothers you met earlier, but I also have a whole passel of cousins and aunts and uncles. Trust me. Everyone is always in someone else’s business.”

“What’s a passel?”

“It’s a lot of kinfolks.”

“Ah, I see.” An awkward silence fell between them. Thankfully, it was quickly filled with the din of many conversations along with the beat of music and the clinking of glasses. Finally, she couldn’t stand it any longer. “I’m really sorry for being such a bitch earlier. And thank you for being so understanding. And you’re right. My family is a sore spot I’ve been trying to avoid for years.” Emotions bubbled up threatening to erupt. She couldn’t let that happen. She pushed away the empty glasses and turned to look at him. “Now, how about that drink, cowboy?”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll be right back.”

True to his word, Cord returned five minutes later with another deadly Texas Tornado. She knew this could lead to trouble, but she wasn’t feelin’ any pain. It seems the first two tasty drinks had blown away her inhibitions. She vowed to sip the third and drink lots of the water Cord had also brought to the table.

“I just want to make sure you’re alright.” Cord’s deep voice did funny things to her insides.

“Yes, I’m fine. I just...like I said, I’m more of a wine girl. I don’t drink hard liquor—much.”

“I might have picked up on that fact, and that’s why I shouldn’t buy you any more Texas Tornados.”

“And as I told you before, I can buy my own drinks if I want one,” she snipped out her words clear and concise.

“So you did,” he replied and gazed out over the crowded dance floor.

“Look, I’m sorry if I come off a little abrupt. I’m one of those women who just doesn’t like being told what they can and can’t do. Really, I’m fine, and thank you for worrying about me. That—well, that means a lot.”

“Entirely my pleasure, but I meant what I said. You want another one of those, you will have to buy it yourself. I am not the kind of cowboy who gets a lady drunk. It’s just not a gentlemanly thing to do.” Cord raised his glass to her in toast and took a sip.

“Duly noted,” she said and raised her giant two-fisted goblet of blue liquid in return. They sat for a quiet moment or two without talking. Julie sipped her third Tornado slowly while Cord nursed what looked like bourbon on ice. She’d read somewhere that cowboys liked to drink beer. Apparently, this cowboy was a little more sophisticated than the run-of-the-mill variety.

After a few more slurps of her drink, she switched to the water glass in front of her and saw a discreet look of approval on her companion’s face. Just then, her stomach decided to

growl. It was then she took note of the time and realized she hadn't eaten since lunchtime. Now she understood why she was so susceptible to the alcohol. She needed to eat something.

"Um, you said something about bar food earlier. What do they have?" she asked with a more pronounced slur to her words. He grinned that damn I-told-you-so grin of his and flagged over a waitress. "Got a menu handy, Roxie? I got a lady here who needs some food."

The heavysset bleached blonde with purple streaks in her hair nodded and pulled a laminated sheet out of her apron. "Sure do, Cord. The special tonight is wings. Better get your order in. The kitchen's closing at one-thirty."

"Understood." Cord gave the waitress a wink and turned back around to Julie with the menu.

"You're good at that aren't you?" she blurted without taking time to filter her outburst.

"Good at what? Tracking down a waitress to get a menu? Oh, yeah. There's a lot of talent in that." He leaned over with the menu in hand so she could see the list of foods available, but she never took her eyes off him.

"Flirting with the ladies," she stated matter-of-factly.

Cord laughed. When she didn't laugh along with him, he grew serious. "You aren't seriously calling that flirting are you?" He frowned and she could tell her accusation troubled him.

"What do you call it?"

"I call it being friendly."

He seemed defensive now. She hadn't meant to accuse him of anything at all. She was just observing people like she always did.

"Remember, I'm from the big city. We have a different definition of friendly. Now, give me that menu, and let me get something in my belly before this drink sets me on my butt." She grabbed the menu from him and studied it. There wasn't

much on here for a girl who tried to stay away from meat.
“Um, maybe I’ll just wait until breakfast.”

“Is that an invitation?” Cord sent her a look that had her squirming on her bar stool.

“Are you hinting at something, cowboy? I thought you’d be too much of a gentleman for such dastardly behavior with a stranger. Aren’t cowboys supposed to be shy around the ladies?”

“I’m hardly shy, little lady, but I was talking breakfast. What are you talking about?”

Julie knew he’d turned the tables on her again. What was it about this guy that flustered her so? He had a knack for pointed jabs and she liked sparring with him. There weren’t many people who could keep up with her in that department. She was very intrigued indeed.

“So, if you aren’t going to eat, wanna dance again? I think we’re gettin’ pretty good at working as a team.”

It was an innocent enough statement, and she was trying hard not to read anything into it.

“I’d love to dance, Sheriff.” She slid off her bar stool and nearly took a spill when one of her heels caught on the bottom rung of the barstool base.

He caught her before she fell. His face inches from hers, she watched his mouth turn up in that damn breath-stealing grin again. “I think we’ve already established those shoes are not conducive to dancing to country music.” He nodded toward her feet.

“I suppose you are right. Then let’s get rid of them.” Julie reached down and raised one leg to pull off one of her stilettos. Wobbling dangerously, she grabbed hold of Cord’s shirt to steady herself.

“Can I help you with that before you fall and hurt yourself?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Sheriff. You have my permission.”

And before she could say another word, Cord knelt down in front of her, ran his hands down her legs, stopping at her feet. “Hold on to me, please. You on the floor would make a spectacular picture in the morning newspaper, but I don’t think you’ll be very happy to see it, do you?”

“No. No newspapers. Thank you.” She knew ending up in the newspaper would be very, very bad.

“Okay, then hold on to me,” he repeated.

She wobbled a bit. Was it from the drink or the shoes, she couldn’t be sure, but she finally decided it was safer if she propped herself against his back. It was hard to do with five-inch heels on, but when he removed the one, she was able to steady herself by hanging on to his shirt. She held up the foot with the remaining heel nearly spiking him in the hand. “Ooo, sorry.” She mumbled.

Barefooted again, she leaned against Cord while he placed her shoes on the bar stool with one hand while his other arm held her close to his side. When he turned his full attention to her again, she was overwhelmed with that same damn urge to kiss the hell out of him. What would it hurt?

“Not a damn thing!” Before her brain could catch up to her urges, she threw her arms around him, tiptoed on bare feet, and proceeded to do just that.

For half a second, she felt him resist her advances, but when her hands slid from around his neck and smoothed over his chest, he pulled her into his arms and did things to her mouth she’d only dreamed of. Somewhere nearby, she heard a voice yelling Cord’s name.

“Hey, Cord. Get a room!” someone shouted from the crowded dance floor.

“Shut up, Duke. I’m just helping out a damsel in distress. Where’s your chivalry?” She heard Cord’s voice volley back to the unknown person.

Always one to join in a debate, she jumped in. “Yeah, Duke. Where’s your shillary?” Encouraged by the laughs she heard, she leaned into Cord and kissed him again. This time,

she went the soft, sweet, lingering kiss route. Finally, Cord pulled away and pressed his forehead against hers. “We can’t do this here.”

“Then where can we do it?” She knew she was playing with fire, but it had been a long, long time since she’d been burnt and she was desperate to remember what it felt like.

Chapter 8

Cord wasn't sure what was happening with his impromptu date, but it was apparent the woman was not a regular drinker. Maybe he needed to find out where she was staying and take her home, but the minute she placed her lips on his, the game changed completely and he realized he was no longer in charge. "How about let's dance?"

"Sure. I want to dance, but I had a different dance in mind," she answered and snuggled against him. Julie nestled perfectly against his chest. And without her heels his chin rested on the top of her head against soft brunette waves cascading down her back. Every now and again, when she moved just right, her hair brushed his hand sitting on her hip. The soft whisper of her long curls sent shivers of desire through his body. He knew everyone in this place would have a story to tell tomorrow about this woman in his arms.

He leaned back so he could see her face. "Maybe I should take you home," he suggested. He was prepared for her to agree. He was even prepared for her to insist it wasn't time for her to go home. What he wasn't prepared for was the beautiful woman in his arms to rise up on her toes and crush her luscious lips against his again. Shock paralyzed him for half a heartbeat, but desire soon overpowered his common sense.

Julie's kiss was soft and languid, but when he invaded her mouth with deep sweeping strokes of his tongue, she met his tongue with her own. She was as good at sparring with her tongue as she was with her words. For an undetermined amount of time, Cord held this stunning stranger in his arms and kissed her like a man dying from thirst. He'd kissed more than his share of pretty women, and he was no slouch in the romance department, but something was different about this one that made him want to get to know her better. A whole lot better.

It wasn't until the music stopped and Ranger's voice came over the loudspeaker announcing it was time to go home, that Cord was able to pull away from Julie's lips. He wasn't sure

what to say, so he just held her close and tried not to look at her kiss-swollen lips. It made him want more.

“Okay, cowboys and cowgirls. It’s lights out. As the old sayin’ goes *you don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here*. Everyone who has an open bar tab, I expect you to pay it before you leave. Remember, you don’t want an ex-ranger up your ass.”

Cord half-heartedly joined in the smattering of laughter tittering across the departing crowd at the bartender’s standard joke on Saturday night’s close, but all he could really think about was the woman tucked under his arm.

Ranger finished his announcement with: “Drive safe. If you need a ride, come see me.”

“I guess that means us too, huh?” Julie said as Cord hugged her close. He did this for two reasons: One, he didn’t want to lose sight of her. Two, he had a very large bulge in his front pocket he didn’t want anyone to notice. Although, he knew it wasn’t something he could hide from Julie. He just wished he knew what she was thinking right about now.

His brothers were waiting for him just inside the front door. “So, now what?” Conner asked. “You can’t leave her here like this. Do you know where she lives? Or where she’s staying? Do you know how she got here?”

“No, I don’t know anything. And you’re right, we can’t leave her here.”

“Are you talking about me as if I’m not standing here?”

He and his brothers turned to Julie standing by his side.

“I suppose we were,” Cord answered, “We thought maybe you weren’t...I mean we need to make sure—”

“Sure you take care of the damsel in distress? Well, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, I don’t need to be taken care of. I’m not a damsel in distress. I’m used to being in charge of my own person...” she turned and made eye contact with Cord, “and I’m used to getting what I want.”

The look she gave him held clear meaning to anyone looking. She wanted him and as far as he was concerned, she could have him.

“Cord? What do you want to do?” Cooper asked while the four of them stood to the side of the exiting crowd dodging first one and then another.

“Why don’t you and Conner head on home. I’ll be along.”

“Sure ya will,” Conner said amusement coloring his tone.

Both his brothers nodded to Julie. “It was nice to meet you, Julie. Hope to see you again real soon.”

He watched Julie offer them a genuine smile. “I hope so too.”

His brothers turned to the door, but he heard Cooper say to Conner on the way out, “Why is it Cord has all the luck with the ladies?”

Conner grinched back, “Who knows? Maybe it’s the cologne he wears.”

Cooper returned banter, “Or maybe it’s that we always smell like horse shit.”

His brothers laughed and headed off into the parking lot to find their truck and head for home. He turned to Julie. “Are you sure about this? It’s not too late to change your mind.” Julie didn’t answer, instead, she reached out and captured his hand in hers. “I don’t want to change my mind, Sheriff.”

He grinned at her name for him. He kinda liked it. “Alright then, let’s go.” Cord followed her out the door amidst the partygoers looking for their rides home. He knew all eyes were on him and Julie, but it wasn’t the first time he, or any one of the cowboys or cowgirls here, had taken someone home for the night.

He made a beeline for his truck and scanned the parking lot at the remaining vehicles knowing their drivers had left them to be picked up in the morning. “Which one is yours?” he asked recognizing most of the cars and trucks left.

“Um, I didn’t park in the parking lot,” she said. There was something in her tone that caught his attention.

“So, how did you get here.”

“I walked.”

“I doubt that. Not in those shoes, you didn’t.”

“Actually, I did.”

“And how far was this walk of yours in those things?”

She turned and pointed through a copse of trees. “Just through there.”

“But that’s the highway. Are you saying you hitchhiked?”

“No, I’m saying my car is sitting on the highway over there.”

“Why would your car be sitting on the highway unless...” He gave her a look that said you-can’t-fool-me-now. “So why would you leave your car on a highway unless it quit running? So, you were a damsel in distress after all!”

Julie shook her head in denial. “No, I mean I did come here seeking help, but I just needed a recommendation on who to call for roadside service. I have a flat tire on my rental car. So technically, I don’t fit the definition of a damsel in distress. Not if I was just asking a question.”

“Is that a fact?” Cord’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Yes, that’s a fact,” she bantered back. “Once I had the information I needed, I fully intended to handle the problem myself. So again, that does not qualify under the legal definition of a damsel in distress.”

“Again, I beg to differ, because what you don’t know is that there are no roadside service companies who operate in this county at this time of night. We are a very small community and everyone except the night shift at the hospital and the sheriff’s department is home in bed, so there’s no help comin’ until mornin’. That means”—his eyes dropped to her lips causing lightning to stir in his veins— “you do qualify, by definition, as a damsel in distress.”

“Semantics. Can I grab a few things out of my car before we go?”

“Of course.”

Julie fished in her bag until she handed him a key fob.

Cord took the fob and put it in his jeans pocket. “You’ve got time to think about this before—”

Without missing a beat, she wrapped her arms tight around his neck and whispered in his ear, her breath teasing his libido. “I’m sure, Mr. Cowboy. Just take me home.”

His conscience warred with his desires. Cord reminded himself that she wasn’t used to drinking and although she definitely wasn’t drunk, she might be...vulnerable. And he would never take advantage of a woman in a vulnerable state.

“I’m not the marrying kind, so if you’re thinkin—”

She laughed. “Don’t worry. I’m not out to catch me a cowboy. I’m not the marrying kind either. Trust me. You wouldn’t want a woman like me for your wife.”

He frowned at her remark wondering what was behind it, but he didn’t question it. He was just glad they both knew the score here. He didn’t want another situation on his hands like Jolene. He’d learned to keep expectations front and center. That way, no one went away with their feelings hurt.

“Your place or mine?” he teased. “But just so you know, I have a lot of family so the walk of shame tomorrow morning could be weird for you.”

She laughed. “My place. I’d rather keep this just between the two of us. No one needs to know, right?”

He unlocked his truck and helped her up into the passenger seat. Before she swung her legs in, he answered her question. “If you’re wondering whether or not I kiss and tell, the answer is no. Never.”

She grinned, grabbed the front of his shirt, and pulled him close. “I knew I could count on you,” she said and kissed him again.

After another couple of scorching kisses, someone honked their horn at them. “We better get goin’, that is, if you’re really sure about this.” Cord offered her an out one more time.

But she pulled him close again and whispered, “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Chapter 9

Julie was aware of everything going on around her. She'd had a few drinks, sure, but she knew exactly what she was doing. She'd listened to her common sense when it told her she was an idiot to have a one-night stand with a cowboy she met just a few hours ago. But her instincts told her she was safe with this stranger, so she told her common sense to shut the hell up. She wasn't looking for a tomorrow. Her world and Cord's world would never collide, but from the moment she met him and his brothers at that neon-lit front door, she felt an attraction to him that could not be denied. It was as if their verbal sparring had ignited a flame that grew hotter with each look, each touch, each dance. Whether she'd had one Texas Tornado or five, the end result would be the same. She wanted this cowboy and she was going to have him. It was nobody's business but her own.

Cord jumped in his truck and started it up.

"What's that sound?" She frowned listening to the truck's engine noise. "You might have a problem with your vehicle too," she warned.

"That's a diesel engine. Haven't you ever been around trucks before?"

She shook her head. "No, my social circle doesn't include trucks unless you count the catering trucks."

"Where is your circle, if you don't mind me asking?" Cord put the truck in gear and drove out of the parking lot, then stopped at the highway. "I guess I need to know which direction we're headed. Where are you staying?"

Julie ignored his first question and focused on the second one. She dug her phone out of her purse and scrolled through her emails for her confirmation. "Holiday Inn on Highway Thirty-One."

"I know the one," he said and turned left toward her rental car.

“I’ll just bet you do,” she teased knowing full well she wasn’t the first impromptu date he’d left the Rusty Spur with.

“If you’re implying I’ve been there before, I haven’t. I usually take my dates to the Motel 6 a little further out of town.”

He was teasing her. “Alright, let’s make a deal. I won’t ask questions about your life, and you don’t ask questions about mine, deal?”

“Okay, deal.” He pulled up behind her car. “What do you need out of your car?”

“I can get it.” She started to get out and he stopped her.

“My momma raised a gentleman; and although, I know it’s important to you to not be a damsel...you know, it’s just as important to me to treat a lady right. It’s what men down here in the south do. So, just tell me what you need and I’ll be quick about it.”

She nodded her understanding. “Got it. I need the suitcase, the briefcase, and the laptop computer bag.”

“I’ll be back.”

She watched him unlock her car and remove the items she wanted. He was a strikingly handsome man. She couldn’t wait to separate his shirt from those amazing muscles she watched flexing across his back as he pulled on her luggage. She wanted his body, naked from head to toe, pressed against hers. She wanted to taste him on her tongue. *All* of him. She wanted his hands on her skin. “Are we there yet?” she whispered to herself. Thoughts of his tongue tracing her—

“If you don’t stop looking at me like that, we won’t make it anywhere.” Cord was busy shoving her things into the truck’s big back seat. His breath sounded labored, coming out in puffs between words, but she knew by the distinct bulge just below his belt buckle, his shortness of breath wasn’t just about lifting a heavy suitcase.

When he was done, he shut the driver’s side passenger door, climbed into the driver’s side, and pointed the fob at her car. The lights blinked and the horn honked. “There ya go,” he

said and handed it back to her. He grinned and started his truck. “It might have been quicker if you’d just said to get everything in the car, don’t ya think?” he teased.

“Now, where’s the fun in that?” she volleyed back. “A girl needs her stuff where I come from.”

He directed a sizzling look in her direction. “You won’t need anything tonight.”

Her pulse raced and she was suddenly hit with the reality that she was really doing this. “Well, I’m not sure that’s one hundred percent correct.” She issued her own breathy response.

“And what is it you need tonight?” He grinned and made a U-turn in the highway heading west toward their impromptu rendezvous place.

She looked out the big pickup window and thought about her answer before she spoke. “It would appear the only thing I want—or need—tonight ... is you.” Julie thought about her comment a second or two before she turned and flashed Cord a very large come-and-get-me smile.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.” Cord punched the accelerator sending the diesel engine into a higher pitch. From the looks of things, Julie was headed for her first one-night stand and she couldn’t wait.

Chapter 10

Cord had had his share of one-night stands. After all, cowboys were expected to woo the ladies, and he knew he had a way about him that tended to attract more than his fair share of beauties. But this one—he cut a sideways glance at his passenger—this one was different. He had never felt such a strong connection. But even more puzzlin' than that, he'd never connected with anyone so quickly and that was something he dare not analyze until the morning sun and come and gone.

The highway was empty except for an occasional armadillo or raccoon scurrying to cross the highway ahead of his headlights. And once he had to swerve to miss a possum sitting smack-dab in the middle of the.

“What was that?” Julie gasped as he jerked the truck toward the shoulder to miss it.

“A possum,” Cord replied searching his rearview mirror for signs of life. He saw the gray shadow hurrying toward the ditch alongside the highway.

“A possum? You mean an opossum?” She corrected.

Cord laughed. “No one around these parts would ever call it an o-possum. You'll mark yourself as a city slicker for sure if you do.”

Julie shrugged. “Not to worry. I won't make that mistake again. I wouldn't think the subject comes up a lot in conversations.” She looked down at her phone. “The motel is at the top of the next hill.”

He waited a moment before he asked the question again to make sure he was really willing to let her go if she changed her mind. Of course, he was. He'd never push a woman into having sex with him if she didn't want to and he wasn't about to start now. Either she came willingly, or he'd go home with a very large and painful bulge in his jeans.

Cord slowed the truck and steered under the portico entrance. He put it in park and turned to Julie. “Are you—”

“If you ask me one more time if I’m sure, it may be the last words out of your mouth. Do I make myself clear?” The look she gave him said there were a whole lot of unsaid nuances behind that sentence. He killed the engine. “I just want you to be sure. I can unload your luggage and say goodnight if you want. There’s no pressure.”

Julie turned to face him, equally matter of fact. “I know about pressure, Cord, and this isn’t it. If I remember correctly, this was my idea. You’re just along for the ride.” She gave him another look that spoke volumes.

“I think we’d better get checked in before we embarrass ourselves here in the parking lot.”

She leaned over the center console and he met her halfway. “I think you have a brilliant mind, Cord. I couldn’t have said it better myself. I’ll be right back.”

Julie grabbed her purse and hurried inside. Ten minutes later, she returned. “Pull around to the back entrance. We are the first room on the left.”

He did as she said and soon she was sliding her hotel card through the slot and tugging on the door handle. “I’ll hold the door open. You grab—”

“Your stuff. Yeah, I remember.” He hurried around to grab her things from the back seat. Truck locked and keys secured in his front pocket, he rolled everything up the wheelchair ramp on the sidewalk. Passing through the door Julie held open wide, he pressed his lips against her ear and whispered, “Lead the way, cowgirl.”

She laughed out loud and then covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry. I guess I’m laughing because I’m the furthest thing from a cowgirl I can imagine.”

Cord turned his head and claimed her lips for another scorching kiss. When he was finally able to pull away, he pressed his forehead against hers. “I’d be willing to bet that’s not true, but only time will tell.” It was obvious by the frown

on her face she wasn't following. "How about we finish this conversation inside the room."

"Probably a good idea," she said and looked down the empty hallway. Julie turned and tapped the card against the electronic lock. The light turned green and she led the way. He was hot on her heels, luggage in tow. The door clicked shut behind them and Julie set her purse and laptop case on the desk. When she turned, Cord was right behind her and he didn't hesitate to capture her in his arms. "Now, how about we finish that conversation we had in the hall?"

"You want to have a conversation now?" She sounded surprised and he couldn't help but laugh.

"Yeah, like I said, I'll bet you're more cowgirl than you think, but there's only one sure way to find out."

She fisted the front of his shirt in both hands and pulled him closer for another heated kiss. When she let him come up for air, she reached up and removed his hat and threw it on the floor. "I would think it would be clear enough that I've never ridden a horse in my life."

He leaned over her and nuzzled her neck. "Being a cowgirl has nothing to do with riding a horse."

"Then what does it have to do with?" She arched her back pushing those delicious mounds of hers against his chest. He was so damn hard he was certain the zipper on his jeans was about to do damage to his erection.

"You've heard that old sayin' about save a horse, ride a cowboy, right?"

She shook her head. "No." But he saw realization dawn in her eyes. "Ah, I get it now." Julie stood back and began unbuttoning her blouse. "Well, then saddle up, cowboy. This cowgirl's goin' for a ride."

Cord reached out and pushed her half-unbuttoned blouse over her shoulder. "That's what I love, a cowgirl comin' in hot."

Chapter 11

Julie thought she was going to lose it right then and there. Oh, she was comin' in hot alright. She was so damn hot she might set fire to this hotel room and everything in it.

Her eyes dropped to the large bulge south of his very large belt buckle. Was it possible to melt in a puddle of pure desire? She wasn't certain, but she certainly felt like it might be.

“Need help with that blouse?” he asked, his voice tight.

“No, why?” She asked as she cleared the sixth button from the top.

“Cause you're takin' too long.”

“Well, then, I shall certainly remedy that deficiency,” she said and jerked the two-hundred-dollar blouse open from around her waist, the remaining buttons flew and bounced against the wall. She laughed. A few hours ago, she would have never allowed herself that kind of freedom, but now ...

Cord's fingers traced the top of her breasts over her expensive lace bra. “Damn,” he said from between clenched teeth. “That's some bra. Makes me want to...” His fingers left her skin and traced the sheer lace to the place where her nipple puckered beneath.

When he didn't finish his sentence, she pushed for an answer. Not that she was insecure. It was just that it had been so long since she'd allowed her self-restraint to run so wild and free. Just this once, she reminded herself. “Makes you want to what?” She whispered.

He didn't answer. Instead, he began to methodically unbutton his own shirt. Snowy white and starched, she watched him loosen each button exposing more and more of that muscled chest of his she'd been leaning on all evening. She wasn't surprised to see a generous dusting of dark blonde hair as the edges of his shirt parted. It was as glorious as she'd imagined.

When he reached the last visible button, he was about to pull the tail of his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans her hands stopped his. His eyebrows raised in question. “No, I’m not having second thoughts. May I?” she asked for permission knowing full well she wasn’t really asking for permission. She was rewarded with that toe-curling grin again. He held out his arms showcasing those generous biceps of his and said, “Be my guest.”

She didn’t waste any time. Her eyes locked on his as she pulled his shirt out inch by painfully slow inch. Finally, it was free and she released her grip just long enough to push the offending garment off his shoulders much like he’d done with her blouse except she grabbed the shirt higher to imprison his arms in its sleeves against his side. The feel of hard muscle beneath tight flesh was a sensory reward she relished. Instincts pulled her body against his, and she placed feather-soft kisses across his chest. Cord stood stock still, but she knew he was as affected as she was if his labored breath was any indication. She had to admit she liked the way he let her take the lead.

Her lips moved of their own volition. Her tongue found the rigid tip of one nipple and she couldn’t keep it from dancing a circle around it. She heard the deep rumble of Cord’s groan so she moved her exploring tongue to the opposing one. He grabbed her head and wove his fingers through her hair applying a light pressure to keep her mouth right where it was. But when she moved her busy lips south, he offered no resistance.

She followed that defined middle ridge between his stomach muscles down to the place where his jeans stopped her progress. Leaving a kiss on his belly button, she stood upright again, her gaze pinning him with a heated look. He started to reach for her, but she shook her head. “No, you can’t touch. Not yet.”

“You’re killin’ me. You know that right?” He moaned his frustration, but he kept his distance.

“I do. That’s why I’m doing it,” she admitted unsure why she felt so free and open with this stranger.

He chuckled. “Figures. A woman who wields the power of being desirable is a dangerous one. I better watch my heart,” he teased.

“And don’t you forget it, cowboy.” She stepped just out of his arm’s reach and pulled first one black satin strap of her bra off her shoulder, then the other leaving that lacy scrap of lace struggling to hold up her generous breasts. His heated gaze dropped to the twin mounds peeking above her bra and she felt her nipples tighten into hard peaks. Suddenly, the bra expertly fitted felt too small. She reached behind her and fumbled with the hooks.

“May I?” Cord stepped closer, but his hands remained at his side waiting for her permission.

“You may.” Her words barely above a whisper. She started to turn around to give him access to them, but he stopped her.

“No, I have a better idea.” He moved her waist-length hair aside and hooked it over her shoulder to keep it in place. Then, he pulled her tight against him, his arms wrapping around her body holding her close while his fingers worked their magic. Soon, the pressure of her bra was gone, but the scrap of lace remained in place, held there by the press of their bodies against each other. “I think we can do without this.” Cord’s fingers traced her bare back. Shivers rippled across her body in every direction. The crest of their waves ending in arrows of white-hot desire at the juncture of her thighs. She shivered. “Are you cold?” Cord asked and pulled her bra from between them leaving nothing between them. Nothing at all.

“No.” She slid her arms around his neck and rose to her toes, every inch of her body stretched against him. It was impossible to deny the hard peaks of her nipples driving into his chest or the rigid length of his erection taut against her stomach. And there was so much heat.

Julie relished the sensual feelings of their body entwined. A few hours ago, she had never laid eyes on this man, but now she felt a connection. Oh, she wasn’t naïve enough to think this was a connection that would last forever. That was a fool’s dream and she was anything but a fool. But she knew when

she returned to her world, this night—this memory—would be something she would remember. Always.

She feathered tiny kisses along his jaw, savoring the soft scratch of his late night, or was it early morning, whiskers against her lips.

With every movement, every breath, her nipples rubbed against his chest. She relished the feel of his coarse chest hair against her sensitive peaks, the friction sending delicious fingers of pleasure down into her belly, concentrating in her core.

Weak with passion, she closed her eyes, floating in the sudden rush of heat and dampness, feeling the insistent clench of anticipation.

His powerful erection stabbed at her through his jeans. She needed him closer. She pushed herself back up on her toes, grinding her body against his, and whispered in his ear making sure her breath worked its magic. If it was possible, she could swear his bulge seemed to grow a little harder. Desire pooled in her matching black-lace designer panties and she was certain she couldn't wait any longer to sample this cowboy's talents. "It's time for that ride, cowboy."

Her knees nearly buckled when he answered, "Saddle up, cowgirl. I'm all yours."

Chapter 12

His body was on fire. The motel air conditioner was running full blast, but Cord was certain his desire for the woman standing in front of him was going to consume them both. His mouth fell on Julie's and he felt consumed with hunger as he devoured her lips.

This wasn't his first rodeo so he knew how to divest a lady of her clothes, so why he felt as much anticipation as if this was his first time, he had no idea. He would certainly examine those emotions later, but right now, he had a cowgirl begging for a ride and the last thing he wanted to do was disappoint her.

"I want to lick every inch of your tantalizing body, Julie, but first I want these." His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears, and he didn't care one bit, not when she squirmed in his arms trying to get closer. Her body against his forced him to suck in his breath letting it out in ragged gasps. He had seen plenty of women's breasts before. In fact, he would consider himself a breast man if he had to pick one part of the female anatomy as his favorite, but Julie's were nothing short of spectacular. Why? They were the bury-your-face-and-never-come-up-for-air kind. Every man's erotic dream. Lush and round, firm and heavy in his hands topped with dusty peaks the same color as her lips. "You're stunning." His voice rasped with need.

"Thank you. You're not so bad yourself," she whispered and reached down and unhooked the latch on his belt buckle. He held his breath as she worked the button on his jeans. It took both her hands to manage his zipper, but she made quick work of it. Soon, the only thing standing between them was a thin pair of boxer shorts and a scrap of black lace. Thankfully, his cowgirl didn't stop there.

Julie pushed his jeans over his hips and guided them down his legs with her foot. When they reached his ankles, she sent them flying across the room with a well-aimed kick quickly followed by her fingers hooked in the elastic of his boxers. So

slowly he thought he might have to beg, she pushed them down over his hips. Finally, his erection was free, and suddenly, he was the one who felt vulnerable. That was new. Usually, he was in complete control of his body and his companion, directing their lovemaking to a satisfying conclusion for them both. But tonight, this incredible woman—this stranger he felt like he'd known his whole life—was in total control. And for once, he was willing to let someone else take the lead.

Standing naked before her, he watched her slowly step out of that tiny scrap of black lace, her gaze never leaving his. He'd never wanted a woman so bad in his life. He reached out and pulled her closer bending his head to suckle the hardened peaks giving each one his undivided attention. Pressing his mouth against her soft, luscious breast was every bit as good as he'd imagined it would be. She moaned and he felt it, a low, throaty sound, beneath his mouth. Another shock of desire shot straight to his cock. He had reached his limit. He couldn't wait any longer.

He pushed her slowly backwards until the back of her knees hit the bed. "Are you sure about this?" he asked the question even though walking away now would be the hardest thing he'd ever do. And even though he knew that feat would be nearly impossible, his Cahill upbringing would not allow him to do anything other than the right thing.

She didn't answer. Instead, she fell back on the bed dragging him with her. He barely had time to temper his weight before their bodies tangled in the sheets. "I'd say that answered your question," she said and wasted no time reaching for his hand and guiding it south until his fingers swept her sex, his erection weeping at the feel of her heat. He rubbed against her nub, reveling in her slickness, and was not surprised when her hips began to press against his hand. "Cord, please," she begged placing her hand on his forcing him to move against her heat.

"Damn, Julie. If you keep that up, I'm not sure I'm gonna last," he said it as a joke, but in truth, he was using every ounce of self-control not to bury himself inside her sweet heat

and empty every last drop into her. It was that thought that gave him pause.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and rolled their entwined bodies over. Now, she was on top, her breasts pinned against his chest. Reaching down she wrapped her hands around his very hot, very hard erection and began sliding it up and down between her folds. Her very wet. Very inviting folds.

His breath came hard as he worked to control his body, but he knew if he didn't put a stop to things, his breath wasn't the only thing that was gonna come hard. "Julie. Wait."

"I'm not sure I can, Cord. I need you inside me. I need—"

"And I'm all for that, but hold on just for a minute." He pushed her away so he could make eye contact. "I know this is probably a dumb question at this point in the evening, but I think I should probably grab a condom, don't you?" He heard the desperation in his voice. His libido warred with his common sense, but common sense won out.

He heard the sharp intake of her breath. "Oh, yes, I think that's a brilliant idea. I'm...I'm surprised at myself for not thinking of it first. Um...do you have one?" He could tell by her expression she was shocked at the notion she hadn't thought of protection herself.

"Unattached cowboys never leave home without one, although I may have been carrying this one around in my wallet for a while." That wasn't entirely true, but he didn't want to give her the impression he was an easy lay or that he did this sort of thing all the time.

"Good to know."

"I'll get it."

He started to get up when she pushed him back on the bed. "No, you don't move. I'll get it." Julie climbed off him and grabbed his jeans out of the corner. He watched her yank his jeans off the floor and fish around in his pockets for a moment. She found his wallet and secured the condom. "Glad to know

you came prepared, cowboy,” she said and then ripped the package open with her teeth.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am too.” He laughed at the sight of the gloriously naked Julie ripping open a condom out of the foil pouch with her teeth. He didn’t think he could get any more turned on. How in the hell had he gotten so lucky to run into this beauty tonight? And even more amazing was the fact that this was her idea. Oh, he’d been thinking some version of this moment the minute he laid eyes on her, but he would not have gotten here without her driving the wagon, and he was happy to turn over the reins.

She climbed back on the bed with the condom in hand.

“Want me to do it?” he offered.

She shook her head. “No thanks. I got this.” She turned those smoky eyes of hers from him to his cock and he was certain he was going to embarrass himself if she touched him at all. He steeled himself in anticipation. “You look like you’re in pain, cowboy.” He heard the teasing tone of her voice.

“I am, but I think you know that,” he teased back. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be looking at me like that.”

“Well, how about if we do this together?” she offered.

“Uh, I’m game.” He’d never had anyone make that offer before and he was eager to see where it would lead.

“Sit up,” she commanded.

“No argument here.” He sat up, and leaned his weight back on his arms, eager to see what Julie had in mind. He waited for her next command. But she gave him no more commands. Instead, she threw one leg over his thighs and straddled his lap. The only thing between them now was his erection.

She looked down at his cock and then up at him. “How about if I do this and we get on with that ride?”

“You’re in charge, ma’am.” He grinned and he saw the look of heat in her eyes and he pulsed with need. She broke their gaze and quickly placed the condom over the tip of his

cock and rolled it to the thick base. “Now, we’re ready.” Without any hesitation, she shoved him back onto the bed, braced herself against his chest, and slowly slid herself down onto his erection until she was fully impaled. Then a delicious shudder ran the length of her body.

Jaws clenched against losing control, he watched her face flush with emotions as the two of them became one. She began to move with deliberate controlled movements creating shards of pleasure throughout his body. He grabbed her hips with his hands to still her movements. “Give me a minute,” he said, his voice hoarse with the strain of control.

“What’s the matter, cowboy? Am I being too aggressive for you?”

He saw doubt in her eyes and he wanted to assure her that was not the problem.

“No, I just wasn’t prepared for you to go from a woman in fancy designer shoes to a cowgirl who had no compunction about comin’ in hot. I don’t want you to stop. I just need a minute to regroup so we’re—you’re—not disappointed.”

She smiled and leaned down, her long hair brushing against his chest sending shivers of white-hot bolts of desire right where he needed it. She kissed him and he returned her ardor with enthusiasm. “Okay, I think I’m good for the long haul, cowgirl. How about that ride?”

Chapter 13

Julie knew she was way out of her Ivy League, big city, blue blood territory, but at this moment, riding on top of the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on, she decided she'd rather be right here than in any boardroom in the world.

She watched Cord's blue eyes darken with desire until they were so deep they reminded her of the midnight blue of a clear cloudless night over Manhattan. She centered him against her sensitive flesh and once again she slowly, oh so slowly, impaled herself on his erection. Penetrating her body inch by incredible inch, filling her, stretching her, to the point the concentrated sensations nearly sent her over the edge. She sighed, taking him all in. It felt right. It felt familiar. It felt like home even as she knew that was a ridiculous notion.

She stilled and waited for the moment to pass. She understood why Cord needed time to regroup. She was feeling the same way, and like him, she wasn't ready for this moment to end. Julie wanted this feeling to last as long as it could. She knew when they said their goodbyes in the morning, their paths would never cross again. Their worlds would never orbit. That's why she wanted the memory of this night etched deep into her mind. Whatever life had in store for her, she could look back on this moment and know that, at least once in her life, someone had looked at her, seen her, wanted her, and their attention had nothing to do with her legacy. She would be forever grateful that she knew, first-hand, how it felt to be wanted for no other reason than herself.

Cord was looking up at her, his hands on her hips. Anticipation on his face. She placed her hands on his hard chest again and braced herself rising as slowly as she'd lowered herself. "I guess we'll see now whether I've got a cowgirl in me."

His fingers pressed into the soft flesh of her hips. His jaws clenched in self-control. "I'm betting you do, but what I do know for an absolute fact is that you've got a whole lotta cowboy in you right now."

Heat pulsed through her core as his words settled around her. “You really are the funny one, you know that?” she whispered. ” He offered her a cheeky grin. She grinned back. “Cocky too, I see. Now be quiet.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He sat up and propped his weight against his arms again, his chest against her breasts. Their faces so close she could reach out and kiss the hell out of him, but he beat her to it. His lips came crashing down on hers and he pushed his cock deeper into her core as her body clutched around him. Her sexual encounters had been few and far between, but once, a long time ago during her college years, she and a roommate had slipped away from their high society balls and visited a bar that had a mechanical bull. She remembered watching everyone try to ride that thing with one hand on the bull and one hand in the air. If she was gonna live out her fantasy tonight, she was going all the way. She would only come this way once.

She grinned at the irony of her thought and offered the sexy-as-hell cowboy beneath her a look that said I’m-comin’-in-hot and there’s no regrets. With her grin still stretched across her face, she placed one hand on his strong, muscled stomach while the other she raised high in the air.

He squinted in confusion. “What exactly are you doing?”

“What does it look like? I’m getting ready to ride, cowboy.” she teased.

His confusion quickly turned into what Julie would describe as pure delight. “Most certainly,” he answered and kissed her again. Their bodies nestled against each other, his coarse chest hair rubbing against her palm, and his erection buried deep inside her. She was ready to prove she did have the heart of a cowgirl.

Julie began to move and she watched him fight for control. She started out slowly, with long, languid strokes. The contact between their bodies pushed him to hit her in the most sensitive and deepest places. She clenched him tighter, each movement in unison with her willing partner. She took him deeper and deeper into her body until there was no more room.

Holding his gaze, she rode him. Harder. Faster. The sensual bliss she felt rose higher and higher until she knew she was close. “Cord, you might want to—” She had barely gotten the words out before he rolled the two of them over and she felt his weight on top of her.

“Take over?” he teased. “My pleasure,” he whispered. Before she could think of anything to say, his lips crashed down on hers, and his scorching kiss followed. He thrust deep inside her. She could feel the power of his muscles and she clutched him as if she’d never let go. Propped up over her, his shoulders were impossibly wide and powerful. She felt him slide in and out with deliberate purpose. Her body hurried to catch up where she’d left off. It didn’t take long under his efforts. She moaned at the sensation of his lips once again closing over hers while he continued his sensual assault. Sweat beaded on his brow as he sank into her again and again, while holding her gaze. Faster. Harder. She clenched him tighter with her body, dragging each stroke from him until neither of them had anything left to give.

Their shared cries of release mingled with the damp and tangled sheets. She felt the warm rush of his release mingle with her own ecstasy. He held his weight off her and reached down again to kiss her. This time, there was no scorching kiss of passion. His lips possessed her mouth in a soft, sensual, slow kiss that had her toes curling again and her nether parts begging for more.

Sated and exhausted, their heated flesh soon chilled in the motel’s air-conditioned room. They sought comfort in each other’s heat along with the down comforter on the floor. Cord pulled it over them and turned off the lamp. Julie allowed Cord to pull her deep into his strong arms relishing the warmth of his hard body. *Allowed. Such a funny word*, she thought to herself. She couldn’t imagine a time when she hadn’t had his strong arms around her, but that was a ridiculous notion. She’d never seen him before tonight and she’d never see him again after they parted ways in the morning. The thought made her sad, but she refused to indulge in a fantasy that simply wasn’t possible.

He pulled her tight against his chest and nuzzled her ear. “Well, I guess that answers that question.” She could hear the teasing tone in his voice.

“And what question was that?”

“Whether you’re a cowgirl or not.”

“Is that a fact? So, what’s the verdict, cowboy?”

He leaned in and kissed her again. “You were born with a cowgirl’s heart, Julie.”

“Is that a good thing?” She bantered back.

“Yeah, it’s a good thing, and yet you’re even more special than that,” he quipped.

Her heart stuttered at his compliment, but she quickly reminded herself there could be no future for them and remained silent.

“Don’t you want to know how you’re special?” he teased her with his words while his finger teased goosebumps across her skin.

“Sure. Why do you think I’m special?” She kept her tone light.

“Because not only are you a cowgirl at heart, you are also a cowgirl who has no fear of comin’ in hot, and that my darlin’, is a powerful combination on a poor defenseless cowboy’s heart.”

She didn’t respond. Quite frankly, she didn’t know what to say. When she didn’t answer, Cord tugged the covers under her chin and rested his face against her head. His warm breath teased her ear.

“Get some sleep. They will be expecting us outta here before noon tomorrow, and since it’s already past five in the morning, we need sleep.” Soon she heard his breathing level off into an even pattern signaling he had fallen asleep.

Julie didn’t tell him she had the room for another night, but he was right about the fact they needed sleep. She had a very

important meeting tomorrow and she needed to be on top of her game.

Lying awake in the dark thinking was a dangerous thing to do, especially lying next to her handsome sleeping cowboy, his arms wrapped around her. She was suddenly struck with the realization she'd just referred to him as her cowboy. *Her cowboy?* Not sure where that thought came from so her analytical lawyer's mind kicked into gear trying to come up with all the reasons why Cord could never be a part of her world. Or she in his.

The first reason was probably the most important one. Growing up with a trust fund the size of the national debt would be a start, she reminded herself. She had learned a long time ago that once a man learned who her grandfather was, they no longer saw her. They only saw her money. Her value became nothing but dollar signs, decimals, and lots and lots of zeros. That was a lesson she didn't need to learn again. Her ex-fiancé, Andrew, had taken care of that the moment he refused to sign the prenuptial agreement before the wedding. Oh, she might have gone through with the wedding regardless—she had loved him that much—but her father would not allow it, and by the time the debate was finished, Andrew had finally admitted he was more interested to a life with her money than he was with her. Her father admitted he'd seen it all along and berated Julie for being so naive. But it was her mother's revelation that cut her the deepest. Her mother had been disappointed alright, but not for Julie's pain and heartache and public embarrassment. Oh, no. Vanessa Nash Foster was angry that the wedding itself, also referred to as the social event of the year, was ruined. Her mother was so angry, she immediately flew to Paris and spent so much money on recreational therapy, Julie's father threatened to cut off her allowance, which she also blamed on Julie. As if the son of a foreign diplomat came with a resume, she grumbled to herself.

The second reason was that they had nothing in common. Despite their extraordinary sex tonight—and it was extraordinary—Cord was...well, country and although he was damn good-looking and she knew without a doubt that all those prissy debutantes of Central Park South would lust after

him the minute he walked into a room, he would be dismissed and discounted just as quickly.

Julie could imagine Cord in a tuxedo at one of her formal affairs. But then what? He would open his mouth and that southern twang of his would give him away. She found his accent charming. No, she found it downright sexy. But the mothers of all those prissy debutantes would try to have him escorted from the building because he might soil their precious daughter's reputations by just standing next to them.

Julie turned in Cord's sleeping arms pushing her rear against him. He was asleep so what did it matter if she stole a few moments to herself. She wasn't naive enough to think he felt anything for her but a fun night of distraction. She smiled in the dark. And it had been fun. The best of her life. There was no doubt she would keep this memory of their one night near to her heart. And on some miserable night when some arrogant ass wipe tried to woo her bank account, she would take out this memory and treasure it knowing this cowboy saw her for who she was. Just...Julie. No history. No trust fund. No last name. No reputation to uphold. He had no idea who she was or what she was. She liked that idea...a lot. She shivered.

The room was cold, maybe a degree above frostbite. She thought about getting up to turn the air conditioner down, but she couldn't make herself leave Cord's warm, strong arms wrapped around her. She wiggled against his sleeping form and snuggled deeper against him. A contented sigh escaped her lips and she felt herself start to relax. Morning would be here soon enough. She should probably get some sleep. Tomorrow would be a test of her negotiating talents and she needed to be on her A game to convince Mr. Cahill to sell the land that has been in his family for more than four generations. Even as she thought it, she wondered what on earth she could possibly say to convince a man to trade his family legacy for money. Most men she knew worshipped the dollar and would sell that land in a heartbeat if they were offered the right price, but there was something about Mr. Cahill she'd picked up over their multitude of phone conversations that struck her as different. He didn't seem to be motivated by money. Or Power. Those arguments wouldn't work against him. So, what would?

Another shiver rippled across her body and she pulled the covers up over her nose. She was suddenly aware of a rock-hard bulge resting against her backside. She smiled and reached around behind her. Just as she thought. Her bed partner was dreaming of something very erotic. His long, stiff column was proof of that fact. Unable to resist the urge, she pushed back against Cord's erection, enjoying the sensations it sent through her body. Maybe she should wake him, and—

“If you keep moving like that, we're gonna have to saddle up again. But you're a smart girl so I think you already know that, right?” His soft breath whispered in her ear adding more goosebumps to her growing collection, but these were of a completely different nature than the ones she got from sleeping naked in a chilly room.

She turned to face him. “You're awake.”

“I would think that's obvious,” he teased.

“So, what are you saying? Are you accusing me of unfair tactics?” she bantered, keeping her hands beneath the covers while tracing the hard muscles in his chest and stomach enjoying immensely the effect her touch had on him.

There was that damn panty melting grin again. What was it about that grin that made her want to climb on him and—

“I am. In fact, I'm the judge and jury. And you my sweet, delicious Julie, have been found guilty of inciting an innocent man into having hot, toe-curling sex with you.”

She laughed out loud. “Innocent my—”

“Ah, now. Don't say it. I'll have to charge you with a second offense and I'm pretty sure you'll be found guilty of that as well.”

“And what charge would that be, Your Honor?” She volleyed back and leaned in to plant a soft kiss on his lips.

“Talking dirty,” he said with a straight face.

“Talking dirty? What did I say?” she teased as her hands moved lower on his stomach. She heard his sharp intake of

breath and watched his eyes darken. She felt her own body react to his erection now hard and stiff against her belly.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s irrelevant at this point. You’ve been found guilty and I must declare you guilty of being a naughty cowgirl.” He rolled over, his body covering half of hers leaving enough room for his hand to have plenty of room to explore. Now he was the one tracing her body with his fingers.

“And what is the sentence, Your Honor? Will you spank me or shall I spank you?” she offered with a sharp slap to his exposed naked ass cheek.

He growled and pushed his erection against her opening. “Oh, no, sweet Julie. Your punishment is much worse. I am sentencing you to surrender to me and let me have my way with you.”

“And how is that a punishment?” she whispered under the onslaught of his kisses.

“You are about to find out,” he promised as he pushed the thick head of his erection into her body, filling her, stretching her, penetrating her inch by tantalizing inch. With his last push, he touched the deepest part of her and her body clenched him tighter as if it already sensed there was something special about this man. Not only had this handsome, funny, honorable cowboy touched her most private places, he’d also managed to outmaneuver her defenses. He’d managed to touch her in a way no one else had. And that was a very bad thing because, she knew she couldn’t keep him. Besides, according to her granddad, the cowboy always rides away.

Chapter 14

Cord woke to the sound of his phone buzzing on the motel side table. He untangled himself from the sleeping beauty beside him. Grabbing the phone, he saw the time. “Oh, shit.” Then, he hit the silence button and whispered into the phone, “Hello?” He heard a familiar chuckle and he grimaced.

“Well, boy. I’d say somebody had themselves a real good time last night. Am I wrong?” His grampa practically yelled into the phone.

“Do you have your hearing aids in?” Cord asked, hoping to change the subject. His grampa was no fool.

“Don’t think you’re gonna fool me, boy. I know whatcher doin’. And for your information, I do have my hearing aids in. Now, what I want to know is, are you goin’ be here when that big city lawyer shows up?”

“Of course I am. I wouldn’t let you face them alone.” Cord racked his brain trying to remember what time that meeting was today.

“We both know I ain’t never alone, thanks to all this god darn kinfolks I got swarmin’ around this place, but you’re the only one that knows what’s goin’ on with those damn pesky lawyers and I want you here, understand?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be home as soon as I—”

“I don’t need to know the details. Just take her back where you found her and then get your butt home. That is unless she’s a keeper. Then bring ‘er with you.”

Cord didn’t say anything to his grampa’s comment. He had to admit there was something special about this one, but...He had too much responsibility as it was. He couldn’t possibly keep her. He shook his head and spoke loud and clear. “I’ll see to it she gets home safely. Then I’ll be home soon.”

He disconnected the call, but not before he heard part of his grampa’s comment. “One of these days you’ll get bit by—”

He knew what his grampa was gonna say ‘cause he’d said it a thousand times. “*One of these days you’ll get bit by that ole’ love bug and you can’t fight the fever.*” That may be true, but today was not that day.

Today, he had things that needed to be taken care of and to do that, he needed to disentangle and get home.

“Hey, pretty lady. Time to rise and shine.” This was always the awkward part about a one-night stand. Cord may not be interested in a long-term relationship, but he wasn’t one to be cruel either. He liked to leave the ladies with a smile and a compliment, but he never lied and he never made promises he didn’t intend to keep.

A mass of dark, tangled hair moved just a smidge as its owner struggled to wake up. Finally, she opened those incredible dark eyes of hers and offered him a soft, sexy smile. “Good morning, cowboy.”

Desire rocketed threw his body like a wildfire. He leaned down to kiss her, but then thought better of it. There was something about those lips that just begged to be kissed, and he knew there were at least two reasons why he shouldn’t kiss her now. One, the morning was half gone. It was almost nine o’clock and he was already late to help his cousins move that rodeo stock to Tyler. And two, he knew if he kissed Julie, it may be noon before they came up for air again. No, it would be best to just get dressed and go.

“Is this where the cowboy rides away?” He heard the humor in Julie’s tone.

“What do you know about a George Straight song?” He was surprised. She didn’t know Dolly, but she knew a song by King George?

“Who?” She sat up in the bed pulling the sheet up with her to hide those luscious breasts of hers from his greedy gaze. His pulse quickened and so did his southern region.

“George Straight. He’s the one who sings that song about the cowboy rides away. You know, King George.”

“King George? Is he married to Dolly Parton?” she asked the question with a straight face. Was she serious?

“Why would you think they were married?”

“You called him King George and you said last night—or rather this morning, that Dolly was the Queen of Country Music. I just assumed...I mean, it stands to reason they would be married.”

He was shocked when he realized she was dead serious, but there wasn't time to explain the inner workings of the country music industry, so he changed direction. “Where did you hear that phrase then?”

“You mean this is where the cowboy rides away? Well, when I was a little girl, and my granddad was still alive, he and I used to sneak out of the house and head to an old cinema to meet up with his fellow cronies. We'd sit together and watch reruns of old westerns eating popcorn and cherry licorice sticks. Just before the movie ended, he'd say, *Hey, Julie Bug, this is part where the cowboy rides away.* Then he'd buy me more popcorn and licorice to go.”

He could see the mist of unshed tears in Julie's eyes and knew how much her granddad must have meant to her. He was sad to know the man was no longer alive. He couldn't imagine his grampa not being around, cantankerous old codger that he is. Hell, he wouldn't be a Cahill if he didn't have some sort of stubborn streak.

“Anyway, my mother hated it and told my granddad I couldn't go with him anymore to watch those kinds of movies. They weren't fit for a young lady of my standing, but granddad told both my mother and my father to take the stick out of their ass and live a little. He called me Miss Kitty, mostly I think to rile my mother, and he'd always say to me in front of her, *Miss Kitty, one of these days, you and me are gonna ride off into the sunset and leave these old curmudgeons behind.*” He watched Julie's emotions flit across her face. She obviously loved her granddad very much.

“And did you? Ride away with your granddad?” he asked and wrapped a strand of her long dark hair around her ear.

“No. I guess you could say he rode away by himself. You see, he died when I was sixteen. Things haven’t been the same in my life since.”

A text pinged his phone. He knew he needed to get going, but he hated to leave Julie when she seemed so vulnerable. Another text pinged and he stole a quick glance at it. It was Conner and Cooper havin’ their fun on a group text message. He’d deal with them when he got home.

Julie took the hint it was time for him to leave. She grabbed the bedsheet and wrapped it around her. “Do you need help finding your clothes, cowboy? I think your jeans are over there somewhere. Not sure about your boots, but your hat is there on the floor by the door.”

He grinned. “We did get a little crazy last night, didn’t we?” Cord picked his wallet up off the floor along with the empty condom wrapper. No point in letting the whole world know what they’d done. He was pretty sure word would get around pretty fast since his brother’s high school girlfriend worked the front desk last night. That was the trouble with living in a small town, everybody knows everybody’s business. His theory had always been if they don’t have hard evidence, then it’s just a rumor. It was then he realized Julie had never answered his question. He was shocked to see her sitting on the side of the bed, wrapped in a crumpled bedsheet with tears running down her cheeks. *Uh-oh*. “What’s going on? I thought you had a good time last night?” he teased hoping to elicit a smile. He wasn’t disappointed.

“I’m fine. Really. And by the way, we had a fabulous time last night. It’s just that...I haven’t thought about my granddad much lately and I just realized how much his loss still hurts.” She quickly swiped her tears away and stood holding the sheet close. “You can take a shower first.”

Surprised at the sudden change in her demeanor, he kept quiet trying to process everything she’d just shared. It wasn’t a lot, but he felt like she’d opened the door to her world a tiny crack. Just enough for him to see that Julie was a lot like him regardless of her fancy external trappings. He wished there was more time to get to know—

“Get going cowboy or we’re both gonna be late.” She threw his wrinkled shirt at him with a half-smile.

“Do you mind? Normally, I’d say lady’s first, but I’ve kind of overslept and I’m a little behind schedule this morning,” he said trying not to make it sound like he was in a hurry to leave.

“Stop walking on eggshells where I’m concerned. And stop worrying so much about my feelings. I knew what I was getting into when I decided to take this ride. I have no designs on you, Cord. In my book, a one-night stand consists of one night and one night only.” She cut him a look that would melt steel and he felt his flaccid member rise with interest. She noticed. “Don’t even think about it. Now get going. I’ve got plans myself and I have a flat tire to get repaired first.”

He covered his now full erection with his clothes and closed the bathroom door putting a solid barrier between him and the beautiful woman on the other side dressed in nothing but a bedsheet. He wished—He stopped his thought mid-sentence. “Don’t even go there, Cord.”

He turned the shower on, but he didn’t bother with the hot water knob. What he needed was a cold shower and that’s all he was entitled to, he reminded himself. And yet...all he could think about as his hands lathered his body with soap, was the feel of Julie’s skin against his. Careful to avoid the area begging for more of Julie’s charms, he wondered how many couples had started a lifetime commitment from a one-night stand. *Couples?* “Damn.”

Chapter 15

Standing on the side of the road, Julie watched the man change her tire. When he let the car down off the jack, she reached into her Louis Vuitton wallet to pay him.

“No charge, little lady. Cord called this morning and said you had a flat tire that needed fixin’.”

“But I need to pay you for the work you did,” Julie insisted and took out a fifty-dollar bill.

“No, ma’am. I did it as a favor to Cord. Him and his family have done a lot for me and the missus. Wouldn’t think of chargin’ him a dime. Now you have a nice day.” The man tipped his greasy cap and left her on the side of the road with a fresh tire at no cost. That sort of thing just wasn’t done in her world. If she wanted something, there was a cost attached. And nothing could be attained without a cost. Not friendships. Not business deals. And especially, not relationships. They were the most costly and she’d learned the only way to win at matters of the heart was to avoid them.

She waved at the big man in the giant truck with the words “Ernie’s Tow Service” on the side as he drove off down the highway. “Well, that was...unexpected.” Julie started the rental car and keyed the address to the Cahill ranch into her navigation app when her phone buzzed. It was Mr. Howe. “Hello, sir.” She used her most positive tone hoping he’d let her handle this.

“Julie, have you made contact with the Cahills yet?” His tone was all business.

“I have an appointment with Mr. Cahill today at two-thirty at his ranch. I thought that would give me the opportunity to see this place and figure out why Mr. Carter wants it so bad.”

“His motivations aren’t your concern, Julie. I hope you don’t let that get in the way of your negotiations.”

Julie thought the statement odd. Did Mr. Howe know why Mr. Carter wanted the ranch? Was there something dishonest

behind the purchase?

“I understand. I’m here to do my job.” She offered a positive tone, but she got that Spidey feeling in her bones something was off about this Mr. Carter.

“Get me that contract, Julie. If you don’t, I’m sending Reggie to get the job done and you know what that means.” Then her boss was gone.

“Well, have a nice day to you too, asshole.” She knew if she didn’t get the contract signed today, Mr. Howe would send Reggie to bully the man. If that happened, she’d be out of a job. Right now, that seemed like a major failure to her career, but somehow she was a little less panicked by the thought than she was last night when she left Miss Franklin. She tried to remember exactly what the woman said. Something about failure having many different faces and she needed to be clear about the end goal.

What was the end goal for this man named Carter and why did he want that land so badly?

What she did know was that he couldn’t get it unless the Cahills agreed to sell it. She would negotiate and if they wanted to sell, fine. If they didn’t, she was going home. Period. Paragraph. She would not use under-the-table tactics to get that piece of land for the sake of her job. That wasn’t happening.

Frustrated and concerned about what might be going on with Mr. Carter and his motives, she punched in the ranch’s address. Arrival time showed to be in about an hour and her meeting wasn’t until two-thirty. She could go back to the hotel and try to come up with something that would convince Mr. Cahill to sell his property to Mr. Carter. Or she could—Just then her stomach made a very unladylike sound. “I never did get to eat last night, did I?” Since it was only a little past noon, she had plenty of time to stop for a leisurely lunch. But where?

Muting the instructions of her GPS, she made a turn at the next intersection and drove north. Ten minutes later, she drove into a quaint little town. Welcome to Wagon Gap, Texas. Home of the Cahill Brothers, Rodeo’s World Champions.

“Great,” Julie grouched to herself. Another reason to add to the growing list of why Mr. Cahill wouldn’t sell, which certainly outweighed her list of why he should sell. She hadn’t come up with a single reason for the man to sell his land other than money, and he’d made it clear he didn’t care about the money. So what chance did she have to make this trip a success and save her job? She knew the answer. She just wasn’t ready to admit defeat yet.

She drove down the main street and spied a mural on the side of a building that read: The Hungry Pig. It featured a pig sitting at a table with a checkered napkin around his neck and a plate full of food in front of him. The parking lot was crowded. “That’s always a good sign when looking for a good place to eat. Go where the locals go.” Her stomach growled again. She hoped there was an empty table. The little café didn’t look big enough to hold all the patrons parked in the lot outside.

A pickup truck was just backing out as she started her search for a place to park. She quickly pulled in, locked her car, and threw her purse strap over her shoulder. Moments later, she pushed the front door open to see six rows of tables three tables deep each with four chairs and a long counter with bar stools, but there wasn’t an empty seat in the house. “Just my luck,” she mumbled as she stood next to the cash register hoping the hostess would put her name on the waiting list. After standing there for a good ten minutes, she grew impatient. When one of the waitresses dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that depicted the same scene as the sign outside walked by, Julie stopped her. “Excuse me, miss. Can I get my name on a list to be seated?”

The woman laughed. When Julie didn’t, she stopped laughing. “Oh, you’re serious. And obviously from out of town.”

“Yes, to both,” Julie admitted with a mixture of irritation and confusion.

“We don’t seat people here, miss. When you see an empty seat, you grab it.” The woman turned and pointed. “Right there. Where those two women are sitting. See? The blonde

and the dark-haired woman. There's two chairs at that table. Better get one before someone else comes in. We get busy around here at lunchtime."

Julie followed the woman's finger to the table in the back near the window. "But there's already someone sitting at that table," Julie explained.

"At the table, yeah, but those two chairs are fair game. Go on over. Introduce yourself. I'll bring you a menu." The woman turned her attention to the man standing at the cash register with money in his hand. "Come on, Gail. I gotta get back to work."

"Hold yer horses, Ray. I only got two hands," she said and set down her pitcher of tea.

Julie tentatively made her way to the back of the restaurant until she came to the table in question. The two women were busy in conversation not paying the least bit of attention to her.

She stood next to the outside empty chair and spoke. "Excuse me, ladies. I hate to bother you, but the waitress said these two chairs were vacant. Would you mind if I..."

The two women stopped talking and turned to her. The dark-haired woman offered her a genuine smile. "No, ma'am. You sit right down. Gail will bring you a menu and some sweet tea in a minute."

The blonde chimed in. "Oh, I know you. You're the woman at the Rusty Spur last night with Cord." Julie knew attitude when she saw it and heard it. And this woman was brimming with attitude. What was her name? Jackie? Jennifer? No, now she remembered. Jolene. The woman who wanted to know if she and Cord were on a date.

Julie sat down and set her purse in the vacant chair. "Thank you for sharing your table. Please, go on with your conversation. I've got some work to do anyway," she said knowing full well this woman was not the type to mind her own business. Julie sensed there would be more questions about her and Cord before this meal was over. She was not wrong.

“This is my friend, Sophie. Sophie, this is the girl I told you about last night. What was your name again? Joanie or something.”

Julie ignored Jolene’s snide remark and addressed herself to her friend. “Hello, Sophie. Glad to meet you. My name is Julie.”

Sophie offered her a friendly smile and a nod. “Nice to meet you, Jul—”

“So, how’d your date go with Cord? Did y’all have fun?” Jolene offered Julie a smile of sorts. It was more a cross between a grinning Cheshire cat and the Joker at his most devious.

“I’m not sure you could call us sharing a few drinks and a couple of dances a date, but I enjoyed it. You?” Julie prodded knowing full well what Jolene thought of her with Cord.

Just then, Gail, the waitress arrived. “Here’s your menu. What can I getcha to drink?”

“I’ll have water with lemon,” Julie replied. She took a quick glance at the menu. There was a lot of meat on this menu. “I’ll just have a Cobb salad, please. With bleu cheese.” She handed the waitress the menu and thanked her.

“What did y’all do after the bar closed?” Jolene poked.

Julie would love to shove the truth down the woman’s throat, but that wouldn’t do her any good if that fact got out. Social media would have a field day and she knew it. Besides, it was no one’s business what she and Cord did last night. Cord said he didn’t kiss and tell. Neither did she. Especially, not to Jealous Jolene. “What is there to do around here at two o’clock in the morning? I must have missed that in the travel brochure.”

“Well, there’s...” The woman stopped short when she realized Julie was being sarcastic. She had to give the woman kudos for not being ditzy. “There’s really only two things a person can do at two o’clock in the morning. Go home or go to someone else’s home.”

“What did you do after the bar closed, Jolene. You looked like you were having a great time with that cowboy I saw you dancing with. What was his name?” Julie asked.

“Um, I don’t know. Which one?”

“Oh, that’s right. I saw you with several cowboys all of them swinging you around on that dance floor. You’re quite the party girl. I could tell you were having a grand time. So which one was the lucky one you took home last night? Or did he take you home?”

“I didn’t take any of them home,” Jolene sputtered.

The dark-haired girl turned to Jolene. “Who were you dancin’ with? Not Chet. Please tell me you aren’t messin’ around with Chet again. You know he’s trouble, Jolene. I swear, ever since you went out with Cord, you’ve been actin’ __” the woman stopped short. “Oh.”

Julie offered an encouraging smile. “Like I told Jolene, Cord and I just met last night and shared a few drinks and a dance. Obviously,”—she looked down to highlight her expensive suit— “I’m not from around these parts and I’ll be gone in a day or two. Just as soon as my business is concluded.”

“And what business is it that you do, Julie?” Sophie wanted to know. “You must do pretty well to afford that purse of yours. I’ve seen that online at a vintage retail shop and even then it was over six thousand dollars.”

“For real?” Jolene turned her jealous gaze to Julie’s purse then back to Julie. “You gave six thousand dollars for a purse? Yeah, what is it you do exactly?”

“I’m a legal negotiator.” She didn’t see any reason to lie.

“What’s that?” Jolene pushed.

“It’s when someone wants something and they can’t make it happen on their own, so they call me and I make it happen. Most of the time.” She wasn’t at all sure about this trip.

Gail brought Julie’s salad and dressing. “Anything else, ma’am?”

“No, thank you.”

“Here’s your check then. No hurry. Just bring it to the cash register when you’re done.” She lay the bill down next to Julie’s plate and left to greet more customers coming through the front door.

“Wow, that sounds kinda fun if you asked me,” Sophie gushed, “especially if you’re makin’ that kind of money.” She gave a nod toward Julie’s tote bag sitting in the chair beside her.

Jolene frowned. “So, you get people what they can’t get on their own, is that right?”

“Correct.”

Jolene shook her head. “Sounds like a high-priced hooker to me.”

Chapter 16

“You look like crap,” his cousin Beau said the minute Cord got out of his truck.

“Well, you’re not exactly pretty yourself, Beau Diddly.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that,” his cousin groused.

“Yep, that’s exactly why I do it.” Cord gave his cousin a playful punch and left him loading haybales on a large, flatbed trailer.

He left the bright noon sunshine and took refuge in the shady gloom of the barn. It took a second or two for his eyes to adjust. “Anybody here?” he called out knowing the barn was never empty.

“Well, look who’s finally up and goin’. Did you have fun last night?” He turned toward his brother, Conner, mucking out one of the stalls in the corner.

“You know I don’t kiss and tell.” He walked to where his brother was busy shoveling horse manure into an already half full wheelbarrow. Resting his arms over the top of the stall wall, he offered his brother a nod. “Looks like you’ve been at this awhile.”

“Yep, some of us got up early to get the chores done, while some of us—”

“I get it. I’m late. But I think I do my fair share of work around here, so—”

“Hey, hey. Don’t be so defensive. I’m just kidding. Why are you so touchy this morning? Did your friend get all clingy and cry on your shoulder this morning?”

“No, just the opposite. She was cool about the whole thing. It’s all good.” At least, it should be, he reminded himself. He wasn’t sure why he was so out of sorts since he’d left Julie at the motel.

His brother stopped shoveling and leaned on his shovel. “So what’s the problem?”

“There isn’t a problem. I just told you, it’s all good.” His tone was clipped and cool.

Connor’s eyes pinned him with a look. “Well something’s eatin’ on with you. Confession time. You liked this one, didn’t you?”

Cord dropped his gaze to land on his boots as he searched for words to answer his brother. “I liked her. So what? She’s different than the girls around here.”

“Well, hell yeah, she’s different. She wears those crazy shoes and she’s probably never ridden in a pickup truck until she rode in yours. Did you ever find out what she’s doing here?”

He snorted. “Nah, we never actually got around to talking much.” He kept his eyes downward to avoid giving away exactly how much he enjoyed last night with his stranger.

Conner laughed. “I’ll just bet.”

“Hey, what’s all the fun happen’ over here? We got work to do.” Cooper saw him and grinned. “Ah, the party boy has returned. Have fun?” His brother jabbed him in the ribs.

“Hey, don’t do that,” Cord ordered and play jabbed his brother in the shoulder.

“Hey, bro, looks like our older brother here has a girl crush,” Conner reported to his younger twin brother.

“No shit?” Cooper exclaimed. “Well, I’ll be damned. Cord finally found a girl, and—”

“Alright, stop it you two. I didn’t find a girl. I spent the night with a girl. Or rather a woman.” He knew without a doubt there was nothing girlish about Julie. She was all female and what a female she was. He couldn’t help but smile when he thought about her holding her right arm up in the air and—

“Ah, there it is again. That’s a big sign he really liked this one.” Cooper directed his comment to his twin.

“Yeah, I saw it. Wow, she must have really been a good lay if—”

“Stop it!” he ordered. “Just stop it. Don’t talk about her as if she’s a—”

“Whoa, bro. We’re just teasin’ you, but from the sound of things, you’re smitten with this one.” Cooper slapped him on the shoulder and high-fived Conner. “Well, whaddaya know? Big brother has finally been bitten by the love bug. Grampa is gonna be so excited when we tell—”

“You two are keepin’ your mouths shut, understand?” He did not want his brothers to make this a big deal, because...it wasn’t. Julie was great. More than great. She was amazing, but...

“Okay. Okay, we get it.” He saw the look the twins exchanged and knew they were speaking their own silent language that twins often did. He felt like he needed to explain...make them understand that Julie was just a one-night stand.

“Look, I’m sorry if I came across grouchy. Let’s just say I’ve had very little sleep and I’m tired. Julie was a beautiful distraction, and I’m a lucky guy to have crossed paths with her. We had a fabulous night together, but that’s all it was. And now it’s over. Besides, she’s probably already gone back to her world, where people wear those ridiculous shoes, and I’ve got work to do. Grampa and I have an in-person meeting with that damn lawyer from New York this afternoon at two-thirty. Fourteen hundred phone calls weren’t enough so now they’ve sent some flunky down here who thinks he’s gonna talk us into selling this land. Not gonna happen and this time we’ll send his ass back to the big city so they can tell whoever wants Cahill land so bad, we’d rather burn it down than sell it.”

When he finished his tirade, he felt a little better. “Now, I gotta go. I’ll be back with a rake and shovel after our meeting. Don’t think you two get to have all the fun mucking stalls,” he teased.

“Just meet us at the bucking chutes about three if you can. Lucas is gonna get in a little practice before the rodeo next

week. He could use some advice from a former champion.” Conner placed his hands on Cord’s shoulders forcing his full attention to his brother. “I know it’s hard for you, being the oldest and all, but it’s okay if you wanna have a little fun. It’s even more okay if you find someone you want to have more than fun with. We’re behind you. Always.”

“Yeah, we’re behind you one hundred percent, one hundred percent of the time.” Cooper nodded his encouragement and support.

“Thanks, guys. I appreciate you sayin’ that. I love you both so much.” Cord’s voice cracked with emotion.

Conner and Cooper shook their head at the same time. “Oh, hell no. Get outta here before we all start bawling like a bunch of babies. Now git!” Cooper turned him around and gave him a playful kick to the butt.

He laughed. “Alright, I’m going. I’ll see you at the bucking chutes at three this afternoon. It won’t take me long at all to explain to this fancy pants lawyer that the Cahills aren’t selling and kick his tail all the way back to where he came from.”

Chapter 17

Julie didn't know whether to laugh or cry. After her run-in with the green-eyed Jolene who so graciously pointed out Julie's flaws, she paid her check and hurried to her car. She wasn't sure now if she was running to get away from Jolene or protect the woman from having Julie snatch her wig off her head and expose what was under there. But even worse, the flat tire that had been fixed by the generous Ernie doing a favor for a friend had gone flat again. She stood staring at the thing trying to figure out if she should call Ernie again or try someone new. Fortunately for Julie, a friendly guy in a pickup truck pulled up to eat lunch and had no compunction about fixing the flat tire. The problem, he kept pushing for her phone number. Finally, she gave him five bucks, told him she was late for an appointment, and she'd catch him next time. She watched him standing in the parking lot scratching his head as she pulled out on to the highway.

"Great, now I'm gonna be late." Julie punched up her navigation app for directions from The Hungry Pig diner to the entrance gate to The Cahill Cattle Company. It was twenty miles. Yep, she was definitely gonna be late.

During the faster-than-the-speed-limit drive to the ranch, she had time to think about Jolene's words which were still ringing in her head. *Sounds like a hooker to me. A hooker?* She was familiar with the word. Or rather the word prostitute. She'd looked it up once when someone she'd beaten in court called her a careerist prostitute. *You sell yourself to the highest bidder whether you're on the right side or not*, the man had exclaimed as his lawyer pushed him out the door for fear the judge would issue a contempt of court order against him and his rants.

She remembered the definition, word for word. *A person who misuses their talents or who sacrifices their self-respect for the sake of personal or financial gain.* She remembered the twinge of guilt as she read the words, but then Mr. Howe had made such a big deal of how good she was at negotiating, she

chalked the man's rant to one of a sore loser. Unfortunately, after the last five years of working for Mr. Howe and his board of greedy lawyers, she wasn't so sure Jolene hadn't *hit a sore spot* as Cord would say. Maybe she was a careerist prostitute. And wasn't that why she left her family's firm in the first place? She didn't want to win for the sake of winning. She wanted to win for the sake of right. Was this right? She honestly didn't know and coupled with Miss Franklin's comment about making sure she knew the end goal, she was no longer sure about anything.

Julie reminded herself what was a stake here. If she didn't get the contract for Mr. Carter, chances are she was gonna be demoted. Or worse, fired. What were her choices?

One, she could go back and work with her father. Not an option. She and her father were as different as night and day. That would never work and she would be right back where she started right out of law school. Under her father's thumb. Doing things—while perfectly legal—were ethically or morally wrong. She hated the thought. Wasn't that what she was doing now though? Honestly, she wasn't sure why it was so important for this Mr. Carter, a man she'd never met, to lay claim to a cattle ranch in the middle of a thousand other East Texas ranches. Why was this one so important? Whatever the reason, she guessed it wasn't to the benefit of the Cahills.

Two, she could always join Nash Industries as a member of their legal counsel, but again, everyone knew she was the granddaughter of the late Winston Churchill Nash. No matter how well she did her job, someone would be whispering behind her back that her success was strictly nepotism at its finest. She'd grown up with that sort of snobbery. Even her excellent performance in law school was met with side looks and snide behind-the-hand comments. She'd worked her butt off to excel and even her most aggressive efforts were met with the slights and innuendos that it was her name that got her through and nothing else.

She shook off her anger and refocused. She had a third choice, but that would just validate all her critic's judgements. Her granddad, Win Nash, had left her a trust fund separate

from her mother's. She flinched when she remembered the fights she and her mother had over that money. "You have no idea how to handle that much money. What my father was thinking leaving a sixteen-year-old enough money to support a country is beyond me." In her teens, the trust fund came up more and more as her father tried to slow her mother's rabid spending sprees. "That money is rightfully mine," her mother proclaimed, but granddad must have known things would go south between her and her mother so he made the trust iron clad. The only person that could touch that money was her and only after the age of twenty-five. Well, she was certainly past that benchmark. And at twenty-eight, Julie hadn't touched a single penny of that money and she wouldn't until she found something that would make her granddad proud. She didn't know what that was at the moment, but she knew she'd know it when she saw it.

The Cahill Cattle Ranch logo came into view. It was hanging on an iron arch over a very big entrance gate. She could see from the road it was locked. Now what? It was then a truck pulled up behind her and a cowboy with a very large straw hat and boots that jingled stepped out. She rolled down her window and realized it wasn't his boots that jingled. The man had real spurs on his boots. The only time she'd ever seen spurs was in her granddad's western movies. She was amazed. This was a real cowboy. She wondered if Cord was the real thing or did he just dress up like one to draw the ladies. Did it matter? It had worked on her regardless, she thought with a healthy dose of chagrin.

"Are you lost little lady?" He had the same charming southern accent as Cord, and although he was cute, he wasn't Cord cute.

"No, I'm not lost. I'm just really late for an appointment with Mr. Cahill."

"Which Cahill?" The man wanted to know.

Was he joking? He didn't seem to be. "How many Cahills are there if you don't mind my asking?"

“A lot. I mean, everybody on this ranch is a Cahill by blood, but I’m guessing you want someone with the actual name of Cahill. Well, there’s Brady Cahill, his brothers Boone and Beau. Then there’s the cousins, Dallas, Denver, and Dalton. And then, let’s see. More cousins, Colt, Cash, and their sister, Cheyenne. And then there’s Cooper Cahill and his twin brother Connor. They have an older brother—hell, just drive on up to the house. You’ll find who you’re lookin’ for. Otherwise, we’ll be here all day.”

Relieved, Julie gushed, “Thank you so much!”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” He touched his fingertips to the brim of his hat and got back in his truck. A few seconds later, the big gate opened. She put the car in drive and followed the asphalt road with her cowboy escort bringing up the rear. The single lane road was bordered by green grass and black pipe fencing. Horses and cows grazed in the lush pastures. This place was so beautiful. Maybe it wasn’t such a mystery why their client wanted it so badly after all.

She and her escort drove about two miles before they topped a rise that led down into a valley so deep and wide, she couldn’t see the end. About halfway through the expanse, there was another small rise and sitting on top of it was a cluster of trees acting as sentinels over a two-story log home that had obviously been built in another century. “Wow,” she whispered to herself as she made the descent toward her rendezvous with the patriarch of this magnificent property. When she reached the fenced yard, she pulled under the shade tree and put the car into park.

The cowboy behind her veered off to the right and she watched his truck follow a dirt road toward a large barn in the distance. “Wow,” she said it again. “Now, I can see why they don’t want to sell. I wouldn’t either.”

Her phone buzzed. She looked at the screen before she answered. She did not want to talk to her boss just now so she clicked the side button and sent his call to voice mail. She’d listen to it later. No sooner had Mr. Howe’s call disappeared from her screen, another call came in, but she didn’t recognize this number. “Hello?” she answered.

“Julie, how’s it going down in the deep south?” It was Reggie Blackstock. Damn it. He must have gotten a new number. She’d already blocked his first three.

“Reggie, what can I do for you?” She had to work hard to keep the revulsion out of her tone.

“Oh, that is such a leading question.” His tone oozed seduction and she found him disgusting.

“I really don’t have time for this. Was there a reason you called?” She was a hair’s breadth away from hanging up on him and pretending later it was the service, but his next words stopped her in her tracks.

“Mr. Howe called me into his office last evening. Said you may be having trouble sealing the deal on the Carter file. He wants to know if you’ve made progress.” His voice oozed arrogant confidence.

“So am I reporting to you now?” The thought galled her.

“Let’s just say Mr. Howe has asked me to follow up and determine if you need my help. I’m just following up.”

“I haven’t had my meeting with Mr. Cahill so it’s a little hard to proclaim success. It’s a bit early don’t you think? I’ll let you know what happens after the meeting.”

“It isn’t really relevant, I suppose. You’ll be happy to know that...fly down and close the deal... then you and I can...each other. I’d love to spend some time...if you get my meaning.”

Frustrated with Mr. Howe and irritated by Reggie’s tone, she decided to take the high road. She knew if she opened her mouth, there was no telling what would come out.

“I’m sorry, Reggie. I’m only catching every third or fourth word. The reception down here is awful. Anyway, everything is fine. I’ll be back in town by tomorrow night.” She disconnected the call. “Let him think what he wants.” She turned her phone’s ringer off and shoved it in the pocket of her suit coat. “This just proves it’s time to make a change.”

Chapter 18

Cord and his grampa had been waiting in the library since two-fifteen for the lawyer who hadn't shown up yet. He looked at the clock again. At five after three, he turned to his grampa. "What do you want to do, Grampa? Wait a little longer or forget it?"

"I ain't wastin' another minute on somebody who don't respect us enough to show up on time. Besides, we were the ones doing him a favor by even agreein' to meet in the first place. So screw him."

"I'll call Bennie. He's got the walkie-talkie for the gate intercom this week. I'll let him know to turn him away if he ever does show up."

"Good. Now we can go about our business. I'll ride with you down to the bucking chutes. Maybe you can give Lucas some pointers."

"I might do that, but are you sure you should be going to the chutes? It's a ways and Mrs. Bennett—"

"Don't coddle me, boy." His grampa's gruff tone wasn't intended to offend. The hard-working, work-toughened, wizened, old cowboy just didn't know what to do with himself, at least until that leg healed.

"Sorry, I lost my head for a minute," he teased.

His grampa cut a look to him that softened was a hint of humor. "Well, don't let it happen again. Now, load me up in that side-by-side and let's get on down to the chutes. Maybe you could show that young gun a thing or two. That buckle holdin' up yer britches is somethin' to be proud of. Ain't everybody can say they was a world champion bronc rider, you know."

"True. Maybe I'll will give him a few pointers." Cord stood. "Afterall, every cowboy has his own way of winnin'. I'll go get the side-by-side and I'll pick you up on the back porch in ten minutes. I'll let Mrs. Bennett know. That way she

won't panic again like she did the last time you disappeared. You know you about scared that woman half to death looking for you."

Grampa chuckled. "She's easy to fluster."

"Her job is to take care of you, not to be tortured by an old man with a skewed sense of humor." Cord gave his grampa an affectionate shoulder squeeze.

"Torture? You call that torture? Why, I used to scare the hell outta your gramma putting crickets in her sugar bowl. She'd open the lid for breakfast coffee and those things would jump out at her and all over the table. She wouldn't make coffee for a week. And once, I put a fake snake in her laundry basket. I thought she was gonna keel over for sure. Afterwards, we laughed until our sides hurt. I miss her so damn much. Damn cancer! Ain't fair, boy. It just ain't fair."

He could see unshed tears in his grampa's eyes. "I know. It's not fair at all, but that's the hand the good Lord gave us. We gotta play it out, like it or not." Cord tried not to focus too much on his grampa's grief. Grampa got mad when he couldn't hold back his grief at losing his wife. He said it made him look weak. Cord tried to tell him it didn't make him look weak. If anything, it made him look strong because he was still standing while his soulmate was no longer beside him to share the load. It wasn't an argument he would ever win. Jefferson Cahill came from a different generation. Hard work and hard livin' was all he knew. "I'll tell Mrs. Bennett I'm takin' you to the chutes. Maybe she can relax a bit when she picks up the laundry basket."

His grampa laughed out loud at his remark. "Sure would be funny to see her throw a fit though."

"Grampa," Cord admonished the man even though he knew it would do no good. "I'll be back in a minute. Stay put, do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear plenty good. Don't mean I gotta listen though."

Cord shook his head and chuckled at his grampa's stubborn streak. He slipped out the back door and hurried to the shed behind the house where the side-by-side was kept. He started the trusty machine and drove it right up to the back porch. "Okay, come on, old man."

The back door swung open and Grampa limped out with his crutches. Mrs. Bennett hot on his trail. "Cord, your grandfather is supposed to be resting. Will you please tell him he needs to keep that leg elevated if it's ever gonna heal."

"You tell him, Mrs. Bennett. I'm just the driver of his getaway car," Cord reported in all innocence.

"You know good and well he won't listen to me." She cut a look to his grampa when he got inside the side-by-side and set his crutches in between them.

"That's right. I'm just fine and I don't need no nursemaid. Why don't you go do laundry or somethin'?"

Cord caught the look of mischief in his eyes. "You didn't do what I think you did. Did you?"

He grinned. "I'm pleadin' the fifth. Now, let's get goin'." He turned to the woman, "Goodbye, Audrey. I'll be back for supper."

Cord started the engine and made a U-turn in the yard. They were barely out of the yard when they heard a loud scream. His grampa chuckled. "Guess she decided to do the laundry after all."

Cord couldn't help but laugh. It was good to see his grampa's sense of humor return even if it was detrimental to hired caretakers. "You keep this up and she'll quit."

"Nah, she won't," his grampa said with a spark of mischief in his eyes.

"And why won't she?"

"She likes it here. Said it feels like home to her."

"But she's got a home of her own. Her husband left it to her when he passed away two years ago."

“She said it *feels* like home, Cord. Can’t you read between the lines? The woman wants to stay.”

Shocked at the possibility another woman could live here in grandma’s house, Cord shook his head. “Ah, that explains you callin’ her Audrey. What did you tell her about stayin’?”

“Why wouldn’t I call her that. It’s her name. Besides, I ain’t told her nothin’—*yet*,” his grampa hedged.

Cord steered the side-by-side down the road winding behind the barn to the bucking chutes. Before they reached the others, he stopped and turned to his grampa. “When you say *yet* does that mean you’re thinkin’ about tellin’ her somethin’?”

It was a good minute before his grampa looked at him, tears in his eyes. “There ain’t never gonna be another woman like your grandma. She was one-of-a-kind, boy. One. Of. A. Kind.” He paused and then took a deep breath. “But...even an old man like me gets lonely sometimes. Now, I ain’t sayin’ I am... but I ain’t sayin’ I ain’t either. Understand?” For the first time in a long time, he looked at his grampa as a man. Cord could tell the idea was troublesome to him, but maybe it was too new yet. Once the idea sank in and took root, it might not be so troublesome an idea after all.

He reached over and gave his grampa’s wrinkled, work-roughed hand a squeeze. “I do understand. A man can be alone, but it ain’t the same as being lonely. Just so you know, me and the boys...we’re behind you one hundred percent whatever you decide.”

His grampa placed his other hand on top of Cord’s. “Thanks, boy. I knew I could count on you.”

“Of course you can count on me. You can count on all of us. We’re Cahills and we never hold back when family needs us.”

Chapter 19

Julie sat in her car parked in front of the large log cabin pondering her next move. Should she call Mr. Cahill and hope he answers? Or should she boldly knock on his front door and apologize profusely about being late? And oh, by the way, I'm here to talk you into selling your family's legacy. She knew she wouldn't do it. She couldn't. She might as well just turn around and head for the airport, except—

A knock at the window startled her from her misery. "Can I help you?"

She looked up to see an elderly woman, perhaps late sixties, peering at her from under a large straw hat. Julie smiled and rolled down the window. "Hi."

"Hello, yourself. Are you lost or are you lookin' for somebody?"

"I'm not lost, but..."

The woman frowned. "Then you're lookin' for somebody. Ain't gonna find many people on this ranch that ain't a Cahill? Which one is the question?"

Julie smiled. "I was looking for Mr. Cahill, the owner of this ranch."

The woman's eyes clouded with suspicion. "And may I ask what you want to see Mr. Cahill about? Folks around here are real protective of that old coot." The woman's words may have been sharp, but her tone was warm and caring when she talked about Mr. Cahill.

Now what? She'd already decided she wasn't going to worry Mr. Cahill about the contract. He'd made it clear he wasn't selling and now that she'd seen the place herself, she understood why. Julie knew her hesitation could be viewed as suspicious, but what could she say when she'd already admitted she was here to see the man. "Um, I was supposed to have a meeting with Mr. Cahill, but I had a flat tire. I just wanted to tell him—"

“Oh, now I get it. You’re that damn lawyer from New York comin’ down here to harass the man about selling this place. What’s up with you people? When a man says no in Texas, he means no.”

“I understand completely. My boss—” Before she could finish her sentence, the woman raised her hand. In it, was an object that looked like a walkie-talkie. When she pushed a button and the radio squelched, Julie knew she was summoning help. “That won’t be necessary. Really, I’m not ___”

A male voice answered, “What’s up, Mrs. Bennett?”

“Cooper, that lawyer from New York is here,” she answered, her eyes cut a sour look toward Julie. “Can you send your brother up?”

“Sure thing.”

“I’m not here to upset, Mr. Cahill. I just wanted to apologize to him and let him know that even after I go, there will be more lawyers from my firm knocking on his door. I’d advise him to—”

The sound of a small engine traveling fast could be heard somewhere nearby. She turned to see a covered buggy of some sort flying down the road toward her sending up a stream of dust that blurred the horizon. Oh, boy. She knew she was in for a serious confrontation. But she could handle this. She would just introduce herself and explain what she tried to tell the woman standing next to her car.

Julie rolled her window up and stepped out of her car to wait for whoever was barreling in her direction. If she could make this woman understand, perhaps she’d have a little support in explaining to an obviously very angry, she assumed, Cahill, that her mission had changed and she could be a valuable asset to counter the efforts of the law firm’s client.

“Mrs. Bennett?” She had heard the man on the walkie-talkie say the woman’s name. “You are right, I am the lawyer that was supposed to meet with Mr. Cahill today, but I think there’s been a misunderstanding on why I’m here.”

“Is that a fact? Well, you can take that up with his grandson.” She turned to go, then stopped. “Good luck, ma’am.” She cast an eye toward the speeding buggy, then back to Julie. “‘Cause you’re gonna need it.” Julie watched the woman turn toward the house just as the cloud of dust encompassed her and the surrounding area.

It took a few seconds for the light breeze to sweep the dust away. Grit covered her clothes, her hair, her stilettos, and was even sticking to her lipstick.

She heard the man’s voice loud and clear. “You might as well clear out now. We got nothin’ else to talk about.”

Julie’s heart stuttered at the sound of the familiar voice. “It can’t be,” she whispered to herself. “It can’t possibly be—”

“Hey, are you listening to me? You are not welcome here. Go back to New York and tell—” The man railed at her until she turned around to face him. The shock on his face would have been funny, except...it wasn’t.

“Julie?” he croaked, his eyes round in disbelief.

“Cord.” She didn’t know what else to say since she was struggling with some measure of shock herself. Of all the people she could have run into, and slept with, she had slept with Mr. Cahill’s grandson. Mr. Howe’s words came rushing back. “*I’m suggesting you seduce Old Man Cahill’s grandson.*” And it would seem, that’s exactly what she’d done.

He approached her, his expression full of questions. “What are you doing here?” Then, he smiled. “I’m sorry I came in so hot like that. I thought you were one of those pesky attorneys down from New York to pester my grampa again about selling this place.”

When she didn’t say anything, he frowned. “What are you doing here?”

She couldn’t think of a single response. If she admitted she was that lawyer, he would hate her, and if she lied to him, she would hate herself.

“Julie?”

“Cord, I can explain if you’ll give me a chance.”

He looked her up and down taking in her clothes and her shoes. Soon, realization dawned on his face. “Now I know what a girl like you is doing in a place like this. You came to try and convince my granddad to sell and you decided to use me to do it. How stupid can I be?”

“I swear, I had no idea you were...I mean how could I have known that—”

“That I was my grampa’s grandson? I can think of a lot of ways, Julie. If that’s even your real name.” His glare held no warmth.

“Of course, it’s my real name. Julie...Foster.”

“Is it? Why did you hesitate?”

She didn’t owe him an explanation so she changed tactics. “When I came looking for help last night, I didn’t know I’d run into you and your brothers. Think about it. You three were on your way out the door. A couple of minutes later and I would have missed you entirely.”

“So, why didn’t you tell me who you were?” he challenged.

“Why didn’t you?” she volleyed back.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he kept that blue-eyed stare full of daggers aimed at her.

“Cord, last night we were just two people looking for a temporary respite from...life. It wasn’t necessary we knew all about the other. We both knew we’d get up and go our separate ways. I swear to you I did not know you were a Cahill. I swear it on my granddad’s honor. I just happened to be at the same place you were at the same time.” She wasn’t sure why it was so important that he believe her. It wasn’t as if she had feelings for him. Because she didn’t. And yet when she saw the hurt of betrayal in his eyes, her heart clenched tight inside her chest.

He stood rigid and unyielding for a minute or two longer, then she saw his body relax. “If all that’s true, then I’d say what we have here is a bad case of coincidence.” He dropped

his head and stared at his boots before he walked toward her, his face no longer tight with anger. “I hope you know I can’t allow you to talk with my grampa. He’s still recovering from his accident. He’s just not as strong as he used to be and we have to protect him. You understand that, right?”

“I do. If he was my granddad, I’d be as protective as you all are. Besides, I’m not here to talk to him about selling the ranch. Not since I’ve seen it in person. I couldn’t imagine leaving this place. It’s beautiful.” She could tell Cord was still suspicious of her motives. “I did come to talk to your granddad, but I wanted to apologize to him for missing our appointment today. The tire again,” she explained. “And I wanted to give him some legal advice.”

“We have our own lawyers that are capable of representing Cahill interests.” He pointed out. Besides, I’m not sure why you’d think we’d take any advice from an employee of Howe, Tolleson, and Worth when they are the ones—”

“I understand, but I’m going to give it to you anyway. I’m quitting the law firm when I get back. I can’t work for a company that is a... careerist prostitute. I’ve always believed in doing the right thing and harassing your grampa isn’t the right thing. It’s his right not to sell and if Mr. Carter wants to buy land, then he can—”

“Did you say Carter?” Cord’s face reflected both shock and anger at the mention of the client’s name.

“Yes, do you know him?”

“Maybe. Let’s go inside. This could be a lengthy conversation and we’re gonna need some of Mrs. Bennett’s ice-cold sweet tea.”

And then he gifted her with that smile of his. *Damn*

Chapter 20

Cord walked Julie up the stairs and through the front door of his granddad's house. He couldn't believe she was here, but even more surprising was how glad he was that she was here. And he had known it the minute he saw her standing there in those ridiculous shoes at the end of those long, sexy legs. He smiled. "Come sit and let's talk about what we know."

He guided Julie into the kitchen. "Mrs. Bennett, would you be so kind as to get us some of your delicious tea?"

"What's she doin' here? You ain't gonna let her upset your granddad, now are ya, 'cause I'm not too keen—"

"Mrs. Bennett, you know me better than that. Of course not. That's not why she's here." Cord avoided telling the whole truth to stem any heated conversations that might ensue. "Would you mind getting us that tea? And radio Cooper we have a visitor with some very interesting information we'd like to share with Grampa."

"Okay, if you think that's best." He saw the suspicious glare the woman was giving Julie, but he didn't have the time or the luxury to ease the woman's suspicions.

Mrs. Bennett set the glasses full of tea in front of them along with a plate of homemade lemon ginger cookies Grampa loved. "Ain't nobody can say the Cahills are cheap on southern hospitality," she grumbled.

"Thank you. And tell Cooper you're comin' to get Granddad in the buggy." He noticed the woman's expression changed in a heartbeat. "Of course, I'll be happy to." She hurried out the front door and soon, he heard the quad's engine, then it faded into the distance.

"I take it she likes your Grampa." Julie said.

He nodded. Surprised she picked up on that, 'cause he sure hadn't. "Apparently so. Grampa told me this mornin' she was sweet on him. I did not see that comin'."

“Is that a problem for you?” Julie’s question caught him off-guard for a moment. “I mean, I’m assuming you were close to your grandma too, so...”

“You know, I thought it would be weird, but we’ve known Mrs. Bennett for a long time and the bottom line is...if my grampa is happy, I’m happy.”

“I get it. I was the same way about my granddad. You’re lucky you still have him.” Cord saw the sadness in Julie’s eyes. He knew the two of them had been close.

“I am. Now, let’s talk about this Mr. Carter. What do you know about him? Where does he come from? Do you know anything about him at all?” Cord pushed for as much information as he could, but he had a strong hunch he now knew exactly what all this was about.

“I don’t know much. Mr. Howe, my boss, kept the client file pretty hush-hush. My job was to convince Mr. Cahill to sell this ranch to Mr. Carter. Why, I’m not sure, but I do know he wants it pretty bad to go to this much trouble.” Julie paused to take a drink of the tea. “Wow, that’s really good.”

“You should taste those cookies.” He grabbed one off the plate and put it on the table in front of her. “Don’t worry, it won’t hurt your figure.” He felt a pulse of arousal at the heated look she gave him before she broke eye contact and tore off a small piece of the cookie and quickly stuffed it into her mouth. Images of the two of them last night made him want to pull her into his arms and kiss those damn lips of hers again, but that would only lead to complications. He had enough of those at the moment. “So, back to this Carter guy, why do you think he wants this ranch so much?”

“I’ve asked that question myself more than once,” Julie admitted.

“Really? Most lawyers I’ve met couldn’t care two hoots about their client’s motivation. Why do you care?” Cord was curious. If Julie was just in this for the money, her sole focus would be getting her client what he wanted any way she could.

“It just didn’t make sense why this Carter person would want the Cahill ranch so badly. My instincts tell me I don’t have all the answers and that’s the thing that’s got me questioning the client’s motives. When something doesn’t make sense, it’s either because the right questions haven’t been asked, or the right answers haven’t been given. I’ve been making a list of plus and minuses ever since this case started to feel off. Now, here’s what I came up with. The property appraised for quite a bit less than Carter’s offering, so why would he make the offer? I thought perhaps he saw an opportunity to make money, but how? There’s no oil here. Development? It wouldn’t be feasible because of your location. Nobody I know wants to drive all this way to work and back. It’s probably a fifty-mile round trip and that’s just to Wagon Gap. I researched their job market. There’s not much there, at least, not enough to sustain a development the size Mr. Carter would have to create in order to make his money back. Then there’s the utilities or rather lack thereof. The cost to install electric and water this far out would be astronomical. I’m just not seeing a business reason why this man would go to these lengths, and expense, to acquire this property. And that brought me to the possibility that it isn’t business. It’s personal. And by your reaction to the name Carter, I’d be willing to bet we have a winner.”

Cord sipped his tea and watched Julie scroll through the screen on her phone reading all the reasons why buying Cahill land would not be a good investment for Mr. Carter. “You’ve been questioning this for a while?”

“Yeah, like I said earlier, my firm may be a career prostitute, but I’m not. Right matters to me and there’s something about this acquisition that just doesn’t feel right.”

Cord rose from his chair and walked around the table, keeping Julie’s gaze pinned to his. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear you say that.”

“What?” Julie frowned her confusion. “You’re glad to hear I have suspicions, or you’re glad that—”

She watched his every move until he reached for her hand and pulled her into his arms. Without preamble, he leaned

down and offered her a soft kiss. She was free to deny him, but without a moment of hesitation, she stepped further into his arms and clung to his shirt while deepening the kiss. Her tongue invaded his mouth and igniting his passion. Within seconds, they were caught up in a firestorm of white-hot desire.

His mouth slid over her jaw and down her throat. His hands roamed freely slipping underneath her jacket and finding the lush, soft roundness of her breasts.

“Cord,” she whispered as she offered herself to him.

He squeezed and lifted her breast, relishing the feel of its weight under his palm. She moaned, and his length grew even harder as images of last night’s escapade invaded his thoughts. He wanted to strip her naked and have her ride him exactly like she did last night. “Julie, we should probably—” He’d been about to say they should take this somewhere else, but he heard the hum of the buggy and knew they would soon have company. “Julie, my granddad is coming,” Cord whispered against her lips.

Julie cupped his obvious bulge from outside his jeans. “With a little time, I could say that about the two of us.” She offered him a coquettish grin.

It took him a full second to realize what she meant. When he did, he swelled so damn hard and hot at the image she had put in his head, he wasn’t sure he could trust the zipper on his jeans. He heard the side-by-side pull up to the back porch and the engine stopped along with the murmur of voices, his grampa’s and Mrs. Bennett’s coming through the kitchen window. “Um, I gotta sit down or else everyone is gonna know what I’m thinking right now.”

“I think I’d better visit the powder room. They’re gonna take one look at my smudged lipstick and know exactly what we’ve been up to. You should probably wipe your mouth a bit.”

She handed him the napkin the cookies were on and he hurried and wiped his mouth.

“Powder room?” She raised her eyebrows in question.

“At the end of the hall.” Cord pointed the way and worked to compose himself before his granddad and Mrs. Bennett made it in the house. Sweat beaded on his forehead. “Damn.” It was all he could think to say about the woman who had invaded his home and his heart. *Wait, what?*

Chapter 21

Julie reapplied her smeared makeup. Her shaking fingers making it difficult to apply her lipstick correctly. She could feel the moisture in her panties from her unexpected contact with Cord. “How was this happening,” she whispered to her image in the mirror. Cord, the dreamy, hot cowboy from her one-and-only one-night stand, turns out to be *the* grandson of the man at the center of her employer’s biggest money-making case. “Wow, Julie. When you do it, you do it up big, don’t you?” She shook her head in amazement. Her parents would be mortified at her behavior. Then, she smiled. “Granddad would be proud though.”

She took another quick look in the mirror, and her eyes dropped to her swollen, cowboy-kissed lips now hidden beneath her freshly applied lipstick. Involuntary waves of heat hit her core when she thought about his talents in the bedroom. Now she knew exactly what talents Cord had been talking about outside the bar last night. Talents he was famous for. “Damn. Focus, Julie. Focus.” What was her game plan? Frankly, she didn’t know. She needed more information about Carter, and to get that, she needed to make an appearance. A professional appearance. One last look in the mirror, she gathered her purse—and her courage—and left the quiet shelter of the bathroom.

Voices down the hall pushed her into work mode. Her job was to get the Carter contract signed, but everyone knew if Mr. Cahill didn’t want to sell, no one could force him. It was as simple as that. What she wanted to find out now is: Who this Carter was? Why he wanted this place so bad? What could she learn to turn the tables on her boss? She wasn’t intimidated any longer by his threat to fire her. She’d already quit. He just didn’t know it yet and that was to her advantage.

She entered the kitchen, keeping her eyes from zeroing in on Cord. She was good at hiding her feelings under normal circumstances, but one look at that delicious cowboy sitting at

the kitchen table would reduce her to a puddle of desire, and she knew she couldn't keep that truth from shining in her eyes.

Cord started to stand when she entered the room, but he gave a mock bow of introduction and sat down as quickly as he'd stood. *Don't look at him. Don't look at him.* She knew exactly why he wasn't standing and it took all her willpower to not jump into his lap and continue where they'd left off this morning, but one look at Mr. Cahill, Cord's granddad, sent all her desires for his grandson out the window. She swallowed and put on her most businesslike smile. Hand out, she approached the elderly man. "Mr. Cahill, I'm—"

"I know who ya are."

"Julie Foster." She dropped her hand and nodded. "Yes, I'm sure you do, Mr. Cahill. Look, I think I think we can work everything out if we can just sit down and have a conversation. I'd like to ask you a few questions—"

"I wanna ask you a few questions first." Mr. Cahill nodded to the chair next to Cord. She took her vacated seat again, her half-eaten cookie still sitting on the table. She never allowed her gaze to stray from Mr. Cahill's bold glare.

"Alright, sir. Go ahead. Ask me anything. I'll answer as honestly as I can." Julie braced herself for an interrogation.

"Who in the hell wants my land so bad they are willing to risk harassment charges and a restraining order against your law firm?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I mean, I have a name, but I have no idea why the man wants your land so badly."

"Grampa, that's what I wanted to tell you. Julie—I mean Miss Foster just told me a Mr. Carter is after our land. She doesn't know his first name, but I think you'd agree the last name is evidence enough as to who is behind this."

She watched Mr. Cahill lean into the table and stare at Cord. "Are you tellin' me there's a Carter after this place? I should have known."

"Yes, sir. According to Julie—I mean Miss Foster."

“Boy, that’s the second time you’ve called her by her first name in less than a minute, but we’ll get back to that in a moment. Now, tell me what you know about this Carter fella.”

“I don’t know much. As I was telling Cord—I mean your grandson, I’ve sensed there was something off about this whole bid to purchase your land.” Julie grabbed her pen and paper out of her purse and jotted some things down. “Do you know this Mr. Carter?”

“Depends. Which Carter?”

She stopped short. “*Which* Carter? You mean there’s more than one?”

“Yep, could be. As far as I know Wilson Carter is still living. And then there’s his two boys, identical twins, Carson and Mason. I don’t know which one is your client, but I can guarantee they’re all in cahoots together.”

Julie felt like there was a big piece to the picture still missing and nothing would make sense until she found out what that piece was. “How about we start at the beginning? Who are these Carters and why do you think they want your land so badly?”

“Oh, I don’t think, I know they want this land. It’s personal. They can’t get it any other way so they’re waving their money around like a bunch of Rockefellers. But it won’t do ‘em a damn bit of good. I wouldn’t sell this ranch for every damn penny the man has.”

Julie sent a helpless glance to Cord. How far could she push Mr. Cahill before he sent her packing out the front gate?

“Grampa, I think what...Miss Foster wants to know is how the Carters are connected to our family and why he wants this land. How ‘bout we start with that?” Cord turned to her and his eyebrows arched in question.

“Yes, that would be a perfect place to start. Whenever you’re ready, sir.” Julie posed her pen over the sheet of legal pad to take notes.

“Alright, here’s how the Carters are connected to the Cahills. Wilson Carter married my cousin-in-law, Hope, after

her first husband, Matthew Cahill was killed in Vietnam. They didn't have any kids. When Hope married Wilson, they had twin boys. That's Carson and Mason."

"So if they know you, why don't they just talk to you about buying the land?" Julie questioned as confused as ever about the Carters' motives.

"They know better than anyone this land won't be sold. It's not allowed."

Julie raised up from her notes. "Not allowed? I don't understand."

"I can't sell the land. It's not mine. Well, the deed's in my name, but this land has been handed down for five generations ever since it was first homesteaded by Randolph Cahill and his wife Sarah. This land belongs to the Cahills. The Hansons know it. The Millers know it. The Webbers know it. But them damn Carters think they can do what they want ever since Wilson let them oil riggers drill on his land. He's got more money than Midas has gold, but he wants the one thing he can't have. The old coot."

"Who are these other names you mentioned? Miller. Hanson. Webber. Are they relatives too?" Julie wrote each name down on her notepad.

"Yes, these are all families that married into the Cahills. They know all about Randolph's trust handed down and attached to the deed to these lands. And nobody whose last name isn't Cahill can hold title to this land." The older man shrugged. "I didn't make the rules, but I damn well intend to enforce them. The Cahill legacy was my grampa's gift to this family. Him and my grandma worked hard to make something out of a raw piece of land, and they passed that legacy on down to their children and their children passed it on down to their children and so on. But the one thing he declared was it be passed to a Cahill, not just by blood, but by name."

"If this Carter person has so much money, why doesn't he just buy a big spread somewhere else? Why this one?" Julie was working to put the puzzle together, but there were still pieces missing.

“He wants the Cahill legacy for his sons. Although my cousin-in-law—a sweet woman, whom we all loved—may have had a claim had her and Matthew had children before he was killed. Afterward, that was no longer within her reach. Although I think there was always a longing for the children Hope and Matthew never had, I think she never gave up on ...” Mr. Cahill’s words drifted off and Julie looked up from the notes on her legal pad. “Mr. Cahill?”

“I was just thinking, maybe that’s the motive for all of this. Maybe Hope expressed more than a wish to Wilson before she died. Maybe she planted the seed in his head. Maybe she was the reason Wilson is trying so hard to do something he hopes those fancy lawyers of yours is gonna make happen. Sometimes, the love of a woman can make a man do things for her sake he might not have done otherwise.”

Julie forced her eyes to remain on her legal pad. She wondered...if things between her and Cord were different... what would he do in the name of love? She shook her head and reminded herself. Cord was a one-night stand and that’s all he is. Stop looking for a fairy tale, Julie. This is where the cowboy rides away, remember? “Mr. Cahill, would you mind if I have a look at the deed and the trust? I just want to make sure the Carters, and my law firm, can’t go from an offer to buy to an all-out court battle on the claim of survivorship.”

“Cord, get in the safe and show Miss Foster the deed and the trust Granddad had drawn up.” Cord did as his grampa asked. When he was out of the room, Julie turned to Mr. Cahill. “Has this trust ever been disputed before?”

“No, everyone knows the rules, except the Carters.” Julie made another note on her notepad.

“Now, let me ask you somethin’, Miss Foster.”

She looked up to see the elderly man watching her with a keen eye. “Of course. Ask me anything.”

“How do you and Cord know each other? And don’t bother denying it, because I see the looks he’s givin’ you when you ain’t lookin’.”

Unsure what to say, she thought it best to stay as close to the truth as possible without giving away all the details. “Cord and I met last night at the Rusty Spur. Funny thing was, I didn’t know he was your grandson.”

“Is that a fact?” His tone made it clear he didn’t believe it was as simple as she was letting on. “And if I ask Cord the same question, is he gonna give me the same answer?”

“I would assume so, Mr. Cahill. Not sure why his story would be any different. He didn’t know who I was either. It was just Julie and Cord. Casual acquaintances with no need for last names, I suppose.”

“You two met last night, huh? So, how do you feel about my grandson this afternoon?”

Chapter 22

Cord should have known better than to leave his grampa and Julie alone in the same room. The old man was crafty like a fox and just as keen. He didn't miss much. When Cord heard his grampa ask Julie how she felt about him, he had to admit for just a second, he held his breath in anticipation. How did she feel about him? What could she feel about him? They'd known each other less than twenty-four hours. But even more important was how did he feel about her? It was a one-night stand, he reminded himself, and yet it felt...different somehow.

He heard Julie hesitate and decided not hearing her answer might be better. Cord pushed into the room in a rush and laid the papers down in front of Julie. "Here ya go. The deed and the trust papers."

"Thank you," she said without looking up. He took his seat again without making eye contact with his grampa.

"Would anyone like some more tea?" Mrs. Bennett asked pitcher in hand.

"Yes, please. Thank you." Julie hurried to answer.

"Yes, me too, Mrs. Bennett. Thank you." Cord nodded still not looking at his grampa.

After a few more minutes, Julie handed him back the papers. "Has there been mention of the wishes in this trust on subsequent wills regarding this property?"

"Are you asking me if every Cahill since this trust was executed has a will that expressed their wishes to uphold this trust? Yes, we have every descendant's will that was set to inherit. Every one of them expressed their wishes to continue the trust just as Granddad Cahill intended."

He watched Julie open her laptop and within a few moments, she was looking at a legal reference website of some kind. In another few moments, she nodded as if in agreement with whatever it was she was looking for. "Mr. Cahill,

according to the Constitution of 1836, all heads of families living in Texas on March 4, 1836, were granted “first class” headrights of one league and one labor of land. That amounts to four-thousand, six-hundred and five and one-half acres.”

“That’s about right. We’ve added a few hundred acres of surrounding land as it has become available, but the original homestead was a little over forty-five hundred acres,” His grampa nodded in agreement with Julie’s assessment.

“These documents prove that your ancestor, Randolph Cahill was awarded this land, and if you have each descendant’s will showing the land has been passed down from descendant to descendant as prescribed by your grandfather’s trust, then the Carters can’t do a damn thing to force you to sell this land. The short story here is there is there’s nothing they can do. I’ll leave you with this, if you need a witness in court to get that restraining order, you call me.” Cord watched Julie take out a business card and flip it over handwriting a number on the back. “The number on the card isn’t mind anymore. I’m writing down my personal cell number.” She slid the card across the table toward his grampa. “I’ll be happy to help you any way I can, sir.”

Julie’s phone vibrated against the table. Cord saw her glance at the screen and then click the side button to quiet it. He didn’t miss the look of irritation on her face as she loaded up her things and placed them back in her purse. “I think my work here is done. There’s an obvious chain of custody with each successor throughout the last five generations. There’s nothing the Carters or anyone else can do to force you to sell this land. If you sell it, it’s because you want to and certainly not because you have to. And if I lived in a place like this...I’d never let it go either.”

Cord noticed a sad note in Julie’s voice as she stood. She walked around the table and shook his grampa’s hand. “Thank you for your courtesy, Mr. Cahill. I’m sorry I was such a pest before. I was just trying to do my job.”

His grampa held on to Julie’s hand, his gaze pinned her with a look Cord knew all too well. “I asked you a question earlier, Miss Foster. You never answered me.”

Julie looked down at their clasped hands and then back up to his grampa. “And what was the question again, Mr. Cahill?”

“How do you feel about my grandson?”

Cord watched Julie’s eyes widen in alarm. She sent a panicked look to him as if asking for help.

“Grampa, don’t embarrass the lady.” It was a feeble attempt, to divert the old man, but he’d been caught off-guard himself and wasn’t exactly sure how to handle this without giving their secret away. What was his grampa up to anyway?

“Are you embarrassed, Miss Foster?” his grampa asked Julie, direct as always. “You don’t seem the type to get flustered. You seem more like the once-committed-hell-will-freeze-over-before-I-let-you-down type. Am I wrong?”

Cord watched a flurry of emotions flutter across Julie’s face. “Well, I’m not sure embarrassed is the right word. I just don’t know how to answer that, sir.”

“It’s not a hard question,” his grampa pushed. “Either you like him or you don’t.”

“Of course, I like him,” Julie hedged and pulled her hand free.

“Grampa, what’s she supposed to say? I’m standing right here.” Cord walked around the table to help Julie escape his grampa’s clutches when the old man turned the tables on him.

“So, how do you feel about Miss Foster?”

Cord refused to make eye contact with Julie. What could he say? *Hey, I think she’s hot as hell and she’s got the heart of a cowgirl. Or she ain’t afraid of comin’ in hot and she’s good at ridin’ her cowboy to the finish,* but that wasn’t gonna happen. “What’s behind all this, Grampa? What exactly are you asking us?”

“It’s a simple question. How do you feel about each other? I’m not really asking for myself, but I’m hoping my question will start a conversation between the two of you before you say goodbye for good. Now, I need some help gettin’ down the hall, Mrs. Bennett. Would you mind?”

“Not at all, James.” The woman started to help his grampa out of his chair and into his crutches.

“Here, let me do that,” Cord offered, but his grampa stopped him. “No, Cord, you should walk your guest to her car.” Then he turned to Julie. “Goodbye, Miss Foster. I hope we’ll see you again.”

“I hope so too, Mr. Cahill,” Julie responded in earnest. Cord was getting’ vibes that Julie was reluctant to leave. Could that be true?

After his grampa and Mrs. Bennett left the kitchen, Cord turned to Julie in shock. I don’t know what to say.”

She smiled and reached for his arm to give it a squeeze. “There’s nothing to say. No strings attached, remember?”

Cord nodded his understanding, but not his agreement as he followed Julie out of the house to her car. Panicked at the thought of saying goodbye for good, he blurted, “But what if I want strings attached?”

Julie stopped in her tracks and turned to face him, shock evident on her pretty face. “Cord, what are you saying? You just met me, and I can honestly say not in the best of circumstances.” Her phone pinged announcing a text had arrived. She ignored it.

He moved closer to her. “I thought they were great circumstances, Julie. I certainly enjoyed our impromptu rodeo, didn’t you?” He reached out and pulled her closer. She hesitated for a moment, but surrender soon followed. He saw heat in her eyes when she looked up at him. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. “I don’t know what’s happening between us, but I can say I’ve never felt a connection to anyone like this before.” He leaned in closer and her eyes fluttered shut. “Would you mind if I kissed you, Miss Julie Foster?” He feathered her lips with his breath.

“I’m gonna look pretty silly standing here with my eyes closed if you don’t,” she bantered back.

Cord loved the feel of this woman in his arms. Was this lust or could his feelings be something deeper? He’d never

been in love before, but if being in love made a person want to throw up at the thought of the object of their affections leaving for good, then he was most definitely in love. He leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her lips. She sighed, and he felt his erection press against the zipper of his jeans. “We can’t keep doin’ this or__”

“Or everybody’s gonna know how much we like each other?” she teased.

He laughed. “Somethin’ like that.”

“I guess we must have given it away somehow, otherwise why would your grampa ask—hell, how did he know about last night? I’m pretty good at keeping my emotions in check. Was it something I said?” He watched Julie try to put the pieces together as to how his grampa knew about last night.

Cord laughed. “No, it was probably me that gave it away. That old man has a way of readin’ things, and what you don’t know about that wily old man is that he has a sixth sense when it comes to noticing when something isn’t quite right with one of his kin. And since I’m closer to him than anyone else...for sure, it was me. I admit it.”

Julie took a step back just out of arms reach and looked out across the meadow. He could see a fine mist of tears pool in her eyes. Was she upset about something he’d said?

“What exactly are you admitting to, Cord? That you’re not a good liar or that maybe you have feelings you shouldn’t.”

His heart caught on the word *shouldn’t*. “So, are you saying you don’t?”

Her phone pinged a new text. This time she glanced at the screen. “Shit!”

Chapter 23

Cord was instantly alert. “What’s wrong?” He walked closer to her searching her face for answers.

“We have a visitor.” She turned to look up the hill at the spot where the road crested on the hill above the house.

“And who would that be?” Cord turned beside her and looked to the same spot.

“Reggie Blackstock.”

“An acquaintance of yours?”

“A co-worker.”

“And why is he here?”

“I didn’t tell you, but my boss, Mr. Howe, wasn’t happy with me when I couldn’t bring him the contract to this ranch, so he has decided to send a backup.”

“Why is that a big deal? We’ll just send him packin’,” Cord assured her.

“There’s more to it than that.” Julie wanted things with Cord to end on a positive note, but she would rather be honest with him than lie. “Look, Cord. I’m not going to lie to you. I was sent down here to get that contract signed and I was instructed to use any means necessary to get it done.”

Cord frowned at her words. “And exactly what does that mean?”

“It means my boss sent me down here with instructions to seduce Mr. Cahill’s grandson if that’s what it took to get that contract signed.”

Disbelief darkened Cord’s face. “Are you saying you lied when you said you didn’t know I was a Cahill? That you intentionally set this whole thing up so you could—”

“No, I didn’t lie. I truly didn’t know you were Mr. Cahill’s grandson. There was no real plan in place, Cord, just my boss being the asshole that he is making suggestions a boss

shouldn't make to an employee no matter what's at stake. Besides, if I had planned to seduce you, trust me, I would have come armed with more than an address and a flat tire."

"Like what?" She could see the doubt in Cord's eyes.

"Like facts, you know, pictures, social media—at least a name, something to give me a clue as to who you were before I jumped into bed with you. I can assure you I don't fall into bed with just anyone and I damn sure don't sleep around for a job, especially a job I'm walking away from."

"You're quitting your job? In New York?"

Julie was surprised when Cord focused on her resignation rather than the possibility she'd had sex with him to manipulate him into convincing his grampa to sell Cahill land. "Yes, I'd already decided I was done working for Mr. Howe before I got here this afternoon. Recent events have convinced me I need a job that has some meaning. I don't want to be a weapon for an over-priced, giant-egoed, stuffed-shirt lawyer and his clients. I'm tired of trying to make everyone else happy. For a change, I think I'll make myself happy."

"Can you do that?"

"Make myself happy?" A strained laugh escaped her lips. "God, I hope so."

"No, I mean, just quit like that?"

"I can do anything I want," Julie said it more to convince herself than Cord.

"And what do you want, Julie?" He reached out and wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger. It was a small thing, but it spoke volumes to Julie. She leaned into his hand and prayed she wasn't misreading him because she wasn't sure her heart could stand the disappointment if she was wrong.

Before either of them had a chance to explore their feelings, a car topped the hill followed by the same pickup truck that tracked her progress hours earlier. Julie inhaled a breath to steady her nerves. "Looks like Reggie got in the same way I did. Through the kindness of one of your cowboys."

Cord nodded as he watched the car and pickup draw closer. “Yeah, I’m gonna have to talk to somebody about that.”

Julie turned to the handsome cowboy next to her and tried to make him understand. “Look, Cord. I can’t stop you from believing what you want about this whole thing. All you have is my word that I didn’t sleep with you for my job and since you’ve known me less than twenty-four hours, I’d probably agree I wouldn’t believe me either. But—” She inhaled a deep breath. She’d been down this road before and it was heart-breaking when it reached a dead end.

“But?” Cord pressed as the car drew closer.

“But I do have feelings for you. The only reason I didn’t answer your grampa’s question is I just don’t know what to make of these feelings. I mean, people don’t...two strangers can’t—” The car pulled into the drive and Julie could see Reggie’s predatory grin through the windshield.

“Can’t fall in love?” Cord turned to her with something akin to hope in his eyes. “Are you saying there’s a rule book for love that tells people when it’s alright to fall in love?”

“No, of course not, but think about it Cord. We haven’t even known each other a whole day. How do we know these feelings are real? How do we know they’ll last and we won’t regret decisions we make for the future? I just don’t trust feelings. They’ve failed me before.” Julie felt her emotions rising to the top and the last thing she wanted was for Reggie to see her at her most vulnerable.

“Then don’t trust those feelings, Julie.” Cord held her by her shoulders keeping her focus pinned on him.

Her heart sank. “So, you don’t believe it’s real either.” Disappointment crushed her reluctant hopes.

“I didn’t say that.” He grinned at her with that stupid sexy cowboy grin that made her weak in the knees.

“Then what are you saying?”

Reggie stepped out of the car with that arrogant grin of his. Impulse made her want to slap it off his face, but she received a small amount of satisfaction when his shiny designer boots

were swallowed up by a cloud of dust making them dull and ordinary. Still sporting that obnoxious grin, he slammed the car door and started to take a step when he looked down and grimaced. “Damn it, and I just had these polished at the airport,” he grouched.

Julie ignored Reggie. All her attention was on Cord. “You didn’t answer my question, Cord. What are you trying to say?”

Cord reached out and pulled her into his heartfelt embrace. “If you can’t trust your feelings, Julie Bug, then put your trust in me.”

Chapter 24

“Hey, how’s it going?” Reggie greeted them like old friends, but Cord recognized an outlaw when he saw one.

“Can I help you?” Ignoring the man’s outstretched hand.

He watched Reggie’s confident grin slip a bit then cut a curious look toward Julie. “Hey, I’m hopin’ I can help you, that is if you are Mr. Cahill’s grandson.”

“I am one of them. Again, I ask, how can I help you?” Cord answered, his tone cool and unemotional.

“I have an appointment with Old Man Cahill,” Reggie announced full of self-importance.

“Is that a fact? Well, by my way of thinking, there’s two things wrong with that statement.” Cord straightened to his full height of six feet making him a good two inches taller than the man in front of him. The confusion on the man’s face gave him a fair amount of satisfaction having knocked the arrogant ass off his better-than-you pedestal. “First, I know my grampa’s schedule and the only appointment he had today was with Miss Foster here. And second, I don’t know where you hail from, but around here we respect our elders. We all call my grampa either Sir or Mr. Cahill. Old Man Cahill will get you a fat lip and a nose full of dirt.”

He could tell his dressing down made the city boy mad. Good. ‘Cause he was fixin’ to get real mad himself.

It took a minute for the city slicker to get control of his anger and regroup. “I’m sorry if I offended you. It certainly wasn’t my attention.” He looked around the yard and up toward the house. “So, obviously there’s been some mistake, but I do have an appointment with Old— Mr. Cahill.” He watched the man’s expression sour having to conform to the etiquette Cord set before him. Cord could tell he was one of those men who didn’t like to be told what to do. Well, as long as he was on Cahill land, the twerp had better get used to it.

“The only mistake I can see at present was that one of my hands let you through the gate without clearing it first. I can assure you we’ll rectify that situation. It won’t happen again.” He knew it would be more of a mention than an outright dressing down, but this ass didn’t need to know that. “So, how about if I escort you off Cahill land myself?”

“Now wait a minute, I need a moment with my co-worker.” Cord watched him turn to Julie. “Can we have a moment in private? There are some things you should be made aware of. Things have...changed since you left New York.”

He saw a moment’s hesitation on Julie’s face and he wondered what was going through that magnificent brain of hers. Was she having second thoughts about quitting her job? Or was she having second thoughts about trusting him? Maybe he should—

“Reggie, I don’t really care what has changed since I left New York because I’m giving my resignation to Mr. Howe as soon as I get back to the office.”

Cord watched the shock on the city boy’s face. “You can’t be serious, Julie? Why would you give up a brilliant career as Mr. Howe’s—” The man stopped short. “Unless...” He turned and sent Cord a knowing look. “Unless you’ve had a better offer.” He turned again to Julie, this time his lip curled in disgust. “So you did it. You actually slept with him.”

He saw Julie’s head shake in denial. “Reggie, it’s not what you think.”

“So, you’re not denying you slept with him?”

Julie volleyed back. “Though it’s none of your damned business no, I ‘m not denying it’s true. I did sleep with him. What I am denying, Reggie, is that I slept with Cord in exchange for a signed contract. That would make me a careerist hooker.” Thoughts of her conversation with Jolene made her smile. Just a small one. “That’s your job.”

Cord could tell Reggie didn’t like that at all and it was quite evident when he turned his anger on Julie full force.

“So, what you’re telling me is that you prefer to fuck a cowboy you’ve only just met rather than me?”

“Don’t talk to her that way.” Cord stepped between the two making sure the city boy knew who was in charge here.

“Don’t talk to her what way, cowboy? What’s wrong with the way I talk to her? I’m not saying anything that isn’t true, now am I?” He sneered at Julie.

“It’s alright, Cord. I don’t mind answering him.” He watched her go toe-to-toe with the arrogant ass and Cord would swear he saw a tiny sliver of fear swirl in the man’s eyes when Julie stepped closer. “So, to answer your question, *Mr. Blackstock*, if I’m being completely honest, I would rather fuck just about anyone other than you. However, just any old cowboy wouldn’t do. It had to be that one.” She pointed at Cord, and he couldn’t help but grin.

The man’s face contorted in disbelief and his obvious scorn grated on Cord’s nerves. “I don’t believe you. You met him less than twenty-four hours ago. You act like you have feelings for him.”

When Julie didn’t answer, he laughed. “I don’t believe it.”

Cord stepped in. “This has gone on long enough. It doesn’t really matter if you believe it or not, *Mr. Blackstock*. If the lady says it, then it’s the truth, like it or not.”

“She’s a liar,” the man taunted. “She isn’t telling you the truth. I know for a fact she came down here to sleep with you. It was part of her plan—”

“Is that a fact?” He turned to Julie and asked her to enlighten the jackass in front of them. “Julie, tell him what you told me. About *the* plan.”

“It’s true, Reggie. *Mr. Howe* is the one who proposed that I seduce *Mr. Cahill’s* grandson, but that was kinda hard to do when I didn’t have a name or a face to go by.”

“That’s a bunch of—”

“Did *Mr. Howe* give you Cord’s name or what he looked like before you headed down here?” Julie pushed.

“Well, no, but it wouldn’t have been hard to figure out. I’m sure everyone around these parts could have pointed him out.”

“Except no one did.” Julie pointed out.

“Okay, I’ve heard enough. Maybe you’re telling the truth and maybe you’re not. Even if the two of you are attracted to each other, so what? That shit’ll wear off as soon as you get back to work. You’ll get over the novelty of a man in a cowboy hat once you’re back to reality.” The man was determined where Julie was concerned, Cord would give him that.

“I told you, I’m not going back to work, at least not for Mr. Howe,” Julie announced.

“What the hell are you doing, Julie? You’re throwing away your career. Your future won’t be shit without—”

“Why don’t you let me worry about her future? And, since it’s obvious—even to you—that Mr. Cahill isn’t going to sell this land, why don’t you get back in that car, turn it around, and head for the airport. There’s nothing else to be said.”

When he didn’t move a muscle, at first Cord wasn’t sure the man had heard him, but if the red streaks on the man’s neck were any indication, oh, he’d heard him alright. And he was very angry indeed. “Oh, hell, no. Cahill or not, you can’t keep me from talking to Old Man Cahill. I flew all this way and I’m not leaving without a contract.” Then he turned on Julie. “And as for you you two-bit tramp, you could have had it all, but you’re throwing it all away. And for what? This?” He pointed a shaky finger at Cord.

“Here in Texas, we treat our women with respect. Name callin’ is strictly frowned upon.” Cord’s fists were just itching to knock a couple of his teeth loose.

“Is that right? And what are you gonna do, *pardner*? This isn’t the old west. You can’t attack someone because you don’t like what they say. It’s called assault and battery where I come from.” The man’s smug face presented an open target for Cord’s disgust of the man’s behavior.

“Well, asshole, where I come from, we call it justice.” He took a step forward ready to pummel the man’s face into the dust, when Julie grabbed his arm. “Cord, wait.” He frowned in question. He had been under the impression she despised the man. He watched her step toward Reggie. Had he been wrong?

But when Miss Julie Foster, designer suits and fuck-me heels, reared back her own tiny fist and punched the man in the face with all her might, Cord couldn’t help but grin.

For a few moments, they both stood and watched Julie’s soon-to-be ex-coworker stagger backwards against the hood of his rented car. Julie followed up her potent punch with a clear and concise declaration. “And you can tell Mr. Howe, I quit!”

