

K.C. MILLS

K.M.P.

Wilde &
SHORE

A MILLER'S POINTE CHRISTMAS

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WILDE & SHORE



NOTE TO READERS

Hello, beautiful people:
If you're returning, welcome back. If you're new...
welcome to my crazy world.

The Holidays can be rough and life can be stressful so I'm dropping this in the hopes that you'll grab a quick escape, with all the feels. we often get so overwhelmed with life that we forget it's the simple things that truly matter.

It's that time of year again for a feel good, holiday treat that warms your heart. This is a swift easy read full of Holiday cheer, witty banter and characters that you can't help but root for.

- instant attraction
- city girl
- cowboy
- close proximity
- new Christmas traditions
- HEA

This novella is not connected to any prior novel/series. All main characters are being newly introduced so you will be meeting them for the first time.

Please be mindful that the foundation of this story is simply learning how to love and be loved. For those of you that prefer my more urban/street-lit, drama filled stories, this one might not feed your soul.

However, it is not void of my signature style with that alpha male who isn't afraid to show his heart. If you're open to falling in love with love, then please proceed!

As always,

Crafting Romance with an Edge!

Sincerely,

K.C. Mills ♥

CHAPTER
ONE



“**W**hat are you going to do?” I stared at the mare instead of turning to Brodie Lawson who’d called me to save his ass. After a few minutes in a stare down, where the horse kicked her heel issuing a challenge, I smirked and turned to Brodie.

“I’m gonna get ’em in the trailer and take her with me. Isn’t that why you called?”

Brodie nodded then glanced at the horse. “Yeah but how? I can’t get near her.”

“You’re not me,” I stated with confidence before I turned to the horse again, carefully watching her. “How did you get her here if you can’t get near her.”

In my periphery I noticed him cringe and whipped my head in his direction. “You drugged her, didn’t you?”

“Shit, Wilde, you see her. How else was I gonna get her crazy ass to my ranch?”

“You shouldn’t have brought her here in the first place, so I don’t care, Brodie. Montana is a sixteen-hour drive which means you had to give her some pretty heavy shit to keep her calm.”

Brodie flinched again and I shook my head. “Never mind. You did it so you don’t care. Consider this one mine.”

“Hell no. That horse is worth a lot of money, Wilde. I’m not giving her to you.”

“She’s only worth the money if you can break and breed her. Without me, neither is happening and the only way I can help is if she’s mine.”

“I’ll get someone else to do it.”

I smirked and stared at Brodie. After a long pause he yanked at his Stetson. “You’re not the only one who can break a horse, Wilde.”

“Not the only but certainly the best. I don’t need to breed her but if I decide that’s what I’m gonna do, you’ll get half of what I make.”

“Half?” I glared at Brodie who backed down. “I want that in writing?”

“I’m giving you my word which is just as good as any contract. You know me, Brodie. I do good business.”

“You think stealing my horse and taking profits from breeding is doing good business?”

“Do you think drugging a horse and trying to beat her into submission is good business? If I let that get out, anybody with half a heart won’t sell to you.”

Breeders with good track records would never sell a quality horse to anyone who would abuse them. I didn’t have to tell Brodie that.

“Alright, half of any profits.” He extended a hand which I accepted and shook.

“How long before you decide...”

I yanked a pair of gloves from my pockets and walked toward the corral. “Don’t know. We have ’til spring to think about that. Get the paperwork ready while I get her in the trailer.”

When I reached the gated entrance, I locked eyes with the mare and slowly unhinged the lock, stepping inside the corral. She blew air through her nostrils in a snorted huff and kicked her heels in challenge again. Her message was clear.

Don’t come near me or you get what you get and it won’t be good.

“You’re not the first or the last. Bring it,” I said gruffly, yanking on my gloves one by one. The horse was saddled. Brodie had been trying his best to ride my new friend with the hopes of avoiding a call to me. He should have known better.

“You don’t like it here do you, old girl?”

The horse tossed her head and kicked her heels once more while I moved cautiously toward her. I lifted one hand, turning my palm up, and she dropped her head just a bit.

“I’m not gon’ hurt, ya. You can relax.” I glanced at my trailer near the gate. She followed my line of sight like she knew what I was thinking and went wild. She kicked and lifted, landing a hoof inches from my shoulder. I stumbled back and landed on my ass, rolling out the way just in time to avoid another hoof to the head.

I was quick enough to jump to my feet, watching as the horse shuffled and lifted again. “Son of a bitch.”

“Told you she was a wild one,” Brodie stated from somewhere behind me. “You sure you can handle this?”

“Shut the fuck up, Brodie,” I growled and he chuckled, garnering him a glance over my shoulder. His smile dropped and I swung my eyes back to the horse. I shoved my hand into my coat pocket and removed a few hay pellets. I dropped them into my palm and locked eyes with my target.

“I’m coming over there and you’re gonna stay your ass still. No bucking, no charging, no more stress. I get it. You’re annoyed. I am too. You just kicked the shit outta me and I’m gonna have a pretty nasty bruise.” As I spoke calmly to her, I edged closer. She focused on my hand but I sensed her gauging my proximity. When I was close enough for her mouth to reach my palm, I lowered my hand so she didn’t have to work for the pellets. “Okay now let me be clear, if you kick me again, I’m gonna kick you back but that’s only fair. You gonna behave?”

She huffed and I raised a brow. The mare kicked dust behind her but didn’t make the effort to move.

“You’re a stubborn old lady.” I smirked and flexed my fingers. After another long moment she gave in and devoured the pellets. I retrieved a few more from my pocket and she nudged my palm, but I shook my head.

“You want ’em, you’re gonna have to let me grab those reins.”

Maybe I was crazy for thinking these horses understood me but treating them with respect had yet to fail me.

“We got a deal?”

I lowered my eyes to the pellets in my palm then moved my hand under her nose. This time when she ate them, I gently reached for the reins. After the pellets were gone, I placed my empty hand on the horse’s head and slowly moved my finger down to her nose. I smirked when she remained calm.

“Alright, let’s go.” I tugged the reins and she kicked her hooves. “Easy, we had a deal.”

I moved and she moved.

Things got a little dicey when I had to force her in the trailer and lock her in but I got it done. She wasn’t going to like the drive but as soon as I made it to my ranch I’d let her run free for a few days. It was winter but not cold enough where I had to keep her locked in the barn. I wouldn’t start working with her until she burned off some of that frustration Brodie had caused.

“Paperwork.”

“How the fuck did you do that? What are you, the goddamn horse whisperer?” Brodie handed off a thick envelope and I glanced inside to make sure I had what I needed.

“You sign ’em over?”

“Did I have a choice?”

“Yeah you did, you just weren’t gonna like how I reacted if it wasn’t the one we agreed on.”

“She’s yours.” Brodie’s tone was laced with irritation. I tipped my hat and headed to the driver’s side of my truck.

“You’re not gonna shit me are you, Wilde?”

“I should, based on the way you treated her but I gave you my word, Brodie. You know the answer to that question.”

I slammed the door and pulled away from his ranch, glancing in my rear view. I could see my new four-legged pal trying her best to get free. “This is going to be a long ride for you, old girl,” I murmured just as my phone notified me of a call.

I answered through the truck, not feeling like digging out the device. “This is Wilde.”

“Hey, sugar pie. You busy?”

I smiled at the sound of Melvina’s voice. She owned the bed and breakfast in town and was close friends with my parents. Since neither of my parents had siblings, Melvina had more or less become an adopted aunt. I’d do just about anything for her and her for me.

“Just picked up a horse from Brodie but I can talk while I head home.”

“Oh, you’re on your way home?”

My brows pinched and I nodded even though she couldn’t see me. “Yeah I am. You need something?”

It wasn’t ideal to drive around town with a wild horse but if Melvina needed me, I’d make it work.

“Actually, I do. I need to call in a favor, a really big one.”

I damn sure didn't like the sound of this.

“I won't make any promises, but shoot.”

“You already made the promise. I'm just collecting what you owe. You remember how you got sick that time and needed someone to come take care of you and the horses.”

Ah shit. This was going to be a huge favor.

“Yeah, Ms. Mel, I remember.”

“Well, I need you to do something for me.”

“I'm listening.”

“One of our guests had a surprise delivery. The room they're in was promised to someone else but they can't leave for another week or so. I was wondering if you could take on the guest I'm putting out.”

“Can't do that. Call, Beau.” Beauden Phox had a horse and cattle ranch not too far from me and with twenty thousand acres. He needed to keep a steady flow of money in the winter. To make that happen, he turned a portion of his ranch into a bed and breakfast so this would be more his thing than mine.

“I did. He's filled to the max. Got a group from Florida staying this week, for some leadership conference. You know that's how he makes money this time of year.”

Damn it.

“Come on, Ms. Mel, can't you think of anything else?”

“If I could, I wouldn't have called. My hands are tied, Wilde, and you owe me.”

I did.

“But that's a lot to ask, Ms. Mel...”

“And cooking, cleaning, caring for your whiny ass and all your horses isn't a lot to ask?”

I groaned then smiled, shaking my head. “I wasn't whiny.”

“Yes you were. Acting like you were five years old all over again but I’ll leave that alone for now. You need to head straight to the train station. She arrives soon. Might already be there and it’s gonna be rude if no one shows up to greet her.”

I hadn’t agreed to a damn thing but she was already moving on like I had. There was no way in hell I wanted to spend my Christmas week with a stranger, much less a stranger who would be staying at my house. I hadn’t planned on celebrating Christmas at all since it was just me this year.

“Ms. Mel, that’s not a good idea and what makes you think she’ll agree?”

“You have six empty rooms at your house, Wilde. Surely you can let her have one. She was going to be out there with you anyway at some point. She scheduled the True Ranch Experience.”

Something I only did as a favor to Melvina. Tourists could come experience a guided tour of the ranch, ride horses, and have a bonfire. She paid well, although most times I refused her money and did it for free; unless there was a large group and I needed to pay my ranch hands extra to help out. It allowed them to make extra money.

“A tour is not the same as staying here. Speaking of, how long is she in town for?”

“A few days, maybe a week. I’ll have to check.”

“Ah, shit, Ms. Mel, that’s a long time to be holed up with a stranger.”

“You’ll be just fine.”

I groaned again.

“Where’s she from?”

“Boston.”

“Fucking great,” I muttered. Some city girl who wanted to slum it in the country but had no clue what ranch life was like, which meant a lot of complaining.

“She’s sweet,” Melvina asserted.

“You met her?”

“Well no, but I talked to her several times and she seemed sweet. Just be nice. She’s going through something.”

“Wonderful. Make sure she knows I don’t have fancy coffee and breakfast is at six thirty a.m. My place isn’t anything like yours ,Ms. Mel.”

She was probably expecting cappuccinos and food on demand. All of which Mel offered to cater to out of towners who rented out her rooms. I wasn’t doing that shit.

“Stop complaining and get to the train station. I’ll fix things on her end.”

“I didn’t agree...”

“Yes you did, now hurry, and Wilde? Be nice.”

She ended the call before I could argue anymore and I made a left instead of right onto the main road to head into town.

One week with a stranger.

“Got damn you, Ms. Mel,” I mumbled.

CHAPTER
TWO



“Are you there yet?”

“I am. Just stepped off the train.”

“Is it terrible?”

I cracked a smile and rolled my eyes at the same time. My sister was a city girl for life. The idea of me wanting to do a two-day train ride only to end up in a small country town to spend Christmas alone had her completely thrown off.

“I can’t answer that just yet. I’m standing on the platform waiting for them to get my luggage off the car. I haven’t seen anything.”

“Then, it’s terrible, Shore. If there wasn’t an entire vibe the second you stepped off the train, then you just wasted a bunch of money to be depressed for Christmas.”

It actually was a vibe. A rustic, small town vibe but not old. The amenities were new and slightly modern but with a southern country feel. There were lifted wreaths hanging in various spots and the old, wood-textured building which served as the station was garlanded with bright red velvet bows woven everywhere. I could smell something smoky and flavorful that I was pretty sure was chestnuts blended with something sweet, possibly cinnamon. It was all very nostalgic.

“You’re so damn dramatic. I’ll text you when I get to my room.”

“No, FaceTime me. I need to see what it looks like. I picture thick ass drapes with sunflowers. Mismatched quilted bedding and furniture hand-carved from wood. Not the kind you buy from a small furniture boutique and mark up a couple grand because it’s antique and hand-crafted. I’m talking about the kind made from timber chopped in a barn then whittled into a poor excuse of a table or bed frame with a hunting knife.”

I barked a laugh and glanced around to make sure no one was watching me. “The place is nice. I sent you pictures, remember? None of those things applied. Just because it’s a small town doesn’t mean it’s antiquated.

“It’s not just a small town, Shore. It’s a small ass *country* town, in the middle of nowhere. They have cowboys. The ones who wear leather chaps, Stetson hats, cowboy boots, ride horses, and raise cattle.” She paused. “Well, that part might actually be a positive to this stupid ass self-discovery thing you’re on. Cowboys are sexy as hell and I bet they can fu...”

“Summer, I have to go. They’re pulling my luggage off now.”

I didn’t want to hear my sister verbally detailing her fantasies about having sex with a cowboy. I didn’t want to think about sex *at all*. I missed sex. Sex was about the only thing I missed after my last relationship ended.

“Don’t forget to FaceTime me when you get there, Shore. I mean it.”

“Mmhm,” I hummed before ending the call. Seconds later a text popped up.

I will catch a flight. Don't play with me Shore.

Not to this small ass country town you won't. I'll play all day.

You're so damn annoying. Be safe.

I smiled.

I will. Love you too, sis.

I approached the guy who not so softly yanked luggage from the car and pointed to the set next to him.

“That’s mine. Is it okay if I take it?”

He glanced at me, nodded, then shrugged. “I guess so.”

“You don’t want to see identification, a ticket, or anything?”

He smirked and glanced at my large and medium rolling bags. “They’re yours, aren’t they?”

“Yes they are but...”

“Then no, ma’am, take ’em.”

Okay then.

I moved closer, yanked the handles to both so they extended and rolled them behind me until I reached the entrance of the train station. Once inside, I situated the largest so I could answer another incoming call, praying it wasn’t my sister. The number wasn’t saved or my area code so I answered with a casual but vague greeting.

“Hello...”

“Is this Shore Manchester?”

“It is, who’s calling?”

The woman sounded cheerful but unfamiliar.

“This is Mel. Melvina Donovan. You reserved a room at my B&B for the week.”

I smiled hard. “Oh hi. I was just about to call. My train arrived. I was wondering where I should meet you for pick up?”

“That’s why I was calling. There’s been a change in plans...”

Great, she was calling to tell me I was on my own getting to her bed and breakfast. I couldn’t imagine this place had an abundance of rideshare options.

“Oh, well I’m sure I can get there on my own. If you’ll just tell me...”

“See that’s the thing. You don’t need to come here. I’ve had to make some alternative arrangements for you.”

“Alternative arrangements. What on earth does that mean?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll have somewhere nice and cozy to spend the week. All the same amenities. Hell, better if you ask me. Wilde had his place renovated a few years ago. All high-end stuff. It’s really top notch...”

“Wilde, who the hell is Wilde?”

“Let me backtrack a little,” she stated calmly. However I was anything but. I had been on a train for two days, looking forward to a nice cozy stay at a bed and breakfast only for this woman to tell me that wasn’t happening. “We had a couple here. Kimmie and Lance. Kimmie was eight months pregnant but that little one decided he was ready to meet his folks. Wasn’t supposed to get here until after New Year’s. Well anyway, she delivered and they can’t travel just yet so they’re having to extend their stay.”

“Okay, what does that have to do with me?”

“The room they’re in was your room.”

“Then give me another one.”

“Would if I could but we don’t have another room. Pipe burst, causing damage to three of our rooms. They’re not ready for occupants so we’re short but I’ve made arrangements for you to stay with Wilde.”

“Who the hell is Wilde and why would you think I would be okay with that? You should have called.”

“Things got a little crazy with the baby and all. Our first birth at the B&B. It was pretty exciting and that baby is so darn cute...”

“Melvina...”

“Yeah, sorry. Anyhow, I didn’t have a chance to call and you were already en route. Wilde is my nephew. He’s a good guy. You had a tour scheduled with him. You know the whole True Ranch Experience.”

“But that was a one-day tour and now you want me to stay there, with *him*.”

“He’s about as happy as you are about this.,” she stated cheerfully and laughed. “His place is huge, there’s enough space where you don’t have to interact if you don’t want to but when you see him, you might change your mind. My nephew is quite the looker. Got a lot of the ladies in town chasing after him...”

Not important. He’s still a stranger so I shut her down. “He doesn’t want me there?”

“It’s not that he doesn’t want you there, more so he wasn’t expecting me to call in a favor. He’s not really a people person. More of a horse person. Spends all his time training ’em and what not. Anyhow, he’s doing this for me and truthfully you’ll have more of an experience spending the week out there at his place. You can come to town to do all the other stuff you had planned too. I hope that’s okay and I’m gonna issue you a credit for the week so your stay here in Miller’s Pointe will be free. How’s that sound?”

I exhaled a sigh. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Then you’ll stay with Wilde?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Not unless you plan on heading back to Boston and you’d still have to stay for two days before you can get a train out,”

she said cheerfully, again like she hadn't just completely derailed my peaceful week.

“Right, well where do I find Wilde?”

“He's on his way. You'll know him when you see him. Big guy, black Stetson, jeans, boots, and *very* handsome.” She paused. “Well there are a lot of those kinds around here but I can imagine Wilde won't be smiling. Start with the cowboy with a scowl in place and that's probably him.”

“Perfect,” I muttered and she laughed.

“Oh darlin', don't you worry. Your week will be perfect. I give you my word. I'll have Wilde bring you to see the baby at some point. He's such a handsome little thing. You're gonna love him.”

Me loving the kid who cheated me out of my cozy B&B stay for the week? Doubtful.

I did a quick survey of the place and landed eyes on a guy who was exactly as she'd described him—black Stetson, jeans, boots and a scowl. Damn if she wasn't right about how handsome he was too.

Broad shoulders that filled out the jean denim jacket that covered them. The dark t-shirt beneath it pulled tightly over a massive chest, narrow waist, and flat stomach. My eyes traveled lower to jean clad legs that were shoulder width apart leading down to brown leather cowboy boots tucked away under them.

Well fuck me sideways. This man was not just handsome but incredibly sexy.

“I think I found your nephew Melvina, I should go.”

“Oh, great, perfect. I'll check in with you later to make sure you're all settled.”

“No need for...”

She ended the call and I closed my eyes, inhaling a slow breath. As soon as I peeled them open a very angry but sexy cowboy had me locked in his line of sight.

CHAPTER
THREE



“Wilde?”

I knew who she was the minute I laid eyes on her. Big expressive eyes, jet-black hair tucked beneath a baseball cap. She was wearing a green jacket over a hoodie with Boston printed on the front and a pair of wide-legged jeans that almost covered the sneakers on her feet.

When I didn’t respond right away after she called my name, she rubbed her glossed lips together and tried again, clutching the handles of her suitcases like she thought I might take them from her.

“Melvina said an angry cowboy would be picking me up. You’re a cowboy and you look...” She grinned. “Not happy.”

I snorted at Melvina mentioning I would be angry. If she was that sure about my mood, she shouldn’t have forced me to

do this.

“I’ll take these.” I stepped forward to grab her bags because my mama would have my ass about not being a gentleman no matter how much I didn’t want to do something. She yanked both and stepped in front of the luggage.

“You didn’t answer me?”

Well shit, she’s not going to make this easy.

I extended a hand. “Wilde Reeves.”

She slanted her gaze at my hand but eventually slid her palm against mine. Her tiny hand was soft against my calloused one and so damn small.

“Shore Manchester. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wilde.”

I smiled and lowered my eyes to meet hers. “You sure ’bout that?”

“Not really but it seems neither of us have much say with this so I’m going to make the best of it.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I accepted her peace offering. This wasn’t her fault so there was no need to be upset with her. Or Melvina, if I was being honest. She was using me as a last resort. The woman loved me like family and would never put me out if she didn’t have to. Now she would damn sure work me hard doing odd jobs, but she respected my need for seclusion and privacy.

This time when I reached for her luggage, she allowed me to grab both pieces then peeked up through long lashes exposing sparkling brown eyes. “And sorry about all this. I know it’s an inconvenience having to be stuck with me for a week.”

Well damn. How was I supposed to be annoyed by this pretty little thing with those big eyes and soft voice which was the sweetest sound I’ve heard in a very long time?

“You don’t have to apologize and it might not be so terrible being stuck with you all week.” My eyes shifted from her face and moved down her body. “Come on, my truck’s out

front and I need to get back to this horse before she tears my trailer to hell.”

“Horse...” Her eyes expanded just a little. “You have a horse?”

“Several, actually. It’s what I do. I breed and train them.”

“I meant you brought one with you? You’re supposed to be picking me up. Why would you bring a horse?”

“I had no clue I was coming to get you. Melvina threw this on me last minute but I’m making it work.”

“Right, sorry. Should I be worried?”

“About?”

“The horse. You said you needed to get it back to the ranch before it tears your trailer to hell. That horse sounds about as friendly as you are.”

I looked her up and down and grinned. “If I let you anywhere near that mare you might be in trouble but as unfriendly as you think I am? I wouldn’t do that to you, now can we go?”

“Lead the way, Cowboy.” She tossed her hand out and I chuckled, shaking my head. She didn’t say much on the drive. Spent most of her time staring out the window or messing with her phone but by the time we pulled through the gate surrounding the entrance to my property I had her full attention.

“She said I was staying at your house.”

“You are.”

Her eyes shifted to the windshield then swung left and right. “That’s your house?”

“It is, why?”

“The place is huge and it’s nice.”

I grinned, glancing at her as I went left off the cleared path to the main property, heading out to the stables. “I don’t know if I should be impressed or offended.”

Most outsiders were surprised to see my ranch and the others nearby. They were modern, multi-million dollar properties. While the house my parents originally built still sat in a small corner of one side of my family's ten thousand acres, almost everything else had been renovated or replaced a few years ago. The main house was only five years old, the stables six. I'd invested in building state of the art, new ones before I gave a second thought to building a new house.

"I didn't..."

"It's fine. Not really what you had in mind when Melvina mentioned you'd be spending the week on a ranch."

Her expression softened and she shook her head. "No, but then again, I don't know anything about ranches..." Her eyes met mine. "Or cowboys."

"Then we'll have to get you educated about both." I winked and her cheeks flushed. So damn cute. She nodded and we continued to the stables where I parked and climbed out. I expected her to stay put so when I walked to the corral and lifted the rope I'd planned on looping around my mare's neck to get her into the paddock and almost collided with Shore, I grinned and stepped around her.

"You could've stayed in there."

"I wanted to see the horse. Never been close to one before."

"Well you won't be close to this one either. Stay back, okay. She's pretty damn angry right now."

I wanted her running wild for a few days to get it out of her system. No point in disrupting the other horses by locking her in the stables right away.

After about twenty minutes of wrestling with her, I managed to get the mare in the paddock but she was still wild and angry. She took off running in circles and eventually settled at the stable's end. I watched for a minute until I felt a body next to mine.

"You weren't kidding when you said that horse was angry. Who pissed him off..."

“*Her* and I did.” I looked down but Shore’s eyes were on the horse.

“So you’re not a fan favorite, I see.”

I chuckled. “Not with the ladies apparently.”

“What did you do?”

“I put her in that trailer and brought her here?”

“Why, if that’s not what she wanted?”

“Because she needs to be trained and if I don’t break her someone else will. Not everyone is nice about how they handle these types of horses.”

Her brows pinched as she looked up at me. “Is there a nice way to break a horse?”

“Actually, there is.”

“Doesn’t sound very nice.”

“It’s not as bad as you think. She’ll be fine, I’m good at what I do. Come on, I’ll get you settled at the house then I’ve got some stuff I need to get done before night falls. My day’s been thrown off a little but I might still be able to salvage some of it.”

She frowned but nodded, heading back to the truck. When she neared the door and I reached around her to open it she glanced at me but kept quiet, sliding into the cab, speaking once she was seated.

“You don’t have to open doors for me.”

I grinned, shrugging. “I assure you I do. Adel would have my ass if I didn’t.” I shut her in and found my way to the driver’s side. Those expressive big brown eyes were waiting when I settled behind the steering wheel.

“Who’s Adel?”

“The woman who birthed and raised me.”

She grinned in a lazy manner. “So the cowboy’s a mama’s boy?”

I chuckled, glancing at her. “If by that you mean I love and respect her, then hell yeah but if you’re insinuating I don’t know shit about being my own man, you’d be absolutely wrong.”

“Hmmm.” She smiled smugly and continued staring out the window for the rest of the way to the house. I helped her out, grabbed her luggage, and let us inside, where she stood just a few feet beyond the door, jaw slackened and eyes wide and roaming.

“This is wow...” Her sights moved around the open floor plan cataloging the details then circled back to me. “All this comes from training horses?”

“My family comes from a long line of horse breeders. The most elite of breeders actually.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she lifted her gaze. “I know what elite is but what exactly does that mean in horse breeding?”

“We deal mostly with purebreds...” Before she could ask I explained. “That would be horses that have pure bloodlines. Arab, Thoroughbred, Orlov Trotter, Akhal-Teke. All demanding top dollar because they’re champion horses.”

“Those sound fancy.”

“They are and to answer your original question, horse breeding is a thirty billion dollar plus industry. This...” I motioned to the interior of my family’s home. “Is because we make up a good part of the money generated in the industry.”

“Interesting.”

“What?”

“You’re rich.”

I nodded, feeling uncomfortable. I didn’t like focusing on the money side of my life. Sure I had plenty but I loved my horses. I loved training and caring for them. I hated the breeding part because that meant sending our horses out into the world with others who I couldn’t guarantee would care for them properly. I did my best to be selective but there was no

way of fully knowing who I was selling to. The down side to the business I was in.

“It’s just things,” I muttered. “None of this is all that important.”

“Says the billionaire.” She smiled brightly and drew one from me.

“When you’ve always had it, you don’t tend to think about it much.”

“I can’t say I’ve experienced that luxury but I get what you mean.”

I lifted her luggage and motioned to the back of the house. “Come on, I’ll get you set up then I’ll get dinner started.”

“Dinner?” She paused and frowned at me. It was just after five but I was usually in bed by nine because I had to be up so early. “And I thought you had other stuff to do?”

I do but I’m liking the idea of putting it off ’til tomorrow so I can stay here with you.

“I’m up by six to get out to the stables. I have to help feed and prep the horses for the ranch tours and handle other duties. I’ll get one of my guys to handle the evening stable routine for today so I can get you fed.”

“Now I feel terrible. You’re already breaking your routine for me.”

“Not a big deal. It happens and I have to eat too, so consider it me wanting an early dinner.”

She frowned but nodded slowly. “It’s winter. How do you tour in the winter?”

I grinned but didn’t turn to her as she followed me through the living room toward the opposite end of the house where the rooms were. I stopped outside of the room at the furthest end of the hall. It was the one that belonged to my brother when he managed to tear away from Crescent Falls. He played professional baseball for the Crescent Falls Badgers which had been a shock to all of us. Just as much of a shock as our

parents moving to Texas to care for my ailing grandparents the year Garrett started CFU.

The plan had been for him and me to run the ranch but after doing a walk-on with the baseball team and discovering a gift none of us knew existed, Garrett was offered a scholarship to play for CFU then picked up by the Badgers after he graduated.

That left the day to day of the ranch on me. I didn't mind. I loved the ranch and loved my horses even more, but some days life was exhausting. With the ranch and all it took to keep things running solely on my shoulders there was little time for much else. I could pay to put people in place to do it for me. Had the money, but nobody would run your dream the way you would so I had a small team and for the rest I was hands on.

I placed her luggage by the door and she followed me into the room. I answered her previous question while she looked around. "Horses ride year round, Boston."

"But it's cold." Her face filled with concern which hit me in a weird way. She cared.

"They grow thicker hair in the winter and they fare well in cold temperatures. My horses spend most of their day outside and we keep 'em in the stables at night."

"What about when it snows?"

Well shit, either she thought I was careless with my animals or she simply had a heart.

"They can handle the snow. Don't do well with ice and it's dangerous for them to be in the pastures if the ground is soggy and slippery but other than that, they do just fine."

"Hmm..." She nodded but still didn't seem convinced which had me squaring my shoulders and hooking my thumbs into the front pockets of my jeans.

"I take good care of my horses, Boston. Wouldn't dare think of putting them through anything that would do them harm."

Her eyes went wide and then settled. “I wasn’t insinuating you would.”

“I’m sure you weren’t. Just wanted to make sure there was clarity.” I shifted my stance and looked around the room. “Anyhow, get settled in and I’m gonna get dinner started.”

“Um, I can help if you want.” She seemed uncomfortable again. I wondered if guilt was kicking in about intruding on my space which meant I had to see after and feed her. That wasn’t on Shore, though. That was all Melvina.

“No need. Just gonna grill a few steaks, if that works for you?”

“Steaks would be great. I’m starving. The food on the train was terrible. I did more picking than eating.”

I grinned and nodded. “Why didn’t you just get on a plane? Couldn’t have been more than a couple hours’ flight. The train is a painfully long ride from Boston.”

She shrugged. “It seemed nostalgic and I’ve never done it before. Besides, I wasn’t in a hurry.”

“Nostalgic, right.” I chuckled. “I’ll leave you to it.”

After I was in the hallway, I inhaled a deep breath to clear my lungs of her. One of the things I didn’t have time for with a full load of running a ranch and training horses was women. Especially not one who would feel nostalgic about being on a ranch until the nostalgia wore off and she wanted to get back to the fast-paced city.

There weren’t enough hours in the day to invest in seeking out and dating women. Plenty set their sights on me but none cared enough to want to spend all their time on a ranch. There wasn’t anything glorious about hard work, pastures, and horse shit. I wasn’t interested in spending time with a woman who couldn’t understand my love for the life I’d been handed.

Having Shore here in my space, with those beautiful eyes, full luscious lips and short curvy frame wasn’t doing much to help my self-imposed celibacy either. The lingering scent of lavender and jasmine that seemed to fill the space she was in wasn’t helping either.

It'd been almost a year since I'd been intimate with anything other than my hand which meant this was going to be an incredibly long week. Melvina had better be grateful I loved her like family or Shore would have been sleeping on a bench at the train station for all I cared.

CHAPTER
FOUR



“How’s it going?” my sister asked as I lifted a stack of clothes from my suitcase then turned toward the dresser, where I had several drawers open. I could have easily lived out of my suitcases for a week but decided not to and something about this house made me want to settle in.

He made me want to settle in.

Had I not been trying to figure out what the hell to do with my life I might have been more inclined to focus on the things he’d made me feel.

“I just got here, so there’s not much to tell.”

I dropped the stack of jeans and tees in one drawer then turned back to the bed with my phone pressed between my

shoulder and ear to grab an equally large stack of sweatshirts and hoodies.

“You can tell me if the B&B is nice or god awful like I think it is.”

“You saw the pictures, it’s not god awful, Summer, but I couldn’t tell you for sure because I’m not there.”

“What do you mean you’re not there? You said you’re unpacking.”

“I am but not at the B&B. Some woman had her kid and can’t travel home. The family is in the room I reserved and since the place is booked for the holiday, there weren’t any other available rooms to put me in.”

“Shore, what the fuck! Where are you?”

“Relax, Melvina’s nephew agreed to let me stay at his ranch.” I smiled, remembering the scowl on his face at the train station. “Well more like she bullied him into letting me stay but either way, I’m fine.”

“Are you high? I know there’s a thing about cow shit doing that. I think I saw it on TikTok. Something about it makes you high from the toxicity. That has to be what’s happening because there is no way you’re telling me you’re on some stranger’s ranch and being this calm about it.”

“How can cow shit make you high? Is that a real thing?” I paused, frowning into open space.

“No, I don’t know, maybe. You’re in the goddamn country. It seems like that would be a thing. It’s not like there’s much else to do in the middle of nowhere and you know people get resourceful.”

“They do but getting high off cow shit is a bit of a stretch.”

“So is you staying at a stranger’s ranch, so can we focus on that?”

“I told you I’m fine. He’s nice enough and the place is beautiful. The guy’s a billionaire. Picture what a billionaire’s ranch looks like and that’s where I am. He’s only twenty minutes from town so not far from the B&B where I was

scheduled to stay. The B&B that is a totally legitimate business, with thousands of five-star reviews, by the way. She wouldn't risk her livelihood to put me in danger."

"Shore, you sound like an idiot. Every fucking thriller movie is about some legitimate business owner allowing a deranged family member to kidnap unsuspecting women who thought the exact same things you're telling me."

"Just scare the shit out of me, Summer. That seems like the right thing to do given my current situation."

"You shouldn't need me to scare the shit out of you. Make better decisions, Shore. Fuck. I'll call and find you another room somewhere. Where is the guy? You're alone, right? Can you lock the door until I..."

"Would you relax? I'm fine. He's a nice guy. And there aren't any rooms available. People come to this small ass town believe it or not."

I didn't know if I could find another room for the week. Hadn't checked and wouldn't. I trusted Melvina and therefore trusted Wilde and his house felt good. *Peaceful*. I needed to feel good.

"And shall we not forget, you spent a month in a bungalow in Thailand with a man you didn't know simply because it was by the water."

"You're not me. You're *sensible*, I'm not. I think I see what's happening. Is he a cowboy?"

"Well, yeah. Why?"

"He's sexy, isn't he? The jeans, boots, hat, and body built from hard labor kind of sexy I bet."

"He's very *cowboy sexy* but that has nothing to do with why I'm staying. It was either this, struggle finding a hotel in a bordering town, or come home. Neither were appealing options. I need this time away, Summer."

"I know," she said quietly. The only reason my sister didn't push too hard about getting in the way of my trip was because she was concerned. The meltdown that had cost me my job

had been a long time coming but she had no clue. My sister was a bit selfish so she rarely saw beyond her own needs.

I knew I was on the edge. The anxiety and stress had been too much for years but I never said a word because the embarrassment of not being able to manage kept me silent.

My family was proud of me. I was the lawyer in the family. A far cry from my sister who floated from job to job doing whatever made her happy. I, on the other hand, had to be the one to live out dreams my parents couldn't.

I was handed the role of giving my parents something or *someone* to be proud of at the cost of my own happiness. It all got to be too much which was how I'd ended up here. I needed a break. I needed something simple. At least for a while.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked.

I smiled and nodded even though she couldn't see me. The two days on the train had been magical. No stress, no panic attacks, even when I thought about how disappointed my parents were going to be when they found out about my failed career. And when I pulled up on the ranch, *his* ranch, I felt like I could breathe, truly, for the first time in years.

"I am. I promise, please don't worry."

"Sorry, you'll have to demand something else. You're my sister, my only sister. I'm going to worry."

My smile expanded and I cradled the phone to my face, gripping it tighter. "I know and I love you for caring."

Finally.

"Love you too, but I need you to make me a promise."

"Okay."

"Two actually."

"What?"

"Check in. Call, not just text. I need to hear your voice."

"Voice message," I negotiated. I didn't want to call my sister everyday and feel the lingering weight of her worry.

“Fine, twice a day and keep your location on, no matter what. On your phone and iPad. Promise me, Shore.”

“I promise.”

“Okay then. Have fun and if he truly is cowboy sexy then consider riding him. That’s what you’re supposed to do anyway. Ride ’em cowboy.”

I busted out laughing. “Why the hell would you say that?”

“Because it’s a thing. Save a horse. Ride a cowboy.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.”

It was already on my mind but I was not trying to get caught up focusing on riding Wilde.

A Wilde ride.

Shore, stop it.

“I love you, okay. Take whatever time it takes to pull it all together and if you need me, I’m here.”

“I know you are and I love you too.”

But there’s no pulling it all together for me.

After I finished the call, I went back to unpacking until both suitcases were empty and stowed in the oversized closet of which I had temporary ownership. It held a few items of men’s clothing, pushed to the one end with a few folded items on the top shelf. I wondered if they belonged to Wilde but exited the closet before I got the insane idea to see if they held the pleasing smell of sage with a hint of cinnamon that I remembered from the ride over.

Instead I decided to go find my host. The minute I hit the end of the hallway I was enticed by the savory smell of grilled meat and spices. My stomach sang its approval as I entered the kitchen fit for a world renowned chef but belonging to a cowboy. I peeked around the massive frame disrupting my view to grab a quick glance at what smelled so good.

“Those look good?”

“Wait ’til you cut into one. They’re gonna taste even better.” Wilde glanced over his bulky shoulder and I nodded in return.

“Can I help with anything?”

“And have Mel ready to chop my head off? No, ma’am. You’re a guest.”

“Well, I mean technically I am, but you weren’t expecting to have a guest. I don’t mind helping out.”

“Would you have jumped in the kitchen at Mel’s?”

I frowned a little, considering the question, and I wouldn’t have. The B&B provided all meals, turndown service, and a few other amenities to make my stay cozy and comfortable. “No, but that was Melvina’s place, which is a B&B. Yours is not. I can’t expect you to offer the same service.”

“You can and you will. It’s what Mel would expect. None of this is my fault or yours. I plan on making your stay here as comfortable as possible. If you wanna help, grab a seat and keep me company. I’m almost done then we can eat.”

He glanced at me over his shoulder again, since I was still standing a few feet behind him, but he quickly turned back to the massive, six-burner, gas stove and flipped the steaks on the striated griddle he’d placed on top of two of those burners.

When I didn’t move, he spoke but kept his eyes on the steaks. “You gonna sit or not? Can’t be much of a view for you back there and I’d feel better seeing your face.”

My eyes traveled over the expanse of his back, watching the way his muscles bunched and flexed beneath the worn, long-sleeved tee he wore. The sleeves were pushed up his forearms, granting a view of smooth brown skin, corded with more muscles.

There was definitely a view from where I was standing. One I was thoroughly enjoying but I managed to pull myself away and found a seat at the small cozy table adjacent to the stove. It was nice and fit the décor but small in comparison to the oversized kitchen.

The size of the space, however, complemented the man who was preparing steaks for me because he fit perfectly.

“That’s much better.” Those beautiful brown eyes of his searched my face and brightened at the same time his lips tilted, granting me a crooked smile.

Have mercy.

It was insanely unfair for this man to be so sexy. Not just sexy but *cowboy sexy*, in his jeans and boots with that body carved pleasingly well from hard labor and a healthy lifestyle.

“I don’t think this is a fair tradeoff.”

“What’s that?”

“Me sitting here doing nothing, watching you cook?”

He laughed lightly and turned off the burners. “I thought women loved stuff like this.”

“Like what?” I frowned, watching him fork the steaks onto waiting plates on the counter next to the stove.

“You know the whole ‘having a man cater to your every need while you sit and enjoy his labor of love’ thing.”

Cater to your every need?

I sure had some needs I would love him to cater to.

I arched a brow his way. “Is that what you’re doing? Catering to my needs?”

And I’d be damned if that crooked smile didn’t blossom into one more sensual and dangerous. “Well no, not exactly. I suppose I’m helping you out in the food department but more than anything I was just making a joke to drive my point and make you feel better about me working over here while you’ve got your feet up.” He winked and turned away from me, heading to the refrigerator. “And to be honest I don’t know much about what women want these days. It’s been a while since I’ve had one to cater to.”

Well that’s a plot twist. How could a man this fine, who lives like this and cooks, be single? Or maybe he’s not single

and just chooses not to cater to the women he's dealing with outside of the bedroom.

Nope not this guy. He's not the type. He's all in when he sets his sights on a woman. She gets the VIP catering treatment. I had no idea how I knew that, but I did. I felt this about him.

"Then let me share that women don't like to be teased about having their feet kicked up, when in fact they don't..." I pointed to the floor. "Mine are firmly planted on your beautiful hardwoods..." I lifted my eyes back to him, watching as he headed my way with a large wooden bowl. "Especially when that woman offered to help out and was forced to sit and do nothing."

He placed the bowl in the center of the table and lowered his eyes while hovering, with all his cowboy sexiness crowding my space. "I appreciate the heads up then. You keep on giving advice about how to handle you and I'll keep on taking notes to make sure I get it right."

No sooner than he delivered that very confusing statement, my cheeks warmed but he missed it because he turned away to get the rest of our dinner, giving me time to process. Was Wilde flirting or was this just good ol' Southern charm? There was no way this man was being this forward. He was simply doing the cowboy thing. They were charming and flirty and engaging, right? And I didn't know if he was single, so I asked.

"A while huh? I take it that means you're single?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Can we not do the ma'am thing?" I cringed and he chuckled, removing two oblong, foil-covered items from the oven. I assumed baked potatoes.

"Sorry, just how my mama raised me. No offense and I'll work on it if it bothers you, Boston." I smiled at the nickname he'd given me. "And I'm very single. Been that way for a few years now."

“Why?” I blurted out. When he turned to head my way with the foiled items plated next to the steaks I wanted to die a slow death.

“Well you blurted that out like it’s a surprise to you. I guess I should feel something for that.” He smiled, hovering in my personal space again after he placed my dinner in front of me.

“It is sort of surprising. You’re not an eye sore and you can cook.” I paused and grinned. “At least I think you can. Jury’s still out until I sample the meal.” I shrugged. “Seems like you’re a decent catch.”

His smile expanded again. “I would say I am but I’m biased.”

“Then why are you single?”

“Ranch life is hard. It takes up a lot of my time with it just being me and the handful of people I employ to help out. Mostly they handle the tours and a few odd jobs. The bulk of running this place falls on me and most women don’t find this lifestyle very glamorous.”

“What about your family?”

“My parents moved to Texas about six years ago to look after my grandparents’ cattle ranch. They were getting up in age and had some health issues. After my grandma passed, my parents decided to stay. They left the ranch to me and my brother.”

“Where is he?”

“Went pro with baseball. Strangest shit I’ve ever seen.”

He turned and headed back to the kitchen to grab utensils and napkins before gathering a pitcher of tea, two glasses. and returning to the table. He sat across from me, placing everything on the table. I reached for what I needed and filled both glasses.

“How is that strange?”

“He never played a day in his life before his freshman year of college. Walked on as a dare from his roommate and turned

out Garrett, that's my brother, was pretty damn good at swinging a bat. Better than good. After he learned the basics, which they were eager to teach once discovering his natural talent, the athletic department granted a scholarship. My brother signed his first contract with the majors two years ago."

"Oh wow, I see your point now. So that left you here to run the ranch on your own?"

"Pretty much, but I don't mind. I love it here even if this life doesn't make me a woman magnet. I can't see living any other way."

"You have help while I'm here."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. It's the least I can do since you're graciously allowing me to crash in one of your rooms for the week."

He rested his arms on the table and stared at me with that sexy crooked smile of his. "You don't have to work for your stay, Boston. I'm pretty sure allowing you to do so is going to put me on Mel's shit list."

"Not if she knows I volunteered and that's exactly what I'm doing."

"Why the hell would you want to do manual labor while you're here? Aren't you on some type of holiday vacation?"

I flinched a little at what he assumed was my reason for being here. I wasn't on vacation. I was escaping my life, trying to figure things out because something had to give. "I'm not on vacation per se. Just a pause of sorts and I think working here might help. I could use the distraction."

"Distraction from your life?" His eyes narrowed and his gaze was curious.

"Is that so terrible? Wanting a distraction from life. Everybody needs to press pause every now and then."

"No, not terrible, Boston. I'm just curious about what could be so heavy in your life that you needed to run away from it."

“I’m not running,” I shot back. He nodded sternly and offered a smile.

“Alright then, not running, just pressing pause. I don’t see any issue with taking a break from life.”