Julie rubbed her hand and Cord flashed a shit-eatin’ grin as wide as the Sabine River. “That’s my cowgirl and I love it when she’s comin’ in hot!”

Chapter 25

Two months later, Julie turned over the keys to her apartment at One57 and said goodbye to the staff. It had been harder than she thought it would be. She'd grown fond of them since she'd moved in five years ago. As compensation for jobs well-done, she'd given them all generous bonuses. It wasn't a requirement for leaving One57. Of the few neighbors she had actually met, none of them had ever bothered to ask about the employees who provided them with excellent service day in and day out, year after year.

Outside, she turned and looked up and down West 57th Street. It was a great location between Sixth and Seventh Avenues in the Midtown neighborhood of Manhattan. The couple who bought her place was going to love living here. They had made it clear they were city dwellers and would never dream of living anywhere else but New York City.

Funny, she thought. Not too long ago, she felt the same way. But now she realized life can throw a curve ball when a person is busy making other plans.

Julie hailed a taxi. Tucked inside against the city's sweltering heat, she gave the driver the address. "Seventh Avenue and West Thirty-third, please. Across from The Garden." She would miss the energy of the city, but her new job was going to be chocked full of purpose, and so fulfilling, she doubted she would have too much time to worry about that. Besides, it wasn't like she was leaving forever. She'd come back for Christmas to show off her city in all its holiday wonder to someone who had never seen it before. She couldn't wait.

Under ordinary circumstances, she would have walked the sixteen-minute trip from her apartment to work, but today she was in a hurry. The taxi stopped in front of The Mason Building. It was quite a feat of engineering and architecture. She'd never met the owner, Broderick Mason, but she'd heard tell he was quite the male specimen. She smiled at the image of a certain cowboy with nothing on but his boots and his hat.

Mr. Mason may be some women's ideal picture of a man, but she was pretty certain she'd already seen the most exquisite example of what a man should look like, and she doubted very seriously Mr. Mason could ever measure up.

She had planned her visit to her old firm when she knew no one would be there, so when she arrived on the law firm's floor, she hurried to her office for the rest of her things. She'd called Miss Franklin the day after she'd arrived back from Texas and asked her to arrange to have someone empty out her office of any work-related items. "Just stack the boxes up in shipping and I'll have everything sent to my new address. That is everything except my granddad's things. I'll come by and get those myself." Julie knew her law reference books would arrive safely to her new office, but she didn't want to take a chance with her precious personal items. She kept a lot of her granddad's things in her office instead of in her apartment. She reasoned she'd just wanted to look up and feel a sense of calm at seeing his things on the shelf. It made a bad day so much better.

Everything of Granddad's fit nicely into the single box Miss Franklin had left for her. The office looked bare. All of her life's achievements in the form of certificates and trophies and awards were packed away leaving not a single trace of her former life anywhere. She smiled, turned off the light, and closed the door. She was just fine with that.

She was laying her office keys on Miss Franklin's desk when a familiar voice spoke. "Leaving already?" She turned to see the woman standing in Mr. Howe's doorway.

"What are you still doing here?" Julie asked in surprise. "Even you usually don't work this late on the weekend."

"I had some things to take care of, but mostly..." the woman hesitated. "Mostly, I just wanted to say goodbye to you and wish you all the happiness you can find."

Shocked, Julie stood speechless for half a minute before she finally answered, "Thank you, Miss Franklin. That's very kind of you."

“Not at all. I mean it. I think what you are doing is very brave and I greatly admire your courage. I wish I had made different choices earlier in my life, but—” Were those tears forming in the fierce, no-nonsense bulldog that guarded Mr. Howe’s door? “On a brighter note, have a seat.” The woman shifted gears and motioned for Julie to take the chair in front of her desk. She sat down behind her desk and unlocked her desk drawer to drop Julie’s office key inside. “I thought you might like to know Reggie got fired the same day he came back and reported to Mr. Howe there was no contract.”

Julie grimaced. “I’m sorry. That must have been hard on Reggie. He thought of himself as a star performer. So sure he’d get that vacant position on the board.”

“You’re just being gracious, Julie. He was an ass and an arrogant one at that. You don’t have to be nice. No one is here, but you and me.”

Unsure how to respond to that, Julie just nodded and kept quiet.

“And I think you’ll be thrilled to know how mad Mr. Howe was at you.”

Julie grimaced again. “I knew he would be mad as hell.”

“Oh, he was fit to be tied, mostly because you had the nerve to quit before he could fire you.” Miss Franklin laughed the first real laugh Julie had ever heard from the woman. “It was priceless,” she admitted.

“You know, Miss Franklin, you should smile more often. You’re quite beautiful when you’re—” She stopped short.

The woman laughed. “When I’m not growling? Yeah, I’ve been told that before.”

“Why Miss Franklin, I don’t think I’ve ever seen this side of you before. I have to admit, I like it.”

“First, you can call me Joneva.”

In shock, Julie was slow to respond. “Okay, Joneva.” She sensed there was more than the small talk they were engaged in.

“Look, I just wanted to say thank you. What you’re doing is admirable.”

“Are you talking about me leaving a very prestigious law career behind? Saying goodbye to all my friends to start a new job and a new life in a foreign country? Some people would call that crazy. Actually, some people have already called me crazy, but it’s my life. They’ll adjust to the idea soon enough.”

“I wouldn’t call Texas a foreign country,” she teased.

“No, and yet some would say it is as far away from New York City as I can get.”

“Are you talking about your parents?”

Julie knew Miss—Joneva was aware of her family legacy and as far as she knew, the woman had kept her promise to keep it secret. “Yes, my father is livid, but what’s new there? And my mother? Well, let’s just say she’s booked a month-long spa treatment somewhere in the south of France. If I’m lucky, she’ll say for two.”

Joneva laughed and Julie relaxed in the woman’s presence. There was a reason for that old saying, *you can’t judge a book by its cover*. This woman was a prime example of that.

“What’s your story, Joneva? You said once you had a very similar story to mine. Care to share now that I’m no longer an employee of the company?” Julie saw a sad smile cross the woman’s face.

“I think a story like that would require copious amounts of wine and since you’ve got a plane to catch...How about a rain check?”

“Your place or mine?” Julie teased.

“I think yours would be interesting to see. How about in the fall? I hear the Texas Piney Woods can be beautiful in the fall.”

“I look forward to it.” Julie offered a friendly smile. Could it be she’d made a genuine friend of the stoic, unapproachable Miss Franklin? “Something else you told me before I left for

Texas. You said, *failure can disguise itself in a lot of different ways*. I didn't understand what you meant then, but I do now."

"And are you happy with your choices?"

"Deliriously!" Julie gushed as thoughts of her cowboy waiting for her came to mind.

"Then I'd say you're a huge success, Julie."

"I would agree with you." She paused to let the conversation settle. A few months ago, she would never have considered quitting her job, but that would have been her biggest failure and she owed a debt of gratitude to her new friend for opening her eyes to new possibilities. "Thank you, Joneva. I hope someday you'll find what you're looking for too."

"Thank you, I hope so too. Maybe someday. Until then, can I walk you out? I've had enough of this place for one week." Joneva grabbed her things and started to close her desk drawer when Julie saw her hesitate. After a moment's thought, she pulled out a file and handed it to Julie. "This belongs to you."

Julie opened the file and saw her life summarized on two pieces of paper. "Thank you, Joneva. I appreciate you keeping this to yourself although now, I suppose it doesn't really matter."

"Oh, trust me. I wanted so badly to rub your family's empire in Mr. Howe's face, but I refrained. I thought I'd better turn that over to you before I gave in to the pleasure of seeing Mr. Howe's face when I reminded him how he'd treated Julian Foster's daughter. Oh, I can just imagine the horror and it brings me such joy. It's that thought alone that gets me through some of the days around here."

"Then you keep it. Use it as ammunition against the old fart. Tell him we are best friends and one word from you, I'll have my father crush this firm and every member of his board. That'll keep him in line." Julie held out the file, but Joneva shook her head.

“No, that’s too tempting. I’d rather he learn it from one of his peers. That will have more of an impact on him than coming from me. Trust me, the truth will come out soon enough.”

“Thank you, Miss Franklin.”

“Uh-huh, remember, it’s Joneva.”

“Joneva,” Julie repeated.

“Then how about we have a drink to celebrate your new adventure?”

“To say goodbye?” Julie hated the fact that now she’d realized the true nature of Miss Joneva Franklin, she wouldn’t have the chance to get to know her better.

“No. Where I’m from, we don’t say goodbye, we say see you later. Goodbye seems...too final, you know?”

“Yes, I do. By the way, where is it that you come from?”

Julie saw a knowing look on the woman’s face. “That is a story for another time.”

“Okay, then let’s have that *see you later* drink, Joneva. I wish we could have done it sooner.”

“I’m afraid I would have bored you with all the gossip of the law firm. You wouldn’t have been able to look one person in the face without busting out laughing. And some, like Reggie, I fear you would have howled at the nonsense that poor excuse for a man has been up to.”

Julie laughed and hugged the box full of her granddad’s things. “I can only imagine.”

Joneva grabbed her purse. “Let’s go have that drink before you leave for the airport.”

Chapter 26

Julie stepped out of the regional airport terminal knowing her life was about to begin at twenty-eight.

“Julie!” She turned to see Cord sitting in his pickup truck in the arriving passenger lane. He got out of his truck and walked toward her. “God, you’re a sight for sore eyes.” He completely ignored the mix of other passengers passing by and pulled her into his arms for a scorching hello kiss. When he finally let her up for air, she was breathless for more than one reason.

“Damn. I should go away more often if that’s the welcome I get.”

“No, ma’am. You’re never leaving my sight again.”

“Can’t say I’m gonna argue with that.”

“Everything done in New York?”

“Yep, everything’s done. I don’t have to go back to New York until Christmas.”

“Christmas? What’s happening at Christmas?”

“I’m taking my handsome cowboy to see my hometown. It’s a sight everyone should see at least once in their lifetime.”

“We can talk about that later. Right now, Ranger is waiting in the truck to show you to your new office.”

“Oh, my goodness, Cord. Why didn’t you say so? You left him sitting in the truck while you and I have been—”

“Sayin’ hello to my best girl? Hell, yeah. And if the tables were turned, I’d be the one sittin’ in the truck while he carried on. Now, get inside before I forget myself entirely and kick Ranger out of the back seat so we can—”

“Cord! Don’t say that so loud.” She sent an apologetic look to a man and woman standing nearby. The woman smiled.

“Don’t worry, honey.” She patted the shoulder of the older gentleman wearing the cowboy hat standing next to her. “I’ve been there myself. It ain’t easy resistin’ a handsome man in a cowboy hat.”

Julie laughed and turned to Cord, still wrapped in his strong arms. “No, it sure is not.” She gave him a quick kiss that held a lot of meaning. “But right now, I’d like to see my new office.”

Cord mock stabbed himself in the heart. “Ouch. I’m playing second fiddle to a desk? You cut too deep, Miss Foster. You cut way too deep.”

“I’ll make it up to you later.” She wiggled her eyebrows in promise.

“Hell, yeah. Let’s see that office. Maybe we can convert that desk to a—”

“Stop it.” She slapped him on the arm and hurried to the passenger side of the truck. Cord helped her in, then Julie turned to the man in the back seat. “Hi, Ranger. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No problem. Got all night.”

“You not working at the bar tonight? It’s a Friday night in the big town of Wagon Gap. Who’s tending your bar at the Rusty Spur?”

“I have a backup when I want to take off. He’s been here about a year off and on, so the bar’s in good hands.”

“Is he a part of the Veterans Guardian Network?”

“Yeah, we’ve helped him get through some tough times. Now, he’s helping me.”

“I can’t wait to get started at my new job, and I can’t thank you enough for suggesting it.”

“When Cord told me you were looking for something to get involved in that had a purpose, I was first in line to recruit. Between your more-than-generous donation and agreeing to be the director of Veterans Guardian Network, it is I who should be thanking you.”

Cord jumped into the driver's seat and started the diesel engine. "Your luggage is in the back, now let's go see that new office of yours."

They pulled out of the airport parking lot and headed down the same highway just as she had done all those weeks ago. She marveled at how much a person's life could change in such a short amount of time.

Ranger's phone rang. "Ranger here." Silence followed and Cord turned down the radio so Ranger could hear. When he hung up, he shook his head.

"Everything okay?" Cord watched their backseat passenger from his rear-view mirror.

"Yes and no. Ben, my backup bartender, cut his hand on a broken glass. Someone put it in the rinse bin and he didn't know it."

"Is he alright?" Julie worried.

"Sure, he'll probably need a few stitches, but he'll be fine. The bad news is I have to go in after all. I'm sorry, Julie. I can give you the key and you can go check out the office yourself."

"That's not a problem at all, Ranger. It's late so maybe tomorrow would be better anyway. I can see it all in the daylight."

Cord slowed down at the next exit and she saw the dim glow of the neon lights of the Rusty Spur shining through the grove of trees she knew well. They pulled into the parking lot to let Ranger out.

"Thanks for the ride. I'll see you two tomorrow." He shut the door leaving Julie alone with her cowboy.

Cord started to pull away when she stopped him. "Hey, wait a minute. I have a brilliant idea. Why don't we hang out here for a while? Maybe have a dance or two. And maybe I'll even try another one of those Texas Tornados again. Or two."

Cord laughed. "I don't know if you can handle those strong drinks. The last time you had some of those you—" he

stopped short.

“Yes, the last time I had some of those I... what?” she teased knowing full well what he was thinking.

“Sign me up!” He spun gravel in the parking lot and pulled into the first parking spot big enough for his truck. “Let’s go!”

Julie laughed and realized how happy she was at this moment. Last time, she’d crossed the threshold of the Rusty Spur, she’d been a miserable person trying to be successful at a miserable job. She thought fighting and scrapping to be at the top would make her happy, but it didn’t. And now she was grateful for a flat tire that led her to the happiness she’d always dreamed about.

Cord helped her out of the truck. Two steps into their walk to the front door, he stopped short. “Wait. I have a present for you.”

“A present? For me?”

“Yep. I wasn’t gonna give these to you until tomorrow, but seein’ as how we’re here, why not now?”

Julie watched him dig in his back seat and he came up with a large square box. “Take those shoes off.”

“Cord, I’m not wearing my stilettos this time. These should be fine for dancing,” she admonished him when he lifted her back into the passenger seat.

“Maybe, but they aren’t as fine as these.”

He set the box on the gravel and opened the lid to reveal a very shiny new pair of red pointed-toe knee-high cowboy boots. “Oh, my! Cord, they are beautiful!”

He offered her that grin of his and she was certain she’d made the wrong decision by stopping for a dance and a drink. “Here, gotta wear socks until they get good and broke end. Blisters.” He pulled a pair of new socks out of the box and slipped them on her feet, his hands roaming freely up her leg.

“Cord, if you keep that up, I’m not gonna get to wear my new boots tonight.”

“Right.” He pulled one boot out of the box and pushed it on her right foot followed quickly by the left. “How do they feel?” He pulled her out of the truck and she did a few line dance moves in the gravel.

“Incredible,” she gushed.

Grinning from ear to ear, he shut the pickup door and locked the truck. “Then let’s send them on their maiden voyage.”

“I agree.”

They kissed their way to the double wooden door of the Rusty Spur. Inside was like another world to Julie, but she couldn’t wait to make it her own. Soon, she and Cord were immersed in the atmosphere of a country bar just like before. Loud music, whoops, hollers, two-stepping on the dance floor, cowboy hats, and cowboy boots.

She pushed her way through the crowd to the bar and greeted Ranger. “Hello, again.”

She could tell Ranger was surprised to see them. “Hey, Julie. Cord. I see y’all decided to enjoy some country spirits. How about one of those Texas Tornadoes? I seem to remember you really liked them the last time you were here. She cut a look to Cord that said you-better-keep-your-mouth-shut. He read her look loud and clear and shrugged. “I think she liked them alright.”

When Ranger handed her the drink, Cord weaved his way through the crowd to an empty table near the one they’d shared the last time they were here together. She held on tight to his hand through the crowd while the other was totally occupied by the very large drink in her hand.

When they were seated, Cord leaned in and nibbled on her earlobe sending shivers of delight over every square inch of her body. “Cord, someone will see you. You remember the last time some cowboy kept shouting, *get a room.*”

“They might as well get used to it because every time they see me, they’ll see you and I’ll be doing everything I can to get you into my bed.”

“Is that the only reason you’re interested in me? Because I was an easy one-night stand.” Julie teased.

“You easy? Hardly. It took a lot of work to get you into my bed *without* being drunk. That, my sweet, was not an easy feat.”

“Because of these?” She held up the half-empty drink in her hand.

“Maybe,” he teased back.

Julie noticed a woman headed toward them. Although the light was dim inside the bar, there was enough neon light for her to know it was Jolene. “Damn,” she grinched and took a long draw on her straw.

“What?” Cord turned in the direction she’d been looking. “What the hell can she want? I’ve made it very clear—”

“Hello, you two,” Jolene greeted them.

“Jolene,” Cord spoke first. “What can *we* do for you?”

Julie noted he emphasized *we* and she had to admit it delighted her down to her brand-new pair of shiny red cowgirl boots. She knew her Christian Louboutin cherry red patent leather stilettos couldn’t hold a candle to these bad boys.

“I heard about Julie and you gettin’ together, and I just wanted to...add my congratulations to the mix.” Julie watched the woman cut a wary glance in her direction. “I might have said a thing or two the last time you were here that maybe I shouldn’t have. So, I guess I’m here to apologize too.”

Surprised, Julie took another look at the sparkling-from-head-to-toe Cowgirl Barbie. “Don’t worry about it, Jolene. Don’t give it another thought.” Julie sat up a little straighter and took a chance on making a new friend. “Care to sit down and join us?”

She saw the shocked look Cord gave her, but she ignored it keeping her focus on the green-eyed Jolene. “Are you sure?” She could tell the woman was unsure of herself. That was probably something new for the vivacious woman. Julie knew how it felt to be out of one’s element.

“Absolutely.”

When Jolene sat on the bar stool across from her and Cord, the conversation lagged a bit. “Jolene, the last time I was here, you said you couldn’t believe I didn’t know who Dolly Parton, Queen of Country Music was, and then Cord said something about King George and I thought he was talking about the Queen of Country Music’s husband. But now I know different. How would you like to teach me the country music ropes so to speak? I could use a good teacher.”

Cord frowned at her. “What about me? I thought I was gonna teach you everything country.”

“You have your own lane to stay in, cowboy. You’re gonna teach me about country dancing and cattle and cowboy ways. Don’t worry, there’s more than enough information I’m lacking in how to be country to keep the both of you busy for years.” She saw Jolene relax a little. “Now, Jolene, if you’ll excuse us, Cord has his job cut out for him. He is going to teach me how to do the Texas Swing Dance.”

“Thank goodness I bought you those boots. Otherwise, you’d break a leg in those crazy red shoes of yours. Did you bring them with you?”

Cord pulled her onto the dance floor and Julie was so happy, she was almost certain she could clink the heels of these red boots together and fly. Instead, she grabbed hold of her Texas cowboy and pulled him close for a scorching hot kiss. Someone across the dance floor hollered, “Get a room!”

They both laughed and felt her heart expand at least three sizes hoping to contain her joy. “I guess we better get this dance over with and do what the cowboy said,” she teased pulling on Cord’s belt buckle.

“If you’re waitin’ on me, you’re backin’ up,” Cord said with that panty-melting grin of his. Her knees grew weak and her stomach fluttered with tiny butterflies. He twirled her around again like the western ballerina she now was. Her feet slid across the dance floor with ease. She laughed in utter abandonment as all the pressures of her old life slipped away. She had nothing to prove to anyone except herself and her

cowboy who was looking at her with a heat in his eyes that threatened to consume them both right on the dance floor.

When he pulled her close again, she stepped even closer and leaned up to whisper in his ear. “By the way, I did bring my fancy red shoes, but I thought maybe I would just wear them for, you know, when we get a room.” Julie wiggled her eyebrows up and down to make her meaning clear.

Cord threw his head back and laughed. Several heads turned at the sexy sound. “I should have thought of that myself.” He whirled her around in a spiral once more and then pulled her off the dance floor and toward the front door. She knew people were watching. She even knew people would be talking about them tomorrow. But she didn’t give a rat’s ass. Let them gossip, or better yet, why didn’t she give this small town something to talk about.

“Hey, Ranger!” She waved at her newest friend behind the bar. “See you tomorrow!”

He waved back. “Y’all callin’ it a night already?” He shot them a knowing grin. Julie laughed. “Yep, I’m turnin’ in early tonight.”

“I’ll just bet you are,” the handsome bartender bantered.

Cord pulled her out the door and hurried them toward his truck. “We have two options,” he noted and helped her up into the truck. He jumped into the driver’s side and backed the truck out of the parking space.

“Two options?” Julie sent him a curious look.

“We can drive to the ranch now or we can find a place a little closer.”

“How far is the ranch again?”

“About twenty-five miles give or take.”

She thought for about half a second. “Then I say we find a place a lot closer, cowboy.”

He laughed. “How about a repeat performance at the Holiday Inn?” He started the diesel engine and steered the big truck toward the parking lot entrance on the highway.

“Repeat performance?” she asked even though she knew exactly what he meant.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to watch my cowgirl saddle up and ride for her own championship belt buckle.”

Julie laughed in surprise. “I’m gonna win a buckle? For what?”

“It’s a new competition created just for you called Comin’ in hot.”

Before Julie could respond, Cord squealed his truck tires across the highway asphalt and drove like a madman toward Holiday Inn on Hwy 31.

“What’s your hurry, cowboy?” She teased knowing full well she was as anxious as he was. She propped her feet clad in red cowgirl boots up on the dash. The look Cord gave her as she stretched out her long legs, her skirt rising to mid-thigh was enough to send her crashing into his arms. After all, it had been two months since—

“Keep lookin’ at me like that and you’ll find yourself on the side of the road again, only this time in the back seat.”

What seemed like minutes later, Cord speed his truck underneath the hotel portico. “Don’t go anywhere,” he said and slammed the pickup door before she could answer that she had no intention of going anywhere. She laughed when he practically ran inside the motel. Seven minutes later, he jumped back into the truck and shoved it into reverse. “Same room as...before.”

Julie laughed. “Was that by design or by destiny?”

Cord’s attention was on his driving as he swung into the first parking space big enough to accommodate his truck when he answered. “Could be a little of both, but who cares?” When he parked his truck, they both climbed out and hurried to the side door. Thank goodness the keyless entry worked the first time.

It was late, so there was no one milling around the hallway. That was a blessing because Julie couldn’t keep her hands off

her cowboy and he was having an equally hard time keeping his hands off her. Just the way she wanted it.

The keyless entry worked flawlessly for the second time. She and her cowboy fell into the room locking the deadbolt behind them.

“Let me help you with those boots,” Cord offered.

She sat on the bed and stuck out one foot aware there was very little hidden from his view as her skirt rode high on her thighs.

“Shit,” Cord cursed. The first boot flew across the room and was soon followed by the second.

“Don’t you need help with your boots,” she teased.

“Oh, hell, no. A cowboy would never think of letting his lady remove his boots.” He sat on the bed next to her and removed his boots and tossed his hat in the chair across the room. Then he stood and pulled her to her feet.

Julie’s pulse raced. He’d called her *his lady*. She threw her arms around his waist before moving her hands to the buttons on his shirt. “Then would a cowboy allow his lady to remove his shirt?”

Cord gifted her with that panty-melting grin of his. “Oh yeah.”

Julie unbuttoned his starched white shirt taking her time in rubbing her hands across his hard chest deliberately scraping his nipples with her fingertips. Encouraged by his intake of breath at her touch, she pushed the shirt over his shoulders and pulled the tail out of the waistband of his jeans.

“And would a cowboy allow his lady to remove his britches?”

She relished the heat she saw growing in his beautiful blue eyes. “Oh hell yeah,” he whispered. “Without a doubt.”

Her fingertips skated across his arousal bulging behind his zipper. It pulsed in response.

“You better hurry up or I’m gonna have to help you,” his words strained.

“My, my,” she teased. “Is my cowboy getting impatient?” Over hard muscles covered in soft hair, she teased his body with her fingers until she reached the zipper of his jeans straining to keep him contained. A quick flick of her fingers freed his erection from its denim prison. She pushed his jeans off his hips and down his long, strong legs. Now, nothing hid him from her but a flimsy pair of boxer shorts. “Ah, just where I want you.”

He reached for her and pulled her closer, holding her tight against him. “Well, you aren’t where I want you.” Cord pulled her T-shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor quickly followed by her skirt and bra. He backed her toward the bed until the back of her knees hit the mattress and then he kissed the hell out of her. Several minutes passed and Julie finally had to come up for oxygen.

“Damn, Sheriff. I could get used to this.” She whispered against his chest as her tongue flicked over the turgid peaks of his nipples.

He pushed her back onto the bed and followed her down. Side by side they faced each other, skin to skin, that is, except for her tiny scrap of black lace and his boxers. She traced the curve of his jaw with her finger resting on those damn kissable lips again. She felt his erection press tight against her stomach and she ached to be even closer.

“Is your wallet in your jeans?” she whispered nipping at those talented lips of his.

“Ah, yeah. I’ll get it.” He started to rise when she stopped him.

“No, I’ll get it. You stay here.” She rose from the bed and basked under his heated gaze. His eyes followed her movements and her core heated to a full simmer. She returned to the bed with a foil package in hand and she quickly divested her cowboy of his boxers leaving his magnificent manhood fully erect. She tore the condom package open with her teeth and placed it on the tip of his erection weeping with

anticipation. “I think I should turn the air conditioner down. It’s hot in here.” Her words breathy with her own anticipation.

“I think it’s high time you saddled up, don’t you?” Cord lay on his back staring up at her with that damn grin of his again. He was magnificent and he was all hers.

“It would be my pleasure.” She straddled him and then realized she still had her panties on.

“Here, let me get those for you.” Cord pulled at her expensive designer lace lingerie until they fell away like strands of cotton candy. “I’ll buy you another pair,” he promised.

She laughed and thought how her mother would react at such a loss. But she couldn’t have cared less. “And now, cowboy, how about that ride?”

Epilogue

Three years later...

“Hey.” Julie heard the deep timber of a familiar voice and looked up from her desk. Her heart stumbled at the sight of her cowboy holding a curly, dark-haired little cowgirl in his arms. The blue-eyed beauty was wearing the cutest pair of red cowgirl boots Julie had ever seen. “Hey yourself, handsome. And how about you Maddie Rose? Is Daddy takin’ good care of you?” She hurried to greet her husband with a lingering kiss that always held a hint of promise. His gaze heated and she knew when Maddie Rose was fast asleep, she and her hot cowboy would saddle up and ride in their own private rodeo. She couldn’t help but smile at the thought.

“Don’t do that,” Cord admonished.

“Don’t do what?” Julie asked, but she knew what he meant.

“Don’t look at me like that. At least, not in the middle of the day, and certainly not when I’ve got our daughter in my arms. I would have a hard time explaining to Child Services how our daughter ended up on her head while her mother and father are—”

“Don’t use that word in front of her!” Julie pretended to be shocked.

“I was just gonna say while her mother and father are busy,” Cord teased.

She took Maddie from Cord’s arms and hugged her close. “Sure you were,” she bantered back over little Maddie’s dark curls. “She smells so good. Did you give her a bath?”

“No, Miss Audrey did.”

Julie nodded. “Any news on that front? Is your grampa thinking about asking Miss Audrey to get married or are they content to live in the same house and keep each other company? How do you feel about the possibility that—”

“We’ll deal with that when, and if, it happens.” Cord said. “Until then, Maddie and I came down to your office to walk you home.”

She turned her attention to Maddie. “Then how about we go to the house and find you an apple?”

“Apple?” Maddie grappled with the word. At eighteen months, Maddie was growing up on a large ranch with a very large family system and Julie couldn’t have been happier. She and Maddie were learning to ride horses together under the tutelage of her father and uncles and cousins. Julie couldn’t wait to add more little Cahills to the mix.

“Let me make one phone call before we go. I need to update Ranger on the non-profit’s progress.”

She planted a quick kiss on her husband’s lips and handed their daughter back to him. She dialed Ranger’s number and he was quick to answer. “Hey, Ranger. I thought you might like to know how the quarter ended. It’s up fourteen percent from last quarter.” While she filled Ranger in on the good news, Julie turned off her computer and desk lap, put away files, and shut down the office. “Stop by the office tomorrow and I’ll show you some of the ideas I have for our fundraiser. I think you’re gonna love my ideas. Alright, we’ll talk tomorrow.”

Julie disconnected the call and turned to Cord. “Shall we head to the house?”

Cord put Maddie down on the flagstone floor and the three of them made their way out of the barn dominium she and Cord had built on Cahill land just over the rise from the original homestead where Cord’s grampa lived with Miss Audrey. They stepped out on the covered front porch and looked across the land that had been in Cord’s family for six generations now. “I just can’t get over how beautiful it is here. And to think, I owe all of this to a flat tire.”

Cord wrapped his arm around her shoulders while they watched their daughter play in front of them stooping to pick a dandelion flower every now and then. Tears burned when Julie thought about her life before she’d come to Wagon Gap.

“Hey, are you alright? Is something wrong?” Concerned, Cord pulled her in his arms and lifted her chin with his finger to meet his gaze.

“No. Nothing is wrong. In fact, everything is perfect. I was just thinking about my granddad and what he used to say and how wrong he was.”

Cord frowned. “Wrong about what?”

Julie smiled up at Cord and heat pooled at her core. “My granddad used to say this is where the cowboy rides away, but he was wrong. My cowboy isn’t riding away. He’s here to stay.”

She leaned her head against her husband’s chest and heard the strong steady beat of his heart.

“Yep, you can’t get rid of me now. Besides, why would I ride away from my lady? Especially—,” Cord bent down and gave her one of his scorching kisses. He let her up for air.

“Especially?”

“Especially when my cowgirl has a knack for, you know, comin’ in hot,” he whispered.

Julie laughed and took Cord’s hand in hers and kissed it. “Then I say we’d better find a babysitter quick.”

* * *

For more sexy stories about the Cahill cowboys of **The Cahill Cattle Company Cowboys**, go to

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**Wild Wood Ranch:
Hale & Everleigh
Dove Daniels**

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Wild Wood Ranch: Hale & Everleigh

The ranch owner and horse trainer are in for a hot, wild ride.

Running from a painful past, Everleigh isn't looking to be rescued, she just needs a fresh start. The last thing she expects to stumble across is a home and family.

Hale is living his dream on Wild Wood Ranch. The family's namesake may be struggling, and Hale's just about given up on finding love, but the ranch is all he's ever really wanted.

From the moment they meet, Hale and Everleigh know they've found something special. Things between them spark quickly and they form an unstoppable team. But people in their pasts seem determined to put an end to what Hale and Everleigh have found before it can even take off.

Wild Wood Ranch: Hale & Everleigh is a short, sweet, dirty, & flirty romance with a slight age gap, a dash of instalove, a pinch of angst, and a heaping helping of steamy hotness between a ranch owner and a horse trainer.

Chapter 1

Everleigh McGraw

“Benton to Hale,” a voice sounded outside the little shack.

“Go ahead,” a staticky voice crackled through the air.

“Got a situation here.”

“What kind of situation? We don’t have time for a damn *situation*.”

“I’m out on the back forty by the supply shack. I saw a trail and stopped to check.” A shadow passed across the window and I groaned.

Damn my stupid ankle.

Tears pricked my eyes.

“And?”

“There’s someone in the shack.”

“Squatter?”

“I mean, kinda? But I’m lookin’ right at her and she’s the prettiest damn squatter I’ve ever seen.”

The guy peering through the window gave me a friendly grin and a wave.

After what I’d run from, I probably should have been scared, but the only vibe I got from this guy—Benton?—was kindness.

“Damn it, Ben, stop flirtin’ with the squatter,” a disgruntled voice said over the radio. “Figure out what the hell she’s doing there, get her some help if needed, and send her on her way.”

“Copy, boss man,” Benton said, that grin still present.

“Let me know when it’s taken care of,” the other voice—Hale?—demanded.

“Over and out,” Benton said. Then he disappeared from the window and knocked on the door. “‘Scuse me, ma’am?” he spoke kindly after unlocking the door and peeking into the little room. “Hi there, name’s Benton Wildwood. This here is our property and my big brother—well, his name’s Hale—he’d like to know just what you’re doin’ sleeping in the shack.”

I refused to be the damsel in distress waiting on a man to rescue me. I pushed myself off the bed, wincing when I shifted on my ankle. The pain sent tears spilling over no matter how hard I tried to contain them.

Dashing them away, I lifted my chin. “I’m sorry. My name is Everleigh McGraw. I was just passing through. Hurt my ankle and took shelter here last night. I swear I only drank the one bottle of water and ate some of the beef jerky. When I get to where I’m going and find a job, I can send some money back to replace it. I’m good for it, I swear.”

Benton stepped farther into the shack, his broad shoulders seeming to take up most of the room.

I knew the moment he saw the black eye and the gash on my forehead when his jovial smile dropped and anger washed over his face. “Ma’am, Everleigh, miss...thought ya said you hurt your ankle.”

“That’s why I took shelter.” I gestured to my face. “This was already here.”

“Where ya comin’ from?”

“Someone I needed to get away from.”

“Fair enough.” Benton wiped a hand over his mouth. “Where ya headin’?”

“Wherever I can find a job and a place to stay.”

“What kind of work do ya do?”

“I can do pretty much anything I’m asked to do. Not a great cook and cleaning isn’t my favorite. My passion is horses, anything to do with them, but especially training.”

Benton’s smile went from bright to megawatt. “Miss Everleigh, you’re goin’ with me.”

For a split second, I wondered if I should be worried, but the grin was the most innocent, lovely thing I'd seen since leaving home. "And where would that be, Mr. Wildwood?"

"Call me Benton. Hale is gonna piss himself." He clapped his hands together. "It's just too perfect."

What in the world had I gotten myself into?

Struggling to stand, my ankle screaming, I reached for my backpack. Before I knew what was happening, Benton had my bag in one hand and me in a bridal carry.

"Just grab that door right there and pull it shut. I'll come back and restock a little later. Guess it sure is a good thing you stumbled across our supply shack," Benton rambled as he rounded the corner, carrying me a lot more gently than I'd anticipated.

We were greeted by two of the most gorgeous horses I'd ever seen.

Benton grinned like a fool at my gasp. "Had a feeling you'd like 'em once you said you wanted to train horses. The paint is mine, she's a good girl, aren't ya, Miss Molly?" Benton's voice got all soft and gushy talking to the horse who blew out a breath as if to agree she was, indeed, a good girl. "You can ride Saint. He's an escape artist and ended up roaming his way all the way out here—guess it's a good thing since I found ya while bringing him back—but he's a good boy too."

The dapple-gray horse was a beauty and reminded me of my own blue roan, Sugar, back home. The tightness in my chest intensified at the thought of leaving her, but I'd had to get away. Once things were better, I'd find a way to get her with me. At least I knew my dad treated the horses better than he treated people. Sugar would be safe until I could have her back by my side.

"You think you can ride with that ankle?" Benton asked, glancing between me and Saint.

"I can ride," I answered confidently.

"Well, all right then. Let's ride."

Benton held Saint while I climbed into the saddle. Taking the reins from him, I spoke softly to the horse while Benton mounted Molly. My ride's ears perked up at my gentle words, nickering and shifting like he wanted to show me what he could do.

Patting Saint, I smiled for the first time in what felt like years. "Where are you taking me?" I asked Benton as we set off at a slow walk.

"Already on Wild Wood Ranch," Benton explained. "But I'm takin' you up to the house. Three of us brothers live there. Hale, he's the oldest. I'm in the middle. Zaiah, he's the baby."

"And this is your ranch?" The day I decided I'd taken one too many slaps and punches and walked away from my abusive father, I never dreamed I'd possibly end up on another ranch. The horses back home were the only thing that had kept me sane growing up. Once my mother died, I'd become the primary punching bag, but the horses were my escape. Maybe twisting my ankle would end up being a blessing in disguise.

"Sure is," Benton answered proudly. "All of us were born and raised here. Our mom died when Zaiah was just a kid, but Dad just died last year." His brow furrowed. "Can't say that we're doing the best on our own, but we're working hard. Hale especially—this place is his dream."

I didn't want to get my hopes up by thinking Wild Wood might be in need of a horse trainer—hell, at this point, just having a bed, some food, and horses to care for would be enough for me.

Maybe you should be concerned about this guy? The thought niggled at the back of my mind for a moment, but I pushed it away. Benton's smile was too bright, too genuine, and he spoke of his brothers too highly as we made our way toward the house.

Like he could read my mind, Benton turned serious eyes my way. "Hale will take care of you, Miss Everleigh. Dontcha worry about that. We've got good cell reception, plenty of food, and we're not too far from town—you can borrow the truck to head in that way any time." He scowled, his eyes

studying the black eye and gash. “Can’t say I know what you came from, but I promise you’re in a better place here. The Wildwood boys take care of what’s theirs and we take pride in our family name. You’re safe with us.”

The lump in my throat made it impossible to speak, so I just nodded and tried to croak out a thank you.

Benton tipped his hat and pointed toward the horizon. “There’s the house.”

The view before me took my breath away. Not only was the surrounding land gorgeous, but the main house and all of its buildings were straight out of an old Western movie. “It’s beautiful,” I breathed. Had I hit my head when I walked into that damn hole? Was I dreaming? How in the world had I run away from home at twenty-five and found myself on the ranch of my dreams? The only thing that would make the scenario more perfect was if I had Sugar by my side.

Throw in a hot guy to love and protect you and you’d have your very own happily ever after. I’d never been one to think I needed rescuing by some knight in shining armor, but I wasn’t going to turn down love if it came galloping my way.

I giggled at the thought.

“You good?” Benton asked.

Nodding, I gave him a smile. “Think I’m just getting a little punchy from being so tired. Not gonna lie, I’d kill for some Tylenol right about now.”

“Comin’ right up,” Benton said. “Like I said, Hale will make sure you’re taken care of.”

“Hale’s the oldest one?” I asked. When Benton nodded, I went on. “He as nice as you?”

Benton made a bit of a face. “Well, he’s a good guy, that’s for sure. Works his ass off and does what’s right.”

“But?”

“He’s a bit grumpier than me and the others.” Benton’s eyes went wide. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s great and he’ll treat you nice. He’s just a little harder to get to know. Doesn’t

really drop his guard around anyone unless he knows he can trust them. But he's gonna like you, I can already tell. Won't be no problem." He winked. "And once you're in—on his good side, I mean—he's loyal to a fault. Just be yourself."

I frowned. "You just met me squatting on your property—I'm not sure being myself is the best plan."

Benton laughed. "You're smart and resourceful; you used what tools you had at your disposal. Hale likes smart girls." His eyes got a faraway look. "Don't mean he always gets involved with *smart* girls," he muttered. "Definitely needs someone like you to bring him around."

That sounded like drama.

Drama I didn't need.

But I *did* need shelter, food, and a job.

I'd grown up in *trauma*—surely I could deal with some drama if it meant getting to take refuge on a horse ranch.

We made our way to the barn. Well, we made our way to one of three barns. A man who looked just like Benton came walking out, squinting against the sun.

Stopping the horses where they could get water, we dismounted, Benton helping me down and letting me lean on him due to my throbbing ankle. "This here is my little brother, Zaiah."

Zaiah eyed me.

"Z, this is Everleigh. She's messed up her ankle something fierce, gonna take her to Hale." I smiled at Zaiah and he frowned in return. "She's a horse trainer," Benton added.

Zaiah narrowed his eyes. "Seems convenient and totally on the up-and-up," he muttered.

Benton cleared his throat and gave his brother a glare, but I shook my head. "No, he's right. I wouldn't believe this story if I wasn't smack dab in the middle of it." I held out my hand. "Hi, I'm Everleigh." I rucked up my jeans and showed him my huge, swollen, purple and blue ankle. "I really did mess up my ankle. I found your little supply shack and was hoping to rest

there until I could walk on it a bit better. Benton found me and insisted I come meet Hale. I swear, I'm not some scammer. If I was, I'd find a much less painful way to go about it."

Zaiah eyed me for a long moment and nodded. "Welcome to Wild Wood Ranch. If you're staying, you better be prepared to work your ass off."

"We work hard," Benton said, "but we also have time to let off some steam, so don't think you'll be workin' twenty-four-seven." He turned to his brother. "She's a horse girl—a trainer."

The look of excited relief that washed over Zaiah was almost comical, but he just gave another nod and sent us on our way.

Shifting to keep my balance as I put my foot back down, I hissed in pain.

Reminded that I needed some pain medication, Benton swept me off the ground and carried me to a golf cart despite my protests. "You can't walk on that ankle right now. We'll get you to the house and get some ice and Tylenol."

As Benton attempted to dodge the biggest bumps—but seemed to hit every single one based on the pain in my ankle—I took in the sprawling ranch. So far, I'd seen three barns, two garages, something that looked like a tool shed, a house the size of a city block, two smaller houses, and an array of other buildings I assumed were for employees—like bunkhouses.

And, of course, acres of land filled with pastures, training rings, corrals, and more—enough to set my heart on fire and bring tears to my eyes. Did leaving the only home I'd ever known—finally breaking free of my father—really and truly bring me here? If I was dreaming, I didn't want to wake up.

Just below the hill leading to the house, Benton radioed his brother. "Hale, we're almost at the house. Me and Miss Everleigh. You're gonna love her."

I put my head in my hands and groaned.

“What? He is,” Benton said with a smile. “You’re gorgeous and I’ve got a really good feeling about where this story is going to go. Hale and Everleigh—I like the sound of that. Let’s do this.” He grinned all the way up the hill.

When Hale Wildwood came into view, everything in my life to that point lined up and made sense. It was like seeing him for the first time opened the curtain to a stage where I could see everything playing out.

It wouldn’t be without hard work and dedication.

It wouldn’t be perfect.

We’d have bumps in the road.

But this—this man, this ranch, this story—*this* was the first day of the rest of my life.

Chapter 2

Hale Wildwood

The call from Benton about some squatter in the supply shack was the very last thing I needed on my plate that day. Hell, it was the last thing I needed that month.

When he'd said he was bringing this girl to the house, I'd nearly reached through the radio to strangle him and his damn optimistic smile. But the thing with Benton was he was almost always on-point when it came to doing what was right, so if he had a reason for bringing the squatter to the house, I had a feeling it was a good one.

Didn't mean I was happy about it.

Pushing aside the keyboard where I'd been poring over numbers that just weren't adding up, I stood and stretched. The crick in my neck was almost as bad as the incessant throbbing pain in my head. I liked numbers, had always been good in math, and working the Wild Wood Ranch had been my dream since I was old enough to settle in the saddle, but the numbers were blood red and I was struggling with how to fix the mess our dad had left us in.

The good news was we had a hefty sum of money from our mother's family several years ago, so we could float for a while.

The bad news was Dad had been a terrible bookkeeper and we owed a lot more than we were bringing in. I didn't think for one second Dad had meant to leave his boys with this kind of debt. He hadn't planned on dying—definitely hadn't planned on his foreman and cook running off together after he passed. But here we were.

Dad loved horses, nature, and the ranch—he wasn't a businessman. Had I known it was that bad, I would have stepped in a lot sooner. Instead, I'd trusted that everything was hunky dory, and now Wild Wood Ranch was at a tipping point.

After weeks of poring over the books, I *thought* we could pull through—if we were smart with how we spent and where we moved money. A complicated dance of robbing Peter to pay Paul, but my gut told me it could be done. Not without the money from our mother’s side of the family—and I hated to dig into that—but I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel.

What the ranch had going for it was the Wildwood family name and our reputation for turning out stellar horses.

Dad had been an ace trainer—everyone said he was a horse whisperer. The boys and I did all right when it came to training, but we weren’t as top-notch as our father. We did okay with the standard training needs—and we had the next few months filled with those jobs.

What the ranch was missing was Dad and his skills. We needed a top-of-the-line horse trainer in the worst way. Needed someone who could handle the really tough cases and bring in the big bucks. But most of those trainers wanted the large, flashy operations—wanted the ranches that were business-only instead of our place which would always focus on family-first and taking pride in the Wildwood name.

So, we needed money and a horse trainer.

The first would come in slowly. The latter I’d been sending up as a prayer every damn day since Dad passed away. If we didn’t get the horse trainer we desperately needed, we’d be looking at more bills than money.

And instead of having time to search through resumes and applications, instead of taking an hour to post our opening on forums, I had to leave the office for my hair-brained brother to bring some trespasser to the house.

Walking out onto the front porch of the home I’d grown up in, I breathed in the sunshine and horses. Fresh dirt, flowers, and a spring breeze teased my senses. What I really needed was a day to ride Big Ben off our property and sleep under the stars—time to be off-grid, a chance to breathe, gather my thoughts, and ground myself after the whirlwind of losing Dad and becoming the one in charge.

What it looked like I was getting was Benton bringing me trouble. I could only hope it was something that was easily taken care of. I just didn't have the time or energy.

The golf cart came into view as it topped the hill. Benton's megawatt smile shone for a mile, but the dark mane of long hair whipping in the wind beside him was what really caught my attention.

When the cart stopped, I found myself drawn down the steps to meet my brother and our squatter.

"Hale, meet Everleigh," Benton said with his usual enthusiasm. "Everleigh, this is my big brother, Hale."

Every single reason for sending this girl on her way went flying out the window.

The bleeding books, feeling like I was drowning some days, the drama of my damn ex—all of it disappeared the moment I took Everleigh's hand in mine.

Not because she was gorgeous.

I'd met gorgeous women before.

Hell, I had a past lined with beautiful women I'd dated, but none of them had ever worked out. They wanted the money they thought came with the Wildwood name. They wanted the notoriety they thought came with the Wild Wood Ranch.

What they didn't want was the hard work.

The back-breaking chores.

The sun-up-to-sun-down effort we all put in to make the ranch run.

They most definitely didn't want the dirt, horse shit, and sweat.

But this girl, her eyes sparkled and she immediately looked like she was home.

One of us.

I'd make her a Wildwood by name, but she already belonged here.

What the actual fuck is going on with you?

Shaking my head to clear the thoughts, I swallowed thickly. “Nice to meet you. Benton, let’s get her into the house. A bath, ice, Tylenol, and food. Once you’re settled, we’ll talk things through, but you’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like.” Anger roiled through me at the thought of the bastard who blacked her eye and gashed her head, but we could talk about that later.

“Tell him what you do,” Benton encouraged. “You’re not gonna believe it,” he said to me.

Everleigh’s cheeks pinked. “Grew up on a ranch training horses.”

As if every single second of my life had been waiting for that exact moment, everything clicked into place. This girl, this family, this ranch, it all suddenly made perfect sense.

She was meant for me, but more than anything, she was meant for this ranch. Years from now, wounded, scared, traumatized horses would find the peace and contentment they desperately longed for all because this girl found her way onto our property.

The future flashed across my mind—Everleigh’s hand in mine, her wearing a white dress, us dancing in the barn, her belly round with my baby, our child learning to love horses and train them just like her momma.

Never in my life had anything made such perfect sense, never had I ever been so sure of something. Like something straight out of a damn romance novel. I wanted to roll my eyes and shove it all away as nonsense.

But I couldn’t.

That gut-deep feeling that this was the first day of the rest of my life was too strong.

Two hearts had found their home.

Hale and Everleigh.

Chapter 3

Everleigh

Three hours later, I woke to the throbbing in my ankle, but it was at least slightly better thanks to the Tylenol and ice I'd applied after the warm bath. Sitting up in the massive bed, I rubbed my eyes and glanced around the gorgeous room.

"You'll have the guest room," Hale had said as he and Benton helped me up the stairs of the ranch house. "It's attached to my room, but there's a lock on the shared door. Zaiah has a room in this wing, but he's downstairs. Benton is in the other wing. I'd feel safest having your room close to mine for the time being."

The way he'd scowled at the gash on my head and the black eye, I'd realized he worried someone was coming after me. Touching the gash gingerly, I'd said, "He won't care that I'm gone."

"All the same," Hale had continued, "I'd like to know you're close."

Benton had taken off to finish up chores and Hale showed me to the guest room. He looked larger than life and out of place in the lavender- and peach-colored bathroom, but he grabbed a fluffy towel, some Epsom salts, a toothbrush, and deodorant from the closet. "This should be enough to get you started. If you put your dirty clothes outside the door, we can get them washed." He walked out of the bathroom and come back with a robe. "You can wear this. There should be some clothes in the drawers and we'll get you some ordered."

"I have a few in my bag," I said.

"All the same, if you're gonna be working here, you'll need actual sturdy ranch clothes and boots."

"Am I?" I'd asked. "Going to be working here?" I couldn't help the flutter of excitement.

“We can talk more once you’re cleaned up and had a chance to rest. At dinner tonight?” Hale had cleared his throat. “But we’re in desperate need of a horse trainer and you seem like maybe you could use a place to stay, so it just seems like one of those things that’s meant to be, if you ask me.”

I’d grinned like a fool throughout the nicest bath I’d ever taken.

After drying my hair with a tiny hair dryer I found in a drawer, I’d climbed into the huge bed and slept like the dead.

But now, in need of more Tylenol and some food, I eased myself from the bed, wincing at the pain in my ankle. Slipping out of the robe and rummaging in my bag for a pair of shorts and a tank top, I dressed, pulled my hair into a messy bun, and yanked on the slippers I’d haphazardly packed after the last go-round with my father.

Grabbing my phone, which was dead as a doornail, I opened the door and hobbled toward the stairs. Despite the ranch house being in a new place and filled with complete strangers, I couldn’t help the feeling of being more at home at Wild Wood than I’d ever once felt under my dad’s roof.

The place was large—like the biggest house I’d ever seen—but it was cozy, warm, and welcoming. It smelled fresh and clean, with undertones of cinnamon and citrus. Crazy as it might have been, I could easily imagine myself descending the stairs in the predawn hours every day, sharing coffee with the guys over a hearty breakfast, and heading out for twelve to fourteen hours of honest, rewarding work.

Can you imagine nights in Hale’s bed and morning kisses before working his family’s ranch side-by-side and someday taking his name?

As absolutely ridiculous as it sounded, I couldn’t fight the grin on my lips and the butterflies in my stomach. Love at first sight was a myth, right? That whole *I knew he was the man of my dreams the moment I saw him* thing was what drove millions of romantics to fictional books and movies every year.

But it wasn't *real*.

Right?

Then why had my whole life clicked perfectly into place, like I could finally breathe easily for the first time in twenty-five years, the moment I saw Hale?

“Hey, you shouldn't be walking on that ankle.”

Speak of the devil.

Hale appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Wranglers fitting him like a damn glove, a t-shirt glued to his broad shoulders, and a pair of house shoes that should have looked ridiculous, but only made him look sexier.

He took the stairs two at a time and met me at the top. For a brief moment, with him one step lower than me, we were eye-to-eye, and my breath caught.

Slow down, Ever, I warned myself. “I'm gonna have to walk on it sooner rather than later,” I said.

“Well, let's give it a day or two and get it wrapped before you go jaunting around anywhere,” Hale said with a wink, his blue eyes sparkling under thick black lashes. With an arm around my waist, he swept my knees and turned slowly to carry me down the steps.

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “You do *not* need to carry me. I'm not an invalid.”

Ignoring my protests, Hale carried me to a little room I would have described as a den, but it appeared he was using it as his office. Depositing me gently on the loveseat, he propped my ankle up. “Be right back.”

I shifted until I was comfortable and looked around the room until Hale returned a few moments later. “You have a beautiful family,” I said, nodding toward the large framed photo of what had to be the three boys and their father. A smaller, older picture showed the three boys—much younger—with both parents.

Hale looked at the pictures and smiled. “Yeah, we do. Did back then and still do.”

“You should get a picture of the three of you framed for the wall,” I suggested, taking the Tylenol Hale handed me and swallowing it with a gulp of water as he tucked a towel filled with ice around my ankle. I pictured the three men in their Wranglers, dusty boots, and cowboy hats lined up near the corral. Hale was the spitting image of Jack Reacher—played by Alan Ritchson—down to his height, broad shoulders, and sandy-blond hair. Benton looked exactly like Hale in the face—he came in just under six foot, only slightly less broad in the chest, and dark brown, almost black, hair. Zaiah had his brother’s height, slightly slimmer build, and a shock of hair I would have described as silver-blond. The one thing I’d noticed about all three men was their stunning blue eyes, almost navy blue, each with flecks of silvery blue.

They were gorgeous and would make a stunning picture for the wall.

Hale cocked his head and studied the pictures again. “Yeah, I guess we should. Haven’t taken many pictures lately.”

Images of the two of us posing for wedding and family photos flashed through my head. My imagination was going insane. That’s all there was to it.

“Well, I guess you probably have questions,” Hale said. “Figure we should wait for the job-related stuff at dinner with all the guys. But you can ask about the ranch until then.”

“Can you tell me about Wild Wood?” I asked, sipping my water and enjoying the view of Hale.

He launched into a tale and I knew within seconds that this ranch, this home, they were in Hale’s blood and he’d fight for them until his dying day. That was the loyalty and devotion I’d been searching for all my life and my heart longed to be a part of it.

By the end of his spiel, I knew Wild Wood was the place for me—if only the brothers would agree to have me.

“Well, like I mentioned, we don’t have a cook these days, so it’s kinda fend for ourselves.” Hale stood from his desk chair and walked over to me. “Let’s get you up and about and

you can chat with the boys as we put something hopefully edible together.” He reached for my hand and pulled me to standing. Being on only one foot threw me off balance and I plastered myself to his chest.

Time stood still for one brief moment.

Like we’d known each other our whole lives, our breathing synced, our hearts beat as one.

Heat swirled around us.

The manly scent of Hale, all leather, horses, and soap, filled my nose.

He brushed the backs of his fingers down my cheek. “Everleigh,” he whispered.

“Well, isn’t this cozy?” a snotty, feminine voice said from the doorway. I had no clue who she was, but immediately wanted to claw her eyes out.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Tawny?” Hale demanded, moving to put his arm protectively around me, the move allowing me to use him like a crutch.

“Rude,” Tawny said. “Hale, baby, I brought dinner. I didn’t like the idea of you boys out here all by yourselves after I heard about the cook running off.”

“Cook’s been gone for months.” Hale’s words dripped with annoyance.

The woman, Tawny, ignored him. She lifted her chin and looked down her fake-bake nose at me. “Who’s Pollyanna?”

I tensed, but Hale’s reassuring arm around my shoulders calmed me.

“Tawny, you need to leave. Take the dinner or leave it, doesn’t matter to me. Thank you for the thought, but we’re fine.” Hale’s words were tight and I could tell he was having a hard time keeping his cool.

“Who. Is. This?” Tawny asked again as if she had any right to know.

“This is Everleigh. She’s the newest addition to Wild Wood Ranch. Best damn horse trainer you’ll ever see.”

He said this with such confidence, I almost believed him.

Tawny narrowed her eyes. “Eeww, she works with those beasts? Hale, baby, just come live in town with me. Hire someone to run this place.”

“We’ve been over this a million times,” Hale said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You and I don’t work. This place is my home, it’s in my blood. I’m not leaving. But you are. Goodbye.”

Rage flickered to life in Tawny’s eyes. “Good luck getting him to love you more than those damn horses. You’ll always come in second.”

Lifting my chin, I spoke clearly, proud that my words didn’t catch. “We’ll love the horses together, it won’t be a competition.”

If looks could kill, I would’ve been dead right there on the ranch house floor. Tawny made an angry screech and stormed off.

Hale turned toward me and cupped the side of my face.

“I’m sorry,” I started. “I didn’t mean to say that; I just wanted her to leave.”

Hale dipped his head and captured my lips with his. He tasted of cinnamon and straw, his lips firm and commanding. Warmth spread through me—the kiss like none I’d ever had. When his tongue danced with mine, I couldn’t stop the whimper or the way my body tingled with need.

He broke from me with an effort. “Don’t ever be sorry. This whole day has me fucked up.” He brushed a dark strand of hair from my face. “Did you mean that? What you said?”

I swallowed thickly. “I don’t understand it, but everything feels right here. I’m not dumb enough to think you could love me, but I’ll always understand your love for the horses because I’ll feel the same.”

Hale chuckled.

“What?”

He shook his head. “I think I’m already halfway there.”

With a squeal, I let myself be picked up and carried to the kitchen.

Benton flashed a huge grin as he peeled carrots. Zaiyah narrowed his eyes while whisking what appeared to be homemade ranch dressing, but he didn’t look *angry*, just intense.

“Only time Tawny left this place any faster was when she stepped in horse shit,” Benton said and the others chuckled. “Don’t know what you said to get her out of here, but it worked.”

“You can thank Everleigh for that one,” Hale said, depositing me on a barstool.

“Knew I liked you,” Benton said, putting an arm around me in a brotherly hug.

“Bum ankle aside, can you at least peel hardboiled eggs?” Zaiyah asked, not waiting for an answer and shoving a bowl of six eggs at me. “We usually use that slicer thing to cut them for salad.”

I got to work peeling the hardboiled eggs, rinsing them in the sink next to me, and took in the fixings for the salad. “For guys who say they don’t cook well, this is a really nice salad mix you’ve got going.”

“Hale makes us eat our veggies,” Benton said with his signature grin.

Hale’s face pinked slightly. “Mom always insisted—it’s one of the few things I remember about her. Dad carried on the tradition. Every meal had to have some sort of veggie in raw form and cooked form. Salad makes it easy.”

“But none of us like tomatoes, so we skip those. Greens, eggs, and croutons with homemade ranch. Carrots are for dipping.” Benton waved a freshly peeled carrot.

Zaiyah slapped at his brother, but not before Benton got a good dollop of ranch on his carrot and took a big chomp.

“We’re pretty good with salads,” Hale said. “But we’re not the best cooks.”

“You cook?” Zaiyah asked.

I shook my head. “Unfortunately, no. Eggs and toast. I can do burgers and dogs on the grill.” My mind shot back to the meals I had to fix for myself once my mom died. Trying to time things right so I wouldn’t be in the kitchen when Dad came in. “Lots of frozen pizzas, boxed mac and cheese, grilled cheese, and butter noodles.”

“Damn, grilled cheese sounds so good,” Benton said. “Do we have tomato soup?”

Hale chuckled as his brothers set to work finding ingredients for the meal. “One of our problems is we don’t plan ahead. We usually have the groceries, we just don’t think about what we want until right when it’s time to eat.”

“What did Tawny bring?” I asked.

The brothers paused.

I shrugged. “Just thinking that if she brought something that can be eaten now, we can save the soup and sandwiches for a lighter lunch tomorrow.”

“She’s a smart one,” Benton crowed.

Hale huffed, but dug into the carryout bags. “Looks like lasagna, breadsticks, and a dessert.”

“Might as well eat it. Shouldn’t let it go to waste,” Benton said.

“Think she poisoned it?” Zaiyah asked.

Hale gave a dry laugh. “Luckily, she just wants me to move in with her. She doesn’t want to kill me.”

“Yet,” Benton whispered under his breath.

“Who’s Tawny?” I asked quietly while Hale grabbed four plates from the cabinet.

Benton huffed and screwed up his face. “Hale’s ex. She’s a nasty piece of work. Thought there’d be a lot more money and

notoriety in ranching. Figured it out real quick and has been trying to convince Hale to leave the ranch ever since. She's got family money and a big name—just wanted the ranch to add to it—so she's got way too much time on her hands.”

“She's not a fan of you,” Zaiah said, obviously eavesdropping. “She might not want to kill Hale, but I wouldn't put murder past her when it comes to someone moving in on what she thinks is hers.”

“Damn, Z, don't scare the girl. She just got here,” Benton said.

“I'm just sayin',” Zaiah said. “Everleigh needs to know Tawny ain't one to be trusted.”

“It's good info to know,” I said.

Hale broke up our little chat by calling everyone to the table and helping ease me from my stool to a chair.

“So, is Everleigh staying?” Benton asked with a shit-eating grin.

Chapter 4

Hale

I loved my brothers.

I truly did.

I couldn't imagine life without them.

Losing our father and taking over our family's ranch, finding out we were struggling more than a few tight months here and there, none of it was anything I'd want to face with anyone but my brothers by my side.

They were my blood, my best friends, my past, and my future.

But sometimes, I really wanted to strangle them all.

Benton especially.

I glanced around the table.

Benton's huge-ass grin.

Even Zaiah looked amused.

Then I caught Everleigh's eyes—huge, emerald-green, so deep I could dive into them and never make my way back to the surface.

How had the day turned so abruptly?

The morning had started out as normal as possible. Ranch chores—which were never-ending, even when there were no real problems—then paperwork that haunted my every waking moment. And instead of heading back outside to work the land and the horses—the only things that ever really eased my troubled mind—I ended up with Everleigh McGraw.

The woman was gorgeous—she drew me in like a moth to a flame.

Spunky, loyal, persistent, and a hard worker—I'd only known her for a moment, but I knew it in my gut.

But more than that, she'd somehow found her way onto my ranch and into my life—it had to be fate. Was there really any other way to explain it? And now she was burrowing her way into my heart—and I didn't think she even knew she was doing it.

I cleared my throat.

“It's no secret we need help around here,” I said. “Biggest problem we have is we need a horse trainer in the worst way—the three of us can hold our own on the standard types of training, but we need someone to take Dad's place with the harder cases. On the flip side of that problem, we don't really have a lot of money to pay a trainer what they're worth.” I took a bite and chewed, trying to gather my thoughts. “We make decisions together when it comes to the ranch. While I'd really like to offer you a job,” I said directly to Everleigh, “we can't pay much, and we'd have to all agree on it.”

She nodded, her green eyes bright. “Could I say something?” When I gestured for her to continue, she said, “I grew up on a ranch, but it was never a home. The horses, they were my only comfort. I knew from a very young age that I'd need to get away if I was going to have a future. Leaving was hard. On one hand, I'm embarrassed it took me so long to finally get away from him. On the other hand, I hate that I had to leave the horses behind—Sugar especially.” She dashed a tear from the corner of her eye. “I walked and hitched rides as far as Little Brook. The last guy was creepy as hell so I snuck out the bathroom window while he waited on me at the diner. I didn't mean to end up on Wild Wood property. Definitely didn't mean to get hurt.” Everleigh lifted her chin. “I didn't have the pleasure of knowing your dad, but training horses is something I know. I've been beat down my whole life, made to feel I was nothing special, not worth a shit, and only good for a man to take his anger out on.” With tears and determination glittering in her eyes, she said, “Training horses is the one area of my life where I have no doubts. I'm good at it—I'd say I'm one of the best you'll ever see. I don't know if it's because I spent so much time with them—being in the barn was better than being with my dad—or what, but they hear me, they respond to me, there's a connection there. I can't explain

it—a lot like I can't explain the feeling that being at Wild Wood Ranch is exactly where I'm supposed to be—but I'd like to ask for a chance. Room and board, get me some clothes, and we can talk about a low weekly pay—it doesn't have to be much right now. Additionally, I'd like to request a twenty percent share of whatever the fees bring in for training. We set it up on contract for a set amount of time—if you don't think it's working, if I'm not doing my share, bringing in the big dogs for training, we don't re-sign at the end of the contract period.”

I studied her. Strong, determined, and smart as hell. That was my girl right there—I had absolutely no doubt in my mind, she was my future.

Glancing at my brothers, I lifted my brow in invitation for them to add to the conversation.

“You know I'm all for it,” Benton said with a grin. He hadn't been my concern.

Zaiah was the obstacle. More like our mother than any of the others, Zaiah would be the one to push back, disagree just for the sake of playing Devil's advocate. “I say we see her with the horses first. She gets first dibs on that new guy we just got in.” He turned toward Everleigh and gave a sheepish smirk. “If you're as good as you say you are, I'd be glad to have you here.”

Holy shit, she'd even won my baby brother over. That wasn't an easy thing to do.

“No argument? No push back?” Benton asked, his brows climbing up his forehead.

Zaiah shrugged. “You're like some kind of seer when it comes to people. And Hale hasn't been this calm and welcoming of someone in...well, maybe the whole time I've known him. If you both have such good vibes for her, I'm sure I'll learn to feel the same. We've been begging for a horse trainer, and one stumbled her way onto our land—not sure we can turn that away.”

I put my utensils and napkin on my empty plate and took a long drink of sweet tea. “Room and board are a given. A base supply of clothing with re-orders as needed every three months. You get twenty percent of every horse we bring in to train whether you work with them or not. If it’s one you need to do by yourself, you get fifty. First month, no weekly wages. Each month after, we’ll look at what the ranch is bringing in, pay bills the most in need of being paid, and what’s left will get split between all of us after putting a bit aside into an emergency fund. We all may be low on wages for a while, but we’ll have shelter, food, transportation, and jobs. Once we get the ranch out of the red, we reevaluate.” I glanced at all three in question. When they all nodded in agreement, I continued. “Everleigh, your contract will be for a year, and we’ll reassess at the end.”

She swallowed and nodded, tears sparkling along her thick lashes. “Thank you.”

“Will the contract require her sharing your room and eventually marrying you?” Benton asked with a huge-ass grin. “Or will that part happen regardless of the work side of things?”

Everleigh’s eyes grew wide, but she didn’t look offended.

Memories of the taste of her on my tongue galloped through my head, but I frowned at my brother and threw a breadstick at his head.

“What?” Benton said, dodging the flying carbs with a laugh. “I’m just stating the obvious: you two are hot for each other. And beyond that—with my seer skills and all that”—he winked at Zaiah—“you’re meant to be. It’s fate. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

The four of us laughed and talked until it was time to clear the table. Having Everleigh in our midst had changed things up, brought a new sparkle to everyone’s smiles.

Forcing Everleigh to sit while we cleaned up was the real chore, but we got the kitchen put back in order and the boys headed out to finish the evening chores.

“I’ll take you around tomorrow,” I told Everleigh. “I think it’s best you ice and elevate that ankle for as many hours as possible before you try to walk on it. We’ve got some crutches in the closet from when Zaiah fell out of a tree—I’ll adjust them for you, and you can try being a bit more mobile tomorrow.”

“I want to get started with working as soon as possible,” Everleigh said. “I’m not a slacker and I pull my own weight.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to work,” I said, helping her to stand and leading her to the living room. “You wanna watch TV? Or go to bed?”

“TV, please,” she said, the soft scent of her smooth skin teasing and taunting me as I eased her down on the couch. “I’m not tired just yet.”

Instead of turning on the television, Everleigh and I launched into one of the most enjoyable conversations I’d ever had. The topic was boring—the ranch schedule, clients, challenges, that type of shit—but talking to Everleigh was something I wanted to do every second of the day.

And somehow, I’d lucked out to have her living *and* working with me.

I was one grateful fucker right then, that was for sure.

The guys found us about two hours later, still discussing the ways of the ranch, but we’d added in bits and pieces of childhood, likes and dislikes, and funny horse stories.

Zaiah ran a towel through his damp, silver-blond hair, which told me he’d showered in the garage before coming in—something he did more often than not. “Heading to bed,” he said. “Night.”

The fact my baby brother had accepted Everleigh so easily was another reason I felt so at home with her. He’d hated Tawny—and any other women I’d brought around—with a passion. His guard was still up around Everleigh, but he liked her, I could tell. His acceptance and growing trust meant almost more than Benton’s immediate positive vibes.

Benton said his goodnights and headed to his wing of the house. The thing about having such a huge home meant that we could all come together for family time, but we also had the benefit of alone time whenever we needed it. Benton could have just about anyone he wanted come visit and the rest of the house wouldn't even know it.

Now, that would mean he'd need to find a woman he wanted to bring home. Benton just needed someone who could put up with his constant good humor.

"No tellin' you," I said, standing up from the recliner, "but morning comes damn early on a ranch. We get up before the sun and head to bed before it—at least in the summer. Black-out curtains are nice." I pulled Everleigh to stand, hoping against hope she'd end up plastered to me again.

Throwing up a thank you to whatever god was listening, I caught her when she stood and wobbled a bit. Her hands on my chest, big green eyes wide as she looked up at me—she was shorter than me, but tall compared to the average woman. "Sorry," she whispered. "Balance is off."

Hot tension swirled around us.

I needed to just help her up the stairs and say goodnight.

But Everleigh's eyes traveled to my lips and she licked her own.

"Told myself I wouldn't kiss you again unless you asked me to." My words were gruff, my arms begging to hold her, my dick hard as nails.

"Then I guess you better not kiss me again unless I ask you to," Everleigh said, playfulness dancing in her eyes.

I nodded, knowing it was for the best, but hating that she'd shot me down.

"I have less than zero experience when it comes to healthy relationships or anything beyond some kisses," Everleigh said, her admission a soft whisper tickling my ear. "But I know what a relationship shouldn't be—know what it shouldn't feel like—and whatever this thing is between us, it feels right." She nuzzled her nose against my cheek. "I don't understand it.

Don't know why I feel so at home here, so connected to you, but it doesn't scare me."

A laugh huffed from deep in my chest. "Yeah, well, it scares the fuck out of me."

Big green eyes stared up at me. "Why?"

"I don't have the best track record with women," I said.

"Because of you or them?"

I started to argue, but she had a point. "None of them ever wanted to compete with the ranch, didn't want to put in the hard work and dedication it takes."

Everleigh cupped my cheek. "I'm not them. I know what a ranch takes. Been working hard every day of my life. Back then, I was working to survive and escape. Now, if you'll have me, I'll be working to build something to stand proud on."

I gathered her in my arms, holding her close, pressing kisses to her cheek and temple. I used to scoff at the idea of love at first sight—instalove wasn't a real thing outside of fiction—but my heart knew this was different.

This was real.

"Guess you better kiss me," Everleigh said, her lips brushing over my cheek.

Cupping her face in my hands, I dipped my head, bringing our mouths together in a slow, deep, searching kiss. We kissed forever, and then we kissed some more. Picking Everleigh up, her legs wrapping around my waist, I held her ass in both hands and pressed her core against me. Her soft whimpers and the rocking of her hips would be the death of me.

Feet shuffled on the hardwood floors and the kitchen light spilled over onto the stairs. "Might want to take it upstairs," Zaiah quipped, going for bored, but sounding amused. "Protect my virtue and all that."

I scoffed and Everleigh giggled. "Virtue?" she asked.

"He doesn't have any virtue, he lost that when he was fifteen and found himself all tangled up with the seventeen-

year-old neighbor girl. They spent the summer getting up to all kinds of trouble. She moved away, but his virtue never returned,” I explained.

Zaiah snorted. “Virtue is overrated and sex is too much fun.” He peeked his head around the corner, a sleepy smirk teasing his lips. “Make him make it good for you, Ev. If he can’t, I’m available.” With that, the little shit walked back to his room with a self-satisfied chuckle.

Everleigh rolled her hips and sighed.

“Well, the good news is Zaiah likes you and that’s a huge feat.”

“And the bad news?” she asked.

“The bad news is I’m going to have to kill him for hitting on my girl. Or maybe for interrupting us. Or both.”

She giggled again, but stopped and cupped my face. “Is that what you want me to be? Your girl?”

I captured her mouth, feeding her my tongue, feasting on the flavor of her lips. When we broke apart, all I wanted to do was drag her to my room and fuck her into tomorrow. But she was a virgin and I wasn’t an asshole.

“I do. But we need sleep and you need to get that ankle healed up. Let’s get you settled in. This”—I gestured between us—“if it’s as real as it feels, it’ll still be here in a week. A month. However long it takes.”

“What if I said I wanted more? Tonight.”

I groaned. “I’d say you’re killin’ me and take you to your bed, tuck you in, and see you in the morning.”

“You’re a good guy, you know that?” she asked, big green eyes soft and sleepy.

“I try. Now come on, we have to be up early.”

I left Everleigh in her room with pain pills, ice, and a bottle of water.

“You want your door locked?” I asked.

She nodded and yawned. “Yes, please.”

I locked the main door and walked over to the shared door. “What about this one?”

She chewed on her lip for a moment. “Unlocked. I like knowing you can come through if something is wrong.”

In two short strides, I was next to her bed, pressing one last kiss to her lips. “Just holler if you need anything.”

It took way too long for my head and my heart to finally settle down enough to sleep. Thoughts of Everleigh, the ranch, the new horses we could bring on to train, and about a million other things rushed through my brain. I thought of my mom’s diary where she’d kept notes on dates she and dad went on, things we did as boys, and quotes she liked from books she read.

“Momma.” My gruff whisper jagged in the darkness. “You’d like her. Betcha you’d write about her in your diary.”

If I kept a diary, I knew I’d fill it up with page after page of Everleigh McGraw.

Dear Diary,

Today, I met the girl I’m going to marry. Never really believed in fate, but there’s no other way to explain it. Mark this date as the first day of the rest of my life with Everleigh by my side.

Chapter 5

Everleigh

The four of us settled into a routine and, before long, we ran the place like we'd been doing it for years rather than just under a month.

My ankle was finally better after about a week on crutches and another couple weeks of keeping it wrapped.

The first day Hale took me around the ranch, I ended up soothing a panicky mare and her baby, getting a grumpy old gelding to come take sugar from my hand, and had a cantankerous and mouthy stallion following me around the corral like a puppy.

The guys had been impressed.

Once I was off the crutches, I'd set to work wrangling a few of the feistier horses and showing the Wildwood boys what I could really do. The most spirited one had calmed and accepted me as a rider within the afternoon.

"Hot damn," Benton had whooped. "We ain't been able to get anywhere *near* that horse with a saddle, and Ever is *riding* him."

There was no doubt in my mind I could do the job back when I'd accepted the offer. Once they saw me at work, the guys knew I was worth what they could pay me and more. The excited awe and soft pride in Hale's eyes filled my heart and had me thinking crazy thoughts about the future.

We were up before sunrise every day. We took turns with breakfast after figuring out we each had a specialty. Hale was good at omelets. Zaiah did delicious French toast. Benton volunteered to do grits and sausage with most of the meals. I'd perfected my eggs in a basket. Once I talked Hale into letting me get about fifteen to twenty laying hens, we'd have fresh eggs, and our breakfasts would surge from delicious to magnificent.

Lunches were a slightly different beast. We did a lot of lunch meat sandwiches, chips, salads, and fruit. Easy things to grab and eat on the go. We didn't meet up for sit-down lunches during the week, but we made sure to have something ready the night before, so everyone got a midday meal.

Dinners had quickly become one of my favorite times of the day because all four of us would wash up and hang out in the kitchen prepping and eating our salads—which we'd decided would be a different type each day of the week so we didn't get bored—while dinner cooked.

We put together three to four casserole-type dishes every weekend and baked them through the week. Buying top-notch bread always upped the yum factor of our meals and I fell into the easy habit of including vegetables with each meal because Hale was so insistent.

I loved the jokes and laughter that always surrounded dinnertime on the ranch. That wasn't to say we didn't have some serious discussions, but it was a time to let loose, a time to wind down, a time to spend with people we enjoyed, and I loved every second of it.

My entire life, I'd wanted to be a part of a real family—a family that loved each other. I hadn't gotten that chance with my blood relatives, but the Wildwood boys had quickly given me everything I'd ever dreamed of.

I was one of them.

Family.

The way they'd accepted me into their fold and loved me like a long-lost sister was something I'd never stop appreciating.

Okay, Hale maybe wasn't looking at me like a sister.

After those first few kisses, he'd backed off a bit.

Well, he'd backed off physically.

But he'd upped his game in the flirting department.

Hale was more reserved than Benton, but slightly freer with his smiles than Zaiah. He was strong in character. Hard

work, respect, and responsibility were key points to knowing and understanding Hale.

He worked hard.

He liked to play, but even fun was serious to him. It was almost as if he made having fun a priority—like he'd been the one responsible for making sure the boys had fun even after their mom had passed, and he still took it seriously as an adult.

Hale was delicious to look at. The way he filled out Wranglers and a t-shirt should have been illegal. But it was more than that.

He was gorgeous, yes.

He was also kind, gentle, and caring.

He was loyal and he loved with his entire heart once he opened up.

I saw it with the way he interacted with and cared for his brothers.

And I knew he'd have the same to offer me, once we reached that point in our journey. The initial attraction had been a flashfire of lust—wanting what I'd never had, both physically and emotionally.

But the moment we'd both realized I was at Wild Wood to stay—

When we'd recognized we didn't need to rush things—

We had all the time in the world.

We'd slowed down a bit.

And the build-up to what I knew would explode between us was delicious and sweet—desire, temptation, and promises the likes of which I'd never dreamed.

Over the past month, we'd settled into a routine at bedtime. Watch some TV, chit chat with the boys, then head to bed. Hale would walk me to my room, his big hand on the small of my back, and lock the door behind him. My heart and head appreciated the safety and security of this. My body longed and hoped for something more to come from it.

Silently, we'd each go our separate ways, change into pajamas, and somehow end up back together in my room. Almost as if he was making excuses to be near me, he'd check windows, mess with the thermostat, and mumble about some leak in the bathroom I hadn't noticed.

The first night he saw me brushing my hair, he'd silently moved to the edge of the bed, his thick thighs and perfect ass clad in just a pair of flannel pants, and sat down next to me. Taking the brush from me, he'd started running the bristles through my hair.

"Used to do this for my mom," he'd said, his words gruff. "Yours is longer though. She kept hers up in a bun most the time. Only time I ever really saw it down was if she was going into town or sick. I remember thinking her hair looked all wrong at her service. She looked like she was sleeping, but she slept in a hair wrap-type thing—said it helped keep it from tangling—so looking at her in that casket, with her hair down and all around her shoulders, I remember thinking she definitely wasn't sleeping." He'd chuckled with no humor, never losing the rhythm of his strokes. "Not that I thought she was sleeping. But a lady at the church had told Benton, '*Mommy's sleeping like a beautiful angel.*' I remember being so pissed off about that. I didn't want him upset. They weren't really old enough to understand any of it, but I didn't want them thinking she was just asleep. Or to be afraid of sleeping. When I saw her, her hair all spread out, I wanted to find that lady and tell her she was wrong. My mom never slept with her hair down like that."

He'd stopped talking then, just running the brush through my hair for several more moments until he gently placed the brush on the side table and cupped his hands around my shoulders. Leaning in, he nuzzled my neck, a fire roaring to life in my belly.

I'd wanted him so badly. Wanted him like nothing I'd ever wanted before. I'd had a few kisses, but none of them had set me on fire like Hale's touches.

"I wanna lay you down right here. Take you hard and slow, make this gorgeous body mine, hear you cry out as I fuck

you,” he said, his words half threat, half promise. “But you’re here for the long-haul and I’m not gonna screw that up. We can take some time.” His hand trailed down to take mine, his rough fingers caressing my knuckles. “But once you’re settled and feeling at home. Once we’ve gotten to know each other and been on a proper date or two.” Hale pressed a kiss to my temple and whispered gruffly at my ear. “*Then* you’re mine. Body and soul, Everleigh. I’ll be the first man to ever touch you like that and you’ll scream my name when I make you come—over and over, your tight hole wrapped around me, my cock owning you, filling you, making you mine.”

I think I agreed, somewhere between a sob and a laugh, my core melting as his words washed over me.

“You want that?” Hale asked.

At the time, I’d only been able to nod.

“You tell me when you’re ready,” he whispered. “We have forever.”

From that point on, Hale flirted with me mercilessly. Gentle touches, soft words, winks, and promising smiles. Like the world’s longest foreplay, the man had made it his mission to leave me wet and begging.

“I think it’s cute,” Benton said one night while we were making dinner, his mischievous smile immediately putting me on edge.

“What’s cute?” Hale asked, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“The way you two are all flirty and sexy—all those little touches and looks you think we don’t see—but how Hale’s being all gentleman-like, courting his girl before he just fucks her through the mattress,” Benton said, batting his lashes like we’d buy the innocent act.

Zaiah burst out laughing.

“I’m not—” Hale started.

“Not courting? Pretty sure you are. Y’all go on walks, spend time together, I’ve seen the kisses you think you’re

sneaking. It's sweet. But I gotta say, even as an observer, I've got blue balls. Ever's lady parts are probably gonna chafe if you keep getting her all hot and bothered and sending her on her way with no relief."

Hale pinched the bridge of his nose.

I pressed my lips together, trying not to laugh—I probably should have been embarrassed or something.

"Friday night dates are all the rage these days," Zaiah said. "I hear all the cool kids are doing it. Take her into town and do it up right."

I was perfectly happy on the ranch. Hale and the boys had taken me into town several times—once for clothes, once for supplies, and one time to show me where the post office was.

But the thought of a date with Hale made my belly flutter.

Hale lifted my chin, bringing my eyes to meet his. "What'dya say? Want to go on a date?" he asked, ignoring the shit-eating grins of his brothers.

I nodded and the boys whooped.

Later that night, as Hale brushed my hair, I closed my eyes. "You know I don't *need* a date. And I'm ready for all those promises you made. Date or no date, I want what you said."

A rumble escaped Hale's chest. "This weekend. You and me—we're not leaving the bed for two whole days."

"The chores—"

"The boys will take care of the chores. Once I get my hands on you, I'm not going to be able to let you go muck stalls or saddle-train a stallion. The only thing you're gonna be ridin' is my dick," he growled in my ear, his breath tickling and sending me into a fit of giggles.

When he stood to leave, I grabbed his hand. "Would you sleep in here tonight?"

Hale's jaw clenched, but he nodded.

I scrambled under the covers and Hale climbed in beside me, spooning himself against my back.

Never.

I'd never felt so protected and cared for.

"You're in control, Ev," Hale whispered. "Every single second we're together, you're in charge. If you don't like something—even if you liked it just fine the day before—you say something. Want something more? Something different? Say something." His warm mouth brushed against my cheek, my jaw, my neck. "We're learning each other together and we can't learn without communication."

"I know you wanna go on that date first," I hedged.

Hale whispered, "You want something?"

"Can we maybe start small? Tonight?"

The hard length of Hale's dick pressed against my ass and I whimpered as I moaned, wanting to feel more of him. "What'dya want?" he asked, his words fire to my blood.

"Want you to touch me, show me what's coming." I bit my lip. "And I wanna touch you."

"Slow," Hale answered. "Tonight and tomorrow night we go slow. Then Friday, we go on our date and then spend the whole weekend in bed. Sound good?"

I nodded, pressing my ass into him.

"Tell me what you want," Hale demanded.

Turning my head over my shoulder, I whispered, "Kiss me. Touch me. Wanna get off."

His growl reverberated off the walls as his mouth came down on mine.

Heat shot through me, my blood boiling, as Hale's tongue devoured me. The taste of him on my lips, my tongue, spurred me on and had me keening, begging for more. I wanted his mouth on mine, but it was more than that.

"Touch me," I pleaded.

Hale pulled back, tipping my chin and bringing my eyes to his. “You stop me anytime.”

I nodded.

“Let me hear you say it. Tell me you know we can stop anytime.”

Cupping his cheek, I pressed another kiss to his mouth. “I know we can stop anytime. I know you’d *never* hurt me. And I know anything we do together is going to be amazing.”

Hale captured my mouth again, his hand moving to cup my breast, his lips absorbing my whimpered moan. “Fuck, Ev, the sounds you make. Just for me, baby, I’m the only one making you sound like that.”

“More,” I begged.

“We’re keeping our clothes on tonight,” Hale said. “If I get you naked, I’ll forget all about that slow shit.”

Part of me wanted to strip naked right then and there, beg him to put his hands and mouth all over me, spread my legs and take him deep inside to quench the ache in my core.

But we had time.

So, I just nodded and moved Hale’s hand to the hem of my shirt. The rough heat of his hand set me on fire, my nipples straining against the tight sleep tank I wore. When he cupped my breast, my nipple ached, begging for more. He grazed a thumb over the tight flesh and I quivered, my pussy wet and begging for release.

“Can I taste you? Wanna suck on these pretty tits,” Hale said.

“Yes,” I panted. “God, yes.”

He rucked up my tank and nuzzled his nose against the plumpest part of my breast. Pressing kisses against the curve of flesh, he moved to lick over the tight bud of my nipple. I cried out and Hale chuckled, his hot breath against my sensitive skin. “You like that?”

Rolling me slightly to my back, Hale leaned down and feasted on my breasts. Tongue, teeth, lips, he sucked and nipped and teased until I was a writhing mess.

“Oh god, Hale,” I whimpered. “I’m close.”

“Fuck, baby, could you come like this? With just my mouth on your nipples?”

“Maybe, but I want more. Touch me. God, I wanna come so bad.”

Hale bent his head, tonguing a nipple as his hand smoothed over my belly and down under the soft elastic of my shorts. When his fingers reached the lacy edge of my underwear, he popped off my breast and murmured against my lips, “Can I touch you?”

On a sob of longing, I nodded and said yes.

And then his big hand cupped my mound and a thick finger slipped between my wet folds. I knew I was soaked, and Hale’s possessive growl confirmed it.

“Fuck, baby, so wet. Wet for me. No one else gets this pussy, you hear me, this is all mine. You’re mine.” He kissed me, his tongue delving deep just as his thick finger breached me and I cried out, my body tumbling over the precipice. Wave after wave of orgasm washed over me as Hale fucked my mouth and my pussy. “That’s it, baby, ride my fingers. Gotta get you ready for my mouth, gonna eat your pussy and make you scream. God, so wet. Wet for my dick, gonna slide in and fuck you so good.”

My body floated on a cloud of pure ecstasy for several moments before I slowly came back to earth. Warm and sated in Hale’s arms, I snuggled against him.

“You good?” Hale asked, his words gruff with sex.

“So good,” I murmured. “Can I touch you? Wanna try sucking you.”

“Fuuuck,” Hale groaned. “You’re tryin’ to kill me, but damn, what a way to go.” He shoved his shorts down just far enough to tuck the elastic under his balls, his hard, leaking

erection bobbing against my thigh. “Touch me, taste me, whatever you want. I’m not fucking you until I take you on a date, but you’re in control.”

I reached down, my hand shaking slightly—whether from nerves, the amazing orgasm, or both—and closed my fingers gently around his hard cock. Loving the hiss of pleasure escaping between Hale’s teeth, I ran my thumb over his leaking slit and experimented with an up-and-down stroke of the hot, silk-and-steel flesh.

“Could you come this way?” I asked in complete awe that my gentle touches had Hale so close to losing control.

“Embarrassingly fast, yes,” he gritted out.

“What if I wanted to put my mouth on you?”

“Fucking hell, baby girl. Killing. Me.”

“Can I?” I asked, licking my lips as I imagined what the thick, weighty flesh would feel like on my tongue.

“Fuck, yeah,” Hale bit out.

I wiggled down the bed and swiped my tongue over his swollen cock head. Salty bitterness teased my taste buds. Hale’s fingers carded through my hair, pulling the length of it away from my face to expose where his dick teased my lips.

“Suck me, just take as much of it as you’re comfortable with,” he said, his words soft and encouraging. “Not gonna come in your mouth tonight. Suck me and then I’m tonguing that sweet clit until you explode and I’ll paint my cum all over your stomach.”

I didn’t have a lot of experience with sex other than getting myself off, but I knew, with the right touch, I could orgasm again. And I had a feeling my body had decided anything and everything Hale wanted to do to me was exactly the right touch.

Parting my lips, curling them around my teeth like I’d heard some girls in the bathroom at the gas station giggling about, I closed my mouth around Hale’s cock and swirled my tongue. The expletive exploding from him spurred me on and I

ran my tongue along the bottom of his shaft while bobbing my head slightly.

I'd seen porn. I knew Hale *could* have gripped my hair and fucked my face until I gagged—not gonna lie, I wasn't completely turned off by the idea, but maybe at a later date after some more practice—but he just held my hair back and watched. No thrusting, he let me set the pace.

When I glanced up at him, my heart was gone. The soft look in his eyes, the way he watched me so intently, with so much care and love. God, what this man did to me. I was done—hook, line, and sinker. He owned me, body and soul.

Losing focus, I took him a bit too deep and gagged. Hale pulled his cock from my mouth with a groan. “Not gonna last much longer,” he growled. Rolling me to my back, he pushed my legs apart and grabbed the crotch of my shorts and sopping wet panties. “This okay?”

I nodded.

Realized he was waiting for words.

Nodded and squeaked out, “Yes.”

And just like that, Hale's mouth was on me. He delved his tongue into my folds, lapping and sucking, the rough stubble of his facial hair scratching my sensitive skin. “You want my fingers?” he asked, his lips moving only millimeters above my clit.

“Please,” I sobbed, “please, Hale.”

I'd gotten myself off before, but that was nothing compared to the press of his lips and tongue against my clit as his thick fingers slid into my wet heat. Imagining how good it would be when his dick was in me, I cried out only moments later as another orgasm ripped through me. Hale lapped at my pussy as I rode out the release, then he shifted to his knees and took himself in hand.

“Pull your shirt up,” he demanded. “Let me see those gorgeous tits.”

Doing him one better, I pulled my ruined panties and shorts to the side, exposing my wrecked pussy with one hand and used the other to lift my shirt. The cool air pebbled my nipples and I whimpered.

“Fuck, Everleigh,” Hale groaned, stroking himself. “So damn perfect, so beautiful. Look at you, pretty girl. Wet and wrecked, just for me.” He jacked himself hard and fast before throwing his head back with a silent roar.

His hot release splattered on my breasts, my sternum, my belly, and I had the urge to spread my legs and beg him to pour his seed into me.

Hale pumped himself until his cock stopped spurting and then dropped to his elbows. Fire claimed his eyes when I ran a finger through his cum and sucked it from my finger. He dipped his head and tongued his cum from my chest before suckling my nipples, swirling around the tight buds, making me moan.

Bringing his mouth to mine, he devoured me. Our tongues sharing the essence of our bodies, his softening cock pressing against my slick core.

So easy. It would have been so easy to urge him to fuck me. To beg him to press what was left of his erection into me.

But I respected his decision to wait.

And it was only one day.

Instead, I let him nuzzle my neck, his breath and beard tickling me and making me laugh.

“We need a shower. Then sleep. We may be taking off the weekend, but we’ve got a whole day of work before we get to that,” Hale said.

* * *

I woke to warm kisses against my neck and Hale’s big hand pressed against my belly. “Mmmm,” I hummed, “good morning.”

“We’ve got exactly twenty minutes before we need to be downstairs for breakfast,” Hale whispered in my ear.

“A little extra sleep?” I teased.

“You can use it however you want,” he said.

“What did you have in mind?” I pressed my ass against his morning wood, longing to feel his weight pinning me down, that long, thick cock owning me.

“Wanna finger that sweet pussy until you come.” His gruff words sent sparks directly to my core. “Quick shower with you on your knees for me. Then we spend the day working our ranch.”

My heart.

Could I have asked for anyone more perfect?

Our ranch.

This land, the horses, and this man. That was all I needed.

Even without the ranch and the horses, as long as I had Hale standing by my side, I’d survive. But sharing this life with him was a daily dream come true and I kept waiting for the ugly truth to wake me up.

I grabbed his hand and moved it to my waistband, loving the throaty chuckle rumbling against my back.

“I take that as a yes?” Hale asked, nipping at my ear.

“That’s a hell yes,” I said, lifting my tank and cupping a breast.

“Oh fuck, yeah. Touch yourself. Play with your nipples while I finger-fuck you.” Hale’s big hand slipped beneath my shorts and underwear, grazing over my mound with a groan. When he slid his thick middle finger between my folds, I gasped and pinched my nipple. “Mmmm, already wet. Who’s got you so wet? Who does this pussy belong to?”

Teasing my nipples between my thumb and finger, alternating between each, I murmured, “You get me so wet, only you Hale.”

He added a second finger, pumping in and out of my slickness, his thumb teasing my clit. “That’s it, pretty girl, ride

my fingers. Gonna feel so good when I slide my dick into that tight, wet pussy.”

His words sent me over the edge and I cried out his name as my body trembled in release. Easing his hand out of my shorts, Hale moved up to kiss me.

“Shower,” I whispered against his lips. “We’ve got like twelve minutes.” I rolled from the bed and shimmied out of my shorts and tank. Licking my lips, my eyes never leaving his, I stripped off my underwear and turned toward the bathroom. “Eleven minutes.”

Hale growled and chased after me, shucking his clothes as he got closer. Laughing hysterically, I turned on the water and grabbed two towels.

Shrieking when he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me into the shower, I sobered quickly as his hot mouth landed on mine, his hard cock pressing against my belly.

“Ten minutes,” I said. “Let’s see what I can do.” I kissed him and then dropped to my knees. Taking his length in hand, I stroked him, licking his cockhead like a lollipop. I took him between my lips, tonguing and sucking, moving my head up and down his shaft.

“Play with my balls,” Hale begged.

As I savored his flavor and the steely weight of him on my tongue, I cupped his balls. Teasing my nails over him, twisting gently, I kept playing while he began thrusting slowly in and out of my mouth.

Knowing we didn’t have much time, I shifted my eyes up to lock on his. Taking my breasts in both hands, I cupped them, squeezing and thumbing over my nipples as he continued to thrust his cock between my lips.

Hale groaned and gripped his cock. “Fuck, keep doing that. Pull off.”

With his fist stroking his shaft, I only had the tip between my lips, but I wanted to taste him. So, I shook my head and kept playing with my tits.

Hale's head dropped back and his cock swelled in my mouth right before thick jets of cum exploded on my tongue. Most of it ended up running out the corners of my mouth, but I swallowed around his pulsing dick, savoring the taste of him on my tongue.

We were two minutes late to breakfast, but it was totally worth it.

* * *

The day was absolute perfection, and I savored the sunshine and soft breeze as I worked with a particularly cantankerous mare.

I felt Hale's eyes on me as the horse and I worked through some of her fears, learning to trust each other. Without turning to look at Hale—it wasn't safe to take my eyes off the horse until she and I had a few breakthroughs—I knew he was leaning against the corral fence watching me work.

He did that almost every day.

The four of us would do breakfast then head to do our own chores. When Hale headed inside to do paperwork, I went to start my day with the horses staying with us for training purposes, and the boys would take care of their own work.

Around lunchtime, Hale would come to watch me with whatever horse I had at the time. He never interrupted or rushed, but he'd watch patiently until we were done for the time being, and then help me with whatever odds and ends needed to be taken care of before walking with me to wherever we opted to have lunch that day.

A lot of our lunches ended up being in the barn, either because the day was gorgeous, we didn't want to track dirt into the house, or we needed to work while we ate.

That day, however, Hale led me to a big shade tree where he'd spread a blanket and the makings of a picnic.

Zaiah snorted as he walked by. "Based on the noises I heard last night, she's a sure thing, big brother. Don't think you have to wine and dine her."

Coming from anyone else, the words could have been offensive, but Zaiah and I had bonded in our own way over the time I'd been at the ranch, and I knew he loved me just as much as I loved him.

"Awww, that's the sweetest," Benton said. "Hale, why dontcha ever make picnics for us?"

Zaiah elbowed his brother and they laughed as they headed toward the house.

"This is nice," I said, toeing off my dusty boots and taking a seat on the blanket.

"You know it's not just to get in your pants, right?" Hale asked as he followed suit and opened up the basket.

"Oh my god." I giggled. "Yes, Hale, I think we both know very well that my pants are open and available."

He growled and toppled me to my back. "Open and available?"

I laughed, squealing and trying to get away. "For you, only for you."

We played around for a few more minutes, teasing and kissing, before Hale pulled away. "Let's eat and get this damn day over with. The anticipation is fucking killing me."

"Mmm, same, but it's delicious too."

As we ate our light lunch, chatting about the horses and some things we needed to do before we could clean up and head into town, something over Hale's shoulder caught my eye.

The yard sloped down slightly and the county road just beyond our property could be seen fairly easily from where we sat under the tree. We didn't get a lot of traffic passing Wild Wood Ranch unless people were coming directly to see one of the brothers.

But what I saw drew my attention because of how slowly the truck was driving. The fact it was a *very* nice truck, not one of the neighbors' beat-up farm vehicles, was also something worth noting.

I glanced at whatever Hale was saying as he packed up the lunch, but my eyes strayed back to the black truck. As I watched, the dark, tinted window lowered just over an inch and binoculars appeared.

What the fuck?

Fear and worry exploded in my gut.

My dad.

But why?

Why would he have taken the time to find me? He didn't even like me. He told me all the time how much better his life would be without me.

So why was he here?

Maybe it's not him.

And he would have *never* spent the money for a truck that nice.

You can rent pretty much anything these days.

Oh god. I couldn't go back there.

Wouldn't.

But I couldn't let him hurt the boys.

Or the ranch.

Just as the truck disappeared from view, Hale realized my attention was elsewhere. "You good?" he asked, his hand cupping my cheek, his lips brushing a soft kiss over my lips.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, just thinking about something I want to try with Trixie once I get her a little more comfortable with me." It wasn't a complete lie. I *did* have a plan for Trixie.

My heart sank. Deep down, I knew I'd lied to Hale.

A lie of omission, but a lie all the same.

Two seconds back in the presence of my dad and I was already letting him taint me with his wickedness.

It might not even be your dad.

Who else would it be? I shot back at my racing mind.

I'd just keep an eye out. If the truck started coming around a lot, I'd tell Hale.

Thanking him for lunch, I wrapped my arms around his neck and nuzzled my face into his neck. A shuddering sob escaped me and Hale tightened his arms around me.

“Hey, you okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah, just looking forward to our weekend.”

Hale kissed me, long and deep. “Me too. Now go get your work done so we can head into town.”

Several hours later, Hale and I were enjoying the most delicious meal at a little place in town when the black truck drove slowly past the restaurant. I caught the truck through the window over Hale's shoulder and choked on my water.

As we walked to Hale's truck, licking ice cream cones and holding hands, I swore the same black truck moved from a far corner of the parking lot and slowly disappeared as we climbed in and the engine rumbled to life.

There was no doubt in my mind the black truck was... stalking? Following? Spying?

Whatever it was doing, and *whoever* was in it, I definitely wasn't imagining things.

Tell Hale?

Eventually, yes. But I didn't want to ruin our weekend plans.

We'd be safe and sound in the house all weekend.

The black truck—and my dad? Who else could it be?—could wait.

Chapter 6

Hale

I'd dated several women over the years. The problems I'd run into when it came to dating was those women seemed to want my name and my money.

When they found out not much came with the name and the money wasn't what they'd thought it would be, not to mention the amount of time and energy I devoted to the ranch—partly because I loved it and partly because I *had* to—they hightailed it out of there.

With women like that, sex had always been easy. Almost impersonal, because I knew they weren't going to stick around. We'd have some fun while they pretended to be Mrs. Ranch Wife, I'd get off more than usual, and then we'd go our separate ways when they got tired of playing around.

When the reality of what it took to be a ranch wife hit them full-on, they quickly opted out—especially when they realized the name and money weren't all that much—and I'd go back to working the ranch. I'd accepted long ago that it would take a very special woman to settle down and be part of the ranch *with* me. Beside me. Supporting the business because she loved it just as much as me.

Honestly, I'd truly started to think it would never happen.

And then Benton came up the hill with Everleigh in that golf cart and my entire world shifted.

The way that girl clicked with the boys almost immediately.

The way she'd taken one look at Wild Wood Ranch and loved it as much as me.

Her passion and skill when it came to the horses.

From the very moment she'd stepped into my life, I knew she was different.

Knew my life was about to change—not in a way that meant giving up the ranch, but in having someone by my side who loved the place as much as I did.

Knew my future was the ranch and Everleigh.

And I knew without a doubt that sex with Everleigh would be the usual good time, but so much more. She was my partner, the *real* Mrs. Wildwood, a key part of the ranch, and possibly the future mother of my children if she wanted the same as me.

And I wanted every second in bed with me to be perfect.

For her.

The fact she'd never had another man touch her spurred me on—had me nearly busting a nut for weeks as we flirted and kissed and got to know each other.

When we got home that night, I opened the passenger-side door and pulled Everleigh to the edge of the seat, stepping between her legs as her breath hitched.

The kiss was long and slow, her warm body wrapping around mine and melting into mine. “Go on upstairs and take a bath or shower or whatever you want. Just relax. We’ve got all weekend, but I want to talk to the boys to make sure they’re on-board with the chores. I’ll take a shower and be there in a bit.”

Everleigh smiled and nodded. We made out for a few more minutes, but eventually headed inside.

The boys teased me plenty about asking them to take over all the chores for the weekend, but I knew they didn’t really mind. They were happy I was happy, and they loved Everleigh like a sister.

After a shave and a shower, I rummaged through my bedside drawer for condoms and lube. Everleigh and I hadn’t yet discussed protection and birth control, but I wanted to be prepared. I knew my sexual history was somewhat questionable, but I’d gotten two completely negative rounds of tests ever since Tawny had left the ranch—we hadn’t slept together since she admitted to cheating on me to make me

jealous, and I'd gone straight to the clinic just outside of town for testing once I'd learned she'd been sleeping around.

So, I knew I was negative, but that didn't mean we wouldn't need condoms.

Everleigh was a virgin, so I doubted she had much to be concerned about as far as sexual health, but she'd be the one making the final decision about using protection or not.

I knocked lightly on our connecting door and walked in when Everleigh answered.

She'd dimmed the lights, lit candles, and the room smelled of her body wash.

Sitting on the bed in her usual sleep tank and a pair of lacy panties, dark hair tumbling over her shoulders, and a rosy-pink cast to her cheeks, Everleigh looked like a princess.

Like every wet dream come true.

Like Little Miss Perfect sitting prim and proper.

Ready to be ravaged.

To cry out my name as I took her over and over.

"Fuck," I growled, clutching the condoms until the packets crinkled.

Everleigh smiled and bit her lip. "You like?"

"There's never anything about you I don't like," I promised her as I moved toward the bed, "but yeah, baby, I like." Pressing a knee onto the mattress, I ran a hand up and down her smooth leg. "You look good enough to eat."

"That's kinda the plan, yeah?" Everleigh teased.

I groaned. "Gotta talk first. My tests are all negative, which I think is important to know. But the condoms-or-no-condoms decision is up to you. I'm good either way."

Everleigh pressed her lips together and nodded. "Does it make me sound slutty if I say I've been thinking about this a lot?"

“Not at all,” I said, moving to toss the condoms and lube on the side table and sit next to her. “It makes you sound like a smart, confident woman who has every right to not only think about these things, but also the right to choose.”

Everleigh took my hand. “You know I’ve never had sex with anyone. That doesn’t mean I’ve not experimented here and there with a toy and touching myself.”

A possessive grumble erupted and I buried my face in her neck, breathing deeply of her perfect scent.

She giggled. “But my sexual health isn’t a concern, birth control is the only thing we’d need to worry about.”

I reached for a condom, but she put a hand on my arm.

“I used to have excruciating periods. When I was finally old enough to get myself to the free clinic without my dad finding out, the nurse there put me on birth control. It helped alleviate a lot of the terrible pain.” She frowned. “Sadly, the free clinic was under a lot of political pressures when I left, so I don’t know how much longer it will be able to provide care for young people who needed help like I did back then. I called one of the doctors in town not too long ago and got an appointment set up here and I’ve switched my prescriptions to the little pharmacy.” Everleigh paused, bit her lip, and smiled. “Sorry, I’m rambling. My point is that we don’t need condoms.” She moved to straddle my legs, wrapping her arms around my neck. “If you’re comfortable with going without, so am I. Not to get *too* serious, but I don’t plan on sleeping with anyone else but you for the rest of my life.”

Growling, holding her tight, I fisted her hair and brought her mouth to mine for a long, deep kiss. Possessing her mouth, owning her, I feasted on Everleigh’s whimpery moans as she rocked her hips against my straining cock.

Breaking away long enough to yank my shirt over my head, I tossed it to the floor before grabbing the hem of her tank. My eyes met hers, asking, pleading.

Everleigh nodded, swallowed, and then whispered, “Take it off.”

Stripping the tiny shirt from her gorgeous body, I cupped each of her full breasts in my hands and thumbed over the pebbled nipples. Loving the way Everleigh moaned, I did it again.

And again.

Dipping my head, I took first one dusky pink bud in my mouth, and then the other. Savoring the flavor of her skin, the peaked flesh on my tongue, and the mewling sounds escaping Everleigh, I suckled and teased.

“Please, Hale,” she begged. “I need more.”

Shifting our position so Everleigh was on her back, her head at the foot of the bed, I nestled my hips between her spread legs. Lavishing wet tongue kisses to her nipples, I moved to press hot, open-mouthed kisses down her torso, teasing her navel, and pausing at the lacy waistband.

Not even waiting for my question, Everleigh huffed with impatience and yanked the panties down. When my bulk blocked her progress, I chuckled and helped her remove them all the way.

“What’s got you so worked up?” I whispered against her inner thigh.

“Fuck, Hale, please. Touch me.”

The desperation in her voice caught my attention and I nuzzled my nose against the junction of her thigh. “You want my fingers or my mouth?”

Everleigh whined, bucking her hips. “Yes, both. Please.”

“Gonna eat this pretty pussy until you come, then I’m sliding my cock inside and filling you with my load until you’re begging to come again.” Slipping my finger into her hot, wet core, I quickly added a second, loving the way her tight channel clung to my thick digits. Finger-fucking her slowly as she whimpered and rocked her hips, I buried my tongue in her folds and swiped up and around her clit over and over.

In literally moments, Everleigh screamed my name, her body convulsing as she rode wave after wave of the first orgasm of many I planned to give her. Pulling my fingers from her pussy, I trailed them over her nipples and leaned in to suck, cleaning her up with my tongue.

Gently wrapping her in my arms, I moved her so she was the right way on the bed and stood to strip out of my shorts. Everleigh reached for me, her hand grazing over my abs before closing around my hard-as-rock cock. "Gimme," she whispered, licking her lips and pulling on me gently.

Not being a man to deny my girl what she wants, I knelt on the mattress near her head and let her suck me deep to the back of her throat. When she cupped her own breasts and crossed her legs as if searching for friction against her clit, I pulled from between her pretty pink lips and positioned myself between her legs.

"You good, pretty girl?" I asked, my cock and balls begging to sink into her wet heat.

Everleigh nodded, spread her legs, and fingered her clit. "Wanna come with you inside me. Please, Hale."

Dragging my cockhead up and down her slit, gathering her slick wetness, I worked my way into her tight heat inch by inch. Fighting the urge to slam into her, to fill her to the brim and feel my balls pressed against her ass, I moved slowly, bit by bit.

When Everleigh wrapped her legs around my waist and forced me forward, crying out as I fully breached her tight ring, I swore and gritted my teeth to keep from unloading in her right then and there.

"Are you okay?" I asked, panting.

She giggled. "It's so good. I've never felt so full." Everleigh reached up and cupped my face. "Make me come, Hale. Fill me up."

How I held myself back from busting a nut then and there, I'd never know. But I wrapped her in my arms and pumped

into her, slowly and gently, making love to the woman I knew was my present and my future. A gift I'd cherish for always.

When she came for a second time, her tight channel gripping me, I let the orgasm take me, pumping her full of my cum in pulse after pulse. Making love to Everleigh was the single most special, overwhelming, intimate act of my life—never had I shared such a closeness with any other person.

In the past, I'd scoffed at the idea of life-changing sex.

But being inside Everleigh, filling her with my seed, feeling her body clench around my cock—I knew it was true.

My life would never be the same.

We cleaned up just enough that we wouldn't be covered in dried cum, and fell asleep.

When I woke to Everleigh stroking me, I groaned.

“You know the best thing about our first time being soft and gentle?” Everleigh asked, leaning in to swirl her tongue around my leaking cockhead.

I grunted.

“I'm not sore and this round can be hard and fast,” she answered before parting her lips and taking me deep.

“You got something in mind?” I asked.

Everleigh pushed me to my back, straddled my waist, and positioned my cock at her entrance. Lowering herself down inch-by-inch, she cupped her tits and pinched her nipples. “Go hard,” she demanded.

Watching Everleigh ride horses was a beautiful thing, but watching her ride my dick was the most gorgeous sight of all.

Several minutes later, when I gripped her hips and shot my load deep, Everleigh cried out and braced her hands against the headboard as an orgasm ripped through her.

She collapsed on top of me, our sweaty bodies sticking together, and the smell of our sex filling the air.

Rousing long enough for a shower—where she sucked me off and I ate her ass and fingered her until she screamed my name—we fell into an exhausted sleep.

By the time we woke, I'd lost all track of the clock—I only knew I was hungry, and I needed Everleigh like I needed my next breath.

We gorged ourselves on the snacks I'd brought up and I texted the boys to see if they'd leave some decent food outside the door.

Zaiah responded with something about needing earplugs and never wanting to hear his sister-in-law make those types of noises ever again.

Benton just sent celebration, eggplant, and water drop emojis.

We laughed, watched movies, and talked for hours after eating the food my brothers left for us.

Sunday morning, I woke hard as a rock with my cock nestled against Everleigh's perfect little ass. Fingering her awake, I lifted her leg and pressed my dick into her slick folds. Loving the angle and the precious noises she made as I fucked her, I reached to cup her breast and tease her nipples into stiff peaks.

“Harder,” Everleigh demanded. “Wanna feel you when I'm working tomorrow.”

Pulling out, I moved her to her hands and knees. Pressing her top half down and nudging her legs farther apart, I slapped her ass with my dick before slamming back into her wet heat. With my fingers gripping her hips so hard I knew she'd have bruises, I gave her the hard pounding she begged for. The bed rocked so loudly, I was grateful we didn't have neighbors to hear, especially when she cried out my name, coming on my cock as I roared my release.

We spent another day in bed, napping, watching movies, and just enjoying our time together. As the day drew to an end and a long Monday of hard work loomed before us, Everleigh

set her phone alarm and then stripped out of her tank and panties.

“We’ve got forever, I know,” she whispered, undressing me and pulling me between her legs. “But I don’t want to miss one last chance before we return to reality tomorrow.” Guiding my length to her core, she smeared the head of my cock into her slick folds.

We both moaned as her wet heat took me deep and I set a slow, easy rhythm.

Pumping gently.

Rubbing just right against her clit.

Holding her close, owning her, loving her.

“Oh god,” Everleigh whined. “Fuck, Hale, oh god.”

When she came, the ripples of pleasure shook me, and my release pulsed hard and fast deep in her core.

Collapsing on top of her, I breathed her in. “Love you so damn much, Ev. So much it hurts.”

Hot tears ran down her cheeks, scalding my own skin pressed against hers. For a moment, I panicked that telling her I loved her was too much, too soon. But the soft smile, the bright eyes as I wiped away her tears, told a different story.

“I love you, Hale,” she said, her words shaky. “I haven’t known much love. Not until I stepped on this ranch and found my family. My home. Finding you and Wild Wood was the best damn thing that ever happened to me, and I can’t stand the thought of anyone taking it away.”

“Hey, shhhh.” I swiped more tears away. “No one is taking anything away. Shhhh, you’re safe here. The Wildwood boys protect their own.”

Everleigh hiccupped a sob and nodded. Kissing away her sadness, I feasted on her mouth until my cock hardened again and I fucked her gently, pumping into her until she came again, my own orgasm weak but pleasurable.

We showered quickly and fell into an exhausted heap on my bed, since Everleigh's was a mess from all the sex. Plus, it was time she started sleeping in my room, since she was definitely no longer a guest, and I wanted her plastered to my side at all times.

* * *

Monday morning dawned dark and broody with storms predicted all day. The four of us did our chores, but a lot of the outside work had to be rescheduled. Paperwork was never-ending, so I knew I'd have plenty to keep me busy.

Zaiah and Benton opted to work in the big garage and service as many of the ranch vehicles as possible, since they couldn't do much else.

Everleigh had an absolute glow about her—the alpha male in me puffed up and took pride in knowing she radiated happiness because of the mind-blowing sex we'd had—but she also seemed slightly off.

Part of me wondered if it was just the change in our routine.

Or maybe she just needed a bit of time to herself—Everleigh was highly independent and spending the entire weekend with me...even though it was fantastic...might have given way to her just needing a little breathing room.

So, when she asked to borrow the truck so she could go to the post office, I didn't hesitate. "Want some company?" I offered, despite knowing she might want time away.

Everleigh smiled and pressed a kiss to my lips. "No, thank you. You have plenty to keep you busy. I'll be back in a bit. And then *I'll* keep you busy tonight."

With thoughts of nightly sex with Everleigh distracting me, I watched her grab the keys and drive away.

Two hours later, the door burst open, and all hell broke loose.

"Hale!" Zaiah hollered.

“Ever, we’re here. Tell us what’s wrong,” Benton said as I rounded the corner.

“What happened?” I took in Everleigh’s distraught features, the streaked tears, the rain-soaked clothes. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

She fell into my arms, sobbing.

Glancing at my brothers, I asked a silent question.

“She ripped into the drive and hauled ass up here,” Zaiah explained. “Knew something was wrong when she got out. She won’t talk.”

“Can you make some tea before you go back outside?” I asked the boys. “We’ll go sit in the living room.” I knew my brothers wouldn’t go back outside until they were satisfied Everleigh was okay, but I thought maybe a bit of privacy might help.

Thirty minutes later, Everleigh’s tears had subsided, and she’d sipped enough of the tea to have some color in her cheeks again.

“You ready to tell me what’s wrong?” I asked, warming her hands in mine.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” Everleigh said.

“In this family, we talk things through. If you need time, that’s fine, but we don’t keep things from each other.”

“You’re not going to like it,” she said, new tears springing up.

Knowing deep in my heart that nothing Everleigh said could be more heartbreaking than thinking she was hurt or unhappy, I took a deep breath. “That’s okay, I’m ready to listen.”

“There’s been this black truck,” she started. “I saw it out here the day we had our picnic. Then on our date night. I went into town today to see if I could find it.”

Biting my tongue to keep from roaring, I gritted out, “There’s a strange black truck following us and you decided to

go into town *by yourself* to see if you could find it?”

Everleigh jutted her chin, fire in her eyes. “I think it’s my father. I won’t let him ruin what we have. Won’t let him fuck things up here at Wild Wood.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I see your reasoning, but going into town to look for a truck you think might be your dad’s is dangerous.”

She sighed and wiped at tears. “Well, I saw the truck, but I couldn’t get a good look, so I’m not even sure it’s him or what the hell he wants. Then Tawny cornered me—”

“Tawny fucking did *what?*” Zaiah exploded from the doorway.

Waving the boys in, Everleigh took the last swig of tea and started in. “I’d just seen the truck, but it drove around the corner too fast. I was heading back to where I’d parked when I literally ran into Tawny. Before I knew what had happened, she’d ushered me into the coffee shop and ordered me a latte. I don’t even like coffee. Then she spent thirty minutes telling me how I’m not even Hale’s type. How he’s obviously going through a mid-life crisis and using me to work through it. Told me the ranch will never survive and if I really wanted to help, I’d convince you to let her buy the ranch. She said she’d buy it easily and then you could decide if you wanted to stick with his poor little country girl or take sides with the owner of his ranch.” Everleigh took a deep breath. “Like, she sounded like she was being nice and helpful, but she was actually being so mean.”

“I’m gonna fucking kill her,” Zaiah said, only stopping when I held up my hand.

“Do you want to sell to Tawny?” Everleigh asked. “She’s gorgeous. You two could probably be great together. And having her buy this place would help all your money problems.”

When Benton opened his mouth to protest, I shushed him and took Everleigh in my arms again. “First things first, in this family, we don’t make decisions about selling without a

discussion. Second, while it *would* be nice to never have to worry about money—” Zaiah tried to cut in, but I scowled at him. “Tawny is...well, she’s a lot of not-nice things that I don’t really want to get into right now. Suffice it to say, I wouldn’t sell to Tawny if she was the very last person on the face of the planet with money and I was starving.”

“Is this just you going through a mid-life crisis?” Everleigh asked.

“Hell, I hope being in my thirties isn’t *mid-life*,” I said and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Tawny doesn’t like to lose. She doesn’t *want* the ranch. In reality, she doesn’t even really want me. She just doesn’t like that I picked the ranch over her.”

“And she *really* don’t like that he picked *you* over her,” Benton said with a huge grin.

“Tawny has never and will never own a piece of my ranch or my heart,” I promised. “The Wildwood family sticks together, and we’ll work our asses off until we get the Wild Wood Ranch back in the black as far as money goes.”

“Got a damn good start with how many clients have been calling to get their horses in with our girl,” Zaiah said.

I reached for my phone and dialed. When Tawny picked up, the seductive purr in her words pissed me right the hell off. “If you *ever* talk to Everleigh the way you did today, I will personally see to it that your life is a living hell. Don’t forget,” I said, lowering my voice, “you told me things that I *know* you don’t want getting out.”

A knock sounded at the door and the boys left the room to deal with it.

“Leave us alone and those things stay a secret. Mess with my family and the first person I’m going to is Sam Jackson’s wife.”

The screeching on the other end of the line was enough to let me know Tawny had understood my threat. I tapped the screen to end the call.

Just as I placed my phone on the coffee table, Benton appeared in the doorway looking worried.

My senses shot to high-alert.

“There’s someone here for Everleigh,” Benton said, his words drawn tight.

She launched herself from my embrace and rushed to the window. “No, no, no,” she muttered. “Benton, keep him outside. Lock the door.”

“What is it, babe?” I asked, moving behind her to look out the window.

“It’s the black truck. It’s gotta be my dad.”

Chapter 7

Everleigh

In the end, the black truck did *not* belong to my dad.

The guy who'd been snooping around in the black truck—and believe me, I gave him a piece of my mind for being such a creeper and scaring the shit out of me—ended up being a lawyer who had been trying to track me down.

From what I understood, my father died shortly after I ran away. Massive heart attack that killed him instantly.

The lawyer, Mr. Arenbough, offered condolences for my loss and then laughed when I said my dad's death was not the slightest loss. "Yes, Miss Everleigh, I would agree. As someone who knew your father, I would describe him as an absolute dick, but that would likely be offensive to dicks everywhere." He'd cleared his throat and pulled a folder from his briefcase. "Your father's will was made up very early in his life—I like to think it was before he became such a terror—and he never got around to changing it. Due to that fact, everything that was planned to go to your mother—God rest her soul—is now going to you. You now own the ranch, the horses, the house, everything."

Benton and Zaiah had sat with Mr. Arenbough while he enjoyed an iced tea and Hale took me to his office.

"Do you want to go back home?" he asked.

My head whipped up, mouth dropping open. "This is my home. Isn't it?"

Hale had me in his arms, crushing the breath from me, within seconds. "Of course it is. Forever. But you own a ranch now. The place you grew up."

"The place I grew up is filled with nothing but hate and hurt. I want nothing to do with that land or that house. The horses are all that mean anything to me."

“Then let’s go talk to your lawyer,” Hale said with a smile.

Arenbough had no issues with me wanting to sell. He gave me the name of a guy who he was pretty sure could sell the ranch and the house within a week. We arranged for the majority of the horses to be delivered to Wild Wood in my dad’s ranch vehicles, which we’d keep. The lawyer said he was pretty sure only a few of the horses weren’t healthy enough for travel and he’d take care of selling those, plus any ranch vehicles left over.

Later that night, I stood at our bedroom window looking out over the moonlit ranch. Hale’s warm embrace sent a shiver through me.

“You okay? I know he was terrible, but it’s okay to have feelings about your dad dying.”

“I do have feelings about it. But I’m not sad. More than anything, I’m just relieved he can’t fuck things up for me.” I turned, wrapping my arms around his neck. “My horses will be here. We’ll have some extra vehicles. And the money from the sale can help *our* ranch.”

Hale shook his head, a scowl forming between his brows. “No way—”

“Shhh,” I interrupted, silencing him with a kiss. “Let something good come from the bad I endured all those years. From the moment I stepped foot on this ranch, it’s been more family and home for me than my father’s place ever was. Let me be a part of this, let the sale of a place that holds nothing but pain and fear for me be used to save this place.” I cupped his face. “Please, Hale. Let me do this. Let me help save Wild Wood.”

Chapter 8

Hale

The sale of Everleigh's place went through quickly and Wild Wood was back in the black with plenty to spare. Letting her use the money from her dad's place wasn't something I'd ever thought I'd do, but it made her so happy, I couldn't exactly tell her no.

We'd had Sugar and Everleigh's other horses on Wild Wood for about three months now and everything was settling nicely.

The day my girl came running to the door as a farm truck full of chickens pulled up, a smile beaming across her face, I knew there was never anything she could ask that I wouldn't do for her.

Hell and damnation.

Chickens.

"Wild Wood Ranch is known for horses, Ev," I complained as the farmer helped her set up the coops and gave tips on raising the chickens.

"We'll forever be known for horses," she said. "But now we'll have farm-fresh eggs and free-range chickens." With a quick kiss to my chin, she continued, "And I won't even ask about getting a rooster for at least a year."

I groaned.

That night, as we settled into bed, I pulled her close. "You know you're a dream come true, dontcha?"

Everleigh sighed, cuddling into me and pressing a kiss to my chest. "You're my dream come true, too. I never needed a man to *save* me, I was capable of doing that myself, but finding a soft place to land safely once I took that leap sure was icing on the cake. I love you and this place and those boys more than life itself."

“All I ever wanted was to run this place. Always thought having the woman I loved running it by my side was a far-off chance, but now it’s my reality. Not gonna lie, I’ve made mistakes in life, and I know I’m not perfect. But from the very second I saw Benton hauling you up the hill in that golf cart, my heart knew you were the one. My person, my love, my future—the one to stand next to me and run Wild Wood Ranch until the very end.”

Everleigh sniffled and chuckled softly when I wiped her tears away. “There is nowhere in the entire world I’d rather be than standing by your side as we keep Wild Wood running as the best damn horse and chicken ranch in the whole state.”

Swatting her ass as she giggled, I rolled her to her back and spread her naked legs to make room for my hips. “Horse ranch. We’re a fucking horse ranch. We don’t do chickens.”

“We do now,” she sing-songed.

I cut her off with a kiss and her teasing about chickens was soon forgotten as I sank into her wet heat. I knew we had the rest of our lives to argue about chickens, but for that moment in time, I wanted nothing more than to make love to the woman I loved and planned to make my wife.

* * *

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Dovetails

About the Author

Dove Daniels is the author of short, sweet, dirty, and flirty romance. She adores writing about gorgeous alpha men and the women they love.

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The Cowboy Billionaire
Britney Bell

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The Cowboy Billionaire

Cowboy and workaholic romcom with laugh out loud moments.

Julia McGregor is a fiercely independent and successful business owner who thrives on control. With a sharp wit and a no-nonsense attitude, she's built her empire from the ground up and has no time for frivolous distractions like romance. However, others close to her think it's high time she found love and takes action by creating a dating profile for her on a new and unconventional app.

Ryan Fields abandoned the corporate rat race after a health scare wakeup call for a simpler, more fulfilling life. He's embraced his passion for a hidden talent and now spends his days on the quiet land of his little Texas ranch. His mother sees him growing old differently than he's planned and seeks out the internet for help.

With full-on matchmaking mode in motion, unbeknownst to Julia and Ryan, they find themselves thrown into a series of comical encounters, orchestrated by well-intentioned people.

At first, sparks fly in the worst possible way as they clash at every turn, but with each misstep, they stumble closer to a love neither of them saw coming, aided by the relentless efforts of the colorful cast of characters surrounding them.

Read today to see if they will give in to their heart's desires or if they will fall back into old patterns?

Chapter 1

Ryan Fields

Clouds. They're breathtaking when you take a second to really appreciate their beauty. Fluffy puffs of white that float through the sky without a care in the world, looking down at the people living in this world. Laughing at their inconsequential worries. Shaking their little cloud heads at the stupidity of the rat race.

You know the race where most people spend their lives working to make somebody else rich off of their dreams. They put things on hold like a family and vacations just so they can punch a clock every day. And then they die.

Almost happened to me. I nearly died trying to build my business up. My heart didn't like the overload of stress put on it day after day. It nearly quit on me, and that was my life-changing moment. I quit that shit as quickly as I could. No way was I going to die without ever truly living.

I gaze at the blood orange and hot pink clouds drifting through the sky over my own little piece of heaven. Texas.

I shift my cowboy hat back in place and continue working on the wood rocking chair I'm trying to perfect. The breeze feels good sitting out here on the back porch. I leave the slider open for Rusty, my dog. He's a golden retriever, and my best bud. He likes to roam back and forth between the air condition and warm weather of the Texas heat.

I stare at the chair. It's been a bit of a struggle to get the angles of the legs just right, but now that I know the rocking chair works, I'm trying to carve patterns into the arms of the chair to give it a little flair.

My beer sits on the table next to me, and I grab it roughly by the neck and take a long pull. Ah. There's nothing like a beer, non-alcoholic, of course, after a long day. My doctor doesn't want me drinking the good stuff, but that's okay with me. I'm a laid-back kind of guy.

I continue with my carving when there's a loud knock at my door. I'm sure it's some solicitor, or maybe someone's lost. Either way, I don't have time for any of that. All I care about is my woodworking.

Rusty barks.

"Shh, boy. They'll go away," I say, scratching him behind the ears.

The knock grows louder, and I set my beer down. Rusty rushes inside, barking at the door. *Fuck's sake*. I stand and stretch my arms over my head, setting the hat on the table. Working long hours on the furniture I create by hand takes a toll on my back, but it's nothing that the stressful hours at the office ever did. This I can handle.

I move through my ranch-style home and open the front door. "Mom," I say when I see my mother's worried eyes looking back at me.

"Ry, I've been calling you and texting you. I even sent a 9-1-1 message saying I was in the hospital."

I step aside so my mother can bustle her way into the house. "You were in the hospital?" I ask as I shut my front door.

She lets out a deep breath, looking dejected. "Well, no, but..." her words fall away as she moves further into my home. She pats Rusty on the head, and he follows her. She settles in the kitchen where my phone is lying forgotten on the kitchen counter. She picks it up and turns on the screen. "Still works. So, you're ignoring me?"

Now she appears hurt.

I scrub a hand over my thick beard. She always has a knack for making me feel guilty. "Mom, I'm sorry. I was just..." I try to think about what I've been doing that would be a good enough reason to not return her calls. Honestly, I never think about my phone anymore. I used to be glued to the sucker, and now... nope, nothing. "I've been busy."

She turns her nose up at me as she sets the phone down on the counter. "Busy? Doing your woodworking nonsense?"

“It’s not nonsense.” I lean against the counter. “Besides, you never need to knock. My front door is always open.”

My mother moves around my kitchen like she lives here, which, of course, I don’t mind, and pulls down two tall glasses. I watch her as she fills them both up with ice from the freezer and water from the fridge. “Have you been taking care of yourself?” She changes the subject.

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Mom. The heart attack was years ago. I’m fine.”

She raises a brow, handing me the glass. “You don’t look fine.”

I glance down at the ratty t-shirt covered in sawdust, and scrub my hand through my beard once more. “I am. I’m sorry I didn’t answer the phone.”

At this exact moment, my front door barges open and my younger brother, Parker, rushes in. “Mom, got your message.” He stops when he sees me in the kitchen, holding a glass of water. “Mom, you said he was dead. He doesn’t look dead.”

My mother moves from around the counter and sets her glass of water down. “No, I said he could be dead. I didn’t know because he never answers his phone.”

“Okay, what the hell is going on?” I ask, setting my glass down next to my mother’s. “I’m not dead.”

My mother crosses her arms over her chest. “How would anyone ever know? You could die and nobody would ever know about it.”

Parker runs a hand across my mother’s back, comforting her. Now I look like the asshole son. “It’s okay, Mom,” he says, giving me a death glare like he wishes I would have been dead so he would have had a good reason for dropping whatever he was doing today to rush out here.

“Listen, I’m fine. I just forgot about my phone.”

Both my brother and mother look at me like I’ve now suffered a stroke.