“Good. So use me however you want while I’m here.”

His eyes flickered and that sexy smile resurfaced. I blinked a few times, acknowledging my mistake before closing my eyes briefly to regroup. “As a worker to help out on the ranch,” I asserted.

He grinned wider. “I knew what you meant, Boston. Didn’t need the clarity.”

He also knew what I’d insinuated based on his smugness.

“Great, then that’s settled.”

“It is, but I’ll warn you. Ranch life is hard. We work our asses off ‘round here. I’ll expect the same from you too.”

“I can handle it.”

His expression was laced with amusement. “I bet you can.”

My cheeks warmed with the look he gave and the intensity in his eyes but he lowered his head seconds later. I sucked in a quiet breath.

“How about we bless this meal so you can give your final determination on whether or not I should keep my ass out of the kitchen.”

I smiled, lowering my head just as he said a quiet prayer. Once he was done, I cut into my steak while he watched until the first bite blasted with flavor on my tongue. I mumbled my approval while chewing, slowly nodding in happiness.

“You get my vote. Stay in the kitchen. Final decision.”

He chuckled and tipped his head. “Eat up then. We have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Were you serious about the six a.m. thing?”

“I sure am, breakfast by six thirty and out the house by seven.”

“I’ll be ready.”

He flicked his eyes across the table at me, shoving a forkful of steak into his mouth and like the desperate, man-deprived woman I was, I watched and enjoyed. Maybe this week wouldn’t be so terrible after all.

CHAPTER
FIVE



Like most days, I dragged my ass out of bed at six a.m., showered, threw on a pair of jeans, a long sleeved tee, and shoved my feet in a pair of thick socks and boots. I'd layer up with a light jacket once I was ready to leave the house. I couldn't work like I needed to with heavy layers and tried to avoid doing so most days. I wasn't ever still out on the ranch so my body generated enough heat that I didn't need to overdo it with winter wear.

Clothing, however, wouldn't be my issue this week. My problem had landed at the train station yesterday and was now sleeping peacefully at the end of the hall in one of my guest rooms. My night had been anything but peaceful, so maybe one of us got some rest. The tossing and turning I did barely classified as rest.

Most of my night was spent thinking about all the shameless flirting I did with Shore and how she'd reacted to that shameless flirting. She liked it. She was down right engaged with most of it which I caught through subtle hints like the shifts in her breathing, the way her lids fluttered, and those luscious lips parting when I made the catering comment.

She damn sure had plenty to enjoy with those pretty ass eyes, bow-shaped lips, and curvy little body. Shore wasn't exactly short but not tall either. Maybe a foot below me. That put her at the right height for tossing around while I fucked her.

I groaned and closed my eyes, adjusting the hardness growing in my jeans before I left my room. This was going to be one long week. Two seconds into the hallway and the smell of coffee wafted into my nose followed by toasted bread and...

Bacon.

What the hell? I strolled down the hall, pausing as I caught sight of Shore, sitting at the kitchen table with her feet propped up on a chair beside her. *Booted feet.* The leather was brand new but I still smiled because she had on cowboy boots.

I chuckled at how damn cute she looked with her dark jeans, bright green sweater, and boots. The sweater was a little too fancy for working on the ranch, probably cashmere based on what I could tell, but it worked for her.

I did a quick scan of the kitchen and locked my sights on the beauty sipping coffee at my kitchen table. She had yet to grant me those luminous browns but she noted my presence by lifting an arm and glancing down at her watch.

"You're late. It's six fifteen." When I stopped on the opposite side of the table her eyes slowly rolled up to mine. She perused at a snail's pace until she reached my face, only to drop her eyes again when I reached for the table and snagged a half-eaten piece of bacon, shoving it in my mouth. She watched me chew and lifted a well-manicured brow slightly.

"We at the sharing food stage already?"

I grinned and shrugged. “Looks that way and I’m not late.”

“You said up by six.”

“I did, but I also said breakfast at six thirty. You just noted that it’s only six fifteen which means I’m early.”

“You have to *make* breakfast.”

“Today I don’t.” I snagged a full strip of bacon from her plate and headed to the counter to lift my own. “Looks like you handled that for me. I thought we had a deal. No cooking while you’re here.”

She lifted from her chair, took the plate right from my hands, turned to the counter near the stove, and began piling on food. Enough eggs and bacon to feed two people and several slices of toast. When she dropped the plate next to where she was seated and pointed to the empty chair, I obeyed the silent command and filled it.

“Our agreement was for me to put you to work on the ranch. Not in my kitchen, Boston.”

“Work is work.”

I bowed my head and blessed my food before diving in. I wasn’t disappointed. Eggs were perfectly fluffy with the right amount of cheese. The bacon had the right amount of crisp. So damn good.

“Did you set an alarm just to make sure you were up before me so you could drag my ass about being late?”

“No, why would I?”

“Don’t know. Seems like something you would do.” I grinned and she rolled her eyes, causing me to laugh while shoving another forkful of food in my mouth. After chewing and swallowing, I motioned to the plate. “Thank you for breakfast. It’s good.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Guess you earned the right to put your feet up, didn’t you?”

“I surely did.” She tossed back what was left of her coffee before standing to head for a refill. “Can I get you some?”

“Nope, false energy. I need the real thing. This’ll do right here.” I pointed at my plate with my fork, watching as she moved to the sink, rinsed the cup, and placed it inside. Instead of getting more coffee she walked to the refrigerator to pour a glass of almond milk. I couldn’t do the real thing and apparently, she didn’t mind the substitute. The way she settled into my space *unsettled* me. I liked her being present a little too much.

“You know this isn’t a contest, right?”

“What’s not a contest.”

“Who caters to who?”

She narrowed her eyes in confusion and I added, “You made my plate. Snatched it right out my hands and filled it. Then you offered to get me coffee. Is that because I made you dinner last night?”

“I grew up watching my mother make my dad’s plate. Doing the same is a bit of a habit. But more than anything it’s a gesture of kindness. Since I’m staying here, against your will, the least I can do is make you breakfast and fix your plate. Don’t go overthinking.”

She was uncomfortable and lying. Well, sort of lying. She had fixed my plate to be kind but she’d also wanted to. I could sense the ease and eagerness when she did it. “*Her* man.”

“Huh?”

“You said you watched your mother making your dad’s plate but the problem with that is, he’s her husband. *Her* man, yet you still made mine.”

Her eyes narrowed and then rolled. “Stop making something out of nothing. I’m not competing with you but if we were in competition, I would totally blow your ass out of the water.”

“Think so.”

“Know so. I don’t have much faith in you since you clearly have been without companionship for a while now.”

“And you haven’t?” She visibly cringed. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“It’s been a few years since I’ve dated but mostly due to my job. My position was very time-consuming and stressful.”

“Sounds like that’s something we share in common.”

I would love to find out what else we share in common.

“Women are just natural when it comes to stuff like that so I’d still do a lot better than you.”

“Mmhmm,” I murmured, then forked more food into my mouth.

She plopped down in the chair across from me. “What?”

“Nothing...” I wasn’t about to go there with her. If I was invested in making her feel good then she would surely not have a chance in hell of outdoing me. Not that I didn’t think she could reciprocate. I would love for Shore to try by finding her way to my bed naked, but I had a feeling with all the time I’d missed pleasing women, she’d be one very happy lady if I got my hands on her. However, I decided it was time to change the subject. “I like your boots.”

“Thank you.” She smiled proudly.

“They new?”

“New-ish. I wore them for a couple days after I got them just to break ’em in. The lady at the store suggested I do so.”

“Smart lady but I don’t think a few days of trudging around your bedroom will help you much. By the end of the day, they should feel just fine next time you wear ’em.”

If she survived the day that is.

“If you’re trying to scare me then don’t waste your time. I’m fully prepared to handle whatever you throw at me.”

My dick perked up and I smiled, shoving the rest of my breakfast in my mouth. While I chewed and swallowed, I

lifted and carried the plate to the sink. After I rinsed it and left it for later to wash, I turned to Shore.

“Well since none of what we’re talking about will get us any closer to handling the tasks I need to tackle today, why don’t we table this discussion for later and head out.”

“I’ll get my coat.”

I tipped my head and watched her travel to the back of the house. While she was gone, I grabbed my hat from the rack near the door, worked my way into a jacket, and waited. A few minutes later, she came moseying from the back with a jean jacket pulled over her sweater and I’d be damned if she didn’t have a cowboy hat to match those cute ass boots.

It wasn’t a Stetson but it also wasn’t one of those cheap twenty dollar deals either. She’d actually put some thought into her attire or at least somebody had. I preferred a Stetson Skyline which I had on now but I wasn’t mad at her choice either.

I was even less inclined to be mad about seeing her dressed like she belonged here. *With me, on my ranch*. I took in the jet-black fluff of her loose curls peeking from beneath the hat, but the dip of the brim hid her eyes, making me realize I wanted to see them.

“What did you do, buy up everything cowboy you ran across before loading on that train to come here?”

She lifted her chin and smiled. “You don’t come to a cowboy town without the basics. I don’t know shit about being a cowgirl but that much I do know.”

I nodded, doing a slow crawl over her once more. “Fair enough. Let’s go.”

We loaded into my truck and drove down to the stables. Once we climbed out, she stood taking in the views and I admired the view of her doing so.

“It’s beautiful out here.” She was facing the pastures that stretched for a few miles, running right up to the mountains. From our vantage point, it appeared as if they touched the sky

which was still slightly dark. We had about another half hour before the sun fully rose.

“It is but you haven’t seen a damn thing yet. Wait until the sun comes up and you have a full view of the land and mountains.”

“You love this, don’t you?”

“What’s that, Boston?”

“The simple life?”

“I do, nothing like it in the world. I appreciate a change of scenery every now and then but having this full time is priceless.”

She smiled and nodded. “So, what’s first?”

My eager little temporary cowgirl. The way my soul appreciated her willingness to be out here had me feeling unsettled again. I had to shove those thoughts aside before I liked the idea of her out here more than I should.

“We feed the horses before turn out. They need a few hours to stretch, move around, and get ready for the day. My guys will collect them and get the horses saddled up for the guests we have scheduled for the day. Then we’ll clean out the stalls, prepare their meals for later, put together their hay nets, and replenish their bedding while the stables are empty.”

“Do I get to ride?”

“You wanna ride?”

“A tour was a part of my package, so yeah, I’d like to.”

“You ever been on a horse before?” I grinned and she shook her head.

“No, but that’s what you do, right? You’ll teach me what I need to know,”

“Yeah, I’ll teach ya, Boston.” *I’ll teach you more than just how to ride a horse...* “Come on, let’s get to work.”

For the next few hours, I directed and Shore worked right alongside me. We shoveled out the stalls, filled and rehung hay

nets, and repadded the horses' bedding after sweeping them clean.

We didn't talk much. Just worked peacefully throughout the morning. Shore asked questions when needed but remained focused on the task while I stayed focused on her and tried my best not to think about this being our regular routine. It felt good, damn good, having her out here with me, but all of this was temporary.

By late afternoon, the stables were done and I decided it was best to give Shore a break, although she hadn't complained nor had she asked for one. That part baffled me a little as well. Stable work was hard labor but she didn't seem to mind. I suppose she wasn't lying about needing a distraction.

"Hey, how about we grab some lunch then I'll take you on a ride?"

She wrapped her hand around the manure fork she was using and balanced it next to her, looking around. "Are we done here?"

"If you're done in there we are. I'm gonna wheel the barrels out to the compost pile and we can head back to the house to eat."

"Sounds good." She glanced around then walked over to where Mosley was hanging his head from out of the stall. Poor guy was a bit depressed but he needed to heal. I watched Shore stroke his head a few times before she turned back in my direction.

"He seems so sad. How long does he have to stay in here by himself?"

"A few more weeks. I let him out and walk him around the paddock once a day but I can't leave him out there and risk making the injury worse."

Mosley had stepped in a hole on a ride and injured his leg. Horses were free spirits and hated being kept on box rest, but it was sometimes required and I always did what was best for them even if they didn't understand my reasoning.

“He doesn’t like being alone,” she said lowly, stroking his head a few more times before she addressed Mosley. “You hate this, don’t you? Everybody else is out there playing and you’re stuck in here.”

He nuzzled closer like he understood. Hell he probably did since I talked to them all the time like she was doing and it made me smile.

“Don’t baby him. He’ll be back to his routine soon enough. That isn’t healthy.”

I nodded at the way she was slowly moving her hands over his head and neck but ignoring me. “Look how sweet he is. You can’t be one of those tough love people to him with this sweet face.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Bringing you out here was a bad idea. Gonna have my horses spoiled. Come on, let’s head out.”

“I’ll be back to visit you. Don’t you worry,” she mumbled to Mosley and I swear the damn horse glanced at me then smiled at Shore.

We put everything away and left the barn only to run into Georgie. He was a new younger guy but a hard worker. He wasn’t trained to do tours yet so he did odd jobs around the ranch while the other guys were out with riders.

“Hey Wilde, who’s this?”

“Shore. She was supposed to be with Melvina for the week but they got overbooked with that baby coming early.”

“Oh yeah. I heard about that. And you offered to let her stay here?” Georgie grinned assumedly. He knew better.

“Melvina aided. I agreed.”

“Uh huh.” He walked closer to Shore which grated my nerves. There was no reason for him to be close to her.

“Boston, this is Georgie. One of our ranch hands.”

“Nice to meet you, Georgie.”

“*George* or *Gee* is fine and Boston?” He glanced at me. “I thought you said her name was Shore.”

“It is.” She rolled her eyes my way. “Wilde calls me Boston because that’s where I’m from.”

“I see. I hear it now in your accent. Kinda funny like. Nice to meet you, Boston.”

She extended a hand to meet his and my mouth flew open with a rebuttal before I could help myself, not that I cared because Georgie was going to have to step the fuck back.

“*Shore*, her name is Shore,” I asserted, causing her eyes to dart my way in confusion and Georgie to smile smugly.

“Got it, boss. Nice to meet you, *Shore*. I’ll dump those for you, since you already cleansed the stables.” He pointed to the barrels of waste then walked away, leaving me with some explaining.

“What was that all about?”

“Your name is Shore?”

I started walking toward my truck and she fell in step with me. I paused outside the passenger door, opening it so she could get in.

“But you call me Boston.”

“Yeah, I do. *He* doesn’t.” Our eyes locked briefly before I shut her in and rounded the rear of my truck, cursing under my breath. *What the hell are you doing Wilde?*

Claiming a woman that wasn’t mine was what I was doing and well fuck me for liking the idea of me having the right to do so.

CHAPTER
SIX



I didn't think I'd ever worked so hard in all my life. My body ached. My back, my arms, my thighs. Muscles I didn't know I had screamed in protest of the way I pushed them today. The feeling was tortuous and freeing at the same time. Today was perfect.

Well aside from the mass confusion I was experiencing from spending the day with Wilde. The man had my mind spinning in so many directions I wasn't sure which one I needed to explore.

The flirty banter. The salacious looks. The hidden innuendos. Then there was the weird exchange that happened between us and his ranch worker, Georgie. It felt like Wilde was jealous of the attention I received and also angry at Georgie referring to me by the nickname Wilde had given me. *Boston.*

It made me smile each time he used the endearment because it felt more intimate than just referencing where I was from. And his comment about him being the only one with permission to use the nickname was damn sure a clear sign he was jealous, or maybe not. Maybe he just didn't want his guys to be too friendly with a guest staying at his house. That made sense, right?

I was truly overthinking all of this. Yes, definitely overthinking.

I lifted my phone and unlocked the device to send my sister a voice message. I didn't want her freaking out so I did as she asked and made sure she knew I was alive and well. She was selfish but she did love me.

It's me, day one. Things are good here. Had a productive day and I'm enjoying myself.

Seconds after I hit send, I noticed the dots dance, followed by a text.

Did you ride 'em cowboy yet?

I groaned and quickly responded.

No, and I have no plans on doing so, please stop.

The best moments in life aren't planned. Keep that in mind. Have to go, love you.

I wasn't surprised. My sister and I were night and day. She was the reason my parents put so much pressure on me. Summer Manchester did what she wanted, when she wanted. After she dropped out of law school to pursue a career in freelance photography, of which she had no skill or training, my parents went on a rampage. they quickly got over it then placed all of their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for having at least one successful daughter on my shoulders.

So of course Summer thought nothing of me having a fling with a cowboy. It was exactly what she would do. I had a good mind to consider it because my sister was happy while I was stressed. Wound so tightly from self-imposed anxieties that I couldn't sleep most days. Before I landed in Miller's Point it

was progressively worse as I tried to decide how to tell my parents I too was going to be a disappointment.

Exhaling a sigh, I was about to go to see what the plans were for dinner when a call came through.

Melvina.

“Hello?”

“Hey there, Shore.”

“Hi, how are you?”

“Fairing pretty well. Thought I’d check in to see how your first day on the ranch was?”

“Good actually.” I smiled genuinely. The day *had* been perfect. “I helped feed the horses, did turn out, and cleaned the stalls. Tomorrow we’re going for a ride. We were gonna do it today, but Wilde ended up having to help the guys because they had some last minute add-ons.”

“I’m gonna thump that boy on the ears. You’re not supposed to be working the ranch. You’re supposed to be relaxing, enjoying the Christmas week. I thought I made that clear to Wilde.”

I smiled, imagining how she was going to thump him on the ears. I had never met Melvina a day in my life but could picture her doing so and Wilde suffering through it because he loved and respected her too much to object or argue.

“You made it very clear because he was adamant about me not helping out, but I was adamant about getting the full ranch experience. No ear thumping will be necessary. I insisted and he fought me, arguing his point and yours, but somebody raised him right because he decided it was best to let me have my way in the end.”

“That would be his mama, Adel. She raised those boys to be well-mannered, respectful, and chivalrous. Glad to know it all stuck. Now their daddy, Archer, raised them to be hard workers, protectors, and smart asses but I guess everything balances.”

I grinned and nodded. “I suppose it does.”

“And what about everything else? You two do any of the Christmas stuff yet?”

I frowned a bit. I hadn't really given a second thought to this being the week of Christmas. Not since I'd been out here on the ranch. There were no decorations at all, not even a tree, which I kinda missed. I wasn't thrilled about not going home for Christmas but avoiding my parents' scrutiny was a better option. That didn't mean I wanted to be a Scrooge. I loved Christmas a lot and felt a tad bit sad about not having the slightest resemblance of holiday cheer around here.

“Well no but I'm not expecting to. He graciously...”

“Don't you dare. If you were here at the B&B you would have a tree and daily Christmas activities. At the very least he can get you a tree and if you get ta itching for the Christmas experience, you have him bring you here to the B&B. We might not have a room but you're more than welcome to join in the festivities. We're decorating gingerbread cookies tonight and having cocoa by the firepit.”

“Thank you so much but I don't want to be a bother. He has a lot to do around here and driving me into town...”

“He'll make it work. I'm gonna call Wilde to make sure he gets you a tree. Adel has plenty of decorations. Haven't been pulled out in years but I know they're around there. I helped her pack them up a few years ago right before they moved to Texas. Everything you need is somewhere in the house. Christmas just isn't Christmas without a tree. You sit tight, honey. I'm gonna call Wilde, right now.”

“Wait, no—”

She was gone. The line went silent and I exhaled a sigh. As much as I wouldn't mind having a tree, the last thing I wanted was to force Wilde to get one or be the reason why Melvina forced him to get one.

I lifted from the bed, feeling the ache in my muscles again as I extended to my full height. The hot shower I had after Wilde left to go help his guys had worked some but I had a feeling this soreness was going to get worse. And my damn

feet hurt like hell. New boots all day on a ranch was just plain stupid but I survived.

As soon as I reached the living room, the front door flew open and Wilde walked in removing his hat and jacket, which he hung on the stand near the door. He stood clutching a cellphone to his ear, nodding as he listened and I knew it was Melvina on the line from the tightness of his expression.

I walked to him, stopping a few feet away and he lifted his face, brows tight and expression pulsing with irritation.

Oh shit. She was demanding that he get me a tree.

“No ma’am. I do. Yes ma’am. No, I wouldn’t want that. If that’s what she needs. Yes ma’am, I will. No ma’am, I won’t. I give you my word. Yes ma’am. Alright, I have to go, Ms. Mel. Okay, will do.”

The second he ended the call, his eyes flashed with amusement. “I guess we’re going to Beauden’s tree farm tomorrow then.”

“Oh, god. That wasn’t my idea.” I pointed to the device in his hand and he handed over that crooked smile.

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” Wilde walked past me, heading to the kitchen where he tossed his phone on the island and moved to the sink to wash his hands. After he was done, he opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water, leaning back on the stainless steel appliance, watching me as he untwisted the cap and drank. Why in the hell was this man drinking water so sexy? The visual was very sexy. He was all dusty from his day, dressed in jeans and boots with muscles flexing while he did something as simple as drink water.

“You don’t have to get me a tree.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I assure you I do because if I don’t, I’ll never hear the end of it. I don’t think my ears can handle the abuse given the cold temperature we’re expecting in the next couple days.”

I grinned when he did.

Good at least he’s not angry.

“So that’s a real thing.”

“It damn sure is. My ears were redder than a firepit for my entire teen years. I was a bit hard-headed and my mama and Ms. Mel didn’t appreciate that too much. Nor did they like my smart-ass mouth, so they would say.”

“Hmm, so a rebel cowboy. I can see that.”

“Can you?”

“Yep, you seem like the type.”

His eyes flashed with amusement before he took down the rest of the water and pushed off the refrigerator to toss the empty bottle into a recycling bin.

Then he crowded me; so damn close. “You like rebels, Boston? I already know you like cowboys.”

“Who says I like cowboys?”

I lifted my chin so my eyes met his and that was a huge mistake. The mischief waiting had an ache growing somewhere other than my sore muscles.

“Just a feeling and I always trust my gut.” He winked and stepped around me. When I turned to watch the path he took, I groaned when he reached behind his back and yanked the shirt he was wearing over his head, exposing a sea of smooth brown skin, tight rounded shoulders, and a trim waist. There was a tattoo on his upper right shoulder of a horse shoe. I was so lost in the view that it startled me when he spoke.

“I’m gonna shower off the day then get started on dinner. You stay put. Don’t you take yourself in that kitchen trying to get it done yourself, Boston.”

I smiled and rolled my eyes.

“I won’t.”

“Alright then. Give me about twenty minutes. You sit tight.”



THE FOOD WAS GOOD. Wings and home fries but watching the man who prepared the food in the kitchen doing so was even more tantalizing. I officially had a crush on Wilde Reeves. The rebel cowboy.

It wasn't just the cowboy thing either. Of the six ranchers I'd met today, who were all equally sexy with muscles and physiques built from endless hours of hard work and not time in the gym, their sexy smiles and Southern drawls, not one had my pulse racing and body tingling the way Wilde did.

Even now, as I watched him do something as simple as pour us shots from a mason jar, I couldn't get my sister's words out of my head. *Save a horse, ride a cowboy.*

"Here. After the work you put in, you earned this, but drink slowly. This stuff is strong as hell."

"What is it?"

"Caramel apple pie moonshine." A smile tugged at his lips as he sat on the sofa and tipped a glass my way. I lifted mine and examined the slightly brown, murky liquid, inhaling deeply afterward. It smelled sweet but I still wasn't convinced.

"I thought moonshine was supposed to be clear."

He lifted the glass to his lips and swallowed a taste. "Some yes, but this is my pops' special blend. He made it himself. My mother refused to drink the regular kind so he made this one just for her. She loves apple pie."

"And she likes it?" I raised a brow, inhaling above the glass again.

"Loves it..." he swallowed a little more. "But she also loves *him* so she might be a bit biased. Try it."

I cautiously brought the glass to my mouth and sipped. The flavor was robust, tasted similar to a caramel candied apple but the liquor content was intense.

"Oh wow, that is strong." I sipped again. "But it's good."

"I'll be sure to tell him you approve and don't let it fool you, take that slow. This stuff will knock you on your ass."

“Has it ever knocked you on your ass?”

He nodded, balancing the glass on his knee. “I was thirteen and thought I was a man. Me and my brother Garrett snuck a jar out to the stables. Drank half of it.”

My eyes went wide. “Half of the whole jar?”

“Between the two of us yeah, but that wasn’t much better. Both me and Garrett were throwing up for days. Sick as a dog and had to work it off. Pops was mad as hell and showed no sympathy. Wouldn’t let my mother baby us either. We had to keep up with our regular chores that entire week while trying not to pass out from almost having alcohol poisoning.” He shook his head, smiling like he was reliving the memory.

“Sounds terrible.”

“It was, could’ve died but we didn’t and it taught us both a very valuable lesson.”

“Which was?”

“We weren’t men. Barely even boys and didn’t have any business drinking this shit.”

He lifted the glass to his mouth and swallowed down more.

“I’m surprised you’re drinking it now after all that.”

“I understand moderation and I’ve developed a liking for the taste. Reminds me of my parents.”

“You miss them.”

“I do.” He nodded. “I was supposed to head out to Texas for Christmas. Just for a few days, but I won’t be doing that now.”

Well shit. I bet that was my fault. I ruined Christmas with his parents.

“Relax, Boston. It has nothing to do with you.”

My eyes shot over to his and he was already staring with that crooked smile in place. “Then why aren’t you going? You don’t have one decoration up. No tree which means you didn’t plan on being here.”

“I don’t decorate for Christmas. That’s usually my mother’s thing. Haven’t since they left. Didn’t see a reason to with it just being me. I usually just head out to the Jubilee they have in town and the tree lighting Christmas Eve with Melvina and her husband. Plans changed because my parents decided to do a Christmas cruise. They invited me, and I considered, but it was seven days. There was no way I could stay away from the ranch that long. Not with how much business we got this year. The True Ranch Experience tours are popular and more than doubled in the past couple years. I guess that’s a good thing.”

“Yeah, I suppose so but it still means you’re alone for Christmas.”

“Was alone for Christmas, Boston. You’re here and it looks like I’ll have a tree too.” He winked and I smiled.

“You really don’t have to get me a tree.”

“You saying you don’t want one?” He narrowed his eyes on me and I couldn’t lie.

“Having a tree wouldn’t be such a terrible thing but I also understand if you don’t want to get one.”

“Putting a smile on your pretty face isn’t such a terrible thing either and seems like getting you a tree would do just that. My mind’s made up so no need to try to change it. Now, since you know why I’m alone for Christmas, why don’t you tell me what brought you here to Miller’s Pointe instead of you spending the holiday with your own family...”

I felt my expression drop but couldn’t help it. My reason for being here wasn’t easy to explain. It was attached to years of family complications that I was carrying the brunt of but hadn’t created on my own.

That would be in the hands of my parents and sister.

“If you don’t want to say, that’s fine. Just figured I’d ask.”

“I can’t say my family is a topic I’m thrilled to talk about. It’s rather complicated but I suppose most families are.”

“I can’t say I can agree. Mine is as simple as they come. My parents were college sweethearts who married young, had a family, and raised us as best as they could. I can’t complain because Garrett and I turned out alright. My brother and I are close. I resented him a little when he got offered a contract to enter the majors but I understand he had to live his own life. I still love him just as much. So like I said, as simple as they come.”

“I wish I could say the same. We’re the opposite of simple.”

“Complicated.”

“Very,” I muttered.

“Wanna tell me how?”

No, not really.

“My parents met in law school.”

“They’re lawyers?”

“That was the plan but they got pregnant with my sister and had to quit. My dad works for the city as a manager for their federal funding programs and my mother is a grant writer. They’re successful and have had amazing careers, just not the careers they aspired to have. Their dreams of becoming lawyers got passed down to my sister and me.”

“Your sister’s a lawyer?”

I grunted and drank more of my moonshine. “My sister is currently teaching classes on Somatic workouts at some high-end Pilates studio or at least she was when I left Boston. Who knows if she’s still there or not. She’s a bit of a free spirit. Which is why I’m here.”

“You’re here because your sister is a free spirit?” He frowned and I slumped my shoulders, drinking more before I answered.

“My sister dropped out of law school her second year. Right at the end of my first year when I decided I didn’t love the idea of being a lawyer. Law is stressful and not what I wanted. Being a lawyer is what my parents wanted for me, but

after how angry they were once my sister dropped out there was no way I could too. I finished, passed the bar, and got a job as a contracts lawyer for a very prestigious firm.”

“Which I’m assuming you don’t like either.”

“I hate it. It was a harsh work environment and stressful. As one of the only women and the only minority I dealt with a lot. Mostly with proving I could do the job. I was smarter than almost every lawyer employed there. They knew I was and wanted me to suffer because of their inadequacies.”

“Why didn’t you quit and get another job?”

“My parents. They were so proud. Always telling me how great I turned out when I was, in fact, falling apart. The job was horrible and I don’t do well with stress. Only what adult couldn’t handle a little stress? I also made six figures a year so no one understood why I hated my job so much. I managed because I refused to hurt my parents. They sacrificed so much for me. I didn’t want to disappoint them, so I made it work but the longer I was there the worse my anxieties became. I wasn’t sleeping or eating. I had been barely hanging on and a few weeks ago, I had a mental breakdown in front of one of their major clients. I couldn’t pull it together and sort of ruined a major opportunity for the firm. The client didn’t want me handling the account or being employed there, so they fired me.”

“Well shit. I’m sorry to hear that.”

I smiled. He seemed genuinely concerned. “The thing is... other than having to explain I’d gotten fired to my parents, I was relieved when they let me go. I know the minute I tell them, their advice will be to brush it off and they’ll dive right into helping me find another equally terrible job, as a *lawyer*.”

“Which you don’t want...” he stated and I shook my head. “If it’s not being a lawyer anymore, what do you want?”

This. The simplicity. The peace I’ve felt since being here. Was I crazy because I felt like I wanted *him* too?

“I want to wake up without feeling like there’s a boulder on my chest from being committed to a job I hate. I want to

feel like what I want matters and that just because my sister disappointed my parents, I don't have to carry the burden of making them proud. She lives her life the way she wants. As much as they don't like what she does, they accept her choices because *that's just who she is*. I get so sick of hearing them express that followed by, but you, Shore, you make us so proud. And I feel bad because I know they love me. Their expectations are simply a lot."

"You don't have to feel bad, Boston. Your life should be your own. I get wanting to make your parents proud but there has to be a line drawn with how far you go to do so."

"Easy for you to say, you don't get it. Your family is simple."

"I don't have to live your life to understand what it's doing to you or how fucked up living someone else's dreams makes you feel."

I exhaled, turned up what was in my glass, and cringed from the burn of it sliding down my throat and warming my chest. "Shit, that bites. And to make matters worse, I lied to them about why I wasn't coming home for Christmas."

"You lied?" he asked with a raised brow.

"I did." I nodded "I told them I had to work, which is the only acceptable excuse for not spending Christmas with my family. How ironic that the job I hated saved me from explaining to my family what a failure I am. And I'm kinda sad. I really love Christmas and I'm going to miss spending it with my family. There's not really much I can do since I'm here in Miller's Pointe trying to figure out my life so I'll make the best of things."

He smiled charmingly sweet and sexy. "I can't say I have the answers to you figuring out your life but I can help you figure out Christmas. We'll start with your tree tomorrow and work through the rest. How's that sound?"

"A little fuzzy actually. And muffled. And I'm pretty sure you now have two heads."

He laughed or maybe it just felt like he did. My mind was clouded.

“That’s the moonshine. I told you it was strong and looks to me like you’re a lightweight.”

“I’m not a lightweight.” I frowned hard and my body warmed suddenly or maybe it had already been warm and I hadn’t noticed.

“With this stuff you are, Boston. I think it’s time to get you in bed. We have to be up early. After I handle the morning stable routine with the horses, we’ll go get you that tree.”

A few minutes later he was standing over me. My lids fluttered when I looked up. My eyes traveled up and down his solid frame slowly before I patted his thigh. “You’re a big guy.”

“Yeah I am. Take my hand, Boston.”

I narrowed my eyes and noticed his opened palm so I grabbed a hold and tried to stand, unsuccessfully. Eventually, I was yanked to my feet but crash landed against his body. What started as me trying to brace myself shifted to my hands roaming over his chest. A very nice muscular chest I could visualize gliding my tongue over. I was tipsy. Possibly a bit beyond tipsy, but I also knew exactly what I was doing. Exploring this beautiful, well-built man and I thoroughly enjoyed every second my fingers moved over his chest and then a little further down until...

“Boston...” His strained voice was a signal of the last of his restraint leaving his body and I stopped but smiled.

“You’re hard, nice and hard. I like that.”

“I’ll consider that a compliment even if you are drunk off your ass right now.”

“I’m not drunk. I only had one glass and there was only a teeny, tiny bit in that glass.” I lifted a hand away from his chest and pinched my fingers to express the amount of moonshine no longer in my glass. The syrupy warm and sweet alcohol currently flooded my veins and had my brain partially scrambled. I was warm all over and my limbs were tingly.

“That’s all it takes sometimes, now let’s go.”

“Whoa,” I yelped when my feet left the floor and I was lifted bridal style into enticingly strong arms that held me so perfectly I felt safe and incredibly horny.

“I think I like this too.” I felt my face shift into a lazy smile as I looped my arms around his neck and snuggled closer.

“I’m sure you do darlin’, but right now we need to get you to bed.”

“Ooooh bed, I like that too. Mine or yours? Mine is very cozy but you know that, don’t you? Seeing as how it’s your bed. Wait, we should kiss first before you take me to bed.”

And with that last thought, I yanked his face down to mine and pushed my mouth against his. He stilled for a brief moment but the minute my tongue pushed against his lips Wilde gave in and I enjoyed the warmth of his tongue working with mine. My world exploded.

The kiss was slow and gentle with smooth, skilled strokes of his tongue as he claimed my mouth. My skin grew overly sensitive and my core began to tighten as a growing pulse of need buzzed through my body. And then I lost him. He pulled back and I blinked, watching his hard gaze travel over my face. Then we were moving again. When I swung my eyes around the space we entered I realized it was my room.

“You should get some rest.” He softly lowered me to my feet then caught me at the waist when I stumbled.

“Maybe we should...would you like to....”

He shut me down before I could get the words out. “You’re drunk, Boston. I’m not doing this. Not while you’re like this.”

His voice was a low raw rasp that brushed against me seconds before I startled when he left, closing the door behind him. It didn’t slam, but I heard it. I wanted to die of embarrassment and fell back on the bed, closing my eyes, trying to calm my mind and settle the urges flooding my body.

What the hell were you thinking?

“You weren’t. That’s the problem, Shore.”

I didn’t bother with my clothes. Instead I managed to crawl under the covers and let my head sink into the pillow. Sleep. I needed sleep. This would all be better in the morning.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



*W*hat the fuck just happened?

I knew exactly what happened. Shore kissed me, I kissed her back, and I wanted to do it again, amongst other things. That was a bad idea. She wasn't in the space to get tangled up with me given everything she'd confessed about why she was here in the first place. I wasn't in the position to get caught up in feelings for a woman that would be like every other female from my past. Temporarily.

Fuck!

My house was eight thousand square feet but felt more like a closet. The open floor plan wasn't enough space or freedom at the moment to keep the weight of what I was feeling from suffocating me so I left the house, made the short drive to the

stables, and saddled up Kolby for a ride. It was dark, the ranch was quiet, but night riding was one of my favorite things to do.

Being out on the ranch, rushing down the trails with the rhythm of my horse and the still of the night, was exactly what I needed. I traveled down the easiest path, taking into consideration the late hour and minimal visibility for myself. Kolby would be just fine and I usually did okay since my other senses heightened with the lack of vision but I couldn't risk another injured horse. Kolby and I had traveled along this trail a million times so we navigated with ease, mostly from muscle memory.

What I was hoping was the crisp night air, the steady rhythm of Kolby's hooves on the hard cold dirt trail, and the dark skies would be enough to wipe out the memory of Shore's lips on mine, the soft feel of her breasts brushing against my chest, and the low throaty moans of her voice that never escaped because our mouths were in a tug of war.

Damn, I enjoyed that kiss too much.

My property was dark as hell and I couldn't see much beyond what was right in front of my face, but we survived. By the time I returned to the stables after the hours-long ride, I still didn't feel any more at peace. My body was buzzing with adrenaline and still anxious as hell knowing I had to go back to the house where my problem began and ended.

Shore Manchester, who was likely still out cold from the moonshine she drank too much of. After removing Kolby's tack and getting him situated in the stable with some extra hay to replenish what I burned off with our ride, I was in my truck heading back to the house with my mind on how the hell I was going to survive the next few days with this very tempting woman in such close quarters.

My mind drifted to her failed attempt at patting my thigh and my dick hardened instantly in my jeans. The feel of those soft fingers landing against it a few hours before was on constant rotation along with the sweet and spicy taste of her tongue against mine. I groaned in irritation as I parked and headed inside, needing to shower but refusing to because I

knew how that would end. My dick in my hand while I imagined it was Shore I was stroking and not my fist.

Instead I quietly walked through the house, peeked into the room where Shore was indeed still fast asleep, then headed back to the kitchen where I grabbed a beer and planted my ass on the sofa. I wasn't getting in my bed after a ride and no shower so the rest of my night was going to be spent right here.

By my third beer I still had a mind full of questions that shouldn't have been circulating. Could there be something with us? Would she be open to the idea of us? If not, would she be open to allowing me to fuck the idea of us out of my system? She would thoroughly enjoy the last one but I couldn't rightly come out and ask if she was willing. I called the one person I could trust to be honest even if I didn't like the honesty he would offer.

"What's wrong, Wilde?" My brother's groggy voice flowed through the phone and I cracked a smile. It was after midnight which meant I shouldn't have been calling him. Most nights I was asleep by nine.

"Relax, nothing's wrong. Well at least not anything you need to worry about. I just needed some advice."

I heard shifting and then a female's voice mumbling in the background before I had Garrett's again. "From me?"

"Yeah, is that so hard to believe?"

"Shit yeah, it is. I'm no longer worried about you being up this late. I'm more concerned that you're calling me for advice. Let's hear it."

I chuckled and finished the beer I was working on, placing the bottle on the floor. "There's a woman here at the ranch with me..."

"A woman? How the hell did you meet somebody when you never leave the ranch, Wilde? Have I been gone that long to miss all that?"

"This is all Ms. Mel. I'm doing her a favor. Long story, but one of her guests ended up here for the week instead of the

B&B.”

“At the ranch? And you agreed?”

“I already said it was Melvina’s doing. You think I had much of a choice?”

“Not if you want to keep your ears out of the danger zone, you don’t,” he said with amusement taking over the grogginess that existed moments before. “So what’s the deal with this woman? She giving you hell and you’re trying to decide how to put her out and not piss off Ms. Mel?”

I wished it were that easy. “Not exactly.”

“Then what’s the...oh fuck, you don’t want her to leave. You want her to stay?”

“Yeah I do and I don’t know how the hell I’m so damn attracted to this woman.”

“Tell me what she looks like and I’ll tell you how?” he said and laughed.

The idea of discussing Shore’s looks had a frown etched on my face. “It’s not just about what she looks like, which is the part that has me so damn twisted up. There’s something about her. Something I both like and don’t like all at the same time.”

“You’re talking crazy, Wilde. You either like the woman or you don’t.”

We sounded like a couple of grade school boys with this conversation but there was no other way around it.

“I like *her*. But I don’t like that I do. Feelings such as these never work in my favor.”

“You don’t want them to,” he said through a sigh. “That ranch is your life, Wilde.”

“It’s supposed to be yours too,” I shot back in a moment of annoyance.

“It is in a way but raising and breeding horses is not where I’m at in my life. Are we going to have this argument again or are you going to let me do what you called me for?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “And what did I call you for?”

“For me to tell you to man the fuck up. Give her a chance. You can be with a woman who wants more out of life than existing on that ranch.”

“And how exactly is that supposed to work, Garrett? Our parents are in Texas, you’re wherever the hell you are, so it’s just me here handling things. If I don’t, we lose all we’ve worked for. *This* is our legacy.”

“I know that and it’s not what I’m saying. Like always you’re hearing what you wanna hear.”

“I’m hearing what you said. I can be with a woman who wants more than I have to offer, which isn’t gonna happen.”

“So all you have is the ranch?”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back. “No.”

“Alright then, my point is, you love that shit. I get it, but things won’t fall apart if you invest in yourself. Take some time away, travel, create a life where the woman you love can have more than just horse shit and hay. You can do both, you know? Run the ranch and be happy.”

“Not if she doesn’t understand the priority of me running the ranch.”

Shore fitted perfectly here. She seemed happy working alongside me but she also had a life back in Boston. Not that she loved that life but being here wasn’t anyone’s dream.

“You saying this woman doesn’t or won’t?”

“I don’t know what the fuck she’ll understand. I’ve known her for less than a week.”

“Well shit, then you’d better get your ass in gear with her. If she has you crying on the phone with me at midnight, she must be something special.”

I barked a laugh. “I’m not crying, Garrett, just needing a sounding board is all. I bet you’ve been waiting all your life for this very moment right here, haven’t you?”

“Hell, yeah I have, big bro.”

I raked a hand down my face. “I don’t know why this matters. Her life’s a mess and she’s only here for a week,” I murmured more to myself than to Garrett.

“It matters because you feel something and all jokes aside, that’s worth being open to. Not very many women make us *feel*, Wilde. Those that do, mostly make us feel something more physical. If this were just about getting her in your bed, you’d fuck it out your system and get it over with. You called because there’s more to it than needing to get off.”

He was right.

I felt a profound pull to Shore. When she was telling me about the reason she ended up in Miller’s Pointe, all I could think about was how the hell I was going to fix this for her. I wanted to know she felt at ease like she’d been experiencing since walking into my house. I witnessed what that looked like, in her smile, and experienced what it felt like in her spirit. I was willing to do anything I could to make it right. And then there was the kiss. The way everything in me settled when she kissed me was enough reason to want her here. She felt right, she felt like she was mine.

“Yeah, it’s more than that.” There was no need to lie to Garrett. He would see right through it anyway.

“Then go for it. What the hell do you have to lose?”

More mounting frustration and resentment when things didn’t work because my life was my life and not what most women hoped it to be. A cowboy was fun, a fantasy. But when the fantasy wore off, there was just me being a good man who wanted a good woman. One I would love better than she could ever imagine possible but not a lot of women valued a real man.

“Enough, trust me. There’s plenty to lose.”

“I’ve never known you to be a pussy, Wilde. Maybe I’ve been away too long and you’ve changed.”

I chuckled. “You’ve been away too long for sure but I haven’t changed. I get pussy, but I’m not one. Speaking of, where are you? Thought I heard a woman.”

“I’m in New York to visit Lyra’s family for Christmas.”

“Meeting the family? That sounds serious.”

“It’s not. I had business here. Some endorsement deals I needed to close before the first of the year otherwise I would have gone on the cruise with Mom and Dad. Lyra is just something to keep me busy and a way to get a home-cooked meal for the holiday.”

“That’s cruel, Garrett. Does she know why you’re there?”

“She does. I’m doing her a favor.”

“I hope you don’t mean by fucking her.”

My brother laughed a little too hard. “Sex is a bonus on both ends but no, not that kind of favor. Her family’s been riding her about settling down. Me being here is buying Lyra more time. We’re just friends so don’t go projecting.”

He cleared that up quickly. “If you say so.”

“I do, but this isn’t about me. This is about whoever the hell has you all bent outta shape. Give it a chance, Wilde. She might be a good fit. You’re already considering the possibility if you called me, so whatever you’re searching for from me, you got it.”

I missed my brother. Hadn’t seen him in person in almost a year. Watching him play on TV filled me with pride but he was my family and I missed having him around. “Preciate you, Garrett. I need to see you soon.”