“You?” Parker laughs in between his words. “How could you ever forget about your phone? You once forgot it at a restaurant and nearly lost your shit when you had to return to get it. You had like fifty missed phone calls in those five minutes you were without it, and I remember you saying something like, ‘I wish there was a way to glue the phone to my hand so I’d never leave it anywhere ever again.’ You were obsessed about it. You once missed my ballgame because you had to take a call.”

I shove both my hands into my jeans pockets. “Yeah, I was sort of an idiot back then.”

There’s a better way to live, and I’ve found it. I control my destiny, not my phone. Not my money.

My mother rushes over to me, cupping both my cheeks into her hands. She’s nearly got tears in her eyes, and now I feel worse for not answering her call. “Ryan, you need to get out more. It’s not healthy living out here all by yourself. You need a woman.”

I laugh, loud and short. “I don’t think a woman would solve my problems.” Not that I have any. But my mother apparently thinks I do. “No, I definitely don’t need a woman.”

“Mom, he’s right,” Parker backs me up. “Remember Alexa?”

I cringe hearing that name float around my kitchen. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard that name, and I’d much rather I never hear it again. However, I nod at my brother, because he has brought up the best point. “Yeah, I definitely don’t need that again.”

My mother shoos her hands at my brother. “Oh please. Alexa was just the wrong woman. Ryan needs to find the *right* woman.”

“True that,” Parker says with a smile. “I don’t think the right woman would like him as he is right now.” He looks me up and down.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

My brother steps closer. “When’s the last time you’ve shaved?” He smacks my beard and I swat at him. He rushes behind Mom, and I laugh.

“Enough, boys.” She turns her attention back to me. “He’s right. When’s the last time you’ve showered and shaved?”

I roll my eyes, moving to the fridge to grab another beer. “I’m fine.”

“You need a woman to be here. To be able to check on you. When you worked in the city at the office, I knew people would miss you if you went missing one day.”

I rub my hand along the back of my neck before opening my beer. “Are you saying out here nobody would miss me?”

“Honey, you know we love you and would miss you. I just hate you being out here all alone. You need a woman.”

“You know I don’t need that complication in my life.”

“Hogwash, honey. The right woman will love you for who you are and not the size of your bank account. You can’t die out here alone with your wood art and a few horses,” is her reply. She gets this goofy smile on her face, and I cock a brow.

“Mom?” I question her. “What did you do?”

“Now don’t be mad?”

I glance at Parker, and he shrugs. “What did you do?” If she has a woman waiting in her car to move in, I’ll disown her. “I don’t need you setting me up.”

She parks both hands on her hips. “I didn’t set you up, per se.”

“Mom,” my voice raises. “What did you do?”

My brother steps closer at the same time I do. My mother has definitely done something bad. Knowing her, she probably signed me up for some reality TV show. Or worse.

“I made you a profile.”

“A what?” What is she talking about? A profile? For what?

Oh no.

Before she can answer, I've already figured it out and stepping back out of the kitchen. I move toward the back sliding door that leads to my back porch. Rusty's hot on my heels. So is my mother. Parker isn't that far behind her.

"What's going on, Mom?" Parker asks. He's only a few years younger than I am.

"I'm forty-five years old, Mother. I don't need you meddling in my life, and I definitely don't need to be on some dating website." I can't believe this.

I park my ass back in my chair and set my beer down. I pick up my scalpel and continue working on my rocking chair.

"Now, honey. Don't be mad." She shuffles up next to me. "I just want you to be happy."

"So, you made me a profile on some dating website?"

Parker has joined us and crosses his arms over his broad chest. "C'mon Mom, even I think that's low."

"No, it isn't. This site uses data about your personality and life and matches you with the perfect match. They have a ninety-nine percent accuracy."

"Sounds like a scam." No one can be *that* accurate.

"They do." My mother's busy pulling her phone out of her own pocket. "Look, they've already found you a match."

I stand. "No, I don't want to meet her."

"What do you mean?" My mother appears confused. Like she can't understand how I wouldn't want to meet some random woman. "Why wouldn't you want to meet her?"

"Mom, you can't be serious?" I glance at my brother for help.

"He's right, Mom. What if this woman is an ax murderer?"

My mother laughs with an eye roll. "She's not an ax murderer. I've seen her picture, and she looks like a nice girl." My mother scrolls through her phone, and then she shoves it into my face. "See? She's beautiful."

I don't want to look at the phone, but there's something that makes me look, anyway. I stare at the image on the screen, Parker pushes me aside to get a good look.

"Damn, she's hot," he says.

I stare at the woman looking back at me, and I have to admit, she is very pretty. Maybe I would have gone for a woman like her back in my past, but not now. I don't need the complications having a girlfriend brings. Why can't I just live the rest of my life in peace?

I glance back at the picture. Her green eyes captivate me as I continue to look at her. Long red hair falls in waves around her shoulders. She has a few freckles splattered across her nose that make me want to sit and count each and every one. I push the phone away. "No."

"What do you mean, no?" my mother asks.

"I'm not meeting her." This woman's trouble. I can see it written all over her beautiful face. There's no way in hell I'm falling for another woman just to have my heart shattered once again.

My mother's face falls flat. "Fine. You win. I won't contact her." She glances down at my rocking chair. "This is nice."

"Thanks, Mom." We spend another hour catching up, and before I know it, both my mother and Parker are leaving to head back to their homes.

I lean back in my chair, watching the sun set before me. "I don't need a woman, right Rusty?"

He stares at me, but if dogs could talk, I know he'd be agreeing with me. No matter how stunning that picture was, it's all for the best. I don't need anyone in my life. I'm just fine with the way things are.

Chapter 2

Julia McGregor

“Mom, I love you, but I really don’t have time to chat. Can we talk tonight? My assistant is out sick, I’ve got a meeting in five minutes, and I still need to book my planning trip that she was supposed to do and apparently didn’t. I should be leaving on Friday, but that’s only in two days and nothing is arranged.”

“Oh dear, that sounds stressful. Let me help you. I can book your trip. You know, put my olden days of being a travel agent to good use, and make all the arrangements,” Mom says.

A sense of relief washes over me. “Sure, Mom, thank you. Just make it some place with all the amenities that I would need to work with great room service because you know I won’t be leaving the room until I get all the budgets and planning done for “Put Me To Work.” The online freelance business I created has grown so much and so fast that once a quarter, I have to physically get out of the office and have a budget and planning week all to myself so I can think straight. No distractions. Not that I have a husband or kids to go home to that can distract me. Who has time for that?

No, I mean no distractions of my cell phone interrupting me. No distractions of friends stopping by, or my mother and two sisters barging into my house like they own the place. I love my friends and family, don’t get me wrong, but sometimes a girl just needs to get away.

“Sounds good. I can definitely do that. I’ll get right back to you with your flight info. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll arrange the full-service treatment for you and the car service will be at the airport waiting area to pick you up and take you to the resort.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I say my goodbyes to her and get off the phone. I suck in a lungful of air and sigh when I think about replacing my old assistant. So much work to be done and there’s only one of me.

Thankfully, Mom stepped up to help. I could just kiss her.

“The quarterly reports are here,” Vanessa says, holding a manilla file in her hand. She’s dressed like she’s going to a cocktail hour at some fancy hotel instead of work. I envy her sometimes, because she can pull it off.

If I were to wear something like that, everyone would ask me, ‘what’s the occasion?’ “Thank you. You can just leave it on my desk.” I sit down, ready to be done for the day, but know I still have many hours left before I can call it quits. Every time I think I’m done with work, something new pops up.

Now I’ll be here all day and well into the night, going over the quarterly budget.

“You look stressed,” she says, stepping into my office. She shuts the door behind her, drops the report on my desk, and takes a seat. “Are you not getting any?”

If any other employee talked to me this way, they’d be fired on the spot. However, Vanessa’s a friend. A very close friend. We spent many nights in college curled up on the sofa, watching chick flicks, and she would cry about how she wanted to meet Mr. Right. I never bought into the notion that there’s one perfect person out there for everyone. How could I?

There isn’t. I don’t have time to date.

I give Vanessa a look like I think she’s very funny. “Ha ha,” I say in my most sarcastic voice imaginable.

“I’m serious, Julia. You need some hot and steamy action in your life. You work too hard.”

I glance at the expense report and laugh as I stand from my chair. “No, I really don’t. I have zero time to date. Besides, there’s nobody I know who I’d even consider.”

“Travis from that marketing firm was hot. He had a body that looked like it could do some good for a body.”

“You sound like a milk commercial.”

We hired Travis' firm to market a few things for us last month, and sure, he was okay, but nothing I'd bother trying to date. I feel like it gives my company a bad name. A horrible image. I hire someone to work for my company. To make it better. And then I go and hit on the owner? No, that's not me.

I glance out my window at all the people in the streets below, rushing off to probably grab a bite to eat. Is it lunchtime? I've completely skipped a meal because I was once again too busy to eat. My mother would probably scold me if she knew.

As if on cue, my stomach growls.

"You sound hungry. Call Travis to meet you for lunch."

I roll my eyes. "No, thank you." My computer dings with an incoming email, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"What's that?" Vanessa asks as I sit back behind my desk to read the email further.

"My mother came through. She booked my work trip."

Vanessa laughs. "More like a snore-trip." She stands. "Will you do me one favor?"

I glance up into her brown eyes. "Sure, what is it?" I'm skeptical to agree, but if this is about Travis, I can just push it off for a while. I'll be out of town for a period of time.

She gives me a big smile. "Try to have a little sex on your vacation."

I blush. "Vanessa, it's not a vacation. It's a work trip."

She waves me off. "Same thing. Let your hair down and have a little fun." She leaves my office and I think about what she said. I can't let my hair down and have fun. I'll be too busy planning the next phase of how I'm going to be a billionaire.

It's nearly midnight when I step out of the Uber. The flight was tiring. The airport was even worse. I just want to fall on top of the bed and pass out.

“Here you are, Miss,” Fred, my Uber driver, says. “Let me get your bags.” He steps out of the driver’s side and heads to the back of the four-door sedan.

Obviously, it was dark when I landed at the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport. But now, not having the city lights to brighten the sky up, I can barely see out my window.

The lights to the cabin in the woods my mother booked. I step out of the car. “Is this Bearpen Creek?” I ask the driver.

He nods, pulling my two suitcases over toward me. The wheels hold out well over the rocky terrain. “It sure is. It’s like our own slice of heaven out here on the outskirts of Dallas.”

“I’m sure it is.” There are no lights anywhere, and even the moon is hiding in the night sky.

Fred nods and gets back into his car and pulls away. I tip him through my app, and then turn on the flashlight from my phone. Ah, that’s better.

From what I can barely see, the cabin is beautiful. It’s not the first place I’d have ever booked myself, but I breathe in the fresh air and thank my mother silently for finding me a place in the middle of some real peace and quiet. I can finally get some work done.

I turn toward the riveting cabin that promises to be my little hideaway for the future and breathe out a sigh of relief. I’m going to make some great progress. I can just feel it, but first I need some serious sleep.

I make my way up the steps and push the door open. My mother’s email was very detailed, saying the door would be open for me and the key would be inside for me to lock up if I needed to head into town and get supplies.

I park my luggage by the front door and turn on the entryway light. Wow!

When you think of a small cabin in the woods, your mind doesn’t go to a palace with a woodsy style. From as far as I can see, the place has all the amenities as any five-star resort. The place is immaculate and roomy. It’s the perfect oasis to

get some real work done. My heartbeat ramps up with excitement.

This is going to be perfect. I move throughout the first floor, making my way into an elaborate kitchen with all the gadgets and gizmos you could ever possibly want in a kitchen. I'm no chef, but just seeing the perks of this space has me imagining preparing a quality meal while working over quarterly goals and expenses.

I open the fridge, and it's fully stocked. I smile, saying a quick thank you to my mother for booking a place that comes fully stocked with food. I spot a bottle of Pinot on the second shelf and pull it out.

Thank god this wine bottle has a Stelvin screw cap, and I don't need to find a wine bottle opener. I pull a glass down from the first cabinet and pour myself a hefty glass of wine. After the day I've had, this is the perfect ending.

I glance out the back sliding glass door, unable to see much outside, but I can just imagine it's going to be a magnificent view of the creek. I sip the wine, letting the fruity flavors hit my palette. Ah. This is perfect.

I spin around and nearly come into contact with a Louisville slugger. "What the..." I call out.

Chapter 3

Ryan

“Who the hell are you?” I shout out, my trusty ol’ baseball bat in my hand ready to swing.

The woman standing in my kitchen in the middle of the night appears shocked. Like I’m inconveniencing her. “Me?” she asks, pointing a finger at her chest. She sets down a glass of wine, and I notice the bottle of my Pinot Grigio on the granite counter.

“Why are you drinking my wine at one in the morning?” I’ve heard of women going crazy, entering other people’s homes and thinking they’re in their own. The woman appears harmless, so I lower my bat, but I don’t put it away completely.

“Ah,” she presses her fingers to the bridge of her nose like she’s got a headache. “I know what this is. We were double booked. That’s the only explanation.”

I stare at her, assessing her level of crazy and I notice how incredibly striking she is. Long auburn hair with intense green eyes, and a set of kissable lips that pout as she stares up at me. It’s been a long time since I’ve been around a woman, and an even longer time since I’ve been around anyone this beautiful.

She’s a downright babe, and I forget the words she’s just said to me. I shake my head. Double booked? What the hell does that mean?

“You’re in my home,” I say in a soothing voice. I’ve always heard when talking to a mentally unstable person to talk in even tones. I don’t want to send her over the edge, but I’m sure tonight will end in me calling the police so they can get this woman back to her home.

By the looks of her, she comes from money. She’s not some strung-out druggie who stumbled into the wrong house looking for her next fix. No, she’s very well taken care of. I

picture her coming from the city of Dallas. She's probably some finance guy's wife, and she got into a fight with him and drove out here to get away. She's probably so distraught that she thought she was walking into their cabin and walked into mine by mistake. There are a few cabins down by the lake that other people own. I'm guessing she's from one of them.

She laughs, and the sound flutters around the kitchen, causing me to soften slightly. It's a pretty laugh, if you could ever call a laugh pretty. "Your home?" She glances around my kitchen, looking for any clues that would validate my story.

I set my bat down on the counter and lean against it. "Yes," I cross my arms, "my home. You're trespassing. I should call the cops on you."

Her eyes widen with clarity, and I can see she's not mentally unstable. "Call the cops. No, I booked this AirBNB, well my mother did." She grabs her phone from her pocket and starts scrolling through it. "See, my mother set everything up with a Paula Fields." She shoves her phone into my face.

However, I don't need to look at the words written on the screen. Paula. My mother. This is insane. Maybe I'm the mentally unstable one.

Or my mother is.

"That's my mother." Everything's clicking together in my mind, but it still doesn't stop the woman from acting like she can boot me out of my house.

"So, you see, I've booked this place for the week. You're going to have to find somewhere else to stay." Her voice rings with a finality tone, and I can't help but laugh at her.

Hard.

"Find somewhere else? What are you talking about, sweetheart? This is my home." What can she possibly not get? I pull out my own phone, scrolling until I see my mother's information on the screen. I don't care if it's one in the morning. I push the button and press the phone to my ear. "I'm not leaving. You are," I say right as my mother picks up.

“Ry, is everything okay?” her voice is groggy with sleep. I know I’ve woken her up, but at this point in time, I don’t care.

“Mom, did you rent out my place?”

“Well...” she starts, but I’m no longer listening.

“Mom,” I cut in. “How could you rent out my place? I’m not looking for a roommate.”

My mother’s tripping over her words as she tries to explain something about needing somebody around to look after me. What the hell is she talking about? I’m not doing this in the middle of the night.

“Mother,” I say with my most stern voice. “I’m not done talking about this. Go back to bed. I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

My mother sighs into the phone. “At least she’s pretty, right?”

I don’t answer.

I hang up the phone.

Has my mother even fully vetted this woman standing in the middle of my kitchen?

“So...” her word draws out. “I’m Julia, and it appears your mother rented your place out. I guess she didn’t know you’d be in town.”

“In town? I live here.” I don’t know how much more clear I can make this. “I never leave. I don’t rent this place out.”

“Well, your mother does.”

Is she for real? “Okay, it’s time for you to go.”

She balks at me. “Are you kidding?”

I cross my arms over my broad chest. “I never joke past midnight.”

She looks taken aback by my statement. “Joke or not, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Um, well, you’re not staying here, sweetheart.”

“Will you stop calling me that?” She parks a hand on her hip. “Where am I supposed to go?” She twists her face in a pretty little way and her other hand lands on her opposite hip. “I’m not leaving.”

“Yes, you are.”

“My mother put a deposit down.” She places a thumb to her bottom lip. “At least, I think she did. Is your mother in need of money? Did she rent out your place because she’s desperate?”

I laugh at this. “My mother is fine. And I assure you she didn’t take any money for this.” My mother doesn’t need to work. I’ve made sure of that. It still makes me wonder where she got this insane idea to rent my place, and how she found this woman. “You say your mother booked this place?”

She nods. “Yes, she booked it all this morning.”

I shake my head. “This doesn’t make sense.”

She pulls out her phone, most likely putting a call into her mother to figure out this mistake. “I need to make a call.” She holds her finger in front of my face. “Mother, what site did you use to book my accommodations?”

“Mmm hmm. I see.” I watch her as she paces only a few steps back and forth as she listens to, I guess, her mom on the other end. “Well, we will be discussing this as soon as I get back.” She brings the phone down from her ear and turns towards me. Those brilliant eyes connect with mine, and I have a hard time pulling my attention away.

I clear my throat to break the thought of taking her immediately to my bed rather than giving directions to the guest room down the hall from my room. “Look, this must be a huge mistake or something going on between our mothers. I’m an asshole, but since my mother does have something to do with this misunderstanding, then she’d kick my ass if I left you on the porch all night. Let’s sleep and we can find out what’s going on in the morning. What do you say?”

Rusty chooses that very moment to come barreling into the living room to greet our new guest... intruder... I haven’t

decided yet, since my cock is doing way too much thinking at the moment.

“Eekk! What is that?” Julia yells, and Rusty jumps around her trying to get her sent as his tail waggles like it’s a windshield wiper on its fastest mode.

“That is Rusty. A dog...” Yes, I could call him off, but I’m enjoying myself watching her squirm and try to get away from him when all he wants to do is smell her and lick her. Hell, I want to smell and lick her also, but in a very different way. *Dammit, just stop thinking like that, you horny bastard.*

“I know it’s a dog. Why is it not on a leash?” she asks and ducks behind me, grabbing both of my shoulders to steady herself. I can’t help but laugh. It’s a full belly laugh; which has not happened in an extremely long time.

“Rusty, stop.” I command, and he immediately stops and comes to my side. “He’s not on a leash because he’s in his home. You woke him up, and now he wants to play.”

“Well, I’ll only stay here if you promise to keep him on a leash.”

“Look, lady. I’m not going to beg you to stay. The option for you to leave is always there. If you’re stayin’, the guest room is that door right there.” I point to the room just off of the living room. “My room is down this hall.” This time, I point in the opposite direction then I start walking to my room. “Come on, boy,” I call to Rusty and let her make her choice.

Chapter 4

Julia

“Mom, I stayed here last night, and that was long enough. There is no way I’m going to stay here in the middle of nowhere. I was supposed to be at a resort right now. You know, with Wi-Fi to plan upcoming action tasks for work, Mother.”

“Darling, just stay and refresh your mind by the different scenery. I’m sure it’s handsome... I mean, beautiful out in the Texas hill country. Plus, it is way too early to be having. Why don’t you go find some coffee, wake up a little? Rather, let me get some coffee and wake up, then I’ll call you back,” she suggests.

“There’s even a dog here.”

“Oh, what kind of dog?” she counters.

“It looks like a golden retriever. You know I’m afraid of dogs.”

“And it’s about time you grew out of that. Nothing bad has ever happened to you from any dog. I told you not to watch that horror show with all those dogs. Yet, you didn’t listen to me, and you’ve been on edge with dogs ever since.”

“No, Mom...” I start, but I’m cut off.

“Bye, Julia. I’ll talk to you after a while. Love you.” With finality, the call disconnects.

Well, fuck. If she worked for me, I would fire her on the spot. She knows that too, and that’s why she would never work for me, even if I offered to pay her more than she could imagine. I toss my phone on the bed and take a chance to go explore to find caffeine.

With the light shining brightly in the room through the sheer curtains that hang on the large window, I get a good look at my surroundings. It’s nicely decorated with what looks like

handcrafted furniture made from wooden logs, and a multicolored patchwork quilt covers the bed. So, I take a few steps to the window and pull the fabric back to peek outside. It takes my breath away at how green it is. Smack in the middle of downtown Houston, is all concrete, metal, and glass that I look at on a daily basis. Here, there's lush grass that a few horses munch on behind a long wooden fence, full trees roll down a line to border the flat landscape, and a white barn sits only about fifty yards away with the sliding doors open at the end of the structure.

Excited for the explorer inside of me that's been dormant for so long, I quickly dress and venture outside to scope out the area.

As soon as I open the back door, the air is so crisp and clean and easy to breathe in versus the smog of the city. It's quiet too. All I hear is crickets communicating amongst themselves and a few birds chirping between the trees.

Through the open barn doors, it's just what I expected. A few horse stalls sit, one on each side, and a corner of hay piled high with a tack room on the opposite side. However, there's more to this barn than just an animal stable. It's bigger than that, and the other set of sliding doors proves it.

At first glance, I know just where the furniture came from in the room I slept in last night. There are rows of logs lined up along one wall, a variety of saw tables arranged neatly around and the sweet smell of fresh cut wood makes me smile. Creativity and artistry lie around this room in unfinished pieces, waiting on their master to complete and make them into their fullest glory.

Looking beyond the equipment, I see a tall, fit man, with arm muscles that are defined by the work that he does in this very room. Ryan, with his head down in obvious concentration on a large work of art before him, doesn't notice me. So, I take a moment to admire his work.

He's only the most handsome man I've laid my eyes on. That circular wood carving, of what looks like it's going to be an owl with intricate designed feathers, is stunning. It's

amazing. This man has so much talent. It blows me away and pulls me in to walk towards it for a closer look.

I make only a few steps in the workroom, and Ryan takes notice and raises his head to see who's invading his personal space.

"Good morning, ma'am," he greets with a half-smile. I don't know how he feels about my intrusion on him and neither do I know how to take this little arrangement that my mother had a hand in.

"Good morning. This is beautiful." I point to the piece in front of him.

"Thank you. There's coffee in that office right there if you want some." He points just like he did last night to show me the way.

"Yes, coffee would be great. Thank you." I move to go to the office, but the rapid pace of paws approaching me has me frozen in place.

"Whoa there, Rusty," Ryan says, and I turn to see what's going to happen. He's clipping a leash onto his collar and hooking it to a bench that's sitting just outside. His gesture makes me feel safe and comfortable in this stranger's home. Even though I weirdly felt at ease and got the best night of sleep I've had in a very long time.

Everything is easy to find, and it's quick to fix my coffee, and when I return to the larger room, Ryan is sitting on one side of the bench. So, I go to join him. Although, as soon as I reach the empty side, Rusty makes a sudden change in position from laying down next to Ryan to apparently trying to greet me. All this does is complicate my feet by wrapping the leash around one of my ankles and sending me flying through the air. My coffee goes in one direction and my body falls fast towards the hard ground at Ryan's feet.

Like a hero, those big strong muscles snatch me out of the air and we're face to face. Chest to chest. Eye to eye. Lips to lips. *Wait. What? I just planted my lips on his!*

Chapter 5

Ryan

I'm standing in the middle of my workroom, doing very little work because all I can think about is the strange, yet beautiful, woman that showed up at my house in the middle of the night. Something about her feels... different. Hell, I even leashed my damn dog for her, so she'd be more comfortable.

Now, she's walked into my space, admiring my work, and Rusty had the balls to do what I couldn't; get her in my arms. With her lips planted firmly on mine, my thoughts have gone from semi-innocent to raging hard-on. I have to take a step back to not only right her, but myself too.

After making sure she's standing upright, I swipe my hands down my jeans and clear my throat. "Sorry about that. He's not used to being tied up." *Tied up. I can think of someone else I'd like to have tied up.*

"It's... okay," she stammers. "I have this irrational fear, according to my mother, of dogs. I know he didn't mean to." We take a seat on the bench together and she asks me about my work. "So, do you make all this yourself?"

"Yeah, it's something I started a couple years back as a way to get some peace. Now it's how I make a living and I love doing it." I smile and she returns it with a beautiful one of her own. "You know, you don't have to leave right away. I know you traveled a good way and you must still be a little tired." I don't know why, but I want her around a little longer. I haven't wanted any woman like this in a long time.

"I was actually going to speak with you about that today. I can't get a flight until at least tomorrow. You'd be okay with me staying another night?"

Darlin', I'd be okay if you never left. "Yeah, sure. What kind of host would I be if not? Matter of fact, I'll even cook you dinner so you get the full experience."

Her eyes light up as she looks at me. “You don’t have to do that, really.”

“Oh, I insist.”

“Okay, so this supposed Airbnb our mothers have created has now become a bed-and-breakfast. Thank you for your hospitality. Can I help with anything?”

“I’ll throw a few steaks on the grill, so it’s not going to be that hard. Just kick your feet up and rest wherever you’d like.”

As I’m busying around the kitchen and back and forth outside cooking, I watch her get cozy on my couch, curl up in a blanket, and doze off. She looks so peaceful and relaxed. I don’t really want to wake her to tell her that dinner is ready, yet I don’t want her food to get cold either.

Decision made, I kneel down in front of her and gently stroke my finger over her forehead to brush away a fallen lock of hair that’s covering her sleeping eyes. She wakes and smiles at me. The look in her eyes is one of happiness and content. That warms my damaged heart.

“Dinner’s ready, sweetheart.” The endearment slips out, but I wouldn’t take it back.

We eat and enjoy each other’s company sitting across another table that I made. It’s actually a good feeling to be able to share my designs with someone other than my family. I never thought that would be the case, and I’m a little taken aback by the realization.

“Let me help you clean up. That meal was delicious,” she offers.

“Sure, we can just rinse off the dishes and throw them in the dishwasher. How about a nightcap on the back porch?”

“That sounds lovely,” she agrees as she picks the plates up from the table. I make work to get all the rest of the scattered items put away.

“Wine okay?” I ask and grab my non-alcoholic beer from the fridge.

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll meet you out there in just a few minutes with your drink.”

“Okay,” she says and walks to the back door, my eyes following the sway of her ass with every step forward she makes. Then I have to take a moment in the kitchen to get my hard-on back under control. Damn, having a woman share my space, even for this short time, is unnerving, but in a good way. Dare I say that I like this stranger being here? It’s definitely an odd feeling.

For the next, however long, we sit in rocking chairs on my back porch and chat about random stuff as we watch the sunset and the sky turn to only the bright moon and stars lighting the scenery before us.

“You ready to call it a night?” I turn towards her to ask.

“Yes, I think so. Although... This has been a great night, Ryan.” She smiles at me, and her appreciation for what I’ve built here cracks another hardened layer of my heart.

I grab her glass and my empty bottle and lead us inside. Just after I set the contents in the sink, I turn and bump into Julia.

“Sorry...” My words die off as her lips are on mine once again. You bet your ass I’m going to capitalize on this situation. I’m not going to let it be lost again. I return her kiss with heated passion and back her up, holding her in place against the kitchen cabinets.

Chapter 6

Julia

Ryan's lips on my neck as he makes his way down my body feels so good. It's like holy water reviving my soul.

Somehow, we make it from the kitchen to his bedroom. I'm in a trance, and I don't care how, I'm just glad we made it to a lying down position. That way he can do with my body as he sees fit.

"Sweetheart, please tell me you have a condom because I don't." Oh my God. Should I be embarrassed to say that I do in my purse, making him question how often I sleep around, or should I own it and just go for it? I'm not that promiscuous, I just keep a few in case the opportunity arises. Now, for him not to have any at the ready, what does that say about him? How long has it been since he's had a woman here, or did he just run out? I'm leaning toward the first question because guys don't just 'run out' of that very important piece of equipment.

"Yes, I do. It's in my purse," I admit, not shying away and owning who I am. I love sex.

"Stay here. I'll run and grab your bag. Well, maybe not run." He looks down at the large tent in his pants, and we both giggle as he waddles out of the door.

He's back before I know it, and I dig the gold packet out from my side zipper pocket to present it to him. That earns me the reward of a passionate kiss and we quickly remove our clothes.

As he stands at the foot of the bed in his naked glory, I ogle the fine specimen he is while he covers his cock in latex.

"God, I can't wait for that to be inside of me," I confess.

"Sweetheart, I can't wait to be balls deep inside of you, either." The timber of his voice does funny things to my core and sends a pulsing warmth through my lower half.

With our eyes locked on each other, he climbs on the bed, takes my breast in his palm, and a nipple into his mouth. I arch into him, seeking more, needing more. Needing him to fill me.

“Ryan...” I beg.

“It’s been a long time for me, Julia. This first time is going to be fast, but I promise you will be fully satisfied before the night is over,” he reveals the answer to my earlier question.

“Sounds good to me.” My last word comes out breathless as he drives two thick fingers inside my channel and gently strokes them in and out while hitting my sensitive nub on every pass. “Fuck.”

“Fuck is right. You are so wet.” He pulls his hand away and I groan in protest, but when I see him put his fingers in his mouth to taste me, I may just climax on sight alone.

He reenters his fingers and repeats the same motion over and over, picking up the pace until I’m writhing under half of his weight as he holds my body down to the mattress with his free arm and his leg is trapping one of my legs so that I stay wide open for him to play with me.

“Ryan!” I scream as my pussy walls pulse around those two glorious fingers working their magic. Not only is he a skilled artist with his hands, he’s also very talented in the art of the female body. “Yes!” My hips buck up into his hand, wanting to ride out the orgasm.

“I need to be inside you,” he growls in my ear, and I welcome him, needing him to hurry up.

He feeds my desire only a moment later by sliding into me, seating himself fully and making himself right at home, completing me.

My hands are all over this man as he pounds into me. I’m trying to stave off another impending climax, but I’m failing miserably.

“Ryan, I’m going to come again,” I warn.

“Do it. Come for me, sweetheart,” he urges and we both scream out our releases while our bodies become one like I’ve

never experienced before.

As we come down from the high, we clean up, and he gives me one of his t-shirts to sleep in. Then he does what I silently wanted him to do, pulls me in close to his chest and holds me until we fall asleep.

The next morning, arriving at the airport is bittersweet. I don't want to leave him, but I have a business to run that I can't leave behind. I check my bags in and we find a couple of seats near the gate away from other people, so we get the illusion of alone time before I have to leave. He had to buy a ticket, so security would let him pass through to the gate in order to be able to sit with me while I waited, which was the sweetest thing.

"I wish you didn't have to go. Couldn't you just finish out your vacation time?" he asks, a forlorn look on his face.

"I wish I could. I really do, but I had already booked this before... we happened. Unfortunately, I can't reschedule my meetings. I don't like it either, but we can always text, and we can call and FaceTime too." I say anything I can to make this moment seem brighter instead of the gloom we have hanging over our heads now.

Long-distance relationships are hard, but I'm willing to at least try if he is. For me, I've never felt this way about anyone before. Sex was just sex. Being with him felt like a beginning, not a fleeting moment. I can only hope that he feels the same way.

"I would like that," he says as they call me for my flight. We share a final kiss, both lingering for moments more. I turn to look at him as I walk away. He waves, a slight smile graces his face, but his true feelings shine in his eyes.

He's as unhappy about this as I am.

Chapter 7

Ryan

“Hey, sweetheart,” I say to Julia as soon as she answers the FaceTime video. She’s been gone now for about a month, and we’ve got in a routine of video chatting just about every night around ten. The last few weeks, it seems like it’s more of a nuisance to her than an enjoyable conversation.

“Hi, Ryan.” Right away, she’s already distracted. “How was your day?”

“It was fine. The usual. How was yours?” I make it quick and volley the topic back to her to try to get her to talk, open up about what’s really wrong.

“Busy. Lots of meetings that I had to sit through when I really needed to be behind my desk at my computer and getting shit done. Now, it was another wasted day, when there’s a lot that still needs to be done.” She finishes talking, and it sounds like she’s typing on her computer, but I can’t see it. Like she’s still very busy with work. I know that sign all too well. That used to be me years ago.

“Damn, that sucks. Sorry. I’ll tell you what. I’m going to hit the sack early tonight and let you have some good quiet time to hopefully get caught up. We can talk tomorrow,” I suggest.

“Sure, that sounds good,” she says, but I honestly don’t think she even heard what I said to her. The video disconnects, and I lay my head back on the pillow and know that I just lost the only woman that I’ve felt a huge connection with. What’s worse is that I lost her to the life I used to live and the life that I’ll never go back to again. I’ll never ask her to leave that behind, either.

For the next month, I’ve cut back on the video chats, almost down to none, but I still receive the daily check in texts that I’ve been getting from Julia since the day she left my place.

They are more like just part of her daily tasks rather than a heartwarming conversation that she's wanting.

So, I think it's time. That moment that I didn't want to have to do, but it's inevitable with long-distance relationships of any kind. "I think it's best if we go our separate ways."

I'm better off staying single. This is another reason that I don't get close to people. I'm better off without her, or anyone, for that matter. People do nothing but let you down. That's how they're built. They can't help it. And it hurts too much when it inevitably happens.

After sending the text, I started avoiding my phone again. I didn't want nor care to see her response. If there even was one. One evening, while I'm working in the shop, Mom and Parker make an impromptu appearance at the ranch.

"Yo, bro!" my brother Parker yells as he walks through the front door without any warning. Not even a knock on the door before entering, like polite people do.

"Ry," my Mom tries to calm me down because she knows what the stare down means, that I'm about two seconds away from throwing my younger sibling into the wall. "Don't be upset. We tried to text and call, but you haven't responded in days. So, we had to drive out here and make sure you're alright." She pats me on the arms and brings my attention towards her. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing, Mom. Nothing is wrong with me," I bark out a little harsher than I should have, and I pinch the bridge of my nose and sign. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You were fine when that nice young lady was visiting here and for a little while afterwards, but now you are not. What happened?"

"What happened is that you should have never got involved in whatever shenanigans you and her mother were up to. You knew that we are in two very different places in our lives, and put us in a situation like that only left room for hurt when it didn't work out. Besides, you know that I'm not going back to that fast-paced business life, and I won't ask her to

walk away from that either. She's worked her ass off to get where she is. No one has any right to ask her to step down from that."

"You're right. I should have stayed out of your love life. I just worry about you. I don't want you to be alone when I leave this Earth. I'm sorry, son," she agrees, a single tear runs down her cheek.

"I'm sorry too, Mom." I pull her in for a hug. "If I'm meant to be with someone, it will happen. We can't force things like that."

Chapter 8

Julia

Somewhere along the last few months, I lost contact with Ryan. I didn't intentionally mean to. Work just got in the way. It has been insanely busy and, like, not one person that I pay a nice chunk of change to on a biweekly basis, has any answers or can do anything themselves without my input. Or did I make it that way?

Am I so much of a hard dictator at the office where I have to micromanage every little thing that the very qualified people that I've hired to do the job question their abilities? I'm not an empowering boss. I'm a failure.

I've even read the fucking book that says your success is only that of those who succeed you. If I don't have trust in them to handle shit, then that makes me successful at all. No matter the dollars in my bank account.

"Charlie," I say to the CFO of my company as he answers on the first ring. "You've got that promotion that you've been hounding me about for a few years now. Well, actually since we graduated from college, and I started this company with only an idea. Congratulations, you're the new CEO of Put Me to Work."

"What?" he yells through the receiver.

"That's correct. This goes into effect immediately. I'm going on a long vacation. Only bother me if the building burns down. Actually, just move to a new office building, so maybe don't even call me then. I'll do quarterly check ins, but other than that, I don't want to be bothered."

"Alrighty then, Julia. Have a nice time off." I hang up the receiver and call my mom next.

"Mom, do you think that you can book me that little Airbnb in Texas again?" I ask.

“Really?” I hear her clap on the other end of the phone. “Yes, I’ll get right to it, and I’ll make your travel accommodations as well.”

“Great because I have a lot of stuff to pack. Thanks. Just send me the flight itinerary to my email.” That’s another thing I’ll have to do. Create a non-business email account because I don’t even want to have to open that up and see all the work stuff.

Within two hours, I’m on a flight to Dallas, and within the next four hours I’m knocking on a wooden door somewhere around one o’clock in the morning... again. It’s pitch black out here, but I’m not afraid in the slightest because I know there’s a big, strong man, and a large, hairy beast behind that door that will protect me at all costs. Yeah, he might push me away, but I’ll take that chance. He’s worth it. We’re worth it.

If he pushes me away, it’s going to hurt, but I’m going for it, anyway.

“What the hell are you doing here?” the burly voice says as the porch light flickers on and the door creaks open.

“I... um...” God, I’m a nervous wreck now that I’m face to face with the man I’m completely in love with.

“I’m just joking. It’s great to see you, but I’m a little confused as to why you’re here.”

“I thought you never joke after midnight...” I say, my voice is a little shaky. Rusty peeks his head through the door, and I kneel down to welcome him into an embrace and give him a pat. He’s soft and loving, and suddenly my fear is erased. Then I stand to confront his master. Hell, he’s my master too. He’s the one that holds my heart.

Tears pool in my eyes as I realize Ryan hasn’t only made my life more, he’s also helped me get over some of my biggest fears. I never thought that I would fall in love. I never would’ve believed I would leave my pride and joy in the hands of someone else, no matter how capable they were, and I surely never thought I could love a dog. Who would’ve thought that two meddling mothers knew more than we did?

“Come here,” he invites me into a big hug, just like I did his dog.

“I love you,” I mumble into his shirt and begin to cry.

“I love you too, sweetheart. Welcome home.”

* * *

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About the Author

I'm a Texas girl... Yes, I can ride horses, but I prefer fast cars. Yet, I prefer country music to hard rock.

Raising two boys, life can get really manly with all that testosterone floating around. The spare time I do get between ball games and outdoor activities, I absolutely love the mental escape that reading romance brings, even if it's in small increments. During the other ounce of my spare time, I write about what's in my head as I'm sitting through all those sports events.

My passion is to bring you that escape. The one where you get lost so deeply in the story that you lose all sense of time and actually do get to have a mental break.

XOXO

Britney Bell

...writing your escape

Read More from Britney Bell

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and
the Lady
Vic Leigh**

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The Cowboy and the Lady

What happens when you get stuck in an airport with no money? A handsome cowboy invites you to his place.

Addison Levine is on her way home from a photography seminar in San Francisco when she finds herself stranded in the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport. This goes completely wrong. She loses everything to a thief.

When I walked off my plane at the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport, I had no idea I would run into the most beautiful woman on earth.

“Hi, I’m Levi Harris. You look like you could use some help.” Yeah, I’m a toad. But it worked. I talked Addison into coming home with me. It’s a couple of days, what could that hurt? Nothing.

Until feelings get in the way, that is.

Chapter 1

Addison

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

My flight from San Diego has been delayed in Dallas. I am flying home to Nashville after a very over-stimulating weeklong business meeting. I have been away from my studio for far too long.

When my assistant suggested I go out west to shoot some photos and take in a graphic design seminar, I had no idea it would be this long. The seminar itself was not bad, I walked away with some great ideas and a new program. It's the flying. I hate to fly.

Now, I've been diverted to Dallas/Ft. Worth airport. So, is it in Dallas or Ft. Worth? No one seems to know or care. I guess it doesn't matter either way, I'm stuck.

My brain is on overload, my body is aching, and I am stuck in this God-forsaken place for two days. What the fuck do you do in Dallas for two days? Rope a cow?

I grab some food from one of the very overpriced restaurants that you have to choose from in this little hub. I don't want to stay in a hotel, but it looks like I might if I can't get an earlier flight.

After eating my very dry, plain hamburger and cold French fried, I make my way to the desk where a customer service woman has perched her ass on the stool behind the counter.

"Ma'am, I'm needing to get to Nashville. Could you check and see if there are any other flights out today?" I wait patiently.

She gives me a skeptical look and begins to type on her computer. "No flights in or out of Nashville. There is a storm moving through and it's not expected to dissipate for several hours. There is another storm moving into the Dallas area and we are grounding all flights after these few planes land. The

storm is predicting some tornadic activity. You may want to find a place to stay.” She dismisses me and walks away.

“What a bitch...damn.” I pull my phone from the bag and call my assistant. “Marge, I’m stuck in Dallas. Can you believe it?”

“Dallas is a nice city. Go find you a room and have some fun.”

Margerie Stanton has worked as my assistant for the past six years. She’s very organized, knows the photography business, and is amazing at finding things when no one else can.

“Can you see what you can find? I’m at Dallas/Ft. Worth airport. See what is the closest to here that I can stay at please.”

I hear her typing.

“Addie, there are no rooms within thirty miles of the airport. Are they sure there are no more flights out today.” She seems frustrated.

“Yes, she said Nashville is having a bad storm and Dallas is about to have one. Have you ever seen a tornado? Do they really exist?”

She laughs out loud, “Yes silly, they do exist. They can be quite damaging. Is there one coming to Dallas?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure how tornados work. Do they just pop up out of the fucking ground or drop from the sky? I don’t even know. I’m going to sit it out at the airport for a bit and see if it clears off. You know the weather, it’s unpredictable. It may miss this place by a hundred miles. Weathermen don’t really know what they are talking about.” It never fails, in Nashville they can say it’s going to rain and it’s the sunniest day of the week.

She laughs, “You are right about that. But we are getting some hellacious storms right now. I’m heading out in a bit and going home before I get stuck on the I-24.”

“Sounds good. Send everyone home. I’ll let you know when I’m going to be back. Hopefully soon.”

“Be safe. I’ll see you when you return.” She hangs up the phone and I place mine back in my bag.

After sitting for another thirty minutes, my eyes begin to close. I’m so tired from the trip and waiting, a little cat nap won’t hurt, right?

I check my bag and make sure everything is secure and zipped up. I sit it between my legs so I can feel if someone tries to take it. I lean my head back on the back of the uncomfortable chair and let my eyes close. I only need about fifteen minutes, and I’ll be good.

Forty-five minutes later

I'm startled awake by the loudspeaker announcing that there will be a flight coming in. When I open my eyes, I've curled up into the chair and jump up. What the fuck? My bag is gone.

Shit! What am I going to do? I go to the ticket counter. There is a different woman behind the counter this time. "Ma'am, my bag has been taken."

"Oh no, let me get a hold of security." She picks up the phone and starts talking to someone.

Then the door opens for passengers to get off the flight that just arrived. I look out the window and it has gotten extremely dark out. It can't be that late. I glance at my watch, nope, it's only four p.m.

I glance back at the door as the passengers depart from the plane and oh my gosh, the most gorgeous, well built, cowboy walks through the door. I think my mouth must be on the floor.

The ticket counter lady says, "Ma'am, security can't seem to locate where your baggage must have gone."

I turn my attention from the hunk of a cowboy, back to the woman, "Look, I'm stuck in the place, apparently overnight, and I need my things. I must find a hotel. My wallet was in that bag."

The cowboy stops near me and just stares. What's his problem?

"I'm sorry ma'am, if anything turns up, I'll let you know. I can call you."

"My cell phone was also in that bag." I'm getting frustrated.

"Ma'am, I am sorry. There are pay phones around the corner if you need to find a hotel for the night."

"Excuse me ma'am." A very deep baritone voice comes from my right.

I turn, look way up into the bluest eyes I've ever seen. They are almost a sea blue, and they sparkle.

"Ma'am." Again, the voice, damn.

I just stare, my mouth must be gapping open.

He smiles, oh fuck, that smile...I'm a goner. "Ma'am, I have a ranch about twenty miles outside the city. I have plenty of room. My name is Levi, Levi Harris. I own Harris Ranch."

I finally get my wits about me, "I'm sorry, what?"

"I overheard your dilemma. I can help."

"Why on earth would you do that? You don't even know me." I'm flabbergasted.

That damn smile appears again, "Because in Texas, we don't leave a lady in distress. I'd be happy to help you out."

"Oh, I bet you would Mr. Cowboy. I bet you would love to help me out. But see, I have no money, no clothes, no nothing. So, if you think you are getting anything from me, you're mistaken."

My brain decides to start working. Men don't just ask to help you unless there is a damn good reason, usually, sexual.

"Ma'am, I assure you..."

"Stop calling me ma'am. I'm not that old."

"It's not an age thing, it's a respect thing. If my momma found out I didn't help a lady out, she would tan my hide. Now, as I was saying, I have room at the ranch, would you be interested in a place to stay?"

"Prove you are a big ranch owner. Show me some proof." I cross my arms over my chest not believing this man in the least.

He reaches into his front jeans pocket, of a very tight pair of jeans, pulls out his phone, clicks some buttons on the phone, and hands it to me. "This is my ranch."

It's a website. Who the fuck has a website for a ranch? Don't they just have cows or something? I scroll through the

site, it's amazing. There are large barns, cows, horses, apparently, he sells beef to wholesalers.

I hand his phone back to him. "It seems you might be telling the truth."

"It's just an invitation. But you are welcome at the ranch. My mom and sister are away for the week. I do have a housekeeper if that makes you feel better."

The smile, the eyes, I fucking can't say no to this man. I mean, I guess I could, but I don't want to. "I think it would be okay, I guess."

He looks at the lady behind the counter, hands her a card, "Here is my number, let me know when the next flight to..." he looks at me.

"Nashville."

"Nashville is and I will have her back."

The lady looks him up and down, smiling the whole time. "Yes sir, Mr. Harris. I'll make sure."

"Thank you." He turns to me, "Are you ready? I have my truck outside in the valet parking. I've already checked-in so it should be waiting." He put his hand on the small of my back and we walk out of the airport.

I'm walking out of the airport with a total stranger.

Chapter 2

Levi

When I walked off that plane, I didn't expect to see the most beautiful woman on earth standing there.

Her dark hair was flowing down around her shoulders and seemed to be in a bit of mess. She looked frustrated and I just couldn't help myself when I heard she was stranded.

My fucking mouth started working and I heard myself invite her to the ranch. I've never invited a woman to the ranch before. I've never had a girlfriend I wanted to invite to the ranch. What the fuck is wrong with me?

When her gaze met mine, those light brown eyes were mesmerizing. I couldn't let her out of my sight. I couldn't let her go without knowing more about her.

I escort her to my waiting Ford F-250, super cab, black pickup.

She stops, "This is your truck?" She looks at me skeptically.

"Yes ma'am..."

"Please, call me Addie. My name is Addison, but everyone calls me Addie."

"Very well, Addie, I'm Levi." I open the passenger door to the truck.

She looks at me one more time then proceeds to get into the truck.

This woman is absolutely gorgeous. Damn. I've got a hard-on and all I did was touch her back. But those long legs, and shapely butt, and her breasts, fuck, she is hot.

We proceed to exit the airport and I head west out of Ft. Worth on I-35W. My ranch is about thirty miles outside the Ft. Worth city limits, it's actually on the outskirts of Weatherford, Texas.

“What do you do, Abbie?” I start a conversation to make the quiet go away.

She clears her throat, “I’m a photographer in Nashville.”

“That must be something. Photographer to the stars, country stars, that is.” I give her smile then go back to watching the road.

“I haven’t actually gotten into the country stars. I do families, kids, no high profiles at all. Well, if you count that one time, I was in the park shooting a family group and saw Jason Aldean, I did get him in the background.” She smiles and looks out the front window.

“I would so count that. What kind of things do you do for fun? Any fun bars you go to in Nashville?”

“There are a few, but I’m more of a homebody and stay close to the house. I don’t get out much. What about you?”

I lie through my teeth, “I don’t get out much either. I’m pretty much a homebody myself. After a long day of riding horses and taking care of the herd, I’m too tired to go out.” I go out with the guys all the time, but she doesn’t need to know that.

She looks over at me. Looks me up and down, then asks, “You aren’t wearing a wedding ring, can I assume you aren’t attached to anyone?”

“You would be correct in your assumption. I’m free as a bird. And I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Are you against marriage or something?”

“No, not against it, per se, but I don’t think it’s for me. I’ve never found that one person that I felt I could spend the rest of my life with.” Now I wish I hadn’t said that.

She gives me a tisk of her tongue, “Oh really. You are a professed bachelor then. Doesn’t that get lonely?”

“Not really. There are about fifteen people that work for me, all men, however. But I keep myself busy. I don’t think ranch work is for women. They would get bored. I did have a girlfriend one time that try to get me to sell my ranch, move to

the city, I dumped her faster than a roadrunner getting away from the coyote.”

She laughed, a beautiful boisterous laugh. “Really, roadrunner and coyote?”

“You don’t like my choice of cartoons? What did you watch as a kid? Power Rangers?”

“Heavens no, I was in my room playing with my Barbie’s. I didn’t watch much TV when I was kid. Mom and dad were always up early and had control of the TV. I never really thought about it until now. Hum.” She looks perplexed.

“I know it’s rude to ask how old a lady is, but could you give me an idea of your age?” I ask gingerly.

She smiles, “That’s old fashion, women don’t mind telling their age now days. I’m going to be twenty-eight in September. How old are you?”

“Thirty-five, just had a birthday in May.”

I pull off the interstate and head down a long two-lane road.

“How much farther is your place? You really do live out in the boonies.”

I laugh out loud, “Yes, I do. It’s only about five more minutes.”

I turn down the long drive that leads to the main house of the ranch. I had a wooden fence built lining each side of the drive with trees planted along the backside of the fence. As we pull through the trees the house comes into view.

Abbie sits straight up and peers out the window. “Are you kidding me?”

“What? Not big enough?” I laugh as I get out of the truck and walk around to her side and open the door for her.

“It’s huge. How many people live here?” She steps down out of the truck.

I grab the bags from the back, and we head up the seven steps that lead to the large front door. “My mom, my sister,

and I. My sister is the youngest and her and mom are gone to New York for the weekend. They'll be back on Tuesday next week."

I'm pretty proud of the house. After dad died, I built the new house, he never would, stubborn old man.

We walk into the foyer, and she is standing with her mouth open looking around the large open area.

The house is only seven years old. It's a log cabin but huge, forty-seven hundred square feet huge. The living, dining, kitchen area is all open and can be seen from the front door.

"Follow me and I'll get you settled in the guest suite upstairs."

"Guest suite?" She questions me.

I laugh, "My mom started calling that because it has everything. There's a large bedroom, with a sitting area, and a huge bathroom. Come on, I'll show you."

I lead her to the stairs that are behind the kitchen, walk down the hallway to the left and open the third door.

She carefully walks into the room. "Holy shit. This is massive. It's bigger than my apartment in Nashville and I have a nice apartment. This is fantastic."

"It's yours until you can get a flight out. I'll leave you to freshen up. Dinner is at six." I start leave.

"Wait," she stops me, "Thank you so much Levi for helping me out. The airlines said they had a flight out in two days. I went ahead and booked it. I'm going to need to get ahold of my assistant so that she can wire me some money. I need to get a few things while I'm here."

"You can use my cell phone. Here ya go." I hand her my phone and leave the room.

That woman not only looks incredibly, but she smells divine. I don't think my dick has settled down since I first saw her. I'll have to be more careful.

Chapter 3

Addison

I push the buttons on the phone and make the call to Marge as I'm looking around the largest room I've ever seen.

"Um, hello."

"Marge, thank God."

"What's wrong? Whose phone is this?" Marge is now in panic mode.

I take a deep breath and let it out. "Long story. My bag got stolen at the airport when I fell asleep. I was rescued by a very handsome cowboy and am staying at his enormous ranch just outside of Ft. Worth."

There was a long pause. Then she finally spoke. "Addison Levine, you should know better than to go home with a strange man. Just how good looking is he?"

I laugh, "Better looking than any Brad Pitt with a Dwayne Johnson smile."

"Holy fuck. And just what do you plan on doing with this Pitt/Johnson hunk?"

I laugh again, "I don't plan on doing anything with him. I'm his houseguest. Plain and simple. But oh, what I'd like to do to him...fuck he's hot."

"Well, you have a two-day layover. It wouldn't hurt to get a little while you are stuck there," she giggles.

"Stop it. I'm not getting anything. I'm here as a guest and that's it. You can get a hold of me at this number if there are any emergencies or anything. His name is Levi Harris. He lives on a big as ranch and has a big ass...everything to go with it."

She's rolling, "At least sneak a peek at his package. I bet he's huge."

“Stop it,” then I started laughing. “I’m not getting laid while I’m in this man’s house.”

“Well, if anything happens, let me know.”

“Can you Google him and make sure he’s not some serial killer or something?”

“Hang on,” she’s laughing so hard she can’t hardly type. “Okay, here he is...holy mother of fucking all that is...shit... he’s fine. Yeah, you need to fuck him. I’ve decided.”

I shake my head and huff, “So he’s really legit?”

“Looks like. He’s worth...wow...his net worth is over a billion. Fuck him, at least fuck him. Shit, you’ll never get a billionaire again.”

I’m laughing now, “I’m not fucking him.”

I then hear a noise behind me and turn around slowly. Oh fuck!

“Marge, I’ve got to go.”

“Give me the juicy details when you get home. Fuck him!” She’s laughing as she hangs up the phone.

When I turn, there stands the man that Marge told me I should fuck, she said several times. I’m guessing my face is about six shades of red.

He’s got that fucking gorgeous smile as he walks slowly toward me.

“Um...how much did you hear?” I ask.

“Oh, I just walked up. I didn’t hear a word.” He is still smiling.

Yes, he did.

“That was just my assistant. I was letting her know where I am, and I told her if anything came up to call me on this number.” I hand him his phone back.

“Thank you, and yes, if you need the phone, just let me know.” He starts to turn and walk away but stops and faces me again. “Fuck, you know you are beautiful.”

My face feels like it's on fire. "Um, thank you. So are you."

He chuckles, "Thanks. I just wanted to let you know dinner is about ready."

"Oh, okay. I'll be right down. Thank you." I turn to head to the bathroom.

I can feel him watching me and I turn again, "Everything okay?"

"Yep, just watching you walk away."

"You know, that could be kinda creepy. We did just meet, and we don't know each other at all." I put my hands on my hips.

He approaches me, puts his hands on my face, "Yeah, but sometimes the chemistry is just there." Then his lips are on mine.

Fuck, I'm in trouble.

Chapter 4

Levi

I never in my life have brought home a stranger from the airport or anywhere for that matter. But this woman is getting under my skin, and I can't help myself, I had to kiss her.

And I'm glad I did. I pull back slightly, and she is breathless for a few seconds.

I look into her beautiful coppery eyes, "I'm not sorry I kissed you. I've wanted to kiss you since the second I saw you when I got off that plane."

She steps back "That was nice, but I think we should keep this...I'm leaving in two days. We should probably not get involved."

"It was just a kiss. But I understand." I move to leave the room, "Dinner is ready."

"I'll be right down."

I leave the room, what the fuck was that? Why did I just kiss a perfect stranger? My fucking libido is out of whack. I walk down the stairs to the kitchen and my dick is hard as a rock in my jeans, I have to adjust myself.

My cook has left for the evening, and we are all alone in this fucking big house. I've got to keep my hands and everything else, off the pretty lady.

I hear her quietly coming down the stairs, there is a creak in one of the steps that gives away when someone is walking down, no matter how quiet you are.

She looks at me with those damn fuck me eyes of hers, "It smells delicious."

"I have a great chef that comes in and fixes my meals when my mom is out. I've tried to tell mom that he can be here full time, but she insists on cooking." I'm rambling, I know this, but damn the woman has me all kinds of flustered. "Have

a seat at the table over there by the window. We can sit in here tonight if that's okay."

"That's great, can I help with anything?"

"You could pour us a glass of that wine sitting on the table. My friend owns a winery in California, his wine is the best." I dish up our food on a couple of plates and start to move to the table.

She's bent slightly over, pouring the wine into the glasses, but all I see is that delectable ass of her. She's fucking perfect. Her jeans accentuate every fucking curve. There goes my dick, fuck this is going to be difficult.

She turns around and smiles at me, "What's for dinner?"

"Veal parmesan, it's to die for. The chef is amazing. He'll cook up some meals ahead of time so I can have them when I'm alone."

"The red wine will go perfect with the veal then." She sits down at the table.

I place a plate in front of her as she sniffs the air, she closes her eyes, and takes in the aroma from the veal parmesan. As her eyes open, she catches me staring at her. I quickly recover and sit across from her. "Dig in."

She uses her fork and knife and slowly cuts into the veal, she moans.

Fuck, I'm in so much trouble here. I should have never suggested she come stay. But what else could she have done. No money, no phone, everything she had was stolen. I couldn't just leave her at the airport. That would have been wrong.

"This is delicious, Levi. You have a very good cook." She slides her fork with a good portion of veal on it, into her mouth.

I feel like one of those fucking romance movies, she's moving in slow motion.

The fork touches her tongue, she slowly slides it in. Her eyes are closed, and she is savoring the moment. It's getting

hot in here, damn I wish her lips were wrapped around my dick like that. Then she moans again. That fucking moan.

She opens her eyes and catches me staring at her. “This is really good.” She looks at my plate. “You haven’t started yet. You are missing out. This is delicious.”

I shuffle my feet under the table, cutting into the meat, I take a bite. “It is, Chef Joseph is really good.” Why do I feel like a teenager trying to figure out if I’m getting laid tonight or not? This is stupid. I’m a grown ass man, I should be able to get through a meal with a beautiful woman without a hard-on.

She smiles her beautiful smile and continues to eat. Oblivious to how uncomfortable I am. Of course she is, she’s a guest. She isn’t in anyway attracted to me. I’m a dumb ass country boy.

We finish our meal, and she helps me with the dishes in silence.

She dries her hands on the towel and looks at me. “Levi, I just want to say thank you again for allowing me to stay here. I have no idea what I would have done.”

“It’s not a problem. Would you like to have another glass of wine out on the deck?” I suggest, because I’m not ready to let her leave the room.

She smiles, “That sounds nice.”

I pour a couple of glasses of wine, then I escort her to the back deck.

When I open the door, she sucks in a breath. “Oh my, what a gorgeous view.”

There are mountains and hills in the background with a rolling meadow spread out in the foreground. You can see the cows and horses meandering around in the meadow.

“Let’s sit over there.” I point to the deck chairs by the railing.

She moves slowly to the chair I suggested. “Levi, you have a beautiful place here. It’s so green for August.”

“We irrigate year-round. We make sure the cows have plenty of field grass before winter so that the hay supply lasts.” I take a sip of my wine.

She looks at me, “It’s breathtaking. I had no idea ranches even existed anymore. According to the news, farmers are going out of business.”

I sigh, “The government has tried to get us to stop selling our beef to grocery stores and meat markets, but I refuse to bow down to their restraints. I had a USDA officer come out recently offering me a million dollars not to sell the beef. It was ridiculous. We have grass fed, non-genetically modified beef, that’s what people want.”

“I love that. It’s wonderful. Oh my gosh, you have a garden?” She exclaims as her focus moves to the right of the house.

“Yes, that’s just for us. We want to make sure we are eating healthier and not getting any of that crap the government calls food.” I take a sip of my wine.

She stands and the slight breeze moves her hair just enough for me to watch her profile as she looks over the deck and back at me. “This is amazing.”

I stand and move to her. “I think you are amazing. You allowed a strange man to bring you to his home. You haven’t complained about anything. You are a gorgeous woman and I’m sure you have plenty of men after you.”

She laughs out loud, “Um, no. I lead a very non-existent life other than work. My assistant says I work too much to have a social life.”

I reach up to her face and slide a piece of hair behind her ear and cup her cheek. “Ms. Addie, you are missing out.” My lips are on her again.

She doesn’t fight me. Her lips separate and allow me entrance.

My tongue swipes over hers, she tastes like wine mixed with spices from the veal.

I feel her hand on my chest, she is reciprocating the kiss. Her tongue moves over mine as we both explore the unknown.

Then a crash of glass sounds and we both jump apart.

“Oh Levi, I’m so sorry.” She dropped the wine glass that she had been holding.

I smile, “It’s no big deal. We have plenty of wine glasses.”

“But...”

I stop her thought process by slamming my mouth into hers again. Her arms circle my neck. This woman is amazing.

Chapter 5

Addison

I don't know if it's the wine or the setting sun or the man or a combination of all of that, but this man is intoxicating. His mouth has been on mine a total of three times since I got to the ranch just a few hours ago. I can't believe I've allowed it, but damn if I want to stop it either.

He smells of woodsy pine and musk and his mouth, fuck, his lips are soft, his tongue is...let's just say that he knows how to kiss.

I feel my arms encircle his neck and pull him closer. It has to be the wine. Wait, what's wrong with a little fling. We don't know each other. We won't see each other again after this week. What have I got to lose? I haven't gotten laid in over a year and that was a terrible mistake.

The kiss ends as he pulls back slightly, pushing my hair behind my ear. He whispers, "I know we just met, and you are guest in my home, but I can't seem to get you out of my mind."

He pulls me closer, and I can feel his hardness on my stomach. This tall handsome man wants me. That never happens.

"Levi...we are two consenting adults. Fuck me!"

I'm not sure who moved faster, me or him. He pulls me into the house, up the stairs, and into a larger room than mine. It's massive. It has massive furniture, a large king-sized four poster bed sits in the middle of the room between two windows. There are large dressers, nightstands, and a sitting area by another window.

All I can see, is the man standing in front of me when fire in his eyes.

"Strip," he says.

For some odd reason, I want to please this man. So, I lift my sundress up over my head and toss it to the side.

He gasps, “I knew you would be beautiful. Now your bra.”

I reach to the clasp at the back and undo my bra letting it slide down my arms. I keep thinking, why is my body betraying me? All I want to do is please Levi. I don't even know this man.

“Now your panties,” he instructs.

I slip out of my flip-flops and slide my panties down my legs, kicking them to the side.

His eyes move up and down my body. “My God woman, you are gorgeous. Every fucking inch. Get on the bed.”

I lay down in the middle of the bed and watch the man that I'm about to give myself to, undress. Oh...my...God...he's massively built.

He pulls his T-shirt over his head, throws it somewhere, he toes his boots off, while unbuckling his jeans. He undoes the button and zipper on his jeans, and I can see the tip of his dick peeking out, shit, he's massive. He never takes his eyes from mine as he slides his jeans and boxer briefs down his tree trunk legs.

I lick my lips as he saunters over to me, his giant cock standing at attention as he approaches the bed.

“Spread those luscious legs for me baby.”

His husky voice vibrates my skin and I do what he says. I've never been so submissive in the bedroom, but this man exudes power, and I can't help but do what he says. I spread my legs and bare all in front of a perfectly good stranger. But damn, what a perfect man he is.

“Good girl. Fuck baby, you are gorgeous.” He moves between my legs and takes a big whiff. “And you smell delectable. I'm going to make you come so many times, you won't be able to stand it.”

His mouth latches onto my clit and sucks it in hard.

My back comes up off the bed and I fucking moan in delight. “Fuck.”

He pulls back, “You like that don’t you.” His tongue swipes down and parts my pussy lips, licking and swiping up and down until he finally plunges his tongue deep inside my pussy.

“Oh fuck...yes...” I grab a fist full of the blanket beneath me.

He moves his tongue in and out of me, thrusting it as deep as he can go and lifting it to my G spot, pressing against it, hard, then back out again.

I’m breathing heavier than before, and my orgasm is so close when he pulls back.

“You taste like sweet nectar, so fucking good.” He inserts a finger inside my pussy and his mouth finds my clit again. Sucking hard and thrusting harder.

I’m about to come undone. “Yes...fucking yes...I’m coming.”

He moves faster, “That’s it baby, come all over my face.” His mouth descends again on my clit just as my release shoots forward. “Such a fucking good girl. God, you taste good.” He sucked and licked up every drop.

I don’t get to recover from that orgasm. He is already kissing up my stomach, he puts two fingers inside me, and moves in and out, slow and steady. “You’re going to come again.” His fingers move faster and harder, hitting my perfect spot over and over.

“Yes...God yes...” I see stars as my next orgasm comes faster than the first.

He reaches my mouth, “You are fucking amazing.” His lips are on mine and I wrap my arms around his neck. He is still pumping his fingers inside me, he’s slowed down some, but he is still moving inside me.

I can taste myself on his lips and tongue, fucking turn on. I buck my hips and he knows I’m going to come again. It’s

indescribable.

I scream his name. I've never come more than once with any man if I came at all. That's three times so far with this man, and he hasn't even gotten his dick wet yet.

"Good girl, fuck you are so awesome." His mouth is on mine again.

He removes his fingers from my pussy, moves over on top of me, placing the tip of his dick at my opening. "You ready for this." He moves his hips slightly, moving his cock against my pussy.

"Oh yeah, I'm ready."

He thrusts his dick hard and fast into me. Then he stops allowing me to adjust to his massive size. He never takes his eyes from mine as he begins to move slowly inside me. "You feel so amazing."

"It feels...perfect. You are so perfect." I can't think of another word to describe what this feels like at this very moment.

Chapter 6

Levi

I can't believe how this woman feels in my arms. My dick is not small, and she fits me like a glove. Her pussy wraps around my cock and feels...like she just said, perfect. How is that possible? We just met and I've never seen anyone take commands like Addie.

"Perfect." I lower my lips to hers and begin to kiss her hard and needy. My dick is moving in and out and I can feel her walls tighten, I pull back from the kiss, "That's it baby, come all over my dick."

Her hips move up toward mine and we move as if we've done this a million times. She meets every movement, every stroke, I don't want to come yet, but she is fucking perfect.

"Your pussy is as perfect as you are." I push into her over and over, changing my direction slightly to hit her clit as I push into her hot wet goodness. "I'm coming...fuck...come with me."

Just as I told her to come, we both let go and come at the same time. I still, while my dick is buried deep inside her soaked pussy, as we both come down from this incredible fuck session. I don't think I've ever had a woman fuck me so good.

I look into her eyes, and they are still, slightly glazed over from the passion we just shared. I kiss the tip of her nose, "You are amazing. Let's take a shower."

She giggles, "I think you are the amazing one. Who knew sex with a stranger could be so great?"

I laugh, "Who knew? Come on." I slowly remove myself from her core, slide off the bed, and help her up. "Let's get clean so we can do that again."

She laughs, "Again? Really?"

"Yep, again."

I swat her ass as she heads to the bathroom, smiling at her all the way. I turn the shower on for it to warm and pull Addie into my arms, “I can’t believe how lucky I am that I found you in the airport. God, you are amazing.

She wraps her arms around my neck, stands on her tip toes, and pulls me down to her mouth, “I’m the lucky one here. Too bad I’m leaving in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, I know. But think of all the fucking we can do in two days.” I latch onto her lips and devour her mouth.

I start moving her backward toward the shower. As we step into the shower together, I break the kiss. “Put your hair under the water and get it wet.” As she did, I squeezed some shampoo into my hands and began massaging it into her hair.

“Mmm...damn you really know how to treat a lady.”

I moved my hands through her hair, then down to her shoulders, and massaged her neck.

She threw her head back as she enjoyed my touch.

“Rinse your hair out, baby.”

Her head moves under the spray again and she rinses her hair. She is so fucking obedient. I squeezed a good amount of shower gel into my hands and started rubbing her body, starting at her neck and moving down. As my hands glide over her already taut nipples, she moans in delight. I continue rubbing the soap into her skin as I make my way down her soft belly, and into her precious sweet spot.

“Levi, damn...yeah...”

My fingers tweak her clit, then rubbing a little harder, her moans begin to escape her lips each time I move my hand. I make sure to wash every inch of her succulent body.

After she rinses the soap off, she looks at me, “Your turn.” She squeezes the gel into her hands and begins to rub all over my body. When she reaches my cock, she begins to rub up and down, slow and steady.

“You keep that up, we will have to shower again.”

She smiles, “Rinse.”

After I rinse myself off, she turns me around, drops to her knees, and looks at me. “My turn to enjoy you.” Her warm wet mouth slid down my dick, and she sucked it down her throat.

“Holy fuck, Addie.” My hands go to her head, and she begins to bob up and down on my cock, sucking when she gets to the tip, then back down again.

Chapter 7

Addison

My mouth almost can't take all of his cock, but I'm doing the best I can. When I pull off his dick, I swirl my tongue over the head, then slide him back into my mouth and down my throat. I swallow just so I can feel it in the back of my throat.

“Fuck...fuck...fuck...damn woman.”

I smile around his thick mass of bulging nerves. I can feel his cock grow inside my mouth as I take it as deep as I can, moving up and down, squeezing his balls with one hand, while the other rests on his tight ass.

His hands start moving my head and he is now fucking my mouth.

I moan and all at once, his balls tighten, and he shoots his warm essence down my throat.

“Fuck, Addison...that was amazing.”

I stand licking my lips. He tastes so good, a little salty and sweet mixed together.

“Where the fuck have you been all my life? God, that was amazing.” He reaches to turn off the water. He steps out of the shower and hands me a towel.

I begin to dry off as I watch him wrap the towel around his waist and he moves to me.

“Baby girl, that was the best head I've ever had. Thank you.” He kisses my lips then backs away. “Come on, I'm not anywhere near done with you.”

“Levi, I need food. I don't think I ate enough. I'm going to need sustenance to keep up with you.” She smiles at me with that beautiful smile of hers.

“Wrap the towel around you and we'll go in search of food. Anything you want, baby, I'll make sure you have it.”

“You know, a girl could get used to this kind of treatment.” She is still smiling that devilish smile of hers.

I laugh, “Oh yeah. I may just have to kidnap you and keep you here.”

We make our way down to the kitchen. I open the fridge, “What shall it be? We have fruit, veggies, I can warm up some of the veal we had earlier. What would you like?”

I put my arms around his waist, his back to my front, and peak around to see what all he’s talking about in the fridge. “Mmmm...how about some grapes and carrots? Oh, you have ranch,” I grab that from the door of the fridge and move over to the bar.

He pulls the grapes, carrots, and veal out of the refrigerator. “I’m going to warm up the veal, I’m starving.”

He moves to the microwave, while I grab the grapes and carrots making my way to the table.

I pop a red grape into my mouth.

Levi laughs.

“What?”

“You can pop my cock into your mouth anytime.” The microwave beeps and he pulls out the veal, joining me at the table.

“That might could be arranged.” I stick a baby carrot in my mouth and suck it in, then push it out with my tongue several times.

He shakes his head, “You aren’t right, lady. My dick just got hard watching you play with your food.”

I laugh after swallowing the carrot. “That carrot was a wee bit smaller than your dick.”

“Ya think?” He cuts into his veal and before he puts the bite in his mouth, he asks, “Did you like sucking my cock?”

“Mmmm...very much so. Did you like me sucking your cock?”

Talking around his food, “Oh yeah, very much.”

I smile, “Good, might have to do that again later.”

After swallowing his bite of food, he adds, “I’ll take you into Weatherford tomorrow and you can get a few things that you’ll need over the next few days. Can your assistant get you a new phone?”

“Yeah, she already ordered it. I’m sure she has already cancelled all my credit cards and checked into getting me a new license. She’s amazing.” I pop another grape in my mouth.

Levi pours some wine that was left sitting on the table, into two glasses. “My dick is hard again just watching you pop food into your mouth. What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“You’re horny.” I shrug. “When was the last time you had sex?”

He looked at the ceiling then back at me. “Two years ago, no wait, it was last year. I forgot about that one-night stand. I don’t do those ever, but I was desperate.”

“So, about as long as me. I was so horny, God, it’s been forever. And the last guy I was with was lame in bed. I don’t think I ever got off.” I continue munching on my grapes and carrots with ranch.

“Yeah, I’m done eating.” He stands and moves to me, “Get up.”

I stand.

He rips the towel from my body and stands there staring up and down my body. “You are the most magnificent woman I’ve ever seen.” His mouth drops to one of my breasts and his hand goes to the other. He sucks one nipple into his mouth while he twists and pinches the other between his fingers.

I throw my head back, “God Levi, that’s good. Yes...just like that...fuck.” My hands go to his biceps.

He pops off my nipple, “My dirty girl likes it rough doesn’t she. I’m going to fuck you until you can’t stand up.”

“Please, my pussy needs some attention.” I gasp as he kneels before me and sucks my clit into his mouth. “Yes, fuck...yes...pussy...attention...”

“Greedy little girl, aren’t you. Damn.” His fingers make their way to my soaked pussy, and he inserts two fingers while he continues to suck on my clit.

“Mmmhumm...I need...more...” I think I may die from orgasm overload.

Levi clamps his mouth on my clit, his fingers are doing their magic thrusting in and out of my pussy, and my hands go to his head holding him in place. “I love...clit play...it’s the...fucking...best...yes, fuck yes!”

He pulls off my clit, “Come, baby girl, come all over my fingers. I need to you fucking come, now.”

I explode. I feel my juices dripping down my legs.

“That’s my good girl. Fuck, you are amazing. Come on.” He stands, pulls me into the bedroom, and he lays on the bed after removing his towel. “Ride me, baby girl, ride me hard and fast.”

I straddle him, center myself over his cock, and sit down hard onto his dick. “Oh...fuck.”

“Fuck is right. Move your ass, sweetheart. Get moving faster.” His hands are on my hips as I move up and down on his cock. “You fucking can’t get enough of my dick can you. You are such a fucking good girl, I...God yes, keep bouncing. I love those tits bouncing up and down.”

“I’m so close...God so close.” I stopped bouncing up and down and start moving my hips, making sure my clit was hitting his pelvis. “Fuck me.”

He holds his hands on my hips, stills my movement and starts thrusting up inside me. “You like it hard, don’t you baby girl, hard...” thrust... “fast...” thrust... then in one fail swoop, he has me on my back and him on top, pushing into me over and over, pushing my legs up, spreading me wide open.

“Fuck!”

As soon as I come, he stops and slides down my body, sucking up all my juices. “Fuck, that’s sexy. I wanted you to come.”

He stopped his feast fest, “Not yet, be a good girl and come for me one more time before I come in that hot wet goodness of yours.” He inserts his tongue, thrusting in and out, rubbing my clit over and over.

“Oh fuck...”

“That’s it,” he replaces his tongue with his fingers. “That’s it baby girl, fucking come.”

Yeah, he didn’t have to tell me twice this time, I let go of the most explosive orgasm in my entire life.

“Fuck yeah. You are such a good girl. You do everything I tell you to do. Good girls get rewarded.”

“Dick...I need your...dick...Now!”

He smiles at me, moves up and thrusts into me harder and faster than I thought possible. “You...like...my...dick.” He says between trusts.

“Mmmhmm...oh yeah...way more than I should.” I move my legs over his shoulders.

He moves in a different direction, and I don’t think I’ve ever come so many times in my life. This is weird and amazing all at the same time.

“Fuck...Levi!” I screamed his name as we both climaxed at the same time.

He didn’t move for several minutes. He just stayed buried inside my pussy. Then he falls down, resting his forearms on either side of my head. He gives me a kiss and I can taste myself on him, fuck this is hot.

I close my eyes wondering how long this can last, yes, I’m here for two days. But seriously, who can fuck for two days straight? I never have.

“Open your eyes, sweetheart.”

I do and he's staring back at me with those mesmerizing blue eyes.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone that wanted to fuck as much as I do. You are amazing." He slips his dick out of me, moves over to the side and pulls me into him. "Rest, we'll do that again later." He kisses the top of my head.

After several minutes, I have no idea what happens after that, because my eyes close and I drift off to sleep.

Chapter 8

Levi

I felt the sun coming through the window as my mind remembers last night. The beauty that fucked my brains out last night, is sleeping soundly next to me. Her breathing is light and ever so often you hear a little snore, it's adorable.

I gently slide my arm out from under her head and move off the bed, care not to wake her.

Putting my robe on, I make my way down to the kitchen, and start the coffee maker. I don't know if she eats breakfast, or likes coffee, or anything. I know nothing about the woman that is staying my house except that she is one amazing woman in bed.

I walk to the back window and look out at my property. It is a nice ranch, with three hundred acres of prime cattle land. We have some horses that are being brought up today for the men to start breaking. I wonder if my houseguest would like to go for a ride. Or she may be too sore to ride a horse. I smile at the thought of how she got sore. I'm pretty proud of myself. I didn't realize I could go as long as I did.

It's been over a year since I had sex. I couldn't help myself, this woman is amazing.

I hear something behind me and turn.

“Good morning.”

Before me stands the most delectable human on earth. Her long dark hair is pulled up into one of those messy bun things on top of her head, she has my shirt on from last night, that hangs to her mid-thigh, God she's sexy.

I shake my head hoping the thoughts I was thinking didn't turn into anything more. But my dick is already getting hard. Fuck. “Good morning. I made coffee.”

“Oh good. I was afraid you were one of those people that didn't believe in coffee. I was going to have kill someone.”

She gives me a bashful smile.

Fuck, I'm in trouble. "Cups are above the coffee maker. There is cream and sugar in the cabinet next to the cups. Help yourself."

She moves rather slowly over to the coffee maker. When she reaches for the coffee mug over her head, she tippy toes, and the shirt raises slightly, nearly exposing that delectable ass of hers. I'm getting some of that ass tonight, for sure.

"How are you feeling this morning?" I sit down at the bar while she preps her coffee.

"I slept like a baby." Her cheeks turn a cute shade of pink. "How about you?"

"I don't think I've ever slept so good." I take a sip of my coffee. "Do you ride horses?"

"Not since I was a kid." She moved next to me and sat in the stool to my right.

I take another sip of my coffee. "Would you like to go for a ride sometime today?"

Her eyes meet mine. "You are really a nice guy. Why aren't you married?"

"I told you, I'm not the marrying type." I drink my coffee.

She's sitting there almost ignoring me sipping on her coffee. Those sweet, luscious lips puckered up to that cup.

I want them on me, and I want it now. I stand, open my robe, and look at her. "Baby, could you do that to me?"

She looks at me, looks down at my hard cock, back at my eyes, and says, "I'm not in the mood."

Really? What the fuck?

She removes herself from the stool, leaves the kitchen, and I hear her walking up the stairs.

I'm standing there with my dick literally hanging out and now throbbing because I want her even more. "Fuck! What was that?" She couldn't be mad at me. She knows my take on

marriage. And it's not like she's staying here anyway, she leaves in less than forty-eight hours.

I close my robe and start to follow her up the stairs when I hear the front door open to my house. Who the fuck is that?

When I turn around, I see my mother and my sister. They are supposed to be in New York. What the fuck are they doing back so soon.

“Mom? What happened to your trip?” I go to her, kiss her on the cheek then kiss my sister on the cheek as well.

Mom looks at my sister then back at me. “Ask your sister. It's her fault.” Then she storms past me to the kitchen.

I look at Nicole, “Well?”

“Long story short, I got drunk.” Then she went to the kitchen both getting coffee.

“That's it? You got drunk and that's why you're back?” I'm so fucking confused.

Mom huffs, “Oh, that's not all she did. She got drunk, she seduced a policeman in the hotel bar, and then got arrested.”

“What the fuck, Nic? Seriously?”

She shrugged her shoulders like it was no big deal.

“What did you get arrested for?”

“Solicitation.” She says it so casually like it's an everyday occurrence.

“Okay, I'm going to go take a shower. Then you can explain to me why a New York City policeman thought my baby sister was a prostitute.” I head upstairs, storm into my room, and head for the shower. My sister was arrested for prostitution. What the hell?

Once I get showered, I dress in my usual jeans, T-shirt, and boots, then make my way downstairs again. I heard my mother talking about dresses then I hear, “Mrs. Harris, that is so kind of you.”

Shit, I forgot about Addie. I walk into the kitchen and my mom and sister have outfitted Addison with a cute little sundress and some sandals.

“What’s going on in here?” I ask.

Mom looks at me, “Why didn’t you tell me we had a guest? What is wrong with my children these days?” She turns to Addison, “Men have no idea what to do with women.”

Addison gives her delicious laugh, and my dick starts to swell. Fuck. “Well, I guess since you’ve met, I don’t have to worry about telling you who she is.”

“Son, you are such a gentleman for invited her to stay. I hate the airport sometimes. We would have been home last night, but the plane delays were terrible.”

Good thing they didn’t, mom and Nicole did not need to see or hear what Addie and were doing last night and early this morning.

I rake my hand down my face, “I’m going to work. You ladies, have a good day. Addie, if you need anything, let mom know, she’ll help you out.”

“What am I, chopped liver? Thanks big brother.” Nicole is a little on the spoiled side and always thinks things should revolve around her.

I throw my hand up and walk out the front door and head to the barn.

Chapter 9

Addison

“Mrs. Harris, I do appreciate you so much. Levi was definitely a gentleman. I never would have gone with a strange man, but he was so kind in the airport, and I just felt I could trust him.” I followed her and Nicole to the living room.

When I came downstairs, was expecting a broody man, instead I got two women, with shocked looks on their faces. After introductions, Mrs. Harris had Nicole find me a dress to put on because I had my dirty clothes from yesterday.

Nicole looks at me, “We can run into town and find you anything you need.”

“That’s so sweet. But if I can just wash my clothes, I can wear them back to the airport tomorrow.” I didn’t want them to be put out on my account.

“I love to shop. So, what did you and my brother do last night? He’s such a bore. I bet he bored you to death.” Nicole is looking between me and her cell phone.

“Oh, we just had some dinner and sat on the back deck for a while.” It wasn’t a lie, we did do that.

“See, boring. Let me show you the town. We have a club in town...”

“Stop it, Nicole.” Mrs. Harris butt in. “That’s enough. This poor girl doesn’t need to be drug all over the place. I’m sure she wants to rest up for her trip back home.”

When I came down earlier and found the two women in the kitchen instead of the frustrated Levi, after our initial shock, I told them about me, and they told me about their trip to New York. Nicole’s version of the arrest and Mrs. Harris’ are two totally different things.

I saw something move out the window and wanted to know just what Levi Harris did on this ranch. After a few kind

words from Mrs. Harris, I excused myself and headed out the front door.

I put my hand up shading my eyes from the sun. From the front porch, you could see a large barn in the distance, a corral, and several trucks around. There were a few men on horses, riding around behind the corral. Then, I spotted him. Levi Harris. He's gorgeous sitting on top of a big red horse. He looked like a God sitting up there.

He was sitting tall in the saddle and wearing a baseball hat.

I thought cowboys wore cowboy hats.

I start walking across the yard and threw the gate that I didn't remember being there last night. I walk toward the corral where all the cowboys seem to be moving to. When I get there, they have a cow in the corral, she looks mad, and is moving from side to side.

Watching from a short distance away, one of the men gets in the corral with her. He's moving slowly around, and it seems he's talking to her. Cows are stupid animals, they do not understand humans. She starts to charge at him and he runs to the railing and nearly flies over the top before she barrels into him.

I giggle at the sight. Apparently, it was funny to the rest of the men as well, they were all laughing their asses off.

After a few minutes, I make eye contact with Levi. He smiles, he should do that more often. He has a nice smile. Makes my panties wet.

He angles his horse in my direction. When he gets to me, he looks down at me. "Did you get enough of my mom and sister?"

I look up at him, "They are nice."

He laughs, "Okay, if you say so. They are both spoiled." He dismounts from the horse and walks up to me, holding the reins, "You look sexy as sin in that dress." His smile is...wow!

"What? This old thing?" I laugh, "So, what are you doing with that cow in the corral?"

He looks over at the corral then back at me. “She’s ready to calve and we wanted to bring her in to do it. It’s her first, and first calves can be hard. We are waiting on the vet to get here.”

“She looks pissed.” I say with a smile.

“She is. She was a bitch to get in. Hey, wanna go for a ride?” His beautiful blue eyes gleam when he asks.

“I don’t know. I haven’t been on a horse in ages,” I shrug.

He laughs, “It’s like riding a bike. Come on. I’ll saddle a horse for you. We have some pretty tame one.”

I walk beside him as his horse follows behind us. We make our way to the barn, and he ties his horse to a bar outside, then we walk in.

It’s a nice size horse barn with six stalls on each side. Levi walks into a room to the right as we walked in, walks out with a saddle. He moves to the end stall where there is a beautiful, white and black paint horse.

Levi sets the saddle down and opens the door to the stall. “Hello, Spirit. You wanna ride? You’ll be nice to the lady, won’t you?” He’s talking to the horse as if the horse is totally understanding everything he’s saying.

He looks at me, “This is Spirit. Spirit, meet Addie. He’s the best horse we have on the ranch. He’s eight years old and just as gentle as a mouse.”

I pet Spirit’s nose, “Hey there boy. How are you?”

The horse whinnies, and Levi and I both laugh.

Levi smiles, “He likes you. He has good taste.”

I smile back, “Yes he does.”

Levi shakes his head, puts a lead rope around Spirit’s neck, and leads him out of the stall. He fastens the lead to a bracket on the wall near the back of the barn. Then, he comes back over and kisses me. Smack dap on the lips, kisses me, full mouth, tongue and all. Then he takes it deeper, and my panties get wetter.

Fuck.

When he pulls back, that fucking smile is back. “For some unknown reason, I like kissing you.”

I smile back, “Because I’m a good kisser.”

He laughs, “Yeah you are.” Then he picks up a blanket, sets it on Spirit’s back, then the saddle and moves back to the horse, setting it on Spirit’s back. He tightens the up the belt that goes under the horse and makes sure everything is secure.

I’m watching in amazement at the flow in which he moves when working with the horse. He gently rubs the horse’s neck, back, and hind end as he does his work.

When he turns to me, he says, “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.” I walk to the left side of the horse, put my foot in the stirrup, and as I’m heaving myself up, I feel Levi’s hand on my ass, pushing me. I look down at him once I get settled, “Thanks.”

“You might want to tuck that dress around your legs so that it doesn’t fly up over your head. It will help with the saddle rubbing on your thighs as well. Don’t worry, if it gets to sore, I’ll rub them later.” He winks at me.

“Thanks. I’ll remember that.” I laugh as he hands me the reins.

I follow Levi down a dirt path. We wind around some trees and when it opens into a meadow, there is a beautiful view of a lake below some hills. He stops and I make my way next to him.

“It’s beautiful.”

He looks over at me, “Just like you.” He dismounts from the horse and walks to me, helping me down from my horse.

“Thank you.”

“I used to come up here and just think and relax. It’s the prettiest spot on the ranch. It’s also the highest point. I’ve been coming up here since my dad first brought me here when I was

six.” He looks out over the expanse of the property, admiring the lake.

I watch him for a few minutes then look at the lake, “I can see where this could be extremely relaxing. Do you still come up here?”

“When I have big decisions to make or just need to get away from my mom and sister, yeah, I come up here. It’s nice to just enjoy the peace and quiet.” He takes my hand, “I just wanted to share my favorite spot with you. Something to remember me by.” He pulls me into him.

I look into his eyes, “Thank you. There are so many things I’ll remember. But this place, will be at the top of the list.”

“Oh, just what else will you remember?”

I smile, “Everything.”

His lips touch mine in a soft, gentle kiss. This is different from any other kiss we’ve shared.

I respond by pulling him closer to me and wrapping my arms around his neck, enjoying the best kiss I think I’ve ever had in my life.

When we pull back from that luscious kiss, he doesn’t let go. I’m wondering what he’s thinking. At the moment, I’m thinking I never want to leave this place. But I have to, tomorrow.

“Addie, why do you have to be so damn wonderful?” He steps back and my arms drop from his neck to my sides.

“I’m just me, Levi. Just like you are just you.”

“I’ve...never mind. Let’s just enjoy the time we have left.” He moves to a rock that is overlooking the water. Sitting on it and motions for me to come to him.

I walk slowly in his direction and move to sit next to, but he stops me and pulls me down where I’m sitting between his legs.

He wraps his arms around me and holds me to him, my back to his front. He leans down and kisses the top of my

head.

Now I'm getting feelings I never thought I would get. It's crazy, I've known this man for twenty-four hours and he's becoming...something...and it scares the hell out of me.

Chapter 10

Levi

I've never in my life wanted a woman to be a part of my life. I've always claimed I'd be a bachelor for the rest of my life. Women are trouble and they make your life hell. I watched my mom give my dad fits, then I look back and remember all the wonderful times they had.

My sister walked away from a five-year marriage because she's a spoiled brat and she said he didn't pay enough attention to her. I don't want a brat and from my experience, most women are bratty bitches.

Until I ran into a woman stranded at the airport. Seriously, it's only been a day. An incredible life, changing day. She leaves tomorrow and that will be that.

"Levi?" Her voice is so soft and damn if it doesn't make my dick hard.

"Yes?"

"I need to ask you a question. I think I know the answer, but I need to ask anyway." She is hesitant about asking whatever she wants to ask.

"Why are you so against marriage?"

I don't answer right away. I'm not really sure, other than, I don't want that bitchy, bratty woman type. I can't tell her that. She won't understand.

She turns and looks at me, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

I clear my throat, "I'm not really sure how to answer the question."

"Did some woman treat you terribly or something?"

I shake my head, "No, I haven't given one time to treat me anyway. I dated a girl in high school, she was a snotty girl. All the guys wanted to date her, but she decided to date me. I think

she thought I had a lot of money. Thing is, I had to work for my money. Dad didn't give anything away without work."

"So what is it then?"

I rake my hand down my face. "To tell you the truth, you may not understand this, but I don't want a woman like my mother or my sister. They are both bitchy, brats and I don't want that."

She smiled, "Levi, not all women are like that. Is that all you have to go by?"

"No, every woman I've ever been with was that way."

"Maybe you are attracting the wrong kind of woman. You kinda give off a 'stay away' vibe sometimes," she laughs.

I give her a what the fuck look, "Really? Didn't seem to work for you. You trusted me right away. Why is that?"

"It's your eyes. I looked into your eyes and knew you could be trusted. You can tell a lot about someone through their eyes. Yours said, 'I'm hurting, I need something'. So, I took a chance that you were not a serial killer and came home with you. I know, stupid, but I'm not upset that I did." She turns and looks back at the water and leans into me again.

I pull her closer, hold her tighter, because after tomorrow, she'll be gone.

I have to let her go, that's my plan. If she stays, she'll turn into one of those bitches I've been running from all these years. I'm thirty-two, I don't need anyone to upset my life. I'm set in my ways, and she'll just want to change everything. I have to stay the way I am, single.

Having her in my arms, however, feels so good and so right. What the hell is wrong with me?

"I want you, right here, in my favorite place." I start kissing down her neck, nipping at her ear, moving down to her neck.

She moans and her hands begin to rub up and down my legs, pushing herself into me.

I whisper, "I have a blanket, let me get it."

She stands. She never complains and always does what I tell her. Such a good girl.

I get the blanket from the roll on the horse, spread it out at the base of the rock, so we can still see the water, and turn to her. I wiggle my finger at her to come to me.

She does.

I put my hand in her hair and pull her head back. I start kissing down her neck, across her exposed globes of her delectable breasts.

Her hands grab my ass and pull me closer to her.

I pull back, kick off my boots, pull my shirt over my head, and toss my hat to the ground with everything else. "I need you naked."

She smiles, pulls her sundress over her head, tosses it over to the side.

I lick my lips, knowing what I'm about to get. I undo my belt, button, and unzip my jeans as she takes her bra and panties off. "You are so beautiful." I slide my jeans and boxers down my legs, stepping out of them, and kicking them out of the way.

As I walk toward her, she backs up to the blanket, and goes down on her back. Her dark hair is spread out all over the blanket, her beautiful dark eyes are smoldering, and her lips are slightly parted as she bites her lower lip.

"Spread those beautiful legs, baby. Let me in. I want to know every single inch of your body."

She spreads her legs, her hands start to play with her tits.

I kneel, I can smell her arousal and I'm entranced by her beauty, and she smells delicious. My tongue darts out and flicks her clit and she lets out a whimper. I look at her as I suck her nub into my mouth, sucking gently at first.

Her hooded eyes watch me, never taking her eyes from mine, she continues to pinch and play with her nipples.

God, she's amazing. I lick down to her wet folds, then back up to her clit. Licking and sucking every inch of her perfection. "Baby, you are so wet for me. I want to take my time and enjoy how you taste on my tongue."

"Levi, please...I need to come." Her hands move to my head, holding me to her.

I continue my assault on her very sensitive goodness. Licking, sucking, and I insert two fingers inside her soaked pussy. I lift my head, "Come baby, come all over me." I push my fingers deep, thrusting up hitting her G-spot over and over.

Her hips thrust up with every movement. "Levi, please."

"That's it baby, squeeze my fingers and come." I thrust harder and faster watching her come undone.

Her orgasm is explosive and screams my name.

I love when she screams my name. I know I'm doing my job when she gets off like that. "That's a good girl." I pull my fingers out of her and suck her juices from them. "Damn, you taste good. I need inside you."

"Yes, please, fuck me, Levi." She spreads her legs farther apart and allows me between her thighs.

I center my dick at her entrance, "You ready for this?"

"Please, yes...God yes." Her hands go to my shoulders, and she digs her nails into my skin.

"I need to mark you. I need you to be...mine...fuck," I plunge balls deep inside her hot wet pussy. I can't help myself. I need her. I need this. I move my mouth to the soft spot behind her ear. I my dick plunges deep inside her over and over, I bite and suck her neck.

She moans and screams my name over and over.

"That's its baby, scream my name. I'm going to take care of you, I'm going to fuck you so hard." I plunge deeper than I thought possible.

I feel the walls of her pussy tighten around my dick, what a perfect feeling. "Oh yes baby, fuck."

“Levi!” She screams again.

I love that. I love...fuck...no, not going there. I hold still for a minute and let her spasms slow before I start moving faster, harder, and not letting up until I shoot my load inside her, hard, fast, and so fucking good. “God, Addison...that’s amazing.” I fall down, catching myself with my forearms on each side of her head. I slowly kiss her. Letting her taste herself. Letting her feel me covering her, with me, with everything I have.

Her arms go limp and fall down to her sides as she lies there, glowing. This woman is amazing.

I don’t want to move. I want to stay buried deep inside this woman and never leave. That thought gets me moving. I slip out of her and roll to my side allowing each of us to catch our breath.

“We probably need to head back. It’ll be dinner time soon and if we aren’t back, mom will send out a search party. She’s the nosiest woman on earth.”

She giggles, “She’s a mom, silly. They do that.”

“I just don’t want to leave yet. I wish we could just stay right here in this little bubble and never leave.”

“But we have to, Levi. I want the same thing, but that can’t happen, can it.”

She’s right, no it can’t happen. I’m losing sight of the real me and I need to get back to that. I stand and help her up from the blanket. We dress quietly.

I move to her after she gets dressed and notice the hickey I gave her on her neck. “You’ll want to keep your hair over that.” I smile at her.

“Did you really give me a hickey? Aren’t we too old for that?”

“You’ve never too old to have fun, Addie.”

“Why did you say you wanted to mark me? What’s up with that?” She has a confused look on her face.

“I just got caught up in the moment, that’s all,” I lie.

She looks disappointed, but I can’t do anything about that.

“Let’s go.”

“Levi, thank you for sharing your special place with me. It meant a lot to me.” She gets on her horse, tucks her dress around her legs, and turns the horse to head home.

Fuck, I’m an asshole. I get settled in my saddle and catch up to her. We make our way back to the house in silence. I’ve fucked up, and I know I fucked, big time. That’s why I’m an asshole.

Chapter 11

Addison

Once we made it back, I left the horse at the barn, and went straight to the house leaving Levi behind. I'm starting to get feelings for this man, and I know it will go nowhere. He's a professed bachelor.

When I walk into the living room, Mrs. Harris is sitting in the living room. "Hey, Addie. How was your ride?"

"It was good, thank you. I'm going to run up and shower before dinner." I start to move to the back of the stairs.

She stops me. "Addie, hang on a minute."

I stop and turn to face her. "Yes, ma'am."

She walked up to me, "Addie, give him time. He'll come around. He thinks he wants to be a bachelor, he's just like his father."

"I'm not sure..."

"Oh, I've seen how you and my son look at each other. I used to look at Mac the same way. Levi's dad. He looks just like him. Tall, handsome, built from the land. Levi is his dad made over." She hugged me. "He'll come around, I promise."

"No offense, Mrs. Harris, but I'm leaving tomorrow. There is nothing going on between Levi and me. We...don't seem to...fit."

"If I know my Levi, he'll step it up at the last minute. Keep the faith," she pats my arm as she moves back to the living.

The woman is delusional. There is nothing between Levi and me except sex. I need to get out of here. One more day.

After my shower, I decide not to go downstairs, I stay in my room. I do not want to see Levi Harris again if I don't have to. Okay, I want to, but I'm not going to.

I check the internet on the computer that Levi loaned me. I checked into my flight for tomorrow at six p.m. "Perfect, I can get out of here soon." I shut the computer off and move over to the bed. I lie down. I fall asleep.

*"You're my baby girl. I want you. Why can't you stay?"
Levi leans over me.*

I look shocked, "Because you don't really want me."

"But I do." His hand moves up my leg, under my dress, and begins to stroke my pussy over my panties. "I do want you."

My breath hitches, "Levi, you only want me for one thing, sex."

"No, baby, I want you, all of you. I want us to be..."

"Addie, wake up, baby. Dinner's ready." Levi's voice floats over me.

"Mmmhmm, Levi, please..." I whisper.

I hear his voice again, "Addie, wake up. I think you're dreaming, baby. Come on, dinner's ready."

My eyes flutter open, "Levi? What are..." I sit straight up, I'm wet and his hand is nowhere near my pussy.

"Dinner, babe. It's ready." He stands and laughs. "Must have been a hell of a dream."

"Why?"

"You were saying my name over and over." He turns laughing at me.

"Shit!"

He stands at the door, "Come on, mom will be pissed if we are late."

"I'll be right there, I need to wash my face." I stand from the bed and head to the bathroom. I hear Levi laughing. "Stop laughing at me."

"Can't, you're too damn cute."

I come out of the bathroom, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He walks to me, puts his hands on my shoulders, “Simple, you are fucking cute. I love that you are dreaming about me. Makes me feel good.”

I scoff, “Makes your ego bigger, that’s all.” I move from his embrace and head downstairs.

“There you two are. I was about to send Nicole up after you. Come on, dinner’s ready. Cook made steaks, baked potatoes, and salad. I hate that it’s your last night here, Addie.”

We all sit down at the table, Mrs. Harris is across from me, Nicole next to her mom, and Levi next to me.

He looks over at me, “Yeah, we are going to hate to see you go.”

I look over at him, “Really? I’m sure I won’t be too missed. You’ll be able to get back to your life once I’m gone.” I start to cut my steak.

Mrs. Harris says, “We are all going to miss you. I’m glad we came back early. We wouldn’t have met you had we stayed in New York. Addie, I think you are a wonderful young lady. You should come back and visit anytime. Isn’t that right, Levi?”

“Yes ma’am. Anytime.” He starts eating.

“I’ll try, my business keeps me going most of the time.”

“Oh, that’s right, Levi told me you were a photographer. That’s wonderful. You should take some pictures around here. It would be nice to have to new pictures.” She continues talking and eating.

I mostly shake my head and agree, not knowing what I’m agreeing to, while I eat. The sooner I get out of here the faster I can get Levi Harris out of my head.

After dinner, Mrs. Harris and Nicole go out on the back deck.

Levi looks at me, “Did I do something to upset you?”

“Nope,” popping the p, “Not upset at all. My flight is at six p.m. Do you think someone could give me a ride to the airport? I have to be there by four.”

“I’ll take you. No problem. Let’s go for a walk.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Come on, please. It’s our last night. Let me...let me be with you one more night, please.” He’s nearly begging and being so sweet.

How can he do this? How can he be nice and sweet, give me the best sex I’ve ever had, and not have anything, no feelings whatsoever.

“Fine, just a walk. That’s it.” I start for the front door.

He catches up to me, “Really, just a walk? We shall see.” He puts his hand on the small of my back and escorts me out the door.

We head down the path that leads past the barn. He takes my hand in his, “Addie, I think I’d like to see you again.”

I stop walking and pull my hand from his. “Why? All you want is sex. You can get that anywhere.” I turn to go back to the house.

“Addie wait.” He catches me, “That is not all I want.”

I stop and look at him. “Just a few hours ago, you said you were a bachelor and that’s the way you were staying. Has something changed since then?”

“Well, I am a bachelor...”

“You still don’t want a relationship, you don’t want to ever get married. Has that changed?” I stare at him.

“Well...”

“No, okay then. I’ll see you later. I’m going back to the house.” I start walking faster so I can get away before I say something I shouldn’t. I can’t believe I’ve allowed myself to fall for a guy so quickly. I can’t figure out what is wrong with me. It’s like he has some kind of spell over me.

I feel myself getting pulled back by the shoulders.

“Addison, stop!”

I can feel the tears and I don't want him to see me this way. I try to get away, but he turns me around. Fuck.

“Addison, I'm sorry. I don't know what I've done. Why are you crying?”

I shake my head, “I have no idea. Just let me go. I'll be gone tomorrow, and you can go back to doing whatever it is you do.” I walk away, this time he lets me go.

What the hell is wrong with me? I walk in the house, go straight up to my room and shut the door. I can't wait to get out of this house. I need to get back to work, get back to my life in Nashville. This would never work anyway.

I walk into the bathroom, wash my face, put on the T-shirt I borrowed from Levi, and get ready for bed. When I slip between the covers, I feel my nerves are shot, I'm exhausted, and hope I can sleep. All I can do is think about the man that is just down the hall.

Sometime in the night, I finally stopped crying, and fell asleep.

I hear a soft knock on the door. When I open it, Nicole is standing there. “Hey, breakfast is about ready.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

I'm sure my eyes are puffy and red, I think I must have cried myself to sleep. “Yeah, allergies I think.”

She nods slightly, “Oh, okay. Well, we have coffee ready whenever you are.”

“Thanks, I'll be right down.”

She leaves and I shut the door. I head into the bathroom again, wash my face, and brush my teeth. I'm not happy, but I

knew who he was when I gave into his charms. It's my own fault. I just didn't think I'd fall for him that quickly.

I change into my now clean clothes. Mrs. Harris had them cleaned for me. She is a really nice lady. Nothing like Levi.

Making my way downstairs, I see Mrs. Harris and Nicole sitting at the bar drinking coffee. I'm going to try to get through this day and get back to my life.

"Good morning," I say with as much enthusiasm as I can muster.

Mrs. Harris looks up from whatever she's reading. "Good morning, dear. Did you sleep okay?"

"Yes ma'am. Thank you." I pull a cup from the cabinet and pour myself a cup of coffee, add my sugar and creamer.

After stirring the concoction, I close my eyes and I take a sip of the glorious mixture. When I open my eyes, both Mrs. Harris and Nicole are looking at me.

"What?" I ask.

Mrs. Harris is smiling, and Nicole is nearly laughing.

Mrs. Harris says, "Levi will be back in time to take you to the airport. He had to run some errands. If you'd like, we can take you to town, or we can do something around here."

"Oh, I'm fine. I think I might take a walk. I need to clear my head."

Nicole hands me a plate, "Foods on the warmer over there." She points to a warming table on the other side of the bar.

"Thank you." I head over, hoping to eat a little without it coming back up. My nerves are on edge and eating is not what I want to do. But I'll try to eat a little. I put a piece of bacon, a scoop of scrambled eggs, and some white gravy over the eggs, onto my plate. I sit down next to Mrs. Harris. She has a plate of food in front of her.

I look at Nicole, "You aren't eating?"

“No, I don’t eat breakfast. Just coffee for me.” She take another drink from her cup.

I begin to eat my food and finish my cup of coffee. I take my dishes to the sink, run some water over them, and turn around to see them looking at me again.

“Okay, what is going on?” I ask.

Nicole says, “Let’s go for a walk. You want a cup of coffee to take with you?”

“Sure, I’ll just fix one.” What the heck are these two up to?

Mrs. Harris stands, “I’m going to get ready for the day. You girls have fun.”

“We will mom.” Nicole answered. Then she turned to me, “Ready?”

“Yeah.” I shrug and follow her out the back door that leads to the back deck. That’s where everything really started. Right there, someone cleaned up the glass, thank goodness. I forgot about the wine glass.

I follow Nicole down the steps and across the expanse of the backyard. “Where are we going?”

“Just for a walk.” Nicole is acting strange. “Is your photography business successful in Nashville?”

“I think so. I mean I don’t do much other than families, kids, and scenery. But it’s something I enjoy doing.”

“So, you could do that just about anywhere then.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Nashville is so historical, it’s got so many places to take different shots.”

We are walking down a path through some trees.

“Have you ever lived anywhere else but Nashville?” She continues the twenty questions.

I answer, “I am originally from Oklahoma. I moved to Nashville six years ago. I fell in love with the atmosphere and the whole town. It’s busy.”

“Where in Oklahoma are you from?”

“A small town called Davis. It’s in southern Oklahoma. It’s very small and not much happens there.” I give a short dry description.

“Small towns are nice. Very nice in fact. I love our little town, Weatherford is a nice spot to be.” She keeps walking down the path looking around.

I stop walking, “Nicole, what is going on? You and your mom have been acting weird all morning.”

She smiles, “Nothing. I’m just trying to get to know my new friend. I do hope you come back. I love having you around. I know Levi does too. Mom thinks you are wonderful, she would adopt you if she could.”

“I’m nothing big. And I’m not sure Levi cares one way or the other. Look Nicole, I like it here, but I have a home and a business in Tennessee. I need to get back. I’ve been unplugged for two days from everything. I’ve only talked to my assistant once since I’ve been here. My life is in Nashville.” I turn to walk back to the house.

“Oh, I know. I’m just trying to make some conversation. Where are you going?” She starts chasing me.

I’m walking rather fast, but she catches up to me.

“I’m not trying to get you to stay, I’m just saying, I hope you come back some time. I’ve enjoyed having you. Even though we just met yesterday, I feel like I’ve known you forever.” She puts her hand on my arm, “You are a special person, and we want you to come back. Soon.”

I stop and look at her, “Thank you Nicole. I do appreciate that. You all have made me feel very comfortable and welcome. We’ll see, okay.”

“Okay, that’s all I ask. I do want your number though. I could come visit you too sometime.”

We start walking back to the house.

“That would be nice. You are welcome at my house any time.” When we get to the back deck of the house, Levi is waiting for us.

“Hey you two. Did you have a nice walk?” He asks.

Nicole says, “Yes, we did. Did you get your errands ran?”

He smiles, fucking smile of his, damn. “Yes, I did. Addie, can we talk?”

Great, now what?

“Sure. I have to be at the airport in a couple of hours.” I remind him.

“I know. Can we sit here on the deck?”

I sit down in one of the lounge chairs.

Nicole smiles, “I’m heading in. It’s getting hot out today. I’ll see you before you leave, okay.”

“Sure thing, I’ll come find you.” I tell her.

Levi sits next to me and faces me. “Addie, I know somewhere I screwed up with you. I want to have a chance to make that up to you. Yes, I said I was a bachelor and that’s what I want to be. Yes, I said I didn’t want to get married. But...”

“Stop, I don’t need an explanation. You don’t own me anything.”

He put his hand on my leg. “Yes, I do. In the past two days, something has happened to me that I wasn’t expecting. I had a very long talk with my mom last night. She opened my eyes to something that I wasn’t sure I wanted to see. I think you are a very special woman.”

“You and your sister both think I’m special. Great,” I’m not understanding where this is going.

He turns his neck and pops it like he’s getting frustrated. “Addison Levine, shut up and let me tell you how I feel.”

Okay, that shut me up. I nod.

“I’m terrible at this. I’m sorry. I’m stumbling over the words. I like you. I like you way more than I thought I would. When I saw you in the airport the other day, something about you just drew me in. I can’t help myself, but I want to be

around you all the time. And not just for sex, although that is pretty amazing.” He smiles that fucking sexy smile of his.

Damn... “Levi, I like you too. But this would never work. I live in Nashville, you live here.” It’s that simple. I can’t do a long-distance relationship.”

He looks down at the ground, then back at me. “Could you try? I’m willing to try having a relationship, could you at least try something with me? I’ve changed, I’ve changed because of you. In two fucking days, you’ve turned my world upside down. You have won over my mom and my sister, two people that are the most stuck-up brattiest women I know. In two days, you’ve managed to break through several layers of my hard heart. I need you, Addie, in my life, somehow, someway.”

A tear slips down my cheek. “Really?”

He reaches up, wipes my cheek with his thumb, “Yes. I will come to Nashville as much as I can. I’ll fly you out here whenever you want. If I had my way, I’d lock you up in my room and never let you leave.”

I glance down at him holding my hand, I didn’t even realize he was holding. “I want that too, Levi. I wasn’t sure how I was going to leave here and never see you again.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen. You’ve wrapped yourself up in me and I don’t want to let that go. I don’t want to let you go.” He leans over and gently places a kiss on my lips. “You could stay and never leave as far as I’m concerned.”

I laugh, “I have a business.”

“You can take pictures anywhere. I’ll hire you to take publicity shots of the ranch. We have a beef ranch that needs promoting.” He pulls me over into his lap, “I am in heavy like with you.”

I smile, “I’m in heavy like with you too.” I bend down and kiss him, this time with purpose. With a future.

He stands with me in his arms. “I’m not letting you go before a proper goodbye.” He takes me to his room and lays

me on his bed. He begins to strip his clothes off. "Take your clothes off baby."

I remove my clothes and get comfortable on the bed.

This time, he doesn't fuck me, he makes love to me. Soft, sweet, rhythmic love.

Chapter 12

Levi

I drive Addison to the airport, reluctantly. “When can you come back?”

“I don’t know yet. My calendar and everything was on my phone. When I get back, I’ll call you.”

“You better.” I pull her into me and hold her for as long as I can before they call her flight.

She looks at me when she hears her flight being called. “Levi, we will make this work.”

“Oh, I know we will. You are the first woman that has made me want more than what I had. I want you. You did that.” I lean down and kiss her long and hard.

They call her flight again. Shit.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll call you as soon as I get back to Nashville.” She pulls away. But we don’t stop looking at each other as she moves through the gate.

I wave at her as she disappears through the door. I put my hand over my heart, this is going to be tough. I’ll fly out next weekend. I’ll surprise her.

6 months later

“Levi, where are you?” Addie calls to me.

I know she is searching for me. I’ll show her where I am soon.

“Levi, if you do not appear right now, I’m leaving.”

“Oh no you aren’t. You just moved in. I’m not letting you go now.” I yell from the loft of the barn.

“What are you doing up there?” She smiles at me.

“Come up here and see,” I challenge.

“Levi Harris, I have unpacking left to do. What are you doing up there?” She is so damn cute. She’s standing there with her hands on her hips, staring up at me.

I smile down at her. “Come get me.” Then I step back away from the edge of the loft.

I hear her coming up the ladder.

“What the heck?” I see her head pop over the edge of the loft.

I help her up that last step, “Come see.”

I have a blanket spread out over the floor of the loft, wine, and snacks. “I have a surprise for you.”

“It better be good because I have a lot of work to do.” She follows me over to the blanket.

“Oh, I think it is the best surprise ever.” I sit down on the blanket.

She follows me down and sits next to me.

“Addison, I know our relationship has been a fast-paced whirlwind from the very beginning. But woman, you are the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. I love you.” I produce a small box and open it.

Her hand goes to her mouth. “Levi, I...”

“I think I’ve loved you from the very second, I saw you at the airport that first night. I was too scared to admit it. You’ve helped me through some very trying times over the past six months. I can’t see me spending my life with anyone else but you. Please say yes.”

Tears form in her eyes. “I...um...oh Levi...yes. I love you too.”

“Thank fuck. I was afraid there for a minute.” I take the ring out of the box and place it on her finger. “I love you Addison Levine. I can’t wait to make you my wife.”

“I love you too, Levi, I can’t wait to be your wife.”

I made love to my fiancé and will be loving this woman for the rest of my life. I'm the luckiest man in the world.

* * *

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About the Author

Vic Leigh is an American Author and has worked in many fields throughout her life. She enjoys reading all authors, but romantic fiction and contemporary romance are her favorites. She is a mother, grandmother, editor, and teacher as well as author. Her small-town romance books are hot, spicy, and addictive.

Keep up to date on new arrivals by visiting her website.

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CINNAMON CIDER WHISKEY

It's All In The Whiskey, book 9

JEN TALTY

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Cinnamon Cider Whiskey

Will they find the strength to overcome the shadows of their pasts and forge a future together, or will the haunting secrets of Whiskey Ranch consume them both?

Cinnamon Cider Whiskey is desperate to escape the clutches of her abusive husband. Seeking solace and safety, she returns to Whiskey Ranch, where her heart first found its rhythm. But her husband, consumed by possessiveness and a twisted sense of control, refuses to let her go.

The ghosts of a failed relationship haunt Austin Sawyer, his heart still mending from the shattered pieces. Just as he begins to rebuild his life, his ex-girlfriend mysteriously disappears, leaving a trail of unanswered questions.

As fate intertwines their lives again, Cinnamon and Austin are drawn together by a shared past and desire for justice. With danger lurking in the shadows, they must navigate treacherous waters, unraveling a web of secrets and deceit. In a race against time, Cinnamon and Austin must confront their own demons and fight for their lives, all while discovering that their love, though tested and scarred, maybe the key to unlocking the dark secrets that threaten to tear their world apart.

Chapter 1

One year ago...

Austin Sawyer took off his cowboy hat and raked a hand across the top of his head. He sucked in a deep breath, holding it for a count of five. A dozen cuss words filled his brain and he desperately wanted to let them roll off his tongue. However, he'd been working on his anger issues and there was no point in using foul language to get his point across. "I'm not moving and that's final."

"You promised this was a trial. That we'd see if we liked it. Well, I hate it here and I'm not staying." Charity stomped her high heel into the dirt and twisted her ankle.

He reached out, curling his fingers around her forearm. The last thing he wanted was to spend an afternoon in the emergency room listening to Charity berate nice nurses and doctors for doing their job while she behaved like an entitled brat.

"Let go of me." She jerked free, stumbling backward into the fence. She steadied herself, brushing the hair from her face.

"I've told you a million times you're going to break your neck wearing those things out here." He shook his head. "You should wear the nice boots I bought you. They have a small heel and—"

"No way. Not happening. And I'm not staying in this hellhole a second longer." She planted her hands on her hips. "There is absolutely nothing for me to do here."

He sighed. It was time to be honest. He'd avoided this conversation for a couple of weeks and it wasn't fair to either of them for him to continue doing it. The worst part was she hadn't seemed to care that he'd been sleeping in the guest room. Or at least she hadn't questioned the fact he'd been coming home late. When he'd mentioned it, she shrugged and said she understood or was glad he hadn't woken her because

he stank like horse shit anyway. “You’re right. You don’t fit in at the ranch.”

“Finally, we see eye to eye. Now, when can we leave?”

“*We* don’t.” He adjusted his Stetson and leaned against the fence. “I think it’s best if you pack up your things and move back to Boise, alone. You and I are oil and water. Tom is a much better match.”

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide. It wasn’t often that Charity could be rendered speechless and Austin had to rein in a smile. He shouldn’t enjoy this moment. However, a lightness filled his mind and soul. Coming back to Whiskey Ranch after being gone so long had been exactly what he needed, only he brought extra baggage that he should have left in Boise.

There had been so many signs that he chose to ignore. He’d wanted to put the pains of the past behind him and he thought he had. However, being back at the ranch had proven that while he could live his life, he had no room for romance in his heart.

She cleared her throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on. Let’s be realistic and honest.” He tipped his hat back and lowered his chin. “You’ve been cheating on me for months with Tom. I honestly don’t know why you agreed to move out here with me when you’d rather be with him.” He pointed to the ring on her finger. “I do want that back. It was my mother’s.”

She narrowed her stare and pursed her lips. Something she did while contemplating her next words.

This should be interesting. Charity could be as sweet as a peach. She had a soft side that not many people got to see, but he had. He did care for her more than any other woman he’d dated in the last fifteen years. However, when she didn’t get her way, she would stop at nothing to make it happen, and that was something he could no longer live with.

“You don’t know what it’s been like for me. We had a nice life in Boise, and then out of the blue you started talking about how you wanted to move back to Buhl and to this ranch.” She tilted her head. “I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe that Cinnamon girl had moved back or something. I know you still have feelings for her and don’t deny that fact.” She pursed her lips. “You’re the one calling for honesty here.”

“Cinnamon is married and lives in Idaho Falls.” If Charity hadn’t been cheating on him, he could understand why Charity would bring up Cinnamon. He’d been madly in love with her since he’d been a freshman in high school and she in seventh grade. He’d known her his entire life, but poor choices on both their parts had put an end to that relationship. “She’s not the reason I wanted to come back. As a matter of fact, and you know this, if she’d been here, I wouldn’t have entertained the job opportunity when JW offered it to me.” It was a lie, but Austin didn’t owe Charity an explanation. She’d been the one who destroyed any chance they had at a future. Not him and his sudden need to learn more about what had really happened to Cinnamon. “But let’s be clear about the truth. You’ve been cheating on me for at least six months before we moved here and I’m the fool who let it go on.” He took her left hand and wiggled the ring off her finger. He slipped it into his pocket.

She gasped. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I read the texts on your phone.”

“You had no right to go through my cell without my permission.”

He laughed. “That’s just it. You asked me to look something up and a message from him popped up on the screen. I have to say, I was a little shocked at the dirty talk. That’s not like you.” She always acted so prim and proper. At first, he thought it was sweet. Something different, but it had grated on his nerves in the last year. If he even said anything remotely sexual, she got all weird.

She lifted her hand as if to slap him, but dropped it to her side just as quickly. “I’ll be gone by morning. I’d appreciate it if you stayed somewhere else tonight.”

“Fair enough.” This had gone better than he’d expected. Part of him thought she might toss a shoe at his face or make a scene, but she didn’t do any of those things.

Truth be told, their relationship had died eight months ago when Cinnamon had randomly called at eleven in the evening. He couldn’t believe she had the same phone number. Curiosity had gotten the better of him and he answered. Part of him wished he hadn’t. She’d meant to call her cousin, JW. Through her sobs, she apologized profusely and then hung up. It prompted him to call JW the next morning. What he’d learned about Cinnamon’s marriage had nearly destroyed him, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. When he tried calling Cinnamon back, she sent him to voicemail. He didn’t dare leave a message. He understood what that might cause.

He did, however, text her a few times. It was under the pretense of Whiskey Ranch business. She was still a member of the Whiskey family and she had a stake in the ranch. The few texts he received didn’t make much sense. They either had nothing to do with his questions, like how was she? Did she need help? Could they talk? Instead, she said things like she’d gotten her nails done. Or she colored her hair. It was as if she were talking with a girlfriend.

That’s when he realized Cinnamon was in big trouble, but he couldn’t do anything about it, except talk to her cousins.

His heart had always belonged to Cinnamon. He’d tried to forget her, but he couldn’t. Being back at Whiskey Ranch only made him want to see her more. But that was never going to happen and he had to accept it, so he’d poured his soul into ignoring the fact his fiancée was cheating on him.

Big mistake.

And now that was over.

Time to pick up the pieces of his life.

Charity turned on her heel and took one step. She glanced over her shoulder. “On second thought, you can sleep on the sofa.”

He chuckled. “And why is that?”

She jerked her chin toward the stable. “That guy over there is always trying to chat me up. He gives me the creeps.”

“Gage? He’s harmless. But if you’re really that wiggled out, lock the doors.”

“No. You can do this one last favor for me.” She cocked her head. “Don’t make me beg.”

“Fine. But I want you gone tomorrow. We’re not playing games. This is over.”

“No shit.” She flipped her hair and marched off, nearly tripping twice before she even reached the corral’s end.

Three weeks later...

Austin lowered his sunglasses. A dark sedan and the local sheriff’s vehicle were parked outside his house on the Whiskey Ranch. He tapped his horse’s belly with his heels and brought Renegade up to a trot. A steady burn filled his chest and increased as he got closer.

“May I help you?” He dismounted his horse about twenty paces from the police officer and another man dressed in a dark suit. He looked like a government type.

“Are you Austin Sawyer?” the government-looking man asked.

“I am.” He thought that was a ridiculous question. “Sheriff Logan, how are you?” He tied Renegade to a tree. He’d deal with putting him in the small barn behind the house later.

“I’ve been better,” Brad Logan said. “This is Special Agent Todd Belmont with the FBI.”

Austin stretched out his hand. “What brings you gentlemen out here?”

“May we go somewhere and talk?” the Fed asked.

Austin shrugged. “Sure. Come in.” He jogged up the stairs and pushed open the front door. “Would you like something to drink? I’m going to get a beer. It’s been a long day.”

“No, thanks,” Brad said.

“I’m good.” Belmont nodded.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll be right back.” Austin’s pulse pumped in the center of his throat. He knew exactly why the cops were at his door.

Charity.

He pulled a cold one from the fridge and strolled back into the family room.

The Fed had taken a seat on the wingback chair in front of the fireplace and Brad continued to stand. He looked like he’d swallowed something sour. Good, because Austin and Brad had played football together and he should know that Austin wouldn’t have done anything to hurt Charity, no matter the circumstances.

Austin had been in a few barroom fights back in the day, but he’d never lay a hand on a lady.

Not even one who cheated on him.

Austin took a seat on the sofa and swigged. “Why are you here?”

“I need to ask you some questions about the disappearance of your fiancée,” Belmont said.

“Ex-fiancée. We broke up the day before she left,” Austin corrected. “She was cheating on me with Tom Riptide, whom she returned to Boise to be with.” This wasn’t the first time someone questioned him about Charity.

Brad had done it once. So had the state police. He’d been on his best behavior both times, but that was before Tom started making wild accusations about his character and telling anyone who would listen that he believed Austin had killed Charity.

Bullshit.

Of course, he knew he shouldn’t be so antagonistic with a federal agent, but this was getting out of hand. He’d done nothing wrong.

“But she never made it to Boise.” Belmont took out a pen and notepad. “You were the last one to see her alive.”

“That’s not true and you know it.” Austin took another sip of his beverage before setting it on the end table and leaning forward. He hated this game and was tired of playing it. “I helped her pack her car and watched her drive from this house. Two other people at Whiskey Ranch have made official statements with the state police that they saw her after I did. You also have witnesses at a gas station and a credit card record that prove she left this ranch.” He held up his hand when Belmont opened his mouth. “I was here at the Whiskey Ranch, doing my job. My boss has stated that fact, as well as others. We can go find them and you can talk to them if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary. I have all their statements.” Belmont rested his hand on his pad. “Your story for that first twelve or so hours checks out. But here’s where it gets confusing.” He licked his finger and flipped the pages backward. “Charity called Tom when she was gassing up her vehicle. She stated that she would stop and have a drink with her friend Cathy.”

“Cathy is her best friend. I’m not surprised she’d want to spend time with her and tell her about everything that happened.”

“But you know she never made it to meet Cathy.” Belmont scanned his handy little notebook.

“I’m aware of that fact.” Austin nodded.

“Here’s the thing. Most people sleep and Boise isn’t that far away. You could have left in the middle of the night and returned by morning.” Belmont arched a brow. “Are you going to tell me that’s not possible?”

“I didn’t leave the ranch.”

“But you can’t prove it,” Belmont said, not giving him a chance to respond, which was probably a good thing, because he had no proof. “Are you also aware Cathy has told us that Charity was afraid of you?”

“No and that’s also not true.” Austin and Cathy had never liked each other, so it shouldn’t be a surprise that she’d go along with all the bullshit Tom was putting out in the universe.

“Cathy said that Charity called her on more than one occasion, crying that you’d gone into a rampage. Throwing things around the house. Yelling and screaming at her. That she was afraid you were actually going to *do it* this time,” Belmont said.

“Do what?” Austin asked.

“Kill her.” Belmont set his pad back on his lap.

“None of those things ever happened. I never once threatened her. You can ask our neighbors in Boise. And you can ask all the people who live here at Whiskey Ranch.”

“Oh, I intend to.” Belmont nodded.

“I hope you’re looking into Tom as hard as you are me,” Austin said under his breath.

“I’m not going to get into that with you.” Belmont stood. “Aren’t you the least bit concerned about your fiancée?”

“She’s my ex and yes, of course I am. I’m very worried, but I didn’t do anything except break up with her because she cheated on me. That’s it. And I believe that’s a reasonable response to the situation.” He rose.

“I don’t disagree, but sometimes things get out of hand and I’ve heard you can have quite a temper.”

“That was when I was in high school and college. Not to mention I never raised my voice, much less a fist to a woman.” Austin let out a long breath. “If you’re looking into my past, then I’m sure Sheriff Logan here can tell you that every single time something happened, it was defending the honor of a lady, which includes my mother.”

“He’s mentioned what kind of man this community thinks you are, but that doesn’t change the fact that a woman is missing and you had motive and opportunity.” Belmont lifted his hand. “I’m following every lead. Questioning everyone. You are not a suspect but a person of interest.”

Austin understood that wasn't much of a distinction and people had already started to look at him differently. Fear had crept into the eyes of those who didn't know him well and even those who did had that look of wonder.

The damage had been done.

"I want to find out what happened to Charity. I am happy to do whatever is necessary," Austin said.

"I'm glad to hear that." Belmont headed to the front door. "I'm going to have to ask you not to leave the area."

"That won't be a problem." Austin opened the door.

Brad lingered inside while Belmont strolled to his vehicle.

"Jesus. You just stood there like an idiot. You could have defended me a little bit." Austin double-timed it across the room and snatched up his beer. He downed half of it.

"No. I couldn't. At least not while he was questioning you. I have to remain impartial. But I did go through your juvie record and the few fights you got into in college with him, which honestly makes you look like a hothead," Brad said. "However, while I did that, I explained the situation."

"Are you fucking kidding me? That all had to do with my mother and my sister's ex-husband. That bastard beat the fuck of Tina for four years and there wasn't anything I could do about it but hit him back. So I did until she finally left him."

"Thank you for that."

Austin still couldn't get over the fact that his big sister married Brad Logan, of all people. Granted, they didn't come any better than Brad, and he was happy for the two of them, but it was still weird to have one of his best friends from high school as a brother-in-law.

"And for the record, I told Agent Belmont that there was no way in hell you did anything to Charity. That said, I'm still a cop and I have to—"

"Save the explanation. I get it." Austin understood what Brad's position required. Brad had been the one who informed him of Charity's disappearance and what that meant for

Austin. “I’m just pissed because Tom gave a press conference the other day and he stated that he believes I murdered her because I went on some jealous rampage. It’s fucking laughable. The moment I found out about the affair, I realized I wasn’t in love with her.”

“But you moved her out here anyway all while you’re still in love with Cinnamon.”

“Don’t bring her into this. She has nothing to do with the breakup.”

“That’s bullshit and don’t try to tell me that you didn’t move back here in hopes of seeing her if she were to ever visit so you can help her leave that dick of a man she married.” Brad inched closer, waving his finger. “I know you and the one thing you can’t tolerate is an abusive man. Even if you didn’t care for Cinnamon anymore, you’d want to save her. It’s in your DNA and not just because of Tina.”

Austin didn’t need to be reminded of his shit father and what he’d done to his mother. He watched it. Lived it. Nothing was worse than getting a phone call while at college and learning your mother had been beaten to death. It had changed his world, especially since he thought his father had been out of the picture. His mom had promised she wouldn’t let him back in the house. However, his dad could be charming and she’d caved to his apologies and believed he’d turned over a new leaf.

Again.

“Cinnamon won’t even talk to me; trust me, I’ve tried.” He stared at his longtime friend. “I’m terrified about what might have happened to Charity and I feel responsible. I should have helped her move back to Boise. Maybe if I had done things differently, she wouldn’t be missing.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Brad rested his hand on Austin’s shoulder. “Everyone who knows you, believes that. But you have to stop being so combative with the authorities. I know you don’t trust us.”

“I have good reason not to have faith in most of you.” He raked a hand across the top of his head. “My mother called the cops how many times? And so did Tina. But that didn’t help them.”