“Then you will. Maybe at one of my games with your new lady. I can fly you both out.”

I smirked. “I don’t need you to fly me out. You have MLB money but I have ranch money. Not the same.”

“I agree but don’t forget I have ranch money too which means my pockets are a little deeper than yours with the combination of both.”

I chuckled. He would always own half of the ranch. I’d never deny him but I could still give him shit. “You’re right, so let me work with these percentages so we’re equal again. I’m

thinking me fifty-one, you forty-nine. That one percent should account for your little baseball earnings.”

He barked a laugh. “Fuck you, Wilde. Swinging this bat earns me more than a *little* money.”

Garrett wasn’t lying. MLB paid him very well but it was fun to mess with him.

“I’ll let you get back to sleep. Call me on Christmas, little brother.”

“I will. Love you, Wilde.”

“Love you too, Garrett.”

I ended the call and turned my head toward the back of the house, snorting at the thoughts I was having.

Give it a chance.

How did I know Shore wanted a chance? She’d kissed me, sure, but she was also drunk off her ass. Shore was attracted to me, no doubt, but that didn’t mean she wanted more than a few great orgasms before she was back on a train heading to Boston to figure out her life.

And why the hell was I sitting here lusting over a woman like a teenager with a crush I was scared to acknowledge?

Because you feel something you haven’t felt in a really long time with a woman...

Potential and possibilities!



THE NEXT MORNING I was up early and headed straight to the stables to do the morning routine wearing the same clothes from the night before. I did wash my face and brush my teeth at least, considering I’d have to speak to my guys. Once I was done, I headed back to the house to shower and dress, checking in on Shore after I was done. She was still out, which concerned me so I crept into her room and carefully peeked

under the bedding she was burrowed beneath to make sure she was okay.

Her soft breathing, echoing in a light snores, allowed me to relax. I tucked her back in and hurried out the room, needing to leave behind the apples and spice that was now lodged in my lungs from lingering in her presence.

While I worked on a fresh pot of coffee and preparing breakfast, I called Beau to let him know I needed one of his trees. The massive balsams were a big hit with the locals and hopefully going to do the trick for Shore as well. After a few rings he was on the line but talking to someone in the background so I held patiently until he was ready.

“Go on ahead, give me a minute to take this and I’ll meet you in my office.”

“Hey Wilde, what’s going on?”

“You sound busy, so I won’t hold you. I need to head out to your place today to get a tree.”

“Who’s it for?”

“Me.”

“*You?*” He sounded amused. “Or do you mean your place but for the woman occupying it with you this week?”

“Does it matter?” I grunted and he laughed.

“Not to me but sounds like it matters enough to you.”

I chuckled. “Can I get the tree or not? You worrying about what I have going on isn’t why I called.”

Beau and I were close friends so he would eventually know about what I had going on but at the moment I didn’t have a damn clue so I couldn’t give him any details about me and Shore.

“Come get what you need but I won’t be around. Got my hands full with this leadership conference.”

“Yeah I bet you do. Don’t forget Ms. Mel doesn’t just run her mouth about my business. She shares everyone else’s too, including yours.”

When Melvina called and demanded I get Shore a tree, she mentioned she was going to reach out to Beau to make sure it was okay. That only meant she was calling him to make sure I got the damn tree. Micromanaging.

She then mentioned he had his eyes on one of the guests who was staying at his ranch and went into some spiel about how there was love on the horizon in Miller's Pointe and maybe she could get some bonus great-nieces and nephews out of me and Beau. I quickly shut her down and moved on to my plans for getting the tree.

"I can only imagine.," he said and I felt his pain. "Come get what you need and if you stick to minding your business, I'll stick to minding mine."

"Works for me. I'll see you at the first of the year to check on those horses and if you talk to your brother before I do, let Kit know I need another order of supplements for my horses. He can leave it with my guys and I'll send over payment if I'm not there when he has it delivered."

"I got you."

After I ended the call, I poured a cup of black coffee and was about to fix my plate when I noticed a sluggish and disheveled Shore heading my way. The frown on her face had me handing over the mug I was about to drink from, which she accepted and groaned a morning and thank you before taking a sip. She cringed and I arched a brow when she went right back swallowing down more of the steamy brew.

"I told you to handle that moonshine with care. You didn't listen."

She scowled at me and I chuckled, turning away to fix a plate. "Have a seat. You need to eat."

"I don't know if I *can* eat," she mumbled but made her way to the table. I followed with a plate of waffles and a side of oatmeal.

"I'm not eating that." She pointed to the bowl and shoved it away. I pushed it right back, lifted the spoon I brought with it and shoved it into the brown sugar and vanilla blend.

“It will coat your stomach and make you feel better. Eat, Boston.”

“I don’t like oatmeal. It’s gross and feels weird in your mouth.” Her eyes darted over to the stove then back to me. “I smell bacon. I’ll have some of that please.”

“The grease will make your stomach feel worse. Eat the oatmeal first then we’ll consider the bacon.”

She frowned. “Are you really policing what I can eat?”

“I am. If I don’t you’ll be stuck in the bathroom all day and we won’t be able to get that tree you want so badly. Now eat the damn oatmeal.”

“I don’t want to. Maybe I should call Melvina and tell her you’re not being hospitable.”

I placed my palms flat on the table and leaned forward until our eyes were level. “Are you gonna be a snitch, Boston?”

“Are you going to be the food police, *Cowboy?*”

The smile playing on her lips had my eyes lowering to those soft, pillowy cushions. The visual created reminders about the kiss we shared last night and my dick swelled.

“Fine, eat what you want but don’t say a word when you feel like shit after and we’re still getting the tree.” I walked to the stove, lifted the plate of bacon, and placed it next to her when I returned. After I fixed my own plate—waffles, bacon, and bowl of oatmeal—I sat across from Shore watching as she shoved an extra crispy and greasy piece of bacon in her mouth.

She chewed slowly, as if trying to make a point, but her stomach grumbled its dissatisfaction. I chuckled and kept my eyes fastened to hers while she cut into the waffle and moved a large chunk into her mouth. I noticed she didn’t touch any more bacon even if she didn’t bother with the oatmeal. I had won a silent victory.

We ate in silence and once she was done, I cleaned the kitchen while she showered and dressed then rejoined me in the living room looking a lot better than she had an hour ago.

Not because she'd prepared herself for the day. I liked the bed hair and crumpled clothes. It had me thinking she'd looked damn sexy in my bed that way, or better, with no clothes on at all. The better in my opinion was that her skin was back vibrant and she had more pep in her step.

"Feeling better?"

Shore smiled. "I am. Thank you for breakfast." She lowered her eyes then slowly lifted them to meet mine again. "We should uh... discuss last night."

I smiled slowly and dropped my hat onto my head. "Which part of last night would you like to discuss, Boston? You telling me all your troubles, you inappropriately putting your hands on me, or the kiss that followed?"

Her mouth dropped open and those expressive eyes went wide also. "I did not inappropriately put my hands on you."

I strode across the room, closing the space between us before I reached for her hand and yanked it forward, placing it a few inches below my belt, knowing exactly what she would be privileged enough to experience because my dick *was* an experience. "*You're so hard, Wilde, really hard and I like it.*"

She snatched her hand free and closed her eyes briefly like she needed a minute, which brought a smile to my face. "Bringing up any more memories of last night, Boston?"

"I did not touch you like that last night. My hand was on your thigh."

"It most certainly was *not*. You were tipsy so I'm sure your memory is clouded, but you get a pass. I won't be flagging your inappropriate behavior because I was hard so you were not wrong." I edged closer. "I liked that kiss too. Maybe we can try again later when your body is buzzing with a need to be touched by me and not from an overload of moonshine. Until then, we have some tree hunting to do."

I walked to the door and left it open, waiting for Shore to go out first. If she had any objections to what I proposed she chose not to speak on them. We would revisit that kiss later, if I had to guess, but she stuck with the plan for the moment and

left the house in front of me, tossing out, “Let’s go get that tree then, Cowboy.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT



*Y*our body is buzzing with a need to be touched by me...

Those words remained on repeat in my head since they left Wilde's mouth but he remained the perfect gentleman, which was a good thing since we were both toeing a very fine line neither of us seemed to want to cross. There was nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting but I had a feeling whatever was brewing between Wilde and me was more than either of us were prepared to deal with.

Regardless, our day together had been perfect. We spent an hour walking through the forest of trees while Wilde let me fawn over them, being overly picky about each one until I settled on what I felt was the perfect fit for *us*. And yes, trees had to fit their owner. The one I chose did just that. It was massive, over nine feet with a large trunk and thick branching

at the base spreading into smaller more delicate ones with bright green, lush clusters of needles.

Strong and delicate, a perfect blend of me and Wilde.

Yes, I compared the tree to us, because it was, well, *ours*. Even if only for this week but I didn't express that to him. He would think I was insane for having such thoughts. While Wilde used an ax to chop down my selection, I was blessed with the image of his sexy body in motion, skillfully tackling the task of securing a tree he'd gone out of his way to make sure I had.

Today was about me.

There was no reason for one man to be so sexy and resourceful and I loved every second of the Wilde Reeves experience. After the tree tipped and landed with a thud at our feet, Wilde bound the branches with rope and tossed the beauty onto the bed of his truck. The tree was far too large to fit properly, so it stuck out the back but we were safely on our way back to town with me giddy about having some semblance of Christmas.

Ten minutes into the drive, Melvina called and demanded we come by the B&B. She needed Wilde's help with something which meant a delay on my personalized Christmas on the ranch but I was looking forward to meeting the woman who'd given me access to my cowboy Christmas, so I didn't complain.

Wilde, however, was convinced that all Melvina wanted was to meddle but he agreed and rerouted us to the B&B. I could sense the two cared about each other and he would do anything for her. It exposed something in him that made him even more attractive. Like I needed the man to have any more assets to obsess over.

Right now, riding shotgun, I was already in overload with so much about Wilde. I had never in my life experienced instant attraction so strongly as this man was evoking in me. Sure, I'd seen men and enjoyed the visual. Their handsome faces, smiles, nice bodies, but that was about as far as it went

with me. What I felt about Wilde was different on so many levels.

He made me feel safe and secure enough to just be. Wilde was a rugged man but one of the most beautiful I'd ever had the pleasure of enjoying. His thick lashes and brows, silky beard, chocolate skin, and crooked smile did things to me. I wondered if he had a clue about how handsome he was.

If I had to guess, no. The guy was so laidback and easygoing. Not that he wasn't cocky. Wilde was surely a confident being but it had nothing to do with his looks and more about his confidence in being a man. The way he moved, the way he asserted himself, was undoubtedly proof that he had the right to carry himself with honed arrogance and I loved every inch of what he exuded.

Other women noticed too because the second we stepped into Melvina's B&B two women lingering in the foyer couldn't keep their eyes off him. It annoyed me but he seemed unconcerned with their presence, other than to offer a tilt of his head and a charming smile.

He tugged me along, taking possession of my hand until we reached a glass-enclosed porch at the rear of the house where several guests sat around a fireplace sipping from mugs or reading books. It felt cozy.

"Took you long enough." A slim woman with gray streaked hair framing her face, styled in bouncy curls, strode over to us. The minute her feet paused she landed balled fists on narrow hips while she tilted her head back and frowned at Wilde who only handed over an amused grin.

"Don't you go grinning at me. You said you were on your way half an hour ago."

"We had to tie the tree down so it wouldn't go flying off the back, ruining somebody's day."

"Mmhmm, just go on out back and see if you can get that shed door back on the hinges. Not sure what happened but I think the screws are stripped. You might have to realign both doors to get them level again."

He frowned. “You want me to remove both doors and put them back up again.”

“Yes I do.”

“Right *now*?”

“Yes, Wilde, right now. I can’t leave the shed open all night. Go on, please. I’ll keep Shore busy.”

He groaned and exhaled a sigh. “Alright.”

He kissed Melvina on the cheek and turned to me. “Shouldn’t take long, I hope.”

“You go, she’s fine.”

His eyes bounced between us and he chuckled, shaking his head. “It’s not *her* I’m worried about, Ms. Mel.”

Wilde winked at me then left out the side door of the porch. I watched him cross the yard, moving confidently with his signature stride—wide-legged, sexy, and confident.

“Based on the way you’re lusting after my nephew, I’d say you two are getting along just fine. See, I knew it would work out. I have a feeling about these things.” My eyes shot up to hers with lightning speed and she was grinning. “Come on in the kitchen and I’ll fix you a slice of my gingerbread cake.”

Melvina was moving before I could regroup from the statement about Wilde but I didn’t have a comeback. I *had* been lusting and she’d caught me.

Damnit!

I followed the path she took to the kitchen, pausing until she pointed to a stool next to the island. I sat and she brought over a plate and utensils before turning away briefly and returning with a glass cake holder. The contents under the dome resembled a pound cake but when she lifted the lid, the fragrant scent of cinnamon and molasses hit me, causing my stomach to rumble.

“That smells really good.”

“It tastes even better. Most people do cookies, and I like those just fine, but this gingerbread cake is so much better. Try

it.”

She dumped a slice on my plate so big I wasn't sure it would be possible to finish it all in one sitting. I lifted the fork and dug in, not wasting any time shoveling the first bite in my mouth and good lord...

“Oh my, this is so good.” I spoke with a mouth full. The soft cinnamon sweetness melted on my tongue.

“Told ya. It's Wilde's favorite. I'll make sure you have the recipe so you can make it for him.”

I choked on the bit I was swallowing and she grinned, turning away. I watched as Melvina opened the refrigerator and lifted a carton of almond milk. “I'm guessing this will do since I know that's what Wilde drinks. He can't seem to stomach real dairy. Not even as a kid.”

“Is he lactose intolerant?”

“No, but the idea of where milk comes from freaks him out. Calls it cow piss. Used to make his mama so mad when he was a kid. Won't drink milk, but will eat an entire cow. Imagine that.”

I smiled, forking another bite of cake into my mouth. “People are weird that way. I don't like the real thing either.”

“See I'm good about these things. You two are a good fit.” She smiled brightly.

Was this crazy woman comparing our preference for almond milk to our ability to pair well in a relationship?

“There's nothing to be right about, Ms Mel.” I lifted the glass, taking down several large gulps.

“My eyes have some age on them, dear, but I know when a woman looks at a man like he means something to her and that's how you were just looking at Wilde. Like you wanted to do the Horizontal Hokey Pokey.”

Once again I choked on some of her amazing gingerbread cake. What in the entire hell? When I managed to clear my throat and wipe the tears that pricked the corners of my eyes from the struggle to breathe, I narrowed in on Melvina.

“Horizontal Hokey Pokey?”

She arched a brow, smiling smugly. “I could be a little more colorful with my words if you’d like, but I’m sure you know what I’m referring to.”

I nodded slowly, not believing this conversation was happening. “I do but I wasn’t thinking about Wilde that way.”

Lies, all lies!

“Mmhm, it’s okay if you were. I encourage it. Wilde needs a good woman in his life and you’re a good woman, Shore.”

“How would you know if I’m a good woman? This is the first time we’ve met.”

“In person, yes, but I’ve talked to you a handful of times and people have energy, Shore. Good, bad, or indifferent, most can’t hide who they truly are from people like me who see through all the fluff. You’re good. A little unfocused but you have good energy. You think I would have let you out there with Wilde if I felt you didn’t have good energy. I would have given you a refund and recommended the first free bed you could have secured for the week.”

Oh...

“I appreciate you didn’t do that with me.”

“I’m sure you do.” She smiled smugly. “Like I said before, looks like the two of you are getting along just fine.”

“We’re...well...” I frowned, shoved another forkful of cake in my mouth, and looked anywhere but at her. The kitchen, just like the rest of the house, resembled a Christmas explosion. There was garland lining the top of the multitude of cabinets and various red and green candles in frosted glass holders on the counters. The containers I assumed held flour and sugar were porcelain snowmen and there were small wreaths secured to both sides of the refrigerator doors. The house also smelled like peppermint and pine.

Everything about the B&B was a blended melody of Christmas cheer.

“Well what, dear?” When my eyes landed on Melvina again, she returned a smile. It was a curious and telling smile, like she could read my mind. I prayed she couldn’t since my thoughts about Wilde were far from innocent and not what I wanted to share with her or even admit to myself.

“Mmhm, that’s what I thought. You like him and he likes you.”

“He likes me?”

He was attracted for sure but I wouldn’t go beyond the physical. I was, however, curious on how she’d determined Wilde also had a thing for me.

“He does, otherwise you wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes out there with him. Wilde loves me because I’m family and more than that love, he respects me. But he will also toe that line when it comes to his peace. If he truly didn’t want you out there with him, he would have *respectfully* told me to find another option. I expected a call after he got to you at the train station asking where he could dump you but it never came. You’re a pretty little thing so I suspect that has something to do with his decision but like I said before, there are a lot of pretty women who are willing to hand over their time to Wilde. He’s very particular about who he accepts invitations from and rarely ever does that happen. He also let you work the ranch and that *ranch* is his baby. If he gave you access to more than a guided tour then Wilde is fond of you, Shore. Question is, what are you two gonna do about it?”

“I... Well... I’m not sure what to say to that.”

She smiled sweetly and patted my hand. “Don’t say anything, at least not to me but think about telling him just how interested you are. You never know what might come of it. Now finish up and I’ll take you to meet the baby you owe a thank you to. If he hadn’t made his grand entrance then you never would have met the man you might marry.”

She winked and I was once again choking on her gingerbread cake. This time she assisted, thumping me hard on the back until I was settled or at least my body was but my mind? Well, that was another story.



WHAT WAS SUPPOSED to be a quick stop at the B&B turned into an all-day visit. It was just after eight and we were still here but I didn't mind. The day had been fun. After Wilde finished with the barn doors, Melvina insisted we join in some of the activities for the evening. It just so happened, all the activities were couples-based which meant Wilde and I were paired and competing against other couples.

He and I were both competitive so we worked well together. Although we didn't win everything, we dominated. The games paused for dinner which was prepared by the resident chef. Some kind of venison stew for the meat eaters and a vegetarian option for the non-carnivores. I couldn't stomach eating Bambi after Melvina went through an entire spiel about what venison was, so I stuck with the vegetarian version.

Once our bellies were full we decorated sugar cookies and cupcakes and now our last activity for the evening was building a snowman which seemed easy enough until Melvina threw in a bit of a plot twist. Each couple had to work together, literally, while joined under an ugly Christmas sweater that was three sizes too big to accommodate both players. The snowman had to be constructed using one of my arms and one of Wilde's.

I had been close to him all evening but not this close. The only way to make this work was me sitting in his lap while we were snuggled together beneath the sweater. With his left arm through the sleeve and his right hooked around my waist, my right arm was laced through the other sleeve with my left draped over the one he held me with.

The position was intimate and stressful. I felt him beneath me, hard as steel, which had my nipples pulled tight and my thighs locked, wondering if he'd somehow left the tree farm with that damn ax shoved up his pant leg because there was no way that was all him. The entire time we sat this way, I had to mentally remind myself not to move or my thoughts would

drift to very inappropriate visuals of Wilde and I doing the Hokey Pokey, when I needed to be focused on building a snowman.

“Okay here are the rules,” Melvina began from across the table. We were down to only four couples. A young guy and his girlfriend from Miami., Josh and Nova. A slightly older couple, Nolan and Deborah, who were visiting their first set of grandkids. They were staying at the B&B because their daughter and son-in-law lived in a one bedroom apartment over a hardware store in town to save money so they could buy a house in the upcoming year. The third couple was Melvina and her husband Lou and the fourth was Wilde and me. “You have ten minutes to get the thing assembled. After we’re done, we’ll let the others vote.”

“The others? They’re shitfaced,” Lou said, pointing to the living room where several other guests—some of whom had been doing the activities earlier in the evening but tapped out due to an overindulgence of spiked eggnog—were sitting.

“We’ll find one or two who are sober enough to judge,” she tossed over her shoulder. “Winner gets a free weekend here, during the off season of course.”

“What if we win, sweetness?”

“Then we decline and next in line gets the weekend. But we’re not gonna win. We never win, Lou. You don’t know what the hell you’re doing,” she fussed with a smile and Lou laughed, kissing her cheek.

“I know what I’m doing, just fine. I’m more interested in you than that damn snowman.” He motioned to the table where several styrofoam balls and other craft materials were positioned in front of him.

“Behave, Lou.” She blushed then lifted the timer. “Okay, let’s get started. You guys ready?”

Her eyes roamed the table and when everyone nodded, she began the timer.

“Are we winning this, Boston?” Wilde asked with his lips near my ear. The warmth of his sugary breath fanned over my

skin, heating me.

“Doubtful. I’ve never done this before, have you?”

The thought of him joining in with another woman sent a wave of discomfort through me. *Unfairly.*

“Never been much for games. This is a first, but I can’t say I’m disappointed in how my first game night is turning out.” He tightened his arm around my waist and I felt his fingers possessively dig into my side.

“How about you focus on that snowman? Time’s running out.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll follow your lead. Use me however you want.”

I groaned at the outright flirtatiousness of his statement and reached for the larger of the three Styrofoam balls so it could be the base. “Here, hold this, while I put the glue on top.”

“You want me to hold these balls?” I stilled and his arm tightened more before he said lowly next to my ear, “I’d rather you hold mine instead but I’ll play nice. *For now.*”

Josh, who was to our left, laughed lightly and Melvina spoke while her eyes remained on the table. “I heard that, even if I didn’t want to.”

“We all heard that,” Nolan offered with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Then maybe focus on what you’re building and not what I’m over here saying,” Wilde stated in an easy tone.

“Or you could focus on what we’re supposed to be building and not make comments like that,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks flame from all the attention.