“I’m not going to defend my department on why their hands were tied so many times with them, and so many others. Domestic violence is always tough, especially when the victims keep returning to their abusers and change their stories.” Brad held up his hand. “I love your sister and I know firsthand what she went through. I hate that my colleagues often had to walk away. I resent that I’ve been called to homes and have had to do the same thing. I also can’t stand that your good name is being dragged through the mud. But I need you to have a calmer, nicer tone when talking with the Feds. They won’t be going away anytime soon.”

Austin let out a long breath. “I can do that.”

“Good.” Brad nodded. “Will you be coming over for dinner? Tina is worried about you.”

“I’ll be there.”

“All right. I need to get back to work. See you in a few hours.” Brad turned on his heel and headed out the door.

Austin plopped back on the sofa and pulled out his cell. He found Cinnamon’s phone number. He always texted, never called, because when she did respond, it was obvious she couldn’t talk. “Fuck it.” He tapped the screen. When it rang, he expected it to go right to voicemail. But it didn’t. His pulse increased.

Three rings.

“Hello?” Cinnamon’s voice came over the speaker soft and sweet.

“Hi, Cinnamon, it’s Austin.”

“You shouldn’t be calling me,” she said.

“Why not?” He set his drink on the end table and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’re old friends and I just want to catch up. You know I moved back to the ranch, right?”

“I heard you were engaged. Congratulations.”

“Not anymore and unless you live under a rock, I’m sure you’ve heard what happened.” He didn’t need to say more.

“What do you want?” Cinnamon asked with a tremor in her voice.

That was a loaded fucking question, and one he wasn’t sure he knew how to answer. “All I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy and safe and I’m not sure either of those things are true based on the weird texts I get from you.” He dropped his head to the sofa and closed his eyes. “Come back to the ranch. It’s where you belong.”

“I belong with my husband.”

He blinked. Anger filled his heart. It pumped through his veins like a wildfire. He knew better than to lecture her about what an asshole Pete was and how she deserved better. That never worked with his mother or with Tina. “Why don’t you come for a visit.”

“To see you? I don’t think so.” Her words were laced with the same fury she had the day she told him to fuck off fifteen years ago.

The last year of their relationship had been hard. After his mother had been murdered and his father went to prison, he’d thought about dropping out of college. However, Cinnamon had pushed him to continue his education. She believed it would be good for him to go on with his life. It took a few months, but in the end, he agreed and was happy he’d listened. But then his father died by suicide. He wouldn’t have cared had his dad not left a note, blaming him for everything that had happened. His father had rattled off everything Austin had done, including being born, that ruined his life and marriage. Had it not been for Austin, perhaps his mother would still be alive.

Austin knew none of it was true, but it affected him deeply and changed who he was at his core for a long time. Looking back, he could understand why Cinnamon broke up with him,

but he could never comprehend how she could fall into the arms of Pete so quickly.

That broke his heart.

“Not me. Your family,” he said. “Everyone is worried about you.”

“I’ve got to go. Don’t call or text me again. My husband wouldn’t appreciate it.” The line went dead.

And so did his soul.

Chapter 2

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One year later...

Cinnamon Cider Whiskey set her suitcase and duffel bag on the front porch and pounded on the door. She glanced over her shoulder; fear still had a death grip on her emotions. It didn't matter that Pete had been arrested. He wouldn't stay there forever. He would hire a good lawyer and he'd be out by morning. The worst part was he'd know exactly where to come looking, which is why she wasn't knocking on any of her cousins' doors.

Nope.

She had to pick her ex-boyfriend.

But she didn't know where else to turn and if anyone on this planet would understand, it was Austin.

She glanced at her watch.

One in the morning.

Shit. He was sure to be in bed. She knocked again. Louder this time.

"Who the hell is out there?" Austin called from inside. His voice was raspy and laced with frustration.

"It's Cinnamon. Open the door, please."

The wood barrier opened.

"What the hell?" Austin stood there in a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and nothing else. His dark hair was ruffled from sleep. It was longer than she remembered, touching the back of his neck. "What on earth are you doing here and why are you wearing sunglasses?"

"I'm sure I don't have to explain that one." She pointed to her bags. "Can I crash on your sofa tonight?" The memories of the past bombarded her brain.

Their first kiss. Their first official date. Prom. Visiting him in college. Making love for the first time. The fights. His moods after his father died.

And then fucking Pete.

A guttural sob stuck in her throat.

Austin reached out and gently removed her glasses.

The shame and horror of her life filled her heart. She turned away.

He let out a long breath. “Jesus,” he muttered, taking her chin with his thumb and forefinger.

Tears burned the torn skin on her cheeks. The excuses for what happened bombarded her brain. Pete hadn’t always been an abuser. He’d been a sweet man when they first got together. However, that had all been a manipulation. Part of his master plan to take her and keep her to himself. He might not have hit her for the first four years of their marriage, but he controlled her in other ways. And he’d never loved her. Not the way a husband should. He married her because she’d been pregnant with the one thing he wanted more than anything.

A child.

Someone to carry on the family name. A little person he could mold and shape into an exact replica of himself.

But when Rosy died, Pete changed. He blamed Cinnamon and when she couldn’t get pregnant again, he started beating her. It wasn’t all the time, but as the years passed, it worsened. Cinnamon had enough. Pete couldn’t ever get past the loss of their little girl and he wanted a son in the worst way. He’d never go to counseling and his fists continued to land on Cinnamon’s face.

It was time to put an end to the insanity.

“Come in.” Austin stepped aside and then snagged her bags. “Where’s Pete?” he asked with a tight tone.

“In jail, for now.”

“That’s a good place for him.” Austin set her luggage by the front bedroom.

She knew this cabin well. A family friend had once occupied it. It had two bedrooms, a family room, and a kitchen. It was located at the north end of the ranch near the bull riding school. Those living in it usually taught lessons or worked at the breeding stables.

Austin had gone to school to study Equine Science. He wanted to be involved in the care and treatment of horses and ranch management. He’d grown up on Whiskey Ranch and intended to return and work there—with her. But that dream was destroyed the day she got pregnant.

She could never say Rosy had been a mistake. She loved her daughter and cherished every second she had with Rosy. For three years she and Pete had made a decent life. But it hadn’t lasted. She missed the ranch. Her family.

And Austin.

“I don’t need an *I told you so*.”

“I’m not saying that.” He planted his hands on his hips. “But those black eyes, the fat lip, and your limp make it hard not to be glad that man is behind bars.”

“We both know he’ll be out soon enough and he’s going to come looking for me. The first place will be at JW’s. Or maybe Georgia Moon and Luke’s. I just need a night or two to figure out my next move, and then I’ll be gone.”

“Do any of your cousins know you left?”

“I’ll call them in the morning.”

“Do you need ice? That swelling is pretty bad.”

“It’s fine. The cops made me go to the hospital.” She stepped around him, making her way into the family room. The furniture had changed since the last time she’d been in this particular cabin. Tired from the evening’s horrid events, she plopped herself on the sofa. She groaned, grabbing her midsection.

Austin rushed to her side. Gently, he brushed her hand away and lifted her shirt.

“That motherfucker,” he mumbled.

Tears filled her eyes.

“Did he stab you? I counted eighteen stitches.” Austin adjusted her shirt. He lifted her chin with his thumb and forefinger and examined her face. “You’re limping something awful. Do you have more stitches in your leg?”

“I don’t want to talk about this now.”

“You don’t get to show up at my house in the middle of the night, tell me that your husband is in jail for beating you, and not expect me to ask questions, especially when you know my history with domestic violence.”

“I thought you of all people would understand and not grill me.”

“For fuck’s sake, Cinnamon. That’s not what I’m doing. I want to know what happened. What’s been happening. Ever since you called me over a year ago, I’ve been worried sick about you. I know your cousins have all been trying to get you to leave that asshole for years.” He pressed his finger gently over her bruised lip. “I do get that it’s not easy. I understand the hold an abuser has over their victims. This is not your fault. But now that you’ve taken the first step, you have to do the hard part and stick with it.”

“You don’t get to tell me what I need to do. You left me years ago.” She closed her eyes. She’d told herself on the ride over she wouldn’t get into this conversation with Austin. It wasn’t the right time or place. What happened between them was long ago and she had no right to still be angry. It was childish and stupid.

This wasn’t his fault either.

But sometimes it was easier to blame him because deep down she still loved him.

“I know you’re hurting and if you want to take it out on me, go ahead,” he said.

She blinked. “No. I’m sorry. It’s just, you have no idea what my life has been like since my daughter died.”

Austin wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. He pressed his lips against her forehead.

It felt like home.

“I’m so sorry about Rosy. I felt like the worst human when I found out. I was such an ass for not staying in touch with anyone at the ranch. If I had known about her passing, I would have reached out. I was a jerk and caught up in my own hurt feelings.”

She rested her head against his strong shoulder. For the first time in a long while, she felt safe. It was as if the past fifteen years melted away, except for the pain of losing her precious baby. That could never be erased. “I never meant to hurt you. I was young and scared. You changed after your dad died and I reacted badly.”

“I was a fool not to fight for you.” He ran his hands up and down her arms. “We can’t do anything about the past. What’s done is done. But you can’t go back to Pete.”

“I know. He’s out of control. He won’t go to counseling and things have gotten really bad. I’m done trying to make things right. He can’t see beyond his own misery and he takes it out on me. I won’t be his punching bag anymore. I filed for divorce, which provoked this beating in the first place.”

“Why didn’t you have an exit plan? You were there when I helped Tina do that.”

She glanced up. “You know how shameful this is and I’m tired of hearing how I need to leave him. I know my family means well, but everyone has an opinion and I don’t want to be a burden.”

He brushed his lips across her temple. “Your cousins only wish to help. However, you’ve pushed them away. JD told me a couple of weeks ago that you barely take their phone calls and you didn’t come back to the ranch for the holidays.”

There were so many reasons she’d avoided her family. However, the moment Pete learned Austin was back at the

ranch, there was no way she'd ever be allowed to return again. Besides, knowing he lived on Whiskey Ranch changed everything. It stirred her emotions in ways she couldn't deal with, at least not while she was still married to Pete.

Nor while Austin was engaged to another woman.

And there was the fact that Charity was still missing and the rumors that haunted Austin's good name.

"You know why I did all those things." She pushed from his embrace. She didn't want to get too comfortable. Her life was too complicated to allow any past emotions to clutter her difficult situation. "For years, you never brought friends home because of what went on in your house."

"That's different. I was a kid."

She arched a brow. "Do you still do volunteer work with battered women?"

He nodded.

"Then you know it's never easy for someone to leave and not just because of the emotional hold the abuser has over their victims." She stood, lifting her shirt, twisting her body, showing off the other stab wound. "I have one more on my leg with twelve stitches and this isn't the first time he's stabbed me. He's also bought a gun. I'm terrified he'll come here and hurt my cousins or their children. Or you. He hates you."

"The feeling is more than mutual." Austin folded his arms across his chest and scowled. "The security on the ranch is excellent and I'll call my brother-in-law in the morning. We'll make sure everyone, including you, is well protected."

"That's not my point and you know it."

He stood, gripping her biceps. "We may not have seen each other in fifteen years, but I think you know me well enough to know I'm not going to stand here and let that man hurt you again."

"It's that tone that makes me wonder if I made the right decision to come to you."

He chuckled.

“I’m serious. You have a wicked temper sometimes.”

“I have only ever hit three men, and they all deserved it.” He lowered his chin. “Including Pete because he swung first.”

“You were acting like a jealous idiot.”

Austin took a step back. “He knocked up my girlfriend. What did you expect me to do?”

“Oh my God. First, it takes two people to make a baby. Second, I wasn’t your girlfriend at the time.”

“Well, I came home to make things right between us and he tells me you’re pregnant and then pulls out a ring and proposes right in front of me like you’re some damned trophy or something.” Austin raked a hand over the top of his head. “I get I was being pigheaded and acting like a jerk, but he was a total dick and sucker punched me. All I did was call him a fucking douchebag with no class.”

“You told him he was going to be a shit father and offered to raise the baby as your own.”

“And I would have if you’d let me.” His chest heaved in as he sucked in a deep breath. “Fuck. I don’t want to fight with you about this. It’s all in the past and you’ve got enough to deal with.”

“You’re right, so I don’t need you throwing a punch.”

“I won’t promise you anything about that,” he muttered. “Any man who puts a hand on a lady is scum in my book.” He marched toward the front bedroom. “There are clean sheets on the bed. I’ll put your things in the room. I’m in the room behind the kitchen. If you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to wake me. I’ll be up by dawn. I’m sure I can rearrange my work schedule.”

“I don’t want you to do that for me.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “You’re here now, so let me help.”

“Thank you.”

He kissed her forehead. “Try to get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.” He closed the door behind him, leaving her in the bedroom alone.

The tears came hot and fast.

She’d made a mess of her life and she was only thirty-four years old. Rummaging through her suitcase, she found her pajamas and carefully slipped them on. Her entire body was covered in bruises. She ached from head to toe. The stab wounds hadn’t done any real damage, thank God. She’d been lucky Pete had been so drunk he could barely stand. That had been the only reason she’d been able to get away. She’d locked herself in the bathroom and called the police.

But Pete had managed to bust down the door. That’s when he attacked her with the knife. The cops arrived just as he stabbed her in the thigh, finally giving her the witnesses she needed to press charges. Pete wouldn’t be able to get away with it this time. He’d face real prison time and she would be strong and hold him accountable for his actions. She was done playing the victim.

After brushing her teeth, she found her cell charger. The nurse at the hospital had reminded her to turn off her location, but suggested she get a new cell. She’d do that tomorrow. For now, she felt secure that Pete couldn’t track the device. As soon as she lifted it from her purse, she noticed ten missed calls and twenty texts.

All from Pete.

Her heart dropped like a cement brick.

He was out already.

Chapter 3

Austin climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling.

Cinnamon was back and the first thing he'd done was pick a fight. Or maybe she had, but it didn't matter. They were right back to where they'd been fifteen years ago. There was so much unresolved conflict between them, and there shouldn't be any issues anymore.

They both had made their choices.

"Austin." Cinnamon came barreling into his room. She stood at the side of his bed with tears rolling down her battered face.

Rage filled his veins. If he ever saw Pete again, someone would have to restrain him because he couldn't control himself.

He bolted upright. "What's wrong?"

She held her phone out. "It's Pete. Someone bailed him out."

"In the middle of the night? How the hell did that happen?"

"I don't know, but he has a lot of wealthy friends in high places. He's been trying to reach me for the last hour. He's left nasty voice and text messages."

"Can I see?" He reached for the phone.

"Sure."

He patted the side of his bed. "Sit down. Try to relax. I know it's hard, but you're safe here."

"I'm not safe anywhere with him out of jail and those messages prove it."

Austin started with the texts.

Pete: *You bitch. I can't believe you did this to me. I will get you for this. And if you think these stupid charges will stick, you've got another thing coming.*

Pete: *Answer your damn phone.*

Pete: *Where the fuck are you? How dare you turn off your location. You think I won't find you? As if there are a ton of places you'd go? You're probably back in Buhl. Ha. If you think your idiot cousins can keep you from me, think again.*

Pete: *You fucking little whore. I know who's back at Whiskey Ranch. You think I'm a monster? He killed his fiancée. He'll do the same to you because you're damaged goods. I'm the only one who will ever want you. I'll give you a day to come home, and then I'm coming to get you.*

Pete: *Pick up the damned phone, you little cunt. I'm tired of this game. You're never going to leave me. You like my money too much. Fucking bitch. Get your ass home now and make sure these cops drop the charges. If you don't, you'll pay.*

Austin had read enough. He set the phone on the other side of the bed. He certainly didn't want Cinnamon to read or listen to any more from Pete. It would only stress her out. "I'm going to call Brad now." He reached for his phone.

"I don't want you to wake him or Tina up. Don't they have a newborn?"

"Gabby's one and Ben is four." He tapped his screen. "Neither one of them will care if I call about this. Besides, I'm not risking that Pete will wait a day or two to show his face in Buhl. He's irrational and this is harassment. Brad and his department need to know. The next call we are making is to JW."

"Absolutely not." She jumped to her feet. "I will deal with my family on my own terms."

"It's almost two in the morning," Brad said when he picked up on the second ring. "What's wrong?"

"It's Cinnamon. She left Pete after he beat the crap out of her. He was in jail but has since been bailed out and is now sending her threatening messages. I'll text you screenshots."

"Do that now so I can take a look."

Austin did as instructed and waited.

“Does she have a restraining order in place? If she doesn’t, we can file one here just in case.”

“Let’s do that.”

“All right. She’ll need to sign it,” Brad said. “I can bring that by first thing.”

“Wonderful, but I think the ranch needs a little extra security.”

“I’ll make sure units are patrolling the entrances,” Brad said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks.” He tapped the screen and pulled up JW’s contact information.

“I swear to God, I’ll walk out that front door if you call any of my cousins.” She groaned when she folded her arms across her middle. “I’m not ready to face them.”

“Ready or not, they have a right to know that he could be on his way here. Not to mention they love you and only want you to be safe. That’s all they care about.” He stared at her for a long moment. “Is there something else you’re not telling me?”

She turned, swiping at her cheeks.

He climbed from the bed. “Cinnamon. What’s going on?” Gently, he took her by the arms, forcing her to face him. “Whatever it is, I can’t help unless you tell me.”

“A few months before you moved back, Pete and I visited the ranch. It ended badly.”

“I heard.”

“I doubt they told you everything, especially Irish.” She shrugged off his embrace and crawled into his bed, hugging his pillow. “It was a real shit show. At first, I had planned on coming by myself. Pete hates this place.”

“I remember. He moved you away from Buhl the second you got married, and according to Georgia Moon, you barely came back.”

“At first, Pete had me convinced the only way we had a shot at a real marriage was if we had a clean break from everyone. I believed him because my family all believed I was making a mistake. They didn’t think being pregnant was the right reason to marry someone. Not to mention, all Pete ever wanted was to work for his father and when I got pregnant, his dad offered him a job.”

Austin had wanted to interject, but kept his mouth shut.

“I was so focused on being a good mom and wife that I was okay with it. Things weren’t great, but I had Rosy. Then my baby girl got sick. She was only two years old. The next year was fucking hell.”

“I can’t even imagine.” Austin eased in next to Cinnamon and rested his arm around her hip.

“Both Pete and I were devastated. Believe it or not, he was a devoted dad. He loved his little girl. She was his world. He would have done anything for her and for a few short years, we were happy-ish.”

“It’s the ish part that bothers me.”

She let out a dry laugh. “Pete and I never truly loved each other, but Rosy brought us close. Her death sent Pete into a downward spiral that was compounded by my inability to get pregnant again.” The tears poured out of her eyes like a waterfall. “I didn’t want to start trying again so soon, but Pete was relentless. That’s when he started hitting me.”

Austin reined in his anger. He wondered what else might have happened and couldn’t allow his brain to go there. The guilt he felt was too strong. He’d let down the only woman he’d ever loved and he loathed himself for it.

“Every time I had to tell him I wasn’t pregnant, he’d slap me. It wasn’t bad at first.”

“Don’t make excuses for his bad behavior.”

“You know how this works.” She squeezed the pillow. “We were both in a bad place. I had been seeing a therapist but couldn’t get him to go. I tried giving him an ultimatum. Either

he went or I was going to leave, and that's when things took a really bad turn. I stopped going to counseling."

"You stopped, or he decided for you?"

"I didn't want to fight him or get hit, so I didn't go anymore. I also avoided my family even more. It was a really dark time. Anyway, when we came here the last time, everyone was trying to get me to leave him. Every second someone had me alone, they'd start talking exit strategies. The pressure was insurmountable. But it was Irish who got in my face. Pete overheard us. He was livid. The fight between him and Irish was something I will never forget."

"Irish told me about it," Austin admitted. "He said that you left in the middle of the night, but he wasn't sure if you went willingly or not and that you haven't spoken to anyone since, except the one time you accidentally called me."

"I did not want to go. Pete woke me up and told me that if I fought him on this, he'd make sure my family was ruined."

"He's tried to do that before. He's never been successful."

"Pete's family has money. Lots of it."

"I'm well aware." That had always been a bone of contention with Austin. He'd listened to whispers around town about how Cinnamon had run off with Pete because he could give her more than a broken cowboy with a questionable past and not even two nickels to rub together. Deep down, he didn't want to believe it, but some days it was hard.

"They have a lot of power in this state. Pete has done and said things to undermine my family business. If I stay away, he leaves them alone. When I contact anyone in my family, he stirs the pot. He'll call anyone he can think of and send them out here."

"We were pretty sure he was the one who caused all the trouble for Kitty and the educational facility two years ago."

Cinnamon nodded. "Pete has cut me off from my family and my friends. I only want a few days to figure things out, and then I'm leaving. I can't put my family at risk. Do you understand?"

“Yes and no.” Austin leaned back and stared at the fan. “I get you want to protect everyone, but they want to do the same for you. Besides, Pete can’t hurt them because they aren’t doing anything wrong. He can send all the inspectors and anyone else he wants. Everything at Whiskey Ranch is on the up-and-up and you know that. Running from this is only putting yourself at risk. You’re staying put. I won’t be the only one who feels that way. So let me call your cousins.”

“They don’t want to hear from me.” She sniffled. “My last words with Irish and JD weren’t pleasant. They told me I had to leave Pete.”

“I believe their words were to call them when you were ready.” He turned his head, arching a brow. “You forget that JD and I were once best friends and we’ve rekindled that friendship. I got the entire story when I moved back and Charity moved out. I doubt they left anything out and they did say they were harsh, something they’ve regretted. However, tough love is sometimes necessary.”

“Looks like you’ve returned to your logical self.” She curled up next to him, wrapping her arm around his middle and draping a leg over his knee. “The last time we were together, you acted like a moron.”

“I was angry and hurt.”

“So was I,” she said.

“It’s all in the past. All that matters now is making sure Pete doesn’t ever hurt you again.” He waved his phone. “I’m calling JW now.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “Pete’s not going to go away quietly.”

“I know. But you have an entire family who will be by your side. You’re not alone in this.”

“I’m sorry that I dumped my problems at your feet. I should have been brave enough to go to my family to begin with.”

“Don’t be silly.” He kissed her temple. “I watched my mother and sister go through what you’re living. It makes sense that you’d come to me first.”

She lifted her head. “Not with our history it doesn’t.”

Setting his cell on the mattress, he took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “No matter what happened between us, I never stopped caring about you. I’m glad you felt you could come to me. You can stay here as long as you want or need to.”

“You’re a kind man, Austin.”

He should either ask her to go back to the guest room or leave himself, but he didn’t have the self-control to do either. Instead, he held her in his arms while he made the difficult phone call to JW.

“What the hell are you doing calling me at two in the morning?” JW asked with a gruff voice.

Austin quickly went through the details. JW cursed on the other end.

“No. It’s not necessary for you to come over now,” Austin said. “She’s sleeping.” It was only a half lie as Cinnamon’s breathing slowed and exhaustion overtook her body.

“I can’t believe she went to you and not one of us,” JW muttered.

Austin lifted the sheets and comforter over their bodies and clicked the light off. “I could give you a thousand reasons why, but none of them matter. She’s filed for divorce and she’s here at the ranch.”

“But you said he’s out on bail. That doesn’t make me feel good about the situation. I’ve seen firsthand what that asshole can do.”

Austin wasn’t about to tell JW how badly Pete had beaten Cinnamon. “Brad’s in contact with the Boise police. If he shows up, Brad can arrest him. Pete’s in a shitload of trouble. Don’t worry. I’ll keep a watchful eye on her tonight. And we can all take turns until Pete is behind bars for good.”

“How are you doing with this?”

Austin lowered his gaze. In the dark, he could barely see Cinnamon. Her head rested on his chest. Her hair was draped

across his body. “I’m just glad she’s home where she belongs.”

Chapter 4

Cinnamon sat on the main house front porch where her cousin JW Whiskey and his lovely wife, Kitty, lived. Their two toddlers, Cheye and Manny, ran around the front yard. It brought so many emotions to Cinnamon's soul. She missed her little girl so badly. Rosy would have been fourteen. Hard to believe.

"Here you go." Kitty handed her a tall glass of lemonade. She eased into one of the Adirondack chairs and sipped her beverage.

Cinnamon had only met Kitty once and it hadn't been under the best of circumstances. "Your kids are so adorable."

"They're on their best behavior today, but trust me, they can sometimes be holy terrors." Kitty brushed her red hair from her face. "I don't know if Austin or JW told you any of what I went through with my ex-husband."

"Only that your ex had done some shady things."

"That's an understatement." Kitty laughed. "It was a difficult time and there were moments that I wasn't sure I'd get through it." She leaned forward. "I don't pretend to understand what you're going through. My ex-husband hit me once. His abuse was more emotional. However, I'm happy to listen if you ever want a girl to chat with. I know how overpowering, though well meaning, some of your male cousins can be."

"That's putting it mildly." Cinnamon raised her glass. "I feel lighter now that everyone knows I've left, filed for divorce, and am here. But it's all nerve-racking now that Pete's been bailed out and no one has seen him since then. I worry he's lurking in some bush, waiting to attack."

"We have hired extra security and JD, JB, Luke, and Irish are all installing more cameras around the ranch as we speak. No one will get on the property without us knowing about it."

“Not to mention I don’t think Austin will leave my side.” Cinnamon wasn’t sure what to do about that. She appreciated his concern and was the one to go to him for help. However, her feelings for him had never died. Waking in his bed, alone, had been both a blessing and a curse. She would have wanted to kiss him, and maybe more if he’d been there.

That’s the last thing she needed.

This entire mess began because she’d jumped into bed with Pete before things had truly ended with Austin. The cause and effect of her actions had always left her with a major moral dilemma. She couldn’t wish her daughter away. She’d never regret those three beautiful years.

However, in some ways, it had robbed her of a life with Austin.

Maybe.

She’d never know now.

“Or Gage.” Kitty pointed to the handyman working on the fence in the distance. “When he heard you were going to be here this morning, he asked if he could work on the fence versus other projects.”

Cinnamon laughed. Some people found Gage to be an odd man. And maybe he was a little. He’d always had a fondness for her and followed her around like a little lovesick puppy. The few times she’d come home, he’d shown up with handpicked flowers. It was a sweet gesture, one that Pete hated and he’d let Gage know. Pete treated Gage like he was a weirdo or a pervert.

Whereas Austin accepted Gage’s kindness and often encouraged it. Gage would nod and smile and say, *Yes, Mr. Sawyer. I understand. I just want to make the ladies here smile.*

And that’s what Gage did. It wasn’t just Cinnamon who got special treatment from Gage. It was everyone. He was a kind man who had lost his family in a tragic fire. He’d always been a bit odd, even before his family died. However, there was a story there and if anyone had ever cared to sit down and chat with Gage, they’d understand why he was different.

“He’s such a sweet old man,” Cinnamon said.

“When I first moved to the ranch, he used to bring me daisies every day. He’d tell me what a bitch JW’s ex-fiancée Bella was and how I brightened up the place. Now he brings the kids little toys every couple of weeks. I wish I could tell him to stop because he’s spoiling them, but it’s not like they are expensive. Half the time they are handmade.”

“His story makes me want to cry,” Cinnamon said. “The way his family died and all. His daughter Ashley was like him—on the spectrum. She was my friend and it always made me sad the way others often treated her.”

“He’s made this ranch his home. I just wish more people treated him better.” Kitty sighed. “Austin’s ex-fiancée was such a mean girl. I hate to say it, but I was thrilled when she left and Gage did a little jig when she drove that fancy car that Austin had bought her away. But now he feels guilty because we still have no idea what happened to her. It haunts Austin.”

“I can’t understand how anyone would believe he could kill a person.” Cinnamon shook her head. “Although, I did watch him beat the crap out of his dad and his ex-brother-in-law once. It wasn’t a pretty sight and it’s a side of him I never want to see again.”

“I forgot the two of you were an item.”

“We started dating—if you could call it that—when I was twelve and he was fourteen. We broke up when I was nineteen. Right before I married Pete. But even when Austin and I were in grade school, we were attached at the hip. He was my best friend before he became my boyfriend. Losing him was one of the hardest things—outside of the death of my daughter—that I’ve ever gone through.”

“You know, if it’s too weird to stay with him, you’re welcome here with JW and me.”

“Thank you. JB told me the same thing. But everyone has little kids and if Pete does manage to get on the ranch, I wouldn’t want to expose any of the children to his craziness. For now, I’ll remain at the cabin with Austin.” Cinnamon had

given a lot of consideration to JB and Cheyenne's offer. Being so close to Austin made her want to forget the last fifteen years. Her heart ached to be with him in ways she didn't understand, nor did she want to examine.

The drive from Idaho Falls to Buhl had been filled with thoughts of the past mixed with emotions she didn't know she had. At first, she chalked it up to the idea she hadn't seen Austin in fifteen years, but the second she laid eyes on him, the love she had felt for him all those years ago flooded her heart. It was as if it had been hidden in a vault and leaving Pete had been the key to unlocking it.

However, her battle had just begun.

Even with the charges that Pete faced, he wasn't going to let her go easily. Pete didn't like to lose and he viewed her as a trophy.

"That man has been through a lot," Kitty said. "Agent Belmont comes around about once a month, asking him questions about Charity's disappearance."

"Austin wouldn't ever hurt a woman."

"We know that, but others have painted a very different story."

"Austin mentioned that, but I still struggle with anyone believing that. If they know his history, they'd understand why he could never."

Kitty leaned back and glanced toward the door. "Austin and JW won't be thrilled with me telling you this. If you google it, you'll find articles and blogs about it. There's more out there about him as a potential murderer than there is about the other man whom Charity was involved with." Kitty held up her hand. "It doesn't matter that there have been a few holes poked in Tom's story, not to mention that Tom doesn't really believe Austin did it anymore and that Cathy—a friend of Charity's—had stated she was going to meet Charity for drinks, but the bartender said he never saw Cathy at that bar waiting for her friend. Which is weird, right?"

“It does sound strange, but I honestly haven’t read much on the story other than she went missing.” Tears burned Cinnamon’s dry, swollen eyes. “Pete controlled many things in my life, including the amount of time I spent on the computer and he often took my phone. The last two years were the worst.”

Kitty’s face hardened. Her lips pursed and she clasped her hands in her lap. “My ex-husband was a controlling bastard. He used his money and power to manipulate me. It wasn’t as bad as what you’re describing. However, there’s one thing I know, having been in that situation, and that is it takes a little space to gather enough courage to be completely done. You can’t have any contact with him. If he calls, don’t answer, because he’s eventually going to change from being a total asshole to being as sweet as a peach.”

“Oh, trust me. I know.” Cinnamon nodded. “The first time he hit me, he apologized the second it happened. He spent weeks making it up to me. And it didn’t happen again for months. He even went to a counseling session. But then something happened and the next time it wasn’t a slap; it was a punch in the gut and it took him two days to say he was sorry.” She wiped a tear that dribbled down her cheek. “The escalation was slow, but I’m so done. He’s so far gone that there is no turning back. Pete’s dangerous and I know if I were to ever return, I’d end up in a body bag and that’s no way to honor my baby girl’s short life.”

Kitty reached out and took Cinnamon’s hand. “If you ever want someone to talk to, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” Cinnamon sipped her drink and waved to Gage who smiled and waved back. “I will need to find something to do once I feel a little better and get these stitches out. Otherwise, I’m going to go mad. I can’t sit on my ass and do nothing. Pete wouldn’t allow me to work and it made me feel like I was useless. I hate that feeling.”

“My ex was the same way. When I left, the first thing I did was go back to school.” Kitty jerked her head toward the house. “JW and I had a long-distance relationship for a while so I could finish my bachelor’s degree. It wasn’t easy with me

still living in Baltimore, but he was super supportive. And now I have the education facility here at the ranch.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a teacher.” More tears burned a path down her face. “I had been going to college locally to become a preschool educator while I waited for Austin to return. But things didn’t work out.”

“He’s never talked about what happened.”

Cinnamon chuckled. “That is a long and convoluted story.”

“Curiosity killed this Kitty.”

“Oh my God. You did not just say that.” Cinnamon shook her head. Pete had isolated her from her family. She’d missed all her cousins’ weddings. The births of their children. Hell, this was the first time she was meeting some of them. She hated him for taking this away from her and loathed herself for allowing it to happen. “I’ll try to break it down into a short tale.”

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

“No. It’s okay. But I’m sure my version is a bit different from Austin’s.”

“That’s always the case.”

Cinnamon set her drink on the table and let out a long breath while she gathered her thoughts. “When Austin’s father died by suicide, it affected him deeply. He always tried to tell himself that he had no feelings for his dad. I kept telling him that he did. That there was a hint of love in his heart. It was his father and his dad did show up to football games. He took him fishing. He never hit Austin until Austin was in college, but that was only because Austin, as an adult, couldn’t stand there and let his father beat the crap out of his mom. He was also dealing with his sister who married an abusive man. The cycle had been handed down.”

“That’s rough.”

“The truth was that Austin was afraid he would be like his dad because he does have a temper.”

“I’ve never seen it,” Kitty said. “He’s always so zen.”

Cinnamon laughed. “Trust me. Austin can be jealous and if he sees a wrong when it comes to a woman, he has no problem stepping in. His father refused a plea deal and the case went to trial. Austin had to testify. That was the beginning of our problems because Austin was conflicted. His testimony helped put his father away for twenty years. When his dad died, he left a note blaming Austin. But it wasn’t just the blame. The comparison of how they are alike started Austin on this weird path. He pulled away from me. He stopped coming home as often. He broke up with me, and then he’d want me back. I’d end it with him, and then he’d come home and things were good. This went on for almost a year. Meanwhile, I had Pete in my ear, telling me how he’d make for a better boyfriend. He’d buy me lavish gifts and he was always there when I needed him.”

“Oh shit,” Kitty said. “Sounds like he tossed over a line with the right bait.”

“You could say that, but Austin wasn’t helping, and one night on the phone, we got into a big fight and I told him to fuck off. That we were done. I saw Pete that night, went to bed with him, and got pregnant. The weird part was that Austin wasn’t all that pissed at me when he came home and found out. His rage was directed at Pete.”

“Do you think he knew what kind of man Pete was?”

Cinnamon shrugged. “Maybe. He has good radar that way. He offered to raise the baby as his own, but once I decided to marry Pete, Austin walked away and I never heard from him. Not one phone call. Nothing.”

“No offense, but what did you expect him to do?”

“I suppose exactly what he did. He felt I had given up on us, but I had been feeling that way for the last year. I was young and stupid and he was pigheaded and hurting over his father. It was a series of events that we—at the time—didn’t have the tools to deal with.”

“Hindsight is always perfect vision,” Kitty said. “How do you feel seeing him now?”

Cinnamon glanced toward the sky. A flock of birds flew overhead. She focused on them for as long as she could while sorting through all the emotions. “So much is going on in my life right now. I’m scared about what Pete will do while he’s out awaiting trial because he’ll be like Austin’s father. He’ll fight as if he did nothing wrong. An uncontested divorce in this state only takes sixty-two days, but he’ll fight that too, so it could take a while. But I have to admit, I do still have feelings for Austin.”

“We all know he cares very deeply for you,” Kitty said.

“He’s said that?” Cinnamon’s heart fluttered like the first time Austin took her hand while they walked across the ranch. She’d been all of twelve. He whispered in her ear about how much he liked her and how pretty she looked.

“Not to me. And I don’t know if he’s mentioned it to JW or any of your cousins, but ever since he’s moved back here, he’s always asking if anyone has talked to you or if we knew what was happening with you and Pete. Once, he did it at the dinner table with Charity sitting right next to him.” Kitty laughed. “She got up and walked out the door and Austin let her go without saying a word. That’s when we knew he didn’t want to be with her.”

“How long after that did she leave?”

“Not for another month. We had no idea she’d been cheating on him. He didn’t tell us until after she left,” Kitty said.

“I wonder why he kept that to himself.”

“He told us later it was because he wanted to confront her first. He did that and she left the next day.” Kitty sighed. “Sadly, she’s been missing for a year. Austin hired a private investigator to look into her disappearance but has found nothing. Gage watched her drive away. She stopped at a gas station not far from here, but after that, no one has seen her or heard from her since.”

“That’s terrifying.”

“There has been no sign of her, but every once in a while, an anonymous tip comes into the Feds, leading them right to Austin,” Kitty said. “We truly hope they find her—and that she’s okay—but it’s not looking good.”

“I just wish the spotlight wasn’t on Austin. He’s a good man with a big heart.”

“For the most part, he takes it all in stride, but occasionally, he loses his shit.”

“I’m sure he does.”

Kitty glanced at her watch. “I hate doing this to you, but I must get to work.” She stood. “Hey. I have a great idea. One of the girls in the infant room will be leaving soon on maternity leave and you don’t need a degree. I need to be official and do a background check, but I’m happy to hire you as a fill-in if you’d like. The position will open up in a week and I haven’t found anyone yet.”

“Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t joke about that.” Kitty smiled. “It’s a temp position. But if you’re going to stay at the ranch and would consider going back to school, I might be able to find you a more permanent gig.”

Cinnamon had no idea what her future held or even if Whiskey Ranch would be a part of it, much less getting the degree she’d always felt robbed of, but her soul came to life at the thought. “I’d love to take the temp job. How do we go about getting the paperwork started?”

“Come by the education facility when you can. I’ll be there most of the day, but my assistant will have it if I’m out. As soon as it’s filled out, I’ll file it and once I get it back, you can start. It should only take three business days.”

“I’ll be by later this morning.” She rose and hugged Kitty. “Thank you so much.”

“Anything for family.” She put her forefinger and thumb to her mouth and gave a big whistle. “Let’s go, kiddos. Time for school.”

Her two children came flying up the porch steps, ran a circle around her legs while giggling, and then raced right through the front door, Kitty following one step behind.

For the first time in a long while, Cinnamon believed her life could actually turn around.

Austin leaned against the counter in JW's kitchen and took the cup of coffee that JW offered.

"Well, last night sounds exciting," JW said.

"Not sure that's the word I'd use to describe it." Austin chuckled. "I was a little gobsmacked to see Cinnamon standing on my front stoop at one in the morning, and then it took every ounce of energy I had not to get in my truck and drive to Idaho Falls."

"Knowing you, thoughts of beating the crap out of Pete danced in your head like sugar plums."

"Exactly." Austin nodded in agreement. "If he does show up here, we all better hope he and I don't cross paths because my blood is on fire."

"So is mine." JW filled his mug and pulled back a stool at the island. "You told me she was in bad shape, but you didn't prepare me for what her face looked like."

"At least she's not making excuses for Pete anymore."

"I can't believe she let it go on this long." JW rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm so mad at myself for not being a better cousin."

"Trust me when I say there's not a lot you could have done. My mom stayed with my dad on and off for nearly twenty-five years. My sister left her first husband because I landed myself in county lockup for beating the shit out of him. Had I not done that, who knows how long she might have stayed before either the worst happened or she had enough. Abuse is tricky, and victims are beaten down emotionally to the point they have no voice."

JW laughed. “I know that’s not funny, but I’ll never forget me and JD picking you up that morning. You were quite proud of yourself and at the same time, you looked as though you’d swallowed a lemon.”

“I should regret my actions. But I don’t. And now she’s married to Brad, which is still weird as fuck.”

“Yeah. They make for an odd couple.”

“They’re happy and that’s all that matters.” Austin peered through the house. He wished he could see out the door to the porch. Better yet, he wanted to hear what Kitty and Cinnamon discussed. He was glad Cinnamon was back where she had a major support network.

And protection.

Pete wouldn’t last two seconds if he set foot on Whiskey Ranch.

“How are you holding up? It has to be strange to see Cinnamon after all these years,” JW said.

“That’s the understatement of the century, and yet, in an odd way, it’s like no time has passed.”

“I have to ask. Why did she go to you and not her family?” JW raised his hand. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m simply glad she’s here, so it doesn’t really matter. But I am a little butt hurt that she didn’t feel comfortable coming to me. Or Irish. She’s the closest to him.”

“Well, I know Irish had some pretty harsh words for her the last time they spoke and as for you or the rest of your siblings, it has more to do with her fear that Pete will come and cause a scene in front of the children. Or worse. Not to mention the shame she feels.”

“Damn. I hate that we made her feel that way.”

“It’s not you. It’s the nature of abuse,” Austin said. “I lived it my entire life. There were times I thought my dad beat my mom because of me. That if I somehow was a better kid, he wouldn’t do it. I know that’s crazy, but to a small child, when you hear your father say things like, *you’re making our kids*

pansies, or Austin would be a better linebacker if you didn't coddle him so much, or my all-time favorite, I'm not even sure I'm their dad."

"I can't tell you how many times your dad almost lost his job. The only reason Chuck Holland or my grandparents kept him on was because of you and Tina."

"I'm well aware of that fact and completely grateful for so many reasons. Growing up here gave me so many opportunities." He pointed toward the front door. "One of them is sitting out there. Only I fucked that up royally."

"She made her share of mistakes, like sleeping with Pete."

"I forgave her for that the moment it happened." Austin rubbed his temple. "I wasn't a saint either. I said some horrible things to her the night that happened. Not to mention I slept with someone else too and she knew about it. But she broke my heart when she married that prick. I would have taken care of her and her little girl."

"Watching Rosy die of cancer was the worst. That was the only time we were ever allowed to be part of their lives. I thought for sure she'd leave him and come home. But things went downhill from there."

"I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for cutting all ties to this ranch, this family, or her for so long." Austin downed his coffee in three gulps. It burned his belly. "She says she's done and I believe her. I hope Pete gets what he deserves."

The front door flew open.

"Daddy!" Cheye came running into the kitchen and flung herself at JW. "Mommy says it's time for school."

"Then I guess we better finish getting ready." He leaned over and kissed his little girl on the cheek. "Go upstairs and I'll be there in a second to help you brush your teeth."

"Uncle Austin." Manny tugged at Austin's pant leg. "Look." He held out a frog.

"I don't think your mama would appreciate that thing in her house." Austin laughed.

“No, she would not.” JW leaned over and scooped up Manny. “Let’s take that out back. Next time you’ll go to bed without a snack. Got it, kiddo?”

“Yes, sir.” Manny frowned.

Austin bit his lower lip to keep from cracking up.

“What’s so funny?” Kitty appeared in the kitchen.

“Absolutely nothing.” Austin snagged his Stetson from the table. “Where’s Cinnamon?”

“Still sitting on the front porch.” Kitty curled her fingers around Austin’s biceps. “Please make sure she comes by the educational center today. I offered her a temp job. But also, the deadline to enroll in fall classes at the local college is in three weeks. Encourage her to do it. I know she’s hurting and a lot is going on, but the sooner she moves on with her life, the faster she’ll heal. It will also help her gain the strength and confidence she needs to get through what’s coming next.”

Austin kissed Kitty’s cheek. “You’re a good woman, Kitty Whiskey.”

“That has always had such an odd ring to it.”

“I used to tease Cinnamon about her name. I mean, come on, Cinnamon Cider Whiskey?” He smacked his forehead. “Have you ever had one of those drinks? They are gross, unlike the woman who bears the name. Speaking of which, I should go. Letting her sit and overthink might not be a good idea.”

“Agreed.” Kitty smiled. “Call us if you need anything.”

He adjusted his hat and headed toward the door. JW and the other cousins decided that Austin would take time off work and stay with Cinnamon. No one wanted her alone and Austin was all too willing to take on the responsibility.

It was the least he could do.

Chapter 5

Austin leaned against the wall by Cinnamon's bedroom door. The guttural sobs that filtered through the air cut his soul in half. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. He'd gotten out of bed to get a glass of water. He'd been restless and unable to sleep. He thought he'd heard something and took a walk down the hallway.

Part of him wished he hadn't.

The other part wanted to go in and comfort her, but he had no idea if she'd even welcome it.

Shit. He couldn't stand it a second longer. He tapped at the door. "Cinnamon?" He pushed open the door a crack. "I'm coming in."

"You don't have to." She sniffled. "I'm fine."

"No. You're not. I can hear you halfway down the hall." He stepped in, leaving the door ajar, allowing the light to filter in.

She was curled up in the bed, hugging a pillow. She pulled the covers over her head. "I'm just having a moment."

Flashes to his childhood filled his mind. His mom used to cry herself to sleep. He couldn't stand that there was nothing he could do to comfort her or make things better. Same for his sister. He'd be damned if he'd let Cinnamon go through this alone.

He strolled to the other side of the bed and pulled back the sheets.

"What are you doing?" She popped her head up.

Wrapping his arms around her, he shifted her body, tucking her head into his chest. "Let it all out."

She tilted her head. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot from crying. "I don't need your pity."

He swiped the dampness from her cheeks and pressed his lips against her forehead. "That's not what this is." He cupped

her face. “I feel your pain as deeply as I felt my mom’s and Tina’s. I watched my mother suffer in silence. You know how much the cruelty of her isolation affected me. I won’t stand on the other side of that door and let you go through this alone.”

“You don’t understand.” She bolted upright, clutching the covers to her chin. “A year after Rosy died, I knew I needed to leave Pete, yet I stayed. I knew better, but for some ridiculous reason, I thought he’d change. Or maybe I thought I could change him.”

“Babe. Don’t do this to yourself.” He fluffed a pillow and leaned against the headboard, knowing she needed a little space. This wasn’t his first rodeo. “My sister didn’t leave her ex at first because she was afraid of what people would think and the fact that she, of all people, should *know better* because of our dad. Abusers never start out in a relationship with fists.”

“Don’t tell me shit I know.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “I don’t need you to be condescending or to remind me of all the pitfalls of what happens to battered women. All I need is to cry it out.”

“I’m not stopping you from doing that. But there’s no point in being alone when there’s someone who cares about you and is willing to hold you until you’re done or fall asleep.”

“Why do you care? I mean, you hated me for years.”

He arched both brows. “What the hell are you talking about?” This was not a response he expected, nor was he sure how to deal with it. “I’ve never hated you.”

“Come on. I cheated on you. Got pregnant. Married someone else, and then you didn’t speak to me for fifteen years until I accidentally called you. And now you all of a sudden give a shit?”

He blew out a puff of air and raked a hand through his unruly hair, which desperately needed a cut.

Her ramble was deflection at its best and he contemplated if he should even give it life. However, they did have their own unresolved issues that he did want to discuss. He figured they’d do it after Pete was back behind bars and her divorce

was more than just a filing. But hell, if she wanted to get her mind off the current problem, he'd go there—for her.

“First, you didn't cheat on me. We'd broken up.”

“That's a technicality.”

“Maybe so, but let's not forget that two months before that I was the one who stepped out on you.” He lowered his chin. “I don't know why you've always given me a pass on that.”

She poked him dead center in the chest. “I was pissed as hell and hurt when you did that. But you told me and I forgave you. We did our best to get past it. And let's not forget, we were also broken up or on a break or whatever when it happened. Not to mention, she was some nameless, faceless girl you met at some party at school. Not someone we both knew. And she didn't end up pregnant.”

Closing his eyes, he counted to ten.

“I hate it when you do that. It means you're contemplating saying something I won't like.”

“I don't think this is the right time to rehash this.” He blinked.

“Just say it.”

“Fine.” He folded his arms. “The only difference between the two situations outside of you having a child was that you married Pete.” He pressed his finger over her mouth when she opened it. “After I told you I still loved you. That I didn't care about what happened and that I'd raise that baby with you. I would have done whatever it took to make us work. But you didn't believe me.”

“You think Pete was ever going to let that happen?” She fell back on the bed. “I thought about having an abortion, but it was too late.”

He rolled to his side, running his finger up and down her arm. “I'm sorry that I abandoned you. I should have fought harder for us.”

“I'm being an asshole,” she mumbled. “I hurt so I want everyone around me to be in as much pain as I'm in.”

“I get it.”

“Sometimes I hate when you’re this understanding. A part of me thinks I married Pete out of spite.”

“I know I moved to Montana and cut off all communication with anyone associated with Whiskey Ranch out of anger and frustration. I thought if I spoke to anyone, I’d ask about you or want to see you, and I was always afraid of what I’d do to Pete.”

“You can be jealous.” She laughed. “Remember Henry McGraw?”

“He was hitting on my girl right in front of me. What did you expect me to do?”

“Not throw your beer in his face.” She rested her cheek on her hands and smiled. “I’m just glad you didn’t hit him.”

“I thought about it.”

“I know.”

Being with her like this brought back so many good memories. He wanted to relish in every single one. “I’m not the only one who could be possessive. I recall one time when you threw horse manure at someone because you thought they were flirting with me.”

“That bitch Susie was absolutely giving you google eyes. And she made fun of the fact she had big boobs and I was in a training bra. She used to tell me that if she flashed you her nice round tits, you’d drop me like a hot potato.”

“That was never going to happen. But I got so much shit for having a twelve-year-old girlfriend when I was fourteen and a freshman in high school,” he said. “You’d come watch practice with all the other girlfriends and my teammates would call me a cradle robber, among other things. It eased up eventually. Two years isn’t a big age gap. But I had been in love with you since the fifth grade.”

“I used to tell JD I was going to marry you when I was like three.”

“He has pictures of you in a little wedding dress and cowboy boots.”

She groaned. “That’s so embarrassing.”

“I think it’s cute.” He reached out and brushed some of her hair from her face. The bruising around her eyes had turned a deep black and purple. It hurt his heart. “Everyone thought we were the most disgusting couple.”

“My dad thought you were a cornball, but he adored you.”

“I miss your dad. He was a good man.”

“I wish he were here,” she whispered. “I wish I could remember my mom.”

Austin hadn’t meant to bring up a painful memory such as her father’s death. He tugged her closer. “You’re not alone.”

“I know that, but sometimes it feels like I am. Not only did Pete isolate me from friends and family, but I’ve been so ashamed of what my life has become.”

Leaning in, he brushed his lips over her mouth. A fire ignited deep in his gut. He cut the kiss short. This was not the time. They may never get the chance to rekindle their love and he had to be okay with that. His role right now was to offer her comfort, a shoulder to cry on, and to be a good friend. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but you’re still young. You have time to rebuild and start fresh. And you have an entire family of crazy people to love you.”

She smiled. “Thank you for invading my personal space tonight.”

“Anytime.” He sat up.

“Austin?”

“Yes?” He glanced over his shoulder.

“Will you stay with me?”

“Of course, but can we go to my bed? It’s bigger and more comfortable. As a matter of fact, I’m going to order a new mattress tomorrow. This one sucks.”

“Thank God. I wasn’t going to say anything, but it’s killing my back.”

He jumped to his feet and offered a hand. “Come on. I promise to stay on my side of the bed.”

She burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“You said those exact words to me the first night we had sex.”

“The difference between that night and tonight is I had no intention of keeping that promise and I had a box full of condoms,” he said. “What you need is a good night’s sleep and maybe a nice long hot bath in the morning.”

“That’s sounds wonderful.”

He tugged her down the hall and into his room. “I’m also being a little selfish.”

“What do you mean?” She climbed into his bed, curling up on her side.

He turned out the light and joined her. “I won’t be able to sleep if I’m worried that you’re having another moment.”

Playfully, she slapped his shoulder. “I can’t tell if you’re pulling my leg or not.”

“I’m dead serious. I hate that you’re in so much emotional pain and that I can’t fix it.” He cupped the back of her neck and kissed her tenderly. “I’ve never stopped thinking or caring about you. I know the timing is all fucked up and your situation is difficult, but I want you to know I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere and you can count on me.”

“Please don’t make me cry.” She snuggled into his body. She was warm and soft and he didn’t want to ever let her go again.

“I don’t want to ever be the reason you shed a tear. However, I’m here to hold you if you need to let it out.”

Her hot lips landed on the center of his chest. She sighed. “Good night, Austin.”

“Sleep well,” he managed.

Chapter 6

The next couple of days flew by in a haze. Cinnamon spent her days at the educational center working at the front desk while she waited for the background check to come back and her nights were filled with dinners with her family. She enjoyed catching up with all her cousins, spouses, and kids.

By the time she returned to Austin's cabin, she was bone-tired.

Austin had returned to his role on the ranch, working with the horses. Watching how some people treated him because of the rumors about his ex-fiancée broke her heart. The fact anyone believed he could have killed her was beyond Cinnamon's comprehension. She understood Austin had a temper and could be the jealous type. She'd seen it firsthand. But murder? Never.

Austin opened the door to Boone's Bar and Grill. "You're going to love this place. The owner is married to Paget."

"She's so sweet," Cinnamon said. "I can't believe how much has changed at the ranch, and yet so much is exactly the same."

"I felt the same way when I got back."

"Austin. So good to see you." Boone, the owner of the bar and Paget's husband, raced to greet them. "You must be Cinnamon. I've heard a lot about you from your cousins."

"I hope it's all been good." Reluctantly, Cinnamon removed her sunglasses. The swelling on her face had gone down and the bruises didn't look half as bad, but they were still noticeable.

"Irish might have told a funny story or two." Boone smiled.

"How's little Henry?" Austin asked.

Boone tapped his chest. "I didn't think I could love anyone as much as I love that little boy. Even when he's being a little

stinker.” Boone smiled. “Why don’t you follow me to the back patio? I’ve got one of our best tables out there.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“I’ll take care of you personally,” Boone said. “Can I start you off with a drink?”

“I’ll take a scotch on the rocks.”

“And what about for the lady?” Boone snagged a couple of menus and headed toward the back of the restaurant.

“Can you make a Cinnamon Cider Whiskey Sour?” Cinnamon asked.

Austin burst out laughing.

Cinnamon elbowed him in the side. “Don’t make fun of the drink or the name.”

Boone chuckled. “My wife lives for a good whiskey sour, which always makes me laugh considering her maiden name is Sour.”

“Try going through life with the name Cinnamon Cider Whiskey and actually enjoying the drink.” Cinnamon first tried the beverage when she’d been seventeen, making her lips pucker. But the older she got, the more she liked it.

“You’ll be happy to know that I make a mean one.” Boone set the menus on one of the tables. “I’ll bring those right out along with a teaser of some of our best appetizers.”

“Thanks, Boone.” Austin pulled out a chair for Cinnamon.

He’d always been such a gentleman and while she never needed that kind of treatment, she always appreciated that about Austin.

“This place is nice. Thanks for taking me out tonight.” Ever since she’d been back, after spending time with family, she always cried in Austin’s arms half the night. She didn’t know why the tears came every time she laid her head on the pillow. She was glad to be away from Pete. It was a relief to be starting over. But not knowing where Pete was had started to grate on her nerves. While she hadn’t reached out to anyone

she knew in Boise, Brad's contacts had told him that no one had seen him since he'd been bailed out. The closer it got to his first appearance in court, the more she felt on edge.

"I thought you might like getting out of the house for a change. And it is Friday night."

"I've honestly been afraid to leave the ranch."

"Why?" Austin asked.

"Afraid of what people are saying about me."

Austin nodded. "I get that." He glanced around. "To be honest, sometimes when I come into town, there are people who walk on the other side of the street when they see me."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "That's terrible. I would think that people would have realized you're innocent after a year."

"The problem is that about once a month either a federal agent comes to town or a story hits some news channel, stirring it all up again."

"Why don't you fight back? Make your own statement. Isn't that what Tom or whatever his name does?"

"That's what he used to do. Now when he speaks out, it's asking for help. He doesn't attack me anymore. And it's not that I haven't thought about it, but the one lawyer that JW had me talk to recommended that my silence is golden. That anything I say could end up being used against me in any courtroom or the court of public opinion if and when they do find Charity. Besides, at this point, I only care about what my friends and family think of me."

Boone returned with their drinks and tray of what smelled like a little piece of heaven. "The apps are on the house."

"You don't have to do that," Austin said.

"If I didn't, my wife would have my head, and you know that."

Austin smiled. "Thank her for me."

Boone nodded. "Do you know what you want?"

“I haven’t had a chance to look at the menu,” Cinnamon said. “Do you have a recommendation?”

“Of course, it’s my restaurant.” Boone tucked his long hair behind his ears. “You can’t go wrong with the steak, burger, or pulled pork. But our Cobb salad is to die for if you want something lighter.”

“Oh, I want the steak, medium rare. Does that come with a baked potato?” Cinnamon asked.

“I can make that happen. And our vegetable today is asparagus.” Boone took her menu.

“Sounds great,” she said.

“I’ll have the same. Medium for me.” Austin lifted his drink and sipped.

“He doesn’t know how to eat meat.” She shook her head. “He thinks if it’s red and bloody, it’s going to kill him.”

“I just don’t want it mooing at me.” Austin laughed.

“I’ll put your order right in.” Boone turned but paused as the hostess brought a group of four to the patio.

One of the women pointed at Austin and whispered something to the hostess before turning and scurrying back inside.

Boone let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Austin said.

“Don’t be.” Boone tucked the menus under his arm. “I can’t stand that woman anyway. If she never returned to this restaurant, it would be too soon.”

“Why?” Cinnamon asked.

“Because she’s a stuck-up bitch who likes to insert herself in other people’s business,” Boone said. “She actually had the nerve once to tell me that my son shouldn’t be in my own place of business. I mean really. Paget and Henry stopped in right before the dinner rush one day and I was short-staffed, so I would have to stay that night. Kind of like tonight. Henry wanted to say good night to Daddy. No big deal. He was in

and out. That freaking lady went off on me like I gave my kid a cigar and three fingers of scotch.”

“She’s coming back,” Austin said.

“Since I seated you, the main dining room might have filled up with the exception of the few reserved tables. She might not have a choice.” Boone cringed.

“I wish I had a cigar to light up and blow in her face,” Cinnamon said.

“I have one in my office, but unfortunately even the patio is nonsmoking. Otherwise, I’d give you one.” Boone leaned closer. “But if Paget knows I’m still sneaking them, she’ll have my head.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Cinnamon smiled.

Boone strolled back into the restaurant.

“He’s adorable.” Cinnamon winked.

“My jealous streak is coming out.” Austin tilted his head.

“Come on, are you telling me you’d kick him out of bed?”

“I don’t think anyone in their right mind would.” Austin raised his glass. “To Boone.”

She clanked her glass against his and then brought it to her lips. “Oh my God. We’re taking him home.”

“I don’t think his wife would like that.”

“She’s cute. She can come too.”

“I do have a thing for younger women.”

Cinnamon kicked him under the table.

“Ouch.” He winced. “You started it.”

“And I’m finishing it.” She plucked an onion ring from the plate. It had been months. No, years since she’d had this much fun. She only wished that Austin would stop glancing at the table where that woman had been seated.

Or that she could stop worrying about Pete.

She glanced over her shoulder.

The woman glared.

“What’s your problem?” Cinnamon asked, staring back, wondering where she’d gathered the courage to confront anyone about anything.

“Don’t,” Austin whispered. “It’s not worth it.”

The woman scoffed and lowered her gaze.

She’d lost her voice the day she married Pete. They’d go out in public and she’d never dare speak unless spoken to and only if Pete allowed it.

Never again would someone else tell her what to do or how to do it.

“No. I’m not going to sit here and let her judge you. Or me for that matter.”

Austin arched a brow. “This coming from the woman who’s been worried about what people think.”

“Yeah, seeing how she just looked at you made me realize that I shouldn’t care.” She pushed back her chair.

Austin jumped to his feet. “Cinnamon. Please, don’t cause a... do what you need to.” To his credit, he sat back down.

She marched herself over to the woman’s table. “Excuse me, ma’am. Do you have a problem with me or my date?”

“How dare you come over here and interrupt me and my family,” the woman said. “And do you know who you’re having dinner with?” The woman leaned closer. “Did he do that to your face?” she whispered.

Cinnamon gasped. “You have some nerve to make that assumption. While it’s none of your business, no. He didn’t. Actually, he’s saving me from the man who did. My soon-to-be ex-husband. And for the record, that man over there is the kindest, sweetest, most gentle human being you could ever meet. You shouldn’t go listening to gossip or rumors.” She stared at the woman. “Oh my God. You’re Mrs. Ledderman. Holy shit. Didn’t your husband get arrested for fondling one of his students?”

Mrs. Ledderman's mouth dropped open like a brick. She cleared her throat. "I don't know what you're talking about. My name is Ms. Welch."

"Nope. I remember clear as day. I was in first grade. Your husband was the orchestra teacher at my friend's private school two towns over. You of all people should be kinder. I certainly wouldn't judge you by your ex-husband's actions. You shouldn't judge Austin or me, especially when he didn't do anything wrong. Now stop staring at us while we enjoy our fucking dinner." She turned on her heel and marched back to the table.

Austin covered his mouth.

"You find that amusing?"

"I didn't recognize her," Austin said. "You have one wicked memory."

"It hit me like a ton of bricks when I looked at her. I felt so sorry for what she went through. But not anymore. She can suck dick for all I care."

"Well, it looks like the Cinnamon that I remember is back." Austin chuckled. "You still have a mouth like a truck driver."

"I thought you always liked that about me."

"Never said I didn't." He raised his glass to his lips. "Listening to you in the stands when I was playing football was always amusing. One of the coaches took me aside once and told me he never heard a girl with a more colorful mouth before."

"I take that as a compliment."

A server came out and placed their food on the table.

"Not that I haven't appreciated all my cousins' hospitality or their cooking, but this is a real treat." She dug into her steak.

"It's nice to see you relax and have a good time."

“I have to admit I was worried about coming out, but I’m glad we did.”

“Me too.” He smiled. “Maybe after this we can go grab some ice cream at that shop around the corner.”

“I’d like that.” She raised her glass. “But I’m having another one of these first.”

“Uh-oh. Are you still a lightweight?”

She nodded. “I promise to keep it at two.”

“Why not three?” He winked. “Last time you did that I got lucky.”

“You’re mixing up our nights.” She waved her fork. “If I have three, you’ll be holding up my hair while I make love to the porcelain god.”

“We don’t want that.”

She held his gaze for a long moment. She could get used to this and she wasn’t sure if it was fleeting or real. They had so much history filled with a ton of baggage, both together and separate. Not to mention there was still so much of his life she didn’t know.

“You’re looking at me like you want to ask me something.” He stuffed his face with some steak.

“I do.”

“Go ahead.”

“How did you meet Charity?”

“That’s a question I didn’t expect.” He wiped his lips with his napkin and leaned back.

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

“It’s fine.” He sipped his drink. “I was working at a ranch in Montana.”

“That’s where you went after you graduated from college?”

He nodded. “I’d been there for about twelve years when Charity and her girlfriends came to the ranch on a girls’ trip.

They did not fit in at all and I found it insanely amusing. They were truly a bunch of fish out of water. Charity and I hit it off, but she was a guest and I kept her at a safe distance. However, she kept coming at me and I figured she'd be gone in a few days. Only she came back a month later."

"Why?"

He lowered his chin. "I can be charming when I want to be."

Cinnamon rolled her eyes. "I guess I asked, so go on."

"For the next seven or eight months, she'd visit me every couple of weeks. I kept telling her that I didn't do relationships. She took that as a challenge. I didn't think much about it."

Cinnamon held up her hand. "Did you have any girlfriends after we broke up?"

"Not really. I mean I dated, but nothing that lasted more than a year."

"I don't know if that makes me sad or if I'm flattered as hell."

He chuckled. "The first few years it was because I hadn't gotten over you, but as time passed, I just got used to being alone. I decided I liked sleeping in the middle of the bed."

"I've noticed. And you steal the covers."

"Well, you snore."

"I do not," she said, pushing her empty plate aside. "Go on. I'm sitting on the edge of my seat."

"Charity kept asking me to come visit her in Boise. I would tell her absolutely not. I told her that I had no intention of ever returning to Idaho. But after about a year, I decided that I liked her and she'd been coming to me, so I owed her at least one visit. It turned into two and then three. Finally, she begged me to move. She even found me a job at a ranch. Although, she absolutely hated me working there and after I moved, that became a thing."

“How long did you live there?”

“A little over a year, but I only worked at the ranch for three months.”

“What the hell did you do if you didn’t work on a ranch?” Cinnamon finished her drink and rested her elbows on the table. This answer should be interesting.

“I sold cars.” He cringed. “It was the worst fucking job on the planet.”

“Holy fuck. I can’t believe you did that.”

He shrugged. “I thought I was in love with her. Anyway, when JW offered me the job at Whiskey Ranch, I told Charity how miserable I was, which she already knew, and I said it was her turn to move for me. I honestly believed she would tell me to fuck off and we’d be done.”

“Were you engaged by this time?”

He nodded.

“You actually proposed to this woman?”

“No. She brought up marriage and then wanted to go shopping for a ring, but I always wanted my wife to wear my mother’s ring.”

“God, I hope she gave it back.”

“She did.” He let out a long breath. “Telling this story makes me feel a bit like a fool.”

“Those are your words, not mine.”

“Gee, thanks,” Austin said.

“What did she know about me?”

“Everything and truth be told, she hated you, especially after you called, and then I became a bit obsessed with discovering more about what was going on with you.”

“So, you thought moving her to my cousin’s ranch would be a good idea.” Cinnamon smacked her forehead. “I can’t imagine that was easy for her.”

“She hated every second of it, but I was happier than a pig in shit. But let’s not forget, she was cheating on me, for months.”

Cinnamon cringed.

“Let’s not go down that road again. We’ve moved past all that when it comes to us,” he said.

“Us. That’s an odd thing to say.”

“Why?”

“There is no us as in present. Only us as in the past,” she said.

“You sleep in my bed every night.” He lifted his drink and downed the last few drops. “You wake up in my arms every morning. That’s something.”

“I’m not divorced.”

“I’m aware,” he said. “But you will be.”

“I’m going to have to testify in Pete’s trial.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t know.” Austin reached across the table and took her hand. “I was half kidding about the sleeping arrangements. I understand why I’m holding you all night. I don’t pretend to believe there’s anything but a lot of history between us. But are you going to tell me you don’t have any feelings for me at all?”

“No,” she admitted. “But it’s too soon.”

“I know. Part of me is just trying to make things light and keep you smiling. But you have to know that I’ve carried a piece of you around in my heart all these years and I can’t just shut that off.”

“I’ve done the same thing but for me, I can’t simply turn it back on.” She took his hand and squeezed. “The feelings are there. I care about you and am grateful for all you’ve done. But I need a little time before I jump into anything other than this friendship we’ve formed.”

“I hear you loud and clear,” he said. “Why don’t we get the check, go get that ice cream, and then go home and watch a

movie.”

“That sounds like a great idea.” A huge weight lifted from her shoulders. As much as she wanted to fall into his arms and make love to him again, it wasn’t the right time. There was still so much confusion that swirled around in her mind. Too much unfinished business to deal with. However, when things with Pete settled, at least she knew there was hope for her and Austin and that made her soul sing.

Austin tossed the receipt with a nice tip on the table. He knew he didn’t need to do that since the owner had waited on them. But Boone would do what he always did and share that tip with his staff. Austin glanced up and his face immediately tensed. His blood turned to fire. He stood, knocking over the chair.

“What’s going on?” Cinnamon asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“Get behind me, now,” Austin said behind a tight jaw.

Thankfully, she did exactly what he asked without hesitation.

“Mrs. Ledderman. Could you please get Boone and tell him to call Brad Logan at the sheriff’s department?”

“It’s Ms. Welch,” she said with a testy tone.

“Sorry. Ms. Welch.” Austin held up his arm, protecting Cinnamon. “Have Boone tell Sheriff Logan that I need assistance with Miss Whiskey’s husband.”

“That’s who did that to her face?” Ms. Welch stood.

“Please. Just do it,” Austin whispered.

Ms. Welch snagged one of the gentleman’s hands that she came in with and scurried around a couple of tables and right past Pete, who was inching closer.

“Stay behind me, unless I tell you otherwise,” Austin said. “And if something happens, I’m apologizing ahead of time.”

“Step away from my wife.” Pete stood eight feet away.

Everyone on the patio went silent.

“That’s not going to happen,” Austin said. “You’re not welcome here, so if I were you, I’d leave.”

“Not without my wife.” Pete inched closer.

Cinnamon gripped his shoulders, digging her nails into his skin. He could feel her body shake.

He hated that Pete frightened her, taking away all her power. Men like him didn’t deserve shit.

“She’s not going anywhere with you. Ever. Now leave before I do something I’ll regret.”

“Are you threatening me? Please tell me you’re threatening me so I can defend myself.”

“Nope,” Austin said. “I’m stating a fact.” He had no idea if Brad was at home, on patrol, or at the station. Depending on where he was, it could take him five to fifteen minutes to get to Boone’s Bar and Grill. If he was too far out, he’d send one of his men. Either way, Austin needed to buy some time. The last thing he wanted to do was toss a few punches around.

But he wasn’t opposed to giving Pete a couple of black eyes.

However, he knew Cinnamon wouldn’t approve and he didn’t want to cause a bigger scene in his friend’s restaurant.

Pete took two more steps closer.

Austin inched back. “Seriously, Pete. She doesn’t want to go with you and I don’t want any trouble.”

“Trouble has a way of finding you wherever you go.” Pete smiled. “And let my wife tell me she doesn’t want to come home with me.”

Cinnamon stepped to Austin’s side. “I will never go anywhere with you again.” She inched back behind Austin.

Thank God.

“You don’t mean that,” Pete said. “Now come on, honey. I’ve let you have your little temper tantrum. It’s time to come

home and put an end to this mess you've created for me." He stepped closer, reaching his arm out.

Austin puffed out his chest. "Back off. Besides, you weren't supposed to leave Idaho Falls. The cops find you here, they will arrest you."

"No, they won't because my little wife back there will make sure all these stupid little charges are dropped." Pete narrowed his eyes. "Isn't that right, sweetie?"

"Like hell I am. You've bashed in my face for the last time," Cinnamon said with a shaky voice.

At least she had one now.

"I'm done playing games, Cinny." Pete's nostrils flared.

"Don't call me that. I hate it." Cinnamon wrapped her arms around Austin's middle, pressing her head to his back. "I'm staying right here."

"With him?" Pete made a *tsk tsk* noise. "You think I'm going to stand here and take this? You think I will let my wife be brainwashed and manipulated by this man? That's not going to happen. Not anymore. Let's go, Cinnamon."

Boone stepped out into the patio. "Excuse me. Is there a problem here?"

Pete turned. "Yeah. I'm trying to collect my wife and leave, but this asshole is holding her hostage."

"I doubt that," Boone said. "I don't believe the young lady wishes to go with you, sir. So, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You're disturbing my patrons."

"I'll be happy to." Pete smiled. "With my wife."

Austin glared at Boone. While he wanted Pete gone, he much preferred it to be in handcuffs.

"Well, it appears she's not leaving with you, so please, don't make me physically remove you or call the police." Boone shifted his eyes.

A cop car was parked outside on the side street.

Well, all right then. Austin would roll with it.

“I’m giving you one minute.” Boone raised his cell. “Leave on your own accord or the police will be here in five. Your call.”

“This isn’t over.” Pete turned.

Boone stopped him. “I’d prefer you go out the back. You’ve made my customers nervous.”

“Fine,” Pete said.

Austin stepped to the side, making sure Cinnamon stayed directly behind him.

Pete glared as he passed. “I’ll make sure you both pay for this,” he whispered.

“Stay with Boone.” Austin kissed her temple before following Pete out the back door where Brad and one of his deputies met him.

“What the fuck?” Pete stopped dead in his tracks. He turned, but Austin was there to prevent him from returning to the patio.

“Pete Thompson,” Brad said. “You’re under arrest for harassment, breaking a restraining order, and failure to remain in Idaho Falls.”

“This is bullshit,” Pete protested. “You can’t arrest me. I did nothing wrong.”

“We’ll be taking you back to Idaho Falls where you could end up remaining in lockup until your trial.” Brad slapped the cuffs onto Pete. “You shouldn’t have left Idaho Falls and you sure as shit shouldn’t have sent harassing texts to your wife. Those will be given to the prosecutor handling your case. Deputy Markus, read this guy his rights.” Brad strolled toward Austin. “I’m so glad you didn’t hit him.”

Austin wiggled his fingers. “I wanted to.”

“I’m sure you did.” Brad curled his fingers around Austin’s biceps. “How’s Cinnamon?”

“Shaken, but okay.”

“Well, you better get back to her. I’ll be in touch when he’s back in Idaho Falls.”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Brad nodded.

Austin strolled back into the restaurant. No sooner did he step foot on the patio than Cinnamon flung her arms around him and hugged him tight.

“I was so scared,” she said.

“It’s all right.” He held her close. “He can’t hurt you now.”

She tilted her head, staring into his eyes with her big blue orbs. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. “No. I was afraid you were going to deck him and you’d end up in jail.”

He chuckled. “I will admit that the thought did cross my mind.” He brushed his lips across her mouth. “But I know you would have been mad if I had, so I chose not to.”

“Can we skip the ice cream and just go home?”

“Your wish is my command.” He laced his fingers through her hand and tugged. “Boone, I’m so sorry about all that.”

“Hey, no worries. I’m just glad Brad got here in time before anything bad happened and they were actually able to arrest him.”

“You and me both.” Austin nodded.

“Excuse me,” Ms. Welch said. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior. I shouldn’t have been so quick to judge based on rumors. What you just did for this young woman took courage. I can see she’s been through a lot.”

“Everyone has a story, Ms. Welch,” Austin said. “Don’t think twice about it and thank you for going to get Boone. It is greatly appreciated.”

“You’re a kind man.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I would have hit the bastard.”

He smiled. “You have a lovely night.”

“You as well.” For the first time in a long while, Austin felt as though he not only could hold his head high, but that he had a future and it was looking pretty bright for a change.

Chapter 7

Cinnamon splashed cold water on her face and stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She looked like a raccoon. Or something straight from a horror movie. She lifted her shirt over her head. Her side didn't hurt half as much. Neither did her thigh. The doctor said the stitches could come out in five days. She'd passed that.

She shimmied out of her jeans and ran her hand over the wound on her leg. Flashes of Pete coming at her with a knife filled her brain. She'd never been so scared in her life. She honestly thought she was going to die and all because she had used the computer.

She pressed her hands against the vanity. She needed to tell Austin the truth about what happened. Why Pete lost his shit so bad that night and a few other things. She also wanted these stitches out. They itched like hell.

Sucking in a deep breath, she opened the bathroom door and entered the master bedroom.

Austin was sprawled out in the bed with his back propped up on pillows and a book in his hands. He glanced up and his eyes went wide. He cleared his throat and lowered his novel to his lap. "Are you aware you're not wearing anything but a bra and a thong?"

"I want you to take these stitches out." She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Excuse me?" He blinked.

"I've seen you do it on horses and other animals before."

"But I've never done it on a human." He set his book on the nightstand.

"It can't be that much different."

He ran his hand across her midsection, fingering one set of stitches and then the other before moving to the set on her leg.

“I suppose your wounds look as though they are entirely closed.”

“They’re driving me crazy. Please, take them out.”

“All right. Let me see if I’ve got something small enough. What I use on horses will be too big.” He pulled back the covers. “But could you at least put on some shorts? There are boxers in the top drawer of my dresser. I’ve been able to keep my hands to myself while you’re sleeping in my bed, but that thong is going to change things real quick.”

She laughed. “I thought you liked this style.”

“That’s the problem and there’s only so much a man can take. I’m going to need a cold shower now before I go to bed.” He made his way to the bathroom.

While he rummaged through the medicine cabinet, she found a pair of his boxers and hiked them up to her hips. They were a little too big, so she rolled the elastic down, hoping that would help hold them up. At least for a little while. She hoped that after she told him the truth, he wouldn’t be too mad—at least he shouldn’t be. If anything, he should be flattered.

And then maybe they could deal with what was obviously happening between them. Her feelings were real. She knew that deep in her soul. They had never died and she wanted to explore them. It didn’t matter that she’d just left her husband because that marriage had died the day they buried their daughter.

Maybe even before.

Her heart had always belonged to Austin and Pete knew it. That fact had made him go crazy.

“Okay.” Austin strolled into the bedroom carrying a small pair of scissors and some ointment. “This should do the trick.”

“You don’t sound very confident.”

“Hey, you’re the one who asked me to do this, so lie down and let me work.” He pressed his hand on the center of her chest and gave her a playful shove. Pinching her stomach, he

tugged at the stitches and began removing them one by one. "Let me know if I'm hurting you."

"It feels so good to get those things out of my body. I just want to scratch like mad."

"Don't do that. I'll put this cream on when I'm done. That should help. It will also help with scarring, so use it a couple of times a day."

"I'm not worried about the battle wounds. They are reminders of what I escaped." She lifted her head and glanced down.

He'd removed one set and was rubbing the warm cream on her stomach. "I'm so sorry about what you had to endure. I'm also sorry that I scared you tonight. But you should have been more frightened of him."

"Trust me, he terrifies me. But I didn't want you to get into a fight and land yourself in county lockup. I know you, and you don't hold back when your buttons are pushed. I also know Brad and he wouldn't hesitate to slap cuffs on you, especially if it was for your own good. But that would have left me alone and that scares me more."

"I'm here for you." Austin moved to the next set of stitches. "I've grown up a little in the last fifteen years. I have more restraint."

"Perhaps, but your rage was palpable."

He leaned over and kissed her scar. "Can you blame me? Look at what that asshole did to you." He pinched her thigh and tugged at the stitch with his fingers before making the first snip.

"Tonight could have been really bad for you."

"Me?" Austin jerked his head. "What about you? All that man was focused on was getting his hands on you."

"That's only part of what he wanted."

"What do you mean?" Austin finished rubbing the ointment on her leg. He stood and pulled out a shirt from his

dresser and handed it to her. Climbing onto the bed, he fluffed a pillow and eased in next to her.

She sat up and let out a long breath. “I didn’t accidentally call you that night I said I meant to call JW.”

“Then why did you say that?”

“I’d managed to lock Pete in the bedroom after he beat the shit out of me. I called the cops, and then I called you.”

Austin closed his eyes. “Why did you hang up on me?”

“Because Pete managed to get out.”

“What happened when the cops got there?” He blinked, taking her hand and kissing the back of it.

“I told them it was a mistake and that I fell down the stairs. They tried to separate us so they could talk to me alone, which they did. But I kept to my story because if I didn’t, I was afraid he’d go crazy and kill me because of you.”

“He knew you called me?”

“Pete had found a journal I had been writing in, which had many references to you, about how I missed you and made a mistake in marrying Pete.”

“Jesus,” Austin muttered. “All your texts now make sense.”

“In my phone I had you listed as Audrey. I don’t know when he figured out Audrey was you, but he did.”

“Did this have anything to do with me?” He waved his hand over her body.

Tears stung the corners of her eyes. “This isn’t your fault.”

“I know that. But I still want to know what happened.”

“You stopped texting and for some reason that crushed me. It had been years since we talked and getting those random texts brightened my day. When they stopped, I felt more alone than I had in years. I risked journaling again. He found them, as usual.”

“What kinds of things did you write?”

“How I missed Whiskey Ranch. My cousins. You.” She swiped at her cheeks. “He had taken my phone and shut off the internet when he was out of the house. I wasn’t allowed to work and my only friends were the ones he approved of, which were like none. I would sneak down early in the morning while he was in the shower to use the computer and google you.”

“You did what?” He jerked his head.

“I know that sounds crazy.”

“No.” He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “It’s sweet.” He brushed his lips across hers in a tender, romantic kiss. His tongue darted into her mouth.

She gripped his shoulders. Her muscles filled with heat.

“Continue,” he whispered.

“I was reading about what happened with Charity when I realized Pete was standing right behind me. I have no idea how long he’d been there. But I had googled your name and other things about you, so when he checked the search history, at least a dozen items had Austin Sawyer in it. But what was worse, he had my journal in his hands and that’s when he went nuts. He slammed my head into—”

“I don’t want the details of the beating.” Austin ran his thumb across her cheek. “I can see what he did to you and that’s enough.”

“For fifteen years Pete has been insanely jealous of you. There were times he’d asked me if Rosy was yours because she had blue eyes while his were brown.”

“You have blue eyes.”

“I know and Rosy couldn’t be yours because of the timing. Besides, I did a paternity test to prove it to him because I was so tired of listening to it.” She pressed her hand on Austin’s chest. “This was before he started beating me. While he was always possessive, it took a while for things to get this bad.”

“Don’t make excuses for him.”

“I’m not. I’m telling you what it was like. My marriage was never good. In the beginning Pete used to say there were three of us in our bed and the reality is that sometimes he was right. I never got over you. I tried. I focused on Rosy and believe it or not, Pete was a good dad.”

“How can you say that if he questioned if he was even her father?”

“He did that to hurt me. He never treated her badly. Only me. When she was diagnosed with cancer, he was at her bedside the entire time. He was attentive to her but blamed me for her getting sick. He would say that if I wasn’t thinking about you all the time, it wouldn’t have happened.”

Austin pinched the bridge of his nose. “I understand how hard it is to leave an abusive relationship, so this question is hard to ask. But why didn’t you leave him back then? Why didn’t you contact me if you still wanted to be with me?”

“Do you remember exactly what you said to me after you offered to raise my baby with me?”

“You mean after you told me to go to hell? Yeah. I remember. I told you that if you went through with the marriage never to contact me again and to enjoy your life.”

“It was a little harsher than that. But I took it to heart and did my best to make things work with Pete. When Rosy died, I was devastated.”

Austin took her hand and squeezed.

“I went into a deep depression and so did Pete. He was drinking heavily and I could barely get out of bed. All I wanted was to come back to Whiskey Ranch. To see my family. To call you. I tried to find you. I reached out to all my cousins, but no one knew where you were. When Pete found out I had been looking for you, that’s when the isolation really began and because I was in such a bad headspace, I didn’t even see it happening.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that.”

“Again, I’m not doing that. But there was a part of me that felt as though I deserved to be punished. I know that’s not true.

However, you have to understand that when I realized what a huge mistake I had made, in my young mind, I believed that I somehow brought on all the misery. A few years went by. I sought counseling, first with Pete's blessing, but when I started to get better and gain confidence, he took that away from me. Eventually, I became numb to it all until I couldn't take it anymore. But even then, I couldn't commit to leaving for a couple of years. He threatened to hurt my family. To destroy you. He told me he knew where you were and that he'd make sure you'd suffer."

"How did you get my phone number? Because I changed it. And you never changed yours, which I find odd because I would think Pete would have wanted you to."

"He allowed it to keep my family from freaking out, but he controlled the communication and it's not that hard to find cell numbers these days. Besides, I asked Irish for it once I knew you were back at the ranch."

"Irish never told me that."

"Because I begged him not to."

"That man does know how to keep a secret," Austin said. "All this time, I thought you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I was young and made many mistakes, but I can't say Rosy was one of them."

He kissed her nose. "I'm so sorry about her passing. It breaks my heart that you had to go through that. I wish I could have met her."

"She was a sweet little girl."

"I'm sure she was." Austin pulled her close. "I don't know if this is bad timing or not, but I feel compelled to tell you that I've spent the last fifteen years thinking about you too. Every woman I've ever dated was never good enough because they weren't you. I can't tell you how many times some chick broke up with me because I was still hung up on you. The only one who didn't was Charity, but she was cheating on me anyway." He laughed. "Funny thing though, the second she walked onto this ranch, she bitched about all the things here

that were all about Cinnamon, including the box I have under this bed.” He leaned over and pulled it out. “This has all the stupid little notes you used to pass me in the hallways at school. Some of the cards you sent me in college. Pictures. All sorts of sappy sentimental stuff. I had to hide it so she wouldn’t burn it.”

“Shit, Pete did burn mine.”

“Now I wish I had hit him,” Austin said.

Cinnamon lifted the lid off the box and pulled out one of the notes. “I can’t believe you kept all this stuff. You were always sentimental and little sappy, but I would have never expected this.”

“I’ll be honest, there were a couple of times I thought about getting rid of them.” He held an old birthday card in his hands. “But every time I tried, it felt like I was tossing away a piece of my heart.”

She continued to thumb through some pictures. “Oh my God. This was from my freshman formal. You look so handsome in that suit.”

“I hated it.”

“I know. You bitched about it half the night.”

“We did make a good-looking couple though.” He took the image from her hands, stuffed it in the box, and set it aside. “Is it crazy that I still care about you?” He palmed her cheek. “Dare I say, even love you.”

She swallowed her beating heart. “I don’t think I’ve ever stopped loving you,” she said. “I worry, though, that all my feelings are past memories. I don’t know the man you are today and you don’t really know me anymore.”

“That’s easily remedied.” He ran his hand through her long hair. “Whiskey Ranch is your home. I’m certainly not going anywhere. There’s no reason why we can’t start fresh.”

“That sounds so cliché.”

“Don’t you believe it’s possible?”

She leaned in and kissed his sweet lips, letting them linger for a long, delectable moment. It truly was like she'd returned to the very place she'd always belonged. "We've hurt each other in ways many could never come back from."

"And yet we're in each other's arms right now." He arched a brow. "Outside of running into Pete, I had a great time tonight. I don't think I've felt this alive in years and that's all because of you."

"I know what you mean, but I don't want to rush things because of our history, which is a total switch from when I walked out of that bathroom, because I had every intention of trying to seduce you."

He chuckled. "I wasn't born yesterday. I figured that out when you weren't wearing much. But I take it you've changed your mind."

"It's not that. I still want you. I'm just wondering if maybe it might be better if we wait."

"Like until morning?"

She slapped his shoulder.

"Okay, tomorrow night?"

"You're impossible."

"I'm kidding," he said. "I never thought I'd ever have a second chance with you, so if waiting a week, two, or a month is what you need, I can do that."

"Oh my God. This reminds me of the first time you tried to have sex with me. You were so patient."

"Only you didn't make me wait for more than three days." He held up three fingers and waggled his brows. "You texted me after football practice and asked me to meet you at your place. I didn't know your dad was gone for the night."

"The look on your face was classic when I met you at the door in a tiny nighty, holding a box of condoms."

"You were sixteen. Way too young to be having sex." He smacked his head. "What was I thinking?"

“You were a horny teenager who hadn’t had sex yet yourself.”

“This is true and imagine my surprise when my girlfriend turned out to be a sex addict.”

“I was not.” She scowled. “I just liked sex with you.”

“I had no idea what I was doing.”

“You could have fooled me.” She yawned. “Is it okay if I still stay in here with you tonight? If it’s too—”

He pressed his finger over her lips. “I’ll sleep better with you at my side, especially until I get word that Pete is tucked back into a jail cell in Idaho Falls.”

“What happens if they let him out again?”

“Babe, we’ll deal with it if they do, but trust me when I say, I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you’re safe.” He pulled back the covers and pulled them over their bodies. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow we can take a nice leisurely horseback ride and have a picnic.”

“That sounds like a little piece of Whiskey Ranch heaven.” She rolled to her side, tucking her back against his chest, and closed her eyes. For the first time since she arrived home, the tears didn’t come.

Chapter 8

The weekend flew by in a haze of happiness. Cinnamon couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this free and light. Austin hadn't left her side for two days. He'd taken her horseback riding. He'd cooked her dinner and served her breakfast in bed. They spent Sunday with the rest of the family at JD and Annette's house. It felt good to be home.

While she continued sleeping in Austin's bed, he didn't push sex. He respected her wishes in wanting to take things slow. They had a few make-out sessions and she wanted to cave sometimes, but she had other concerns about making love.

Like the fact she hadn't liked it anymore. Sex with Pete hadn't been enjoyable the last few times they had it and if Austin knew there had been occasions when it wasn't consensual, he'd go ballistic.

Another truth she needed to tell him, but that would have to wait for another day.

There was still so much that hung over her head.

Pete might still be in jail, but he had a hearing to determine if the judge would make him stay there until his trial. That thought terrified her because she did not doubt that he'd return to Whiskey Ranch if given his freedom.

"Hey, babe. Is there any more coffee left?" Austin strolled from the master bedroom into the kitchen, smelling of fresh pine. His hair was damp from his shower and his face was free of stubble. He wore a pair of faded jeans and a black T-shirt. He set his Stetson on the counter.

"I already put some in your travel mug." She handed it to him. "There are a few strips of bacon left too."

"Mmm. Yum." He kissed her cheek.

A knock at the door startled her and she jumped. "Sorry. I'm so nervous about today."

“You tossed and turned half the night. I know you’re worried, but the DA’s office said they’d call us as soon as anything has been decided.” He patted her bottom as he moved toward the front of the house.

“I know. I know.” She pulled out one of the stools in front of the counter and plopped her ass on it. Lifting her mug, she sipped her coffee.

“Luke. Georgia Moon. What brings the two of you out here this morning?” Austin said.

“I need your help with an injured bull,” Luke said. “He got tangled up in some barbed wire and the vet’s not around for a couple of hours.”

“Bulls are not what I’m known for, but I’m happy to go take a look,” Austin said. “Why don’t we call Gage to give me a hand. He’s always been good at assisting me with stuff like this.”

“Gage asked for some time off. Something about wanting to go visit relatives,” Georgia Moon said. “I thought it strange because he’s never once asked for vacation time.”

“Not to mention he hasn’t talked to his siblings since the fire that took his family,” Luke said. “He hasn’t spoken to them in years.”

“Maybe this is a good thing,” Austin said.

“I don’t know about that.” Cinnamon had spent many hours listening to Gage discuss how his siblings blamed him and refused to attend the funeral. “He told me it would be a cold day in hell before he ever forgave them. What exactly did he say?”

“He sent us a text message,” Georgia Moon said. “All it said was that he was going to see his family and that he needed a week or so to deal with some personal things. We told him not to worry and take as long as he needed. That if we could do anything for him, not to hesitate to reach out. He’s always been such a loyal employee that we felt it was the least we could do.”

“That doesn’t sound like Gage,” Austin said. “However, he is getting older and I can see how he might want to reconcile with his siblings.” He nodded. “We should get going. I don’t want that bull to suffer.”

“Me neither,” Luke said.

“I’m going to stay here and visit with Cinnamon for a bit.” Georgia Moon scurried into the kitchen. “I hear you’re going to start working in the infant room today.”

“I am.” Cinnamon smiled. “I’m so excited.”

“Did you fill out the application for school yet?” Austin snagged his Stetson.

Cinnamon shook her head.

Austin scowled. “The deadline is approaching.” He wagged his finger. “Don’t start with me about the money. It will get figured out.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I’ll see you tonight.” Austin leaned in and kissed her a little too hard on the lips in front of her cousin and Luke. “Have a great day with the babies.” He followed Luke out the door with a spring in his step.

“He’s happy this morning.” Georgia Moon pulled down a mug and poured some coffee before sitting on a stool. “Something you want to share?”

“Nothing’s happened.” Cinnamon was close to all her cousins, but she and Georgia Moon had a unique friendship. It had been strained because of Pete, and they hadn’t talked for many years. But as kids, they were close and Cinnamon was glad to have that friendship back. “I’m not ready yet.”

“Why not? It’s obvious to everyone how much the two of you still love each other.”

“That’s not the problem.” Cinnamon groaned, dropping her head to the counter. “There’s one thing I haven’t told him yet and I don’t know how he’s going to take it. Not to mention, I don’t know how I’ll react to a sexual encounter.”

Georgia Moon ran her hand up and down Cinnamon's back. "I'm sure Austin's brain has already gone there, because the rest of us have already thought it or talked about it."

Cinnamon jerked upright. "What the hell?"

"Come on. You still have bruises on your face. Pete abused you. It goes without saying he most likely raped you too."

"How can you say that so flippantly?"

"I'm not." Georgia Moon held her gaze with a softness emanating from her tender eyes. "Are you going to tell me it didn't happen?"

"No." Cinnamon sighed. Her first thought had been to explain it away like she'd always done. She could come up with a million reasons why Pete had done the things he had, but she was done making excuses for that asshole. What happened was wrong. Criminal even. And if she were smart, she'd add it to the list of things she needed to testify against him for. "I feel such shame over what happened and every time I think I'm ready, I tense over the idea. I worry that I'll freak out. Or do what I did with Pete and leave my body and lie there like I'm dead."

"I'm not a psychiatrist, so I could be speaking out of my ass, but you've loved Austin since you were a kid. He's not Pete. He's a kind, sweet, gentle man who would walk on water for you. I'm sure things with him would be so different, especially if he knew your fears."

"You don't know him the way I do." Cinnamon shifted, straddling the stool. "He has a wicked jealous streak when it comes to me. He despises Pete more than ever for what he's done. I know it took a great deal of restraint on his part that night at Boone's place not to haul off and put a fist through Pete's nose."

"But he didn't because Austin has learned over the years that punching someone doesn't correct the wrong. It doesn't even make him feel all that better."

"And you know this how? He left Whiskey Ranch and had no contact with any of you for over a decade."

“Because I’ve seen it in action,” Georgia Moon. “A few months ago, we had an employee whose husband abused her and Austin tossed his ass off this ranch, but he didn’t hit him. Just literally lifted him over his shoulder, tossed him in his truck, and drove him to the bus station where he handed him a ticket and warned him that if he ever saw him near Tamara or this ranch, all bets were off.”

“Has that man ever returned?”

Georgia Moon shook her head. “Of course, my husband went with Austin and carried a shotgun, which helped.”

“Oh, Luke. God, I love that man. I’m so glad the two of you found each other.”

“It was a long hard road, but I couldn’t be happier.” Georgia Moon squeezed Cinnamon’s biceps. “You can be this happy too. With Austin. The two of you are meant to be together. This is your second chance.”

“I’m scared. When I left him at nineteen, I was so angry at him for the roller-coaster ride he’d put me on the last year of our relationship. I was mad at myself for turning to Pete and getting pregnant. But at the same time, I was excited to be a mom. I wanted that baby so badly. My own little person to love. I pinned all my hopes on her and I failed her too.” Once again, the tears came hot and fast.

“Oh, honey. No, you didn’t. I understand that everything that is happening is bringing up so much pain and making you question the decisions you made. But what matters is what brought you to this moment in your life. You’re going to be free of Pete and there is no reason why you can’t start building a life here again. You’ve got job opportunities. You can go back to school and have the career you’ve always wanted. And you can have the man you love. You just have to tell yourself that you deserve it.”

“Austin thinks I should see a therapist.”

“What do you think?”

“I know he’s right. I went to one for a brief time when Rosy died, but Pete was so against it.” Cinnamon swiped at

her cheeks. She reached for her coffee and sipped. “Austin looked up a few this morning and left them with me. He even offered to go with me if I thought it would help. Or at the very least, he said he’d sit in the waiting room while I did my thing. He’s super supportive about everything and while I know he means it, I sometimes don’t trust it.”

“Because of Pete.”

“Yeah. But also because of what happened after Austin’s dad died. He went through a dark time.”

“I remember. He blamed himself for a lot of things.”

“He does that with me. As if he could have prevented what happened with Pete. He’s constantly telling me he should have fought harder for us. We both have regrets. The thing is, I can never regret Rosy.”

“I take it you’ve told him that.”

Cinnamon nodded.

“And what does he say?”

“That he doesn’t expect me to. That what’s done is done. That we can’t change the past. We can only move forward.”

“I’m not sure I understand what the problem is then.” Georgia Moon lowered her chin. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I don’t know. Maybe being happy. I’ve forgotten what that looks like.”

Georgia Moon smiled. “There’s only one way to find out and that’s to let it happen.” She kissed Cinnamon’s cheek. “I need to get back to the bull riding school and you need to get to your first official day at the nursery. Trust me. Let Austin in. It’s going to be worth the risk and you know your heart and soul want it.”

“You’re right.” Cinnamon rose and squared her shoulders. “I’ll send in the application for college today. Call a therapist. And I’ll tell Austin the truth tonight.”

“Good for you and call me anytime you want to talk. I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate how you and everyone else have welcomed me back.”

“Are you kidding? You’re family. We’ve missed you.” Georgia Moon looped her arm around Cinnamon’s waist. “This place hasn’t been the same without you.”

Chapter 9

Austin pushed open the door to the cabin. “Cinnamon? Are you home?”

“In the kitchen.”

He tossed his Stetson on the sofa and kicked off his boots. “Are you cooking? It smells like... I don’t know... is that pasta or something?”

“Fettuccine Alfredo. At least it’s what I’m trying to make. I have no idea if it will be any good or not. I’ve never been the best cook.”

“I’m sure it will be great.” He took the beer she offered and leaned against the counter.

She’d pulled her hair into some bun thing on the top of her head. She wore jeans, a white tank top, with an apron, and bare feet. The sexiest thing he’d ever seen. “Did you have a good day with the babies?”

“It was the best. I can’t wait to go back tomorrow. Oh, and you’ll be happy to know that I sent in my college application today. But...” She waved a spatula in his face.

He leaned back and arched a brow.

“...it’s incomplete because of the financial aspect. I’m still married to dickface so I can’t apply for financial aid.”

“I told you that I’d pay for it.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Then you can pay me back when you get your divorce and go from there,” he said. “Consider it a loan.”

“You have an answer for everything.”

“I’m a smart man.”

She set the spatula on the counter and shoved two plates in his gut. “You’re a wiseass is what you are and while I appreciate the gesture, I need to be on my own two feet.”

“Babe. Right now, you have no credit cards, no money, and everything is wrapped up with your soon-to-be ex.” He set his beer on the counter, moved to the other side of the kitchen, and did as he was told. Not just because she asked, but he knew her well enough that getting out of her way while he had this conversation was for his own safety. “I understand you want to do this on your own terms. I respect that. But Pete is in jail. Even if this case doesn’t go to trial and he plea-bargains it out, we both know he will fight you in this divorce.”

“Not to mention he won’t give me a dime.”

“All the more reason to let me give you a loan.” He made sure he chose the words she would hear, even if that meant he’d have to let her pay him back. He didn’t want that because eventually he wanted a life with her, and to him, that meant they shared everything fifty-fifty. But until they reached that point, he’d agree with her borrowing the money.

“I could get a loan from a bank.”

“Interest rates are high and don’t shoot the messenger, but you haven’t had a job long enough for a bank to take that risk. I, on the other hand, wouldn’t charge you interest and I know you’re good for it.”

“You’re going to argue with me until I say yes, aren’t you?” She carried a large plate of pasta and set it on the table. She smoothed down the front of her apron and sighed.

“I’m not arguing. I’m pointing out facts. And hopefully being a good boyfriend.”

“Oh, is that what you think you are?”

“I’m not?” He raced to the other side of the counter, grabbed his beer, and chugged.

“You are.” She laughed, although it was a nervous one. “But you might not be after this dinner.”

“Why? Are you really expecting that it will taste that bad?”

“No.” She turned and lifted a bottle of wine and poured a glass. “But the dinner conversation is going to be tough.”

“Uh-oh. Let me fill my belly first.” He sat down and stuffed his face with a big forkful. “Holy shit. This is actually really good.”

“I’m glad you like it.” She let out a long breath. “I need to tell you something and it’s going to upset you.”

He wiped his mouth with his napkin and leaned back. “I’m listening.”

“It’s about Pete.”

“He will be in jail until his hearing and hopefully, the judge will keep him there.” His appetite disappeared. He had a good idea where this conversation was headed. He had suspicions about some of the underlying issues Cinnamon had been having regarding intimacy. He didn’t need to be a counselor or a doctor to figure that one out. He’d opted not to pry or pressure her into talking about it, much less doing anything other than snuggling or kissing. When she was ready, they’d deal with it.

He had his own set of problems that he would have to share, which would also have to be tonight, making this evening even harder. The only reason he knew anything about what was going on with the investigation into Charity’s disappearance was that his brother-in-law had heard about it through his buddy at the FBI.

“I know and I feel better knowing he’s there. I just wish he’d sign the divorce papers. I called the lawyer today and nothing has been done regarding that. I don’t want it to go on forever.”

“It won’t. Eventually, whether it be because he signs them or because it goes before a judge, it will happen.”

She twirled her pasta around her fork, but never brought it to her mouth. She stared at her food as if it were going to speak for her, so Austin decided to make it easier.

He reached across the table and took her hand. “Cinnamon, look at me.”

She lifted her gaze.

“I shouldn’t assume anything about what happened in your marriage, but a lot has gone on inside my head. Since you’ve been home, I’ve had nightmares about it.”

“What do you mean?”

He touched the side of her face. “Your bruises are disappearing. The scars are healing, but I know there is more to this story you haven’t told me. I haven’t asked because I know it’s painful. Shameful. Embarrassing and a whole list of other emotions for you. However, you need to know that I don’t see you as the sum of what he did to you. I’m angry as hell. I hate knowing he hurt you emotionally, physically, sexually. I blame myself for it, even though I know there was nothing I could have done. I hope that asshole rots in prison for the rest of his life. But what he did has nothing to do with you or how I feel about you. It doesn’t change the fact that I love you.”

Tears fell from her eyes. “Why do you have to be so kind and know all the right things to say and at precisely the perfect moment?”

He pulled her from her chair to his lap. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her neck. “I don’t know. I know you were struggling to tell me something, and I took a stab in the dark at what it could be based on how you pull away.”

“I don’t want to be like this.”

“Babe, I know that. And you won’t be forever. Did you call any of those therapists and schedule an appointment?”

“I have one on Friday.”

“Would you like me to come?”

She cupped his face. “You have to work.”

“Come on. You know how this ranch operates. It will be okay if I let JW know I need to sneak off for a few hours for something.”

“All right. I’d like that.”

“Good. Now, I have something I need to discuss with you,” he said.

“That sounds ominous.”

“It kind of is,” Austin admitted. “Brad called me about an hour ago. It seems tomorrow morning I will be getting a visit from Agent Belmont.”

“Who’s that?”

“The FBI agent who has been investigating Charity’s disappearance.”

“Why would Brad know about that?” Cinnamon asked.

“He has a buddy at the local FBI office who gave him the heads-up.”

“Why is he coming?”

“That’s the scary part. I don’t know. He usually comes out here once a month or when one of Charity’s family members tells a crazy false story about my relationship with Charity. But this time, there’s been nothing in the press. No chatter about someone who thought they saw Charity or a tip that came over the hotline. Nothing. That makes me nervous. However, Brad told me there has been a lot of activity and he won’t tell me what that is. He says he can’t this time, but he said it’s potentially bad.”

“Does this agent act as if he thinks you did something to her?”

“He did in the beginning. Now he goes back and forth between it either being me or Tom. It’s like he plays us off each other. One day he’s all friendly with me, telling me he believes it’s Tom and not me, the next it’s the opposite. He has a job to do, and I get he has to follow all the leads. Brad keeps telling me that if he honestly believed I had anything to do with her disappearance, he’d be coming around more often.”

“Do you think Tom did something to her?” Cinnamon asked.

“I used to, but not anymore. He’s just as distraught over her disappearance as I am. Actually, even more. I think the man loved her. I just wanted you to know that this agent will be showing up tomorrow to have a little chat with me.”

“I’m glad you told me. It would have totally freaked me out if he randomly knocked on the door and I didn’t know.”

He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger, giving her little kiss. “Let’s finish this amazing dinner. Then I’ll do the dishes while you take a nice hot bath. After that, we can watch a movie and go to bed.”

“I like that sound of that.”

So did Austin.

Now matter how much Cinnamon tried, she couldn’t settle her mind. Granted, it had only been twenty minutes since they had climbed into bed. Every night she slept with her back to Austin’s chest and his arms around her body. He would whisper good night in her ear and kiss her shoulder. But when she woke in the morning, she’d be alone. He’d always managed to slip from the bed without waking her and jump in the shower. She had no idea why it bothered her so much, but it did.

She rolled to face him, resting her knee on his legs.

He blinked. “Is something wrong?”

“I can’t sleep.”

Palming her cheek, he leaned in and brushed his lips over her mouth. His kisses were always tender and loving, his embrace protective and warm. She could feel his love with every touch.

But not his passion.

“I know you’re worried about things with Pete and the FBI agent coming. I am too. But close your eyes and think about ___”

“It’s not that.” She ran her hand down his chest, letting her fingers graze across his nipples. She moved over his taut stomach and fingered the elastic of his underwear. She didn’t dare reach inside. That would be too bold. Too forward. She would allow him to move things along. He had to want it too.

He grabbed her wrist. “What are you doing?”

“I feel like another weight was lifted tonight by you knowing everything that happened and that it allows us to take the next step in our relationship.”

He smoothed her hair from her face and stared intently into her eyes. “There’s no rush.”

“Don’t you want me?” She resented the quiver in her voice. She hated how Pete had stolen all her confidence. She’d never had the chance to grow as a woman. She’d been stuck in a cycle of constant fear and denigration.

But not anymore. It wasn’t just being back with Austin that gave her strength. She would admit that he helped her pave the way and showed her exactly who she wanted to be. But so did everyone else on Whiskey Ranch. The supportive environment made it easier for her to heal quickly both physically and emotionally. There was no judgment. No one responded negatively. Everyone was happy to have her home.

However, in her heart of hearts, she knew Austin was her soulmate. He was her everything. Not a day had passed that she hadn’t thought about him and what he might be doing. Had he married? Did he have children? She had missed him terribly. Now that she could start over, she didn’t want to let another night pass.

“Of course I do.” He pulled her tight, running his hand up and down her back, gently squeezing her ass. “Don’t ever question my desire for you. It takes a lot of restraint and many cold showers to stay here each night and keep my hands to myself. I don’t want you to rush into this. You’ve been through so much and you’ve barely even left him. You have a lot to work through. I don’t want you to regret being with me.”

She cupped his face, running a finger over his lower lip. Never in a million years would she have thought he would be concerned about something like that. “I would never. I love you.”

“I know you do. But—”

She hushed him with a kiss. She slipped her tongue between his lips, twirling it frantically around his, desperate to show him how ready she was. Feeling empowered, she rolled him to his back, straddling him. She pressed her hands on his chest and sat up taller.

His chest heaved up and down.

She ripped her shirt over her head and tossed it across the room. Taking his hand, she placed it over her breast. Pressure grew between her legs. Her muscles ignited with joy.

His thumb fanned across her nipple. It tightened and tingled.

She arched her back, letting the sensations take over.

“Cinnamon,” Austin said with a raspy voice. “Before we continue, I need something from you.”

She lowered her gaze. “What?” Her lungs burned. She couldn’t fill them.

“I need you to be in control. We do this your way. Whatever you want. How you want it. If you don’t like something, we stop. If you’re uncomfortable, you tell me and we stop. I need you to promise me that you won’t continue just because you think it’s what I want.”

She couldn’t love this man more if she tried. “I promise.”

Lifting his head, he took her nipple into his mouth, keeping his eyes locked with hers. He swirled his tongue over the sensitive nub and then sucked.

Running her fingers through his hair, she watched him go from one breast to the other. He teased her relentlessly and she loved every second.

He glided his fingers down the center of her chest, across her stomach, and into her panties. “I want to touch you.”

“Oh, God. Yes, please.”

He chuckled, lifting her off his lap and gently laying her on the bed. He tugged her underwear down and kissed her ankles. “You’re so beautiful.” He licked two fingers before

gliding them up her inner thighs. Gently, he rubbed them across her, teasing her, toying with her until she jerked her hips upward, demanding he give her what she desired.

“Please don’t hold back.” She could barely manage a full breath. “I need you.”

He nestled his head between her legs. His tongue darted from his mouth, licking her hard, throbbing nub.

Immediately her body exploded like fireworks going off on the Fourth of July. She dug her heels into the mattress and stared at Austin in awe. She’d never felt more loved in her life.

He reached his hands up and fondled her breasts, tugging and twisting at her nipples.

“Oh my God. Austin,” she cried out. An unexpected orgasm tore through her body. She jerked and quivered uncontrollably. She clutched at his head, squeezing her legs together.

Austin continued to lap at her slowly. He inserted two fingers, stroking her tenderly.

The sensation repeated itself two more times, although not as intensely as the first.

He lifted his head, kissing his way up her stomach, stopping at her breasts to suck on her nipples before landing on her lips.

Wrapping her arms around his strong shoulders, she drew him close.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

“I can’t believe you just asked me that question. Isn’t it obvious?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. It is. But I’m trying to be a nice guy.”

“You can do that by seeing if we can make that happen again.” She reached down, slipping her hands into his boxers and pulling them over his ass. “But first I have to see if you’re ready.”

His brows shot up. “Trust me. I’m more than ready.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” She pushed him to his back and his boxers to his ankles. It had been a long time since she had enjoyed sex. She ran her hands up his legs, cupping him, stroking him, enjoying how he tensed and relaxed.

“You don’t need to do this.”

“I want to.” She smiled before taking the tip into her mouth.

He groaned, taking her hair and piling it up on top of her head. “You’ve got two minutes. That’s all I can handle.”

“Sucks to be a man and not have the ability to have multiples.”

“I’m a giver, not a taker.”

She stared into his soulful eyes as she licked his shaft.

“Now you only have a minute,” he said behind a tight jaw.

Wanting to put that time to good use, she took as much of him into her mouth as she could. Austin had been the first man she’d ever touched. He taught her about his body and showed her things about herself she had no idea about. They had learned to love together. The thrill of being back in his arms filled her heart. There was no other man for her.

Only Austin.

He tugged at her hair. “That’s enough.”

“I thought you said I was in control.”

“You are, except for that.” He cupped the back of her neck and kissed her hard. It was filled with passion and made her come alive.

She felt desirable for the first time in years.

Straddling him, she eased his length inside, taking him glorious inch at a time. He filled her like no one else.

He gripped her hips. A groan escaped his mouth.

She rocked back and forth, letting the pressure build. Her muscles twitched and tightened as her climax approached. She

curled her toes, hoping to ward it off, but the pleasure exploded like a volcano.

“Austin. Yes.” She pressed her hands on his chest, arching her back, grinding against him with fury. Every nerve ending tingled. Her orgasm rolled into a second as he thrust himself deep inside her, releasing his own.

“Sweet Cinnamon,” he whispered, pulling her to his chest and kissing her neck. He ran his hands up and down her back, massaging gently.

It took a good five minutes for either of them to catch their breath.

She rolled off him and snuggled into his side. Tickling her fingers through the few strands of chest hair he had, she sighed. “You’re so wonderful.”

“So are you.” He pressed his lips against her temple. “I love you so much.”

She lifted her head. “I love you too. Thank you.”

He chuckled. “You never have to thank me for loving you.”

“It’s not that.” She rested her chin on her hands. “You’re always so patient and kind.” A tear burned her cheek.

“Don’t cry, babe.”

“These are happy tears.” She smiled. “I was so lost when I came here and now I have direction. I truly feel like the world is at my fingertips and everything will be all right.”

“It will be.” He rubbed his thumb over her lip. “But we might have a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Are you on birth control? We didn’t discuss that.”

Her eyes went wide. “I was, but I left all my pills back in Idaho Falls. I haven’t taken them since I arrived and I just didn’t think about it.”

“I should have been the one who did. Not you.” He brushed her hair back. “I’m sorry.” His eye twitched. “Would you ever want to have another child?”

“Wow. I don’t know. I mean, obviously not in my past situation, but I’d always thought it would be you and me having a family.” She dropped her head to his stomach. Her cheeks heated. “I used to fantasize about it late at night or when writing in my journal.”

“You wrote about that?” He lifted her chin. “And Pete read it? That couldn’t have gone over well.”

“Let’s not talk about him or what he did with that information.” A flash of one of the worst beatings, outside of the last one, she’d ever taken filled her mind.

“Fair enough.” Austin nodded.

“Do you want to have kids?”

“I never wanted to have them with anyone but you.”

“What about Charity? Did she want them?” Cinnamon asked.

“She did and we talked about it, but it wasn’t something that I was fully on board with. I used coming back to Whiskey Ranch as one of the conditions in having a family, which looking back was a mean thing to do.”

“You didn’t love her.”

“No, I didn’t.” He brushed his warm lips over hers in a tender kiss. “I’ve always loved you and if I’m being honest, while I don’t think this is the right time for us to be reckless about birth control, I want a future with you, including having a family.”

“There’s still so much that is hanging over my head.”

“I know. That’s why from now on, I’ll reach for a condom.”

“You have some?”

“I bought them the other day.” He laughed. “I like to be prepared. I’ve been hoping that someday soon you’d be ready

to be open about everything that happened and we could move things along.”

“I’m a lucky girl to have such a sweet man in my life.”

“No, I’m the lucky one. Now let’s get some sleep.” He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes.

There were only three things that worried Cinnamon.

How long her divorce would take.

How long Pete would end up in prison for.

And what this FBI agent wanted to discuss with Austin.

She sucked in a long shallow breath, letting it out slowly. As if all those worries weren’t enough.

Chapter 10

Austin leaned against the railing, sipping his coffee and watching the sunrise. He hadn't slept well, which bothered him because he should have, considering how the evening ended. Being with Cinnamon again had been beyond his wildest dreams. It was as if they'd picked up where they left off. They'd been so young. He had been only twenty-one and she nineteen. They'd both suffered great tragedy in their lives. She handled hers well, but Austin had gone to a dark place and he'd lost the woman he loved.

He had only himself to blame for the last fifteen years.

Well, and Pete.

Last night should have marked a new beginning. A fresh start. Their love was even deeper than before, yet this black cloud hung over his head, waiting to be unleashed. There had been only two other times that Agent Belmont showed up without a story popping up in the news. The first time there had been an anonymous tip that someone had seen Austin dumping what looked like it could have been a body. There was absolutely no truth to it and after Belmont investigated, it turned out to be nothing. According to Belmont, that piece of information was going to be kept from the press and for about a month, there was no talk of it. But someone leaked it and Belmont had to comment.

It made Austin look as though he'd done something to Charity because of the close proximity to the ranch, but no body had ever been found. However, people still talked.

Which didn't help Austin in the court of public opinion.

The second time was when some random woman came forward, stating she saw Austin driving Charity's vehicle near the same location. That was damning because this woman was adamant and had a clear description. But there was not enough evidence to bring Austin up on charges.

Yet.

His cell buzzed. He glanced at the screen.

Tom.

In the last few months, they'd become friendly.

"Hey, Tom, what's up?"

"Have you gotten a visit from Belmont?"

"I'm expecting him this morning, why?" Austin asked.

"I know we don't always see eye to eye on things, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"I take it you've spoken to Belmont."

"He paid me a visit last night and asked me all sorts of questions like if I knew about any connections Charity might have had with a Pete and Cinnamon Thompson."

"What the fuck?" Austin dropped the phone. He bent over and picked up, hitting the speaker button and planting his butt on the steps. "Are you shitting me?"

"Nope. He asked me if Charity could have been speaking with either of them."

"Is it?" Austin swallowed.

"When I look back on the last few months of the affair, I wonder why she moved there with you. I begged her not to. Please don't take this the wrong way and I don't say it to hurt you."

"We're past all that, Tom."

"Okay. Okay. She kept complaining to me about how much she didn't love you and hated the idea of living there. Once she got to the ranch, it was even worse. I didn't understand why she did it if she wanted to be with me. She kept saying she owed it to you and I thought, not if she didn't love you. So, if this Pete guy wanted to take you down for some reason, and she knew it, anything is possible."

"Holy shit." Austin jumped to his feet and raced into the house. "Cinnamon, I need your cell."

"Cinnamon's there?" Tom asked.

“Yeah. It’s a long story, but if my suspicions are right, there’s a timeline, and we might finally have some answers. Can I call you back?”

“Please do, but also, watch your back. And for the record, I’m sorry if I did anything to perpetuate this vendetta against you. I’ll also do whatever it takes to help.”

“I might just have to take you up on that,” Austin said. “I’ll be in touch.” He stared at Cinnamon who stood in the kitchen wearing his old football jersey and boxers.

He groaned.

“Why do you need this?” She placed her phone in his hands.

“Did you delete anything from Pete or from me over the last year and a half?”

“You told me not to in case we needed it in the divorce or his criminal trial.”

“Good girl.” He batted her nose. “I can’t believe I didn’t see this sooner.”

“What are you talking about?” Cinnamon asked.

“The timing of when we started talking. Charity moving here. Her disappearance. And someone trying to frame me.”

Austin’s heart pounded out of control. He paced on the porch, glancing at his watch every couple of minutes. Yesterday, he had no desire to speak with Belmont.

This morning, he couldn’t wait.

“You need to relax.” Cinnamon stepped from the house and handed him a tall glass of lemonade. “Not only are you going to put a hole in those floorboards, but it’s not going to make this guy show up any faster.”

He set the glass on the small table next to the Adirondack chairs. “A million things are running through my brain and none are good.”

Cinnamon pointed down the long dirt road. “Is that him?”

“Looks that way.” Austin wiggled his fingers. “Why don’t you go inside for a while.”

“I didn’t take the day off work to sit on the sidelines.” She planted her hands on her hips. “Don’t push me away because you believe I can’t handle what you’re thinking.”

“It’s not that.” He inched closer, curling his fingers around her forearms. “I just don’t want him to question you.”

“Why not? Maybe I know something but I’m not aware that I do.”

Shit, that made way too much logical sense. However, he still didn’t like the idea. Not until after he learned why Belmont had made the trip. The secretiveness about this haunted him. “That’s possible, but I want to talk to him alone first. It has nothing to do with hiding anything from you or not believing you can handle it. I want to understand what he has or doesn’t have before sharing my thoughts. I need to know what’s going on and Brad won’t or can’t tell me.”

“Fine.” She spun on her heel and stormed off into the house.

Fuck. That’s not how he wanted her to respond. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the approaching vehicle. Glancing over his shoulder, his heart ached. He hated that he’d hurt Cinnamon’s feelings. All he wanted to do was protect and shield her from what could be coming. Brad had warned him that the moment Belmont came unannounced could be the time he came with either a warrant to search or one to arrest. This situation was ripe for disaster.

Austin hadn’t done anything. However, he was the most logical suspect. He had motive and opportunity.

Tom did as well and had faced similar questioning from Belmont. It wasn’t until Tom and Austin decided to stop looking at the other as the bad guy and come together in the search for answers that they realized that Charity had been playing them both. She was only going to stay with whoever would give her the kind of life she wanted.

Austin had more money. He could provide the lifestyle she wanted but refused to lavish her with expensive gifts and let her spend whatever she wanted. However, he did cave on occasion.

The car.

Clothes.

But Tom had status in Boise. He was respected. He owned a business and everyone liked him. He might not have a bank account filled with a couple of million, but he did have the social life that Charity craved. Their love triangle became a contest that he wasn't even aware he'd become a participant in until it was almost too late. But once he had, he'd given her walking papers and because she had her backup, she ran as fast as she could before Tom wised up to her game.

Belmont stepped from his vehicle and adjusted his suit coat. He always showed up in his standard dark suit and black tie. He looked like a typical federal agent. The first time Austin had met him, he'd been terrified, but that emotion came out sideways in sarcasm and frustration.

Not anymore.

“Good morning,” Austin said. “It’s been about two months since you’ve paid me a visit.”

Belmont nodded. “May I join you on the porch and have a little chat?”

“Of course.” Austin waved his hand. Most conversations were pleasant enough. It had only been the first two or three that had been extremely uncomfortable, or even painful. Belmont had a dry personality. His tone was even and controlled, but Austin could tell he cared about his job and this case in particular.

Belmont chose one of the Adirondack chairs, so Austin picked the one next to him.

“Shall we get right down to business?” Belmont asked.

“Sure.” Austin stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankles, doing his best to relax. “Do you have any leads?”

“That’s why I’m here,” Belmont said. “We got an anonymous tip that Charity’s car was spotted not far from Whiskey Ranch.”

Austin arched a brow but said nothing.

“Does that surprise you?” Belmont asked.

“It does. Especially after all this time.” Austin wondered if the question was meant to bait him into a certain reaction. His attorney had told him to answer questions without adding too much, be polite, and stop talking the second he felt as though he were under the microscope. “Did you find it?”

“We did.” Belmont leaned forward. “Most of the time, these tips lead us on a wild goose chase. If we do find something, it’s not what we expected. Or it doesn’t give us a clear picture of what could have happened. This time, we found the vehicle exactly where the tip said it would be.”

“Are you going to tell me where that was?” Austin sat up taller. His heart hit his throat. Poor Charity. Whatever happened to her, she had to be terrified and that broke his heart into a million pieces. He’d failed her like he’d done so many other people in his life. Just because he didn’t love her or want to be with her anymore, didn’t mean he wished her harm.

“Five miles from the ranch. It was driven off a dirt road and hidden in a field.” Belmont held Austin’s gaze. “We’re going to take the car to our lab today.”

“When did you find it and how did we not know about it?” Austin made sure he kept his tone even. “Also, should I have my attorney present now?” He waved his cell. “Because if that’s the case, he’s ten minutes out and we’ll need to put this conversation on hold.” The one thing Austin had always been able to count on when it came to Belmont had been honesty about when Ted should be at his side.

This felt slightly different.

Belmont rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger, glancing at the sky. “I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place here. This case has been ice-cold for months. Every tip we get always points to you, yet it always comes up like I’m

chasing a wild goose. This is the first time the anonymous caller's information had any teeth. But I find the timing of it very suspicious."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't show you this." Belmont tapped his screen, holding it up for Austin to see. "This was sent the same day we got the tip, two days ago."

Austin clenched his fists as he watched the interaction between him and Pete at Boone's bar. It showed a little different story than what actually happened. The version that had been shared with Belmont portrayed Austin as the aggressor, not Pete.

Fucking artificial intelligence.

"You should know this was posted to social media as of this morning," Belmont said. "My boss is hot for me to wrap this case up now that we have Charity's car."

"This was altered. I can produce many witnesses."

"That's not necessary. I took the time to do some digging before I came out here. I didn't want to question you without a bigger picture, so I contacted some key witnesses and they painted a much different story." Belmont held up his hand. "Right now, I don't want you to answer any questions or tell me anything. Not without your lawyer and that's not because I think you had anything to do with Charity's disappearance. I've been doing this job a long time and some things have me sniffing in a different direction. But again, my boss is ready to pounce on you, so I have to play along a little bit. I also want to make sure the investigation is protected as well as you."

"I appreciate your vote of confidence, especially since in the beginning I thought you believed I did something to her."

"I'm not sure I ever thought that, but I had to consider the possibility." Belmont leaned back. "I will have to go through the process. Ask you all the tough questions—with your lawyer present—and I need to interview Cinnamon Thompson." He lifted his thumb and motioned to the house.

“First, she’s changing her name back to Whiskey the first chance she gets. Secondly, why? And finally, what makes you think she’s here?”

Belmont laughed. “I can’t tell you why now, so I need a little trust from you, and come on, man. She was in that video, which is in the forensics lab, so if it was doctored, we’ll figure that out. But she’s your ex-girlfriend and I’ve done my homework. She’s the love of your life and everyone in this town is rooting for the two of you to get back together. Hell, after hearing the stories, I’m even hoping it happens.”

“You’re not talking to her without a lawyer or me present.”

“Lawyer is fine, but you will not be there. Sorry. That would be mudding waters, and I can’t afford to do that.”

“Can you at least tell my why—outside of that video—you need to converse with Cinnamon?”

“Nope.”

“I might have an ounce of trust for you, but I don’t for your profession,” Austin said.

“Ouch.” Belmont tapped his chest. “I’m sure you don’t feel that way about your brother-in-law.”

“Oh, we’ve had our differences of opinion a time or two.” Austin understood how the legal system worked but didn’t often agree with it. “Here comes Ted.” Ted Rosen had worked as JW’s lawyer since his situation with his ex-fiancée a few years ago but had also done contract work as needed for Whiskey Ranch before that. He was a good man and Austin wished he didn’t need his services. “Shall we do all this now?”

“I’d rather get through as much as I can, but I will have more questions as we process the vehicle.”

Austin waved Ted up. They were way past formalities, considering Austin had to constantly call him last minute to come out and handle this situation with Belmont. “Thanks for coming out.”

“Sure thing.” Ted stretched out his hand and shook both men’s hands. “I drove past a crew of local police and Feds

pulling out a vehicle from the deep off the side of the road. Is that why I'm here?"

This was one of the reasons Austin appreciated Ted. He got right down to business and he didn't sugarcoat things.

"That's one of them," Belmont said.

"What does that have to do with my client?" Ted asked.

"A number of things, beginning with the registration matches Charity's car. The proximity of the ranch. The fact that we found two items that we believe belong to Austin and —"

"What items?" Ted asked.

One of the many things Austin liked about Ted was that he didn't let anything go by without demanding further explanation. He didn't wait for anyone to finish their statement before digging for what he wanted to know. It often caused a rift between him and law enforcement, but that was the nature of the beast.

"A pair of men's gloves, which have blood on them, and a belt with a Whiskey Ranch buckle much like the one he's wearing now." Belmont lifted his finger. "None of this is being released to the press."

"Ted, am I allowed to speak freely?" Austin glanced at his lawyer.

Ted nodded.

"I'm not missing a belt. However, a few weeks ago, Gage borrowed a pair of my gloves."

"I'll need to speak to Gage," Belmont said.

"He's visiting his brothers in Twin City. He left a few days ago and we haven't heard from him since he departed." Austin didn't want to bring Gage into any of this. He'd been through enough in his life. The loss of his family had tormented Gage for years. The dirty looks from the community because so many people believed he started the fire, which had been proven false, but that didn't stop the gossip.

Gage was on the spectrum and many people didn't understand what that meant. They viewed him as strange and off-putting, when in reality he was the kindest, sweetest man on the planet.

"I'd like his contact information," Belmont said.

"I'm happy to give it to you, but you need to understand that Gage has some social issues. You can't come at him like you would anyone else." Austin leaned forward. "When you speak to him, it would be better if someone from this ranch—someone he trusts—is with you; otherwise, he's going to panic."

"I've spoken to him a couple of times. He's very protective of you and everyone else on this ranch. I understand his personality and promise to handle the situation appropriately. However, I have to consider what you just told me about the gloves and the fact that Gage made it very clear he couldn't stand Charity. I'm also aware he wasn't a fan of Pete. Is that because of Cinnamon? Because I get there is more to that story and now I want to know why."

"It mostly has to do with Cinnamon, but Pete did date his daughter before she died. Pete didn't care about her. It was all to stay close to Cinnamon and Gage took it personally because it hurt Alyssa, but shortly after that, the fire happened." Austin shook his head. "There is no way in hell Gage would have done anything to hurt Charity, no matter his feelings. He might wear his emotions on his sleeve and he can occasionally say things that are socially inappropriate, but he doesn't have a violent bone in his body."

"As opposed to you." Belmont lowered his chin.

"I don't pretend to be a saint. However, I've never once laid a hand on a woman." Austin was so tired of this never-ending cycle. He wanted Charity to be safe, but deep down in his soul, he knew that wasn't the case. It had been too long since she disappeared for that to be true.

Now all he wanted was answers and for whoever had harmed her to be locked up where they belonged.

But it wasn't Gage.

"Are you willing to give a DNA sample?" Belmont asked.

Ted waved his hand. "If you find DNA in the vehicle, we'll have that conversation, but I'm not going to allow my client to give it now."

"Fair enough," Belmont said. "Now I want to talk about this video." He handed Ted his cell. "Austin had indicated he believes it was doctored. I have spoken to the owner of Boone's Bar and Grill and a Ms. Welch as well as those she had dined with along with five other people I've been able to track down that were at Boone's that evening. I've spoken with the local sheriff. They have all given me the same story, which doesn't quite match up to that video."

Ted handed the phone back. "I'm not sure what this has to do with Charity's disappearance."

"I can't get into the details of the possible connection other than we got an anonymous tip the next day," Belmont said.

"Still don't get it." Ted arched a brow.

"I want to know more about your relationship with Pete Thompson." Belmont held Austin's gaze. "Let's start with how long have you known him?"

Austin glanced to Ted.

"Go ahead and answer," Ted said.

"Most of my life. He grew up here in Buhl. We went to the same high school." Austin had been trained to keep his answers short and to the point, so he left it at that.

"Were you friends?" Belmont asked.

"Nope." Austin folded his arms. Any conversation about Pete tended to put him on the defensive.

"Why not?" Belmont took out his notebook and pen.

"In part because he had a thing for Cinnamon," Austin said.

“She was your high school sweetheart, correct?” Belmont thumbed through his pad. He knew all this, so why he had to ask was beyond Austin.

“We were best friends and then became boyfriend and girlfriend,” Austin said.

“Was there any other reason you didn’t get along with Pete?” Belmont asked.

“Sure,” Austin admitted. “He was the kind of guy who thought he was better than the rest of us, especially anyone who thought being a rancher was a good way to make a living. His parents were divorced and he lived here with his mom who had married a man who worked at a neighboring ranch. Pete hated it and couldn’t wait to get the hell out and go work for his dad. That’s exactly what he did. He’s used money and power to get whatever he wants.”

“Is it safe to say that you and Pete have butted heads for as long as you’ve known him?” Belmont asked. “And have you been in any physical altercations with him?”

“It’s common knowledge that we don’t like each other and yes, we’ve been in a few brawls both in high school and once right before he and Cinnamon married,” Austin said. “Can you please tell me where you’re going with this?”

“Not yet.” Belmont glanced up. “Does Pete know Tom? Or did he know Charity?”

Austin thought he’d been prepared for this question, but hearing it made the acid in his stomach lurch to his throat. “I don’t believe so.”

“But is it possible?” Belmont set his notebook aside.

“I suppose. However, I don’t see how or why,” Austin said. But he did. Only, he wasn’t willing to be the one to verbalize that thought. That needed to come from someone else.

Ted leaned forward. “Are you suggesting that Pete could be setting Austin up to take the fall for Charity’s disappearance? Is there something I need to know to help my

client navigate this new territory you're heading in? Or is there new evidence I should have?"

"Even if that were the case, you know I couldn't express that as the lead investigator in this case. Not while actively asking the questions." Belmont tilted his head.

"Should we break out a beer and chat like old buddies?" Ted lowered his chin.

"Right now, everything I'm thinking is based on hunches and half information," Belmont said. "Remember, my boss is gunning for Austin, but I'm taking a little different approach. Please let me do my job and have a little faith that I want truth and justice. This is more than wrapping up a case and getting it off my desk. I don't want to see an innocent man go down for something he didn't do. But I also don't want to rush anything."

"I can live with that," Ted said. "But you're forcing us to fly blind here, and I don't like that. Austin has been through enough."

"I agree." Belmont sighed. "Now, I really need to speak with Cinnamon and I know she's inside."

"You're not doing that without me present," Ted said. "So, I need to have her hire me." He stood. "Let me go take care of that. In the meantime, Austin, don't answer anything else officially."

"I know the drill." Austin leaned back and watched Ted stroll across the porch and into the house. A theory formed in Austin's head, and he didn't like it one bit.

Chapter 11

Cinnamon resented that Austin couldn't be present. He'd become her rock. Her safety net. She felt like she could get through anything when he was around. It wasn't that she didn't believe in herself. Being home had given her strength. Her family had wrapped their loving arms around her without question or judgment. She knew she could continue on her path because she had the support she needed.

Austin added a different element to her world. He was her future. A partner in life. Someone she could confide in. Trust. Love.

She fiddled with her fingernails and glanced between Ted and Belmont. Ted told her that he'd remain quiet unless necessary.

"I only have a few questions for you," Agent Belmont said. "Did your husband ever mention Charity or Tom's name to you?"

"No," she said, taking the advice of Ted and keeping her answers direct.

"Did your husband travel for work?"

"He did," she said.

"Did he ever travel to Boise?" Belmont asked.

"A few times a year."

"What about Twin City?"

"He went there too," she admitted.

"Does your husband have a second cell phone?" Belmont asked.

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. "I believe so. I mean, I've seen him with one and when I asked him about it, he told me it was none of my business." She rubbed her cheek. "And then proceeded to hit me." She decided tossing that piece of information out there was okay.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” Belmont’s expression softened. “Could your husband have gone places and done things you wouldn’t have known?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can you please explain to me how that is possible?” Belmont asked.

In the past, her shame would interfere with her ability to be honest, but not anymore. “It was an abusive marriage and Pete was incredibly controlling. When he left for work in the morning, he shut down the internet, then took the car keys and all my credit cards. I’ve left him, which is why I’m here.”

“Was he always like that?”

She shook her head. “The first few years weren’t horrible. It wasn’t until after our daughter died that things changed. It was difficult for us, and he didn’t handle it well.” She held up her hand. “I’m not making excuses for what he did, especially considering how bad it got. However, it was a slow progression and I found myself trapped in a situation I didn’t know how to get out of.”

“That’s usually how it happens.” Belmont nodded.

Cinnamon glanced at her watch. It was still before noon. All she could focus on was Pete’s hearing. She should be more concerned about this visit from Belmont and what that meant for Austin.

And she was. The last thing she needed was more drama or for something bad to happen to Austin.

But she couldn’t deal with the idea that Pete could be released from jail. He believed he was above the law and wouldn’t hesitate to return to Buhl to collect what he believed was his property.

“Cinnamon, is it safe to say that your husband would do anything to ensure Austin was out of your life?”

“Not just Austin, but my family too. He didn’t like how close we all used to be. Pete did whatever he could to cut me off from them and sadly, I allowed it.”

“What about Gage?”

“Gage?” She tilted her head. “What does he have to do anything?”

“I’m not sure. However, I understand he had a soft spot for you and hated Charity.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about Charity. I never met her, but yes. Gage and I have a special bond. I was quite close to his daughter, Alyssa. She was on the spectrum—like Gage—and got bullied a fair amount in school from the popular crowd.”

“Did Pete bully her? Austin told me they dated in high school.”

Cinnamon laughed. “I’m not sure you could call it that. Pete hung around her as a way to get close to me. He had it in his head it would make me jealous. It didn’t. If anything, it made me mad because I never once believed he cared for her. After the fire that killed her, her two brothers, and her mom, Pete did his best to use that to console me, but I had Austin.”

“I read the fire report. It says that a cigarette started it in one of the boys’ rooms,” Belmont said.

Cinnamon closed her eyes. “I’ve always found that hard to believe. Her older brothers chewed tobacco but they never smoked.”

“But her father did, is that correct?” Belmont asked.

“He’d quit a year before and I’ve never seen him light up after that. No one has.”

Belmont flipped through his pad. “Pete stated in his interview that Alyssa confided in him that she’d not only seen her father smoke, but he’d gotten drunk and had a horrible fight with her mother that day.”

“Gage has never raised his voice in all the years that I’ve known him,” Cinnamon said. “And he’s not a drinker. He might have a beer or a glass of whiskey with the crew, but never more than one.”

“I’m seeing an intriguing pattern in this questioning,” Ted spoke for the first time since the interview began.

She’d almost forgotten he was there.

“It’s as if you’re implying two things,” Ted said.

“And what’s that?” Belmont arched a brow.

“That Pete might have had something to do with the fire that killed Gage’s family and that he could have had a hand in the disappearance of Charity,” Ted said. “Why are you being so cagey about this? Austin has never done anything but cooperate with this investigation. Cinnamon is now doing the same thing. I would appreciate a little color here.”

“All I have is a working theory with absolutely no facts to back it up.” Belmont held up his hand. “I need a lot more information before I can even call Pete a person of interest. The only thing I have is that the tips come from a phone in Boise.”

Ted sucked on his teeth. “Why didn’t you tell Austin this?”

“Because I can’t have him go off half-cocked, and we both know that’s exactly what he’ll do,” Belmont said.

“Not with me here, he won’t.” Cinnamon stood and planted her hands on her hips. “We have a second chance and he’s not going to do anything that will jeopardize that. Pete has a hearing in three hours. If he—”

“Trust me. I’m aware of that hearing and here’s the problem. I’m told the judge overseeing that case doesn’t have a stellar reputation—as in he’s taken bribes before—but it’s never been proven. I’m on a time crunch here to raise a flag that Pete could be involved. I know Austin and I can’t have him getting in my way.”

“Keeping shit from Austin isn’t the way to do it,” Ted said. “Or me for that matter. You need to use us.”

“I can’t. That will taint the case. I’ve already told you too much.” Belmont tucked his notebook into his suit pocket.

“I’ve got an idea.” Cinnamon inched toward the picture window. She stared at Austin who paced in the yard by the oak

tree. “It’s going to take a lot of convincing to get Austin to go along with it, but if Pete is behind this, he’s arrogant enough to tell me about it.”

“Excuse me?” Belmont said.

She turned. “Pete has always used fear to control me. After our daughter died and he started hitting me, I told him I would leave. I was stronger back then and wasn’t going to stand for it. I had even packed my bags. But when Pete came home from a business trip, he’d brought something that belonged to Georgia Moon. He told me that if he could slip into her room at night and steal that, he could do whatever he wanted.”

“Jesus,” Belmont muttered. “He admitted to breaking into her home?”

Cinnamon nodded. “Pete threatened to ruin—or hurt—my family. It started as little things. Exposing family secrets. Or making up lies that he’d make stick. He beat me down emotionally and physically until I believed everything he told me. Plus, I knew his threats were real.” She blew out a long breath. “He once told me he was the one who made all the horses sick at Whiskey Ranch when Austin first started working. There were other things too, like feeding Bella—JW’s ex-fiancée—information about him to use against him after they broke up. If I stayed with him, he promised to leave them alone. I had minimal contact with my family, so I hadn’t heard the stories or read the headlines until Pete showed them to me each time I threatened him that I would leave. I didn’t even know Bella existed until after JW dumped her.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Ted asked.

“If he gets out of jail, let him come. He’ll enjoy telling me what he did to this family. And if he did set fire to Gage’s house, I’ll get him to admit that too.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I’m the only one who can get him to admit it.”

“All while he’s beating the crap out of you.” Ted jumped to his feet. “Not only won’t I let you do this, but Austin will go ballistic.”

“It’s not Austin’s decision. It’s mine.” She held Ted’s gaze.

“And if he’s not released?” Belmont asked.

“I’ll go to him,” she said. “This is not up for debate. It’s the only way to find out if he had any connection to Charity or to Gage’s family. We all want answers. Let’s get them.”

“No fucking way. Nope. Not happening. Over my goddamned dead body.” Austin stood in the kitchen and stared at Cinnamon with shock and horror in his heart. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“I’m thinking clearly for the first time since my daughter died.” She held his gaze with a fierce determination that he hadn’t seen in years.

Austin turned and raked a hand through his thick hair.

“Brad said—”

Austin interrupted Cinnamon. “You called my brother-in-law?” He turned on his heel and pointed to Ted. “Did you know about this?”

Ted nodded. “I suggested it.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” He took in a slow calming breath when all he wanted to do was put his fist through a wall. He should have known something was up the second Belmont asked him to walk him to his vehicle and then told him absolutely nothing of importance. “It’s one thing to call the bastard, but I’m not letting him walk onto this ranch, much less spend any time alone with you. It’s insanity. Hell, it’s a death wish.”

Cinnamon eased closer. She rested her soft hand on his forearm. Her touch calmed his soul but didn’t ease his fears. “The one thing Pete wants more than anything is to control me. In order to do that, he needs to make me believe he still has power over me. That he can hurt me. The only way he can do that now is to prove to me he’s already done horrible things and will continue if I don’t return to Idaho Falls.”

Austin ran his thumb over her cheek. “Hasn’t he caused you enough pain?”

“He’s done that to all of us,” she whispered. “But I’ll have the upper hand. I won’t be alone. Brad will have this place bugged. Or wherever I end up meeting him. He will have his people there and Belmont promised he’d have some of his men—people Pete doesn’t know—there as well. He won’t be able to lay a finger on me and I’ll be able to get him to tell me everything.”

“Why can’t I do it?” Austin asked.

“Because you won’t be able to control your temper,” Ted said.

“Not to mention he doesn’t want to control you and keep you to himself.” Cinnamon ran her hand up and down Austin’s arm. “I’d be more afraid he’d kill you than me.”

Austin audibly growled. “I don’t know about that. I saw what you looked like the night you showed up here.”

“That’s because I filed for divorce. Because I said I was coming back here and he knew you were single and still living on the ranch. If he believes there’s a chance I’ll come back to him or that he can win, he’s not going to do that kind of damage.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “If he killed Charity and is trying to frame you, it’s all about getting you out of the picture. I’m the trophy and he won’t hesitate to put her six feet into the ground. It’s time to beat him at his own game.”

“She makes sense,” Ted said. “It’s not the perfect plan, but if he’s released from jail, we all know he’s coming here anyway. We might as well be prepared to nail his ass to the wall once and for all and end this.”

Austin pulled Cinnamon to his chest. “I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost you again.”

“Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m worried about Gage, though. What if he did something to him? The timing of when he left to go see people he hasn’t seen since his family died and when Pete showed up is unusual to say the least.”

He kissed her temple. "Belmont is looking into it. So is JW." He squeezed his eyes. "I will go along with this plan, but only if I can be part of it."

"Brad isn't going to like that," Ted said. "But I did get him to agree to make sure you were in on everything, and he wouldn't dare ask you to sit on the sidelines simply because he wouldn't if this were his wife."

Austin had to love his brother-in-law.

"I need to get going," Ted said. "Call me when you know what's going on and Cinnamon, make sure this guy keeps his cool."

"I will." She pulled from Austin's embrace. "Thank you for everything."

"I'm looking forward to getting to know you better once all this is over." Ted smiled. "I'll see myself out."

Austin reached for a mug and made his third cup of coffee for the day. "Would you like one?"

"I'll float away if I have more." She climbed up on one of the stools.

While he didn't feel great about the plan, he knew it was the only way. However, his heart still remained firmly wedged in his throat. The mere idea of her confronting Pete made his skin crawl. Worse, the fact that he could have been responsible for Alyssa and her brothers' deaths made him want to strangle the man himself. Poor Gage had been accused of killing his family. He'd lived with the stares and cruel looks from the town for years. Even he'd wondered if he'd been sneaking cigarettes and never told anyone out of shame. But he knew him well enough that he would have owned up to it and not allowed one of his boys to be blamed for an accidental fire.

"I'm exhausted and it's not even one in the afternoon yet," Cinnamon said.

"I know what you mean." He leaned against the counter. His mind continued to mull over everything he'd learned or pieced together in the last two hours.

“I missed a whole day with the babies and will probably have to miss tomorrow since I won’t want to wait there for fucking Pete to show up.”

“Nope. We will want to ensure we put as few people as possible in the line of fire.” He raised his cup to his lips and sipped. “I still don’t like this ridiculous plan all of you came up with behind my back.”

“Austin, it wasn’t like that.”

“It feels that way to me.” He set his mug on the island. “But I suppose I can be stubborn and I might have reacted even worse when it was first discussed.”

“You have to know this was totally my idea.”

He nodded. “While I still don’t like it, I do love that you’re regaining your confidence and voice and standing up for what you want.”

“I will never let another man control me again.”

“I guess I came on kind of strong, but all I want is for you to be safe and free of Pete.”

“And you want me here with you.”

Austin ran a hand over his face. “Isn’t that what you want?”

“There are so many things I want and I do know I can have many of them once I’m out of the clutches of Pete. It will take some hard work on my part, but I can turn my life around.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “I need to go to counseling. I need to have a little time and space to heal.”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“I love you.” She eased off the chair and made her way around the island.

His chest tightened. Fear gripped his soul. His world hinged on her words. “Why do I feel like there’s a but coming?”

“There’s not.” She palmed his cheek. “We’ve eased into living together and I haven’t wanted to leave because I feel

safe from Pete. You protect me from all the bad things on the other side of the ranch fence.”

“Isn’t that what a boyfriend is supposed to do?”

“Talking out this plan, I realized a part of me doesn’t know how to take care of myself. I need to be able to do that. When this is over, I want to ask JW if there is a space that I can move into—by myself—and spend a little time living alone.”

“What about us?” He held his breath.

“We will still be together.” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “I don’t want things between us to change, except I can’t live here. Not yet.”

“I understand.” And he did. She’d been only nineteen when she married Pete and became a mom. Nineteen when Pete began to gaslight and control her every move.

Austin had waited fifteen years for her to come to him, he could wait a few more months. He brushed his mouth across her warm lips. “You should live here and I will move into the bunkhouse.”

She jerked her head. “With the cowboys?”

He laughed. “The apartment above it is currently empty. It’s the only place I know that’s available on the ranch and I don’t think you want to live there.”

“No, I don’t. But do you? The cowboys can get pretty rowdy.”

“It will be temporary.” He kissed her nose. “Because I intend to sweep you off your feet and show you what a great catch I am.” He winked.

“I already know that. But what I need to comprehend is that I’m one too.”

“I can be a patient man.” He pulled her close. He would give her the world if he could. Whatever she wanted because she deserved to have her hopes and dreams fulfilled. He’d deal if it meant sleeping alone for a few more months. “I will do whatever you need because I love you and I want you to be happy.”

She sniffled into his shirt.

“Damn, I didn’t mean to make you cry.” He smoothed his fingers through her long silky hair.

“Your willingness to let me do what I need to makes me want to change my mind.”

He cupped her face. “A lot is going on right now. You’re in the beginning stages of a divorce. Your husband is facing criminal charges. Not to mention everything we just learned. It’s overwhelming for both of us. Settling into a relationship together too quickly might not be the healthiest move. We have lots of time to date and learn about each other and who we are now. I don’t want you to think this is me stepping back because it’s not. I’m being realistic about the situation.”

“You’ve changed,” she said. “For the better. The old you might have taken this as me having second thoughts.”

“Even if you were—and I know that’s not the case—it would be okay.” He pressed his lips over her mouth. “Now, I don’t know about you, but I can’t sit here and wait for a phone call regarding Pete’s hearing. I’m not that patient. I will lose my freaking mind. So, how about we grab that leftover fried chicken and potato salad, saddle up a couple of horses, and have ourselves a little picnic.”

“Sounds like a perfect way to avoid going stir-crazy.”

“You pack the basket. I’ll go get the horses ready.” He patted her bottom. “I’ll see you outside. He glanced at his watch as he approached the back door. It could be an hour before the phone call came in.

Or five.

In the meantime, he’d call JD. Everyone at the ranch needed to be prepared for the worst. He also needed to get a handle on where and what Gage was up to. He didn’t like that Gage had been MIA. That didn’t make sense and he worried that something had happened.

Cinnamon set the basket on the kitchen table. The picnic had been a nice distraction, even though she couldn't eat very much. She had tried forcing down as much as possible, knowing she'd need her strength. If Pete was released from jail, she knew he wouldn't wait long before heading to Buhl. He would view this as a personal attack and he wouldn't take it lying down.

A knock at the door startled her and she jumped, knocking the basket to the floor. "Shit," she mumbled.

Half the contents tumbled out, making a massive mess. Chicken bones, mustard, and the potato container opened.

"Let me see who's at the door, and then I'll help with that." Austin squeezed her shoulder. "I know you're stressed, but this is not a big deal."

She sighed, bending over, then snagged the bones and tossed them in the garbage.

"Austin? Are you here?" a familiar voice rang out.

"In the kitchen," Austin said.

"Wonder what JD wants." Cinnamon took a roll of paper towels and got on her hands and knees. "I can't imagine he's heard about the hearing before we have." Her words were more to herself than Austin.

JD strolled into the kitchen. He smiled, but it was forced. "I just got off the phone with Gage's brother."

Immediately, she stopped what she was doing and rocked back on her heels. Her heart dropped to her gut.

"And?" Austin asked.

"Gage hasn't been in contact with him, much less scheduled a visit." JD leaned against the counter. "I've already called Brad and filed a missing person's report."

"Jesus." Austin sat on one of the stools. "But Gage texted us." He raked a hand across the top of his head.

Cinnamon leaped to her feet. "Gage supposedly left for his brother's place about when Pete showed up. I bet he had

something to do with Gage's disappearance. Pete could have sent that text and since Gage hasn't responded to any call or subsequent text since then, it's what makes the most sense."

"Especially since Pete's been behind bars on and off," JD said.

Cinnamon planted her hands on her hips and paced in front of the island. "If Pete hurt one hair on Gage's head, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands."

Austin stepped in front of her. "Don't say things like that. Someone might think you're being serious."

"What if—"

He hushed her with his finger. "We're all thinking exactly the same things you are. That Pete killed Charity. He killed Gage's family. And now maybe Gage."

"And he's setting you up to take the fall." She glared.

"I'm well aware of what he's trying to do to me, but he's not going to get away with it." Austin lowered his chin. "However, we can't go making threats of murder because if Pete does wind up dead, and anyone has heard us say that, it can be used against us."

She blew out a puff of air. "Fine, but I won't sit around and let him ruin my life anymore. Or anyone I care about. I've been a victim for too long and thanks to me, innocent people have died."

"None of this is your fault," JD said. "I do have to wonder how he managed to get Charity's car out here because that timeline doesn't fit. He was in jail when it showed up."

"He could have paid one of his employees to do it," Cinnamon said. "He has a few loyal ones, although he uses fear and gaslighting to control them too. When people quit his company, he destroys them. He had one nice man working for him a few years ago. But because he dared to question the way Pete ran things, he was put through hell in the press. Some scandal with his wife that turned out wasn't even true."

“We know he was behind some of the shit we’ve had to deal with over the years,” JD said. “We’ve always had the ability both with money and the fact we’ve never done anything wrong to come out of whatever was tossed our way.”

“But now we’re talking possible murder.” Austin squeezed her biceps. “And not just Charity.” He reached into his back pocket. “This is the call we’ve been waiting for.” He tapped the green button and put it on speaker. “Hey, Belmont. I’m here with Cinnamon and JD Whiskey.”

“I just got off the phone with the DA in Idaho Falls. The judge ruled in Pete’s favor. He’s being released as we speak. He’s been warned he’s not supposed to leave the county except for business, to which he immediately explained he has a meeting tomorrow in Twin City.”

“That’s not too far from Buhl,” Austin said.

“No, it’s not,” Belmont agreed. “I’m forty minutes from the ranch. I want to set it up tonight. I’ll contact Brad as soon as I end this call.”

“You should know that we’ve filed an official missing person’s report on Gage,” JD added.

“I’ve already seen the report and made it part of the FBI investigation. I need Austin’s DNA sample as we found blood in the car and on the gloves,” Belmont said.

“That makes me nervous since I lent a pair to Gage and it’s possible the blood could be mine.” Austin rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m aware,” Belmont said. “There is more physical evidence that we have found and we can prove that the car was moved to that location recently.”

“How?” Cinnamon asked.

“Eyewitnesses who saw two men put it there. Unfortunately, they don’t match Pete’s description, but they don’t match Austin’s either,” Belmont said.

“Can you get me a description? I might be able to match them to Pete’s employees.”

“Already have a forensics artist working on a sketch. Once I have that, I’ll let you take a look,” Belmont said. “I’ll be at Austin’s place soon. I suspect that Pete will either come in like a snake before dawn, or he’ll contact Cinnamon between now and morning like the arrogant prick he is. Either way, when he does show up, I want to be ready.”

“So do we,” Austin said. “See you soon.” He wrapped his arms around Cinnamon. “We’re going to get him and put him where he belongs. I promise.”

“I know you mean that, but Belmont is right about him being a snake. He’s gotten away with so many things and I wish I could say I wasn’t terrified.”

JD stood. “You’ve got everyone on this ranch behind you. No one will let him ever hurt you or anyone else again. Trust me on that.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I’m just sorry we didn’t intervene sooner.”

“I didn’t let you,” she said softly.

“Doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have tried harder.” JD nodded. “I’ll gather the troops and be back here with everyone in half an hour.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Austin shook JD’s hand.

She squared her shoulders, refusing to let the tears fall this time. This was her home. It was where she belonged, and damn it, she would fight for it.

Chapter 12

Austin sat on the front porch, watching the sun kiss the morning sky.

No sign of Pete. No text. No phone call. The only thing they had was that he'd arrived in Twin City with two other men late last night.

The sound of the front door scraping across the wood caught his attention. "Good morning," he said.

Cinnamon handed him a cup of coffee. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," he lied. He'd tossed and turned most of the night. So had Cinnamon, but thankfully, she'd been sound asleep when he'd slipped from the bed at four in the morning.

"You're a terrible liar." She handed him her cell. "Pete texted me an hour ago."

Austin stared at her phone.

Pete: *I'm coming for you and if you know what is best, you will meet me at the ranch entrance at seven a.m. If you're not there, bad things will happen. This is your only warning.*

"I'm glad you didn't respond."

"There's no point." She eased into one of the Adirondack chairs. "Do you think we should change the plan and I should meet him?"

"Are you crazy? Absolutely not. We need to make him come here. He knows this is where you are. He'll come here."

"I don't believe he will," she said. "Not based on that text."

"He wants you back. That's what this is all about."

"That's what I thought too. But maybe he knows that's never going to happen now that I've returned home." She reached out and took Austin's hand. "Before things got really bad, he was so insecure about our relationship. He constantly

worried that I would leave him and come running home and that you'd be here to pick up the pieces. I told him that Rosy was his daughter and that I'd never take her away from him. After she died, he did whatever he could to control me. To ensure I wouldn't come to Whiskey Ranch. To you. Now that I have, his worst fear has materialized. He has nothing left to lose."

"That's crazy. He has a lucrative business. He could face real prison time. He has everything to lose, which makes him even more dangerous."

She leaned forward. "When it comes to that part of his life, he's as arrogant as they come. He thinks he's untouchable, like his father. He believes he can buy his way out of trouble. But when it comes to me, he's always thought I was the only woman for him."

"But he cheated on you. That makes no sense."

"It doesn't have to," she said. "Sadly, I know how his brain works. And the more I think about it, the more these two worlds are colliding. If he can't have me, he will make sure you can't either."

"All the more reason for you not to go meet him at the front gate."

"You're not listening to me," she said. "In his wacky mind, if I go to him, it means I've caved. He's won. He can take me and we can go back to our previous life. But if I don't. You won. He lost and that will enrage him. He'll do whatever it takes to take you and this ranch down or end your life and anyone he believes stood in his way."

Austin had to agree she made sense, but he still didn't believe meeting Pete at the gate was the right move. "Brad has two men posing as cowboys right over there." He pointed. "Let me shower, and then I'll call Belmont and see what he says about this text. For now, I want you inside."

"All right. But promise me you'll tell him my thoughts."

"You can be part of the conversation." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Come on. You should eat something."

Austin tugged at her hand. The next few hours would prove to be the hardest, but after today, he prayed that Pete would be out of their lives.

Cinnamon tossed her backpack over her shoulder and inched toward the main gate. She couldn't believe that Belmont agreed that her plan was the stronger of the two.

Austin had lost his shit, cussing and pacing in the kitchen. He almost didn't let her leave the house. But in the end, this wasn't about what he wanted. It was time to end Pete and his wickedly horrible games.

Quickly, she glanced at her watch.

She was six minutes early. Pete would appreciate that. He hated it when anyone was late. She climbed up on the big boulder outside the gate and waited.

Minutes ticked and not a single car drove by.

It was now five minutes past seven. Her pulse beat in the center of her throat, making it impossible to swallow.

A Range Rover eased to a stop and the passenger side window rolled down.

"Get in," Pete demanded.

"No. Not until you answer a few questions," she managed with a shaky voice.

He laughed. "Not happening."

"I'm going with you, so humor me." She didn't budge from the perch on her rock.

"I have no intention of sitting here arguing with you. Now get in or I'll get out and force you into this car."

"You owe me," she said.

"That's rich. You're the one who has put me in a difficult position with these games." He slipped from the driver's side and stepped around the vehicle's hood, waving a weapon.

Shit. She knew he owned more than one gun and should have known he'd flex his muscles with them, but she hadn't expected he'd do so the second he saw her. "If you want me to go, I want to know what happened to Gage."

"Are you serious right now? Why would I know anything about that man?"

She folded her arms. "Where's Gage? What did you do to him?"

"Nothing." He opened the door. "I'm waiting."

"I want honest answers, and then I will get in and we never have to discuss it again." She sucked in a deep breath. "You do this for me, I'll drop all the charges."

"You're going to do that anyway."

"He was my friend, Pete. He was a kind man who didn't do anything to you." That should push his buttons.

"Not true," Pete said. "He always hated me. He didn't like me dating his daughter. He wouldn't let me take her to prom. Hell, I couldn't even pick her up for a proper date. There wasn't anything *kind* about him."

"Did you hurt him?"

"Gage is fine," Pete said with an exasperated sigh. "The man is as dumb as a doornail. I had one of my men pay him off to disappear for a while."

"Gage wouldn't take your money."

"He would if he thought it would protect you, your cousins, or Austin from harm." He waved his weapon. "Now get in the car."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Because once you are home and the charges are dropped, I'll tell him he can go back to the ranch. That no harm will come to anyone."

"I want proof now," she said as she jumped from the rock. "Call him and put it on speaker."

“Fine.” Pete reached into the car and snagged his cell. He tapped on the screen. It rang twice. “Gage?”

“Yes,” Gage’s voice flowed through the speaker. It was weak and sad. Not his usual peppy self, but it did sound like him.

“Our arrangement will be coming to an end perhaps next week.”

“Cinnamon is okay, yes? Austin is unharmed, yes?” Gage asked.

“Everyone is fine,” Pete said. “I’ll be in touch.” He tossed his phone back inside his SUV. “Satisfied?”

“Actually, no.” Something didn’t feel right. “Why did you send him away? It doesn’t make sense. What difference did it make if he was on the ranch or not?”

“For fuck’s sake.” Pete lunged forward.

She took three steps back. “I’m serious, Pete. I want answers before I get in your fancy car and go back to our life.”

“You can be a real pain in the ass,” Pete muttered. “If I couldn’t frame Austin for Charity’s death, then Gage was my backup.”

Cinnamon gasped. “Did you know Charity?”

“Of course I did.”

Cinnamon’s heart beat faster and faster. “How?”

“Why does it matter?”

“If you want me to go home and be quiet, I want to know all the things I’m shutting my mouth about. I think that’s only fair.”

“So you can use it against me? No way.”

“No,” she said. “Knowing will keep me from doing what caused you to bash in my face. This is how we reset and start over. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Are you telling me that I’ve finally gotten through to you?”

“Yes,” she said. “Please tell me how you knew Charity.”

“I met her while on a trip to Boise. She was in a bar I went to. I couldn’t believe it when I found out she was dating Austin. I struck up a friendship. Eventually it became more, but she knew I was married and would never leave my wife.”

“You were having an affair with her?”

“Maybe if my wife wasn’t so frigid I wouldn’t have to.” Pete arched a brow. “But I was helping her figure out who she should be with. I encouraged her to pick Austin over Tom. I told her he was the much better catch.”

“Did she know you had a history with Whiskey Ranch?”

“Eventually, I told her that I knew of the Whiskey family and that she would learn to love it there if she gave it half a chance. When she called me and told me she was leaving, I tried talking her out of it, but that didn’t work.”

“So you killed her.” Cinnamon narrowed her eyes.

“I took an opportunity to ensure Austin would be out of our lives forever. That man is like a bad rash that won’t go away.”

“What about Alyssa?” Cinnamon asked before the police and the FBI could jump out from wherever they were hiding. “Did you kill her and her family too?”

“You are fucking full of questions and I’m so tired of giving you answers. It’s time to go home. And I never want you to have contact with anyone on this ranch again.”

“You want that, give me this one last thing. I promise, I will never bring up this ranch or my family again. I swear.”

“You better not, or you know what will happen,” he said. “It was only meant to be a warning. That hadn’t been my intention.”

“What do you mean a warning?”

“I didn’t know they would all get trapped inside. That the house would go up so quickly.” He waved his hand. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.” She took one step forward.

Three police cars came flying into the drive.

Pete grabbed her and pressed his weapon against her temple. “You fucking little bitch. You set me up. I’m not going down for this.”

Austin appeared fifty feet away, holding a shotgun. He stopped dead in his tracks.

She swallowed. This part she hadn’t been prepared for.

Austin lay on his stomach next to his brother-in-law, listening to the woman he loved and Pete. The conversation made him sick to his stomach.

The only saving grace was that Gage was still alive.

As soon as the police cars rolled into the main drive, he jumped to his feet and raced toward Cinnamon.

Only, Pete pressed his weapon to her temple.

If anyone took a shot, if they killed Pete dead, he could still end up shooting Cinnamon.

Austin froze. “Fuck,” he mumbled. “What now?”

“We let the FBI talk him down,” Brad said. “Let’s inch closer, but follow my lead, got it?”

“You’re the expert.” Austin stayed in line with Brad as they moved closer to the main gates.

“I can’t believe you did this to me,” Pete’s voice came over the comms in Austin’s ear. “Now we’re both going to die thanks to you.”

“It doesn’t have to end that way,” Belmont said. “Let her go and we can talk demands.”

“This is entrapment. It wouldn’t stand up in a court of law,” Pete said.

Thankfully, even if he didn’t confess to Charity’s murder, he’d left behind physical evidence that proved he at least was

in the vehicle. But they still didn't have the body. That was something that Austin wanted to give her family.

And Tom.

"I don't want Pete to see you," Brad said. "Go to the other —"

"What is that motherfucker doing here?" Pete shifted, staring at Austin. "This is all his fault. We wouldn't even be standing here if it weren't for that asshole."

"Too late," Austin whispered. He sucked in a deep breath, lowering his weapon. No point in antagonizing the asshole any more than he already was.

"I'll kill her," Pete yelled. "Is that what you want, Austin?"

Austin laid his rifle on the ground. He was now twenty feet away. "No. I'd like for you to let her go."

"Not going to happen." Pete held her tight in front of his body. Quickly, he stretched out his arm.

Bang!

Bang!

Cinnamon screamed.

Austin dropped to his knees, gripping his right thigh. "Fuck. That hurt." His teeth rattled. His muscle felt as though someone had stuffed a grenade inside it and pulled the pin.

"She's next if anyone comes closer," Pete said. "I won't hesitate."

"I've got a clean shot," someone came over the comms system.

"Last chance to put down your weapon," Belmont said.

Pete took a step toward the SUV. "We're getting in the vehicle and driving away. You're not going to follow us, or she's dead. It's that simple."

"If you still have the shot, take it," Belmont whispered.

Bang!

Austin glanced up from his position on the dirt.

Pete fell to the ground. His gun tumbled from his grasp.

Cinnamon took one look at him before taking off running in the direction of Austin.

“I need to stop the bleeding.” Brad ripped off his shirt and tied it around Austin’s leg. “Did the second shot get you?”

“I don’t believe so, but don’t you think one is enough,” Austin said through gritted teeth.

Brad laughed.

“It’s not funny, man.” Austin lay back on the hard ground.

“Austin!” Cinnamon stumbled, landing next to him. “Oh my God. Someone call an ambulance.”

“Already on the way,” Brad said. “He’s tough. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m seeing stars, so I’m not so sure about that.” Austin blinked. The sharp pain had turned into an intense throb. “Are you okay?” He took Cinnamon’s hand. “Are you hurt?”

“No. I’m fine.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I’m not sure I’ll be needing a divorce anymore though.”

Austin chuckled, but it quickly turned into a cough. “I shouldn’t laugh at that.”

“I should feel bad, but I kind of don’t.”

“He murdered people in cold blood,” Brad said. “He held you at gunpoint and shot at your boyfriend. I think it’s okay to feel relief that this is all behind you.”

Sirens rang out in the distance.

Austin stared at the sky. His vision blurred. “This is going to suck.”

“What is?” Cinnamon asked.

“Being laid up. Unable to work.” He lifted his head. “I don’t think I’ll be able to move into the apartment above the bunkhouse.”

She bent over and kissed his lips. “You’re going to need someone to take care of you for a little while and it’s the least I can do, considering you did take a bullet for me, literally.”

Chapter 13

Six weeks later...

Austin lay sprawled out on the sofa with the television remote in his hand. He'd flipped through the channels three times and still couldn't find something to hold his attention for more than five minutes. His cell buzzed on the coffee table. He reached for it and groaned. The doctor told him it would be another good three months before he was one hundred percent. The bullet had been lodged in the bone, making the injury more complicated. It required a delicate surgery to remove it and he had to stay in the hospital for two full weeks after.

He wasn't sure what was worse.

The hospital stay or being bedridden at home.

"Hey, Tom." He set his phone on his chest. "How was the service?"

"It was nice. I'm sorry you couldn't be here," Tom said.

"Besides being unable to put weight on this leg, I'm not sure the family would have wanted me there."

"Everyone asked about you," Tom said.

"I'm just glad we could give them—and you—closure." Austin might not have loved Charity, but he never wished her dead. He could only offer her family the ability to find her body and help them lay her to rest. He'd been grateful to the FBI and the local sheriff's department for all their hard work locating where Pete had buried her body.

"How are things with you?" Tom asked.

"I'm healing," he said.

"And Cinnamon?"

A smile spread across Austin's lips. "She's happy to be back with her family. She's all enrolled in college. While she still has nightmares and a shit ton of guilt over things that aren't her fault, she's doing well."

“What about the two of you?”

“For the most part, we’re good.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Tom asked. Since Pete’s death, a day hadn’t gone by where Austin hadn’t spoken to Tom. They had become close friends, which to some seemed odd. However, Austin enjoyed the camaraderie. The more he got to know Tom, the more he realized how much they had in common outside of Charity.

“She has a lot of emotional healing she needs to do and I’m doing my best to give her the space. Sometimes that causes a disagreement.”

“That makes no sense.”

Austin chuckled. “She thinks I often pull away. But I’m not. I’ve gone to a couple of her therapy sessions and don’t do well.” He adjusted his pillows and sat up taller. It was hard for him to discuss this shit with her cousins. It didn’t matter that JD was one of his closest friends. Or JW and JB had been in his life since he was a kid. Or he and Irish had been friends forever. They were Cinnamon’s cousins and he didn’t want to burden them with their problems, which weren’t big ones, but still things they needed to work through. “I worry we’re rushing things, especially since I need help and she’s living here with me. She needed to stand on her own two feet while we discussed how to handle the situation with Pete. However, since I was wounded and he died in the shootout, she’s done a bit of a one-eighty.”

“She got scared she could have lost you.”

“That’s what her therapist said, but I’m not going anywhere. I want her to feel like she’s in control of her own destiny. To understand she doesn’t need me to be whomever she wants. I’m just here to support her.”

“You’re a good man,” Tom said. “I started seeing someone a couple of months ago and I was thinking—when you’re feeling up to it—maybe the four of us could get together.”

“I’d love that and I’m sure Cinnamon would like it too. But why wait? You should come out to the ranch. I’m going

crazy sitting on my ass. I'd love the company."

"Talk it over with Cinnamon and we'll set up a date and time," Tom said. "I still have some of Charity's family here, so I best be going. I just wanted to check in on you."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Austin ended the call. He tossed his phone to the coffee table, found his crutches, and groaned as he hobbled to the kitchen for a snack. He was supposed to stay off his leg for another two weeks. But he was going nuts doing absolutely nothing but watching television, reading books, and waiting for Cinnamon to return from work.

However, today she embarked on a new chapter in her life.

College.

He was so excited for her and couldn't wait to hear about her first day. She'd always wanted to be a teacher and now she'd get that chance.

The front door swung open.

Shit. He was going to hear hell for being off the sofa. Georgia Moon had come over to feed him lunch and Annette had been by two hours ago to make sure he hadn't needed anything else. Outside of that, he wasn't supposed to do anything.

Two more weeks and he'd be able to put weight on his leg.

But it would still be at least another month before he could return to work.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Cinnamon tossed her backpack on the chair by the fireplace and raced to his side.

He eased onto the stool. "I was thirsty." He lifted his big water bottle. "And hungry." He pointed to the bag of popcorn he'd pulled from the cupboard.

"And how did you plan to return that to the sofa?"

"I was going to sit right here," he said like a defiant child.

"You're going to make the healing process longer." She grabbed his drink and the bag. "Do you want help back to the

couch?”

“I know how to use these.” He waved at the crutches. “They do have me doing things in physical therapy, you know.”

She laughed. “I hear you’re a big baby.”

He rolled his eyes. “How was your day?”

“Amazing. Wonderful. I can’t wait to go back tomorrow.” She helped him onto the sofa, lifting his bad leg and resting his feet on her lap. “But I feel so old.”

“You’re far from it.”

“Tell that to the eighteen-year-olds who thought I was either the professor or the PA.”

He laughed. “I thought you would have been home an hour or so ago. Did you get hit on by all the young studs?”

“That’s gross.” She shook her head. “I had a doctor’s appointment.”

He arched a brow. “Therapy? You didn’t tell me you had that today. You know I’m always happy to go.”

“No. I went to the gynecologist.”

He pounded his chest and coughed. “I guess I didn’t need to go to that one.”

“Not this time you didn’t.” She squeezed his foot, rubbing gently. They’d slid into an easy time of living together and he more than enjoyed it. He thrived in their relationship.

Whenever she felt he was too far away emotionally, she told him so and he did his best to adjust. He wanted to please her more than anything, giving her whatever she needed. His biggest concern was never making her feel like he was the one in the driver’s seat, which was the dance that had become difficult.

She was used to being in a controlling and manipulative marriage. Pete had stripped her of her ability to make her own decisions. Austin would never be that man, but she often told

him that she felt as though he tiptoed around the harder conversations and begged him to stop.

Something that he'd been working on.

"I can't imagine there's any time I'd need to go with you to see that doctor."

"Then you don't understand women or their bodies as much as I thought you did." She poked his good leg.

"Excuse me?"

"I have an appointment for an ultrasound in a couple of weeks and you will want to be there for that."

"An ultra what? And why? Is something wrong?"

"Are you really that stupid?" She shifted, setting his feet back on the sofa. Straddling his hips, she leaned over and kissed his lips. "Am I hurting you?"

"You asked me that last night when we were in this position and what did I tell you?" He smacked her ass.

"You might have said no, but then you groaned."

He laughed. "That was in throes of pleasure and I'm more than willing to have a repeat of the action. But the bed would be more comfortable."

"I'm sure you are, but what we do in the bedroom is what led me to see the doctor." She pressed her hands on his chest and held his stare. "I can't believe you aren't getting this, so let me recap. I went to see an OB/GYN. That's a doctor who —"

"I know what kind of medicine that doctor practices and there is no reason I would need to go with you..." He let his words trail off. His heart lurched to his throat. His eyes grew wide. "Why do you need an ultrasound? Isn't that something that is used to see babies?"

"Exactly."

"Are you trying to tell me you're pregnant?" His mouth went dry. "I need to sit up."

She moved to the side, helping him to the edge of the sofa. “I haven’t gotten my period since returning to Whiskey Ranch.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?” He tossed his good leg over the side of the couch.

“We’ve been a little busy between you having surgery and the complications from that surgery. And then there was dealing with the settlement from Pete’s death with his family, which came in the mail today, so I can pay you back for my tuition.”

“I don’t think so.” He raked a hand across the top of his head. “If we’re going to have a baby together, then whatever is mine is yours.” A baby. He couldn’t believe it. They had been using condoms, except for that first time.

“For a minute there, I thought you were going to freak out about this.”

“Oh, I’m freaking out.” He took her hand. “We knew this was a possibility, but when you never brought it up again, I’d sort of put it out of my mind.” He kissed her palm. “How are you feeling?”

“Other than I’m a little tired, fine. But I’m more worried about you and whether or not you’re happy about this. You’re giving me the biggest non-reaction a man who is about to be a dad could possibly give.”

“Babe, I’ve been fantasizing about this moment my entire life. You’re the only woman I’ve wanted to have a family with. I couldn’t be more thrilled.” He reached for his crutches. “Help me to the bedroom.”

“We are not going to go have sex right now.”

“Wasn’t going to suggest that.” He chuckled. “I have something else in mind.” He hobbled down the hallway. “I want to give you something.”

“What?”

“My mother’s engagement ring. It was always supposed to be yours. I know we said we would take things slow, but a

baby changes things. Besides, I love you and I always want to be with you.”

“Did you just ask me to marry you?”

“It wasn’t the best proposal, but that’s my intention.” He found the ring in the dresser’s top drawer and pulled it from the box. He took her hand and placed it on her ring finger.

It was a perfect fit.

“I love you, Cinnamon Cider Whiskey. Will you do me the honor and be my wife?”

“Oh, hell yes.” She wrapped her arms around his middle. “But I’m not doing some big-ass wedding. I want a small one right here on the ranch and as soon as possible—before I’m as big as a house.”

“Whatever makes you happy.” He tossed his crutches to the side and pulled her tight. “I’m going to have to put an addition on this place.”

“Oh, I have ideas.”

“I’m sure you do,” he said. “I need to sit.” He plopped his ass on the edge of the bed.

She joined him, resting her head on his shoulder. “We’re going to make a wonderful home for our family.”

“Our family,” he repeated. “You’re going to have to keep pinching me, because all of my wildest dreams have come true.”

* * *

Thank you for taking the time to read *CINNAMON CIDER WHISKEY*. For more information about the rest of the Whiskey gang, please visit

<https://jentalty.com>.

* * *

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About the Author

Jen Talty is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, and Paranormal Romance. In the fall of 2020, her short story was selected and featured in a 1001 Dark Nights Anthology.

Regardless of the genre, her goal is to take you on a ride that will leave you floating under the sun with warmth in your heart. She writes stories about broken heroes and heroines who aren't necessarily looking for romance, but in the end, they find the kind of love books are written about :).

She first started writing while carting her kids to one hockey rink after the other, averaging 170 games per year between 3 kids in 2 countries and 5 states. Her first book, *IN TWO WEEKS* was originally published in 2007. In 2010 she helped form a publishing company (Cool Gus Publishing) with *NY Times* Bestselling Author Bob Mayer where she ran the technical side of the business through 2016.

Jen is currently enjoying the next phase of her life...the empty nester! She and her husband reside in Jupiter, Florida.

Visit my website at: <https://jentalty.com>

Home on the Ranch

Euryia Larsen

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Home on the Ranch

Rocky Karin

Moving back to the town I grew up in is the best thing I could've ever done. The people and love surrounding me is exactly what I need to reset myself and find true happiness. Maybe one day I hope to find love, but I'm not going to hold my breath. Love and romance for me, seems to be more fantasy than reality.

Athan and Teo Minos

Our mother fell in love with twin brothers and we always knew that was the kind of relationship we wanted as well. Unfortunately, we could never seem to make it work. That is until Rocky came back to Sweet Heaven. She's not the shy, mousy girl we remember from school. This woman is the type that sets us both on fire and we would gladly burn for her.

These sexy cowboys make it hard to choose who to date for the smart women in this series. But they don't have to choose as these hot ranchers like to share. This fall, read some of your favorite contemporary romance authors for a menage romance series that will have you wishing for your own cowboy – or two.

Chapter 1

Rocky sat on the plane looking out the window at the clouds. She bent down to her backpack and pulled out her headphones, deciding she needed music. Palaye Royale's latest album started to play. Turning the volume too loud, she closed her eyes and thought about the last few days.

She'd been so pissed when she came home to find the locks had been changed. She pounded on the door for a good ten minutes before her roommate finally opened. "What?"

"What the hell?"

Carrie rolled her eyes as she asked, "Isn't it obvious? I'm kicking you out."

"Just like that?" Rocky growled.

Yup."

"Fine," she muttered as she pushed her way in. "I'm getting my stuff." As she walked towards her room she found herself face to face with her very naked mother's boyfriend. "Well, this certainly explains everything. You can have him. He's terrible in bed."

Rocky sighed heavily at the memory. She'd taken the whole situation as a sign that it was time to go home. She might not truly have a home anymore but the small town she grew up in was better than the big city was. With a soft smile on her lips, Rocky cleared her mind and let herself get lost in the music. Before she knew it she'd be home.

* * *

Auntie Bea looked at Rocky with a bit of a scowl on her face. "Sweet girl, I'm downright insulted that you'd think I'd let you pay or stay anywhere else. Sweet Heaven is your home, plain and simple. I have a lovely room with its own attached bathroom. It even has the large walk-in closet I'm sure you're going to need with all that luggage out there. How does that sound?"

Rocky smiled at the older woman, “More than perfect, but please let me work or pay or something, Auntie Bea.”

“Your money’s no good here. I do occasionally need help but only occasionally. I want you to find your feet here, sweet girl. You never know what wonders the future holds and I for one am looking forward to seeing you bloom.”

Rocky blushed lightly and hugged the woman who was like family to her.

“Now here is your key. Your room is on the second floor at the end of the hall. Go get settled in.”

“Yes ma’am,” Rocky giggled as she headed up the stairs to her new home. Once she opened the door, she looked around the room. It was nicely decorated with a few pieces of furniture and her stuff piled in the middle of the room.

As she tried to figure out what to unpack first, she realized the first thing she needed was some music. Pulling out her phone, she stood it up next to a lamp. Turning up the volume she played a random playlist and continued to unpack her several suitcases.

* * *

Rocky sat on her bed pleased with everything she’d accomplished. An unexpected loud knock sounded on the door. Opening it she squealed in delight at seeing the lady in front of her. “LeeAnn! I was hoping to see you!”

LeeAnn laughed as she hugged Rocky. “It’s wonderful to have you back. Girl, there is just so much going on lately. Have you heard about the Charity Rodeo at the Minos Ranch?”

Rocky shook her head no. The Minos brothers were a couple of years above her in school. She’d always had crushes on both of them but she was a shy mouse in school and was sure they never even noticed her. Those days were gone though, as was the mouse she used to be.

“The first night is tonight. So I’m here to drag you along with me. Wait till you see Athan and Teo. Two hotter boys

have yet to be discovered. If I wasn't already married I'd be all over them."

"Don't lie! I've seen the photos of you and Mike online. You're so in love with each other it's rather sickening."

"Fine. You're right. He's working the event though so we'll see him there. Now let's get you ready to go." After digging through Rocky's clothes, LeeAnn sighed. "When one goes to a rodeo, it's traditional to wear cowboy boots, not combat boots. And especially not ones with platform heels," she laughed.

"Whatever! They look good on me," Rocky responded with a laugh as they headed towards the stairs. Their eyes met as they hopped up onto the banisters and slid down to the foyer in unison. They both were giggling as they climbed into LeeAnn's truck and were on their way to the rodeo.

Chapter 2

Athan pulled the long bed pickup as near to the saloon as he could. As soon as he stopped their dog, Bowzer, hopped from the back and was off and running. He was at home at the ranch.

“Hey guys, thanks for hauling this stuff up here,” Paul greeted as he came up with Rand, who stood back quietly.

“No problem, glad to help. That way we won’t feel so bad when we clean up playing poker,” Athan grinned.

Paul chuckled and shook his head in a yeah right manner, as he opened the back door to lift out a quarter keg of beer and handed it off to Rand.

Teo, his brother moved round to the tailgate and Bowzer came up and ran a circle around him, lifting his front paws and barking. “What, you crazy Mutt?” Athan laughed as the dog jumped up and rested his big paws on his shoulders. “Go on! Go play. I’ll get you some food as soon as we unload.”

Bowzer barked, lowering his head playfully over his front paws, his back end wagging in the air. Before Athan could even shake his head, Bowzer bolted around him again and galloped off stumbling over his paws once or twice as he

Teo laughed as he walked by with a cooler, “One left,” he nodded toward the truck bed “Meet you inside?”

“Yeah, right behind you,” he answered before pausing, briefly distracted by two women walking by laughing and lost in their conversation. The one wearing a red T-shirt knotted low at her back was LeeAnn. It was the one wearing a blue shirt that caught his attention. Athan’s eyes were drawn down to the sway of her hips.

“Yo Athan, you coming?” Paul yelled from the doorway.

“Yeah, yeah, on my way,” he answered, pulling the cooler to the edge and taking one more look at LeeAnn as she and her friend vanished into the crowd. Shaking his head he sang “I

wanna be a cowboy baby” as he hoisted up the cooler full of ice and drinks and headed into the saloon.

As Teo walked back outside he grabbed his cell from inside the truck. He couldn't help but smile at all the cowgirls he was seeing. “So many cute girls, so little time!” he chuckled.

Athan laughed and teased, “Be careful dude, one of these girls may capture you and then you'd be stuck, stuck, stuck!”

“No way! I'm footloose and fancy-free and plan to stay that way!”

“Whatever, bro, get inside, I want to take all your money.”

“You wish!” Just then Teo noticed two girls sauntering towards him, lost in conversation as they headed to the food. One of the girls he didn't recognize. She was a petite gorgeous little number in blue, which had him conjuring up all sorts of wicked ideas, and then she smiled. That smile was like a kick in the gut as it sucked the air right out of him. She was breathtaking, literally, when she smiled.

As he started to cough and tried to start to breathe again, he proceeded to trip over his own feet. Catching himself in a less-than-graceful move, he had to wonder what the heck had just come over him.

“Learning to walk still a new concept?” Athan asked with a teasing laugh.

“Bite me, dude!” As Athan laughed, Teo discreetly looked around for the girl he'd just seen. Like the nymph she was, she had simply vanished. Taking a deep breath he shook his head at himself. “Come on, let's get some drinks and find the guys!”

“As if! I seem to remember the last game you went home broke!”

Teo laughed as he led Josh into the saloon. Whatever had just happened was over now. Time to have some good ole fun!

* * *

Rocky was enjoying a relaxing afternoon at her favorite coffee shop. They had large overstuffed chairs where she could curl

up with a good book and a wonderful cup of coffee. Taking a break she decided to people watch and just relax.

This particular shop usually had a regular stream of customers. The variety of people was always interesting. As she sipped her coffee she watched the two older ladies in one corner giggling and chatting happily as they knitted. They looked like they had been friends forever. In another chair sat a goth girl drawing in a sketchbook. She wore a t-shirt that said, "All About Vamps". Rocky could only roll her eyes.

Just then a rather loud old pickup truck parked next to her pride and joy, her Lady Vanquish. Making sure the door didn't ding her car, a pair of tall good looking men climbed out of the truck. Rocky watched with a small smile as they walked around her car in appreciation.

As they walked in and approached the counter, Rocky realized it was the Minos brothers. She couldn't help but appreciate both of them. That was the thing, she never could decide which she liked better.

They were both mighty fine pieces of scenery. From the way their clothes fit their bodies, it was obvious the men were all chiseled muscles. She noticed that Athan was the same chatty guy she'd always seen him be while Teo stood back and smiled at the girl behind the counter. Seeing that smile, Rocky had to stop herself from drooling. The man had a smile that could turn a girl into a pile of quivering goo.

She continued to watch as they got their order and headed back to their truck. She smiled as once again both brothers made sure not to ding her car. As Athan pulled out and drove away she sighed to herself. She could drool and daydream all she wanted about them like that but one thing history had proven to her it was that she just wasn't cut out for more. It was a lot less painful to her ole heart to just ogle from afar. Shaking her head to clear it, she turned her attention back to her book and continued to read.

Chapter 3

Rocky sat at her little writing desk, going through her email on her laptop. Junk, junk, interesting junk, and more junk. She smiled as she paused and read through the emails about a Halloween bash at the Minos Ranch. It sounded like it could be fun and maybe she'd see those hot brothers again. She just needed to figure out a costume. She mulled over the possibilities in her mind until she burst out laughing. Her costume idea was firmly planted in her head, so she decided to go do a bit of shopping.

Her first stop was at a local punk shop. They had all sorts of goodies for her costume. She picked up a pair of fuchsia fishnet stockings, black and silver fishnet hand gloves, fake tattoos, dark punk make-up, temporary hair color, a spike belt, and a wristband. As she chose each item, her smile grew more and more wicked.

After she paid for her items, she headed out of the store and back to her car, only to pause as she saw another store across the street she had to go into. Quickly crossing the street, she walked into the army surplus store. The big burly guy behind the counter eyed her curiously before turning his attention back to the black and white TV near him. After much searching through the piles, she squealed in delight when she found a pair of combat boots in her size. "PERFECT!" she exclaimed as she walked up to the counter. "Hey sweetie, you wouldn't by any chance have a few of those patches I see on army uniforms do you?" she asked the big burly guy.

He grunted as he pulled over a basket full and waited as Rocky made her choices. After thanking the guy only to receive another grunt while paying for her purchases, she headed to her car. As she placed her bags in the passenger side, she mulled over where to get the final but most important pieces to her costume. As she started the engine of her car, she smiled brightly as she said, "Oh I know where!"

A little bit later, she pulled in front of the country-western attire store. She giggled to herself as she thought about her

costume. As she entered the store, she gasped as she immediately saw the first item she was looking for... a fuchsia pink cowboy hat! Jumping up and down in delight, she quickly took the hat and plopped it on her head.

She continued to roam around the store until she came upon the final missing piece of her costume. Rocky couldn't contain her laugh. It was so perfect and so hideous at the same time. The gingham dress was a mix of orange and green and blue. Although it was a tad big, it was too perfect to pass up and the size really wouldn't matter with everything she was going to do to it.

She got another series of strange looks from the lady behind the counter. Rocky simply smiled and said, "Halloween." The woman nodded and Rocky smiled wickedly. Oh yeah, she really couldn't wait for everyone's reaction to Rocky's sense of style for Halloween.

Rocky looked in the mirror. Her outfit was definitely unique and one all her own making. She could guarantee no one else would be wearing anything like it. She giggled as she plopped the pink cowboy hat on her head and headed out the door of her bedroom.

She ran smack dab into Auntie Bea who burst out laughing at the costume. "Rocky, I don't know I even want to ask."

Rocky beamed at her. "The theme is... Cowgirl Goes Punk: The Nightmare."

Bea laughed even harder. "Only you Rock. Only you!"

"Why thank you," Rocky replied with a bright smile.

* * *

Rocky roamed around the party at the stables munching on yummy food and saying hi to new and old friends. She kept eyeing the maze but was unsure if she should attempt it. Finally, she decided to just go for it and entered the maze. This way and that she turned, around and around she went. After almost an hour she conceded that she was lost.

Looking up at the sky with a sigh she said loudly, "Really?" What the heck was wrong with her sense of

direction lately? Swearing colorfully she tried to figure out what to do. She looked up at the height of the corn stalks. She doubted anyone would see her if she jumped up and down. What to do, what to do.

With a heavy sigh, Rocky got down on her hands and knees and tried to push her way through the cornstalks. After a long while she finally got through to the other side of the first barrier. She was covered in scratches and realized that if she continued she'd be here all night.

Feeling nearly on the verge of tears from frustration at once again getting lost, she firmed up her resolve and took her hat off. She jumped up once and managed to swing her hat above the corn stalks. Maybe if she did this enough someone would see. Maybe. Once her friends heard about this, she'd never live it down she realized with a deep sigh.

* * *

Athan crunched into the candied apple and at people as they walked by. Bea approached him and grinned, "What a fun night. I was sure I'd see Rocky here but so far I haven't. Have you seen her?"

"Rocky? You mean that quiet little thing that moved right after high school?"

"Yup. She moved back a few weeks ago. I'm surprised you didn't see her with LeeAnn at the rodeo y'all hosted a couple of weeks ago.

"Wait, that was Rocky?"

"Maybe? Petite and beautiful girl with the bluest eyes."

"I didn't meet her but I saw her. That was not the Rocky I remember from high school." He paused and looked at the corn maze behind them squinting, something had caught his eye. He waited for a second; there it was again, a little flash of pink. "You see that?" he asked.

"See what?" Teo asked as he walked up to join them. Everyone turned and looked toward the maze.

Athan waited again and pointed as the pink flashed again. "That!" he walked around the booth toward the maze.

"What am I looking for?" Teo asked as his eyes scanned in the direction Athan pointed to.

"There in the middle of the maze, something pink... watch!" As they all moved closer.

There it was again, this time Bea and Teo saw it and they all heard a faint, "Hello anyone there?"

Bea blinked, "I know that voice. Rocky?" she called.

"Auntie Bea? Is that you?" the voice came back.

"If I hear 'build it and they will come' I am running," Teo laughed.

Bea shushed him, laughing too, "It's me, Rocky what are you doing in there? Come on out!"

"Well, um, I would if I could!"

"Oh don't tell me!" Bea asked, trying to smother her laughter, "You're lost?"

"Yeah, but don't laugh at me!" The voice sounded frustrated almost on the verge of tears or it might have been laughter Athan wasn't sure. "Bea, are you still there? Please come get me." The pink hat flashed briefly above the corn again.

Teo glanced over at Athan, who had his head lowered and his shoulders were shaking with laughter. Teo pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to keep from laughing himself but he knew it was a losing battle. Drawing in a breath, "I'll go." He headed toward the start of the maze, quite intrigued by who was brave enough to wear a hot pink cowboy hat.

"I'll backtrack from the exit," Athan said as he walked towards the maze exit. "Stay there, help is on the way."

"So do you get lost often?" Teo called trying to get a bearing on what direction she was in, marking the way by bending a stalk at the turns.

"No!" she answered. "Not usually without GPS."

“Oh,” Athan called, moving toward her. “Not too sure GPS works out here.”

“Hey, are you sure you’re finding me? I hardly heard you. You sound farther away!”

Teo shook his head as he rounded the corner, the last path took him past her, moving from her then back. He stopped in the opening as he saw her, his eyes trailing up over combat boots and a dress that called attention to her curves if you could get past the bad tablecloth-type material.

She was dabbing a scratch on her leg where one of several holes was torn in her fishnets. She was a petite little thing, not even five feet tall. He wondered how she managed to jump high enough for them to see the hat. She hugged herself, rubbing her arms to keep warm, letting out a desperate breath. “Hello!” she yelled.

“Can you hear me now?” he asked.

She turned with a gasp, “Hear you? I can see you!” she grinned, looking extremely relieved. “Oh and you, too!” She smiled brightly as she saw Athan as well.

“You’re the cute little cowgirl from the rodeo that was with LeeAnn,” Teo commented. At Rocky’s nod, he smiled as he said, “I’m Teo, that’s my brother Athan.”

She smiled so beautifully as she introduced herself. “I’m Rocky. I know both of you, though. You were a couple of years ahead of me in high school.”

“Wait, the shy, sweet little thing from school? What made you return to Sweet Heaven?”

Before she had a chance to answer Athan, Teo asked her, “You alright?” he nodded toward her scratches. Trying to keep his mind off how sexy fishnets were even with holes torn in them, not to mention what fun it would be to make those holes bigger.

She rolled her eyes and blew out a breath that was visible in the night chill. “Yeah I tried to crawl through the stalks, didn’t realize they were so difficult to navigate,” she shrugged.

He caught her shiver but doubted she would take him wrapping her in his arms too well, although it was tempting. He decided to offer his jacket instead. “Well let’s get you out of here and see if we can find a hot cup of coffee.”

“Okay, my treat though. Payment for the rescue,” she replied as she accepted his offered coat.

“Deal,” the brothers said in unison as they led her out of the maze.

Chapter 4

Athan headed back towards the barn with the latest supply orders in hand. Some of the numbers seemed off so he needed to check their stock. As he passed the tack room he heard some muffled swearing and then a heavy thud. He rushed into the room and there on the floor, under a pile of bridles was none other than the sweet angel he'd enjoyed coffee with the previous night.

Both Teo and he were enamored with the beautiful Rocky. They grew up knowing that the best woman for them would be for both of them. He doubted Rocky would be into something like that but he found himself kind of hoping.

He took a look at her and with a quick inspection, knew she wasn't hurt, just trapped by the weight of the gear. He chuckled and leaned up against the door jamb, crossing his arms and legs as he grinned down at her. "Am I going to have to rescue you every time I see you?"

She looked up at me. Her eyes were heavenly limpid pools of light blue with flashes of fire in their depths. Her angelic voice rescued him from drowning in them. "Are you just going to stand there and let me be crushed by these insanely heavy horse things?"

"Horse things?" He shook his head and chuckled loudly. "Well, I suppose I can't let that happen now can I?" He continued laughing under his breath. He knew he wanted to keep her there as long as he could so he took one harness at a time and lifted it off of her, hung it on the post, and came back for another one.

Her displeasure showed in her gruff reply. "Well, I don't know what these things are and as it's a horse stable I assume they belong to the dang horses." Watching him, she finally got to the heart of her displeasure, "Could you move ANY slower?"

He laughed as he asked her. "You're such a beautiful little troublemaker, Rocky?"

“Troublemaker? Come on, please hurry it up, will you? These stinky things are heavy.”

There was that fire again. Chuckling he picked up the rest of the bridles, and hung them up, turning back to her, he offered his hand to help her up. “Now... you want to tell me what you were doing in here?”

She lifted her chin and stared right up at me, “I was making a delivery for Bea and got curious.”

“You grew up here, how are you not familiar with working ranches?”

She shrugged. “Mom and Dad never felt the need for me to be around animals and such.”

“Would you like a tour of the stables?”

“I would... this place is huge.”

“Nah, well the grounds are, but the buildings aren’t. You look awfully pretty today, Rocky.”

When Athan offered to give her a tour of the stables Rocky couldn’t have been happier. If truth be told, she was hoping to see the brothers when she went exploring. She enjoyed the short time they had coffee together the previous evening.

“Here are the stalls. We keep the horses in the stalls.”

Looking at the stalls she smiled and nodded. The horses there were gorgeous but made her nervous. They were so big.

Athan continued as he said, “The room you were in is the tack room.”

She paused for a moment, a bit confused. “Tack room? What’s a tack room?”

Athan smiled at her question as he answered. “It’s where we keep the tack, the bridles, and such for the horses.”

His answer didn’t help her confusion and so she asked, “Why is it called tack?”

Athan paused thinking for the right answer and then let out a lovely sound. He chuckled as he said, “Don’t know. Never

really thought about it, ‘spose it’s just like asking why we call grass-grass. It just is.”

Rocky smiled and shrugged. “Ok.” She couldn’t help but giggle at his expression. She knew she sometimes asked odd questions but that was just how her mind worked.

“Oh, and over here is the ring where we have the English riding classes.”

Rocky giggled as she asked, “English riding? Are they all huffy about it or something?” If she hadn’t been holding onto his arm, Rocky was sure her legs would have given out under her. They turned to mush as the loveliest thing happened. Athan threw his head back and laughed.

“No, it is just a different style of riding. See in Western you just keep your seat. In English, you post,” he tried to explain.

Rocky smirked as she replied, “That’s all Greek to me cowboy.”

“Nah, it’s just something you’re not used to. You’ll catch on eventually.” He rounded a corner and he pointed out, “Over here is our barn office.”

Now that was something she wanted to see. “OOOOO... I wanna see inside your office.”

Athan looked at her surprised as he asked, “You do? Why? It’s just an old office.”

Rocky smiled, “Cause it’s where you work, silly.”

“Hmm... well, ok, just mind the mess, er, I mean don’t mind the mess. Oh, I... oh never mind.” Leading her into the office he said, “Here it is.”

Rocky giggled as she looked over the office. “Very kewl! Now when I think of you working I can picture your office.”

The idea that Rocky thought of him working made Athan smile, “You... think of me? I mean well...”

Nodding and deciding to rescue him, Rocky suggested, “So show me some of these horses you have.”

Athan breathed a soft sigh of relief. He led them out of his office and said, “The horses, well most of them are out here in the paddock.”

“Paddock?” Rocky asked again, confused.

“Umm... yeah. Corral, I guess you could call it. The fenced-in yard where we keep them until they are ready to go out.”

“Ok, corral I understand.”

Athan nodded and smiled. He then led her over to where the horses were standing around the water trough. Pointing out the different horses he said, “This here is Star. And that one there is Billy.”

Rocky looked at the horses nervously. “Are all horses so... BIG?”

“Well, most are between 14 and 16 hands. Unless they are ponies, then they would be smaller. Like that paint over there. He’s only about 10 hands I think.”

At that moment Rocky wished she had a translator. She had no clue what measuring a horse by hands meant. She looked at the ‘small’ one and, quirking an eyebrow, said softly, “He’s still big to me.”

Athan, wanting to help her get over her obvious nervousness around the horses, offered, “Would you like a ride?”

Rocky looked nervously from Athan to the horse and said, “I dunno...”

“They don’t bite, well, most of the time they don’t.”

“But they are SO big.” All Rocky could think of was how far down she’d fall if she couldn’t maintain her grip.

“We could take this one here,” Athan offered, pointing at the Appaloosa. “She’s on the smaller side.”

Rocky didn’t want her time with Athan to end so she swallowed her fear and said, “Well, ok. You won’t let me fall off will you?”

Athan smiled, “If you’d like, I will ride up there with you and hold on real tight. I promise not to let you fall. How’s that sound?”

That thought alone made Rocky smile. That would be PERFECT! Nodding, she agreed, “Ok... if you promise.”

Athan smiled even wider and started saddling the horse for their ride.

Athan nodded, grabbed Dulce’s saddle and blanket off the rail, and saddled her up as fast as he could. No sense in giving her a chance to change her mind. “Now just put your foot on top of mine, no, not that one, unless you want to land, facing me.”

She giggled and switched feet. He pulled her up nice and easy, helped her get her left leg over Dulce’s head, and got her settled in. She slid down into the saddle and he drew in a sharp breath and scooted back. He smirked as the little vixen scooted back some more.

Grabbing up the reigns, Athan turned Dulce and guided her toward the gate. The easy gait of the horse seemed to reassure Rocky and she relaxed just a bit, leaning back against him. He fought to keep his left hand resting on his leg while the right one guided them out across the meadow. Once Dulce started in at a trot he felt her tense up. On instinct, he wrapped his arm around her waist and then took the liberty of kissing the top of her head.

As soon as Athan realized what he’d done, he stiffened up and loosened his grip on her waist. Rocky grabbed his arm and kept it there, making him smile as he realized that maybe the kiss wasn’t such a big mistake. She drew in a delighted breath and settled back against my chest as she took in the beautiful scenery around us. Reigning in Dulce he pointed her towards the side of a stream. As Athan pulled up on the reigns and dismounted, Rocky’s eyes followed every move he made.

He tied Dulce to a sapling and turned back to Rocky. He reached up both arms, beckoning her with his hands. Glancing from him to the ground and then to Dulce, she finally decided to trust him, making him grin broadly.

She placed her soft hands on his wrists and slid them slowly along his arms until they rested on his shoulders. He pulled her in close and let her slide down his body, his eyes darkening at the feel of her. As her lips passed his, he placed a quick kiss on them. Before she could do anything about it, he grabbed her hand and pulled her off into the clearing. “Stay here.”

He released her hand and headed back to Dulce. Uncinching the saddle, he took it off her back and removed the blanket. “Sorry old girl, but I need this more than you do at the moment. Can’t have the little lady sitting on the ground now can we?” Dulce shook her head as if she understood and went back to munching the grass at her feet. He grabbed up the blanket with one hand and slung the saddle over his shoulder and headed back to the beautiful lady that hadn’t even realized she’d quickly taken ownership of his heart.

The afternoon sank into the evening as they traded stories back and forth. As they watched the sunset, Athan once again captured her lips in a kiss, this time the kiss became increasingly more passionate, with each giving and taking, each fully tasting the other. The passion he held under tight control started to break free. He wanted, no, needed her so badly his body ached from it. And when he heard her next words, his body very nearly sang for joy.

“Love me, please, Athan,” Rocky pleaded from her heart. She knew she was falling in love with this man, and the part of her heart scarred from the past tried feebly to stop her, but her soul called out to him.

Loving her... that was incredibly easy to do, and he wanted to show her that. “Are you sure, love?” He asked as his fingers played with the hem of her t-shirt.

Smiling at him, passion burning in her eyes, Rocky reached up and removed her shirt. “Absolutely!”

The moment the shirt landed on the ground, Athan was done. Every bit of him needed to claim this beautiful nymph as his own. Capturing her lips once again, he crushed her to him in a desperate need for his body to feel hers.

Rocky couldn't take his clothes anymore; she wanted to feel him, all of him. She broke the kiss and quickly started to unbutton his shirt and then pulled it off of him. Raking her nails down his hard-muscled chest, she could only think about tasting every inch of him.

Running his hands through her silken hair, Athan claimed Rocky's lips as her hands worked to release his belt. Athan pulled them up and worked to release her jeans as she pushed his pants down, her fingers lightly drifting over that most intimate part of him, causing him to hiss as he took hold of her hand. "Continue to do that, love and any last remaining bit of control will be lost," he warned, his voice rough from passion.

"You mean doing this?" she asked, her fingers dancing over him. "Or this?" her hand fully cupping and massaging him.

Growling, Athan captured her lips in a kiss so filled with passion and desire it was almost painful. Kicking off his shoes and socks, he stepped out of his pants that were piled on the floor and scooped her up, carrying her to the blanket. As he laid them down upon it, his hands moved to release the sexiest bra he'd seen in a long time and what lay before him was sheer perfection.

As Athan's hands captured her ample, round breasts, she moaned in pleasure. Her breasts had always been sensitive and in his wonderful hands they were on fire, but she wanted more. Rolling them over, she sat on top of him. Slowly, her eyes never leaving him, she slid down the length of his body. As she did, she took his boxer briefs with her. Smiling wickedly, her hands massaged and teased his thighs moving closer and closer to his manhood, never actually touching him until she ran her tongue up the length of him before fully taking him into her mouth.

Athan was convinced he had just died from sheer pleasure at that moment. All he could see were stars, all he could feel was her. After a few moments of ultimate bliss, he quickly grabbed her and pulled her up, rolling them over so that she lay under him. At her pout, he said in almost a growl,

“Another moment of that and I’d be done and that’s not where I want to be when that happens.”

Athan nipped at the insides of her thighs while his fingers teased her. Rocky moaned in pleasure as she arched her hips towards him. Spreading her so that she was open to him, he leaned down and tasted her fully. Finding her bud, he ran his tongue over it, driving her into a frenzy of pleasure. “Oh god, Athan!” she moaned as she felt that pleasure was about to consume her.

Bringing her right to the edge, Athan moved up her body so that he was laying over top of her. Capturing her lips in a powerful kiss, his length teased her at her entrance. “Do you want me, Rocky?” he asked as his hands stroked her body, leaving a trail of fire everywhere he touched.

“Yes! Please!” she pleaded as she moved her legs so that she was fully open and exposed to him.

Athan tried to go slow, afraid he was going to hurt her petite frame. Before long though he was seated to the hilt and nothing had felt so perfect. He was sure he was in heaven!

Rocky could feel him holding back and she knew he didn’t want to hurt her. She wanted all of him though; she wanted him to lose that control. “More Athan,” she moaned into his ear. “Don’t hold back, baby. I want all of you. I want you to claim me completely as yours!”

Her words shattered the last bits of his control. He pulled back until he was at the edge of her opening and with one powerful thrust entered her fully again. Again he pulled back, and again he thrust. Over and over, each time harder and faster.

Nothing had ever felt so wonderful to her. She felt as if her heart and soul were joining with him after being separated for far too long. He was large and perfect for her. They fit together as if they had been made for each other. And with each stroke, her moans of passion became louder as he brought her closer and closer to the edge. Her body moved with him, meeting him thrust for thrust, demanding more each time as she clung to him.

He'd been with a few women in his time but this woman was like no other. It took everything in him not to explode on the first thrust. She felt so incredible. He'd been worried that he was too heavy, too large for her. But every time he held back, she begged for more. Their lovemaking was a give-and-take until neither of them could hold on any longer. Their passion consumed them until all too soon, they reached the edge together, and as he captured her mouth in a fiery kiss, one final thrust threw them over the edge.

Panting heavily, they lay joined together, bodies entwined. It took several minutes before either could speak. It was Rocky who spoke first as she reached up and stroked his cheek. "If I'd known being with you was that wonderfully perfect I'd have made sure we remained lost in that maze at Halloween."

"I wouldn't have minded at all!" he replied with a smile. Looking at her reddened swollen lips he touched them softly as he asked, "I didn't hurt you did I?"

"No, not even a little. It felt as if we were made for each other," she sighed happily. After a few moments, she said, "Let's stay here for a little longer. I want to just be with you."

"Your wish is my command, my lady, my beautiful woman."

"Your woman?" Rocky asked teasingly.

"Darn straight, my beautiful nymph. You are mine now."

"I like the sound of that," she said happily as she closed her eyes. "Very much so."

Chapter 5

Rocky appraised herself in the mirror and smiled. Oh yeah! She looked good! The dark-purple almost black, super soft leather catsuit fit her like a glove and the matching 5-inch heeled boots gave her a little bit of height so that for once she didn't feel so short.

When Athan got a look at this outfit he was sure to start drooling. Fluffing her hair in a pure vixen fashion she giggled softly. Grabbing her keys, purse, and an envelope for Athan, she headed out the door.

* * *

A trail of dust rose behind her sports car as Rocky arrived with a flair all her own as she spun her car to expertly park it next to Athan's truck at the stables. Smiling mischievously, she climbed out of her Vanquish and walked towards Athan's office. As she walked by the main house, she was graced with the whistles of Teo and Paul, who were sitting on the front porch. "Don't you guys ever work around here?" she asked, smiling.

Teo smirked. "Who can work with your arrival, looking like temptation incarnate?"

Blowing a kiss to him, she turned to Jeremy and asked, "Athan in his office?"

"Yes ma'am," Jeremy answered with a chuckle.

"Thank you handsome!" Rocky said with a wink and smile as she headed towards Athan's office.

As she approached the doorway to Athan's office she smiled wickedly to herself as she glanced down at the envelope. Oh yeah, this was gonna be good! She continued to smile as she looked up and paused in the doorway. She sighed to herself as she appreciated the immensely good-looking cowboy in front of her. He was pouring over paperwork and muttering softly to himself. His wavy brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail giving her an unobstructed view of his

profile. “Howdy cowboy!” she called out in her deepest voice. Athan looked up surprised and then Rocky was graced with that killer smile of his.

“Love, what are you doing here?” Athan asked, his eyes appraising her outfit appreciatively. Quickly pulling his eyes up from her body and pointedly looking at her face as he said, “I didn’t expect to see you till tomorrow.”

Rocky couldn’t help but smile. “I was just dropping off a love note, handsome,” Rocky answered mischievously. Walking up closer to his desk, she tossed the envelope in her hand into his Inbox and leaned over his desk. Giving Athan a quick kiss, she said, “See you tomorrow cowboy,” and quickly turned with a smile and left his office.

Athan stood up and walked to the entrance of his office. He watched as she walked away, silently thanking the gods above for having blessed his day with such a vision. Standing there staring after her, long after she’d left his line of sight, he suddenly remembered the “love note” she’d tossed into his Inbox. He turned and retrieved the flower and heart-covered envelope. It was addressed to “My Dearest Athan.” Smiling, he opened the envelope and burst out laughing. Inside from Ms. Rocky Karin was an invoice. On it were charges for \$100 for “New Blue Jeans,” \$25 for “Bug Bite Care,” and \$100 for “Lost Bra Replacement.”

Hearing Athan’s laugh as he walked by, Teo popped his head into the office and asked, “What you got there?”

“A love note,” Athan answered, starting to laugh all over again.

As Teo read it over Athan’s shoulder, his eyebrows went up. “Lost Bra Replacement?”

* * *

Teo walked into the Sweet Heaven Diner ready to get some food and just relax. Spotting an empty booth he snagged it and got out his tablet to play a game of chess. Just then he heard a musical giggle over the music. With a smile, he looked around to see if he could spot where the beautiful sound came from.

Then he saw her. Over by the bar sat Rocky, the gorgeous little thing he'd helped out of the Halloween maze recently, and had his brother wrapped around her pinky finger. She was chatting it up with Bea and LeeAnn, telling them a story that had them all laughing. He smiled as he watched her when it suddenly dawned on him, she was the nymph from the rodeo. Now his interest was piqued even more so.

“What can I get you, Teo?” Taran asked, briefly surprising him.

“A bowl of today's soup and some sweet tea, please.”

“You got it!”

After Taran left he went back to observing the beauty across the room. She had an aura about her that just lit up the place. As he continued to ponder his fascination with her, he smiled at how beautiful and sexy she was. Tonight she had on a tight black skull t-shirt cut to display her cleavage and jean shorts. What threw her outfit into the realm of drool-worthy sexiness were the thigh-high black stockings held up by the garter belts that disappeared under the shorts. Stiletto's black boots completed the look that made him have to readjust his pants. He wondered if she knew the effect she had on men.

Giving himself a mental shake to try and snap himself out of his drool fest, he watched as one of the regulars walked up behind her, and placing his hands on her shoulders he whispered something into her ear before kissing her cheek. Teo could almost hear her indignant gasp from across the room as she turned and looked at him in shock. Smacking him in the gut she said something that had everyone laughing.

It was then that Taran brought over his order. Noticing where his attention lay, she smiled as she said, “That's the one and only Rocky.”

Teo smiled at her as he replied, “I met her recently. She certainly does brighten the place up.”

“That she does!” Taran agreed before walking away to attend to a customer who was calling her.

As he watched he sighed deeply. It didn't surprise that he liked the same girl as his brother. He just wished she'd be open to being with both of them.

Chapter 6

It was early morning when Rocky emerged from her room. At least she thought it was early morning. She'd been up all night and then some, working on a graphical project for a friend. She rubbed her eyes and tried to clear the fog in her head to no avail. She needed caffeine badly. She could tell she was teetering on the edge of a lack of caffeine and sleep insanity. That was never a good place for her to be.

As she walked into the kitchen and started to make coffee, her mind went to Athan. She missed seeing him this week. Distracted, she rinsed out the pot, ground up the coffee beans, put in a new filter, put in the grounds, and then went to the fridge to get the bottled water she liked to use for her coffee. Standing in the open doorway of the fridge, Rocky paused to yawn and rub her eyes. She reached into the fridge and got out the water. Pouring the water into the coffee maker, she turned it on and sat on a stool to wait for her coffee.

Fighting a serious case of the sleepies, Rocky yawned again and closed her eyes for a moment. Suddenly, she was pulled out of her brief nap by Bea screaming. Rocky pulled open her eyes and proceeded to rub them. Either she was more tired than she thought or a fog had rolled into the kitchen.

Waving her hand, trying to see better, she realized there was also a rather foul stench in the kitchen. With dread, she moved towards the coffee maker. What she saw would cause nightmares for a long time to come. Instead of coffee dripping into the pot; a black goo sputtered and spit from every opening in the coffee maker. It was everywhere. The "fog" was smoke that accompanied the black goo.

Teo arrived at Bea's B&B to help her take care of a few honey-do projects. As he reached the back door, a horrible smell wafted toward him. Pulling a bandana out of his pocket, he held it over his nose and headed to the kitchen to investigate.

Slowly, cautiously, Teo opened the door. A thick plume of smoke was the first thing he encountered. And the smell! If he

thought it was bad outside of the kitchen, he was greatly mistaken. This was wretched.

The first thing he saw through the smoke was Rocky. And oh what a sight she was! Rocky's face was tear-stained and smudged from the smoke. There was black stuff splattered all over her wrinkled sweats and her hair was pulled up into the messiest bun he had ever seen.

It was then he saw Bea, who was flailing her arms at something on the counter. As Teo moved closer when he suddenly saw it. The coffee maker was sputtering goo and smoke everywhere. He looked back and forth between Bea and Rocky in an attempt to figure out what happened and why the coffee machine was spouting goo like some horrible sci-fi movie creature. "Bea, what happened here?" he finally asked. His eyes followed Bea's arm as she waved frantically at the guiltiest-looking bottle of Diet Coke he'd ever seen. "Well, fuck!"

Rocky, looking like a cranky porcupine from all the pencils and pens stuck in her hair, simply stood there hiccupping, sobbing, looking completely confused and upset. Her only reply was, "I only wanted coffee."

Gently taking Rocky's face in his hands, Teo said to her, "Rocky, kitten. Are you ok? How long have you been awake?"

Rocky blinked at him and replied, "Only a day, maybe two."

With a sigh, Teo pulled the fire extinguisher from under the sink, unplugged the coffee machine, and proceeded to hose it down. Bea took the offending machine and tossed it outside. She then turned her attention to opening windows and cleaning up the kitchen.

Teo turned back to Rocky and taking her hand in his, he led her friend out of the kitchen as Bea got out the fans and her arsenal of cleaning supplies. As they reached the foyer, Rocky started to resist him as she said, "Coffee."

At the sad look on her face, his heart ached for her. Scooping her up he took her upstairs to get her showered and

then take her for coffee. All of his plans were derailed when he realized she was sound asleep in his arms. Tenderly laying her on the bed, he removed the most destroyed of her clothing and then tucked her into bed, placing a tender kiss on her cheek.

* * *

The remnants of the Minos Ranch Christmas party had settled into the main house. Athan and Paul were playing pool. This left Rocky looking bored and alone doing nothing.

He looked over at her. She was leaning against the foosball table, spinning a handle with a sigh, watching the players rotate rapidly over and over. Gods, she looked gorgeous! She was wearing a pale blue dress that matched her eyes, with black lace-up moccasin boots, and her hair soft and loose with big curls. What he wouldn't give to run his hands through those silken tresses!

“Ah Damn!” he muttered to himself. He yanked open the fridge and snagged a couple of bottles of Coke. He walked over and handed her one as he took a long swallow from his.

“Thanks,” she smiled.

He took a position at one end of the foosball table and spun one of the rods. “Wanna play?” he arched a brow at her in a challenge as he spun the players again.

“Okaaaay,” she said slowly, moving to the opposite end of the table. The tip of her tongue touched her upper lip as she took the ball out of the goal pocket and rolled it between the palms of her hands, her hips shaking from side to side. “First to 15 wins?” she asked.

As Teo nodded he wondered if she did those little things to drive him crazy or if she didn't realize how naturally sexy she was. She tossed the ball and it dropped in the center, they both leaned forward, hands moving to the grips, eyes locked. With a flick of the wrist, Teo couldn't tell whose, the game was on.

As they played she told him all about graphic arts jobs she'd been taking on and the excitement flowed from her. He chuckled, he had never seen a computer geek like her. She was far from quiet and mousy. Okay so maybe she could fit the

absent-minded professor criteria every once in a while, but dang she was cute when she did. Her enthusiasm for living and her unique style of doing it were some of the things he appreciated most about her.

His body reminded him what else about her he appreciated. He watched her incredibly beautiful long hair swaying back and forth as it hung over her shoulders and down her back while her beautiful body rocked, her petite hands grasped the handles and her teeth tugged at her bottom lip as she played, attempting to score. They kept matching each other point for point and before he knew it they were tied at 13.

“You know I didn’t think this place was so spacious and beautiful,” she said, blowing a wisp of hair out of her face.

Teo found himself watching it move and that slight distraction let her score. Damn, 13-14.

She giggled greedily, “One more point and I win.”

He arched a brow and grit his teeth, forcing his eyes to stay on the table. “Yeah,” he grinned, “It’s not so bad and I don’t have to be worried about being late for work.” He spun a rod hard and the ball went in causing her to growl.

“Next point wins,” he wagged his brows and she dropped the ball, with a ‘you’re going down’ look. “Only thing about being out on a ranch is that rats can be a problem.”

“Rats?” she asked, her eyes getting wide.

“Yeah, like that one behind you,” Rand said as he wandered over.

Rocky’s head shot around and Teo drove in the ball, “15 I win!”

“What?” She gasped, looking back at him and then at the table, “No way, you cheated! There’s no rat.”

Rand started laughing.

Teo looked offended, “No I didn’t, Rand is the one that said there was a rat.”

Rand was still laughing.

“Only rat here is him,” she huffed glaring at Rand.

Rand clutched his chest as if wounded.

“And you started it, so you did cheat!” she poked Teo in the stomach.

He laughed, “No, I didn’t,” as he poked her back.

She wiggled away from him. “Stop,” she laughed.

“Oh someone is ticklish!” his eyes narrowed as he wiggled his fingers.

“No, oh no. Teo! Don’t! Okay you win, but I so want a rematch!”

He held up his hands. “You’re on! Best 2 out of 3.”

Chapter 7

The party was over and the only ones left were Athan, who was snoring on the couch, Rocky, and Teo. Rocky looked towards the pinball machines at the back of the game room and then back at Teo with a mischievous grin. “Teo, you may have won 2 out of 3 of our foosball competitions, because you had help I might add, BUT I bet I can whup your butt at pinball!”

“I won that competition fair and square and no one beats Teo at pinball!” he announced.

“Well, this someone will!” Rocky snorted as she stood up and headed over towards the machines. Coming up behind her, Teo caused her to squeal when he poked her in the ribs. “That’s it, mister! That’s war!”

Teo laughed as he sprinted away from her, allowing Rocky time to appreciate his backside. And what a mighty fine backside it was. Shaking her head slightly, she tried to rid herself of those thoughts. “He’s just a friend. Friend, friend, friend,” Rocky thought to herself. But damn if he wasn’t one fine friend.

The way his jeans cupped his behind just perfectly caused her to desperately want to reach out and squeeze. He had to know what kind of effect those jeans had on a girl. And that shirt for heaven’s sake, clung to every muscle and threw her hormones into a tizzy and sent her mind to places where it did not belong. “Rocky, get your mind out of Gutterville right this instant!” she silently admonished herself. “If you keep this up you’ll be so distracted, he’ll win by default and do you want that to happen? Hell no!”

Walking up behind Teo, and unable to resist, she smacked his derriere and said wickedly, “Let’s play ranch-man!”

Teo looked at Rocky in surprise as he exclaimed, “Hey!”

“What?” she asked innocently. “Ballplayers do it all the time. Why should they have all the fun?”

Teo shook his head and laughed as Rocky began to play.

Many many millions of points later, Rocky hooted and hollered and did a little dance as she beat Teo for the third time in a row.

Teo laughed and shook his head at her antics as she danced around the pool table. Rocky paused in her dancing to take a long drink of Coke. Placing the glass down on the nearest table with a loud thud, Rocky said mischievously, “Next round is on you as payment to the pinball master.”

Teo raised an eyebrow as he replied, “Pinball master? You simply had a biased machine.”

“Biased machine?” Rocky snorted. “Fine! You pick the machine and I’ll still whup your cute arse!”

Sometime later, Rocky stood up on a bar stool and announced, “Winner and still Pinball Master... RRRRRRRRROOOOOOCCCCCKKKKKKKKYYYYYYYYYYY !!!!!!! Thank you, Thank you very much!”

Laughing, Teo grabbed Rocky around her legs, causing her to squeal, and carried her to the bar. With a laugh, he said, “I must pay homage to the Pinball Queen.”

Rocky giggled and proceeded to enjoy the view of Teo’s backside from her current position until slowly Teo lowered her to the ground, her body sliding along his. This was so wrong, Rocky wanted Teo to kiss so badly she ached for his kiss, and yet Athan was just feet away. “Teo,” she moaned as she looked up into his dark eyes.

Before another word could be said, Teo captured her lips in a punishing kiss. He wanted this woman so badly that his body vibrated with it. Wrapping his hand in her hair, he held her to him as a simple kiss blew away every fantasy he’d ever had.

With a gasp, Rocky pulled away. Her fingers covered her mouth as tears started to fill her eyes. “Athan...”

“It took the two of you long enough,” Athan grouched as he stretched. Standing up, he walked over to Rocky and pulled her into his arms. Leaning down he whispered into her ear, “We’ve dreamed of a woman that could love us both. It’s what

our mother had with our fathers. It's your decision but whatever you decide you won't lose me. Now, I'm going to take a shower. Either explore things with Teo or join me. It's your decision, ok?"

"Truly? You aren't mad?" Rocky asked, tears escaping.

Athan captured her lips as Teo's arms caressed her sides, pulling back he caressed her cheek as he looked at her with love. "How could I be when you're making every dream I've ever had come true." He kissed her once more before leaving the room and heading upstairs.

Teo wrapped his arms around her, his lips nipping and tasting the tender skin on her neck. "Are you ok, kitten?"

"I think so, more like I'm stunned that having feelings and desires for two brothers is ok and I'm not some horrible skanky slut."

Teo pulled away and turned her to look at him. "Never! You could never be that for loving us. Do you understand me? Never!" He captured her lips in a punishing kiss that forced all the negative thoughts to be quiet.

Athan said it was ok as did Teo. Who was she to say no to every fantasy she'd been ashamed to come true?

Teo picked her up and pushed her up against a wall as he growled, "I need you, kitten. I've had a crush on you in high school but I didn't think I was good enough for you. Now I may have a chance with you. Please, let me have you." His voice was emotion filled as he begged her while he offered his heart to her. How could she deny him when it was what Athan wanted as well? She couldn't.

Pulling him closer, she captured his lips in a bruising kiss. Before long the fire between them turned into an inferno. Teo pushed her dress up to her waist and shoving the thong that she wore aside, used his thumb to massage her bud, causing her to gasp in pleasure.

Rocky's hands found the zipper to his pants and freed him as he lifted her, his hands kneading her bottom. Wrapping her

legs around his waist, she took him in her hands and guided him to her warmth as she moaned, “Take me.”

Teo groaned, a deep sense of possessiveness filling him as he drove his manhood home and filled her. This was their woman, his partner, the woman meant for him. Now would not be slow and sensual, now was all about claiming her as his. Slow and sensual would be for later. Now was all primal need.

In and out he thrust, banging the wall, her nails digging into his back as she clung to him, her orgasm rising higher with each movement. Crying out his name, she threw her head back against the wall as one last powerful thrust threw her over the edge into ultimate bliss, the tightening of her muscles pulling him with her into oblivion.

After several moments, Rocky kissed Teo deeply and said, “I think that has been building for a while.”

“Kitten, it’s a good thing the only one here is Athan because I think the whole house could hear that!”

Rocky laughed as she unbuttoned his shirt and nipped at his collarbone. “Good thing, indeed.”

As Teo slipped out of her, the smile she wore turned into a pout. Kissing that pout, he said, “Tonight is just beginning.”

“What about, Athan?”

Teo held her in his strong arms as he headed to his room. “Tonight is about us. Soon we’ll explore all of us but tonight is my turn to claim you.”

“I just don’t want to hurt him or you.”

He kissed her tenderly as he felt the love coming from her, “Let us worry about that. I promise you aren’t going to hurt either of us by simply loving us.”

“I can definitely love you both.”

“That is all we want.” He put her down in front of his bed as he turned her around and unzipped her dress. He pushed it off her shoulders, causing the dress to slip to the ground and exposing her naked body to him. With a wicked smile on his face, he immediately picked her up and laid her on his bed

before taking hold of one of her beautiful breasts and fully tasting the taunt nipple before him.

“Oh Teo!” she moaned as she thrust her nipple further into his mouth.

As he loved one breast, he teased and pinched the nipple of the other, bringing her closer and closer to another orgasm. Reaching down, he used the jewels on the thong she wore to tease her bud, while shoving several fingers into her moist warmth, causing her to cry out and start to vibrate in his hands as bliss claimed her once again.

When she opened her eyes and looked at him, he said heatedly, “Tonight, I am claiming and marking every bit of you as mine.”

Reaching up and grabbing hold of the edges of his shirt, she ripped open the remaining buttons as she growled passionately at him, “Too many clothes!”

Smiling, he kicked off his shoes and in one fluid motion, removed his pants and shorts. As she lay on the bed before him wearing only a thong he said, “The most beautiful sight in the world lies before me.”

“An offering to do with as you please,” she said suggestively.

Parting her legs, he leaned down and licked up her juices before using his teeth to remove the one thing in his way. Once the thong was gone, he returned his mouth to her and suckled her bud until once again she was on the edge, stopping just short of that passion consuming her, he moved up and kissed her deeply as once again he brought his manhood home. “My favorite spot in the world,” he moaned.

“My Teo,” she sighed happily, holding him close.

Moving slowly, he made sure to hit every one of her pleasure spots until she was begging him for more. Only then did he truly pound and thrust into her, giving her everything she begged for. Before long, orgasm after orgasm claimed her and still he held out. It was only until her vibrating walls clamped so very tightly onto him almost continually that he

allowed himself to follow her into ultimate bliss. Moment after moment, her walls massaged and squeezed him dry.

Breathing hard they clung to each other as their bodies continued to hum. After many long minutes, Rocky finally murmured to her as she started to drift off to sleep in his arms, "Yours, always and forever."

Kissing her softly, Teo closed his eyes as he held her close and whispered, "My everything!" before he joined her in dreamland.

Chapter 8

Rocky awoke feeling a pleasant soreness all through her body. Last night was wonderful. They'd spent the remainder of the night just exploring each other thoroughly before finally falling asleep in each other's arms. Right now, waking next to Teo was just as wonderful as waking next to his brother. For once she got to be greedy and have both of them.

"Mmmm, good morning, my beautiful Rocky," Teo purred next to her.

"Morning, handsome," Rocky replied as she nibbled at his collarbone and seductively rubbed up against him as her hands caressed his stiffening member.

"Wanting to start your day off right are you?" he asked huskily with a wicked smile. Teo's eyes darkened with intense passion. "You are my every fantasy!" he said against her lips before kissing her deeply.

Rolling him over so that she was sitting on top, she slid over him and slowly took him inside her, relishing in the feel of him filling her up completely and perfectly. Moaning in pleasure she started to move her hips back and forth, rubbing him, feeling him grow even larger inside her. Running her nails down his chest, she sighed a sound of happiness at the feel of his tight hard muscles.

Teo ran his hands up her flat stomach until he captured her rounded breasts. He massaged them, lightly pinching her overly sensitive nipples causing her to moan loudly in pleasure as muscles tightened around him, causing him to moan as well.

She continued to ride him alternating between hard and fast and slow and seductive. All the while he tasted and teased her breasts and as she climbed higher and higher so did he. This wasn't going to last very long but then their bodies were highly sensitized from the night before.

"Kitten, you feel so good!" Teo moaned, his eyes closed as he enjoyed her velvet flesh and what it was doing to him.

Before long she was riding him in earnest and as they reached the peak together, Teo captured her lips in a passionate kiss, sending them both over the edge, exploding in pleasure.

Panting, Rocky collapsed onto Teo's chest, breathing hard, unable to speak.

"Wow!" was all Teo managed to say as he held her to him, not wanting to let go just yet.

A while later, Rocky smiled as she heard Teo's stomach growl. Sitting up she sighed dramatically before saying, "I guess we should get up and get some food for you."

"Might be a good idea," Teo chuckled.

She started to roll out of bed, only to be pulled back and kissed deeply in a purely possessive way. Leaving her smiling, he then got out of bed and grabbed her hand pulling her into the shower with him.

Rocky was so happy, she just hoped this continued because Athan and Teo were the kinds of guys she could see herself being happy with for a long time. As she continued to wash herself, Teo's hands caressed her skin. Just as he started to plant kisses along her collarbone, her stomach growled loudly.

Teo chuckled as he planted a kiss on her cheek. "Let's get some food in you, otherwise that beast is likely to attack me."

"Hmmm," Rocky replied distractedly, as she was appreciating him in the nude instead of listening. "Wait, what beast?"

Teo laughed as he led them out of the shower.

* * *

"I'm going to run out to the coup and grab us some eggs," Teo said as he planted a kiss on her cheek. He loved how she looked in his shirt. It was down to her knees and sexy as hell.

Rocky smiled and nodded at him. She watched him head outside before turning to look up at the cabinets again. It was counter-crawling time again. Kicking off the shocks that she stole from Teo for her cold toes, she put her hands on the counter to prepare to push herself up onto them. Pushing off,

she squeaked as two hands caught her mid-leap and swung her away from the counter before gently putting her back on the ground.

“Allow me,” said Athan, grinning at her. Opening the offending cabinet he reached in and pulled out mugs for all of them. Rocky grudgingly accepted hers from him, eyeing his long length enviously.

“You know, I could have been taller if I’d wanted to,” she grumbled before heading over and pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Athan casually leaned back on the counter, his arms crossed over his chest. Turning his head he shot a grin in her direction. “Don’t worry, love, you’re still a contender. Teo outside grabbing eggs?”

Rocky nodded as she looked somberly into her cup before asking Athan the question that had been sitting at the back of her head. “Do you not mind that I’m also with Teo? I don’t want to destroy anything between us or the two of you.”

Athan pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips. “What do you remember hearing about us when you were younger?”

Rocky thought about it before answering. “I remember lots of whispering and pointing but then the two of you were so perfect compared to my mousy, shy ways that people could have been saying y’all were a family of serial killers and I wouldn’t have believed it. Why?”

“Teo and I had a very unconventional but very loving upbringing. Our dads were twin brothers who both fell in love with our mom. To us, we simply had two dads. To suit was normal, to everyone else it wasn’t. We didn’t care though. We saw how much they both loved our mom and us.

“As we grew up, Teo and I knew we wanted the same thing. We always seemed to like the same girls. None of them felt right though. Some even made fun of us for it. Then you brought your light into our lives and we just knew. I’ve been waiting for Teo to feel comfortable with approaching you.

He's been hurt more than I have and has been reserved about his desires until now.

“So to answer your original question, no, I do not mind that you two are finally together. Now that doesn't mean I'm above stealing you for some sexy times but I know we can make this work if you want it to.”

Rocky smiled at him before grabbing the collar of his shirt and kissing him like there was no tomorrow. “Steal away, baby. Only, wait until after breakfast, ok? I'm famished!”

Chapter 9

Teo smiled as he and Athan came in from running to town. It'd been several days since they'd seen Rocky and they were happy to see her car outside. Athan chuckled as the stereo played loudly throughout the house. Rocky was definitely in the building.

Teo suddenly stopped him from going any further, his eyes locked on the nymph dancing in the kitchen. Athan's sudden intake of air let him know that he'd seen her as well. She was wearing an itty bitty tank top and even tinier shorts as she sang into a wooden spoon, her body enticing them with its moves.

"May the gods have mercy on us!" Athan mumbled as he found himself in a similar situation as Teo. Teo chuckled as they headed over to their woman. As he came upon Rocky her back was towards him. Pressing his body up against hers, he moved with her motions, his hands on her hips as he said huskily into her ear, "Are you trying to kill me, kitten?"

Rocky smiled wickedly as she could feel just how turned on he was. Reaching up, she gently pulled his head down and replied, "You never know," as she nipped at his ear.

Teo groaned at what her words did to him. Leaning down, Teo kissed her possessively as they slow-danced to the love song that was playing. How he missed seeing her these past few days.

Athan moved to the front of and as he moved with her, he grasped her chin in his hand and gave her a very dominant kiss. "Love, do you know how naughty it is to tease the both of us?"

Rocky blushed as she bit her bottom lip and nodded with a shy smile. "I missed you both so much." She loved the way they held her body as they moved with her. Their words, their movements, and the look in their eyes fanned the fire already burning in her for them. Smiling wickedly, she continued to dance with them.

Turning her attention back to the man behind her, she turned around and faced him as she looked into Teo's eyes. "So this sharing thing, is it one at a time or more?"

Teo smirked as he leaned down and planted a kiss on her nose. "More?"

The shirt Teo was wearing showed off the fact that he had not a bit of fat on his muscled chest which made Rocky run her fingers down his chest so she could feel the delectable hardness. "More, as in all of us together."

"Only if that means both of us with you. I ain't ever kissing that ugly mug!" Athan shuddered as he looked at his brother.

Rocky couldn't contain the giggle that escaped at the horror on their faces.

At the musical sound, Teo suddenly scooped her up and put her over his shoulder. "Little teasing minxes get to find out just what it's like to be the center of our attention. No passing go, straight to the bedroom for you, our little sassy kitten."

Rocky squealed in laughter as Athan smirked while Teo made sure to smack her ass for good measure.

After entering Teo's room and being tossed to the bed, Teo turned to his brother and asked, "Front or back?"

"Pretty sure double penetration is new for her," Athan murmured appreciatively.

Teo smiled as he caressed her cheek before answering, "You're more patient."

"Lube?"

"Bathroom."

Athan climbed onto the bed and kissed her. "Play. Enjoy him. I'll be right back."

She watched him roll off the bed, smiling as he started to remove his clothing. "Is this going to be bad?"

Teo fully removed his clothes before he started on hers. "No. You're going to be nervous, and that's ok, but we will not

hurt you. This is going to feel very, very good, and if it doesn't all you have to say is stop."

He cupped the side of her face and kissed her. "And you're allowed to say no."

"I wanna try." Man, she felt like an idiot. "It's up there in the wish list, you know?"

He pulled me over his lap, so I was sitting on his waist. "Athan is gentle and patient. I'm not."

"So what do I do?" She asked as he kissed her again.

"Say please, Teo."

"Please, Teo," she repeated.

"Fuck, but you can get me going fast." He lifted her hips to guide her onto him. "Right there, kitten. Sit down and..." He paused to suck in a breath as she obeyed.

"That's my girl." She saw his eyes flick over her shoulder and felt him throb inside her, but she didn't get a chance to ask. Athan's hand gently pressed between her shoulders, encouraging her to lean forward.

That put her ass in the air, exposing where she and Teo were connected as well as everything else. "Slowly," Athan said, his touch guiding her up.

"She feels good." Then Athan's hand slid down her ass, right over the center, and it was slick. Lubricated. Cold. That change in temp made her clench, and Teo's hands found her hips, holding her still for a moment before resuming the pace.

"You are so amazing," Athan told her. "Beautiful, passionate, and mine. Ours."

He moved her a little faster. "Close your eyes, Rocky. Stop thinking. Just feel me, right... there." Every thrust Teo made was angled to drive her to distraction, to help her relax, and she was willing to give herself to it.

Then Athan's hand teased the pucker of her ass. She sucked in a breath, but he pretended not to notice. Slowly, almost deliberately so, Teo pulled her down to kiss him.

Rocky's hands were pressed against the flat planes of his chest, using his body to hold her up.

Athan took advantage and leaned in to kiss her spine, moving easily with each thrust, but this time they didn't talk. This time, they were gentle, loving, and sensual. This time, she was the center of their attention, and she loved the way it made her feel.

Then she felt pressure as one finger slipped into the entrance of her ass. Athan didn't force it, and the new sensation made all the rest more intense. The truth was that she even liked it.

When his kisses didn't stop, she decided she liked it a lot, the same way she liked them touching her face, grasping her thigh, and all those other personal touches. Then he began to play. Never in her life had she experienced a lover so concerned about her. Now she had two, and they were working in tandem.

Four hands roamed across her skin. Teo's weren't just on her breasts, but also her stomach, her neck, and anywhere else. And Athan's roamed down the back of her leg.

Then there was that new thing, the one that was now thrusting in opposition to Teo, letting her know exactly what would come next. "Athan?" She begged. "I want you."

"We're not in a rush, love," he promised.

"She's tight," Teo told him, holding her in place.

Athan leaned back, his hands leaving her. "Kiss her again."

Teo did, palming her neck to hold her to his mouth, but she heard the lube. She also didn't care. This was her fantasy, and she was going to enjoy it. She kissed back, hard, the way he had, and felt Teo's response inside her. Their tongues danced, and each gasp felt like it came right from his lungs.

Then he was back. Athan's strong body crushed her against Teo's chest. His mouth was right beside her ear, but Teo's tongue was still between her teeth. She felt the rush of excitement, the thrill of the taboo, and the head of his dick nudging gently against her ass.

“Relax,” Athan whispered. “Press back, but relax. I got you, love. I will always have you, but I am not going to hurt you.”

Teo smiled against her lips. She pressed back to take him, as she felt the lube first. He’d used a lot, which let him slip right in - a bit. Then her body clenched.

“Breathe,” Athan whispered.

Teo cupped her cheek. “Does it hurt?”

All Rocky could do was shake her head. “No, it’s...”

“Invasive,” he agreed.

“Makes you feel vulnerable, open, and sexy. It also feels so good for him. That hot, tight ass of yours? A few more inches and he’ll feel me inside you. Look at me, sweetie, and breathe.”

She huffed out a breath to prove she was, and Athan pushed in just a bit more, but it was enough. Something changed, and all that she could do was moan because her body was trapped between them.

It felt... good. Better than good. Then Teo lifted his hips. Holy. Fuck. Wow. The only thing she could manage to get out was, “Yes.” But that was enough.

Gently, Teo set the pace, and Athan followed. Rocky didn’t need to move. She couldn’t. She also couldn’t think because she could feel both of them and her senses were overwhelmed. She was doing this. They were doing this, and it was more than she could even describe. More than she could handle.

She was on the verge of cumming so hard. Every stroke. Every thrust. All of the sensations were sending her over, and all she could do was moan. She didn’t even try to hide it.

“Yes,” Teo groaned, feeling her clench, as he rode her through it, faster, deeper, driving her higher and higher while Athan held her close, pulling her back against his chest. He groaned, the grip in his hands proving she wasn’t the only one who liked this, and then... she’d never had a climax so intense in her life. Her core tightened, squeezing her men inside of

her. It was then that Athan lost it, grunting at the pleasure of it all.

Teo just kept thrusting, heaving his hips up again, and again until leaned his head back to moan, proving he couldn't take any more. Then she felt it, the swelling, the pulsing, and the hot release of Teo's climax. Pressed between them, connected to them, and satiated by both of them, she couldn't think of anything more amazing. The three of them, together, were somehow one.

She knew it was foolish, and the thought was driven by love hormones or something, but it was still true. There, caught between both of my men, there was only one thing that mattered. We were family.

Epilogue

A month later...

Teo came home after he and the ranch crew had completed another successful large fence rebuild project. After putting his work stuff away, he came in, grabbed a drink, and went to look for his lady. As he headed into the foyer he heard laughter coming from the kitchen.

As he headed towards the kitchen, he noticed that the door was open and he could see her, she was chopping, or trying to, as Athan gave her instructions. Teo smiled as his noise brought Rocky's attention to him. With an incredible smile that always brought joy to his soul, she jumped up and ran to him. Throwing her arms around his neck, she said, "Hiya!" and kissed him soundly.

"Now that is a greeting! How was work today?" he asked as he took the knife out of her right hand and took over for her.

"It was good. I was able to complete several projects."

Rocky watched as Teo chopped everything for her. The man was just so incredibly good-looking. She could just watch him all day every day. "I missed you today," she said softly against his lips before kissing him again.

Teo responded instantly to her kiss. Pulling her against him, as she decided to tell him and Athan a few thoughts she'd been having. "My Teo, my love, my soul mate," Rocky sighed as Teo's kisses moved across her jaw and down her neck.

As he heard her, he looked deeply into her eyes. How he loved this woman. How he admired her. "My kitten, you are my world! I love you so much."

Rocky gasped as tears filled her eyes in happiness. As she tried to calm her tears, Athan came over grabbing her cheeks, he wiped her tears as he told her, "You... you make me happier than I'd ever thought I'd be. I love you more than anything and being with you is all I want, EVER," Athan

smiled. “You complete me and without you, there is no happiness!”

“Awww, baby, continue to talk like that and I might just have to jump your bones, again,” she smiled with a kiss, “and again,” another kiss, “and again!”

Teo laughed as he pulled Rocky back into his arms as he said mischievously, “And again... and again.” And finally with a deeply passionate kiss, “And again!”

* * *

I hope you enjoyed Home on the Ranch. You can find more of my stories by visiting my website.

<http://www.EuryiaLarsen.com>

About the Author

Euryia Larsen grew up thinking that what she was being told about the world was only part of the story. She loves myths both historical and modern and often sees the possibility in ‘what if’. A good romance with strong ‘alpha’ heroes and even stronger heroines that can be a partner for them are her favorite kinds of books. If the heroines are just a tad crazy, even better.

Euryia is a stay-at-home mom of two beautiful daughters, three crazy cats, three crazier dogs, and a husband to round out the bunch. She deals with her fair share of issues while dealing with Fibromyalgia and other complications and as a result, she finds an escape in books where there is always a happily ever after. She’s always been creative and has written for herself as an audience for longer than she can remember.

I’d love to hear your thoughts on this or myths or books in general or even just a hello.

Check me out at

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Pucker Up, Cowboy

Zee Irwin

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Pucker Up, Cowboy

She may be the team owner's daughter, but she's stolen my favorite cowboy hat and is wearing my jersey—now that makes her mine.

When I'm enticed away from my Montana ranch to return to hockey with an offer I can't refuse, I'm a fish out of water in the beach-town hockey team. I try to fit in with my teammates, until a woman falls into my lap. After she steals my hat, I have to find her and get it back.

Despite my sweet-and-dirty-talking ways, she's more of a test than lasting eight seconds on a wild bronc. There's more to our first kiss though, like an instant attraction to her I just can't shake, but she runs off before I can get her name or number.

It isn't long until our paths cross again in a totally unexpected way. But will our instant attraction turn into more or will her father stand in the way of our happily ever after?

Chapter 1

Duke Daniels

The sleek red Porsche parking in front of the white bunkhouse looks out of place amid the grand vista of the Double Barr ranch.

In a sprawling valley between two mountain ranges, the property is often hailed as one of the most scenic in Montana. The ranch has been in my cousin's family for generations, surviving by sheer grit and determination to make an honest living off the land.

The ranch hands eye the man unfolding out of the sports car with suspicion, as they do to most city slickers. I'm the only one who recognizes him.

My agent waves at me. "Hey, Duke. I have an offer you shouldn't refuse," he says while trying to shoo away the barking dog at his knees.

"What the hell are you doing here, Bradley? Come here girl." I call my dog and dismount my horse, handing the reins off to the guys to put it away in the paddock. Shelby runs to me and growls. I crouch and pet the lab's golden fur in her special spot beneath her ears. "Yeah, I know. A stranger is invading our space."

"Stranger? That's funny." Brad takes offense. "What isn't funny is you hiding up here not making use of your God-given talent for scoring. I can change all that today. Where can we talk?"

"What makes you think I'd listen?" I ask.

"Because I just negotiated one of the sweetest deals ever, and I know you're curious." He gloats, and removes his designer sunglasses. Bradley always possessed an overly confident air about him, with his blond hair slicked back, and filling out his fancy suits. His charm and style serves him well; the guy has a reputation for gaining fat contracts for his players.

I chew my cheek. The money I'd make playing again is tempting, but so is telling him to get the hell off the ranch.

He notices my hesitation. "You've been away long enough. Time to get back into the game, Duke."

"Don't you fucking say that. I'll decide when it's enough." I trudge past him into the bunkhouse and grab a beer from the fridge. The cold fizz streaming down my throat calms me down a little, and my shoulders fall. I hate admitting he might be right.

I'd taken a season off to help my sister and her kids cope with the loss of her husband in a tragic hunting accident. My best-friend died way too young. Before I knew it, one season off became three.

Shelby follows Bradley inside and stops barking long enough to lap at her water dish.

"Got a beer for me?"

I motion to the fridge, but he sits on a chair and crosses his legs. The hem of his pants rise enough to show bare ankles and brown leather shoes, slick from a shoe shine. I'm thankful the ranch hands aren't here yet to make fun of him.

"How's your family?" he asks.

"They're better, thanks."

"And you?"

I'm not prepared to answer that. At first, I'd worked my ass off to provide for Callie and my niece and nephew, while she finished her college degree. Now, her new job pays well including insurance benefits; they don't need me. Why, just last week she asked when I planned to move out. Guess I've overstayed my welcome.

So how am I? Lost. I love riding on the range, taking care of the horses, and not being confined. My office, as the great outdoors, suits me fine. But being a rancher for life was never my grand plan.

Being a hockey star, with my name in all the record books and multiple Cup wins, had always been the goal. Along the

way, I got horribly off track. “I’m fine. Can’t complain.”

“Are you in shape?”

“Probably the best shape of my life. Hard labor on a ranch will do that to a man.”

He nods and licks his lips while scanning my body head to toe. Yeah, I know he plays for the other side, but it doesn’t bother me. He’s a good agent who cares about his players. “I can see that. How recently have you set a blade on the ice?”

I shake my head, and shift to look out the kitchen window. “Does once a winter on the ice at the pond count?”

“You think you can get used to being on skates again?”

“It’s like riding a bike. You never forget. But what makes you think I’m interested?”

“You haven’t thrown me off the ranch yet,” he smirks. “Come on. It’s a great deal. The new pro expansion team, The Vipers in Los Angeles, is gearing up for their first season, but their affiliate team in the minor leagues is crap. You know how it is, all the owners care about is marketing and ticket sales, and this owner has a huge fucking ego. Losing isn’t an option.”

A snort escapes my nose. “He sounds like an asshole.”

“He wants the minor team to shape up and win and gain attention, and he’s throwing a shit-ton of money at it. He’s looking for a player like you with your experience to bring it in line. Because of your previous record, they’re willing to take a chance on you. You’d be perfect for this.”

I peer outside at the grand view. “Play for a minor team? No thanks. Besides, I couldn’t trade all this in for palm trees and beaches.”

Bradley leans forward with a heavy sigh. “Duke, straight talk here. After what happened, few teams would even consider taking you back, no matter how stellar your scoring record was.”

I flash back to the last day I played. I received news of Mike’s passing just before a game. My best friend since

Kindergarten killed by one errant bullet? It threw off my vibe; I couldn't get into the zone on the ice. When a fight broke out mid-game between our teams, I got in the middle of it and turned my emotions into a battle. I was thrown out of the game and left.

The guy I beat up hasn't been able to play again and never will. It was an accident, but team owners don't care. Duke Daniels playing for them is a risk and a potential marketing disaster.

"This deal could be so good. You start at the affiliate team, practice hard, play hard, and win, prove to everyone the professional you are, then the expansion team may pick you up for the next season. You'd be back in the national league then. Now, I've got everything ready for you, including a sweet rental to stay in. You just need to put the past behind you."

"You make starting over sound way too easy." Can I magically pick up a hockey stick, wave it around, and forget the past few years?

"No. Ironing out this deal is the easy part. The rest is harder, and up to you to work your ass off on the ice and make the most of this opportunity."

Shelby sits at my feet, looks up at me, and barks. I can't believe I'm considering this. "Did you rent me a place that allows pets?"

"What?"

"I don't go anywhere without my dog." No matter how much time I play on the ice, I'm a cowboy at heart. Always will be. "If I'm leaving Montana, my dog is going with me."

"Oh. Okay, not a problem. I'll find you a great place for you and...the dog. Does that mean you're saying yes?"

"When do I leave?"

He stands and puts his sunglasses back on with the grin of a winner. "Tomorrow. The Puckers are already practicing and the first game is next week."

“Puckers? That’s the name of the affiliate team? Jeezus.”
Am I making the biggest career mistake of my life? Time will tell.

Chapter 2

Phoebe Tate

I'm the embarrassment of the family. The one they all talk about in hushed tones. The total opposite of my sister.

I sneak glances at her and her fiance sitting at the head of the oblong table of twenty at a swanky restaurant overlooking the beach. All our loved ones are gathered to celebrate their love at the rehearsal dinner on a lovely fall night. Either the shrimp canapes are making me ill, or it's the love fest doing the trick.

Someone clinks a glass with a spoon for the umpteenth time, and the happy couple kisses to prove yet again how sickeningly sweet and perfect their union will be. I'm happy for Cecilia, truly. And Jim, well, he's Jim. A perfectly a-okay kind of guy, not my type, but hers. He must do something for her because she's been gaga over him for two years since they met in their MBA classes. And our father approves of him, so there is that.

Cecilia and Jim will live in a home his rich parents bought for them in an Orange County suburb. Three times a week, she'll perform her wifely duties, open her legs, and let Jim slide right in. Soon, they'll have 2.5 children and she'll join the stay at home mom squad, and support her husband in his career.

They'll be safe and content with each other for life, I'm sure of it, but I want so much more. I must walk into a room, lay eyes on my man, and feel my stomach flip. His eyes better be glued on mine and no one else's, and he better forgive any silly or wild thing I do, because if he gives me unconditional love, I'll give it to him right back.

I need a life filled with passionate pursuits, and the man I'll marry someday will want that, too. Not that I expect that day to arrive any time soon since I'm divorced, soon to be homeless, and currently without a job. I have bigger things to worry about than dating right now. Like suffering under the

disappointed stare across the table from Pete Tate, my father and L.A.'s celebrated golden guy of sports.

Once a fearsome football player, when he retired from playing he turned to management, eventually buying out the city's football team. He built it into a top-ranked organization, and now his focus has shifted to hockey. Nothing can stop him from succeeding it seems.

If he's the apple tree and I'm the apple, then I must have fallen and rolled way down the hill right into a ditch because success at anything has eluded me.

I finish off my glass of expensive red wine when old Aunt Gerdie taps my elbow next to me. "Phoebe, where's your husband tonight, dear?"

I stiffen. Poor thing, her memory must be going. It's been two years since I left Aaron Roberts behind.

"We're divorced."

"Huh?" She leans in closer, putting a hand to her ear.

"Divorced," I say louder.

"Speak into my ear, honey. I didn't wear my hearing aids tonight."

"I divorced the asshole, Aunt Gerdie." Just my luck, the entire table stopped talking and my statement was broadcast around the room for all to hear. My father's disappointing glare doesn't falter.

"What'd you go and do that for? He was a pretty sexy fellow," she says. Oh my God. Well, I shouldn't be surprised my aunt has the hots for him—considering every woman in L.A. did as well judging by the collection of hotel keys I found tucked in an old wool coat at the back of our joint walk-in closet.

This is Los Angeles. We don't need wool any day of the year. I'd still be married to the quarterback prick if I hadn't decided to take his dusty old coat to the dry cleaners.

That's what I get for marrying a man my father fixed me up with...someone just like him. Someone who thought he

could control me, keep me cooped up in a little box, while he goes out to play doing whatever he wanted.

“Excuse me,” I say and retreat as fast as possible to the bathroom. Once there, I don’t shed a tear over Aaron, never have and never will. Another sign we weren’t meant to be.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror and the too-tight, too-revealing, too-short red scrap of fabric Cecilia talked me into wearing tonight. For what? It’s not like there’s any men here I’ll go home with. Although a night with a stranger who knows nothing about me might feel good.

Just once, I’d like to meet someone who doesn’t know the name Tate or Roberts.

My sister walks through the door and hugs me from behind. “Oh Pheeb, I’m so sorry about Gerdie.”

“Whatever, it’s fine.” I go through the motions of washing my hands.

She eyes me in the mirror, then shifts to the side and finger-fluffs her hair. Her ombre dress in the colors of a fall sunset hugs her curves and shows off every asset, and she’s just as comfortable dolled up as if she were wearing her most worn-in pair of jeans. Me? I’d prefer my daisy duke shorts, a tank top, and a kimono robe while wearing my cowboy boots any day.

“Can you believe it? This time tomorrow night, I’ll be Mrs. James Bueller. Isn’t it romantic?”

“You know I’m happy for you. But—”

“Hm?” She faces me, and I don’t have the heart to tell her to prepare for a life of mediocrity with Safe Jim.

“But why’d you go and make me wear this dress tonight?” I laugh, pulling down the skirt like it’ll sprout another two inches.

“You look so hot in that dress, Phoebe. I’d do you.” She laughs and winks, too. “Dammit, I was hoping there’d be more eligible men for you to flirt with here, but...I’m sorry we planned a small, intimate wedding. There’s not even a

groomsman for you to flirt with while walking down the aisle on the beach tomorrow.”

“It’s okay. I’m not exactly in a flirty mood under Dad’s watchful eye.”

“Oh, you know he’s only worried about you. I worry, too.”

“I’m fine. I’m getting my act together, scouting for a new job, and a place to live.” It isn’t a total lie as long as five minutes reading through an online job board counts while I ate my morning cereal at the hotel lobby. I have until she and Jim return from their honeymoon to move out, because they’ll be moving to their new place.

“I just don’t understand why you won’t take the job Dad offered you at the Vipers’ office?” She’s the VP of marketing for his football team; everything’s always been so easy for her.

I bust out a laugh. “Let me break this down for you in easy terms. Dad drove us crazy the entire time growing up with talk about his precious football team. Then I married the player he wanted me to, and I divorced the jerk. What’s not to get? I want nothing to do with any man in sports ever again.” I wrap my arms around her neck and hug.

“Just want you to be happy, little bug.”

My eyes squeeze closed at the nickname our mom used to call me. “I’m getting there.”

“Now, don’t be late. You’re the first one the makeup artist and hairdresser will do in the morning. You have everything packed we need, right? You double checked the list I gave you?”

I roll my eyes. I’m so prepared for her wedding, nothing could possibly go wrong. “Triple checked. Now go on, enjoy the rest of the night. I feel a headache coming on though, so I think I’ll go back to my room and lie down, but I’ll see you in the morning bright and early, okay?” I kiss her cheek and turn on my heel before she can protest. Only I’m not heading to bed. I need a drink. Or three. Maybe a walk on the beach to clear my head.

Along the boardwalk from the restaurant toward the hotel, I keep my eyes peeled for a dive bar or a wine bar, I'm not very picky. A door opens up ahead and a couple of women exit from a place with loud country music playing. I catch the door and see inside it's filled with party people; I'd be lost in the crowd. Perfect. Seems as good a place as any to drink away my troubles for a while.

Chapter 3

Duke

My teammates, who busted my ass all week during practice, are now buying me drinks. They nicknamed me Cowboy tonight. Very original, considering I wore my Wranglers, a black cowboy hat, my prized rodeo belt buckle—and yes, the size of it matters—and shit kickers that have actually worked hard on a ranch in Montana, and probably still have some of the dirt from it.

Guess it's a better nickname than the guy on the barstool next to me. His name is Tucker, but they call him Pucker, who plays for the Puckers team. Again, originality in naming isn't the teams' strong suit. What they do have is potential, and plenty of it.

Over the week, I observed their plays, the way each line reads each other and moves as one to set up and score. The group is a fun mix of young and old, with me being the oldest and most experienced as a left winger. I could tell, by the end of the week, they were starting to look up to me, but it took me by surprise when they voted me team captain today.

“We're ready for our season opener Monday,” Pucker raises his bottle, his dimples on full display grinning ear to ear. In the off-season he works as a fire-fighter in the mountains up north. Blaze, Ignite, or Flame might have all been better nicknames for him.

Storm, whose real name is Nathan, taps it with his. “I got a good feeling about this. We're gonna win and take the American League title.” The young goalie from Oklahoma got his nickname because he used to have a YouTube channel in high school where he and a few stupid friends would chase tornadoes. We've taken him under our wing all week, chiding him about the way the figure skating chicks arrive early to the practice rink and wave at him from the stands.

“With the weekend off, what's the plan? Anyone getting laid?” Pucker chuckles, rubbing the patch of dark scruff on his

chin. He's closer to my age and has been kicking around the minor leagues for a while as a center.

"Nope. I'm getting extra ice time so I'm ready for the game. Then I gotta find a pet park or something. My dog is going crazy cooped up all day inside." Poor Shelby. I'm starting to think moving her to Cali wasn't the best decision I'd made.

About to respond with my opinions of our chances at a winning season, I'm interrupted when someone bumps my arm, causing my beer to spill over our table. This damn beach bar is way too crowded for my tastes, but it's the nearest country establishment we could find, and the guys wanted to take me out. All week long, I'd been a fish out of water, annoyed by the traffic, irritated by the cost of living, and grumpy about people everywhere.

I glance up to see who jostled me, but all my eyes take in is a beautiful backside of a curvy woman in a tight red dress. A man has her by the elbow and she doesn't seem too happy about it, judging by how she yanks away.

When she teeters on her heels and falls into my lap of course I catch her. I'm all too happy to lend a hand or two, as both are now holding her body tight. Guess that's just the gentleman in me. My glare at the other guy warns him away.

One look at her sweet face, though, and I'm a goner; the dirty cowboy in me takes over ogling everything about her. Baby blue eyes peek up at me through dark long lashes. Her golden strands of wild curls fall across my chest. When she bites her plump bottom lip, I need to adjust myself.

"Hey, darling." I give her my best country boy smile so she knows I'm one of the good ones. I haven't bothered with relationships in the past few years, despite Callie trying to fix me up with all her friends. With any luck, tonight this woman in red could break my dry spell.

"I'm no one's darling." She's tipsy telling by the way her words slur.

"Why, you're a little spitfire, aren't you?"

She laughs, then she dares remove my Stetson. Lifting off me, she stands and places it on her head. Of course it's a little too big for her so it sits cocked up on her head, and it's downright adorable, but no matter. I need it back.

She giggles and rushes away before I can stop her, disappearing into the crowd. Being short and petite like she is, I can't spot her even with my hat on. "The hell? Did she just steal my hat? Where'd she go?"

Pucker and Storm Chaser strain their necks, and I stand and scan the room. A minute later, I see a flash of red. "There. She ducked into the bathroom. I'll be back."

"Give her hell, dude. Or a kiss," Pucker calls after me and they both laugh.

I take off. When I reach the lady's room door, I barge in. Three women at the mirror stare at me with wide eyes. "I'm here to catch a hat thief. Everyone out, let's go," I bark. Must have scared them, because, surprisingly, they all shuffle out and I lock the door behind them.