“You don’t like my comments, Boston? I feel like you do, just maybe not in front of an audience, but we’ll discuss that after we get back to the ranch. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds great, now build your damn snowman, Wilde,” Melvina mumbled from across the table. I felt the vibration of

his laugh and smiled without meeting anyone's eyes. We survived the rest of the activity but didn't win the free weekend. The prize went to Josh and Nova who managed to work together skillfully enough to build something that resembled a snowman. I was distracted by Wilde's flirty comments which he managed to whisper to me until the timer signaled the end of the competition.

Half an hour later we thanked Melvina for such a fun evening and left but I had a feeling our night was far from over.

CHAPTER
NINE



The sexual tension was wound so tightly between me and Shore that we avoided conversation and eye contact on the way back to the ranch. I could feel her thoughts, or hell, maybe they were just mine, but I was willing to bet a pretty penny she and I were thinking and feeling the same things.

If she wanted to cross that line, I wouldn't deny her but I also wouldn't push. I had a bad habit of seeing what I wanted to see and I refused to do that with Shore. When we walked in the house I decided to let the day end in a good space regardless of how painfully hard my dick was and had been for most of our evening.

"It's been a long couple of days. I think I'm going to grab a shower then head to bed. I haven't been getting much sleep."

“Yeah, I’ve disrupted your life since being here.” She flashed a smile and I chuckled, stepping closer but not enough to touch her like I wanted to.

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing, so I’m not complaining, but I do need to be up early to take care of a few things that have been lagging.”

“*We* need to be up early. I thought we had a deal that you were going to use me however you wanted while I was here.”

My eyes narrowed and a slow smile tugged at my lips when I lowered my eyes to hers. “Yeah, we did. I guess you’re right then. We need to be up early.” I lifted my hand and tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear. “Good night, Boston. Get some rest and I’ll see you in the morning.”

My eyes lowered to her lips then her throat when she swallowed thickly. “Right, in the morning. Good night.”

I stepped away and was on my way to the back of the house, refusing to turn and look at her again because if I did, neither of us would be getting any rest or sleep tonight. I managed to shower without using my hands to release the tension I was feeling and climbed into bed. I stared at the ceiling knowing, regardless of the effort, there was no way in hell I would be getting any sleep anytime soon.

Not with the memories of those lips I wanted to taste again or the reminder of her wiggling on my lap while we pretending to care about making a snowman. She might have cared, but my mind was on the softness of her ass pressed against the hardness of my dick. My very angry dick because he had different plans for how the night would end.

And so did I...

“Fuck this,” I muttered and threw my covers back. I lifted from the bed, heading to the door with the intent of crossing *that* line with Shore. Unless she flat out shut me down, I was going to keep my promise about revisiting that kiss and hopefully adding on a few other things she and I could explore. With a new determination to be the one placing the offer on the table, I opened my door and smiled realizing she

and I were more in sync than I thought. Standing in the hallway, hand mid-air, eyes soft with surprise from the force of my yanking open my door, Shore stood there wearing nothing other than a very thin, short t-shirt and a seductive smile eased onto her pretty face.

“You need something, Boston?”

“No, but *you* forget something?”

“Did I?”

She nodded and took a few steps in my direction. “You owe me a kiss. If I’m not mistaken, you very boldly stated we would be revisiting the one from last night...” She stepped closer so our bodies were inches apart. “Without the presence of moonshine.”

I edged closer and lowered my head to make sure there was clarity with what I was about to say.

“If I put my mouth on you, it won’t just be your lips I’m gonna explore.”

“I have no objections to you exploring me with your...”

Mouth.

Got it.

I cut off her sentence and finished it in my head seconds before my hands were on the side of her face and I cuffed her cheeks, expanding my fingers widely while I brought my mouth down on hers. I kissed her with the type of need that shouldn’t have existed between two people who barely knew each other. Fuck if she didn’t feel so goddamn perfect. I swore under my breath when she hesitated but only for a brief moment before the incredible, sensual feel of her lips against mine took over again.

With a leisurely exploration of my tongue against hers, I enjoyed the warmth and feel of her mouth. She was better than last night, better than anything I had ever experienced and I wanted more. I pulled back and let my teeth graze over her lower lip, watching as a small smile surfaced before I kissed her again.

My tongue slipped through her parted lips and I knew this was right. *She* was right. My entire body settled into the feel of soft, warm hands against my chest. I moved mine down her neck, over her shoulders, until they found their way to her hips which I gripped tightly, holding Shore close to me while I kissed her deeper until I needed more and had to give her a warning and last chance to shut this down.

“I’m about to fuck you so thoroughly you won’t remember what your body felt like before I got my hands on you, Boston. If that’s not what you want, you’d better leave right now.”

“I want it,” she rushed out on a ragged breath that had my eyes narrowing and a cocky smirk taking over my mouth.

I moved a hand over her hip and under the t-shirt she wore. The only thing beneath it was a pair of panties. I worked my fingers beneath the edge and smiled when her body shuddered and tensed.

“You sure?”

She would leave at the end of the week. There wasn’t a damn thing I could do about that but at the moment, I wanted her, so I didn’t care. If she said yes, I planned on making the most of this moment. I had a feeling I was going to regret being with a woman I couldn’t have permanently in my life, a woman I knew I wanted to keep, but who the fuck cared. I’d deal with missing Shore after she was gone.

“Very.”

My mouth was on hers again while I turned us and guided her back toward my bed. When her legs hit the mattress, I lowered my eyes to the bed, issuing a silent command. She lifted onto the edge, back enough to plant her feet on the mattress while I glided my fingers over her knee and down the inside of her thigh until I reached the seat of her panties. She watched through heavy lids when I brushed my thumb over the dampened material.

Fuck I needed this woman, now...

Those panties were the first to go, her t-shirt followed. Once I had her completely naked and laid out before me I

wasted no time getting to work. I gazed down at Shore knowing I could easily get used to the sight of her in my bed, lying beneath me every day. *Wishful thinking*. I dipped my head and ran my tongue over the length of her neck, then further down, allowing my teeth to graze her right nipple before I latched on and sucked hard enough to cause her body to jerk away from the mattress.

“So sexy,” I mumbled, flicking my tongue over her nipple a few more times. Her breath caught in her throat when I brushed my fingers over her pussy and dipped them low enough to slide inside. One followed by another which I worked in slowly. “You’ve been thinking about me playing in this pussy, Boston?”

Her hips bucked and I lifted my eyes to hers, working my fingers at a steady pace. When she didn’t respond, I narrowed my gaze on her. “I asked a question, you’ve been thinking about this moment...”

“Wilde...” Not the yes I was looking for but my name out her mouth was ten times more effective. My dick pulsed in need. There was a tremble in her voice which expressed she was just as anxious and ready to unravel as I was. For days I had been waiting to get my hands on her this way. To be inside her, but first I had to get my mouth on that pussy. “I need to cum, right fucking now, *please...*”

“Hold on, Boston, I’ll get you there.”

I sank my fingers deeper, turning my palm up and applying pressure with the pads of my fingers. She moaned and tilted her hips, demanding more, so I gave it to her. My fingers moved faster, increasing the pressure and her first orgasm began to surface. Her muscles tightened around my fingers and her breathing increased rapidly.

So close.

This is too easy.

I lowered my head again and flicked my tongue over her nipple, followed by the scrape of my teeth before I pulled it between my lips and sucked hard again. I picked up the pace

of my plunges in her slick, warm pussy and that was all it took to send her over the edge.

Shore shattered and came hard, with her hips bucking as she sank into the mattress, working through the aftershocks.

She shifted, attempting to inch away to recover but I wasn't done yet. "Don't move."

I pushed my palms flat against her inner thighs and dropped my face between them, delivering one long swipe of my tongue before it circled her clit and dipped lower. With short, flat strokes, I licked my way over every inch of her, loving the way she reacted.

I sucked and licked the entirety of her sweet pussy, while she gasped and moaned, pumping her hips into my face harder while I used the tip of my tongue to tease her clit until she came for a second time, slightly harder than the first.

I licked her nice and slowly until she calmed, her body relaxed and sank into the mattress again. I lifted to my full height, shoving off my shorts. I retrieved a condom from my nightstand which I quickly donned then I was back between her thighs, delivering a trail of kisses over her stomach, up the center of her chest until I was kneeling over her. I waited patiently until those lids fluttered open and those pretty browns were on me. When I had her full attention, I pushed into her as far as I could go, ever so slowly.

She blinked a few times and released a satisfied sigh, which brought a smile to my face. This moment was so right. She felt so goddamn good as I pulled back and sank into her again.

Soft, warm, and tight...

Shore swallowed thickly before I had that trembling voice of hers again. "What the hell are your flaws, because at this point, everything about you is too damn perfect."

My mouth met hers. I thrust my hips forward again and she tightened around me so securely, I could barely move. The tempting urge to fuck her hard surfaced, but instead I took my time, stroking her slowly, while I leaned down and dragged

my teeth across the soft expanse of her neck, following that same path with gentle kisses.

I felt the warmth of her hands on my back then the scrape of her nails before they dug into my skin. The pinch of pain had me sinking deeper between her thighs like we were in competition. Maybe we were, but fuck what she thought, I would win but she would receive the reward.

I watched her face the entire time, fucking her at a controlled, steady pace, my eyes locked on hers, searching for something. I desperately needed her in the moment with me. Shore's heavy lids lowered at the same time she spread her thighs wider, pulling me in more by digging her nails into my skin and I fucked her deeper, with hard, long strokes.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck...”

I grinned when her breath became more labored, with gasps and moans. I brought my hands down, pushing them into the mattress to garner more power and leverage, while she threw her head back, arching into me.

Her mouth dropped open and her breath hitched while her pussy tightened and convulsed. Shore matched my movements stroke for stroke and I fucking loved it. I rocked forward, increasing my pace, I felt the pressure building. Felt her on the edge of her release and mine was so fucking close I had to focus not to get there before she did.

“So good...” Her voice was hoarse and labored which had me pushing in deeper.

“Fuck...” I buried my face in the cover of her neck and fucked her harder until I felt her tightening and pulsing around me, her muscles locking beneath me while her thighs slammed hard against my waist. When I felt her loosen and relax, I focused on riding out my own orgasm, thrusting deeper into her pussy with a few more long, lingering strokes. I pulled all the way out then slammed back in one last time as I emptied myself into the condom.

I rolled onto my side and pulled her into my chest, both of ours heaving with the intensity of the moment. Neither of us

spoke for a long moment until Shore inched closer and exhaled a sigh. “You win.”

I grinned and gently rubbed my hands up and down her back. “It wasn’t a competition.”

“Mmhmm,” she mumbled softly before her breathing evened out into a soft, slow pace. I eased out of bed, trashed the condom, and found my way back in bed with Shore. I had no idea how much time passed before I finally began to drift off but while I lay there staring into the darkness of my room, with Shore wrapped around me, I realized how much I wanted this. Someone here in my bed with me, but the fucked up part was it couldn’t just be someone, it had to be Shore. I hadn’t the slightest clue how I was going to make that work but it was going to have to fucking work. I wanted Shore Manchester. One week was not going to be enough.

CHAPTER
TEN



The next morning I crept out of Wilde's bed, leaving him sleeping peacefully while I quickly tipped down the hall back to my room, showered, and dressed. Since he still wasn't up when I passed his room and peeked inside, I smiled at the sight of him, stretched out on his stomach in bed, arms shoved beneath his pillow, face half-buried.

A sea of beautiful brown skin exposed from the expanse of his broad shoulders down to his narrow waist which was draped in pale gray sheets. He was truly a beautiful specimen. After fighting the urge to strip out of my clothes and climb back in bed with him, I decided to return the favor of kindness and handle the morning stable rounding. I wasn't an expert but felt I'd learned enough to get the job done.

My hope for the day was to let Wilde sleep in late then maybe he and I could decorate my tree at some point after he

was up. My presence had disrupted his schedule so the very least I could do was give him a few extra hours of sleep back that he'd lost because of me.

I yanked on a lightweight puffer over my sweatshirt and my cowboy hat before leaving the house and decided to walk to the stables since I'd elected to wear my leather Uggs for comfort. Wilde had been right about a few hours around my house not being enough to break in a pair of brand new cowboy boots.

After my first day working the stables my feet were very unhappy with me. The walk to the stables was only about fifteen minutes, a little under a mile, and with the crisp winter air cutting through me, I moved at a steady, brisk pace with my head down and hands shoved into my pockets.

It was peaceful and, from my vantage point, the beautiful landscape extending to the mountains and the sky was serene and peaceful. I felt an instant pull to being out here. The desire to settle into this slow-paced, country lifestyle was a complete surprise.

I was a city girl born and raised but this town, this ranch, the man whose bed I woke up in this morning, gave me a feeling of belonging which literally made no sense. I barely knew him. Regardless, the idea of this being my life, with a man like Wilde, made my heart skip a few beats.

Or maybe you're just settling into the idea of accepting the clusterfuck that is your life and you're ready to do something about it.

I groaned as I reached the stable and lifted the latch to let myself inside. I yanked the leather work gloves Wilde had given me on my first day from my pocket and smiled as I scanned the building trying to decide where I would begin. I did a mental inventory of what I remembered and decided to start turn out for the horses that slept in the stables the night before.

The next hour was productive, I collected and filled hay nets to feed the horse and soaked grain in buckets to give them after they finished their hay. Once all of their bellies were full,

I guided the horses out of their stalls one by one with the halter and lead set exactly the way Wilde had shown me. I also remembered to pause just before I took them out to reinforce that they were to follow and respect my lead, just like I had seen Wilde do.

I smiled after getting all ten horses out into the paddock and swapping them with the six that had spent the night outside the stables. They were fed before I began sweeping out the stables and re-padding bedding in the empty ones. Moving through the morning stable routine felt so natural, like I'd been doing this all my life.

After I was done, I spent a little time pampering Mosley then went out to the paddock to enjoy a few minutes of watching the horses roam before heading back to the house. Once I climbed onto the railing and planted my feet to steady myself, I startled when I heard a male voice that didn't belong to the one I had grown accustomed to enjoying over the past few days

“Damn early for you to be out here, Boston.” I turned to find Georgie filling the space beside me. He leaned forward, propping his arms on the railing where I was seated. I arched a brow in his direction, noticing the smug grin on his handsome face, taking in his features—smooth brown skin, thin eyes, nose and lips that filled his almond-shaped face. Beneath his goatee and mustache, I could still recognize his youthfulness. Georgie was young. No more than mid-twenties, if that, which meant he was a lot younger than my thirty-four. Very handsome, but a baby.

“I thought you got warned about calling me Boston.”

His smile expanded when his eyes shifted my way. “I did but I don't see the boss out here anywhere so I figured I was safe.” He winked and did a casual sweep of my body before his gaze traveled back to the horses in the paddock. “Where's he anyway? Should you be out here alone?”

“Wilde is asleep and why shouldn't I be?”

“*Asleep?* Wilde? It's almost seven. What the hell did you do to him...” He grinned, shaking his head. “Wait, never mind,

don't answer that. Not my business.”

My cheeks blushed from what he was hinting at.

“Nope, not your business.”

He chuckled and adjusted his hat, yanking it further down on his head. “I’m guessing you handled the stables and turnout all by yourself this morning, then?”

“Yes, why?”

“Nothing. You’ve only been here a fast minute and you were able to get it handled alone?”

“Don’t *you* do it alone?”

Wilde had mentioned he took care of turnout and the morning stable routine most days while the other guys prepared for the daily tours. They would collect the horses and saddle them up just before the guests arrived but most of the stable work was handled by Wilde and Georgie, the two either working together or alone.

“Yeah, I do, but I’ve been here for a few months.”

“I’m a fast learner and Wilde is a good teacher.” I shrugged, turning to find Georgie staring at me with a smug grin.

“I bet he is, *especially* with a pretty thing like you. I’m sure you got a lot of hands-on training from Wilde.”

I rolled my eyes but kept the smile on my face. “Should you be worried about my looks, Georgie?”

He smiled wide. “I got eyes, Shore, but I also like my job so all I’m gonna do is admire that pretty face of yours from afar. Not trying to piss off the boss by showing too much attention to his lady.”

I wasn’t Wilde’s and the reference of being his stung a bit because the minute it left Georgie’s mouth I realized I wanted to be Wilde’s.

“Oh, we’re not...”

Georgie shook his head, cutting off my sentence. “You might not have a label, Boston, but you’re something to him and he’s something to you, if you’re out here on his ranch taking care of his horse and grinning like you’ve been doing every time his name came up. You need some time to make sense of things but there’s something there.”

I opened my mouth to argue but an unfamiliar sound off in the distance caught my attention, a roar of sorts followed by tires crunching the cold ground then a man’s voice yelling. All of which had my head whipping around from my current focus of the paddock until my eyes landed on the man in question.

“Georgie, bear...” Wilde slammed his truck to a stop and hopped out of the driver’s door which he had already flung open and darted toward us with a hard look on his face. I swung my head to the left just as Georgie cursed from beside me.

“Stay put. Don’t you fucking move.”

Everything happened so fast. Several shots sounded from the gun Wilde had aimed in the air, the bear roared again but turned and began running away from the stables followed by the rumble of a few horses who’d begun a mini stampede in a panicked frenzy. The one closest to me lifted its front legs into the air, kicking wildly, so close that I startled again and fell backwards off the railing, crash landing onto the cold, hard ground.

A rush of pain shot down my back from the awkward way I landed. Before I could fully take in that I’d hit the ground, I was lifted bridal style into a familiar set of arms.

“*Motherfuck!* Shit, Boston, hang on.”

He hurried me into the stables and I was carefully seated on a bale of hay while Wilde’s eyes and hands roamed all over me. He started at my head, moved down my arms, then back up to my neck.

“I’m fine, relax,” I mumbled, out of breath, feeling another spike of pain pulse down my back.

“You’re not *fine*, you flipped off that railing and landed on your ass, Shore.”

Shore.

He called me Shore. The panicked and concerned look in his eyes were clear indicators that he was worried.

“Wilde, I’m fine. I promise. It hurt like hell hitting that cold ground and I’m sure I’m going to have a headache from hell before the sun officially sets tonight but I’m fine. Really.”

“How the hell am I supposed to *relax* when you almost knocked yourself unconscious,” he growled with his hands placed snugly at the sides of my neck. His handsome face was set in a scowl, while his eyes swept my face. “Hang on, I’m gonna call Doc Hanson...”

“No, you are *not*. Seriously, I’m okay. Please don’t call a doctor.”

He narrowed his eyes and exhaled a sigh. “Your head hurts?”

“Not yet.” I grinned and he narrowed his eyes more. “It’s gonna hurt. I hit my head pretty hard, there’s no way of avoiding the headache on the way, but I don’t need a doctor.”

He stared for a moment longer then cursed under his breath, bringing his forehead to mine. “Fuck, I should have thought about that mare, how close she was to you, and how she would react.”

The moment was interrupted by Georgie clearing his throat. We shifted our eyes to him. He walked over and handed over my hat which Wilde snatched from him before I could get my hands on it. He placed it beside me on the hay bale just before Georgie spoke up.

“Bear’s gone. Took off after he heard the gunshots.”

“And the horses.”

“They’re calm again. Scared the shit out of a handful of ’em.” His amused eyes landed on me and when Wilde noticed he glared at Georgie.

“We’re good. You can go now,” Wilde grunted which caused a smile to surface on Georgie’s face. He knew better than to make matters worse and simply tipped his hat and left the stables.

“You didn’t have to be mean. He was just worried,” I stated, just to mess with him.

“He doesn’t need to be concerned about you. That’s my job,” he murmured, his expression still laced with irritation at Georgie’s little crush on me. I grinned, fisted his shirt, and pulled Wilde closer to me.

“You want to be concerned about me, Wilde Reeves?”

“I’ve been concerned about you since I laid eyes on you at the train station, Boston. Hard to change things now, especially after last night.” He grinned and cuffed my face, planting a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth before it clashed with mine where he eased his tongue between my lips. The kiss was slow but demanding, reminding me of the ways his lips and tongue explored me last night.

“I kinda like you being concerned about me.”

“Good because there’s not much you can do about it at this point.” He pulled back and moved his hands down my neck to my shoulders once more like he was still worried that I’d damaged or broken something. “You sure you’re okay?”

I smiled and nodded. “I’m gonna be sore, for sure. Other than that I’m fine. But why was there a bear out here? I thought they hibernated? Is that not a real thing?”

He nodded and stood, extending his hands to help me to my feet. “Most of them are in their winter dens now but occasionally a few roam for food. Evolution’s changing things with the animals too. A few of the bears have been hanging around the stables looking for anything they can get to.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“They can be, but most of the time they mind their business. Their presence freaks the horses out though and an anxious horse is dangerous. Especially with that mare I just

brought here. She's the one who sent you flying off the railing."

"It's not her fault. She got spooked."

He lowered his eyes to me with a soft smile. "I'm not blaming her, but I still don't like that you got caught up in her being spooked. You shouldn't have been down here in the first place."

I shrugged as we left the stables heading to his truck. "You were asleep and there was work to be done."

"*My* ranch, my *work*. You should have woken me or even better, stayed in bed and let me awaken you in a much more pleasing way."

"You needed the rest and we had a deal. I'm yours for the week so technically *our* ranch, our *work*."

Something flickered in his eyes before he shut me into the passenger side of his truck but Wilde kept his thoughts to himself.

Maybe I overstepped.

We rode in silence back to the house and as soon as we walked in, I noticed my tree, *our* tree, was in a stand, positioned in the corner next to the fireplace. I glanced over my shoulder at Wilde who was already watching me.

"You brought the tree in?"

"When I woke up and realized you weren't here, I figured you were out there doing my work so I decided I might as well get started on yours."

I grinned over my shoulder. "Decorating the tree is my work?"

"Pretty much. You wanted it."

"Well yeah but for *us* to decorate."

"I'll watch and stay out of your way. Can't say I'm any good at it. That's always been my mother's deal. If I learned anything worthwhile from my father about Christmas, it was

to stay the hell out of my mother's way or get cursed out for doing things all wrong."