"You can come out now, thief." I cross my arms, standing in the middle of the bathroom.

From the middle of three stalls, the click of the lock is followed by her appearing through the door. "My, my, this is brazen. Touchy about your hat, cowboy?"

"Normally I wouldn't be, but this one belonged to a good friend of mine. Now give it back." Mike's hat is on a very short list of items in my possession that I treasure.

"Uh-huh. I know the rule. Wear a cowboy's hat, get a kiss." She sashays forward, her hands clasped behind her back. "So, pucker up, cowboy."

Her face tilts up at me and her eyes flutter closed, and I like this look on her. Only on her knees would it be better. Daring me to steal her breath away, she doesn't have to beg twice.

I move in, and when I land on her full lips, my heart leaps and my stomach flips. Damn, it's been far too long since I've

tasted a woman. Call me a thief too...I'm taking more than one.

My hands cup her face and I suck in her bottom lip, teasing it with my tongue. She opens up and just when I'm thinking I've tamed this woman, we don't make it eight seconds before she bucks away like a mare who'd never been ridden.

Chapter 4

Phoebe

Out of breath, my blue eyes turn frosty at the cowboy whose brawny stature takes up the middle of the bathroom. “What was that?”

“Back where I come from, we call that a kiss, city girl.” The cowboy smirks. Oof, he’s cute.

“You took more than one.”

“You let me.”

I did, and it was so good. He smells like a man going out on a date with a spicy cologne that hangs around us in the air, but I stick my nose up. “Well...you should have said please.”

“Oh, I get it, wild thing. You look sweet on the outside, but really you’re a tease.”

“I am sweet.”

“Yeah, I’m sure there’s one place in particular where you taste sweet.”

He steals my breath again with his boldness...and I like it. “You’re a dirty cowboy.”

A corner of his lips turns up. “Only when I see a woman who’s begging to be soiled.”

I’m suddenly aware we’ve been drawing toward each other, almost nose to nose again in this exchange. The heat between my legs is unbearable. I swallow hard thinking of the next thing to say.

“Don’t flatter yourself. You think because you walk into a beach bar all dressed up playing some kind of cowboy that the women will fall at your feet when you call them darling.”

“I’m a cowboy from Montana, so this isn’t a costume. Yeah, I can get dirty, but in case the message got lost somewhere along the way, I’m also a good guy. So while this

has been fun, I'll leave you be." He reaches for the door handle, but I stop him.

"Wait. Here's your hat. Must mean something awfully special to you." I hold it out for him with one hand, while smoothing down my hair with the other. His eyes follow from the hat and up my arm then land on mine. The hazel color and gold flecks there are intriguing and glued to me, boring deep as if seeking my soul.

"I'm tempted to let you keep it. You see, we have a rule about hats where I come from too. A lady takes a man's hat, it means she's claimed him as hers."

I snort. "I hardly know you to claim you."

He cocks his head. "We can change that. How about a walk on the beach? I've been here one week and haven't yet had the time to see what's the big deal. Care to show me?"

I eye his outstretched hand warily. The old me long ago would have jumped at the chance to stroll away with him. Now?

"Look, I told you I'm a good guy. Now, you either believe me or you don't. Either way, I'm getting out of this crowded bar, taking off my boots, and putting my feet into the sand and surf."

"Wow. You're unlike any man I've ever known."

"I hope that's a good thing?"

Compared to Aaron? My Dad? They're the two men I've been around the most, and already this cowboy shows promise of outshining them. But going to the beach with this stranger may not be smart. It'd be the kind of impulsive act my father is used to seeing from me. Another thing for him to be disappointed about.

The cowboy mistakes my hesitation as a no then takes his hat. When he puts it on his head and positions it just so, complete with a tiny tip my way...Mm. A real, live cowboy in Southern California. My heart takes off at a rapid pace, and my stomach...flips.

“Ma’am.” He unlocks the door and leaves me there with my mouth gaping. Suddenly, I feel utterly alone without his presence, as if he crash landed in my life, gave me hope, then quickly retreated.

My instinct is to run after him and leap into the unknown, like always. I turn back to the mirror instead, looking at what’s supposed to be the new me. The one who settles down and thinks about her future. But what if the future just walked out that door?

There’s only one thing I’m aware of...I need more of him. I rush out and scour the bar for black hats, but every face under them isn’t his. Then I recall what he said about the beach.

Outside, I take the path behind the restaurant that leads to the sand, and remove my heels, but it’s dark. Shadowy figures of people are all I see as my feet dig into the sand, and none have the outline of a hat head. Great, I find me a cowboy who excites me more than any man has in a long time, then I lose him, and I don’t know his name or any way to get a hold of him.

I curse myself about him all the way back to my room, until I hear the messages waiting for me, snapping me back to reality. All from my sister, they’re packed with reminders. What time to show up and don’t forget to bring this and that. She’s always done this, and acts like I don’t have a brain in my head. I love her, and this is her wedding day. Of course, I’ll be ready in the morning, and, frankly, I’ll be glad to get it over with.

Chapter 5

Phoebe

It's 5:45 in the morning. My curls are half up and half down, and my makeup is airbrushed to perfection. I'm impressed with myself that I'm on time and have everything as instructed.

The bridesmaids are in various stages of getting ready, too. We're all wearing our matching bridal party white shorts and button down shirts with white tennis shoes, not ready to put on our gowns yet.

My sister, on the other hand, despite everything, is having a bridezilla breakdown one hour before her sunrise wedding on the Will Rogers Beach. "I cannot believe I forgot my tiara," she cries. I'm fanning her with wedding programs as she overheats.

Words about how someone should have been more prepared and double checked her own list are biting back on my tongue, because, for once in our lives, it's not me.

"Don't worry. One of your friends has been sent to retrieve it. The sun isn't even up yet on a Saturday so traffic won't be bad. They'll make it back in time," I try to reassure her, but even I'm not convinced.

"I can't have my hair done until it gets here," she sniffles. "Oh, my wedding schedule is ruined."

I suck on my lips not to laugh, but also hate seeing my sister so sad. A knock comes at the door and I take this chance to step away from all her drama.

"Oh, hi, Phoebe. Could you step out into the hallway? We have a little, um, situation," Melanie, the hotel event planner, whispers. I can't blame her. One more *situation* and my sister's entire perfect life will crumble.

"What is it?" I shut the door behind me.

“We have a cake emergency. I don’t have time to explain, but I need your help. The florist should arrive any second and Cecilia changed where the floral arrangements are supposed to go last minute. So I need someone to show them this new schematic. Would you be able to go down and meet them? Thanks.” She shoves a flashlight and a hand drawn map of the ceremony in my hands and scurries away before I can answer.

“Guess I’ve been volun-told,” I sigh. Once outside, I use the flashlight to guide me, familiar with the path to the rows of white chairs waiting for guests to occupy them. I make my way to the arch and stand under it, staring out at the early dawn and the glass-like sea.

The last time I was under a similar arch I wed a man who was hand-picked for me by Dad, as if he couldn’t trust me to pick someone great on my own. My track record for sound decisions was to blame.

Would I ever marry again? That’s a great question I often ask myself. Once bitten, twice shy—

“Uh, hello?”

I jump and turn, shocked at shining my light on my—er, the cowboy rising from a chair holding his head. “You? What are you doing here?”

“Could you not shine the light? God damn, my head hurts.” He sits up in the spot we’d marked for Dad at last night’s rehearsal. I turn off the light and rush to him. Close up, he recognizes me.

“How did you find me?” I ask.

“I didn’t. Ugh. I had one too many shots with the guys, then I wanted to dip my feet in the sand, like I told you. Must have passed out here. Wait—what time is it?”

I blink at him groaning and stretching to stand. As much as I’m surprised and glad to see him, I think, I need him gone before the ceremony starts. The beeping and blinking back tail lights signal the florists maneuvering their van down the beach to us. “Almost sunrise.”

“Shit. I need to get home. My dog’s been locked inside since last night. See you around, *darling*.” He emphasizes the last word with a twitch of his lips and walks away with his hat in his hands. From the back, with a body looking like it’s made of steel, I’m not thinking straight and rush after him.

“Uh, wait, cowboy, or whatever your name is. I’m Phoebe.”

“Now you want to be on a first-name basis?” He stops and chuckles. “I’m Duke. Hey, why are you here anyway?”

Duke? Perfect name for a cowboy. I turn and point to the words printed on the back of my shirt.

“Bridal party,” he reads. When I turn back around his eyes are like saucers. “Please don’t break my heart and tell me you’re getting married today.”

“No. It’s my sister’s wedding. I’m divorced. Um, I usually hate telling people that, because it’s like admitting another failure in my life.” I turn pink being so open and honest with a stranger like he is, but I said it now. It’s a part of my life I’ll never be able to run from.

“I see. On the other hand, you could count yourself lucky to have another chance, not being tied down anymore. You took a swing and struck out, no big deal.” He shrugs, and I like his attitude. “Uh, were there kids involved?”

“No.”

“Good. I mean, were you happy or sad about the divorce?”

My head shakes. “Indifferent?”

“Hm. Okay. Last question before I run home to let my dog out. Have you had a rebound man yet?”

“What kind of question is that?” My brows stitch, and from the corner of my eye, I spy the florists are setting up some arrangements, and if they aren’t in the right place my sister might be the first bride ever to scream down the aisle.

“It’s a perfectly normal question. See, last night, you wore my hat, so you claimed me. Now I need to know where I stand and be prepared. Could I be just a flirtation for you or a night

of incredible rebound sex or potentially something more?” His lips twitch, finding this amusing.

I’d go along with it, and maybe say all the above, but I’m running out of time.

“Can we talk about this later? I have a sunrise wedding and brunch reception to attend.” I push him down the aisle.

He catches my wrist and pulls me into him. My hand lands on the firmest, fullest pec I’ve ever felt. Duke is in mighty fine shape, possibly better than Aaron, and he’s staring into my eyes. His fingertips play gently with the curls framing my face.

“You’re a beautiful woman, wild thing, but I’m particularly taken aback by how cute you are all flustered right now.” Just when my breathing stops, thinking he might kiss me again, his head cocks and his lips land on my ear lobe.

Tiny kisses, brushes really, of his lips work down the lobe, then suck it in. My eyes flutter closed at his attention. “Oh,” a breathy moan escapes me when his lips trail down my neck. “Kiss me, cowboy.”

More tingles torture me by what he’s doing, moving along my collarbone that he’s somehow made bare by tugging at my sleeve. “Is that all you want from me is a kiss?”

I moan again. “No, I think I want more.”

He chuckles. “I wish I had a breath mint, a condom, and somewhere to take you to hook up right now,” he says, the whole time his lips speaking on my skin.

“Good oral hygiene is important. I was in school once to be a dental technician.” One of many attempts at a career, and God I can’t stop telling this man all my failures.

“Oh yeah? What do you do now?” he asks, back on my ear lobe which is on fire and lighting an aching need between my thighs.

“Excuse me, ma’am? Are you the wedding planner?”

Dammit, we’re interrupted by the florist. “I’ll be right there. Um...” I part from Duke and the void without him is

daunting. I wish my day wasn't filled with family obligations so I could go anywhere with him right now. "I have to go."

"When is this party over today?"

"Around noon, why?"

"Ma'am, please? The ceremony will start soon and we need your approval," the florist's irritation is apparent in his tone.

His sly smile is a picture that will keep me hot all day. "Go on. Don't worry, I'll find you, darling."

I don't know how he will, but I nod and jog off to the florist. My heart races; I guess I have a date or something. I don't know what it is about him or why this is happening to me at this particular time in my life, but I'll go along for the wild ride.

Chapter 6

Duke

New five year plan. Make Phoebe mine.

Well, I hope it doesn't take that long. I'd also add in to win this season with the Puckers. Get into the national league next year with the Vipers, at which point, with a major league contract, I'll be able to afford my own little ranch in Montana.

I can picture it all now. Little kids with wild, curly blonde hair and her by my side. Anything seems possible because there's something about Phoebe that makes me want to plant seeds and let those roots run deep. Very deep.

Less than twenty four hours since Phoebe dropped into my lap and she's all I can think about. I try to focus as I slap another puck at Storm and it slides beautifully by his glove.

"Ah, come on now. You could have done the splits and caught that one," I complain, not that I want him to stop my goal, but to help him think faster on his skates. I'm taking my mentoring role seriously now.

"Oh yeah? It's too early in the morning and I'm not loose yet, asshat. My muscles aren't stretched enough," he shoots me a comeback.

Pucker yawns next to me. His hands are leaning on the tip of his stick with his chin resting on them. "Remind me again why we're here so early?"

I don't bother mentioning because I was awakened at the crack of dawn by Phoebe.

"It was the only practice time open. Saturdays are a busy day for kids, between skaters and peewee games." I flip a puck lightly down the ice behind us for Shelby to chase. She loves being on the ice and finally out of the house. When I turn back around, a couple of ice skaters have arrived, lacing their boots in the stands.

I skate closer to Storm to practice some flicks. “Don’t look now, Storm, but your favorite redhead is here.” He looks, my puck flies by, and that’s another goal for me. “Yee haw.”

“Damn you, Cowboy. You play dirty,” he smirks at me.

“That’s what she said,” I laugh.

He waves at Savanna Albright, the popular redhead in her early twenties, like him, practicing to make the next Olympics. She smiles broadly and is clearly smitten with him, I can tell. But Storm’s been too shy to ask her out yet.

“Fuck, I hope she’s wearing the sexy black strappy thing today,” he wishes as Pucker and I skate up to him. We all stare, and sure enough, she removes her sweatshirt revealing his wish.

I laugh. “Great, you’re no use to me now. Get the hell out of here and go talk to her. Pucker, you’re in the net.”

“Forget that. I don’t have the protective gear he does. I have a date tonight and don’t want to show up with teeth missing.”

“I have a date, too.” I blurt out, but regret it. I usually like to keep my female pursuits to myself.

“With little miss red dress?” Pucker wakes up now, his eyes wide.

“I hope so.” More kids arrive and Shelby’s barking like crazy. “Looks like our rink time is about to end. Come on, guys, I’ll race you around a few laps to finish.”

To my surprise, three laps later, I win, and they’re more winded than I am. They like to tease me about my age. That’ll show them. “You guys wouldn’t know a day’s hard work until you’ve been on a ranch in Montana,” I laugh as I leave the ice.

I get all in my head as I grab my things and go. Maybe there’s a reason why I’m here now. Not that I’d wish for losing my best friend all over again, but my time away from the rink, living the ranch life, out in nature more, might have been good for me.

Out in my Jeep, I touch Mike's dog tags, a routine of mine for the past few years. I know he's up there, watching over me. Someday, hopefully many, many years from now, we'll party it up in Heaven and have a good old time shooting the shit about the old days.

For now, I'm here, playing hockey again, chasing a sweet woman, and I'll live my life to the fullest as much as I can... because he can't.

Shelby sticks her head out the window as I drive to a dog beach. I wasn't sure how she'd do with the sand and water, but after an hour I realize I had nothing to worry about. She loves it, running and jumping around, chasing a tennis ball.

As a lab, her first experience jumping a wave and dog paddling around in the ocean water goes off without a hitch, like she was born to be a Southern California dog. I know she misses the ranch, though, and I do too.

For now, I'll play hard and work hard, and save every penny I can so one day when I'm done with hockey I can buy a little place of my own on several acres. I hope I won't be alone, though. And that has me thinking about my little gal in the red dress.

"Come on, girl. Let's get home." A *wild* idea formulates in my head, although I don't know if it's a *great* idea. I can't wait to see Phoebe again, though, so I'll take a chance.

Chapter 7

Phoebe

It's hard to tell the true purpose of this wedding and reception. To most of the one-hundred or so guests, they see the love between Cecilia and Jim, and the smiles splitting their faces. The newlywed couple is having the time of their lives, as they should be.

What most people don't see is Dad at the hotel bar, entertaining the guests who are his business associates, laughing it up, making deals. He's the man of the hour and it's all about him, showing off his money, and his daughter's fancy marriage.

I make every attempt to avoid him if I can, but one trip back from the lady's room and I bump into him.

"Phoebe," he says in the stern tone of voice I swear he only reserves for me. Nothing I've ever done has pleased him, except briefly on the day I married Aaron. "Are you having a nice time?"

"Sure, but it's all about Cecilia and Jim, right?"

"Always." He smiles and nods at a couple walking by I don't recognize. It fades when he turns back to me. "Now what's this I hear about you not taking the job in the Viper's office?"

"I'm not qualified for the position of sales manager, and you know it."

"That's why you'd have staff around you to delegate to." He huffs, and shakes his head. "If you don't take this, what are you going to do, huh? Job hop some more? What's the job of the month going to be this time? Ice cream scooper? Oh man, that one had to be my favorite."

"I don't know. But I'll figure it out." I hold my sides and squirm under his belittling laugh and glaring eyes, making me feel about one foot tall.

“You promised me when you moved back here that you’d get your life together. Now, I’ve been very patient with you after the disappointment your marriage turned out to be. But it’s wearing thin. I won’t stand for having a daughter of mine embarrassing me. Goddamn, you’re so much like your mother was.” His words become vile and he has no idea how hard I’m holding back the tears right now.

“Hey, darling. There you are. Am I interrupting?” My cowboy comes up to me with a dazzling grin, dressed to impress in a dark suit with a light blue button down shirt, and he places his hand at the small of my back. A debate rages in my head as to which look is hotter and which I like better, suit or cowboy? But what the hell is he doing here?

I freeze. From the look on Dad’s face, he’s shocked as well, only he recovers quicker and sticks out his hand, putting on the fake charm like usual.

“Hello. Peter Tate, Phoebe’s father. And you are?”

“Duke Daniels.” They grip hands. I’m stunned, watching them, and from the white’s of their knuckles, it’s a firm, powerful handshake like one is asserting his alpha status over the other.

“Daniels? Oh, right. My new left winger at the Puckers. Nice to meet you.” Dad does an about face, becoming friendly. “I didn’t know you were dating one of my players, sweetheart.”

I’m speechless, my eyes snap to Duke. He’s a hockey player? I almost let a groan escape me, because under no uncertain terms do I intend to ever date a sports player again.

“We recently met, but I’m hopeful things will work out.” He winks back at me, and I’m crushed by it, like it knocks the wind out of me. My gut churns and I want to throw up all the fancy wedding food and cake right now.

“So, Duke, what do you think are the chances for a winning season?”

“Excuse me, Pete, but Phoebe doesn’t look well. We’ll have to talk another time. Right now, I want to take her to her

room and let her lie down.”

His hand on my back presses us forward toward the elevators, and I don't look back at my dad. I play along, biding my time. The only thing I know for certain is I've never seen someone do that to my father in the middle of a conversation. I'd love to frame a photo of my Dad's face when Duke led us away.

I whisper, “What are you doing here?”

“I told you I'd find you. I called the hotel, asking about the sunrise wedding. The only thing I didn't know was if I'd run into you once I arrived. Looks like I got here just in time to save you from that asshole.”

Once we're in and the doors close, though, I turn on him with my eyes blazing.

“That asshole is my father, and you're a hockey player?”

“And you're the daughter of Pete Tate? I heard every word and did *not* like what he said to you or the way he treated you. If I ever hear him talk that way to you again, my fist will be in his face so fast he won't know what hit him.”

I stumble back to the elevator wall, blinking and unbelieving. “Aaron never stood up for me that way. In fact, toward the end of our marriage, he was sounding a lot like Dad, berating me for every little thing I did.”

“I'd never do that to you. Ever.”

With his jaw set, I think I trust him. But we're so new, how much do I really know about Duke? For example, I had no clue he was a hockey player, and I swore off dating anyone involved in the world of sports.

“You don't understand. Job after job, all my crazy business ideas Dad's supported that failed...I get why he's fed up with me. Then he married me off to Aaron, and he wasn't any better. My sister is the perfect one. I've done nothing but disappoint them again and again. So if they're harsh to me, I probably deserve it after all the years I've messed up.”

He rushes up to me and places both hands on the wall on each side of my face. “Don’t you ever say that again. What you deserve is to be treated with respect, and to be given the time and space to let you figure out what you want to do with your life. No one should belittle you. Nobody will put my wild girl in a box and expect her to conform, ever. As long as we’re together—”

The elevator door opens on my floor and I duck under his arm and step out, but turn and put my hand up to block the door, keeping him inside. I know I should believe his words, and that he’ll treat me better than anyone else ever has but—“Duke, you’re sweet, and good, and everything I’d want in a man, except for one thing.”

His brows stitch together like he doesn’t understand what’s happening right now. “What’s that?”

It kills me to let him down as I let go of the door. “You’re a hockey player. I just—I can’t do this with you. I’m sorry,” I say as the door closes, shutting him out of my life as quickly as he came into it.

Chapter 8

Duke

I take my best shot and insert my right hand at the last second just before the elevator door closes, expecting it to bump and reopen. It doesn't.

“Aargh!” My hand is stuck. For a moment that feels like forever, pain shoots up my arm, and then finally the door releases me.

“Oh my God! Duke! Are you okay?” Phoebe jumps back in the elevator with me, the doors close, and we're taking a ride down.

I hiss at the pain now centered and throbbing on the back side of my hand. “No, I'm definitely not okay. I think I need to go to the hospital.” What hurts worse—my hand or my heart—is up for debate.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no. What have I done? See what I mean? I mess everything up.” She's freaking out, but I refuse to let her think she caused this.

“No, I did this. I wasn't about to let you just walk out on me because I'm a-a damn hockey player. Although, if my hand is as broken as it feels I may no longer be after tonight.” Damn, this hurts.

“What? I ruined your career, too? I ruin everything.” Tears fall down her cheeks and if I weren't in so much pain I'd swipe them away for her. “I feel so helpless. What can I do?”

“You can kiss me.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. I need something to make me forget how much this hurts. So plant one on me, wild thing. I'm dead serious.” She's looking at me like I grew three heads and I don't think even my injury will bring her back to me.

“Then pucker up, cowboy.” She surprises me, gathering my lapels in her hands as her lips crush mine. I've waited

hours for this, since our first kiss in the bathroom. Her sweet taste urges me on, wanting more. With my good hand I bring her hard against me, her body molding with mine. Our lips part, tongues meet, and only when the elevator doors open are we forced to let go. And the unbearable pain in my hand returns.

“Come with me to the hospital.” It’s a command, not a question.

She nods. “Of course.”

We step out of the elevator and run right into her dad. With her arm around my shoulder and me holding my swollen hand, growing bigger by the moment, he observes the entire scene.

“What the fuck is going on? What happened to your hand?”

“It was an accident, Dad. I didn’t mean to—”

“You did this? Dammit. Is it broken?” His voice raises, echoing through the lobby. “Ah, hell, you injured one of my players? Phoebe, you are nothing but trouble. A worthless, useless—”

“Hey. No one talks to my wild girl that way.” I launch at him and punch his face with my good, left hand. He teeters then falls back against the wall, looking so shocked, I doubt anyone has ever stood up to him. I lean down and yell into his face. “If I ever hear you put her down again, I’ll knock you out cold, understand me? You know what she is? A beautiful woman who deserves all the respect in the world for putting up with your sorry ass all these years.”

A crowd is gathering, including who I assume are her sister and brother-in-law. “What’s going on?”

“He hit me. You’re done in hockey, Goddammit. You hear me? Done. Not a single team will hire you now.” Pete spits blood. I know I’m done. So be it. Looking at Phoebe, she was worth it.

“Who the hell are you and what did you do?” The bride blazes her eyes my way while crouching down to her father.

Phoebe steps between us. “This is Duke. I’ve known him less than twenty-four hours, and he did what no one else has ever done for me. He protected me.”

“I’ve protected you. I’ve always been there for you,” the bride cries and points to her chest.

“To dry my tears, to tell me what to do, to remind me incessantly about things, sure. But never once did you stand up to Dad for me.”

“Oh honey. You make things too hard for yourself. Just take the job Dad has for you.”

“What? No. I love you Cecilia, but I can’t go on like this. I need space from all of you.” Phoebe cries buckets of tears and I’m gutted for her. The best thing I can do now is take her away from all of this.

“Darling, come with me. I’ll never let these people hurt you ever again.”

I take her hand in mine and walk out of the hotel. Peter yells after us, and we don’t stop.

When we reach my Jeep, I let go of her hand and take in a shaky breath, I realize both my hands are hurting now. “You’ll have to drive, okay? And help me into the passenger seat, please.”

She nods, and we manage. When she buckles me in, our eyes lock. “I can’t believe what just happened. You stood up for me.”

“I’d do anything for you. I don’t know how to explain this, but there’s something between us. Do you feel it too?” This beautiful woman has been in a cocoon all these years, kept down by the stupid people in her life who didn’t understand her. I know with care and nurturing she’ll blossom into a gorgeous butterfly and figure out her life. With any luck, I’ll be the man by her side, her biggest cheerleader, and greatest fan.

More tears fall from her eyes. “Yes, I do. What does it mean? What is this?”

“Love?” I chuckle, with no other word to describe how full my heart is. “Besides, you stole my hat, so I’m yours, remember?”

Finally a smile breaks through the sadness. “I do. Does it mean forever?”

“Forever and ever, as long as you’ll have me. And as soon as we get done at the hospital I’m going to take you to my bed and show you just how much I love you.” I claim her lips, crushing them, opening them, snaking my tongue with hers, getting hard at the thought of finally being with her, but I forget about my pain for a moment and move my hand to pull her on me.

“Ah,” I wince and break our kiss. “I swear, as soon as my hands are healed, they will be glued to your curves for a week.”

Chapter 9

Duke

A few days later, in my place, Phoebe fixes us a snack of apples and peanut butter. She's been so good to me, nursing me daily, especially with plenty of kisses. I'm ready for more, though, now that my left hand is less bruised, and I only hope I can satisfy her one-handed.

My right hand is set in a cast and will heal soon from a break, then I'll go through physical therapy. All costs will be paid by the team's owner, thanks to the awesome contract my agent negotiated for me.

As for my hockey career in the future, I'll let Bradley handle that too. Hopefully, he'll negotiate for me to move on to another team. I'm sure the feeling is mutual for Peter Tate.

I don't really care where I play, as long as Phoebe comes with me. For now, she's been a patient nurse for me, but eventually, when she's ready, I'll support her in whatever she'd like to do.

I come up behind her as she's chopping apples, and shift her hair to one side, exposing the back of her neck. I plant soft kisses and whisper, "I still can't believe everything that's happened, my wild thing."

She's taken to wearing my jersey around the house and little shorts underneath, and driving my cock crazy. She's mine in every sense of the word, we just have to make it official, and I'm ready for her.

Her breath catches, and she drops everything, reaching up to pull my head down onto her neck further.

"It's time, baby. I need you to apply some of that amazing nursing to a certain part of my anatomy." My left hand grabs her hips and pulls her back on me to feel my hard cock.

She grinds her ass against me, and I growl. "Yes, my cowboy. I'm ready, too. As long as you're sure we won't hurt your hand."

“No guarantees, and if so, it’ll be worth it, believe me. I need to make love with you, wild thing.”

“Yes, my cowboy.”

I reach around, feeling down her front until I find her warm, wet place. “You’re soaked. Been thinking about me?”

“Yes.” Her breath hitches as I tug her panties to the side.

“And how good it’s going to feel when I drive my cock into you?”

“Oh, yes, especially that.”

I yank her by the hand, headed for the bedroom. She’s laughing the entire way as Shelby barks and follows us.

I crouch down and pet her behind the ears. “Not this time, girl, but I’ll take you to the P-A-R-K when we’re done.”

I close the door and Phoebe’s still laughing. “I have a feeling you’ll be making a ton of promises to her.”

“Me, too. But I don’t mind making both my girls happy.” I lean back on the bed, and she straddles my lap. She commandeers my mouth, then pulls the jersey over her head and tosses it to the floor.

My eyes are treated to her perfect round tits in my face and I lean in taking my time, sucking each nipple to the size of a pebble. My right hand in the sling doesn’t move, but my left lands on her thigh.

She squirms against me like her clit is seeking sweet relief. I add my hand and rub in circles.

“Oh, yes,” she cries, grinding harder. My fingers dive into her soaked pussy. She moans. “This feels so good with you.”

It takes effort, but I flip us around, using all my strength on one wrist to hold me up. Her feet hook around my back, and she slides along my cock. With every ounce of energy I’m holding back, letting her use me, seeking her satisfaction on me.

“I want us to come together, baby. Are you on the pill?”

“Yes. Please, can I feel you? I want to feel every inch of you.”

She’s ready, pulling me to the bed, pushing me on my back, and straddling me.

Her hand reaches behind and positions my cock at her entrance, sliding slowly onto me.

“Oh God, wild thing, I love you.” I plant my feet on the bed and I plow into her tight pussy.

“Yes, I love you, too,” she cries.

One long growl roars from my chest as my dream of us being together in Montana someday, with a family, will come true.

Somehow, I know, I’m about to plant my seed in my little wild thing and let love grow.

* * *

The Puckers Series will continue.

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www.ZeeIrwinAuthor.com

About the Author

Zee Irwin is a USA Today Bestselling Author who gets powered up by steamy small town romance. She's a bit of sunshine living in the countryside in Pennsylvania with her own grumpy alpha guy, two teenagers, and twin kitties. Her favorite character to write is a small town billionaire, especially if he falls first, is former military, and is possessive of the woman he loves.

Visit her at zeeirwinauthor.com/series to keep up to date on her latest work in progress.

My Way to You
MEGYN WARD

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My Way to You

Sometimes, you have to lose yourself to find your way...

Devon Michaels has always exceeded everyone's expectations...until now. She's messed up big time. To find space to glue together the shattered bits of her broken heart and to regain the faith her parents had in her, she takes her first teaching job at a one room schoolhouse on the Nebraska prairie. Isolated from her family and especially her boyfriend, she's got the school term to get herself together.

Jase Varner is doing the right thing. The problem is, it's killing him inside. Between running the family ranch, babysitting his alcoholic father, and supporting a brother with failure to launch, he's losing sight of his own dreams. Maybe he should marry the neighbor he's known forever and accept the life everyone expects of him.

When Jase and Devon collide on a country road, they aren't prepared for the instant attraction or the complications it could cause. Jase isn't leaving the ranch and Devon isn't staying. Even if they can clear all the obstacles keeping them apart, Devon's dark secret could destroy any chance for happiness. With their futures heading in opposite directions, can they ever find their way to each other?

Chapter 1

Devon

Surprise. Another hill. More brown grass. A billion more black cows baking in the August heat.

My phone burned against my ear where I'd had it pasted for the last seventy miles while Cassie droned on about the party last night. A party I'd missed because I'd been home throwing the last of my clothes into my old Honda so I could start driving before dawn.

"Tommy was so wasted. I know you leaving is killing him." Cassie looped around to the beginning of the conversation. She'd already been over this ground three times.

My heart contracted at the thought of Tommy, as it always did. I repeated the same thought I'd been saying since I'd reluctantly accepted this job. "I'll only be gone for a year. Less than that."

Cassie sighed. "Yeah, but you've only seen him once all summer."

If my parents had their way, I wouldn't even have seen him then. As it was, they made us sit in the backyard and I knew they watched from the house. "You bringing it up every five minutes doesn't help. I miss him, too, you know."

"I know. But you're so much stronger than he is."

I'd been strong enough to survive the unbelievable pain of the last few months but did I have enough muscle left to rebuild my life?

Cassie chattered on, keeping time with the tires on the road. "But he's a guy and they can't wait that long. I don't want him to give up on you. Damn Marsha and Benji for sending you out there and putting temptation in Tommy's way."

Why would waiting be any harder for him than for me? I'm the one my parents sent to outer Siberia, well, western

Nebraska, but it amounted to the same thing. “Next time you see him remind him about how hot I am and how much I miss him.”

“Why don’t you tell him?” Cassie slurped her Gatorade and crunched a mouthful of cheese puffs, her usual hangover cure.

“My folks are checking my phone so they’ll see the number. I thought about having Tommy use your phone but the deal is I’m allowed 60 minutes a week, unless I’m talking to Mom. I need my Cassie time.”

“Aw, bitch, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. God, Marsha and Benji are Nazis. Why do they hate Tommy so much?”

Guilt banged my gut. I hadn’t told Cassie about what happened in May. She was my best friend but I couldn’t reveal that secret to anyone. Only my parents and Tommy knew. Not all of them had stood by me.

I accelerated down a valley where a bridge ran over a thready creek. “I’ll get a cash phone as soon as I find a damned Walmart, then I can call whenever I want.” There had to be a Walmart someplace, right? But I’d been driving from St. Louis through Omaha and out to the beyond. I hadn’t seen any sign of civilization for three hours, unless you count a few towns of population 500 without any stop signs. A few towns had greasy little cafes with names like Red’s or Betty’s Home Cooking. They had two or three rusty pickup trucks parked in front, which probably constituted a party around here.

I sighed. “It’s only for a year.” Cassie joined me on the second part. “Less than a year.” We laughed and I gunned over the bridge and up the other side. “I’ve got to keep positive or it will be a long year. So no complaining.”

“It’s just that Tommy looked so sad. I’m afraid he’s going to start drinking too much.”

I topped the hill to see... another hill. More grass. More cows. A pickup met me and the driver lifted a finger off the steering wheel in greeting.

I didn't want to think about Tommy being sad. Thinking about him at all made me squirm in the car seat. Tall, with light, wavy hair that brushed his shoulders, blue eyes that crinkled when he laughed, and he laughed a lot. Tommy and I had been together since junior year in high school. Even after everything that had happened, memories of his passion always caused a twinge in my belly and lower. But now, a feeling of sorrow and heaps of guilt followed.

Tommy was my first. My only. Together we'd learned about everything from passionate kissing to touching and before too long, sex. He'd been with other girls before so he took the lead. But it didn't take me long to learn. Without warning my mind took me from driving across endless prairie to Tommy's dorm room. I felt myself on my knees, straddling his hips. He closed his eyes, his breath ragged, sweat beading his forehead. His long fingers dug into my hips as he directed me to a faster rhythm. "Devon," he groaned my name with such longing. He loved me. He needed me. I gave him the sense of belonging he'd never had before.

Marsha and Benji didn't understand the connection between Tommy and me. Even before last summer they'd tried to get me to break up with him and date other guys. They said he held me back. Then, after what happened, they gave up pretending I had any control over my life and forbade me to see him. I was hardly in the position to protest.

"New rule," I told Cassie. "No more talking about Tommy."

She didn't respond.

"Cassie?"

Nothing.

I pulled the phone away, feeling the relief of cool air on my ear. No signal. Fan-fucking-tastic. Guess it didn't matter if Marsha and Benji monitored all my phone calls. No signal meant no calls to monitor. No need to find a Walmart for a phone if I had no signal.

Might be a long year. Less than a year.

In the end, though, I'd return to St. Louis. I'd be whole and strong. Tommy would prove his loyalty and love and we'd be together.

After another hour that seemed like a decade, I spotted the sign for Highway 61 heading north. I checked the directions I'd thankfully written down. Good thing I wasn't relying on my phone's GPS in this digital black hole. "Mile marker 281." What the hell was a mile marker?

I searched the road for signs but reflectors along the side and barbed wire fences were the only visible manmade structures. Plenty of cows and grass and hills, though. A few seconds later I spotted numbers attached to one of the reflectors. It read 240. I watched the side and in a mile, another number said 241. Guess that explained mile markers. Only forty miles to go.

Columbus must have felt like this—heading into nothing and traveling forever with no idea what to expect on the other side. What had I gotten myself into?

Chapter 2

Jase

Dad's yelling echoed beneath the pounding of Frijole's hooves as I loped away from the barn. Who knew or cared what bug crawled up his ass this afternoon or just how long he'd been into his whiskey. He probably wanted me in the hayfield moving stacks.

Screw that. Let Grant ride around in the air-conditioned tractor cab. It's the kind of easy work he could handle.

I'd planned on moving the hundred head of steers into another pasture this afternoon. I should have done it last week but the irrigation sprinkler in the alfalfa meadow had broken down and I'd gone to Omaha for parts. Usually, Grant liked to go on parts runs. He took any opportunity to get off the place and Dad was happy to let him go. But Grant was best man at a wedding and Dad couldn't be trusted to drive.

I hated to admit how much I liked getting off the ranch. I didn't leave often because there was always so much work to do and if I left, I'd get behind. But I'd loaded up my truck and took off.

Since I had to be there overnight, anyway, I'd found a hopping blues bar in the Old Market. After a few beers and some good music I'd hooked up with a friendly cocktail waitress and hadn't even had to spring for a hotel room.

There was a lot to be said for getting a break from the endless country music around here, for being anonymous, and for friendly cocktail waitresses. But the ranch wouldn't run itself. Or rather, if it was left up to Dad and Grant, not much of anything would get done.

I trotted up to a wire gate and hopped off Frijole to open it and lay it back so I could herd the steers through. A puff of dust on the trail road alerted me to company. "Nice of you to show up," I said to Myron, my blue heeler cow dog.

He hung his tongue out the side of his mouth and stared at me with alert eyes. “At least you’re always enthusiastic and smart and don’t argue with my plans.”

He wagged his tail and fell into line with me when I mounted Frijole and we headed for the water tank, where I knew the steers would be gathered.

Riding across the hills brought down my thumping impatience. I started to relax and let the rocking rhythm of Frijole’s gate soothe me. If I didn’t learn how to deal with the stress of this ranch and my fucked-up family, I wouldn’t make it to my twenty-fourth birthday in three months, let alone live to be an old man.

A breeze blew across the back of my neck, cooling the summer heat. But it had that hint of fall in it, the lazy reminder that in a few weeks it’d turn increasingly aggressive. In a few months its howl and bite could threaten everyone on the plains. Nebraska winters could be tough. As the old saying goes, “Nebraska is a good place for men, but it’s hard on horses and women.”

I hated the thought of spending more time in the house with Dad and Grant.

At that thought, the ease of the ride dribbled away. What to do about Grant? He’d finished college at the University in Lincoln with a degree in business administration in May. He’d spent the summer at the ranch and as far as I knew, hadn’t sent out a damned resume anywhere. With Dad drinking more and more, I could use the help on the place. If we had two hard-working cowboys, we might be able to run more cattle, put up more hay, and, in short, make some money.

Problem was, Grant wasn’t any more help than Dad. He spent a lot of time on social media and gaming and not much time doing ranch work. I couldn’t afford to keep him in the style he’d grown accustomed to. I hated asking him to do any work, didn’t feel right bossing him around. I couldn’t kick him out so the resentment grew.

The sun hit that late afternoon burn and I was glad for the cowboy hat pulled low over my eyes. By this time of year, the

prairie grass had faded to dull golds and browns, like the hair of that waitress in Omaha. I liked her. She laughed easy and really seemed to enjoy our night together. But I hadn't taken her phone number and she hadn't offered it. That was the kind of relationship I did best. No strings.

A girl not from here would never want to stay. A girl from here would never want to leave. I was somewhere in the middle and didn't need more pressure either way.

In another few weeks, the pastures would be streaked with copper and red grasses and glow with beauty. It made me think of someone I hadn't met. The woman I dreamed about with hair the color of the bright fall grass. The woman who accepted me, the one who didn't constantly want me to be something else, something better.

I topped the ridge expecting to see the steers at the windmill. They were. But only about half of the herd. Damn. The pasture wasn't large by Nebraska Sandhills standards, but with only me, Frijole and Myron, it would take a couple of hours to round up the bad boys and get them into the other pasture. Normally, it was a job I'd enjoy. But today, with so much work piling up, the added hassle and time made me feel like the whole damned universe plotted against me.

"Come on," I called to Myron and kicked Frijole into a lope. In fifteen minutes we reached the far end of the pasture. I counted a couple of dozen head along the way. The rest of the herd bunched around a patch of green grass in a low spot at the corner of the pasture. It might be the last bit of green grass of the summer and the bastards weren't anxious to leave it.

I whistled to Myron and he flanked me and Frijole. Coaxing, rushing, me hollering and Myron nipping at heels and tails, we managed to get the stupid assholes moving along the fence line, heading toward the windmill. We'd add the few stragglers along the way and gather the whole bunch at the water tank. From there, it wouldn't take too much to get them through the gate into the new pasture.

Their hooves scuffed along the sand and they fell into an easy walk. Even though I was impatient to get them moved

and head back to the hayfield, I knew better than to push them too hard. If they felt rushed, they'd get nervous and panic and then I'd have a rodeo.

An engine gunned, followed by a horn honking. Startled, I twisted in my saddle. We were several miles from ranch headquarters. Who would be out here?

A red Ford F150 bounced down the hill after coming from the southern pasture gate. I knew who drove that rig. I frowned. That pasture and little red pickup belonged to Roddy Phillips. Phillips and we Varners had been neighbors for the last hundred years or so. They say good fences make good neighbors and even though I was sure to keep that barbed wire strung good and tight, it didn't seem to make much of a difference for Roddy Phillips.

But then, Roddy's antagonism didn't focus so much around the fence as it did his daughter, Jenna. Bulls jumping the fence and breeding the neighbor's heifers was bad enough. But young men doing the same thing made for some dicey neighborly relations.

The pickup honked again and idled by the fence. Roddy must have his boxers in a bunch this afternoon. I reined in and pulled Frijole around. Myron started after me but I pointed at the last steer in the bunch and said, "Go." Myron had a lot more cattle smarts than Grant and he turned back to keep the herd trailing over the hill.

I wasn't in a big hurry to let Roddy rail on me this afternoon. The mood I was in, I was likely to lose my friendly face and tell him what a stupid fuck I thought he was. That wouldn't be good.

The driver's side window rolled down as I approached. Almost immediately, a head with soft brown curls thrust through, then shoulders and one leg. The little munchkin was on a mission to escape the pickup. He might be fearless but he scared the crap out of me.

I kicked Frijole and we lurched ahead. We reached the pickup in time for me to catch him as he leaped into my arms.

I hugged his twisting hot body close, smelled the sweet, little boy sweat on his damp hair.

“Jase!” He threw his chubby arms around my neck. “I came to see you. I can ride with you, huh? I can hang on tight and I can help. What are you doing? Frijole won’t mind if I come along. Mom said I could. Maybe I can ride Mutton when we get to your house. Mom said maybe.”

The words tumbled from his five-year-old’s brain and through his mouth in a stampede. I couldn’t help the laugh that rumbled from my chest. “Slow down, partner,” I said, hanging on tight. The fear of him flying through the air and me not being there to catch him still clutched at my chest.

“Hi, Jase.” The sultry voice drew my attention from the squirming little boy in my arms to the pickup. Jenna smiled up at me, her aqua eyes flashing with humor. She flicked her long blonde hair back from her face and let the tip of her tongue run along her upper lip.

Despite myself, I felt my jeans get tight and the saddle suddenly felt too small in some places. I was glad I held on to the rug rat so she wouldn’t see the involuntary effect she had on me.

I guess she didn’t need the evidence. Her intuition must have told her all she needed to know. She sat up a little straighter and adjusted her shoulders back, thrusting her breasts against her t-shirt. She had the full, round type most guys dreamed about. She wore no bra and the points of her nipples added to my “growing” discomfort.

“What were you thinking?” My voice came out harsh. “If I hadn’t gotten here in time, Cody could have fallen and been hurt.”

Cody squirmed and settled himself to sit in front of me in the saddle, looking at his mother. “But you caught me, like I knew you would.”

Jenna tilted one fine eyebrow up. “See?” This was Jenna’s world. The universe and everyone attached to the planet jumped to please her. As far as I knew, there was only one

time the world ever let her down. And that had resulted in Cody. Who could call that a bad thing?

She usually managed to piss me off enough I could resist all her physical charms. “I thought you were Roddy here to give me hell about moving the steers.”

She gave me that cute pout that usually got her noticed. “Daddy bought a new pickup and gave me his hand-me-down.”

Her castoffs were three grades higher than my best stuff.

I let Cody take Frijole’s reins and I nudged the horse into a walk. I directed him in a small circle with my knees while Cody believed he did the steering. We came back to the pickup. Jenna had climbed out and sat on the tailgate, leaning forward, enough for her t-shirt top to gape open to show her cleavage. I looked down at the top of Cody’s head. “What are you doing out here?” I asked her.

“Cody said he wanted to see you. I called over to the ranch and your brother said you were rounding up this pasture. Cody begged to come out and ride with you. I have two finals to study for but I dropped it all because Cody’s school starts tomorrow and he won’t be able to go with you as much from now on.”

Cody let out a raspberry of disgust. “I don’t want to go to school.”

I ruffled his curls, my hand covering the whole top of his head. I knew how he felt. Being inside the one-room school at the ranch, then high school at Otis, thirty miles away, had seemed like prison to me. College, now that was a different story. I swallowed down my disappointment at not getting to experience that first hand. I still held out hope that someday I could get away from here. I shoved that thought away, as I did every day. “I hear there’s a new school teacher this year. You can help her learn about how things work out here, huh? She’s from a big city.” I tried to put all the enthusiasm I could into my voice.

He didn't look convinced. "Does she know about Mutton and Frijole?"

I ruffled his hair. "She might know about horses but she hasn't met ours, yet. You can introduce her."

He considered that.

Jenna frowned. "I hear this is her first year of teaching and that she graduated a year early. She's only twenty-one. But I guess kindergarten isn't that big of a deal so it'll be okay."

I put a better spin on it. "Not many people are willing to come all the way out here to teach so I think we're pretty lucky to get her at the last minute. Dortha knows her parents and said they're good people."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "How good can she be if her parents had to get the job for her?"

I hated that Jenna said stuff like that in front of Cody. It would be a hard enough transition without starting off in doubt. "School is important, pardner. How else are you going to get smart?"

Cody leaned into me. "You can teach me. You're the smartest person in the world."

I laughed from my heart. This kid always brightened my day. "And don't you forget it."

Cody twisted and looked around me. "Myron is gone. We gotta go now, Jase! The cows are getting away. Let's go!" He kicked his little boots against the saddle and scooted forward, trying to make Frijole move.

My heart sank and I hated what I had to say. "Sorry, pardner. I can't take you with me today."

From above him, I saw his lower lip stick out. "Why not?"

I shot Jenna a stern look. "I'd like to take you with me all the time, but sometimes it's not safe for you. Today I'm going to ride hard and I've got a lot to do. I'm sorry."

"But Mom said..." He fought his tears of disappointment.

Jenna gave me a pleading look, her big blue eyes doing that trick that almost always got her way.

I pried Cody from me. His first instinct was to hang on to the reins and I felt him tense. But this kid had maturity and self-restraint his mother lacked. His grip loosened and he let me lift him from the saddle and stand him on the pickup tailgate next to Jenna.

I struggled for the same control so I wouldn't tell Jenna what a shitty thing she'd done to me and Cody by trying to manipulate me into taking him when I couldn't. If she'd called first or asked when I might be able to take him, I'd have worked something out. This little game of hers was going to have to stop. But I couldn't say any of that in front of Cody.

I gave his shoulder a squeeze as the tears gathered in the corners of his eyes made me want to cry, too. "School starts tomorrow. That's Wednesday. I promise to take you with me on Saturday. That's four sleeps."

Cody nodded, his little lips pressed together in his effort to be brave. "What will we do?"

"We'll saddle up Mutton and take a ride in the corral."

Cody brightened a little. "Can Mom come, too?"

Jenna tilted her pretty head at me. "Please?"

I forced a smile for Cody's benefit. "If you want."

Chapter 3

Devon

I turned off at mile marker 281. Good thing it was labeled because there was nothing along the empty stretch of road for a landmark. As soon as I left the highway, I dropped onto a dirt road and rumbled across a series of half a dozen metal bars in the middle of the road. It shook my poor Honda Civic. But that was only the beginning. Rocks pinged on the underside of my car and the washboard dirt road rattled my brain until it felt loose in my skull.

A few miles from the highway I hit a fork with two signs. One was newly painted with sharp lettering and a silhouette of a cowboy on a horse throwing a rope around a cow. It told me Phillips Land and Cattle was that way.

The other sign was simple, chipped and faded. It looked like it might have been painted all white once with black lettering that showed the way I was supposed to go. From the directions sent by the Spencer County school superintendent, Dorthea Stratton, I knew it ought to say Varner Ranch. Now, the white flaked off showing weathered gray wood. The V missed most of its right arm, along with the a and r. The R was completely erased.

I chugged up a steep but short hill. From the top I caught sight of my home and the school.

Oh. My. God.

I hit the brakes and stopped the engine, clutching the steering wheel and trying to keep from bursting into tears. They'd told me it was rustic. "Nothing fancy," is how Dorthea had put it. "But serviceable and you can make it real cute." Somehow, I'd pictured Little House on the Prairie and a log school with a chimney, in a yard with sweeping oaks and a hitching post where the children could tie their horses. The yard would be grassy, providing a place to eat our lunches and for some outdoor classes. Maybe a tire swing and a slide or a quaint baseball field.

I climbed from my Honda onto the dirt road. The heat beat on my head and my skin started to crisp almost immediately. The silence suffocated me. No traffic or voices, no stereos or lawn mowers, kids shouts or garage doors opening or closing. I couldn't smell sprinklers on hot pavement, backyard barbeques or fresh cut grass, just hot nothingness. The sounds and smells of a neighborhood and the life I knew had disappeared and the void felt creepy. I couldn't take my shocked gaze from the scene at the base of the hill below me.

What I saw was a barbed wire fence, the same three-wire style that outlined everything from here to Omaha. Inside the mostly bare dirt enclosure, a single-wide trailer sat across from a red brick square building that looked like it had been transported from London after the WW II bombings. That had to be the school. The dowdy trailer would be the home that despite Dorthea Stratton's promise, I would never be able to make cute. They looked like something straight out of a movie, maybe *Raising Arizona* or *Fargo* or something more *Grapes of Wrath-y*.

An old metal swing set, like the kind my parents might have had in their backyard growing up, constituted the whole playground equipment. A row of scraggly cedar trees struggled against the west side of the barbed wire fence and one lone elm waved sad branches behind the trailer.

"No way." I spoke my conviction out loud. "I can't do this." I didn't care what promises I'd made my parents. I might have agreed that a new environment, getting away from the pain and putting my mistakes behind me was a good thing. I might even have thought time in the country would help me heal. But this? Not this.

The plan we'd agreed on was based on me living quietly. They thought I needed time to let go of my old lifestyle—mostly my relationship with Tommy—that had resulted in such a terrible mistake. They thought I'd come back a changed person ready to start fresh. My idea was to get away for a while to grieve or do whatever I needed to do to give my heart room to feel again. Because right now, as much as I told Cassie I loved and missed Tommy, mostly I just felt numb.

I had to get out of here. Even at less than a year, this situation was impossible. I didn't sign up for a third world experience with no cell phone, living in a trailer in the middle of a dirt patch and nothing but cows for company. Maybe I thought I could deal, but this was too much.

I'd beg Mom. She was always the weak link. I could convince her that sending me out here was cruel and that I could serve out my sentence somewhere, anywhere else. I cast about for any way out of this dead end. I could live at home, under house arrest. They could keep an eye on me and I'd be good. Really, truly good. I'd watch CSI with them every night, never go to a party and stay away from Tommy for the year they'd expected me to be here. The same deal, just under their roof.

That sounded awful, but at least I'd have civilization around me. Not like here. Nothing around for miles and miles. A dumpy trailer for a house and probably the Children of the Corn for students. Except, there wasn't even corn around here. Just grass.

I heard a sound far away and after some thought, recognized it as a moo.

On the verge of panic, I tried for any solution. No one from Nebraska knew I was here. I could get the hell out of Dodge, make some excuse to Dortha tomorrow about my mother being diagnosed with incurable cancer and only given a year to live and I needed to stay in St. Louis and nurse her to the end. I'd do my year of penance under my parents' roof and at the end, Tommy and I could be together again.

Making the plan helped me hold back my alarm rising at all that freaking silence and emptiness. But I still felt spooked and wanted away from here.

I jumped back in the car and started the engine. With no one on the road, there didn't seem to be any need to worry about a U-turn. I cranked the wheel and hit the gas. My rear wheels spun on loose gravel and slid to the side. When they finally caught, I lurched forward too fast. The road wasn't quite as wide as I'd thought and I hit the brakes so I could do a

three-point turn. But instead of stopping immediately, like the car would do in a settled place with normal concrete, the tires slid on the gravel again.

I finally gained traction and gunned the engine, gritting my teeth. My heart raced at the thought of open rebellion. How would Dad react? I had thirteen hours of driving to think about it. My mind a jumble of anxiety, I accelerated up the hill, topping it at forty-five.

Oh my god! Black, fur, hooves, bones and flesh filled what had been empty space minutes before. I screamed.

Instead of an open dirt road winding up and down and around, eventually taking me back to a real life, a mass of black crowded in front of my hood.

I slammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel. I had no idea how I avoided slamming into one of the cows; there were so many and they seemed to be everywhere. It was like some horror movie and I imagined blood and cow guts slathered all over the road and the car, me laying in a heap of smoking, twisted metal, cows tearing me to pieces.

As if in slow motion, my front wheels hit the side of the raised dirt road. I braced my legs and pushed against the brakes but it didn't matter. The car kept its momentum. There was nothing I could do except hang on the wheel as the front tires went into the ditch and the rest of the car followed. The grill hit the bottom of the ditch with a thud and I jerked forward.

Black fur streamed past my window. But inside, the engine chugged merrily, even though I was trapped. I twisted the key and killed it.

Damn it! I slapped the wheel. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Behind me the chaos of cows bellowing and hooves clattering the dirt road sent my heart tripping out of my chest.

I wanted to push the door open and climb out but cows raced by my car window. I white-knuckled the wheel and forced myself to breathe.

Finally the bunch crossed the road and took off across the open pasture. With shaking hands I shoved the door open and stepped into the ditch, sand sifting through my flip flops. I struggled to keep from cursing again and tried to get myself under control.

The car didn't look dented or caved in. I'd gone over the side so slowly I hadn't expected much damage. But it sat at a 45-degree angle. No way could I back it out of there.

Now what the hell was I going to do? Out here, alone in the wilderness, no one around for miles. I held my hand up to shield my eyes from the sun and looked back the way I'd come. I'd gone a long way from the fork that sent me to Varner's or Phillips'. Which ranch was closer? And when I got to either one, would an old crone and her toothless idiot son invite me inside and murder me?

The stupid cows had scattered. They ran in all directions. What the hell were they doing on the road anyway? Just some random herd movement? I looked at my car and spotted a barbed-wire gate hanging open. They must have passed through there on a cow quest of some sort.

Even though it was stupid, I pulled out my phone and checked the signal. Nothing. A cow mooed from the direction the herd had attacked me. I tried to follow the sound. I squinted at a speck of black against a brown and yellow hillside off to what I thought might be the north. After my eyes adjusted a little, I made out a bunch of black cows walking this way. As I studied them, it became obvious why they were all going in one direction. Someone riding a horse topped the hill behind them. A smaller something, probably a dog, zipped along between the horse and the cows.

Now the bunch on the road made more sense. This cowboy was on some kind of roundup and had purposely sent them in my direction. His hat tipped up and he might have caught sight of me. He kicked his horse and made a wide swathe around the dozen or so cows he followed and started to gallop my way.

Damn. I like horses in principle. They're pretty and mystic and all that crap the other girls love. But they're big and dumb

and have hooves like razors. Who knows what kind of damage they could do to little ol' me. I wanted to jump back in the car and hide. What I did was move around to the opposite side of where he came.

He might be a murderer or not but my choices were limited. Even this late in the afternoon, by the time I got to the Varner or Phillips ranch for help, I'd be sunburned. It wasn't the first time I cursed the gift of red hair and freckles I received from my mother.

I waited, wondering what kind of help this old rancher could be. He'd have to ride his horse to his house, wherever that was, and get a truck to pull me out of the ditch. Wait. The old cowboy wasn't coming toward me. The spotted horse careened through the gate and jumped the ditch several yards ahead of me, thundered across the road and down the other side. The cowboy was chasing some of the cows that had charged me.

"Hey!" I waved and shouted, but the cowboy didn't seem to notice. Was he hard of hearing?

If I was going to get this hayseed to help me, I had to get his attention. I slid from around my car and climbed from the ditch. "Wait!" I yelled and waved my arms.

The cows coming down the hill picked up their heads and stopped. Their ears perked toward me. The dog barked. The cowboy glanced over his shoulder, saw the cows start to break ranks and pulled on the reins of his horse. The horse whirled around and raced back toward the gate.

I waved my hands above my head to signal. "I need some help!"

"Stop!" The cowboy yelled at me as he galloped through the gate. The cows coming down the hill toward me scattered. The cowboy raced behind them and whipped the horse from one side of the dispersed group to the other until they bunched up again. The dog barked and leaped at the cows like he was helping herd them. They quickly formed a group.

And stampeded toward me!

“Get out of the way!” The man shouted.

I didn't know what to do. But I couldn't spend a lot of time making a plan because the beasts were bearing down on me, obviously heading for the gate. A barbed wire fence ran straight up the hill from where I stood, creating a corner to the pasture that had the open gate. If I could scale the waist-high wire, there would be a fence between me and the mad cows. I dashed toward a wood fence post. I grabbed the post and placed one flip flop on a wire. The barb poked all the way through the flimsy rubber sole into my foot. I hefted myself up and put another foot on the next wire, this time careful to avoid the barbs.

I heard hooves and heavy breathing. They'd run me over in one more second. I launched myself over the last wire, catching my knee. One flip flop stuck to the barb and I landed in the sand on the other side just as the cows ran past.

The pounding of horse hooves and a sharp whistle rose above my panting and the rush of blood thudding in my ears. “Hey-up!” The blur of black and white swam before me as the spotted horse and rider raced by.

The dog barked and scrambled alongside the cowboy. They worked together in an amazing dance. Each took off after the two lagging cows. One sprinted south and the other west, quickly rounding the strays and expertly heading them across the pasture in the general direction of the others. Now all the cows were through the gate, angling off away from me, heading up a hill and thankfully disappearing.

I sprawled on the ground, blood oozing from the rip in my knee where the barbed wire scratched it. My flip flop bounced on the wire fence like a pink surrender flag.

The cowboy jerked his horse around to rush toward me. I had no time to jump the fence again. He seemed bent on running me over.

I planted my hand to push off the sandy ground and yelped at the stinging in my palm. I barely got to my feet in time for the horse to put on his front brakes and stop in a spray of sand.

“What the hell?” I shouted. I rubbed my stinging palm and looked up.

I don't know what I expected exactly. A middle-aged rancher with salt and pepper whiskers, bad teeth, and slow, inbred eyes, maybe. Like the school and living quarters, what I saw was way different. Unlike the trailer and depressing school grounds, this time, the package was a whole lot better.

The guy on the horse couldn't have been much older than me, probably mid-twenties. His cowboy hat sat low, shading his face but not enough I didn't note his deep, brown eyes and a brush of hair the color of chocolate on his forehead and skimming the collar of his plaid western shirt. He'd rolled the sleeves of the shirt to just below his elbows, revealing tanned and strong forearms. His broad shoulders narrowed toward his hips and when the soft breeze flattened the thin fabric of his shirt over his chest and belly, it was easy to see there was not an ounce of flab on this guy.

In short, if he weren't scowling so fiercely at me, he'd have been gorgeous. But there was that pissed off face glaring at me.

The gray and brown wiry-haired dog bore down on me. His tongue lopped out the side of his mouth and he looked like he laughed. He wagged his tail with warm greeting. I couldn't resist his welcome and lowered my hand, fingers curled underneath. He sniffed it, wagged even harder and lowered his head, inviting me to pet him. “What a good boy,” I said.

The cowboy's harsh voice caught me off-guard. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

My hand stung and I glanced down. Several tiny cactus spines stuck from the meat of palm. I tried to pick at one. It broke off. “I need help.”

His eyes widened slightly and his full mouth turned up in a humorless grin. “You got that right. And now, thanks to you, so do I.”

The dog leaned into my legs and I rubbed my uninjured hand along his spine. Not sure how to deal with this mad guy, I

thought the best approach was to give him a second to calm down.

I placed my foot carefully on a bare spot of sand and picked my way to the fence to retrieve my flip flop. “Your cows ran my car into the ditch.” I pointed. “I need someone to pull it out.”

His gaze traveled to the car then back to my face. “How fast were you going that a few steers ran you off a perfectly dry, wide road in the middle of the day?”

When he put it like that, it sounded pretty stupid. The way he looked me up and down, from my shorts and wife-beater to my flip-flops, made me feel like a zoo animal.

“You’re just lucky you didn’t hit the posts along the Autogate,” he said with a shake of his head as though that would have been a disaster.

“Autogate?” I looked around for anything that might be automatic.

He rolled his eyes and pointed at the bars across the road. “Some places they call them cattle guards. Here, we call it an Autogate. Keeps the cattle in the pasture without stringing a gate across the road.”

“Right.” I tried to say it with no inflection. He might think he was all that and a bag of chips, sitting so superior on his horse and looking down on me, but he was only a dumb cowboy from the boonies, even if he did look more like a hunk than a hick.

I straightened my shoulders and gave him my best mean girl face. “Can you help me out or not?”

He sighed. “Sure, why not? You’ve already spooked the steers and sent them running for Timbuk-three, which will take me three hours to round up and finish moving them, instead of the twenty minutes I had planned. I guess I can worry about fixing the baler tomorrow and hope it doesn’t rain tonight and ruin the hay that we already cut and is lying on the ground. I’ve got nothing better to do with the rest of this day than gallop home, get a truck and drag a princess out of the ditch.”

I spun around—a difficult feat in flip-flops on sand. “Forget it.” I walked toward the fence. The dog followed close on my heels.

He turned his horse around to watch me. “What’s your next plan, Princess?”

I was so mad I thought I could stomp back to St. Louis without stopping. But that wasn’t going to happen. “Where is the Varner Ranch? I’ll walk there and ask them to help.”

He tilted his hat back. “It’s two miles as the crow flies. But you’d need to take the road because you can’t walk across the prairie in that stupid footwear. Then it’s more like three.”

His horse shifted his weight and I jumped back, afraid I’d get trampled. Stupid. The horse wasn’t going to attack me. Probably.

I crossed my arms and felt the sting of sunburn. “Fine. I’m sure they’ll be more than happy to help me.”

He settled back in the saddle with a half grin. I had to admit, even though he was mean and rude and stupid, that little bit of a smile lit his eyes and he looked good enough to eat. “They’ll help you out, I guarantee it. That’s what neighbors do around here,” he said.

“You must not be from around there, then.” If it weren’t so damned hot out here, he’d probably be able to see steam coming from my ears. I forced myself to march past the horse and through the gate and stabbed my toe into another cactus. “Ouch!”

He laughed. “You’ll be okay once you get to the road.” He tipped his hat like a hero in an old Western and turned his horse around. “Come on, Myron.” He trotted away without looking back.

If I’d have seen a rock I would have launched it at his back. Instead, I bent over and worked at removing the cactus from my big toe. I assumed the dog’s name was Myron. Myron? What a stupid name for a dog. He licked at my toe when I stood up. I ruffled his ears. “Thanks, big guy.”

I made my way cautiously down the road with Myron keeping close. A shrill whistle stopped him and he turned his head toward the sound. The cowboy had trotted halfway up the hill and he whistled again, no doubt calling Myron to him.

As it turned out, I got the last laugh on Mister High and Mighty. Myron let out a little whine, then trailed after me.

Chapter 4

Jase

Damn it. I was so rattled by her appearing in the middle of nowhere that I didn't even realize Myron wasn't with me until I'd ridden halfway up the hill. How could someone straight from my fantasies magically appear out of thin air? She had hair like copper that fell soft around her face, strands almost glowing as the breeze caught them. And those green eyes. In my imagination, they'd focused on me with desire, not the fiery temper she'd shown.

She sent me so far off my center I hadn't known what to do. I'd wanted to jump out of the saddle, take her into my arms and crush her to me.

In my daydreams, I had slowly undressed her a thousand times. Her throat, silky white and soft as a kitten, beat with her growing need. She tilted her head back and I kissed the silky skin and inhaled the soft scent of lilacs in spring. With my head bent and lips still caressing her throat, I unbuttoned her blouse. One tiny pearl at a time, tickling her chest as I trailed my fingers to the next button. Showers of gooseflesh rose in response to my fingers brushing bare skin. Slowly I pulled away the flimsy fabric to see the firm breasts with pink nipples as hard as pebbles. I couldn't resist closing my hands around her and squeezing with gentle pressure. She moaned and tilted her head back, her fingers winding in my hair as I lowered my lips to her nipples, swirling my tongue, teasing and sucking. Tasting the salty desire as her breath grew more ragged and soft moans escaped from her.

She'd press herself to me. I felt the strength of her desire as she stroked my back, her hands sliding down and tugging me close enough to feel my need. She pulled away and bent her head to watch as she unbuttoned my jeans. I was as hard as granite and swollen so the tip rose from the waistband of my underwear and strained against my jeans. She slipped her warm fingers around me. In daydreams there was no awkward shedding of clothes or stretching out, just us together on the

ground, the sun warming my back, our eyes locked as I raised my hips and pushed into the folds....

Fantasy. That's all. A really good fantasy. With a red-headed angel. Who just happened to appear on the Varner Ranch in the middle of a hot August afternoon.

But this girl was real. And really not interested in making love. The prairie was full of stickers and cactus, as she'd discovered. And I'd blown any chance of charming this stranger and getting to know why she was here and somehow convincing her to hang around.

I'd reacted the exact way Mom had warned me not to act. She'd known that when I got nervous or unsure, I covered up by getting pissed off.

That last spring we'd sat together on the front porch. I'd wrapped her in bundles of quilts and settled her on the swing. She'd been so weak and pale it tore me up to watch her. But I spent as much time with her as I could. We all did. One afternoon, when Grant and Dad had gone to town for feed, she took my calloused hand in her cold fingers. "You're so much like him."

I didn't understand. "Who?"

"Dean."

Dad? We'd butted heads my whole life. He was stubborn and hard-headed, incapable of seeing someone else's point of view. I hated to think I was like him in any way. "You're crazy."

She laughed. "Probably. My parents thought so when I married Dean and moved out here. I'd just got my first engineering job and probably could have had a great career. But I gave it up because I couldn't imagine living without Dean and he couldn't bear to leave these hills."

I understood how he felt about the hills but I didn't have the same love for the ranch. I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to disagree with her.

Mom had that sweet smile she always had when she talked about Dad. "You're patient and kind to the animals. That pup

of yours loves you so much he practically reads your mind. You take care of everyone, especially Grant. You're steady and reliable and your heart is loyal and strong."

I rolled my eyes, uncomfortable with this sentimental talk.

She leaned her head back on the swing, too tired but wanting to continue. "Whatever you want, fight for it. Don't let anyone stop you. That's a wonderful trait you got from Dean. So many times he came close to losing the ranch but he never gave up."

She wanted me to help Dad so he'd be able to hold on to the place. My heart dropped, fearing I'd never be able to leave. The lump in my throat kept me from answering but she knew I would do anything she asked.

"You both love so deeply, so completely." Tears glistened. "You're going to have to help him. Don't let him give up after I'm gone."

I nodded.

"I'm glad you've taken after your father in so many ways. But one way I'm not happy about is your temper and the way you let it rise up and get the best of you."

I dipped my head, feeling my cheeks burn.

"Give people as much patience and care as you do the livestock and your dogs. It's something you need to work on."

Since I avoided people as much as possible, I hadn't worked on it enough. Obviously. I unconsciously looked around for Myron. He always made me feel better. Something about unconditional love. Then I remembered he'd abandoned me.

Not that I blamed him. I'd made that stupid comment about her flip flops but that was because I'd been so rattled by her long, tanned legs. God, they looked so toned I couldn't help but imagine them wrapped around me. But her legs had nothing on her ass, so well defined in those short shorts. Add to that the way her t-shirt hugged her, showing small breasts and a flat belly, and I could understand why any male, even a dog, would follow her to the ends of the earth.

Myron was my dog. I don't mean that I own him. I mean that I'm his god. He spends every moment possible by my side. If I leave for town, he'll be on my doorstep when I return. When I'm home he's never more than a whistle away and can't wait to do whatever I ask of him. Sometimes he doesn't know exactly what I want and before I'd trained him, he'd mess things up, but never on purpose. Most of the time it was like he read my mind. I'd never known him to willingly leave my side or disobey me.

Until today. He'd stayed with her. I didn't know what to make of that. I should be mad as hell at both of them. But I wasn't.

Chapter 5

Devon

Note to self: flip-flops aren't much protection from rocks and pebbles when hiking three miles on a dirt road. Note two: even if it's after four in the afternoon, a red-head can still get a nasty sunburn in August in Nebraska.

Thankfully, the sun had dropped low enough it no longer hit me like a laser. But my feet ached and my toes stung and my hand hurt. I hadn't eaten since the Whopper and fries in a town called Kearney, about a million miles and a hundred hours ago. I'd seen enough grass and dirt and cows to last me a lifetime.

If it hadn't been for Myron's company and his happy face and wagging tail, I'd probably have slit my wrists about a mile back. Not that there was anything around to use for a blade.

I already hated this place. As soon as this nice neighbor, Rancher Varner, pulled my car from the ditch, I'd be speeding back to St. Louis. Somehow I'd make my parents understand I couldn't stay here.

I trudged up another hill with Myron trotting in the lead. He disappeared when he reached the top and when I got there, I saw why. The Varner Ranch headquarters stretched below me in a green valley. Giant cottonwoods and pines shaded a lush lawn. A huge red barn stood some distance from the yard with a white V and some design painted above the door.

But the house drew my full attention. It looked to be three stories, painted a cheery yellow with white accents on the tons of windows. A wide porch wrapped around the front and sides, cooled by the abundant branches. This looked exactly like the daydreams I'd had of a ranch on the prairie.

Myron sprinted down the hill toward the house and if my feet didn't hurt so bad, I would have joined him. I couldn't wait to get there. In a place so beautiful, well-kept and inviting, there would be a cool drink, maybe lemonade

accompanied by cookies served up by the rancher's white-haired and kindly grandma-like wife.

I picked up my pace and made it to the base of the hill in short order and maneuvered across another Autogate.

I only had about 20 yards to go before I would be able to kick off my flip-flops and feel the cool grass on my toes. A rumble of an engine made me turn toward the barn.

A rambling heap of a white pickup lumbered from the side of the barn and chugged across the open space between the barn and the house. Someone in a cowboy hat sat behind the wheel and he looked like he headed toward me.

So much for sinking my feet in soothing relief. But maybe I could explain what I needed and he'd invite me up to the house for the Missus to rustled up some refreshment before we tackled pulling my car out and I sped back to the modern world.

I changed direction and walked out to meet my savior. Myron, already inside the pickup, braced his front legs on the driver's thighs and leaned out the window, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth in that goofy grin I'd already come to recognize.

The driver wore his hat pulled low. I didn't suffer the shock and disappointment until he pulled up next to me and leaned out the window. Well, I should have been shocked and disappointed, but the disappointment was slow in arriving.

"How do. What can I do you for?" He tipped his hat back. The brown hair tumbled down his forehead and his dark eyes held a touch of humor.

"You." My heart skipped a beat at his good looks but I let contempt color my voice. I turned my back and started toward the house.

"Hey, where are you going? I thought you needed help with your car." He sounded surprised. With all his good looks and confidence, he probably wasn't used to girls walking away from him.

I kept walking. “I’m going to see if the Varners will help me.”

The engine kept rumbling but the pickup door opened and slammed shut. Myron zipped around my legs and stopped in front of me. Footsteps crunched on the gravel and fingers closed on my arm.

Yeow! With my sunburned skin it felt like he shoved thousands of tiny needles into my arm. I gasped and jerked it away.

He stood in front of me and I sucked in another quick breath, this time it wasn’t because of pain. The cowboy had been a babe on his horse, but standing on his own two feet, well, like I said, he took my breath away. He stood about six, three. I could tell because Tommy bragged that he was six, one, even though I knew he stretched it that last inch. This guy had at least three inches on him. I briefly wondered how he compared in other measurements.

This guy was all lean muscle from his shoulders, tapering to his hips and long legs, ending in the worn and dusty cowboy boots on his feet. He was pretty darned good from the waist up but the whole package was killer.

“I can help you with your car. Climb in and we’ll go.”

I raised my shield. “You didn’t offer to help me when I was stranded in nowhere. You knew I was heading here and you hurried back to meet me. You seem pretty set on stopping me from going to the house and you want me to get into a pickup with you.”

He held out his hands and shrugged, a cute smile playing on his lips. “Sorry about that. You surprised me out there and I didn’t react well.”

“No shit.” I stepped around him, ignoring my foolish urge to jump in his pickup and go with him anywhere. Serial killers were always charming, right?

The screen door squeaked open onto the front porch and a guy walked out.

I almost burst out laughing. My parents sent me into exile to get me away from guys and keep me out of trouble. I hadn't been out here more than half a day and already I'd ditched my car and landed in a pile of trouble. And cute guys seemed to be falling from the sky.

The guy on the porch, a Varner, no doubt, wore gym shorts. That's it. No shirt, no shoes, but he was good looking enough to get serviced just about anywhere with just about anything.

"Hi!" He waved and started down the stairs and across the yard.

The cowboy in front of me exhaled and his shoulders fell a little.

I started for the yard, feeling better with each painful step.

The guy in gym shorts stopped at the edge of the grass and waited for me. "I didn't see you drive in." He scanned the yard behind me and looked puzzled.

This new guy looked a little younger than the cowboy. His nearly blonde hair looked as soft as bunny fur and I had the urge to run my fingers through it. While not quite as broad shouldered as the hired hand, he certainly had nothing to be ashamed of. He sported six pack abs, decent biceps, and skin that glistened as if he'd been working out. "I didn't drive. My car went off the road by the school and I walked here hoping you'd help."

He clicked his tongue to indicate a bad break and gave me a toothy smile. He had the polished good looks that reminded me of a frat boy. No doubt he melted hearts wherever he went. But mine had turned into a puddle under the blazing sun somewhere down the road.

"I'm Grant Varner," he said.

I offered the best smile my sweaty, dusty, starving, and exhausted self could give. "I'm Devon Michaels."

"You've already met my brother, Jase."

Brother? Jase Varner. At least he had a name. He'd struck me as a jerk before, when I thought all he had to help me with was the killer stallion. But knowing he owned the Varner Ranch and all the equipment at his disposal and he didn't bother to tell me—that torqued me. He could have had me wait at the car instead of traipsing all the way to the ranch. What a douche.

But a cute douche. Jase edged around to stand next to Grant. "Ready to go?"

Myron licked my hand and wagged his tail.

Grant shifted his weight and seemed to settle in for a chat. "So what brings you out here, Devon Michaels?"

"A wrong turn." I couldn't resist Myron's plea for attention and scratched behind his ears.

Jase gave me a skeptical look. "Okay. Let's go see about your car."

Grant looked over my shoulder at the pickup. "She doesn't want to ride in that old beater."

"I'm happy it's not a horse," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Grant laughed. "Believe me, if he thought he could do the job on a horse he'd be riding over there now."

Jase's lips tightened down in annoyance. "This truck's got the power to pull her out of the ditch. I'm not sure any of the other pickups will do the job."

Grant nodded. "You're probably right. I'll take Devon over in my rig." He spun around in the grass. "Just let me get my shoes."

Jase scowled. "Get some clothes on while you're at it."

We stood at the edge of the yard watching Grant sprint toward the house. When the screen door banged closed Jase looked down at me. "You didn't take a wrong turn, did you?"

"You have no idea how wrong," I muttered.

He tilted his head and studied me. “You’re the new school teacher, aren’t you?”

“No.”

Now his eyes told me clearly he knew I was full of shit. If it’s true cowboys don’t use many words I could figure out why. If they were all like Jase, their eyes did the talking. He waited.

“Okay. I might have been hired to be the teacher but I changed my mind. As soon as my car is back on the road I’m out of here.” I heard the desperation in my voice. Even a waver that hinted how close I was to tears.

His face softened. “It’s been a long day, I’m sure. But it isn’t as bad as it seems. I know the school board had the house and school cleaned and they even put in a new bed.”

I couldn’t speak for fear of crying. A new bed, but no trees, no family, no friends, no life.

He looked nervous. “They collected odds and ends but only the good stuff, not things people wanted to throw away.”

He needed to stop talking. It edged me closer to a breakdown. “Way to sell it.” When I get upset, the snarky in me pops out. I regretted it immediately.

His dark eyes turned cold. “Sorry. We’re not a wealthy school district. But we’ve got six kids who need schooling and the forty-mile drive to town is too hard on families.”

Guilt stabbed at me. I argued with it. I didn’t make these people drag their children to the ends of the known universe. I didn’t belong out here with stampeding cattle, hostile cowboys and devil horses.

The screen opened and Grant hurried down the stairs. He’d traded his shorts for low-hung jeans, tennis shoes and a tight t-shirt.

Jase eyed Grant and seemed to get an angry wind. He narrowed his eyes at me. “You probably have options and don’t really need to work. Maybe you can live at home and sponge off your family.”

Grant heard this and halted a few feet from us. He stared at Jase with wounded eyes.

Jase held his gaze for a second, then a flush crept up his neck and he lowered his eyes. "I'll go get the car out."

A crash, like a stack of china plates tumbling to the floor, came from the house. Jase and Grant passed a startled look between them. Grant took hold of my arm, again reminding me of the sunburn, and headed me toward a big steel building next to the barn. "Probably better get after this. It'll be dark in a couple of hours."

I looked back at the house. "Do you think you ought to check on that?"

He tugged gently until I started to follow him. "No. It's fine. Dad's doing some work in the kitchen. No problem."

Jase walked close behind us, making me think of the way Myron herded the cows. Grant directed me to a shiny black pickup just inside the building. A red tractor with its guts strewn around the concrete flood was parked behind it. And several other giant pieces of equipment lined out into the darkness. They looked like those big robots that attack in the opening scene of *The Empire Strikes Back*. I wasn't a big Star Wars fan, but Tommy loved them and made me watch them over and over.

Grant held the door of the pickup open for me. Say what you want about country bumpkins, this one, at least, had some manners. As soon as I climbed inside, Jase turned around and marched toward his rumbling truck.

"This is nice," I said, running my hand over the soft leather bucket seat and surveying the gleaming dash and new GPS and phone dock. Jase said it wasn't a wealthy school district but the Varner Ranch didn't seem to be doing too badly.

It looked like Grant sat up a little taller. "It's my graduation present."

"From college?"

He laughed. "You didn't expect to meet an educated guy out here, did you?"

Busted. “I, well, it’s...”

He started the pickup and waved his hand in dismissal. “It’s okay. There aren’t too many of us college grads around here. I’m the first in my family to get an advanced degree.”

That meant Jase hadn’t gone to college. There was definitely intelligence in those expressive eyes. But he wasn’t educated.

“You don’t need a degree to chase cattle and fix fence. I don’t intend to stay here very long. I’m weighing some options and will probably make a decision soon.”

Jase already headed up the hill away from the ranch by the time Grant eased us out of the steel building and into the yard. He didn’t seem to be in any hurry.

“Where did you go to school?” God, it did sound like a frat party. I would have to stop myself from asking, what’s your major?

“University of Nebraska at Lincoln. I majored in business. And in the Huskers.” He laughed.

“Huskers?”

He slowed and stopped the pickup and looked at me. “Are you serious? You don’t know who the Huskers are? Are you from outer space?”

“Compared to Nebraska, yeah, probably. I’m from St. Louis.”

He sat there a moment. “St. Louis. Cool. I should have known you’re not from Nebraska. You’re too sophisticated.”

Right. I felt totally sophisticated in my shorts and flip-flops, with a splotchy and sore sunburn growing brighter by the minute. He didn’t seem to mind that I didn’t answer.

“Yeah. People around here can be resentful of someone with some worldliness.”

“Huh.” I said, wondering why we weren’t following Jase.

“Take Jase, for instance. You might have noticed him getting all tense about college graduates sponging off their

families.”

Now he had my attention. Jase had seemed mad at me earlier and called me Princess. “What was that all about? He just went off.”

Grant’s blue eyes lit up. “Right? He doesn’t get that I shouldn’t get the first job that comes along. I need to wait and take the right job. The first position you take out of school will set the tone for the rest of your career.”

God, I hoped he wasn’t right.

“So I’m being picky. It’s the smart thing to do. But Jase, he doesn’t know about anything except manual labor. If you don’t get up at the crack of dawn and keep working until after sundown, then you’re lazy in his book.”

I had an idea why Jase might call Grant lazy. I held my hand out to indicate the road in front of us. “Shouldn’t we be getting back to my car?”

Grant looked puzzled, then opened his eyes wide as if a light just went on. “Oh. Yeah. I totally forgot. It’s been so long since I had the chance to talk to an educated person I guess I got distracted.”

Chapter 6

Jase

This is the last thing I needed. Moving the steers took me much longer than I'd planned. Even without having to drag this ditzy chick's car from the ditch, I'd be up half the night repairing the baler. Normally, I'd be mad enough to spit nails.

And I was. But the neck I wanted to wring wasn't Devon's. I even felt bad for calling her a ditzy chick in my mind. She obviously had some intelligence if she was only twenty-one and starting her first teaching gig. Heading out to rural Nebraska, away from her family and friends and taking on a one-room school took a bucket-load of courage. It wasn't a secret that horses and cows terrified her and yet, she'd held her own. She hadn't complained about walking that far in her flip-flops. The girl had gumption and spunk.

I climbed from the truck into the dry road. The sun blared from above the western hills, giving us another couple of hours of daylight. When I was a kid, I loved this time of day. Dad usually let me off from the hayfield early. That was probably Mom's idea. She hated that he had me and Grant out working all day as soon as we turned nine-years-old. He bound blocks of wood to the tractor pedals and we'd rake hay. I loved it. Grant, not so much.

I surveyed the situation. No shock that Devon drove a cute little Japanese car. A nearly spotless newer model Civic. Mommy and Daddy probably bought it for her as a graduation present. Isn't that special that after four years, or three in her case, of someone footing all the bills while she partied and watched movies and took naps and sometimes made it to class, she got rewarded with a shiny new car.

Jesus. I wasn't projecting or anything. Just because I felt like that about Grant didn't mean Devon Michaels was the same way.

I hefted the rope, thick as one of Devon's wrists, from the bed of the truck and dragged it to the front of the truck. I

hooked it to the hitch on the truck, then lay down on my back to find a place to attach it to the back of her Honda.

When Grant developed bad allergies, he got a pass from the hay field. He was supposed to tend the big garden and take care of the horses and chickens. But I suspected he mostly played video games and Mom covered for him. Even though I loved the hayfield and working with Dad, I have to admit the resentment I felt about Grant not working.

But about five o'clock on those hot summer days, Dad signaled for me to quit. I'd take the old pickup home and Mom would have lemonade waiting. She'd sit on the front porch with me while I drank it and listen to whatever tales I brought home from the hay field. I'd tell her about the fawn I found hiding in the tall grass and shoed off so she wouldn't get cut in the mower. Or the grouse or coyotes in the hills lining the field. Sometimes I'd tell her the stories I made up to pass the time while I drove the tractor back and forth. I think she liked those the best.

God, why did I keep thinking about Mom today? It made me feel like a lost little mama's boy. I'd been running the ranch for a few years. I'd carried the worry and the work more and more as Dad slipped further away. I could make hard decisions and deal with the fallout. But some whimpering damsel in distress, flip-flops into my afternoon and I suddenly want to sit on the front porch with lemonade and tell Mom all about my fantasies and how one turned very real.

Shit. I climbed back into the cab and shoved the pickup in reverse. The engine wrapped up as it strained to pull the car.

Devon might be the symptom, but it was Grant who had me pissed off. No surprise there. Where I was sweaty, in my old jeans and ratty shirt—a stupid-assed cowboy shirt I'd found in Granddad's closet—Grant looked like a normal guy. I didn't miss that he'd managed a quick shower in the few minutes it'd taken him to change clothes.

Those few minutes when I'd once again stuck my foot in my mouth and said stupid shit.

Who cared? Devon Michaels didn't plan on sticking around for long. And even if we were to hook up—something I'd ruined by making her walk to the house, being rude, and generally acting like an asshole—when it all went to shit, as relationships did, I didn't need an awkward situation this close to home.

The best thing was for me to get her out of here as quickly as possible. And if Grant could score in the meantime, what difference did it make to me?

Maybe not much. But it might matter to Devon. Grant had a way of leaving disaster in his wake. Just ask Jenna.

The front tires popped over the edge of the ditch as Grant pulled up and stopped in the middle of the road. Just in time. He was a master at showing up as the work finished. I cut the engine and got out to unhook the tow rope.

Devon jumped out of the passenger side. Man, her face glowed like a cherry and her arms and legs went beyond pink to a painful Husker red. "Are you okay?" I asked.

She raised her eyebrows that looked like delicate white caterpillars next to her sunburned forehead. "My feet are a little sore from my hike but yeah, I'm fine."

Myron hustled over to her, his tail wagging. The way she smiled a welcome at him sort of made me jealous.

"Your sunburn looks like it might hurt." That was smooth. Every girl wants to be reminded of how strange she looks.

She ignored me and hurried over to her car. "Thanks!" She opened the driver's door and fished inside, coming out with her glittery, oversized purse. It had so much bling attached it flashed in the sunlight. She pulled out a wallet, equally blinged out and filed through it. She stuck out her hand with a bill between two fingers.

I stared at her.

She wiggled her hand. "It's for pulling me out. I appreciate it. And since I'm headed out of here, I want to give you something for helping me."

I shook my head. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

Her eyes widened and she stopped breathing. Her voice came out in a whisper. “What do you mean?”

She had obviously reached the end of her control. If I could have fixed her car I’d have gladly stayed up all night to keep her from more disappointment. I couldn’t say I wanted to send her on her way, but I hated that what I had to say would upset her. “The driveshaft is broken at the rear differential. You can’t drive this.”

Chapter 7

Devon

Fuck. Shit. Damn. Fuck, again. I wanted to throw something. I wanted to bang my fists on the hood of my car. I thought about pummeling Jase with a quick one-two jab. What I did was stand as still as I could and hope I didn't shatter into a million bits of failure and blow onto the prairie.

If I hadn't screwed up last spring and gotten into trouble. If I hadn't lost my parents' respect and trust. If I hadn't lost everything and thought time away would help. If I hadn't panicked and tried to retreat and sped down the road. If I hadn't messed up everything I'd touched in the last year. If, if, if. I wouldn't be standing here in the middle of the road, stranded in the wilderness, facing a future of a dusty, worn out trailer that probably had chipped linoleum and mice, but a New Bed, for fuck's sake.

And I wouldn't have to start teaching six students ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade with nothing but textbook lesson plans and one semester of student teaching in one of the shadier St. Louis public schools.

At least Jase acted civil for now. "I can tow your car to the schoolhouse."

I couldn't hold back my tears and I took a few quick steps toward the school and my new home so the boys wouldn't see. I ran a hand through my hair, feeling grit and sweat from my horrible afternoon. My voice shook. "Okay. That'd be great."

Grant put a hand on my back. "You're the new teacher? I thought you said you were lost."

Oh boy, I was more lost than he knew. I swallowed hard and swiped at my eyes. I cleared my throat. "My first job. I'm so excited." And with that, the dam broke and I burst into tears.

Grant put his arms around me, all the bluster gone. "Hey, hey. It's okay." He patted my back and said some calm words.

Myron whined and pushed against my legs.

I struggled to get control. The last thing I needed or wanted was a guy riding to the rescue. It was bad enough I had to have Jase tow my car but I couldn't fall to pieces in a stranger's arms, no matter how good it might feel. And Grant's arms didn't feel half bad.

I stepped back and wiped my eyes. "Sorry about that. I've been on the road since two o'clock this morning and I haven't eaten. I'll be okay."

Jase stood in front of me with his arms crossed. He glared at me with his mouth in an angry slash. Guess he was the kind of guy who hated to see a girl cry. I couldn't blame him there. I'd seen my mother use tears to manipulate my dad so often it made me madder at him that he fell for it.

Grant threw an arm around my shoulders and hugged me to him. "You poor thing. How about I drive you to Otis for a burger and beer?"

My stomach growled.

Jase let his arms loose and started for the cab of the truck. "I'm sure Devon would like to settle in and get ready for class tomorrow." He spoke with the authority of a parent telling a kid to get to bed early to be rested for a test the next day.

Grant waved him off. "There's plenty of time for unpacking. Besides, nothing happens the first day. You pass out books and assign desks and play ice-breakers to get to know each other."

Actually, I had a few other things planned for the first day involving some assessments to see what level the students had achieved so I could tailor the lesson plans. After this awful day, going to bed early would only be smart. Responsible.

A nerve twitched in Jase's jaw. "It's a forty-minute drive to Otis so by the time you eat and get back, it'll be late." Again, the tone that said he knew best and gave the orders.

Screw that. I was through with people telling me what to do. And I was damned hungry and I didn't even want to face

the probable wreck of a home waiting for me in the dreary yard below. "I'd love to go to dinner with you."

Grant slapped his thighs in response. "Hell, yeah." He didn't hesitate to jump in the pickup.

Myron trailed after me and looked ready to jump into the pickup when I opened the door. I couldn't miss his disappointed look when I held my hand up to signal him to stay. As soon as I pulled myself up and closed the door, we were off.

I gazed out the side mirror. Jase stood beside his pickup with his hands on his hips. He didn't look happy as he watched us drive off.

Almost immediately I regretted my decision. The nerves about my new job and the kids kicked in before we even hit the highway. I should have stayed home, taken a cool shower and gone over my notes and plans for the next day. I hadn't even set foot inside the school.

Dorthea Stratton had emailed me the inventory lists and I'd ordered a few supplies but I'd been relying on using computers and the Internet. That wouldn't be possible.

It turned out I didn't need to worry about carrying the conversation. Grant was happy to talk about himself, the good times he'd had in college, and how growing up on the ranch had been such a bore.

Darkness fell all at once on the drive to Otis, not lingering with a colorful sunset. The town was probably six streets square with a main street dividing it in four parts. Counting a bank with a digital sign showing time, 8:45 and temperature, 78, there seemed to be around ten businesses, including a post office, some kind of general store, gas station/pizza/convenience store, grocery store and the Longbranch Bar and Grill. A few dusty pickups and SUVs parked in front of it and smells of a deep fat fryer lingered in the air.

All seven tables in the Longbranch Bar and Grill were full. Grant and I sat at the bar. I was so tired I didn't care that

everyone in the place—and that amounted to less than two dozen people, including the bartender and cook—stared at me.

Grant chattered on about each of them, filling me in on details I promptly forgot. I didn't give a shit who married whom and how many kids they had and how big a ranch they owned or where they worked.

By the time he drove me to my trailer, the whole evening was a wash of memory, like a blackout after a bad drunk. Being sent here was my own fault and I'd have to take the consequences but right then, the loneliness and isolation, certain I'd landed on a foreign planet amid a strange race, all I wanted was to feel the heavy air of St. Louis, hear Cassie's self-absorbed chatter and feel Tommy's arm around my shoulder.

Grant pulled up with his headlights on the front door of the trailer. My poor, broken car looked sad parked to the side. Next to it, a rusted El Comino sat at an angle. I pointed to it. "Who's that?"

Grant made a face. "That is my brother's ride. He keeps swearing he's going to fix it up but he's had it for a couple of years and so far, all he's done is tinker with the engine. It still looks like butt."

"What's it doing here?" I hoped Jase wasn't inside waiting to attack me with more accusation of being a spoiled princess.

Grant looked puzzled. "Got me. Unless he's loaning it to you until you get your car fixed."

"It's the least he can do," I muttered. If it hadn't been for Jase, I'd be halfway back to St. Louis by now. A thought popped into my head. If Jase drove the El Comino over here and Grant was out with me, who took him back to the ranch? He must have walked. I knew how long that hike was.

I climbed from the pickup and stumbled up the steps to the front door. My heels ached from the afternoon tromp and I'd developed a blister at the base of my right big toe from the thong of my flip-flops.

Grant rolled down his window and stuck his head out. “I had a great time tonight. Good luck tomorrow with the little monsters of Spencer County.” With a short toot of his horn, he backed out and gunned the pickup out of the yard and down the road.

The quiet of the night rose up around me. Talk about alone. The stars jumped out at me. They never showed up like this in St. Louis. The air felt different, too. Instead of the thick, humid air that pressed against my skin all summer, this air seemed to draw me out and open me up. Wide. Everything felt big and open and free. But in a spooky way. Like I might fly off into space.

All I wanted was a shower and to fall into bed. But I’d have to haul my suitcases from my car and probably put sheets on the New Bed. It would have been nice of Grant to offer to help me unpack my car. But I could do it just fine myself. As I trudged up the steps I thought about the bare minimum I could get by with tonight. Why hadn’t I packed smarter so I’d only have to bring in an overnight bag? But I’d thrown all my shit helter-skelter into bags and boxes. That’s what happens when you drag your feet until the last possible moment.

I opened the door and felt around for a light. I slapped it on. A floor lamp in the corner cast a glow into a tiny living room, separated from an equally small kitchen by a breakfast bar.

It might be small and outdated but it fairly sparkled and smelled brand-new clean. At the far end of the living room, a bay window opened out to darkness. It would face the morning sun and make the whole front of the house sunny. The couch had seen some wear but it was covered in a blue chintz slipcover and the rest of the furniture looked only slightly used.

I wandered into the kitchen and found a light. The Formica counters and weirdly fake wood cabinets screamed old school but they were scrubbed clean. I opened a cabinet and pulled out a thick plate. The set was probably donated but it had a sweet pattern of pink roses and there seemed to be more than a set of six, though the different number of dinner plates, cups,

salad plates and bowls made it obvious it was an incomplete collection. On the counter next to the refrigerator sat two sacks of groceries.

I peaked at them. Peanut butter, bread, chips, crackers, a box of cereal, and several cans of soup and tuna filled one bag. The other held one item. I pulled it out. Aloe Vera lotion. To soothe sunburn.

I opened the fridge to see butter, milk, a package of hamburger and a brick of cheddar cheese. My heart did a couple of strange leaps and dips. It had to have been Jase who brought the groceries. Who else knew I'd shown up with nothing to eat, believing that I'd be able to buy something when I got here. How did I know the nearest grocery store was miles away and closed at 6 o'clock? Jase had brought food enough to keep me going for a couple of days until I could go to town on Saturday and been thoughtful enough to think about my burning skin. Yet I'd left him standing in the road with barely a thank you for helping me with my car.

I would have to make it up to him. But not tonight. I'm beat and still needed to drag in my bags.

I shuffled down the short hallway and poked my head into the bathroom. Not much to look at but it had the essentials and again, it was spotless. I continued toward two open doors at the end of the hall. One, with blue walls and brown and white shag carpeting, had two small windows close to the top of the wall. It held a scratched but serviceable desk and a bookshelf.

Eager to see the New Bed for myself, I stepped to the last door and felt for the light.

Yep, it was a New Bed alright. A queen with a log frame and matching nightstands. The dresser came from another bedroom set and was shoved into a corner. The bed took up most of the room.

Resting on the floor at the base of the footboard huddled all of my bags and boxes. I collapsed on the bed and started to cry. The disasters that had fallen on me all damned day were bad enough. But the eventual kindness of the cowboy undid me.

I gave myself a few minutes to throw my little fit. Then I'd pull myself up from the New Bed, try out my shower, and get a good night's sleep.

I fell asleep before the tears dried on my face.

Chapter 8

Devon

It had been before five o'clock when some stupid bird decided to tune the orchestra outside my window. That old elm was the only tree around for miles. If I were a bird, I'd hang out at the Varner Ranch in all those sweeping cottonwoods. The little bastard was soon joined by an army so I pulled myself up and staggered to the kitchen.

My skin felt like plastic wrap stretched too tight and set on fire. My feet had morphed into throbbing blocks of swollen mush. I didn't think I could blame the two beers I had at Otis's last night for the headache that pounded in my temples. I'd chalk that up to fatigue, stress, and lying at a weird angle all night with no pillow.

The Angel Jase had provided coffee and I found a French press, microwaved some water and soon had a steaming cup, complete with cream in my hand. I rummaged in my purse and found Ibuprofen and rubbed the Aloe Vera lotion on my sunburn. So far, so good. I might be able to survive.

I checked my phone. No signal. Closer inspection of my new digs revealed an old-school phone with a cordless handset but it had no dial tone and a boxy TV with a collection of DVD's. They ranged across all genres but nothing too racy. My guess is they were more donations from generous locals. I found the remote and turned on the set. After it warmed up, I flipped through the channels. Three came in clear. Not 300 or even 30. Three. One of those was PBS. Survival now seemed questionable.

Coffee cup in hand, I stepped out to the front deck. Deck is pretty generous for the ten by ten redwood platform and three stairs leading to the dirt yard where my broken driveshaft of a car rested. If you didn't count what sounded like thousands of birds singing—and I did count that because the little bastards had woken me up—the quiet pressed in on me.

A thin layer of fog rose over the valley and the morning air brushed cool and new against my skin. I inhaled deeply. What was that smell? Nothing. A lot of it. No car fumes or neighbor's cooking. It was like sticking my face into a pile of cotton balls.

Nervous with the void of people, I hurried back inside and spent the next couple of hours getting ready for school and trying to keep my nerves at a manageable level.

By seven-thirty, I'd crossed the open yard between my trailer and the structure they used for the school. It seemed to be a hundred-year-old house. They'd taken out all the walls except one that divided a room with some ancient school desks like my parents might have used in grade school, and the kitchen, which had a sink, a long craft table, microwave and refrigerator. Dorthea told me the students all brought lunches so this would be our art room/cafeteria.

I pried open wooden windows to let the morning air in, reviewed my lesson plans and sat at my big, important teacher's desk at the front of the classroom. This set up looked a little more like Little House on the Prairie and if I hadn't been so fucking nervous, I might have been able to appreciate the quaintness. But I felt nauseated with tension.

Who the hell did I think I was to be left alone with six kids and be responsible to teach them everything they'd need to know to advance to the next grade, then graduate to junior high and go to the consolidated high school in Otis, go on to stretch their wings and attend college, and venture into the big world to start careers? I grasped the edge of my desk.

Get a grip. As Dad would say, "One day at a time." Shit. One day away from home and I was quoting my father like he was Gandhi or something. Big girl, here. *Pull up the panties and be the professional you trained to be.*

For the zillionth time I reviewed my student list in my head. Cody Phillips, a kindergartner. Sam and Bill Norris, second and fourth. Bailey and Stetson Burgess. Cowboy hat trade names, how cute. Bailey, the only girl, was a fifth grader and Stetson was a second grader along with Sam. The last

student was Trevor Lowes, also a fifth grader. That made one in kindergarten, two second graders, a fourth grader, and two fifth.

The front door opened and sunlight burst across the room, silhouetting someone. It was too early for students. They shouldn't be arriving for twenty or thirty minutes. My stomach did five loop de loops and dropped to the floor. I stood and my chair scraped the old wood floor.

He shut the door and Grant stood in front of me, wide grin and apple in his hand. "Wanted to welcome you to the first day at District 6 Elementary School."

I let out a whoosh of air and walked to him to accept the apple. "Thanks."

He stepped back and surveyed the professional gray suit and pumps I wore for the first day. It was actually my official interview suit but I wanted to look mature and responsible the first day parents brought their little treasures for me to shepherd. "Wow. You clean up nice!"

That eased my nerves a little. "Thanks, again." He didn't look half-bad himself. He wore a blue, long-sleeved shirt with the tails hanging out of his jeans. His light hair had a dab of gel to make it spike in the perfect way. He resembled any number of frat guys trolling the paths of any university. A typ-a-dick, as Cassie and I called them.

They were the typical kind of guy who did all the right things. He brought you flowers when he was supposed to. He took you to the hip bars and parties. He quoted all the popular movies and drove the coolest car. But he was interchangeable with every other typ-a-dick out there. They liked to date typ-a-chicks.

The typ-a-chick said OMG a lot. She liked all the dopey popular music, wore trendy clothes and was on the hunt for the perfect typ-a-dick she could show off to her friends and brag when he proposed by hiding the ring in the bottom of a champagne glass or he gave her roses for the bazillionth time.

Grant gestured to the schoolroom and beyond and his voice sounded ironic. “How do you like it so far?”

No matter how disappointed I felt, it irritated me that he seemed to think we were above it all. “It’s really a sweet trailer. Better than the dorm room I shared with two other girls or living with my parents. I just wish I had some cell service here.”

His face fell a little. “You can get reception on the hilltops. We’ve got a satellite hookup at the house. But it’s expensive so probably not worth it for you since you won’t be here long. You can come over and get online anytime you want, though.”

That was convenient. Oh well, at least I’d be able to climb the hill and communicate with my people.

Grant tilted his head and leaned against the door frame. “I’ve got to run to North Platte today.” He stopped when he saw my blank look. “That’s the nearest town that has anything resembling business. It’s your closest Walmart, McDonalds, dentist and movie theater.”

I nodded. “How far away is that?”

He gave me a sympathetic look. “Ninety-three miles.”

What?! “You’re kidding me. I didn’t study the map before coming out here but it never occurred to me there was a place in America so remote.”

He held out his hands in a “what are you gonna do” gesture. “Only a year.”

“Less than a year,” I said.

And... we were back to him. “I’ve got a meeting with a guy about a business opportunity. It could be big. Being an optimist, I’m here to invite you over for a celebratory dinner. We’ll toss some steaks on the grill and toast to my shining future.”

“I wish you the best but I think I’m going to hang around my place, get settled in a little and rest up.” Maybe curl into a fetal position and mourn the loss of modern society.

“Oh, come on. You have months to get that done. Come over tonight. About 6:30.” He actually put both hands up to form pistols, pulled his thumb for a trigger and spun—literally, spun—on his heels.

I paced the school room for ten minutes before the sound of a vehicle sent me scurrying to the window.

A red pickup bounced over the Autogate. Right behind that, a silver Suburban with a dent the size of a walrus on the front fender, turned into the yard. A dust trail up the road indicated someone else heading this way. That’s three out of the four families. I smoothed my suit, took a deep breath and headed out to greet my pupils and their parents.

A woman stepped out of the red pickup and walked around the passenger side. She was much younger than I would have expected for a mother, probably close to my age. Maybe she was an older sister or nanny. Her eyes locked on the El Comino and she scowled then she whipped her head in my direction. Her eyes met mine and her smile was less than welcoming as her gaze traveled up and down my body.

The Suburban pulled up next to the pickup, the engine clicking after it shut off.

The third vehicle had made up lost time. The polished black Escalade wheeled into a spot next to the beater Suburban. The back doors flew open and two sets of feet landed in the dirt under either door. Slam, slam, and what had to be the Norris boys raced to the swing set.

“Dibs!” The smaller of the two, Sam, the second grader, yelled.

Bill, the fourth grader, hollered over his shoulder. “There’s no dibs, dimwit.”

A gray-haired woman with a short bob jettisoned from the Escalade. She rushed at me with long, purposeful strides, extending her hand before she got to me. “I’m Judith Norris.” She jutted her head toward the swing set. “Those are my grandchildren. They’ll be staying with us while their mother is in rehab and god knows how long after that before she can pull

herself together.” She flashed a startling smile that didn’t mask her anger. “So. I’m off to a Natural Resource District meeting in North Platte, then on to Lincoln for the Governor’s Council on Rural Conservation. My husband will pick the boys up. Dutch said he’d be here by 4 but sometimes he loses track of time. Just let them play outside until he shows up.”

“Uh. Sure.” I didn’t have time to introduce myself or ask any questions before she marched to her Escalade.

She backed out before the old Suburban’s doors opened and an overweight woman in dirty pink sweatpants and a gray hoodie spilled out. She used both hands to work on the latch of the back passenger door and finally swung it open. A boy, I guessed Stetson, looked like a cartoon character whose feet form a spinning wheel as he dashed from the backseat on a run for the swings.

Sam jumped from his swing and landed in the dirt. He ran to Stetson and they collided, both falling back into the dirt, laughing and talking in decidedly outside voices.

Bailey slid from the Suburban obviously ignoring her mother. She stuck her delicate nose in the air and flipped long, unevenly cut brown hair over her shoulder. She wore high-waisted western jeans with a shiny silver belt buckle bigger than her hand and a long-sleeve cowboy shirt with pearl buttons and bold paisley print. She sauntered toward the school, giving me a smile full of silver braces.

“I’m Bailey,” she said and I immediately fell in love with her dimples and sweet eyes. “You’re Ms. Devon. I know because Dortha told us all about you. You’re from St. Louis and you went to Washington University, which is practically an Ivy League school. I want to go to Harvard so I need to pick your brain about how to get there.”

“Glad to meet you, Bailey. I’m looking forward to a great year.”

Bailey eyed the boys at the swing set. “It’s the boys against us. We definitely have the brain power over them, but they’re loud and messy and they might be able to overpower us. We need to stick together.”

“I’ve never had a problem with boys.” I winked at her. “I doubt you have, either.”

She looked puzzled at first, then seemed to understand and giggled. “Right.”

The woman in the pink sweats lumbered up the cracked walk toward us carrying a laundry basket full of dishes. Bailey looked over her shoulder, huffed in irritation and flounced into the school.

The woman rolled her eyes. “The Dutchess has introduced herself. I’m her mother but I don’t get to be the queen. I’m just the chambermaid, Mandy Burgess.”

“Hi, Mandy.” I tried not to show my surprise. Mandy didn’t look old enough to have a ten-year-old.

Mandy held out the laundry basket. “This is lunch. It’s tradition for me to bring lunch the first day. I’ve been doing it since the Dutchess was in kindergarten. She was a picky eater and wouldn’t eat anyone else’s cooking. So I brought lasagna. Now she won’t eat lasagna. I figured the rest of you would and there’s yogurt and celery sticks for her highness.”

“Wow. That sounds great!” Since my culinary expertise ran to drive-throughs and Hot Pockets, this sounded perfect. I’d planned a peanut butter sandwich.

“I’ll take it to the fridge.” She lumbered up the steps to the door and disappeared inside.

The woman at the pickup crossed her arms and stared into the cab. She stood there a moment then marched toward me, her mouth set.

This was one gorgeous chick. She was tall and slender, with legs that wouldn’t quit. Her blonde hair shone in the morning sun and her face had an angelic glow. I’ll bet she snapped her fingers and the world panted to do her will. I wasn’t one of those people who hate gorgeous women on sight. They got a fair chance with me to prove if they were bitches or regular girls.

When she got close enough she shook her head. “I’m Jenna Phillips. Our ranch is just over that hill.” She pointed to

the south. “Sorry about Cody. He refuses to get out. I’m afraid he doesn’t want to go to school.”

I could relate. Maybe Cody and I could take that fancy red pickup and drive to the nearest movie theater—which was a day away, practically—and forget the whole idea of school. Instead, I tried for my most confident face. “First days can be scary. I’m glad to meet you, Jenna. I’m Devon Michaels.”

Mandy came out of the school and down the stairs. “Cody balking?”

Jenna sighed and rolled her eyes. “After five years of being at his beck and call every minute of every day, I am so looking forward to a few hours of *me time* five days a week. And he’s pulling this shit. I’ve been fighting with him since I drug him out of bed. This sucks.”

Mandy shrugged. “At least he’s a boy. Bailey can’t wait to get to school just to get away from me. Nothing I do is good enough. But she doesn’t complain that I wash her laundry and cook and clean and drive her to 4H every week.”

The three boys on the swings had a jumping contest going on. Sam pumped to get himself about half swing capacity and launched. He hit the ground in a puff of dirt and they yelled. While Bill marked the spot with a stick, Stetson took the swing.

I wanted the women to go away and leave me to my job. I was itching to get the kids inside and start our school year together. The nerves now replaced with excitement.

Mandy shifted her weight and stuck out a hip. “So you met Judith Norris. What did you think?”

“I, uh, she seems nice.” What the hell? The question seemed inappropriate and intrusive.

Jenna’s eyes raked me up and down and a smirk touched her lips. “I’ll bet she took right to you. She’s all about being professional and all stuck up and stuff.”

Mandy shifted to her other leg. She spoke quickly, as if trying to smooth over Jenna’s insult. “She doesn’t want to admit she’s one of us. She’s on all these committees with the

state and county. I think she's going to run for Nebraska legislature. That's what Bob says." Mandy addressed me. "Bob's my husband. He's foreman at the Bar C, across the highway."

Jenna corrected Mandy. "Well, the Dumbbell Ranch, anyway. The Bar C is a corporate ranch and they have land in about four states. The Dumbbell is one of their smaller places. Bob's dad used to own it but he had to sell out so now Bob runs it."

Mandy's proud face fell but she stayed cheerful. "They give us free rein to do what we like and Bob always makes a profit."

Jenna's chuckle sounded condescending. "He ought to know what he's doing. He's been there all his life." The proof was in. Jenna was a beautiful bitch.

Mandy changed the subject. "Ruth Ann isn't here yet. That's a big shock."

I didn't want any more gossip but my interest peaked.

Jenna shrugged. "Why should today be any different than any other day?"

Mandy looked down the road. "I thought that with a new teacher she'd want to make a good impression."

Jenna waved that off. "She expects the world to wait for her, not the other way around."

Mandy confided in me. "That's Trevor's mother. Ruth Ann isn't from around here. Her husband, Byron, is the only heir of the Lowes place. It's huge. He's like fifth-generation rancher. He met Ruth Ann at the University. She's from like Omaha or some big city. She's always thought she was better than us."

Jenna eyed my suit again.

I was starting to see a pattern. Jenna wore tight, low-cut jeans with layered tanks and flip-flops. She'd fit in any mall across America, but she wasn't dressed up. She was pretty enough she'd be a knock out in anything. Mandy looked like she dressed for comfort without a care how she looked. And

without a make-over, Mandy wasn't going to win any beauty contests.

I pulled my nearly useless phone from my pocket, its sole function reduced to an expensive watch. We were already fifteen minutes behind schedule and I had my fill of gossip. "Let me see if I can convince Cody to join us."

Jenna held her arms out in invitation. "Be my guest."

Chapter 9

Devon

Frijole trotted along a cattle trail as if he knew where we headed. Myron led the way and I didn't doubt he had my number. No fooling them. I squinted into the sun. Eight-fifteen. If everything had gone well, Devon would be inside the classroom starting her term as the teacher and I'd ride on by, no one the wiser.

If she'd hit any kind of snag—and with Jenna involved, snags were common—I might be able to run some interference. Not that Devon Michaels needed any protection from me, she seemed capable of dealing with whatever came up.

Came up. Using that phrase popped me right back in high school with the stupid jokes. I couldn't help that thinking about Devon gave me a ...boost. Yeah, I wondered just how Devon might handle what "came up" when I thought about her. And there it went again. Shit. I shifted in the saddle to find a more comfortable position. Maybe I should think about something else.

And there was plenty to think about. By the time I'd returned from towing Devon's car and unloading her bags, Dad was snoring on the couch, a nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels on the floor next to him. It wasn't even dark, yet. He was getting worse and if I didn't do something soon, he'd drink himself to death. But what could I do?

I'd researched rehab facilities and had a couple of options along Colorado's Front Range. It was just over a four-hour drive but that seemed about the best choice. When should I approach it with him? When he was sober and in a good mood, I hated to destroy it. But after he started drinking, conversation was impossible.

Thinking about that sure took care of my hard-on. Frijole carried me up the hill and I looked down on the schoolhouse. Jenna and Mandy stood by the front steps engrossed in

conversation. No doubt they were ripping up some innocent person. I hoped it wasn't Devon but suspected it might be. Sam and Bill Norris played with Stetson Burgess on the swings. I looked around for Cody. Then I spotted Devon standing by the open passenger door of Jenna's pickup. I figured what was happening.

We trotted down the hill and when Jenna and Mandy spotted us, I gave them the quiet sign. Jenna caught on and gave me one of her dazzling smiles. She shouldn't have to look too hard to find a guy who would put up with her mean shit to get at that beautiful body.

I came through the gate and approached the pickup from behind Devon. I couldn't hear her words but her voice sounded full of adventure and fun. If I were a five-year-old, I'd sign up for anything, as long as I could be with her. Hell, I almost craved sitting in a desk right now.

I tried hard not to notice the way she bent slightly to talk to Cody and the way her ass looked tight and smooth in the gray suit. Tried hard. Those damned high school puns.

Cody saw me first. His eyes lit up and he jumped up to stand in the pickup seat. "Jase!"

Devon spun around. Wow. She looked like confidence all wrapped up in a professional package. Except the lobster-red complexion. I glanced at her bare legs. Still shapely and looking like they belonged wrapped around me, but glowing like a space heater. Yow. That had to hurt.

She stepped back as Cody took a step to the edge of the bench seat and launched himself out of the pickup. The way she gasped, I knew she hadn't expected a flying munchkin.

I was prepared and had already kicked Frijole forward. I easily caught Cody with one arm and planted him in the saddle. He grinned up at me, his eyes red and cheeks wet with tears.

"Are you giving Ms. Devon a hard time, pardner?"

Cody dropped his head. "I don't want to go to school."

"I thought we talked about this. School is important."

“Yes, sir.” His voice sounded so small. I would have given a lot to pull him close, kick Frijole into a lope and take him far away from desks and books and being locked up inside.

I leaned down, trying to keep my voice low so Devon wouldn't hear. “What about Ms. Devon? Isn't she pretty? And nice?”

He nodded with enthusiasm.

“You wouldn't want to hurt her feelings and make her think you don't like her, would you?”

He shook his head and lifted his eyes to me. “She's like Ariel.”

I tried not to laugh. The poor little guy had his own fantasies of copper-haired maidens. “And she moved all the way out here just to be your teacher for your first year of school. She's got all kinds of fun things planned.”

He started to brighten. “She said I can paint a picture of Frijole and Mutton.”

I shifted my eyes to see Devon squatted down in her pumps, her knees pressed together, rubbing Myron's ears and letting him press against her, probably shedding hair and dirt all over that fancy suit.

“Okay, you don't want to be late for that.” I urged Frijole into a walk and headed for the school. I deposited Cody on the steps.

Jenna hurried to me and put her hand on my thigh. With her other arm she reached up and tugged on my arm until I reluctantly leaned down. She planted a wet smack on my cheek. “You're our hero!”

Embarrassed, I sat up quickly. Jenna stepped back and I swear she lasered a triumphant gaze at Devon.

Myron followed Devon as her dress shoes crunched on the dirt. She climbed the stairs and stood holding Cody's hand. Whatever message Jenna sent—and I'm sure it had “Mine” written all over it—had been received. Damn Jenna. I wasn't hers, even though we'd been pushed together since we were

toddlers. Even if I'd wanted to date any girls around, Jenna made it clear to everyone that she intended to have me. It hadn't bothered me before. In fact, it made my life easier if everyone thought we had a thing.

But it sure bothered me now.

Devon raised her voice to call the boys from the swings. "Okay, guys, let's get this party started."

She looked up at me and mouthed, "Thank you," then followed the kids into the school.

Chapter 10

Devon

I sat on the steps outside my trailer, wishing I had a cold beer or even a Diet Coke. Actually, a Rock Star would probably be better. I was exhausted in that good way you get when you've worked hard at something and it turned out well. The evening sun still felt crispy on my skin but I figured it couldn't make my sunburn any worse this late. The lotion Jase provided gave me relief and I thanked him again for thinking of it.

I leaned back on the sun-heated siding of the trailer and smiled. I'd done it. The birds kept up their song, though not with as much enthusiasm as they showed at dawn. But then, they didn't need to roust me out of bed now. I listened to the quiet and realized I'd been hearing the sound of a motor for most of the afternoon. It drifted from far away but it droned on until it became part of the atmosphere.

I stood in my shorts and t-shirt, my feet in my running shoes. I'd shed the suit, pumps, and even my bra, glad for the freedom. With my phone clutched in my fist, I walked across the schoolyard and started to climb the hill. Sand sifted into my socks and sweat slicked my pits but it felt good to stretch and be on my own, without considering how every gesture, word or expression might be interpreted by six little minds.

I reached the top of the hill and looked down the other side. A valley stretched out, covered in green. A pond lay in the middle surrounded by reeds. I understood the low droning of the motor I'd been hearing. A red tractor, maybe the one I saw in Varner's garage yesterday, made its way in ever-widening circles around the puddle. The grass in front of the tractor grew large and deep green. Behind, it lay in rows, more sage in color. This must be the hayfield Jase talked about yesterday. That was probably him in the tractor, mowing hay. The meadow was huge and he'd been at this most of the day. I couldn't remember when the sound of the tractor started but it had been in the atmosphere for a long time.

I felt a kind of tightening all over when I thought of Jase in the tractor. You know that feeling you get when you see some sexy celebrity. You don't really know them but you get that squidge. I knew Jase, though. He'd caused me to run off the road and then made me walk a million miles in flip-flops in Saharan heat. He'd accused me of being pampered.

But he'd also brought me groceries and sunburn lotion. He'd carried in my bags and left me a car. And he'd been gentle and helpful with Cody.

And he was a guy. A species I was sworn off of for a year. Less than a year.

I punched speed dial and waited for Cassie to pick up. "Beotch!"

I inhaled a lungful of air, noticing the faint smell of fresh cut grass. "God damn it's good to hear your voice and know I don't have to watch what I said or how I say it."

Sounds of voices and activity filtered through the phone. "Just a sec. I'm in the union. Let me get outside."

A wave of homesickness hit me. The Union would be filled with kids my age. They'd be laughing and joking, taking off for their next class or hanging out after their last one. This time of day, they'd be gathering for a beer or three. I twisted up inside.

The phone quieted and Cassie spoke. "So, how did the first day go?"

I pushed away thoughts of her sitting by the fountain in the Union Plaza. This was my reality now and I needed to embrace it. I found a sandstone rock, just crouching height and squatted to sit. It wasn't all that comfortable but at least it didn't have stickers or cactus. "It went really well. I love all the kids. There's this kindergartner, Cody. Oh my god, Cass, he's so cute and sweet!"

Someone spoke at the other end. I imagined Cassie motioning that she was on the phone. "Uh huh. What did you do all day?"

I knew she probably couldn't care less but excitement welled in me and I let myself spew. "We started the day playing some ice-breaker games. Turns out I was the only one who needed them. The kids are like six siblings. They could answer all the favorites of each other. Even little Cody fit right in. The two-second graders, Sam and Stetson, were all proud showing Cody the cubbies and where to hang their coats and the lunchroom. There's this fifth grader, Bailey. She's like the expert of everything. She's pretty bossy but she filled me in on the routines and where all the supplies are and how the heat works. Except we don't need heat, yet. My god it was hot in the school but we opened the windows and it helped."

"That's great." She didn't sound all that interested.

"I know I'm rambling but, shit, there's no one here to talk to."

She laughed. "I'm here for you, sister."

I told her about Jenna and Mandy and their gossip-fest. I gave her the low down on Judith. "Trevor Lowes and his mother, the fabulous Ruth Ann, blew in around ten o'clock. They brought a tin of chocolate chip cookies and Trevor looked embarrassed by the production. It was like Ruth Ann orchestrated the whole thing to make an entrance. She insisted we stop everything for a treat. The kids didn't complain. They grabbed cookies and raced outside to this lame swing set that is the only bit of playground equipment they have. I planned recess in another fifteen minutes but, hey, I'm cool and flexible."

She laughed. "That's what Tommy says."

Boom. Mention of him hit me like a hammer to the gut. It stopped the freight train of words coming from my mouth.

Cassie knew it would affect me like that. "He misses you."

I put up a wall. "We made a rule about that conversation, remember? Besides, I've got a Trojan Twister and I'm not afraid to use it. He can figure something out, too."

"That's harsh."

“Not as harsh as living in isolation from the modern world where I can’t go through a drive-through for a salad and the inbreds call me Ms. Devon.” Before I’d even finished saying it I wanted to take it back. The kids were bright and full of enthusiasm. Jenna had nothing on me in the bitch department.

Cassie didn’t answer right away and when she did, there was a hint of strain to her voice. “Tell me more about your class.”

Cassie and I had been friends since high school. We told each other everything. Until last summer. Even if she didn’t know why, she knew something had changed. I tried to ignore the hurt I felt from her. “Okay. So Fabulous Ruth Ann has this awkward son, Trevor. He’s tall and kind of delicate with long legs and hip bones that jut out. He walks like a runway model. He was dressed like Mrs. Cleaver might have dressed the Beaver for his first day of school. Only sort of western. So he had really new, dark blue jeans and cowboy boots and a white shirt tucked in. He slicked his hair back in a wave. He’d be really hipster anywhere else but I get the feeling he’s just a nerd here.”

“Or gay,” Cassie said.

“Being a hipster, nerd, or gay out here might be hard on a kid.”

“Good thing he’s got you in his corner,” Cassie said. She seemed to have gotten over the whole Tommy conversation. That’s what I loved about Cassie, she never held a grudge. That might be because she could be so ditzy she forgot to be mad.

“He’s got this really sweet smile and he’s super polite. As soon as he saw Bailey they started whispering and giggling, like two besties.”

“Gay,” Cassie said.

Finally able to come up for air, I turned it over to Cassie. “Tell me about your day.”

“The same old, same old. Classes, studying, Pete and Maggie riding my ass to be more like Devon and finish school

and start paying my way.” Pete and Maggie were Cassie’s parents. They’d be disappointed if they knew about my big fall from grace.

“Go ahead and tell them that I’m not really paying my way.” I could give her that, at least.

“And take away their hope of a debt-free future? I’m not that cruel. You may have a deal with Marsha and Benji for them to pay your school debt, but I’m not willing to bargain my celibacy for mere money.”

At the time, promising abstinence and sealing it with having thousands paid off made perfect sense. My heart had been shattered in a million shards and I blamed sex and Tommy for all the pain. If I had a good incentive to never sleep with him, or anyone else, for a year (less than a year) then it seemed like a win/win.

“Speaking of high and dry,” Cassie said, “you’ve talked about kids and mothers. Aren’t there any guys out there?”

“I’m not interested in guys for another year.”

“Less...”

“I know.”

Cassie laughed. “You might not be interested but maybe I want to road trip. Tell me what I can expect.”

I sighed. “The school and trailer are on the property of the Varner Ranch. As I understand it, there are two brothers that run it. I’ve met them. The younger one just graduated from the University of Nebraska and he’s trying to get a job. The other one is already an old stick-in-mud rancher dude. He’s cranky and mean and only thinks about work.”

“Huh. For someone not interested you have the whole information packet. What do they look like?”

I watched the tractor make its slow progress around the pond. That squidge attacked me again. “I guess they’re both pretty good looking.”

“Pretty good?”

We'd been talking about boys since we met. Cassie could read my voice. "Okay, hot and sexy. Which is why I need to keep my distance."

"For the sister with enough discipline to study her ass off and graduate a year early, that shouldn't be a problem."

"Except the younger one took me to dinner last night and invited me over to the ranch tonight."

"What? You're in the middle of butt-fuck Nebraska and you've only been there two days and you already have a guy after you. I'm in the middle of a university campus and haven't had a date in a month. You want to steer clear of guys and I'd like to get laid. What's wrong with this picture?"

I couldn't help my laugh. "If all you wanted to do was get laid you wouldn't have a problem. You want to find Mr. Right, then get laid. That complicates things."

"It gets even more complicated when you find Mr. Right, get laid and then take off for the wilderness."

His words slapped me and I felt a snarky reply building. I fought to let it go. I didn't want to fight with Cassie. I needed her to be my friend. "I wish I didn't have to go."

"Yeah, I'm glad no one asked me for dinner, too."

I noticed a dust trail rising on the road heading from the highway. Grant's black pickup raced over the Autogate and cruised over the hill on his way to the ranch. "I'd be happy to stay home and relax. I already tweaked my lesson plan for tomorrow so I can put my feet up and do nothing."

"That doesn't sound like you."

She was right. I didn't do much sitting around. In the last three years most of my spare time was spent studying or working a part-time job. Yet, I'd still managed to find enough time to get into trouble. "I'd watch a movie but I only get three channels and no signal at my trailer."

Cassie gasped. "Oh my god! It's like you're on the Dark Continent or something."

“I haven’t had any time to read for fun in the last few years so this will be my chance to catch up.” There, how’s that for a silver lining?

More voices came through her end of the line. “Hang tough, chica. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, heh? I’ve gotta bounce or I’m gonna get left behind.”

Hanging up felt like breaking a line with a lifeboat.

I stood and brushed sand from the seat of my shorts. I walked a few paces and looked down on my trailer. It would be empty and quiet. My stomach growled and I thought of the leftover lasagna in the schoolhouse. Mandy told me to help myself and she’d pick up the pan tomorrow. I took a few more steps and thought about the hours stretching out before bedtime. Silent. Alone.

Well. I could call Marsha and Benji. It was an hour later there. They’d be home, probably having a glass of wine on the patio. They’d love to hear about the first day, just like when I’d been little and wanted every detail from what I ate for lunch to the homework, with a sprinkling of the other kids and the teachers thrown in.

I walked back to the sitting rock and crouched down.

Marsha answered on the first ring. “I’ve been worried sick. I tried to call and you wouldn’t answer. Dorthea said you’d arrived and school started today.”

Wow. Some tom-tom communication went on out here to give Dorthea Stratton an update. I wondered who she’d talked to. “You can’t believe this place, Mom. I don’t have any cell service at my house or school. I have to hike up a hill just to make a phone call. The TV only gets three channels. Town is 30 miles away and that’s barely anything but a grocery store and a greasy spoon.”

I heard the smile in her voice. “That’s one way to keep you focused.”

I tried to stay mature and reasonable but I heard the waver in my voice. “Let me come home. I can’t stay out here for a year.”

She sighed. “Less than a year, honey. And you can’t leave now. You told them you’d teach. They don’t have a replacement for you. Hang in there. It can’t be that bad.”

My throat ached with pent up tears. “It’s awful!”

She sounded close to tears, too. “I’m sorry, honey. But you agreed it would be good to get away. You need to learn to be independent and responsible.”

“Responsible? I graduated early with honors! How is that not responsible?”

We’d been over this at least a million times and she sounded tired. “Yes. But you nearly threw all that hard work away because of a poor decision. Because you let yourself be influenced by someone else.”

“Say it, Mom. By Tommy. You hate him.” I might be standing on a deserted hill a thousand miles away but it was the same old fight.

She delivered her line. “We don’t hate Tommy. But we’re not happy how you’ve let him manipulate you. We’re hoping this time away will show you what an amazing person you are and how he’s held you back.”

What made me think I could live with them? “Whatever. I had a good day at school. I’ll call again when I feel like a forced hike.”

“Wait.”

There was a rustle on the phone then Dad’s voice. “Hi, Princess.”

Anger immediately heated my sunburned face. “Don’t call me that.”

He paused. “Okay. I didn’t know it bothered you.”

It hadn’t. Until Jase called me that. When I was younger and Dad used it, I felt special and precious. Since I’d heard Jase say it, I felt pampered and protected and incapable. I know that’s not what Dad intended, especially when the next words out of his mouth were, “You need to step up here, Devon.”

I clenched my jaw. Typical Benji to go for the lecture.

“Some things in life are tough. You know that, after what you’ve just been through.”

I waited, knowing he wasn’t done. Mom had given him the phone so he could deliver the talking points they’d agreed on earlier. It was their version of the “wait until your father comes home” scenario” when I was a kid. Mom was too much of a softie.

“You demonstrated a lack of judgment and now you need to show what you’re capable of.”

I hated that Benji spoke like a textbook, but what can you expect from a college prof.

“That’s why you need to successfully complete this school term, before we’ll pay off your school loans.”

I leaned back on the rock. “Thanks for reminding me because I’d forgotten.” It would take me years to pay those off at the minimum monthly rate so even though I’d agreed coming out here would be good for my head, that wasn’t the only reason.

He cleared his throat. “It’s a substantial sum.”

I tried to sound grateful. I was, really, but still. “I know. Thank you.”