"I can speak from experience about you knowing how to do things *right*..." I lowered my eyes from his, doing a slow crawl down his body and back up. "But I don't think that's what you were talking about, was it?"

He groaned deep in his throat. "Careful, Boston, or that damn tree is gonna have to wait." His large hand found its way to my chin which he lifted just a bit and dropped a kiss on my appreciative lips before he stepped around me. "I'm gonna go start dragging the boxes out of storage."

I watched Wilde gait down the hall, enjoying the view before I followed him. "While you do that, I'm going to shower and change into something comfy."

"Make sure you put some damn pants on this time," he tossed over his shoulder and my smile expanded with the memories of last night. Me in my t-shirt and panties at his door and the way he'd thoroughly enjoyed my minimal selection of clothing below the waist.

Maybe I'd revisit that again later but for now I had a naked balsam fir waiting on me to decorate. As soon as I made it to my room, I pulled out my phone to ensure I kept my promise to my sister by sending my daily voice message. This one I had a feeling she would be overly excited about, but it was still early and there was no way Summer was awake so I wouldn't get her reaction until later today. I hit the microphone and began my message.

I took your advice and rode a cowboy. You're right it's exactly what I needed.

I think I finally have my mind right and am ready to get back to life. Hiding isn't helping. I know what I want now. I love you and I'll call you soon.

With a tap of my finger I sent the voice message then swiped out of my texts, going back to the site for the B&B where there was a job listed for activities coordinator. On the ride home last night, I'd searched for dates after Christmas

because I was already considering staying for a while. In the process I stumbled on a link that led to the job opening.

The salary was decent enough and considering the job, I felt it would be a perfect fit. With all the years I'd worked as a lawyer, I made good money so I had quite a bit saved. I could see living off the salary the B&B paid and only digging into my savings if absolutely necessary. I couldn't imagine it would take much to survive here in Miller's Pointe. Everything here had just the right feel, right pace.

Simple life.

I wanted that. I wanted a simple life with Wilde, but even if he wasn't thinking about entertaining one with me, I still wanted to stay here in Miller's Pointe. This town was perfect. The people were nice and Wilde Reeves was everything I never knew I needed in my life.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



One by one I scanned the boxes containing all of my mother's Christmas decorations I was about to lug to the living room for Shore. I should have had some reservation about handing over family heirlooms that held priceless memories for not just me but my entire family to a woman I barely knew but there were no reservations at all. Not an ounce of hesitation existed about allowing her the privilege of bringing Christmas into my home. Honestly, I welcomed the idea of Shore and I creating our own memories. I had surely cataloged plenty since she'd stepped foot in my house.

The most notable was making her cum in my bed last night.

I possessed such comfort and ease at the thought of every inch of my home being filled with holiday memories centered around Shore. Acknowledging that comfort was a bit

alarming, but in a good way. I wanted this, I wanted *her*. I had an intense urge to call the woman who would tell me exactly what I needed to hear, which was to let things be and stop overthinking, but she was somewhere in the middle of an ocean with no service. However, that didn't stop the whisper of her voice in my head.

“Life is gonna happen whether you want it to or not. Your job isn't to make sense of things, son. That's your problem. You always want things to make sense but life rarely ever does. You simply have to saddle up and enjoy the ride. Embrace the good stuff and do the hard work to survive the rough patches.”

I chuckled at how laidback and easygoing my mother was. She never let anything stress her. She accepted things for what they were and made the most of the hand life dealt, taking it all in stride. She also had never been one to believe in forcing a fit. Another one of her famous sayings had been...

“When things are right, they just work out how they were supposed to and there isn't a damn thing you could do to mess it up besides denying your right to happiness.”

That was exactly what I was doing. Letting things be what they were. I wasn't going to force a fit but I didn't have to because Shore damn sure fit. She felt right and not just physically. All I had to do was make sure she didn't deny herself the opportunity for all the happiness I was more than willing to provide.

She wasn't happy with her life back in Boston and seeing how easily she settled in here on the ranch gave me hope that this would work with us. As crazy as it was to feel connected to someone after only a few days, I did. If I was reading Shore right, she and I were on the same page. The problem was, whatever this thing was might not be enough to convince her to stay. No matter how complicated and unsatisfying her life was back in Boston, she still had one there that didn't involve me or my ranch. I planned on making sure she understood that given time, we could make this enough for both of us.

With the first box in my arms, I traveled from across the hall to the room Shore was in, pausing when I heard her voice.

I shouldn't have imposed, but the words caught my attention so I listened.

I took your advice and rode a cowboy. You're right it's exactly what I needed.

I think I finally have my mind right and am ready to get back to life. Hiding isn't helping. I know what I want now. I love you and I'll call you soon.

Ready to get back to life...

I know what I want now...

Well fuck? Maybe I read this all wrong which meant I had some convincing to do if she planned on leaving. I had never been a man who didn't go after what I wanted and I *wanted* Shore Manchester. *All* of her, here in Millers' Pointe, on my ranch, in my life, in my bed. I needed to put that option on the table so she understood just how I felt which had me dropping the box to the floor and pushing her door open.

Shore jumped at my intrusion and yanked the shirt she had just pulled off her body close to her chest. "Shit, you scared me. Is something wrong?" She smiled and tossed the shirt but her smile dropped when she searched my face.

"Depends on what you want?"

Her brows furrowed. "Huh?"

"I just heard you telling somebody you were ready to get back to your life and you knew what you wanted. What do you want, *Shore*, and is it here or back in Boston?"

Her eyes narrowed and I added. "I shouldn't have been listening to your call and I would apologize but I really don't give a damn about your privacy right now. What I do care about is if riding a cowboy was some kinda twisted fantasy or if you enjoyed riding this cowboy and wanted it to be more than a one-time thing."

She smiled slowly, placing her hands on her hips which brought my eyes down her body enjoying the view until she spoke. "Technically I didn't get to ride my cowboy, he rode

me and damn good I might add so I haven't experienced the pleasure of that rodeo. Are you offering?"

My dick steeled on demand but I managed to stay focused. "You know what I'm asking, Boston. Was last night just something to check off your bucket list?"

I angled my head to the side, waiting. If she said yes, I wasn't sure how I was gonna take the news. At the moment I was mentally processing how quickly I could get undressed to provide her with enough orgasms to consider staying longer than she originally planned but that wasn't logical nor did I want sex to be the reason she elected to be here.

"I kinda like it here and was thinking about hanging around for a while." She walked up to me and lifted onto her toes, looping her arms around my neck, tugging me down to where she had access to my mouth. Her lips ghosted across mine. "I like you too, *Cowboy*, and it wouldn't be so bad to get to know you a little better."

My hands landed on her hips and I pulled her into me. "You already know everything there is to know about me, Boston."

"No, I don't."

I grinned and brushed my mouth over hers. "Yeah you do. I'm a simple man. I love my ranch, my horses, and my family. There's not much else that matters other than adding you to that list."

She grinned slowly but I kissed her before the smile fully formed. "Then I'd like to stay."

"Alright then take your shower and I'll finish getting this stuff out so you can handle that tree." I kissed her once more and backed out the room, enjoying my last peek at all her curves cause that ass was noteworthy. In fact, my mind was already on what that ass would look like while I had her bent over something, fucking her from behind.

I was tempted to say fuck that tree but it was important to Shore and I had no desire to explain to Melvina the reason

why Shore didn't get Christmas was because I couldn't keep my dick out of her.

Yeah, that wasn't a conversation I planned on having, so just before closing her in the room, I demanded one last time, "Make sure you don't leave this room without pants on, Boston."

I heard her laugh just as the door clicked and wouldn't be surprised if she skipped the pants just to test my restraint. I had no problems letting her persuade me to buckle under pressure.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



“Let it Snow” by Boyz II Men was playing softly through the wall speakers while I stood in front of the tree I’d just finished decorating. There were also twinkly lights lining the mantle of the fireplace, loosely tacked in random spots on the walls and lazily draped around the coffee table and matching end tables.

It was tacky and had no rhyme or reason to the designs, but I loved every single decoration.

I glanced over my shoulder at Wilde who had not too long ago rejoined me. After hanging lights, he dipped off to shower and get comfortable after grilling fish for our dinner out on the massive deck attached to the rear of his house.

We ate, then I decorated what was left of the tree. Overloading his open floor plan with all the decorations I

found in the boxes his mother had packed away had literally taken hours. We stopped for a quick lunch of sandwiches and chips that I prepared then I worked hard for the next couple hours, only pausing for dinner.

An entire day of decorating while Christmas music played as background noise was exactly what I needed. Most of the songs were on their third and fourth rotation but I didn't mind. I loved every chaotic moment of the entire process.

“This is so perfect.”

His eyes circled the room and landed back on me before they moved past me to the massive tree. “My mother would die a slow painful death if she had to witness all this.”

I frowned, turning back toward the tree before my eyes were on him again. “You don't like it.”

“I love it, Boston, but she would absolutely hate it. This isn't her style.”

I grinned and walked to Wilde, climbing into his lap so my knees pressed into the sofa. His hands moved to my hips and around to my ass, settling there. “It's her stuff. How could she not like it?”

“I wouldn't believe it was hers if I hadn't seen you taking it out the boxes with my own eyes. The way you have it all organized is nothing like she would have done.”

I placed my hands on the back of the sofa next to his head, leaning in so close I could feel the warmth of his breath on my face. “Well I like it and you better like it too, because I worked hard.”

“If it makes you happy, then I love every tacky ass design you put together.”

“Even the tree?” I grinned and kept my eyes on Wilde while his moved past me and locked on the tree, that crooked smile surfacing in a matter of seconds.

“It's *interesting*.”

“That's not my fault. Who the hell decorates a tree with horses, cowboy hats, and lassos?”

The decorations were all ranch themed, made of etched glass and brass, very beautiful and surely expensive but still *ranch* themed. There wasn't much I could do with that.

“My mother and don't you dare ever tell her you don't like her decorations.”

I grinned, gently tugging at his lower lip with my teeth. “I wouldn't.”

“Good because she would be devastated. And don't you dare ever tell her that you put the kid tree ornaments on with her custom-made and antique ones.”

I glanced over my shoulder, focusing on the horribly designed, kid-crafted Christmas themed items that were placed alongside crystal horses, glass bulbs, and brass cowboy hats. “I think it adds character.”

Most of the kid-created ornaments had chunks of glue, macaroni falling off, crayon designs where they were colored outside the lines and aged photos of Wilde and his brother Garrett. Crafts they both made as kids and brought home to their parents.

He told stories about them as I pulled each from the box and added them to the tree and also explained how it was tradition to have a kid tree, even though he and his brother were now, thirty-six and twenty-four. Adel Reeves refused to let anyone ruin her tree. Each year her sons got their own to do what they pleased. When they were too old and didn't care about decorating. She took on the labor of dragging out old crafts and doing it herself.

“It adds *something*, I don't know what though.”

I rolled my eyes. “We only had one tree so I had to compromise. I would think your mother would appreciate the gesture.”

Wilde moved his hands up my back, pulling me into his chest, placing his mouth on mine. “She would appreciate the gesture but still hate that her ornaments were slumming it with our grade school creations.”

“Then don't tell her.”

“You sure you don’t want me to send a picture.” He smiled and kissed the curve of my jaw then my neck.

“Nope, hard pass. I might need to win her over before I ruin our relationship by *ruining* her holiday themes.”

Wilde chuckled. “She’ll live. I think she’ll be more focused on me having someone to fuck up her perfect tree than she will be about the fact that you did it.”

“That doesn’t give me hope.”

“You’ll have to trust me on that. What does Christmas look like for your family?”

I exhaled a sigh at the thought of missing Christmas with my family. No matter how stressful my life had been because I felt pressured to be what *they* wanted me to be, I still missed my sister and parents. I missed everything about spending the holiday with them. His hands softly moved up and down my back, bringing my focus back to him.

“Christmas takes on an entire life with my family. Imagine Ms. Mel’s B&B on steroids. I’m talking decoration overload, ugly sweaters, matching pajamas, jingle bell karaoke, and the twenty-five days of Christmas bake off.”

“Damn, it’s like that.”

“Very much like that.” I smiled, nodding. “You would hate every second of Christmas at my parents’ house.”

“A twenty-five days of Christmas bake off sounds like something I can work with.” He smiled, moving a hand to the back of my neck bringing my mouth down to his. After a few soft pecks he searched my face. “You should call them. Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve and I’m sure they’re missing you just as much as you’re missing them.”

“I will. Tomorrow. Tonight, I have other plans.”

“Am I a part of those plans?”

“*You* are the plans.”

I lifted off his lap and, after my feet were planted on the floor, I slowly lowered and kept my eyes on Wilde while I

worked my fingers beneath the band of his shorts, lifting them enough to get a visual of his dick. He was already hard when I wrapped my hands around the base and my eyes never left his while I flicked my tongue over him. When the warmth of my mouth completely consumed the head, he groaned and his eyes narrowed to slits. I dropped mine and grinned.

You might want to saddle up, Cowboy. I'm about to provide a Christmas memory that you damn sure won't want to share with your mother.

I lowered my head and swallowed his dick, relaxing my jaw and throat so I could take in as much of him as possible. When he groaned again, and his fingers slid into my hair, I knew I had him. His other hand tucked a few loose strands behind my ear and when I looked up his heavy-lidded gaze was focused on the motion of his dick sliding in and out of my mouth.

He twitched under my palm which was still firmly wrapped around the base of him and I squeezed, applying a good amount of pressure while I trailed my tongue along his heated flesh.

“Boston, you’re killin’ me.”

I took him into my mouth and hummed as he slipped deeper, landing at the back of my throat. He groaned from somewhere deep and I pulled back to the head and took him in again. I glanced up to find his eyes cut with intensity but this time he lifted his hips, thrusting up, forcing himself deeper.

The weight of his gaze, the deeper I took him, and the feel of him pulsing against my lips had my pussy throbbing and I was so drenched that when he gently lifted my head so his dick slid from my mouth and motioned to his lap, I wanted to scream thank you, but this wasn’t about me. Not this first one.

“You’re stopping me?” My tongue darted over my bottom lip and I grinned slowly at Wilde who returned one.

“I’m pretty sure I owe you a ride.” He eased his hand into his shorts pocket and held up a condom. I glanced at the foiled package then arched a brow before I took it from his fingers

and shoved my shorts down over my hips. Once they landed in a pile on the floor I stepped out of them.

“Were you planning on having sex with me after I finished decorating?”

His eyes did a greedy descent over my body while I ripped the condom open. “I was planning on having sex with you *instead* of decorating. You were just so damn happy caught up in it all of that, I didn’t want to fuck up your moment.”

My hands skillfully worked the condom on him while he talked so by the time he was done, I sank onto him, exhaling a deep sigh. Last night was everything, however, this moment with me on top, completely taking in the fullness and length of Wilde with no room for anything but him granted me the experience on an entirely different level.

“That was very kind of you. I think it’s only right that I deliver a proper thanks.”

“I’m not going to disagree,” he said before his back hit the sofa and his mouth was on me. His tongue slowly glided across my left breast before he sucked the nipple between his lips, garnering a groan from me.

I bucked, losing my rhythm, but he took over, thrusting upward with hard plunges that landed deep. My body felt so damn amazing, warm and tingly, while he stroked me toward my first release. We fell into a steady rhythm of me rocking and grinding against his lap while he lifted his hips, holding me down with the pressure of his fingers pressing into my waist. So fucking blissful.

When I came, he came. Wilde kissed me through the entire wave of energy that swirled through my body, pulsing and squeezing, from the inside out until I completely shattered. When I crashed into Wilde’s chest, he kept rocking into me with slow thrusts, working through the rest of his release while he hugged me tightly against him with his face buried in the crook of my neck.

If nothing else felt right in my life, this damn sure did!

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



Christmas Eve.

I had never been overly enthused about the holidays but our mother forced it on us because she was. We all played along to make her happy, but this year, waking up with Shore curled up next to me in my bed, brought a new meaning to the holidays. She was now the outline for what my Christmas would be.

Contentment. Fulfillment. Comfort. Peace.

Her smiles, those damn expressive eyes that clung to me when she spoke about her first Christmas on the ranch, in Miller's Pointe *with me*, was enough to make me feel peace. Even now, she was so fucking adorable and sexy moving around my kitchen making a surprise Christmas breakfast. Heavy on the sexy because the way my dick was painfully

hard while I watched Shore in one of my t-shirts with only panties beneath it, exposing toned brown legs down to white painted toes, was pure torture.

I wasn't supposed to be paying attention to what she was doing according to Shore. Breakfast was a *surprise*, but the amount of cursing and fussing she was carrying on with while preparing it had a grin on my face and my eyes following her every move.

“Okay, I think I'm done.”

Shore stood in the center of the kitchen with her fingers laced together, arms locked, shoulders squared like she was nervous. *So damn adorable.*

“*Think or you are?*”

She smiled slowly. “Well I am done, but not sure if it's complete.” Her smile expanded a little more. “Or *good*. You can be the judge of how it all turned out.”

“Shit, that's not much of a selling point.” I glanced past her at the table and lifted from the sofa, crossing through the living room until I met her in the kitchen. “But if you prepared it for me, then it's perfect.”

This woman could have shoveled shit on a plate and I would have enjoyed it with a smile. Yeah, I was pretty damn gone over her and not caring in the least. She was well worth falling for.

I dropped a kiss to her lush lips and moved past Shore to the table where I found two plates piled with food, very colorful food.

“Um, what's this?”

She inched close to me. “You wanted to know what Christmas was like with my family, well this is it.” She pointed to the plates. “Santa cakes, green eggs, milk, and winter berry toast.”

I lowered my gaze to the stack of bright red pancakes which were topped with whipped cream and a little replica of Santa placed on top. It was made with a grape, banana and

strawberry for the hat. The pile of eggs beside the Santa cakes were green and so was the milk. My stomach twisted in concern at the thought of what I was about to eat, because I was eating every damn bite even if I ended up at Doc Hanson's office at some point today.

"I had what you needed to make all this?"

She shrugged. "The food yes and I found some food coloring in one of your cabinets. Might have been a little out of date but it's just dye so I don't think it will kill us."

I barked a laugh, lowering my eyes to Shore. "You might want to search that on the internet before we eat any of this."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, Cowboy, you're not afraid of a little food coloring, are you? I've seen you face off against a bear and a wild horse. This should be easy breezy. You also live on a ranch. This thing should be ironclad."

She slapped her palm over my stomach which was bare since I wasn't wearing a shirt. The warmth of her fingers and proximity had my dick eager for Shore to move that hand a little lower.

"I'm going to give this a try but if it goes wrong..."

"It won't." She grinned, pointing to the chair across from the one she flopped onto. "Sit, let's eat."

I did as demanded, settled across from Shore and after a quick blessing I shoved a fork into my eggs and slowly brought them to my mouth. She waited with an enthused grin until I had a mouthful.

"Good, right?"

"It's green eggs," I teased and took another forkful.

"Such a hater. This is the best Christmas breakfast you'll ever experience. I want a happy plate too."

I chuckled at her enthusiasm. "I'll see what I can do."

Breakfast was easy. We ate, Shore did most of the talking, then cleaned up the kitchen so I could take her for a ride I had been promising since she'd been here. We made it down to the

stables and while I saddled up Kolby, Shore watched from nearby. Once I was done I pointed to three other horses in the stables.

“You can pick either one of those. They’ll be a good fit since they’re older and used to new riders.”

She frowned and shook her head. “I was thinking maybe I could just ride with you today.”

I smirked and glanced at the panicked look on her face. “You don’t wanna learn to ride?”

“I do but maybe another time. Can’t I fit up there with you?”

“Yeah you can. Come on.”

I grabbed the reins for Kolby and guided him from the stables. Once we were near the paddock I pointed to the stirrups. “Put your foot in there, press down, and lift up. Swing your leg over the saddle and keep your legs wide. If you press his side, he’s gonna think you want him to move.”

“Wait, you want *me* to get up there *first*?”

“You’re riding in front. That’s how it has to happen.”

Her expression dropped when she glanced at Kolby then back to me. I chuckled and tapped her side. “I’ll hold ’em steady. He’s not going anywhere without me and as soon as you’re up there, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay but if he runs...”

“He won’t. You gotta trust me.”

It took a few tries to get her settled in the saddle then I found my place behind her. Our seating in the saddle was intimate as hell and once again my dick was hard thanks to her ass brushing up against it. This was going to be a painfully long ride. I lifted the reins up over the saddle horn and eased one arm around Shore’s waist giving a gentle kick to Kolby’s side and a click of my tongue as a verbal command for him to get moving.

Once we were on the trail, Shore glanced over her shoulder with a slight frown marring her pretty face. “This feels weird. Like I’m not doing it right.”

“You have to relax into the horse’s rhythm. When he bounces up, lift from the saddle and when he lowers, settle into it. Riding’s all about rhythm, being in sync with the horse’s movements.”

“So pretty much like sex.”

“Fuck no,” I belted out and laughed. “Not even close.”

“I meant the being in sync with your partner part. Kolby is our partner at the moment. I have to find his rhythm and settle into it.”

“Mmhm, that’s right.”

She was quiet for a minute then glanced over her shoulder again. “I think I have it now. This feels better.”

“Good, because we’re about to move faster.”

I spurred his belly and loosened the reins. “Yah...”

Kolby took off in a steady gallop and I tightened my arm around Shore so she felt secure. We traveled along the trail that outlined my property. The tree lined path shaded our ride and dropped the already chilly temperatures which had Shore leaning back into me and snuggling closer for warmth. I think I liked riding with her more than I did my solo trips.

“It’s so peaceful out here,” Shore said quietly. Her head tilted up, moving left and right as she took in the landscape. There was a never ending expanse of pastures leading up to the mountains. Riding out this far was one of my favorite things because it was peaceful and serene. To know Shore felt the same made pride settle into my chest from her appreciation and genuine gratitude for a part of my life that not many understood. My body settled into the moment further confirming that this woman was perfect for me.

The steady cadence from Kolby’s gallop combined with Shore leaning into me while I cradled her waist was a blissful

combination. One I was looking forward to experiencing on a regular basis.

For the next hour, I rode with Shore until we circled back to the stables where I pulled on the reins and slowed our pace. After we reached a complete stop near the paddocks, Shore tipped her head back with a gleeful smile exposed. “I’m pretty sure this is my new favorite thing.”

I chuckled and shifted forward, enough to get my mouth on hers. The kiss was soft at first but it grew hard and demanding, with me tugging her close while I explored her mouth. When I broke away, she released a harsh breath. “Okay, *one* of my favorite things.”

I pecked her lips once more and swung down off the horse and reached for Shore, helping her onto the ground. She brushed her hand softly over Kolby’s side and turned to me.

“I’m good at this.”

I barked a laugh at the seriousness in her expression and shook my head. “You didn’t do shit to be good at, Boston. The ride today was all me. We’ll see how good you are when you’re up there alone.”

“Let me get him stripped down and we’ll head back.” I guided Kolby into the paddock and Shore leaned her arms against the fence watching me until her phone sounded with a call she ignored. Whoever was on her line was persistent because they called several more times back to back until she answered.

I kept my eyes on her while she spoke in hushed tones but animatedly until the call ended. By then I was carrying the saddle and leaving the paddock so when I got to her I had to know what was wrong. She seemed upset.

“Bad news?”

“My parents found out I got fired. Summer let it slip that the reason I wasn’t home for Christmas had nothing to do with me working and I’d gotten fired. My sister was calling to give me a heads up that my mother was on the warpath...” Her

eyes lowered to the phone and she was frowning again. “Shit. That’s my mom.”

She turned away from me, heading for the stables. I entered a few seconds after and dropped the saddle on the floor nearby, stepping in front of Shore who was staring at her phone with a panicked look.

“If you’re not ready to talk to them, don’t, but no matter how long you wait, the conversation is still going to be hard. Might be best to get it out the way and tell ’em what’s going on.”

The call stopped for a brief moment and started up again. “You’re right.” Shore released a sigh, swiped a finger over the screen, and lifted the phone to her ear.

When she stepped away, I gave her space even though I wanted to be right there with her, handing over whatever support she needed. This was her situation and she had to work through it. But I decided to mind my business until I noticed her voice elevate and begin to get a little shaky. In a couple of long strides, I was at her side again.

“Well if that’s what you think then fine. I can’t live your dream and *mine*. It’s not my dream, it’s never been. It’s yours. I never wanted to be a lawyer, but you made me feel like I had to because *you* couldn’t be one and Summer refused to. I hated my job. I was miserable... I...yes...I know and I’m sorry... yes, sure. I will.”

She ended the call and huffed a sigh. “Well that was pointless.”

“What did she say?”

“The better question is what *didn’t* she say. She kept going on and on about how much they invested in *my* dream, *my* career. She also made sure to tell me how disappointed she and my father were because I got fired and that right after the new year, they would be helping me find a proper job. A *job* I don’t want and have no intention of accepting.”

“And how do you feel about all this?”

She shrugged. “Truthfully, I don’t care. I’m tired of living for everyone but me. I deserve to be happy.”

“What makes you happy, Boston?” I moved closer, lowering my chin so my eyes leveled with hers.

“*You*. Being here. All of this but my parents are never going to understand any of this because I barely do.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense; it only has to make you happy.”

“I know...” she huffed. “But I also don’t want to fight with my family. I don’t want them to hate me or be angry because I’m...”

“*Choosing yourself*.” I had no idea what she was about to say but that was exactly what the problem was. Shore was choosing herself over making her parents happy and she shouldn’t feel like shit from doing so. “Listen to what you’re saying. This is not about them. It’s about *you*. You love your parents, but they should love you too and if they do, they’ll be okay with whatever makes you happy even if it’s not what they feel is right for you. Regardless, the decision isn’t theirs, Shore. It’s yours. Garrett went through the same thing when it came to telling me and my parents he wanted to play baseball instead of working the ranch. I didn’t like it, neither did they, but we loved him enough to let him make his own decisions about what his life should be.”

“Yeah.” She sighed again. “I feel like a damn child.”

I smirked and edged closer, bringing Shore into a hug. “You’re *their* child but that doesn’t mean you don’t have the right to live your life. You can have whatever you want.”

“I want *this*...”

“Then it’s yours.” I hooked her chin and delivered a kiss. “I’m all yours.”

“Hmm, I like the sound of you being mine. Now all I have to do is convince my parents to get on board with the idea of *this* being my life.”

“Call ’em back,” I stated bluntly and she frowned, shaking her head.

“I think I’m done defending my life to my family until after the holidays.”

“Let me talk to them.”

“Oh no, that’s not happening. You don’t know my mother and she doesn’t know you. I’m not that crazy.”

“I don’t know her but if you truly want this and *me*, then I will eventually have to get to know her. Might as well start somewhere and here seems like a good enough place. I can’t be half a man to you, Shore. If you’re mine, then I fully accept the responsibility of making sure you’re good. This thing between you and your family is bothering you and I’m not okay with you being out of sorts. You can’t enjoy the rest of your time here or fully embrace a new start if you don’t get things settled with your parents. Let me talk to them.”

She toyed with the corner of her lip, staring at me like she was struggling through an internal war, but eventually she lifted her phone, swiped the screen, and made the call. She extended the phone to me and I lifted the device to my ear but kept my eyes locked on Shore.

After a few rings, a woman’s voice flowed through the device.

“You’re calling back so I hope that means you’ve come to your senses about all this. Your sister said you’re on some ranch in the middle of nowhere. Maybe that’s what has you talking crazy. You should have just come home so that we could have worked through this as a family, sweetheart.”

“Afternoon, Mrs. Manchester. This isn’t Shore. My name is Wilde Reeves.”

“*Wilde Reeves*. Why do you have my daughter’s phone?”

“Because she’s here with me and I wanted to talk to you for a minute if that’s alright.”

“No, that is *not* alright. Put Shore on the phone.”

“I can’t do that, not until I speak my piece.”

“Look, *Wilde*, I don’t know who you are but I would advise that you get Shore on the line and rather quickly or I’ll...”

I smirked. “There’s not much you can do from where you are but I will do you the justice of making this quick. Shore hates her life. The life she’s been stuck in trying to be something you wanted her to be. She hates being a lawyer and *I* hate seeing her distraught or unhappy, so for now, her career is on pause until she decides what will make her happy...”

“You don’t know my daughter to speak about what she likes or what she wants to do with her life.”

“No disrespect, ma’am, but I know her about as well as you do if you insist on demanding she live according to what you think is best for her.”

Shore stiffened uncomfortably, but I winked and kept talking. “She tried the lawyer thing. It didn’t work out. She was miserable, so we’re trying things a little differently for a while. Shore’s gonna be here for as long as she wants until she decides what makes her happy. I’m hoping the thing that *keeps* her happy is me, seeing how I know I’ve been doing a damn good job of *making* her happy over the past couple days.”

A slow smile eased onto Shore’s face and she shook her head with the look of disbelief crawling into her expression. This wasn’t the conversation she expected me to have with her mother but I was and would always be a straight to the point type of man. So this was what she was getting.

“You’ve known my daughter for five minutes. I’ve known her *all* her life. You can’t possibly think you know what she wants, no matter how happy you’ve seemingly made her over the past couple days. I assure you whatever romp in the hay you two have had is temporary. Shore is having a lapse in judgment which I will talk her through.”

“I’m sure that’s what you want to believe but I know her quite well and if you take the time to ask her what she wants and *listen* to her answer you might get to know her a little better yourself. Regardless, she’s told me she wants to be here

so that's what we're doing. I'm gonna hand over the phone and you two can settle whatever you need to settle for now."

I extended the device back to Shore and she hesitantly accepted. I kept my eyes on her while she talked.

"Hey, Mom. Yes. No, I'm not in danger." She rolled her eyes. "No, he's not holding me at gunpoint or against my will. I'm sure. Yes, very." She smiled softly. "He's a good guy. Yes, I'm sure and yes, I'm safe. Yes. Not that I need your permission or approval but it would be nice to have. I can't tell you how everything is going to play out but for now I'm happy and this is what I want. I need a break. I need to do this for me. Okay. I love you too and I'll call you guys tomorrow. Yes, I know we will. I love you too. I know, okay, bye."

She ended the call and inched closer, lifting onto her toes. After a quick kiss she grinned. "My mother believes that I've lost my mind."

I chuckled. "Have you?"

"Maybe."

I lifted Shore and she wrapped her legs around my waist while I carried her to one of the hay bales and sat with her on my lap. "What did she say?"

"Well after she demanded that I give her a sign that only she could decipher if I was being held against my will or at gunpoint, she said that none of this made sense. I was acting erratically, behaving out of character, and I needed to think about what I was doing."

"All valid points," I muttered.

"They are but it's my life and not hers. She also agreed and said she didn't like any of what I was doing, but I was an adult and could make my own decisions. She told me we would revisit my midlife crisis after Christmas. I'm only thirty-four so I'm not sure how this classifies as a midlife crisis but she's hoping by then I would have found my mind again since *clearly* I've lost it." She grinned and shrugged. "Considering what I just dumped on her, she has the right to think I've lost

my mind. I didn't argue. I just agreed to review the topic at a later date."

"And when you do..."

Are you going to change your mind?

"When I do, I stand firm on the decisions I've made. Unless you've changed your mind about this or us?"

"Not on your fucking life." I spoke through a smile before my mouth clashed with hers.

"Okay then, Cowboy, looks like you're gonna be stuck with me for a while."

"I'm all in with being stuck with you, Boston. You'll get not one damn complaint from me."

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



“**W**hat did you do to our mother?” There was a hint of amusement in my sister’s voice which had a smile on my face when I answered.

“I didn’t do anything to her, why?”

“She’s on her second bottle of wine and keeps glaring at me, mumbling that I ruined you.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes. “She’s blaming *you* for my decision to stay here?”

“Pretty much.”

“Good, you deserve their scrutiny. I’ve been suffering through it for years.”

“Whatever, and *her* scrutiny not *theirs*. Dad keeps telling her to get over it. He also told her it could be so much worse

and to be grateful you're not joining a cult or something crazy like that."

I barked a laugh. "Why the fuck would I join a cult and why would he say that?"

"I don't know, you've got both of them acting out but he's not mad. Neither is she. She's just not used to you disrupting the balance of our family. Causing chaos is usually my job."

I agreed by nodding, even though she couldn't see me. I thought about the text I received from my dad not long after the call with my mother.

If this is what makes you happy then we support your decision. Just promise me you're safe and that we'll meet this man who had the gall to go toe to toe with your mother sooner rather than later.

Nobody challenged my mother which led me to believe that my dad already liked Wilde for doing so. My mother was a lot and not many could stand their ground with her. I was living proof of that.

"Well, it looks like we're both rebels now. I sort of like being disruptive and honestly they both took it a lot better than I thought. I should have made this decision years ago."

"I will have to disagree. If you had then you wouldn't be hiding out in cowboy heaven and you wouldn't have met Wilde. Things happen when they're supposed to Shore."

"I guess you're right."

My eyes flicked over to Wilde standing in the kitchen also on a call, but doing more nodding, mmhming, and grunting than he was talking. Made sense being that it was Melvina on his line.

"Of course I'm right. I'm always right."

"You're never right, Summer, and when you are, it's not you being right. More about you lucking up on something that made sense."

She laughed but didn't argue. "I'm happy for you, Shore. I think you're crazy as shit for doing something even I wouldn't

do but I can tell you're in a good space. I can hear it in your voice and I love this for you."

"Thank you."

"It's about time you decided to man the hell up and live the life you want."

"How was I supposed to man the hell up when I was always making up for your shortcomings?" I teased and Summer was quick to say, "I never asked you to make up for what I lacked though, sis. You made the decision to do so all on your own."

She was right. She never did, carrying the sister load was a weight I placed on my own shoulders. "Yeah well someone had to be the responsible sister and that used to be me but not anymore. You can take over."

"Heck no, I'm perfectly content being the family black sheep. I'm good at the role too. You keep doing what you do and making them proud, Shore. Even if it's not in the ways they planned out, they're still proud, sis. Don't think for one minute they're not. The alternative is *me*."

I smiled softly. "You're not so bad."

"I'm fucking amazing, but I'm not their dream child."

"Shit, neither am I, not anymore."

"Welcome to the live your life freely club. I love it here and you will too."

My eyes shot over to Wilde who already had his on me. He shot me a wink, bringing a smile to my face.

"I already do."

"Love you, Shore."

"Love you too."

Wilde was ending his call at the same time I ended mine with Summer. He left the kitchen and joined me on the sofa, tugging me into his lap after he was seated.

"That call looked fun?"

“About as fun as yanking teeth out with rusty pliers and no pain medicine.” He grinned and I rolled my eyes.

“It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“We missed Jubilee and are currently missing the lighting of the tree. Mel isn’t happy about either one. It’s sort of a tradition.”

“Oh, we could have...”

“*Could have* but didn’t. I told her we’re making new traditions of our own and that got her off my line quick, fast, and in a hurry.”

“Please tell me you didn’t give details.”

He shook his head while his fingers danced over the inside of my thigh. “No, I didn’t but there also wasn’t a need to. I’m pretty sure she had a good idea what those memories were all about but I did promise we’d make it next year.”

“Next year?” I arched a brow and he nodded slowly.

“That’s the plan, isn’t it? You here, us creating our own memories. That would be kinda hard to do if you’re *not* here, Boston.”

“Agreed, good thing I plan on being here.”

“Mhm,” he hummed from the curve of my neck. “I like the idea of you here and me, here.” His hand slipped between my thighs and I groaned from the way my body reacted.

Shit me too.

“Good thing I don’t have any objections to that either.”

Wilde chuckled and kissed my neck, pulling back. “She also mentioned something about you taking a job at the B&B.”

“I applied. She hasn’t hired me yet.”

He lifted his eyes to mine. “You had the job the minute she saw your name attached to interest for the position, but you don’t have to accept if you don’t want to.”

I shook my head. “No, I want to. I think it would be fun and the position is only part-time. I still have to head home...”

“*Home?*” His eyes fastened to mine and I smiled because calling Boston home irritated Wilde.

“Back to *Boston* to settle things there and bring what I need here. I was thinking I could get a place in town, something small...”

“No, that doesn’t work. You can stay here....”

He pinched my nipple through my shirt and I groaned. “Slow down, Cowboy. We still have to figure things out with us and how all this will work.”

“I want you here, you want to be here, what’s there to figure out?”

“A lot.” I smiled when his lips were on my neck again.

“Whatever it is we’ll *figure it out* from here on the sofa, in the kitchen, at the stables, in my bed, all *here*, where I have unlimited access to help guide your decisions with *figuring us out*.”

“That’s now how this works.”

“It is if I say so. You can stay here. It’s where you’re gonna end up anyway. Might as well get used to the idea of this being home.”

“Who says I’m gonna end up here?”

He ignored me and pinched my nipple again. “If I’m not mistaken you did, *multiple* times. *This is what I want, this is where I want to be.*”

Wilde mimicked my voice as best as he could and my words. Words I’d said multiple times.

He wasn’t wrong.

“Okay fine, you win but if you decide you need space...”

“Not happening,” he mumbled against my mouth before his tongue pushed through my lips. He kissed me slowly and sensually until I pulled away.

“*If* you do, then I can find a place.”

“Mhm, sounds good.”

“Wilde...”

“Boston...” he challenged and I shook my head.

“I see you’re not going to take this seriously.” I grinned, locking my eyes to his.

“I’m taking this very seriously. I just know what I want and so do you. Now if we’re done pretending you don’t belong here with me, then I would like to keep my promise to Ms. Mel and get to making those new Christmas memories.”

His hand slipped between my thighs once again and I moaned my approval for the contact. “Memories it is then.”

He tugged at my bottom lip before speaking against them. “Merry Christmas, Boston.”

“It’s not Christmas yet. We still have a few hours.”

He smiled deviously. Wilde shifted us until my back landed on the sofa and he was wedged between my legs. “It will be by the time I’m done with you.”

Oh...

Well Merry Christmas to us!

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER...



“How the hell are we supposed to do this?” I frowned at the red cups sitting on the table next to the bright green plate with a snowman printed in the center. The table was covered in large marshmallows to the point of barely being able to see the green tablecloth with tiny white trees that covered the polished wood.

“Ask her, this was Shore’s idea.”

I groaned and shook my head. “Can I skip this one? There’s no way my hands are gonna fit into those cups.”

I held them up, expanding my fingers and Shore shook her head. “Nope, you’re doing it. This is my first Christmas as activities coordinator and it has to be perfect. All of you are participating to make sure these games work before I get to the guests.”

It was the week of Christmas and Shore was taking her job as activities coordinator seriously. I loved that she'd settled into her lane with not just me out on the ranch but here at the B&B too. She only worked a couple weeks out of each month when Melvina had themed activities that needed to be planned but Shore loved helping.

"Fuck me," I mumbled and Melvina and Lou looked at each other and laughed before Lou pointed my way. "That's how you ended up here in the first place. Maybe stop thinking below the belt, Wilde."

I grinned and shot a look over to Shore who blushed when she felt the heat of my gaze. "No can do, that's my favorite thing when it comes to that one."

I motioned to Shore with a toss of my chin.

"Seriously, Wilde. Your mama raised you better than this. She would be very disappointed to hear you talking like that."

"I doubt it considering that kinda talk is what's gonna get her some grandchildren and since Garrett has no plans of settling down any time soon, I'm their best bet."

Melvina grunted under her breath and Lou chuckled. "*And* since she's not here because being in the middle of the ocean is more appealing than spending Christmas with me and her soon-to-be daughter-in-law, she'll never know how I'm talking unless you tell her. Ms. Mel."

"Hey, they invited us, Cowboy. She cares about spending Christmas with me," Shore said, defending my mother. The two of them had a quick and easy bond after my parents spent a week with us last spring. I loved the way Shore and my parents connected and became instant family.

"She did but I couldn't get my answer out before she followed up with 'but if you guys don't want to come I completely understand.' That was a code for your father and I would prefer to have this time alone."

They did want the time alone so when we declined because Shore's parents were spending Christmas weekend with us, my

mother wasn't at all disappointed. She hadn't planned on us accepting the invitation to join them in the first place.

"Well can you blame them? They're on the grown and sexy Christmas cruise this year. Been thinking about booking one of those for me and Lou since Shore seems to have things under control here at the B&B. I hear that one's pretty spicy. Got all kinds of grown and sexy activities for the guests."

"Come on Ms. Mel. I don't want to hear that."

"Not so fun when the shoe's on the other foot. Now are we doing this or not? That gingerbread cake I just pulled out of the oven is calling my name."

All eyes were on Shore who nodded and lifted the stopwatch from around her neck. This was the last and final activity. We had been cycling through them for the past hour since she was using us as her test subjects to gauge if her ideas would work well for the guests staying at the B&B Christmas week.

"Okay you bunch of whiny asses. Hands in your cups."

I grunted my displeasure but did as I was told and by the time we were done, there were more marshmallows on the floor than on our plates. Regardless, Shore seemed pleased with the outcome, so I was fucking elated no matter how silly we must have looked trying to scoop those marshmallows onto a plate with cup covered hands.

Making her happy had become my sole purpose in life and I was doing a damn good job if the constant smile she kept in rotation was being used as a determining factor. The same one she was wearing right now.

"Well that was a cluster of mess," Melvina mumbled then smiled across the table. "But I think the guests are gonna love it. Why don't you two get this cleaned up and I'll get everyone some cake. I'll meet you in the living room."

"Yeah, I'm gonna help Mel get the cake," Lou said, following his wife, skipping out on the cleaning. My eyes traveled across the table and to the floor, taking in the mess.

"How the hell did we get stuck with this?"

“It’s not that bad,” Shore said, taking it all in. When her eyes rounded back to me I narrowed mine and she laughed.

“Okay, it’s *kinda* bad.”

She moved around the table and lifted the stack of bowls she’d used to dump the pile of marshmallows on the table while setting up. When she attempted to step around me, I hooked an arm around her waist and lifted Shore onto the edge of the table. After taking the bowls from her hands and placing them behind her, I pushed between Shore’s legs.

“Wilde...” she whined but with a smile as she dropped her arms around my neck, making no attempt to get to the task at hand. “We’re supposed to be cleaning.”

“We will, but I’m collecting my reward first.”

Shore lifted a brow, smiling smugly. “I have to reward you in order to get you to help me clean?”

“No, but I take what I can get, when I can get it. I’ll do whatever you ask me to, Boston. I’m pretty sure you already know that to be true.”

I tugged at her arm and wrapped my fingers around her wrist, bringing Shore’s ring into view. I kissed the spot below the diamond I’d put there this morning after I awakened her with my head between her legs then asked her to marry me.

Her eyes lowered to the ring and she nodded. “I do.”

I do too...

“Not time for that yet, but glad to know you’re practicing.” I leaned in and kissed her. “But for the record, I can’t wait to hear those words on our official day.”

“It’s already official, Cowboy. Been that way since I stepped off the train and found you there with your boots, hat and scowl planted on your face. You were mine from that very minute, Wilde Reeves. I just didn’t know it.”

“As long as you do now, that’s all that matters.”

“I more than know but I never thought I’d be the kinda girl who would fall in love with a cowboy. Can’t say I’m

disappointed though.”

I leaned forward, resting my forehead on hers. “And I never thought I’d fall in love with a city girl, yet here we are and I’m pretty sure I love you more each minute I’m with you, Boston.”

“I think I feel another Christmas memory in the making,” she said against my mouth seconds before Melvina and Lou surfaced again, breaking up our moment.

“Not on my table, you don’t.”

Shore and I both burst out laughing before I helped her down so we could get to cleaning then get home to make those memories on our own damn table.

Happy Holidays from Miller’s Pointe and the Reeves Ranch!

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