Again, he cleared his throat and his voice sounded rusty. “You may not believe me but we love you and want what’s best for you. Staying out there, getting away from... influences here, will help mold character.”

Talk about manipulation. Tommy didn’t have a monopoly on that. “Okay. I finish the year. Then what? Have you got another job lined up for me? Is my whole career in your hands now?”

The softness in his voice vanished. “We’re in a position to help you locate another position at a more prestigious school, yes. But what about grad school? You don’t want to be a teacher forever. You can do so much more.”

There is was. That hint of disappointment. The tone that said they expected better things. And with it came the guilt. I'd taken their expectations and shattered them into a million pieces.

Chapter 11

Jase

Hell didn't begin to describe how I felt driving the tractor from the hayfield to the ranch. Dry, dusty, bone-jarring tired. I'd gone through my gallon of water about three hours ago. I could have stopped and filled it up at the windmill on the edge of the meadow but I didn't want to take the time. I got a later start than I'd wanted because I'd ridden to the schoolhouse after checking on the steers. That hadn't been a necessary diversion but I couldn't resist.

I smiled thinking about Cody. That little rascal had wormed into me from the moment I held him in my arms an hour after he was born. In those five years he'd only burrowed deeper into my life. I couldn't say Jenna was a bad mother. I had to give her credit for sticking with him and not giving him up or aborting him. She was so young when she got pregnant and was still young. She might have a few wild oats she wanted to sow and she'd been known to drop Cody off with me for the night and not show up again for a couple of days. But she knew he was in good hands here.

At least, he used to be. With Dad's increased drinking, I hoped that was still the case. Dad didn't get violent, though. He usually drank until he stumbled and eventually passed out. Not every day, but enough of them to make having visitors dicey.

I didn't want to think about that. Today had been a good one. I'd been up hours before dawn to finish tractor repairs with the goal to get the hay cut by sundown. I'd accomplished that and felt like I'd scored the winning touchdown. But I had the added thrill of seeing Cody on his first day of school.

I chugged the tractor into the ranch yard and cut the engine, letting it puff—puff—ugh to a stop. This tractor had rumbled off the assembly line five years before my dad was born. I don't know when Granddad bought it but I know he didn't buy it new. Built way before cabs and air conditioning,

it had spent decades mowing hay on the Varner Ranch and would probably die here. Hopefully decades in the future.

My thoughts didn't stay with Cody. Much as I enjoyed being part of his milestone day, if I were honest with myself, my biggest pleasure had been seeing Devon Michaels. She looked fresh and polished in that suit. Her hair shone like new copper in the sun and those green eyes flashed with excitement. She'd tripped all my fantasies yesterday, showing up out of the blue in her shorts and tank top. Even after the walk wilted her and covered her in grit—a stab of guilt hit me again—she'd been sexy. But today, all cleaned up and professional, she'd been a different person. Confident and energized. And still sexy. Very.

I didn't try to stop my imagination as it flipped through the scenarios I'd replayed all afternoon. I usually spent the boring hours on the tractor thinking about the ranch or other problems, but today, my mind had been all about Devon. How many times had I run my hands down the smooth fabric of that gray suit, feeling her firm ass and pulling her to me?

She raised her green eyes to mine. They heated with barely restrained desire. Rising on her toes, she put her hot lips to mine and kissed me with deep passion. Her tongue pushed gently against mine in a slow dance that drove me crazy. Blood rushed between my legs and my jeans grew so tight I had to shift my balance.

I found the zipper at the back of her skirt and it fell away. She didn't resist as I ran my hands up her firm belly, the silk of her blouse tickling my fingers. She shrugged from her jacket and keeping her eyes locked on mine, unbuttoned her blouse, letting it flutter in the breeze. Her creamy skin warmed my palms and she let out a soft moan of pleasure. Her sweet breasts lay encased in pale pink satin. I could see the nipples through the thin fabric, hard and erect and begging for my lips. With one arm around her back, holding her firmly to me, feeling my heat pressed to her sweet spot, I brushed her bra away and lowered my mouth, licking and tasting the salty skin, feeling her nipple harden even more—

Grant's black pickup ripped across the Autogate and into the ranch yard, spewing dirt and gravel. He braked hard, threw open the pickup door and flew out, slamming it with force. He stomped to the porch and took the stairs two at a time, wrenched open the screen and disappeared. I didn't know why he'd taken off so early this morning but whatever he'd planned hadn't turned out as he'd wanted.

Even though he'd destroyed a perfectly good daydream, one I'd been having all day in various iterations, I was glad for the distraction. Devon was okay as long as I kept her in the fantasy department. She was going to be gone at the end of the school year. A casual relationship with the school teacher who lived three miles down the road would be awkward. Okay, I didn't mean casual, I meant sexual. I meant hot, crazy, clothes-ripping, wet, groping sex. It might satisfy my craving but there was no keeping a secret in Spencer County. Eventually everyone would know and then Devon's role as school teacher would erode. People would assume she was a slut trying to hook a local rancher and it would make her life here tough.

For my part, I didn't need the stress of having a pseudo-relationship with a girl. In my experience, they say there are no strings attached and are willing participants but after a few times together, they start thinking they own you or you owe them and pretty soon they're picking out June dates for a wedding. I had a ranch to run, a father in trouble, and a brother with failure to launch. I didn't need a girl with attachment issues or one I might eventually start to like and depend on, who would vanish in a couple of months.

None of this even made sense to me. Did I want a fuck buddy? Well, hell yeah. If so, Devon would be convenient and with only nine months to be here, how much harm could it do to her career? And what did I—or her for that matter—care about her reputation if she would be gone soon? So, go after the easy picking.

Yet, I'd been worried about her getting attached, which wasn't going to happen since she hated the isolation out here, hated the ranch, and probably hated me, too. See? This is

exactly why I avoided girls around here. They confused me and complicated my life. And they didn't even know it.

Best to keep Devon Michaels in my fantasies and satisfy myself by finding a willing waitress when I traveled to Omaha or Denver. I needed to keep my nose to the grindstone. Eventually, the ranch would turn a profit, Dad would straighten out, and Grant would find a job. When my ship sailed those smooth waters, I'd follow my own dreams and find a girl who fit that life.

My future settled, I stood across from the house, taking in the lush green grass shaded by the towering cottonwoods. The porch swing looked empty without Mom. But that was an old pain, nearly faded to sweet memory now. The screen door opened and Dad walked out. He carried his quart-sized glass of iced tea and a beer and held them up to me. "Gonna stand there all day?" he called.

I grinned. Yes, it was a good day. Dad was sober and drinking iced tea, the hay lay in neat windrows waiting to be stacked, and I still had a few hours to enjoy dinner and get some work done upstairs. I hurried across the yard and up to the porch. "Is that for me?" I indicated the beer.

Dad handed it to me. He'd shaved and showered recently, notable because when he went on his mourning benders, it could be days or weeks when that didn't happen. "Nothing better than a cold one after a day in the hayfield."

I threw my head back and took a long pull, feeling the carbonation burn down my parched throat. "Ah. That's good."

Dad settled himself in a wicker rocker, leaving me to the swing. "I'm back on the tea." He held up his glass. "I know I've been out of it lately. It's August. Lanny...." He trailed off.

I knew. Mom died at the end of August. Whatever pain and joy Dad experienced started and ended with his love, Lanny. "Remember that year she grew all those tomatoes?"

Dad gazed at the spot to the north of the house where Mom always kept a giant garden. Three sad tomato plants withered beside a couple of bell pepper plants. Pole beans hung limp on

the trellis. Everything else, planted with optimism last spring, had died from neglect. His eyes lit up and I knew he saw Mom's lush achievement. He chuckled. "She started them all from peat pots and couldn't stand to let any die so she planted all hundred. God, she worked hard ditching them for irrigation and then, my god, the crop! She gave them to everyone and canned so many we had them for five years."

His eyes lost their shine and fell flat.

"Dad."

He looked at me.

"We've got to remember the good. You know she'd want us to keep living. She'd hate to see you so sad." I wanted to add that seeing him drink himself to death would destroy her.

He tried for a smile. "I know you're right, son. But it's so damned hard without her. She was everything to me. Everything."

I couldn't understand a love so deep that losing it would make me want to die. But even if I found a girl that joined my heart so completely, I knew I'd have to go on if she left. "Mom loved you enough she'd want you to find some happiness."

Dad's gaze shifted back to the dying garden. "I know you're right. And I'm done drinking. From now on, it's iced tea and coffee. I can do this for Lanny."

I drained my beer, only slightly guilty for enjoying it so much. "That's the spirit. She'd be proud."

He took a deep gulp, made a dissatisfied face and quickly grinned to cover it up. "Damned straight."

I stood up. "I saw Grant got steaks out to thaw before he took off this morning. I'll start the grill and get a salad made."

Dad pushed up from the rocker. "Naw. You go take a shower. You stink. I'll get supper going."

"That's the best deal I've had all day!" If you didn't count the fantasies I'd made up about Devon.

I tripped up the stairs anticipating the relief of water running over my hot skin, a juicy steak and fresh salad, and afterward, some time on my computer, escaping to my own world. Grant's bedroom door was closed and rap music thumped, vibrating the floor. I ought to roust him out to help Dad with supper but if the slamming pickup door and loud music was an indicator of his foul humor, I'd just as soon leave him to himself.

It's hard to describe how terrific it feels to step out of a shower into clean shorts after a day in the hayfield. My skin tingled and every muscle felt relaxed and alive at the same time. The clean smell of soap replaced cut grass, tractor grease and heat.

I walked to the top of the stairs and smelled steaks on the grill. My stomach collapsed in on itself. God, I was hungry and thirsty. I stopped in the kitchen and downed two glasses of water and reached for another beer, then met Dad on the front porch. He lowered the lid on the grill, smoke and the best aroma in the world swirled around his head.

He'd set the table at the end of the porch with Mom's stoneware, with full place settings of silverware and even napkins. His guilt was in overdrive and he worked to make amends for his last bender. I didn't trust it would last but I'd enjoy the reprieve while it did.

We both turned at the sound of an engine and the rumble of tires on the Autogate. My El Camino slid into view. Heat rushed to my head and I fought a stupid grin that wanted to jump to my face. What was she doing here?

Dad's eyes traveled from the El Camino to me. "Who's that in your ride?"

"The new school teacher," I grumbled. "She had car trouble so I loaned her Cisco."

Dad raised his eyebrows. "There's a couple of beat-up pickups out back. Surprised you let that baby out of your sight."

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. “Those rigs are pretty rough and I’d just vacuumed Cisco. It’s no big deal.”

Dad studied me. “Yeah. No biggie.”

Devon brought Cisco to a stop and stepped out. She’d exchanged the fancy business suit for a pair of khaki cargo pants and t-shirt. She’d pulled her hair into a ponytail and it bounced as she came up the porch steps. “Hi. Man, that smells great!”

Speaking of smelling great. A faint scent of lilac rose from her, tickling my nose. It made me want to bury my face in her skin and inhale all of her.

I did a quick calculation. We had our own beef butchered and packaged every year. The steaks were frozen four to a package. With the three of us, we usually grilled all four. If we didn’t divide that last one up at the meal, someone generally gobbled it for a midnight snack. “We’ve got plenty, would you like to eat with us?”

She looked puzzled.

Dad straightened his shoulders. “How do, miss. I’m Dean Varner, head honcho of this place. I hear you’re the new school teacher. I didn’t catch your name.”

Devon flushed even deeper than her sunburn. She extended her hand. She’d been trained up to be polite and professional. “I’m glad to meet you Mr. Varner. I’m Devon Michaels.” She nodded at me. “Jase and I met yesterday. He’s been very helpful.”

She stood as if she didn’t know where to put her hands or what to say. I waited, wondering what brought her over and not sure how to help her out of this awkward moment.

I started to ask how we could help her and she spoke at the same time. We laughed in a nervous way and I said, “I’m sorry. You go.”

She pasted a strained smile on her face. “Is...is Grant here?”

Of course. Grant had laid on the charm in the last twenty-four hours and she'd fallen already. In my daydreams from the hayfield, I hadn't considered that. What an oversight on my part.

Dad acted as if the mystery had been solved. He motioned me with his head. "Run up and get Grant and tell him Devon is here."

I guess that showed Devon who was in charge and giving orders. He dismissed me and turned his attention to her. "Did you need something we can help you with?"

I didn't think she could get any redder but she did. "Um." She stammered. "He invited me over for dinner."

He'd invited her over, then forgot. That ass! I spun around and was through the door and up the stairs before I heard Dad say anything. I pounded on Grant's door.

No answer.

I banged harder. "Open up, Grant."

"Go away," he said, barely audible above the thrumming music.

"Open the fucking door." I hoped Devon couldn't hear us on the front porch but unless Dad had her in conversation, she probably could.

The door flew open and a wave of pot smoke wafted into the hallway. I lunged inside, shut the door and jerked his iPod out of the dock. The music dwarfed to a tinny echo. "What the hell are you doing?"

He stood in front of me, swaying slightly, bare-chested, wearing his old gym shorts. He cast bloodshot eyes at me. "Relaxing after a hard day at the office."

I clenched my back teeth to keep from losing my temper. "Well you'd better get your shit together fast because your dinner date is here."

He squinted. "Dinner date?"

What a piece of shit. “Devon, the teacher? She’s downstairs waiting to have dinner with you.”

He stared for a moment then slapped his forehead and laughed. “Fuck me. I totally forgot.”

“She didn’t. And she’s on the porch making small talk with Dad.” I sifted through a pile of clothes on the floor and brought out a shirt and jeans that didn’t look too bad. I tossed them at him.

He looked stricken. “Is Dad—?”

“He’s fine. Just get dressed and get your ass down there.”

He dropped the clothes and held up his hands. “I just don’t feel up to it, dude. Tell her I’m sick or something.”

God, I itched to throw a punch into his face. He had a way of treating girls like they weren’t real people. “No way. You invited her, you entertain her.”

“I’m fucked up! I can’t go down there. Dad will figure it out and be pissed. I’ll make a fool out of myself in front of her.”

I could stand here and argue with him all day. I’d never win. The only time I ever won was when I whipped up on him. Shit.

I stomped out and closed his door behind me.

Chapter 12

Devon

Awkward. More than a little. I stood on the front porch, the smell of grilling steaks making my mouth water like a gastronomical tsunami, while Dean kept talking louder and louder, trying to drown out the sound of Jase banging on Grant's door and cursing.

I pretended not to hear. At Jase's last demand to "open the fucking door," Grant must have relented because the noises from upstairs quieted, leaving me trying to come up with some answer to Dean's question of why a "pretty young thing like me would want to come way on out here."

He finally motioned me to sit on the porch swing and he settled into a rocking chair. If I hadn't felt like such an intruder, I would have loved the cool, serene feel of the evening, looking out on the green grass and across the ranch grounds to an abundant meadow. But I felt like I was enduring another job interview and every muscle tensed up. I ought to get used to meeting new people since I'd been sent someplace where I didn't know anyone.

It felt like my throat had been left in the sun to dry and I wondered about asking for something to drink. But I didn't want to be more of a bother than I obviously was. "I graduated early from Washington University. I interviewed for lots of jobs but I think because I'm so young, schools were afraid to hire me. So I took this job to get some experience on my resume." I didn't add the bit about how I'd nearly ruined my life and my devastated parents thought shipping me to the ends of the earth would straighten me out, so they called in a favor from their college buddy, Dorthea Stratton. No boys to lead me down the garden path, as Mom often said about Tommy. No friends to take my focus off achievement.

He studied me. "So you don't plan on sticking around for long."

I didn't want to lie, even though it seemed to be what he wanted to hear. "Just this one year."

He shook his head. "Too bad. The kids do better if they have consistent schooling but I understand it's tough to be out here if you don't have family."

"Everyone seems really nice, though." It was a pathetic attempt to appease him.

He pulled his iced tea to his mouth, the ice cubes clinking, the sweat beading in the way beverage advertisers used to tease people into craving their product. I didn't need the encouragement and swallowed, the sides of my throat sticking together.

He lowered his glass. "It's hard to keep young people out here. Me, I've got two boys. Thank god Jase going to stick around forever. He'll get him a pretty little heifer and they'll raise up some kids." His eyes brightened. "Grant, now. He's just got his college done. He's gonna do big things."

I wondered what a heifer was. Some kind of woman, I supposed.

I knew I shouldn't make assumptions about someone else's feelings—I'd learned all that in therapy at the clinic while I recovered—but I hated the way Dean seemed to pick favorites. "Jase seems like he works really hard and knows what he's doing."

Dean sort of sneered. "He's itching to get away as much as any young person. But this is his place and he'll figure that out. Getting a young woman of his own will settle him down."

The screen door squealed on its hinges and Jase walked out. He'd changed into jeans but he hadn't put on shoes and had only fastened the lower buttons on his short-sleeved shirt, as if he couldn't bear to wear so many clothes on a warm night. He held two bottles of beer, droplets of condensation building on their sides. He handed one to me. Again, my savior.

He tapped his bottle against mine in a bottom's up motion. A beer never tasted so good.

Dean stared at my beer in a way I couldn't interpret, like it was a beautiful woman or something. He frowned at Jase. "Where's Grant?"

Jase answered, addressing me. "His allergies are acting up. It happens when I cut hay. He said to tell you he's sorry."

I felt relief I could retreat home even though I would definitely miss that great smelling dinner. It hit me how I'd thought of that trailer as home already. Maybe I didn't mean home as much as it was mine, a place where I didn't have to be polite or wonder if I said the wrong thing. "I understand. I'm kind of tired after the first day of school anyway. Thanks for the beer." I turned to Dean. "It was nice meeting you. I'll probably see you around." See you around? What kind of lame thing was that? Since he didn't have any kids at school, I wouldn't be seeing him around unless I started hanging out here. And that didn't seem likely.

Jase took a step forward. "You can't leave until we eat. Aren't those steaks done, Dad?"

"Oh, that's okay. I don't mean to intrude." Right on cue my stomach growled.

Jase laughed. "Busted." He pointed toward the table. "We've already got three places set. You have to stay."

Dean frowned. "Too bad Grant's not feeling good. He's the entertaining one. But I'll do my best and maybe Jase won't be so grouchy, like he usually is."

Dean laughed like it was a joke, but a flicker of something passed in Jase's face. Hurt? Anger? He hurried over to the grill and lifted the lid. "They're ready. I'll go get the salad."

We settled at the table. The steaks tasted like a piece of heaven. I was surprised at how quickly I relaxed and started to feel comfortable. It might have been the two beers I polished off. But a lot of it was due to Dean and Jase. If they had issues, they buried them and regaled me with stories of the ranch and the school. They had me laughing until my sides hurt.

Dean leaned back in his chair. "Poke me with a fork, I'm done."

Huh? I raised my eyes to the meadow and noticed the moon high in the dark sky. I jumped up. "I've got to get home. It's a school night."

Dean stretched. "It's been a fine time. You come on over again soon."

I thanked them for the meal and company and started across the porch. Crickets chirped but that was the only sound.

Jase rose. "Wouldn't do for the teacher to show up late or tired out."

"Yeah, Trevor and the Fabulous Ruth Ann have that department covered."

Dean's chair scraped on the porch. "Ruth Ann has never fit in around here. That woman ain't got any sense." He made it sound like having no sense and murdering babies were equal sins.

Jase acted a little more tolerant. "She's okay. She thinks the world revolves around her but she doesn't mean any harm."

Dean shook his head. "She's going to ruin that kid of hers. The way she's all over him she'll make him a sissy."

"She brought cookies for everyone, so that was nice. Then I listened for twenty minutes while she told me how she's read all the books on homeschooling and she could keep Trevor at home and give him the quality education an exceptional mind such as his needed."

Dean snorted. "That kid needs to get out from underneath that crazy woman."

While I thought Trevor could benefit from time spent with friends, I felt uncomfortable gossiping. "From what Jenna and Mandy said, Ruth Ann is chronically late. But I think she cares about Trevor so I thanked her for the cookies, told her that starting tomorrow math would be our first subject and how important it was for a student to keep up daily."

Dean laughed. "You may be young but you're a feisty one. Sounds like you won't have trouble keeping that school in

hand.” He started into the house, a plate in each hand. “Grant is kind of like that, too. He’s got lots of ideas and plans and he’ll get them accomplished.”

A muscle in Jase’s jaw twitched.

Jase walked me down the steps. The light from the house faded as we made our way toward the El Camino. His voice rumbled low on the night. “Jenna and Mandy are probably right about Ruth Ann. But you need to be careful about them. Especially Jenna.”

I’d had that thought, too. She seemed like a pretty typical Mean Girl. “She can’t be too bad. Look at Cody. He’s a great little kid.”

Even in the dark there was no missing Jase’s wide smile. “Keep an eye on him, too. He can get into trouble faster than you’d think.”

We stopped at the El Camino and leaned against it. I really needed to get home and get my ass into bed. But I hated to drive away from Jase. I’d only met him yesterday but hanging out with him felt comfortable and good. “It’s really weird,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “What’s weird?”

“Back home, I could go to work in the grade school down the street from my house and talk to my parents about it. They wouldn’t know the kids or the parents. Here, your father, who has no reason to be involved with the school, not only knows who all the kids are, he knows what they’re personalities are like and all about their parents and grandparents. He really seems interested.”

“Yeah, just wait until the Spelling Bee.”

“The Spencer County one? Next month?” Dorthea had emailed me a calendar and highlighted that. Apparently, we’d load the kids up and take them to an all-county competition in Otis. Looked like the best we could do for a field trip.

“Yeah. Everyone shows up for it.”

How strange. When I went to school in St. Louis, only a few parents attended our grade school plays. No one came to a spelling bee. “That’s nice people show an interest.”

Jase looked up on the porch where Dean stacked the dishes. “That caring and involvement is the best and worst thing around here.”

“What do you mean?”

He stood in front of me, tall and lean, his broad shoulders straight. The smell of warm skin and soap flirted with the night sky. He paused, considering his answer, and my mind ran around it to a place totally out of bounds. I imagined sliding my hands under the open shirt, rubbing my palms along the smooth, tanned and muscled pecs. His skin rippled and a murmur of pleasure vibrated from his throat. I’d release the other buttons and drop his shirt off his wide shoulders to get a look at his well-formed biceps. My lips would find his strong heartbeat at the base of his neck and with slow, wet kisses I’d make my way across his chest, stopping to tease at his nipples and make that groan a little deeper.

I’d trail kisses down that six-pack while running my hands up and down his back, sliding to his ass, tucked so tightly into his faded jeans. My tongue reached the soft spray of hair visible just above the button of his jeans—

“Like when my mom died four years ago,” he said, finally choosing his words.

Wait. What? The moment felt like I’d been listening to a sweet symphony and someone scratched the needle across the record, like an old movie. I jerked from the hot scene to his mother dying. “I’m sorry,” I said, without hesitating.

He paused. “Thanks. But my point is that the whole community supported us through that time. They brought food and all the neighbors got together and put up our hay. They were really great.”

I hated to hear about this tragedy in his life. It obviously still caused him pain. But I was glad for the distraction from

my daydream. That kind of thinking could only get me into trouble.

He continued. “But now everyone thinks they need to be my mother. They keep trying to set me up with dates or bug me about when I’m going to settle down.”

I grinned at him. “So when are you?”

He slapped his forehead. “Change of subject.”

An easy silence settled and we stood for a moment. I needed to go. I didn’t want to. Jase was probably impatiently waiting for me to take off so he could watch a baseball game or play a video game or whatever he liked to do out here in the evenings. And I kept standing here while he stayed all polite. Why was I acting like some lovesick high school twit with a crush on the football captain? I stirred. “I guess—“

He shifted at the same time. “Can I ask—“

We laughed. “You first,” I said.

He crossed his arms, then let them fall. “I’m embarrassed to admit this. And really, I didn’t mean to pry. But when I was hauling your stuff into your trailer...”

Heat rose to my face. I hadn’t packed so much as tossed. Clothes and books and stuff I didn’t think I could live without all went into boxes and bags. No telling what shit was hanging out all over. I tried to recall what it looked like.

“... I set a heavy box down and the flaps popped open. It was books and I know I shouldn’t have snooped but I couldn’t resist.”

Shit. What else had he investigated while I wasn’t home? I waited.

He dropped his eyes to his feet and waited a moment. “So. I’m sorry about that. But I noticed you had a bunch of mystery novels.”

I leaned back on the El Camino. “I love thrillers and mysteries. But I haven’t had time to read for fun for the last few years. I kept buying them, though. I figured I might have

time to catch up now. And after seeing the TV reception I get at the trailer, I'm super glad I brought them."

"Who's your favorite authors?" We launched into a discussion that moved us from standing by the car door to sitting on the tailgate. I had to laugh when Jase confessed he'd named Myron after one of his favorite characters, Myron Bolitar from Harlen Coben's mysteries.

We compared books and authors and somehow ended up sitting thigh to thigh, swinging our legs in unison. I don't know how long we sat there. Long enough that the air grew damp and chilly. But I didn't mind. I stopped thinking about school the next day or exile or anything but this smart and funny guy, the warm length of leg next to mine, and the stories we'd both read or wanted to read.

Finally, a gruff voice called from an upstairs window. "Would you both shut up? It's after midnight on a school night. Get to bed."

My cheeks blazed. Embarrassed because I didn't realize our voices carried through the open windows on the still night air but more because the instant thought of going to bed with Jase sent a thrill through me.

Chapter 13

Jase

I woke up before the birds and stretched my legs, noticing the tent I pitched in the sheet. I'd been thinking about Devon, maybe dreaming. It's hard to say in that space between sleep and waking. Smart, cute, smelling like spring, and she liked mystery novels. I hadn't talked about books like that since Mom died. She's the one that got me started on them.

I felt lighter than I had for a long time. Well, since Grant got home from school and Dad spent a good portion of last year's calf crop buying him that new pickup. I stopped myself from grinding over that resentment again. It wasn't hard. All I had to do was think about Devon.

And I did. I thought of her especially while I took an extra long shower and used a lot more soap than I normally did.

Pink barely brushed the sky when I bounded down the stairs. I'd get an early start in the hay field. Maybe finish in enough time to clean up and check in on Devon. She might need a ride to town for groceries or maybe she'd like a drive to see some of the countryside.

I pushed the screen open and stepped outside.

"Mornin'"

The voice made me jump. "Dad. What are you doing up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep." He rocked forward and back, the runners on the wicker chair brushing against the wood deck.

I cringed at the slur to his words and scanned the deck next to his chair. Yep. The Jack Daniel's bottle sat empty. "Thought I'd check the windmills before I start raking the hay," I said, trying to keep accusation out of my voice.

"You can't have her, you know."

I'd already started for the steps but stopped. "What?"

He reached for the bottle, saw it was empty and set it back down. “Oh, I heard you all sparking last night. Laughing and flirting.”

“No, that’s not...”

He waved his hand and let it flop into his lap. “Kept me up. Made me think of the way Lanny used to go on about those books. Always had her nose in one.”

I stepped backward. “I really ought to go.”

“She never fit in here. She was too smart. Too educated. Like Grant.”

I folded my arms. I wanted to escape but no matter how drunk he is, he’s still my dad. For that I owe him respect.

He pointed down the road. “That little filly there. She’s smart like Lanny. You don’t want to trap her here. It’d kill her. Like it did my Lanny.”

“Cancer killed Mom.” I hoped to stop his tirade before it started.

The screen door squeaked open and Grant shuffled out. He plopped onto the swing. “You’re making an awful lot of racket. Even more than those fucking birds.”

I wasn’t helping Dad calm down. His voice rose to a higher pitch. “But you can’t have her because you got to stay here on the ranch. Grant, now Grant can take that sorrel-top and ride her all the way to town.”

Grant laughed.

I clenched my hands at Dad’s crude reference to Devon being a horse his son could ride. “I don’t...”

Dad leaned his head back on the chair and looked at me. “You’re the firstborn. You gotta stay here. Run this place.”

He was on the wind-down now. So I tread carefully. “I’ll be here until you get back on your feet.”

He started to fade. “Keep it in the family. It’s your duty.”

Grant pushed the porch swing with one toe and smirked at me.

“You’ve got two sons, you know.”

Grant sat up.

Dad’s chin bounced on his chest. “Stay away from that little girl, Jase. She ain’t gonna stay here.”

I watched Dad’s eyes close and he started to snore.

I focused on Grant. “Maybe it’s your turn to work the ranch and babysit Dad.”

Grant stood up. “That’s not the way it goes, big brother.”

I felt as if I were slipping down a black hole. “Why not? You’ve got as much responsibility to the ranch as I do.”

Grant stretched. “Since I can remember it was all, *Jase is such a great rancher*. And they made no secret that this place is all yours.”

“What if I don’t want it?”

Grant raised his eyebrows. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

No one had heard of it. I’d kept it to myself because Mom and Dad expected me to stay on the ranch. It was a struggle to come up with the money to send Grant to school and Mom and Dad needed me to help out. I figured as soon as he graduated, I’d sit down with them and explain about my dreams of being an engineer. I didn’t expect them to pay for my school.

But before that happened, Mom got cancer. And Dad fell apart. Now, I was afraid I’d never leave.

Grant smirked at me. “What, did the school teacher get you all hot? Devon Michaels hasn’t already worked her whiles on you, has she?”

I growled at Grant as I jumped down the stairs. “Devon doesn’t have anything to do with it.” But maybe she did. Since I’d met her two days ago I’d been thinking about her non-stop. It made me happy and restless and worried about being

trapped on the ranch all at the same time. She was fucking up my head in a way I did not need.

Chapter 14

Devon

Grant stopped over the next evening after school. He apologized about the hay fever and I didn't tell him I thought he was full of shit. After that, he stopped over occasionally to chat or watch one of the old movies in my trailer. A couple of times he'd driven me to town for groceries and a burger. The truth is, even though Grant wasn't the type of person I usually chose to hang out with, he wasn't bad company. He'd turned out to be the only friend I had out here.

I didn't see anything of Jase for the next six weeks. I thought we'd hit it off pretty well and had pulled out a couple of paperbacks I intended to lend to him when I saw him again. Not seeing him was a good thing. I could count the reasons why steering clear of a guy that turned my temperature on high was a good thing.

That didn't keep me from fantasizing about him. Every time I caught myself thinking about his hands on my skin or his lips kissing me, I pulled myself up short. I had to stop this train of thought. I couldn't afford to think about Jase like this. Number one, student loans of \$40,000. Number two, boys were bad news. They led to heartbreak and worse. Number three, I was supposed to be going home to Tommy in nine months.

I had to get my emotions back on track by then. Get over being mad at Tommy. Forget...

Maybe I'd get over the pain of last year's incident and move on eventually. But right now, it hurt to think about it. I needed to concentrate on my job, my students, and stay out of trouble.

I shut the schoolhouse door to the blustery wind and made my way down the steps. Anxiety clawed at my gut. We'd been practicing for the county spelling bee for a few weeks. Normally, I wouldn't put performance pressure on the kids like that, but apparently, this was a Big Deal. All of the parents had

mentioned it to me, making sure to warn me that at least one District 6 student had brought home a championship in their class since 1980.

The kids talked about it almost as much as they discussed the Huskers or the Broncos, the Otis High School football team. They were all about winning and showing everyone the power of District 6. Somehow, they'd infected me with the competitive spirit. They were bright kids and they were prepared from the practice lists supplied by the state. But this much pressure could lead to all kinds of problems and broken hearts.

I inspected the back of Mandy's Suburban to make sure Bill, Stetson and Sam had their seatbelts buckled. Bailey sat in the front seat with her arms folded across her chest, in a tiff because she had to ride with her mother and not with Trevor in Ruth Ann's pickup. I didn't get in the middle of that fight. Judith Norris was away at another conference and Dutch said he only had time to drop into the spelling bee for a second, so the Norris boys needed to ride with someone else.

Ruth Ann insisted she and Trevor needed their privacy because she intended to quiz him on his spelling on the drive to town. Before she climbed into her spanking new F350 dually, bought to pull the fancy stock trailer that would take Trevor to all the biggest and best Little Britches Rodeos where he was expected to win, she reminded me about District 6's legacy at the spelling bee.

That left me riding with Jenna. I would rather have taken my own vehicle but my car still sat abandoned in my front yard and I didn't feel comfortable taking Jase's El Comino unless I absolutely had to.

A brisk October wind lashed my bare legs and tugged at the skirt of my interview suit as I climbed into Jenna's red pickup. Cody sat on a booster chair strapped in the middle between us. He looked unhappy. I knew he normally rode free in the cab, to stand or kneel or sit with his face pressed against the window. Since we'd be taking the highway to Otis, Jenna must feel the need to abide by seatbelt laws.

It took Cody a few minutes to warm up but thankfully he let go of his huff quickly and was soon chattering away. He was a social lifesaver because Jenna and I had a tough time with any conversation. I didn't like that everything she had to say seemed to put someone down and she just plain didn't like me.

After six weeks of school, she'd made it clear she hated the way I talked, taught, dressed, and thought. She and Mandy would stand by their vehicles for several minutes every morning after they dropped the kids off and again after school. If I ever ventured over, Jenna immediately broke off her sentence and stared at me with impatience. At first, out of sheer loneliness I thought I might visit for a minute or two. But now I only ever approached them if I had some school business to talk about.

We managed to make it to Otis without having to interact with each other except when Cody asked us direct questions.

As soon as I saw the high school parking lot my blood pressure spiked. Apparently, Jase wasn't joking when he said everyone turned out for the spelling bee. The place was packed.

We piled out of the vehicles, everyone in their finest. Bailey wore red western jeans and a frilly shirt, which she'd never have picked out on her own. She looked as uncomfortable as I knew she'd be in the girly clothes. The Norris boys wore plaid shirts and khakis. Poor Trevor had been forced into a sterling silver bolo tie and a tooled leather belt to highlight his new jeans and white tuxedo-front shirt.

Cody clung to Jenna's hand, his face suddenly apprehensive. Jenna, looking as gorgeous as ever in black jeans and a red leather jacket over a low cut blouse, scanned the parking lot as if inventorying her admirers.

Ruth Ann slicked Trevor's hair and Mandy smiled at the class. Her muffin top plumped from the top of her jeans.

"Okay guys," I said in my best locker room voice. "You know your stuff. You've practiced. You all look fabulous. Just

go out there and do your best. However this turns out, we're proud of you and know you're doing your best."

Jenna rolled her eyes. Mandy clapped and everyone started for the school. Ruth Ann pulled my arm and held me up. She whispered. "You aren't one of those people who think that everyone ought to get a ribbon, are you?"

"What?"

Her fingers dug into my arm. "That speech wouldn't put the fire in anyone's belly. You basically told them they don't have to try. They don't have to win. That's not the way we Lowes see the world. I want Trevor to learn that winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

I let that sit while we crossed the parking lot. I reached for the glass door and held it open to her. "Right."

The school smelled of warm cafeteria, bread baking, meat cooking. The linoleum shone underfoot as we joined the crowd in the hallway, no doubt making their way to the auditorium. Voices echoed off the cinderblock walls and we meandered with all the speed of cattle I'd seen going to water at the windmill.

A gaping stage with one microphone on a stand and a spotlight trained to it made the worst possible venue. A speller would feel like a murderer under interrogation. Rows of theater chairs rose in increments to the darkness at the back of the hall. Most of the 300 or so seats were filled. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, god knows who all, pilgrimaged to see the county's children stammer and sweat and struggle on stage.

Bailey and Trevor led the way to the section assigned to District 6. Ten seats allotted to us. One for each kid and four left over for teacher/parent/driver. The Otis town elementary school had a whole section. Other country schools had a couple of rows. Ours was definitely the smallest contingent.

Dorthea Stratton, the County School Superintendent, took the stage. She was my parents' age but looked much older in her polyester pants suit and gray hair in a tight perm. She

welcomed everyone, announced the details about lunch and the bake sale and raffle to raise money to send the football team to state should they qualify. Then she called the kindergartners on stage and invited the first graders to gather in an adjoining classroom. Each class was instructed to make their way to the staging classroom when the previous grade was called on stage. To everyone in the place, this was standard operating procedure. They'd been doing it forever, or at least since 1980 when District 6 started its winning streak. That pang of anxiety showered acid in my belly.

Jenna pulled Cody off his chair. He climbed back on. She stood and picked him up and set him on the ground. He fought to get back to his chair. At the far end of the row, I jumped to my feet and started to work my way toward them.

Suddenly, Jase appeared in the aisle next to Cody. I stopped.

Jase squatted down to Cody's eye level. I couldn't hear what he said but Cody shook his head, his little mouth set. Jase spoke again and pointed at me. Cody turned his eyes to me and I gave him a thumbs up and a big smile.

He turned back to Jase and listened for a couple of seconds, nodded slowly. Jase stood, took Cody's hand and walked him to the stage.

Nothing in the world rivals kindergartners for cuteness. There were only ten of them in the whole county. They didn't have to compete against each other. Dorthea announced the words and they spelled them as a group. In the midst of their adorableness, my eyes unexpectedly teared up. I clenched the sides of my seat and waited for the wave. Would I ever stop feeling the pain?

The kindergartners were dismissed and the first graders took the stage. Cody marched down the stage stairs and straight to our section. Jenna held her arms out to offer her lap. He passed by her and squeezed down the aisle to throw himself at me.

He grinned. "I am the greatest!" He said it loud enough half the people in the auditorium heard and they laughed.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “You were awesome.”

We watched the first graders, then cheered and moaned as Sam and then Stetson missed their words. They’d both made a fine showing, with Stetson going all the way to runner up. The third grade droned on and Cody squirmed and wiggled. Bill Norris made it about halfway through the fourth graders before being eliminated. Then, thankfully, Dortha broke for lunch.

I wanted the kids to have fun and enjoy the specialness of the day but I knew Sam and Stetson were hyped to overdrive so I sat between them on the cafeteria bench. I had to admit, the food tasted pretty damned good. The sloppy joes had real hamburger covered in a sauce bursting with flavor. The buns were fresh, baked that morning. Dark, chewy brownies tasted like magic. This was nothing like I remembered from my grade school days. But then, the ladies I’d seen in the kitchen here all looked like ranch wives and I’d discovered from the treats sent to the school by mothers, grandmothers and dropped off occasionally by people in the community, the women around here knew how to cook. Not the men, apparently. That division of labor was another indication that I’d arrived in the Land That Time Forgot.

Trevor and Bailey sat together at the end of the table. They looked tense and I took it for performance nerves. I got up to return my tray and keeping an eye on the rambunctious boys, I squeezed in next to Bailey.

“You’ll do fine. Both of you.” I patted Bailey’s thigh.

She forced a smile. “Yeah. I know. But no one’s won yet. So it’s all on us.”

Trevor’s hands shook when he wadded his napkin and placed it on his tray of uneaten sloppy joes. It started to absorb the sauce and turned bright orange.

I wanted to cheer them up. “Remember what I told you what Eleanor Roosevelt said?”

Neither said anything.

“Do one thing...”

They both finished with me, “Everyday that scares you.”

I'd been giving the kids inspirational quotes every day.

"Are you okay, Trev?" I asked. "You know you've been working on the sixth and seventh-grade words. You've got this licked."

He lowered his head and didn't meet my eyes. "It's not that. It's...." He trailed off.

I hated how competition weighed on some people. Ruth Ann had heaped such high expectations on this poor kid. I knew how that felt. I reached across the table and put my hand over his. "I know you can spell these words. It doesn't matter how you do up there on stage. We know you're a genius."

He dropped his head further.

I started to say more but a crash alerted me to Sam careening backward from the bench with his tray landing on top of him and Stetson howling in laughter. I jumped up and helped them clean up their trays, gathered up Cody and Bill and herded them all outside to burn off some energy before we started up again. I left Trevor and Bailey to their own worries.

While I shivered in my interview suit and they raced around the brown grass of the school's front yard I felt pretty good about the day so far. Sure, no one had been county champion of their grade but they'd all held their own. We were rocking the spelling bee, in my opinion.

Footsteps on the sidewalk made me turn. Jenna stepped off the pavement and strode to me on those long legs. She'd slipped her spotless white down jacket on over the red leather and looked like a cover model for fashionable cold weather gear. I felt like a dowdy schoolmarm dressed in gray, with frozen fingers and chapped lips.

"So here's where Cody went. I couldn't find him."

I watched Sam and Stetson tackle Bill while Cody galloped along after them. "I can barely stand to sit still that long. They need some release."

"Cody sure does like you," Jenna said.

I couldn't help the warm glow when I thought of him. "He's a great kid."

"I was surprised when he chose to sit on your lap. Ever since he was tiny he either wanted me or Jase. No one else." She sounded casual, but I suspected she had an agenda.

"He responds to Jase, that's for sure."

Her voice sounded firm. "He ought to. Jase was the first person to hold him, even before I did."

Jase was in the delivery room? He took a real interest in Cody. He was always around that kid. It didn't take a genius to put it all together. Jase must be Cody's father. That made sense. My only surprise is that I hadn't figured it out before. The realization smacked me upside the head. I didn't know why it made me feel so awful. My face felt cold then hot.

Jase was a father. He had a baby with Jenna. My mind flashed on an image of them making love and I shut my eyes against it.

They weren't together. At least, I didn't think so. But it made sense why she'd hate me so quickly. I represented a threat to her. She must want Jase. Or at least, didn't want me to have him. I ought to let her know I had no interest in her territory. At least, I shouldn't have. And I didn't. Not beyond daydreams.

But the buzzer rang, signaling time to go back to the spelling bee.

Jenna arched a delicate eyebrow. "Last chance for that championship. Wouldn't it be awful if you were the teacher that broke the run?"

Great. No pressure. The fifth graders would be assembling in the staging classroom. "Can you round up the boys and bring them in? I need to check on Bailey and Trevor."

I hurried into the school, grateful to be out of the wind and cold. When I started down the crowded hall I heard a shout, then raised voices. I skirted around an older couple. Something was wrong and I needed to check it out. Pushing and bouncing off the parents and others in my way, I struggled to get to the

staging classroom. It felt like hours but it must have only taken seconds. I made it to the threshold just as another burst of angry voices rang out. I heard Bailey yelling. I shoved the man in front of me.

Too late. A blonde kid crouched on his knees behind Trevor and a big kid in a thermal shirt stood in front. He shoved Trevor, who fell onto his back as the blonde kid scooted away. The big kid straddled Trevor and slammed his knees on Trevor's arms. He raised his fist, ready to smash it into Trevor's already bloody nose.

How could this happen so quickly? It was as if they all moved on fast forward and I was stuck on pause.

Bailey launched herself from five feet away and smacked into the bigger boy, knocking him off Trevor and sending them both tumbling across the floor, sliding a table which scraped across the linoleum. The kid howled when he knocked his ear on the table leg.

I hurled myself into the room but Jase arrived a split second before I did. He inserted himself between Bailey and the crying boy just before Bailey flew into him again. I rushed to Trevor and helped him sit up.

He fought tears but they slid down his face, mingling with the blood from his nose. Someone shoved a tissue box in my face and I pulled out a handful and pressed them to his face. I took his hand and held it to the wad. He responded enough to keep the pressure on.

Bailey was still hollering while Jase held her back with one hand and pulled the kid up with the other. Between Bailey's threats to "whup his ass" the kid managed to say, "He's such a faggot he's got to get his dike to fight for him."

I was on my feet and ready to pummel the little shit myself before I even knew it. Jase's fingers crumpled the fabric of the boy's shirt and he lowered his face inches away. In a voice thick with danger he said, "That's enough."

The boy pulled back and shut his mouth.

Then teachers and parents, Dorthea and a crush of people, all descended. I leaned over to help Trevor and shield him from whatever else might damage him. Jase appeared on Trevor's other side with Bailey tucked close to his side. Before anyone could get organized enough to stop us, we had the kids out of the room, down the hall and into the parking lot.

Ruth Ann shot from the school and Mandy followed with Stetson in tow.

“What the hell is going on? Where were you? Why weren't you with your students?” Ruth Ann screamed at me as she ran to Trevor and snatched him away from me in a smothering bear hug.

He mumbled and fought against her but she hugged him. “You poor baby.” She snapped her focus back to me. “Are you so busy flirting with your boyfriend you don't have time to do the job we pay you for?” She glared at Jase.

Jase looked surprised. “Hold on, Ruth Ann. This...”

Mandy tried to ease the tension. “Thank goodness Bailey was there to...”

Ruth Ann turned on her. She screamed. “Trevor doesn't need her help! She should have stayed out of it. She made him look weak. He doesn't need her!”

I ached for Trevor. I desperately wanted to pull him from Ruth Ann's clutch and her hurtful tirade. This boy who loved science fiction movies and books and eagerly dove into the truth behind the stories. The soft-spoken leader of his little school, helping the younger students to understand math, and reading to Cody every afternoon. His dorky jokes and the strong bond with Bailey. He deserved unconditional love and acceptance, not a mother who pushed him to succeed according to her standards. Not ignorant, name-calling heathens raised to fear anyone different.

Jase spoke quietly. “Nothing wrong with friends helping...”

She held up one palm, keeping her other arm crushing Trevor to her. “Don't talk to me.” She popped back to me.

“You. I’m suing you. You’ll be held accountable for not protecting our children.”

Bailey slipped into Mandy’s arms and buried her face. Her shoulders shook in sobs. Mandy patted her back and held her close.

Jase stepped in front of me, moving toward Ruth Ann. He spoke as if soothing a raging bear. “Okay, slow down. I know you’re upset.”

“Upset?!” She spit it at him. “My child is bloodied!”

Jase looked suitably sad. “It’s terrible. But Devon was right there to protect him. You know how boys are. Hell, kids. They can be mean. Put the blame where it belongs, Ruth Ann. Talk to Grace and Hank.”

Grace and Hank must be the delinquent’s parents. Of course Jase and Ruth Ann knew the culprit.

Ruth Ann panted and stared at Jase. “Maybe. We’ll see.” She spun around, and Trevor had difficulty keeping his feet under him. Still clutching him, she marched to her shiny F350.

By now Jenna had rounded up the rest of the kids and they stood huddled together with Mandy.

With her arm around Bailey, Mandy started for her Suburban. “Guess that’s that for the spelling bee. No champion this year.”

Chapter 15

Jase

“Damn it!” My voice echoed around the cavernous shop. It was the third time I’d pinched my finger with the vice grips trying to loosen the bolts of the old tractor tire rim. My hands were numb from the morning chill so it stung even worse than normal. I’d checked the weather, as usual, and today would be unseasonably warm for late October. I thought of jumping into Cisco and heading down the road. Then remembered Cisco was out on loan.

It brought an even better idea to mind. Taking Devon and driving away. It was Saturday. A sunny break before winter clamped down on us. Wouldn’t it be great to throw away all our responsibilities? Just the two of us. No plans. No worries. Maybe I needed to stop reading fiction. There was no way Devon wanted to be with me.

Not after that mess at the spelling bee. Ruth Ann had launched into her. Then Mandy and Jenna treated her like it was her fault no one brought home a championship. I wanted to say something to let her know it was all right. But I’d stood there and watched her walk to Jenna’s pickup and drive away. I should have stuck up for her more.

She looked so defeated. I knew so well how it felt when you thought you let everyone down. She should know not everyone cared about the spelling bee.

And I shouldn’t be thinking about her, either. Ever since that night at dinner I’d kept my distance. Dad was right. I had a duty to help out on the ranch. I’d promised Mom. And besides, Grant had been hanging out over there almost every night. He was a much better match for her than me.

“Shit!” I scraped my knuckle on a sharp metal edge and broke open the skin. I wiped blood on my jeans. I needed to get my pissy mood on the mend. Cody was coming over to ride Mutton today.

The familiar roar of Cisco's engine snapped my head up. I tried to ignore the way my heart brightened but there it was, instant happy. I grabbed a shop rag and hurried to the entrance.

Devon left Cisco idling and stepped out, her eyes on the house, a slight frown creasing her forehead. She wore jeans and a hoodie, just what I'd expect for an adventure. I mentally slapped away the fantasy of us taking off together.

"Morning." I walked from the shop, hoping I didn't look like too much of a low-life in my work clothes.

She spun around, startled. A grin spread across her face, making me feel even lighter. "Jase. You're working already."

She probably thought that was all I ever did. She'd be right. I had to be the dumbest guy on earth. "Fixing machinery. Going have to start feeding hay pretty soon."

"Really?"

She couldn't be interested in this. "Grass is about dead and the snow will start pretty soon."

She grimaced.

"You've got your winter duds, Sorrels, mittens and all that ready, right?" I teased.

She wrinkled her forehead. "Sorrels?"

This poor girl didn't know about Sorrels? She was in for a long winter. "Boots. Rubber soles, insulated. You'll need to get some so your feet don't freeze walking from the trailer to the school."

"Oh." She didn't sound too excited.

I made it to her and we smiled at each other while the silence grew. I had to break it. "So, what's up?"

She glanced at the house. "I'm waiting for Grant. He said he'd take me and my car to town this morning."

"Your car?"

She patted Cisco's rumbling hood. "I love this car but I've imposed long enough. It's time I do something about getting

my own wheels.”

I liked the thought of helping her. “You’re welcome to Cisco as long as you want.”

She shrugged. “Thanks. But I hate driving it too much. And if I don’t, I end up having to rely on other people.”

“Like Jenna?”

She shrugged again and looked away. “I just need my own car.”

“I get it. But Grant can’t take you to town today.” A plan wasn’t that hard to figure out and I felt better and better.

She frowned. “Why not?”

“He’s not around. He left yesterday afternoon to visit a friend in Omaha.”

Her face fell. “Oh. He must have forgot.”

I wondered if he’d ever planned to help her out. Loading her car on a flatbed trailer wouldn’t be that much trouble but Grant didn’t like to work and it was work. “Look, I don’t have anything pressing today. Why don’t I take you in?”

Her grin spread like sunrise. “You wouldn’t mind?”

I trotted toward the shop. “Let me wrap things up here. I’ll take a quick shower, get the trailer and meet you back at your place.”

For that smile I’d haul her car to China.

While I hooked up the trailer and got ready, I kept telling myself to quit acting like a stupid jerk. This wasn’t a date or anything. She hadn’t even come to the ranch to see me; she’d been here for Grant. And then I told myself to shut the hell up. I was going to take her to town. That’s all. No big deal. I was just glad to have something to take me off the ranch for a while. That’s all.

She was waiting for me when I pulled up with the flatbed trailer. We loaded her Honda. It hadn’t taken much with that little car. As soon as she popped into the pickup seat she pulled out a paperback by Harlan Coben. “Have you read this?”

When I said I hadn't she handed it to me. "You're going to love it."

I had a surprise for her, too. I pulled a book from the hump next to the gear lever. She took it. "Craig Johnson?"

"He writes about a sheriff in a small town in Wyoming. I thought it might explain what it's like around here."

She didn't look all that thrilled but took the book and thanked me anyway. From there, we talked about books and movies and I told her some stories about the folks who lived at various ranches we passed on the way to Otis.

We paused and the tires rumbled along the road. The sun sparkled in the cloudless sky lighting the prairie and chasing off the earlier chill. Just riding in the pickup with Devon made me feel as sunny as the day.

She took a deep breath and stared at me for a minute. "Can I ask you something?"

Her serious tone made my hands tighten on the wheel. "Sure."

She paused. "Are you and Jenna...?" She stopped and started again. "Are you together?"

That's all? I relaxed. "No. God, no."

"But you used to be?"

I figured this came from Jenna. She was up to her old tricks, making sure Devon would think we were a couple. I needed to set it straight. "Not ever. We've known each other all our lives and our families have been neighbors for three generations. But me and Jenna? No."

She frowned at that. "But you help her out with Cody?"

"Yeah, sure. I kind of feel like it's my duty but I'd help her anyway."

She gave me a look I couldn't understand. "Must be hard to be a single mother."

Maybe she didn't mean anything by it, but it hit me like a punch. From Dad, to meddling neighbors, to Jenna herself,

people always acted like Jenna was an innocent who got trapped and had no one to help. “She made choices that got her where she is. Maybe she shouldn’t have been sleeping with someone when she was fifteen. But she really shouldn’t have been screwing around without protection.”

What an idiot! I hadn’t meant to sound so much like a grandpa. It’s that stupid temper of mine.

She flushed and we sat for a moment. Then she tried to let me off by teasing. “Tell me how you really feel.”

We passed an old homestead and I told her about the time I’d helped those ranchers on a cattle drive and had a runaway when I was five. She was horrified I’d been riding on my own at that age. But laughed at the story when it turned out fine.

She talked about growing up in St. Louis and spending time at the pool or the mall.

Finally, when there was a break in conversation I blurted out. “Okay, my turn.” My heart thudded and I wished I hadn’t said anything.

She faced me and smiled. “Shoot.”

“Never mind. It’s none of my business.”

She placed her small hand on my arm and it felt like she sent a gush of warmth into my blood. “No, go ahead.”

I stared down the road and blurted it out. “Are you and Grant a thing?”

She laughed. “Grant? We’re just friends.”

I shouldn’t feel as relieved as I did. “Does he know that?”

She leaned back in the seat and looked out the window. “Yeah. He knows because we talk about my boyfriend.”

That took away the relief and the sunshine. “Oh.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “He’s in St. Louis. I haven’t seen him since summer.”

I wanted to know more but she didn’t seem to want to talk about it. I didn’t get the impression of undying love. It seemed

more like a problem she wanted to solve.

Not that it mattered to me, or rather, not that I'd admit it mattered to me, but I filed away two bits of information. One, she wasn't interested in Grant. And two, this boyfriend thing seemed to be on the decline. At any rate, there was room in her life for another friend. I could be a friend.

I don't know how it felt to her, but it was by far the shortest trip to town I'd ever driven. Too soon we unloaded her car at Russell's shop and drove to the grocery store. I packed almost two grocery carts to her half.

I didn't open my bossy mouth and tell her if the weather turned sour, like it could do this time of year, that measly amount of provisions wouldn't last too long. I figured she'd learn. Maybe, being such a thin girl, she didn't need to eat much.

I took her to lunch at the Longbranch and the theory of her eating like a sparrow was shot to hell. She matched me, burger for burger, with fries and onion rings thrown in. It surprised the hell out of me when she finished off with a slice of the Longbranch's special apple pie.

I dropped her off at Russell's and headed to get a load of cattle salt from the feed store. Damned if when I got back she hadn't traded off her Honda for a used pickup. A forest green V6 four-wheel-drive Tacoma. Good ol' Bud Turner had driven it the last several years. He was retired and only drove around town so it hardly had any miles. Hell, he couldn't see and everyone knew to watch for him. When he died a few months ago, no one in town had the heart to drive it around. So Russell hadn't been able to sell it.

Guess Devon Michaels didn't have trouble making a decision or driving a bargain. I was glad for her but sorry she'd made the trade because it meant we'd be driving home in separate vehicles. But I had a plan of my own.

Chapter 16

Devon

“You what?” Dad’s voice blasted from the phone and I pulled it away from my ear.

I enjoyed sounding like the reasonable one. “The drive shaft was broken and even if it could be fixed, it would never be right. Besides, the Honda isn’t going to get me around out here when it snows. Everyone says I need four-wheel drive.”

Jase had seemed impressed with the deal I’d made. He knew a lot more about pickups and the roads around here than Benji. Dad could stomp and bluster all he wanted. I felt good about what I’d done. I felt good all the way around. My day with Jase had been fun, maybe the first real fun I’d had since coming here. I hated that it ended so early but Jase said he had to get back to the ranch, as usual.

Benji was working himself into a froth. “And this happened because you got caught in a stampede and run off the road?” Skepticism oozed from his voice.

“Go to Nebraska, you said. It’ll be great, you said. It wasn’t my idea, It’s like f—.” (I stopped myself from dropping the f-bomb. “It’s like Bangladesh here.” Even though the sun was still bright, it was slipping to the west and a chill rose from the sand. I was glad for the heavy hoodie I’d worn for my trek up the hill.

He sounded strangled. “Bangladesh?”

I waved my arm in frustration. Why not? No one could see me on the hilltop behind my house. I paced and stared out across the hay meadow where I’d seen Jase mowing that first day. Now the field contained dozens of big round bales of golden hay. They looked like spilled Shredded Wheat biscuits waiting for the Jolly Green’s breakfast. “Some random third world country without paved roads and where livestock wander around. I need a pickup if I’m going to stay here until spring.”

He sputtered. “But you traded your Civic for a used Tacoma? With all those miles? Does it run? Is it safe? You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“You sent me out here to be on my own. If I’m not making the decisions you want me to make, let me come home and you can monitor all my moves. I’m trying to survive the best way I can.”

A rustling came over the line and he exchanged a few words with my mom. She came on. “I’m proud of you that you figured out how to solve your problem. You negotiated your first car deal. I was in my thirties before I bought my first car on my own. If you didn’t make the best deal, well, it’s only money. The important thing is the experience you’re getting.”

I rolled my eyes. “I made a good deal, Mom. And you’d love this pickup.”

“It’s certainly cute for a pickup,” she said.

I’d sent them a picture of it before I left Otis, while I still had reception. When I got home and climbed the hill, they’d left five messages to call back. “I’ve turned total redneck in less than three months. I live in a trailer, don’t have any need for a suit and dress shoes, and drive a pickup. By the time my sentence is over I’ll only have two teeth left and will be spitting tobacco.”

Mom laughed. She acted like the whole year in Nebraska was a lark. Glad she could enjoy it. “Tell me about school.”

I felt stiff and the hangover of resentment hung in the air, but as I talked about the kids and the projects I planned, I warmed up and soon babbled on. Mom only added an “uh-huh” or “that sounds great” at appropriate times. “There was a county-wide spelling bee last week.” I waited to see if they’d heard from Dorthea and what she’d said about the fiasco.

“How did your kids do?” Apparently, Dorthea hadn’t spilled.

I didn’t see any point in detailing. “They did okay.”

Grant’s pickup topped the hill coming from the ranch. I watched his dust trail inching down the road. My ear burned

from talking on the phone too long. “That’s about all the news. I’ve got to put away my groceries. I’ll call you next week.” This was like prison, doling out our phone time.

“If your car was wrecked, how do you get it to Otis?”

A smile jumped to my face and a sparkler flashed in my chest. “The rancher whose cattle caused the wreck towed it in this morning.”

“See? That’s what I’d expect from rural people. You keep saying how isolated you are and how alone but there are people looking out for you. You’re perfectly safe.”

“Safe from people, sure. But I’m living in a trailer all alone. What if there’s a fire or storm or something like that?”

Mom laughed. “You can handle it. You figured out how to fix your car situation, didn’t you?”

“I guess. But I might die of boredom before it’s all done.”

Her voice hardened. “A little boredom won’t harm you. It’s just like you learning to negotiate a deal on your pickup. You grow with the experience and you’ll be stronger. You won’t let others influence you so much when you discover you can be on your own.”

And there’s the lecture. She’d held back longer than normal but she couldn’t help herself. I ought to let it go, end the call on a decent note. But I was my mother’s daughter. “Tommy didn’t influence or force me, Mom. If anything, I influenced him. But when people love each other, they’re supposed to compromise and work together.”

Now she got all mama-bear on me. “When someone loves you they take care of you. They don’t hide at the first sign of trouble.”

“Okay. I’ve got to go now.”

Mom sighed. “Fine. We’re proud of you, honey. You’re doing so well.”

She didn’t add, “for a fuck-up” but I knew that’s what she meant.

I punched her off and watched Grant slow as he approached the school turn-off. I sent a quick text to Cassie telling her I'd call later and hurried down the hill.

Grant's arm shot out of the pickup window and he waved at me, then pulled into the yard and stopped in front of my trailer. He stepped out of the pickup and leaned against the door watching me traipse down the hill toward him.

He looked great in his typ-a-dick way. But on a Saturday evening, with no plans and no friends and no life, to me he looked like a burger might look to a bulimic. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved Henley shirt. His long legs stretched in front of him and his welcoming smile looked damned good. "Howdy, school teacher."

"Howdy, yourself. How was the trip?"

He looked confused, then nodded. "Oh. Yeah. Got back earlier than I expected. Sorry about the car thing."

"It's okay." I meant that. I'd had way more fun with Jase than I would have with Grant. "See my new wheels?" I displayed the Tacoma proudly. "I named her Tessa."

He admired her briefly. "That looks like Bud Taylor's old rig."

Why didn't it surprise me he knew exactly where it came from and probably how much I'd paid?

He considered me for a moment and exhaled. "I've got to confess. I didn't go out of town to visit a friend."

This was interesting. "I had my suspicions."

He pushed himself from the pickup. "I had a business opportunity in Omaha."

I nodded.

He stuck his hands in his pockets. "It didn't pan out. The guy was a total jerk-off. Turns out he wanted me to pay him to buy all this merchandise to sell, like door to door."

"Sorry about that." I started toward the house. "Want a beer?"

He nodded and followed me. “Thanks. What an idiot I was. I mean, I just wanted it to work out, you know? I need to get out of here and stand on my own two feet for once and I thought this would be my chance and it sucked. I suck.”

We went into the trailer. I kicked off my shoes and padded to the fridge to get the beer. Bags of groceries spilled out on my counter, enough to last me a couple of weeks. I felt like a satisfied settler laying in supplies for the winter. “You don’t suck. Getting a job is hard.”

“You got one.” He accepted the beer.

I waved my hand around the room. “And what a prize it is!”

He agreed. “At least you’re not living with a tyrant who resents that you went to college and wants to make something more of your life than to do what your parents and grandparents did and wither away at the edge of a prairie and never experience anything.”

I might be in the prairie but I certainly felt like I was experiencing things. Maybe not good things. “Dean didn’t seem like a tyrant to me.”

Grant took a long pull on the beer. “Not Dad. It’s Jase. God, you’d think he was king or something. He acts like he knows everything and orders me around. I know he wants me out of there so he can take over.”

“Doesn’t Dean run the ranch?”

Grant looked startled. “Dad? Well, he’s transitioning to me and Jase so he can retire. And that’s good. But Jase won’t listen to anything I say. He’s set on doing everything like it’s always been done and won’t even listen to new ideas.”

I perched on a stool at the counter bar. From our conversations today, it seemed like Jase had a lot of plans for changing things at the ranch. “So what’s your next plan of attack on the job?”

Grant tipped his head back and drained his beer. He strode across the living room, dropped the bottle in the trash and opened the fridge to help himself to another. He burped. “I’m

not going to think about it tonight. I'm heading to town to party. That's why I stopped by. Come with me."

I waved at the mess on my kitchen counter. "I just got back. I need to put my stuff away and cut out pictures for bulletin boards."

"That's bullshit. It's Saturday night. We're young, free, and single. Let's go."

I hesitated. Another night with my iTunes for company, or some time with other people? "Let me change. I'll be ready in a minute."

I dashed into my room and tore through my closet. I yanked out my best jeans and a v-neck silky sweater. I even opted for boots with two-inch heels. I felt downright hot, something I hadn't felt in a long time. I ran a brush through my hair and I was ready.

Grant had a fresh bottle of beer when I came out and a quick glance in the trash told me he'd downed two while I'd changed. So much for the six pack I thought would last me all week.

Chapter 17

Jase

The cool grass on my back and fluttering last leaves on the branches above my head added to the perfection of the day. Cody's giggles ruined his stealthy attack. I waited and pretended to be unaware until he was close enough. I lunge and grabbed him by the waist and tackled him. He squealed and wrestled with me, laughter nearly paralyzing him.

We settled back on the grass, me on my back and him flying above me on my feet. I held on to his hands and swayed a little. "What was your best thing about today?" I asked.

He grinned down at me. "I like ridin' Mutton. He's the best horse in the whole world."

I kept him flying. "He's a good one. I'm partial to Frijole, myself."

Cody considered that. "Granddad says a man and his horse have a special bond."

I burst out laughing as I lowered Cody to the ground. He sounded so much like Roddy Phillips when he said that. I might not be thrilled Cody was being raised by his grandfather but there were worse role models.

"I want to ride Mutton outside the corral."

I considered it carefully. "You and Mutton need to get more acquainted with each other. You're both kind of new to this riding thing."

Cody folded his arms. "I am not new. I've been ridin' Buster since I was little."

I nodded. "True. But Mutton isn't as experienced as Buster. He's only a few years old and it'll take some time before he's as smart as Buster."

Cody settled next to me on the grass. "Why couldn't I come over this morning?"

I stretched out my arm and Cody squirmed to use it for a pillow. “Ms. Devon needed a ride to town and I took her.” Warmth started in my belly and spread outward when I thought about it.

I’d picked up a decent bottle of wine at the feed store that also served as the liquor store in Otis. Since I couldn’t call her, I figured I’d head over to her place after Jenna picked up Cody. She might have other plans and I’d have to apologize and come on home. But, really, what other plans could she have? She didn’t know anyone and might be happy to spend the evening with a live body instead of the three disappointing TV stations.

If she wasn’t at home, I knew she’d be at the Longbranch. I’d just go into town and act like I’d planned to do that all along. At least we could spend some time together. Or more time together.

I probably should remember Dad’s warnings. But what harm could hanging out do? We’d had a great time today in town. Hanging out didn’t mean we had to take it any further. She was fine being friends with Grant. Why not me, too?

Cody kicked his short legs into the air and flopped them back on the grass. “I guess I don’t mind kindergarten so much.”

I rolled over and propped my head on my arm. “That’s good to hear.”

“Ms. Devon is so pretty and nice. And she smells good.”

I thought of that faint lilac scent that always surrounded her. “That she does.”

“Granddad says I can’t marry her because I’m too little and she’ll be an old gray mare by the time I grow up. But maybe you could. You don’t have a girl.”

I didn’t know about marrying. But I could think of a few things I’d like to do with Ms. Devon. Before I could scrape my mind out of the gutter and think of something appropriate to say, we heard a pickup heading our way. We both sat up.

Cody's face fell. "Oh, man. It's Mom." He pulled on my arm and I held it stiff. He swung from it but he was growing so big he had to raise his legs instead of just hanging like he used to. "Tell her I can stay overnight. I can help you make pizza. Maybe we can get the tent and sleep outside like we did last time."

I grabbed him and stood. "Not tonight, buddy."

"Aw," he voiced his disappointment and pouted at Jenna as she parked her pickup.

I dangled him upside down to his delighted shrieks.

Jenna grinned as she made her way across the grass. "Having a good time?"

I set Cody on the ground and he folded his arms and legs. "Why'd you haveta come so soon?"

She ruffled his hair. "I love you too, big guy."

She wore painted-on jeans, snug enough to outline her firm ass to perfection. The tight t-shirt clung to her and in the chilly breeze, left nothing to my imagination. I'm sure she knew what seeing her pointy nipples would do to me.

It pissed me off that she pushed at me like this and made me even madder that I obliged her every time with an instant hard-on. So many times I thought I ought to give her what she asked for. It would feel good to just fuck her and get it over with.

But I didn't want that. She had lots of faults but she didn't deserve to be screwed and left alone again.

She dropped to the ground and spread her legs wide, pulling Cody into her lap. He only stayed for a second, then was off like a rocket, running with Myron to the garden. She didn't draw her legs together but leaned back and thrust her breasts outward. Her eyes drifted to mine, checking to make sure I noticed the invitation. "What do you have planned for tonight?" she asked.

I turned my head and watched Cody play tag with Myron. "Not much."

She ran a hand down the inside of her thigh as if smoothing her jeans. “I could stay and fix you a chicken fried steak.”

Jesus, could she be any more obvious? I raised my voice and it came out harsher than I’d intended. “Come on, Cody. Time to get going.”

He whipped his head toward me in surprise, as if I’d betrayed him in an unexpected way. He pursed his lips but he took slow steps our way.

Jenna frowned and stood up. “Okay, then. Thanks for taking Cody today. He needs good male role models.”

I cupped Cody’s head as I walked him to Jenna’s red pickup. “I like having him around.” I lifted him into the seat. “We’ll do this again soon, pardner.”

He nodded. Jenna leaned across the seat and bent to give Cody a kiss. Maybe she really did feel a sudden affection for her son. I’d like to think that was it and not an effort to let the top of her t-shirt gap and give me the final boob flash.

Chapter 18

Devon

The noise from inside seeped through the doors even before Grant swung it open for me. After the last couple of times I'd been in the Longbranch, the scene shocked me. Instead of the empty bar with maybe one or two cowboys leaning on it shooting the breeze with the bartender and a few of the tables full of townspeople, the bar was packed. We had to shove and maneuver to make our way to get a couple of bottles of beer.

Smells of deep fryers on overdrive, grilling burgers and stale beer mingled with wool and bodies. Everyone seemed to have come in from the cooling evening.

"They must have won," Grant shouted above the riot of voices and country music.

"Who won?" The cold beer tasted great.

Grant looked at me like I'd been living under a rock. "The playoffs?"

I shrugged in question.

"I can't believe the kids at school haven't said anything. Otis's six-man football team played the semi-finals tonight. I'm guessing they won and will be going to state in Omaha next week."

People stood toe to toe, butt to butt. They laughed and yelled their conversations. This was a redneck, miniscule reenactment of Times Square on New Year's Eve. All for high school football. Everyone from grandparents to babies in arms seemed pumped with the victory. "Is this Friday Night Lights?"

Grant laughed and took hold of my hand to pull me through the crowd. "Something like that."

He snaked us through people to a booth along the wall. Jenna was squished next to the wall with Mandy and a hairy, overweight rancher propped on the edge of one bench. A

pretty, dark-haired girl sat across from Jenna. A guy wearing a cowboy hat had his arm around her and another girl filled out their side of the booth. All eyes focused on Jenna as she spoke. “I couldn’t even believe it. She was all like drooling over him because he lets her drive his car. And I’m like, ‘Back off, bitch.’”

Everyone laughed. The pretty girl reached across the table. “I can’t believe she’s even here.”

Jenna tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Cody says she doesn’t know anything about horses. Thank god she’s only here for one year.”

Mandy laughed and looked up. When she saw us standing there she looked startled. “Oh! Grant. Devon. I didn’t know you were at the game.”

Jenna whipped her head toward me. Her eyes narrowed.

Grant waved his hand in the air. “We’re not crazy enough to stand around in the cold. We’re fashionably late to the celebration.”

Even if someone wanted to make room for us to join them, the booth offered no extra space. I noticed the pool table in the corner, maybe because it was the only open spot in the bar. I put a hand on Grant’s arm. “Let’s play pool.”

The next two hours flew by while Grant and I teamed up at the pool table. Despite continuing to drink beer, we couldn’t lose. I met dozens of people as they played against us or just hung out around the pool table. The strange thing about this place was that age didn’t seem to make much difference. Young people, middle-aged and old folks hung around and teased and visited all together. I liked that.

Slowly the crowd diminished. When I looked up, only a few tables were occupied and no one stood around, except the people hanging out around the pool table.

Jenna still held court at her table. Mandy and her husband had been replaced with a young couple who were obviously drunk. The dark-haired girl and her cowboy still sat across from Jenna. All five leaned inward, their heads together. Every

few minutes they'd laugh then lean close to each other again. They looked like every lunch table of cool kids in every high school in the country. They relished their exclusivity and made a show of having more fun than anyone else.

Jenna tapped the girl next to her, who shoved at the guy. They all slid out and Jenna stood. She flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder and pulled the hem of her t-shirt, smoothing it on her hips, drawing it tight over her breasts.

She eyed me and sauntered our way. I glanced around. Out of the six guys we'd been playing pool with, five of them watched Jenna's progress with something like goddess worship on their faces. Probably the only reason guy number six didn't watch her was because he was ordering another round.

Jenna leaned a hip against the pool table. She smiled at me. "You've been stuck over here all night, surrounded with testosterone. Are you sick of hearing about football and hunting?"

I set my pool cue on the table and reached for my beer. "It's been fun."

She eyed my beer. "Anything is fun if you drink enough."

Huh. What was her point?

"Lucky for you Dorteia went home right after the game. She frowns on teachers hanging out in the bar because it sends a bad message."

I kept my eyes on hers and lifted my bottle for a sip. "How's your night? Did you go to the game?"

She rolled her eyes. "I had to. They were honoring past homecoming queens."

Her eyes traveled over my head to the guys behind me. I suppose she wanted to admire her admirers admiring her. The tip of her mouth ticked.

I backed up against the table and casually glanced that way. The guys huddled together laughing, not paying her any attention. "I was never into sports in high school," I said.

“Oh, around here everyone is in sports. I played volleyball and basketball. Jase was a real athlete. He was a quarterback and even took his basketball team to state when he was a senior.”

“Really?” I could say that these days, Jase seemed way more interested in mystery novels. But then, I got the feeling she was staking her claim again and I didn’t want to get into that game.

The dark-haired girl cut a wandering path toward us. The cowboy followed her, his blurry eyes fully focused on her ass. She threw an arm around Jenna’s shoulder. “What is my BFF doing over here?” Her words sounded as fuzzy as her focus.

Jenna hugged the girl back. “Betsy, this is the new school teacher, Devon Michaels. Devon, this is my friend, Betsy. Her brother plays on the football team so she’s home from school to watch.”

If Jenna had been homecoming queen, even after having a baby, she must have been The Shit in high school. It was probably hard seeing everyone, including BFF Betsy, go off to college and all the newness and fun. Maybe Jenna needed to be important even if it was one night. If she wanted to make me look bad to make her look good, then what was it to me? I wouldn’t be in this county for very long. I felt like a saint, doing a good deed without anyone knowing.

Jenna and Betsy swayed together and I realized Jenna was drunk, too. Jenna pointed at Devon. “Isn’t she just the cutest thing you’ve ever seen?”

Betsy lifted her eyebrows and considered. She reached her hand out to pat my hair. “Just like a red-headed step-daughter.”

I tried to smile. “What’s that mean?”

Jenna and Betsy shared a sloppy giggle. Jenna said, “It means that you don’t belong. You know, like redheads are kind of rare and no one really likes them much. Like a step-child. So putting them together makes you doubly bad.”

I waited a moment, trying to resist a nasty comeback. I reminded myself that their insults didn’t matter to me.

Jenna nodded toward me. “Devon is some kind of genius. She graduated from college a whole year earlier than normal. Dorthea says she was like the top of her class or something.”

Betsy snickered. “Education. Teaching college. Anybody can do that. She ought to try accounting. No one graduates early in that. Especially at the University.”

That would be the University of Nebraska, where I’d heard the N stood for Noledge. I didn’t point out my degree was from Washington University.

“So how impressive is it she got sent out here to Bumfuck, Nebraska in a one-room schoolhouse?” I wondered if Betsy was this much of a bitch when she was sober.

“I’m really loving my students. They’re all so sweet,” I said, emphasizing sweet.

“So you’re out there all alone?” Betsy said.

Jenna tensed. “She keeps herself busy. She hikes. That’s how she makes phone calls.” Jenna cracked up and Betsy joined her.

“I bet she recycles and meditates,” Betsy barely got it out before they fell against each other in laughter.

“Yeah.” I clenched my teeth. “I exercise and eat lots of vegetables. Not like most of the people out here who drive their ‘rigs’ around and eat corn nuts and Twinkies.”

Jenna’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh, she bites!”

Grant’s arm snaked over my shoulder with a fresh beer dangling from his fingers. I closed my hand around it. “Thanks!”

Jenna’s eyes shifted from me to Grant. “Oh Grant. How sweet of you to take care of Devon.”

A sharp tone split the rounded edges of the late night. Grant’s eyes looked guarded. “If you want a beer I’ll get you one.”

Jenna’s laugh was cruel. “Sure. A beer. That’s what I want from you.”

Grant smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "On second thought, I think you've had enough."

Jenna's eyebrows lifted. "There you go, taking care of me now. So unselfish. Not like you at all."

I'd had enough of Jenna's mean-spirited jabs. I slipped my arm around Grant's waist. "Grant's been a big help to me since I got here."

Jenna glared at Grant. They definitely had something going on below the surface. "I'll bet he's been nice. That's our Grant."

Grant backed up a step, taking me with him. "I think maybe we should be going."

Jenna closed the gap. "Right. Run away, you're good at that."

"Maybe I'm not running away but toward something," he said.

She laughed. "You're so full of shit. And pretty soon, everyone is going to figure that out."

I hated the hurt look on Grant's face and tried to stick up for him. "Grant is a great guy."

Jenna shot me a skeptical look. "Really. I thought you were more attracted to the strong silent type."

I pressed closer to Grant and tilted my head to his. I tried for my best *fuck me* look. "Grant is my type of guy."

Betsy and Jenna snorted together. Jenna sneered at me "See how far that gets you."

I couldn't have predicted Grant's next move. His arm tightened around my waist and bent over, pulling me into him. When I turned my face up to his to question his action, he lowered his lips to mine and kissed me.

Not some peck or even a medium kind of friendly kiss. He kissed me with purpose, rubbing his mouth against mine, urging my mouth open. His other arm snaked around my shoulders, pulling me even closer while he slid a hand down

my spine and cupped my ass. The kiss seemed to go on for an hour but it probably only lasted a few seconds. Long enough for me to go through shock, anger, understanding, acceptance and then to jump on board.

Whatever went on between the two of them didn't concern me. I suspected it had something to do with Cody and Jase not acknowledging him, and she let some of the blame dribble on to Grant. I didn't think his choice to react this way was a good one. I would have preferred he walk away from Jenna, but I wouldn't leave him on his own. I had his back, or in this case, his ass. I followed his lead, pressed into him and dropped both of my hands to his butt, pulling him toward me. I didn't feel any tale-tell bulge in his jeans and hoped no one else noticed.

When we finally pulled away, I tried to act as if my knees were weak and I leaned into Grant, giving him a doe-eyed stare of adoration. At least, I hoped my acting skills carried it off.

Jenna and Betsy didn't have a lot to say after that. If I'd known kissing Grant would shut Jenna up, I'd have tried it sooner.

I didn't have much time to savor the win. A satisfied smile crept along Jenna's face. I dropped my head against Grant's chest and followed her line of vision. A jolt of regret shot through me and I must have stiffened.

Grant swung his head around and he sucked in a quick breath.

Jase stood in the middle of the Longbranch bar. I couldn't read his eyes from this far away but his fists clenched. He spun around and strode out the door without a word to anyone.

Chapter 19

Devon

The rhythmic thump of the pickup tires on the highway and Frank Sinatra's croon from Grant's iPod carried us the first ten miles out of town toward the ranch. The moon lit up the hills in a silvery glow, making them magical. But I was too busy feeling miserable to notice.

I'd just told Jase today that I wasn't interested in Grant and then he walked into the bar to see us in a clutch. It made me look like a liar and a cheat. More than that, the hurt look on Jase's face soured my stomach.

Grant reached up and poked off the music. "You like him, don't you?"

Startled, I tried to cover. "Who?"

He gave me a sidelong look. "My brother. I can tell."

This was proof I'd let my imagination get the better of me. I hadn't kept my stupid, immature, romantic fantasies buried deeply enough. They'd come close enough to the surface that Grant, and probably Jenna, had caught a glimpse of them. I spoke to myself as much as to Grant. "Sure, I like Jase. He's been a big help with Cody and he's done some nice stuff."

Grant shook his head. "Don't play dumb."

"Okay, yeah, I know what you mean." I tried to find the right words and finally dove in. "I think Jase is hot. He's tall and sexy and has this cowboy mystique. I wouldn't mind jumping his bones."

Grant burst out laughing. "Don't hold back."

"But I'm only going to be out here for less than a year. Then I'm heading back to St. Louis and Tommy."

Grant watched the road. "How did you meet Tommy?"

A strange feeling of sadness curled in my gut. "We met in the ninth grade. Me and my best friend Cassie, and Tommy were put in a group in English class. We had to do a

presentation on *The Scarlet Letter* and they never read the book. But I did and I loved it. So I told them all about it and they made up the PowerPoint and we got an A. From then on, it was always the three of us. But our junior year, Cassie got this asshole of a boyfriend and sort of left us. She came back when they broke up, but by then, Tommy and I were together.”

Grant nodded. “It’s good to have friends that understand and are there for you.”

“What about your friends from high school?”

He gazed out the driver’s window, his face away from me. “I didn’t have any really close friends.”

“I can’t believe that. Everyone knows you and loves you.” Everyone but a drunk Jenna and her bitchy friend, Betsy.

He sucked on his full bottom lip. “I’ve always been... different. And, yeah, everyone kind of accepted me and I went to all the parties and shit, but I didn’t have any real friends. You know?”

“Different? Because you wanted to go to school? Seems like most kids here plan on going to college.”

He looked sideways at me. “Yeah, but I’m not all macho. I don’t like horses or tractors.”

I laughed. “It’s not a big deal, Grant.”

“It is around here. It is to Dean.” He waited a second and , “It is to Jase. I used to get beat up when I was younger.”

“I’m so sorry about that.” I thought of Trevor.

“Dad and Jase thought it was good for me. Thought it would toughen me up.”

I put a hand on his arm. “Then they’re shitheads. Stupid, ass-sucking, fuck-wads.” Jase hadn’t acted as though he thought Trevor needed to toughen up.

He chuckled. “But they’re my family. And I love them and I hate that I might disappoint them or embarrass them in front of their friends and stuff.”

“Oh my god, Grant. This isn’t the dark ages!”

He didn't say anything for a long time. When he spoke, his eyes drilled into me. "So, you don't have any plans to be with Jase?"

Even if I'd been tempted before, and I wasn't because I wouldn't cheat on Tommy, I absolutely was done with Jase now. I couldn't be with a caveman who wouldn't accept his own brother just because he wasn't man enough. "Not interested."

His beautiful mouth turned up in a smile. "Then maybe you could do me a favor."

"Sure."

"I've got resumes out all over the place in Omaha and I'm sure I'll get a job pretty soon. I just need Dean and Jase to get off my back until I get it all worked out and can move to Omaha. Can you just, like, be my girlfriend until this all comes through?"

I choked. "What?"

"If you really don't want to be with Jase it would be a perfect solution. Jenna won't be jealous of you and will leave you alone and Jase and Dean will stop being so suspicious and we'll all just get through the winter. Come spring, we'll all go our separate ways and in the meantime, we'll all have peace."

He turned off the highway onto the gravel road.

I squirmed. "I hate lies."

Grant snickered. "You're so lucky. You grew up with these parents who loved you. You had a couple of close friends who know all about you and will always have your back."

"I'm not sure creating this fiction is a good idea. You can't have a real relationship with your family if they don't know who you are."

"They don't want to know the real me. They want me to fit their idea of what a Varner is. Dean is on the edge now. Just help me out, Devon. What harm can it do?"

I shook my head as he slowed the pickup and eased off the road into my yard. "I don't know."

He made a strange sound and I whipped my head around to look at him. A tear wound down his chiseled cheekbone and dripped off his chin. "I just want a little peace until I can get away. Please, Devon."

What a sucker I was. I couldn't resist his tears and broken heart. Really, what difference would it make to me?

I opened my mouth to agree to be his pretend girlfriend. Then I closed it. Instead of seeing Grant sitting next to me in the dark pickup cab, I saw Tommy in his dorm room. I was buttoning my shirt, trying to cool my passion since he'd just discovered he had no condoms. He asked me to stay. He said just one time wouldn't cause any harm. I knew better but he looked so hurt and rejected. I had let my soft-heartedness take over. It had been a huge mistake.

I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, Grant. I am glad to be your friend but I won't lie for you."

Chapter 20

Devon

God, I was glad this day was over. Trevor and Bailey had a fight over something neither of them wanted to tell me about. That was fine with me. I didn't want to get in the middle of it. But the rest of the kids all took up sides and the whole bunch of them spent the day sniping and glaring and being belligerent. I'd finally made up a relay game that involved their history lesson on the Civil War and incorporated some math and spelling. I took it outside where they had to race around the school building to symbolize running messages through enemy lines as spies. They had to spell a word from their vocabulary list as a password and do a math problem to figure out how many troops were on the move. It was inspired, if I did say so myself.

It did the trick. By the time their rides showed up after school, the kids were back to being friends. There is nothing like friendly competition to mend fences. I was tired and exhilarated at the same time. I needed to tell someone about my day so I climbed the hill with my phone.

After about a week of cold and some snow, the weather had warmed again. During the cold I'd had to drive Tessa to a hilltop to call but Jenna had seen the tracks and made a point to tell me how driving on the fragile prairie would ruin the ground and it might take decades to grow back.

Lucky for me, a hoodie was enough to keep me warm today.

Tommy picked up after three rings. "Devon. God, I'm glad you called. I've been needing to talk to you for days."

I sat on my sandstone rock and shielded the phone as best I could from the chilly wind. "Is something wrong?"

He sighed. "It's all wrong without you. I miss you."

His sadness took my thoughts away from the kids and my successful day. "I know. I miss you, too." I said the words by

rote.

He sounded irritated. “Are you outside again? The wind is making it hard to hear you.”

I hunched deeper, trying to block it. “Sorry. I still haven’t found anywhere else I get reception.”

“You could drive your pickup like you did before.”

I didn’t want to talk about phone reception. I wanted to connect to someone. To Tommy. “I hate to do that because it rips up the hills and might cause a blowout.”

Frustration seeped from the phone. “What the hell is a blowout?”

“Never mind. You sound upset. What’s going on?” I’d listen to his day and then tell him about mine. That’s what couples did, shared their experiences.

“I’m really lonely without you.”

When he said lonely it made me sad. “I know.”

“You don’t know. You’re in Nebraska doing all these new things and having all this fun and I’m here, doing the same old stuff with the same friends. Do you even know how hard it is to go out with everyone and not have you there?”

Did he care I didn’t go out with anyone, ever? I pushed away my pettiness. He couldn’t know how alone I felt most evenings. “I miss you, too.”

His voice hardened. “You say that but you don’t do anything about it.”

A spark of anger flashed in my belly. “What do you want me to do?”

“Come home to me. Just quit and get back here.” His voice smoothed out to a soft plea at the end.

I felt close to tears. “You know I can’t do that. If I don’t finish the year my folks won’t pay my school loans. I’ll end up with debt it will take me years to pay off.”

He paused and when he answered he sounded mad. “So what you’re saying is that money is more important to you than I am.”

I hit my fist into my thigh. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m asking you—again—to be patient for a few months. Then when I come back, I’ll be debt free and we can get our own place.”

“Come on, baby. Be reasonable. They don’t make you pay that much on those loans every month. I’m going crazy here without you.”

I heard a girl call his name. It sounded like he held his phone away and shouted, “Just a sec.”

My heart squeezed. “Who’s that?”

He brushed it off. “Some new friend of Cassie’s. They’re waiting for me to go to Horsefeathers.”

A pit formed in my stomach. He was going to the bar with Cassie and someone she’d found to replace me. I was going to traipse down the hill to my leaking, dripping slum home and spend the night reading a mystery novel. “You’d better go. Don’t want to keep them waiting.”

“In a minute.” He lowered his voice. “Come home. Do you know how I feel every night in my bed all alone? All I do is think of you and miss you. I’m doing myself so often I’m getting carpal tunnel. I need you.”

My throat felt dry. I thought of Tommy’s bed, of his weight on top of me.

He kept at it. “Thanksgiving break is too long to wait. Come home now. Let me show you how much you’re missing.”

Thanksgiving. I needed to tell him. “I’m not coming home at Thanksgiving.”

The purring tone switched back to anger. “What do you mean?”

I hated having to tell him, he’d be upset. “It’s just too far to drive for only a couple of days.”

I pictured him throwing his head back in annoyance. “No way! How can you say that? What’s a little driving compared to us being together?”

“I have to teach on Wednesday so I couldn’t even get home until late Thursday and Marsha and Benji are going to Arkansas so I’d have to go with them and would get back to St. Louis in time to drive back on Sunday and start school Monday.”

He sounded like a hurt little boy. “I’m afraid you’re not coming back to me. That you’ll fall in love with Nebraska and you’ll leave me. I can’t live without you, Dev. You’ve been my whole world since we were in high school.”

I heard the desperation in his voice and should reassure him. “I’m not going to fall in love with Nebraska.” It was the closest I could come to promising to return to him.

“You don’t even hear yourself. You go on and on about the kids and how great they are. You have this whole new vocabulary about Autogates and blowouts and you even bought a pickup for Christ sake.”

That old need to make him feel better surfaced. “I hate it here. Really. The people are all twenty years behind the world. Look at me, I have to climb a hill just to talk on the phone. And my trailer is a total dump. The bedroom window leaks when it rains, which isn’t that big of a problem because it hardly ever rains. Just wind and dirt that covers every surface. The toilet runs and even jiggling the handle doesn’t help and the kitchen faucet leaks. Just drip, drip, drip all night.”

He waited a beat. “Then come home. You didn’t have any trouble sleeping in my dorm room. I’m still there, alone.”

Again, the girl called him.

“I’m sorry, Tommy,” I whispered. “I can’t walk out on the kids now.”

His voice hardened again. “Right. I get it.”

“Tommy.”

“I gotta go. Call me again if you get the time.”

He hung up. I considered punching his number again but I really didn't have anything to add.

I stood up and wrapped my hoodie closer around me. The wind bit through it. I'd have to dig out my parka. This was going to be a long winter.

Chapter 21

Jase

I hadn't really meant to eavesdrop. I'd been out riding Frijole and checking heifers when I heard someone talking. I followed the sound to the hilltop above the schoolhouse just in time to hear Devon launch into how much she hated Nebraska.

She was obviously talking to her St. Louis boyfriend, the one she hadn't seemed so sure about. But then, she'd also told me she wasn't interested in Grant. What the hell was her game? And what was wrong with me? I'd been successful steering clear of girlfriend drama. I hated the complications of relationships and how people played each other. And here was this girl obviously using everyone and still, I didn't quite believe it. Something about her made me think there had to be an explanation for all this. I needed to go by the evidence, not some fantasy I'd been creating in my mind since I was a kid.

What was it with her? No one had ever made me so mad before. She weaseled under my skin and rubbed on all the raw spots. And still I wanted to be around her. Why did I even care?

The window in the bedroom leaks, huh? The toilet runs and the sink drips. But we're too primitive to notice. Man, Devon sure had a high view of herself. And a low view of country folks.

I trotted Frijole down the hill away from Her Highness. Even though the wind picked up, my face burned. I was plenty mad, yeah, but I was also embarrassed. We couldn't fix the trailer if she didn't tell me it needed repair and she didn't tell me about it because she thought we were too backward to care.

The school and residence maintenance fell to me. I'd volunteered since it sat on the section we leased from the state. It just seemed like the logical thing to do and I'd been doing it since high school. Might as well take care of the princess's

distress while she was up on the hilltop having phone sex with hunky St. Louis cool-guy, Tommy.

For once, Myron took my side and followed me instead of hanging with his new best friend. I watched him sniff the ground, probably on the hunt for rabbits or mice, since I didn't have any cattle for him to chase. I rode around the school and tied Frijole to the hitching post by the back door. I kept a toolbox under the sink and I retrieved it and stalked across the yard to her trailer. I glanced around for Myron but didn't see him. He'd probably found that rabbit and was tearing around. He'd return after he had his fun.

My dander was up, as Mom would have said. I didn't want to analyze why. What did I care if Ms. Devon saw us all as hicks and hillbillies? As far as I was concerned, St. Louis wasn't a paradise. Traffic, crime, people everywhere all the time. No space to breathe and everything cost money. Coffee for five bucks, fancy restaurants and bars, expensive clothes. Beer on my front porch didn't cost a whole lot and the scenery and company were pretty damned good. It didn't matter that my jeans were faded and had a few holes.

I lugged my tool box up the trailer steps and inside. The trailer looked neat. Her books lined the shelves in the living room and her dishes were all washed and put away. Even with the drafty windows and frequent wind, there wasn't a speck of dust. She might be an entitled princess but she knew how to take care of things.

Fixing the sink took about three minutes and was a matter of tightening some washers. I moved on to the toilet. The smell of lilacs wound into my nostrils and gave me an immediate hard-on. I leaned against the sink and closed my eyes. I didn't invite the image but I didn't fight it. Devon stood in the shower not three feet from me. Warm water cascaded down her glistening skin. She raised her arms to her head, working lather into that coppery hair, her eyes closed. Soap suds frothed down her neck and slid across her breasts with their erect nipples. The shampoo foam caressed her belly and firm thighs, outlining the curves of her ass.

Shit.

I opened my eyes, now really pissed off. I didn't need this kind of stimulation. I didn't have a trip planned away from the ranch for a while. Damn it.

The bathroom was every bit as neat as the front rooms. She must have OCD to keep everything so neat. Probably a control freak.

I needed to remember that Devon was off limits. It made me feel better to think of her imperfections. I took the lid off the tank and fixed the leak. Again, it was simple. Maybe I ought to show her how to do these minor things so she wouldn't have to suffer drippy, leaky plumbing. But if I did that, I wouldn't have an excuse to come over.

I threw the wrench into the toolbox. I didn't need an excuse to come over because I didn't want to see her. I should teach her and then I wouldn't have to be around her. But then, I'd have to be around her to teach her and ... I slammed the lid on the toolbox and stomped into the bedroom. I'd have Grant take over maintenance.

After the Girl Scout correctness of the rest of the trailer, the bedroom stopped me in my tracks. The bed was a tangle of sheets. The down comforter a mangle of fluff bunched in the middle of the mattress. A pair of jeans and a few t-shirts lay in a heap on the floor. The closet door stood open and her dresser was a chaos of jewelry, notes, change, keys, phone cords and junk.

Again, the smell of lilacs and something else tightened my jeans. I put up a wall to keep myself from identifying that something else tingle in my nose but the knowledge seeped through the cracks. It was her smell. Deeper than shampoo or perfume or even skin. Devon's essence. And I wanted to bury my face in it, inhale it, own it.

I slammed the toolbox to the floor in front of the window. No. I didn't want that weird romantic shit. That worked in novels but not for real life. I wanted to get laid. That was all. She brought it out in me because she was something new. I'd find an excuse and go to Omaha soon. Get this out of my system so I could relax.

I inspected the window and saw it was going to take more than a screwdriver and wrench. I'd need to come back with caulk and take the storm window off from the outside. I picked up my toolbox and turned to leave, then caught the sight of something I wish I'd never seen.

Chapter 22

Devon

I felt each jarring step as I descended the hill toward my trailer. I'd hiked up feeling tired but like a teaching rock star. I came down not only worn out but feeling like a failure at life. Tommy was supposed to be the most important thing in my life and I was letting him down big time. He depended on me, needed me to help keep him up and stable. And I'd bugged out on him. I worried he'd slip into depression, maybe start drinking too much, hanging out with the wrong kids, drugs, legal problems.

He'd had some rough times last summer after what had happened. At first, I'd been really mad at him and didn't want to see him. I was barely able to take care of myself, let alone support him. Then Marsha and Benji had sent me to Arkansas and then here. I was feeling stronger and more stable all the time. I really needed to be there for Tommy now.

A little voice, probably the Evil Marsha dwarf in my brain, tried to remind me that Tommy hadn't been there for me when I needed him most. Not like Jase at the high school that day of the spelling bee. Jase had stood up to Ruth Ann and defended me without question.

My gut did a little twist when I remembered his face in the Longbranch a couple of weeks ago. I shouldn't care.

It was just that we'd had such a good time when he'd taken me to town that day and I'd told him I wasn't interested in Grant. I had five more months here and it would have been nice if Jase and I could have been friends. We had so much in common.

I didn't thrill at the thought of sitting in my trailer all night. Maybe I'd put in one of the donated videos and bake a cake. It might be fun to learn to cook from scratch. Mandy had given me a couple of recipes. I think she felt bad about what I overheard at the Longbranch and wanted to make up for it. She'd been friendly ever since that night.

I could bake a cake and if it turned out, I'd take it over to the Varners later. Not for Jase but to surprise all of them. I hadn't seen Grant much lately. They probably didn't get a lot of baked goods and it might be fun just to drop it off.

I had a new plan that made me feel a little better. Dad always said when you feel sad, do something nice for someone else. I hated to admit he might be right. I was halfway down the hill when my phone beeped. Surprised I had reception, I thrilled, hoping it was Tommy calling back so we could clear things up.

I didn't recognize the number but it was a Spencer County code. I pressed answer.

"Ms. Devon? This is Ruth Ann." She sounded clipped.

"Uh, hi." Surprised she even had my number I was immediately on guard.

She didn't waste time getting to her point. "Trevor came home today with a hole in the knee of his jeans. He said you had them running all over the playground in some sort of harried race. These are a brand new pair of high-end jeans."

Heat rose to my face. "I...I...uh, sorry about that. Trevor and Bailey had a problem between them and I thought the kids had extra energy. I came up with an idea to help everyone mend fences and settle down." Now I could show off to someone about how cleverly I handled the situation. "I made up a game that involved their Civil War lessons with math and spelling and it..."

Words shot through the phone. "I realize you're young and might get bored with the regular lessons but our children need their book learning, not games on the playground 24/7. And this issue with torn clothes. Well. I ought to make you pay for these jeans. They cost me seventy-five dollars."

I thought of a thousand things to say, most of them defending me and trashing her parenting but I clamped my mouth shut and let her spew.

"He was going to wear those to the roping this weekend. You may not realize it but appearance is 50% of confidence

and after that debacle at the spelling bee, Trevor needs all the confidence he can get. He needs to win these competitions to keep up with his father's reputation. And you just ruined it for him."

"I'm sorry, Ruth Ann." I kept my voice as calm as possible. "Trevor is an extremely bright kid and he really shines in his school work. He gets excited when he discovers new things and reaches to learn more. I think that shows quite a bit of confidence."

"Says someone barely out of diapers. You don't know anything about my child and what he needs. I am seriously considering homeschooling."

I felt a desperate urge to protect Trevor from his mother. I may be young and naïve and absolutely lacked experience, but I knew enough not to fight with her. That would only make things worse for Trevor.

"I'm sorry for the jeans. Thanks for calling and for the feedback on my teaching techniques. I'll really think about that for future lessons. I'm glad to get all the advice I can, especially from experienced educators." I didn't need to lie and add the extra, "such as yourself" because I figured her ego would supply it.

She seemed a little more subdued. "Okay. Well. See you tomorrow."

I shoved my phone back in my pocket, for the first time glad I didn't get reception at the trailer. Would I be getting crazy calls from all the parents if I did? I still felt the relay had been inspired teaching but my spirits fell even further. It would be great to have someone share the success with me.

The cake. I'd take it over to the Varners and Grant would listen. He'd understand the challenge of the kids and why this meant so much to me. Okay, Grant might be more interested in telling me about his day. The image of Jase popped into my head. Actually, it didn't suddenly appear. I'd been thinking of him all afternoon. I knew he'd laugh when I told him Cody's excitement at spelling pie correctly and adding 3+2 to tell the commander there were five armies heading his way.

Tires on the gravel road made me look up to see Jenna's red pickup turning into the schoolyard. Great. She probably had some issue with today's activities, too. Cody's clothes had been intact when I sent him home, if a little dirty. I couldn't wait to find out what else I'd done wrong.

She idled the pickup in front of the trailer and leaned out the window. Cody stood next to her on the seat and leaned out, too. "Ms. Devon! Mom made runzas and we're going to Jase's and gobble them all up like big bears."

His excitement rolled out, immediately lifting my spirits. "Big bears can eat a lot. What are runzas?"

He disappeared into the pickup.

I smiled at Jenna, waiting for her complaint on my teaching style. She'd been civil toward me since the Longbranch incident. I figured since there weren't very many people out here to begin with, everyone learned to forgive and forget. We were all going to be thrown together often enough, we'd better try to get along.

She shrugged. "Sorry for the interruption. We were on our way to Varner's and Cody spotted you coming down the hill. He insisted we stop."

Cody popped his head out the window and thrust his hand toward me, a golden, crusty bun clutched in his little fingers. "Here." He said, then turned a concerned look to his mother. "Ms. Devon can have some, can't she?"

Jenna ruffled his hair. "Of course. We've got a ton. They're one of Jase's favorite things. I've been making them for him since high school."

Of course she had. She'd supplied him with all kinds of buns in the oven, hadn't she?

I took the warm bun from him. It smelled of onions and fresh bread. The savory aroma brought water to my mouth. I held it to my face and inhaled.

"It's my favorite, too. We're going to surprise Jase with supper!" Cody bubbled over with delight. I know how he felt.

The thought of surprising the Varners with cake had tickled me, too. Now, even that anticipation vanished.

Jenna indicated the bun I held. “A runza is a traditional thing. Probably from the settlers who came from Germany. It’s cabbage, onions and hamburger all wrapped in sweet roll dough. Everyone around here makes them.”

Thank you, Jenna, for once again pointing out how I don’t fit in. “It smells wonderful.”

Cody bounced up and down like the pickup seat was a trampoline. “We’re going to have them at the branding on Saturday. You can come to the branding. Everyone is going to be there. I can’t ride Mutton because he’s not ready yet but Granddad said I can ride Buster and we’re gonna round up the cows.”

I laughed at his enthusiasm. “That sounds great.” Jenna stared out the window.

“You’re gonna be there, right? I can’t wait to show you Buster.”

There was an awkward pause. I finally said, “Well, I don’t know if I can make it.”

“Aw, please!”

Jenna finally turned to me. “You should come, really. It’s Saturday morning.”

I could tell the offer was grudging. “That’s nice of you but...”

“You HAVE to come!” Cody begged.

Jenna lowered her shoulders. “Yeah. You really should. A branding is kind of big deal and since you’re only going to be in Nebraska for a little while, you ought to experience it.”

Again she emphasized my outsider status. Me showing up would probably irritate Jenna. “Sure. I’d like that. Thanks.”

“Anytime.” Jenna nudged Cody into the pickup and backed out. He stood next to her on the bench seat, waving out the back window.

I stomped up the steps to the trailer, threw open the door and tromped inside. “Have these people never heard of booster seats and seatbelts?”

So what if I didn’t have friends to talk to? I addressed the blank TV screen. “Maybe I’ll give a lesson on car safety. I could probably find clips from YouTube that show what happens to children who don’t wear seatbelts.”

I looked at the sofa. “Oh yeah, except we don’t have Internet because we live in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere.”

I bit into the runza and stopped. “Oh yeah. This is good.” The warm hamburger and cabbage mingled with the onions and salt, all wrapped in a light, crusty bun tasted like heaven compared to the mac and cheese I’d planned.

I stared out the bay window at Jenna’s pickup disappearing over the hill. “Of course it’s delicious. Everything she does is perfect. *Here, Jase, let me make you the food of gods.*” I imitated her fake voice, the one she always put on when Jase came around. “And I’ll just ignore Cody except when I want to show what a great mom I am. *Oh, Cody, honey, show Jase how you tie your shoe.* Only you people don’t tie shoes because you all wear stupid-ass cowboy boots.”

I was on a roll now. The sofa got the brunt of my fit but I included the bookshelf and bar stools so they wouldn’t feel left out. In between my ranting I stuffed in bites of the runza. It really was delicious.

Chapter 23

Jase

I stood in Devon's bedroom, my eyes on the purple device next to her bed. A vibrator. I nearly passed out thinking of her on this bed, naked, aroused, her moans building...

The front door banged open and slammed shut.

Shit. How was I going to get out of this? I hadn't worried if she came home while I was fixing the faucet and stool. I sort of wanted her to. Then I'd show her we knew about indoor plumbing and had every intention of making sure her trailer stayed well-maintained. I had a terse speech planned to make her feel small for saying such rotten stuff about us.

But now, standing in her bedroom, smelling her smell and seeing her private, well, seeing her vibrator and knowing she was not a frigid school teacher. I guess I never saw her as a frigid... oh hell. I was rattled and sweating and didn't know how to get out of this.

She started speaking and in short order, her voice rose until she practically yelled. I focused on her words. She went off about Jenna.

I tried not to laugh when she imitated Jenna's voice. I'd heard Jenna switch gears like that, from sweet to sour instantly.

Her stomping rumbled through the floor and I pictured her pacing. *"I'm Jenna and I wear the tightest jeans and shortest t-shirts I bought at Wal-mart five years ago and nobody wears anymore."* She paused and it sounded like she had a full mouth when she continued in her Devon voice. "Okay, well, the rest of us can't wear tight shit like that because we don't have those long legs, tight ass and big boobs. Whatever."

It sounded like she swallowed. "And what about Judith?" Stomp, stomp. *"I'm so busy with my very important work I don't have time to bother with these two little boys. Hey, call my husband if I don't show up to get them. Oh, you have to*

climb the hill to use your phone? Too bad, that's not my problem."

Devon sounded a lot like Judith. I grinned at her imitation, even though I felt bad to be part of this.

She was definitely eating and she paused, then spoke again while she chewed. "And *I'm Mandy/Bob/Mandy. Bob is so great. Bob scraped my car windows. Bob picked me wildflowers. Bob said. Bob did. Bob. Jenna/Bob. Jenna said. Bob said. I don't have any thoughts of my own.*"

I quit smiling.

She ran the water in the kitchen sink as if washing her hands. "The Fabulous Ruth Ann. *I've been to Paris and Rome and now I'm stuck on a ranch with my thumb up my ass. But that's okay because I married MONEY and will never have to work again so I can put all my energy into my little darling, Trevor. But he better be the boy I need him to be. He will rope and ride and be the best darned calf wrestler there ever was. And don't you dare send him home with holes in his jeans.*"

This imitation was undoubtedly the best. I cringed hearing the bitterness in her voice, hoping it only mirrored Ruth Ann and wasn't a part of Devon.

"What the hell was she doing sending a kid to school in expensive jeans, anyway? Never mind that I told her about Trevor and Bailey and their terrible fight. She might consider asking Trevor about his day. And oh, by the way, your son is gay. What about that?"

Bark.

Sparks shot through my brain. Shit. How could I make Myron shut up? I still hoped maybe Devon would go back outside and I could sneak out. But Myron was giving me up.

Bark. Bark. Bark.

The front door opened. "Myron?"

His nails clicked on the kitchen floor. "Hey, buddy. What are you doing here?"

I cast about in desperation. Maybe I could slip out the window. Stupid idea. Even if it were big enough I didn't have time to get the screen off. If I hid in the closet I might be there all night. There was no room to crawl under the bed.

Shit. I had to go out there. My feet wouldn't move.

Myron wasn't happy to stay in the front room. I heard him leading her down the short hallway. I grabbed my toolbox but didn't get more than one step toward the door when Myron popped around the door, tail wagging.

Devon stopped in the doorway and gasped. A hand flew to her mouth and one to her chest, her eyes popped open in alarm.

My heart jumped out of my chest and I couldn't think of anything to say.

We stood like that for what seemed like two years. Finally her eyes narrowed. She looked to the bedside table and back at me. A few more seconds ticked by with her shooting daggers with those green eyes. Finally she spoke. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I skirted the bed and she stepped aside to let me down the hallway to the living room. "I stopped over to fix the faucet."

She followed me, her arms still crossed. "The faucet, huh? Last time I checked there was no faucet in my bedroom. Are you some kind of perv? Just wanted to check it out, sniff my underwear?"

Myron gave the slightest of whines and caught her attention. She ripped open a cupboard and pulled out a mixing bowl and stuck it under the faucet. She filled his bowl without noticing the faucet worked perfectly. She set the bowl on the floor and Myron lapped at it with gusto.

I'd seen her pissed before but this was a whole new level. I held up my hand and backed toward the front door with my toolbox. "The window leaked. I wanted to take care of it."

"How do you know the window leaks?" She stopped and I could see thoughts skittering through her head. "Where's your pickup? You rode your damned horse, didn't you? You heard

me talking to Tommy and snuck down here knowing I wouldn't be home and you could go through my stuff and toss out a good excuse if you got caught."

I tried to defend myself but she took off on a rant again. "You inbred, uncouth people! You think you can barge in anywhere and do whatever you want."

She stepped too far over the line and I flared. I had no trouble finding my tongue. "Why the hell do you think anyone would want to sneak in here and rummage through your stuff? Because you're so beautiful and wonderful and wise? Because you grew up in La-de-da St. Louis and are better than the rest of us?"

I must have caught her off-guard because her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Myron sat between us. His tongue hung from his mouth and he panted in the warm trailer.

I wasn't ready to quit. "You're right. I heard you talking to your boyfriend and I couldn't wait to see what wondrous new-fangled gadgets you brought from the magical land of Civilization."

"You..."

I didn't want to listen to her anymore. "I never had any intention of fixing all the measly little shit you complained about, that was only my excuse. You're so smart. Smarter than any of us hayseeds out here. And better in every way."

Myron lowered himself on the kitchen linoleum and his eyes shifted from me to her and back again.

Now her emerald eyes narrowed again and her cheeks flamed in anger. "Get the hell out of my home!"

"Yeah, I will. But not before I enlighten you a little on the minions you assume are not up to your standards."

She shifted her weight to one foot and crossed her arms, her mouth and eyes set in impatience.

"Let's start with Judith Norris. You accused her of being detached. Nothing could be further from the truth. Judith and Dutch had one daughter, Cara. They poured all their love into

Cara. Judith doted on her and they were best friends. Whenever you'd see one, you'd see the other. Everyone thought Judith was the best mother in the world. Then Cara went to Lincoln to the university. And she went wild. Maybe it was in her nature or something triggered it. She ended up getting pregnant, not once, but twice. Judith tried to help her and eventually had to go to court to get custody of the boys. Judith thinks it's her fault Cara jumped off the wall. She thinks if she hadn't been so involved and close, Cara would have learned to handle freedom and be on her own without Judith telling her right from wrong. So Judith, being a smart woman, isn't going to make the same mistake with Sam and Bill. They are learning to be independent."

Devon's face lost some of its steel.

I wasn't finished. "And Mandy. Yeah, she loves Bob with all her heart. And she's got a few insecurities and doesn't do a lot of standing up for herself. But she gets up every day and takes care of two kids, helps on the ranch, cooks for hay crews and manages a life. For where she came from, that's impressive. See, Mandy's dad wasn't a nice guy. He regularly beat the crap out of her and her mother. She has an older brother but he bugged out and didn't finish high school. I heard he's in prison in Colorado. Bad things happened in that house, to Mandy and to her mother. And when Mandy was fourteen, her father ended it all by shooting Mandy's mother, then himself."

Devon sucked in air and put a hand on the counter. Her eyes revealed her shock.

I drove the point home. "So when Bob came along, an older guy and graduated by then, and fell for her, she grabbed hold with both hands. Bob loves her and he's good to her. She may not be a fashion queen but she's got a life worth living."

Devon's voice sounded small. "I didn't know."

"Oh, really? You don't know everything?"

She stared at me. Myron stood and padded to Devon. He thrust his head under her hand and bumped it to get her attention. She absently patted him.

“Let me tell you a little bit about Jenna. Yeah, she’s hard and resilient. She needed to be. She was a cheerleader in high school. She lettered in volleyball and was a princess in the Winter Ball. Then she fell for a boy and got pregnant.” My gut clenched with guilt. “He didn’t stand by her. Her parents wanted her to have an abortion and put it all behind her but Jenna couldn’t bring herself to do that. Think about that, Devon. She’s seventeen-years-old, pregnant, and standing against everyone to protect her baby.”

Tears pooled in Devon’s eyes.

“She might not always be the nicest person and sometimes she can be immature. But she’s struggled. She finished high school and, yeah, her folks helped with Cody, but it wasn’t easy. And then she watched all her friends go off to college and have all this fun and she was stuck here. At home every night with her parents and a little boy.”

A tear slipped down Devon’s cheek. Myron licked her hand.

“So before you get too offended by her insults, think about how much she envies your life. You went to high school and only had to worry about getting your homework done and what new outfit to wear to school the next day and hoping the coffee shop could make your mocha on time so you could climb into your shiny car and drive to school. While Jenna was getting up in the middle of the night with a colicky baby and holding her own against the gossips in town and dealing with the judgment of people like you.”

Devon’s face flamed and more tears streaked down her face. Her mouth opened and closed twice as if she struggled for something to say.

What a dick. Sure, she’d made me mad and she had said some pretty mean and snotty things. But she didn’t know any of the people’s history and she hadn’t been treated well by anyone. She thought she’d been venting in private. Hot shame rose in me.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I started.

She held up her hand. “No. You’re right.” She spoke through the tears and sniffed. “I suck.”

I strode to her and put a hand on her shoulder. It felt awkward and insufficient.

She didn’t pull away but didn’t lean into me, either. She lowered her head. “Anything else? What about Ruth Ann?”

“Ruth Ann? Far as I know she’s just a bitch.”

She chuckled but then looked up at me with watery eyes. “Poor Trevor.”

I nodded. “Yep. Poor Trevor.”

We stood like that for a while. Myron’s panting sounded like a coal train. I didn’t want to take my hand away from her back but felt weird standing there. I fought the urge to pull her into my arms and soothe her. But that didn’t seem appropriate. I’d just told her what a lousy person she was and she probably hated me. I didn’t blame her.

She walked into the living room, leaving me to drop my hand and taking away the temptation to pull her close. “I appreciate you telling me.” She didn’t sound sarcastic or mad.

“I shouldn’t have.”

She held up her hand. “No. You’re right.” Again silence. Then, “So, I’ve got to work on the history lesson for tomorrow. Thank you for doing the maintenance and... and for everything.”

God, she sounded so sad and sorry. I wanted to stick around and make her smile. But she walked to the door and opened it.

I had no choice but to leave.

Chapter 24

Devon

When I left my trailer frost clung to the prairie grasses and the fence wires, shimmering in the morning sun. The thud of closing the trailer door rebounded across the hills in the hush and I hurried to Tessa. It only took her a couple of minutes to crank out heat and not long after that to melt the ice from the windshield. “Good girl,” I said out loud.

“Nice. I’m talking to myself.” No wonder everyone out here had a dog. At least if a dog was around you could pretend to talk to him and not feel quite so crazy. I thought of Myron and grinned. Maybe Jase would let me borrow him for a Saturday sometime. I dismissed that idea. Jase might be a tight-assed prick, but he loved his dog. He wouldn’t be loaning him out any time soon.

I followed Jenna’s directions. The trail road wound up and down the hills but it wasn’t hard to navigate with Tessa. Finding the way was easy since people who arrived ahead of me left tracks in the damp sand. See? After only a couple of months I was turning into a real person of the land, tracking just like Daniel Day-Lewis in *Last of the Mohicans*.

I noticed a gathering of pickups and horse trailers across the meadow and drove Tessa through the open field to join them. About a dozen vehicles and trailers surrounded a set of white metal portable fences set up to make a pen about the size of a basketball court. I stepped out into the chaos of cows bellowing and calves crying. The sun had melted the frost by then and the day warmed up nicely.

Voices yelled from the pen and people moved around through the penned animals. They all seemed busy and alert, covered in mud and dirt and sweat. I recognized most of the neighbors. Many of them had stopped into the school at one time to bring treats for the kids. Some I met at the spelling bee or the Longbranch.

Grant was sprawled on the ground opposite Trevor. A calf stretched between them. Grant squatted on the shoulder, holding on to a front leg. Trevor had one booted foot wedged against the calf's back leg and he held the other leg, leaning back and pulling with effort. Three other couples either had an animal down or wrestled to take it down or stood watching one of two people on horseback. Judith Norris hurried over to Grant and Trevor with the biggest syringe I'd ever seen. It was shaped like a staple gun. She leaned over, stuck the needle in the calf's neck, pulled the trigger and moved on to the next calf held by another couple.

A roaring sound at the edge of the pen added to the general confusion. With tubes attached to a propane tank, the device looked like a rustic barbeque grill made from a metal fifty-gallon barrel. Several poles rested in the fire. Mandy's husband, Bob, yanked one of the long metal poles from a raging fire and started toward Grant and Trevor. I realized it was a branding iron. He pressed the hot end into the calf and I smelled burning hair. My stomach turned.

Jase's dad, Dean, walked over, squatted down and fiddled with the calf for several seconds. While he worked, a woman scurried over. She fitted a yellow piece of plastic the size of a credit card into another gun-like device and held it to the calf's ear. She squeezed and pulled away, leaving the tag in the calf. Dean stood. Grant and Trevor looked at each other and let go of the calf. He jumped to his feet, shook his head and trotted off, looking a little dazed but not as traumatized as I felt.

Grant spotted me and waved. Trevor grinned. Dean recognized me and headed my way. The two people on horseback moved into the herd of cows bunched at one end of the pen away from all the frenetic activity with the calves. The black of Jase's hat was unmistakable, as was Jenna's long, blonde ponytail. They studied the herd. Jase raised his arm, a lasso clutched in his hand. He slowly swung in a circular motion and flicked his wrist, sending the loop into the bunched cows. He jerked his arm up and grinned.

Jenna said something and they both laughed. Jase kicked Frijole's side softly, urging him to turn and move slowly out of

the herd. He wound the rope around the saddle horn. It grew taut and Frijole pulled. A calf emerged from the bunch, tugged along by the rope attached to his back leg. Jase dragged the calf to a waiting couple of calf wrestlers and they flipped it onto its side and stretched it out, releasing Jase's rope. He turned Frijole around and walked back to the herd.

Jenna found her own target, copied Jase's moves and caught a calf. She passed Jase on the way to the wrestlers and again, they shared something that made them both grin. Jenna reached out and gave Jase a playful shove and he grabbed her hand in a teasing twist. Obviously, they knew each other well. Really well.

"GARR!!" Little arms embraced my legs and threw me off balance. Cody grinned up at me. "You came! See Buster? He's over there."

I followed his pointing finger to see a brown pony tied to one of the metal panels. "He's very handsome."

Cody nodded. "He's a good one. But not as good as Mutton."

Dean approached. In one hand he held a pocket knife covered in blood. In the other, several items that looked like slick ropes swayed with his movements. "Good to see ya out here. I'd shake your hand but—" He held up both hands to show they were occupied.

I had no idea what dangled from his palm but I didn't mind not touching his bloodied hands. "I've never been to a branding before. This is pretty intense."

Dean surveyed the activity. "Guess you could say that. This is a small one. Just a cleanup. Between you and me, Roddy Phillips ain't much of a rancher. You shouldn't have these odd bits and pieces that calved out during the summer."

Dean seemed on his usual critical streak. I caught a faint whiff of whiskey breath. I tried to draw him to the positive. "What an operation. What is everyone doing?"

Dean looked over his shoulder. "Well, you got the ropers. They're bringing the calves to the wrestlers. There's hierarchy

at work here.”

Dean might speak with a slow, western drawl but he had a decent vocabulary. Somewhere along the line he read a lot or had an education.

“The ropers are at the top, wrestlers at the bottom. Usually the wrestlers are the youngest or inexperienced. The ropers are those with the most skill. Jase usually ropes and has since he was a sprig.”

I didn’t detect any pride in his words. Maybe even a bit of a sneer.

“He’s got one of them personalities that makes him want to do everything better than anyone else.”

I thought maybe the driving force for Jase was perfectionism more than competitiveness. But Dean probably knew his son better than I did.

“Jenna’s got some natural talent and her daddy, Roddy, used to work with her when she was young. Even though she’s got that kid, she still seems pretty capable in the arena. She won the ranchwoman’s rodeo at the county fair last year. She and Jase make a pretty good pair. Always have. She gives him a run for his money.”

“I can see that.” Why did Dean think it was important to let me know Jase and Jenna were a pair?

“So then Judith and Martha are vaccinating the calves. The calves get antibiotics and other stuff like kids get before they go to school. Keeps ‘em healthy. And they get an ear tag with a number on it so we can identify them. Then there’s the brand, that’s pretty clear. And I cut the bulls.” He held up the hand with the slick ropey things.

“Cut?”

He chuckled. “Testicles. I take their balls.”

Added to the smell of burnt hair, the bawling of the calves and general confusion, realizing he held the bloody remains of poor calves’ innards flipped my stomach. I must have turned a

funny color because Dean cackled. “Ain’t never seen that before, I’ll bet.”

Cody hung on my legs. “Want to wrestle a calf with me?”

Dean turned to Cody. “You run along and play. You’re too young and she’s too citified for calf wrestling.”

Cody’s face fell and he shoved himself behind me, away from Dean’s menacing face. No wonder Grant and Jase weren’t close to their father. What a dick.

The roar of the stove stopped abruptly. The wrestlers stood and the others started packing up their equipment.

“Guess they found the one they were looking for,” Dean said.

All of this just to find one particular animal? “Which one was that?”

“The last one.” Dean chuckled and walked away.

Grant came over. His jeans were covered in mud and manure. He smelled like a man who’d been working for hours. Cody’s face lit up and he held up his arms to Grant.

Grant swung him in the air amid squeals and giggles and settled Cody on his hip. He turned to me. “What did you think?”

“Looks brutal,” I said.

He nodded. “Yeah. I guess it can look that way. But it’s really not so bad.”

Jenna rode up, followed by Jase. Cody squirmed. “Give me a ride on Frijole. Please, please, please.”

Jase leaned over and took Cody from Grant’s arms. “We’ll go kick the cows out.”

They rode away and Jenna dismounted. “Glad you could make it over,” she said to me.

“It’s very interesting. I had no idea this went on. You look great roping like that.”

She shrugged. “No big deal. Jase and I have been roping at brandings since grade school. Huh, Grant?”

Grant watched Jase and Cody ride away. “And I’ve been wrestling. Never get to move up to the good jobs.”

Jenna’s tinkling laugh grated. “Oh, some old timer is bound to die off one of these days and you can get their job.”

“Can’t wait,” Grant said, sarcasm heavy in his voice. “I’m going to get something to drink. Want a beer?” he asked me.

“It’s not even nine o’clock!”

Jenna’s lip curled up. “Yes, but some of us were horseback at four this morning, rounding up the herd.”

Jenna had said to come over mid-morning. I had no idea everyone else started working before dawn. I smiled at Grant. “I think I’ll pass. I haven’t worked hard enough to deserve it.”

Jenna tossed her ponytail. “I’ll have one if you’re getting them. I feel like I deserve it.”

Grant walked away and Jenna turned to me. “Do you ride?”

“What? Horses?”

Jenna laughed. “Yes, horses.”

I gave my head a hearty shake. “No way. But this is a pretty one.”

She patted the horse and tilted her head at me. “He’s a sorrel.”

“What’s a sorrel?”

“That’s the color.” She reached out and flipped my hair. “Like yours. Why don’t you take him for a ride?”

I laughed. “No way. Horses scare the hell out of me.”

Jenna’s eyes opened wide. “Really? That’s so weird for me. I can’t believe it. I’ve been riding since before I could walk. I had a platform where I could stand to brush my horse and get on him way before I could lift a saddle. We used to ride all over, just me and Buster.”

“The same Buster Cody rides?”

Jenna laughed. “Yeah. He’s been around a while.”

“What a great way to grow up. When I was little my babysitter walked me to the park and watched over me while I played on the swings and the super-safe play station. No way would I have been allowed to mess with a horse and ride off bareback on my own.”

“Have you ever been on a horse?” Jenna asked.

I was pretty happy with her standing between me and the rust-colored beast that she held the reins of. “I went on a couple of trail rides when I was in junior high. You know, the kind with tired old horses who plod after the one ahead of them for an hour.”

She stared at me, not having any idea what I meant. “So you want to ride Cactus, here?” She held out her hand with the reins.

I took a step backward. “Nope. I’m good.”

Jenna gave me a disgusted look that said she saw me as a total chicken shit. “Come on. You should try it to help you get over your fear. Cactus is super gentle.”

“I don’t see me ever needing the ability to ride a horse so it doesn’t seem like the kind of fear I need to work through. I’ll just remain an equestrian weenie.”

Jenna shifted her weight in irritation. “That’s stupid. Didn’t you tell Cody about Eleanor Roosevelt saying you should do one thing that scares you every day? And now you’re too scared to even sit an old, gentle nag like Cactus.”

“Really, I’m good with this.” I did not want to get on a demon-possessed horse.

“So you’re a hypocrite. You just tell the kids whatever sounds good but you don’t walk the talk. They’ll figure you out pretty quick.” She held out the reins and waited.

Damn it. She had a point. “He’s really gentle?”

She rolled her eyes. “Even if he had some fire, he’s been working for hours so he’s tired.”

I hesitated, my heart thumping up my chest and into my throat. I ought to walk away. I searched for Grant, hoping he could get me out of this. But he was tipping back a beer with Mandy’s husband, his palm on the back of Trevor’s head.

“While you’re living in ranching country, you ought to experience a little of it. When are you ever going to get a chance like this again? You’ll go back to St. Louis and regret not trying out everything.”

My palms felt clammy and my breath came in short bursts. I stared into her eyes, fighting the cautious side that said I didn’t need to experience riding an unpredictable wild animal with the part of me that thought I ought to be brave and reach beyond my small world.

Chapter 25

Jase

Cody took Frijole's reins and I directed the horse with my knees. Good ol' Frijole knew who to pay attention to and didn't mind Cody's slight tugs if they contradicted my prompts. I only half-listened as Cody chattered about riding his pony in the round-up. I'd seen him with Roddy for a few minutes before the sun had come up. This kid may not have a live-in dad but he had lots of people who loved him and spent time with him.

I tried not to look over my shoulder at Devon. I hadn't thought she'd be here this morning and when I noticed her green Tacoma crossing the pasture my heart had done a little jig. Little jig? What the hell kind of thought was that? This girl twisted everything inside of me, even the way I thought to myself.

From the moment she walked to the fence panel I was aware of her every move. I hated that Dean had gone over and wondered what poison he spread. He'd never have approached one of the neighbor women with the bloody testicles hanging from his hand. Dean wanted to gross Devon out and from the look on her face, he'd done a good job.

I hadn't really meant to ride over to see her but couldn't help it. I had no idea what I'd say when I got there but couldn't stop myself from going to her. When Cody piped up it solved my dilemma and I scooped him up and beat a retreat.

Now Jenna had her cornered. Devon looked nervous. Then Jenna held out the reins to that stupid horse, Cactus. That damned horse was about as unpredictable as they came. Jenna had trained him and he worked fine for her but that's about it. I'd been on him a time or two and it was always a fucking rodeo. He bucked and reared and tried every trick to get me off his back.

Jenna couldn't really be trying to get Devon to ride him, could she? From the time she was little, Jenna had her eye on

me. She'd tried all kinds of tricks to get me, including dating other guys to make me jealous. It hadn't worked. I'd seen her go all mean-girl when she was in high school if she thought I might like someone else. She'd seen Devon and Grant in the Longbranch that night. She ought to feel secure there was nothing between me and Devon.

Jenna might not be convinced Grant and Devon were together. I'd seen it, too, and it didn't feel right. Could be Grant playing games. Even if it wasn't about me, Jenna would dislike Devon on principle. She'd hate someone as cute and smart invading her territory. But Devon didn't know anything about horses and putting her on Cactus was dangerous. Especially since Devon was scared of horses. A horse like Cactus could smell it and he'd take advantage of that.

But Devon was too smart to let Jenna trick her into doing something she didn't want to do.

Devon took the reins from Jenna. Her usually white face paled even more and from across the pen I could see her freckles. She was terrified and still she let Jenna move her around to Cactus's right side and help her put a foot in the stirrups.

Shit. I jabbed Frijole in the ribs with my boots, waking him from his slow plod. He threw his head up as I wheeled him around. My arm tightened around Cody to keep him close. "Hey!" I yelled at Devon.

She didn't even look up. The mooing of the worried cows as they searched for their bawling calves drowned out my voice. "Devon!"

Grant heard me. He whipped his head up, saw where I headed and looked to Devon. His mouth dropped open. Even Grant knew this was going to be a disaster.

I leaned over Frijole's neck and urged him faster.

Devon placed her foot in the stirrup and Jenna boosted her into the saddle. Jenna pointed to the saddle horn and Devon clutched it, and grabbed the reins in her other hand. Her bloodless lips narrowed into a thin slash, her eyes widened.

Jenna stepped back and spoke to Devon. Nothing happened and I hoped the whole point was only to have Devon sit on Cactus. Maybe Jenna was trying to help Devon overcome her horse phobia and sitting in the saddle was the first baby step.

When Devon looked ahead, Jenna reached up and slapped Cactus on the butt. Cactus's back leg shot out to kick at the slap. Devon tipped forward, over the saddle horn. If she'd slid off then, she might have ended up with a bruised leg or sore tailbone. But she caught herself and pushed back, squeezing her knees into Cactus's sides and regaining her balance.

Cactus tossed his head, jerking the reins from Devon's hand. He laid his ears back and took off, dust flying from his hooves. Devon hunched over the saddle horn. If she flew off she could be hurt.

I reacted before I even thought about it. I raced Frijole to where Grant stood and barely slowing down, I grabbed Cody. Grant had his arms up as if he knew the plan. I handed Cody off without slowing much and as soon as I felt Grant take his weight and I knew he was safe, I slapped at Frijole with the end of the reins. I might even have hollered, "Hya!"

Cactus cleared the pens and the milling cattle on a dead run. The reins dangled and flipped, tickling his legs and creating a panic. He flattened his neck and raced across the prairie. If his foot caught in a gopher hole he could tumble and flip. Devon would fly off and break her neck or maybe be crushed beneath him. Even experienced riders would be fearful. Devon must be terrified.

I kept muttering, "Hold on." Frijole knew the goal. He sighted in on Cactus and stretched out. His hooves thundered on the ground. Wind whipped my hat off and tore tears from my eyes. I leaned over Frijole's neck, giving him ample rein and urging him faster.

Cactus showed no signs of slowing down. He headed across the pasture to a few lone cottonwoods 200 yards away. Some hopeful homesteaders had built a soddy and planted trees. But they'd sold out or been run out, the soddy had faded

back to the pasture and the trees stood quiet vigil on the empty prairie.

A smart horse with an attitude is a dangerous thing and Cactus had a plan. He'd try to brush Devon off the saddle by running her under a low branch. I'd seen him try tricks like that with Jenna but she knew how to deal with horses. Probably frozen with fear, Devon wouldn't be able to do anything to save herself.

God, I needed to get to her. Even though I felt like Frijole ran through thick mud, we gained ground. I couldn't tell if we'd be able to overcome them before Cactus got to the cottonwoods. "Go! Go!" I shouted at Frijole but I knew he was giving it all he had.

Cactus stayed a few yards ahead as he swerved towards the trees. Devon would be so scared she wouldn't be aware of the surroundings. She had to be totally focused on hanging on and when Cactus ran under the branch she'd be swept to the ground, probably after smacking her skull. It was likely she wouldn't survive.

We couldn't get to her in time.

Just as Cactus galloped toward the tree, Devon let loose of the saddle horn and threw her arms around Cactus's neck. This lowered her head so he couldn't scrape her off. Once clear of the trees, she pushed herself up and hunkered over the saddle horn again.

I got to her just as Cactus swerved again, heading for the barbed-wire fence. Cactus turned away from us, hooves still pounding, breath huffing in exhaustion. I had to get control of him but the reins dangled from the bridle. The only way to get them would be to lean over from one running horse to another. That was something for trick riders, not for a stupid cowboy. I could easily tumble off Frijole right into Cactus's cutting hooves.

Shit. I had no choice. Cactus wasn't going to give up until he dislodged Devon. Whatever fall he could manage would be devastating for Devon. I flicked the end of my reins on

Frijole's butt to goose him enough to gain on Cactus. It worked.

I inhaled, rose up in the stirrups and leaned over, stretching to get hold of the reins. My fingers brushed the leather and the reins bounced away. I lunged, groping for the touch of the reins, trusting Frijole and praying I had the reach.

My fingers close on leather and I threw myself back in the saddle. I wrapped the reins once around my hand. I had plenty of slack so Cactus wouldn't fight the pressure and buck or kick. The other rein still hung and bounced. The horses ran side by side.

I finally stole a look at Devon. I'd expected eyes full of panic. I thought she might be so far gone she wouldn't be able to recognize me or function. She squinted her green eyes and her mouth was drawn in concentration. She didn't look out of control. In fact, she looked pissed off.

I tugged lightly on Cactus's rein and put a bit more pressure on Frijole's. Gradually Cactus slowed his pace and in a few minutes he started walking, his sides heaving.

Devon stood in the stirrups, reached forward and grabbed the dangling rein. She whipped the other from my hand, dragging my arm until the rein was loose.

She yanked back. "Whoa, you son of a bitch!"

"Hey." I was so surprised I didn't know what to say so I said the absolute wrong thing. "You have to let him walk it off or he'll get colicky."

She pulled back harder and when Cactus stopped, she yanked her left foot out of the stirrup, swung her leg over the saddle and slipped to the ground. "I hope he colicks all over the place and drops dead." She glared at me. "You and your girlfriend, too!"

Myron ran up to her, tongue hanging out, tail whipping back and forth. He licked her hand. She bent down and scratched his ears. "Hiya, bub."

I reached over and took the reins she'd dropped. I started to walk in a wide circle around her to let the horses cool down

a little. “My girlfriend? Would that be Jenna?”

She could have sliced me open with the look she gave. She put her hands on her hips. Myron planted himself in front of her, giving her his complete attention. She glared at me. “I get it. You guys don’t want me here. I’m an outsider and I don’t like horses or tractors and I don’t know who’s related to whom and what guy slept with his cousin. As far as I’m concerned you’re all inbred throwbacks. The sooner I get out of here the better.”

Maybe I expected a puddle of tears and trembling. That’s not what stood in the center of the circle, smoke rolling out of her ears. I grinned. “A little thank you might be in order, don’t you think?”

She flapped her arms to her sides. “Thank you? Are you kidding me? You guys set me up. Everyone back there is probably laughing and having a great time at my expense. I could have been killed!”

Myron jumped up and licked her hand again. She petted him, giving him attention despite her agitation.

The vision of her lying bleeding and broken on the prairie froze my blood. The only reason she was standing here now is because she had the sense to duck when Cactus tried to shed her. She’d said herself that horses scared her. Yet, she’d climbed up on one and kept her head when it had taken off. This was a girl with grit and I admired that. “You did a great job with Cactus. Maybe I can teach you to ride so you can enjoy it next time.”

I guess she wasn’t in the mood for a little humor. “Go fuck yourself.”

“No. I’m serious. I wasn’t making fun of you. You’ve got balance and you didn’t panic. I think you might like riding if you got over being scared.”

Her eyes flashed fire and she stomped away, Myron at her heels.

“Hey, where are you going?” I directed Frijole her way and pulled Cactus to follow us.

“Leave me alone.” She swung her arms, her stride long and angry.

“Here, get on Cactus and we’ll ride back.” I paced Frijole to keep up with her.

“Not in this lifetime.” She kept her eyes straight ahead and I was sure she considered the distance to her pickup.

“Come on. He’s okay.” I knew her legs might be shaky from clamping them so tightly on Cactus, not to mention how weak she might be from fear alone.

“He’s a fucking demon.” Her voice cracked.

God, I felt so bad for her. She had been out here for a couple of months with only Grant as her friend. Maybe he was decent company but I knew he was way more wrapped up in himself than he was anyone else. She had no girlfriends and no clubs or movies, restaurants or anything she’d known all her life. And then Jenna pulls that mean stunt that truly could have hurt Devon. And still, she didn’t break.

“The clouds are moving in. You won’t get back to your pickup before it starts to storm.” I tried to persuade her.

“I’ll be fine.” She set her face and kept walking.

I stayed with her. “Sure, you won’t die of exposure or anything, but it won’t be comfortable and I guarantee you’ll get cold.”

She stopped and gave me more of that blazing stare.

Mom would have liked her. That thought struck me unexpectedly. And I let it weave into my head. Mom would have had Devon over for dinner. She’d have invited her to spend time on the weekends, maybe taking her out to the horses and helping her to learn something of the ranch life. Instead, I’d ignored her, Grant used her for support and Jenna was so jealous she’d resorted to being dangerous.

I lowered my voice and spoke slowly, like I would to a spooked animal. “Okay, I understand. But it’s a long walk back. Why don’t you ride with me. Frijole is gentle and I promise we’ll go slow.”

She stopped and folded her arms again. “I don’t trust you.”

I’m not sure I would, either. “Seriously. I give you my word we’ll take it easy. Come on.”

She eyed me and then spoke to Myron. “What do you think?”

He immediately dropped to his butt and let out one yip. I’d never seen him do that before. Close as Myron and I were, he never answered my questions like that. I wasn’t thrilled my best friend was taking on another master, but I was grateful he had my back.

She let out a deep sigh and gave me a sideways look, wrinkling her mouth in the cutest way. “Fine. Help me up.”

Chapter 26

Devon

If I had any brains at all I would tell him to fuck himself again and tromp all the way back to the pen. When I got there, I'd find Jenna and punch her lights out. I hadn't ever hit anyone before but I'm not sure I ever needed to. That bitch had tried to kill me. I had enough adrenaline pumping through me I thought I could take her and the whole bunch of hillbillies on.

But here was Jase, acting all nice and protective. He'd stopped that raging dragon of a horse who was trying to kill me. At first, when he'd shown up and slowed that bastard Cactus down, I'd been grateful and relieved. If he'd been anywhere close to me, I'd have thrown myself into his arms and probably burst into tears. I would have let him hold me and comfort me and take care of me. Yeah, in some brain-dead girl fantasy.

And then, the first thing he said showed me he cared more for that killer beast than he did about me. I came to my senses and wanted to punch him and the horse and shoot Jenna full of arrows. Then Myron arrived and licked my hands and calmed me down. Sort of.

But I had to admit it wasn't all Myron who opened the steam valve and vented my temper. The wind had come up and blown through the thin fabric of my t-shirt, cooling the sweat of my fear and chilling me. I would be a western Popsicle before I got back to Tessa and my down coat.

There was something else. I'd been all ready to blame Jase and to hate him for this. But something in his face held me back. I'd yelled at him and cursed at him and he hadn't met my anger with anything but patience. And he had come after me, stopped Cactus and maybe kept me from getting killed.

He'd been teasing me when all of a sudden his eyes changed. Those damned brown eyes always so full of expression. All of the sudden he seemed to see inside of me and to offer me more than teasing and meanness. And then

Myron sat right down and told me to trust Jase. That was just plain weird.

With all of that pressing on my weakened frame of mind, I caved and let Jase help me up to Frijole's back. He slid out of the saddle and sat behind me on Frijole's butt.

If letting Jenna talk me into riding Cactus was a mistake, getting on the horse with Jase was a disaster. The second I settled into the saddle in front of Jase I knew I'd done one of the stupidest things I'd ever done. Maybe there was the back of the saddle between him and me but that's not a lot of space. I could smell the warmth of his body, slightly soapy but strong with the work he'd been doing. It wasn't sweaty body odor, but just... Jase.

Thank god he couldn't see my face because as soon as I realized how close we were I flamed, probably glowing red. His arms came around my waist as he gripped the reins. It was so close to an embrace I involuntarily leaned into him. His chest felt hard and his warmth quickly penetrated into my back. I jerked forward to give us some space. A gust of cold wind shot between us, snaking up my spine and showering me in goosebumps. I shivered.

Jase took both reins in one hand and drew me back against him. "Here, lean back. It's getting cold."

He smelled of sun and sand and country air. His chest rose and fell against my back as if he had a hard time breathing. But he was luxuriously warm and safe. I tried to remember that I was mad at him. He'd probably set me up along with Jenna. But I couldn't quite convince myself he'd known about it.

Frijole's gait was slow and we swayed together in the saddle. The thought of him so close and the luscious rocking of the saddle against my front sent a sizzle between my legs. The heat from Jase's chest on my back was nothing compared to the fire that created a molten sensation. I knew what I wanted to ease that frustration and before I could stop myself, my mind made a leap.

I had an image of me twisting in Jase's arms and lifting my face to feel his mouth claim mine. His hand slid under my t-shirt and up my belly, sending a cascade of tingles radiating across my skin. I sucked in a breath as his fingers pried underneath my bra and his palm closed around my breast, his thumb flicking at the rock-hard nipple.

That's when I realized the fantasy had gone too far. I might have started breathing heavy or maybe I arched against Jase without realizing it. Whatever I did caused a noticeable reaction in Jase. His arms tightened around me.

I sat up straighter, the hell with the wind blowing between us. The cold would do us good. I tried to think of something, anything to say that would break the moment. "Grant told me you always wanted to be a rancher."

That did the trick. I don't know why that seemed to irritate him. "Grant says so, huh?"

"Well, didn't you? I mean, don't you?"

He didn't answer for a moment. We were getting close to the pens. Jenna and Grant both waited for us, both sitting on the beds of their own pickups across the clearing from each other.

The panels had been taken down and the cows and calves had wandered over a hill to the east. Everyone else had loaded the horses, equipment, children and everything else, leaving no trace of the frantic activity except a worn spot on the prairie.

Jase spoke with acid in his voice. "Yeah. Cowboy. That's all I am. All I'm good for."

"I didn't say that..."

Before I could tell him that being a rancher was a good career Jenna started running toward us.

"Oh my god! Are you okay? I had no idea he'd do that!"

I wanted to jump out of the saddle and tackle her, pummel her gorgeous, insincere face into a pulp—as if I could.

Jase made a growling noise in his throat. "Jenna, you—"

I jabbed Jase in the ribs to shut him up. He choked and I felt his breath on my head, as if he looked at me.

I jabbed him again and said in a loud voice. “Cody! Are you still here?”

Cody slid out of Jenna’s open pickup door, his thumb in his mouth. Tear tracks ran down his dirty cheeks and he stared at me. “Are you okay, Ms. Devon? I was scared Cactus would hurt you.”

Jase’s firm hand gripped my arm and helped me out of the saddle. I lowered myself to the ground and hurried to Cody. I picked him up, giving him a hard squeeze. “I’m great. Cactus can run so fast I felt like I was flying over the prairie.”

Cody nodded with enthusiasm. “You should see how Mutton runs. He’s the fastest ever.”

I put Cody down and let him ramble on his favorite subject. I looked up at Jase. He watched us with a smile on his face. However Jase felt about me didn’t matter. What was important was how he felt about Cody and from that look of adoration in his eyes, he was devoted to the little guy.

I shifted my gaze to Jenna. She watched us, too, and I was pretty sure the look of rage wasn’t directed at her son.

Grant rushed over and gave me a giant bear hug. “Thank god you’re okay.”

I pulled back quickly. “Yeah. It was scary. But safe and sound.” I couldn’t help myself from checking to see Jase’s reaction.

His face looked stony. Damn. Grant had made it look like we were a couple, again. Jenna didn’t look any more pleased by Grant’s display than Jase did. I would gladly have dropped into a hole.

Grant threw an arm around my shoulder. “I have something to announce.”

Jase’s eyebrows raised and he looked hopeful. He probably thought Grant got a job. Jenna gave him her attention.

Grant grinned. "It's time we brought back the Varner family tradition of Thanksgiving."

No one said anything and Grant continued. "I know you're going to say it's a bad idea, Jase. But it's been four years and it's time we move on."

Jase leaned back in the saddle. "No. I think it's a good idea. It'll be good for Dad."

Grant hugged me to his side. "And I want you to join us."

Again, no one spoke. I didn't relish the thought of Thanksgiving alone in my trailer but sitting at the table with Jase and Grant and Dean didn't sound great.

Jenna leaned over and picked up Cody. "That's great! Mom and Dad are flying to Dallas to be with my sister so we don't have any plans. I'll bring the green bean casserole."

I hadn't heard Grant invite Jenna but maybe the tradition involved the Phillips. Knowing she'd be there made it even less appealing to me.

"You don't have other plans, do you?" Grant asked. "Even if you do, break them. You've got to come."

Nothing like putting me on the spot. "Sure. What can I bring?"

Grant hesitated. "Why don't you bring the rolls."

Jenna eyed me. "Grandma Varner used to bring rolls every year. She's got a great recipe. I'll bring it for you. And don't buy any yeast. I got a bunch at Sam's Club that will expire if I don't use it up. I'll give you some."

Gulp. Bread from scratch? Shit. Mom always got the rolls and pies from the bakery in the strip mall by our house.

Grant's excitement built. "Good. I found Mom's oyster dressing recipe."

Jenna laughed. "Remember that time she..."

I tuned out while Jenna launched into a story I swear she brought up just to show me how much I didn't belong.

I glanced up at Jase and he quickly looked away from me.
I couldn't read his expression.

Chapter 27

Devon

I rumbled over the Autogate, leaving tracks in the skiff of new snow that had only started falling as I left my trailer. My sorry excuse for a meal contribution nestled on the passenger seat. I should have taken Mandy up on her offer and bought dinner rolls from her. What was I thinking trying to make rolls from scratch? As if I had any experience in bread baking. My plan was to make them at the last minute and bring them warm. By the time I realized they weren't going to rise and would end up baking like tiny brown bowling balls, it was too late to make another batch. Maybe they'd be okay drenched in gravy.

I'd spent a little time debating what to wear. It was Thanksgiving and Mom would insist I dress up. She'd opt for the black dress and pumps. But this was Nebraska and the clouds hung low and heavy, with the forecast for a couple of inches of snow. Yes, I'd started watching the local news for weather reports. I chose a short red skirt and cashmere sweater, with tights and riding boots. It would be too casual by Mom's standards, but I'd fit in just right out here.

I parked Tessa next to Jenna's red pickup, pulled my long wool coat around me and hurried up the porch steps to the house. Grant met me at the door. He looked surprised. "Wow. You look nice."

He wore a faded Nebraska Huskers hoodie and jeans with holes at the knees. Uh-oh. "Thanks."

He took the rolls from my gloved fingers. He squinted at them as if trying to identify the food group.

"They're rolls. Sorry they didn't turn out as I'd planned." I should have left them at home.

He waved it off. "No problem! There's so much food it won't matter." A row of decorative hooks hung by the front door and I recognized Cody's Batman jacket and Jenna's fur-lined ski coat. A large canvas barn coat and several other jackets filled the hooks. Grant thrust my coat over the top of

one of the others. I noticed a row of shoes and Sorrels and that Grant stood in his stockings. I unzipped my boots and stepped out, the floor felt chilly through my thin tights.

“Come on in. Jase and Jenna are finishing up the turkey. Dad and Cody are playing checkers but I think Cody is making up the rules. You can help me set the table.”

He pointed to the right. A cozy fire burned in the living room and Dean sat in a leather recliner. Cody balanced on his knees on a dining room chair shoved close. A TV tray between them held a checkerboard. The two seemed deep into their game. When Cody saw me he jumped off the chair and scurried over.

“Ms. Devon! Me and Dean are playin’ and I’m winning!”

I ruffled his hair. “Good job.” Dean and I waved at each other.

I followed Grant as he took a left into the dining room. A festive linen cloth covered the long table with a centerpiece made from dried prairie grasses, set off with thick candles. A few trivets scattered across the surface waiting for the warm food. A pile of heavy silverware heaped next to a stack of china plates at one end, along with linen napkins in silver rings.

Grant popped through the doorway off the dining room into the kitchen and I went in after him to wash my hands. He quietly set the pan of rolls on a back counter behind some grocery bags. “Devon’s here! Let’s eat.”

Was I late? Jenna had told me to come at one-thirty. It was just a little after one. But everything looked ready to go. The turkey was even sliced and mashed potatoes heaped in a bowl. “I’m sorry. Was I holding things up?”

Jase spun from the sink where he’d been washing dishes. “Don’t worry. We’ve got all afternoon.” He grinned with such welcome I immediately felt at ease. Instead of the usual tension that surrounded him, he looked relaxed. I might go as far as to say he looked happy.

Jenna took a pan Jase rinsed. She wore leggings and a long sweater. Thick wool socks bunched around her ankles and her cheeks flushed from the heat of the kitchen. She looked so comfortable and cute and, well, like she belonged in this kitchen with Jase. She flashed a generous smile at me. “I know I told you we’d eat at noon but it worked out okay that you’re late so don’t worry a bit. The turkey took a little longer than we expected.”

The bitch! She’d set me up to look bad.

She dried the pot and bent over to stash it in a cupboard. I couldn’t help noticing how Jase and Grant watched as the sweater rose up her thighs giving them a nice view of her... leggings. She obviously knew her way around this kitchen. “Did you bring the rolls?”

My stomach tightened and my face flamed. I didn’t look at Grant. “Damn. I knew I forgot something. I left them on the counter at home. I can go get them.”

Jenna’s eyes had a twinkle and her mouth ticked in a cat smile. “Oh that’s okay. We had a little time while we waited so I made Grandma’s famous biscuits. They’re one of Jase’s favorites from when we were little.”

Double bitch. She’d known my rolls would fail. She’d given me the recipe and the yeast. How stupid of me to think she meant to help.

Grant grabbed my elbow. “We’re seconds away from finishing the table. Let’s go!”

In short order we all gathered around the table. Dean took the head seat and Jenna sat at his right. Jase directed me to sit next to Dean and Cody insisted on sitting next to me.

I finished filling the wine glasses and set Cody’s milk in front of him. Dean asked me to get him another beer so I supplied it and settled in.

Jase asked Cody if he’d give a prayer and after the rushed, “God is great, God is good and we thank him for this food, amen,” we passed the steaming bowls of traditional Thanksgiving deliciousness around.

I don't think I was being overly sensitive but Jenna really did steer all conversations to Thanksgivings the Varners and Phillips had shared in the past. When that ran its course she continued to talk about people and events for which I had no reference. In between times, she flirted with Dean.

I didn't mind. I cut Cody's turkey and helped him make a mashed potato damn for his gravy. We had our own discussion about what Batman did for Thanksgiving and if his mom made him eat green bean casserole. I wanted to tell him I didn't think anyone should be forced to eat anything that was made with canned cream of mushroom soup, but thought better of it.

Dean nudged me and touched his beer can. I went to the kitchen to get him another. When I sat down I caught Jase's frown.

I wanted to see his relaxed face again. "I don't know as I've ever had turkey this moist."

Dean tipped his beer back and drank deeply.

Jenna flashed her smile at Jase. "See? I told you."

He sat back and laughed. "You win."

She lifted her chin, eyes bright. "Jase wanted to smoke it like we did a few years ago. But I insisted we brine it."

Isn't that cute. Like some old married couple planning a big dinner party. Change of subject. I shifted the attention to Grant. "The table looks great."

Dean downed his beer and set the can on the table. He nudged me. I glanced at Jase. He watched me, the smile gone. Shit. I didn't know what to do so I pretended I didn't notice Dean.

Grant beamed. "We don't use the big table very often. And haven't had the china out since..."

Silence dropped on the room. Dean shoved his chair back. And he struggled to his feet. "I need a beer. Can I get anything for anyone?"

"Dad," Jase started.

Dean whirled around and bent toward him and spit one word. “What?”

Jase paused. “Nothing.”

Dean turned around and ambled toward the kitchen. “Didn’t think so.”

Grant leaned closer to me. “We haven’t had a holiday here since Mom died. This is the first time I’ve used the china and the linen. It’s hard on Dad.”

Jenna tilted her head and stared at the kitchen, tears filling her eyes. “Lanny loved Thanksgiving. This is all so sad.”

Jase’s jaw twitched as if he clenched his teeth.

Dean staggered back to the table and sat two beers in front of him. He bumped a table leg scooting himself to the table and gravy sloshed onto the table cloth.

“I want to ride Mutton.” Cody piped up. I recognized his cranky voice coming on and knew by the way he rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand that he was getting tired. Sometimes at school I could convince him to take a nap after lunch.

“Hey, how ‘bout I read you a story?” I thought maybe I could cuddle next to him on the couch and he might drop off to sleep.

Jenna scowled at me.

Cody raised his voice. “But I want pie. We haven’t had pie. And it’s Thanksgiving and the pilgrims had punkin pie and...”

Jase interrupted with a firm voice. “Here’s an idea. You have a little bit of pumpkin pie and Ms. Devon will read you a story and you can have a rest. Then maybe we’ll see about riding Mutton.”

Dean finished one beer and popped the top on the other. I couldn’t believe the speed at which he put them away.

Cody’s lower lip puffed out. “I want to ride now.”

Jase laughed. “Deferred gratification, pardner.”

I grinned.

Cody's face scrunched up. "I don't know what you mean."

Jenna elbowed Jase and teased him. "That's okay, Cody. We never know what Jase is talking about."

Grant joined in. "Big words and all that intellectualism just dripping off him."

Dean curled his lip and slurred his words. "Yeah. Thinks he's better than the rest of us."

Jase's face flushed and he didn't move.

Grant sounded more mean than good-hearted. "Didn't go to college but knows everything."

This looked like a dogpile on Jase. I never could stand an unfair fight. "A college education doesn't make someone smart."

Jenna held up a fist and gave me a pointed look. "Amen."

Grant shrugged. "Maybe. But it's a good starting point to learning about the world instead of being sheltered and never going anywhere."

I addressed Jase. "If you're serious about going to school I can probably help you." Being Benji and Marsha's daughter ought to get me some perks.

Dean slammed his beer can down. "He's not going to college, damn it."

Jase pushed his chair back. "Guess I'll start the dishes."

"But we haven't had pie," Cody whined.

Jenna snapped at him. "It's time for your nap."

He started to cry. I put my arm around him. "Let's find a book."

He shrugged off my arm. "I don't want to find a book. I want pie!"

Jenna gave him that universal mother warning look that said he'd better shape up.

Dean slammed his fist on the table rattling the dishes. “Books and college. All this shit and money and damned education. For what?” He pointed his finger at Jase. “You’ve always got your nose in a book and are full of this nonsense about going to school and leaving the ranch when you know this is the place you belong. You don’t know how lucky you have it.”

Jase didn’t want to be a rancher?

Grant cocked an eyebrow at me. “He didn’t have any interest in college until I went.”

Jase gripped the edge of the table and stared straight ahead.

Jenna put a hand on Jase’s forearm. “Everyone puts ranchers down like we’re all stupid. But it takes a lot to run a ranch. It’s a great life. There’s no better place to raise children.”

Cody squirmed away from me. “Why can’t I have pie? I want it.”

Jenna snapped at Cody. “You straighten up or next time I won’t bring you.”

His thumb popped out of his mouth and he started to cry again. I didn’t know what to do. My instinct was to take him onto my lap and calm him down. I figured he just needed to relax and he’d fall asleep. But that felt like overstepping my bounds since his mother sat right there. I didn’t want to interfere but his crying broke my heart.

Dean picked up my unfinished glass of wine and downed it.

Grant probably meant to lighten the mood by teasing Jase but the snide edge to his tone made me uncomfortable. “Jase hated school. I don’t know why he’d want to go back now. Besides, he barely graduated.”

Dean rubbed a hand over his face. “Not because he couldn’t.”

Grant said, “Because he skipped school and hardly ever did his homework.”

Jase's face flamed and I couldn't tell if he was mad or embarrassed. I hated to see Grant belittle Jase. "I know something about admissions. I might be..."

Jenna stood up and started around the table. "That's enough, Cody. You're going to bed."

He let out a wail.

Jase jumped up and strode around the opposite side of the table from Jenna. He got to Cody first and whisked him from his chair. "We all need a time out, huh, pardner?"

Jenna and Jase faced each other for a single beat before Jenna's shoulders relaxed and she exhaled. Their eyes locked and a look of understanding passed between them. Jenna returned to her chair.

Cody stuck his thumb in his mouth and sniffled. He must be totally worn out. I'd never seen him come undone like this.

Grant's fork scraped along his plate and he kept his head down, shoveling sweet potatoes into his mouth.

"Disaster." Dean slurred the word but everyone could hear it plainly.

Grant perked his head up. "What's that, Dad?"

Dean leaned back. "We shouldn't have done this. It's not right. Lanny should be here. She'd make it good. She'd know what to do."

Dean reached across the table for the wine bottle. With Cody on his hip, Jase lunged for it and swept it beyond Dean's grasp. "You've had enough."

Dean aimed a deadly gaze at Jase. "Damned right I've had enough. Enough of you god-damned telling me what to do."

Jase stood behind Cody's chair, the knuckles of one hand white on the backrest. Again, his jaw twitched but he didn't say anything. Dean's outburst shut us all up, even Cody quit whimpering.

Dean pushed back and his chair fell over. He grabbed the edge of the table to keep himself upright. "I'm glad Lanny's

dead. It would break her heart to see this. One son trying to shirk his legacy and the other too lazy to get his hands dirty.” He swept his hand toward Jase and Cody. “And what the hell is that? Everyone tiptoeing around and not calling a spade a spade. Or a Varner a Varner.”

No one spoke. Dean must know Cody was Jase’s son and it must kill him that Jase didn’t claim him. My heart thudded against my ribs and heat rushed through me and I wasn’t even in the firing line of Dean’s vitriol. Everyone else must be dying inside.

Dean stumbled backward but managed to stay upright as he lumbered toward the kitchen. “I need another drink.”

Jase thrust Cody onto my lap. “Read him a story.” He hurried after Dean.

Jenna turned to Grant, her mouth hard, rage spilling from her.

Grant lifted one eyebrow and absorbed her heat. Whatever conversation they had stayed silent. After a second, Grant turned back to his plate and picked up a biscuit. “These are a little drier than I remember your grandmother’s being.”

Something crashed in the kitchen. It sounded like shattering china. Dean shouted but his words were a jumble of consonants.

Jase replied, his voice strained but controlled. Another crash of glass.

Jenna tossed her napkin on the table and hurried into the kitchen.

“Let’s see about that book.” I tried to sound enthusiastic to get that glazed look off Cody’s face as he stared at the kitchen door.

Grant’s fork still scraped on his plate but I noticed he was pushing turkey and green beans around. He raised his eyes to me and my heart nearly broke. Fat tears slid down his cheeks.

I didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “I thought it would be okay. I guess it’s too soon. Maybe it’ll never be okay.” He let out a sob. “I miss Mom so much.”

I put a hand on Cody’s back and he laid his head on my shoulder. I could only comfort one little boy at a time. Something wasn’t right, though. Just seconds before, Grant had seemed to be baiting Jenna. Dean’s outburst didn’t seem to bother him then. Now, all of a sudden, he was crying. He wanted me to fake being his girlfriend. So much about Grant didn’t add up.

I took Cody into the living room and let the chaos in the kitchen fade as we chose “Where The Wild Things Are” and I read it seven times before Cody’s thumb dropped from his mouth and sweet little snores whispered across the long shadows of the living room.

Somewhere around the fourth time through the book I heard a pickup start up and drive away but I couldn’t see the windows from our place on the couch. I wanted to escape, too, but with Cody sacked out on my lap, I felt trapped. Besides, I didn’t want to venture into the kitchen to say thank you and goodbye.

The living room sank into late afternoon dim when Jenna padded in. She scowled at me and crossed the room. She lifted Cody from my lap, leaving a cold place where his warm little body had cuddled. She settled him at the end of the couch and pulled a crocheted afghan over him. It occurred to me I could have done the same thing. But I didn’t know he slept so soundly he barely moved, just cuddled deeper into the blanket.

I stood and stretched. I whispered. “Wow. That was quite the scene.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Yeah. Thanks a lot.”

Me? My fault? “What do you mean?”

Her whispered words spewed from her. She batted her eyes. “*Oh, you want to go to college? I might be able to help you.*”

“What’s wrong with that?”

She glanced at Cody and pulled me a few steps away. “We’re all doing our best to keep Dean calm and help him through this time. This is the first time he’s been willing to have a holiday since Lanny died. And then you have to bring up Jase going to school.”

I didn’t bring it up. “So?”

“Lanny and Jase were really close. She wanted him to stay out here and ranch because she knows that deep down, that’s what he wants to do. But he’s been getting restless, especially since Grant graduated. Like maybe he’s jealous or something. And having you here makes it even worse.”

I felt my face flame even though I didn’t feel as though I’d done anything wrong. “You’re here. Why is it worse that I’m here?”

She moved behind me and sort of herded me toward the hallway. “I’m like family.” She tossed her blonde hair. “I practically grew up in this house like Grant and Jase grew up in mine. Eventually, Jase is going to see how perfect we are for each other and what a great dad he’ll be to Cody. But having you around confuses the issue.”

Frankly, I didn’t want to be around. “I’ll go say thank you and be on my way.”

She yanked my coat from the hook and kicked my boots toward me. “You’d better just go.”

Chapter 28

Devon

As soon as we got back from Thanksgiving break, the kids were an excited jumble of anticipation. Keeping them focused on school work was a bigger challenge than before. Luckily I had a bunch of art projects planned for them to make for Christmas gifts and we had a program to practice for.

Everyone in the district was invited to the afternoon program, as they had been since the first homesteaders arrived in the 1880s. This was truly Little House on the Prairie and I caught the enthusiasm and anticipation from the kids. Even though Mandy and Jenna both assured me the community would expect the traditional songs with angels and little baby Jesus, I checked it out with Dorthea to make sure. I wouldn't put it past Jenna to enlist Mandy and have me infuse the program with Christian themes just to get me fired.

Dorthea laughed at my caution. Then she floored me by saying what a great job she thought I was doing. She said she'd had nothing but positive comments from some parents and from the community. With the exception of Ruth Ann's constant complaints that ranged from her tantrum at the spelling bee to her annoyance with my quotes of the day that often emphasized confidence in accepting your true self. Ruth Ann believed those thoughts gave kids the idea they didn't need to work hard.

"I know we've only contracted for this school year. But I'd like you to consider staying another year," Dorthea said.

By now, the weather had grown so cold I could no longer hike up the hill to talk on the phone. I huddled in Tessa and my mouth dropped open. "Well. I haven't really thought about it. I sort of planned to go to grad school next year."

She sounded distracted. I was sure she had forty thousand things to do that day. "The best grad programs like students with experience. Another year in the field might help your

chances to get into a great school as opposed to a good school.”

I told her I’d think about it and hung up. I hated lying to Dorthea but the truth was, I gave it a couple of seconds of thought and then turned my attention to the real reason I’d driven up to the hilltop in the dwindling early December sunlight.

My stomach flip-flopped and nausea crept in. I needed to do this before I talked myself out of it. Again.

The daily quotes had been working on more than just Trevor. Between the quotes about following your dreams and believing in yourself and being away from my parents and all my friends for the first time, I had started to really think about my life and what I wanted.

Sitting at Varner’s Thanksgiving table and hearing how Jase was being railroaded into working on the ranch and eventually marrying Jenna, had been a turning point in my mind. It was time for me to take charge of my life. For once.

The fact that Marsha and Benji had wanted me to do this for five years made me a little uneasy. But I couldn’t let what they wanted or didn’t want run my life anymore. Doing something only because they disapproved was just as bad as letting them dictate what I did, where I lived or whether I taught school or enrolled in school.

Right. I told myself all of this again as I watched the bright Northern Star appear in the open sky. Do it. Now.

I took a deep breath and hit speed dial. It rang four times, and with each ring my heart beat harder and more acid seeped into my gut.

Finally he picked up. “Hey, Dev. Thank god you called. You know how I always get low during the holidays. It’s really bad this year. You’re gone and I don’t have anyone. Mom and Jeff are fighting and finals are coming up. I need you.”

I squeezed my eyes closed. This was going to be tough. “I know. I’m trying to get the kids ready for this big program and...”

He interrupted as if I hadn't even spoken. "When are you coming home? We've only got two weeks before break and I'll have to move out of the dorm for a month. I can't take it at home."

I opened my eyes and picked at Tessa's steering wheel with my gloved fingers. "Doesn't look like I'm going to be coming home at all."

"What?"

Here we go. "Marsha and Benji already got me a ticket to fly from Denver to Long Beach. We're all going to stay at my uncle's. I only get two weeks, anyway."

Something banged on the other end as if he slammed a book down or threw something. "Shit! When are you going to let them quit running your life? What about us? When do I get to be important to you?"

I leaned my head back and focused on a minuscule tear in Tessa's liner. "My whole family, all my cousins and aunts and uncles and everyone, is going to be there. It doesn't make sense for me to go to St. Louis to spend Christmas alone."

Anger beat in his voice. "You wouldn't be alone. You'd be with me. We'd be together. I can't believe you're letting me down again."

As if I owed him. As if he hadn't left me on my own to tell my parents what we'd done. As if he hadn't refused to come to the hospital saying that Marsha and Benji made him nervous.

Good thing he said that because it made me mad enough it fueled my courage. "Seems like all I've done is let you down for a long time, Tommy."

He must have heard something in my voice. "It's okay, baby. Just come home for Christmas. We need to be together."

I gripped the wheel and took a deep breath. Jump. "It's not working."

"What's not working?"

Bad beginning but at least I started. "Us. We've been together for a long time and I think I was just used to you and

me. But last summer it all kind of fell apart and you left me to deal with it all alone.”

“Wait a minute.” He voice smoothed with hurt. “I wanted to be with you but Marsha and Benji hovered around you and they wouldn’t let me close.”

“They love me and were worried about me. They didn’t keep you from me, though. You chose not to see me.”

He tried a different tack. “Are you going to hold every mistake I’ve ever made against me now? You know I wasn’t raised the same way you were, with parents who cared about me and paid attention to every detail of my life. So sue me if I sometimes don’t get it. I thought you understood me. Marsha and Benji succeeded in separating us and now their poisoning you against me.”

“My parents have nothing to do with this.” A certain cowboy has everything to do with this, I could have said. Jase and I would never be together, I knew that. But he’d shown me what it felt like to have someone stand up for me, to have someone risk their safety to protect me. “We’re just growing in two different directions and I think it’s time we let it go.” Shit, could I be any more cliché?

He drew in a sharp breath and said nothing and then I heard him start to cry. My stomach clenched and my heart dropped. He sniffed. “Don’t do this, Dev. Don’t abandon me. Not now. Not like this.”

Now I started to cry. “I don’t want to hurt you. But this...”

He talked faster, his words watery with his tears. “It’s because we haven’t seen each other for so long. You’ve forgotten how good we are together.”

“I don’t think...”

“You can’t do this on the phone. Not when you’re so far away and we haven’t seen each other. Don’t do it to me. Please. I need you. I can’t take it if you break up.”

“Tommy. It’s better if we just...”

“No! Please, Dev.”

We sat in silence for a few moments. He seemed to get some control and began again. “Okay. I get that you’re out there alone and I know you’re pissed at me because you think I wasn’t there for you last summer. But give me another chance. Give us a chance. We love each other. We’re soul mates. So just don’t break up with me.”

I knew this wouldn’t be easy. Tears ran down my cheeks but I kept my voice together. “It’s not working, Tommy.”

“I can’t take it if you give up on us so easily. Just do this, leave the door open. Come back in May and we’ll spend some time together. You only think you want to break up because you’ve forgotten what we’re like together. Don’t make the mistake of a lifetime based on a few months.”

“I think it would be best...”

“You’re not yourself, Dev. Even Cassie says that. She says you’re all lonely and totally wrapped up in the kids at your school and don’t even want to talk about your friends here. I know it hurts to be away and you’re coping by trying to push us all away. So hang on. Just don’t do anything drastic. It’s like you’re in prison and you can’t know what you want or need. You’re just surviving.”

And you’re full of shit, I wanted to say. But didn’t. “It doesn’t seem fair to you to have you hanging on when you could be dating other people.”

He laughed and sobbed all at the same time. “I don’t want anyone but you. Haven’t I proven that? You don’t think I haven’t had a chance to hook up since you’ve been gone? You don’t think chicks have been available? But I’ve been true to you. Because I love you.”

“Maybe you should...”

“And I’ll stay true to you to prove how much you mean to me. We’re meant for each other.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Just hold on,” he said. “Promise me you’ll keep the door open. Let’s not break anything this precious because you’re in purgatory.”

I was getting dragged down into the black hole. I'd promised myself to make the break. Do it cleanly and we'd both move on. But Tommy kept talking in desperation. He reminded me of the good times and the times we'd clung to each other, how we'd grown up together and shared so much.

After an hour my phone warned me it was going to quit and I felt the same way. I didn't want to string Tommy along. I really felt that spending time apart gave me the perspective to see our relationship. I understood Tommy used me to help him limp along but he didn't give me much. Still, I owed him time to get used to the idea.

In the end, he wore me down and I agreed to keep the door open until we saw each other again. I punched the phone off, exhausted with the emotion.

A knock on my frosted window made me scream and jerk away. My heart hammered against my ribs. I looked in the rearview mirror.

The parking lights of a pickup glowed against the falling darkness. How had I not heard a pickup approach? I must have been really wrapped up in my misery. Without thinking, I rolled down my window.

Jase stood outside wrapped in a barn coat against the cold. "Are you okay?"

Chapter 29

Jase

She cleared her throat. Her eyes looked puffy, like she'd been crying. "Yeah. I was just making a phone call."

What an ass. I'd probably interrupted her call to her boyfriend and she was all sad because it was the holiday season and she couldn't be with him. I looked at the rising moon and puffs of air rose from my breath. "Oh. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No. I'm done." She sounded firm.

The warmth from inside the pickup hit my face. "I was waiting at your trailer and when you didn't come back for a while I thought I ought to check up on you."

"I'm fine." We were having a hard time getting the conversation going. "Why were you waiting for me?"

"I." Shit. I ought to go home. "I wanted to talk to you. Apologize for the other day."

"You've got to be frozen. Get in."

She rolled up her window.

She couldn't hate me too much if she invited me inside. I walked around and climbed into the warm pickup.

She leaned her back on her door and faced me. "You don't have to apologize for Dean. It's not your fault he got drunk."

But I did have to. "Yeah. But I should have warned you, given you the option of steering clear of all the drama."

She put a hand on mine, the warmth of her skin shocking. "What's the deal with you and the ranch?"

I didn't want to talk about this. "What do you mean?"

"I thought you loved being a rancher and living out here. Grant said you were groomed to take over all your life and it's all you ever wanted. But it sounds like maybe that's not the case."

It felt like she held a screwdriver and picked at the seal around my heart. “Grant doesn’t always get it right but it’s true my parents expected me to take over the ranch eventually.”

“And you don’t want to?”

I gazed out the fogged window and the words walked out of my mouth almost against my will. “I love the ranch. I do. It’s an opportunity not many people get, you know. To live out here in the country and be where your family has lived for four generations.”

“But.”

Shit. Why was I telling her this? “But I’d like to go to school. I want to be an electrical engineer. I’ve wanted to do that since I was a freshman in high school.”

“Does Dean know?”

Now I just let it out. “He might suspect I’d like to leave. The only person I ever told about this is Mom. But she made me promise to take care of Dad and Grant. I can’t walk out on either of them.”

She sounded genuinely interested. “How would going to school equal walking out on them?”

I clenched my fists. “Dean can’t run the ranch. He can barely make it through the day. And Grant doesn’t even have a job. How will they survive if there’s no income from the ranch?”

“Grant has a degree. He may not be able to find a great job but he can support himself. He doesn’t have to, that’s all. You allow him to fiddle-fuck around.”

Did she just say fiddle-fuck? That was such a Nebraska term. She was picking up all the best habits. “I know you’re right. But I promised my mom. I can’t kick him out. I can’t leave Dean out here alone.”

Her voice sounded flat. “So you’re going to give up your dream?”

“I’ve got responsibilities I can’t walk away from. People depend on me.” Frustration built behind my words.

She shifted and peered into the darkness ahead. “It’s tough when the people we love put so much pressure on us. They depend on us to help them survive and you never know if you’re only making the situation worse by letting them dictate to you, or if you need to shake it all off and run out there on your own.”

That sat between us for a while. Cold seeped into the cab and she started the engine to let it warm up.

“Okay,” she said, startling me.

“Okay.”

She grinned. “Here’s my plan. We both have people depending on us. Lots of expectations. So I propose we have a friendship. No strings. No expectations or demands. Just hanging out if we feel like it, trading books when we want. I’m only going to be here a few more months. You’re going to be here forever, so we just keep it easy and light.”

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard in a long time.” I didn’t need the hassles and the pressure of letting someone else down.

“And I’m freezing. Why don’t we go back to the trailer and watch one of those lame movies. I’ll let you pick.”

Chapter 30

Devon

How bad could two and a half weeks in Long Beach be? My Aunt Leanne and Uncle Bruce had a big house and pool, situated within walking distance of the ocean. My mom had three siblings, which gave me six cousins. I was by far the youngest. Some of them were married or partnered up and a couple had already started on families. This year, everyone made an effort to get together so throughout my time there, the house was a revolving door of activity.

As much as I loved the constant social whirl and the almost overload of electronic stimulation, I found myself retreating to the quiet of my room or the pool when others weren't around. I watched about a million new movies on my iPad. I didn't open a book. I ate seafood and drank frappes and fancy coffees every day. It was about as far from the Nebraska experience as I could get.

And I thought about Trevor, wondering if he made the tiramisu he'd wanted to try and if Ruth Ann appreciated it or pushed him to the heated rodeo arena to practice roping. Did Sam and Bill's mother make it home and did she stay clean the whole holiday? Bailey would have a story to tell about helping her dad and the holiday basketball tournament in North Platte. Cody would be full of delight at Santa's visit.

In the quiet moments, I sent emails to Jase. I described my family and the meals we all cooked together. I told him about the movies and bars we attended and the constant ebb and flow of the group on vacation. In return, he wrote in the mornings and evenings, sometimes at noon when he retreated from the freezing temperatures into the warm ranch house. He wrote about the sunrise on the frosted hills or the puff of breath from a pregnant cow in the early morning air. All of it would sound dull if I told Cassie, but his words brought the scenes to life and made me picture the isolation and beauty of the ranch.

As luxurious as it was to walk barefoot or sit in a hoodie on the sandy beach, I felt restless and eager to get back to the

little trailer and my kids. And Jase.

Ever since the night on the hill, we'd spent a lot of time together. He'd stopped at the trailer two or three times each week, usually bringing me books he'd read or returning those I'd loaned him. At least, that's how it always started out. But then I'd invite him in and we'd watch a movie or—and I couldn't tell any of my St. Louis friends this—we'd play Scrabble or gin rummy. He taught me how to play cribbage but I wasn't very good at it. We'd become friends through it all. If I had fantasies about anything more, I buried them. We had our rules and I'd stick to them.

My two weeks in Long Beach started to drag about the end of the first week and by the time I packed up to head back, my heart raced and I couldn't drag my thoughts away from Jase. I'd boarded the plane in sunshine and seventy-degree weather and stepped out of the Denver terminal into freezing temperatures. Tessa started right up though, and away we went, through Denver's rush hour traffic in darkening skies and into the prairies of northern Colorado and Nebraska.

My thoughts swirled like water going down a drain. Marsha and Benji and Uncle Bruce had been working like little elves for a while. Turns out, with all their connections and strings, they found an uppity private grade school that invited me to apply for a position for next year. It would be a sweet setup. I'd be able to live at Uncle Bruce's house in one of the posh bedroom suites, enjoy the perks of a pool and housekeeper and close proximity to the beach. I'd teach a classroom of fifteen at most, all the same grade.

So there was that. But Marsha and Benji really wanted me to go back to grad school. Dad had pull at Washington University so admittance was a given. Of course they wanted me to live at home. I'd need to make a decision soon.

Snow flitted in front of the pickup for most the of four-hour drive from the Denver airport. The heater kept the cab of Tessa toasty but looking at the icy crystals whipping along the highway in the wind made me shiver. By the time Tessa crossed the Nebraska state line, night had dropped like a blackout curtain. I sat straight, my hands clutched on the

wheel, hating the cold, the night, and the snow piling up and starting to stick on the road.

Bone tired, relief seeped into me hours later as I finally turned off the highway onto the Varner Ranch road and rumbled my way on the frozen, snowy road to my trailer. Weariness vanished in an instant when I saw the lump of white in front of my trailer and recognized it as Cisco. A trail of exhaust rose from the tailpipe.

I pulled up alongside and cut my engine, throwing myself from the cab. Jase seemed even more eager and met me before I had Tessa's door slammed. I wanted to jump at him, wrap my arms around his neck and feel him pull me close. But we were friends. Just friends.

His wide grin faltered. He dropped his arms to his sides and I realized he'd had them up, as if waiting to catch my embrace. We stood awkwardly while the wind tugged my hair and whipped it into my face. "Damn, it's frickin' freezing out here!"

He stepped around me to reach into Tessa's bed and yanked out my suitcase. "Send you to California for a month and you get soft."

"Two weeks," I corrected, hurrying to the deck steps. They'd been swept recently, though snow covered them again.

"Seemed like a year." I thought I heard him say, but he mumbled and the wind howled so maybe he said something else.

I banged the door open and we rushed inside, pushing the door closed against the invading army of winter. Jase dropped my suitcase and I snapped on a light, catching my breath and waiting for the icy air of the trailer to seep through my hoodie.

I relaxed my shoulders. "It's warm in here!"

Jase's lips ticked up a little. "I hope you don't mind that I came in. I lit the pilot and started the heat. We lost power a few times while you were gone and I figured the place would be an icebox."

The deck swept, heat turned on, the only thing missing was...

He spun around, jerked open the door and stepped outside. A second later the door opened and he appeared with a bottle of champagne. "It's not very good but it's the best the Feed Store could manage. I celebrated New Year's by going to bed early so I could get up to feed the cows. I thought maybe you'd like to celebrate with me."

"You don't have to feed tomorrow?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. I've got to feed every day. But if I'm going to lose sleep, I want to make it worthwhile." A blush rose to his face and busied himself by taking off his Sorrels.

I liked being considered worthwhile. "Wait here." I said. "I've got a box of groceries to bring in."

He handed me the bottle of champagne and stepped into his boots again. "I'll get it. You find some glasses and try to get warm." He banged out the door.

I kicked off my shoes and padded to the kitchen.

Friends, friends, friends. I repeated the mantra.

With second semester starting I was halfway to the finish line. Four and a half months and I'd be out of here. With any luck, I'd be in Long Beach setting up a classroom for a dozen second graders. One lesson plan for the day. Unlimited Internet access and the resources of an affluent school district. Debt-free. Finally ready to start living.

I couldn't screw it up now because a cowboy treated me like a queen. He never asked how he could help or seemed to expect thanks. He just knew what would make my life easier and did it. More than that, he did it with those dark eyes so full of expression. And the broad shoulders, the tumble of brown hair across his forehead. And the full lips...

Friends, friends, friends.

Jase returned and I took the box of groceries while he removed his boots and shrugged out of his canvas barn coat.

He took the bottle, peeled off the foil and started twisting the wire cage from the cork. “I have to admit I haven’t done this very often. Out here, if you need a bottle opener for beer people think you’re putting on airs.”

He popped the cork on the champagne and I only felt a little bad when it dented the ceiling in the living room. He poured the sparkling wine into the juice glasses I offered as my best crystal. We tipped them together. “To the new year,” he said.

It wasn’t his words or the wine. It was his eyes. I tried not to see the heat and desire in them. It only mirrored what I felt. The sudden vibration in the base of my stomach that led directly to the moist spot between my legs. My toes curled on the old linoleum and my breath stalled. I raised the glass to my lips, still unable to break my contact with his eyes. The cool champagne tickled my tongue and sweetened my mouth but I had to concentrate to send it down my throat.

I found my voice and it sounded loud and awkward. “Wow. I’m not a champagne expert but you’re right. This isn’t great stuff. My uncle served us all this champagne he’d ordered from France. It tasted like bubbly sunshine.”

I regretted it immediately. A trickle of embarrassment entered his gaze and he lowered his eyes and chuckled. “Well, you can’t expect much for the sticks, can you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m such a bitch. This is good. I mean, my uncle is super-rich and he’s a prick. I like this. Really.” I took another sip.

He set his glass down on the counter. “Happy New Year, anyway. I should go. You’re probably tired. I just wanted to make sure you got home okay and the heat was working.”

I so didn’t want him to leave. I grabbed his arm on impulse, then let go when the electric shock of his warm skin hit me. “Stay. Finish your champagne at least.”

He looked uncertain. “You don’t need to unpack?”

The suitcase sat by the front door where it could stay for the rest of the winter. I wouldn’t be wearing the tanks and

shorts here for a while. I didn't say that, though. "Just let me put away the groceries."

He picked up his glass. "Tell me about Long Beach."

I leaned on the counter and sipped my wine. "I already emailed you everything. What's going on here?"

He frowned. "Nothing much."

I pulled milk and butter from the box and opened the fridge. "Out with it. Something happened. Not good."

He didn't say anything while I pulled frozen pizza from the box and stuffed it into the freezer compartment. When I turned he stared at me intently, as if considering what to say.

"Tell me," I prompted.

He continued his inner argument for a few more seconds before one side won. A sad smile played on his face. "Maybe some other time."

We held our gaze for a while and I tried to let him know that whether he wanted to tell me or not, he could trust me with his secrets. I ached to put my hands on his wind-burned face and pull him to me. My lips burned with the need to kiss him, to draw him to me, take whatever pain he carried and hold it for a while.

My imagination took me even further. I could feel his warm skin on mine, his legs pressed along mine, his weight on top of me. Something flooded his eyes and I knew he'd seen into my mind and felt the same thing.

I grabbed something from the box of groceries and spun around, opening a cabinet at random and stuffing it inside. When I closed the cabinet, Jase stood behind it, his face full of gentle humor. "Do you always store your cereal with the plates?"

It wasn't the most romantic thing a guy ever said to me, except it was. I don't know if I reached for him first or if his arms circled my waist and pulled me closer. It didn't matter. My blood rushed to my ears, my heart thundering as his lips

found mine. Warm and soft, they moved with a tenderness and longing that melted my knees.

He leaned into me and I pressed my back against the refrigerator. His kisses flamed my blood and I heard myself moan in pleasure and I pulled him harder against me, meeting his mouth with the fire he'd ignited. My fingers bunched at the flannel tails of his shirt, finding their way underneath, desperate to feel the heat of his skin. I ran my palms up the hard muscles of his back, feeling them ripple at my touch.

He squeezed against me, his breath harsh. "Oh god, Devon." He lowered his head and showered my neck with butterfly kisses, muttering against my burning skin. "Devon."

He pulled back for the slightest moment and grabbed the hem of my hoodie, yanking it over my head and taking the t-shirt with it. I stood topless in front of him and he drank in the sight of my small breasts as if he'd been in a drought. "God, you're beautiful."

I fumbled with the buttons on his flannel shirt. My fingers shook in my rush to pull the fabric from his arms. I dropped the shirt on top of my hoodie and t-shirt. His chest heaved against my palms and I reached up to put my lips on the beating heat at the base of his neck.

He moaned as my lips branded his chest. He tasted of salt and desire. His hands closed around my face and he brought me up for a full kiss, his passion searing into me.

He kissed my cheeks and neck and let his tongue tease my collar bone as he drew down, finally sucking and tugging on my hard nipple. My throat felt raw and I realized I'd been drawing in ragged breaths, my need for him pounding in my blood.

I tangled my fingers in the silkiness of his hair and he wound his arms around my bare back. His arms were bands of warm steel, holding me in a way that told me he never wanted to let me go. He broke away from ravaging my breast and looked into my face.

In one fluid movement he swept me in his arms and carried me down the short hallway to my bedroom. He set me gently on the bed and kissed me deeply, his hands touching and teasing my breasts. I fell back on the pillows and he stretched out next to me. He ran his open palm down my belly and stopped at the zipper of my jeans. He whispered against my mouth. "Is this okay?"

I arched against his hand and moaned. "I want you."

The words seemed to spur him on and he flipped the button open and pulled the zipper down. I struggled out of my jeans as he did the same.

He rested on his knees between my legs, gazing at me from head to foot. "You're more beautiful than I imagined."

My thoughts mirrored his. He was a solid frame of muscle. It roped from his arms and chest, down his taut stomach and to his solid legs. Everything about him was hard. He didn't have to tell me how much he wanted me. It was obvious.

I reached down and took him in my hand, feeling him strain against the touch. He closed his eyes and his Adam's apple bounced in his throat. He threw his head back as I stroked him, heat searing my palm.

"Oh god, Devon. Look what you do to me." He fell forward and locked his lips to mine. I took the weight of his body as he stretched on top of me, feeling his hard desire against my inner thighs.

I thrust my hips against him and he groaned into my mouth. Again he pulled his head back and looked into my eyes. His eyes burned dark and he looked drugged. He swallowed in a fight for control. "Are you sure?"

I teased him. "Could you stop now?"

He rose up on his arms, suddenly alert. He pushed as if to roll off. "If you don't want..."

I planted my hands on his firm ass and clamped him to me. "I want." I kissed him hard and mumbled against his mouth. "I want."

He suddenly sat up. His face was flushed with desire but he frowned. "I, um."

God. I'd done something wrong. He was right. This was a mistake. We were only going to be friends. My throat closed and I wanted to cry.

He jumped from the bed and reached for his jeans. "We need. I have." He looked away as he thrust a leg into his jeans.

He couldn't get away from me fast enough. I couldn't move.

He yanked his pants up. "Condoms. I have some in Cisco's glove box."

I went limp. He wasn't trying to run away. He was being smart. Protecting himself and me. I guess we'd both learned the hard way. But with him, the lesson hadn't been wasted. Even though the worst thing had happened to me, I still hadn't learned.

"Good. Thanks." I said. "Hurry."

He rushed from the room. Seconds later the front door opened and closed. I waited for what seemed like a decade, then he was back.

The good part is that we got to start all over. The slow kisses that fan flames. It didn't take long for me to make him hot again.

He entered me with a thrust and I gasped with pleasure. We fell into a fast rhythm, both consumed with each other and both came so quickly it was almost disappointing. But the fast climax gave us the space and time to explore each other. Which we did. Over and over again, until we eventually fell into a satisfied and exhausted sleep.

Chapter 31

Jase

I woke well before dawn, the thin winter light filtering into the bedroom window. Devon lay tucked to my side. Her body radiated heat from her deep sleep. I inhaled her unique scent of lilacs, skin and sex. I nuzzled the softness at the back of her neck and felt myself swelling against the curves of her ass as I pressed into her. She stirred and I backed away.

Her breathing evened out and I watched her chest rise and fall. What perfection. Her long eyelashes rested against her cheeks and her mouth puckered slightly with each exhale. That mouth. I grew even harder remember how she'd used it on me, sucking and teasing, running her tongue over me without hesitation. I wanted to put my hands over her soft, pale skin and bury myself deep inside her again.

But I knew if I woke her and we started in where we'd left off I'd never crawl from her bed into the frosty morning. And I had no doubt it was damned cold and snowy outside. But the cows needed to be fed.

I slipped from under the blankets and collected my jeans and various other bits of clothes. I found my shirt by the refrigerator. It took all the discipline I had not to shed my clothes and slide back beside Devon. I could barely zip my jeans thinking about her sweetness and how wet she got. How she bucked against me and pulled me deeper inside. Her cries of pleasure and the way every muscle tensed in her orgasms.

I swallowed and ran a hand through my hair. I'd had sex before. Good sex. I'd been with experienced women and with enthusiastic lovers. But no one had ever made me feel like Devon did. Every touch sent waves of desire coursing through me. I felt like I could make love to her for a month straight and never want to leave the bed.

I shoved my feet into my Sorrels. I'd be back in two hours. Just as soon as I strung hay for the cows. No matter what else might need attention today, it would wait. I had to be with

Devon. This felt like the beginning of a whole new life for me and I couldn't wait to start it.

The cold smacked my face and lungs. I couldn't get my breath and let out a string of coughs. Jesus, it had to be twenty below zero. I went through the motions of starting Cisco, letting him heat up and driving home. On automatic pilot I loaded hay on the feed sled and drove the tractor to the pasture. The cows gathered as usual and I tried to concentrate on checking them out and making sure they weathered the cold okay. But I couldn't take my mind off of Devon.

She'd be snuggled under the blankets, the sun cheering her bedroom while she slept. I thought of her shapely legs stretched along the sheets, her arms curled and her hands tucked under her cheeks. I pictured myself pulling off my jeans and pressing myself against her back, pushing to enter her from behind, her warm flesh welcoming me.

Lost in these thoughts and many more, I drove the tractor home and parked it. I trotted to my pickup, not being able to get there fast enough.

I slid inside, slammed the door and cranked the heat on high. Still lost in memories and plans of Devon I thrust the gear shift into first and let off the clutch.

Bang! Bang! BANG!

What the fuck. It sounded like the engine fell out but I realized something hit the passenger window. I jerked my head to see Grant in shirt sleeves. Panic filled his eyes and his mouth moved as he shouted. I slammed the breaks on and jumped out of the truck. "What's going on?"

"Dad. Oh god, Jase. I think he's dead. Or dy-dy-dying." His voice broke and he let out a sob. "I called the ambulance but they can't get enough people to make the run."

I sprinted for the house.

Dad lay face down on the living room rug where he'd apparently rolled from the couch. His cheek rested in a pile of vomit and he smelled like urine and worse.

Grant ran into the room behind me. “I rolled him over so he wouldn’t choke.”

Dad’s heart beat at a wild and erratic rate and his breath was uneven and light. I slapped his face but it had no effect.

“Get the pickup,” I said to Grant. He seemed relieved to have some direction and raced from the room.

I grabbed one of Dad’s arms and with some effort hefted him to my shoulder in an awkward fireman’s carry. I crouched down and with my free hand pulled at the afghan Mom had knitted for him. I threw it over him.

I lumbered out the front door to the pickup Grant had pulled up to the steps. He jumped out and ran around to help me stuff Dad into the cab. “Hurry,” he said.

“Aren’t you coming?”

He stepped back, his face pale in the morning frost. “I can’t. I... Mom... I can’t go to the hospital.”

Right. Thank you, Grant for making me do this alone, because it’s so much easier for me.

I raced to the driver’s seat and jumped in. I buried the gas pedal and we zoomed through the snow to the hospital, an hour and a half away. We flew past Devon’s trailer at seventy-five miles an hour. I spared a second to glance at her bedroom window before I focused back on the road.

Chapter 32

Devon

I slammed the scissors down on the counter and strode to the bay window. Snow flitted down in giant flakes and long shadows fell across the white ground. Evening paced just beyond the horizon, promising another arctic night. Only this night I'd be in a cold bed all alone.

I stomped back to the counter. I had some more prep to do on the art project I'd planned for the kids. Bailey and Trevor would be able to complete the whole project on their own. I'd take care of various skills for the other students according to their ability. For Cody, I'd leave him only a few basic steps.

But my heart wasn't in it. My heart, traitor that it was, lay broken and bleeding on the tousled sheets in my bedroom.

I'd woken up with a sweet glow, a tingle in the warm spot between my thighs. It grew into furnace heat as I remembered the night before with Jase. My breath grew harsh as I thought about his hands on me, his lips and tongue. I called out, thinking maybe he was in the kitchen or taking a shower. He didn't answer.

Stupid me. I assumed he was out feeding those hungry cows of his and when he finished, he'd be back. I thought about how I'd meet him. Naked by the front door? Maybe wearing my heels and thong. Or maybe the lace demi-bra. Or maybe I should leave a trail of lingerie leading back to the bed. Where I'd be stretched out waiting for him.

The more I thought about it, the wetter I got. I leaned over and tugged open the bedside table and pulled out my Trojan Twister. I flipped it on and arched upwards as I slid it inside. My thoughts lingered on Jase and I imagined him above me, thrusting in and out, his passion rising.

After that pleasant interval, I drifted back to sleep. When I woke, it was almost noon. Jase hadn't returned. Maybe he had a breakdown with his tractor. Even then, I'd been able to fool myself into believing he'd be back. It didn't even occur to me

then that I was just a conquest. Another girl he fucked and crossed off the list. Another notch in his belt.

By four o'clock it was obvious he wasn't coming back. How stupid could I be to believe he actually cared about me?

Chapter 33

Jase

I nearly crawled out of my skin while I waited for hours at the hospital. Dad hadn't come to by the time we'd driven the hour and a half to the hospital. I'd pulled up at the emergency door, hefted him over my shoulder and struggled through the sliding doors, yelling for help.

People in scrubs appeared out of nowhere along with a gurney. They whisked him away and I was left to fill out forms. I didn't have the information but they could get most of what they needed from Mom's records.

I hated the hospital. Not with that vague feeling of sadness and fear the idea of hospitals bring on. But with the visceral, sickening memories of Mom slipping away bit by bit, pain coursing through her blood and settling in her bones. Every corner, every hallway, every smell in this small hospital cradled some awful memory of her last few months. I understood why Grant couldn't be here. But I hated him for leaving it to me. Again.

I stood at the window of the waiting room. The sun had already abandoned the day and icy air wafted from the glass. New snow fell and had already covered the parking lot, giving off its own glow, making the world a steely blue.

More than anything I wanted to call Devon. None of this would be so bleak if she were here with me. I knew that one look at her steady green eyes would take away this fear crawling in the pit of my stomach.

If Dad died I'd be alone. I felt like I'd been taking care of him for the last three years. He hadn't done much on the ranch. I'd been deciding what work to do and when. I'd paid the bills and bought the supplies. I'd sold the cattle and bought bulls, put up the hay and maintained the equipment. I'd done my best to make sure he ate right and god knows I'd tried to curb his drinking. I'd done what Mom asked and even tried to take care of Grant.

But I'd failed everyone and everything.

The only light I could find was Devon. I knew she'd stick with me. Mom would say she was a quality person. I'd seen her integrity with the kids, her strength dealing with the parents, her fearless defense of those weaker than her.

The way she'd opened herself up to me last night told me how much she cared about me. I'd been with plenty of girls but never had that same feeling of connection, of being lost and found and safe in someone's heart. This is what my parents must have shared. It's what Mom talked about when she urged me to leave Jenna alone. No wonder Dad was so lost when Mom died.

Rubber soles squeaked on the linoleum. "Mr. Varner?"

My heart jumped to my throat. I didn't know what to expect and dreaded hearing bad news. I had to clear my throat. "Yes."

A man in his mid-thirties stood in front of me in navy blue scrubs and white lab coat. "I'm Dr. Turner." He held out his hand to invite me to sit on the orange vinyl couch. He sat opposite me in a grungy blue plastic chair. "He's stable and conscious."

I let out my held breath.

Dr. Turner shook his head. "But the situation is not good. His liver is shot and he's drinking himself to death. At this rate, it could be only a few months."

Helplessness washed from my feet and knocked the words from me. I closed my eyes to wait for it to recede so I could think.

Dr. Turner reached into his coat pocket and pulled out several brightly colored pamphlets. "I recommend a treatment center. There are several good ones along the Front Range." He shuffled through the stack and pulled one out and handed it to me. He tapped it. "They have pretty good luck at this one."

I tried to concentrate on the print, to believe in the hope the paper held.

Dr. Turner's voice held a fatherly tone and even though he wasn't much older than me, I wanted so desperately to trust its assurance. "I've spoken to your father about it and he seems willing to give it a try. I can't guarantee it will work, but at this point, it's probably your best option."

We spoke a little longer and he outlined more details, most of which flew right past me. He left to release Dad and make the necessary calls so the rehab center would be expecting us. It would be nearly midnight before we got there but they apparently dealt with admissions around the clock.

I called Grant while I waited for Dad's release. He sounded relieved and promised to feed Myron and the horses. He said goodbye and before he hung up I stopped him.

"Um."

Grant waited. "Yeah?"

I rolled my eyes at the ceiling. "Will you do me a favor?"

He sounded willing. "Sure."

Here goes. "Will you drive over to Devon's and tell her where I am?"

He sounded surprised. "Okay."

I didn't say anything.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"No." I struggled. "Tell her. Um. Oh, just tell her I meant to come back to her this morning and I'm really sorry and I can't wait to see her."

He didn't respond.

"Grant?"

"Yeah. Okay. I'll tell her."

He hung up. Damn it. I was a jerk. I knew Grant had a crush on her. This wasn't the first time we'd been attracted to the same girl and it usually ended badly. But I couldn't let Devon think I'd slept with her and abandoned her. It was really shitty to make Grant do it but I didn't have a choice.

We settled Dad in the pickup. Somewhere they'd rounded up a set of surgical scrubs for him so he wouldn't have to ride in his puke-soaked clothes. We headed off into the cold night. He dozed for the first couple of hours and I drove, trying not to let the dark despair swallow me. I knew I was doing the best thing but I ached for him. He hadn't expected his life to go this way. He probably saw himself aging with Mom. Grant and I would marry and give him grandkids and he'd step away slowly from the ranch, filling his days puttering in the shop and hanging out with Mom.

But she'd died and the family would never be the same. Grant would be gone, first chance he got and I...

I didn't want to go down that road. I would stay at the ranch and keep it running.

Dad stirred. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

I reached over and tapped his knee. "S'okay, Dad."

He pushed himself to sit, his eyes bleary. "That little sorrel-top of yours. She's not for you. And I'm sorry but I had to keep you from making a mistake."

He wasn't making any sense and he sounded on the verge of tears. "We've got a ways to go, Dad. Why don't you try to sleep."

"But you can't have her. She'll take you away from the ranch."

I shook my head at the windshield. "We can talk about his later."

He waved his hand at me. "You gotta stay there. Grant can't be there. He'll sell it right off."

"I'm not sure I want to stay at the ranch."

"*Psht.* You don't know how easy you got it. My dad and granddad worked hard to build this place up and I'm handing it to you. You have to keep it in the family."

I might feel the burning anger later but right now I saw a broken man and I couldn't make it worse. "So you want me to

run the place. I get it. But why don't you want Devon and me to be together?"

He sat up straighter and focused on me. "She doesn't fit on the ranch. She's all city and career. She'll make you miserable and pile on the guilt until you want to die."

"Why would you think that?"

His voice cracked. "Because it happened to me. She loved me. She said she didn't care where she lived as long as it was with me. And she moved out to the ranch. Oh, yeah, she had you boys and she said she was happy. But as time went on she read her books more and more. And they took her away."

That's not how I remembered it.

"And then she left me for good."

I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Dad, she died of cancer."

His eyes didn't focus. "She died of an imprisoned heart. I locked her up on the ranch and she withered away."

I didn't know what to say.

"And that's what will happen to your sorrel-top. She'll say she loves you and then you'll strangle the life out of her."

"I don't think..."

He slapped my hand away and threw himself against the seatbelt, straining it across his chest. "You marry that Jenna Phillips. She'll be a good wife for you. Raise that little boy to be a Varner. It's only right. You have to do it. For the honor of our family. For our legacy."

I placed my hand on his chest and urged him to lay back. He released his energy and slumped back. In a few seconds his snores vibrated in the cab.

I swallowed hard and gripped the wheel. I stared at the road in my headlights but I saw Devon, pale and dwarfed amid the hospital pillows, tubes and monitors attached, her life draining away.

I couldn't do that to her.

Chapter 34

Devon

I drove along the highway at dusk. Frost rimed Tessa's windows and I glanced at the rearview mirror to make sure the boxes of groceries in the bed rode okay. Mid-march and the ground was still frozen, the sky gray, and the days short. It felt like this winter would never end.

This Saturday I'd left home early to drive to North Platte for a month's worth of groceries. I'd tried to spend the whole day shopping but after I'd gone through Wal-Mart and Target and indulged my fast-food craving at McDonalds, there wasn't a whole lot left to do. I found the movie theater but they didn't have a big selection and show times would have me killing time for another two hours. I'd turned Tessa north and headed home.

My life had slipped into some kind of Bizarro-Land. I used to spend all week looking forward to the weekend when I'd party or just lay around and watch movies. The unstructured days always flew by too fast and I'd be back in class, studying and working and keeping to my schedule.

Here, in Bumfuck, I dreaded weekends. I hadn't been to the Longbranch since before Christmas break. I hated the idea of hanging out in a grease-infused bar with married couples and horny cowboys. Grant hadn't even been around. Apparently this time of year was all about *calving*.

Trevor and Bailey had filled me in on the season. The cows and heifers—yes, I now knew the difference between a cow, bull, steer and heifer—had been bred in the summer. So now was the time when they'd all have their calves. They had to be monitored around the clock. Most times they'd have their calf without problems. But if there was trouble, which happened frequently with the heifers since they hadn't had a calf before, then the rancher needed to help them out by “pulling” the calf. When Trevor explained that process I nearly flipped out.

Anyway, someone had to check on the pregnant animals every two hours so that meant getting up all through the night. If the weather got bad, as it had several times in the last two months, it complicated everything. Newborns and young calves had to be gathered and sheltered and the calving animals watched even closer.

Despite Grant hating ranch work, even he stepped up and helped out this time of year. He was the Varner's night calver, which meant he stayed up all night and slept all day. When I did see him, he was cranky and non-responsive. Calving was all anyone ever talked about when they came to get their kids. It was like the whole countryside drew into themselves and settled into nothing but work. Like a two-month finals week, where everyone had red-rimmed eyes and walked around like zombies.

But my weekdays totally engaged me. Instead of dragging my ass to school every morning, I'd wake up full of ideas and plans. The kids responded best to anything that got them out of their desks so I had a challenge to find ways to keep them active and learning. I planned group projects so everyone could be up and interacting, but had to learn to keep them engaged and quietly working on their own level when I instructed others.

After the kids went home, I often spent time cooking. Mandy helped me out with recipes and tips. I used the handy-dandy Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook, with pictures and complete instructions that Mom had given me for Christmas. I'd made gooey cinnamon rolls, pies with flaky crusts, pots of soup and chili, pot roasts, even runzas. The challenge was getting rid of the food once I'd cooked it. I took the goodies to school and the kids gobbled them up. I would have loved to take the food to Varners. With Grant and Jase both working so hard at calving I supposed a meal or two would taste good. But I didn't feel welcome there and thought taking food would make me look desperate.

I tried not to think about Jase every waking second. Sometimes I'd even go five minutes. I was pissed at him and yet, still ached for him. How was that even possible? Tommy

and I talked once a week at our usual time. But twice I had forgotten to climb the hill at the appointed time and he'd gone bat shit. The conversations were strained but we hadn't mentioned breaking up again. I didn't even know how he felt about it. Cassie was all into her classes and the latest gossip with her new friends, people she'd met this year while I was away being a grown up.

I was desperate for company, I guessed. But March was nearing an end and School District 6's last scheduled day was May 6th. Not much time left.

Speaking of not much time, I figured I had phone signal on this road for another fifteen miles. I pulled my phone from my purse and punched Cassie's number. It rang three times and her voicemail answered. I left a message and my mood dipped even further.

Tessa's wheels rumbled along the road and I thought about a Saturday afternoon last March.

It was the last weekend of spring break. Tommy's roommate wouldn't return until Sunday. I'd spent the week with my parents, driving down to Arkansas to visit my father's sister. It had been a fun trip but I'd missed Tommy.

He'd had his typical bad week at home. His mother's latest boyfriend got drunk and smacked his mother. Tommy got in the middle and took a punch. Eventually everyone forgave each other and got drunk together. But tension grew as the week progressed. As soon as the dorms opened up, Tommy moved back in.

That Saturday I'd gone to see him. The sky had been a heavy, oppressive gray, just like today. We'd put on a movie and relaxed on Tommy's bed in his dorm room. Of course, we had no intention of watching. In three seconds flat my clothes lay in a heap beside the bed and Tommy shed his.

I turned the heat down in Tessa and squirmed against the seat, remembering. Tommy's lean body pressed against mine, the hair rough, the muscles like steel. I reached for him. He was hard as granite in my palm.

He whispered, his lips close to my ear. “I missed you, Devon. I need you.”

Without waiting, he rolled on top of me and thrust inside. His need made him fierce and almost rough. He pounded against me, and I struggled not to panic. But his release came almost immediately, before I even had time to get the rhythm.

He fell against me. “Sorry, Dev. You’re so beautiful and hot I can’t control myself.”

He held me and I felt wanted and loved. While the ice beat against the window we made love again. And again. He spent more time, touching me, tasting me, bringing me to climax in shattering waves.

I finally left him snoring. I should have gone home hours earlier, when the ice started. I knew my parents would be worried. My body felt worn and tingly, like I would after a tough workout. The silence of the hallways of the dorm and the cold of the parking lot gave me a vague sense of loss that I couldn’t name.

I assumed it was the good girl guilt of knowing my parents would be disappointed I’d spent my afternoon in Tommy’s bed.

Maybe my body knew more than my brain that afternoon. Two months later I was pacing in my parents’ living room, alone, trying to explain why their princess was pregnant. And two months after that I was lying in a hospital bed trying to absorb the miscarriage and my Dad telling me I was moving to Nebraska to teach school for a year.

Tommy had been there for the sex. He’d been willing and attentive and satisfied my body’s craving. But he hadn’t been there for the end.

My phone beeped and I jumped, swerving across the center line. I grabbed it. “Cassie!”

“Hey, bitch, ‘sup?”

She sounded happy with lots of noise in the background. “It’s cold and gray and I’m bored. What are you doing?”

“We’re hanging at the mall. Hold on, I got a mocha and I’m gonna find someplace to sit.” More talking and banging around. I heard her say, “I’ll catch up later,” and then she came back on the line. “Okay. It’s cool now. What the hell is going on with you?”

Cassie and I used to spend lots of Saturday afternoons at the mall, trying on clothes, drinking coffee, watching boys and gossiping. “Cody said the funniest thing this week...”

“Cody. Is he that cute rancher dude?”

“That’s Jase. This is Cody, my kindergartner. So we were finger painting and he...”

Cassie interrupted again. “Tell me what’s wrong with this picture. You call me up on one of your limited times to tell me about a student and not to give me details of a romantic adventure.”

“If I did tell you about any guys you’d get all indignant and lecture me about how much Tommy misses me and how it’s killing him to be faithful and you’d bitch me out and I’d feel like shit. So, yeah, I’m telling you about the cutest guy out here in the boonies.”

She slurped her coffee, making my mouth water for a hot mocha. “So there is something going on out there you just don’t want to share it with me.”

I pretended to laugh at the absurdity of it. “You’d kill me if there was.”

She didn’t say anything for a beat. “Yeah. I would.” She gulped again. “Cause, you know, he really loves you.”

I grinned. “Wow. Thirty seconds into the conversation before you mentioned it. He must have found someone new.”

She didn’t have a snappy comeback. “You know, you’ve been gone a long time. It wouldn’t be that crazy to think Tommy accidentally, you know, not setting out to or anything. But if he got really lonely one night and there was someone close to him and he, well. What if he drank too much one time and then his self-discipline didn’t, you know, stay strong. And...”

She danced around, in and out, brushing up against it but not really saying. “Wait a minute. Stop talking.”

The mall traffic continued but she shut up. I tried to process what she said. “Tommy is cheating on me?”

She gasped. “No. God no.”

“But he slept with someone else.”

She didn’t answer right away. Then she spoke rapidly. “Not cheating. You know. Cheating would be if it happened a lot with the same person.”

Digging the details from her tangled my temper. “So what happened?”

“Sometimes it’s better if you don’t know everything. Like, what good would it do to know, you know? I mean, Tommy loves you. He really, really loves you. But, like, he’s a guy and you know, guys just need to, well, you know, let off tension, you know? I mean, like, we need to do that too, like have sex and stuff. But guys need it even more, you know? And you’ve been gone for a long time and...”

“Cassie!” I shouted and my voice bounced back to me from the windshield. “I’m almost home and I’m going to lose signal so tell me what happened.”

She hesitated and I heard someone call her name. I pictured her waving and pointing to the phone. I waited. “Okay,” she said. “I just want you to understand that it was a one-time thing. We’d all gone to a party at this girl’s apartment. It’s someone you haven’t met, Dawn. She’s from California and going to school here. She’s way cool. You’ll love her.”

I didn’t know how much I’d love someone who slept with my boyfriend. But I waited for the rest of the deets. “What happened?” I heard the hardness in my voice.

Cassie swallowed again. “Now don’t get mad. Tommy didn’t mean anything to happen. It just did.”

“I’m not mad.” But I was and my tone didn’t hide it.

“So we were talking about you and how much we miss you. We kept telling stories and next thing I know we’re both crying and then hugging and then...”

I finally got what she was saying. I couldn’t speak.

“...and then we were hugging because we wanted to make the other one feel better. You know?”

I still didn’t say anything.

She started to cry. “I swear. We didn’t plan it. It just happened and then we both felt...feel. We both feel awful. I’m sorry, Devon. It didn’t mean anything.”

I listened to her sobs. I knew how she looked sitting on the side of a planter in the middle of the mall. Her hair in a pony, Uggs on her feet, tights and skirt coordinated with her coat. Her mascara might run a little and her eyes would be red and puffy, her mouth turned down and watery. She cried so easily and it was never a good look for her.

I turned off the highway. “So let me get this straight. You, my best friend, slept with my boyfriend.”

She sniffed. “Technically. But there’s more to it. You always go all black and white.”

“Okay.”

She started crying again. “I love you, Dev. You’re the best friend I’ve ever, ever had. I hate that you moved away and that you hardly ever call. I feel really alone.”

“Yeah, I can tell. You’ve got parties every weekend and are hanging out at the mall with whoever.”

“That’s not fair. What am I supposed to do? You’re the one who left. You know, you just got weird at the end of the semester last year and you haven’t been the same since.”

I almost blurted out, *yeah, that’s what getting pregnant and having a miscarriage will do to you*. I bit my lip and stared down the dirt road into the gathering darkness. Cassie had a point. I’d checked out when I found out I was pregnant and fell apart when I lost the baby. I let my parents make plans for me and I made excuses to Cassie. I told her I was doing a

student teaching gig in Arkansas and staying with my aunt and uncle. Then I was off to Nebraska.

It was weird that Tommy hadn't spilled the whole story to her. If they were that close and talking about me, why hadn't he let her in on why I'd left so quickly? I didn't want to admit it but I wondered if he held back because it would make him look bad. And if he looked bad, he couldn't get her sympathy. And by sympathy, I meant pussy.

"Cassie."

She broke off with her sobs and sniffed. "Yeah?"

"I know you really love me. And I know I haven't really been there for you for about a year. I'm sorry for that. I believe you feel terrible about sleeping with Tommy and I'd love to let you off the hook and make you feel better."

She squeaked. "Oh."

I leaned forward and turned on my headlights. "But I'm not ready to, yet. We've been friends since freshman year and I imagine we'll still be friends. Probably forever. But right now, I feel really lousy about what you did. So, you know, I'll forgive you, just give me a little time."

She burst out into another round of tears just before I dipped into a valley and lost signal.

I set the phone down and continued to my trailer. I forced myself to picture Cassie and Tommy together. I squinted until I imagined his lips crushing hers and their hands fumbling with each other's clothes. I tried to force myself to cry.

I pulled in front of the trailer and slapped off the headlights, staring into the impossibly bright stars and the sliver of moon in the cobalt blue sky. I had tried to break up with Tommy a few months ago and he'd begged me not to walk away. He promised me unfailing love and commitment. Then he slept with my best friend. And what kind of friend would do that?

I thought of Jase and knew how defenses could go down in the heat of the moment. Sometimes, you just made bad

decisions. But these were two people I'd been friends with longer than anyone.

I stepped out into a cold so sharp my nostrils stuck together. I wanted to feel bad. I should be mad enough to punch Tessa's side. I leaned over and hefted a box of groceries.

I just didn't feel that bad.

I put the groceries away and settled in with a new book I'd bought in North Platte. I tried to forget that Jase would like to read it when I finished. The heater in the trailer roared to life. Not that there was anything to hear going on outside the trailer, but it created enough ambient noise I wouldn't have heard a tank passing on the road. I quickly forgot about boyfriends and best friends. I almost forgot about boys who lived down the road, one in particular who had fucked me and never called again. I fell completely into the world of Harlan Coben and his hero.

A thudding against my front door made me jump and gasp. I jerked my stiff neck to the door. Someone banged against it again. I stuck my finger in my book, noticing I'd placed it about halfway through. Darkness pushed against the living room window but a full moon gave the prairie a glow. I'd been lost in my book for several hours.

"Devon! Are you there?" The muffled voice coming through the door shocked me almost as much as the first knock that jerked me from my fictional world.

It took me a moment before I could make my feet move. I rushed to throw the door open. "Tommy?"

He stood on the front deck, shoulder-length blonde hair a mess of tangles. His red-rimmed eyes looked frantic. He wore his typical baggie jeans, his oversized hoodie draping from his shoulders like they were wire coat hangers, falling halfway to down his thighs. He didn't hesitate when I opened the door but threw his arms around me. He pulled me out to the deck and lifted me off the ground. "Devon! Oh god, I missed you."

He hugged me tight, his arms like iron bands. I fought rising panic. With my hands on his chest I managed to wriggle free. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He stood back. “I had to see you. I can’t stand being away from you anymore.”

I had forgotten his blue eyes and how tall he was. I swallowed down the old feeling of belonging. “You shouldn’t have come.”

He shook his head. “I get it. I mean, I know I let you down at the hospital. But I think about you all the time. I want you Devon. God, I need you so much.”

He used that voice, the one he knew turned my knees to butter. He infused it with so much desire it always sent a shot of electricity straight between my legs and I’d be instantly wet. It didn’t work today. Instead, I thought about lying in the hospital bed, the burning pain in my belly that couldn’t compare to the serrated edges of my heart. Mom and Dad’s faces lined with anger and pain, as if they couldn’t decide the dominant emotion. But in the end, disappointed won out and they’d peppered me with the shrapnel of the expectations they’d had for their only child.

He’d abandoned me.

But here he was on my doorstep. And he wanted me. I held firm. “I tried to tell you before. This isn’t working between us.”

He reached for my hand and I let him hold it. “I was an asshole. I know that. I was so sad and scared and didn’t know how to deal. I know I let you down. I promise I’ll never let that happen again.” Funny, he didn’t mention sleeping with Cassie. He probably thought she wouldn’t tell me.

Tears formed in the crystal blue of his eyes. It was that look that had drawn me to him in the first place. He had a soft heart and always meant well. He couldn’t be mean to anyone. I loved that he saw the best in people, everyone. “Tommy. Don’t do this. It’s over.”

He shook his head. “It can’t be over. We are meant for each other. We love each other. Since we were fifteen. You know how much I depend on you. You’re the only one who’s never let me down.”

Damn it. Tears pricked my eyes. I fought them back. “But you let *me* down.”

He reached for my other hand and drew me closer. “You’ve always so much stronger and better than me. But you’re teaching me.”

Here came all that guilt. “I’m sorry, Tommy.”

He reached up and ran a finger along my cheek. “You can’t leave me, Devon. I’ve got nothing if you leave.”

Maybe someone stronger could have held out. I knew that giving in would only postpone the inevitable and make it harder. But he was so familiar. He and I had been together for so long. He loved me and needed me.

I resisted for another minute while I stared into his eyes and heard his breath getting more ragged. Maybe my heat was a conditioned response from so many years together. But I suddenly wanted to feel someone’s arms around me. I needed to know someone wanted me.

Tommy felt the momentum shift in his direction. He leaned forward and gave me a gentle kiss. I hated that I responded. He let out a groan and pulled me close, grinding into my hips. “I need you, baby. You’re all that keeps me alive.”

Wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew it. But I shut off the smart part of my brain and let my hormones have their say. I tangled my fingers in his long hair and accepted his tongue as he thrust it between my lips.

I pulled Tommy into my trailer.

Chapter 35

Jase

“How is calving going?” Dad asked me. For the first time in three months he sounded interested.

I shifted the phone to my other ear and leaned against the kitchen counter. “Grant has the night shift. We haven’t lost any, yet.” I didn’t want to worry him with details. But everything wasn’t as rosy as I tried to make it sound.

He wasn’t satisfied with my vague answer and peppered me with more questions. He managed to figure out that we had plenty of sick calves and that Grant wasn’t really pulling his weight. He sounded like his old self, able to hear the fatigue in my voice, putting the pieces together and really listening.

After about an hour of him grilling me on all the details, he came up with a plan of action to get the sick calves healthy and to prevent the others from coming down with it. He remembered a similar situation about twenty years ago.

When I hung up, I felt better about everything than I had in a long time. Maybe since before Mom got sick. Dad said he and his therapist thought he should stay another few weeks. He felt good but didn’t want to get back here in the middle of the most stressful time of year, with too much work outside that he wasn’t able to do yet and bad weather that could confine him to the house without much to do.

I agreed. But he wanted to come home. He was interested in the ranch again and could make decisions. Maybe, just maybe, we could work toward me going to school.

With that optimism, my thoughts immediately turned to Devon. She hadn’t tried to get in touch with me after the day I’d taken Dad to the hospital. I knew I should have gone to her when I returned. But I felt defeated. With Dad the way he was I didn’t see any reason to see Devon. Seeing her would only make it harder on both of us when spring came and she’d be gone. And I’d have to make sure she left. Dad might have been wasted but he had made some sense. Devon wouldn’t be

happy here. Sure, she'd be okay for a year or two, but this wasn't her life. Sooner or later, she'd want out. If I couldn't go, too, I'd have to let her walk away. That would break me as surely as it had broken Dad when Mom died.

The best thing was to contain the damage. One night would be easier for us to overcome than an entire relationship.

But it hadn't felt like that. The last three months had been torture. How many times had I climbed into Cisco and started out for her trailer, only to stop myself. I couldn't do that to her. Clean cut, that was the best way.

She must feel the same way. That was plain since she hadn't tried to contact me, either. She must be counting down the days until she high-tailed it back to St. Louis. As far as I could tell, she hadn't seen Grant, either.

But after my conversation with Dad, things looked different.

If I wouldn't be tied to the ranch for the rest of my life, there was a possibility we could be together. Maybe she hated me. Probably she hated Spencer County and even all of Nebraska. March could do that to you. But if there was any chance she didn't hate me, I had to take it.

I had no idea what I'd say to her. I wanted to explain why I had stayed away and what was different. I needed to think it over.

Too restless to hang out at the house, I saddled Frijole. Myron kept pace ahead of us as we made our way to Devon's trailer. I came up with all kinds of ways to start the conversation but none of them seemed right.

I finally decided I'd just wing it. I imagined her surprise when she opened her door to see me standing on her step. Her green eyes would open wide. She might try to shut the door on me.

Why wouldn't she? After all, in her eyes I'd slept with her and walked away. She might give me some credit for having Grant deliver a message, but probably not much.

But she'd listen to me. If I asked, she'd let me in. I'd explain how much she means to me and why I'd stayed away.

I could imagine her standing in front of me with her arms crossed and her mouth set. She'd listen and then say I wasn't the guy for her. She regretted our night together and she planned on chalking it up to a mistake and moving on.

What I hoped would happen, though, is that I'd see the cold drain from her eyes. More than anything I wanted her to open her arms to me. I could feel the warmth of her body pressed to mine and hear her soft words of acceptance.

But I wouldn't know which way she felt until I opened myself up to her. And finally, I felt like it was time.

The moon lit up the countryside and I didn't have any trouble making my way across the pasture. Frijole topped the hill looking down on the schoolhouse. A thousand sparrows fluttered in my belly. I thought of Devon's eyes that last night, how she'd looked at me with trust and passion. That wouldn't disappear in three months, would it?

Myron knew where we headed. With a yip and wag of his tail, he bounded down the hill. Frijole picked his way around frozen bunch grass, his breath huffing in the chilled air.

My heart thudded harder with each hoof beat. I hoped. Oh, I hoped.

We came around the back end of the trailer and I pulled on Frijole's reins. A dark blue Chevy Cavalier with a big dent in the rear fender was parked next to Devon's green Tacoma. I hadn't seen that vehicle before. I urged Frijole a couple of steps forward, just enough that I caught voices coming from the front porch.

One more step and I saw a guy with long, light-colored hair. I caught my breath. Devon looked pale and upset. I couldn't hear her words but they it sounded like she was mad.

The guy reached out to her and she backed away. They exchanged a few more words and I decided I ought to see if she wanted any help. I leaned forward in the saddle, ready to direct Frijole ahead.

Just then, the guy leaned forward and kissed Devon. I froze.

He pulled her close and I stopped breathing.

In an instant, she grabbed his arm and pulled him into the trailer.

I might have sat on Frijole for ten minutes or an hour, I don't know. Myron's whine brought me back to the fact that the moon was setting and my hands and feet felt like blocks of ice. I probably tugged on the reins and turned us around to head home, but I don't really remember.

Chapter 36

Devon

The sound of children playing mingled with conversation and laughs of adults as the soft spring breeze seeped through the open window above the sink. The last day of school party traditionally took place in Varners' front yard with a barbeque. All the families supplied pot luck and, as with the Christmas party, everyone showed up, whether they had a kid in school or not.

The children and I had been busy hauling their best art pieces and school work to display on the front porch and the mothers, always the mothers and never the fathers, set up the food and got the picnic laid out.

The party had culminated with a play about Johnny Appleseed. Cody played an adorable seed that Trevor planted. He'd forgotten his lines but did a great job growing into an apple tree. Bailey acted as narrator and the boys mumbled and jostled their way through.

Jase had shown up early and helped get the grill going. He'd been helpful finding tablecloths for Ruth Ann and filling the giant cooler with water for lemonade.

Cody dogged his heels, taking Myron's place because Myron wanted to guard the food table. I hated that I was uber-aware of Jase. Along with that sixth sense I'd honed over the last eight months of knowing where all my charges were, I'd somehow developed a feeler for Jase. I hated that my eyes tracked him.

I knew when Cody pulled him away from his plate piled high with a hamburger and hot dog, Mandy's potato salad, Jenna's baked beans, Judith's Jello concoction, Ruth Ann's fruit salad and a big slice of the chocolate cake I'd baked last night. I tried not to watch them walk hand in hand to the barn. I could imagine Cody chattering about Mutton and Jase's indulgent smile and reminder that Mutton wasn't ready for Cody, yet.

When I forced my attention back to Mandy's story about Bob buying her a dishwasher, I caught Jenna's eyes on me. I couldn't read her expression. It wasn't the hatred I'd seen before but not friendly, either. Something deep was going on in her head and I was glad I would be driving out of here tomorrow and wouldn't have to deal with it.

I had several boxes of winter clothes and books stacked in my living room. My plan was to take off early tomorrow morning and be back in St. Louis by evening. I felt a growing excitement to sleep in my old room. I wanted to sit in the breakfast nook with Mom and drink coffee while Dad made pancakes and afterward, go out to the patio and enjoy the daffodils and tulips and the lush green of Mom's yard. Spring came so much earlier to St. Louis than it did in western Nebraska. Here, the lilacs had barely started to bloom.

I took a moment to enjoy the sun on my face. In the meadow behind the house, Varners' black cows chomped on the spring grass and their calves kicked up their heels in the fresh morning air. The old cottonwoods put out new leaves. This would be a great day. It was the one I'd been looking for since I got here. My last day. I was heading home.

I should be ecstatic. I ought to be dancing around the lawn, thinking about stuffing boxes into Tessa. No more isolation. I'd have television and Internet and cell service. Mochas and shopping and friends around all the time.

Instead, my feet felt heavy and I fought the lump in my throat. I was going to miss my kids. My eyes followed Jase's retreating back. This might be the last time I ever saw him. I felt too heavy to move.

I hadn't seen more of him than a passing glance since our time after Christmas. He'd become an expert at avoiding me. I missed Cassie and my parents. And when I'd first moved here, I thought I missed Tommy. But what I felt about Jase scraped and cut at my heart.

We'd only been together that one time. But before that, our friendship had bloomed overnight. Without any warning, he'd carved a place in my heart and I felt his absence every day. It's

hard to say you miss something you barely had. But I missed Jase now and I feared I'd miss him all of my life.

I forced my focus back to the party. The sooner I returned to St. Louis, the better. I'd come here to mend my broken heart and had only succeeded in tearing it apart even more.

People made moves to pack up their dishes and take off. A few wandered over in ones and twos to tell me goodbye. I put my plate down and stood up to talk to them. There were a lot of thank yous for coming out to teach. Some said they wished I'd consider another year or two. Even a couple of hugs and handshakes with wrinkled, work-worn hands.

Jase and Cody came back from the barn and Cody ran off to play with the Norris boys and Stetson over by the garden. I didn't want to think how much I'd miss my boys. Cody and Bill, Stetson and Sam. And Trevor. I searched and found him under a cottonwood with his nose in a book.

I refused to think about Jase. He didn't want me. That was good enough reason to quit tracking his moves and stop wondering what he thought and how he felt. I needed to cut him out of my mind and my heart.

I gathered bowls and serving utensils and took off to the kitchen. I'd had enough of goodbyes and sad thoughts.

Jenna collected another handful and followed me inside. I filled the sink and washed. She opened a drawer and pulled out a dish towel and dried. We didn't speak to each other as people came and went, bringing dishes and saying goodbye. Man, this place and its traditions! No one would think of leaving without another five-minute conversation. I felt exhausted and on the verge of tears.

I pulled the plug on the kitchen sink and watched as the sudsy water drained and gurgled. "And that's the one we were looking for."

Jenna frowned at me. She'd seemed lost in thought and annoyed I interrupted. "What?"

I indicated the Tupperware bowl I'd plopped in the dish strainer. "The last one."

She gave it an abstract glance. “Oh.”

Mandy clambered into the kitchen. “Okay, I’ve got Stetson’s paper machete dragon and Bailey’s sugar cube castle loaded, thank you very much.” Her wide grin reflected pride in her kids’ accomplishments. “Next year do some final projects that won’t take up so much space. We’ve got a small house.”

She paused as if realizing what she’d said. “Oh. Damn.” She hurried over and hugged me. “I keep forgetting you won’t be here next year. Change your mind. Stay. Bailey needs you.” She hugged me again. “Trevor needs you.”

“Ouch. That was a sucker punch,” I said, trying to smile but knowing I wasn’t pulling it off.

Her eyes filled with tears. “We’ll miss you. Come back to visit.”

I nodded and I’m sure we both knew that wouldn’t happen.

Jase poked his head in the kitchen and Mandy squeezed around him. He acted as if he didn’t see me and spoke to Jenna. “I’ve got to run over to the bull pasture and check the windmill. I promised Cody I’d let him ride Mutton in the corral and I’d lead him with Frijole.”

Jenna thought about it. “Sure you want to do that today?”

Jase nodded. “They aren’t ready to go out of the corral but they need to practice together. I got them saddled and tied in the corral. I’ll be right back.”

Jenna stepped too close to Jase and put a hand on his arm. “Where’s Cody now?”

Jase locked eyes with me and instantly looked away. “He’s playing with Sam. Grant said he’d keep an eye on him.”

Jenna leaned closer to Jase. “How’s Dean?”

Jase backed up slightly. “He’s doing great. Seems to be enjoying the picnic.”

Jenna threw her arms around him and her words came out muffled against his collar. “I’m so glad. I knew it would all work out.”

Jase leaned down, maybe drug down by Jenna's weight. His arms went loosely around her and he patted her back. Again, he looked at me, then quickly at the ceiling. He stepped back, breaking Jenna's grasp. "Gotta go."

Jenna stood in the doorway and watched him. When she turned back to me she raised her chin. "I'm glad you're leaving."

I turned my back and ran cold water to rinse the sink. "I figured as much."

Heavy footsteps sounded behind me and her hand landed on my arm, spinning me toward her. "You come in here like you're something special. You upset everyone. And you act like you don't even care."

I held up my hands. "Hey. I just came to teach school. I did my best and I think I did a damned good job."

She stepped back, red slashes of emotion marking her cheeks. "Oh yeah. You're one great teacher, all right. You've got Bailey thinking she's going to be an architect when there's no way they can ever afford to send her to college. Because of you, Trevor is probably going to come out of the closet and send Ruth Ann to the looney bin. And Cody's so in love with you he doesn't even see me anymore." She choked on the last words.

My heart cracked a little at her loss. "That's not true."

She glared at me and I knew she fought for control of her emotions.

I tried to sound as supportive as I could to a girl who'd done everything she could to hurt me. "He's got a crush on me. That's totally natural. I'm new and different. You're his mother. I can't replace that."

She looked at the window behind me, tilting her head back as if to keep tears from spilling from her eyes. "That's right. You can't replace me. You don't have the grit to do what I've been doing for the last five years."

I heard a pickup rumble across the Autogate and roar away from the house. I didn't move. Best just to let her have her say.

I had only a few more hours to be here and then I'd never have to listen to her again.

"All you see is this cute little boy. Happy and curious and polite. You didn't see me in the hospital all alone. His father didn't want anything to do with us. He still won't claim Cody. It all looks friendly and easy now but it's been," she suddenly gulped in a sob. "So. Hard."

That could have been me. I didn't tell her that I'd give anything to be in her shoes. How could she know that raising a child, even alone, seemed so much better than having one die inside of you?

I reminded myself that Jase, the guy I couldn't get over, the hunky, strong, silent type, really wasn't any better than Tommy. Jase had left Jenna alone to deal with Cody, just as Tommy had left me. Maybe not totally alone, because he spent a lot of time with Cody, but he didn't claim him. Didn't make it official that he had a son.

"He was a colicky baby and no one got up at night with him except me. I finished high school doing online classes. But even then I had to drive to Otis to the library to do it and if Cody cried, I had to leave."

"Didn't your parents...?"

She raised her arms and let them drop. "Oh yeah. Mom and Dad. They were so proud when their sixteen-year-old daughter got pregnant. Yeah, they love Cody and sure, they let me live with them. But they made it plain they'd raised their kids and Cody was my responsibility."

I couldn't help feeling bad for her. She was so young to have so much to carry. "It must have been hard."

She swiped at a tear. "Yeah. But it's going to be worth it. Because eventually, Jase and Cody and me are going to be a family."

I dried my hands on my jeans, trying to keep the image of Jase and Jenna being together out of my head. "Good for you."

She put her hands on her hips. "He loves me. We're meant to be together. Everyone says so."

“Everyone except Jase.” I immediately regretted letting that slip.

She pointed a finger at me. “You think he’s got something for you? You’re just new and different. You’ve confused him. But after you’ve gone, he’ll realize what’s good for him. He loves Cody and he loves me. I can give him the life he’s supposed to have, out here. In this house and on this ranch.”

“You know,” I started toward the kitchen door. “I don’t care. You’re all nuts here and I’m glad I’m outta here.”

She followed me. “Can’t happen soon enough.”

“Good.” I pushed open the screen door and stepped out on the porch.

“Cause the sooner you leave, the sooner Jase will be happy.”

I spun around and nearly pinned her to the screen door. “With you?”

She straightened her shoulders and shoved me back a step. “It’s damn sure not with you. I can ride and rope and cook and clean. I know how to take care of a man and to live out here. I can be the kind of woman he needs to be by his side on the Varner ranch. And I’ve got Cody.”

“How do you know Jase even wants to stay here?”

Jenna laughed. “Why wouldn’t he? It’s the only life he knows.”

“Could be he’d like to try something new.”

Jenna took another step toward me. “He’s happy here. He...”

I held up my hand and stopped her.

She must have read my face because she quit talking and cocked her head. “What?”

I swung around to the garden, where I’d last seen the boys playing. Back to the front yard where the lawn chairs sat empty. “Where’s Cody?”

Jenna's eyes flew open in alarm. "Cody!" We both ran down the stairs. Jenna took off around the side of the house, yelling for him.

We shouldn't panic. He was probably playing in the back or maybe curled under a cottonwood napping. But something told me he wasn't doing either of those things.

I raced to the old barn, through the alley and wrenched the latch on the wooden door leading to the corrals. I threw my weight against the door and flew into the sunshine.

It was as bad as I'd feared.

The small gate in the fence stood open. A quick survey showed me Frijole was the only horse in the corral. Cody and Mutton were gone. Jase had said Cody would be safe on Mutton if they stayed in the corral. Did he say Mutton might run off in the open?

Oh god. I needed Jase. I stared at Frijole. My heart hammered in my chest and I couldn't get a breath. I should run for Jenna. She could ride Frijole. But she'd gone in the opposite direction and it might take me too long to track her down and get her back here.

I had to do it myself.

I tried to calm myself down so Frijole wouldn't freak out. Jase said horses sensed fear. I just hoped Frijole could sense how much Cody depended on him. I had to put it that way, because I couldn't let myself think that Cody's safety depended on me. I couldn't ride. I was terrified of horses.

But I loved that little boy.

Frijole stood still while I approached and untied his reins. "Okay, boy. We've got to work together here. And I need you to do the heavy lifting on this one."

Myron raced through the gate, jumping with joy that we were going for a ride. "Be like Lassie, find Cody," I said to him as I launched myself into the saddle and Frijole danced a little. I grabbed the saddle horn. "Agh." I let out a little scream and gritted my teeth.

With one deep breath I dug my heels into Frijole's sides and yanked the reins, steering him toward the open gate. Myron beat us through and took off up the hill. I didn't really believe Myron led us to Cody so we could save him. I figured Myron's instinct was to herd everyone together and he'd naturally take off for Cody.

I thought I heard Jenna hollering. I should try to yell back and tell her where we were heading, but I needed all of my concentration to stay atop Frijole. I let him have a loose rein, hoping my instinct was right to encourage him to run. Myron ran down the dirt trail road. Frijole overtook him quickly. I let him go wherever he wanted, assuming he'd take the same path Mutton took since Cody wouldn't have been directing him.

The road took a short but steep hill and Frijole lunged, nearly bouncing me from the saddle. Blood pounded in my ears and my fingers were locked onto the saddle horn in a grip so tight it hurt. The reins were pinned under my palms, cutting into my hands.

Just please, let Cody be all right. I searched the ground, terrified I'd see him in a heap, thrown from his horse.

We thundered around a bend and there he was. Cody hunched forward, his hands lost in Mutton's mane. They trotted about 50 yards ahead of us. Reins dangled from Mutton's bridle and I knew Cody had no control over the young and skittish horse.

"No." I said under my breath, the whine torn from my throat. What had Jase done that day I'd been on Jenna's horse? I'd been panicked and so mad I couldn't remember the details.

Think, Devon. You have to use your head. Cody needs you.

Frijole gained on Mutton. But the younger horse swung his head back when he heard us. He kicked his back legs and Cody screamed. Mutton lowered his head and accelerated. Thank god Frijole seemed to understand what we needed without me telling him. It felt like he kicked it into fifth gear and once again, we cut the distance between them and us.

I couldn't let myself think too much about what I had to do. When we got close enough I put the image of Jase into my head. I saw him lean out and reach for the reins of Jenna's horse. I made myself be Jase. He was fearless when he wanted to protect me. I could do it, too.

I have no idea how I managed it. Frijole knew what he was doing and Jase had shown me what needed to be done. Somehow I put my brain on autopilot and the fear vanished. The thinking part of me dropped deep underneath the instinct and I stood in the stirrups.

The horses' hooves beat on the sand, the wind whipped past my ears, and everything crawled in slow motion as I leaned over, my eyes focused on the dancing reins dangling in front of Mutton. It was as if I watched someone else's hand fumble and finally grasp hold of the leather.

I sat back and sucked in a draught of cool, clean air. I felt like I opened my eyes, though I know they hadn't been closed. The world sped back up to normal and my heart nearly burst from my chest. My hands shook when I looked down and marveled at the reins clutched in them.

Cody sat in the saddle, tears streaming down his face, sobs from the depths of my worst nightmares shook his little body. Frijole huffed and blew from his nose. Mutton pranced and threw his head.

I slid off Frijole and held my arms to Cody. He tumbled off the horse and clung to me, wrapping his arms around my neck and his legs around my hips. We both stood on the prairie trembling and crying.

I let loose of the reins, not caring whether the horses stayed or ran off, lived or died.

Chapter 37

Jase

Picnic tables littered the front yard but all the neighbors had gone home. All except two. Jenna's pickup sat next to Devon's green Tacoma in front of the house. I didn't want to see either one of them. Okay, I didn't want to see Jenna.

I wanted more than anything to see Devon, hold her, taste her. I didn't want to let her go. I shut off my engine and stared at her pickup. She was leaving, probably tomorrow. I'd never have a chance to see her again.

I thought I ought to walk in that kitchen, take her in my arms and confess how much she meant to me. I'd never needed anything or anyone the way I needed her. What if she felt the same way about me? Didn't I owe her the chance to make up her own mind?

Dad said being on the ranch killed Mom but I didn't think so. She had been happy here. Maybe Devon could be, too.

But I'd never get another chance to find out. I eased open the pickup door, my heart thumping in my stomach. Never get another chance, I repeated as I started walking up the walk toward the porch.

"Jase! Oh my god!" Jenna rounded the corner of the house by the garden.

I spun toward her. "What's wrong?"

"Cody!" She screamed and tugged my arm. "We have to go!"

I let her pull me toward the pickup I'd just left. I didn't know what she wanted but it was vital. I jumped into the driver's side. "What?"

She climbed in, her face pale, her hands clutching the dash. "Mutton. He took off on Mutton. Devon. Frijole." She pointed behind the barn. Frijole thundered up the hill on the dusty trail

road. Devon's red hair was the last thing I saw before they disappeared on the other side. Myron raced behind them.

Horses, runaways. Two people I loved most in the world. I backed out and gunned it after them.

“Hurry!” Jenna kept yelling.

The pickup felt like it trudged through thick tar. I floored it but it wouldn't go fast enough. Devon couldn't ride. Yet, she'd jumped on Frijole and from the single moment I saw her, she was at least staying in the saddle. Mutton was unpredictable and as a young horse, would likely be out of control in his own panic attack. Neither Cody nor Devon could do anything but hang on and wait for the horses to tire out.

We finally hit the top hill. Fifty yards away Frijole came alongside Mutton.

“Oh my god!” Jenna screamed again. She hit the dash. “Go. Go. Go!”

Driving on instinct, I couldn't take my eyes off the disaster unfolding in front of me. I couldn't believe it when I saw Devon stand in the stirrups. I knew she'd sail from Frijole and be mangled under his sharp hooves.

But she leaned over, like some kind of trick rider in a rodeo, grabbed the reins and brought the horse to a stop.

Jenna was bawling and yelling and all I could do was try to breathe. She was going to be okay. Cody was safe.

By the time we pulled up to them, Devon had Cody off the horse and the two of them were shaking and crying. Jenna sprang from the pickup and had Cody in her arms before I put the pickup in park.

I jumped from the cab and ran to Devon. Without thinking I pulled her in my arms. She trembled and clung to me, breaking down in heavy sobs. Her tears melted me and I could only hold her tighter. My senses filled with her, the smell of lilacs and salty fear. Her hair tickled my chin and she felt delicate in my embrace. I wanted to keep her there, safe and protected.

Jenna took Cody to the pickup and they climbed inside. Devon's sobs tapered off quickly and she pushed herself away.

I wanted to tell her I loved her, ask her to sign her contract and come back for another year, give us a chance to figure it out. But none of that came out. "What happened?"

She swiped her forearm across her eyes. "Cody decided to ride Mutton."

Damn it! I'd saddled the fucking horses and left them there. I was so stupid. I wanted to hit something. Me, preferably. "Wasn't anyone watching him?"

She recoiled at the anger in my voice. She opened her mouth to respond but my temper took off. "Where was Grant?"

She shrugged.

"I can't count on him. I can't count on anyone." Wow, I was throwing a two-year-old tantrum. I could see myself doing it but I was bursting with frustration and pain. I'd tried so hard for so long, hoping if I worked hard enough I'd get rewarded in the end. I'd get to go to school, find the life I dreamed of. But here I was, on the ranch, staring at the girl I'd dreamed of all my life and she was leaving me. I'd never get off the ranch. Never.

"You can't count on anyone?" Her green eyes shot lasers at me. "Are you kidding me?"

I shut my mouth.

She advanced a step. "Who is it that walked out on me? Who fucked me and left without saying goodbye and never bothered to call or stop by ever again?"

"Dad got sick." I offered an explanation.

Her voice rose. "Yeah, I get that. But no word? Usually, when things go bad, a person leans on people who care for them. But I got nothing. You didn't need me, didn't even think about me."

"That's not true. I asked you to come but you didn't. I never heard from you."

“You never asked me jack.”

“Grant. He gave you...”

We both looked at each other, coming to the same conclusion. “Grant,” she said. “The guy who was supposed to be watching Cody.”

“So you thought I was ignoring you?”

She nodded. “It seems to be your MO.”

Now I was confused. “What do you mean?” Her hands shook as she pushed her hair from her forehead. I wanted to take her in my arms again and hold her until she felt safe.

“You’re like most other guys. You like the sex and take what you want but when consequences strike, you’re gone.”

“What consequences? We used protection.”

She started to cry, something that broke my heart. “Sure. We did. But you weren’t always so careful, were you? And now you have a son and you don’t even claim him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t pretend everyone doesn’t know Cody is yours.”

Frustration built in me. “Cody isn’t my son. He’s my nephew. Grant is his father.”

She narrowed her eyes, taking in the information.

I vented again, wishing I’d keep my mouth shut. “Do you think I’m so stupid I’d just have sex without protection? That’s for people like Grant who don’t think about anyone but themselves.”

“Oh, really?” She was still crying. “How about me? Do I only think of myself? How stupid am I?”

“You’re not making sense.”

“Because I did it. I was that person and I suffered the consequences and the father left me to deal with it. We made a baby and it died inside of me. So, now how stupid am I to fall for another guy who doesn’t know how to stand by me?”

“It’s not like you missed me.” I was on defense and wanted to turn it around.

“How do you know what I feel?”

“Because I saw him.”

“Saw who?”

“Your boyfriend. The cool guy with the long hair. He was here.” My heart twisted and my words tasted bitter. “You let him in.”

She threw her arms up and let them slap on her thighs. “And then I told him what a scumbag he was and how I didn’t want to see him anymore. He wasn’t there more than the fifteen minutes it took me to tell him what a loser I think he is.”

I couldn’t speak. “Why would you do that?”

“Why? Because I found the courage and brains to realize I don’t need to do what everyone else wants me to.”

Her words drummed into my brain. “What do you want?”

She swiped at her tears. “I thought I wanted you.”

“And now?”

She shook her head. “You don’t want to be here on the ranch. But you’re going to stay because it’s expected of you. You support your brother because you’re supposed to. You’ll probably marry Jenna and do what everyone else wants you to do.”

I hated that what she said was true.

“I’m going back to St. Louis and figure out what I want to do with my life. Me. My life.”

I watched her stride to Frijole and climb into the saddle. I still hadn’t moved when they passed me and she rode out of my life.

Chapter 39

Jase

The rain hit before I rounded up and unsaddled Mutton. Dad and I got soaked while we stowed the tables from the party. The clouds took up residence in the two days since and I hadn't seen the sun make the slightest effort to peek through. It matched my mood. Gray, heavy, drenched.

I hadn't driven away from the ranch since the day of school party, couldn't bring myself to see Devon's trailer sitting empty and know she was gone for good. I'd been working until midnight fixing the hay equipment. I wouldn't need it for another month but I had to keep busy or I'd go crazy. Normally I'd lose myself in novels or researching colleges but I hadn't been able to concentrate. Every time I sat down at the computer I'd picture Devon.

Wind gusted, driving cold sheets of rain down the back of my neck. I trudged up the porch steps. I planned to nuke a couple of hotdogs and head back to the tractor I'd dismantled all over the shop floor. That ought to keep me busy until I could sleep.

Myron drug along behind me. He didn't seem any happier these days than I felt. Either he picked up my mood or he missed her, too. He shook the rain from his fur and I leaned over to wipe his paws on the mat so he could come inside.

I pushed open the front door and nearly tripped over something in the hallway. A black suitcase the size of newborn calf blocked the entryway. Covered with dust, someone must have hauled it from the basement.

"Come on in here." Dad's command yanked me out of my cloudy brain. "We got business."

I pulled off my damp boots and soggy jean jacket and padded into the living room in my stockings. Dad sat upright in his recliner. Grant sprawled on the couch, a frown on his face.

My hackles rose and I lunged across the room. My fist closed on the collar of Grant's t-shirt and I hauled him to his feet. I pulled my arm back, anticipating the satisfying feel of his nose cracking under my knuckles. His eyes glowed with fear and he opened his mouth to shout.

A firm grasp on my poised arm stopped me. I whipped my head around to see Dad with his teeth clenched. "Let him go. We're here to parley, not resort to fisticuffs."

I released Grant's t-shirt, leaving a wrinkled knot at his throat. I craved pounding Grant but a rational part of my brain rejoiced that Dad seemed to be back in control. I eyed Grant and spoke to Dad. "You know he left Cody alone after the party. It's his fault Cody could have been hurt."

Dad put a hand on my chest and directed me to sit in the chair opposite the couch. "Yep. We've discussed that."

I growled at Grant. "Where have you been the last few days?"

Grant started to speak but Dad cut him off. "If he's not been getting' a job he should have been."

Wow. Dad really was back.

Grant folded his arms. "I was in Omaha meeting with some contacts. They're starting a new company and want me to be the chief financial officer."

"Good deal," Dad said, not sounding impressed.

"But they need to raise a little more capital before they're ready to go. By fall, the end of the year at the latest, we'll be taking on clients and making serious bank."

Dad leaned back. "What do you mean to do until then?"

Grant looked from me to Dad. "I'll stay here and work on the ranch."

Dad nodded. "Work. Like you been doing the last year?"

Grant looked a little uncertain. "Well, yeah."

Dad pointed to the entryway. "You see that suitcase?"

Grant nodded.

“You take that upstairs and fill it with whatever you’re gonna need for the next few months. Then you’re gonna get in that fancy rig of yours and head out.”

“Head out to where?” Grant asked, his voice rising in anger.

Dad shrugged. “That’d be your choice. You’re a grown man with a college education. You need to be supporting yourself.”

Grant jumped up. “But I will be. It’s just a bad economy right now. Jobs are rare.”

Dad looked as calm as if he watched a soap opera on TV. “I imagine there’s a Home Depot or McDonalds willing to hire you.”

Grant raised his arms in frustration. “But I’ve got a degree in finance. I shouldn’t have to work at minimum wage.”

“Probably right,” Dad drawled. “You hold out for one of them high paying jobs. But my guess is you’re gonna get pretty hungry.”

Grant’s voice rose to a whine. “How am I going to go to interviews or look for jobs if I’m working at McDonalds?”

A tick in Dad’s jaw was the only sign of his irritation. “If you can’t find time when you’re working an hourly position, then maybe you aren’t so damned smart in the first place.”

“You can’t kick me out. What would Mom say?” There was a hint of desperation in his tone.

Dad rose and Grant backed up a step. “I imagine she’d say, ‘What took you so long?’ I’m doing you no favors by letting you freeload around here. Be a man, get out there and earn your own keep.”

Grant started to protest again and Dad’s arm shot up. He pointed a finger at Grant. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You’ve got a kid you’ve never spent any time raising and I doubt you’ve ever paid a dime for his upkeep.”

“How...”

Dad shouted, his temper showing now. “Shut up! You ought to be damned glad you’ve got a brother who is willing to take responsibility for the trouble you got this family into. I’ve been a sorry excuse for a father ever since your mom passed but that’s changing now. Since you don’t seem motivated to grow up and clean up your messes or even support yourself, I’m forcing you. I want you out of this house tonight. And I don’t want you coming back until you show me you’re paying for yourself and that young one.”

“Where am I....?”

Dad’s face looked like a thunderstorm about to break loose. He lurched across the room toward Grant.

Grant jumped out of reach and hurried to the door. He snatched the suitcase and bounded up the stairs.

Dad collapsed to his chair and closed his eyes.

We sat in silence for a few minutes.

Finally Dad sat back and pulled the footrest up on his recliner. “There’s something wrong with that kid.”

I didn’t answer. I’d been thinking that for as long as I could remember and it felt good to hear someone else admit it.

Dad turned his attention to me. “And there’s something wrong with you, too.”

“Me?”

He scowled at me. “You’re what, twenty-four, twenty-five?”

“Twenty-three.”

He waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t interrupt.”

I leaned back to listen.

“You think you’re so smart and responsible and doing the right thing.”

My stomach flipped.

“You’ve been here deciding how everything should run and selling my old equipment and changing the way I’ve done everything all these years.”

I lowered my head and closed my eyes. I wanted to argue that someone had to do it because he hadn’t been capable.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” He sounded mad.

I clenched my fists and waited for the onslaught.

“You ought to be out there in the world chasing your dreams. Not tied to this ranch wearing yourself out putting up hay and feeding cows.”

I raised my head to look at him.

“Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate all you’ve done. You did a mighty fine job not only keeping it all together but getting us running in the black for the first time in ten years.”

His words confused me. “But...”

He held up his hand. “I ain’t done yet. Don’t know how I managed to raise two boys with no more respect than to interrupt me when I’m talking.”

I nodded for him to continue.

“So, what I was fixing to say is that you’ve been playing Dad and rancher long enough. I’m back and ready to take on the job again. And the first thing I’m going to do is fire your ass.”

“What?”

He reached to the floor beside his recliner and picked up a manila envelope. He slid out a stack of papers.

“This is a letter from a Marsha Michaels at,” he squinted at the letterhead, “Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.”

Marsha Michaels? Some relation to Devon? Washington University. Why did Dad have a letter from them?

He cleared his throat. “Dear Mr. Varner. Thank you for your application to attend Washington University. Although it was an unconventional application, I understand the

circumstances and am willing to consider admitting you to our university.”

Dad paused. That was a good thing because I couldn't breathe and the blood rushing in my ears made it difficult to hear him.

He snapped the page. “There's a bunch of details about resubmitting your application in the right way. But it ends with this: If you're half as hard-working and intelligent as my daughter, Devon, says you are, your chances of admittance are very high.”

Devon's mother was in admissions at Washington University? She must have sent my application to her mother. I looked at Dad, trying to form a question.

“She brought this over before she left,” he answered my silence.

“Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't she give it to me?” I was stammering. I jumped up from my chair and took the letter from Dad.

He folded his arms and watched me. “Considering the way you treated her when you saw her last, can you blame her?”

I lowered myself to the edge of the couch, my hand to my forehead. “I...” My throat closed up and I swallowed to keep from breaking down. I looked up at Dad. “I shouldn't have done that but I was so... full.”

His eyes teared up. “Lanny always said you were like me. When I get too full—like you said—of fear or love or anything, I lose my temper.

I couldn't believe I just blurted out what I was thinking. “I want her, think about her all the time. She's inside of me, everywhere. All the time.”

He nodded. “I know how that is.”

“But it can't work.”

Dad raised his eyebrows. “And why is that?”

How could he not know? “Because I’m here. This ranch, in the middle of nowhere. She’d never be happy here.”

Dad nodded. “And that’s what I’ve been telling you, you dimwit. You don’t have to be here.”

What he said finally started to sink in.

His voice came out rough and I barely heard it. “Follow your dreams, son.”

I stared at him. I was free to leave. I could go to school and learn to be an engineer. I couldn’t process it. The possibilities crowded my brain and I felt overwhelmed.

Dad started to laugh. “Opens up a few doors, eh?”

I rose from the couch and stood in front of his chair. I felt a grin spread across my face. “There’s only one door I need to walk through right now.”

Chapter 40

Jase

Thank god for GPS. Devon's neighborhood turned and twisted with street after street of massive houses with landscaped yards, three and four car garages, everything polished and trimmed like some kind of architect's model. The streets gaped wide with sidewalks winding through green space. Trees and flowers bloomed like an impressionist painter's dream.

Following the annoying woman bossing me from my phone, I turned a corner and looked for my "destination on the left." I pulled Cisco up front, and wondered if some neighborhood watch group would have him towed before I could return. He was by far too old, too dumpy, and too domestic for this place.

Devon's green Tacoma sat in the driveway, looking as out of place as I felt.

I opened Cisco's door and pushed myself up and Myron jumped out, too. He shook and stretched and trotted to the nearest tree. I was sure that wouldn't be tolerated but a dog's got to do what a dog's got to do. I started up the front walk, my steps getting slower and my blood rushing through me like a molten river of anxiety.

What was I thinking, driving out here without calling? But we'd never spoken on the phone. It seemed like a bad time to start. Plus, she could easily turn me away on the phone. There were so many misunderstandings between us, I needed to see her face. I had to know what she felt about me.

Myron had his nose to the grass, sniffing like a steam engine. "Come on," I said to him. It probably wasn't smart to bring him. But I wanted the company and courage on the drive here. I should put him back in the car but he needed to move around after that long trip.

He ignored me and followed his nose. He crossed behind me on the front walk and headed toward the driveway. "Myron." I used my most commanding voice.

He kept to his course. Now his tail started to wag and he picked up his pace. He trotted across the driveway. I took off after him. "Myron. Come."

Nose to the ground, he rounded the side of the house and I sprinted after him. Shit. I shouldn't have brought a country dog to the city. Why didn't I at least get a leash?

By the time I turned the corner, his head was up and he let out a yip. He raced ahead and my stomach fell. He'd found a damned rabbit. I'd never get him now. At least, not until he either lost the trail after tearing through the pristine yards of rich folks, or he caught the bunny and mangled it on someone's roses.

I could only follow and keep my cursing under my breath. I ran along the side of the house and popped around the corner into the backyard. As if I hit a brick wall, the air left my lungs and I stopped. I couldn't move.

Myron found his prey. She squatted on an enormous redwood deck with a few tables and colorful umbrellas scattered next to a bar-b-que grill the size of a hay mower. Potted hydrangeas and roses bloomed and a water fountain bubbled behind her.

But I couldn't take my eyes off her. She wore a tank and shorts, like the first day I saw her. She bent over Myron, rubbing his ears and telling him what a great dog he was. All that soft, beautiful copper-colored hair fell in a curtain around her and I couldn't see her face.

I just stood there, like a total dope. Watching her. Wanting her. At the same time, feeling just how out of place I must seem to her. She came from this perfect world and I came from a place where a decrepit trailer and a new bed constituted luxury. I would have slipped away unseen, but Myron had ruined that escape plan.

She raised her head and brushed her hair away, her eyes searching for me. A smile grew across her face as she straightened. "Long drive, huh?"

I nodded, my throat so dry I couldn't form words. I swallowed. "I'm sorry."

An eyebrow ticked up. "You are?"

I still couldn't move. "I should have talked to you after I took Dad to rehab. But when I saw you with your boyfriend I nearly broke in half. Then, seeing you in so much danger that day with Cody, I lost it. I don't know why but...." I searched for words. "I came here to tell you that you mean everything to me."

She lost her smile. "I do?" She sounded skeptical.

"I've been a jerk. I thought I shouldn't be with you so I tried to stop thinking about you. But you're everywhere all the time. In my mind, in my heart."

She studied me but didn't say anything. What was she thinking?

I had no choice but to forge ahead. "I heard what you said about making decisions for myself and following my dreams. And I thought about how I was making a decision for you, without giving you the chance. I was rejecting you, trying to protect you. I decided that you wouldn't be happy living in Nebraska, being with me. Even if you hate me and never want to see me again, you get the right to make the choice for yourself."

The grin came back. "Is that so?"

"But you need all the information. The most important thing is that I love you. I want you. I have from the first day you showed up in the middle of my steers and upset my whole life."

He eyes shone, tears amplifying the green. That could mean anything. She might tell me she loved me, too. Or she might say, I'm sorry, you blew it, go away.

"The second thing is that I'm going to stay on the ranch."

I held my breath but she didn't react.

"But only for a year. That's to give Dad a chance to get stronger and to give me a chance to take a few prerequisites

online.”

“Jase...” She started to speak but I interrupted.

“So I understand if you hate me and want nothing to do with me. I understand if a year is too long to be apart if you want to make this work. But I’m asking anyway. I’m asking because I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. You said to follow my dreams. You have been my dream for my whole life.”

We stood in silence. Myron sat in front of Devon as if waiting for her reply.

“Are you finished?” she asked.

I nodded, waiting for her temper to flare.

“First of all, thank you for allowing me to make my own choices. Secondly, I signed the contract with District 6 to teach for another year. And thirdly,” she paused.

I waited. Finally said, “Thirdly?”

She took two steps to stand directly in front of me. I smelled lilacs and the heat of her skin seeped into me. Her breath sounded ragged and her breasts, with her hard little nipples poking through the wife beater, rose and fell. She stared so deeply into my eyes I thought I might melt. She sounded husky. “Thirdly.” She put her arms around my neck and closed the space between us. “You’d better kiss me now.”

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY best-selling author Megyn Ward lives on coffee, chocolate and more than the occasional glass of red wine. When she's not spending time with the hot, dirty-talking Alphas and the strong, capable women who love them, that live in her head, she's busy chasing chickens (and kids), hanging laundry and burning dinner. Either way, she is almost always in the company of her seven dogs, her truest and most faithful companions, and her almost as faithful husband, Joe.

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